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An Ethnographic Study of the Dorla Tribe of Bastar

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ABSTRACT

This study presents an ethnographic investigation into the Dorla, an endogamous tribal group inhabiting the southernmost tracts of Bastar in Chhattisgarh (Hajra, 1970). A lowland branch of the greater Gond population natively designating themselves as Koitor, the Dorla possess distinct linguistic and socio-cultural traditions influenced by their riverine habitat along the Sabari River valley and long-standing interactions with neighboring Telugu-speaking populations (Grigson, 1938; Hajra, 1970). Based on field investigations conducted across Konta tahsil, this paper examines their demographic distribution, environmental surroundings, historical trajectories within the former Bhiji Zamindari, and permanent settlement architecture (Hajra, 1970). The study highlights the Dorla's practical material culture and settled agricultural economy, which centers on paddy (bhanji) and sorghum (jonna) cultivation supplemented by seasonal forest foraging and palm toddy (tar) extraction (Hajra, 1970). Furthermore, it analyzes their social organization, which is structured around patrilineal descent and five exogamous phratries (gatta) that regulate marriage, lineage dynamics, and village governance (Hajra, 1970).

KEY WORDS

Dorla Tribe, Bastar Ethnography, Dorli Language, Ethno-Ecology, Southern Chhattisgarh, Totemic Lineages.

INTRODUCTION AND GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION

The Dorla primarily inhabit the southernmost tahsils of Konta and Bijapur within the Bastar district (Hajra, 1970). Territorially contiguous with parts of

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Andhra Pradesh and Orissa, they form a section of the larger Gond tribe and natively designate themselves as *Koitor* (Grigson, 1938; Hajra, 1970). While highland Gonds are referred to as *Meta Koitor* (or *Gotte*), those inhabiting the riverine plains are termed *Dor Koitor* or *Dorla* (Hajra, 1970). Anthropological literature suggests that “Dorla” is a derivative of *Dor Koitor*, influenced by the honorific Telugu word *Dora* (meaning “lord” or “chief”) due to prolonged cultural interaction in the lowland tracts (Grigson, 1938; Hajra, 1970). Demographically, census records reflect historical shifts in ethnic enumeration across the princely state of Bastar (Census of India, 1941; Hajra, 1970). In the 1941 Census, the total Dorla population in Bastar State was recorded at 14,605, with Konta tahsil accounting for 7,542 and Bijapur tahsil for 7,063 (Census of India, 1941). By the 1950s, language and revenue surveys estimated the Dorla-speaking population in Konta tahsil at approximately 8,500 individuals, distributed across 81 revenue and forest villages where they constitute the dominant ethnic group (Hajra, 1970).

Environmental Setting: Land, Climate, Flora and Fauna

The geography of the Dorla country in Konta tahsil ranges from open riverine plains in the east along the Sabari River to heavily forested and undulating terrains toward the west and north-west (Hajra, 1970). The southern region is dominated by the Golapalli Reserved Forest and the Golapalli hill ranges, which reach elevations between 1,200 and 2,600 feet, while the central Tikampalli hills attain heights up to 2,800 feet (Hajra, 1970). The Sabari River (known as Kolab in upper reaches) acts as the main hydrological artery, forming the boundary between Bastar and Malkangiri for nearly fifty miles before joining the Sileru and emptying into the Godavari at Kunnavaram (Hajra, 1970). The climate of south Konta is hot and dry, characterized by tropical deciduous forests (Hajra, 1970). Summer temperatures frequently reach 117°F (47.3°C) during April and May, followed by heavy rainfall from the south-west monsoon between June and September (Hajra, 1970). The flora features economically and culturally critical species such as Teak (*Tectona grandis* or *Tekam*), Saja (*Terminalia tomentosa* or *Mard*—sacred to the Gonds), Mahua (*Bassia latifolia* or *Irp*), Toddy-palm (*Borassus flabellifer* or *Tar*), and Tamarind (*Tamarindus indica* or *Ita*) (Hajra, 1970). The dense Golapalli forest supports fauna including panthers, tigers, bears, wild boars, spotted deer, and the Indian bison (*Gavaeus gaurus*), whose horns are utilized for ceremonial dancing head-dresses (Grigson, 1938; Hajra, 1970).

