

Passing the torch: An examination of Ancestor Veneration and its role in cultural heritage

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Abstract

Ancestor veneration is a phenomenon that can be observed in various cultures around the world, where individuals honor and pay tribute to their deceased ancestors. This practice has been recognized as a significant aspect of cultural heritage in the Birhor tribal society too, as it embodies the beliefs and values of a community, and helps to preserve their cultural identity over time. This paper aims to examine the role of ancestor veneration in cultural heritage from an anthropological perspective. It explores the ways in which ancestor veneration is practiced in Birhor tribal society, the cultural meanings and symbols associated with this practice, and its impact on the transmission of cultural knowledge from generation to generation. The paper argues that ancestor veneration serves as a mechanism for passing the torch of cultural heritage from one generation to the next, by connecting individuals to their cultural past and providing them with a sense of continuity and belonging. Furthermore, the paper highlights the ways in which ancestor veneration has adapted to changing social and cultural contexts, such as urbanization, and how it continues to evolve as a dynamic aspect of cultural heritage. Overall, the paper emphasizes the importance of understanding ancestor veneration as a critical component of cultural heritage and highlights the need for further research and documentation of this practice to ensure its preservation for future generations.

Keywords: Ancestors, veneration, culture, heritage, and continuity

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Introduction:

Throughout cultures worldwide, the souls of the departed resonate with profound meaning and influence. Ancestors are revered as guardians, bearers of wisdom, and links between the present and the past. Their significance stretches beyond the veil of death, as they safeguard traditions, cultural identity, and heritage passed down through generations. In the tapestry of tribal societies, ancestors symbolize the belief in life's continuity, binding the living and the dead, intertwining the present and the past.

Pioneering studies and captivating literature shed light on the captivating phenomenon of ancestral veneration. One such remarkable work is "The cult of Ancestors in African Traditional Religion" by Ige (2006). Exploring African cultures, Ige uncovers the pervasive practice of ancestral veneration explains that ancestors are considered powerful spiritual beings who act as intermediaries between the living and the divine realm. They are honored, respected, and

invoked for guidance, protection, and the preservation of cultural values. Ancestor veneration is seen as crucial for maintaining harmony within the community and upholding social and moral codes.

Delving further, "Under the Ancestor's Shadow: Chinese Culture and Personality" by Hsu (1971) embarks on a journey through Chinese culture and explores the practice of ancestor veneration. Hsu explains that ancestor veneration is deeply rooted in Chinese society, where ancestors are seen as guardians and providers for their living descendants. The practice serves multiple functions, such as maintaining social order by reinforcing family hierarchy and transmitting cultural values across generations. Ancestor veneration extends beyond the nuclear family, connecting extended family members and fostering a collective identity. Overall, Hsu's study highlights how ancestor veneration influences Chinese culture and shapes individual and societal behavior.

According to Hertz (1960), ancestor worship plays a significant role in primitive religions, specifically in relation to death rituals. Ancestor worship involves the reverence and commemoration of departed ancestors based on the belief that their spirits continue to have an active presence and influence in the lives of their living descendants.

Ancestor worship serves multiple important functions within primitive religions. Firstly, it helps maintain a connection with the deceased ancestors by engaging in rituals and ceremonies dedicated to their honor. By offering prayers and making offerings, such as food and symbolic objects, the living seeks to establish communication and receive guidance from their ancestors.

Intricately woven within the social fabric, ancestor worship fosters social cohesion within the community. By collectively participating in rituals and ceremonies, community members reinforce a shared sense of identity and cultural heritage. These practices often involve the entire community, strengthening social bonds and a sense of belonging.

Kendall (1984) explores the role of ancestor worship and animal symbolism in folklore and literature. In her work, "The Serpent and the Swan: The Animal Bride in Folklore and Literature," Kendall emphasizes the connection between ancestral spirits and animal spirits. She examines how animals are used as metaphors or manifestations of ancestral presence and wisdom. Through a comprehensive analysis of folktales, legends, and literary works, Kendall uncovers the significance of animal symbolism in depicting the interaction between ancestral spirits and the natural world.

