



THE BINJHIA: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY OF LESSER-KNOWN TRIBAL COMMUNITY OF JHARKHAND

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Jharkhand is a state that holds a distinctive place both nationally and globally due to its multicultural and tribal identity. It is home to thirty-two (32) recognized tribes, among which the Binjhia tribal community (also known as Binjhoa or Binjhwar) stands out as a unique, albeit lesser-known, group. Binjhia settlements or villages are typically small and compact, usually situated near hills, rivers, or other natural water sources. The villages are surrounded by trees and vegetation, reflecting the community's deep connection with nature. Traditional Binjhia houses are mostly constructed from mud with thatched roofs, although brick and semi-permanent structures have become common over time. Research into the historical background of the Binjhia tribe indicates that the community has long been associated with the Vindhya mountain range in Madhya Pradesh. According to oral traditions and folklore, their ancestors inhabited the Kalanghari region of the Vindhya area and identified themselves as "people of the Vindhyas." The tribe derives its name, Binjhia, from this geographical association and their worship of a deity residing in the Vindhya region. Driven by factors such as livelihood, security, and historical circumstances, they migrated from the Vindhya region—traversing routes through Odisha and Chhattisgarh—to settle on the Chota Nagpur Plateau in Jharkhand, particularly in the districts of Simdega, Ranchi, Khunti, and Gumla. Today, significant populations reside in Jharkhand, as well as in Odisha and Chhattisgarh. From a demographic perspective, data from the 2011 Census clearly illustrates the community's current status; while the tribe's total population stood at just 6,725 in 1961 (when it was part of the undivided state of Bihar), it rose to 14,404 in present-day Jharkhand by the time of the 2011 Census. Consequently, the population of this community has nearly doubled over the past five decades. There are 3,109 Binjhia families in total, with 3,041 residing in rural areas and only 68 in urban areas. This clearly indicates that the Binjhia community remains largely connected to its roots, as over 98% of its population lives in villages. However, field studies have also revealed a significant rise in educational awareness among families living in urban areas or in villages near major towns like Ranchi and Bundu with the younger generation rapidly embracing modern education. The social structure of the Binjhia community is highly disciplined and robust. Most family members engage in farming together. Gathering forest produce, manual labor, and small-scale household activities also serve as sources of income. Traditionally, they worship nature and preserve their culture through their customs and festivals.

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Introduction

The state of Jharkhand holds a distinctive place in India due to its unique multicultural heritage, natural beauty, and rich tribal identity. According to official data and the schedules of the Indian Constitution, Jharkhand is a predominantly tribal state, home to thirty-two (32) recognized tribes. These tribes constitute approximately 26.2% of the state's total population, with a literacy rate of 57.13% and a sex ratio of 1,003. Each tribe possesses its own history, geographical setting, language, dietary habits, and lifestyle. Within this tapestry of cultural and social diversity, the Binjhia tribe (also known as Binjhoa or Binjhwar)—considered one of the region's lesser-known tribal communities—occupies a significant and unique position. From the perspective of human history, the process of human origin and evolution began in South Africa, after which groups of humans migrated across the globe in search of food, security, and better living conditions. The roots of the Binjhia tribe are also linked to this historical sequence and migratory chain. According to the traditions and oral histories of the Binjhia community, their ancestral home was

