

The Birjia Community of Jharkhand: A Study of Geographical Distribution, Societal Framework, and Household Economics

Siddhi Pandey¹, Priyanshu Kumar²

¹Research scholar, University Department of Economics, Ranchi University, Ranchi

²Research scholar, Department of Economics, Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee University Ranchi

Abstract

This study examines the socio-economic and societal aspects of the Birjia community in Mahuadanr block, Latehar district, Jharkhand, using a mixed-methods approach with surveys, interviews, and secondary data. A sample of 36 households was selected through multistage random sampling, purposive sampling, and snowballing techniques. Findings indicate that most households earn ₹15,000–₹25,000 monthly, relying heavily on forest products for income. While basic amenities like toilets and bank accounts are common, challenges remain in access to modern energy, digital banking, and education, especially for girls. The community primarily engages in subsistence farming, with limited commercial agriculture, highlighting the need for focused development interventions in education, healthcare, and sustainable livelihoods.

Keywords: Birjia, societal dimensions, social parameters, economic parameters

1. Introduction

Jharkhand, a state rich in cultural diversity and natural resources, is home to various indigenous communities, each with unique socio-economic and cultural identities. Birjia is one among eight PVTGs found in Jharkhand. These communities offer a profound lens into the complexities of rural livelihoods, traditions, and adaptations in a rapidly modernizing world. This paper aims to provide an in-depth exploration of the ethnographic and socio-economic dimensions of Birjia households in Latehar, illuminating their ways of life, cultural practices, economic activities, and interactions with broader social structures.

Mahuadanr is a prominent administrative block located in the Latehar district of Jharkhand, India. Nestled in the chotanagpur Plateau, this region is known for its scenic landscapes, rich biodiversity, and cultural heritage. Surrounded by dense forests and dotted with hills, Mahuadanr plays a significant role in the ecological and cultural tapestry of the state.

The population of Mahuadanr is predominantly tribal, with several indigenous communities, including the Birjia, Oraon, and Munda, residing here. These communities have preserved their traditional practices, languages, and festivals, which are integral to the region's cultural identity. The local economy is primarily agrarian, supplemented by forest-based livelihoods like lac cultivation, collection of non-timber forest products (NTFPs), and small-scale animal husbandry.

The Birjia community, with its distinct traditions and practices, forms an integral part of the region's socio-cultural fabric. However, their marginalization and limited representation in scholarly discourse necessitate a focused study to understand their lived experiences and challenges. This research situates the Birjia within the context of Jharkhand's tribal landscape, examining their demographic patterns, cultural heritage, subsistence practices, and access to resources such as education, healthcare, and employment opportunities.

By adopting an ethnographic approach, the study delves into the everyday lives of Birjia households, offering a nuanced understanding of their social organization, kinship structures, and cultural expressions. Through this dual lens of ethnography and socio-economic analysis, the paper seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on tribal studies in India and advocate for more inclusive developmental frameworks that address the unique needs and aspirations of the Birjia community.

2. Review of Literature

Charles Winick (1956), an American anthropologist, defines a tribe as a social group distinguished by a specific geographic territory, a unique dialect, cultural homogeneity, and a unified social structure. A tribe often consists of various subgroups, such as sibs or villages, and is typically guided by a leader. Its members usually trace their origins to a common ancestor and may share a patron deity. The families or smaller communities within the tribe are closely connected through economic, social, religious, familial, or kinship relationships. Similarly, the sixth revised edition of *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* (1951) describes a tribe as a group characterized by political and social cohesion, self-governance, and a claim to ownership or occupation of a defined geographical region. Classification of primitive tribes in India began with the 1931 census, marking the first attempt to systematically identify these groups. The Government of India Act of 1935 further acknowledged the existence of "backward tribes," and the Thirteenth Schedule of the Government of India (Provincial Legislative Assemblies) Order of 1936 officially recognized certain tribes as backward in regions such as Assam, Bihar, the Central Provinces and Berar, Madras, and Bombay. In 1961, the Dhebar Commission, chaired by Shri U. N. Dhebar, highlighted the severe socio-economic underdevelopment of several tribal groups. The commission's report underscored the importance of government intervention to address the pressing challenges faced by these marginalized communities. Deogaonkar (1986) conducted an ethnographic study of the Hill Korwa tribe, documenting their traditional dependence on shifting cultivation. While this practice has largely declined due to legal restrictions, some Korwa members still engage in it. Conversely, the Dih subgroup has adopted settled farming, although they face challenges such as restricted access to fertile land. Pandey (2023) notes in his article that the Birjia, a subgroup of the Asur tribe in Jharkhand, are considered lower in status due to settling in the region after the Veer Asurs. Tribes such as the Oraon, Kharwar, and Kisan view themselves as socially superior to the Birjia. Often associated with the Baiga, the Birjia follow a patriarchal system where inheritance is passed through male lineage. They are engaged in traditional activities like iron smelting, agriculture, and bamboo basket weaving. Over time, their lifestyle, including food and jewellery, has become increasingly assimilated into mainstream culture. Polygamy is prevalent, with men permitted to have up to three wives, each fulfilling distinct household roles. Second marriages are referred to as engagements, and marriage customs feature traditions such as Visut and Agua.

