

# Housing Ancestors

## The Reorganization of Living Spaces among the Birhor of Jharkhand and Odisha

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### Abstract

The Indian Government has defined the Birhor as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG). They live in small, scattered communities in Jharkhand and Odisha. Until the 1950s, their lifestyle was primarily nomadic and depended on the availability of forest game and market trends. The government of India then began to limit Birhor access to the forests, forcing them into low-skilled agricultural and mining jobs and settling them in resettlement colonies. The majority of the Birhor still live in these colonies, in houses that they use and inhabit, yet cannot completely appreciate. The reason for this lack of appreciation derives mainly from their religious beliefs and their cultural perception of living spaces. Consequently, many Birhor have made considerable changes to their allotted housing, not only to adapt it to their cultural concepts, but also to serve the perceived requests of the invisible, yet omnipresent, *hapram bonga*, spiritual ancestors, who are always treated with the greatest consideration in Birhor settlements.

### Keywords

India, Birhor, hunter-gatherers, Scheduled Tribe, resettlement

### Introduction

According to the 2011 Census of India (Census of India 2011), about 8.6% of the Indian population is made up of “tribal” people or, to use official terminology, members of the 645 Scheduled Tribes (ST) recognized by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. The colloquial term for these people is *ādivāsī*, a word of Sanskrit origin which literally means “first (*ādi*) dwellers (*vāsī*)”. Other terms used are: *vanyajāti* (caste of the forest), *vanvāsi* (forest dweller), *girijān* (mountain/hill dweller), *pahārī* (hill dweller), *ādimjāti* (aboriginal caste), *jānjāti* (forest caste) and *jāngālī* (forest dweller).

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Even though acknowledgement of them as the first inhabitants of the country is still a matter of controversy at a national and international level, the term *ādivāsī* and the related concept of indigeneity plays a crucial role in, among other things, the delicate social and political issues of economic development and forest management. Among the STs, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs has recently classified 75 Primitive Tribal Groups (PTG) as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) (Ministry of Tribal Affairs 2014a).

The Birhor are one of these PVTGs. They live in Central-East India, mainly in Jharkhand, but also in Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Bihar and West Bengal. They speak Birhor, a language that belongs to the Munda branch of Austroasiatic languages and is, according to UNESCO, “critically endangered”. The size of the Birhor population is difficult to estimate, as the Birhor are one of the smallest STs of India and difficult to count due to their traditional nomadic lifestyle. Even though their current situation is quite different from this traditional pattern, demographic data on the Birhor are still very approximate. For example, according to the 2011 Census of India, they numbered nearly 18,000 (Ministry of Tribal Affairs 2014b), whereas in 2007 Ethnologue claimed there were no more than 2,000 of them (Ethnologue 2014).

The first ethnographic account of this population was published in 1865 (Dalton 1865: 1). Based on the last 150 years of their history, Birhor can be described as a nomadic hunting-gathering society. Using mainly nets and traps, they hunt small game such as rats, rabbits, squirrels, monitor lizards, mice, wild boar, birds, hares, deer and, especially, monkeys. In fact, in the region Birhor are renowned as specialists in catching monkeys and, hence, are known in Odisha by the name Mankirdia, a term that may also be derogatory. Nevertheless, it is their skill in catching monkeys which raises the status of the Birhor in the eyes of their neighbouring tribal and non-tribal communities. So much so that when monkeys cause damage in rural areas and destroy crops, fruits and vegetables, the local people generally turn to the Birhor to catch and kill these animals. According to A.K. Adhikary (1984: 68), they are also called Mankar-khia-kol, “the Kol who eat monkeys”, and their neighbours, the Munda, know them as Jamsara (from *jam*, to eat, and *sara*, monkeys).

In addition to being hunters, the Birhor are also foragers. In the forest, they collect honey, fruits, roots, flowers and, above all, *siali* fibres, the basis of their third economic activity: rope making. They produce ropes and similar bark-derived items (including nets, baskets and bags) that they either use themselves or sell at the local markets they regularly attend, where their main customers are local agriculturalists. As a matter of fact, Birhor nomadism

is determined not only by the availability of forest resources such as animals and plants, but also by the demand for their handicrafts.

### **Towards “development”**

Article 366 (25) of the Constitution of India defines Scheduled Tribes as “such tribes or tribal communities or part of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under Article 342 to be Scheduled Tribes (STs) for the purposes of this constitution”. However, Article 342 does not state the criteria for identifying these STs. On the other hand, with reference to the 75 PVTGs selected from the STs, the Fifth Five Year Plan of the Planning Commission applies the following indicators: low demographic growth, a pre-agricultural economy and low levels of literacy (Chaudhuri 2005: 2). On the basis of this supposed “vulnerability”,<sup>1</sup> the PVTGs have been targeted as recipients of government “development” programmes. Since their nomadism and hunting-gathering economy have been recognized as the main indicators of their “backwardness”, Birhor have been forced to move into the resettlement colonies provided by the government and re-establish themselves through low-skilled work as agricultural labourers or manual workers in mines and road yards. In the resettlement colonies they have been provided with houses, agricultural land (although often barren and allocated only nominally and temporarily to the Birhor), seeds, bullocks, agricultural tools, wells, pumps, goats, rope-making machines and bank accounts. Initially, schooling programmes, basic health assistance and sterilization campaigns were also provided (Gupta / Gupta 2006).

