Ethnicisation or Re-ethnicisation? 
Case of the Kurmi-Mahatos in Chotanagpur

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Human societies in the contemporary times are increasingly exhibiting a peculiar mark of ambivalence. Uncertainties are making their presence felt in all the aspects of social structure. Important social institutions and the social organizations of the societies worldwide are confronted with the crises of either extinction altogether or radical as well as unprecedented shift in their roles. Such a bizarre social situation is quite seriously affecting the identities of the individuals in the societies at present. Everywhere people are found negotiating with their identities, which have become ruptured, fragmented and contested. Obviously, such a turbulent process of social change has also influenced ethnic identity, which is quite well known for its subtlety. The forces of globalisation amidst all its promises of cultural homogenization are increasingly making people conscious about their ethnic identity. The political economy of globalisation spearheaded by neoliberalism is quite ruthlessly marginalizing people socially, politically and economically. The rhetoric of ‘neoliberal development’ is continuously making the core – periphery distinction more prominent. Such a situation provides the breeding ground for ethnic identity assertion and reassertion. On the basis of a heightened feeling of internal colonialism people try to mobilize themselves for which ethnicity appears to be the most effective as well as tangible option. Like many societies world over, the Indian society too, is witnessing such a process of ethnic upsurge having tremendous bearing over the future of her democracy. There have been mobilizations by communities like the Banjara, Rajbanshi, Koch, Riyang, Gujjars, Kurmi-Mahatos etc. to achieve ethnic status. Within the framework of the equation of tribalism and ethnicity drawn in the Indian context such
aspirations naturally boils down to the achievement of tribal status in the form of getting included in the list of Scheduled Tribes (S.T.s). Such a process of ethnicisation or re-ethnicisation as the cases might be, has been taking recourse to social movements to fulfill the ethnic aspiration of the respective communities. In the present paper attempt has been made to analyse the structural reality of the phenomenon of ethnic identity construction (reconstruction?) of the Kurmi-Mahato community of Chotanagpur plateau region reflected in the process of transition from caste to tribe in the background of the historical specificity of the Jharkhand Movement through which it has operated.

Kurmi-Mahato Ethnicity: The Social-anthropological and Historical Moorings

The Kurmi phenomenon is interesting not only for the process of ethnicisation but also for the reverse process of de-ethnicisation, which it has witnessed. The community is “still known by its totemic name (Kurm = tortoise)” says Arvind N.Das (1984, p. 1618). It was considered to be one of the adivasi (tribal) communities in Chotanagpur till 1931 and was even declared as a ‘criminal tribe.’ Since the closing period of the nineteenth century a section of this community proved to be efficient agriculturists and achieved considerable economic advancement. This relative economic security and affluence of the Kurmi–Mahatos vis-à-vis the other adivasi communities, led them to resent their adivasi affiliation possibly due to the stigma of backwardness attached with it. This sanskritisation drive resulted into their claiming a caste status deserting that of a ‘tribe.’ This effort ultimately resulted in the de-scheduling of the community in 1931 (G.O.I., 1990).

K.S.Singh (1978), however, adopts a political economic approach to understand this transition. In his view the colonisation of the adivasis of Chotanagpur started much earlier than the British colonialism. It began with the process of indigenous state formation in the adivasi region when the local chiefs to acquire the crucially important agricultural surplus encouraged the settlement of the non-adivasi outsiders, having superior agricultural technology, in the adivasi region. With this began the process of peasantisation of the adivasis who were basically the reclaimers of the forestland having exposure to a low level of development in agricultural technology. British colonialism
while maintaining this process added some newer dimensions into it. Through the dismantling of the communal mode of production and introduction of private right in land it forced the adivasis to adopt the improved agricultural techniques of the outsiders, the people of the plains. This resulted into the increase in the degree of mutual interdependence among the adivasis and the non-divasi peasants. With the penetration of the market in the tribal economy such a process of peasantisation of the adivasis got further developed. The introduction of the new land revenue system by the British rulers made it a compulsion to pay land revenues in terms of money. This created a demand for money in the non-money economy of the indigenous adivasis of Chotonagpur. While the adivasi communities who were still in the occupation of hunting and gathering suffered due to this, the relatively advanced adivasis by adopting the superior agricultural technology brought into the region by the outsiders benefited. Economic affluence gained through this process gave birth to the process of sanskritisation through which, Singh observes (1978, p. 1228), “…the tribal society was moving closer to the peasant/caste system.” The sanskritisation attempt of the Mahatos, a prosperous agricultural community of the region, analyses Singh (1978) followed this course.

