



Ethnographic and Cultural Study of Tribal Communities in Rohtas, Bihar

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Abstract

This study explores the cultural and ethnographic features of tribal communities in the Sasaram region of Bihar, including the Kharwar, Chero, Agariya, Oraon, Ho, Korwa, Gond, Kol, and Majhwar tribes. Based on historical texts, archaeological records, and field data, it highlights their traditional lifestyles, religious beliefs, social structures, and economic practices. The research reveals that most tribes are agrarian, with supplementary reliance on animal husbandry, forest produce, and artisanal crafts. Cultural traits like tattooing, totemism, and nature worship are prominent, along with increasing influence from Hinduism. Marriage customs, family structures, and burial traditions further reflect a unique blend of tradition and adaptation. The study emphasizes the deep link between these tribes and their natural environment, showcasing a rich heritage rooted in prehistoric traditions.

Keywords

1. Tribes
2. Tribal Culture
3. Ethnography
4. Bihar
5. Traditions

The history of any community, caste, or ethnic group is closely connected to the geography of the region where they have lived either for generations or after migrating due to various reasons. The natural surroundings, climate, and resources of a place shape the way of life, culture, and development of its people over time. In this context, Bihar holds a special place in the history of India. It is one of the oldest regions in the country, where evidence of human life from prehistoric times to the present can still be found (Sinha, 2020). Archaeological studies in Bihar, especially in areas like the Rohtas, have revealed tools, pottery, and remains that show how early humans lived, farmed, and built their societies.

The region around Sasaram, located in Rohtas district, is especially important because of its rich cultural and historical background. Surrounded

by hills and fertile plains, it has been home to many tribal communities for centuries. These tribes are mainly dependent on agriculture and have developed their own unique ways of living, farming, and interacting with nature. Their customs, beliefs, and daily lives are deeply linked to the environment they live in.

This study focuses on the tribal communities living in Sasaram and nearby areas. It aims to understand their culture, lifestyle, and how they have adapted to their surroundings over time. By looking at archaeological records, historical texts, and present-day traditions, this research highlights the deep connection between the land and the people who live on it.

The Kharwar Tribe

According to various scholars, two major tribal groups migrated from the northwestern regions into Bihar. Among them were the Munda, Ho, Bhumij, and Kharia tribes belonging to the Proto-Australoid or Austric group, and the Oraon and Kharwar tribes of Dravidian origin. Historical evidence and scholarly opinions suggest that the Kharwar tribe once held dominion over the Kaimur hills, particularly in the region now known as Rohtas.

The Kharwars are a tribe of Dravidian origin, believed to have migrated from present-day Uttar Pradesh. Scholars propose that they originally came from a place known as Khairagarh or Khairajhar. According to oral traditions within the community, their ancestors initially worked in Vrindavan producing catechu (kattha) and later migrated to the Kaimur hills to settle. Dr. Gupta states that the Kharwars, being of Dravidian lineage, migrated from a place named Kherijhar, which gave them their tribal name Kharwar. In the Shahabad region, they identify themselves as Suryavanshi Rajputs and wear the sacred thread (janeu), a marker of high caste status (Tribal Research Institute, 1974). Sir H. Risley notes that the Kharwars regard Rohtas district as their place of origin and trace their lineage to Rohitashva, son of the solar dynasty king Harishchandra (Risley, 1891). In the *Bihar District*



Gazetteer, Rai Chaudhary mentions that the stone fort of Rohtasgarh is named after Rohitashva, the son of King Harishchandra. The region of Rohtas was once the homeland of the Kharwar, Chero, and Oraon tribes. The Kharwars consider themselves descendants of the Suryavanshi Kshatriyas (Raychaudhuri, 1966).

The Kharwars strictly follow the social norms and traditions of their community. Their families are typically joint and patriarchal in structure. Monogamy is the common marital practice. Division of labor within the household is usually based on age. Women are primarily responsible for domestic works. Within Kharwar society, women are considered the heads of household affairs and are given due respect and honor. They also play a vital role in social events like marriages, festivals, and rituals.