in the Vindhya mountains of Madhya Pradesh. Originating from the Vindhya region, they were historically known as "Binjhia" or "people of the Vindhyas." Community elders and traditional beliefs recount that their ancestors lived in an area called "Kalanghari" within the Vindhya valley and worshipped the powerful goddess "Vindhya-Nivasini." It was this association with the Vindhya region and the goddess that gave the community the name "Binjhia." Over time, in search of security and sustenance, they migrated from the Vindhya region; some settled in various parts of the Chota Nagpur Plateau in Jharkhand, while others traveled via different routes to Odisha and Chhattisgarh. Even today, a large and active population of the Binjhia people resides in the states of Jharkhand, Odisha, and Chhattisgarh. In Jharkhand, the Binjhia tribe is primarily settled in Simdega, Ranchi, Khunti, and Gumla, as well as in specific areas significant to their community such as Bansjor, Bundu, Lapung, and Tamar. Depending on their location, they use regional languages and dialects—such as Sadri, Nagpuri, Odia, and Hindi—which serve as the primary mediums for communication and cultural exchange within their communities. The social structure of the Binjhia community is highly disciplined, robust, and rooted in traditional values. The community largely adheres to a patriarchal system where men manage and control family affairs; however, women play equally active and vital roles in the household economy, agriculture, and social customs. Society strictly follows an exogamous clan system—meaning marriages always take place outside one's own clan—thereby strengthening kinship ties. From demographic and developmental perspectives, the Binjhia community has witnessed significant changes in its population size and social indicators over time. In 1961, the total population of the Binjhia tribe in the undivided state of Bihar was recorded at just 6,725; by the 2011 census, this figure had risen to 14,404 in the present-day state of Jharkhand. Thus, the community's population has nearly doubled over a span of approximately five decades. Data analysis further reveals that there are 3,109 Binjhia households in total, with 3,041 located in rural areas and only 68 in urban or semi-urban settings. This clearly demonstrates that the Binjhia community remains deeply connected to its rural roots and cultural traditions—largely untouched by the sweeping impact of modernity—with over 98% of its population residing in villages. In terms of livelihood and economy, the primary occupation of this tribe is agriculture and related activities. Living in a rural setting, their sustenance depends entirely on nature, forests, and farming. Furthermore, their standard of living is gradually improving due to modernization, the expansion of education, the growing impact of urbanization, and various government-implemented social welfare programs. While contact with the outside world and development initiatives have enhanced their lives, the Binjhia community has successfully preserved its distinct cultural identity, traditions, customs, and social cohesion. This study provides a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the social, historical, demographic, and cultural aspects of the Binjhia community—inhabitants of this culturally rich yet lesser-known region—to foster a better understanding of the unique nature of this tribal community.

Aims and Objectives of the Study

- To ascertain how sociocultural elements influence economic conduct;
- To comprehend how sociocultural elements and economic behavior, as well as associated systems and processes, work.

Methodology

Anthropological research methods were employed in this study to analyze the social, demographic, and cultural aspects of the Binjhia tribe. The methodology is as follows: Selection of Study Area: Targa village in Bansjor Block (Simdega district), and Lotehatu and Kuchidih villages in Bundu Block (Ranchi district); these are areas with a significant Binjhia population.

Sample Size: Primary data was collected from a total of 200 households (100 in Targa and 100 in Lotehatu-Kuchidih).

Data Collection Sources

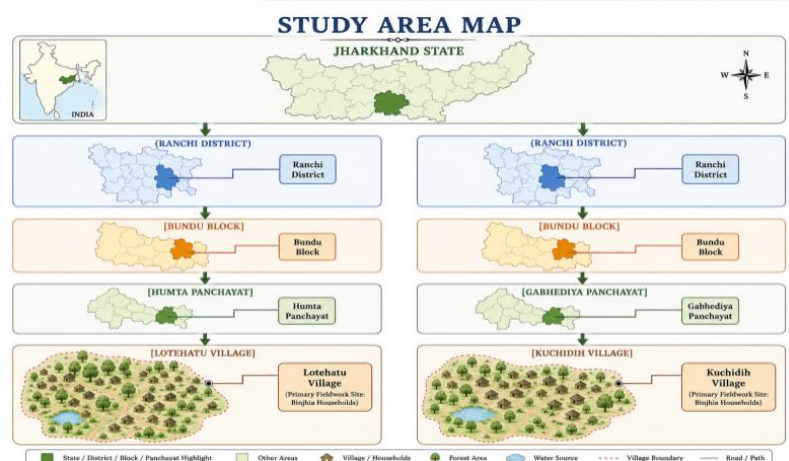
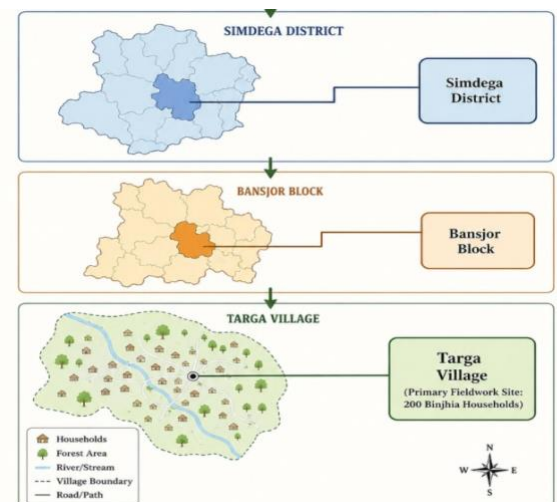
Primary Data: Obtained through fieldwork using household questionnaires, interviews, and observation.

Secondary Data: Obtained from the Indian Census (2011), published books, research papers, and government reports.

