

Historical Root and Cultural Context of Bhumij Community in West Bengal: An Ethnographic Study

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Abstract:

The Bhumij tribes have a traditional identity with certain territories of community living, especially in West Bengal, Jharkhand, and Odisha. As per the 2011 census report, the total Bhumij population is 911,349. This study has been focused on the origin, historical roots, and cultural context of the Bhumij community. The study arises from the fact that Bhumij tradition and culture need to be preserved. Bhumij are highly influenced by Hindu culture and rituals, and their traditional culture has been rapidly changed. This study explores the Bhumij's dress code, food habits, birth, marriage, and death, as well as their religious beliefs and practices. This study was conducted in six districts in West Bengal and Jharkhand. The researcher applied the ethnographic method and used primary and secondary both sources of data. For the collection of data, participatory observation, interviews, and household surveys were used. Bhumij are the fourth largest tribal community in West Bengal, but the acculturation process has been highly prevalent in Bhumij society. Due to the effects of acculturation, they have rapidly lost their own traditional culture and language.

Keywords: Bhumij in the tribe, tribal roots of the Bhumij community, cultural context of Bhumij, West Bengal Jharkhand in India

Introduction:

There are many advantageous and productive components in the tribal population's intangible heritage, including the traditional knowledge system, which are truly priceless for the entire human race. Despite playing a key part in bringing people together and promoting a sense of cultural and personal ownership, intangible heritage is threatened gravely. The quick rate of modernization has had a negative impact in several areas of India. The rapid processes of homogeneity, globalisation, and the ubiquitous impact of western culture all contribute to the threat. Tribal cultures are currently confronting an even more dire situation: the enormous push to join the cultural framework of the ruling class elite. To meet necessities, each human society has created its own culture.

As per the Indian Constitution Order (1950), the BHUMIJ Community had placed a number of eight in West Bengal. Bhumij is the fourth-largest tribal community in West Bengal. Bhumij are found in Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, Assam, and Bihar. They are concentrated in the districts of Midnapore,

Purulia, Bankura, and 24 Parganas in West Bengal in Odisha, they are thickly concentrated. In the districts of Mayurbhanj, Sundargarh, Keonjhar, and Balasore and sporadically distributed in other parts.

According to the 2011 census, the total Bhumij population is 869,653 (males 436,267 and females 433,386) in West Bengal, Jharkhand, and Odisha. From the study of their distribution, one fact is unquestionably established that the strongest seat of the Bhumij is in the districts of Manbhum and Singhbhum district. In the western districts of West Bengal, there are prominent groups of Bhumijes, although numerically, they are considerably behind the Santals and Bauris. They live in the territory between the Kasai and Subarnarekha Rivers. The Bhumij tribe comes under the Austro-Asiatic linguistic population. Austro-Asiatic speakers, hypothesised as probably the earliest settlers in the Indian sub-continent, and they are also found in other parts of India as well as in East and Southeast Asia.

Objectives of the study:

1. To know the origin, historical roots of Bhumij tribal community in West Bengal and Jharkhand.
2. To know the cultural context of Bhumij community in West Bengal and Jharkhand.

Methodology of the study:

- ❖ **Study area:** Present study has been conducted in Bankura, Purulia and Jhargram districts in West Bengal and East-Singhbhum, West-Singhbhum and Seraikela -Kharswan districts in Jharkhand.
- ❖ The present study used traditional ethnographic method. Purposive sampling and snow-ball sampling methods is used by the researcher for house hold (field) survey and collection of data. Present researcher has selected 57 villages in three districts of West Bengal and 39 villages in three districts in Jharkhand. researcher selected 255 house hold survey and conducted 109 interviews in West Bengal and 210 household survey and 93 interviews in Jharkhand.
- ❖ **Tool for data collection:** In order to get entry to the accurate findings of objectives the researcher had made a Check list cum interview schedule for house hold survey and Interview schedule for parent's tools for collection data.