Kharwar Woman

There is considerable diversity among the regions inhabited by the Kharwars across Bihar. The geography, climate, and availability of economic resources vary from place to place. The Kharwars are

traditionally agrarian and also engage in animal husbandry. In earlier times, when they resided in the Kaimur hills, they practiced shifting cultivation known locally as *bhoomchas*. Today, much of the forest cover in Rohtas and Kaimur has dwindled. The primary economic activities of the Kharwar tribe now include agriculture, animal husbandry, collecting and selling firewood and medicinal herbs, hunting, and wage labor. Those who have migrated from the hilly areas of Rohtas and Kaimur to the Son Valley mainly rely on farming or daily wage work for their livelihood. However, nearly 80% of the Kharwar population still resides in the hilly regions. Identifying as Suryavanshi Kshatriyas, they consider manual labor beneath their social dignity.

Kharwar men generally wear kurta, ganji (vest), and pagdi or chadar (shawl), often accompanied by a gamchha (cotton towel) draped over their shoulder. In tribal and impoverished areas, young boys and girls are often seen semi-nude due to economic hardship. Kharwar women typically wear saree, jhula (loose upper cloth), blouse, kanchuki or choli and saya or tahban (petticoat or underskirt). Widowed women wear white garments as a sign of mourning. Jewelry is commonly worn by both men and women. Many Kharwar men have pierced ears adorned with gold or silver earrings. Boys often wear silver bangles known locally in Rohtas as bera. Most women wear ornaments made of silver or gilt metal. Tattooing (godna) is a widespread custom among Kharwar women and holds cultural significance.

Kharwar homes are generally built with mud walls and roofs made of tiles, grass, or straw. In tribal areas and among landless Kharwars in Rohtas, thatched huts made of hay and paddy stalks are more common. Women decorate the walls of their homes using white or colored clay found locally in their environment.



House Making (Kharwar Tribe)



The Kharwar tribe uses porridge made from maize and rice as their staple food. They consume pulses such as arhar (pigeon pea), khesari (Lathyrus), and masoor (lentil). In terms of non-vegetarian diet, they eat chicken, goat, and fish.

The Kharwar tribe is primarily settled from the Rohtas and Kaimur districts of Bihar to Katihar (Purnia). Due to this widespread presence, some of their deities are part of ancient tradition, while others have been adopted locally. The Kharwars of the Rohtas region consider themselves Suryavanshi Kshatriyas and worship Hindu gods and goddesses. Their main deities include Hanuman, Kali Mai, Surya Lakshmi, Dharti Dihwar, and Durga. Many Kharwars also worship Parvati, Shiva, and Ganesha. They consult a shaman (Ojha) for the appeasement of spirits like Brahm, Kichchin, Pishach, and Danav. Their places of worship may be temples, platforms (chabutras), or peepal trees. Religious rituals are conducted by Brahmins.

Chero Tribe

The people of the Chero tribe predominantly reside in the Sonbhadra district. They also inhabit Naugarh in the Chandauli district, and Kaimur and Rohtas districts of Bihar. The Chero tribe is mainly considered to be of Dravidian origin and is possibly a branch of the Kol tribe. The Chero people claim to be originally tribal Kshatriyas. In the *Bihar District Gazetteer*, Mr. Rai Chaudhury has stated that the fort of Rohtasgarh was the dwelling site of the Cheros and Kharwars. The Cheros were also referred to as *Barah Hazari* (Talents, 1926). The Kharwar tribe has a close relationship with the Chero tribe. According to Dalton, the Kharwars also known as Kol have long lived in harmony with the Cheros. The customs of both tribes are completely similar to one another. Both Cheros and Kharwars trace their origin to the Sun. Their father was a Kshatriya, and their mother belonged to a tribal group known as *Bharn* (Dalton, 1872). Marital relations were also established between the Cheros and the Kharwars.



Chero women



Chero Children

In some places, the Chero tribe is also referred to as *Baiga*. The livelihood of the Chero tribe is based primarily on agriculture and animal husbandry. They also engage in wage labor. Their tribal settlements are mostly located in hilly or forested areas and are usually small in size. Their houses are primarily made of stone, with roofs constructed from grass, hay, and weeds.

Surveys of Chero tribal settlements reveal a scarcity of clothing. Typically, the men wear *kurta* and *dhoti*, and carry a *gamcha* over their shoulders. The women wear *sari* and blouse. Chero women adorn themselves with various ornaments such as

baali (earrings), necklaces, *susiya* or *hasiya*, *kada* or bangles on their hands, *bulak* in the nose, and *kanphool* in the ears.

