



## 14. Eternal Echoes: The Timeless Tradition of Ancestor Veneration in the Birhor Tribe

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### *Abstract*

*The practice of honouring and worshipping one's dead ancestors has been part of many tribal cultures throughout history, popularly termed as Ancestor Veneration. In many Indian tribes, ancestors are considered powerful spiritual entities that can influence the lives of the living. This practice can take many forms, varying from culture to culture, from elaborate rituals to simple prayers and offerings. This practice is also associated with recognizing the importance of guidance and blessings from their dead ancestors. It also plays a significant role in maintaining the community's cultural identity and preserving its traditions and customs.*

*This research paper investigates the importance of ancestor veneration practices in the Birhor tribal community, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group and marginalized group residing in the Indian State of Chhattisgarh. This paper also tries to examine the importance of ancestors. Ancestor veneration profoundly impacts the Birhor community's social, cultural, and spiritual life. It reinforces the community's shared values, traditions, and customs and helps maintain social harmony and unity.*

**Keywords:** Ancestors, veneration, worship, culture and rituals

### *1. Introduction*

Ancestor Veneration<sup>1</sup> is a cultural practice tied to the beliefs in ancestor spirits and the afterlife and is seen as a way to secure blessings and protections from the ancestors. This belief is also associated with honouring the dead ancestors and paying homage to one's ancestors. It is a widespread cultural phenomenon that Anthropologists have studied for several years. Ancestor veneration is practised in various forms across cultures, including in African, Asian, and Indigenous communities. Throop & McGee (2012) argue that ancestor veneration serves as a way of maintaining a connection with one's cultural heritage, preserving communal values, and providing guidance for daily life. Ancestor Veneration is expressed through rituals, offerings and memorials, which are believed to provide a strong bond between the living and the dead. The practice of Ancestor Veneration is one of the elements in creating families, clans and many other issues in life (Huan, 2019). According to Van (2002), the type of belief in ancestor

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<sup>1</sup> An act of showing respect to their dead ancestors



eneration can be divided into broad and narrow categories. The broader one takes the worship pattern as a part of the contribution to the village, local community and nation by the community or family members performing the practices. In contrast, the narrow sense is connected with strengthening the clan bond by worshipping the deceased blood relatives. The tribal population believes their dead ancestors have mystic powers and can live with the living generation after their death if appropriately honoured. Many tribal societies also equate their dead ancestors with God and deities as they believe their dead ancestors always keep an eye on the deeds and acts of their living generation.

However, some Anthropologists in their studies show that the living generation's actions affect the mood of their dead relatives. Sharma (1994), in her research, referred to the departed ancestors as "ambivalent<sup>2</sup>", which means that the ancestors have mixed feelings that depend on their living generations' actions. When the ancestors are offered sacrifices regularly and are appeased constantly, they remain "benevolent<sup>3</sup>". In contrast, when the living age doesn't respect their ancestors, the anger of the dead and their retaliation has no bounds; they turn "malevolent<sup>4</sup>". It is also believed that the dead relatives must be appeased on a regular basis; otherwise, these powerful ancestors' ire can destroy the family, even the whole clan.

With this feeling, the practice of venerating the ancestors can be seen in many tribal societies worldwide. The tribal community have their own way of thoughts and beliefs when it comes to their dead ancestors and venerating practices. Although 'venerating the dead' is a common form of ritual activity in many religious groups and systems; however, only a few works are now directed to the practice of 'venerating the dead' in the field of Anthropology.

So, this research paper explores the importance of ancestor veneration practices in the Birhor tribal community residing in Chhattisgarh State, India. This paper also examines the importance of ancestors in their lives and the changing ritual practices related to ancestor veneration over time.

## 2. *Ancestral Connections: Exploring the Role of Anthropology*

Anthropology studies human societies and cultures, including their beliefs, practices, and customs. Religion is an essential aspect of human culture, and anthropologists have studied various forms of religion across different cultures and societies. Ancestor veneration is one such religious and cultural practice in many communities worldwide. Anthropologists studying ancestor veneration may examine the ritual and symbolic aspects of the practice, how it reinforces social hierarchies and kinship ties, and its role in shaping cultural identity and worldview. They also explore how ancestor veneration practice intersects with other aspects of society, such as politics, economics, and gender roles.

