

Preserving the Language and Folklore of the Mal Pahadiya Tribe in Jharkhand: An Ethnographic Study

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Abstract

The Mal Pahadiya are one of the most vulnerable tribal groups within the Pahadiya community living in Jharkhand. They mostly reside in the Rajmahal Hills, located in the Santhal Pargana region of Jharkhand, as well as parts of West Bengal and Bihar. These hills are known to the Pahadiya people as “Saba Lakh Pahad” or sometimes “Saba Lakh Ekkes Pahad.” The government classifies them as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG). They primarily speak two languages: Mal Pahadiya, which is an Indo-Aryan language, and Maudi or Maudu, a Dravidian language.

Language plays a crucial role in preserving their history and culture. While many communities write down their stories, tribal groups like the Mal Pahadiya pass their heritage orally through folktales and traditional stories. Though some stories may be similar across cultures, the language and style in which they are told make them unique. Today, their culture and traditions face the risk of disappearing. Low literacy rates, lack of awareness, and a history of invasions by Marathas, Mughals, British, Santhals, and other settlers have made the community vulnerable.

This study explores their important customs such as birth, marriage, and death rituals, and how these are connected to their folktales and beliefs. It also looks into their spiritual life, their close relationship with nature, and ancestor worship. Fieldwork was conducted in several villages across the Godda, Dumka, and Pakur districts of Jharkhand, using interviews, group discussions, questionnaires, and photography to gather information. The study concludes that the traditions and culture of the Mal Pahadiya people need to be protected and documented, as they are gradually fading away.

Keywords: Mal Pahadiya, Folklore, Oral Traditions, Tribal Culture, Language Preservation etc.

1.1 Introduction

The Mal Pahadiya are one of the two main branches of the Pahadiya tribe, the other being the Sauria Pahadiya or Male. The Mal Pahadiya consider the Sauria Pahadiya impure because they eat beef and use cows for farming, so they keep social distance from them. Another group called Kumar Bhag Pahadiya is seen as a subgroup of the Mal Pahadiya. Although marriages occur between Mal Pahadiya and Kumar Bhag Pahadiya, the government does not officially recognize Kumar Bhag Pahadiya as a tribe and classifies them as a backward class. The population of the Mal Pahadiya has steadily increased over the years. In 1941, their population was about 40,000. By 2011, it had grown to over 115,000. The sex ratio is mostly balanced, with a slight female majority in some years. Nearly half of the population is unmarried, 43% are married, and about 7% are widowed. Mal Pahadiya are considered a separate tribe

because their lifestyle, work, and customs are very different from other Pahadiya groups. They do not marry outside their group and live separately, maintaining their unique culture. Most live in the Santhal Pargana region of Jharkhand, while some also live in Bhagalpur, Singhbhum, and Munger. These areas are hilly, forested, and have challenging weather conditions. Their main deity is 'Dharti Gosai' or Mother Earth, often represented by a stone under a tree. They also worship other gods such as Kando Gosai and Gomo Gosai. The Sun god is called 'Singbonga' by some related tribes. The Mal Pahadiya are the original inhabitants of the Rajmahal Hills and have a proud history of bravery. Many fought in the Indian National Army during the freedom struggle. However, due to low education levels, many now work as daily wage laborers or migrate to cities in search of work. Earlier, the forest was their main source of food and income, but government control over the forest has made this difficult. Their villages are small and usually located on hilltops, with about 15 to 30 houses in each. The houses are made from wood, bamboo, and thatch, with walls plastered with mud. Typically, the houses have two rooms and a veranda but no windows. Bamboo doors and surrounding bushes protect the homes. The main sources of income for the Mal Pahadiya are farming, collecting forest products, and working as daily laborers. They sell items like bamboo, firewood, fruits, and roots in local markets. Many still practice hunting and slash-and-burn farming to survive.