Primary data were original, raw and extracted directly. It was collected by participatory observation, indirect oral investigation, case study, telephonic interview, in-depth personal interviews, focus group discussions and house survey method through wide fieldwork with the Bhumijes of study area. Study related secondary sources were journals, books, government documents and reports, webpages blogs. Following research methods were used by researcher to collect information in respect of research objectives:

- A. Participatory observation
- B. Non- Participatory observation
- C. In-depth interview

Discussion:

Bhumij people belonging to a group of people from Mundari Branch, they speaking their original Munda language and Bengali, Hindi or mixed language in various districts of West Bengal and Jharkhand. According to the anthropologist the all Munda people were Australoid i.e., their physical characteristics is very close affinity of the Australian Aboriginal Tribes. If follow the classification of human race, we have to Except them they are closely related to the greater race of the Negriod. when we focus on ethnic characteristics of Bhumij tribe Will make us believe that Bhumij belonged to Proto -Australoid group of

mankind. Bhumij are largely found in West Bengal, Jharkhand and Orissa, they settled in the Bankura, Puruliya, Jhargram, West Midnapore districts and East-Singhbhum, West- Singhbhum, Seraikela-kharswan, Gumla, Ranchi districts in Jharkhand. They are mainly located in the area between the Subarnarekha and Kasai rivers in Jharkhand and West Bengal. Dalton have classified Bhumij are mainly as kolarian on linguistic ground and Austro -Asiatic linguistic family. H.H risley opens that "The Bhumij are the one branch of the Mundas, who have spread to the eastward, inter married with the lower caste Hindus, and thus for the most part severed their connection with the parent tribes. although they have adopted and assimilated Hindu customs and rituals, and are fast becoming Hindus, there can be no doubt that they are the descendants of the Mundas who were the country's original settlers and were given the name Bhumij (autochthon) by the Hindu immigrants who discovered them in control of the soil. S. C Roy believes that "It is only with the Bhumij of Pargana Patkum which adjoins the Tamar Pargana of the Ranchi district, that the Mundas of Tamar side still inter-marry. In fact, the Bhumij-Mundas of Tamar and adjoining Parganas of the Manbhum district would appear to belong to the same tribe as the Mundas". The word Bhumij means "Autochthon" that arose from the earth or the son of soil. Bhumij are divided into many endogamy groups based on occupation and territory. In the state of Jharkhand Bhumij have three social divisions -1. *Tamaria Bhumij*, 2. *Desi Bhumij*, 3. *Dhalua Bhumij*. Risley in his book 'Tribes and castes of Bengal' mentions six divisions of Bhumij -*Deshi, Tamaria, patkumia, Barabhumia and sikhariya*. They are of medium built and have dark brown to black complexions with plenty of body hair. With the Population growth and its continuous settlement in the area for several centuries. They began to be considered born of this land by the last immigrants and with Hindus, who probably lived in peace for two centuries, but Encouraged by the large influx from the north and west. Bhumij are called Hindu but their own religion is *Sarna*. They have lots of surname namely Singh, Singh- Sardar, Sing Thakur, Sing Pator, Sing Murha, Manki, Mahata etc. Their clan name is *Sanri, Gulgu, Jaru, Man, Hembram, nayng, Sagra, Bhuyia, pilha* etc. Although the studies on Bhumij, other tribes have also been reviewed to see the degree of similarities among them. Bhumij tribe comes under Austro-Asiatic linguistic population. According to Austro-Asiatic speakers, the Austro-Asiatic language group, which was also found in East and Southeast Asia and other regions of India, was responsible for the early settlements on the Indian subcontinent. It follows that if Northeast India had been the initial corridor, it is likely that the Austro-Asiatic tribes of this area would have provided the genetic link that has been missing up until now, which may indicate genetic continuity between Indian and East/South Asian groups. From the historical records it is known that the Bhumij people by cutting their ties with the Mundari group of people multiplied in Purulia, Bankura and Jhargram. The Bhumij, like the neighbouring Mahato, Kora and Santhal are settled in cultivation and agriculture group, but Agriculture is mainly subsistence-oriented and is not a main source for earning cash. Unlike the Maria, the Bhumij have strong concern for individual ownership of land. Whatever they acquired were obtained from the Mandali tenures, Ghatwali tenures or the *Bhuinhari* tenures that were initiated as service tenures from the 16th century. After the occupation of Bengal by the Mughals, "Todarmali- Bandobasta" was initiated under which the lands were divided in Bengal into three categories namely- Bangar, Parauti and Chachar based on the fertility of the land and accruing revenue. Lands in these districts, which were mostly constituted out of the upland from Chotonagpur plateau, had fallen also within the classification meant for revenue collection by the Mughal overlords. Most of the tribal people who earned their livelihood by tilling had to limit their activities on the *Chachar* type of lands. Usually they did not pay rents and simply earned their food by simple avocation of tilling soil and harvesting the crops on marginal levels. The *Banjar* and *Parati* lands were under the control of the revenue