Ancestor veneration is a common religious practice in many societies across the world. It involves the adoration and worship of deceased ancestors as supernatural beings who can

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<sup>2</sup> Showing a mix attitude or opinion about something or someone

<sup>3</sup> Kind, helpful and friendly personality

<sup>4</sup> Showing a desire to harm others or evil spirit

provide guidance, protection, and blessings to the living. Anthropologists have long studied the phenomenon of ancestor veneration in various cultures and societies.

One seminal work on ancestor veneration is "The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual" by Victor Turner. In this book, Turner (1967) examines ancestor veneration's symbolic and ritual aspects among the Ndembu people of Zambia. He describes how the Ndembu use ancestor veneration to establish social order and maintain a connection with their cultural heritage.

Another vital contribution to the study of ancestor veneration is "The Ancestor Cult and the Chinese Idea of History" by Joseph R. Levenson. This book examines the role of ancestor worship in Chinese culture and its influence on the Chinese concept of history. Levenson (1973) argues that ancestor veneration has played a significant role in shaping Chinese society and multination and is an essential aspect of Chinese identity.

A more recent work on ancestor veneration is "Ancestors and Antiretrovirals: The Biopolitics of HIV/AIDS in Post-Apartheid South Africa" by Claire Laurier Decoteau. In this book, Decoteau (2013) examines how ancestor veneration and biomedical interventions intersect in the context of HIV/AIDS in South Africa. She explores how traditional beliefs about ancestors and healing influence the acceptance and use of modern biomedical treatments for HIV/AIDS. Overall, studying ancestor veneration in anthropology has provided valuable insights into various societies' religious and cultural practices worldwide. These works offer a glimpse into how humans make meaning and establish connections with their past, their ancestors, and the supernatural.

The above studies show that ancestor veneration is vital in anthropology because it provides insight into the cultural beliefs, values, and social structures that shape human societies. By studying ancestor veneration, anthropologists can better understand a culture's history, social and political dynamics, material and symbolic expressions, and how cultural practices are maintained and adapted over time.

### *3. Methods, methodology and the study population*

#### *3.1 Data and research methods*

The data for the present study is collected using the Ethnographic method from the Birhor families residing in the village, Jhargaon of district Jashpur of State Chhattisgarh. For the study, the total enumeration method was used, and the data from all thirteen households were collected. The study is descriptive in nature and employs various Anthropological research methodologies and field techniques.

The data is collected with the help of an interview schedule, observation, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, etc. More detailed information on various rituals and offering related to ancestor veneration is collected through the non-participant observation tool, which is minutely described by the researcher in the text. The interviews were taken and recorded by

the researcher with the participants' consent and were transcribed later. The verbal expressions of the participants while giving the information were also noted by the researcher for more clarity during the analysis of data. The study is qualitative in nature, and this paper is an account of an elaborated descriptive explanation gathered from the study field.

In addition to this, the study is also supported by some pre-existing literature available on the topic or related to the topic. The researcher has used secondary sources like books, journal articles, data from TRI, etc., for the study.

### *3.2 Data collection limitation and its effect on the study*

As the topic is religious in nature and the ritual patterns and offering practices are quite personal in nature in every tribe, the researcher was not allowed to take photographs of the rituals or the way they performed them. So, photographs of various rituals on different occasions and festivals are not in hand for a better explanation of data and in-field experience.

In addition to this, as a female, the researcher was not allowed to enter their house or sacred places all day. There were many restrictions associated with pollution days (menstrual days). So, certain minute data from those days were not collected. However, the researcher tried to collect that information by interviewing the elderly persons who were a part of the ritualistic performances later.

### *3.3 About the tribe- Birhor: A little-known jungle tribe of Chhattisgarh*

The Birhor tribe is primarily found in several states of India, such as Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha and West Bengal. They are an indigenous tribe popularly known for their forest-dwelling activities and traditional livelihood practices of hunting, gathering, and shifting cultivation. They are small in population and isolated from the mainland. They are kept under the PVTGs list due to their poor socio-economic status.

