

**Socio-Economic Transition, Occupational  
Diversification and Policy Intervention among the  
Birhor PVTG in Purulia District, West Bengal**

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**Abstract**

The Birhor community, identified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), is one of the most marginalized indigenous communities of India. This paper, based on historical, socio-economic, and policy approaches, explores the transformation of Birhor communities of Purulia district of West Bengal, India. Through longitudinal data (1956-2017), survey research, and policy evaluation, it examines the occupational pattern, educational achievement, income pattern, and policy intervention outcomes of Birhor communities. A mixed qualitative methodology using longitudinal secondary data (1956-2017), ethnographic field research, household interviews, and policy document analysis are applied here. A transition policy mediation model will be used to interpret socio-economic and cultural change. This paper suggests a structural transformation of Birhor communities from forest-based subsistence economy to wage labour and diversified occupations, and improvement in literacy and economic status over time. However, it also

suggests that poverty and policy and governance limitations are major challenges for the Birhor communities of Purulia. This paper suggests that the transformation of Birhor communities is not a linear process but rather a complex interaction of modernity and environment.

**Keywords:** *Birhor, PVTG, occupational diversification, socio-economic transition, tribal development, Purulia.*

## **Introduction**

India is home to different indigenous populations with unique socio-cultural and economic characteristics. The Birhor is a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group that ranks lowest in terms of literacy rates, pre-agricultural economic techniques, and economic deprivation. The Bihors are a group of forest dwellers and hunter-gatherers whose lives have significantly changed because of modernisation, deforestation, and government intervention. The vulnerability is not just linked through regulations and principles—they theorised vulnerability as a fundamental part of the entirety of human existence due to being human (social beings with bodies). Vulnerabilities can arise from being human; however, there are other vulnerabilities associated with the inability to access health care facilities, which arise from the unfair and ungenerous prioritisation of how society treats people. It is then, very critical to examine the socio-economic condition of the Birhor tribes, their employment, way of life, income status, level of education, eating habits and standard of life (Dhibor et. al. 2012). Oraon (2024) found that the social structure of the Birhor tribe is complicated and dynamic, governed by their traditional lifestyle, cultural beliefs, as well as the environmental conditions. However, with growing acquaintance with the conventional society and changing socio-economic dynamics, the social structure of the Birhor tribe is also evolving.

Purulia is a district in West Bengal that houses a large number of Birhor populations and is therefore a significant case study of socio-economic changes in India. The earlier studies on this region were mainly focused on economic changes and policy interventions individually. However, few studies have explored historical changes in terms of occupation, economic and social mobility, and policy interventions simultaneously. The indigenous populations of South Asian countries are facing rapid changes in terms of economic and social mobility because of environmental changes and policy interventions. The Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups are at the lowest rung of economic and social status because of historical deprivation and ecological vulnerability. The Birhor community, historically forest-dwelling hunter-gatherers, represents a classic case of ecological subsistence economy transitioning under modernization pressures. Traditionally dependent on hunting, rope making from forest creepers, and gathering, the Bihors are now undergoing structural livelihood transformation in Purulia district of West Bengal. Mathew and Kasi (2021) research indicated that the Birhor's lifestyle is changing from that of hunter-gatherers to a more settled existence; however, they are also beginning to adopt the new cultural/social way of life in their resettlement area.

Although some studies have explored tribal livelihood diversification and development policies individually, few have attempted to integrate occupational diversification, educational mobility, cultural change, and policy intervention under a single framework of analysis. This study does just that.

