

# The Dehuri: In Search of an Identity



Calling itself the 'Dehuri', the Hill Khadia tribe, the hero of this tale, is in search of a space for itself in agrarian settings. Their confusions, struggles, perceptions of society and the desired role of intervention agencies constitute the body of the narration.

## Introduction

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**T**he Khadias belong to the Munda sub-group of the Austro-Asiatic languages-based ethnic group classification. They are sub-divided into three groups—the Hill Khadia, the Delki Khadia and the Dudh Khadia.

The Hill Khadias are also called the Pahari (meaning hill) Khadias, Savara/Sabar, they live in a forest and depend upon forest produce for their primary livelihood. They are listed as PVTGs (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups).

These traditional hunter-gatherers were displaced from the Similipal biosphere after it was declared a Tiger Reserve in 1973. The Hill Khadias are very few in number compared to other the tribes living in and around the biosphere. The dedicated development agency (formed by the government) named Khadia Mankdia Development Agency (KMDA), in 2010, placed their population at 1908. Jashipur block of Panchpeed sub-division has the highest population of Hill Khadias.

There are about six villages in the periphery of the Similipal biosphere, where the Hill Khadias have been rehabilitated. Earlier before being rehabilitated they used to live in caves or huts made out of *sal*

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## The other villagers (Ho, Bathudi and Santhal), gram panchayat officials and KMDA all say that the Khadias are not civilized, live like savages and the money spent on them is a waste

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(sorea robusta) branches; today, their chicken-coop, like-houses, constructed for them by the government), are more like ghettos.

The government has planned and implemented many development schemes for them, directly through the block the *panchayat* and KMDA. No project, however, has ever yielded the envisaged outcome. For example, the plans to involve the Khadias in agriculture or livestock-rearing have failed miserably because the people never adopted the practices taught to them by the officials of the various departments. Of course, the departments were also responsible for the failure because they did not supply material on time.

There were attempts to form women's Self-Help Groups (SHG); the women of the tribe, however, never attended meetings regularly. The tribals go into the forest for five to six months each year regularly; they dig tubers and collect honey for their own consumption and sale. The rest of the time they work for the villagers and the *gram panchayat* as manual labour. The only successful intervention by KMDA is the Hill Khadia residential

school. The school has brought education into the hamlet and now most of the young people can read and write. Not all the children enrolled in school attend school; however, they are now very familiar with television and other technologies.

The other villagers (Ho, Bathudi and Santhal), *gram panchayat* officials and KMDA all say that the Khadias are not civilized, live like savages and the money spent on them is a waste. The general sentiment is that they are people who have failed the government and the *panchayat*. Is that really so? Or is it that we lack the perspective to understand them and to support them in their idea of development? What does development really mean to them? To understand the question of development for them, one needs to first understand them and try to figure out their ideological stance and identity.

It is important to understand the fluidity of their identities, and to acknowledge their struggle as they search to position themselves in the new context of a tribal and mixed agrarian village, the balancing of their traditional life and livelihoods with the new opportunities,

and their attempts at creating a new identity while holding on to traditional values and ethics.

The new identity will emerge from the resistances (resistance, is the act of standing against power) of the Hill Khadia. They will first have to rekindle the fire of what it once meant to be a Dehuri (their old and much-revered identity). This phoenix-like reincarnation of a Dehuri is like the old riddle of the Ship of Theseus. If all the material used in the ship is changed, would it still remain the same ship? If the values, ethics, life and livelihood choices of these people are altered, would they still be Dehuri? Or would a political organization be required to assume the desired, evolving identity?

That might have its own constraints. History is never written for or by people in the present. It has its own version of truth and truth is layered with memories. Memory itself is as morphed as cultures are fluid. The interaction of the community with other societies and the introduction of education have brought new flavours and fluidity/mobility into play; all these have their own sets of merits and demerits. The phoenix, therefore, that is going

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to emerge from the ashes will most probably be a new one. Every time a reconstruction of this identity is attempted, a new Dehuri will emerge, different from the previous Dehuri and, yet, the same.

A quest needs to be undertaken to identify the sameness and the criticality of the commonality. This requires facilitation and an exploration of the world along with the community. It will mean first understanding its world-view and, then, looking at the changes in the villagers' lives from their perspective. This exploration of identity is not just an idea or a superficial exercise; it requires a deep engagement with the people, questioning their current realities, rummaging histories and deconstructing existing notions to arrive at a reality that will predominantly define their lives, livelihoods and be in congruence with their identity.