Moreover, several national parks established or enlarged in the last 60 years (such as the Simlipal Tiger Reserve in Mayurbhanj District of northern Odisha) cover vast areas of Jharkhand and Odisha. For example, in 1952 the National Forest Policy was inaugurated, resulting in increasingly strict legal restrictions on entering forests for living, hunting and gathering purposes. The general principle motivating these policies is to safeguard national interests.

The accident of a village being situated close to a forest does not prejudice the right of the country as a whole to receive the benefits of a national asset. The scientific conservation of a forest inevitably involves the regulation of rights and the restriction of the privileges of user depending upon

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, words such as “vulnerability”, “development” and “back-wardness” are used in the sense assigned to them by the Indian Government and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. Therefore, they appear in inverted commas.

the value and importance of the forest, however irksome such restraint may be, to the neighbouring areas (Chaudhuri 1997: 235).

In some areas, for example in the Reserved Forests (which represent 80 per cent of the forest area of Mayurbhanj district, where the majority of Birhor in Odisha live), only what are classified as Minor Forest Products (such as flowers, fruits, roots, creepers, seeds, resins and leaves) may be collected (SCSRT 2004: 6). The collection of timber, a classified Major Forest Product, is forbidden in the Reserved Forests. In addition to these legal restrictions, the progressive deforestation of these areas of India is largely to blame for making the life of Birhor and other small tribal groups in the same situation more and more challenging.

### From the *kumbhā* to the *pukka* house

Until the 1950s,<sup>2</sup> the vast majority of Uthlu Birhor (hereafter referred to as Birhor) lived in small temporary camps called *tanda*. Each *tanda* generally comprises no more than 50 individuals grouped in nuclear households of between two and eight people each. Each family lives in a *kumbhā*, a cone-shaped hut with a circular base about two metres in diameter. The *kumbhā* is about 1.70 metres high. It is made of 10–15 poles (*churludāru*) that are driven into the ground at regular intervals along the circumference, converging at the top. When longer and more flexible branches are available, the poles can be bent and the extremities inserted into the ground. The shape of the *kumbhā* is then hemispherical rather than conical. To build their *kumbhā* Birhor generally use branches and leaves of the *gūngū* (*Bahunia scandens*) and *sal* (*Shorea robusta*) trees. Smaller branches and leaves, woven into each other or tied with dried vines to the framework, cover the wooden frame structure. A small square opening of approximately 60 cm<sup>2</sup> left between two of the poles allows entry into the *kumbhā*, either by squatting or crawling. The entrance of the *kumbhā* remains open most of the time. To close the *kumbhā*, a square door (*bagdir*), usually made of branches and leaves, but at times a wooden structure covered with a blanket or piece of cloth, is simply leant against the frame of the entrance.

In the rainy season, a short wall of mud is built around the outer circumference of *kumbhā* to prevent water from flowing into the hut. Nevertheless, *kumbhā* are usually constructed on well-drained soils and take advantage of the terrain to avoid inundation and stagnant water. When

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<sup>2</sup> The first resettlement colony for the Birhor, built in Jehangutua in the district of Palamu, dates from 1956 (Gupta 1983: 116–117).

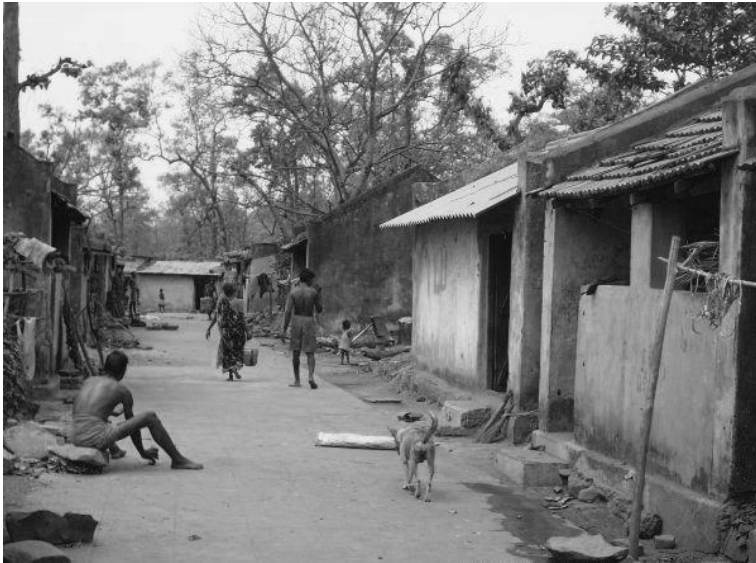
FIGURE 1: Danua *tanda* consisting of *kumbhā*.