## **Literature Review**

Govt. of Orissa (2010) in a publication of a book on the Bihors by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs mentioned Birhor people as

rustic, alcoholic and vibrant tribals. They are a little-known, simple, wandering, cautious, and God-fearing tribal group living in forests. Birhoors are semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers who exist as part of the early human life development stages in the forest. The Birhor, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), are historically nomadic hunter-gatherers whose traditional livelihoods based in forests are at risk due to rapid urbanization and industrialization. Large-scale deforestation has affected their social and cultural structure, making it necessary for them to move away from subsistence economies and toward modern systems. Even though they are getting more exposure to modern education and government development programs, they still have a lot of problems, such as slow population growth and low literacy rates (Ghosh & Chatterjee, 2024). The Birhor tribe is moving from a nomadic, forest-based economy to a settled, agricultural one because of changes in the environment and government action. This change often means losing one's traditional cultural identity and having to adjust to working in the city (Hembrom, 2024). The Birhor tribe has always depended on the forest for rope-making and hunting-gathering, but modernization and deforestation are putting their way of life and cultural identity at risk. Land alienation, displacement, and poverty are important issues that affect their way of life, so they need to adapt to changes in the economy and society (Oraon, 2025). The Birhor tribe in Chhattisgarh lives in very poor conditions and relies mostly on collecting forest products and making baskets to make a living. Many Birhor people do not own land and live on land that they do not have permission to use in jungles, which makes them always afraid of being moved. Their nomadic way of life, which is caused by a lack of stable resources and land, makes it hard for them to make money (Nagwanshee & Kumar, 2025, pp. 2). Mathew and Kasi (2021)

discovered that the Birhor people are gradually shifting from a traditional hunting and gathering lifestyle to a more settled way of life, embracing new sociocultural practices in the study area. Because of modernization, there is a mix of a forest economy and wage labour. This change is happening because forest resources are running out and people cannot move around much, so they are looking for other ways to make money, such as farming and building. The Birhor language is an important part of Birhor culture and identity because it shows their history, traditions, and way of life.

However, because they have more contact with mainstream society and other languages, many members of the Birhor tribe are also bilingual or multilingual and may also speak Hindi or other regional languages (Oraon, 2024). They have received extensive training regarding their customary job of rope making; however, they have shown little interest in receiving an education. The fact that they live in isolation, are not familiar with educational paradigms, lack the means to travel long distances to get to school, and are impoverished all contribute to the current situation (Kujur and Kujur, 2018). If one speaks of negative impact, then one can accede to the fact that there has been increase in blending of culturalisation and outbound culturalisation of Hindu cultures. As a result, the new generation slowly getting cut off from their cultural heritage. The present generation, does not even have knowledge of the 'Pendra' song or the 'Damkach' dance (Premi and Kumar, 2018).

Research on tribal development in India has thoroughly investigated matters of economic transition, cultural transformation, and state intervention within marginalized indigenous communities. Scholars are interested in the Birhor community because they are a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) with a forest-based way of life, a history of moving around, and a low social and economic status.

## **Research Questions**

1. How has the occupational structure of the Birhor community transformed over time?
2. What role has education played in facilitating economic mobility?
3. How effective have state-led development policies been in ensuring sustainable transition?
4. How is socio-cultural identity reshaped under modernization pressures?

## **Conceptual Framework: Transition and Policy Mediation**

The present study attempts to conceptualize the process of Birhor development in terms of the interaction among the following processes:

- Economic Transition Model: Forest economy → Agricultural Labour → Diversified Occupation
- Education-Economy Cycle: Education promotes occupational mobility → Enhances income → Increases investment in education
- Policy Mediation Framework: Accelerates developmental process → Leads to uneven outcomes due to gaps in implementation

## Study Area

**Table 1: Study Area – Birhor Villages**

| Name of the Block | Name of the Villages   |
|-------------------|------------------------|
| Bagmundi          | Bhupatipally, Bareriya |
| Balarampur        | Bersa                  |
| Jhalda            | Mahultanr, Dekai       |

**Figure 1: Map of Purulia District block wise (West Bengal)**



Source: <http://purulia.gov.in/distAdmin/blocks/blocks.html>

## Methodology

A mixed qualitative methodology with longitudinal secondary data (1956-2017), ethnographic field research, household interviews, and policy document analysis will be used. A transition policy mediation model will be used to interpret socio-economic and cultural change.

