

Tradition in Transition: Changing Cultural Identity and Knowledge among the Bharia Tribe of Pataalkot

Mrs. Kritika Sahu, Dr. Rameshwar Shinde

Abstract -

The Bharia tribe of Pataalkot, Madhya Pradesh, represents a significant yet understudied Indigenous community in India. Known for their distinct language, herbal healing practices, and ecological lifestyle, the Bharias are currently facing socio-cultural transformations due to external developmental influences. This paper explores the transition in their traditional identity and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), drawing on secondary data from government reports, academic studies, and authentic media sources. It examines the influence of infrastructure development, educational access, welfare schemes, and legal provisions such as the Forest Rights Act on Bharia. While these changes have enhanced access to services and mobility, they have also contributed to the erosion of linguistic traditions, medicinal knowledge, and cultural autonomy. The analysis highlights the dual nature of these transitions—bringing opportunities but also posing threats to cultural preservation. Using sociological concepts of identity, agency, and resilience, the study calls for inclusive development approaches that recognise and integrate tribal knowledge systems. It concludes by recommending educational integration, community-led conservation, and participatory planning as key strategies for sustaining Bharia identity amidst transition.

Keywords: - Bharia Tribe, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Cultural Identity, Tribal Development,

1. Introduction

The Bharia tribe is listed among the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in India. According to the Census 2011, the total population of Bharias was approximately 1.27 lakh, with a major concentration in the Chhindwara district of Madhya Pradesh (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, 2011). A large number of Bharias live in the Pataalkot valley, located in the Tamia block of Chhindwara. Pataalkot is a deep and forested region surrounded by steep hills. Due to its geography, it remained isolated from the outside world for a long time, allowing the Bharia people to preserve their unique way of life (Tribal Research and Development Institute, 2020).

The Bharia tribe traces its origin to the ancient Bhars of Central India. Some scholars also associate them with the Gond tribe, but the Bharias identify themselves as a distinct community (Choudhary, 2016). Traditionally, they were forest dwellers who depended on nature for food, medicine, and other needs. They speak a local dialect called Bhariati, which is now considered endangered and is spoken by only a small number of elderly community members (101Reporters, 2021). Their culture includes the use of herbal medicines, folk songs, traditional dances, spiritual beliefs connected with nature, and a diet based on local forest produce. Worship of local deities and rituals based on ancestral customs form an important part of their identity (Sharma, 2022).

In recent years, the Bharia community has been facing many social and cultural challenges. Government schemes such as habitat rights under the Forest Rights Act have reached Pataalkot, along with development projects including roads, electricity, education, and mobile networks (ETV Bharat, 2022). These have brought many benefits, but they have also led to changes in lifestyle. Younger

Bharias are adopting modern clothing, food habits, and language. Many are migrating to cities for education and work. As a result, old customs and knowledge systems are slowly being forgotten. There is growing concern that their language, traditional medicinal knowledge, and cultural identity may disappear shortly if not preserved (Ground Report, 2022).

This paper studies how the Bharia tribe's cultural identity and traditional knowledge are changing due to modern influences, with a focus on the Patalkot region. It is based on secondary data from government reports, scholarly research, and credible news sources. The aim is to understand what aspects of their culture are changing, what is being preserved, and what efforts are needed to support their cultural survival in a rapidly changing society.

2. Methodology

This research is based entirely on secondary data. The aim was to study how the cultural identity and traditional knowledge of the Bharia tribe in Patalkot are changing due to modern development and social changes. Since this study did not involve any fieldwork or direct interaction with the Bharia community, it relies on data and insights collected from existing and reliable sources.

The sources used in this study include government reports, census data, research publications, journal articles, newspaper reports, and documentation from tribal research institutes. Special attention was given to selecting sources that are authentic, updated, and relevant to the Bharia tribe of Madhya Pradesh.

