

Exploring Manhood and Masculine Identity in the Kutia Kandha Tribe: Traditions, Roles, and Cultural Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the construction of masculine identity among the Kutia Kandha tribe in Odisha, India, emphasizing the role of cultural traditions, rituals, and socio-economic factors. Masculinity is deeply tied to agriculture, forest resource management, and ritualistic duties, positioning men as community leaders and knowledge custodians. Rites of passage, including tattooing, hunting, and marriage rituals, reinforce endurance, bravery, and communal responsibility. However, modernization, education, and economic shifts are reshaping these roles, creating tensions between tradition and contemporary aspirations. Through ethnographic methods such as participant observation and in-depth interviews, this research examines how younger generations navigate evolving masculinities. Framing the findings within anthropological theories of hegemonic masculinity and cultural adaptation, the study highlights the resilience and fluidity of tribal masculinity. It contributes to a broader understanding of gender constructs in indigenous communities, showing how tribal masculinities adapt to external influences while striving to preserve cultural identity.

Keywords: Manhood, Masculine identity, rites of passage, Kutia Kandha tribe

INTRODUCTION

The exploration of manhood and masculine identity is an essential area of inquiry in anthropology, particularly among indigenous and tribal communities where cultural practices shape individual roles and societal structures. The Kutia Kandha, a Scheduled Tribe predominantly residing in Odisha, India, presents a unique case for understanding how cultural traditions and socio-economic conditions influence the construction of masculine identity. The concept of manhood in the Kutia Kandha tribe is deeply interwoven with their indigenous beliefs, rituals, and practices, reflecting their intimate relationship with nature, ancestral spirits, and community-based living. This study seeks to investigate the meanings ascribed to masculinity in this tribal context, focusing on how these are manifested in rituals, roles, and societal expectations. Understanding these dimensions provides valuable insights into how traditional societies preserve and perpetuate

gendered roles amidst external influences such as modernization and globalization (Xaxa, 2001; Rath, 2020).

Traditionally, masculinity in the Kutia Kandha tribe is tied to responsibilities that ensure the well-being of the community, including roles in agriculture, forest resource management, and ritualistic duties. Male members are often seen as custodians of tribal knowledge, mediating spiritual practices and performing leadership roles in resolving disputes. Rituals such as the *Meriah* sacrifice and other communal ceremonies not only reinforce collective identity but also serve as markers of transitioning into adulthood and attaining manhood. The tribe's conceptualization of masculinity also emphasizes physical endurance, bravery, and loyalty to the community, reflecting broader anthropological theories of manhood as a cultural construct tied to specific social and ecological needs (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). These practices underscore the interconnectedness of gender roles with the tribe's subsistence strategies and their

cosmological worldview.

However, the Kutia Kandha's masculine identity is increasingly being reshaped by external forces, including state policies, education, and exposure to globalized modernity. Shifts in economic practices, religious conversion, and integration into larger political systems have led to a redefinition of traditional roles and perceptions of manhood within the tribe. For instance, the younger generation often grapples with balancing tribal expectations with aspirations influenced by modern education and urban lifestyles. This dynamic creates a complex interplay between traditional and evolving masculinities, raising questions about cultural resilience and adaptation. Examining these shifts offers critical insights into how tribal masculinities navigate the challenges posed by broader socio-economic changes while striving to retain their cultural identity (Singh, 1994; Sharma, 2021). This study aims to explore the traditional markers of masculinity within the Kutia Kandha tribe, examine the roles and responsibilities ascribed to men, and analyse the influence of socio-economic and cultural changes on the tribe's conceptualization of manhood.

Literature Review:

The concept of masculinity has been a critical focus in anthropological and sociological studies, particularly in the context of tribal communities where gender roles are closely tied to cultural and ecological systems. Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) framework of hegemonic masculinity emphasizes how masculine identities are constructed and maintained within a specific socio-cultural and economic milieu. In tribal societies like the Kutia Kandha, masculinity is often shaped by community-oriented practices, such as collective rituals, subsistence activities, and conflict resolution mechanisms. Studies by Rath (2020) highlight the role of indigenous ceremonies and traditions in reinforcing masculine roles, particularly through initiation rites and communal gatherings, which mark the transition from boyhood to manhood. Such practices not only foster a sense of identity and belonging but also serve as vehicles for transmitting intergenerational knowledge, particularly about agricultural techniques, forest stewardship, and spiritual beliefs.