In terms of diet, the Chero people mainly consume coarse grains such as millet, gram, lentils, sorghum, etc. *Mahua* is consumed both as a food item and an intoxicating drink. Meat is also consumed widely as part of their diet. The economic life of the Cheros primarily includes wage labor, forest produce collection and selling it in the local market, agricultural labor, and farming. In addition to this, they are also involved in animal husbandry.



Chero tribe breaking stones



Animal husbandry by Chero tribe

Looking at the social life of the Chero tribe, it is generally observed that their families are nuclear. Their families are mostly patriarchal. There is close bonding among blood relatives. The women here not only perform household tasks but also contribute to earning a livelihood. Women are capable of expressing their independent will in both familial and other matters. In the Chero tribe, monogamy is commonly practiced, although instances of polygamy are also observed occasionally.

In ancient times, the culture of the Chero tribe was entirely rooted in religion. Their culture exhibited all elements of tribal religious and cultural uniqueness. However, over time, their values, customs, and religion began to lose their tribal originality and distinction. Due to the deep influence of Brahmanical traditions, they now have faith in Hindu deities such as Ram, Shiva, Parvati, Krishna, and Hanuman, although their devotion to their tribal deities is still strongly visible. Deities like *Garaiya*, *Birha Baba* etc., are their prominent local gods and are worshipped by them. For removing evil spirits, diseases, etc., rituals of offering the sacrifice of a goat are performed. It is also customary to offer *mahua* liquor to deities for driving away evil spirits and illnesses. Major festivals celebrated by them include *Ram Navami*, *Holi*, *Deepawali*, *Teej*, and *Makar Sankranti*.

Agariya Tribe

The Agariya tribe is known by different names in different states. This tribe is mainly found in Rewa, Sarguja, Udaipur, Sonbhadra, and Kaimur districts. They primarily migrated from Rewa and settled in the forests of Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, and Bihar. The term *Agariya* is a Hindi word used for iron ore. The people of the Agariya tribe consider themselves blacksmiths (Lohar) (Crooke, 1975). The Agariya tribe is also believed to be of Dravidian origin. Agariyas belong to an artisan class of tribe

that extracts raw iron by filtering it from underneath soil and stones.

In the Agariya tribe, both joint and nuclear family systems are observed. The joint family is known as *Bhai-bandh* (brotherhood) family. Division of labor is based on the capacity of family members, but in activities like agriculture, hunting, and house construction, all family members participate collectively. Monogamy is mostly prevalent in the Agariya tribe, but polygamy is also permitted. Child marriage is also practiced among them, and love marriages are accepted as well. Agariya women take part in the management of family affairs as well as social and religious activities. They are also folk artists. For their livelihood, they perform folk songs and dances.

The Agariya people depend on naturally available food from their environment. They primarily consume grains, fruits, and meat-fish as part of their diet. *Mahua* is a staple food in their life. They also consume meat of pigs, goats, ducks, etc. On occasions of marriage and festivals, liquor consumption is considered essential, and even Agariya women partake in drinking on such occasions.

By the end of the 10th century, as observed by some Western scholars who studied this tribe, it was found that earlier they used to cover their bodies with leaves. However, the current situation is different, and there have been significant changes in the attire of men and women. Both men and women wear ornaments. Agariya women also get tattooed with designs like flowers, scorpions, and even their husband's name.

Highlighting the economic aspect of the Agariya tribe, it is evident that they mainly belong to the artisan class. They primarily work as blacksmiths. They repair agricultural tools for farmers and receive grain as wages after the harvest. These people earn their livelihood by making agricultural tools and wooden masks. Hunting and selling forest products



are other means of their livelihood. They collect and sell wild herbs, fruits, flowers, and animal skins for sustenance. Agariyas living in plains engage in agriculture and produce wheat, rice, millet, cotton, gram, etc. They also work in factories. Some people earn by spinning thread, weaving baskets, making ropes, and clay pots. Thus, it is clear that the economy of the Agariya tribe is of a mixed type.

At present, the Agariya tribe believes in the goddess Lohasur as well as in Hindu deities. They also believe in spirits, witchcraft, and sorcery. If there is no rainfall, a pandemic, or childlessness, they consider such misfortunes as a result of displeased spirits. Hence, to avoid such adversities, they continuously worship these spirits. Their religious behavior revolves around spirit-worship or magical practices. Villagers worship *Dulha Dev*. To ward off deadly pandemics and famine, the help of a *Gunia* (traditional healer) is sought. Agariya culture is deeply influenced by Hindu religion.

