

Economy, Livelihood, and Cultural Continuity among the Birjia: An Ethnographic Study from Jharkhand

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This paper analyses the livelihood practices, economic activities like traditional and modern, and related cultural continuity of the Birjia tribe of Jharkhand. This study examines the development and changes from forest-dependent livelihoods to diverse areas like daily wage labor, forest labor, garden laborers, state-sponsored initiatives, and agriculture. Despite their increased integration into various economic activities, the Birjia maintain a strong connection to their culture. They also face government schemes and social and ecological hurdles to their livelihood. This paper will also explore the complex relationship between adaptation, acceptance, and continuity for the economy and livelihood.

Keywords: birjia, livelihood, tribal economy, cultural continuity, cultural ecology

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1. Introduction

Everyone in this world engages in activities directly related to their means of subsistence and the economy. There is no one who is not doing something. There is no longer any trace of the tribal economy in the mainstream. In the past, the majority of the tribes were hunters and gatherers. After that, they transitioned into those who worked as foragers, horticulturists, pastoralists, and finally agriculturalists. They began working in the forest on projects undertaken in the name of development immediately after colonization. The current situation is that they are working in industries ranging from manufacturing to information technology, reflecting a significant shift in their roles and contributions to the modern economy.

The livelihood perspective begins by examining the diverse ways individuals inhabit various locations. The livelihood perspective has been pivotal to rural development theory and practice in recent decades (Satpati & Sharma, 2020). The literature presents various definitions of livelihood, such as 'the means of earning a living' or 'a combination of resources utilized and activities performed to sustain life' (Chambers, 1995). The Department for International Development (DFID) defined 'livelihood' as the capabilities, assets, and means necessary for sustaining a living (Solesbury, 2003). Individuals amalgamate various activities within a portfolio to sustain their livelihoods. The natural environment surrounding the populace offers various goods, services, amenities, and other ecological resources that sustain the tribes (Kumar & et al. 2016).

The livelihoods among tribal communities in India are a complex, dynamic, and multidimensional phenomenon, the perception of which varies with geographic location, type of community, age, gender, education, fluctuations in resources, services, and infrastructures, and social, economic, cultural, ecological, and political determinants (Kumar et al., 2009). While agriculture constitutes the main source of livelihood among tribes in India, playing a vital role in the national economy, rural development, employment and occupation, agro-industries, food and nutrition security, growth and survival, social, economic, and cultural conditions, and poverty alleviation (Surayya et al., 2008). But in Birjia's case, they are not recognized as a settled agriculturist.

The Birjia mostly live in the Chotanagpur area. Textual and contextual evidence indicates that they were traditionally the *beonra* (slash-and-burn) farmers, iron smelters, and basket weavers (Dasgupta, 1994). It is not straightforward to categorize their livelihood pattern and economic activities. Earlier, they were completely cut off from the money-based economy. Even when they used to be simple nomads, they always possessed a few coins. They got their drink, food, shelter, and other substances from nature. Money did not function as capital or as a resource for generating wealth (Kongari & Tirkey, 2024).

Despite a growing body of literature on tribal livelihoods in India, there remains a lack of focused ethnographic studies that examine the interrelationship between economic change and cultural continuity among PVTGs such as the Birjia. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring how shifts in livelihood patterns influence, reshape, or sustain cultural practices and identities.

This paper is exploring the economic and livelihood activities of the PVTG (particularly vulnerable tribal group) Birjia of the Jharkhand state. In the categorization of the PVTGs, economy itself is one of the parameters. PVTGs are characterized by (a) forest-based livelihoods, (b) a pre-agriculture level of existence, (c) a stagnant or declining population, (d) extremely low literacy, and (e) a subsistence economy (National Commission for Scheduled Tribes, n.d.). All parameters not only reflect their socio-cultural conditions but also relate to practices that fulfill their sustenance needs; these practices are deeply connected to all their activities, including their livelihood and economy, which are derived from the forests through foraging, hunting, and gathering essential resources for survival. Since the implementation of forest rights acts began, individuals have been giving up their traditional means of livelihood. As a result, they are transitioning their economic activities away from the forest and toward other ways of earning sufficient income to support themselves.