racketeers who mostly had come from non-tribal groups and were employed by the Mughal administrators. Incidentally the frontier passes in Bengal, Bihar and adjacent areas were required to be guarded by certain powerful men. The Mughal administrator had the wisdom to appoint such guards from amongst the local tribal groups who were settled there for a long time. These guards were paid not in cash, but in terms of rights on Banger or *Parati* lands. These frontiers guards enjoyed advantages of garnering the surplus production. Thus, gradually a special community or a privileged group emerged on the line of development of the Zamindari group in Bengal. The tenure they enjoyed, were variously named like *Mandali*, *Bhuinhari* or *Ghatwal* etc. privilege gave special cultural status to the privileged. To protect their status, the privileged group had to maintain a global outlook of life and inter communication. Since the Hindu people were in their close proximity, they imitated them in their social manoeuvring. The Hindu opportunist group also tried to penetrate the region in collaboration with this privileged group in order to undertake various economic pursuits like interest harvesting, employing the poor on minimum wages, depriving the labour of their legitimate dues for rendering services, taking away the surplus production on the plea of repayment by the incumbent of the loans previously taken, etc. The tribal overlords, as well as the Hindu exploiters had the same of economic gain.

Cultural Context: Culture is the implementation of values. Also includes physical manifestations of groups as exposed to facilities that make, such as clothes, shelters, tools, weapons, tools, plates, etc. In this sense, each person has a culture. This consists of culture not only elements of the characteristics, but also their connections and organizations. Different cultures can have many specific schemes, but in all cultures, there is an organization or a configuration that makes it an integrated set. change in a part of the culture hits other parts. Tribal culture is changing rapidly. This change affected their lives, rituals, traditions, beliefs and social customs.

House condition and construction type: House pattern among Bhumij tribe is common and similar of different areas in west Bengal and Jharkhand. Wall built by the mud but few are cemented and brick. Maximum roof made by the (1) Tin and wood (2) Machine made tiles (3) Asbestos. few room making by bamboo, thatch, wood, grass. Sometimes walls are decorated with different designs.

Food habit: Rice and puffy rice is common food in Bhumij community. They are non-vegetarian but do not eat beef or pork. They are eating rice three times with vegetables, pulse, fish, egg. Mans are Drinks rice beer(*Handiya*), toddy and *Mahua* (*matkom poure*) liquor.

Dress code: Male dress commonly wearing lungi, Gamcha and dhoti with shirt. Women are mainly wearing their traditional colourful sari and blouse. Women and young girls both are wearing various ornaments such as earrings, necklaces, ring, Wristlets. New generation boys and girls are using modern cloths.

Modern devices/Material: Bhumij are using aluminium and steel utensils for cooking, eating and drinking. maximum family are using mobile phone, bath soap, detergent and only new generation are using toothbrush and tooth paste. Bicycle is common transport media and motor bike and scooter is rarely. They are using chemical fertilizers and thresher machine in cultivation, some people in their community using tractor or hand tractor.

Birth, marriage and death: The birth of a child is usually arranged in another break room Surrounded by the rear veranda. they are experienced Women to support mother to facilitate the birth of a baby. Contamination at birth is observed for 9 days. During this period The family is considered unclean. No one receives food from them. The father does not shave his beard or cut his hair. after nine days celebrated and the new-born will receive the name chosen by The elders / mayors (*Morol*) of their village use grain based divination (mustard). Usually the name of the great- Priority is given to maternal parents. After 21st day they are mother is free from separated. When a child is about 1 year, he Observe the ear piercing formula (*luturtukul/luturtupi*) baby. Nowadays they are aware of mother nutrition in pregnancy and go to hospital for child delivery. Marriages are usually arranged by negotiation by guardians through the relative or a match - maker (*Dandia*). There are no professional matchmakers. A member of The community plays the role of mediator. Bridal prices play an important role in the finish to marry. However, the price of the dowry (bride -price) is not fixed. Konya pan (Bride price) varies from place to place and man to man. It depending on the economic circumstances, social status, of the both parties. Personal beauty of the bride is very valuable for Konya pan. The clan system regulates marriage and adult marriage is prevalent. Negotiation and paying the bride's value is a common way to establish a marriage. Some time it seen to be captured, by intrusion and by service. Widow marriage (*sanga Biha*), cross-cousin marriage (*bodol Biha*), levirate and sororate marriages are permitted in Bhumij society but they are not permitted the exogamous marriage (other society marriage). There have several types of marriage in Bhumij community, like –1. Love marriage 2. Arrange marriage 3. Widow marriage 4. Polygyny 5. Marriage by abduction 6. Marriage by elopement