Oraon Tribe

The Oraon tribe is one of the tribal communities residing in Bihar. The people of the Oraon tribe migrated to Bihar from the neighboring states of Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, and Odisha. Their highest population is found in Ranchi (Vidyarthi, 1986). The Oraon people are generally of short stature, and their skin color ranges from deep brown to black. Their hair is black and curly, and they have small eyes. According to Sir Herbert Risley, the Oraon tribe is considered to be of Dravidian origin. Dr. Ghosh has classified them under the Proto-Australoid group (Vidyarthi, 1986). Several scholars have attempted to study the antiquity and migration of the Oraon tribe. Based on their findings, it was concluded that the Oraon people were originally engaged in hunting and food gathering. Later, as part of their development, they began agricultural activities.

The current social organization of the Oraon clan is a reflection of its ancient past when the Oraon people used to live in small bands or groups. Among the Oraon, the tradition of marrying outside their own *gotra* (clan) is prevalent. They refer to all individuals of one generation by the same term. For instance, the Oraon refers to his father and all his father's brothers as *Ba*, and similarly, he calls his mother *Aaisu* (Ahmad, 1978). The Oraons are primarily patriarchal. Inheritance in the clan follows the paternal line. Women are dependent on their husbands.



Oraon King

The Oraon people use various methods to beautify their bodies. They usually get tattoo markings done on their hands and feet. Their children (both boys and girls) have their ears pierced. They are accustomed to wearing minimal clothing. During festivals, the men wear a garment called *Kariya*, and women wear a cloth from waist to knee called *Khanriya*. The women wear ornaments made of brass or other metals. They wear seven thick bangles from wrist to elbow, which they call *Rasniya* in their language. They wear a thick *Hansuli* (neck ornament) around the neck.



Oraon women



Members of the Oraon tribe



The economic life of the Oraon people depends on agriculture. In farming, they are more advanced than other tribes. They possess knowledge of different methods of irrigation and fertilization. They rotate their crops every year. They rear animals like cows, buffaloes, and goats. Some households also keep dogs, pigeons, and chickens. The women sell the harvested crops in nearby markets. Their main crops are rice, oilseeds, and pulses. The barter system is still in practice among the Oraons. They sell grains and vegetables and purchase other essential goods. Besides agriculture, the Oraons also engage in share cropping and hunting wild animals.

The Oraon people have deep faith in religion, magic, and totemism. Various magical practices are aimed at achieving success in hunting and increasing the number of children. Totemism still serves as the basis of their social relationships such as marriage, kinship, etc. Different animals and plants are considered their totems. They associate their totems with their ancestors, believing that at some point in time, a particular totem had helped their forefather. Additionally, the practice of *Dhunkuriya* is prevalent among them, which aims at imparting social and religious responsibilities to adolescent boys. The Oraon people also believe in various deities. Their chief deity is *Dharmes* (the Sun God), whom they worship. Apart from this, they also believe in animism. To protect themselves from evil spirits, the practice of animal sacrifice is followed. Their religion appears to be deeply influenced by Hinduism.

HoTribe–

The Ho tribe inhabits the Sonbhadra district of Uttar Pradesh and some parts of southern Bihar. However, their main settlement is in the Singhbhum district of Jharkhand. Primarily, the Ho people reside in the Kolhan region, though they are not the original inhabitants of Kolhan. Their language and culture are different from the Mundas, yet so similar that it can be inferred the Ho clan must have separated from the Mundas only a few centuries ago. Apart from their own community, they refer to others as *Dikus*. The physical condition of the Ho people is not very good. Though they have broad chests and wide shoulders, their overall health is not considered sound. Their skin is dark, nose flat, and they are short in stature. Their eyes are small, and they have almost no moustache or beard.

The Ho people build their homes on elevated land. Their houses are usually made of mud, with thatched roofs of grass and hay. To beautify the walls, they paint them with various colors. Ho village is divided into several *kilis* (hamlets), one of which

holds primacy over the others. The Ho society is also divided into many *gotras* (clans), usually named after animals, objects, or plants. Marriage within the same *gotra* is not allowed. Their families are patriarchal, and women are not granted paternal property. Polygamy is a prevalent practice in Ho society, and a man's social status is determined by the number of wives he has. In Ho society, the groom's parents pay a bride price to arrange the marriage. For this reason, the groom's parents are often dissatisfied with the expense of marriage. In their tradition, it is not considered proper for the girl's parents to initiate a marriage proposal even if the daughter remains unmarried for life, they will not take the initiative. The proposal must come from the groom's side.