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properly built, the *kumbhā* is a very solid structure and perfectly suited to its climatic and ecological environment. It provides shelter from the rain and is well insulated, retaining warmth produced by the fire, and yet, surprisingly, during the summer it provides cool relief from the extreme heat outside. The cover of foliage lets enough light into the interior to see, yet is thick enough to keep the room dark and cool.

A *kumbhā*'s interior is mostly empty and ideally divided into three sections. One area is used for sleeping (on a mat made of date palm leaves or directly on the ground), another for storing belongings (clothes, shoes, hunting tools, cooking utensils and food supplies) and the third for cooking, especially during the rainy season, when it is not possible to light a fire outside. Usually, a mud fireplace is built outside close to the entrance of the *kumbhā*, while in the rainy season it is relocated and rebuilt along the edge of the hut's internal structure. During winter and summer, the family's belongings are hung on the hut's exterior or on nearby trees, freeing up space inside the hut. However, in the rainy season, when the fireplace and the family's belongings are moved inside, *kumbhā* are generally enlarged.

FIGURE 2: Kendumundi resettlement colony consisting of *pukka* houses.



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The housing built in the resettlement colonies<sup>3</sup> by the Indian Government under the Indira Awas Yojana<sup>4</sup> scheme for the Birhor is completely different from the *kumbhā*. The model adopted for the houses (colloquially named *pukka*<sup>5</sup> houses) was generally standardized, with little variation in size and the placing of doors and windows. Usually these single-storey brick houses consist of a room in the back and a veranda in the front. There is a door between these two sections; the room seldom has windows in the other

<sup>3</sup> In the course of her fieldwork the author visited seven of these colonies: Dingura and Kendumundi in Odisha (Mayurbhanj District) and Chauparan, Sijhwa, Nagri, Dingura and Demotand in Jharkhand (Hazaribagh District). The author also visited Dauna, on National Highway 2 in the northern part of Hazaribagh District, one of the very rare traditional *tanda* composed entirely of *kumbhā*.

<sup>4</sup> Indira Awas Yojana is a social welfare programme instituted in 1985 by the Indian Government to provide housing for the rural and urban poor (Ministry of Rural Development 2013: 1).

<sup>5</sup> From the Hindi word *pakkā* (literally “cooked”, “ripe”), *pukka* means “solid” and “permanent”. These *pukka* houses are made of concrete, stone and clay tiles, in contrast to *kaccā* (literally “raw”) homes which are made of mud and other organic material.

walls. Steps lead up to the house, which is built on a cement foundation. Furniture, plumbing and electric wiring are not provided. Walls and ceilings are not painted and the floor is cast concrete. Generally these houses are three metres wide, three metres deep (one metre for the veranda and two metres for the interior room) and 2.5 metres in height.

The enormous differences between the *kumbhā* and *pukka* houses is the most obvious example of the profound changes in living conditions that Birhor have experienced in the last 60 years. However, there are several other striking structural differences between the traditional *tanda* and the recent resettlement colonies. In traditional nomadic *tanda* there are no structural elements (other than the huts) that create social aggregation and identify the site as a village. For example, there are no fences, gates or specifically designated central meeting areas. This reflects an underlying principle of the Birhor: each nuclear family is at liberty to move around independently, evidence that the most important social bond is the nuclear family rather than the group as a whole. This principle is evident in the founding myth of Birhor society: there is no reference to the construction of a village; rather, its cultural hero is characteristically defined as being the first person of the group to survive in the forest and to master the craft of using *siali* fibres to make hunting nets and ropes.

Not surprisingly, in the Birhor language the word “Birhor” literally means “man of the forest” (from *bir*, forest, and *hor*, people). According to A.K. Adhikary (1984: 68), neighbouring groups also call them “Birmunda”, the “Munda of the jungle”. For Birhor, the connection to the place they feel they belong to is of overriding importance. The forest is what shapes their identity in reference to the other ethnic groups living nearby: Birhor identify with the forest (*disum*), while they place their neighbouring groups exclusively in the *muluk*, i.e. the agricultural side of the world (*utaye*), with fields, markets and villages. These three myths about the origin of Birhor people are illustrative:

Ravan Raja abducted Sita to his kingdom in Lankā (Ceylon?). Ram, Lakshman and Hanuman went there to rescue her. The Birhor were then living in those parts. When Hanuman first appeared within the garh [fort] of Ravan, his men sought to catch Hanuman but failed. At length Ravan ordered them to call some Birhor as they lived in the jungles and might be more skilful in catching the Hanuman. An old Birhor couple were brought. But all their efforts were unsuccessful. Then Hanuman took pity on them and taught the old man how to make suitable nets. “Make your nets”, said he, “with interstices thrice the breadth of a human finger. And then you will be able to catch me.” And so they did; and Hanuman was caught in the net (Roy 1925: 425). The Birhor affirm that they and the Kharwars are of the same race descended from the Sun. They came, seven brothers, to

this country from Khairagarh (in the Kaimur hills); four went to the east, and three brothers remained in the Ramgarh district. One day when the three brothers were going out to fight against the chiefs of the country, the headdress of one of them got entangled in a tree. He deemed it a bad omen, and remained behind in the jungle. His two brothers went without him and gained a victory over the chiefs, and returning found their brother employed in cutting the bark of the chob. They derided him, calling him the Birhor, ("Birhor" is Munda for woodman or forester) or chob cutter; he replied that he would rather remain a Birhor and reign in the jungles than associate with such haughty brothers. Thus originated the Birhor, lords of the jungles. The other two brothers became Rajahs of the country called Ramgarh (Roy 1925: 8–9, quoting Edward T. Dalton). A lady, named Koltin, were [*sic*] two sisters. The Birhor are the descendants of the elder sister, while the younger sister gave birth to another community called the Mahakul. It is said that Koltin had illicit sexual relations and as a result become pregnant. She gave birth to a male child. Her parents came to know about her illicit relationship and one day when she was sleeping with her baby in the hut, her parents burnt the hut with a motive to kill them (mother and child). Next day, in the morning, the villagers rescued the mother and the child. [...] The boy was brought up in the village but without any process of socialization (i.e. initiation and birth purification ceremony). The child gradually grew up in cultural isolation and the villagers looked down upon him and prevented him from participating in sacred/religious ceremonies of the community. [...] He then started dwelling in the Biru Hills and thus the term Birhor was coined (Sinha / Banerjee 2004: 232–233).

As a rule, traditional Birhor *tanda* are built on the fringes of the forest, where the availability of natural resources makes hunting and gathering of food and raw materials for rope-making profitable, but they are located not too far from the local markets that these people attend to sell their handi-crafts. Whenever possible, these settlements are constructed in the midst of bushes, under shady trees, near a rich supply of water for drinking and washing. At first glance, placement of the *kumbhā* in traditional *tanda* appears quite casual and confused.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the huts are not built close to each other, but quite scattered. Usually at least three metres are left between them, especially if the families who live in them are not closely related. The only exception to this rule is when a newly married son of a couple builds his hut near one of his relatives. This proximity makes it possible for parents to share their fireplace with their newly married son until his own nuclear

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<sup>6</sup> All the ethnographic reports on Birhor agree with this observation, except for Sudhir Kumar (2004: 71–72), who writes that "the individual sheds are constructed in parallel rows with an intervening space, hence the pattern is parallel".



family is established and big enough to be considered an independent unit (usually after two or three children) (Sahay 2009: 96).

The organization within resettlement colonies could not be more different. First of all, these colonies are permanently designated areas. Moreover, usually they have a gate, a fence along the perimeter (in Dingura there is a barbed-wire fence), a community hall and a central open space or a road with houses uniformly distributed along its edges. Houses are built in close proximity to each other, usually no more than two metres apart. Within the colony, nothing distinguishes the clusters of close relatives. In fact, such clusters are *de facto* relatively impossible to create, unless Birhor change their house every time a boy gets married and begins his family. Traditionally, nomadic Birhor prefer not to camp too close to the villages of neighbouring communities. However, in Kendumundi, for example, they were forced by the Hill Kharia & Mankirdia Development Agency to share their colony with the Hill Kharia (another PVTG).

Due to the temporariness of traditional *tanda*, the lack of drainage systems never adversely affects the sanitation of camps. In resettlement colonies, private toilets have not been provided, and consequently the people are forced to exit the colony every time for their physiological needs or risk the quality of the settlement's sanitation. The Sijhwa resettlement colony is a rare case in which the government has built public latrines, namely, two for an entire village; as they are located a few metres away from National Highway 33 they are never utilized.

### **Reorganizing the living spaces of the *pukka* houses**

The author's fieldwork provides new insights into Birhor behaviour with respect to the different types of housing. The interior space of the *pukka* houses is generally left empty or used for storing clothes, nets and hunting sticks. No daily activities (such as sleeping, eating or working) take place in the room. The reasons for the infrequent use of the room are both pragmatic and symbolic. The *kumbhā* are built with perishable materials, so their duration depends on weather conditions and plant deterioration. Birhor traditionally maintain their *kumbhā* only by adding new branches to the existing ones, but only once or twice at the most. If this intervention is inadequate, they prefer to destroy the *kumbhā* and build a new one, as they believe that every occurrence beyond the normal deterioration process constitutes a dangerous threat. The most common examples of these inauspicious occurrences are deaths, frequent and anomalous diseases, and constant leaks caused by rain. When these happen, Birhor say the only

reason is the disappointment of their ancestors (*hapram bonga*), who are angry that their descendants have not chosen a good place for the settlement or build a poor *kumbhā* for their *hapram bonga*.