1.1.1 Methodology

For this study, I used an ethnographic approach to collect data by spending time living with the Mal Pahadiya people. I used two main methods: observation and in-depth interviews. By observing them in their natural setting, I was able to see their daily lives, actions, and interactions clearly. This helped me understand not only what they do but also how they behave in different situations. At the same time, through interviews, I had the chance to hear their personal thoughts and experiences, which gave me deeper insight into their lives. Specifically, I focused on learning about their folktales, stories, and language. I listened carefully to their songs and stories, especially during festivals and special occasions, to understand how they use their language and stories in real life. I talked to older people and community storytellers who shared folktales, legends, and songs passed down through generations. I recorded these stories in their original language to preserve their true meaning and style. While collecting stories, I also paid close attention to how they tell them their speech, expressions, and the places where storytelling happens. This helped me see how important these stories are for keeping their culture alive and passing down lessons. I noticed unique words and phrases in their language that are different from other nearby languages. By combining observation and interviews, I was able to document their living traditions. This work is important because their stories and language are slowly disappearing as the world around them changes.

1.1.2 Area of Study

The study was mainly done in three villages are Basgo (Chota Basgo and Bada Basgo) and Kunjbona in the Godda district of Jharkhand. These villages were chosen because they were most suitable for the topic of the research. Most of the people living in these villages belong to the Mal Pahadiya community, which made the area a good place for the study. The villages have small populations, and the people live closely together, which helped me observe and talk to them more easily during the research.

1.2 Language and Folk Tradition of the Mal Pahadiya

Language and culture are the two most important ingredients for survival and identity in this world. Without language, life cannot be imagined, and without culture, there is no systematic pattern to live

life. In the case of indigenous communities, language serves as one of the major storehouses of knowledge, history, and worldview. The Mal Pahadiya community, classified under Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), inhabits the Rajmahal Hills in eastern India. Their lifestyle, culture, and social structure are uniquely distinct from other communities, especially due to their geographical isolation and historical resistance to external domination. Unlike many other hill communities in India, the Mal Pahadiya have a proud history of fighting off invaders and protecting their land, which is why they hold a significant place in the freedom struggle no other caste or tribal group in India has paid such a heavy price.

Despite their courageous past, development and modernization have not sufficiently reached this community. As a result, the Mal Pahadiya are currently undergoing a rapid transition where their customs, language, and traditions are at risk of fading away. The pressure to migrate to urban centers in search of livelihood further accelerates this loss, leading to a gradual erosion of their indigenous knowledge systems, rites, rituals, and oral traditions. During my fieldwork, it became evident how difficult it is to collect reliable data about the Mal Pahadiya's traditions because of the declining number of elders who still retain this knowledge. Compared to other major tribal groups in Jharkhand and India, the Mal Pahadiya remain understudied. Their literacy rate is low, which hinders conscious efforts to preserve their language and culture. Moreover, increased interaction with modern and dominant cultures has instilled a sense of inferiority among many community members, making them hesitant to openly discuss their traditions and language in urban or mixed settings.

The Mal Pahadiya primarily speaks a language they call Maudo, which is closely related to the Angika and Khortha languages spoken in the surrounding areas. However, the Maudo language varies considerably between regions. Some Mal Pahadiya speak what they call the Mal Pahadiya language, likely a mixed dialect incorporating elements of Maudo, Khortha, and Angika. Similar to other Pahadiya groups such as the Sauriya Pahadiya and Kumarbhag Pahadiya, the Mal Pahadiya's linguistic and cultural isolation helped preserve their language for a long time. Yet, exposure to dominant cultures and forced displacement in search of better livelihoods has caused noticeable shifts in their language and cultural practices. In districts like Dumka, Pakur, and Sahebganj in Jharkhand, a clear linguistic pattern is observed: those living at higher altitudes primarily use Maudo in daily life, while those settled in the plains commonly speak Khortha. Those residing in intermediate zones use a mixed Mal Pahadiya dialect. This linguistic diversity has been further complicated by groups like the Kumarbhag Pahadiya, who are not officially recognized as a tribe but try to blend with the Mal Pahadiya to avail government benefits, thereby blurring the lines of authentic Mal Pahadiya identity and complicating linguistic categorization.