3. Objectives

1. To provide an overview of geographical distribution of Birjia population in Jharkhand.

2. To explore the structure of Birjia society.
3. To analyze the social status of Birjia households.
4. To assess the economic status of Birjia households.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

Table 1: It presents the several aspects of research conducted including sample size and sampling technique.

| | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Approach | Quantitative and qualitative |
| Type of research | Descriptive |
| Target population | Birjia Households |
| Research area | Mahuadanr block, Latehar |
| Sample size | 36 |
| Sampling techniques | Multistage Random sampling (villages of Mahuadanr were selected on a random basis and then households too), purposive (purpose was predefined to study Birjia households) and snowballing (to allocate isolated Birjia households) |
| Primary data collection technique | Questionnaires and interviews |
| Secondary data sources | Data sources, including the Census, reports from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, other government publications, and various books and journals. |
| Plan of Analysis | Mean and percentage with the help of MS Excel |

Author’s own compilation

4.2 Sample selection

Mahuadanr block from Latehar district of Jharkhand have been selected as the research area because of good concentration of Birjias in this district.

Table 2: It provides a detailed overview of the sample area, including the villages surveyed and respective respondents.

| Village | Number of responses collected |
|---------------------|-------------------------------|
| Aarahansh(sohar) | 10 |
| Netarhat Birjiatoli | 13 |
| Bandua | 8 |
| Chetma | 5 |
| Total | 36 |

Author’s own compilation

5. Findings of the study

5.1 Overview of geographical distribution of population

Table 3: District wise distribution of rural, urban, male and female population of Birjias.

| District | Rural | Urban | Male | Female | Total |
|----------------------|-------|-------|------|--------|-------|
| Garhwa | 115 | 0 | 58 | 57 | 115 |
| Chatra | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Koderma | 8 | 0 | 2 | 6 | 8 |
| Giridih | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Dhanbad | 0 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Bokaro | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Lohardaga | 584 | 0 | 293 | 291 | 584 |
| East Singhbhum | 29 | 12 | 24 | 17 | 41 |
| Palamu | 9 | 7 | 9 | 7 | 16 |
| Latehar | 4110 | 14 | 2098 | 2026 | 4124 |
| Hazaribagh | 2 | 4 | 1 | 5 | 6 |
| Ramgarh | 17 | 0 | 6 | 11 | 17 |
| Ranchi | 16 | 33 | 23 | 26 | 49 |
| Khunti | 13 | 0 | 10 | 3 | 13 |
| Gumla | 1264 | 3 | 633 | 634 | 1267 |
| Simdega | 18 | 0 | 7 | 11 | 18 |
| West Singhbhum | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Saraikella-Kharsawan | 7 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 8 |
| Total | 6197 | 79 | 3174 | 3102 | 6276 |

Author's own compilation

Source: Census 2011

Birjias constitute 0.07 % of total tribal population of the state. Geographically, Birjias are concentrated in Latehar, Gumla and Lohardaga districts of Jharkhand. To be more specific, they are mainly found in Barwadih, Garu, Mahuadanr, Balumath of Latehar districts, Bhandariya of Garhwa district, Bisunpur of Gumla district, Senha and Kisko blocks of Raidih and Lohardaga districts.

5.2 Overview of birjia society

Physical features of Birjia

The Birjia people are part of a group that shares common ancestry with the Proto Australoid group. They usually have darker skin, flat noses, broader faces with prominent cheekbones. which are typical of many tribal communities in their area. Their hair is generally thick and black, often tied up, and their eyes are usually dark brown or black. These physical traits are similar to those found in other tribes that speak Austroasiatic languages, which includes the Korwa.