This attempt at sanskritisation of the Chotonagpuri Kurmis in the early part of the twentieth century got a good support from the Hindu Kurmis of the Gangetic Bihar. To satisfy their sanskritised aspiration for Kshatriya status they started to promote the feeling of brotherhood and kinship among the Kurmis living in different parts of India. They even tried to establish their kinship ties with the Kunbis of Maharashtra*. To meet their end an organization named All India Kurmi Kshatriya Mahasabha was also formed in 1894. In the 17th session of the “all India Kurmi-Kshatriya Conference” held at Muzaffarpur (1929) it was resolved that Chotonagpuri Kurmis were similar to all other Kurmis living in India (Lacay, 1933, Singh and Mahato, 1983). In this conference three delegates from Manbhum were present on behalf of the Chotonagpur Kurmis and they also wore the sacred thread there. In the same year another large meeting was convened at Ghagharjuri in Manbhum. A representative of the Kurmis of the United Provinces

* Shibaji, the famous Maratha ruler belonged to the Kunbi community.
attended the meeting. It came out with some significant resolutions, as mentions Lacay in the Appendix V of his Census of India 1931: Bihar and Orissa:

“It was settled that the Kurmis of Chota Nagpur and Kurmis of U.P. and Behar are akin to each other and there will be inter-dining and inter-marriages among the said Kurmis; the Kurmis of Chota Nagpur would join closely with the all-India Kurmi Kshatriya Association and will be guided by the directions of it… the Kurmis are Kshatriyas and they have right to wear sacred thread” (1933)

As a consequence to this some fifty Kurmis took the sacred thread in the conference with the help of genuine Brahmin priests. The number went on increasing and in the “all India Kurmi-Kshatriya Conference” held at Manbhum in 1931 a large number (from two hundred to thousand) of Kurmis of Chotanagpur took the sacred thread. The inclusion of the Chotanagpur Kurmis in the All India Kurmi Kshatriya Mahasabha along with the conferences gave them enough confidence and courage to raise their caste status. Not only wearing of sacred thread, the entire gamut of social and cultural life came under the influence of such a sanskritising drive. In many of the caste sabhas held during the 1920s at Manbhum resolutions to this effect were adopted. To quote from Lacay once again:

“It was decreed that Kurmis should no longer eat chickens or drink wine; Kurmi women should not work as casual labourers for persons belonging to other castes; they (the women) should wear a second garment and should not go to the bazar by themselves but should always be accompanied by menfolk of their own caste; when a Kurmi died, his sradh ceremony should take place on the twelfth day after death, as with the Kshatriyas of Bengal, instead of on the tenth day as heretofore.” (ibid. 1933)