One of the notable features of the Maudo language is the rare use of the nasal sound "AN" (ँ), which is often replaced by "N" (ण). For example, the word पानी (water) is pronounced पाण in Maudo. Such phonetic nuances distinguish Maudo from related languages. Additionally, many Maudo words closely resemble those in Khortha and Angika due to long-standing contact. For instance, "Chedko" refers to major girls and "Ghanghadiya" to major boys in Maudo, terms that are also present in Khortha. Expressions like "एत दंघाड़मस्ती कैन्हें करै" are used when parents scold children for excessive play or roaming, highlighting the shared cultural and linguistic nuances. The similarity between Maudo and surrounding languages has led to debate about the direction of linguistic influence whether Maudo borrowed from Angika/Khortha or vice versa. Nonetheless, it is clear that the Maudo language maintains a close connection with these neighboring tongues, which reflects the intertwined cultural and social

relations of the region. At the end it can be said that spoken by the Mal Pahadiya, especially Maudo, are not merely means of communication but vital carriers of their folklore, history, social values, and cultural identity. Preserving these languages is crucial to maintaining the community's oral traditions and collective memory, which in turn strengthens their sense of self and belonging in a rapidly changing world.

1.3 Mal Pahadiya Folklore and Oral Traditions

The Mal Pahadiya community of Jharkhand is one of India's lesser-known, yet deeply rooted indigenous groups whose cultural identity is preserved and passed on primarily through rich folklore and oral traditions. In the absence of written texts or recorded history, these oral narratives serve as the primary vehicle through which the community understands its past, defines its present, and guides future generations. Storytelling in Mal Pahadiya society is not merely entertainment; it is a sacred tradition, binding generations through shared myths, rituals, and lessons. Each tale carries spiritual meaning, moral instruction, and social structure, deeply influencing their rituals, worldview, and everyday life. Myths explain not only the origin of the universe and human society but also justify customs, eating habits, and social divisions within and beyond the tribe. These stories give meaning to the natural environment—the forests, hills, rivers, and animals—and establish a close spiritual relationship between humans and nature. Every ritual, from birth to death, is informed by these stories, and every seasonal festival carries echoes of these age-old beliefs. Even modern practices among the Mal Pahadiyas are often layered with references from their oral narratives, reflecting how resilient and adaptable this traditional knowledge system is. In a world rapidly changing due to globalization and cultural homogenization, the folklore of the Mal Pahadiya stands as a living archive, preserving their unique identity, history, spirituality, and ancestral wisdom.

1.3.1 Creation Myths and the Role of Bada Gosai

In the worldview of the Mal Pahadiya community, the origin of life and the divisions among human groups are explained through a deeply symbolic creation myth centered around the deity Bada Gosai. According to oral tradition, Bada Gosai is the supreme creator who fashioned all forms of life—plants, animals, climate, and human beings—on Earth. After creating the world, Bada Gosai sent seven brothers from the heavens to reside on Earth and begin human civilization. Upon arrival, however, the eldest of the seven fell ill, and the remaining six brothers decided to organize a grand feast. The nature of this feast was more than celebratory; it was symbolic, as each brother chose to eat different kinds of food, which would come to define their future identities and the people who descended from them. One brother, who ate goat meat, left to settle in a distant land and his descendants became the Hindus. Another, who ate various meats but avoided pork, was said to be the ancestor of Muslims. The third brother's dietary choices were not clearly mentioned, but his descendants became known as the Kharwars. The fourth brother consumed dog meat and moved northward; his lineage became the Kiratas, or tribes of the North-East. The fifth brother, who preferred forest-based foods, settled in remote hilly regions and his descendants were identified as the Kol tribe. The sixth brother, who ate a variety of foods freely, is believed to have fathered the white races or foreigners. However, it is the story of the seventh brother—the sick one—that holds central importance for the Mal Pahadiya identity. Because he was ill, the leftovers of all the food were served to him on an old plate. Feeling humiliated and rejected by his six brothers, he was abandoned and forced to live alone on the mountains. This abandoned brother, according to Mal Pahadiya belief, became the first of their tribe. They see themselves as descendants of