Socio-Economic Transition of the Birhor PVTG  
in Purulia District, West Bengal

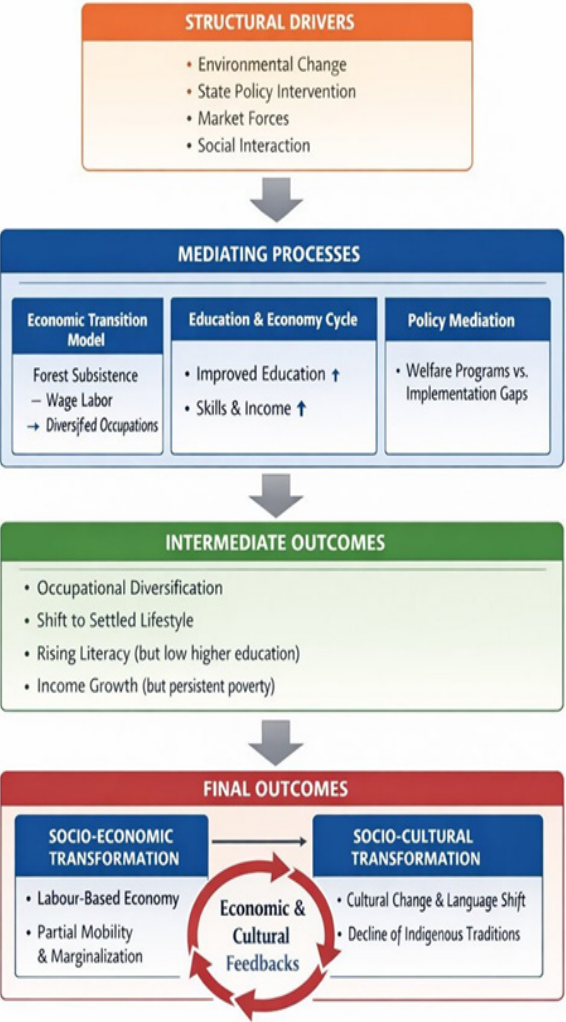


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework Diagram

## **Conceptual Studies on Tribal Development and PVTGs**

Scholars have underscored that tribal communities embody distinctive socio-economic systems influenced by ecological factors, cultural traditions, and political marginalization. Sahani and Nandy contend that PVTGs are defined by low literacy rates, a dwindling population, and restricted access to resources, rendering them vulnerable to socio-economic exclusion. Government policy papers also say that PVTGs are groups of people who use old technology, have low incomes, and rely on subsistence-level ways of making a living.

Eswarappa (2024) emphasizes that state-led development initiatives for PVTGs seek to enhance welfare through affirmative action and livelihood assistance; however, challenges in implementation frequently hinder their efficacy. Research on tribal development underscores structural impediments, including isolation, exploitation, and inadequate infrastructure, that sustain poverty within vulnerable tribal populations. These studies offer a theoretical framework for comprehending socio-economic transformation within marginalized tribal communities.

## **Ethnographic Studies on the Birhor Community**

According to the earliest anthropological studies on the Bihors, they can be categorized as forest-dependent hunting-gathering tribes with a semi-nomadic mode of living. According to Premi (2014), the Birhor population constitutes one of the smallest tribal populations in India with distinct physical as well as cultural characteristics. In addition, they have high socio-economic vulnerability. In ethnographic studies on Birhor society, various aspects of Birhor society have been discussed. For instance, Premi (2014) discussed the family structure of Birhor society, their marriage traditions, religious beliefs, and cultural taboos. Such studies indicate

the importance of traditional institutions in Birhor society. According to various studies, Birhor culture is considered to be highly rooted in oral traditions. In recent ethnographic studies on Birhor society, it has been indicated that spiritual traditions play an important role in shaping their worldview.

