

History of Panika Tribe In Madhya Pradesh

Dr. Aditi Pitaniya

Translator, Centre For Excellence, IGN Tribal University, AMARKANTAK (M.P.)

Abstract: PANIKA or PANKA as they are popularly called are the Dravidian people of Central India, spread over the states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Ironically, they had been granted different caste status ranging from tribe to OBC in each of these states which has been proven non-beneficial to their advantage. This is however officially proposed that the Panika be recognized as a Scheduled Tribe of Chhattisgarh and the proposal is under process by the central government. Panika tribal community is recognized as ST in the eight districts of Madhya Pradesh while in other districts, it is categorized as Other Backward Class (OBC).

1. Introduction

Panika is an important and unique tribe of India. Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh have their largest concentrations. Dense population of this tribe heavily resides in the areas of in (i) Chhatarpur, Panna, Rewa, Satna, Shahdol, Umaria, Sidhi and Tikamgarh districts, and (ii) Sevda and Datia tehsils of Datia district in Madhya Pradesh. Some branches of Panika also live in the districts of Mandla, Jabalpur, Dindori, Anuppur and Singrauli, the forests of Vindhya and Satpura ranges right from Amarkantak-the origin place of the River Narmada to Chhattisgarh especially in Bastar, Kanker, Dantewara, Dhamtari, Bilaspur, Korba, Sarguja, Korja, Durg, Kawardha etc. till some parts in eastern Madhya Pradesh. In addition to Madhya Pradesh, the Panika also live in Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh (especially in Sonbhadra and Mirzapur districts). According to the census of 2011, Panika have populations in the range of 47,806 to 81,335 in Madhya Pradesh.

The caste recognition of the Panika community is exceptional when it comes to Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. The community had been granted the status of Scheduled Tribe in 1949 by the Government of India. The Madhya Pradesh government maintained this status when it came into being in 1956. A Madhya Pradesh government

gazette publication in December 1971 derecognised the tribal status of Panika tribe in the entire Chhattisgarh region (then the state was part of Madhya Pradesh). In eight districts of Madhya Pradesh, Panika tribal community is recognized as ST while in other districts, it is categorized as Other Backward Class (OBC).

When Chhattisgarh came into being in November 2001, the state government continued with the practice of its parent state. The Panika tribal community in Chhattisgarh got the recognition of OBC. Though officially the people of Panika community had two separate divisions, the cultural relation however kept both the ends united.

The community has been struggling to rectify the error as the people of Panika tribe in both the states had similar lifestyle, traditions and culture. Many Panika organizations had been fighting for the cause since 1971, but neither the Government of India nor the Chhattisgarh government bothered to note down their grievances.

Although Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Raman Singh had assured the members that he would look into the matter and explore the possibilities of granting ST status to the community in the state. But no action had been taken on his announcement till now.

Due to the different linguistic, cultural and geographical environment, and its peculiar complications, the diverse tribal world of Panika tribe has been largely cut off from the mainstream. There are so many reasons as to why they were not given the status of an indigenous tribe in the entire state by the government when they truly deserve it. We shall discuss the similarities between their culture and traditions and other tribes of Madhya Pradesh so that any individual can have an insight into their world which reflects all the essential components of a tribal society.

2. Background

India is a fascinating country where people of many different communities and religions live together in unity. Indian Population is polygenetic and is an amazing amalgamation of various races and cultures.

It is impossible to find out the exact origin of Indian People. The species known as

Ramapithecus was found in the Siwalik foothills of north western Himalayas. The species believed to be the first in the line of hominids (Human Family) who lived some 14 million years ago. There are many diverse ethnic groups among the people of India. The 6 main ethnic groups are as follows;

1. Negrito
2. Proto - Australoids or Austriacs
3. Mongoloids
4. Mediterranean or Dravidian
5. Western Brachycephals
6. Nordic Aryans

2.1 Dravidians

According to Thompson, "The earliest known inhabitants of India are the Dravidians. There is no satisfactory evidence to show how and when they came into this country."

Dravidians knew farming and domesticated animals. They were the earliest people to build dams across rivers for irrigation. They constructed houses and fortifications. There is a possibility of village republic system, mainly governed by primitive petty chiefs as still found in tribal people. It was probably a matriarchial society. Under the Dravidian tradition, Mother with their children formed the nucleus of a settled and developed society. The caste system had not developed till then. The male members often went away from their huts either for hunting or fishing and mother kept children and thus occupied an important social status. A sort of tribalism was present in the Dravidian people and people grouped under small group each possessing its own totemism. Animals, trees and birds etc. occupied an important place in totemism which grew as a religion of the ancient Dravidian and Chalcolithic people.