Historical Trajectories and Local Traditions

Prior to national integration, Bastar operated as a Feudatory State ruled by the Kakatiya dynasty of Warangal, established by Annam Deo in the 15th century following the downfall of King Pratap Rudra (Elwin, 1947; Grigson, 1938). Historically, Konta tahsil comprised three principal zamindaris: Sukma, Chintalnar, and Bhiji (Hajra, 1970). Bhiji zamindari, covering 855 square miles and 100 villages in the middle of the 19th century, formed the traditional homeland of the Konta Dorla (Hajra, 1970). Local oral traditions record intense historical conflicts between the rulers of Bhiji (*Korkond Raj*) and the neighbouring Reddi rulers of Rampa/Rekapalli (*Orse Raj*) (Hajra, 1970). Sentinels like Panda Onga and Poriam Kesha guarded the Sabari River banks, cooking meals in simple bamboo tubes (*gontam*) during prolonged watches (Hajra, 1970). Following the collapse and drowning of the Bhiji ruler in a local tank, settlements shifted; lineage headmen such as Panda Malla and Panda Bakka migrated from Irpagura to establish key contemporary villages like Fandigura and Injiram near the close of the 19th century (Hajra, 1970).

Settlement Organization and Domestic Architecture

Dorla villages are permanent agricultural settlements situated near natural water channels, predominantly along the Sabari River (Hajra, 1970). Settlement selection prioritizes water availability, though artificial irrigation channels are rarely constructed (Hajra, 1970). Adjoining forest tracts (*nistar*) provide timber, thatch, fuelwood, and grazing areas for livestock (Hajra, 1970). Low-lying areas prone to seasonal waterlogging are avoided for residential building (Hajra, 1970). Houses within a settlement are arranged lineally along a wide central space that serves as a common thoroughfare, reflecting broader architectural traits observed across tribal Bastar (Elwin, 1947; Hajra, 1970; Thusu, 1965). Dwellings feature timber posts, bamboo matting, and mud-plastered walls (Hajra, 1970). Roof structures rely on a central ridge-pole supported by sturdy timber pillars, over which rafters (*vansa*) are systematically laid and bound with twisted bamboo splits (*pakki*) or creeper ropes (*Bauhinia Vahlia* or *Tara*) (Hajra, 1970). Thatching is completed using wild grasses or palm leaves (Hajra, 1970).

Material Culture, Utensils and Personal Adornment

The material possessions of the Dorla reflect a practical adaptation to forest and agricultural environments (Hajra, 1970). Household utensils comprise locally fabricated wooden ladles (*buriam* and *gavam* churners), grain mortars, flat grinding stones (*karakal*), wooden seats (*pinta*), and bamboo hanging shelves (*alpum*) suspended above kitchen hearths (Hajra, 1970). Earthenware cooking and storage pots (*kunda*) are primarily obtained through cash or barter trade from Telugu-speaking potters (*Kumbhars*) at weekly markets like Konta (Hajra, 1970). Personal ornamentation involves distinct metal alloys and designs (Elwin, 1947; Hajra, 1970). Women and young girls wear coin-like brass neck ornaments (*billa*), heavy silver rings (*kante*), and gold collars (*patter*) (Hajra, 1970). Married women wear a dedicated marriage thread (*puste*) containing small brass or gold discs, which is placed by the groom during wedding rituals and retained throughout the husband's lifetime (Hajra, 1970). Facial ornaments include facial studs (*bestiri*, *kam*, *par-pung*) and stone-studded septum pendants (*hada-baska*) inserted through piercings made at an early age (Hajra, 1970).