### **Economic Transformation and Livelihood Change**

Birhor economy heavily relies on rope making. High variety of fibres are harvested through the cutting and removing strips of bark from the trunks of mature siali (lama bayer) creepers. An open-air shop is also in place outside their Kumbhas (centres of Birhor life) and mostly underneath trees where they create all types of finished rope products, including slings, nets, bags, and small baskets (*topas*) (Govt. of Orissa, 2010). However, the surveyed villages had a very few families dependent on rope making.

Significant literature is available on the transformation of tribal people from traditional subsistence economic systems to diversified economic systems. The available literature on Birhors suggests that they are gradually adapting to new economic systems by shifting from hunting and gathering activities to settled agriculture and wage-based economic systems. Substantial literature is accessible on traditional economic systems and how tribal people are dependent on forest collection and craft production activities, which are still part of tribal economic systems. However, with modernisation and deforestation, traditional economic systems are facing a decline.

The available literature suggests that occupational diversification is a result of adaptive strategies of tribal people in response to changing socio-economic conditions. These adaptive strategies often involve a shift from subsistence economic systems to market-based economic systems.

## **Language, Culture and Identity**

Language is also crucial in sustaining tribal identity and culture. Birhor is a Dravidian language central to the Birhor tribe's culture and daily communication. While many members now also speak Hindi or regional languages due to external contact, it remains a vital link to their identity through its various dialects (Oraon, 2024). Research on the Birhor language suggests that it is part of the Austroasiatic language family and highlights its vulnerable status because of its reduced use by younger generations. Linguistic research projects focus on the documentation and preservation of vulnerable tribal languages and involve community participation.

Researchers suggest that cultural change in tribal societies occurs through the gradual adoption of mainstream religious systems and traditional systems of belief. This results in new cultural identities that emerge as a result of contact between tradition and modernity.

## **Tribal Development Policy and State Intervention**

Development schemes for tribal welfare undertaken by the government include the generation of employment opportunities, agricultural development, and infrastructure development. According to various policy studies, the primary aim of the development schemes for tribal welfare is to encourage income generation and economic self-sustainment among the vulnerable tribal groups. There have been various studies that have highlighted the disparity between the formulation and implementation of the tribal welfare policy. The structural barriers include non-participation, institutional barriers, and lack of awareness. Loss of forest has taken a toll on the livelihood and economy of Birhor people. Thakur and Sharma (2012) found that the deforestation of

their habitats has destabilised the Birhor people's economy by cutting off traditional income sources. While they have attempted to transition to agriculture as an alternative, they face significant hurdles due to poor soil quality and a lack of farming expertise.

### **Historical Economic Structure of the Birhors**

The name "Birhor" comes from a combination of two words from the Mundari language. "Bir" means forest, while "Hor" means man. The Birhor are one of the 75 Primitive Tribal Groups of India and are considered to belong to the Proto-Australoid group of peoples; linguistically, they can be classified as Austro-Asiatic. According to Birhor tradition, they are descendants of the Sun. They also believe that they are related to the Kharwar tribe (the Kharwars also claim to be descendants of the Sun) (Thakur and Sharma, 2012). Traditionally, the Birhor economy is based on:

- Hunting and gathering
- Rope making from forest creepers
- Collection of forest produce
- Semi-nomadic way of life

Their socio-economic activities are closely related to the ecology of the forest, with minimal involvement in agricultural activities. However, with the process of deforestation and the development of modern forestry policies, there was a change in the occupation of the Birhor.

### **Occupational Diversification and Economic Transition**

- In the traditional phase, they adopted the livelihoods of hunting and forest collection, rope making as the principal occupation, and nomadic lifestyle.

- In the transitional phase, they have already adopted the livelihoods of agricultural labourers, daily wage labour, sharecroppers, and animal husbandry.
- In the contemporary phase, they nowadays adopt the livelihoods of casual government work, participation in the self-help group, craft production, and wage labour.

The distribution of the workforce has shown that the livelihoods of rope making are declining, but those of wage labour and agriculture are increasing.