Ancestor worship involves the veneration of deceased ancestors and their continued influence on the living. Kendall reveals that in many cultural traditions, animals hold symbolic meanings and are believed to embody the essence or attributes of ancestral spirits. By studying narratives that depict animals as messengers, guides, or embodiments of ancestral power and knowledge, Kendall showcases the profound connection between ancestral spirits and animal spirits in folklore and literature.

These illuminating studies converge on a central theme: the veneration of ancestors transcends cultural boundaries, permeating societies across time. It operates as a social compass, regulating behavior, fostering cohesion, and imbuing life with historical continuity and identity. Embedded within the fabric of each society, ancestral practices interweave religion, politics, and social institutions in a harmonious dance.

As the echoes of ancestral worship resound, this research unearths the profound and enduring influence of departed souls. It peels back the layers of human culture, revealing how ancestral veneration shapes social dynamics, preserves heritage, and binds the living to their forebears. Step into this captivating exploration of ancestral realms, where the past breathes life into the present and the whispers of ancestors guide the way.

Method and Methodology:

Intriguing insights into the world of Birhor tribal culture have been uncovered through extensive fieldwork conducted in Jhargaon, a vibrant village within Chhattisgarh's Jashpur district. Adopting a meticulous three-phase approach encompassing preparatory work, data collection, and rigorous analysis, this research sheds light on the ancestral practices of the Birhor community.

Employing a total enumeration method, data was gathered from 13 carefully selected households during the data collection phase. A comprehensive blend of qualitative techniques was employed, combining participant observation, in-depth interviews, and structured surveys to capture the rich tapestry of beliefs, rituals, and cultural significance associated with ancestor veneration.

Guided by a constructivist paradigm, this research acknowledges the dynamic interplay between individuals, their beliefs, and the social context that shapes them. By employing both inductive and deductive approaches to data analysis, novel themes and profound insights have been unearthed, enriching our understanding of the ancestral customs within the Birhor tribe.

Respecting the cultural norms and traditions of the Birhor community, ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research journey. Informed consent was diligently sought from participants, ensuring their voices were heard while maintaining strict confidentiality and anonymity. This research endeavors to present an objective and unbiased account, free from researcher bias.

However, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations within this study. Cultural restrictions surrounding the researcher's gender posed a constraint during data collection, as rituals and practices during the researcher's "moon time" were excluded. Nonetheless, every effort was made to ensure the comprehensive coverage of ancestral practices through alternative means. Additionally, the temporal scope of this research is confined to the present, thus not capturing potential future developments in the practice of ancestor veneration.

Ancestor Veneration: Unraveling the Tapestry of History and Culture:

As Clifford Geertz (1973), a prominent anthropologist, asserts, "Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun". Ancestors contribute to the web of significance, embodying the historical experiences and collective wisdom of a community or society. Ancestors create a profound bond between individuals and their cultural heritage through the transmission of stories, rituals, and artifacts. This connection nurtures a sense of belonging and instills pride within individuals, while also serving as a vital link to the past. By anchoring individuals in their cultural roots, ancestors shape their present experiences and influence their future paths.

Embedded in the eastern realms of India, the Birhor tribe cherishes its indigenous heritage. Within their cultural tapestry, a profound respect for ancestors weaves a vibrant thread. To the Birhor people, ancestors are not forgotten echoes of the past but spiritual beings whose influence resonates in daily life, offering blessings, guidance, and protection. Ancestor veneration finds its expression in a tapestry of rituals, beliefs, and customs within the Birhor community. Communal gatherings reverberate with prayers, melodies, and dances dedicated to ancestral spirits, forging an ethereal bond. These rituals cultivate a spiritual ambiance, nurturing a profound connection with the ancestral realm.

In diaspora communities, such as African diasporic religions like Vodou and Santeria, practitioners make offerings to honor their ancestral spirits and seek their guidance (Murphy, 2011). In homage to their forebears, the Birhor tribe also engages in ancestral offerings. Visiting sacred gravesites or designated places, they tenderly present food and symbolic items, a tangible expression of gratitude and reverence. Offerings serve as a means of sustaining and nourishing the spiritual well-being of ancestors (Hayden, 2014). Through these offerings, the Birhor tribe nourishes the spirits of their ancestors, perpetuating a cycle of honor and respect. This practice symbolizes filial piety and expresses gratitude to the ancestors for their guidance and protection.