These people were chiefly concentrated around South India. They have been believed to come before the Aryans. They have different sub-groups like the Paleo-Mediterranean, the true Mediterranean, and the Oriental Mediterranean. They appear to be people of the same stock as the peoples of Asia Minor and Crete and pre-Hellenic Aegean's of Greece. They are reputed to have built up the city civilization of the Indus valley, whose remains have been found at Mohenjo-daro and Harappa and other Indus cities.

The Dravidians or Tribes have distinguished physical characters like long heads, broad noses and dark complexions. They are usually of short stature. They were not completely uncivilized or barbarous in nature.

The Tribes have few food taboos, rather fluid cultural practices and minimal occupational specialization; while on the other hand, the

mainstream population of the plains has extensive food taboos, more rigid cultural practices and considerable caste-based occupational specialization. In the Hindu caste system, the Adivasis have no place. These indigenous people have their autonomous existence outside the mainstream. This led to the preservation of their socio-religious and cultural practices, most of them retaining also their distinctive languages. Common social practices like widow burning, enslavement, occupational differentiation, hierarchical social ordering etc. are generally not found in this tribe. Though there were trade between the Tribe and the mainstream society, any form of social intercourse was discouraged. Caste India did not consciously attempt to draw them into the orbit of caste society.

3. History

The diversity in the tribes across the state comes from differences in heredity, lifestyle, cultural traditions, social structure, economic structure, religious beliefs, language and speech. It's a known fact that due to the different linguistic, cultural and geographical environments; the diverse tribal world of Madhya Pradesh has been largely cut off from the mainstream of development.

In ancient times a large area was called Gondwana. The prevailing myths or folklore mentions various Gond forts and kings. On the basis of archaeology an opinion is formed, that there was a time when Gond community ruled a considerable area. Opinions differ on origin of the Gonds. Some scholars have opinion that they had come from south whereas others believe that their origin place is Amarkantak or Narmada region. On the basis of Gondi dialect their arrival from the south is confirmed.

It is a common belief that the Panika tribe always co-existed with the Gonds. Although their earliest history is scarce, as per the common folklore the original place of Panika is Panika-dih in Jagdalpur, Chhattisgarh. There existed the famous predecessor of Panika called Jagtu/Jagdu Panika who was believed to have indigenous knowledge like that possessed by Baigas. He used to mark his territory by means of indigenous mantras. Scholars believe that Gonds settled in Gondwana, now known as eastern Madhya Pradesh, between the 13th and 19th centuries A.D. Muslim writers described the rise of Gond state after the 14th century. Gonds ruled in four kingdoms (Garha-Mandla, Deogarh, Chanda, and Kherla) in central India between the 16th and 18th centuries. They built number of forts, palaces, temples, tanks and lakes during the rule of the Gonds dynasty. The Gondwana kingdom survived till late 16th century. They also gained control over

the Malwa region after the decline of the Mughals followed by the Marathas in the year 1690. The Maratha power swept into Gondland in the 1740s. The Marathas overthrew most of the Gond Rajas and Princes and seized most of their territory while some Gond zamindaris or estates survived until recently.

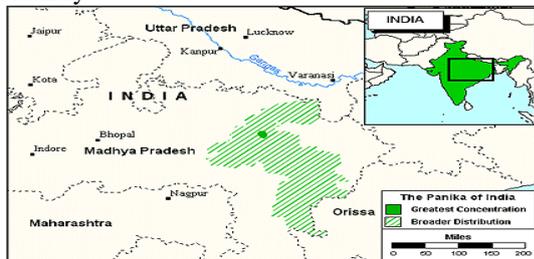


Fig.1: The Panika of India

4. Origin

Very little is known about the origin of the Panika. Although some sources say that the Panika are of Dravidian origin, others simply refer to them as "unclassified." The Panika tribes live primarily in the Shahdol division of Madhya Pradesh, central India. There are additional communities in the Maikal Mountains surrounding Madhya Pradesh. This community has lived among the historic Gond and Pathari like indigenous people for centuries.

According to their traditions and beliefs, the name Panika is derived from the Hindi term for water i.e. **Pani**. So they are believed to be a part of the clan which descended from water like the Hindu deities Brahma and Vishnu. As per another belief, which seems more practical, is that the term Panika is derivative of the Hindi word for plant leaf which is **Parn**. This tribal community was historically involved in the collection and utilization of leaves, bark etc. of forest plants for making plates (i.e. pattal and dona), mats, ropes and dressing purposes. Hence, they acquired the name **Panka or parn-ka** i.e. of plant leaf, which was later corrupted to the present form Panika. Their tradition was Music and Hunting. They were also involved fully in making dresses from plant fibres. But Dance, Party and Music were their life until some of them started farming.

Later on, during 14th-15th century A.D. a schism was formed in this tribe where a large section of the tribe adopted the teachings of Saint Kabir and hence formed the Kabirpanthi sect of tribe. It is said that a person called DhaniDharmdas basically a shaivaita became a follower of Kabir. He was a resident of Bandhavgarh region. He is the person who is responsible for converting first five people of Panika tribe as Kabirpanthi. This section is mainly concerned with the weaving of clothes like their preacher saint Kabir and renounced the

basic practices of drinking and hunting. But a huge amount of similarity can still be seen in various rites and rituals of both the sects.