this seventh brother a people marginalized and left to suffer in harsh, forested hills. This myth not only provides a theological explanation for their social isolation and poverty but also reinforces a strong sense of identity and spiritual dignity. Despite being left out of the mainstream human journey, the Mal Pahadiyas carry the legacy of endurance, survival, and spiritual closeness to the Earth, all rooted in their origin from the forsaken but resilient seventh brother.

1.3.2 The Tale of Lit Mai and Lit Baba

In the rich oral traditions of the Mal Pahadiya community, the story of Lit Baba and Lit Mai holds a place of great reverence and significance. According to their folklore, Lit Baba was the first man created by the divine forces, embodying the origin of humanity. However, he was initially alone in the world, and it was only after some time that Lit Mai was created to be his companion. Together, Lit Baba and Lit Mai symbolize the primal human couple from whom all human beings descend. Their union is not just biological but deeply spiritual, representing the harmony and balance between masculine and feminine forces that sustain life. From this couple came 24 children, each one symbolizing a distinct human group or clan, illustrating the diversity that emerged from a single source. This myth serves a dual purpose: it explains the origin of the various tribes and communities in the region while also emphasizing unity through a shared ancestry. For the Mal Pahadiyas, Lit Baba and Lit Mai are more than ancestral figures; they are central to their worship and rituals today. They are honored through various ceremonies and offerings, reflecting the community's profound respect for their origins and the interconnectedness of all people. Their story also reinforces values such as family, continuity, and the sanctity of life, which guide the social and religious practices of the Mal Pahadiya people. In this way, Lit Baba and Lit Mai are living symbols of cultural identity, binding the community together through a shared mythos that transcends generations.

1.3.3 The Myth of Language and the Broken Unity

One of the most compelling and symbolic tales in Mal Pahadiya folklore is the myth explaining the origin of language and the fragmentation of human unity. According to the oral tradition, the early ancestors of humanity, represented as siblings, sought to reach the heavens by building a grand ladder that would connect the earth to the sky. This ladder symbolized their desire for unity, divine connection, and the collective strength of their people. However, their ambitious plan threatened the established cosmic order. In response, God decided to intervene to prevent humans from gaining direct access to the divine realm. To disrupt their unity and halt their ascent, God confused their speech, changing their single, shared language into twelve distinct languages. This divine act created barriers between the siblings, causing misunderstandings and divisions. As a result, the once united group splintered into twelve different human groups, each speaking its own language and developing separate cultural identities. Among these groups, one pair the elder brother and sister were spared from this linguistic confusion. They retained their original language and unity, and their descendants became the direct lineage of the Mal Pahadiya community. This myth serves as a powerful explanation for the linguistic and cultural diversity found in the region, while also asserting a unique identity for the Mal Pahadiyas as the preservers of the original language and cultural essence. It reflects a deep awareness of the importance of communication, unity, and cultural heritage. The story also conveys a subtle warning about the consequences of division and the loss of harmony among people. In Mal Pahadiya society today, this myth resonates strongly, fostering pride in their unique linguistic heritage and a sense of responsibility to maintain their traditions despite external influences and the passage of time.