However, literature also underscores the vulnerability of these traditional masculinities to the forces of modernity and globalization. Xaxa (2001) and Sharma (2021) have observed that socio-economic transitions, including education, market integration, and migration, challenge

the traditional notions of manhood in tribal communities. Among the Kutia Kandha, the younger generation increasingly finds itself negotiating between traditional expectations and the allure of modern lifestyles, such as formal employment and urban living. This has led to a growing intergenerational divide in the perception of masculinity, as highlighted by Singh (1994), where elder members often view the erosion of tribal traditions as a threat to cultural identity. Furthermore, external interventions, such as government policies and religious conversions, have also contributed to the redefinition of masculine roles within these communities. While modernization offers opportunities for economic mobility, it also destabilizes traditional structures, posing questions about the resilience and adaptation of tribal masculinities in rapidly changing socio-political contexts.

Kakar (1990) delves into the psychological and cultural dimensions of masculinity in Indian societies, emphasizing the role of rituals and familial structures in constructing gendered identities. His work highlights how tribal masculinity often mirrors broader patterns of patriarchy but is uniquely shaped by ecological dependence and collective living. Similarly, Pfeffer (2001) investigates gender roles in Indian tribal contexts, shedding light on the connection between masculinity and subsistence activities, particularly in agrarian and forest-based economies like that of the Kutia Kandha. Pfeffer's research demonstrates how men's roles as protectors, providers, and ritual leaders are critical to maintaining communal harmony and cultural continuity.

Moreover, Das and Singh (2014) analyze the impact of socio-economic changes on tribal communities, arguing that globalization and state-led development programs have significantly altered traditional gender dynamics. They assert that modern education and economic aspirations create a duality in masculine identity, where younger men often experience conflict between adhering to tribal expectations and embracing modern lifestyles. Toppo (2019) contributes further by examining how religious conversions in tribal regions, particularly to Christianity, have redefined gendered responsibilities and spiritual leadership roles. These contributions collectively underscore the importance of understanding tribal masculinities as fluid constructs influenced by both internal cultural practices and external socio-political forces. Such perspectives enrich the discourse on the resilience and adaptability of tribal gender identities in the face of modernization.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the concept of manhood and masculine identity within the Kutia Kandha tribe. Given the deeply cultural and contextual nature of the subject, ethnographic methods, including participant observation and in-depth interviews, form the primary means of data collection. Additionally, the study incorporates a review of relevant literature to contextualize the findings within broader anthropological and sociological frameworks.

Research Design:

A qualitative, exploratory research design was adopted to understand the lived experiences, traditions, and evolving perceptions of masculinity among the Kutia Kandha. This approach allows for an in-depth analysis of cultural practices, gender roles, and socio-economic influences shaping masculine identity.

Data Collection Methods:

Ethnographic Fieldwork:

The study utilizes ethnographic fieldwork as a key methodological tool. This involves immersive engagement with the Kutia Kandha community, enabling firsthand observation of cultural practices, rituals, and daily activities that define masculinity. Observations are documented through field notes and reflective journaling.

In-depth Interviews:

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with male members of different age groups within the tribe, as well as with elders, women, and community leaders to gain a holistic perspective on masculinity. These interviews explore topics such as rites of passage, roles and responsibilities, and perceptions of modern influences on traditional masculinity.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):

FGDs were organized with groups of Kutia Kandha men to facilitate discussions on shared cultural values, generational differences, and evolving notions of masculinity. These discussions help capture community-wide perspectives and consensus on key themes.

Secondary Data Analysis:

Existing literature on tribal masculinity, gender studies, and Kutia Kandha socio-cultural practices were

analyzed to contextualize the primary data. Scholarly sources, government reports, and historical texts provided additional insights into the transformation of gender roles within the tribe.

Sampling Strategy:

A purposive sampling method was used to select participants based on their age, social role, and level of engagement in tribal traditions. This ensures representation from elders (custodians of traditions), middle-aged men (practitioners of tribal roles), and younger men (negotiating between tradition and modernity). Women were also included to provide complementary perspectives on masculine identity within the community.

Data Analysis:

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes and patterns in the data. Interview transcripts and field notes were systematically coded and categorized to extract insights related to traditional masculinity, rites of passage, roles and responsibilities, and the impact of socio-economic changes. The findings were then interpreted in light of anthropological and gender theory frameworks.

Ethical Considerations:

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. The study adhered to ethical research practices, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity of respondents. Additionally, cultural sensitivities were respected throughout the research process, with consultations conducted to ensure accurate representation of tribal beliefs and practices.

Manhood among Kutia Kandha tribe:

The concept of manhood is deeply rooted in cultural practices, traditions, and societal roles. In the case of the Kutia Kandha tribe, an indigenous community primarily located in Odisha, India, the understanding and expression of manhood are inextricably linked to their traditions, spiritual beliefs, and communal lifestyle. This article delves into the intricacies of masculine identity among the Kutia Kandha, highlighting their unique practices, roles, and cultural perceptions.

