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Interrogating Development: Transformation and Disruption in Aboriginal Livelihood of Birhor Tribe

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ABSTRACT

The Birhor, one of India's 75 officially recognised Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), represent one of the most ecologically integrated and linguistically endangered communities in Central-East India. Historically semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers and skilled rope-makers, the Birhor have inhabited the forested landscapes of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and West Bengal for centuries, sustaining a subsistence economy rooted in intimate ecological knowledge. This article interrogates the ambivalent trajectory of "development" as experienced by the Birhor, examining how state-directed sedentarisation programmes, large-scale deforestation, and welfare-oriented interventions — far from enhancing livelihood security — have systematically disrupted the socio-ecological foundations of Birhor life. Drawing on a synthesis of ethnographic literature, government policy documents, and recent field-based research, the study analyses three interlocking axes of disruption: (a) the erosion of forest-based livelihood systems through deforestation and land alienation; (b) the cultural and occupational dislocation produced by forced or incentivised sedentarisation; and (c) the inadequacy of mainstreaming welfare schemes in addressing the structural vulnerabilities of this community. The article argues that the dominant development paradigm — premised on sedentarisation, agricultural integration, and market assimilation — constitutes a form of "epistemic violence" against Birhor ecological knowledge and ontological identity. It calls for a rights-based, culturally consonant developmental framework, anchored in the provisions of the Forest Rights Act (2006), PESA (1996), and the constitutional safeguards under the Fifth Schedule...

Keywords: Birhor, PVTG, aboriginal livelihood, sedentarisation, development disruption, forest rights, tribal identity, Jharkhand, epistemic violence, indigenous knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of "development" in the context of India's indigenous tribal communities has long been a contested terrain. While the post-colonial Indian state inherited the colonial civilisational discourse of "upliftment" of "backward" communities, it also produced — paradoxically — the very conditions of marginalisation it sought to address (Guha, 1989; Béteille, 1998). Nowhere is this paradox more starkly visible than in the experience of the Birhor tribe, a small-numbered, forest-dependent community that anthropologists have described as one of the most ecologically integrated societies in South Asia (Sinha, 1972; Roy, 1925).

The Birhor — whose name is derived from bir (forest) and hor (man), meaning "men of the forest" — are primarily found in Jharkhand, with smaller populations scattered across Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and West Bengal. Their total population, estimated at approximately 10,000, places them among the smallest tribal groups in India (Census of India, 2011). Classified as a PVTG since the Dhebar Commission's recommendation in 1975, the Birhor are characterised by a pre-agricultural economy, declining population, and extreme social and economic marginalisation (Government of India, 1975).

The academic literature on the Birhor has largely followed two trajectories: ethnographic documentation of traditional life (Roy, 1925; Sinha, 1972) and, more recently, analysis of their adaptation and crisis under development pressures (Bandyopadhyay, 1990; Mathew & Kasi, 2021). However, few studies have comprehensively examined how these processes of economic adaptation interact with and undermine Birhor identity, cultural continuity, and long-term survival (ShodhSamajik, 2025). This article addresses that lacuna
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by situating Birhor livelihood transformation within the broader political economy of tribal development in India.

The central argument of this paper is threefold: first, that the Birhor's traditional livelihood system constitutes a sophisticated, ecologically sustainable economy that has been systematically undermined rather than supported by development interventions; second, that sedentarisation — the cornerstone of state policy towards nomadic PVTGs — functions as a technology of governmentality that disrupts social, cultural, and ecological bonds without providing viable alternatives; and third, that the Forest Rights Act (2006), despite its emancipatory potential, remains largely unimplemented for the Birhor, leaving them doubly dispossessed — excluded from the forest and inadequately compensated by the market...

2. Theoretical Framework: Interrogating Development as Disruption

The theoretical scaffolding of this article draws on three intersecting bodies of scholarship. The first is the critique of "development" as a discourse of power, rooted in Arturo Escobar's (1995) foundational argument that development constitutes a historically specific apparatus through which the Global South is rendered "underdeveloped" and made subject to expert interventions. Applied to the tribal context, this means that state programmes designed to "develop" the Birhor are simultaneously programmes that define Birhor life as deficient, their economy as primitive, and their knowledge as irrelevant.

The second theoretical frame draws on James Scott's (1998) concept of *legibility* — the way states simplify and standardise complex social realities to make them amenable to administrative control. The sedentarisation of nomadic communities is a paradigmatic example: the nomadic Birhor is "illegible" to the revenue system, the ration card database, and the school enrolment register. Making them sedentary makes them legible — but at the cost of destroying the mobile, forest-based economy that sustains them.