1.3.4. Sacred Geography and Natural Beliefs

The Mal Pahadiya community's folklore is deeply intertwined with the natural world, reflecting their profound respect for the land and the elements that sustain life. Their sacred geography is not just a physical space but a spiritual landscape shaped by myths that explain the origins of the earth, rivers, hills, and forests that surround them. One central story recounts the creation of the earth with the help of a mighty Earthworm, a creature sent through a pipe known as the Nalka. This Earthworm played a crucial role in shaping the land as it wriggled and moved underground, carving out spaces that eventually became rivers, hills, and fertile valleys. The myth beautifully illustrates how natural features are considered living parts of a grand cosmic design, interwoven with the forces of life and creation. The story also explains how the waters once covered the land but gradually receded, revealing the earth where human life could flourish. Among these tales is the legend of Saba Lakh Pahad, a great mountain believed to be sacred and powerful. According to the myth, a demon tried to block the mighty Ganga River, attempting to stop its life-giving flow. This act of obstruction was seen as a cosmic imbalance that needed to be corrected for the survival of the people and the natural order. These stories serve to emphasize the community's close connection with their environment, highlighting a worldview where humans, nature, and spiritual forces exist in a delicate balance. The hills, rivers, and forests are not merely backdrops to daily life but sacred entities that command respect, reverence, and protection. This sacred geography shapes daily practices, rituals, and taboos within the Mal Pahadiya culture, guiding how they interact with their surroundings. Their natural beliefs also foster a strong sense of stewardship and sustainable living, as the land is both their heritage and their responsibility. Through these myths, the Mal Pahadiyas express a worldview that sees nature as a living, sacred presence a source of life, identity, and spiritual power.

1.3.5. Origin of Maghi Puja

Maghi Puja holds a significant place in the spiritual and cultural life of the Mal Pahadiya community, rooted deeply in their age-old traditions of protection and survival. This ritual originated as a sacred practice designed to shield the community from the dangers posed by wild animals that roamed the dense forests and hills surrounding their villages. According to the folklore, the worship of Vidhi-Vidhanta a protective spirit or deity began as a desperate measure to safeguard lives and livestock from frequent animal attacks, which were a serious threat to the community's livelihood and well-being. The ritual is closely associated with the figure of Gande Dehri, a divine presence invoked during the puja to ward off these dangers. The ceremony is highly structured, involving specific offerings and ritualistic actions that symbolize appeasement and protection. Traditionally, red chickens are sacrificed as part of the offerings, believed to carry away misfortune and please the protective spirits. The ritual is led by community specialists, including the Ahadi, Chakladar, and other assistants who have defined roles in conducting and maintaining the sanctity of the puja. Each participant's role is crucial in ensuring the effectiveness of the ceremony and the safety of the village. Over time, as human settlements expanded and threats from wild animals decreased, the frequency and intensity of Maghi Puja observance diminished. However, the ritual still holds immense cultural significance, symbolizing the resilience and adaptability of the Mal Pahadiya people. It acts as a living link to their ancestors' struggles and their harmonious relationship with nature. The Maghi Puja also reinforces social cohesion by bringing the community together in collective worship and shared cultural identity. Though the original fears of wild animal attacks have lessened, the ritual continues to embody the Mal Pahadiya's reverence for protective deities and their spiritual connection to the land. It remains a potent reminder of the delicate balance

between humans and the natural world, underscoring the community's enduring belief in divine guardianship and ancestral wisdom.