*Hapram bonga* are an important element of Birhor belief. Apart from a long list of deities (such as Sing Bonga, Chandu Bonga, Dharti Mai, Burhi Mai, Lugu Haram and others), ancestors (in other words, spirits of the dead) occupy a prominent position in the vast Birhor pantheon. According to A.K. Adhikary (1984: 72–73), they can be divided into two categories: *churgin* and *hapram*. *Churgin* are basically malevolent, since they live on earth, but in highly inhospitable places and are *bhulah*, i.e. as a consequence of violent or unnatural death they wander around in anger and are not duly respected, remembered and worshipped by their descendants. *Hapram*<sup>7</sup> are diametrically different from *churgin*, since they are fundamentally benevolent. Their descendants still remember them and, above all, respect them, worshipping them regularly at the family level. In exchange for this great consideration, *hapram* protect their descendants, looking after them and mediating between them and the deities, who can be merciless in the sufferings they inflict to humans. In other words, between the Birhor and their *hapram* there is a bond of reciprocal care and collaboration. However, the *hapram* are the dominant party in this relationship. Consequently, their descendants must always be very careful not to provoke them, otherwise they will be victims of the *hapram*'s disappointment. Consequently, Birhor pay constant and considerable attention to all indicators of their ancestors' disappointment and are always willing to adapt their own behaviour to please them.

As mentioned above, a clear indication of *hapram bonga*'s discontent in traditional *tanda* is constant leaks inside the *kumbhā*. In this case, Birhor immediately destroy and re-build their huts or else immediately leave the location and establish their camp somewhere else. Unfortunately, in the resettlement colonies leaks and mould are common in *pukka* houses as their occupants cannot afford to fix the problem and government authorities do not provide this kind of assistance. The problem is exacerbated by government rules forbidding the building of *kumbhā* within the resettlement colonies or re-allocation to another house. In theory, Birhor can leave their allotted house and move elsewhere, but given the decline in their nomadism and the drastic restriction of access to the forests, setting up temporary

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<sup>7</sup> Within the category of *hapram*, A.K. Adhikary (1984: 72–73) distinguishes between *bura buri* and *chowrasi*. *Bura buri* are the ancestors whose names are still individually remembered by the Birhor, while the names of the *chowrasi* have been forgotten, since they died too long ago. However, this distinction goes beyond the scope of this article, for which the broadest term *hapram* suffices.

camps is not a viable alternative. Moving to another resettlement colony is theoretically an alternative, but colonies are generally already overcrowded.

Circumstantial confirmation of the fact that many of the Birhor in the resettlement colonies are dissatisfied with the conditions of their *pukka* houses, both for practical and symbolic reasons, is the widespread use of the veranda instead of the interior room as the centre of household activities, such as cooking, eating, sleeping and working. The room at the back is generally used only for storage. In several of the resettlement colonies the author visited, the veranda that was initially open on three sides (apart from the supporting pillars) was enclosed with improvised brick walls or, more often, panels made of branches and leaves. Despite the obvious difference in shape, through this transformation the veranda acquires distinct elements of the *kumbhā*. Furthermore, it was not uncommon to see a makeshift door with which to close the veranda. This door is clearly a larger replica of the panel used in traditional *kumbhā* to close the tiny entrance of the hut. The fact that this door is used to close the veranda and not the interior room (which in many cases already has its own proper door) is confirmation that the Birhor who live in the resettlement colonies consider the veranda rather than the interior room (in other words, the house proper) to be their house.

### **Delivery room and girl dormitory**

Within Hindu society and, more generally, where the effects of orthodox Hinduism are particularly strong (as among many “tribal” communities located in those parts of India where Hinduism is more widespread), the concept of purity and impurity is of paramount importance. Given that this notion is extremely complex and geographically diverse, the scope for generalization is limited. This concept is the foundation of the caste system, since the pursuit of purity and, vice versa, the avoidance of impurity, assign individuals and communities their place in the Hindu hierarchy. In practical terms, this notion guides believers’ deeds, thoughts and speeches in a myriad of contexts and situations: in private as well as public life, in the exchange of food, in the choice of occupation, in kinship and marriage, in religious rituals and in every significant moment of life (such as birth, death, wedding, etc.).

As Ajit K. Sahay (2009: 22) writes “she [the pregnant woman] is considered to be polluted and impure during that period [the pregnancy], hence she is not allowed to visit or enter any other kumbha except her own kumbha”. As a matter of fact, in traditional *tanda*, when a woman reaches the last stages of her pregnancy, her husband generally builds a separate

*kumbhā* for her, where the delivery will take place. In cases where the couple decides that the delivery can take place in the hut where the family resides, a small secondary exit is opened on a side of the *kumbhā* for a period of between one and six weeks. It is constructed so that the woman is able to leave the *kumbhā* quickly and inconspicuously without contaminating the rest of the hut and its inhabitants with the pollution resulting from the delivery. Sarat C. Roy (1925: 222) claims that “it is believed that if she used the old door during the period of impurity, two members of the family would certainly die”. After the *chhathi* ceremony is performed, when the umbilical stub of the baby dries and falls off, usually five to six days after the birth, mother and child leave their state of pollution and are permitted to join the rest of the family and the group. In particular, the state of impure liminality they were in ends after a hot bath, a massage with mustard oil, turmeric and milk and putting on new clothes (Sahay 2009: 29).