Ho people wear very minimal clothing. Sometimes, they even use tree leaves to cover their bodies. Women usually wear sarees, and men wear dhotis. As for jewelry, women wear ear ornaments, necklaces, and bangles. Both men and women get tattoos (*godna*) on their arms.

Despite a life filled with sorrow and hardship, the Ho people live with joy and entertainment. In the evenings, they gather together to tell stories and perform songs and dances. They are very patriotic by nature. Swimming, climbing trees, running, singing, and dancing are their main forms of recreation. Their main games include *chor*, *kaj*, *kasa*, *hata-danda*, and *kalachal*.

The primary occupation of the Ho society is agriculture. They also supplement their livelihood by hunting wild animals and fishing. They prefer to perform every task collectively. Hunting and fishing are done in groups. They also help each other with fieldwork. However, if someone does not assist others in the fields, then others will not help him in return; and if they do, they charge labor. In their society, wages are not given in money but in goods. After harvesting, a portion is set aside for the *bonga* (deities). The remaining grain is divided one part is stored in the *bandi* (granary) for domestic use, and another portion is kept aside for paying taxes.

Ho people refer to their deities as *bonga*. Their supreme deity is *Singha-Bonga*, who is believed to have created the entire world. *Naga-Bonga*, the wife of *Singha-Bonga*, is the goddess of water. In addition to these, they also worship *Disoli*, *Madog-Bonga*, *Hatu*, and others. According to their belief, *bonga* is a great power that gives life to all things. This power exists in various forms and is responsible for natural calamities like storms, floods, and famines. It is *bonga* who brings both happiness and sorrow to humans.

The Ho have adopted many Hindu festivals, yet they also celebrate their traditional festivals with



great enthusiasm. There are seven major festivals among the Ho – *Maghe*, *Baha*, *Damurai*, *Jamanama*, *Kolan*, and *Batauli* (Ahmad, 1978). All these festivals are related to agriculture. Some are performed to ensure a good harvest, while others are to please the deities. Their most important festival is *Maghe*, celebrated in January–February. During this time, they suspend all work and celebrate joyfully. They sing *Maghe-Rag*, drink liquor, and participate in dance and music.

Korwa–

The Korwa tribe primarily inhabits the forested and hilly regions of Chotanagpur (Russell & Hiralal, 1916). In addition, they also reside in areas bordering Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand. A small number of Korwa people also live in the Sonbhadra district of Uttar Pradesh and the Kaimur district of Bihar. According to Dalton, the Korwa people are short in height and have a dark brown complexion (Dalton, 1872). The Korwa tribe is mainly divided into two groups: first, the *Dihariya* or farmer Korwas those who live in the villages (*Dih*) and engage in agriculture; and second, the *Pahadi Korwa*, also called *Benwariya*, because they practice *bewar* or shifting cultivation.

The houses of the Korwa people are typically made of mud with thatched roofs. Some Korwas living in hilly areas have homes made from wood and bamboo. The floors are smeared and cleaned using mud or cow dung. Their houses generally have one or two rooms.

The Korwa society is patriarchal. Families are usually nuclear in structure. After marriage, Korwa men establish their own household but continue to show full respect to their parents. Korwa women also hold an important position in society and play significant roles in all economic and social activities. According to Korwa customs, marriage is not allowed among those who share a blood relationship. Endogamous marriage is practiced in Korwa society. The tradition of bride price or *bride-wealth* has existed in their community since early times.

Korwa men wear a *pancha* (loincloth) below the waist and a *bandi* (vest) on the upper body. Korwa women wear *lugda*, *porka*, or a sari. Korwa women wear jewelry made of brass or imitation metals, such as bangles on their hands, *phuli* (nose ring) in the nose, and wooden or brass ornaments in the ears. To enhance their physical beauty, most Korwa women get tattoos (*godna*). These tattoos often depict animals, flowers, stars, and similar motifs.

Pregnant women in the Korwa community continue to participate in economic and domestic work until delivery. The Korwa people consider childbirth a divine blessing. Therefore, they construct a separate hut made of leaves, known as *kumba*, for the delivery. The delivery is conducted by a *dhogin* (local midwife). The umbilical cord is cut using a knife and buried inside that same hut a common practice in the Korwa tribe.

