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Research Note

Living like Chameleons
A Bedia Folk Performing Troupe from West Bengal

The Bedia, a Scheduled Tribe (ST) community found mainly in eastern India, contains a group of performers within it who live by performing *bahurūpī*—referring to one who can take many forms—which has been termed as the "chameleon art" in some government documents. *Bahurūpī* performance is referenced in many of India's historical texts, some of which date back to the pre-Christian era. The present study was conducted among an entire troupe of *bahurūpī* Bedias living together in a single village. The Bedias constitute a mosaic of groups living according to different economic persuasions, and they can arguably be said to have multiple origins. They present an interesting case on the tribe/caste continuum on the one hand; on the other, they bring before us a unique case of cultural adjustment through occupational specialization. They have gradually transitioned from a nomadic style of life to a semi-nomadic or sedentary lifestyle. In the present article, the performing tradition of *bahurūpī* has been socio-historically contextualized along with the description of the nature of their performance, performers, training of performers, audience, patronization, and recent changes. The example of the *bahurūpī* provides us with valuable data concerning the nature of survival among small communities in the Indian context, since they display multiple layers of identities at the economic, social, and political or administrative levels.

KEYWORDS: *bahurūpī*—Bedia—identity—nomadism—performance—Scheduled Tribe

The so-called "tribes" in India are classified in different ways depending on their economic condition, since it is one of the main criteria used for a beneficial positive discrimination that is done by conferring upon certain tribes a special status termed Scheduled Tribe (ST), as per the Constitution of India. The tribal people of India practice a wide range of economic activities from foraging to white-collar jobs. There are very few tribal groups that subsist solely on various types of performing arts and crafts. Sometimes a section of particular tribes relies economically on a specialized form of performing art. The Bedias, an ST community found mainly in eastern India, has been one such group of performers, who exist for the purpose of performing *bahurūpī* ("multiforming"). Some government documents refer to it as "chameleon art," due to their ability to change appearance at will. *Bahurūpī* performance is referred to in many old Indian texts, some of which date back to the pre-Christian era (Goswami 1990). Caste-designated people also perform *bahurūpī*, but the present study is concerned only with a group of *bahurūpī* Bedias living together in a single village. We do not find any single caste group that subsists solely on this profession. Though the Bedias constitute a mosaic of groups living in different economic conditions, they can arguably be said to have multiple origins. The different groups of Bedias have taken up different professions at the same time, with one specializing in *bahurūpī*. The *bahurūpī* present a case study of how small communities are surviving in India by adopting different professions at the same or different points of time and thus changing their identities accordingly at social, economic, and administrative levels.

This research note begins with an introduction to the Bedias in general. It features the *bahurūpī* population living in the village of Bishoypur, located in the Birbhum district of West Bengal. It then narrates the origin and migration of the people under investigation to situate the community in an ethno-historical context. Then it moves on to describe the social organization of the Bedias, as well as the art of *bahurūpī*. My analysis will demonstrate how features such as population, ethno-historical past, and social organization are linked with the occupation of this performing community. The study also has its focus on the performative tradition of *bahurūpī* to understand how it is historicized and contextualized in the economic lives of the performers. I have endeavored to understand the dynamics of patronage, audience response, and audience-performer negotiations. The study could have concentrated only on the performative tradition of *bahurūpī*, but I

have noticed that their social background, which plays a significant role in the emergence of the tradition, has received scant ethnographic study in the past.

The Bedia

The Bedia are a Scheduled Tribe in West Bengal having a total population of 55,979, which is 1.3% of the total tribal population of the province, as per the 2001 census (*Census of India* 2001). In 2011, their population grew noticeably to 88,772. Remarkably, their population grew by a whopping 58.58% in only one decade. This rate is well above the all-India average of 49.7% but below the state average of 63.8%. The Bedia community is mainly found in the districts of South and North 24 Parganas. It is observable that the Bedias show little homogeneity in both economic activities and in social organization. The Bedias studied here, as mentioned, live in a single village named Bishoypur within the jurisdiction of Labhpur Police Station in the district of Birbhum, West Bengal. They reside in a small hamlet called Byadhpara located at the extreme northwest of the village. In fact, they now use the word Byādh as their surname, mostly in parentheses along with Chowdhury. Locally they are called *Bede*. There are approximately thirty houses huddled together on a small patch of land at the side of a large pond named Mohanapukur. Bishoypur is a large multi-ethnic village with a population of more than two thousand. There is a high school in the adjacent village, Bhalkuti. A primary school is also located nearby. The village is now well connected with the district headquarters—a town named Suri—and other important places like Sainthia. It is now also connected to Labhpur by regular bus service.

Herbert Hope Risley (1981) mentioned that Bediya (= Bedia) is the generic name for a number of vagrant gypsy-like groups, among which he included seven broad types: (1) Babajiya, Lava, or Patwa, who are peddlers; (2) Bazigar, Kabutari,

Figure 1: Byadhpara hamlet in Bishoypur village. The back side of the small brick-built shrine of the deity Dharmaraj is seen at the right bottom corner of the picture. Photo by the author.

Bhanumati, or Dorabaz, who are acrobats and conjurors; (3) Mal or Ponkhwa; (4) Mir-Shikar or Chirimar, who are hunters and fowlers that catch birds with a tool termed *sātnali*, a light lance divided into sections like a fishing rod; (5) Samperia, who are snake charmers, hawkers, and makers of fishhooks; (6) Shandars, who are peddlers and divers; and (7) Rasia Bediyas. The occupations Risley mentioned are still found among contemporary members of the Bedia community. However, each group does not exactly follow the professions mentioned by Risley. In fact, there is considerable occupational shift among the Bedia. For example, Risley did not mention the *bahurūpī* Bedia in his extensive survey of tribes and castes. However, earlier works mention them making a living from bird-catching with a *sātnalā* and selling herbal medicine. Risley considers these groups to be converts to Islam. The Bedia I studied, however, follow the Hindu faith. One point that he mentioned is very significant in this regard, for he was confused "whether they can properly be described as castes" (Risley 1981, 83). Raktim Das (2011) has written a book on the Bedia in Bengali. In this book he mentions the presence of forty-three divisions (*khom*) among the Bedia in India. These divisions are categories essentially based on occupational specialization. For example, the Junhar and Masuria are snake charmers, while the Sahesia are cattle-doctors. The Chamha sell spectacles and the Turkata peddle herbal medicines.

Origin and migration: The sedentism/nomadism continuum

The Bedia believe that their ancestor was Bali, the great monkey hero of the *Ramayana* epic. The epic hero Ram killed Bali, taking the side of his brother, Sugriva. He told Ram at the time of his death that he would be reborn as Byādh to retaliate this murder by Ram. In the next incarnation, Ram was born as Krishna, who was killed by a Byādh. This Byādh is said to be the forefather of the present-day Bedia. The Bedia also narrate another story that relates their origin to the Magadha king named Jarasandha, a purported contemporary of Krishna, who is an avatar (incarnation) of Vishnu, the Hindu deity of preservation. I have found another narrative about their origin in which they consider themselves to be the successors of Kalketu, a hero in the medieval Bengali text titled the *Chandimangal*. In the text, Kalketu is portrayed as a Byādh who founded a mythical city named Gujrat after being blessed by the goddess Chandi, in whose honor the text was originally composed. It is interesting that all of the stories indicate their so-called "low" origin, either from a monkey, a demon, or a Byādh.