The upbeat Kurmis found a good amount of support also among some of the local chiefs or rajas of Chotanagpur region having Kshatriya origin who not only accepted them as Kshatriyas but also took utmost care to promote their sanskritising drive.
The attempt at vertical mobility of the Chotonagpuri Kurmis, hence, found a significant impetus from the Bihari Kurmis in the 1920s. On the basis of a heightened sense of caste commonality the two communities moved hand in hand in the drive of sanskritisation. But scholars’ opinions have been divided about the validity of such a sense of caste similarity. While Dalton (1872) in his Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal describes the Kurmis as ‘unquestionably Aryans,’ Risley (1884) in his Tribes and Castes of Bengal considers the Chotonagpur Kurmis much alike to those of the tribes of Dravidian stock and to him they are ‘perhaps a Hinduised branch of the Santhals’. In the Volume V (ii) of his Linguistic Survey of India Sir George Grierson (1920, pp. 145-146) mentions that the Kurmis of Chota Nagpur, “are an aboriginal tribe of Dravidian stock and should be distinguished from the Kurmis of Bihar who spell their name differently with a smooth instead of a hard r.” This is a significant observation since one can find today in the Chotanagpur region that the Kurmis are designating themselves as ‘Kudmi’ instead of ‘Kurmi.’ Coupland (1910) in his District Gazetteer of Manbhum considers the Kurmis of Chotanagpur as one of the Kolarian tribes as he finds, “…the Mahto or village headman of the Kurmis corresponding exactly with the Majhi of the santhals, the Sardar of the Bhumij and the Munda of the Ho races.” More recently Mehta (1982, p.94) argues that the claimed similarity between the Kurmis of Chotanagpur region and those of the Gangetic Bihar, “…exists only in the group name.” With the support of the anthropological data he comes to the conclusion that the totemic Kurmis of Chotanagpur were much similar to the tribals (Adivasis) of the region and were distinct from the caste Hindu Kurmis residing in Gangetic North Bihar and other regions. Sengupta (1980, 2003) also considers the Kurmi Mahatos of Chotanagpur region as ‘originally tribals’ and cites the instance of a simultaneous initiation of the ‘Gossaiyan Movement’ by a cross section of the Kurmi Mahato community of Chotanagpur to protect their cultural identity from the threat of assimilation posed by the Kshatriyasation movement, to support this position.

Attempt at perceived vertical social mobility of this sort is, however, not unique to the Kurmi community alone. In the early part of the 20th century many lower castes and communities of the Bihar plains viz. Goalas, Ahirs, Koeris etc. have exhibited the
similar tendency towards sanskritisation. Tallents (1923) mentions about the accumulation of considerable literature by the Ahirs in support of their claim to Kshatriya status. There have been efforts at cultural revivalism too. The Gop Jatiya Maha Sabha of the Goalas, or the Ahirs (as they prefer to call themselves) through resolutions reduced the Shraddha ceremony to twelve days like that of the twice born upper castes from thirty days as prescribed for the Sudras. Prohibitions were imposed on drinking of liquor, child marriage, Begari for the landlords etc. Their women folk were not permitted anymore to attend the markets to sell milk and ghee.

While the attempts were similar, the cause of sanskritisation for the Kurmi Mahatos of the Chotanagpur region and those of the Goalas, Ahirs and the Kurmis of North Bihar differ. While Singh (1978), Das (1984) hold the relative economic affluence of the adivasis gained through improved agricultural practices as the motive force for sanskritisation, Jha (1977) picks up the factor of getting rid of the socio-economic oppression of the upper caste zamindars as moving force behind the attempt at sanskritisation by the lower castes. This difference in the motive of sanskritisation is revealed quite clearly when he says,

“...it was the economic and social oppression rather than the economic prosperity that led the peasants of lower castes in general and Yadavas in particular in Bihar during early 1920s to start the process of sanskritising themselves.” (1977, p.557)

He views the sanskritisation drive of the lower castes, as an attempt to upgrade their caste status to the level of the oppressor zamindars on the expectation that on the basis of caste equality they can bring an end to the exploitation they are subjected to by the latter. He justifies it by establishing the inextricable link that existed between caste and class in early twentieth century Bihar where class exploitation continued under the coverage of caste based oppression.

The Kurmis of Chotanagpur at present, however, denies the viability of such a sanskritisation drive. To them it was a ‘conspiracy’ of a very tiny elite section comprised
of either the zamindars or the rich peasants of the Mahato community who actually proved to be successful agriculturists due to their large landholdings. To them the general Mahato people never aspired for the Kshatriya status. They assert their similarity with the adivasis on the grounds of language, culture, custom and religion and point out that it is a ploy of the ruling political and economic elites to divide the adivasis to destroy their solidarity and numerical strength. To satisfy the elites’ aspiration, they believe, a blunder has been done by the colonisers. Such a thesis of elites’ involvement has also been supported by Mahato (2008). He points out to the leading role played by some of the landowning and literate Kurmi families of Chotanagpur in the sanskritisation movement. They organized the Kurmi – Mahatos with the help of the Arya Samaj and Hindu Mahasabha who supplied the necessary myths in support of their claim to Kshatriya status. These organizations also played a significant role in the national political arena during the 1920s. Mahato finds out an important link between the sanskritisation drive of the Kurmi – Mahato elites and the national political dilemma prevailing in the early part of the 1920s, as he argues,