There is a lack of ethnographic studies examining the relationship between the livelihoods and economic activities of the Birjia tribe. This study is trying to fulfill this research gap by exploring how their livelihood shifted in different ways and how the culture is affected through the economic changes.

2. Objectives

The objectives of the study are the following:

- To examine the traditional and contemporary livelihood practices of the Birjia;
- To understand the level to which cultural continuity is preserved or altered amid evolving economic circumstances.
- How does culture shape the livelihood and the economy?

3. Land and People

The term "Birjia" comes from the words "Bir," which means "forest," and "Jia," which means "dwellers." It means they are considered himself as 'Forest man'. From an anthropological perspective, the Birjia belong to the Proto-Australoid race. The Birjia dialect is part of the Austro-Asiatic language family. They speak Hindi and colloquial languages like Sadari and Nagpuriya in addition to their language. The tribe is split into two main clans: Telra (or Telia) and Sinduria. Telra Birjia is split into Dudh Birjia and Ras Birjia. The Birjia tribe mostly dwells in the state of Jharkhand. They mostly live in the Latehar, Lohardaga, Gumla, Palamu, and Ranchi districts. In Latehar, they mostly live in blocks like Mahuadand, Garu, Barwadih, Balumath, Netarhat, and Bhadaria. In Gumla and Lohardaga, they live in a few other blocks. The Birjia tribe is one of the eight PVTGs in Jharkhand state. The Census of India (2011) said that there were 488,494 PVTGs living in the state of Jharkhand. The Birjia community in Jharkhand has 6,276 people; 3,174 of them are men and 3,102 are women. Most of the Birjia people live in rural areas, while a small number live in cities. The Birjia tribe has a sex ratio of 977, which means that there are a few more females than males. Their child sex ratio is 997, which is intriguing because it shows a little predilection for girls. But the literacy rates are not very high: 50.2% overall, 61.7% for men, and 38.4% for women (Kumar, 2024).

The current study area is in the Mahuadand block, which is part of the Latehar district in Jharkhand. Latehar consists of ten blocks and is designated as a Nagar Panchayat. The Birjia communities reside in the forested regions of this district. The area of Latehar is 3,622 square kilometers, and its population is 726,978.

4. Research Methodology

The methodology of this research is ethnographic. The study selected the two villages of Dauna and Purandih in the Mahuadand block. We selected the villages through purposive sampling due to the higher population of Birjia in these areas compared to others. Furthermore, the same method was used for the selection of the block. The number of households in Birjia is 95, and the available population is almost 545 in Dauna village. There are about 30 households in Purandih village, which has almost 160 people. This ethnographic study is focused on qualitative depth rather than statistical representation. A total of almost 120 participants were selected for group interviews; some of them are shortlisted for personal interviews, and for more clarity about culture and concern data, the focus group discussion has also been conducted. The study utilized quasi-participant observation and was using photography and audiovisual recording methods.

5. Theoretical Framework

The study's theoretical framework connects with the subsistence economy, the livelihood approach, cultural ecology, and other economic orientations like market-based work and industry-based labor. This comprehensive perspective offers a broad understanding of the interconnectedness between economic and livelihood transformation within a socio-cultural and ecological context. Julian Steward, in 1955 developed an approach he termed "cultural ecology." Steward proposed that cultures interact with their environmental settings by adapting features of technology, economic organization, and even kinship or religion to allow people to best pursue their livelihoods. Thus, cultural ecology views the environment as presenting problems and opportunities, not just limits or simple determinants, while recognizing that the resulting cultural adaptations depend as much on the sociocultural features at hand as on the environment (Steward, 1955). In this context, this perspective is essential for understanding the complex connections between their culture and the forest-based livelihoods of the Birjia. Traditionally, their economy and livelihood activities are widely subsistence-oriented and dependent on the collected resources from the forests.

However, increasing some external interventions, including state policies, has gradually shifted agriculture and the market, leading to changes in the traditional subsistence practices of the Birjia and affecting their relationship with forest resources. While agriculture remains the dominant source of income for rural households, non-farm sources are increasingly contributing a larger share of their earnings (Gandhi, 2018). In the near future, the market will play a more significant role in the economy. Economic liberalization also presumes a field where the market can function in an effective manner to maximize the welfare of the society (Agnihotri, 2002).