Techniques Used: Anthropological techniques such as participant observation, structured questionnaires, and in-depth interviews were utilized during the study.

Result and Discussion

This research study presents a detailed anthropological, statistical, and analytical account



based on primary fieldwork data (2022–23) collected from Simdega district (Targa village in Bansjor block) and Ranchi district (Lotehatu village in Bundu block and Kuchidih village in Gabhediya panchayat) in Jharkhand, alongside historical documents, genealogies, and official Census of India records.

This section on results and discussion is central to understanding the socio-economic profile, historical continuity, and environmental adaptation of the tribal community in question. The 'Binjhia' (also known as Binjhoa or Binjhwar) tribe is one of the lesser-known yet highly distinctive communities of Jharkhand. This chapter provides a detailed and logical assessment of their demographic changes, settlement patterns, subsistence economy, land-use systems, traditional labor-exchange networks ('Madait' and 'Sangat'), social structure, kinship, marriage norms, traditional panchayat systems, and religious life.

1. Demographic Structure, Settlement Patterns, and Historical Growth of the Binjhia Tribe

A micro-analysis of the demographic structure is essential to understanding the geographical spread, growth dynamics, and stability of any tribal community. According to historical census data, the total population of the Binjhia tribe in the undivided Bihar region was recorded at merely 6,725 in 1961; with gradual growth and administrative recognition, this figure rose to 14,404 within the current territory of Jharkhand state by the 2011 Census. Thus, over a span of approximately five decades (51 years), the community's population in Jharkhand has more than doubled.

Table 1: Population growth of the Binjhia tribe in undivided Bihar and present-day Jharkhand according to the Census of India (1961–2011)

Census Year	Total population recorded	Statistical trend
1961	6,725	Early official census records from the undivided state of Bihar.
1971	9,119	A rapid decadal growth of approximately 35.59% compared to the previous decade.
1981	10,009	Stable, gradual growth rate.
1991	13,090	The trend of positive growth continues.
2001	12,428	Reorganized geographical data following the formation of the new state of Jharkhand.
2011	14,404	Total official population recorded within the present-day state of Jharkhand (current Jharkhand context).

(Source: Census of India, Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India)

An analysis of these population growth figures reveals that, despite adverse geographical conditions, the isolation of plateau regions, and an initial lack of modern healthcare facilities, the Binjhia community has managed to ensure its demographic survival. The 35.59% growth rate recorded in 1971 demonstrates that once these communities secure permanent agricultural land and stable settlements, their natural fertility rates and family stability begin to strengthen.

Table 2: Detailed statistics regarding the Binjhia tribe based on the 2011 Census (Jharkhand context)

S.No.	(Parameter)	Gender	Total	Rural	Urban
1.	Total number of households with at least one Binjhia member	—	3,109	3,041 (97.81%)	68 (2.19%)

2.	Total population (including institutional and homeless population)	Total	14,404	14,209	195
		Male	7,320	7,211	109
		Female	7,084	6,998	86
3.	Population of children in the 0–6 age group	Total	2,088	2,060	28
		Male	1,083	1,062	21
		Female	1,005	998	7
4.	Literate Population and Percentage	Total	6,939 (48.17%)	6,813	126
		Male	4,300	4,230	70
		Female	2,639	2,583	56
5.	Total workers	Total	7,388	7,318	70
		Male	4,182	4,126	56
		Female	3,206	3,192	14
6.	Main workers	Total	4,004	3,961	43
		Male	2,658	2,621	37
		Female	1,346	1,340	6
7.	Marginal workers	Total	3,384	3,357	27
		Male	1,524	1,505	19
		Female	1,860	1,852	8
8.	Non workers	Total	7,016	6,891	125
		Male	3,138	3,085	53
		Female	3,878	3,806	72

(Source: Census of India 2011; Census Handbooks for Jharkhand and Simdega/Ranchi districts)

An analysis of the detailed data in Table 2 above reveals several significant academic facts:

- Residential Concentration:** Of the 3,109 families/households in the Binjhia community, 3,041 (97.81%) live in rural areas, while only 68 (2.19%) reside in urban areas. This statistical evidence fully confirms that the Binjhia community is truly rural, rooted in the land, and deeply connected to nature. This community has been minimally affected by urban pull factors or migration.
- Sex Ratio and Labour Force:** Of the total population of 14,404, 7,320 are men and 7,084 are women, indicating a very balanced gender ratio (approximately 968 women for every 1,000 men). Furthermore, the total workforce numbers 7,388 people, with the proportion of working women nearly equal to that of men (3,206 working women). This demonstrates that women in the Binjhia community are not confined to their homes but work side by side with men in agriculture, the gathering of forest products, and all other subsistence sectors.
- Literacy Overview:** According to 2011 data, the overall literacy rate stood at 48.17%, with male literacy higher than female literacy. Although this figure is slightly below the state average, it clearly indicates that literacy levels are rising as educational facilities reach the villages.