Thematic analysis was used to understand the information gathered. The data was categorised under three core thematic areas: (1) Traditional Cultural Identity, which includes aspects like language, housing patterns, festivals, and healing traditions; (2) Structural Catalysts of Cultural Transformation, such as the role of infrastructure development, education, housing schemes, and legal rights; and (3) Impact of Developmental Transitions on Bharia Indigenous Knowledge Systems, focusing on the decline in herbal medicinal knowledge, linguistic erosion, and shifts in forest-based livelihoods. A sociological lens was applied to interpret how these changes affect identity, knowledge transfer, and community resilience.

The study is limited to the Patalkot region, where most of the Bharia tribe is concentrated, as this area has been widely documented and is known for preserving many aspects of Bharia culture.

3. Findings / Analysis

3.1 Traditional Cultural Identity:

The Bharia tribe's traditional identity is a result of centuries of interaction with the natural environment of Patalkot. Their way of life, knowledge systems, and cultural expressions are embedded in their land and ecosystem. However, these are now undergoing rapid change. This section explores four key areas—language, festivals, housing, and healing knowledge—that form the core of Bharia culture, with support from government studies and policy reports. It also reflects on their ongoing value in the modern world.

3.2 Language

The Bharia people speak Bharnoti, a tribal dialect that is unwritten and passed down orally. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2018) lists Bharnoti as a vulnerable tribal language, with decreasing usage among younger generations. According to a report by 101Reporters (2021), most Bharia youth now prefer Hindi due to schooling, mobile phones, and migration, and only a few elders continue to speak Bharnoti. The Tribal Research and Development Institute (2020) highlights that no formal education is available in the Bharnoti dialect, which contributes to its decline.

In today's world, language is not only a communication tool but also a carrier of culture and memory. The loss of Bharnoti risks erasing stories, songs, rituals, and indigenous wisdom tied to the environment. Promoting multilingual education and community-based language documentation could help revive and preserve such endangered dialects.

3.3 Festivals and Rituals

Bharia festivals such as Hariyali Amavasya, Chaitra Navratri, and ancestor rituals reflect their relationship with nature, seasons, and community bonding. These celebrations involve folk music, traditional dance, and storytelling. The Anthropological Survey of India (Choudhary, 2016) notes that these rituals serve not just religious purposes but also act as spaces for social gathering, knowledge exchange, and moral teaching. The Tribal Cultural Heritage Report (2017) mentions that tribal festivals are central to their identity and should be protected under cultural development policies. In modern life, where stress, alienation, and social fragmentation are increasing, such festivals offer models for community cohesion, ecological respect, and mental well-being. Their continuity can inspire sustainable and inclusive cultural frameworks.

3.4 Housing and Architecture

Traditional Bharia houses are made from mud, bamboo, stone, and forest grass, and are suited to the hill slopes and humid climate of Patalkot. The Census of India (2011) and TRI Madhya Pradesh (2020) both document these housing patterns as environmentally sustainable and cost-effective. They require local skills and materials, and also reflect the tribe's knowledge of weather, soil, and natural resource use.

However, under rural housing schemes such as Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), many Bharia families are shifting to concrete homes. While these offer durability and government support, they lack climate sensitivity and often ignore local aesthetics or cultural layout (Ministry of Rural Development, 2020). In the context of climate change, the Bharia's housing model offers lessons in eco-friendly construction and resource-efficient living.

3.5 Healing Knowledge

The Bharia tribe is known for its traditional healers, the Bhumkas, who have deep knowledge of over 60 medicinal herbs and plants. According to the Ministry of AYUSH (2019), many of these herbs are used to treat fevers, wounds, skin diseases, and digestive problems. This knowledge is passed down orally and is based on observation, experience, and ecological understanding.

However, modernisation and lack of official recognition have led to a decline in traditional healing practices. The Tribal Health Report (Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, 2018) notes that traditional medicine is disappearing among tribal groups due to the rise of government health services and lack of support for folk practitioners.

In the modern era, where interest in natural and holistic healing is growing, Bharia's herbal knowledge holds potential value for alternative medicine, biodiversity conservation, and community health models. It can complement modern medicine if properly documented and integrated into public health systems.