The exploration and support for this reconstruction is important for a facilitator or a development practitioner. The criticality of engagement as a facilitator is to navigate towards a 'singularity-agency' while valuing the multiple points of view. The subjective history they have narrated

remains largely uncontested but the current identity and the future they aspire to is very complex, and the multiplicity is very high. The individual agencies and the collective agency run parallel. ("The margins at which disciplinary discourses break down and enter the world of political agency," Spivak Reader).

The first and foremost task is to listen to them, identify their central argument and understand and accept their idea of themselves. This may have the potential to become their political stance and their political voice. With this understanding, we attempted to listen to the subaltern and we observed their resistances so as to give shape to their identity. (In postcolonial theory, the term subaltern describes the lower classes and the social groups who are at the margins of a society: a subaltern is a person rendered without agency by social status.)

*"Aame kichhi kahibu, aamaku Khadia kuha nahin; aame 'dehuri'."* (We will say something,, do not call us Khadia, we are 'Dehuri') said 20 people of the Hill Khadia tribe, Kumudabadi village, Jashipur block, Mayurbhanj, Odisha.

### **We will say something (*Aame kichhi kahibu*)**

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One summer morning of 2016, I went to Kumudabadi village with my colleague Soubhagya. The Hill Khadia hamlet is at the extreme end of the village, near the jungle on the most unproductive hillock of the village.

PRADAN (Professional Assistance for Development Action) and KMDA had tried to form SHGs with the people here but these groups never functioned for more than three months. KMDA had also given loans to the women, which has not been repaid for the last five years. Five people (three women and two men) attended the meeting and told us to come the next day.

The next day, almost 20 people gathered for the meeting. Most of them were women, who did not go to the forest that day in order to attend the meeting. This was contrary to what the villagers said about the Khadias never attending a meeting. We started to talk about their village, their livelihood and what they generally do in a day. We told them about ourselves. After an hour of interaction, they told us that they wanted to go to the

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jungle meet us again the following Friday.

They said, "You are one of the first people, who did not come and tell us to make a group, take a loan, or insurance, or do some livelihood although we are disappointed that you will not give us any grant. You talked to us like we are *manisha* (human beings); you wanted to know about us and told us about yourselves. We felt free and happy being with you, so we would like to meet again."

One old woman held our hands and said, "We are 'Dehuri' not 'Hill Khadia'. During the discussion, you said we are Khadia; but we are not Khadia." She added, "We are worshippers of the forest and nature, and that's why we are Dehuri. But the government and the people have named us Hill Khadia, which we do not like to be called."

This was very significant for me because I was hearing the voice of the subaltern. I was listening to their view about themselves. I was enthralled to be bestowed with a glimpse of 'resistance' by the oppressed.

**Do not call us 'Khadia' (*Aamaku khadia kuha nahin*)**

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Our discussion and exploration resulted in multiple meetings with them. One of the mythic stories (subjective history) that they narrated in the subsequent meetings is relevant in understanding how they became Khadia and why they despise being called Khadia.

Jamuna Dehuri narrated the legend: "Long ago, there was a territorial meeting conducted by all the tribes. Several instruments were placed in a row and each tribe was to select one instrument to determine their lives and livelihood. The Kolho selected the plough, the Santhal selected the bow, and the Khadia selected the axe, which can only be used to cut trees. Our elders were wise because they knew it is important to live in harmony with the forest, our mother nature, as Dehuri. The other tribes thought we were fools not to select an instrument that could have provided us land. From that day, we, Dehuris, have depended upon the forest. The forest is everything to us."

According to them, they are peaceful people and have never wanted any fight because their practices of being Dehuri restrain them from any violence. They substantiate this with the following story:

"More than 100 years ago, they used to live across the Similipal biosphere, where they found plenty of natural flora and fauna. Then the Kolho and the Santhal came there and forcefully evicted them from their lands. They used brute force to evict the Dehuris and converted their land into agriculture lands. This compelled the Dehuris to migrate farther into the deep core zones of Similipal. People interpreted their innocence as foolishness and their understanding of nature as a shortcoming. They started calling them Khadia and their identity as Dehuri gradually diminished. With the evolution of villages with multiple tribes in the buffer zone of Similipal, the Bathudi tribe took the responsibility of nature worshipping because the Khadias had migrated into the deep forest. Now, the Bathudi tribe (Naik) is known as Dehuri, or the worshipper of the village

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The older people say, "Our Dehuri soul is dying and our forefathers who shared the same roots of nature as those of the trees are no more. We've lost the skills and ability of the Dehuris, who could worship 'Athar Deuli (the forest God)' and the forest"

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sacred groves, and the real Dehuris have become Khadias."