The third frame is drawn from indigenous studies scholarship, particularly the concept of *epistemic violence* (Spivak, 1988) — the erasure of indigenous knowledge systems through the imposition of dominant epistemological frameworks. When state development agencies classify Birhor rope-making and hunting as "backward" practices to be replaced by wage labour and settled agriculture, they perform an act of epistemic violence that delegitimises centuries of ecological knowledge embedded in Birhor practice.

3. THE TRADITIONAL BIRHOR LIVELIHOOD SYSTEM: AN ECOLOGICAL ECONOMY

3.1 Hunting, Gathering, and the Forest Commons

The Birhor's traditional economy is fundamentally a forest commons economy — a system in which the community holds collective, uncodified rights over forest resources, managing them through customary norms and ecological knowledge accumulated over generations (Roy, 1925; Sinha, 1972). The core livelihood activities of the traditional Birhor include: hunting of small game (particularly monkeys, rabbits, and birds such as *titir*); collection of minor forest produce (MFP) including honey, fruits, roots, tubers, medicinal herbs, and firewood; rope-making (*simul* or *siali* fibre ropes) for sale in *haat* (weekly markets); and trapping of crop-damaging monkeys for neighbouring agricultural communities — a service for which they received grain or money in exchange.

This economy is not merely subsistence; it is a sophisticated system of ecological exchange. The Birhor's knowledge of forest ecology — species distribution, seasonal availability of MFP, animal behaviour, plant medicinal properties — constitutes a form of indigenous environmental knowledge (IEK) that has no equivalent in formal scientific discourse (Mathew & Kasi, 2021). Their rope-making, for instance, requires precise knowledge of *siali* vine (*Bauhinia vahlii*) growth patterns, harvesting cycles, and fibre processing techniques — knowledge transmitted orally across generations and embedded in the social structure of the *tanda* (nomadic camp).

The Birhor are internally differentiated into two groups: the *Uthlu* (wandering Birhor), who maintain a fully nomadic lifestyle, moving their *tanda* in accordance with forest resource availability; and the *Janghi* (settled Birhor), who have partially or fully adopted sedentary living (Roy, 1925). This internal distinction is crucial: it reveals that sedentarisation has been an ongoing process within Birhor society itself, not merely an external imposition — though the pace and character of externally driven sedentarisation are qualitatively different.

3.2 The Social Architecture of Livelihood

Birhor livelihood is not an individual economic activity but a collectively organised social practice. The *tanda* — a temporary settlement of 4–8 huts housing 10–30 people — is the primary unit of economic cooperation. Rope-making, hunting, and MFP collection are all organised collectively through kinship obligations. The *naya* (headman) coordinates decisions about migration, resource use, and trade (Sinha, 1972). Gender roles are clearly defined: men hunt, make ropes, and trade; women process fibre, manage domestic tasks, and play a critical role in cultural transmission and food processing (RJPN, 2025).

This social architecture means that livelihood is inseparable from social identity, cultural practice, and ecological relationship. To disrupt the livelihood is, therefore, to disrupt the entire social fabric — a point systematically ignored by development planners who treat Birhor poverty as an economic variable to be addressed through income-substitution programmes.

4. AXES OF DISRUPTION: HOW DEVELOPMENT UNDERMINES BIRHOR LIVELIHOOD

4.1 Deforestation and the Collapse of the Forest Economy

The most fundamental disruption to Birhor livelihood has been the large-scale destruction of forest cover in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh over the past five decades. India's Forest Survey of India (FSI) data reveals significant forest loss in Jharkhand — a state that was 29.61% forested in 2021, down from higher historical cover, with continuing encroachment from mining, industrial corridors, and infrastructure projects (FSI, 2021). For the Birhor, whose entire subsistence system depends on intact forest ecosystems, this is existential.

The destruction of forest cover has ruined the Birhor's traditional livelihood in multiple, interconnected ways (ResearchGate, 2024). The decline of *siali* vine availability — the primary raw material for rope-making — has made this central economic activity increasingly unviable. The depletion of game and minor forest produce has reduced food security and nutrition. The loss of medicinal plant species has eroded Birhor ethnomedicinal knowledge and health practices (ResearchGate, 2017). As Bandyopadhyay (1990) noted in his longitudinal study of Birhor in West Bengal's Purulia district, the destruction of forest cover produced a demographic crisis: declining population growth, rising malnutrition, and increased dependency on external food sources.

Critically, the legal framework governing forest access has actively dispossessed the Birhor. The Indian Forest Act (1927), the Forest Conservation Act (1980), and forest department administrative practices have consistently treated Birhor forest use as encroachment or poaching — criminalising practices that are, in fact, their customary livelihood rights. The Forest Rights Act (2006) was intended to undo this "historical injustice" (Government of India, 2006), but its implementation for Birhor communities has been severely incomplete. Most Birhor households lack individual or community forest rights titles, leaving them in a legal grey zone — simultaneously dependent on the forest and legally excluded from it.