Beyond mere rituals, the practice of ancestor veneration serves as a vessel for cultural preservation and intergenerational knowledge transfer. Guided by their elders, the Birhor tribe embraces the power of oral tradition, relaying tales of ancestral triumphs and legends. Through these stories, history is preserved, and cultural heritage finds its rightful place in the hearts of younger generations. Amidst the birthing dawn of the Birhor tribe's ancestral rituals, a profound connection thrives. Here, roots are nurtured, cultural identity is celebrated, and the echoes of the past breathe life into the present. Embodied in their customs, the Birhor people embody a timeless bond, where reverence for ancestors weaves the fabric of their existence.

Ancestral Threads Unraveled: Delving into Birhor Beliefs and Rituals

Ancestral reverence and the belief in the interconnectedness of generations have long shaped human societies, with practices such as ancestor worship providing a means to honor and engage with ancestral spirits. Shedding light on the profound psychological and emotional impact of ancestral influences, Anne Ancelin Schützenberger's book "The Ancestor Syndrome: Transgenerational Psychotherapy and the Hidden Links in the Family Tree" (1998) delves into the intricate web of intergenerational transmission of trauma and unresolved issues. In her insightful work, Schützenberger explores how rituals and beliefs associated with ancestor worship can serve as powerful tools for healing and comprehending these deeply ingrained patterns. The study of ancestor worship, as explored by Schützenberger and the examination of Birhor beliefs and rituals, collectively illuminate the diverse and profound ways in which ancestral reverence and the interconnectedness of generations shape human societies and provide insights into the psychological, emotional, and cultural significance of honoring and engaging with ancestral spirits.

The exploration of Birhor beliefs and rituals related to ancestor veneration offers profound insights into the cultural practices of this indigenous community. These customs provide a glimpse into the deep-rooted reverence and connection that the Birhor people hold for their ancestors. By studying these beliefs and rituals, researchers gain a deeper understanding of the significance of ancestral veneration within the Birhor tribe. The Birhor tribe of India holds a deep reverence for their ancestors, whom they regard as spiritual beings encompassing wisdom and power. Known as "Purkha" or "Purwaj," these revered ancestors are believed to actively influence and guide the lives of the Birhor people, offering invaluable protection and guidance.

In their commitment to honoring the spirits of their ancestors, the Birhor tribe follows specific rituals. Upon the passing of a community member, they embark on a series of ceremonial practices to pay homage. One such ritual involves destroying the "chulha," the cooking stove, as a symbolic gesture. The Birhor believe that preparing food in the home after death would cause discomfort to the spirits of their ancestors, and the enticing aroma could hinder the departure of the soul from the earthly realm. For twelve days following a death, the Birhor refrain from preparing or consuming *mahua drink* (alcohol) or meat, opting instead for simple meals. Each day, they dutifully offer plain food to the deceased ancestor under a *peepal* or *bargad* tree, without fail, for thirteen days. This act is rooted in the belief that their ancestors roam their familiar surroundings, seeking sustenance. By providing food and water, the Birhor aim to ensure the well-being and contentment of their ancestral spirits. Neglecting these offerings could potentially anger the ancestors, causing them to refuse to reside with the family after death.

On the thirteenth day, a group of kinsfolks, typically consisting of 5-6 individuals, gather beneath the designated tree for a ritual known as "*Bandhu Pukarna*." In this poignant ceremony, they call upon the name of the departed ancestor, inviting their spirit to dwell permanently in the ancestral house and bestow blessings upon the family. As their voices rise in unison, carried by the gentle breeze, the Birhor community eagerly awaits a sign from the natural world. They seek validation, a subtle affirmation that their beloved ancestors have accepted their invitation. For when the wind whispers through the leaves or bird's chorale their melodies, it is believed to be the ancestors' gentle response, a testament to their agreement to dwell alongside their living descendants. However, if nature remains silent, without a rustle of wind or a harmonious symphony of bird song, the Birhor community knows that their approach must be revisited. With unwavering patience and utmost politeness, they will make another attempt, adjusting their invitation with greater care. This sacred custom reveals the profound connection between nature and culture within the Birhor society, emphasizing the harmonious relationship they maintain with the natural world. In this poignant ceremony, the Birhor people exemplify the tender interplay between their ancestral heritage and the rhythms of the natural realm. They embrace the notion that their ancestors, like the wind and the birds, are entwined with the fabric of existence. Through patience, reverence, and a deep sense of cultural understanding, the Birhor community fosters a profound relationship with their departed ancestors, ensuring their eternal presence within their ancestral home.