Leaving these mythical narratives aside, when we attempt to pinpoint the exact time of migration to their present habitat, we find that it is again shrouded in conjecture. It is said that the Bedia were brought to their current location from Odisha by Bhabadeb Bhatta, a historical personality who was a minister in the court of the king named Harivarma, in the eleventh century. They were brought to engage in spying. It is inferred that they became masters of masquerade, since they learned to take different forms for the purpose of spying. Their profession as *bahurūpī*s allowed them to move about from place to place, thus giving them the opportunity to take stock of what was happening in the king's country. But this

hypothesis remains unfounded, as the performers under investigation themselves claim that they learned the art of *bahurūpī* later. When asked, they denied the Odisha connection, citing the example as the origin narrative of another group known as the Bazikar, who live in another village a few miles away in the same police-station district. But Madhab, a fifty-three-year-old male, told me that they were brought by a local *navāb* (semi-autonomous Muslim ruler) to fight against Mir Zafar. (Madhab is well exposed to media ever since reports on him were published in newspapers, and he still has contacts with reporters down to the present; he is most often considered to be the spokesman for the group, for he is able to give speeches on their martial practices and their subsequent downfall from a state of prosperity.) Another view is that they were a section of the Paharia tribe that was brought to Birbhum by a local *zamindār* (landlord) to perform menial labor and engage in watchmen's work. This scenario, however, is not tenable, because there is no explanation concerning why a group of people lost every faculty of menial labor and retired to the forest bereft of any sort of landed property. Moreover, no feature of the Paharia tribal group is noticed among them (Dalton 1978).

The account the Bedia narrate about their settlement in the region appears to be more tenable and substantiated by genealogical data. They say that they lived in the forest-clad banks of the Mayurakshi River immediately before arriving at their current location. They used to catch birds with the aforementioned *sātnalā*, *copṛe* (a lance with glued-tipped bamboo sticks used to catch birds), and snares, supplemented with minor hunting in the forest. In addition, they were collectors and sellers of medicinal herbs. For this purpose, they would occasionally visit the villages and local markets (*hāṭ*) to seek out clients. They thus used to practice a nomadic or semi-nomadic style of life suitable for their subsistence purposes. In the locality where they settled they were called *pākhmārā* (bird killers). Less than a hundred years ago, three Bedia men, along with a non-Bedia person who married a Bedia girl, came to the present settlement. They say that hunting animals or catching birds was getting increasingly difficult, due to stringent forest acts imposed by local authorities, so they had to search for new means of livelihood.

The first among them to learn the craft of *bahurūpī* was Ashutosh, who acquired his training from Brajeswar Roy, a Bengali Hindu "gentleman" (*bhadralok*) who lived in Bhastor village on the bank of Mayurakshi river located a few miles away to the north-east of Bishoypur. Besides Ashutosh, Adhar Master, who married a Bedia girl and used to live in the village, also learned *bahurūpī* performance. They used to take part in a rural folk drama form known as *kestojātrā*. The other villagers gradually learned the art of *bahurūpī* performance from him. *Bahurūpī* performance is now the main occupation for thirty (in 2008) to forty (in 2015) families living in the hamlet under investigation.

In Birbhum district the *Bahurūpī* Bedia are found in two places. One is their present place falling within the Labhpur block, while another settlement is in the Ilambazar block. In Purba Burdwan district, they are more or less permanently settled in Guskara, Katowa, and Ukhra. Besides these two districts, the Bedia live off of the *bahurūpī* profession in Murshidabad district as well. Around one hundred and fifty to two hundred families of *bahurūpī* artists belong to the Bedia commu-

nity. Besides the Bedia, some caste-designated people survive sporadically on this type of performance in the districts of Hooghly, 24 Parganas, Purba Burdwan, Nadia, and both Purba and Paschim Medinipur. These people belong mostly to lower castes, such as the Sadgop, Dom, Namashudra, Kaibarta, and so on. The population of Bedia *bahurūpī*s is nonetheless greater than the total number of caste *bahurūpī* performers.

If we analyze their economic activity with regard to their migration and settlement patterns, it appears that when they took up the profession of *bahurūpī* and settled in the village of Bishoypur, their absolute nomadism came to a halt. They began to practice sedentary habitation in the village, but they had to be nomadic for certain parts of the year for the sake of their livelihood. In other words, they would travel to perform and make money during certain portions of the seasonal cycles, while always returning home to the same spot when their tours ended. Thus, their nomadism and sedentary ways of life merged into a continuum. Such a pattern might also have happened in the past.

R. J. Fisher (1981, 55) created a typology of the Bedia that includes the following: (1) pastoral nomads; (2) aboriginal hunters; and (3) groups that are identified (rightly or wrongly) by their adherence to a common profession necessitating movement. The Bedia studied here fall into Fisher's third category, even though a section of them partly subsisted on hunting. Some other terms are also used for the classification of nomads in India. These include "symbiotic" nomads, "service" nomads, "non-food producing" nomads, and "trader" nomads (Rao and Casimir, 2003).

The word peripatetic is also used for such groups in India. The group of Bedias that I studied is an example of itinerant performers with sedentary habitation. Today they cannot be called nomadic. In earlier days when communication was not well developed, they used to move in clans with their families. A Bedia group, for example, would pitch tents in an area where a considerable population exists. After some time they would move to another location. In this scenario, they would also occasionally spend nights under the sheds of railway platforms. Their population was therefore widely dispersed over a large area.

Some of them, of course, were semi-sedentary, since they also used to live on the margins of villages in small bands of two or three families. A section of them, no doubt very few in number, had permanent homes in the village and were engaged by the local rulers or wealthy landlords for specific work that required courage and martial dexterity. These sorts of jobs included the wardenship of the local armory or the guarding of mobile posts. All these odd jobs are not caste specific, so whenever their earlier socioeconomic structure failed them they could easily shift to some sort of other non-caste-specific occupation. The Bedia thus appear to constitute three types of habitation patterns: sedentary, semi-sedentary, and nomadic. When the change in forest laws occurred, their dependence on the jungle also began to change. Gradually, they began to live together in permanent settlements, instead of remaining dispersed, after which they consolidated their group identity under a particular occupation (here *bahurūpī*) with the common name Byādh.

The Bedia refer to themselves as *māṅgtā*. They have their own language named *māṅgtābhāṣā*, which was spoken by them throughout the region in the past. At present, the older generation can still speak and understand this language, but they do not use it even in household conversation any more. It testifies to the fact that they once lived close together or had a common territory. Being pushed out of their habitat by the encroaching agro-pastoral civilization, they were compelled to take shelter on the margins of villages or in the unwelcoming forest. Their economy was of a peripheral nature too. As dwellers of the forest, they became adept at hunting, snake-charming, and bird catching. They also had a deep knowledge of herbal medicines, as I have already stated. Various Bedia groups were once nothing more than a mosaic of disparate groups living off of a number of specialized skills or occupations not pursued by their caste-oriented neighbors. From this stage of adaptation they devised three different ways of life: sedentary (very few), semi-sedentary (greatest portion), and nomadic (also few). In a later stage, the sedentary or semi-sedentary settlements often acted as hubs that brought the peripatetic sections together to settle around it.