4.2 Sedentarisation: The Governmentalisation of Nomadism

Since the early post-Independence period, the Indian state has pursued a consistent policy of sedentarising nomadic tribal communities, including the Birhor. The rationale has been administrative — nomadic communities cannot be efficiently covered by welfare schemes, education systems, and healthcare infrastructure — and implicitly civilisational: nomadism is read as a sign of "backwardness" to be overcome through settled agricultural life (Scott, 1998).

Sedentarisation schemes for the Birhor have typically involved the provision of pucca housing (often under Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana or earlier equivalents), ration cards, and incentives to take up agriculture. On the surface, these appear benign welfare measures. In practice, they have produced what researchers describe as "acute dilemma" for the Birhor: cultural shock, identity threat, and occupational overhaul (ResearchGate, 2024). When a nomadic community is permanently settled, "the whole social milieu gets entangled in a situation which drifts them apart from their customary ways of living and doing things" (Medwin Publishers, 2024).

Specifically, sedentarisation has produced the following disruptions. First, the *tanda* as a unit of ecological adaptation dissolves: the logic of the nomadic camp was to follow forest resource availability, and a fixed settlement cannot replicate this. Second, rope-making — which requires access to distant forest patches — becomes difficult to sustain from a fixed settlement. Third, social structures built around collective nomadic labour are eroded as individual household welfare becomes the administrative unit of state intervention. Fourth, the Birhor's distinctive identity as *bir hor* — "men of the forest" — is destabilised when they are permanently removed from the forest environment, producing what might be described as ecological homesickness and identity dissolution.

Research in Hazaribag district of Jharkhand found that Birhor who had been settled for more than a decade showed significantly higher rates of alcohol dependency, intra-community conflict, and loss of traditional knowledge compared to those who maintained semi-nomadic patterns (Bandyopadhyay, 1990). This finding is consistent with a broader pattern observed in studies of sedentarised hunter-gatherer communities globally (Woodburn, 1982).

4.3 Market Integration and the Commodification of Labour

The third axis of disruption is the integration of the Birhor into the casual wage labour market — an

integration that is structurally coercive rather than voluntary. As forest-based livelihoods become unviable, Birhor households increasingly depend on daily wage labour in agriculture or construction. This transition is marked by severe disadvantages: the Birhor face social discrimination not only from dominant caste communities but even from other tribal groups such as the Gond and Kawar, who "look down upon them" (ShodhSamajik, 2025). This double marginalisation severely constrains their bargaining power in labour markets.

The rope-making economy, once a source of both income and identity, is increasingly unviable in a market flooded with synthetic ropes. The Birhor cannot compete on price with machine-made alternatives, and their product commands no premium in mainstream markets despite its ecological and cultural distinctiveness. The absence of any fair-trade or geographical indication (GI) protection for Birhor crafts means that their traditional knowledge-based production receives no market recognition.

MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) has provided some income supplementation in settled Birhor communities, but its implementation has been plagued by documentation requirements — job cards, Aadhaar linkage — that disadvantage communities with low literacy and high mobility (CGSRLM, 2025). Moreover, the nature of MGNREGA work (earthmoving, road construction) is ecologically alien to the Birhor and provides no pathway to livelihood restoration.

Disruptions to Core Livelihoods

Encroachment, mining, and agricultural expansion have shrunk forest cover, banning hunting and diminishing rope demand, forcing reliance on low-wage labor and market vending. Loss of indigenous knowledge in medicine and sustainable harvesting erodes cultural identity, with colonies isolating them from forests and amplifying poverty cycles. Infrastructure like roads aids access but fragments habitats, exacerbating food insecurity.

Aspect	Traditional Livelihood	Post-Development Reality
Resource Base	Forest foraging, NTFP trade repository.	Wage labor, limited farming
Mobility	Nomadic tandas	Sedentary colonies
Income Stability	Seasonal, barter-based repository.	Unstable, market-dependent
Cultural Impact	Forest-centric rituals	Religious conversion, knowledge loss

5. POLICY FRAMEWORK AND ITS LIMITATIONS

5.1 The Constitutional and Legal Architecture

The Indian Constitution provides multiple layers of protection for communities like the Birhor. The Fifth Schedule (Article 244(1)) establishes a special administrative regime for Scheduled Areas, empowering Governors to adapt or modify laws for tribal protection. The PESA Act (1996) grants Gram Sabhas in Scheduled Areas significant authority over land, forest resources, and minor water bodies. The Forest Rights Act (2006) recognises both individual and community forest rights of scheduled tribes and other traditional forest dwellers, explicitly including PVTGs.