According to the 2011 Census, the Birhor tribe of Chhattisgarh accounts for only 4,695 of the total population. In the district Jashpur of Chhattisgarh, 1,436 Birhor people reside, as per the 2011 Census. They are known for their unique religious beliefs, rituals, nature worship, forest resource management skills, making forest-based products for living etc.

However, they are still marginalized and face discrimination as they have faced numerous challenges. With the modernization and development activities, the natural habitat of the Birhor tribes is disturbed, and it has affected the culture of the tribe, too, in Chhattisgarh.

## *4. Ancestors: An Important link between the dead and living*

In the Birhor families, the dead ancestors are considered an important part of the family and clan. They believe that their dead ancestors serve as a medium between the dead and the present generation, and to show their regards, they perform certain rituals to honour them. Birhors call their dead ancestors *Purkha* or *Bandhu*. They venerate their dead ancestors not only on special

occasions but every day as a daily ritual. The ritual has its own significance in their family and is bound by certain rules and regulations. In short, Birhor tribal society believes that their dead ancestors continue to exist in spiritual form, watching their deeds.

The significance of dead ancestors in Birhor tribal society can be seen in several ways:

#### *4.1 Ancestors as intermediaries*

Many tribal communities believe that the spirits of their dead ancestors continue to exist and can act as intermediaries between the living and the divine. Ancestors are seen as having a special relationship with the gods and can help to communicate the wishes and desires of the living to the divine realm.

In Birhor tribal society, their *Purkhas* are also seen as possessing special knowledge and power, which allows them to influence the world of the living. As such, ancestor veneration often involves rituals and offerings meant to honour and appease these powerful intermediaries. Ancestors are believed to have the ability to influence the fate of their descendants. Birhors believe that the actions of one's ancestors can affect the luck and fortune of their descendants. Ancestors are believed to have the power to intervene in the lives of the living. Ancestors are believed to be able to communicate with the living through dreams and visions, providing guidance and advice to those who seek it. During the interview, one of the respondents said,

*“My Purkha used to appear in my dreams often when something bad was going to happen, so whenever I see such dreams, I realise that I have to be more careful and conscious now.”*

In addition to their role as intermediaries, ancestors are often seen as gatekeepers who can facilitate communication with the spiritual realm. Ancestor veneration involves the use of sacred objects, such as totems<sup>5</sup>, which are believed to enable communication with the ancestors. Ancestors may also be invoked during spiritual ceremonies and rituals as a means of connecting with the spiritual realm and seeking their guidance and protection.

#### *4.2 Ancestors as protectors*

In Birhor culture, ancestors are believed to protect and guide their descendants. They are seen as powerful beings who can intervene in the lives of their living relatives and offer them blessings, guidance, and protection from harm. This belief is often reflected in ancestor veneration practices, which are designed to honour and respect the protective power of the ancestors. A similar practice is found in Native American cultures, where ancestors are believed to offer protection to their living descendants, often through the use of spiritual

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<sup>5</sup> An object (may be a living thing also) which acts or serves as an emblem of a family or a clan as a reminder of its ancestry

ceremonies and rituals (Powers, 1982). Ancestor veneration is often seen as a means of connecting with the protective power of the ancestors and seeking their guidance and support in the Birhor community. Many of the respondents told that-

*“We worship our Purkha every day, as we believe that our Purkhas are powerful and they have the power to protect us from many bad powers. They are like our family God, and we consider it our duty to worship them every day without fail.”*

The Birhors believe that their ancestors not only protect them from evils but they have the power to protect their crops, wealth and precious materials from damage or evil. Many respondents during the interview reported that-

*“If our Purkhas are not appropriately venerated, they get angry and destroy our crops, and sometimes, they even make our kids ill to teach us a lesson. So, to ensure protection, we must venerate our dead ancestors without fail.”*

In Birhor culture, ancestors are also viewed as protectors who can offer guidance and assistance to their living descendants (Bose, 2009). Ancestors are believed to have the power to influence events and bring good fortune to their descendants. As noted by Maity (2017), Birhors believe that their ancestors can intervene in the lives of the living, protecting them from harm and offering guidance and advice when needed. Ancestor veneration practices in Birhor culture are often focused on honouring and appeasing these protective spirits.