In Nagri resettlement colony the practice of having a special room for delivery with a secondary exit continues even in the absence of a *kumbhā*. A storeroom has been chosen as the delivery room for all the women who may need it, and bricks are removed to create a hole in the wall for the period of expected delivery. As soon as the baby is born, the midwife who assists the puerpera throws out through this hole the dirty and polluted clothes used during delivery and, therefore, symbolically, the pollution of the mother and the baby as well. Whereas this secondary exit is apparently not used by the women to leave the delivery room, probably because it is quite small and uncomfortable and, above all, a big door is already available in the building, the second purpose of this exit, i.e. the removal of the clothes used during the delivery, is evident in the visible piles of clothes at the back of the delivery room. The thorny branches used to mark the delivery area and keep away malevolent spirits who often try to attack new-born babies are also thrown out with the clothes. It is particularly interesting to note that even if this room already has small windows, the Birhor of this settlement prefer to create a new hole, presumably because this is what they did in their traditional *tanda* in the past.

In Nagri resettlement colony, a second building near this delivery room, initially built by the government as a storehouse, has been converted by the Birhor into a dormitory for young women. In traditional Birhor *tanda*, unmarried teenagers of both sexes between the ages of approximately 10 and 16 do not live in their parents’ *kumbhā*, but move into another one purposely built for them in the camp. In the Nagri colony this dormitory is replicated in a simple brick room with no floor, a wooden rickety door and some little holes in the wall, made by removing bricks, to let in some light and air. In this room all unmarried teenage girls are free to sleep together at

night and are socially encouraged to do so, especially when they are in the menstrual period. In fact, a second exit, quite small in its size, has been opened in the back wall of this room to allow girls to go out at night to meet their partners and on the last day of their period also to throw out the dirty clothes used during their menstrual cycle. After a bath, their purity is re-established and they are welcomed back into their homes, unless they prefer to continue to spend the night in the dormitory with their friends.

### **The needs of the *hapram bonga***

As stated above, Birhor consider their *hapram bonga* to be some kind of tutelary deity, spirits of the dead who protect their descendants. Nevertheless, in exchange for this assistance *hapram bonga* demand constant and sincere consideration. Birhor attend to this need by building *bonga kumbhā* (ancestors' huts) in their camps. These huts are very similar to the ones generally used by people, but are usually smaller and simpler in their structure. They are built near a family's hut by the male members of each family. As Jagannatha Dash (1998: 82) reports in his sketch of a traditional Birhor *tanda*, such *bonga kumbhā* look like small satellites in the orbit of the *kumbhā* of the family they belong to. In these huts the ancestors of the family are generally identified in earthen pots or little stones, honoured through food offerings (usually rice) and flowers.

Until recently, Birhor were nomadic and therefore moved their camps quite often, generally at regular intervals and along pre-established routes. At every departure, each family completely destroyed its *kumbhā* to leave the site free of human intervention. Even though the same group would later return to this camp, they would never utilize the old *kumbhā*, but would build new ones. This rule applies only to the *kumbhā* used by people, since Birhor never destroy *bonga kumbhā* (Sahoo 2007: 153). However, at the same time, they cannot leave their ancestors behind or alone in a deserted camp. Instead, they simply remove their ancestors from the *bonga kumbhā*, i.e. the bowls or the stones that represent them, and carry them during their move. Later, when a new site is chosen for the settlement, the rule prescribes that the first huts to be built are the *bonga kumbhā*. Only after that can the people's *kumbhā* be built.

This rule is strictly adhered to when a death occurs within a family, because it means that a new *hapram bonga* will join the rest of the ancestors. Consequently, respectful and careful consideration will be required to prevent the spirit of the dead from feeling alone, sad and irritated by the lack of moaning and attention from his relatives. In other words, it is imperative

not to turn him into a malevolent and revengeful *bhulah* spirit who will then put all his efforts into causing trouble for his disrespectful and ill-mannered descendants.

FIGURE 3: *kumbhā* for the *hapram bonga* (spirits of the dead).



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The use of the masculine pronoun is intentional because within Birhor society it is only men who can achieve the status of a *hapram bonga*. However, gender is not enough to acquire the status of “*hapram-hood*”. Men also have to be married or widowed and must have behaved in accordance with Birhor social norms (such as sharing game, behaving collaboratively and having cordial relationships with relatives). When these requirements are met, the process in which a man joins the rest of the *hapram bonga* starts during the funeral ceremonies. Birhor resort to burial for every member of their society, irrespective of gender and age.