### **Educational Transformation**

The level of literacy among Birhors is increasing over time. More people are going to primary school, and a small percentage have reached higher levels of learning.

The role of education is significant in occupational diversification, economic mobility, social awareness, and skill formation. However, dropout rates and low rates of higher education participation are of concern.

Poverty is increasing among Birhors despite an increase in their income level. A large percentage of Birhors is living below the poverty line. They are suffering from a lack of job security and are dependent on seasonal demand for labour.

Regarding government intervention and policy outcomes, it has been observed that the government intervention is helpful for housing facilities, electrification, education, vocational training, and employment generation. However, there are many structural issues with government policies and programmes, for example, a lack of transparency in policy implementation, less participation of Birhors in local governance, poor infrastructure, and monitoring of development programmes.

## Structural Drivers of Change

The major factors which have influenced the transformation include deforestation and environmental changes, the advent of modern education, rehabilitation measures by the government, the impact of market forces, and contact with non-tribal groups. It is these factors that have influenced the transformation of Birhor livelihood in recent times.

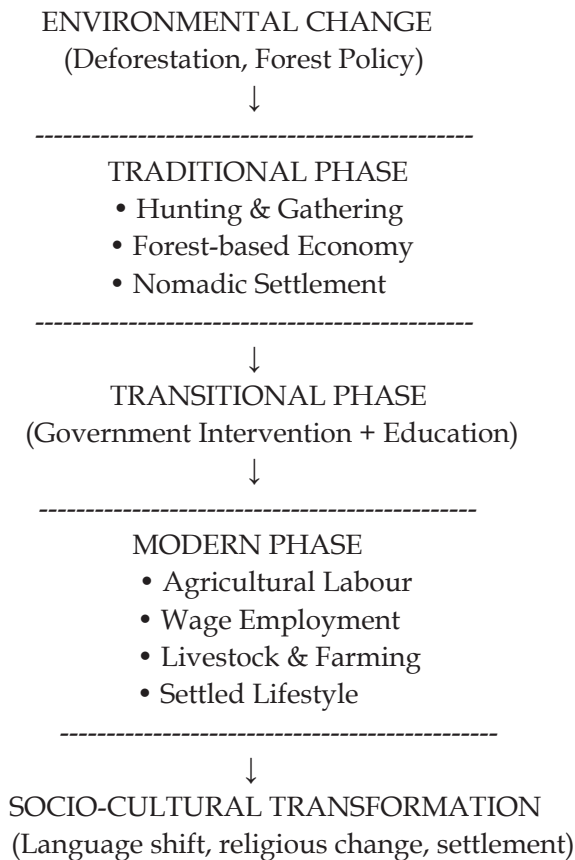


**Figure 3: Transition Model of Birhor Socio-Economic Transformation**

## **Major Findings**

- 1) Birhor economy is in the process of transition from forest subsistence to labor-based economy.
- 2) Occupational diversification is an indication of the adaptation process to modern economic forces.
- 3) Education plays an important role in economic mobility.
- 4) Policy interventions have shown some success.
- 5) Structural marginalization continues to persist, notwithstanding the development efforts.

## **Spatial Distribution and Demographic Characteristics**

The field survey conducted by BKGK, Department of Geography in 2025 in the villages of Bhupatipally and Bersa in the Purulia district provides some insight into the demographic characteristics of the Birhor population. There are five villages in the Purulia district where the Birhor population lives, namely Bhupatipally, Bareriya, Bersa, Mahultanr, and Dekai. These villages fall under the blocks of Bagmundi, Balarampur, and Jhalda, respectively. The total number of Birhor people living in these villages is around 443, with 119 families.