These four areas—language, festivals, housing, and healing knowledge—are not only part of Bharia identity but also contain valuable insights for the larger world. However, without institutional support and cultural respect, they may be lost in the wave of modern development. Recognising and revitalising this traditional knowledge can lead to more sustainable, inclusive, and respectful development practices.

4. Structural Catalysts of Cultural Transformation:

Over the past two decades, several development initiatives have reshaped the everyday lives of the Bharia tribe in Patakot. These include improved road connectivity, education schemes, housing programs, and the legal recognition of habitat rights. While such measures have improved living conditions, they have also contributed to the erosion of traditional values and knowledge.

4.1 Road Connectivity

Earlier, Patakot was almost cut off from the rest of the region due to its deep valley geography. But in recent years, roads under schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) have reached the valley. According to the Ministry of Rural Development (2023), over 45% of villages in Patakot now have pucca roads. This has allowed better access to markets, healthcare, and government offices.

Positive impact: Roads have improved mobility, reduced travel time, and made it easier for children to attend school and families to access medical services (MoRD, 2023).

Negative impact: Easier access has increased exposure to urban culture, resulting in reduced use of the local language and traditional clothes. The cultural isolation that once helped preserve the Bharia identity is now diminishing (Choudhary, 2016).

4.2. Education

Government initiatives like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) have increased enrollment of tribal children in formal education. As per the Tribal Affairs Department, Madhya Pradesh (2022), literacy among the Bharia tribe in Chhindwara district rose from 33% in 2001 to nearly 53% in 2011.

Positive impact: Literacy and awareness have increased. Some tribal youth are now participating in local governance and even in higher education (Tribal Affairs Dept., 2022).

Negative impact: Education systems often do not include indigenous knowledge or language. As a result, children move away from oral traditions, medicinal plant knowledge, and tribal narratives passed down through generations (Sharma, 2022).

4.3. Housing Schemes

Schemes like the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Gramin) have led to the construction of concrete houses replacing traditional mud and stone structures. The Rural Housing Progress Report (2024) by the Ministry of Rural Development states that over 80% of Bharia households in Patakot have benefited from pucca housing.

Positive impact: These houses offer better protection from rain, cold, and wild animals, improving overall quality of life (MoRD, 2024).

Negative impact: The loss of traditional Bharia architectural knowledge, which was eco-sensitive and adapted to the climate, is concerning. Community-based house-building practices are being replaced with contractor-driven models (Ground Report, 2022).

4.4. Habitat Rights

In 2022, the Madhya Pradesh government awarded Habitat Rights under the Forest Rights Act (2006) to the Bharia tribe of Patakot, making them the first PVTG (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group) in the state to receive this recognition (ETV Bharat, 2022). This gave them legal control over their traditional land and forest resources.

Positive impact: It has strengthened land security and given Bharias the right to protect and manage their habitat, boosting community confidence and cultural pride (Tribal Research and Development Institute, 2023).

Negative impact: Implementation challenges remain. Many Bharia families are unaware of the rights granted, and there is still dependency on external NGOs or officials for documentation and usage guidance (101Reporters, 2021).

In summary, these development efforts have played a dual role. While they have improved socio-economic conditions, they also act as forces that challenge the Bharia community's cultural self-sufficiency. As sociologists point out, development in tribal areas must not only focus on infrastructure but also on sustaining cultural integrity.

4.3 Impact of Developmental Transitions on Bharia Indigenous Knowledge Systems

The Bharia tribe, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) residing in the Chhindwara district of Madhya Pradesh, is custodian to a rich repository of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) shaped by generations of co-existence with forests, hills, and sacred landscapes. However, accelerated development interventions and external socio-cultural influences are endangering this intricate web of knowledge.

4.5 Ethnomedicinal Knowledge

The Bharias are renowned for their deep botanical expertise. Traditional healers (Bhumkas) possess ethnomedicinal wisdom involving over 200 local species of herbs, roots, and barks used for ailments like bone fractures, malaria, infertility, and snake bites (Meshram & Singh, 2014).