Burial is the usual method of disposing of the dead. The head of the corpse is placed in the southward direction. Some grains are buried along with the body. After the burial of elders, branches of the *sal* tree are placed over the grave. When someone dies, their hut is torn down, and it is never inhabited again. Children under the age of five are buried either inside the house or under a banyan tree. This is possibly based on the belief that it facilitates the child's rebirth.

The main crops cultivated by the Korwa tribe include maize, paddy, finger millet (*madua*), sesame (*til*), and *bodi* (beans). However, the fertility of their land is so poor that it is insufficient for their sustenance. In such conditions, they work as agricultural laborers for other castes and tribes in the region. Primarily, they survive by collecting wild forest products such as fruits, flowers, tubers, and roots. Earlier, they also hunted animals and practiced lac cultivation. Apart from this, honey collection was once an important occupation, though they have now mostly abandoned it. They rear livestock such as cows, goats, pigs, and poultry.

The Korwa people believe that deities and other supernatural forces dwell on the hills surrounding their settlements. If these are not appeased on time, natural calamities or divine wrath may strike the entire village or family. Through various religious rituals, they remain in contact with these supernatural forces. All Korwas also worship and revere their ancestors. *Singbonga* is their principal deity. Other deities they worship include *Dihwa Gonhal*, *Rakhsal*, *Savi*, *Satbahi*, *Karma*, and *Sarhul*.

Gond

The Gond tribe is one of the major tribal communities of India. A large population of the Gond tribe resides in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. This tribe also inhabits several districts of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The Gond tribe is believed to be of Australoid origin and is considered part of the Dravidian tribal family.



GondTribe



People of the Gond Tribe

The people of the Gond tribe are generally black or dark brown in complexion. They have well-shaped bodies. Their hair is thick, black, and curly; their faces are oval-shaped, noses flat, lips thick, and they have sparse beard and moustache hair. Their average height is around 165 cm.

The houses of the Gond people are usually made of mud and thatch. They decorate their homes with various paintings, especially of vegetation, animals, and birds. The main entrance of the house symbolizes the prosperity of the family. The Gond people are simple, honest, brave, and courageous. Their bravery is often sung and celebrated in folk songs. The people of the Gond community have continued to observe their customs and traditions diligently. From birth to death, numerous rituals are practiced in this tribe.

The Gond society is patriarchal, yet women are also granted equal rights. Gond women are entirely free to choose their life partners. Various marriage customs exist among Gond families. One of the prominent types is *Lamsena* marriage (Russell & Hiralal, 1916), in which the young man works as a laborer in his future father-in-law's fields for a fixed period. After this period of service, the couple is

married. Besides this, other prevalent forms include *Bhagli* marriage, *Pathoni* marriage, *Chadh* marriage, *Payasotur* marriage, and *Dudhpeva* marriage.

In earlier times, members of the Gond tribe lived completely naked or covered themselves with leaves. For the past 3–4 decades, however, they have started using clothing. Men generally wear *dhoti*, carry a *gamchha* on their shoulders, and tie a turban (*muretha*) on their heads. Women usually wear sarees. Both men and women of the Gond tribe adorn themselves with ornaments. Along with women, men too get tattoos (*godna*).

The economy of the Gond tribe is mainly based on agriculture. Earlier, they relied on hunting, animal husbandry, and shifting cultivation, but nowadays they engage in settled agriculture and also pursue other occupations. The Gond people are hardworking by nature and remain occupied in various tasks throughout the day. Their other occupations include basket making, honey and lac collection, mat weaving, musical instrument making, forest product gathering, and hut construction. They usually grow coarse grains such as *kodo*, *jowar*, and *kutki*. The Gond people make extensive use of *mahua* (*Madhuca longifolia*).



Agricultural Plough



Even today, most members of the Gond tribe continue to follow their ancient tradition of nature worship, though their religion has been significantly influenced by Hinduism, similar to many other Indian tribes. The original religion of the Gonds is called *Koya Punem*, which means "the path of nature." Their religious beliefs strongly emphasize *taboo*, *totemism*, and *bongaism*. Every Gond worships their specific totem. The primary deity of the Gond tribe is *Baradeo*. Additionally, they worship *Dulhadeo*, *Badhadeo*, *Meghnath*, *Surajdeo*, *Narayandeo*, and others. Under the influence of Hinduism, they also worship Hindu gods such as Shiva, Kali, and Hanuman. The tradition of burying the dead is referred to as *Jeevatun Toli Siyana* (Pal, 2017) in their culture.