2. Field Survey and Micro-demographic Study (Taraga and Lotehatu Villages)

Intensive fieldwork was conducted during 2022–23 to study the internal social and demographic realities of the Binjhia tribe at the grassroots level in the historic 'Targa' village of Bansjor Block (Simdega district), as well as in 'Lotehatu' village (Bundu Block, Ranchi district) and 'Kuchidih' village (Gabhadiya Panchayat).

Table 3: Details of the study area, selected panchayats, villages, and households.

District	Block	Panchayat	village	Number of families from whom information was collected
Simtega	Bangor	Targa	Taraga (traditional majority village)	100 Families
Ranchi	Bundu	Humta	Lotehatu	94 families
Ranchi	Bundu	Gabhediya	Kuchidih	6 families
Total (two District)	Two Block	Two Panchayat	3 Village	Total 200 Families

(Source: Primary fieldwork 2022-23)

During the field survey, the total population of 100 Binjhia families in Targa village, Simdega, was recorded as 513, comprising 272 males (53.02%) and 241 females (46.98%). Meanwhile, the total population of 100 families across Lotehatu and Kuchidih villages in Ranchi district was recorded as 410, consisting of 208 males (50.73%) and 202 females (49.27%).

Table 4: Population distribution by sex and age group in Targa village (Simdega)

age category	Category Description	Males (M) – Number and Percentage	Female (F) number and percentage	Total Population and Percentage
class 1	Infant Group (0 to 5 years)	13 (2.53%)	14 (2.72%)	27 (5.25%)
class2	Boy / Girl (Above 5 to 14 years)	42 (8.19%)	46 (8.96%)	88 (17.15%)
class 3	Youth (14 to 45 years of age)	98 (19.10%)	61 (11.89%)	159 (30.99%)
class 4	Adult age group (45 to 60 years)	95 (18.52%)	96 (18.71%)	191 (37.23%)
class 5	Elderly age group (60 to 85 years)	24 (4.68%)	24 (4.68%)	48 (9.36%)
total	—	272 (53.02%)	241 (46.98%)	513 (100.0%)

(Source: Fieldwork 2022-23, Targa village)

A more detailed analysis of Table 4 reveals that the youth and adult population (aged 14 to 60) in the village of Targa constitutes approximately 68% of the total population, indicating a highly active community with a high level of labor intensity. The ratio of children to the elderly also points to a balanced family structure.

Similarly, a comparison with survey data from the village of Lotehatu, in the Ranchi district, reveals that Binjhia families in Lotehatu possess greater awareness regarding education due to their proximity to the Ranchi and Bundu blocks. The literacy rate in Lotehatu was recorded at 74.45%, whereas in Targa, the rate varied due to the traditional setting. This provides academic evidence that geographical proximity and closeness to urban centers play a significant role in the educational and cultural transformation of tribal societies.

3. Subsistence Economy, Land Classification, and Agricultural System

The economy of the Binjhia tribe differs fundamentally from the profit-driven concept of the modern capitalist market economy. Theirs is essentially a subsistence-oriented economy. The primary objective of this economy is not the accumulation of wealth or the generation of profit, but rather the uninterrupted fulfillment of the basic needs of family and community life—such as food, clothing, shelter, and the discharge of socio-religious obligations. The livelihoods of all families in the study area are based, directly or indirectly, on agriculture, animal husbandry, and forest resources.

Topographic classification of land

Reflecting the rugged plateau slopes and valley terrain of Chotanagpur, Binjhia farmers have divided their agricultural land into three distinct categories:

1. **Don:** This refers to the fertile land of the lowest-lying valleys or basins, where water naturally accumulates. Characterized by clayey soil, this land is primarily used for intensive paddy cultivation, employing both transplanting and direct sowing methods.
2. **Tand:** This region features high plateaus and sloping terrain, with soil that is red and gravelly. This soil has very low water-retention capacity, causing water to drain away rapidly. Crops such as coarse grains and pulses—including madua (ragi), maize, gondli, urad, kulthi, and mustard—are grown here.
3. **Bari:** This refers to fenced, fertile land situated close to houses and settlements, where organic manure—derived from household waste and cattle dung—is used extensively. With the facility for partial irrigation, crops such as potatoes, onions, tomatoes, chillies, various leafy greens, and seasonal vegetables are cultivated here.