"At that time, the Hindu Muslim controversy between the Arya Samaj, Hindu Mahasabha and Hindu Mission on one side, and the Muslim League on the other, had sensitized the issue. The Bengali-Bihari-Oriya upper castes became their spokesmen and, since the Kudmi-Mahato elites joined the freedom struggle ‘en-masse’, the Government of India, under pressure from the Hindu upper castes, de-scheduled them in 1931 from the list of tribals…” (2008)

Besides the sanskritisation drive, what makes the Kurmi situation distinct is that just within a span of a few decades the same community began to disown their sanskritised social status. To analyse this one needs to have a very close look at the decades of exploitation, oppression and subjugation to which a majority of them have been exposed in the Chotanagpur plateau region from the early part of the twentieth century. Since then the area known at present as Jharkhand witnessed waves of capitalist developmental programmes. As the logic and consequences of such ‘development’ projects run everywhere, here too it has resulted in the devastation of the socio-economic and cultural life of the people of the region. The desperate rush of the capitalists to
appropriate the natural resources of this resource rich region has contributed little, if at all, to the all-round industrial growth of the region. The disproportionate thrush at industrial profit accumulation has not contributed to the development of agriculture either. Along with other communities of the region, the Kurmis have also become the victims of such an economic process. The resultant fall in agricultural income associated with the increasing problem of land alienation, most probably, prompted the Kurmis to unite with the adivasis in order to launch a combined struggle against the exploitation of capital private as well as public.

The mobilization of the Kurmi-Mahatos of Chotanagpur for sanskritisation and later on de-sankritisation bears a close resemblance with the mobilization of the Rajbansis of North Bengal. Both these reveal the recent trend of community mobilizations operating under the democratic body politique of India. Rajbansis are originally a tribe of the Koch stock. Both in literature and popular beliefs in North Bengal they are viewed as the descendants of the Cooch Behar royal family. But the Rajbansis, writes Karlsson,

“…have striven to discard any reference to the term Koch, and thus, both to the Koch Kingdom and to any relationship with the tribal people of the region. Instead Rajbansi intellectuals have traced their royal lineage to the purer ancient Kamboj dynasty in northwestern India.” (1997, p.236)

To unveil the cause that prompted the Rajbansis to create such a distance with the tribals of the region, one needs to look at the history and nature of colonial rule in North Bengal. The expansion of colonial infrastructure in North Bengal since the later period of the nineteenth century opened up several new avenues and possibilities. Job opportunities opened up in the tea industry, in government service, in education and in other related fields. Both the pre-colonial literate class and the newly educated middle class (by-product of the colonial education system) among the Rajbansis found that these opportunities were monopolized by immigrant upper caste Hindus who looked down upon the Rajbansis. This resulted in the Rajbansi elites’ organizing the so-called Rajbansi
Kshatriya Movement to bring themselves in equal platform with those of the upper caste Hindus. This led the Rajbansis to detach their ties with other tribes of the Koch stock. The Kshatriya movement began with the Colonial Census operations of the late 19th and early 20th centuries where Rajbansis were enumerated as equals of the Koch (who were classified as ‘tribal’ or ‘semi-tribal’). They emphasized the Aryan origins of their caste, which should be treated as Kshatriyas. As a mark of their Kshatriya status they started to observe the twelve days Sradh ceremony instead of the customary thirty days. At many places people started to wear the sacred thread. In a much similar fashion to the Goalas, Koeris, Kurmis etc. of North Bihar who attached the surnames like ‘Singh’, ‘Rai’ etc. to their surnames, the Rajbansi elites began to attach more Kshatriya like surnames like ‘Singha’, ‘Barman’, ‘Roy’ etc. to their names. Like the Kurmi – Mahato elites the Rajbansi elites also engaged themselves in rewriting their own history, creating myths to substantiate their caste superiority vis-à-vis the Koch tribes.