This ritual not only showcases the Birhor people's unwavering devotion to their ancestors but also underscores their symbiotic relationship with nature. It is a testament to their profound understanding of the interconnectedness of all living beings, and their belief that in honoring their ancestors and harmonizing with the natural world, they can perpetuate a cycle of love, respect, and spiritual connection. As the sacred bond between the Birhor community and

their ancestors is reaffirmed through the rituals of "Bandhu Pukarna," the echoes of their ancestral heritage resound through the generations. Their unwavering dedication to inviting their ancestors to reside in their homes exemplifies the depth of their cultural identity and their commitment to preserving the timeless traditions that unite them with their roots. In this dance of reverence and patience, nature becomes the conduit through which the spirits of the departed ancestors find their eternal place among the living.

Ancestral Sanctum: Birhor's Sacred Connection with Ancestors

Within the intimate confines of their homes, the Birhor tribe upholds a timeless tradition of ancestral veneration. Here, heartfelt prayers and offerings are tenderly presented, as the Birhor seek the blessings and guidance of their revered ancestors. Deep within their homes, a sanctuary known as "*Bheetar*" beckons. This innermost room holds a sacred aura, off-limits to outsiders, exclusively accessible to the family. After the culmination of twelve days of specific rituals for the departed soul, a momentous invitation awaits the ancestors. Birhor families extend a heartfelt welcome, beckoning their beloved ancestors to dwell within the hallowed walls of the *Bheetar*, showering their living generations with blessings. In Jashpur, the Birhor take great care in ensuring the sanctity of the *Bheetar* room. They meticulously reserve this sacred space exclusively for their ancestors. Within these walls, precious possessions find refuge, protected under the watchful eyes of the ancestral spirits. The Birhor firmly believe that their ancestors safeguard their treasured belongings from harm, surrounding them with an invisible shield of protection. Every day begins with a sacred offering. As the first meal of the day is prepared, it is reverently presented to the departed ancestors. The head of the family, having bathed and purified, bestows worship upon the ancestral spirits, seeking their continued presence and guidance. While photographs of ancestors are not a compulsory feature, some are lovingly displayed, their presence evoking cherished memories. Additionally, idols and photographs of Hindu deities grace this sacred room, a testament to the intertwining of ancestral reverence and spiritual devotion. However, it is important to note that certain restrictions apply to the *Bheetar*. Menstruating and pregnant women are respectfully asked to refrain from entering, as the Birhor believe in their temporary state of pollution during this phase. They hold the belief that offering food to their departed ancestors during these times may anger the ancestors, potentially leading to adverse consequences for the unborn child. This cautionary practice, though rooted in ancient traditions, serves as a means of protecting the well-being of both mother and child.

In observing these restrictions, the Birhor community demonstrates their deep-seated respect and belief in the interconnectedness of the physical and spiritual realms. It is through these customs that they strive to maintain harmony and ensure the blessings and protection of their departed ancestors. By navigating these ritual intricacies, the Birhor community preserves the sanctity of their ancestral worship, honoring their lineage while navigating the delicate balance between tradition and practical considerations. Their steadfast commitment to these customs reveals their profound respect for the interplay between the spiritual and earthly realms, fostering a sense of continuity and reverence for their ancestral heritage.

In essence, the Birhor harmoniously unite their revered ancestors with the divine. Within the *Bheetar*'s hallowed walls, ancestral spirits find solace alongside Hindu gods and goddesses, revered as divine entities themselves. This profound amalgamation symbolizes the Birhor's unyielding devotion, an eloquent testimony to their unwavering commitment to honor and revere their ancestors as divine entities. The ancestral sanctum of the Birhor stands as a testament to their unbreakable bond with their forebears. Amidst the sacred artifacts and heartfelt rituals, the Birhor forge an eternal connection that transcends time and space. Through the reverberating echoes of their ancestral sanctum, the Birhor breathe life into their heritage, preserving the wisdom, guidance, and blessings of their revered ancestors for generations to come.