The pertinent question to ask is whether or not India's all-pervasive caste system allowed certain groups to live on its margins without specifying a particular position in the hierarchical structure for them. Such people lived in and off of the ecologically marginal areas seen as less habitable and less livable by caste-based groups. The caste system was presumably established by overpowering weaker groups of people, who were forced to retreat to the forest in order to avoid subjugation. Not all of them went deep into the forest, for sections of people stayed between deep forest dwellers and caste people. I posit that these intermediary groups residing betwixt and between jungle and village were the ancestors of the present-day Bedia in Bengal. They possessed a characteristic language, practiced endogamy, and participated in a pre-agricultural economy before assimilating into village settings. What makes them somewhat distinct from caste-oriented people is that they do not maintain rigidity with regard to language and marriage. The Bedia have a tutelary clan system that was most likely borrowed from the neighboring caste people. They must have thus actively sought to establish a position in the stratified caste system by claiming a position not fully accepted by people practicing caste. In the course of this interaction with caste-based groups, they also seem to have internalized some caste values. By doing so, the Bedia demonstrate the permeability of the tribe/non-tribe or caste/tribe distinction (Beteille 1991). It can also be taken as an example of the tribe/caste continuum discussed by Indian anthropologists over the years.

The demographic data on the people I studied were collected during two periods of ethnographic fieldwork with a gap of seven years in between. The first body of data was collected in 2008 with the help of census schedules. All the houses in the Bedia hamlet were covered. The same schedule was used in the collection of data

during the second round in 2015. The seven-year gap was taken because by the time my first fieldwork trip ended a new generation of school-going children was born, as the minimum age of enrollment in the formal school system became six. I therefore wanted to see how far education impacted the marginal Bedia. Many scholars, educators, and bureaucrats feel that literacy is one of the main indicators of change, because going to school ensures interaction with other communities, leading to ever-greater acculturation. Such interaction in an educational environment would therefore presumably result in many significant changes in the marginalized community. Two case studies are presented here to show what significant impact educational interactions have had.

> Maton, a fifty-three-year-old-male, narrated to me one incident during his childhood that left a deep scar on his psyche. He was admitted to a local school at the age of seven. His mother bought him new clothes and shoes, so that he would not feel embarrassed while among his classmates. There was an open space attached to the school where a local high-caste man of considerable wealth used to sit with his entourage to pass time gossiping. Little Maton once happened to pass by in front of him. This enraged that aged man, so he summoned the headmaster of Maton's school, asking him about the boy's whereabouts. When he came to know that Maton belonged to the *pākherā* (short form of *pākhmārā*, another name for the Bedias in this location) community, he became furious and shouted out something about how a *pākherā* boy dared to cross his way while wearing shoes. (Author's field notes, August 26, 2016, Labhpur, Birbhum district; all names have been changed)

This anecdote shows the experience of a young Bedia who was looked down upon by a high-caste member of the dominant society. The Bedia boy's experience, no doubt replicated many times over the years, suggests one kind of hardship involved in getting marginalized peoples into the formal educational system that could ultimately benefit them by providing literacy. It also suggests a reason why a humiliated young boy might not wish to return to school to face more taunting and insults. Another example goes like this:

> Srikumar, a fifty-five-year-old-man, sent his daughter and son to school. There, the children were doing well. The headmaster of the school called Srikumar and told him to apply for the ST certificate that would help his children in further studies. The headmaster suggested that their physical features were more "tribe-like," so they could get ST certificates. The headmaster's suggestion motivated Srikumar and his fellow hamlet dwellers to move forward together in a united fashion to procure caste certificates for their community that would allow them to get listed officially as Bedias. (Author's field notes, August 26, 2016, Labhpur, Birbhum district; all names have been changed)

This example makes it quite clear that interaction with caste-oriented people outside of their immediate community brought about an opportunity for significant changes in the collective life of the group that could lead to upward mobility, both social and economic. Moreover, the various assistance schemes provided under different government projects reach tribal communities first through the

schools. My data also suggest changes that occurred in other aspects of my informants' lives.

In 2008, there was a total of 128 Bedia individuals belonging to thirty families residing at my field site, Byadhpara. Actually, there were thirty-seven families with an additional twenty-seven people who belonged to this hamlet. But at the time of enumeration they were camping outside the district, in connection with their performances. The socioeconomic data were thus collected from those who were residing in the village at that time of the fieldwork. In 2015, the population had increased to 133. One interesting finding is that the number of families in the village had also increased from thirty to forty. Seven years back a total of thirty-seven families existed in the village. Of them, seven families were staying outside the village. Now, with increasing connectivity, the *bahurūpī* performers need not stay outside of the hamlet on the pretext of their profession. Sedentary practice has almost been established among them as a whole. Another point is that the percentage of sub-nuclear families has also increased, suggesting an overall growth of the Bedia over a short span of time. This last fact in and of itself deserves more inquiry than can be undertaken here.

The Bedia group I studied, in any case, appears to be a growing population as far as the number of individuals in the lower age group is concerned (see table 1). The sex ratio is 939, meaning 939 females for every 1,000 males. This is, however, below the Bedia average in West Bengal, which is 962 according to the 2001 census. The data reveal that small-size families occur in maximum frequency among the Bedia, which are mostly nuclear (see table 2). Tarak Chandra Das (1962) has found a preponderance of nuclear families among the hunting and gathering communities of India. In the case of the nomadic groups of Mysore city, for example, a considerable number of nuclear families are found among different peripheral groups (Misra et al. 1971). The sub-nuclear family is a domestic unit composed of a man or woman with his or her unmarried children after the death of a spouse. The single-member family has been included in this type, and its frequency is significantly high at 23.33%.

In 2008, I found 54.21% of the Bedias under study to be non-literate. The non-literate percentage has decreased significantly, for in 2015 the percentage decreased to only 44.44%. The changing attitude toward formal education is obvious when we compare trends of literacy in the age groups of 5–9 and 10–14 in 2008 and 2015. In 2008, 17% and 46.15% of the population in the age groups 5–9 and 10–14, respectively, remained non-literate. The picture changed in 2015 when only 5% in the age group 5–9 was left out of school. The rate of non-literacy came down to 13.33% in the age group of 10–14 in 2015.

Social organization

The Bedia identify themselves as a distinct group of people following Hinduism, practicing the craft of *bahurūpī*. They are quite clear about their identity as Byādh, even using this identifier along with the more familiar Chowdhury as their surname. They have also received the coveted Scheduled Tribe certificate recently.

But they are not fully aware of the ramifications of this status, which makes them complacent in securing a concrete position in the *varṇa* system that governs Hindu social order. One old *bahurūpī* in the village informs, "We are Kshatriya (warriors or rulers). For this reason we do not hit the bullock with a staff." What this oblique comment refers to is that the Bedia do not do agricultural work because of their Kshatriya status. However, their status as a "caste" is also ambiguous. Residents mention that they used to roam about in the forest and that contact with caste people in the village was only marginal at best. In contrast to the settled village people around them, they were wanderers in the forest. In the traditional caste hierarchy, as I have been stressing, no particular occupation was specified for them. So, while visiting the village they used to camp on the fringes of the settlement and maintain minimal social interaction with the caste-based villagers, since they were not a part of the traditional *jajmānī* relationship network based on patron-client relationships having to do with occupational specialization. Rather, they subsisted on the marginal ecological resources that remained untouched by other agriculturally oriented communities. The ecological basis of the caste system has been studied extensively by anthropologists, who have used terms like Sanskritization, Hinduization, or Kshatriyaization (see Srinivas 1952, 1962; Sinha 1962, 1965) to discuss the dynamics of how marginal tribal communities become incorporated into the larger fold of Hindu society. In this regard the adoption of a caste ethos through Hinduization and Kshatriyaization helped them to forge better relationships with the local Hindu caste populations with whom they came into contact. However, they were mainly nomadic or semi-nomadic forest dwellers in contrast

Age Group	Male		Female		Total	
	2008	2015	2008	2015	2008	2015
0–4	11	9	10	7	21	16
5–9	8	6	9	14	17	20
10–14	8	8	5	7	13	15
15–19	6	7	7	7	13	14
20–24	11	9	6	6	17	15
25–29	3	4	7	4	10	8
30–34	4	5	3	6	7	11
35–39	3	2	8	4	11	6
40–44	5	5	2	4	7	9
45–49	4	4	2	0	6	4
50–54	0	1	2	0	2	1
55–59	1	1	0	3	1	4
60+	2	4	1	6	3	10
Total	66	65	62	68	128	133

Table 1. The total population of Bedia in Byadhpara, Bishoypur distributed by age and sex in 2008 and 2015.