6. Economic System and Livelihood Practices

Birjia, a forest dweller, lives inside or near the forest and maintains a close connection to the environment. Earlier, the forest was the only source of their livelihood, and they relied on it. Gradually, they are moving toward money-based economic fulfillment. The outside world has the biggest impact on changing their economy. Even though things have changed, they are still facing economic or livelihood changes. The stages of their economy and livelihoods are as follows:

(1) A Composite and Transitional Economy

Birjia's economy doesn't fit into a single category. Historically, they were known for iron smelting. At that time, they practiced *beonra* (shifting cultivation) in the forest and the foothills. Simultaneously, they engaged in basketry and, from time to time, hunting and gathering as well. The forest is not only vital for their livelihood but also provides materials for making houses, tools, and items used in their cultural rituals.

(2) Agricultural Practices and Ecological Constraints

Birjia are not considered an agriculturist tribe. They are doing agriculture once a year and only for their livelihood. Their cultivable land is classified into types: *tand* or *tanr*, *don*, *tenora* (*chawra*), and *bari*. The *tand*, or *tan*, is dry land. *Tand* or *tanr* is the dry upland rich in laterite content, thus less fertile. This type is various uploads situated just above the *dawn*. And always away from the homestead. Here they are cultivated: *gondli*, *marua*, *jatengi*, and pulses like *rahar*, *kurthi*, etc.

The *den* is a wetland. This type of land is found at the bottom of the slopes between the ridges. It is rich with water content, so it remains wet throughout the year. The *Teona*, or *chawra*, is a lower land that is also considered a sub-part of the *don*. The land is located in a small upper region of *Don*. During the rainy season, paddy is cultivated in this land, which is harvested in November-December. This is also considered the best variety of arable land. Lastly, the term "*bari*" commonly refers to the land that is attached to houses. The *bari* land is productive, as it receives a considerable quantity of manure in the form of cow dung and refuse from the house. In this type of land at least two varieties of crop (maize, marua, paddy, and mustard) are cultivated.

However, agricultural production is significantly dependent on several major factors, such as lack of irrigation, soil quality, reliance on rainfall, and wild animals (often up to 40% of crops are destroyed by wild animals, especially elephants).

(3) Persistence and transition of traditional livelihood

Basketry

Once, basketry was one of the traditional jobs of Birjia. From bamboos, they were making *tokri* (baskets), *nachua* (winnowing fans), *kumni* (fishing traps), *Sadam* (a tool for splitting bamboo), and *banki* (knives) (Dasgupta, 1994). The making of these kinds of materials shows the skills of Birjia. But nowadays they are not completely relying on bamboos they are have the access of the market. Now they can buy the factory-made alternatives of these bamboo products. Although, they still cutting the bamboos for making the home and some materials. But now they are no longer to make any skill-based bamboo work.

Iron Smelting

In the past, the Birjia engaged in iron smelting. They are known as iron smelters. They manufactured axes, plows, and various types of agricultural or household tools in their own home furnaces. The area is surrounded by bauxite and laterite soil, which is suitable for the furnace. Now they have access to the market, and market products are much easier and more reliable to obtain. As a result, most of the Birjia have already quit the smelting process.

Some Birjia are now using their furnaces simply to sharpen knives, but the furnaces themselves are purchased from the market. A very rare ancient furnace is still located in the Birjia village.

Currently, it is considered a declining occupation. Due to the sanctions of administrative rules, they are running out of raw materials. Additionally, the younger generation is more fascinated with the outside world, leading to a lack of interest in learning these skills from their senior family members. Furthermore, the distinction of this technique lies in the lack of progress in technology and advancements in iron smelting techniques. The major impact comes from the market, where they can easily access better, more reliable, and cheaper iron materials.

Wood Cutting and Forest-based Activities

Wood cutting and selling in local or weekly markets is an important side job. They sell cut wood for cooking purposes, known as *bhar*. Although they follow guidelines from forest officials, they sometimes incur fines. Their connection to the forest influences their decisions, leading them to take risks by engaging in these activities for their survival.