One common practice is to make offerings to the ancestors, such as food, tobacco, and *mahua*<sup>6</sup> drink, as a way of showing respect and gratitude for their protection and guidance (Maity, 2017). Ancestor veneration ceremonies may also involve the use of totems and other sacred objects that are believed to enable communication with the ancestors, as well as the use of traditional music and dance to honour and celebrate their presence.

Through these practices, Birhors seek to maintain a close relationship with their ancestors, who are viewed as important protectors and sources of guidance in their daily lives.

#### *4.3 Ancestors as guardians of tradition*

In Birhor families, ancestor veneration is often seen as a way of preserving and honouring the cultural traditions and values of the community. According to Basso (1996), in Western Apache culture also, ancestors are believed to act as spiritual guardians and are considered to have the power to intervene in the lives of the living. Ancestors are believed to embody the

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<sup>6</sup> Popularly known as Butter Tree or *Bassia Latifolia*, an Indian tree which has fleshy edible nectar rich flowers used for making alcoholic drink



wisdom and knowledge of previous generations and can help to ensure that these traditions are passed down to future generations. Ancestors are often viewed as guardians of tradition in the Birhor families, preserving cultural knowledge and values that are passed down through the generations. Ancestor veneration is seen as a means of honouring and preserving these cultural traditions and ensuring their continuity for future generations.

In African cultures, for example, ancestors are viewed as the guardians of traditional values and knowledge (Mbiti, 1990). Ancestor veneration is often practised through storytelling and other forms of oral tradition, which are seen as a means of passing down cultural knowledge and values from one generation to the next. By honouring and respecting their ancestors, individuals can help to preserve these traditions and ensure their continuity for future generations.

Birhors believe that ancestor veneration can also serve a psychological function for individuals and communities. It can provide a sense of continuity and connection with one's past and can help individuals to feel rooted and grounded in their cultural identity. It can also provide a sense of comfort and support, as individuals may turn to their ancestors for guidance and protection during difficult times. During the interview, a respondent told-

*“When we venerate our Purkhas, we feel that they are blessing us and will guide us in our difficult times; however, if we fail to venerate them, we fear that they will leave us forever and the family bond will be affected.”*

Moreover, ancestor veneration can also serve as a means of social cohesion and community building. By honouring and respecting their ancestors, individuals can strengthen their sense of belonging to a community and may feel a sense of responsibility towards future generations. Ancestor veneration also provides a shared sense of cultural identity and values, which help to strengthen social bonds within their community.

#### *4.4 Ancestors as sources of power*

Ancestral spirits are seen as sources of spiritual power that can be tapped into by living individuals. In Chinese culture, ancestors are seen as possessing special knowledge and power and are believed to have the ability to influence the luck and fortune of their descendants (Chen, 2013). This power can be used for various purposes, such as healing, protection, and divination. Ancestors are often viewed as sources of power in Birhor culture, possessing spiritual energy that can be harnessed by their living descendants. This belief is often reflected in ancestor veneration practices, which are designed to honour and respect the power of the ancestors and to seek their blessings and guidance.



Ancestors are often seen as powerful sources of spiritual energy, with the ability to offer protection, healing, and other forms of assistance to their living descendants. Ancestor veneration is often practised through offerings of food, drink, and other gifts, as well as through rituals and ceremonies that seek to connect with the power of the ancestors. In indigenous cultures, ancestors are also viewed as sources of spiritual power, often represented through totems and other sacred objects (Turner, 1969).

Overall, the importance of ancestors in Birhor tribal culture in India reflects a deep respect for the continuity of life and the interconnectedness of the living and the dead. Ancestor veneration helps to maintain a connection to the past while also offering guidance and support for the present and future.

Here are some specific ways in which the Birhor tribe honours their dead ancestors:

- a) *Ancestor worship rituals*: The Birhor tribe performs rituals and ceremonies to honour their ancestors, such as offering food, drink, and other gifts to their deceased loved ones daily and on special occasions like death anniversaries, festivals, birth anniversaries, marriages, etc. These offerings are believed to appease the ancestors and show gratitude for their continued presence and support. These offerings are made at a specific location known as *Bheetar*<sup>7</sup>, which is considered sacred or spiritually significant. Every day, the food is placed in *Bheetar*, after taking a bath. In Birhor families, the ancestors have the right over the first meal, and then only the other members of the family can eat. So, food is kept for the ancestors in *Bheetar* along with water. No outsiders and menstruating women are allowed in the *Bheetar*.