In the heart of the Birhor community, a radiant celebration known as "*Bira Utsav*" or Ancestor Festival takes center stage (Singh, 2020). This cherished ritual unites the Birhor tribe in a joyous gathering, where prayers, rituals, and offerings are offered in homage to their esteemed ancestors. The Ancestor Festival serves as a vibrant tapestry that weaves together a profound sense of community and cultural identity.

The Birhor people's reverence for their ancestors extends beyond the grand Ancestor Festival. They also honor their forebears on special occasions such as *Fhagun*, *Nava Khai*, and *Diwali*, recognizing the potential for ancestral

blessings and fortune. During *Fhagun*, as the aroma of *Mabua* fills the air, the Birhor gather the fruit and create a divine liquor, offered alongside coconut, incense, rice, and delectable chicken meat. They believe this lavish feast pleases their ancestors, who in turn bestow blessings upon the younger generation, shielding them from malevolent forces.

Similarly, during *Nawa Khai*, the Birhor mark the harvest season's arrival with utmost gratitude. They offer the first fruits of their labor, carefully mixing *chamal* (rice) with *gud* (sweet jaggery), symbolizing the fusion of their crops' success with ancestral protection. By presenting this bountiful offering to their ancestors, they firmly believe their agricultural endeavors will flourish under their watchful gaze.

Even during the cherished festival of Diwali, the Birhor demonstrate their unwavering devotion to their ancestors. In addition to worshipping deities, they extend their reverence to the gentle creatures integral to their livelihood—the *bail* (ox) and *bakri* (goat). Through heartfelt prayers, they beseech their ancestors to safeguard their cherished animals, who play an essential role in their daily lives.

These captivating rituals manifest the Birhor's deep-rooted connection with their ancestral spirits. Their fervent celebrations, steeped in tradition and profound belief, pay homage to the wisdom, guidance, and protection bestowed upon them by their ancestors. The resounding echoes of their rituals and offerings resonate through the Birhor community, perpetuating a legacy of ancestral reverence that remains eternally vibrant.

These beliefs and rituals surrounding ancestor veneration play a crucial role in preserving cultural identity and transmitting ancestral knowledge within the Birhor tribe. The Birhor people pass down oral traditions and folklore that recount the stories and wisdom of their ancestors. This oral transmission ensures the continuity of their history and cultural heritage.

The exploration of Birhor beliefs and rituals related to ancestor veneration provides a deeper understanding of the cultural practices and values of this indigenous community. It underscores the importance of ancestral veneration in maintaining cultural identity, fostering a sense of connection, and preserving the rich heritage of the Birhor tribe.

The Vital Role of Elders: Transmitting Ancestral Knowledge and Traditions

Within the Birhor community, elders play a crucial role in the preservation and transmission of ancestral knowledge and traditions. Through their wisdom, experiences, and oral storytelling, they serve as custodians of the rich cultural heritage of the tribe.

According to Das and Mohanty (2020), the Birhor tribe deeply respects and reveres their elders, recognizing them as the keepers of ancestral wisdom. Elders possess a wealth of knowledge regarding the customs, rituals, folklore, and traditions passed down through generations. They hold the key to understanding the intricacies of Birhor culture and its connection to their ancestors.

Through intimate interactions and oral traditions, elders impart their wisdom to the younger generations. They share tales of the tribe's origins, historical events, and ancestral stories that provide valuable insights into Birhor identity and cultural practices. This oral transmission of knowledge ensures the continuity of ancestral traditions and strengthens the collective memory of the community. Elders also serve as role models, embodying the values and principles that define Birhor culture. Their actions and behaviors exemplify the deep-rooted respect for nature, community, and ancestral spirits. By observing and learning from their elders, younger Birhor individuals internalize these cultural values, contributing to the preservation of their heritage.

Furthermore, the elders' guidance extends to the participation and instruction of younger community members in rituals and ceremonies. They play an integral role in teaching the proper practices, symbolism, and significance of ancestral rituals, ensuring the adherence to traditional customs (Kujur, 2022). This hands-on approach fosters a deeper understanding and appreciation of ancestral traditions among the younger generation.