With the passage of time things have started to change. As the logic of colonial development goes everywhere, in North Bengal also it has appropriated whatever resources it had at its disposal. Moreover, under the influence of neoliberalism the exploitation of capital has compounded many times. Presently one can easily witness severe crunch in the opportunities thrown up by the expansion of colonial rule at its initial phase in North Bengal. The tea industry is perhaps the worst sufferers among all these. Amidst this changed economic scenario the mobilization pattern of the Rajbansis has also changed a lot. Karlsson quite succinctly describes the present situation when he argues,

“…with the recent Kantapuri or Uttarkhand movement against the Bengali dominance in North Bengal the Rajbansis now represent themselves as the true original settlers who want to re-establish their ancient kingdom In Assam, the Rajbansis have taken a further step and now call themselves Koch Rajbansis, and they have launched a movement demanding inclusion in the Scheduled Tribes list. In other words, being tribal (Koch) is no longer perceived as a stigma but as an asset in community mobilization.” (ibid. p.236)
Although the Rajbansi mobilization exhibits quite similar pattern to that of the Kurmi-Mahatos’ of Chotanagpur, but one can trace the differences too especially in the participation of the latter in the age old struggle for the liberation of the oppressed Jharkhandi sub-nationality. Collective mobilisation in the form of the Jharkhand Movement brought the Kurmis in the field of renewed interaction with other participating communities. The ethnic essence of the movement influenced the process of reconstruction of their collective identity. This process started with the invention, at times reinvention of their tradition. It has been argued that a section of the Kurmis inhabited the Chotanagpur region even before the arrival of the ‘early settlers’, the Mundas. Mahato (1994, p. 52) is of the opinion that, “…the Munda immigrants had compelled the Kurmis to move eastwards leaving their original settlements at Kurmgarh on the borders of Ranchi and Surguja districts.” To substantiate this claim Mahato cites Mehta (1981) who observes that according to the Kurmi tradition, it is said that after living for about 81 (Ekashi) generations at the original site of Kurmgarh, the Kurmi were divided into 83 (tirashi) factions, due to which they could not face the attack of one Risa Munda’s Pankhi Raj. Accordingly the Kurmis had to move further east and at present are found only in the districts of Ranchi, Hazaribagh, Dhanbad, Santal Parganas, Singbhum, Purulia, Midnapore, Bankura, Sundargarh, Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar. Apart from tradition there has been linguistic assertion as well. To uphold their ethnic identity the Kurmis brought into fore their linguistic distinctiveness. Kurmali, the spoken language of the Kurmis has almost ten million speakers and it is one of the dominant languages in Jharkhand region. To glorify the cause of their language the Jharkhand intellectuals claim that, “Kurmali may be the nearest form of language used in Charyapada.” (Basu 1994, p. 25) In the context of Jharkhand movement, where the issue of language has played an important role in the construction of ethnic identity, this assumes immense significance for the promotion and consolidation of the ethnic cause.

The common cause of economic exploitation and cultural oppression of the indigenous communities of Jharkhand by the exploiter outsiders (the Dikus) brought the Kurmi – Mahatos and numerous adivasi communities of Jharkhand on the same platform. The inter-community interaction within the space of collective ethnic mobilisation of the
movement, perhaps, has been instrumental for the redesigning of the Kurmi – Mahato identity along ethnic lines. Moreover, the nature and magnitude of collective mobilisation, signified by the vigorous reemergence of the movement in the early 1970s under the aegis of the JMM, also had its contribution. The emphasis on ethnic solidarity along with other dimensions infused such energy in the movement that increasingly led the participants to detach the stigma of backwardness attached hitherto with the status of ‘adivasi.’ This was certainly an important fillip for the reconstruction of ethnic identity of the Kurmi-Mahatos. On the face of such an aroused ethnic sentiment, the Kurmi – Mahatos contributed positively in the enhancement of the level of ethnic solidarity in Jharkhand movement. This has reached such an extent that the Kurmi- Mahatos came to be, “equated” writes P.P.Mahato (1994, p. 54), “with the tribal groups of the region, as is evidenced by their identification as Kurmi-Hor, akin to Santal-Hor etc. In the Hor – Diku dichotomy, the Kurmi – Mahatos were thus aligned with the tribals, being accepted by the Santals and Bhumij as Mitan (friend).” The claim of the Kurmi – Mahatos to be included in the list of Scheduled Tribes (S.T.) should be analysed in the background of such an elaborate social process of ethnic identity formation.