1.3.6. Supernatural Beliefs and Deities

The Mal Pahadiya community's worldview is richly woven with beliefs in various supernatural entities and deities who govern different aspects of life, nature, and protection. These spiritual beings are deeply respected and invoked through rituals and prayers, reflecting the community's close relationship with their environment and their reliance on divine forces for safety and prosperity. Among the most important supernatural guardians is Pahad Thakur, revered as the protector against wild animals. Pahad Thakur is believed to watch over the forests and hills, ensuring that the people and their livestock remain safe from predatory creatures. In a community historically vulnerable to the dangers of the wilderness, such protective deities hold immense significance. Another notable entity is Chor Danu, the guardian against theft and misfortune. This spirit is called upon to safeguard possessions and maintain peace within the village, emphasizing the value the community places on security and trust. The Van Shakti, or forest power, embodies the life force of the crops and agricultural produce. As the Mal Pahadiyas depend heavily on farming, Van Shakti's blessings are essential for a good harvest and overall well-being. The community believes that appeasing Van Shakti brings fertility to the land and protection from natural calamities. Dhani Mal Jog is another revered figure, considered the owner of the mountains. This deity governs the natural resources, forests, and wildlife, and is called upon to ensure harmony between humans and nature. Alongside these primary deities are others like Mahadan, who serves as a bringer of warnings and omens, alerting the people to impending dangers or changes. Figures such as Karudanu Jakh Baba, Rangadhari Baba, and Aanchay Kudbi represent more localized spirits, each with specific protective or guiding roles within the community. Their stories and worship rituals reflect the Mal Pahadiyas' intricate belief system that blends animism, ancestral reverence, and natural forces. These supernatural beliefs reinforce social norms and communal identity, providing moral guidance and a sense of security. Through offerings, prayers, and festivals, the Mal Pahadiyas maintain a living connection with these deities, ensuring the continuity of their cultural heritage and spiritual resilience. This rich tapestry of supernatural entities not only governs the unseen world but also shapes everyday life, influencing decisions, social interactions, and the community's collective consciousness.

1.3.7. Ancestral Worship and Household Spirits

In the Mal Pahadiya community, the veneration of ancestors holds a central place in spiritual and daily life, reflecting a profound respect for the lineage and the continuity of family heritage. Ancestors, especially figures like Mada Modpa, are believed to be guardians who continue to watch over their descendants, offering protection, blessings, and guidance from the spirit world. This ancestral worship is often practiced within the household, where family members perform specific rituals to honor their forebears and seek their favor. These rituals reinforce the bonds between the living and the dead, emphasizing the community's belief in an ongoing relationship beyond physical existence. Each household maintains particular spirits or deities that are intimately tied to their home environment, with Teen Mundiya Jarav being one of the most notable. This household deity is believed to reside in the home, ensuring harmony, prosperity, and protection from evil influences or misfortunes. The rituals associated with Teen Mundiya Jarav are often simple yet deeply symbolic, involving offerings such as grains, flowers, or animal sacrifices, depending on local customs. Superstitions and taboos linked to these spirits guide everyday behavior, dictating how family members should act to avoid displeasing the household gods. For instance, certain actions like neglecting the hearth fire or disrespecting elders can

be seen as inviting the wrath of the spirits, which might manifest as illness or bad luck. These ancestral and household spirits thus play a dual role: they are protectors who ensure the family's well-being, and moral enforcers who maintain social order within the domestic sphere. The importance of this form of worship is not only spiritual but also social, as it upholds family unity and preserves cultural identity through generations. During festivals and important family events, collective prayers and offerings to ancestors are made, reinforcing community ties and collective memory. In a rapidly modernizing world, these traditional practices continue to provide the Mal Pahadiyas with a sense of rootedness and continuity, serving as a bridge between past, present, and future generations. This intricate system of ancestral reverence and household spirit worship is a testament to the community's deep connection to their origins and their belief in the enduring power of familial bonds.