Subsistence Economy and Food Patterns

Agriculture forms the backbone of Dorla economic life, supplemented by forest gathering, livestock rearing, and seasonal labor (Hajra, 1970). The primary staple crops are paddy (*bhanji*) and sorghum/millet (*jonna*) (Hajra, 1970). Paddy varieties include early-maturing *chura bhanji* (small paddy) and late-maturing *beria bhanji* (big paddy) (Hajra, 1970). Sorghum cultivars are divided into hill varieties (*kond jonna*) and plain varieties (*gom jonna*) (Hajra, 1970). Forest products cushion the agricultural economy during lean dry months (Hajra, 1970). Wild leafy vegetables, tubers, bamboo shoots (*viddur-kuk*), mushrooms (*putkuk*), red ant eggs (*alli*), and wild honey are gathered regularly (Hajra, 1970). Sun-dried Mahua flowers (*irp*) are consumed parched or boiled, or distilled into liquor (*sara-kal*) (Elwin, 1947; Hajra, 1970). Toddy sap (*tar*) extracted from male and female palm trees forms an essential dietary fluid and social drink consumed daily during peak season at designated communal gathering spots (*gajri*) (Hajra, 1970). Tobacco (*pogo*) is smoked as cigars rolled in tendu leaves (*tumir-aki*) or consumed as powder with lime (Hajra, 1970).

Social Structure, Phratry System and Kinship

The Dorla maintain endogamous ethnic boundaries with neighbouring groups like the Maria, but share extensive marital, social, and cultural ties with the Koya populations of Andhra Pradesh and Orissa (Grigson, 1938; Hajra, 1970). Social organization is structured around five exogamous phratries (*gatta*), exhibiting structural similarities to clan divisions found across regional Gond and central Indian ethnic groups (Grigson, 1938; Hajra, 1970; Thusu, 1965):

- **Peramboi-gatta** (associated parent clan: *Aolam* or *Saolam*) (Hajra, 1970)
- **Paren-gatta** (Twelfth division; associated parent clan: *Marvi*) (Hajra, 1970)
- **Muro-gatta** (Third division; associated parent clan: *Markam*) (Hajra, 1970)
- **Aido-gatta** (Fifth division; associated parent clan: *Ori* or *Sori*) (Hajra, 1970)
- **Ero-gatta** (Seventh division; associated parent clan: *Kawasi*) (Hajra, 1970)

Each phratry contains multiple exogamous clans (*lot-peder* in Gondi or *intiperu* in Telugu) (Hajra, 1970). Descent is patrilineal, with children acquiring the phratry and clan affiliation of their father (Hajra, 1970; Thusu, 1965). Clans within a phratry are tied to specific ancestral clan-gods (*pen* or *velpu*) divided into major original deities (*boram-pen*) and minor subordinate deities (*karra-pen*) (Grigson, 1938; Hajra, 1970). The nuclear family consisting of parents and unmarried children represents the standard residential unit (Hajra, 1970). Post-marital residence is patrilocal, though the youngest son traditionally remains in the ancestral home to care for elderly parents and inherit the primary homestead (Hajra, 1970). Lineage groups (*kutma*) manage collective socio-economic duties, succession to village offices (such as the hereditary *Patel* or headman and the village priest), and ritual obligations during life-cycle events (Hajra, 1970; Thusu, 1965).

CONCLUSION

The Dorla of Bastar represent a resilient cultural interface between the Central Indian tribal belt and the Dravidian cultural spheres of the eastern Deccan. Their identity as "Dor Koitor" highlights a distinct adaptation

to the riverine lowland plains along the Sabari River, balancing traditional Gond heritage with long-standing economic and linguistic ties to neighbouring Telugu populations. As revealed by ethnographic observation, the Dorla's subsistence strategy integrates settled agricultural practices primarily paddy and sorghum cultivation with a deeply embedded ethno-ecological relationship with their forest environment. Seasonal gathering of non-timber forest produce, particularly Mahua utilization and Toddy-palm sap extraction, provides critical ecological cushions and reinforces communal cohesion.

Structurally, Dorla social organization remains anchored by patrilineal descent and a five-phratry (*gatta*) exogamous framework that governs kinship, lineage dynamics, and ritual responsibilities. Their permanent lineal settlements, functional domestic architecture, and distinctive material culture reflect a pragmatic harmony with the surrounding tropical deciduous landscape. Ultimately, the Dorla present a compelling case study in tribal continuity and adaptation within Southern Chhattisgarh—demonstrating how ecological habitat, historical migrations within the former Bhiji Zamindari, and inter-ethnic interactions collectively shape the socio-cultural fabric of a riverine indigenous community.

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