The Gond tribe is rich in art, culture, and aesthetics. Their main traditional festivals include *Meghnad Bidari*, *Karma*, *Bakpanthi*, *Hardili*, *Navakhani*, *Chetra*, *Jowara*, and *Madai*. Dance is customary during these festivals, with prominent forms including *Karma*, *Saila*, *Sua*, *Gendi*, *Birha*, *Kaharwa*, and *Abaltoi*. *Sajni* and *Deewani* are women-centric dances.

Kol-

The people of the Kol tribe inhabit the regions lying between the Narmada, Son, Ganga, and Chambal rivers. The Kol tribe considers Rewa in Madhya Pradesh as its primary homeland. This tribe also resides in the foothill regions of the Vindhya and Kaimur mountain ranges. The Kol tribe is an ancient tribal group of the Munda lineage (Risley, 1915), which has now completely separated itself from the Mundas. The Munda group is also referred to as Austric and Kolerian. Remains of the Kolerian race have also been found in the Indus Valley Civilization. References to the Kols are found in the *Vishnu Purana* and *Harivamsa Purana*. Some Kols even trace their ancestry to Shabari, who is mentioned in

the *Ramayana*. The *Ramcharitmanas* and *Mahabharata* also mention the Kols.



Kol woman and child

The houses of the Kol people are usually made of mud with thatched roofs. Kol society is patriarchal. Both nuclear and joint family structures are observed. After marriage, a new household is usually established separately from the family. The status of women in Kol society is good. Women actively participate in household tasks as well as other activities. They have equal participation in economic, social, cultural, and religious affairs. The practice of bride price also exists among them, which is known as *Pote*.

Kol men wear *dhoti*, *kurta*, and a turban (*pagri*) on their heads. Women wear sarees and blouses. Both Kol men and women are fond of ornaments. Most of them wear silver or imitation jewelry. Kol men keep moustaches and long hair. They are fond of walking sticks (*lathis*) and always carry one. Tattooing (*godna*) is considered an ornament among the tribes. Kol women are more fond of tattoos than men.



Tattoo (Godna)



The Kol tribe is a culturally rich community. Girls are usually enthusiastic about decorating and embellishing the home using traditional arts. The Kol people are very enthusiastic and fond of music, dance, and singing. Gathering and performing dance and music during festive and ceremonial occasions is a traditional custom. *Koldahka* dance is the main and traditional dance of the Kol tribe. Besides this, they also perform other dances such as *Saila*, *Ghod-Murela*, *Karma*, and *Kehra*.

The economy of the Kol tribe is based on agriculture. The main crops grown by them include maize, jowar (sorghum), bajra (pearl millet), *kodo*, and various vegetables, which are used for their consumption. In addition to agriculture, one of their traditional occupations is iron smelting and making tools from it. They also collect forest produce and sell it for their livelihood. Most Kols now work as agricultural laborers.

Regarding religion, the Kol tribe, like many other tribal groups, has deep faith in magic and witchcraft. The Kol people consider their origin from the Sun god or *Singhboga*. Most of their deities are associated with good harvests, protection from wild animals, and relief from epidemics. Due to the influence of Hinduism, they also worship deities like Rama, Krishna, Shiva, Hanuman, Bhairav, etc. Other major tribal deities include *Thakur Dev*, *Barka Dev*, *Ahira Baba*, *Pahalwan Baba*, *Sannasi Dev*, and *Baghaut*. They also resort to magic and rituals to counter the effects of venom from poisonous creatures. The Kol tribe celebrates all Hindu festivals (Shandilya, 1999), including *Holi*, *Diwali*, *Dussehra*, and *Navratri*.

Majhwar Tribe

The Majhwar tribe is also known as *Manjhi* (Hasan & Das, 2005). The Majhwar or Manjhi are considered a sub-tribe of the Gond tribe. The literal meaning of *Manjhi* is the head of a tribal sub-division. This word is derived from the Sanskrit word *madhya*, meaning "center." The Majhwar tribe is divided into five sub-groups: *Poiya*, *Tekam*, *Chika*, *Oiku*, and *Morai*. This tribe is settled in the Satpura and Vindhya hills. A legend is prevalent among the Majhwars that when Lord Rama broke the bow in King Janak's court, it broke into four parts, and one part fell on the banks of the Narmada River, where even today the Majhwars go for pilgrimage.