Social Structure

The Birjia society is organized around clan systems, with each clan tracing its lineage to a common ancestor. Decision-making within the community is typically done by elders and village councils. They maintain a patriarchal social structure, although women play significant roles in household and agricultural activities.

Marriage

In traditional Birjia society, polygamy was an accepted practice, often linked to social, economic, and cultural factors. It was considered a means to address issues such as infertility, strengthen familial labour resources for agriculture, or enhance social standing within the community. However, in contemporary times, the practice has become less common due to a combination of legal restrictions, economic challenges, and evolving societal norms

Languages and ethnicity

The Birjia tribe, like other tribes in Jharkhand such as the Munda and Santhal, has its own unique language called Birjia. This language is part of a larger family known as Austroasiatic and falls under the Munda group.

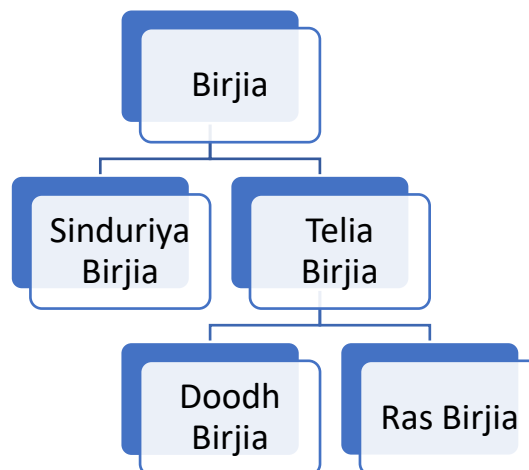
In the Gumla, Lohardaga and Latehar districts, most Birjias communicate in Sadri, which is like the Nagpuri language.

Attires of Korwas

As Birjias are getting connected with the dominant societies, their way of clothing is becoming similar to people living majorly in those areas. Most of the male wear shirt, t-shirt, lungi, pants etc and female wears saree, frock, skirt, suit etc.

Classification among Birjias

Birjias have been divided into two parts: Sinduriya and Telia. The two subdivisions of the Telia Birjia are Doodh Birjia and Ras Birjia. Sinduriya Birjia uses Sindoor in marriage while Telia Birjias do not use Sindoor. In the same way, Dudh Birjias drink cow’s milk but do not eat meat while Ras Birjias drink milk and eat meat also.



Flowchart 1: classification of Birjia

Author’s own Compilation

Religious beliefs

Main deities are Singbonga and Marang Buru. Their Main festivals are Sarhul, Sohrai, Asadhi Puja, Karam, Fagua, etc. They call themselves as the descendants of Pundarik Nag.