The term 'gentrification' was first introduced by sociologist Ruth Glass in the 1960s to describe a trend that was transforming urban spaces in reference to the 'invasion' of a working class neighbourhood by wealthier 'gentry'. I find here, that the establishment of agrarian villages and the coerced migration of the Dehuri people into the deep forest may be seen as 'rural gentrification'; an invasion of agrarian tribes into the habitat of the hunter-gatherers.

### We are 'Dehuri' (*Aame Dehuri*)

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"Who is a Dehuri and what does it mean to be a Dehuri?" These were the two questions that we started exploring. In a tribe that no longer practices and owns the rights to worship, and in which the last worshippers died some 20 years ago, how can this question be answered by the existing generation?

The older people say, "Our Dehuri soul is dying and our forefathers who shared the same roots of nature as those of the trees are no more. We've lost the skills and ability of the Dehuris, who could worship 'Athar Deuli (the forest God)' and the forest."

We, in PRADAN, relied heavily on their narrations for information about their lives and history. They used to collect forest produce after worshipping and never harvested more than what was needed. Sometimes, they sold the produce and from that money managed their households. A Dehuri has the right to and knowledge of worshipping the Similpal forest and Athara Deuli. The wife of a Dehuri is usually called Dehuriani and her role is to assist her husband to arrange the items and the material required to worship Athara Deuli.



**Equipment a Dehuri uses: Bow and arrow, axe, climbing hook, and container.**

Traditionally, a Dehuri has a bow and arrow, an axe and a *gandra* (bag), required to collect forest produce. The Dehuris live off the income from the produce. Visiting the forest every day and protecting the forest is their duty. Saving the forest from fire is another responsibility. A Dehuri village has a worship place called the Jahira, where their Almighty lives and listens to all

the Dehuris. Trust and worship are their key ingredients to living a meaningful life.

The Bathudi now worship the forest and the Forest Department calls the Dehuri thieves and does not let them into their beloved forest. The Dehuri now have restricted entry into the forest. They feel like aliens in their new settlements and have no work to do. According to them, they do not fit here. They ask, "How can a fish survive without water and how can a Dehuri survive without Similpal?"

They are trapped and they oscillate like a pendulum between government facilities and schemes and their traditional beliefs. They are now slowly and inexorably taking on the identity of beneficiaries of government schemes and grants.

Exploring their skills and the needs of the village, I found that neither do they own the lands, nor do they know how to cultivate. They are not even skilled to practice any livelihood in agrarian villages. They work in the lands of the Kolho and the Bathudi, as agriculture labourers or as unskilled workers under MGNREGA to fill their stomach. When I look at them from the perspective of their rights as

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## Deprived of their rights and denied access to their own forest, there is a revolt of unfathomable magnitude simmering deep within their hearts although they are bound by their principle of non-violence

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human beings, their right to livelihood, access and control over forest, their constitutional rights and government entitlements, I find them far away from the desired scenario. The apathy of the government in involving them in governance and their own resistance have created a complex sub-optimal existence. They are the first beneficiaries of all egalitarian schemes; yet, they do not know what to expect from these entitlements (for example, Rastriya Swasthya Bima Yojana, Indira Awas Yojana, Atal Pension Yojana, drinking water project, Old Age Pension) or how to influence the system.

The oppression and coercion by external agencies for adopting established agrarian livelihoods, disallowing the histories of the tribals to be included in their children's education, the cutting off of ties with forest-based livelihoods in the name of conservation, the silencing of their views in the matter of forest and village, in one way or the other, forces the remaining hope in the governance to fade away.

Although in the first interaction they seemed content with the facilities they get from the government, 35 kg of subsidized rice per month does not seem enough food for the

hungry bellies and also does not compensate for the soul of the people whose strong heritage is marred and coerced to denounce their right as worshippers and protectors of the forest.

Deprived of their rights and denied access to their own forest, there is a revolt of unfathomable magnitude simmering deep within their hearts although they are bound by their principle of non-violence.