Death: after death, the family members anoint the corpse with mixed mustered oil and turmeric paste. Then they are carry corpse on river side or their own clan land. The eldest son ignites the pyre. After cremation they collect some pieces' bone from pyre. The bones put in clay pot then the clay pot buried in their own clan area. The birth and death of the deceased are inscribed on a stone slab at that place. This process called '*Harrhsali*'. Death pollution continues 10 days. Purification ritual (*Ghate utha*) will take place on the 10th The day they preside Traditional priest (*laya*) or low grade Hindu Brahmin. This day, Family and kinsfolk of The deceased goes to the nearest pond with Priest and barber. In the evening The bereaved family arrange with relatives and villagers a vegetation feast and next day they are taking non vegetarian food with *mauha* liquor or rice beer.

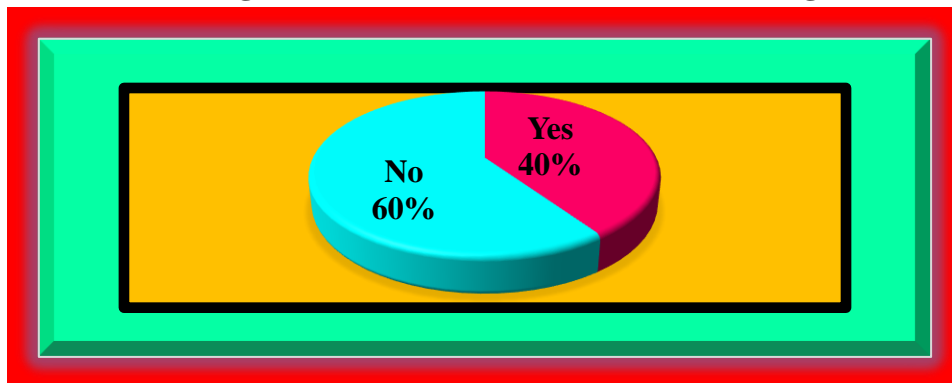
Language: Maximum Bhumij people in west Bengal and Jharkhand lost their own Mundari language. They are use Bengali, Hindi or mixed language.

Religious belief and practices: The Bhumij believe that they are the sons of the sun. They worship the sun with the names *Sing-Bonga* and *Dharam*; both are considered their supreme deities. During the *Sarhul* festival in the months of Baisakh (April–May) and Phalgun (February–March), they worship Jahuburu in the village's sacred grove. *Karakata*, a female deity responsible for rain and abundant crops; *Bagh-Bhut*, a male deity responsible for keeping animals away and protecting the harvest in the month of Kartik (October–November); *Gramme-Deota* and *Deoshali*, the village deities, to ward off disease and control the supply of drinking water and irrigation in the month of Ashadh uly–August); B Buru, a mountain deity, for general prosperity in the month of Magh; Panchbahini and Baradela, the local deities of Bankura and Purulia stricts. They are worshipped by the Bhumij. Manasa, a serpent-headed deity, will be in the month of Shravan (July–August) for two or three days in Seraikela, east Singhbhum, Bankura, and Purulia