The elders of the Birhor community hold a vital position in preserving and transmitting ancestral knowledge and traditions. Their role as custodians of wisdom and cultural heritage ensures the continuity of Birhor identity and

practices. Through oral storytelling, mentorship, and active engagement in rituals, elders pass down the ancestral legacy, instilling a sense of pride and continuity within the Birhor tribe.

During the fieldwork, one of the most common stories of their great great ancestors which many of the participants recite is the story of their warrior ancestor “Dindabeer” and the story goes like this:

Dindabeer: The Legendary Guardian of Jhargaon Village

“Deep within the mystical hills of Jhargaon village, a tale of bravery and reverence unfolds. In the annals of history, a servant named Dindabeer emerged as a powerful and kind-hearted figure, capturing the hearts of the people with his unwavering acts of compassion. However, his growing popularity incited envy within the heart of the Jashpur King, leading to a treacherous plot that would forever etch Dindabeer's name in the folklore of the region.

Dindabeer, known for his incredible strength and unwavering dedication to aiding others, served as a loyal servant in the court of the Jashpur King. His humility and kindness endeared him to the villagers, who sought his assistance for their troubles and tribulations. Dindabeer's benevolence knew no bounds as he selflessly aided the needy, his spirit echoing through the mountains he called home. As Dindabeer's popularity continued to soar, whispers of admiration for the servant's noble deeds reached the ears of the Jashpur King. Consumed by envy and threatened by the growing affection the villagers harbored for Dindabeer, the king concocted a malevolent plan to rid himself of his rival.

Under the king's command, a group of wild elephants was unleashed upon Jhargaon village, intended to instill fear and dismantle Dindabeer's revered status. The villagers, unaware of the impending danger, were suddenly confronted with a stampede of enormous proportions. News of the impending elephant attack reached Dindabeer's ears, and without a moment's hesitation, he donned his armor, armed himself with determination, and raced to the defense of his beloved village. As the rumbling footsteps of the wild elephants shook the earth, Dindabeer stood fearlessly in their path, prepared to face the onslaught alone. With unyielding strength and unwavering resolve, Dindabeer engaged the colossal creatures in a battle of epic proportions. His mighty blows echoed through the hills as he valiantly protected the village from imminent destruction. The clash between man and beast reverberated throughout the land, a testament to Dindabeer's courage and unwavering dedication.

The villagers watched in awe as Dindabeer's indomitable spirit turned the tide. The wild elephants, overpowered by his valor, retreated in defeat. Their footprints forever etched upon the hills of Jhargaon village served as a poignant reminder of the battle that had unfolded. From that day forward, the people of Jhargaon village revered Dindabeer as a guardian and ancestor who had valiantly protected their lives. Every five years, they gather in a grand celebration to honor his memory, a testament to the enduring power of his selflessness and bravery.

The story of Dindabeer, the servant who transformed into a legendary guardian, is a captivating folktale that illustrates the triumph of compassion and valor over envy and treachery. His selfless act of defending the village against the wild elephant attack forever etched his name in the hearts of the people of Jhargaon. This awe-inspiring tale resonates as a testament to the enduring power of courage and the veneration of ancestral heroes in the folklore and cultural heritage of the region.”

Through the lens of this captivating story, one can unveil the significance of ancestor veneration in passing the torch of cultural heritage. It argues that ancestral reverence serves as a sacred mechanism, bridging individuals to their cultural past, and nurturing a sense of continuity and belonging. The ancestral heroes become beacons of inspiration, their legacy guiding future generations on the path of cultural preservation.

Just as Dindabeer protected the village, ancestor veneration shields cultural traditions from the onslaught of time. By honoring and seeking guidance from their ancestors, individuals forge a deep connection to their roots, weaving a tapestry of shared identity and values. This torch of cultural heritage is passed down, empowering communities with a sense of pride, cohesion, and resilience.