### Is it possible for a Khadia to be Dehuri today?

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“An identity is established in relation to a series of differences that have become socially recognized. These differences are essential to its being. If they did not coexist as differences, it would not exist in its distinctness and solidity. Entrenched in this indispensable relation is a second set of tendencies ...to congeal established identities into fixed forms, thought and lived as if their structure expressed the true order of things...Identity requires difference in order to be, and it converts differences into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty. (Identity/Difference, 64, William E. Connolly)

The quest of redefining and reinventing Dehuri with the new-age Khadia, who are now educated in government schools, and have now migrated and are living across India and are differently skilled (not as worshippers and protectors), as manual labourers is an uphill journey but a journey worth taking. The journey of carving a life of dignity, a movement for reforming the identity, enriched with past wisdom is very essential for this tribe. This is the much-needed intervention for their development; the essence of true development.

For now, the only solace that they are drawing and we can offer is:

*“Tume ajithu amaku Dehuri kahiba, amku val nagiba, tume val loka, ama katha tike bujha. (From today onwards, call us Dehuri. We will feel good. You are a good human being and you will understand us),”* says Amila Dehuri, Hill Khadia Hamlet, Kumudabadi village.

### Approach to Change

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As Freud argues, “The importance of free association is that the patients spoke for themselves, rather than repeating the ideas

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of the analyst; they work through their own material, rather than parroting another's suggestions." The approach of the facilitator is also based upon free association, where the subject needs to identify his/her current reality, based upon his/her own history and pan out the future course of action rather than parroting the ideas of the facilitator and that of the various intervening agencies. The path can only be sustainable if it is based upon open exploration and attempts to equality by making a collage of different realities.

The style of facilitation we adopted was to engage with and support this group of people, who were struggling to be identified as Dehuri once again, and to collectivize them into a group, creating, amalgamating, and critiquing the new identity of the Dehuri.

As facilitators, we were clear that we would not work like KMDA or the government because they were already doing their bit to provide door-step services to the people. The only aspect we tried to engage the people with was to form a political identity of the new Dehuri through awareness and consciousness. Through this, a group that would learn and

support each other to establish an identity would also emerge.

The first step was to understand their history and the story of their existing identity. The subaltern history as a space of difference is very important in understanding the violence and the struggles entangled in the creation of the existing identity. The relationship between a Dehuri and Dehuriani is very important because during rituals both have to perform specific tasks; if they do not perform these, nature would be angry that year. The result of such anger would be animal attack, poor rain, malaria and so on. These ritualistic practices are very important for the new age Dehuri.

Along with this, the call for modernization is also evident. The thin lines between greed and need are gradually becoming blurred. Traditional practices and the compulsions of being civilized denizens of an agrarian village run parallel and the modern Dehuri, each day, resists and negotiates these while creating her/his own identity.

The premises for exploration solidified into three aspects: a) the culture and practices of the

Dehuri in the past and now, along with efforts of the government in their development; b) how can cultures be reshaped and core values identified and kept intact, with education and modernization, and; c) the different gender roles and their evolution in this context.

The narratives of the subjects, from their own frames of reference, revolve around a few cornerstones that shape their identity, and which they would like to sharpen and bolster to establish a new identity.

### **Cornerstones**

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The cornerstones identified and prioritized by people (primarily, the second and third generations after rehabilitation) in reconstructing their identity as Dehuri are:

- a) Their relationship with the forest (Similipal)
- b) The opportunity to assert their rights and get the deserved entitlements
- c) Sustainable livelihoods
- d) Freedom to practice their tradition

The new Dehuri will live among the forests of Similipal where they will worship the Athara Deuli, will look for livelihoods out of the jungle, protect the forest from the timber mafia and check jungle fires

a) *Their relationship with the forest (Similipal):* The Dehuri is the steward of nature, who worships nature, protects it and harvests it in a way that nature rejuvenates easily (they do not kill all the bees of a bee hive because they know the remaining bees will make hives again for harvest). The new Dehuri will live among the forests of Similipal where they will worship the Athara Deuli, will look for livelihoods out of the jungle, protect the forest from the timber mafia and check jungle fires (The animals and plants are food for many big carnivores such as human