**Table 2: Population of Birhors in Bhupatipally, Bareriya, Bersa, Mahultanr and Dekai in 2019-2020.**

| Sl No.       | Villages     | Blocks     | Number of Families | Total Population | Male Population | Female Population |
|--------------|--------------|------------|--------------------|------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| 1            | Bhupatipally | Bagmundi   | 72                 | 278              | 148             | 130               |
| 2            | Bareriya     | Bagmundi   | 23                 | 72               | 39              | 33                |
| 3            | Bersa        | Balarampur | 10                 | 39               | 21              | 18                |
| 4            | Mahultanr    | Jhalda     | 10                 | 41               | 22              | 19                |
| 5            | Dekai        | Jhalda     | 4                  | 13               | 7               | 6                 |
| <b>Total</b> |              |            | 119                | 443              | 237             | 206               |

**Source:** Singh.S.S, A Book on the Primitive People of India, April 2022.

Bhupatipally has the maximum number of families, i.e., 72, among all the villages. The next village with the maximum number of families is Bareriya, with 23 families, and Bersa has 10 families. The villages of Mahultanr and Dekai have a smaller number of families. The demographic characteristics indicate that the families are small, with an average of 3 to 4 people living in each family, owing to the economic backwardness of the population.

The age-sex pyramid made from the primary survey of 46 households (243 people) shows that the population is mostly young and has a slightly higher percentage of females than males. These demographic patterns show that the population is at risk and that the settlements' demographics are slowly becoming more stable.

## **Transformation of Settlement Pattern and Housing**

One of the most visible outcomes of the field survey is the shift from temporary forest dwellings to permanent dwellings. The Birhor people used to stay in temporary dwellings called “Kumbha.” These dwellings were made up of leaves, branches, and other things that could be found in the forest area. The dwellings were designed in such a manner that they could be easily disassembled and reassembled, which was suitable for their previous nomadic lifestyle.

However, the traditional Kumbha dwelling system is declining rapidly due to modernization, rehabilitation, and forest restrictions. The traditional Kumbha dwelling system has been replaced by permanent dwellings such as bricks in the Birhor area, which is the result of government initiatives such as the PM Awas Yojana scheme. The shift towards permanent dwellings has been observed in the Bhupatipally and Bersa villages, where the Birhor people are living in small concrete dwellings with the help of rehabilitation schemes. Though only a few people are able to construct the traditional Kumbha dwellings, the elderly people are aware of the traditional dwelling system.

## **Livelihood Structure and Occupational Transformation**

Hunting, gathering, and rope making are some of the activities the Birhor tribe used to engage in while in the forest. Birhor is derived from Bir, which means forest, and Hor, which means man, thus showing the tribe’s affinity towards the forest.

Traditional occupations have been studied in November, 2025. According to the interviews, the Birhor tribe’s main economic activity was rope making. The tribe used the fibres of a plant known as “chihor,” which was found in the forest, to make the ropes. These ropes were used for agricultural

activities, cattle, and extracting water from wells. They were also sold in the market.

The Birhor tribe was engaged in activities such as rope making, hunting, and gathering. Specifically, the tribe hunted monkeys, rabbits, and gathered fruits, honey, and herbs. The tribe showed high sense of community through the activities of the hunting team, where the food was shared equally from the hunting activities.

### **Occupational Diversification**

However, as per the study, the traditional occupations have drastically reduced due to:

- Exhaustion of the resources found in the forests
- Government regulations regarding the forests
- Competition from synthetic products in the market

It is for this reason that the Birhor community is increasingly becoming involved in wage employment, agriculture, animal rearing, and collection of products from the forests. Currently, the Birhor community from the nearby villages works as wage labourers and/or farmers. As part of the government rehabilitation programme, the Birhor community has also started rearing cattle such as cows, pigs, and goats.

### **Education and Linguistic Challenges**

The educational system of Birhor people is still at an early stage. There is a primary school at Bhupatipally where education is provided up to Class VII. A junior high school is also there, from where four Birhor girls passed Madhyamik a few years ago. Now as per reports, they have left their studies and now work as labourers. However, there are several challenges that hinder the progress of education. One of the biggest challenges is the language. While education

is provided in Bengali, Birhor people speak Birhori, which makes learning difficult.