Food habits

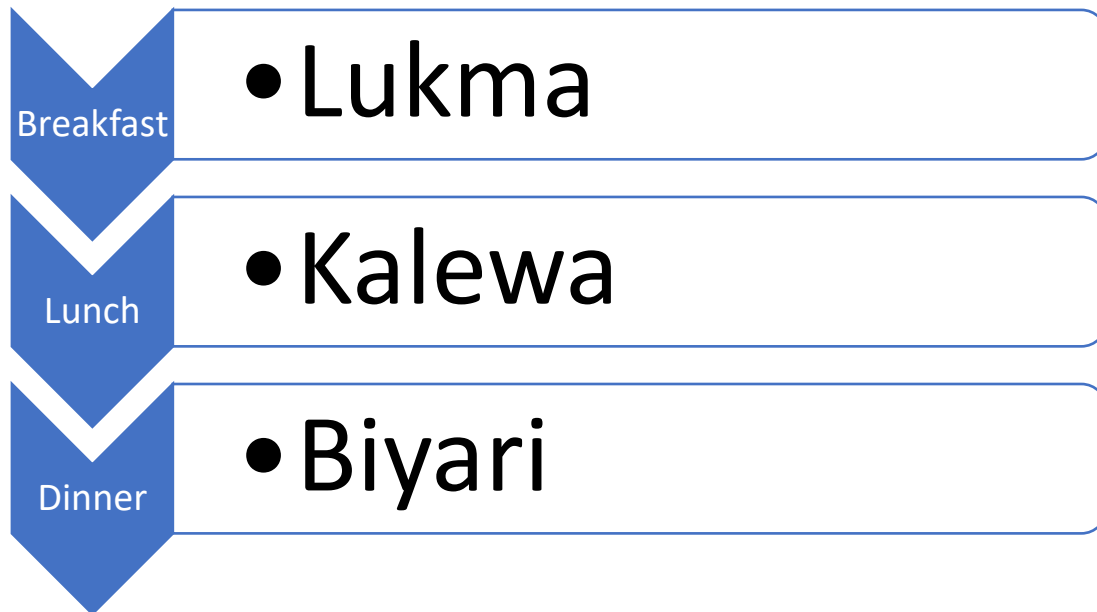


Figure 1: Food habits and their names

Author's own compilation

Livelihood and economic practices

Agriculture is the primary occupation of the Birjia tribe, with a focus on shifting cultivation and subsistence farming. They settled in Pat- area on the mountain and do the cultivated farming. Tenancy is their main sub-profession. In addition to farming, they also rely on various other livelihoods such as collecting forest products, working as daily wage labourers, engaging in animal husbandry, crafting, and bauxite loading.

Specifically, the Birjias cultivate Gondly (a type of millet), potatoes, pulses, vegetables, and a small quantity of paddy, primarily due to geographical limitations. Forest products they gather include bamboo, mahua, wood, and honey.

Education and Healthcare

High dropout rates are particularly evident after primary education, especially among girls, due to the long distance between the village and schools. It is rare to find individuals who have attended college or obtained a degree. The primary factor contributing to this dropout rate is the distance, and there is a significant lack of motivation among the Korwa community to attend school regularly. Health centres are located at considerable distance from the hamlets, which poses a challenge in emergency situations. However, over 95% of children are vaccinated, which is a positive indicator of improvements in health within the community. Despite this, the rate of deliveries at health centres remains quite low. The lack of access to nutritious or balanced meals is likely a key factor contributing to the undernourishment and frailty observed among many individuals.

Governance system

The traditional caste Panchayat of this tribe is called **Kutumait**. The system of caste Panchayat is found in this tribe whose head is generally an esteemed person. All kinds of matters are settled by the Caste Panchayat. The head of panchayat is called Baiga. Besra, Dhawak, and elderly and respectable people of the village are included in their caste Panchayat.

5.3 Overview of Social Parameters of Birjia Households

Table 4 – It presents the mean social parameters from Birjia households of Mahuadanr block, Latehar.

| Variables | Mean | Description |
|-----------------------|------|---|
| Household size | 7.5 | The average number of people living in a household is 7.5, indicating relatively large families. |
| Gender | 0.61 | This value likely represents the proportion of males is high among the respondents with 61% of the respondents being male. |
| Age | 44.2 | The average age of the household head or sampled individual is 44.2 years. |
| Separate Kitchen | 0.22 | Only 22% of households have a separate kitchen, indicating that most households do not have designated spaces for cooking. |
| Number of pucca Rooms | 1.6 | On average, households have 1.6 pucca rooms, where "pucca" refers to permanent and well-constructed rooms. |
| Waterproof house | 0.86 | 86% of households have houses that are waterproof, reflecting relatively good housing conditions in terms of protection from weather. |
| Number of rooms | 4 | The average household has 4 rooms, including living spaces, bedrooms, and potentially storage or multipurpose rooms. |
| LPG connection | 0 | No households have an LPG (liquefied petroleum gas) connection, which implies |

| | | |
|--------------------------|-----|--|
| | | reliance on alternative cooking fuels, such as wood or kerosene. |
| Toilet | 1 | All households (100%) have access to a toilet, suggesting complete sanitation coverage in the sample |
| Bank account | 1 | All households (100%) have at least one member with a bank account, indicating full financial inclusion in this respect. |
| Internet banking/UPI | 0 | No households use internet banking or UPI (Unified Payments Interface), indicating low digital financial literacy or access. |
| Children | 1.6 | The average number of children in each household is 1.6. |
| Vaccine | 1 | All children have access to vaccines or are fully vaccinated. |
| Child education | 1 | All children in the households are receiving education, indicating universal school enrolment. |
| Land | 8.2 | Households own an average of 8.2 katha (local measuring unit) of land. |
| Access to Forest product | 1 | All households have access to forest products, such as firewood, bamboo, Mahua, forest fruits etc. |
| Livestock | 1 | All households have livestock, which may include cows, goats, poultry, or other animals, reflecting dependence on mixed farming systems. |