So one can say that the Panika tribe is divided into two broad groups: the one being Kabirpanthi; it is the largest group and the other group **Sakta** which worships goddess Shakti. The Kabirpanthi follow the teachings of Saint Kabir. They avoid liquor and meat; therefore, they consider themselves purer and more advanced than the Sakta. The Sakta, who are keen to liquor and eat meat freely, are more tribal in nature. The Panika were once known among the tribes for their honesty. It was their distinct trait.

The Maikal Mountains consist of flat-topped plateaus that reach elevations of 2000 to 3000 feet. Different rivers have carved extensive basins in the soft rock formations of these mountains, and this is where the Panika have settled.

The Panika have farmed the fertile river basin area for times immemorial. Their principal crops include rice, wheat, chick-peas, soyabean, sorghum, corn, sesame, and mustard seeds. Their society is evolving and most of their children attend school. Some of the people even have fields, cattle, and farming steers. Many were employed as '**Kotwar**' or village messengers, village watchmen, forest guards, and teachers, while others are businessmen.

The Sakta Panika has been much more hesitant to settle on farms and begin raising cattle. They still rely heavily on hunting and gathering for survival. The traditional trade of cloth weaving by Kabirpanthi Panika is gradually becoming obsolete due to the rapid production of mill-made cloth in their area. Yet, there is still a high demand for the colorful hand-made garments, so the Kabirpanthi Panika continues to weave and trade their beautiful clothes.

The Panika live in multi-ethnic villages alongside the Gond, the Baiga, the Pathari and other tribes. They are organized into a number of groups, which are mostly named after various plants and animals. There is a strict prohibition of marriage within the same group, and girls are usually married at the right age.

5. Their beliefs

Hinduism was introduced to the Panika in the fourteenth or fifteenth century. The Sakta worships many different village deities; whereas, the Kabirpanthi have formed their own sect and have no faith in outward observances or idol worship. As observed they were never a part of the Hindu caste system.

There are also a great number of male and female deities and spirits which are worshiped by Panikas. They epitomize various natural features. It

is strongly believed that every hill, river, lake, tree, and rock is inhabited by a spirit. The earth, water, and air are also ruled by deities. All such deities shall be venerated and appeased with sacrifices and offerings according to the cause. These deities and spirits are often kind, but they can be whimsical, malicious, and prone to harming individuals who have broken a rule of the tribal code. The deities and spirits, especially the ancestor spirits, watch over the strict observance of the tribal rules and punish offenders.

The Kabirpanthi Panika is required to observe sanctity and purity in their daily lives and behavior. They believe that good behavior and meditation on the virtues of god are the methods of finding fulfillment. Those who are literate read their holy books, which contain the messages of Saint Kabir. Many illiterates are now learning to read and write.

The sacrifice ceremony on family occasions is popularly known as **Pujai** and is performed by the head of the family. Such ceremonies are performed at regular interval of 3 or 5 years. It entirely depends on the choice of an individual whether they want to offer animals like chicken, goat, etc. or keep it simple by offering pumpkin and coconuts. The Tribal villages usually have fortune tellers and psychic mediums who are unofficial intermediaries between the unknown paranormal world and humans. Like the other Tribals of India, Panika also believes that diseases and misfortunes are caused by evil spirits and upset deities. It is the task of the fortune tellers and psychic mediums to find about the cause behind any sickness or misfortune and the means to rectify it. If fortune tellers and psychic mediums can't be of any help, sorcerers must be employed. Tribals believe that through some magic formulas or devices Sorcerers can force any deity or spirit to carry out their orders. Psychic mediums are persons who easily fall into trances and are possessed by deities or spirits that forecast about a person. In the tribal world, Magic is not a foreign entity; it may be white or black depending on its usage and outcome. Panika also believe in the evil eye and witchcraft. Usually a leaf or leaves of the plant called Andapaan is advised to be kept as a shield against evil eye. A witch is a woman who brings sickness and death to the people by her evil power. If discovered, she is likely to face public humiliation and can even be expelled from the village or could be killed under extreme conditions.

6. Conclusion

In the present political situation the Panikas are, despite their numbers, politically powerless, which is partly because of the Tribal disunity but also because of their comparative lack of education

and drive, and their great poverty. Those few who are members of the legislative assemblies or even the national parliament (Lok Sabha) are either alienated from their tribal culture or easily manipulated by other politicians.

At present these are around 35-40 lakhs in India but their number varies according to the status granted by the Govt. of India as ST, OBC or General. This Tribe is facing degradation especially due to severe drinking problem as liquor manufacturing is duty free in tribal areas.

7. References

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