Historical and Cultural Context:

The Kutia Kandha tribe is a subgroup of the Kandha

community, known for their rich cultural heritage and close connection to nature. Historically, their societal structure and gender roles have been shaped by their subsistence-based lifestyle, which revolves around agriculture, hunting, and forest gathering. The tribe's worldview is influenced by animistic beliefs, with reverence for nature and ancestral spirits playing a central role in their cultural practices.

Manhood in the Kutia Kandha context is not merely a biological construct but a socially and culturally cultivated identity. From childhood to adulthood, boys undergo various rituals, responsibilities, and teachings that shape their perception of masculinity and their role within the community.

Rites of Passage and Initiation:

One of the most significant aspects of masculine identity in the Kutia Kandha tribe is the emphasis on rites of passage. These rituals mark the transition from boyhood to manhood and are laden with symbolic meaning, reflecting the tribe's cultural values and communal way of life. Such rites are not merely personal milestones but are also community-affirming ceremonies that reinforce the collective identity and continuity of the tribe. Among the most critical of these rites are tattooing, participation in hunting expeditions, and marriage rituals.

Tattooing (Chitta):

Traditional tattooing practices, known as *Chitta*, are a hallmark of Kutia Kandha culture. For men, tattoos are much more than mere adornments; they are profound symbols of strength, resilience, and social maturity. The intricate patterns etched onto their skin are believed to hold spiritual significance, serving as a connection to ancestral heritage and tribal identity. The tattooing process itself, though excruciatingly painful, is an essential trial of endurance and courage. Boys undergoing this rite are expected to embrace the pain as a reflection of their readiness to shoulder adult responsibilities. The ability to endure this pain without complaint is lauded as a sign of mental fortitude, emotional control, and physical strength, qualities deemed indispensable for adulthood within the tribe.

Hunting Expeditions:

Participation in hunting expeditions is another pivotal rite of passage for young boys in the Kutia Kandha tribe. These expeditions serve both practical and symbolic

purposes. On a practical level, hunting ensures sustenance for the community, reinforcing the tribe's reliance on their natural environment and the importance of communal sharing. On a symbolic level, hunting is a test of bravery, skill, and resourcefulness. Young boys are taught the art of tracking, trapping, and navigating the forest from an early age, but their inclusion in actual hunting expeditions is a privilege earned only when they exhibit sufficient maturity and competence.

During these expeditions, young boys are mentored by experienced hunters, who guide them not only in mastering survival skills but also in understanding the ethical and spiritual dimensions of hunting. Successfully taking part in a hunt signifies a boy's ability to protect and provide for the community, two fundamental attributes of manhood in the Kutia Kandha tribe. The communal celebration of a successful hunt further cements the young hunter's transition into adulthood, as the tribe recognizes and honors his contributions.

Marriage Rituals:

Marriage is regarded as one of the most critical milestones in the life of a Kutia Kandha man, marking the culmination of his transition into adulthood. Within the tribe, marriage is not merely a union of two individuals but a deeply communal event that underscores the importance of family and social interconnectedness. Before entering into marriage, a man is expected to demonstrate his readiness and capability to establish and sustain a household. This includes proving his skills as a provider, his emotional and physical resilience, and his ability to contribute to the well-being of the community. The marriage rituals themselves are elaborate, often involving symbolic gestures that reflect the responsibilities and expectations of married life. For instance, the groom may be required to demonstrate his ability to provide for his bride and future family by offering gifts, often in the form of food, livestock, or handmade items, to her family. These offerings symbolize his preparedness to assume the role of a provider and caretaker. Moreover, marriage signifies a man's integration into the broader social fabric of the tribe, as he takes on new roles and responsibilities not only within his own family but also within the larger community.

Broader Significance:

Each of these rites of passage plays a crucial role

in shaping the masculine identity of Kutia Kandha men. They are not isolated ceremonies but interconnected events that collectively represent the journey from boyhood to manhood. These rituals reinforce the values of endurance, bravery, responsibility, and communal solidarity, which are central to the tribe's way of life. Additionally, they serve as a means of preserving cultural heritage and passing down traditional knowledge, ensuring that the values and practices of the Kutia Kandha tribe endure across generations.

For the Kutia Kandha, masculinity is not defined solely by individual achievement but by one's ability to contribute meaningfully to the community and uphold the tribe's cultural legacy. These rites of passage thus symbolize not only personal growth but also a reaffirmation of the tribe's shared identity and collective strength.