Rituals may also involve the use of sacred objects, such as totems, which are believed to facilitate communication with the ancestors. Ancestors may be invoked during spiritual ceremonies and rituals, with the goal of seeking their guidance and protection.

In addition to offerings and invocations, ancestor worship rituals may also involve storytelling and other forms of oral tradition, which are seen as a means of passing down cultural knowledge and values from one generation to the next. This may involve retelling stories of the ancestors and their deeds, as well as passing down traditional songs, dances, and other forms of cultural expression.

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<sup>7</sup> The innermost room in a Birhor family which is considered as the most sacred and purest place of their house where the Birhor believe their dead ancestors resides after their death



- b) *Ancestral spirits in nature*: The Birhor tribe believes that their great ancestors' spirits are present in natural elements like trees like *Peepal*<sup>8</sup> and *Bargad*<sup>9</sup>, rocks, and rivers. They show reverence for these natural elements and believe that they can help them communicate with their ancestors.

Similarly, in African cultures, ancestors are believed to be present in natural elements such as trees, mountains, and bodies of water. These natural features are often considered to be living entities with their own spirits and powers and are seen as sources of spiritual energy and guidance.

The belief in ancestral spirits in nature reflects a deep respect for the interconnectedness of all living beings and a recognition of the spiritual power and significance of the natural world. It also reflects a belief in the continuity of life and the importance of honouring the wisdom and knowledge of previous generations, which can be seen as embodied in the natural world.

In Birhor culture, ancestral spirits are believed to inhabit specific natural sites, such as caves or waterfalls. These sites are considered to be sacred and are often venerated and protected as places of spiritual significance and power.

- c) *Ancestors as role models*: The Birhor tribe considers their ancestors as role models and sources of inspiration. They believe that their ancestors' wisdom and knowledge can help, guide them in making important decisions and solving problems.

Birhors oral traditions and folklore often depict ancestors as individuals who exhibited qualities such as courage, wisdom, and respect for nature (Bose, 2009). Through ancestor veneration practices, the Birhor seek to honour and emulate these positive qualities in their own lives.

Additionally, in Birhor society, there is a strong emphasis on community and intergenerational relationships. Ancestors are seen as important members of the community, and their stories and experiences are valued as a means of preserving the cultural traditions and values of the Birhor people. By honouring their ancestors and seeking to embody their positive qualities, the Birhor strive to maintain a strong sense of cultural identity and continuity across generations.

Overall, ancestor veneration is a crucial aspect of the Birhor tribe's religious beliefs and cultural practices. It serves as a way of connecting with their past, preserving their heritage, and seeking guidance and protection from their ancestors in their daily lives.

### *Conclusion*

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<sup>8</sup> A large, long lived fig tree which is considered as a good source for maintaining a healthy oral health and to cure other health related issues, since ancient times, popularly known as Bodhi or Ficus Religiosa

<sup>9</sup> An Indian tree with aerial roots which have healing and anti-microbial properties, popularly known as Banyan Tree or Ficus Benghalensis.



After conducting research on the practice of ancestor veneration in Birhor tribal society, it is evident that this practice holds significant cultural and spiritual significance for those who engage in it. The practice serves as a way to connect with one's ancestors and cultural heritage, providing guidance and protection to the living.

Ancestor veneration is a complex practice that varies widely across cultures and takes on many different forms. It can be seen as a way of maintaining social and cultural continuity and a means of preserving the memory of the deceased. Additionally, ancestor veneration serves as a way of coping with loss and finding comfort in the belief that one's ancestors continue to exist in a spiritual realm.

The psychological and social benefits of ancestor veneration have been documented in various studies, including reducing stress and promoting feelings of social connectedness. However, it is important to note that ancestor veneration is not a universal practice, and some individuals may not engage in it for various reasons.

Overall, the practice of ancestor veneration is an important aspect of Birhor culture and deserves further exploration and understanding. By studying and preserving the legacy of ancestor veneration, we can gain a deeper appreciation for the diversity of human culture and the importance of our spiritual and cultural heritage.

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