However, when women and children die, the funeral ends with the burial, whereas when a man dies the procedure is longer (Adhikary 1984: 73). His eldest son builds a small-scale *kumbhā* on the grave and invites the soul of the dead to live in this hut, in which fresh food is placed for him.

Then, some days after the death, one man of the family goes to the temporary hut on the grave to invite the soul to move into the *bonga kumbhā* the family has built for him in the settlement, either on the occasion of this death or when the family sets up its hut in the new camp. Alternatively, in instances where no women are living in the hut of the descendant who wishes to take care of the deceased, the deceased's soul can be given hospitality directly in the *kumbhā* where the descendant lives. In both circumstances, when the soul leaves the temporary hut built on his grave, the rest of the family immediately burns it, so it is impossible for him to return to it. All this is done to enable the new member of the *hapram bonga* to reunite with his family and enjoy the care they provide for him. It is interesting to observe the concept of death among Birhor and, above all, its symbolic and practical connections with the family and the *kumbhā*, which represent the core of Birhor society and human relations. The metaphor of a never-ending meeting with a millipede is an illustration of how Birhor conceive of death and its most obvious consequence, the absence from home and family.

A Birhor, who was dead, revived as usual, and, after having bathed in a stream, was returning home, when on his way he met a lindum [millipede]. The crafty lindum barred his way and told him, "Count my 'legs' first, and then you will go home." The man agreed and began to count the legs of the lindum when it moved a few steps forward and the man had to begin counting the legs over again. [...] This trick the lindum went on repeating so that the man could never finish his task and walk back home (Roy 1925: 253).

For this reason, the soul is not able to go back to its family and the body it is connected to dies and begins its decay. For Birhor there are parallels between the moment of death and its consequences for the human body and the *kumbhā*. The hut experiences the same process of deterioration when the family who lived in it no longer uses it and stops taking care of it. Sarat C. Roy reports a similar account, with reference to the role of dreams in explaining the phenomenon of the death:

A man has two souls – a male one and a female one. [...] When a person dreams, the male soul goes out of the body and visits different persons and places, while the female soul, it is said, remains in charge of the body, "just as his wife is left in charge of the hut or encampment when a Birhor goes out to hunt". So long as the male soul does not come back, the body is said to be sleeping, but when it is unusually long in returning, the female soul too goes out in search of her mate leaving the body dead (Roy 1925: 253–254).

Additionally, Birhor believe that when building a new *kumbhā* appears in a dream it is an indisputable sign of a forthcoming death in the family (Roy

1925: 387). In fact, as mentioned above, Birhor move their camp on the occurrence of unnatural or violent deaths and, in cases where a male member of the family dies, his child starts taking care of him as *hapram bonga*, building for him a small-scale *kumbhā* on his grave.

To understand this strong link between respect for the *hapram bonga* and the importance of the traditional (*uthlu*) *kumbhā* at a practical and symbolic level, it is useful to take into consideration the *janghi kumbhā* as well. In Sarat C. Roy's account of Birhor (1925), it is already evident that this population can be divided into two, not rigidly separated, but nevertheless quite distinct groups: *uthlu* are mainly nomadic hunter-gatherers, while *janghi* prefer a more sedentary life, especially in the periods of the year when they can resort to agriculture (as day labourers, not landowners). Their living spaces clearly show the difference in their lifestyles: *uthlu kumbhā* are the cone-shaped huts described at the beginning of this article, constructed from temporary and perishable building materials, while *janghi kumbhā* are more solid and durable, made of mud walls and solid wood branches and covered by a two-pitched thatched roof.

In addition to the *pukka* houses built by the government, there are also *janghi kumbhā* in several of the resettlement colonies visited in the course of the author's field research, such as Kendumundi and Durdura. They are built by the Birhor near their allotted houses to shelter the families who have not been included in the assignment made by the authorities, either because they were part of another band of Birhor or simply because of the gradual, but steady increase in the Birhor population (Firdos 2005). For the purposes of this article it is interesting to note that while these people prefer to build *janghi kumbhā* for their personal use, as they are more viable in terms of durability, comfort and space, for their *hapram bonga* they continue to favour traditional *uthlu kumbhā*. Of course, this choice can also be explained by practical factors: *uthlu kumbhā* are easier and cheaper to build. However, discussions of this preference with Birhor indicate that this choice is motivated by other factors: "We are Birhor and this is how Birhor live."<sup>8</sup> In Kendumundi resettlement colony the male members of the family are reported to occasionally move to the *bonga kumbhā* to spend the night there and sleep with their ancestors. However, this kind of *kumbhā* appears to be too small and poorly built to allow a person enough space to sleep, so it is quite possible that this practice is only a principle that is not actually implemented. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that even if this cohabitation

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with H.B., 15 March 2009, Durdura Resettlement Colony (Mayurbhanj District, Odisha).



with the ancestors is nowadays only metaphorical, the Birhor seem to continue to attach importance to it.