Family Size	Frequency				Family Type	Frequency			
	2008	2015	% 2008	% 2015		2008	2015	Percentage 2008	Percentage 2015
Small (1–4)	18	33	60	82.5	Nuclear	18	24	60	60
					Sub-nuclear	7	16	23.33	40
Medium (5–7)	10	7	33.33	17.5	Joint	4	0	13.33	0
Large (8+)	2	0	06.66	0	Extended	1	0	03.33	0
Total	30	40	100.00	100.00		30	40	100.00	100.00

Table 2. Family size and family type among the Bedia.

to caste members who were permanent settlers of villages and towns. At this stage of development, two dominant references to "tribehood" are present among the Bedia. One is tribe as designated by forest dwelling, while the other is the non-sedentary life they led prior to settling down. When they came to settle down in the village by adopting the *bahurūpī* profession, their caste status was unspecified, though they adopted some of the features and ethos of the caste system. This is what I call the "proto-caste" stage. At the level of social ethos they assumed some aspects of caste behavior, but at the official level they imbided in a tribal status to reap governmental rewards, such as financial assistance, health care, education, and so on.

The larger social group and clan

I mentioned earlier that there are forty-three groups (*khom*) among the Bedia. The *bahurūpī* group is one of these (Das 2011). I have found three different clans among the Bedia: Kashyap, Palashi, and Ghoshrishi. However, among the *bahurūpī* Bedias of Bishoypur only the Kashyap clan is found. It is tutelary in nature, as it is named after the mythical sage Kashyap. This clan is also seen among Bengali Hindu castes, both high and low. I have inquired about the possibility of finding out whether Kashyap has a totemic association, since I have noticed elsewhere that one community belonging to the Kashyap clan observes a taboo concerning the consumption of turtle (*kacchap*). As interesting as it may be, I have not found any such taboo among the Bedia, who used to eat turtle. It is probable that they might have appropriated Kashyap, the clan name, later as part of the Sanskritization process. The clan is patrilineal. Clan endogamy is seen, so it retained Kashyap as the clan name throughout the community here.

From table 2 we can discern that small-size families of one to four members occur most in the Bedia hamlet I studied. There is also a greater percentage of nuclear families than other types. This is a consistent trend that is reflected in my 2008 and 2015 enumerations. The group is gradually moving toward greater nucleation as an economic strategy for survival. In 2008, there were just four joint

families and one extended family. None of them exists today. They have split up into nuclear and sub-nuclear families. But a very interesting feature is the occurrence of sub-nuclear families in large numbers. These have increased from 23% in 2008 to 40% of the total number of families in 2015.

Life-cycle rituals and ceremonies

There is no strict rule of group endogamy among the Bedia, since marriage outside the community has been practiced for a long time. They give away their daughters in marriage and also accept individuals who marry their daughters and want to settle among them. Some fifty years ago, for example, one man belonging to the Baishnab sect married a Bedia girl and permanently settled in the village. In spite of that incident, village and group endogamy was more strictly followed in the past than it is now. One reason may be that marital relations among a small number of families within the village after settlement in the present hamlet would have resulted in a situation where everyone would have ultimately become a relative of everyone else. In other words, settling down restricted further exchange of women within the village. It left two options for them. First, they could allow fellow Bedia to marry outside of the community, or they could allow marriage between tertiary kin, even among cousins. Thus, marriage with other lower castes, such as Sadgop, Dom, Bagdi, and Dhibar, is becoming more and more common. With the exception of Sadgop, all of the aforementioned groups are lower, belonging to the so-called "untouchable" castes that are now collectively referred to as Dalit (oppressed). Marriage below the age of eighteen is still frequent, and widow remarriage is practiced.

Marriage rituals are held in the courtyard of the house. For this purpose, a marriage platform (*chādnā* or *chātnā*) is erected in the courtyard. The womenfolk of the family draw an *ālipanā* (geometric design) on the ground at the *chātnātalā* (place of the marriage ceremony). Not unlike Bengali women, the drawing of *ālipanā* is considered a sacred duty for Bedia women. The individual who draws the design works steadfastly until the design is completed. Before that, the place is plastered well with cow-dung mixed with mud and water. A banana plant is placed at the middle of the *chātnā*. During the marriage ceremony there is a custom of breaking a pitcher (*kalsibhāṅgā*). The respective bride and groom perform this in their own houses. They are made to stand at the center of the *chātnā*, where a pitcher is kept behind them. They eventually break the pitcher by blindly kicking it with their heels. The Bengali custom of *gāÿehalud* (smearing the bride and groom with turmeric paste) to "cool" the bodies of the future couple is also done as a part of the marriage-ceremony preliminaries. They have a special stock of songs for this auspicious occasion, which are sung by the women. A local Brahmin priest usually comes to officiate over the marriage imposingly, but the Bedia do not technically seek out the service of the Brahmin priest for marriages. Instead, there is an interesting custom of gifting a *jāl* (net) and *nalā* (lance) to the groom by the bride's father. In addition to this, the father-in-law would say, "I am giving this patch of forest to you as a marriage gift," while pointing to the forest in the distance. It may

serve to remind the new couple of their past origins in and dependence on the forest. In addition, it is an indicator of resistance to Sanskritization, as is indicated by the performance of an indigenous rite without the assistance of a Brahmin priest.

The Bedia observe two birth rituals. These are *pāñcuṭ* and *ekuśā*. On the fifth day after the birth of the child, *pāñcuṭ* is held. The midwife and barber come to anoint the mother and child with mustard oil and turmeric. It is also the day reserved for naming of the infant. The twenty-first day after birth is called *ekuśā*, *ekuś* being the Bengali word for twenty-one. On this day the ritual pollution (*aśauc*) associated with the birthing process is ended after the barber shaves the mother and child. They are then bathed to restore a ritual state of purity. Some families organize what is known as *harināmsaṁkirtan* (religious choruses sung by devotees of Vishnu). It reflects the influence of the Hindu *vaiṣṇava* sect on these former animists. *Mukhebhāt* (*mukhe* = in mouth, *bhāt* = rice), the first rice ceremony performed for the child's benefit, is held when the child is six months old. It is also a time to display the newborn to the entire community, which is invited to attend the event. The maternal uncle (*jhāmā*) ceremonially touches the rice to the mouth of the child. On this day a *jāl*, *nalā*, and bow and arrow are touched to the child, again symbolizing their earlier subsistence pattern that was dependent on hunting and gathering in the forest.

Disposal of the dead is done by cremation. Bedias have a separate cremation ground set apart from the Hindu one. The period of pollution (*aśauc*) lasts ten days for the members of the deceased person's family. On the eleventh day the *śrāddh* ritual is held for the ancestors, when the eldest son touches fire to the mouth of the recently deceased. He plants a *benā* (*Andropogon muricatus*) on the side of a pond and waters it every day for ten consecutive days after the death occurs in the family. In other words, the planting activity is preliminary to the commencement of *śrāddh*. The place in the courtyard where the corpse was last kept before taking it to the cremation ground is specially marked, and an iron nail is hammered squarely into the ground within the death space. Performers of the rite believe that this will prevent the departed soul from returning to their dwelling place. During periods of pollution, they will not consume meat, fish, bread, or puffed rice, the latter of which is a staple throughout the region. Only sundried rice is allowed. The family members will not apply oil to their hair and not use a comb. On the day of *śrāddh*, a Brahmin and a *nāpit* (barber) come to visit. The male members who are younger than the dead person in the family are tonsured by the *nāpit*. After that they take baths and wear new or washed clothes. A feast is usually organized, which is attended by the neighbors belonging to their community in the village.