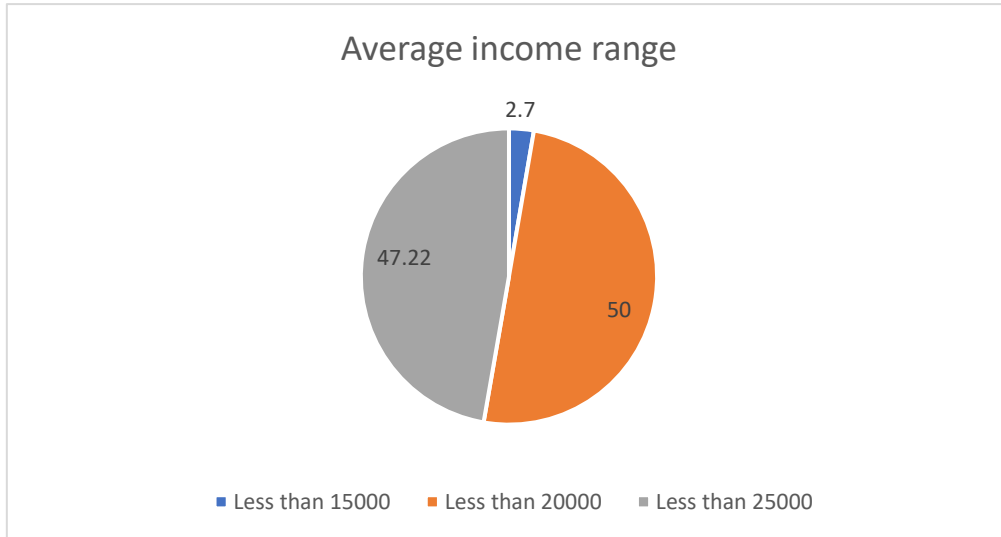
Author's own compilation
Source – field survey, March 2024

This data paints a picture of Birjia society with large households, significant reliance on traditional resources, good basic amenities like toilets and bank accounts, but limited access to modern conveniences like LPG and internet banking. Livelihoods seem closely tied to agriculture, forest resources, and livestock.

5.4 Overview of economic Parameters of Birjia households

Income level of Birjia households in Mahuadanr block of Latehar district

Figure 2- Average income profile of Birjia households



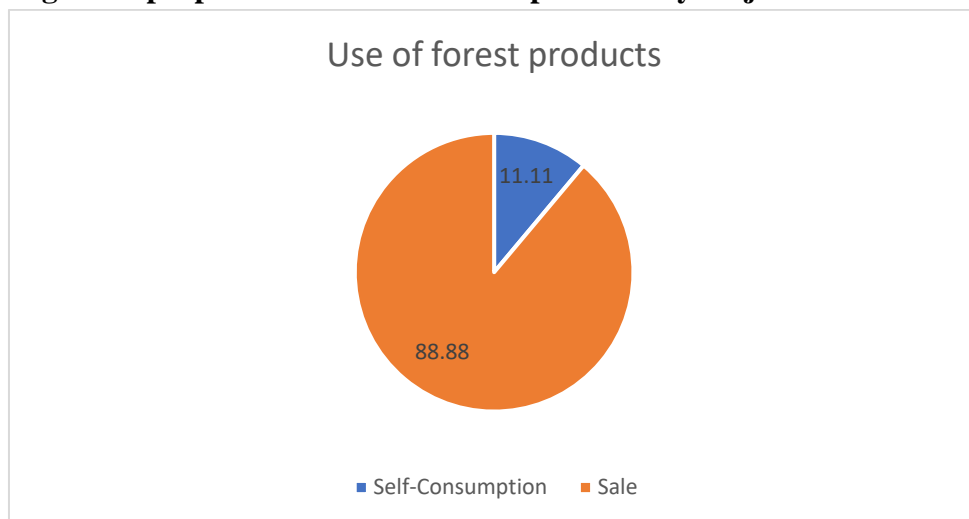
Author’s own compilation

Source – field survey, March 2024

The majority of households (50% + 47.22% = 97.22%) earn between ₹15,000 and ₹25,000 per month.