The Majhwars have a medium height, dark black complexion, long nose, and thick lips. There is less hair on their face. Their body is uniformly built with a strong chest, jaw, and firm teeth. Based on physical characteristics, they are categorized under

the Proto-Australoid group. Majhwar is a tribe of the Dravidian linguistic family.

Their houses are mostly built on elevated land. These are mud houses with a central wooden pillar. The roof is made of bamboo and wood. Each house usually has 2-4 rooms. The inner room of the house holds religious significance, where idols of deities like *Dulha Dev*, *Adhiyari*, etc., are installed.

The Majhwar society is generally patriarchal. However, women also hold a respectable position in society. Various types of marriages are practiced among the Majhwars. Polygamy is also seen among them. Types of marriage include conventional marriage involving bride price (*Haroni*), elopement marriage (*Udaria*), bangle marriage (*Dejabhut*), and others (Premi, 2015). In birth rituals, religious practices are carried out before the birth of the child to protect the mother and child from evil spirits. The umbilical cord is traditionally buried in the house. In death rituals, this tribe follows the practice of burial; cremation is not practiced.

For food, Majhwars mainly consume rice (*bhat*) with leafy vegetables (*bhaji*) or chutney. Dal is occasionally consumed, mostly during festivals. They use *mahua* in large quantities. A strong preference for meat and alcohol is observed. Their clothing is simple. Men wear *lungi*, *gamchha*, shirts, or vests and wrap *gamchha* on their heads. Women wear *lagra* and *polkha*. Children wear very few clothes and often remain half-naked. Both women and men are fond of ornaments. Men prefer to wear bangles in their hands and earrings made of aluminum, copper, or iron. Women wear bangles (*churi*), anklets (*kathar* and *pai*), waist chains (*kardhan*), armlets (*nangmori*), and earrings (*bala*).

Like other tribes, Majhwar women tattoo various patterns on their bodies. Common designs include scorpions, flowers, and leaves. Men also get tattoos on their hands and ears. The belief behind tattooing is that after death, the tattoos remain with the body in the afterlife.

The primary occupation of the Majhwar tribe is agriculture. In addition, they rely on forest produce. The main crops cultivated by them are *kodo*, *paddy*, *moong*, and *urad*. Major forest produce includes *mahua*, *guli*, *tendu leaves*, *harra*, *gum*, *tamarind*, etc., which they sell for livelihood. Wild tubers, fruits, and vegetables are collected for personal consumption. During the rainy season, they catch fish from local streams for their own use. They are also engaged in animal husbandry.

The religion of the Majhwars is based on nature worship. They see their gods and goddesses in all animate and inanimate things. They believe in the existence of three types of spirits: sacred spirits,



impure spirits, and evil spirits. Their major deities include *Bango Dai*, household deities, village gods, *Mahadev Gauri*, *Thakur Devta*, etc. Their important festivals include *Kathori*, *Hareli*, *Nag Panchami*, *Karma*, *Dev Uthoni*, *Gaura*, and others. Festivals like *Karma*, *Bair*, and *Gaura* are celebrated annually at the village level.

Common Cultural Traits of the Above-mentioned Tribes

- All of the above-mentioned tribes are agriculturally oriented. Rice is their principal crop; in addition, they all cultivate coarse grains, vegetables, etc.
- All these tribes domesticate various animals, among which buffaloes, goats, cows, and chickens are prominent.
- Hunting and fishing are major occupations of these tribes.
- All of the above tribes collect forest produce and sustain their livelihood by selling it. The collection of tubers, fruits, flowers, herbs, etc., from forests is a common feature among these tribes.
- Most of the above-mentioned tribes reside in huts or houses made of raw mud, wood, and thatch.
- In most of the above-mentioned tribes, women are granted equal rights in society, and the practice of bride-price is prevalent. Each tribe has some form of **totem** without exception.
- In every tribe, there is a tradition of tattooing (*gudna*), and the belief behind this is that only the tattoos accompany the soul to the afterlife after death.
- The practice of burying the deceased is common among all these tribes. Along with this, placing some items with the deceased is also practiced in certain tribes—just as was done during the Mesolithic and subsequent periods. In some tribes, there is a tradition of burying children below the age of five inside or near the house, with the belief that the child will be reborn.

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