Political organization

The Bedia say that traditionally they had a headman or leader, but the former traditional system of political leadership no longer exists. However, I observed one elderly Bedia man who seemed to exert some authority on the others in the village, perhaps due to his seniority and eloquence. Fellow Bedias concede that the old

man is "like" their leader. Usually elderly people in the village sit together to arrive at a decision on village-related matters. The main occasion for which such sitting assemblies are called is the annual worship of Dharma *ṭhākur* (lord), an anomalous village deity worshipped throughout Birbhum and contiguous districts (Korom 1997a, 1997b, 1999). In addition to this regularly occurring occasion, the old men also gather together to sit when any problem arises in the village that needs to be disputed and resolved.

Though the villagers are not actively involved with any political party, I have observed them to be in touch with local political leaders to seek assistance for things like discrimination and other injustices related to social stratification. They used to have contacts with the earlier communist (CPIM, Communist Party of India [Marxist]) party leaders when they still held power in West Bengal. When the Trinamool Congress (TMC) came into power, however, the Bedia gradually shifted their loyalty to them. Only a few are still left as CPIM supporters.

Religious life

The Bedia of Bishoypur hold a great congregation on the occasion of Dharmaraj or Dharma *ṭhākur* worship, which is held during the lunar month of Baishakh, sometimes Jaistha, which is the region's hot-season period. The prescribed date for the ritual is the day of Buddha Purnima, which is the full moon birthday of the Buddha. This is the only occasion during which the entire hamlet participates as a whole. Bedia men become the ritual disciples of the deity by ritually transforming themselves into temporary renunciants (*saṃnyāsī*). This practice of becoming a temporary *saṃnyāsī* is also found among other caste Hindu people in West Bengal at the time of the *gājan* festival that is centered around the worship of Shiva, the Hindu deity of destruction who is sometimes and in some places identified with or at least associated with Dharma *ṭhākur*. There, the *saṃnyāsī*s are called *bhaktā*s (devotees). The duration of *saṃnyāsī*hood in such cases may be one or a few days. As a *saṃnyāsī*, a Bedia man must observe certain restrictions with regard to eating and physical behavior. In the present case, some of the Bedia men become *saṃnyāsī*s on the day of Dharma *ṭhākur*'s worship. Their role is to attend to the complex rituals performed and assist the Brahmin priest in the small terracotta shrine dedicated to the deity. The temple within the Bedia hamlet where the annual rituals occur is located on the banks of the adjacent pond. The *saṃnyāsī*s fast on the main day of the ritual and take a bath in the pond before entering the temple to perform their work. There is no image or idol of Dharma *ṭhākur*. Instead, a raised mound of earth represents the god. Some scholars have argued that lay followers of Buddhism, a religion that once flourished in ancient and early medieval Bengal, converted to Hinduism under pressure. However, they still continue to practice some of their old rituals in transformed form. Some speculate that the worship of Dharma *ṭhākur* is one such example.[1]

The Bedia also worship Fullora along with Dharma. The other gods and goddesses revered by them include Shiva, Durga, Saraswati, Manasa, and other Hindu deities in their local forms, which suggests that they are well on their way to total

absorption into Hinduism. The Vaishnava sect that is very prevalent in West Bengal has especially influenced them. Many have even taken initiation (*dīkṣyā*) under a *guru* (religious teacher). Those who have been initiated wear a small garland of *tulsi* (basil) beads around their neck. They regularly pay visits to the residence of their initiating *guru*, particularly at the time of specific calendric events.

Bahurūpī

As already discussed, the *bahurūpī* is an itinerant performer who amuses people by assuming various forms. Governmental officials have acknowledged *bahurūpī* as a distinct performance genre, which has benefited the Bedia performers to some extent. Therefore, the term *bahurūpī* is used both for the performer and the art-form itself. In fact, a member of parliament from their constituency gave one of them a certificate that reads as follows:

> his only means of livelihood is only from traditional Bahuroopi folk art demonstration from villages after villages in the district.[2]

Another certificate from the District Magistrate, Birbhum contains the following:

> Sri . . . Chowdhury (Byadh) is allowed to show "Chameleon" (Bahurupi) against his petition dt.15.10.01 by DM, Birbhum.[3]

The certificate also adds that "there is no objection to allow him to show 'Chameleon.'" As is common with other folk forms of performance throughout India, official recognition allows for the performers to advance in their artwork, while also achieving some fame and status with the general public. In some cases, such performers manage to travel abroad, where they perform as parts of delegations representing the nation of India at fairs and museums.

While conversing with one well-known *bahurūpī* performer of the village, I was told by him what *bahurūpī* means according to his understanding. He said that *bahurūpī* is a person who can take many (*bahu*) forms (*rūp*) in a way that the audience would fail to recognize his human identity. He added that the essence of his community's art is how perfectly they can change their *rūp* and *buli-chali* (delivery of speech).

Another aged performer laments that now it is difficult to meet with an *āsal* (real) *bahurūpī*, because people now invest less time and devotion to this performance genre. Another performer remarks that the present day *bahurūpī* has become *ekrūpī* (one who assumes only one form or *rūp*). By evoking *ekrūpī*, the speaker implies that the individual *bahurūpī* is putting on a particular type of makeup and going to exhibit this one form in the morning, then returning in the evening. By performing only a single form, the *ekrūpī* is violating traditional *bahurūpī* by reducing its complexity. In earlier days the individual used to stay in a village from seven days to a fortnight at a stretch. Each day the individual performer would put on one particular dress and go door to door to display the daily form. After seven days, he would go to the houses in the village where he performed to collect *sidhā* (rice, vegetables, pulses, and money) from the householders who enjoyed his performances during previous days. It cannot be equated with

Figure 2: A *bahurūpī* performer dressed as Chaitali Roy, a well-known media personality from a local news channel returning from the day's work. Photo by the author.

alms that are offered to beggars, since it is a reciprocal transaction. The *bahurūpī* practitioners believe that it is appropriate to receive *sidhā*, since it is a service provided for the purpose of entertainment. It is not, in other words, begging. The householder thus has an obligation to offer *sidhā* to the performer as payment for the service provided.

The wage for the service cannot be fixed in market terms, however. Rather, because the performance has value linked with honor and accountability, it is a payment based on responsibility, just like the Brahmin priest who officiates at a household ritual would receive *sidhā* for his services rendered.

The duty of payment has significance with regard to the contextualization of the performance as part of a client-patron relationship, if we consider the social obligation of the householder to pay for the *bahurūpī* performance. A senior *bahurūpī* once told me that villagers consider them welcome, because they believe that their visits will usher in good fortune. Moreover, the *bahurūpī*s take on forms of different Hindu gods and goddesses, which is considered auspicious. According to him, mothers would scare their children by talking about the monstrous form the *bahurūpī* might take. Moreover, the *bahurūpī* would preach on topics that have educational and moral value, thereby educating as well as teaching. I have asked some of the villagers how they understand the performance of *bahurūpī* at their homes. Almost all of them unanimously stated that these performers provide a good deal of amusement, particularly for the benefit of the children. The children gather around the *bahurūpī* as he enters the village. Sometimes, the *bahurūpī*s scare the children by wearing a grotesque mask or displaying a monstrous form. Many of the villagers still recall their childhood memories of confronting the scary appearance of a *bahurūpī*. Their appearance is thus simultaneously both feared and appreciated, since it breaks the monotony of daily village life.