Bamboo Cutting

Cutting bamboo and selling it is quite profitable for them. The price of bamboo is typically set at a single piece rate. In rural areas, bamboo is very useful for constructing houses and garden fencing.

They are generally allowed to collect firewood and small timber from the buffer zones. According to the Forest Rights Act (2006), they have the legal rights to collect, use, and sell "minor forest produce" (MFP).

(4) Market Integration

Local markets and the nearest block-level market maintain a strong connection with the Birjia community. Each block area contains many villages. A unique aspect of this region is that there is a local market operating almost every day of the week in various villages. As a result, residents can access the market either daily or every other day. In the Birjia market, people sell various items. These can include millets like *Madua*, crops from their fields such as maize (makai), vegetables, seasonal fruits, country chickens, eggs, goats, and some Birjia women also sell a local drink called *Hadiya*.

Despite their limited aspirations, they remain somewhat involved with these markets to earn money.

(5) Seasonal Migration and Long-distance Migration

Earlier, they did not want to go anywhere, but in the last one or two decades, they have continuously migrated from their land to other states. First, they moved to the state capital of Jharkhand, Ranchi. It is much easier for them; the accessibility and mobility are suitable. Then, they began moving to Mumbai, Pune, Bangalore, etc., influenced by local builders or agents, to work as construction site laborers. Nowadays, many Birjia are migrating to the southern parts of India, such as Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh. These states all have their own coastal areas. Mostly, they are hired for work in palm and coconut gardens. They are also employed at ports for loading and unloading goods from ships. Historically, they worked in tea gardens in Assam and West Bengal, but now they do not prefer to go there. Additionally, they are not inclined to travel to Delhi or the northern regions. More often than not, they face bullying or humiliation in northern India. When any victims come from the north, they sadly explain their situation, leading the rest of the community to believe that the north is not safe for them.

This means they are facing drawbacks from migration. The age of migrants is between 18 and 50; sometimes they move permanently and leave their families in their villages. They do not send any money to their dependents. Furthermore, some young people are marrying locals in these areas, which leads to gradual changes in society and culture.

(6) Government Schemes and Mediated Access

The government of India and the state government run many programs in the rural areas for eradicating hunger and uplifting their economy. A large number of Birjia are working in MNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act). It aims to enhance livelihood security in rural areas by providing at least 100 days of wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), n.d.).

Recent programs have been launched, such as the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, to assist individuals in building their homes. The Antyodaya Anna Yojana provides 35 kilograms of subsidized grains per family. These types of schemes are beneficial for them. The Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society (JSLPS) is a separate and autonomous society under the Rural Development Department of the Government of Jharkhand. JSLPS serves as the nodal agency for the effective implementation of livelihood promotion in the state (jslps.jharkhand.gov.in/, n.d.). They set up solar lights and water tanks in every village of the Birjia.

(7) Emerging occupation and aspirations

The diversification of livelihoods has created opportunities for alternative occupations. Some women are working as health workers in the health department, known as *sahiya*, while others from the Birjia community are employed in Anganwadi centres or primary schools as peons. The state of Jharkhand offers direct recruitment for graduates from particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGs) in state jobs. These new alternatives have emerged and inspire the younger generation.

7. Conclusion

The study reveals a close connection between the Birjia's economy and livelihood and their ecological and cultural relationships with the forest. Their traditional livelihood system was based on subsistence-oriented activities such as shifting cultivation, hunting, gathering, basketry and iron smelting, all of which manifested a close interaction between environment, economy and culture. However, their traditional economic structures have been greatly transformed by increasing market integration, state interventions, migration and changing socio-economic conditions.

The study shows that the Birjia economy is currently a transitional and mixed system where traditional ways of making a living cohabit with wage work, market participation, and government-backed ways of making a living. Some jobs, like basketry and iron smelting, are slowly going away, while movement and jobs that aren't on farms are becoming more important for young people. These changes show that the subsistence economy is slowly shifting from relying on forests to a market-based and money-based method of making a living.

On the other hand, the study shows that changes in the economy don't always mean that cultures fall apart completely. The Birjia still have strong traditional and symbolic ties to the forest through their beliefs, social practices, and daily lives, even though the way they make a living is changing. So, cultural continuity among the Birjia is not a fixed holding on to custom but a living process of changing and negotiating.

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