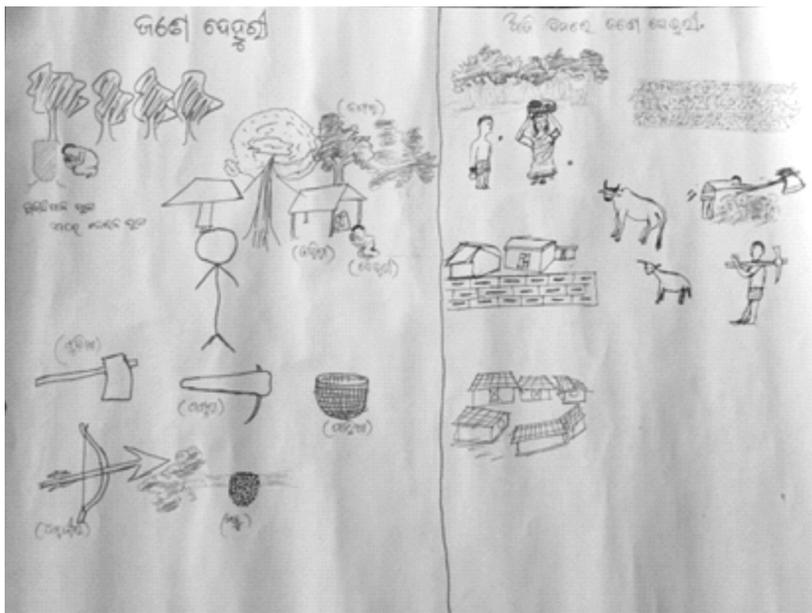
beings and they need to be protected from fire, so they can live and reproduce).

b) *The opportunity to assert their right and get their deserved entitlements:* As they are rehabilitated in the nearby agrarian villages, they want basic healthcare and timely food from the Public Distribution System (PDS). They have their land rights under the Forest Rights Act (FRA); although they have the land *Sironama* (official record), their land is not demarcated because of which they are unable to till or convert it into

plantations. Their homes were constructed in 1976, during the time of their rehabilitation. Despite many promises by the government, these are still not renovated. Their houses need repair. They want work under MGNREGA because this is the best wage-earning opportunity for them. They would also like their children to learn about the values and practices of the Dehuri in school.

c) *Sustainable livelihoods:* The new Dehuri would like to earn wages from MGNREGA, have some livestock and land for cultivation and learn the skills to grow crops (in their new identity, they visualize themselves as marginal farmers). Along with this, they would like to go to the jungle to collect Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) and want to live the life of farmers in their village. They see it as an integrated identity.

d) *Freedom to practice their traditions:* The new Dehuri would like to continue to visit the *Gunia* (village druid) and understand the medicines and practices of the druid; worship the forest for good rain; pay reverence to the jungle God before entering into the jungle and would like to be in nature



**Left: What it means to be a Dehuri. Right: The new identity of the Dehuri.**

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Counter hegemony is only possible when the wishful idea of reconstructing the identity of Dehuri becomes a political force, fueled by collective agency, based on the existence of a collective, a political movement resisting and negotiating for the new identity

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always. They would like to restrain their intake of liquor but not abstain totally because it is part of their culture. They want all the stakeholders and their neighbours to respect this.

### Counter hegemony of cornerstones

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It is noteworthy to assimilate: “We must have a strategy of ‘counter-power.’ We, the social movements and political movements, must be able to move into spaces of power at the local, national and regional level.” (quoted in Bello and Malig, 2006).

Counter hegemony is only possible when the wishful idea of reconstructing the identity of Dehuri becomes a political force, fueled by collective agency, based on the existence of a collective, a political movement resisting and negotiating for the new identity. The collective may not be a pre-requisite but may evolve along with the counter hegemony of identity whereby the movement will form the collective and the collective will enrich the movement. This process of becoming conscious requires

constant engagement with the Dehuris and understanding the structural causes of their oppression; to address them and thereby help them create their own identity. The historic and existing collectives and their action need to be explored for further engagement. The people are eager to form a new form of collective, which may be the platform to discuss, sharpen the central argument and start the creation of the new identity of the Dehuri, rising as a Phoenix.

This is a long-term investment and I have no idea how we can move towards it with so much other work to do and so much influence from other agencies. The existing mandate for us, in terms of volume and nature, is very different from what this engagement requires.

Although I personally see great alignment of this kind of work with our vision statement of a just and equal society, I fail to understand how, with all our other work, we will be able to channelize our energies for the much-coveted transformation. This may require a different kind of group formation because SHGs

may not be a suitable medium. These are yet to arrive at their own identity and are not yet ready to influence others about their political motives, which requires an incubation period; as we know, this incubation is a very time- and energy-consuming process whereas we are so tied up with external commitments and the zeal to grow big. The Dehuris constitute a very small population among the poor. Although their issues are unique, in terms of numbers, they are very few and I wonder if working with them will ever satisfy our aspirations of growth and expansion.

This puts forward new challenges and opportunities to work differently and to have a meaningful engagement with the community. Engagement with the Dehuris will sharpen us more as professionals and help us understand the different sections in the rural set-up and help us guide the community to address discriminations.

I am left with many questions and in search of some glimmer of hope.

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