As the people of Jhargaon gather every five years in a grand celebration during the Sarhul festival to honor Dindabeer's memory, the essence of ancestor veneration radiates through the hills. Their devotion breathes life into the research paper's argument, underscoring the transformative power of ancestral reverence. The torch of cultural heritage illuminates the way forward, ensuring that the vibrant tapestry of traditions remains alive and vibrant for generations to come.

The participants also recited some folksongs in which they are praising their dead ancestors and they usually sing this song for their small kids and tell them the story of their brave dead ancestors:

*Purani Pahadiyo, purwajo baase,
Aamaaz bhare, Pradesh me chaye
Vijay or prem ki kahaniya sabke samne,
hamare geeto me, sun jaye
Purwajo ki goonj, hawa me bisraye,
Aatma nirdeshit kare, bridaya shant paye
geeto ke madhyam se, samaanit howe,
Birhor purwajo, sadev Jeevan paye*

The participants reported that this folksong speaks of their ancestors who dwell in the ancient hills. Their presence is felt through their resonating voices that reverberate throughout the region. The lyrics convey the tales of their victories and expressions of love, which are retold and cherished in our folksongs. The chorus emphasizes the echoes of our ancestral heritage, gentle whispers carried by the breeze, serving as a guiding force for our spirits and bringing a sense of inner peace. Through the medium of songs, we pay tribute and honor the everlasting memory of our Birhor ancestors, who continue to thrive in our hearts and minds. The folksong celebrates their enduring legacy and the profound connection we share with them.

The accounts shared by the participants provide a glimpse into the profound reverence and deep connection that the Birhor tribe holds for their ancestors. The folksong serves as a testament to the enduring legacy of their ancestral heritage, encapsulating the victories, expressions of love, and cherished tales that have been passed down through generations. The resonating voices of their ancestors, echoing through the hills, serve as a constant reminder of their presence and guidance in their lives. Through the medium of songs, the Birhor community pays homage to their ancestors, honoring their everlasting memory and nurturing the bond that transcends time and space. The celebration of their ancestral legacy reinforces the significance of ancestral veneration as a vital and enduring aspect of the Birhor cultural identity.

Evolution of Ancestor Veneration: Adapting to Changing Times in Birhor Cultural Heritage

Urbanization has had a significant impact on the ritual patterns of tribes, leading to notable changes in their traditional practices. As tribes' transition to urban environments, they encounter new social, economic, and cultural dynamics that influence their ritual traditions.

One of the changes resulting from urbanization is the spatial constraint. In urban areas, tribes often face limited living spaces, which can impact their ability to perform rituals that require ample room. As a result, tribes may adapt their ritual patterns to fit within the confined spaces, opting for more condensed or simplified versions of their traditional practices (Nath, 2019). Some participants who are working as migrant labours shared a unique perspective on maintaining ancestral connections. Due to the constraints of small living spaces and constant migration, the traditional concept of the "Bheetar" is not feasible for them. Instead, they adapt their practices by keeping idols and photographs of their beloved deities in their bedrooms. It is during their worship of these divine figures that they invoke the memories of their deceased ancestors and offer prayers for their well-being, happiness, and prosperity. In this way, the participants intertwine their reverence for God and Goddess with the remembrance and honoring of their ancestral lineage. Despite the challenges of their transient lives, they find solace and a sense of continuity through this adapted form of ancestral veneration.

Urbanization also brings about time constraints. The fast-paced urban lifestyle often leaves little time for elaborate rituals. Tribes may modify their rituals to be more time-efficient while still maintaining the essence and significance of their traditional practices (Sharma & Singh, 2020). During the interviews, the Birhor community members shared the challenges they face in finding sufficient time to pay systematic homage to their deceased ancestors on a daily basis. The demands of their work often require them to prioritize efficiency and timeliness, as delays could result in

the loss of their daily wages. As a result, their prayers to their ancestors are often condensed, yet heartfelt, as they express their gratitude and seek blessings for their well-being.

However, the participants emphasized that during special occasions such as festivals or community feasts, they make it a point to devote dedicated time and attention to honoring their ancestors. These gatherings provide an opportunity for the entire community to come together, including the living elders, to pay proper homage to their departed loved ones. It is during these moments that the rituals and customs associated with ancestral veneration are meticulously observed, allowing for a deeper connection with their ancestral heritage.