For example:

- “Brahmi” (*Bacopa monnieri*) for cognitive strength.
- “Safed Musli” (*Chlorophytum borivillianum*) as an aphrodisiac.
- “Giloy” (*Tinospora cordifolia*) for immunity enhancement.

However, a decline in oral transmission due to migration, modern schooling, and lack of community apprenticeship threatens this ecosystem of health (ICMR, 2021). Commercial exploitation of herbs by outsiders without benefit-sharing also discourages knowledge holders (NBA, 2020).

4.6. Bhariati Language and Oral Literature

Bhariati, a unique dialect with Dravidian influence, is rapidly vanishing. Once a vital vehicle for oral storytelling, cosmology, and agricultural knowledge, it is now spoken by less than 2% of Bharias under age 25 (Census of India, 2011; UNESCO, 2018).

Loss of Bhariati affects:

- Naming of herbs, animals, and seasonal cycles.
- Oral folktales that embed ecological ethics and social norms.
- Sacred chants and ritual incantations are used during healing ceremonies.

As per Devy (2020), language loss in tribal communities results in the erosion of ecological memory and cultural resilience.

4.7 Traditional Architecture and Settlement Knowledge

The Bharias construct eco-sensitive dwellings using mud, bamboo, cow dung, and khaprail tiles, designed to insulate against heat and monsoon dampness (TRIFED, 2022). Settlement patterns respect hill gradients and drainage routes, revealing a sophisticated environmental understanding.

Government housing schemes like PMAY-G, while improving living standards, often promote RCC-based homes that overlook thermal suitability and local aesthetics (MoRD, 2021). As a result, traditional housing knowledge is being discarded without sustainable alternatives.

4.8 Agro-Ecological Practices and Forest Management

The Bharias historically practiced mixed cropping and seasonal rotation based on lunar cycles. Crops like kodo-kutki millet and tubers were both climate-resilient and nutritious (Ministry of Tribal Affairs [MoTA], 2021). Their knowledge of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) such as honey, mahua, and tendu leaves contributed significantly to food security and income.

Modern agricultural extension has often promoted hybrid seeds and monoculture, reducing biodiversity and making tribal farmers dependent on external inputs (Xaxa, 2018).

4.9 Ecology and Sacred Geography

The Bharia worldview includes reverence for sacred groves (devrai), hills, and nagdevta stones. These sites are not only spiritual centers but also biodiversity hotspots, protected through taboos and seasonal rituals (IGNCA, 2019). Many such beliefs act as informal conservation systems.

Developmental projects such as road expansions or mining explorations threaten these culturally protected zones. Disruption of sacred geography weakens the community's identity and ecological guardianship (Verma, 2021).

The Bharia tribe's Indigenous Knowledge Systems are holistic, integrating healing, food security, ecology, housing, language, and spirituality. However, modern development—though beneficial in terms of infrastructure and services—is inadvertently leading to cultural and ecological loss. Preserving and integrating these knowledge systems into state programs is essential for both sustainable development and cultural continuity.

5. Discussion:

Sociological Implications: Identity Transformation, Agency, and Cultural Resilience

The contemporary experiences of the Bharia tribe in transitional geographies such as Patalkot offer a rich ground for examining the sociological dimensions of identity, agency, and resilience amid structural change. Drawing upon frameworks from cultural sociology, postcolonial theory, and indigenous knowledge paradigms, this section critically interprets the ongoing shifts in Bharia lifeworlds.

5.1. Identity Transformation in Transitional Spaces

The Bharia tribe, historically categorised under the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), is experiencing a layered identity reconfiguration influenced by both state-driven modernisation and market penetration. As Stuart Hall (1996) argues, identities are not fixed entities but are continuously formed through interaction with cultural representations and power structures. Among the Bharias, traditional identity—anchored in ecological embeddedness, oral epistemologies, and kinship-based roles—is being redefined as formal education, state schemes, and infrastructural integration mediate everyday life. Youths navigating urban education systems or state employment are increasingly engaging in what Appadurai (1996) termed 'self-fashioning'—reconstructing their social positions in light of aspirational modernity. Simultaneously, cultural estrangement from the Bhariati language, rituals, and knowledge is observed, suggesting a partial de-culturation process.