Although the evidence from the Nagri resettlement colony reflects a different situation, all Birhor share the core idea that the *hapram bonga* have to continue to live as “authentic” Birhor, despite the profound changes that have affected the lives of their descendants. The Birhor who nowadays live in Nagri resettlement colony had led a sedentary life in this place for 30 years prior to the construction of the colony. During this time they lived in *janghi* huts and built smaller scale *janghi* huts for their ancestors as well. Prior to this thirty-year sedentary phase they were nomadic and lived in *uthlu* huts, like their ancestors. Thirty years ago, they were assigned the new *pukka* houses and moved into them, despite not wanting to move their *hapram bonga* as well. They continued to build *janghi* huts for their ancestors since *pukka* houses were not suitable for them: “In these houses they don’t want to enter.”<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

The government’s resettlement schemes since the 1950s have drastically changed the lifestyle and living environment of the Birhor. Apart from severely curtailing their nomadism, substantially reducing their access to the forest, and economically rehabilitating them with the intention of turning them into farmers and day labourers, the primary and most evident change that has affected the daily life of these people is the total alteration of their living environment. *Uthlu kumbhā* are completely different from *pukka* houses: the concepts of space of temporary *tanda* on the one hand and sedentary colonies on the other are diametrically opposed. Nevertheless, after an initial period of transition and adjustment, it appears that the Birhor have managed to adapt to this new environment or at least accept the change. However, this new environment is a major challenge for the Birhor inasmuch as it seems to be almost irreconcilable with their need to satisfy and constantly please the spirits of their ancestors, the *hapram bonga*. Birhor seem to be aware that they are departing from traditional ideals of “Birhor-hood” (characterized by close contact with the forest, nomadism and the building of *kumbhā*). Nonetheless, they cannot accept that their ancestors must suffer as a result of this compromise. For their *hapram bonga*, Birhor seem to desire to adhere firmly to the past or, perhaps more

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with A.B., 6 April 2009, Nagri Resettlement Colony (Hazaribagh District, Jharkhand).

correctly, to the cultural framework that determines their identity as “Men of the forest”.

In his book *Hunter-Gatherers and the Colonial Encounter*, John H. Bodley (1999: 470) writes about the ethnocide and ecocide affecting the Birhor. The term “ethnocide”, occasionally contested for the confusion it creates with reference to the words “culture” and “ethnicity”, is generally used as a synonym for “cultural genocide”. According to the UNESCO, “ethnocide means that an ethnic group is denied the right to enjoy, develop and transmit its own culture and its own language, whether collectively or individually. This involves an extreme form of massive violation of human rights and, in particular, the right of ethnic groups to respect for their cultural identity (Schabas 2000: 189)”. Predictably, anthropologists take a great interest in this concept and in its practical applications. In 1970, in his publication *La paix blanche. Introduction à l’ethnocide*, Robert Jaulin described ethnocide as the result of a collective and systematic process of destruction of others’ way of living and cultural worlds. In the following decades, in which anthropology has been increasingly concerned with growing instances of assimilation and exploitation of foraging societies (and other minorities), the concept of ethnocide has become particularly delicate and pressing (see for example Headland / Blood 2002). At the same time, however, the notion of cultural resilience has been developed and gained acceptance even in the field of hunter-gatherer studies. By “resilience” (or culturally-focused resilient adaptation) social scientists generally mean “how cultural background (i.e., culture, cultural values, language, customs, norms) helps individuals and communities overcome adversity” (Clauss-Ehler 2010: 324). Nowadays, several anthropological works (Griffin 2002; Fleming / Ledogar 2008, Lu 2010) focus on the notion of resilience as positive cultural adaptation and, through it, strongly emphasize the agency of the people who, until this conceptual shift, were generally considered as passive victims incapable of reacting to and taking a stand against abuses and adversities (Robbins 2013).

While it cannot be denied that Birhor are increasingly losing control over their territory and its natural resources as a consequence of a well-planned government programme that can certainly be defined as ecocide<sup>10</sup>, there are also grounds for some optimism in respect of ethnocide. Even if it

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<sup>10</sup> According to the definition proposed by Polly Higgins to the International Law Commission of the United Nations, “Ecocide is the extensive damage to, destruction of or loss of ecosystem(s) of a given territory, whether by human agency or by other causes, to such an extent that peaceful enjoyment by the inhabitants of that territory has been or will be severely diminished” (Eradicating Ecocide 2010).

is undeniable that, as highlighted by Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt (1997: 195), the “development” pursued by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs seeks to be a “project of national integration essentially attempted to assimilate the adivasi”, it would be wrong, in both scientific and human terms, to ignore the examples of cultural resilience exhibited by the Birhor in a number of resettlement colonies. Unfortunately, claiming that these efforts of cultural resilience will be enough to avoid ethnocide of the Birhor is another, much more complicated, matter.

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