The *bahurūpī* performer says that his presentation carries *ras* (aesthetic value or pleasure). The essence of this *ras* is basically *raṅgtāmāśā*, which they very often pronounce as *rantaṅgśa*, a humorous form of entertainment or spectacle. This *ras* is invoked through a particular style of speech (*bulichāli*) spoken in the region of Bengal where my fieldwork was conducted. There is a different voice used for each character being emulated. The selection of voice is a general norm, not the hard and fast rule, since they sometimes transform the dialogue into a divine form, such as Shiva addressing a most mundane topic. Voices can therefore change according to the context of the performance. One *bahurūpī* performer was heard uttering a dialogue during which Shiva was talking about his consumption of poison at the time of churning the milk ocean (*samudramanthan*). Suddenly the performer was interrupted by a group of young men chatting loudly. He went straight to them and asked them to pay the price of his hemp: "please pay, dear sons. I have come from Kailash. Pay me the cost of hemp." It is not that the *bahurūpī* himself intended to smoke hemp, but rather a way of asking for money. The *bahurūpī*s consider such diversions and ability to create impromptu dialogues as a special skill for which they should get paid. This skill must be perfected for a person to become a successful *bahurūpī*. The performer here depends on his personal eloquent power and charisma.

Although the performers are trained in how to transform into a character, there is no special training in how to act or speak as that character. No technical terms are used for the facial expressions or body movements used for specific characters, since much of the performance is improvised. Young boys learn the craft by watching how their fathers perform. The success of depicting a role depends on how perfectly a *bahurūpī* can emulate the original character. Therefore, keen observation is the most essential part of learning and performing. In this sense, it can thus be considered an imitative art form. In other words, no specific set of canonical rules has been imposed on this imitative art. It has not been formulated through a "grammar" of art as happened in the case of other Bengali folk dramas or dances. Unlike other forms of folk drama, the *bahurūpī* genre is a dramatic performance by a single actor.

Lakshman, Mahiraban, and Harischandra as well as madmen and demons are all characters played by the *bahurūpī*s. They put on clothes and wear makeup as per the character's requirement (see figure 2). The character speaks the dialogue appropriate to the form taken. The actors draw their elements of the *bahurūpī* performance from diverse sources, such as Hindu religious texts, secular literature, governmental pamphlets, other folk forms, contemporary sociopolitical situations, and more. The *bahurūpī* performers are adeptly creative and reflexive. They can instantaneously compose dialogues, songs, or verse about the immediate situations in which they are put. Sometimes dialogue is set in verse form. At other times, performers compose dialogues orally while performing. However, they also collect scripted dialogues from other sources or request a person whom they know to write songs or dialogues for them. An example of dialogue from the *bahurūpī* form recognized as Tarasundari is rendered in the local vernacular as follows:

Kai go ṭunṭunir mā phunphuni
Hey you, where is Tuntuni's mother Funfuni?

Bali āmār nām Tārāsundāri
I say, my name is Tarasundari!

Āmi cātāle nātāle bās kari
I live on the lawn of the big house.

Bardhamāner mahārājār baṛacheler bau
I am the eldest daughter-in-law of Burdwan's king.

Nāśune khālbharārā ālubeguner jalbharārā[4]
All the fucking fools don't pay heed to what I say!

Kebal āmāẏ bale khepi ār khepi
They only shout at me and call me mad.

Tarasundari is an episode in which a *bahurūpī* dresses like an imposing woman. It is interesting to note that there is no current king in Burdwan, but he is kept alive in the folk rendition of this play. Tarasundari depicts a traditional cowgirl, although dressed elaborately to catch the audience's attention and dazzle them with the spectacular drama being performed. The *bahurūpī*s innovate new forms out of traditional ones to suit the taste of the present generation by including contemporary elements from modern media, such as the newswoman in figure 2. That character is Chaitali Roy of Khobor Kolkata (News Calcutta), who the *bahurūpī* mimics by acting like she does on television. The *bahurūpī* performer used to depict Chaitali as a *ṭāṭkābaumā* (fresh daughter-in-law), which certainly carried a variety of messages, some having implicit sexual overtones to the young men in the audience, as I observed during the performance. In this particular dialogue, the *bahurūpī* performer's lines include the following:

Ārki balbo ṭhākurpo lajjā lāgche āmāke
What more should I say brother-in-law? I feel ashamed.

Esegeche kāśmirer khod ṭāṭkā āpelbaumā
Sister-in-law has come to you like fresh apple from Kashmir.

Ṭhākurpo āpnāder baumā kashā piẏārā khāẏnā
Brother-in-law, your sister-in-law doesn't eat green guava.

Āmi Bardhamāner mahārājār baumā
I am Burdwan's king's daughter-in-law!

Āmi nakuṛi natalā cheṛe ektalāẏ bāskari
I left a nine-storied palace to live in a single-story.

Ghare āmār ekkhānāo inṭ nei ākāś dekhte pāi
Here in my house there is no brick. I can see sky.

Bujhtei pārchen āmi kata baṛagharer baumā
Can you even understand how big of a house's daughter-in-law I am?

Śvasur āmār nāitiriśbighe jamir dhān cāsh kare
My father-in-law cultivates no less than thirty (*nāitiriś*) *bīghā*s of land.

Bikhyāta biśāl gharer baumā
I am the daughter-in-law of a huge house.

Ghare āmār ekpʰoṭāo dhān nei
[Yet] I don't even have a single grain of rice in my house!

Āmār ghare chiẏānabbaiṭā lāṅal āche ekṭāo dhān nei
There are ninety-six ploughs in my house [but] no paddy.

Ṭhākurpo ārki balbo āpnāke lajjā lāgche āmāke
What more I should say to you, brother-in-law? I feel ashamed!

In this narrative, the *bahurūpī* actually tells the audience about his poverty in a sarcastic way. By using his body in seductive ways, he makes feminine gestures that generate hilarious responses from the audience. The actor's mode of delivery, with some characteristic sounds or nonsense phrases like *ghicāṅghiṅghinā* or *khyācāk dam*, provokes ludic responses from the onlookers. Such linguistic and paralinguistic features are said to enhance the performance by adding a special flavor to the individual's rendition of dialogue in rhythmic verse. Such added performative features mark the artistry of the individual artist, often resulting in the creation of fame and a bit of fortune.

The Bedia perform such skits by going to different parts of their home district but also to the adjoining districts—two Burdwan districts and Murshidabad. They normally visit the houses of village residents and stage their art in the courtyard. Sometimes they perform in a public place like an open yard of a landlord or the courtyard of a temple. For this, permission from the local authority must be sought. The performing troupe usually spends a few consecutive days in a particular area, covering two or three villages per stay. After completing a performance they ask for material or financial help. They do not call it begging as it sounds derogatory, but they say whatever they get is in exchange for their performance. In these rural areas they spend the night under the awning of a public place like a temple, where annual religious functions are held, or at a clubhouse run by village youths. Sometimes an individual household may even allow the troupe to sleep at night on the lawns in front of their house. They also pitch tents by the side of a locality, particularly during festive occasions, such as Durga *pūjā*, or on the occasion of village fairs. When they live in a village for five to seven days at a time, they collect whatever they can from residents at the end of their stay before leaving the village.