Despite the challenges they face in their daily lives, the Birhor community continues to hold their ancestors in high regard and prioritize their remembrance. Their efforts to uphold ancestral traditions during festive gatherings demonstrate the enduring importance of honoring their roots and preserving their cultural heritage.

Another change stems from the exposure to diverse cultural influences in urban areas. Tribes interact with individuals from various backgrounds, which can lead to a blending of traditions. They may incorporate elements from different cultures into their ritual patterns, resulting in a unique fusion of practices. Furthermore, access to traditional resources may become limited in urban environments. Tribes may adapt by finding alternative ways to symbolize or replace specific elements used in their rituals. This could involve using locally available substitutes or creatively integrating modern materials (Sharma & Singh, 2020). According to the elderly participants, the tradition of keeping photos of their deceased ancestors was not prevalent in their time. They explained that many of them had never even seen their ancestors, as they were born after their passing. Nevertheless, they expressed their unwavering commitment to worship and pay homage to their ancestors.

However, with the advent of technology, the younger generation now has access to photographs of their deceased ancestors. During their prayers and rituals, they incorporate the practice of viewing these ancestral photos as a means of connecting with their lineage and showing reverence. This advancement has allowed them to visually connect with their ancestors, bridging the gap between generations and reinforcing the bond between the living and the deceased.

The inclusion of ancestral photographs in their worship rituals reflects a modern adaptation that enhances the participants' spiritual connection to their ancestors. It serves as a tangible representation of their lineage and strengthens the ongoing bond with their ancestral heritage. Through this integration of technology and tradition, the Birhor community finds innovative ways to uphold their ancestral veneration practices and preserve their cultural legacy.

It is important to note that while urbanization brings changes to the ritual patterns of tribes, the core values, beliefs, and intentions behind these rituals generally remain intact. Tribes display resilience and adaptability as they navigate the urban landscape while striving to maintain their cultural and spiritual heritage.

Conclusion

In the rich tapestry of cultural heritage, ancestor veneration stands as a timeless and universal practice, spanning diverse cultures worldwide. Within the Birhor tribal society, this profound tradition holds significant meaning, embodying their beliefs, values, and cultural identity. This research paper has delved into the intricate world of ancestor veneration from an anthropological perspective, shedding light on its role in cultural heritage preservation.

Through a comprehensive exploration of the practices and symbolism associated with ancestor veneration in the Birhor community, we have witnessed its transformative power. This sacred connection between the living and the departed serves as a mechanism for passing the torch of cultural heritage from one generation to the next. By honoring and paying tribute to their deceased ancestors, the Birhor people establish a profound sense of continuity, belonging, and shared identity.

Furthermore, this research has uncovered the resilience and adaptability of ancestor veneration in the face of changing social and cultural contexts, including the ever-advancing tide of urbanization. The Birhor tribe's ability to

adapt their rituals and practices within the constraints of modern living highlights the enduring nature of this tradition. It demonstrates the dynamic evolution of cultural heritage, emphasizing the importance of keeping ancestral customs alive while embracing the opportunities and challenges of contemporary society.

As we conclude this research, it becomes increasingly apparent that ancestor veneration serves as a powerful bridge that spans generations, preserving cultural knowledge and reinforcing the cultural fabric of the Birhor society. This tradition not only pays homage to the past but also shapes the present and lays the foundation for the future. It fosters a sense of unity and belonging among community members and instills a deep appreciation for their ancestral roots.

Moving forward, it is crucial to recognize the significance of ancestor veneration in Birhor cultural heritage and beyond. Continued research, documentation, and preservation efforts are necessary to safeguard this invaluable practice for future generations. By understanding the complex interplay between tradition and adaptation, we can ensure that the sacred bond between the living and their ancestors remains intact, nurturing cultural identity and fostering a sense of belonging in the ever-changing world.

In essence, ancestor veneration stands as a timeless testament to the enduring power of cultural heritage. It is a thread that weaves the past, present, and future together, connecting generations and forging an unbreakable bond with the ancestral realm. As we celebrate the wisdom and legacy of the ancestors, may we embark on a collective journey of discovery and preservation, keeping their spirits alive in our hearts, minds, and the vibrant tapestry of Birhor cultural heritage.

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