Cow Yoking Taboo:

A significant and distinctive ethnographic taboo within Binjhia agricultural culture is the prohibition against using cows for plowing. While cows harnessed to the plow may occasionally be seen among neighboring tribes or impoverished groups with limited resources, the Binjhia community regards the cow as sacred—an embodiment of the clan goddess. Only bulls and buffaloes are used to plow the fields. This taboo is deeply rooted in their cultural tradition of protecting cows and in their claim to high social status as "pure Kshatriyas/Rajputs."

Traditional labour-exchange systems: 'Madait' and 'Sangat'

Despite the growing influence of the modern money-based economy and the market, systems of traditional mutual cooperation and community labor exchange remain robustly alive within the Binjhia society today. These systems not only facilitate their agricultural activities but also preserve their social unity:

- **Madait System:** When a family requires multiple laborers simultaneously for their fields during the busy agricultural season—such as for paddy transplantation or harvesting—they employ the 'Madait' system. Under this arrangement, fellow villagers voluntarily contribute their labor without receiving any cash wages. In return, the host family provides all the participating villagers with hearty, nutritious meals (consisting of rice, lentils, and vegetables) for lunch and dinner, along with the traditional beverage 'Handia' (rice beer). This constitutes a direct, non-monetary labor exchange; in the future, when the villagers who provided assistance require help in their own fields, the family that previously received aid will reciprocate by contributing their labor for free.
- **Sangat System:** The 'Sangat' is a highly organized and institutionalized community labor group system within the Binjhia society. Young men and adult males of the village come together to form a 'Sangat' team. This group provides voluntary, unpaid service for public and community tasks in the village—such as cleaning village wells or ponds, maintaining the Sarna site (sacred grove), repairing roads, or constructing homes for the poor or widows. If the 'Sangat' team undertakes wage labor for an outsider or a wealthy farmer, the earnings—whether in cash or grain—are not distributed among individuals but are instead deposited into the village's 'Community Fund.' This fund is utilized to cover expenses for annual festivals (such as Karma and Sarhul), purchase musical instruments, or organize the annual community feast.

Social Structure, Kinship, and Marriage Systems

The Binjhia society is based on a well-regulated patriarchal, patrilocal, and patrilineal system. An individual's identity within the society is determined by their lineage, clan (gotra), and sub-group. The hierarchy of kinship in the society is clearly defined and structured across five levels:

1. **Dibiri:** Extended Family; this includes the closest patrilineal blood relatives living under the same roof and sharing the same hearth.
2. **Jama:** Minor Lineage (Laghu-kul or Laghu-vanshanukram); this is a local group of close relatives and families spanning three generations.
3. **Khumuri:** Major Lineage; within a village, several 'Jama' groups combine to form a 'Khumuri', which gathers together on ritual occasions.
4. **Barga:** Small Clan; a 'Barga' is formed by the unification of several 'Khumuri' lineage groups and serves as an intermediate unit for marriage and social control.
5. **Clan:** The main clan unit; the main clan is formed by the organization of several 'Barga' groups. Its traditional social and political head is the 'Gauntia'.

Marriage Rules and Life Cycle

- **Endogamy:** The Binjhia society is strictly endogamous. This means that a Binjhia individual must marry within the Binjhia tribe; marriage outside the community entails severe social penalties and ostracism.
- **Rules of exogamy:** Village exogamy is strictly observed among most traditional Binjhia groups. They regard the entire village as descendants of a common ancestor; consequently, marriage within the same village is strictly prohibited. Additionally, rules regarding clan exogamy—based on totemic clans (such as Nag, Bhairav, and Kashyap)—are also strictly enforced.
- **Sanga:** While monogamy is considered the ideal in society, full social acceptance is granted for remarriage among widows, widowers, and divorced individuals through the 'Sanga' practice, ensuring that no helpless man or woman is left without support.
- **Funeral Rites:** Both cremation and burial are socially accepted methods for the last rites of the deceased. An ethnographically significant fact is that distinct burial and cremation grounds are reserved for each lineage ('Khumuri' or 'Jati'). Following death, the souls of the ancestors are enshrined as clan deities through the practice of ancestor worship.