Bedia performers do not stay very long in any particular area but keep on the move to maximize performance time and earning potential. They say that generally they would not visit a place twice in a single year, due to the decreasing potential for multiple payments. Only Bedia men perform this art form. They may take their wives and children with them when they go to distant places from where regular commuting is not possible, but otherwise, when the men go for a week or more, they do not take their female kin with them. Now that the region is better connected to the towns by regular bus services, it is easier for the performers to return home more regularly, so they often avail themselves of this opportunity by departing early in the morning to exhibit their work and then return by sundown.

Donald Brenneis has classified performance audiences into two types: primary and secondary. According to him, a performance is aimed at the primary audience (2013, 176). The primary audience of the *bahurūpī* performer consists mainly of the villagers and town dwellers in front of whom they exhibit their art and get financial and material assistance, such as food grains and vegetable items. Urban people or the masses gathered on the occasion of a fair, who watch the Bedia perform *bahurūpī* on stage, are basically the secondary audience. Officials, interested scholars, and experts in folk or performing arts are also part of this secondary audience, people who are invited guests at staged performances. The evaluations done by this second category of audience provide significant direction to the evolution of this art form. Government officials, mainly from the Information and Cultural Affairs Department, sometimes make comments on the performances that are later incorporated into the repertoires of the performers. The *bahurūpī* is also recorded and shown on television nowadays, which helps to spread their fame. The audiences that have watched on TV also constitute another type of secondary audience. However, I find one problem in using Brenneis's categories in classifying audiences. Traditionally speaking, villagers constituted the primary audience for this sort of folk performance in the past, but *bahurūpī* is currently being staged as part of folk festivals before mass audiences drawn from different regions of the province, mainly the literate section of the Bengali population. In cases of such performance, a *bahurūpī* told me that they change their performance according to the nature of the audience and their taste. Therefore, the performance is now being aimed more and more at the urban, educated section of the population. As a result, it can be concluded that primary and secondary are relative categories as far as the composition of audiences is concerned. There is also another category of audience emerging contemporaneously that includes the invitees of socio-religious occasions like marriage ceremonies, first rice feeding, and so on. On these occasions, the *bahurūpī*s are sometimes hired to exhibit their forms to the people who are invited. In such cases, there is little scope for interaction or evaluation, because the *bahurūpī* performers only saunter around the marriage hall or plaza assuming various forms.

The primary audience that mainly includes the inhabitants of the villages where the *bahurūpī* show their performance is the main patron of the art since its beginning. *Bahurūpī* is undoubtedly an age-old performing art, the references to which in ancient texts have already been mentioned. However, *bahurūpī* has not received any royal patronage from kings or zamindars, unlike some other folk forms such as *jhumur*, *chou*, and so on. The *bahurūpī* used to show their performance form door to door and earned their living. In this sense, this method reminds us of an early stage of development, when acting in groups was yet to evolve.

From my participant observation in *bahurūpī* performances, I can summarize by stating that the form has the following socioeconomic features:

1) It is usually a dramatic performance by a single individual who depicts a character of some real, fictitious, or mythical nature in very brief skits.
2) The performers are usually men who often dress like females, as per the nature of the character.

3) They wear costumes appropriate to the character they mimic and apply their makeup themselves.

4) They stage their performances virtually anywhere where they can attract an audience, such as in the courtyard of a house, on the street, or in a market.

5) They are given money or rice and vegetables by audience members who gather around the performer or by the householder for whom they perform. This has been the main source of their livelihood, until recently.

6) They speak dialogues that are either spontaneous or rehearsed, which may be original compositions or written by a local composer hired for the purpose.

7) They make their own costumes and accouterments, such as langur tails or the skins of other monkeys or bears, but sometimes they order special costumes from local tailors (see figures 3a and 3b).

8) Their art is orally transmitted from one generation to another. A son learns the craft from watching his father or other family elders, then passes it along to his own sons.

There are some caste people who also make a living by performing *bahurūpī*, as already mentioned, but nowhere in the state of West Bengal is any other single group found that entirely depends on *bahurūpī* for subsistence. Another general difference with these caste Hindu performers is that they do not normally recite dialogue during the performance. They simply take a form like the Hindu deities Krishna, Kali, or Shiva, then visit house to house or go to shops where people congregate. Some even accost people walking in the streets and coerce them into watching them perform. People recognize them easily as *bahurūpī*s and so help them with small donations, usually ranging from one or two rupees up to ten rupees (which is less than a quarter of a US dollar).

Recent changes

Bahurūpī has undergone a number of changes in recent years. In fact, performing *bahurūpī* is now no longer the sole means of livelihood for many performers. Instead, they work as wage laborers and various sorts of helpers. One of them, for example, has opened a grocery shop in the village. Another young man does tailoring work and has procured a sewing machine. Though they consider *bahurūpī* to be their occupation handed down to them by their *bāp-ṭhākurdā* (father-grandfather), they have introduced many new themes or elements that were not traditionally allowed, such as the aforementioned newswoman. Now they are taking part in government programs to disseminate various sorts of messages. Here, they are engaged in awareness campaigns concerning the environment, good health practices, and so on. On such occasions they perform on raised stages. Sometimes this is a group performance instead of a single-*bahurūpī* show, which is another modern innovation; now it has come to resemble more of a one-act play. Another very significant change is that women are also beginning to take part in *bahurūpī* performances, which seems to be happening with many of India's rural performing traditions. Among the Bedia, though, it only started as recently as 2014, when female members of Bedia families applied to the Information and Culture Depart-

3a

3b

Figures 3(a) and 3(b). Some *bahurūpī* props: (a) is the lower part of a bear costume being spread in the sun for drying, while (b) is the tail of a langur made of plastic threads. Photos by the author.

ment of the West Bengal Government for the necessary identity card to prove that they are bona fide "folk" artists. In 2015 the government announced a monthly maintenance allowance (*bahālbhātā*) to assist the community in lifting themselves up out of poverty.

The *bahurūpī* tradition, when historically contextualized, can be seen to have evolved through certain stages. The performance started in the village as the common profession of a group of people some seventy years ago. A Bhat Brahmin named Brajashayam Roy and his two brothers who lived in Bhastor village, Murshidabad, were expert *bahurūpī* performers. Adhar Master of Bishoypur village, where they now live, had an affinal relationship with the Roy family. Later, the younger brother of the Roy family married a Bedia girl who was connected to Ashutosh Chowdhury Byādh. Ashutosh and Adhar Master then learned the craft from the Roy brothers. The present-day *bahurūpī*s of the village are either their relatives or friends. It can be said that a family-level craft has been transformed into the profession of the entire village in Bishoypur. If we construct a genealogy of the early settlers in the village, we see that the key players in maintaining and developing the tradition were connected by marriage or birth to each other, since cross-cousin, parallel-cousin, and intergenerational marriage took place among them. This social structural pattern played an important role in the consolidation and spread of this art form among the Bedias living in the village in which my fieldwork was conducted. Due to the absence of any specific patronizing body or regulatory authority, the *bahurūpī* tradition of these people was based on individual performance.

The *bahurūpī*s would travel to outlying villages for days to exhibit their characters. Approximately seven or eight years back this trend of staying away from home to reside at the performance site began to change as a result of the emergence of group performance. Performances thereafter began to be held on stages for large audiences. It was this transformation from non-stage to stage and individual to group performance, resulting from governmental interventions and

improved transport and communication systems, that transformed the tradition into the modernized forms witnessed today at fairs and festivals not only in India but around the world. The state has now become another patron of this art form by issuing identity cards to recognize the expertise of select "folk" artists. Earlier, the artist had to seek written permission from a local authority before starting their work in an area. Now this card serves that same purpose. In addition to this intervention, the government is also giving financial assistance in the form of pensions to those aged sixty or above. Younger artists now also receive monthly retainers (*bahālbhātā*). Performers are now also taking part in government schemes to spread awareness about social and environmental projects. In essence, folk artists are doing the advertising and publicity through their particular art-form on behalf of local authorities.