The statistical findings of the survey indicate that about 20-25% of Birhor people have completed primary education. About 7% have completed middle education. Only 2-3% have completed secondary education. Less than 1% have completed higher education. There have been recent developments despite these challenges. An important milestone has been reached in the educational journey of Birhor people, as some of them have begun to take up secondary and higher education. First-generation learners have benefited greatly from Maitreyo Paathshala, a programme at Bersa village, where mid-day meals and education are provided.



**Photo 1: Bhupatipally High School**



**Photo 2: Village Paathshala building, Bersha**

## **Cultural Practices and Social Organization**

Strong communal traditions and close kin relationships are the basis of the Birhor tribe's distinct cultural identity. Birhor communities are small, with extended family relationships, thus promoting communal work and cooperation. Despite following patrilineal and patriarchal lineage, Birhor women preserve high social standing and near-equal roles in household management. They share responsibility for finances, community customs, and parenting decisions, while also supporting the home through domestic labour and traditional resource gathering.

## **Religion and Rituals**

The Birhor community holds certain religious beliefs based on the animistic tradition and the influence of Hinduism. The Bihors believe in the worship of nature deities and ancestral deities of the forests, mountains, and rivers. The ceremonies and rituals take place under the guidance of a religious figure named "Naya," who performs sacrificial ceremonies during the festivals.

One of the major festivals of the Birhor community is the Maghi Sim, which falls on the full moon day of the Magh month, i.e., Maghi Purnima. According to Ghosh and Chatterjee (2024) Bihors have a belief system that revolves around different types of supernatural beings, including a number of spirits and gods. Among the gods of the Birhor, Sing Bonga (the sun god) and Dharati Maa are believed to give them safe, healthy lives and good crops. In addition to believing in these gods, the Birhor people also believe in witchcraft and consult with traditional diviners for assistance. The Birhor practice their religion through ceremony and have set aside certain periods during the year to celebrate life with different types of festivals (e.g., hunting festivals, such as Phagun and

Sarhul) that culminate in some form of religious dance for each festival.

### **Oral Traditions and Language**

Birhori is an unwritten language, and it is a dialect spoken by the Birhor people, who belong to the Austro-Asian linguistic family. Folk tales, songs, and historical stories are passed down from generation to generation in oral form, but due to their interaction with mainstream society, most Birhor people have become bilingual, speaking Bengali and Hindi, which has eventually crept into their way of speaking.

### **Health Practices and Use of Medicine**

Traditionally, the Birhor tribe used herbal medicine and healers, known as Ojha and Gunin, to treat diseases. Plants collected from the forest are used as medicine to cure common diseases. From observations, there has been a gradual shift towards modern health care practices, especially for serious diseases, over the last decade. However, the traditional method of treatment is still used along with modern medicine. Commissioner Report for ST/SC, (1986-87) mentioned that the Birhor people and other primitive tribal groups are marked by extreme veracity with a “fragile” build and extreme levels of malnutrition and social isolation. Thus, many aspects of their general health are negatively influenced by several factors: Waterborne Diseases: Consumption of polluted water frequently leads to the following diseases: diarrhea, dysentery, and other gastrointestinal disorders. Chronic and Infectious Diseases: There are many alarming infections and chronic conditions in the local population, such as (i) malaria (including cerebral malaria), (ii) tuberculosis, (iii) leprosy, (iv) epileptic disorders, and (v) iron deficiency anaemia. Nutrient Deficiencies: Nutrient deficiencies are common; for example, children frequently develop rickets, and many

women within the Birhor community experience goitre due to iodine deficiency. Genetic Disorders: The main genetic abnormality occurring within the Birhor community is the expression of sickle cell anaemia and the G-6-PD enzyme deficiency associated with sickle cell anaemia. The expression of both genetic conditions is increased in populations living in malarial areas. Demographic/Social Factors: High rates of infant mortality and the distorted sex ratio have resulted in a shortage of females, which is critical for the long-term viability of the Birhor community.