Traditional Autonomous Government System

The Binjhia community maintains a traditional self-governance system that is highly effective in preserving internal discipline and peace, as well as ensuring the prompt resolution of conflicts. Although the modern Panchayati Raj system has been implemented, their own traditional village council remains the ultimate authority on internal social, religious, and matrimonial matters. This traditional council comprises three key officials:

- **Gauntia:** This is the highest administrative and social head of the Panchayat (a hereditary position); he presides over Panchayat meetings and delivers final verdicts on land disputes, family quarrels, divorce cases, and social offenses.
- **Kalo / Naya:** He is the village's traditional religious priest (Pahan), who conducts the worship of deities at the Sarna site and performs rituals to protect the village from epidemics and crises.
- **Kotwar:** He acts as the messenger and security guard for the Panchayat, conveying information about meetings to the villagers and maintaining order during the proceedings.

Penal System and Social Rehabilitation

If a person violates social norms or taboos (such as consuming beef or pork, or entering into a relationship within a forbidden gotra), the traditional panchayat takes very severe measures. The offender is fined or, in serious cases, ostracized (expelled from the caste). Such a person becomes completely isolated from the community, and all forms of social interaction—including the sharing of food or drink—cease. To have the ostracism lifted, the offender must undergo a purification ritual under the supervision of the village Kalo and host a large community feast (jati bhoj) for the entire locality; only then are they readmitted to the community.

Religious Beliefs, Festivals, and Cultural Continuity

The religious life of the Binjhia community presents a unique and harmonious blend (syncretism) of nature worship, ancestor worship, and elements of the Hindu pantheon. They are primarily followers of the 'Sarna Dharma' (Sacred Grove Religion).

- **Principal Deity:** Their foremost village deity is 'Budha Raja', whose sacred abode is the 'Sarna' (sacred grove)—a cluster of sacred Sal trees located outside the village. Special worship of Budha Raja is performed by the Kalo (priest) during every harvest and festival of the year. Additionally, they worship their clan goddess, 'Vindhyavasini Devi', which serves as evidence of their connection to their Vindhya origins.
- **Major Festivals:** Sarhul, Karma, Sohrai, Jitiya, and Bhai-Jiuntia are their key cultural festivals; these strengthen their agricultural seasonal cycle, the bond of love between siblings, and community brotherhood. The 'Karma' festival, celebrated during the month of Bhadrapad, is the very soul of their cultural identity.

Conclusion

Anthropological research into the Binjhia tribal community of Jharkhand reveals a society that maintains a balance—delicate yet remarkably resilient—between historical continuity and modern socioeconomic adaptation. Originating in the Vindhya

Range of Madhya Pradesh and having migrated over centuries to settle primarily in the Simdega, Ranchi, Khunti, and Gumla districts (on the Chota Nagpur Plateau), this community has preserved a distinctive ethnographic identity that sets it apart as a unique and little-known tribal group. Demographic analysis of the 2011 census highlights their deep connection to their origins, showing that over 98% of the population resides in rural settings, maintaining traditional settlement patterns and locally rooted community structures.

At the core of the Binjhia way of life lies a subsistence economy fundamentally linked to nature, structured around traditional land classifications such as fertile lowland fields (Don), terraced sloping land (Tand), and homestead plots (Bari). This lifestyle is reinforced by strict cultural norms—including the prohibition against using cows for plowing due to their sacred status—and by robust cooperative institutions, such as the Madait labor-exchange system and Sangat community fund initiatives. Furthermore, their patriarchal social organization—governed by clear kinship tiers ranging from the extended family (Dibiri) to major clans led by the Gauntia—alongside a traditional self-governance council comprising the Gauntia, the Kalo/Naya, and the Kotwar, ensures internal discipline, conflict resolution, and cultural preservation. Despite the progressive expansion of modern education, increasing proximity to urban centers, and access to various state and central welfare programs—such as MGNREGA, PM Awas, and the National Rural Livelihood Mission—the Binjhia community continues to demonstrate unwavering loyalty to its ancestral roots. Their religious syncretism—which harmoniously combines nature worship characteristic of the Sarna tradition, ancestor veneration, and the invocation of the clan goddess, Vindhya Vasini Devi—reflects a profound capacity to adapt to the contemporary realities of development without sacrificing their indigenous heritage. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that the Binjhia community remains an integral, dynamic, and culturally rich pillar of Jharkhand's diverse tribal landscape, capable of successfully navigating the pressures of modernization thanks to deep-rooted social solidarity and traditional resilience.

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