districts. The Bhumijis also worship Paori, a female deity, in the month of Jaistha (May–June) and again in Asadh (June–July) for timely rains and the general welfare of the people. Asadhi puja is performed before the ploughing and transplantation of rice seedlings. They worship *Jaharburi* in the month of Chaitra (March–April), combined with the better and better flowering of the salt tree, which comes from salt leaves. *Atra*, a goddess who used to protect herself from smallpox, is adored. *Dhulla Puja* takes place in the month of Baisakh (April–May) to feel good about the city. *Vadhna Parab* takes place on the day of the new moon of the month. instead of Kartik (October–November) before harvest and Nua-Khia, the new rice to eat ceremony. The Bhumijis also celebrate the *Karam* festival in the month of Bhadra (August–September) for the prosperity of the town. A single man goes into the jungle and brings a Karam tree branch and plants it near the Dehuri house or anywhere else a special place is designed for it. After a long time of dancing and music throughout the night, soak it in water the next day. The Bhumijis peoples in West Bengal and Jharkhand participate in various Hindu festivals and worship Siva, Krishna, Kali, Sarasvati, Lakshmi, Durga, Ganesh, etc. In the state of Jharkhand, they celebrate Diwali and Holi under the influence of Hinduism. The Bhumij also believe in spirits and rebirth. *Kudra* and *Bisaychandi* are spirits of cannibal tendencies in the interest of the community. *Varam-Bhut*, who prowls the trees and mountains near human habitation, leads to infertility in young women and slow death in men. They appease the evil deities with magical practice. His belief in ghosts is so strong that he has witnessed the accidental deaths of humans and animals due to the misdeeds of some evil spirits. Bhumij believe in witchcraft, black magic, and the *Ojhas* (shaman) concept.

Transaction with other community:

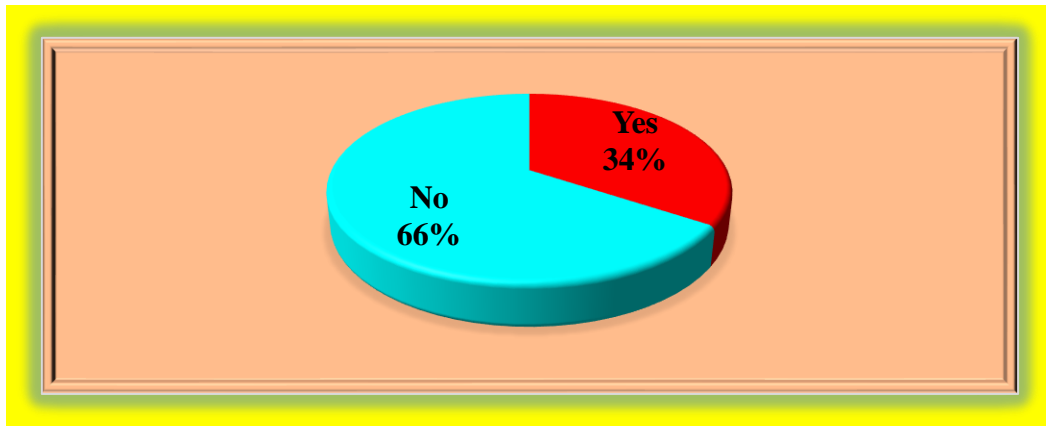
Figure-97: The Upper Caste People and Bhumij People Were Invited to each other’s Ceremonies: Percentage of House Hold in the state of West Bengal.



Source -field survey

Out of 255 Bhumij families in West Bengal, 40.39% (103) of the family opinion is that upper caste people and Bhumij people were invited to each other's ceremonies, and 59.61% (152) of the family opinion was that upper caste people and Bhumij people were not invited to each other's ceremonies.

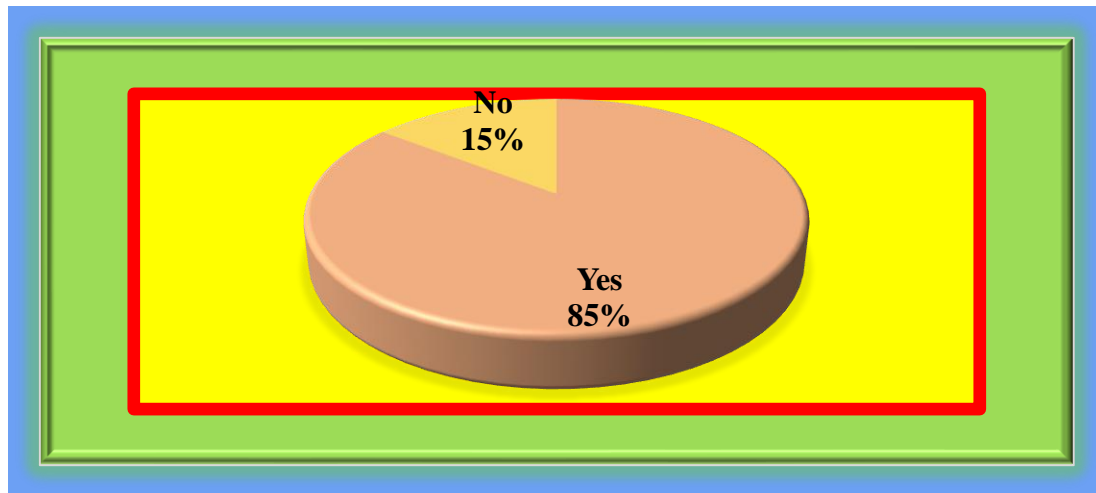
Figure-98: The Upper Caste People and Bhumij People Were Invited to each other’s Ceremonies: Percentage of House Hold in the state of Jharkhand.