1.3.8 Village Guardian Deities and Ritual Practices

In the Mal Pahadiya community, the village as a collective unit holds great spiritual significance, with guardian deities believed to protect the entire settlement from harm and misfortune. These village guardian deities symbolize the community's collective identity and shared responsibility toward safeguarding their environment and social harmony. Central to this system is the figure of the Gaon Rakhwar, or village protector, who acts as a spiritual and social leader entrusted with the well-being of the entire community. The Gaon Rakhwar is often a respected elder or priest who leads ritual activities, ensuring that traditional practices are properly observed and that the blessings of the deities are sought for the village's prosperity. One of the key religious figures assisting the Gaon Rakhwar is the Dehri Baba, who presides over the sacred altar (Dehri) where offerings and sacrifices are made. The Dehri serves as the spiritual heart of the village, a place where the invisible bonds between the community and its guardian spirits are renewed through ritual. Rituals typically involve the offering of red chickens, a symbol of vitality and life force, which are sacrificed to appease and honor the village deities. Alongside chickens, offerings known as Pochai, which may include rice, grains, and other agricultural produce, are presented to invoke protection over the crops and ensure a bountiful harvest. These ceremonies are deeply communal events, often accompanied by music, dance, and the recitation of ancient chants or prayers. They not only serve religious purposes but also reinforce social cohesion by bringing villagers together in shared acts of devotion. The rituals act as a collective safeguard against dangers such as wild animal attacks, disease outbreaks, theft, and natural calamities, with the guardian deities embodying the community's hopes and fears. The belief in these protective spirits reflects the Mal Pahadiyas' intimate relationship with their natural surroundings and their understanding of human life as interconnected with unseen forces. The ongoing practice of these rituals underscores the community's commitment to preserving their cultural heritage, even as external influences and modernity challenge traditional ways of life. Ultimately, village guardian deities and their associated rituals serve as a vital expression of Mal Pahadiya identity, anchoring the community in a shared spiritual world that shapes both their social interactions and their relationship with the environment.

1.3.9. Integration with Mainstream Religious Practices

Over time, the Mal Pahadiya community has experienced increasing interaction and integration with broader Hindu religious traditions, reflecting both cultural exchange and adaptive transformation in their spiritual lives. While the community retains its distinctive folklore and indigenous rituals, many Mal Pahadiyas now actively participate in mainstream Hindu festivals such as Durga Puja, Laxmi Puja, and Karma Puja. These festivals, celebrated widely across northern and eastern India, mark key seasonal and religious occasions and are embraced by the Mal Pahadiyas as a way to connect with a larger Hindu

cultural and religious identity. For example, Durga Puja the worship of the goddess Durga as a symbol of strength and protection is celebrated with great enthusiasm, including ritual offerings, prayers, and communal gatherings. Similarly, Laxmi Puja, dedicated to the goddess of wealth and prosperity, is observed with rituals aimed at inviting abundance and well-being into homes and villages. Karma Puja, which is closely linked to agricultural cycles and fertility, resonates deeply with the Mal Pahadiya's close ties to the land and their traditional livelihoods. Alongside these adopted festivals, the community continues to hold onto unique indigenous practices that remain central to their identity. One notable example is the Vishhari Puja, a ritual specifically related to snake venom healing and protection. Given the Mal Pahadiyas' close proximity to forests and wild environments where venomous snakes are a real threat, this ritual has vital practical significance. During Vishhari Puja, participants seek blessings for safety from snakebites, and the event often includes collective dances and songs that reinforce social bonds and express gratitude toward protective spirits. The integration of mainstream Hindu festivals does not erase Mal Pahadiya traditions but rather complements them, creating a layered religious landscape where old and new beliefs coexist. This syncretism illustrates the community's resilience and flexibility, allowing them to navigate modernity while maintaining a strong connection to their ancestral roots. Importantly, this blending also opens avenues for cultural recognition and social inclusion within the wider regional society, fostering a sense of belonging beyond the immediate community. In sum, the integration of mainstream Hindu religious practices among the Mal Pahadiyas reflects a dynamic process of cultural adaptation and identity preservation, showcasing how traditional communities negotiate their place in a rapidly changing world.

1.4 Findings and Discussion

The Mal Pahadiya are a tribal group living in the Rajmahal Hills of eastern India. They are listed as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) because their traditional way of life is at risk. The community has a rich culture that includes stories, myths, and rituals passed down through generations. These stories reflect their history, beliefs, and daily life. Their traditions are closely linked to their language, Maudo. The Maudo language is very important for keeping the Mal Pahadiya's knowledge and traditions alive. Although it is similar to nearby languages like Angika and Khortha, Maudo has special features that make it unique. For example, "N" (𑒧), which makes the language different from others usually replaces the sound "AN" 𑒧𑒻. This special way of speaking helps show their identity and brings the community closer, especially those living in remote hill areas.