THE FATE OF SMALL PERFORMING GROUPS

There are a number of itinerant groups who play a crucial role in the handing down of traditions in India. Promode Kumar Misra, Isaac Verghese, and Chennkeswara Ramanuja Rajalakshmi (1971) said that they are a part of the economic, social, and ritual network of the areas in which they live and perform. He and his colleagues have provided ethnographic notes on the nineteen nomadic groups of Mysore city. Milton Singer (1955) refers to them as traveling cultural specialists who provide useful links for the continuity of tradition in Indian civilization, for they embody cultural skills that are otherwise lacking. For Venkataraman Raghavan (1956), they contribute to popular religious instruction, drawing upon new forms of media to disseminate religious concerns to broader and broader audiences. In one of his earlier studies Misra (1967) has remarked that these itinerant groups perform two-way activities. First, they carry the culture of tradition in the style, dialect, and media that easily captures the imagination of local people. Second, they propagate local traditions. The Bedia considered here take the forms of various gods, goddesses, and other mythical characters in their performance. In this sense they bring the *śāstrīya* (classical) elements of Hindu culture to the village dwellers to create a core of common knowledge shared across a rural-urban continuum. This may be called a process of *commonization*, through which the elements of another tradition are brought to the understanding of the common folk in a style, dialect, and media form comprehensible to rural audiences (Misra 1967). With regard to the second function, I would add that the local traditions mentioned by Misra consist of the indigenous knowledge stored by particular groups of performers and utilized to subsist in a specific social, economic, and ecological context. In this sense, they are the providers of specialist cultural skills. Nirmal Kumar Bose (1953), the doyen of Indian cultural anthropology, had much earlier already mentioned the processes involved in what he called the "Hindu method of tribal absorption," through which tribal communities experimenting with Hindu religious elements gradually enter into the Hindu social system. Even before that Risley (1981) talked about the gradual transformation of tribes into castes. Mysore Narasimhachar Srinivas (1952, 1962) proposed the processes of Sanskritization and Brahmanization,

as already alluded to, which are still going on in Indian tribal societies today and are bringing about significant and dramatic changes. Khastriyaization, Rajputization, and state-formation are similar models proposed by Surajit Chandra Sinha (1962) to explain facets of change and transformation in tribal society.

All these pioneers of Indian anthropology coined the aforementioned concepts to show us ways of understanding how dynamic change occurs among indigenous groups. However, as many subsequent fieldworkers have demonstrated, the process of change is never a one-way street. Sinha (1965), for instance, showed that the movement from an isolated tribal pole to the caste or peasant pole involves a progression toward ethnic heterogeneity in terms of social interaction, role specialization, social stratification, and the enlargement and diversification of networks that forge relationships with civilizational centers. In another article, Sinha (1981) tried to understand tribal transformation in broader terms, even though the status or fate of smaller tribes has not been dealt with extensively here in my study. Kumar Suresh Singh (1982) has also discussed the transformation of tribal people as a result of economic development programs that have direct bearing on the Bedia in my present study, too. More recently, Virginius Xaxa (1999) discussed change among Indian tribal communities using three predominant phases: from tribe to caste, tribe to peasant and, finally, from tribe to cultural and social heterogeneity. In the present case, the Bedia group I have studied is strategically managing to maintain multiple identities that draw on "caste" and "tribe" simultaneously. This clever strategy allows them to move in and out of two social systems with better ease.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that the group under investigation has managed to effectively utilize marginal environmental resources, as they were first pushed into the forest to subsist on produce and game. To me, it is clear why Robert Redfield (1956) referred to tribes as "ecological communities." When this community was forced to abandon their earlier subsistence pattern of dependence on the forest, they adapted to survive economically with their newly found profession of *bahurūpī* because it was a viable option left open to them, since it was unconstrained by caste barriers and still remained an unspecialized occupation. The Bedia were neither particularly adept at agriculture nor comfortable with any other forms of menial labor, as they had to live apart and adopt a nomadic or semi-nomadic way of life. Again, as other lower-caste groups had already taken up the menial fields of labor prevalent within the caste system's agricultural dimension, this left the performance tradition of disguise vacant for newly assimilating groups such as the Bedia. Due to competition for scarce labor work, the Bedia had to manage as best as they could in the little cultural spaces left for them, such as performance, which is considered low status and results in low pay. This cultural niche specialization left them with no option but to become a nomadic group.

Moving from the utilization of ecological space or resources for subsistence, the Bedia considered here moved toward a mode of subsistence drawing on socio-cultural resources. They transformed themselves into a community that now subsists

more on the utilization of cultural space and resources than on ecological ones. It is a case of transformation from natural nomadism to cultural nomadism. Misra (1967) reserved the term "symbiotic nomads" for them. Any group in any given region of India can catch birds and hunt for pleasure or as a pastime, but these skills became specializations for the Bedia as an ecologically defined group during their forest sojourn. From there they moved on to a professional specialization by developing expertise in *bahurūpī* performance, which led to their classification as an economically defined group similar to caste. Taking up a caste ethos was therefore a necessary adjustment for their survival. Accordingly, they have also adopted strategies at the behavioral or practical as well as symbolic levels to ensure an effective adjustment to their given situation.

The next transformation in the offing is concomitant with the conferment of ST status. Here *bahurūpī* performance is no more important than earlier subsistence strategies employed by the Bedia. Now their identity as Byādh or Bedia provides more valuable cultural capital, on the basis of which they can claim the "prized status" of Scheduled Tribe, which offers the potential to bring about further changes unconnected to traditional practices. Thus, in reality, the transformation of small communities like the Bedia is becoming a complex scenario of multiple strategies for survival, with a number of possibilities divorced from caste or tribal obligations. Change based on the interactions of civil society on secular grounds brought forth by new politico-legal and economic opportunities is what the Bedia have to contend with today. It will be interesting to see what their future holds in store.

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Notes

1. The scholar Haraprasad Shastri was the main proponent of this view (Bhattacharyya 1975). However, Asutosh Bhattacharyya (1975) considered the worship of Dharma Thakur to be rooted in the worship of the sun god. For Sukumar Sen (1965), it originated in the worship of the Vedic deity Varuna. Bhupendranath Dutta (2014) traces its roots to more ancient tribal religions, from which the Buddhists assimilated tribal rituals. Whatever the true origins, all of the aforementioned scholars have agreed on the point that Dharma worship was prevalent among lower-caste Hindus and Dalits, such as the Dom, Hari, and Kapali, in the past, and it still continues vibrantly in the present. For the most recent overview and assessment of the deity Dharma's origin and development, see Korom (1997a, 1997b). For rituals associated with him, see Korom (1999).

2. Certificate given by Dr. Ram Chandra Dom, Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha) on December 27, 2013.

3. Vide Memo no. 2309(3)/5, dated November 9, 2001, issued by the Judicial Department of the District Magistrate (DM) Office.

4. This is slang; the literary translation of it may be "fillers of canal, water of potato and brinjal." Literally, *khāl* means canal, *bharā* is the infinitive for "to fill," while *ālu* means potato, and *begun* means brinjal or eggplant. However, these words metaphorically refer to the female sex organ and intercourse.

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