**Concluding Remarks**

Indigenisation, retrabalisation, desanskritisation or ethnicisation whatever might be termed, the reconstruction and reassertion of ethnic identity of the Kurmi – Mahatos should be traced within the parameter of the renewed Jharkhand movement since 1970s. In fact, the unity and solidarity of the Santals and the Kurmi - Mahatos has been the key behind the formation of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (J.M.M.) in 1973 which infused enough fresh blood to the otherwise decaying movement. Together they formed a viable social force that voiced the cause of liberation of the oppressed Jharkhandi sub-nationality in quite an effective fashion. It would perhaps be an oversimplification to reduce such a process of ethnic identity formation of the Kurmi-Mahatos with the rather opportunistic move to be included in the Scheduled Tribe list to obtain the benefits of protective discrimination. Sengupta (1980, p.665) quite aptly provides the justification as he argues, “The Jharkhand Movement has invested the tribal identity with prestige. The Mahatos have recently started demanding their inclusion in the scheduled tribes list – a
demand which was not raised earlier in spite of the fact that government extends many special privileges to scheduled tribes.” For the Kurmi-Mahatos it is purely an issue of reconstruction of ethnic identity within the space of collective mobilisation under the Jharkhand Movement in alliance with other ethnic groups. Such a heightened ethnic sentiment, perhaps, resulted in the renaming of the “Kurmi-Kshatriya Mahasabha” into “Adivasi Kudmi Samaj” in 1978. But the aroused solidarity did not last long. With the emergence of middle class elitism in the movement in the eighties, political factionalism, sheer opportunism and corrupt practices became apparent in the leadership which in due course frustrated the followers to a great deal. The solidarity of the ethnic and non-ethnic communities, which emerged as a result of the vibrant movement of the 1970s, got ruptured to a large extent. In such a grim situation how far the formation of the new state of Jharkhand on 15th November 2000 has been the consequence of this solidarity remains an issue to be debated. The movement, which regenerated with a promise to satisfy the unfulfilled aspiration of the oppressed Jharkhandi sub-nationality, was in a total state of despair on the eve of the new millennium. In such a situation the present demand of the Kurmi – Mahatos to be included in the list of S.T.s, perhaps, does not reflect the same aspiration and the concomitant identity assertion which brought them in the arena of struggle against the severe exploitation of capital in the early 1970s. Rather it may be directed more and more towards acquiring the economic benefits of reservation from the state. In this whole effort of collective bargaining, the distinct cultural identity of the Kurmi-Mahatos is being used instrumentally. This is clearly revealed from the opinion of one of the prominent leaders of the “Adivasi Kudmi Samaj,” who is not satisfied with the granting of O.B.C. status to them*. The reason he states for this is that among the O.B.C.s there are some relatively advanced communities and classes with whom the Kurmi-Mahatos will not be able to compete. If this is the reason of their demand for re-inclusion in the list of Scheduled Tribes, then it is more than clear that they are using their identity as a leverage to extract more and more economic benefits from the state. At the same time the recommendation of the state government of Jharkhand in November 2004 in favour of granting S.T. status to the Kurmi-Mahatos in the total absence of the collective

* The Kurmis in West Bengal are included in the list of recognized Other Backward Classes (O.B.C.) vide Notification No. 346-TW/EC dt.13.07.94
mobilisation that germinated the feeling of such ethnic identity among them may be another ploy of the ruling elites to divide the Jharkhandis to achieve narrow electoral success. The concurrent protest of the adivasis against the government’s recommendation in favour of the Kurmi – Mahatos, perhaps, serves the proof here.

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