Roles and Responsibilities of Men among the Kutia Kandha:

Masculinity within the Kutia Kandha community is deeply intertwined with specific roles and responsibilities that define both individual and collective identities. Men are regarded as providers, protectors, and custodians of the tribe's cultural and spiritual heritage. Their roles extend across multiple domains, emphasizing their indispensable contribution to the community's sustenance, governance, and cohesion. These responsibilities can be broadly categorized into three key areas:

Agriculture and Forest Activities:

The Kutia Kandha place significant importance on agriculture and forest-related tasks as the primary means of survival. Men are entrusted with physically demanding duties such as clearing forested areas, plowing fields, and preparing the land for cultivation. These activities ensure that the community has access to essential resources like food and materials for shelter.

Additionally, hunting and gathering play a vital role in their subsistence economy. Men venture into the forests to hunt game, collect honey, and gather medicinal plants. These tasks not only fulfill the tribe's immediate nutritional needs but also reinforce the image of men as providers and protectors, capable of braving the wilderness for the welfare of their families and the broader community.

Ritualistic and Spiritual Roles:

The spiritual life of the Kutia Kandha is deeply rooted in their belief system, which sees a close relationship

between the natural and supernatural worlds. Men are often at the forefront of this spiritual framework, assuming leadership roles in rituals, ceremonies, and festivals that honor deities, ancestors, and the forces of nature.

As intermediaries between the spiritual and physical realms, men are tasked with conducting sacrificial rituals, leading prayers, and ensuring that traditional customs are upheld. This role extends to seasonal ceremonies linked to agricultural cycles, where men lead community offerings to ensure bountiful harvests and protection from calamities. Such responsibilities position them as spiritual guides who safeguard the tribe's harmony with the unseen forces of the universe.

Community Governance and Decision-Making:

Traditional governance among the Kutia Kandha is highly participatory, with village councils (locally known as *gram sabhas*) forming the cornerstone of their decision-making processes. Men predominantly occupy leadership positions within these councils, serving as representatives of their households and as arbiters of justice.

Their responsibilities include resolving disputes, managing communal resources, and maintaining social order. In times of external threat or internal conflict, male leaders act as strategists and negotiators, ensuring the community's security and stability. This governance role is not only an expression of their authority but also a reflection of their accountability to the collective welfare of the tribe.

Custodians of Cultural Heritage:

Men among the Kutia Kandha are also seen as custodians of the tribe's cultural and oral traditions. They play a vital role in preserving and transmitting knowledge of folklore, music, and dance that encapsulates the tribe's identity. Through storytelling, they pass down historical narratives and moral lessons, instilling a sense of pride and belonging in the younger generations.

Furthermore, men contribute to the preservation of traditional skills such as tool-making, crafting hunting weapons, and building structures. These practices not only ensure the community's functional needs are met but also reinforce the cultural values associated with self-reliance, resilience, and sustainability.

In the Kutia Kandha society, masculinity is intricately linked with fulfilling a multifaceted range of responsibilities that sustain the community's physical, spiritual, and cultural

well-being. Men are regarded not just as individuals but as pillars of the collective, embodying strength, wisdom, and leadership. Their roles, rooted in traditional knowledge and practices, highlight their indispensable contribution to the tribe's survival and identity, ensuring the continuation of their rich heritage for generations to come.

Masculinity and Modern Challenges:

The Kutia Kandha's traditional notions of manhood are not immune to external influences. With increasing exposure to modernization, education, and economic changes, younger generations are grappling with a duality of identities. While many still adhere to traditional practices, others are integrating aspects of mainstream societal norms, leading to evolving definitions of masculinity.

For instance, formal education and employment opportunities outside the tribal community are reshaping men's roles, often challenging the traditional provider-protector archetype. Moreover, deforestation and environmental degradation threaten the tribe's subsistence-based lifestyle, forcing a reevaluation of traditional masculine roles tied to agriculture and hunting.

Cultural Perspectives on Masculinity:

From the Kutia Kandha perspective, masculinity is less about dominance and more about responsibility, resilience, and harmony with the environment. Their understanding of manhood emphasizes communal well-being over individualistic pursuits, reflecting the tribe's deeply ingrained values of cooperation and mutual support.

Conclusion:

The exploration of manhood and masculine identity among the Kutia Kandha tribe offers valuable insights

into how cultural practices and traditions shape gender roles. For the Kutia Kandha, masculinity is a multifaceted construct rooted in rites of passage, societal responsibilities, and spiritual connections. As the tribe navigates the challenges of modernity, their unique perspective on manhood—anchored in resilience, responsibility, and communal harmony—continues to evolve, offering a poignant reminder of the dynamic nature of cultural identities.

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