5.2. Negotiated Agency and Cultural Hybridity

Contrary to earlier anthropological frames that constructed tribal communities as passive recipients of development, emerging literature underscores the dynamic agency of indigenous actors. The

Bharias exemplify this through their selective adoption of state programmes and cultural negotiation. For instance, while concrete housing is accepted under PMAY-G, many families continue to incorporate traditional courtyard structures for community rituals. This aligns with Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, which highlights how social actors exercise agency within enabling and constraining structures. Further, Bhabha's (1994) notion of the 'third space' is evident in how Bharia youths blend traditional healing knowledge with formal vocational training, creating a hybridised cultural space where indigeneity coexists with modern aspirations.

5.3. Resilience and Continuity through Knowledge Systems

Despite ecological and socio-cultural disruptions, Bharia communities demonstrate resilience—defined by Norris et al. (2008) as the capacity of communities to absorb disturbances while retaining essential functions. Traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), particularly in herbal medicine, seed preservation, and forest navigation, continues to function as a repository of adaptive resilience. Documented in studies by Gadgil et al. (1993), such knowledge enables sustainable livelihood options, especially in healthcare and agriculture. Localised practices like the use of Kalmegh and Giloy for seasonal flu, or soil-conserving cropping patterns in hill slopes, reflect embedded resilience mechanisms that align with modern ecological sustainability goals (Planning Commission, 2014).

5.4. Social Stratification and Emerging Inequalities

While welfare schemes have led to material upliftment, they have also introduced new forms of intra-community differentiation. Access to government jobs, education, and political representation varies within the Bharia tribe, often privileging those with proximity to townships or existing networks. This stratification is reminiscent of Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital, where literacy, linguistic proficiency, and bureaucratic navigation become symbolic resources. Such disparities can potentially weaken collective tribal solidarity and marginalise voices that remain deeply rooted in the forest-based economy.

In synthesis, the sociological implications of change in the Bharia context reflect a complex interplay of identity realignment, emergent agency, and adaptive continuity. While development interventions have altered the material landscape, the community's response demonstrates not just resilience but active cultural negotiation. Hence, recognising these lived realities and integrating indigenous perspectives into policy frameworks is essential for fostering inclusive, context-sensitive tribal development.

6. Conclusion: Towards Sustainable Recognition of Indigenous Knowledge and Identity

The case of the Bharia tribe in transitional geographies like Patalkot exemplifies the complex interplay between tradition and modernity, indigeneity and development. As this study has shown, the Bharias are not merely recipients of change but active agents navigating identity reformation, cultural hybridity, and systemic adaptation through their indigenous knowledge systems (IKS). Their practices in herbal medicine, forest-based livelihood, and socio-spiritual life reflect a deep ecological consciousness and cultural continuity.

6.1 Key suggestions for sustaining this resilience include:

- Documentation and integration of IKS into local school curricula and healthcare systems, supported by Tribal Research Institutes (TRIs) and NCERT frameworks.
- Community-led ethnobotanical mapping and participatory forest management under schemes like the FRA (Forest Rights Act, 2006) and CAMPA.

- Skill-linked livelihood initiatives that respect traditional practices (e.g., herbal value chains, eco-tourism, forest food enterprises) while ensuring economic security.
- Digital platforms for cultural archiving, supported by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs and NGOs, are being used to preserve oral traditions and tribal languages.

6.2 Future research should explore:

- The intergenerational transmission of indigenous knowledge within technology-mediated environments.
- Comparative studies across tribes facing similar transitions;
- Policy-oriented ethnographies that influence more culturally grounded tribal development models.

Recognising and preserving tribal identity must go beyond tokenistic representation—it requires structurally embedding indigenous worldviews within mainstream planning and education. In the Bharia context, this means not only safeguarding knowledge but also empowering custodianship through autonomy, dignity, and voice in their developmental journey.

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