The Mal Pahadiya tell stories like the creation tale of Bada Gosai, and the stories of Lit Mai and Lit Baba. They also talk about sacred places like Saba Lakh Pahad. These stories are not just for fun they teach values, connect them with nature, and are part of their religious and cultural life. The stories are told during festivals and rituals and are a living part of how they see the world. But their language and culture are facing many problems. Because of urbanization, migration, and pressure to join the larger society, younger people are slowly stopping the use of Maudo. They often speak languages like Hindi, Bengali, Khortha, or Angika instead. This change is happening faster because of poverty, lack of education, and no government help to protect their culture.

Even within the Mal Pahadiya, people in different areas like the hills or the plains speak different versions of Maudo. Also, some other tribal groups, like the Kumarbhag Pahadiya, are claiming to be Mal Pahadiya to get government benefits. This creates confusion and makes it harder to protect the true culture and language of the Mal Pahadiya. The community also takes great pride in their history of

bravery. They have stories about how they fought to protect their land and way of life. But sadly, many of these stories are not written in history books, and their heroes are forgotten in official records. This shows how their voice has often been ignored.

For communities like the Mal Pahadiya, language is more than just a way to speak. It carries wisdom, values, and beliefs. Their stories are not only a part of their past—they teach younger generations and help them stay connected to their roots. That's why it is so important to protect the Maudo language and their oral traditions. Since many people in the community cannot read or write, recording their language and stories through videos and audio is helpful. Community storytelling and including Maudo in school lessons can also help. This way, young people can be proud of their culture and learn to value it. Protecting their culture also means supporting their way of life. Their festivals, rituals, and traditions should be respected. Government policies should avoid giving benefits to people who wrongly claim to be Mal Pahadiya. Instead, the focus should be on helping the real community preserve their true identity. The language and stories of the Mal Pahadiya are not just old traditions. They are still alive today and are important for their dignity and future. Saving these traditions is not just about culture it is also about respecting the rights and history of a proud and unique people. Helping the Mal Pahadiya keep their language and traditions alive means helping them move forward in today's world without losing who they are.

1.5 Conclusion

The Mal Pahadiya community represents a vital thread in the rich cultural fabric of eastern India, carrying centuries of history, language, and folklore that define their unique identity. Their oral traditions, myths, and language are not just stories from the past — they are living expressions of who they are, how they understand the world, and how they relate to nature and society. However, in today's fast-paced, globalized world, these traditions are at a crossroads. The influence of mainstream cultures, increasing urban migration, and socio-economic pressures has led many Mal Pahadiya individuals to gradually distance themselves from their ancestral language and customs. This cultural shift is amplified by the lack of formal recognition and documentation of their language and oral history, which makes it harder for the younger generations to access or appreciate their heritage. The dominance of languages like Hindi, Bengali, Khortha, and Angika in their daily lives has caused a gradual decline in the use of Maudo and the Mal Pahadiya language, further threatening the transmission of traditional knowledge. The community's rich folklore and spiritual beliefs, which have historically guided their relationship with nature and social order, risk fading into oblivion. Yet, despite these challenges, there is hope. Awareness is growing about the importance of protecting indigenous languages and cultures globally, and the Mal Pahadiya community can benefit from this momentum. Efforts such as community-based documentation, inclusion of their language and folklore in education, and celebration of their festivals and rituals can help strengthen their cultural pride. Additionally, respectful collaboration with researchers, local governments, and NGOs can provide the necessary resources and platforms to preserve and promote their heritage. Ultimately, preserving the Mal Pahadiya's language and folklore is not just about safeguarding the past; it is about securing their future ensuring that they remain visible, heard, and respected in the broader society. It is about allowing the Mal Pahadiya to navigate modernity without losing their roots and to pass on their unique identity to coming generations. In a world where diversity is increasingly recognized as strength, supporting the Mal Pahadiya's cultural survival is essential for the richness and pluralism of our collective human story.

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