Uses of forest products by Birjia households

Figure 3- proportionate uses of forest products by Birjia households



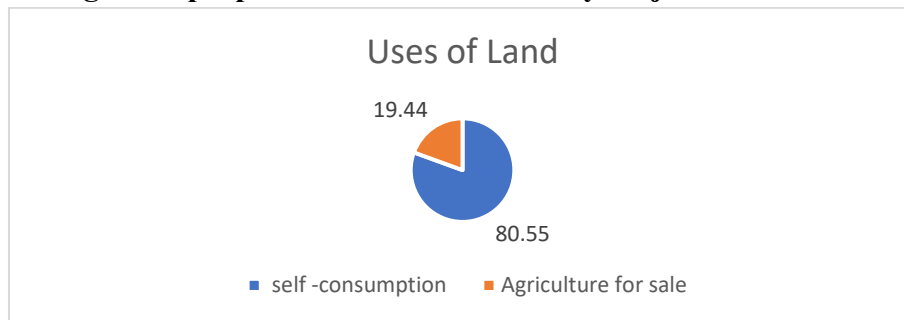
Author’s own compilation

Source – field survey, March 2024

The majority of households (88.88%) use forest products for sale, suggesting a significant reliance on forest resources for income generation. Only a small portion (11.11%) uses them exclusively for self-consumption, which could indicate limited subsistence dependence or a preference for monetizing forest products.

Uses of Land by Birjia households

Figure 4- proportionate uses of Land by Birjia households



Author's own compilation

Source – field survey, March 2024

The data suggests that majority of households (80.55%) prioritize self-sustenance by using their land for agricultural purposes aimed at their own consumption. A smaller portion (19.44%) utilizes land for income through agricultural sales, indicating that commercial farming is less prevalent in the surveyed group.

6. Conclusion

In summary, the Birjia community exhibits a socio-economic profile deeply rooted in traditional livelihoods, with limited integration of modern amenities. Their dependence on forest resources for income generation and self-sustenance underscores the vital role of natural resources in their lives. While most households prioritize agriculture for personal consumption, commercial farming is relatively rare, indicating a focus on sustenance rather than market-driven production. Despite improvements in basic facilities such as toilets and bank accounts, access to modern conveniences like LPG and Internet banking remains limited. With most households earning between ₹15,000 and ₹25,000 per month, the community's reliance on primary sector activities highlights the need for targeted initiatives to enhance livelihoods, modernize agricultural practices, and improve access to technology and infrastructure.

7. Policy implication

To address the socio-economic challenges of the Birjia community, policies should prioritize sustainable livelihoods, improved infrastructure, and education. Skill development initiatives focused on their traditional expertise, such as value addition to forest products, can enhance incomes while promoting resource sustainability. Expanding access to modern conveniences like LPG, electricity, and digital banking, coupled with digital literacy programs, can significantly improve living standards. Financial inclusion through microfinance and credit support can encourage entrepreneurship, while community-led forest management can ensure sustainable resource use. Additionally, educating the community on modern agricultural practices, financial literacy, and available government schemes can empower them to transition towards greater socio-economic progress while preserving their cultural and environmental heritage.

References

1. Pandey, P. K. (2023). BASIC ELEMENTS OF SIMILARITY IN SANATAN CULTURE AND GOTRA, RELIGION, SOCIAL BEHAVIOR ETC. OF ASUR, BIRJIA AND CHERO TRIBES OF JHARKHAND. *Jamshedpur Research Review*, 12.

2. Census of India, (1931). Vol. I, India. Part 1: Report. J. H. Hutton (Ed.). Delhi: Manager of Publications.
3. Census of India, (2011): Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, accessed on 9th April, 2014 from <https://censusindia.gov.in>
4. Deogaonkar, S. G. (1986). The Hill-Korwa. India: Concept Publishing Company.
5. Dhebar, U.N. (1960) *Vol 1, Report of the Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes Commission*. rep. New Delhi: Manager of Publication.
6. Government of India (Provincial Legislative Assemblies) Order 1936, Schedule XIII)
7. Government of India act, 1935
8. Government of India. (1961). Report of the Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes Commission (1960-1961), Vol. I. <https://indianculture.gov.in/reports-proceedings/report-scheduled-areas-and-scheduled-tribes-commission-1960-1961-vol-i>
9. O. G. S. C. (1952). NOTES AND QUERIES ON ANTHROPOLOGY: 6th edition, revised and rewritten by a Committee of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland. routledge and kegan Paul, 1951. 28s. *Antiquity*, 26(103), 167-168. doi:10.1017/S0003598X0002398X
10. Ranjan, M. (2022). *JHARKHAND GENERAL KNOWLEDGE 2021*. Prabhat Prakashan.
11. Winick, Charles.1964. Dictionary of Anthropology. New Jersey, Little Field, Adams & Co.