Source-field survey

Out of 210 Bhumij families in Jharkhand, 34.29% (72) of the family opinion is that upper caste people and Bhumij people were invited to each other's ceremonies; 65.71% (138) of the family opinion was that upper caste people and Bhumij people were not invited to each other's ceremonies.

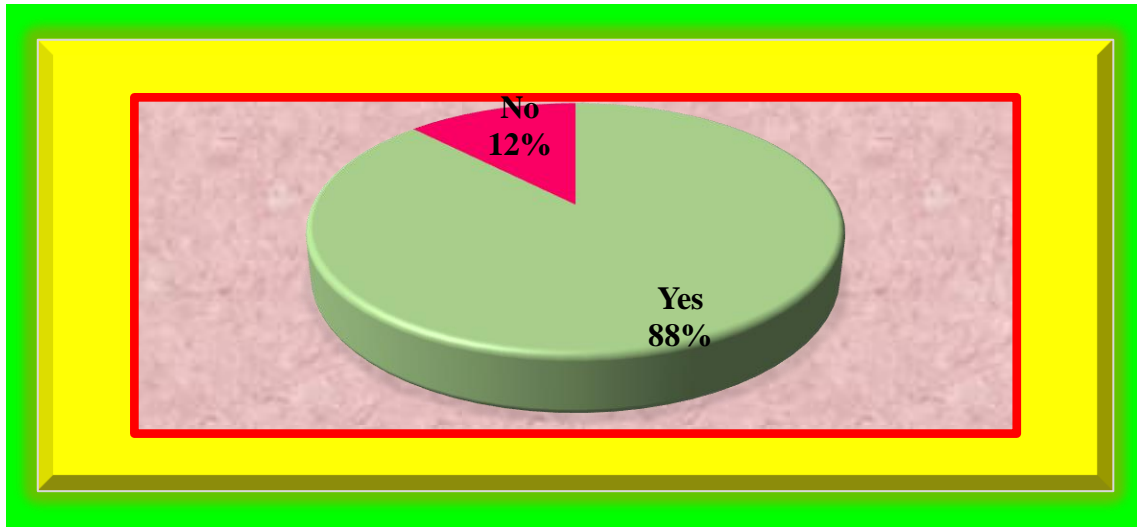
Figure-99: Percentage of Join in Worship or Ceremonies of other religion in the State of West Bengal.



Source-field survey

It is found that 85.49% (218) of the Bhumij family participate in worship or ceremonies of other religions in the state of West Bengal, while 14.51% (37) of the family does not participate in worship or ceremonies of other religions. It is clear that the majority of the Bhumij community in West Bengal participates in other religions worship or ceremonies.

Figure-100: Percentage of Join in Worship or Ceremonies of other religion in the State of Jharkhand.



Source-field survey

In the state of Jharkhand, 87.62% (184) of the Bhumij family participates in other community religion-related worship or ceremonies, and only 12.38% (26) of the family does not participate in other community religion-related programmes.

Conclusion:

Tribal societies in India have undergone an array of remarkable and long-lasting changes. This study arises from the fact that Bhumij tribal cultures and traditions need to be preserved. These are our indigenous culture and traditions on the Chotanagpur plateau; if we do not make the effort to preserve them, we would lose a life that was once an integral part of our everyday existence. Bhumij are highly influenced by Hinduism, but they have their own culture and language. Customs, social norms, and religion Bhumij is a Hinduized branch of the Munda and Astro-Asiatic linguistic families. They are the great worshippers of nature. Due to the impact of modernization and acculturation, their primitive standard of living has changed a lot. This effect has been seen in their food habits, dress code, and other aspects of life. But it must be remembered that they have their own clan and still confine their own community.

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