The collective knowledge of plants possessed by the Birhor tribe goes beyond just gathering and using them. The Birhor have knowledge about different types of plants, their distinct features, and where they are located. Overall, the amount of ethno-medicinal information that the Birhor possess is remarkably high and, therefore, their expertise extends past medicinal purposes. An excellent example of this expertise includes their knowledge regarding under-utilized protein sources from plants that could provide alternative food sources for them (Mairh, Mishra & Kumar, 2009). Although the above example is from Jharkhand and Chhattishgarh, the surveyed villages displayed remarkable awareness about the efficacy of modern medicines among the tribal people.

### **Cultural Transformation and Contemporary Challenges**

The findings have shown that the Birhor community is currently going through a major socio-economic and cultural transformation. The factors contributing to this transformation include:

- Deforestation and changes in the natural environment
- Government rehabilitation efforts
- Development of education

- Association with non-tribal people
- Inclusion of the market system

Although the growth in the provision of housing, education, and medical facilities is improving levels of access for this community, negative social impacts related to community fragmentation have occurred as well. Specifically, there has been a loss of culture relating to shelter, language, and natural surroundings. With that said, some cultural values remain that the Birhor continue to maintain. To promote the welfare of these beneficiaries, the Government of India has launched numerous initiatives, ranging from agriculture (Birsa Awas), livestock (goats and chickens), and tools (spades or Gainta) to pensions for seniors affected by poverty. The government also provides social security schemes for both men and women. In addition, several initiatives help them raise goats and chickens for daily consumption and as sources of income. Unfortunately, many men struggle with intoxication and spend family income on it (Ghosh and Chatterjee, 2024).

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this study indicate that the Birhor community living in the Purulia district of West Bengal is currently experiencing a major socio-economic and cultural transition in their lifestyle. Traditionally, their livelihood was based on forest resources, including hunting, gathering, and rope-making activities, which have gradually converted to settled agriculture, wage work, and cattle rearing due to environmental changes and rehabilitation policies of the state encouraging them to settle and adopt alternative livelihood options. Unlike previous studies, rope making is no longer a popular livelihood option among the Bihors of Purulia district.

The demographic study of the Birhor settlements in Bhupatipally and Bersa villages shows that the population is small and vulnerable with limited household sizes and economic resources. The government initiatives in providing housing to the population, such as the PM Awas Yojana, have led to a shift from traditional temporary dwellings such as the 'Kumbha' to permanent concrete dwellings, which show a clear shift from nomadic lifestyles to settled lifestyles in villages. The disappearance of traditional dwellings has shown the beginning of the end of indigenous knowledge systems. The educational development in the Birhor community has shown slow progress in recent times. The language barrier between the Birhori mother tongue and the Bengali medium of schooling, poverty, and the absence of secondary schools in the surrounding areas have shown that the educational development in the community has not progressed much. The emergence of first-generation learners has shown the beginning of change in the community with the involvement of NGO initiatives in the area.

The cultural practices of Birhors still show evidence of a strong community tradition based on animistic beliefs, oral traditions, and kinship-based social systems. The celebration of Maghi Sim, traditional hunting activities, and the role of ritual specialists such as Naya are indicative of a continued cultural identity in spite of increased exposure to modern culture. However, modernization, linguistic assimilation, and reduced forest dependency are also having a gradual impact on the cultural scene of the Birhors.

All things considered, the Birhor community in Purulia can be seen as a transitory society caught in the middle of conventional means of subsistence and contemporary development processes. Though there are some positive developments in terms of living conditions, the Birhor

community still struggles with the consequences of poverty, education, and culture. Thus, sustainable development in the Birhor community can be best achieved through culturally appropriate policies that emphasize skill-based employment, education, indigenous culture, and the involvement of the Birhor community in development processes.

Such an approach would not only improve economic resilience but also help maintain the cultural heritage and social identity of one of India's most vulnerable tribal communities.

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