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 is particularly significant for the Birhor. Section 3(1)(e) of the Act specifically recognises "rights of PVTGs and pre-agricultural communities to community tenures of habitat and habitation" — a provision tailor-made for communities like the Birhor. This "habitat rights" provision effectively recognises the entire traditional territory — not just individual forest plots — of a PVTG community as legally protected.

5.2 The Implementation Gap

Despite this robust legal architecture, the ground reality for the Birhor is one of persistent dispossession. The implementation of FRA for PVTGs has been notoriously slow. As of 2024, India's 75 PVTGs have received habitat rights in only a handful of cases — the Mankidia (a Birhor sub-group in Odisha) received habitat rights in September 2024, making them only the sixth PVTG in Odisha to secure such recognition (LearnPro, 2024). For the much larger Birhor population in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, habitat rights remain largely unimplemented.

The reasons for this implementation gap are structural and political. Forest department officials, trained in a conservation paradigm that views tribal habitation as a threat to forest resources, have historically obstructed FRA implementation (Dash, 2023). District administration lacks the capacity and political will to conduct the complex, community-intensive process of habitat rights delineation for nomadic communities. And the Birhor themselves — characterised by low literacy, geographic dispersal, and limited political organisation — lack the advocacy capacity to press their claims.

The PVTG Mission (PM-JANMAN), launched by the Government of India in 2023 with a budget of ₹24,000 crores, represents the most ambitious recent policy initiative for PVTGs. Its objective is to improve access to housing, education, healthcare, livelihood, and infrastructure for all 75 PVTGs within three years (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2023). For the Birhor, this translates primarily into housing construction, ration card coverage, and MGNREGA enrolment. While these are not without value, they represent a welfare approach to what is fundamentally a rights deprivation — treating the symptom (poverty) rather than the cause (land and forest dispossession).

6. THE WAY FORWARD: TOWARDS A RIGHTS-BASED, CULTURALLY CONSONANT DEVELOPMENT

The analysis presented above suggests that the dominant model of Birhor development — premised on sedentarisation, agricultural integration, and welfare dependency — has been both ineffective and destructive. A genuinely emancipatory development framework for the Birhor must be built on three foundational principles.

First, legal recognition of habitat rights must be treated as non-negotiable and urgent. Without secure rights over their customary forest territory, all other development interventions remain precarious. State governments — particularly Jharkhand, which has the largest Birhor population — must implement FRA's PVTG habitat rights provisions immediately, with dedicated administrative support and community facilitators drawn from within Birhor communities.

Second, the Birhor's traditional knowledge and ecological economy must be recognised and supported rather than replaced. This means investment in sustainable forest management programmes that increase MFP availability; market linkages for Birhor rope-making that capture a fair price; and intellectual property recognition for Birhor traditional knowledge. The model of Community Resource Persons (CRPs) developed by the Chhattisgarh State Rural Livelihoods Mission (CGSRLM) — drawing on women from within PVTG communities as culturally compatible intermediaries — offers a promising approach (CGSRLM, 2025).

Third, sedentarisation must be voluntary, not incentivised or coerced. For Birhor who choose to maintain semi-nomadic lifestyles, the state must create a legal and administrative framework that accommodates — rather than penalises — mobility. This includes mobile health units, mobile schools, and multi-location ration card access. The right of the Birhor to determine their own mode of settlement — nomadic, semi-nomadic, or sedentary — is a fundamental expression of self-determination that must be respected under both PESA and FRA.

7. CONCLUSION

The Birhor case offers a sharp lens through which to interrogate the broader contradictions of tribal development in India. A community whose traditional economy embodied ecological sustainability, social solidarity, and cultural richness has been progressively impoverished by the very interventions designed to "uplift" them. Deforestation has destroyed their resource base; sedentarisation has dissolved their social architecture; market integration has exposed them to exploitation without protection; and welfare schemes have produced dependency without dignity.

The Birhor are not, as the development discourse implies, victims of their own "primitiveness." They are victims of a development paradigm that systematically undervalues indigenous ecological knowledge, disregards cultural autonomy, and prioritises administrative legibility over human flourishing. As Arturo Escobar (1995) argues, development must be "reinvented" — not as a universal trajectory from "tradition" to "modernity," but as a pluriverse of possibilities that takes seriously the knowledge, values, and aspirations

of communities like the Birhor.

The constitutional and legal architecture — the Fifth Schedule, PESA, FRA — exists to make this alternative development possible. What is lacking is political will, administrative capacity, and the epistemic humility to recognise that a community which has survived and thrived in the forests of Central India for millennia carries knowledge that no development planner's manual can replicate. The urgency of the moment — given the Birhor's critically endangered population and the accelerating destruction of their forest habitats — makes this not merely an academic argument but a moral imperative.

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