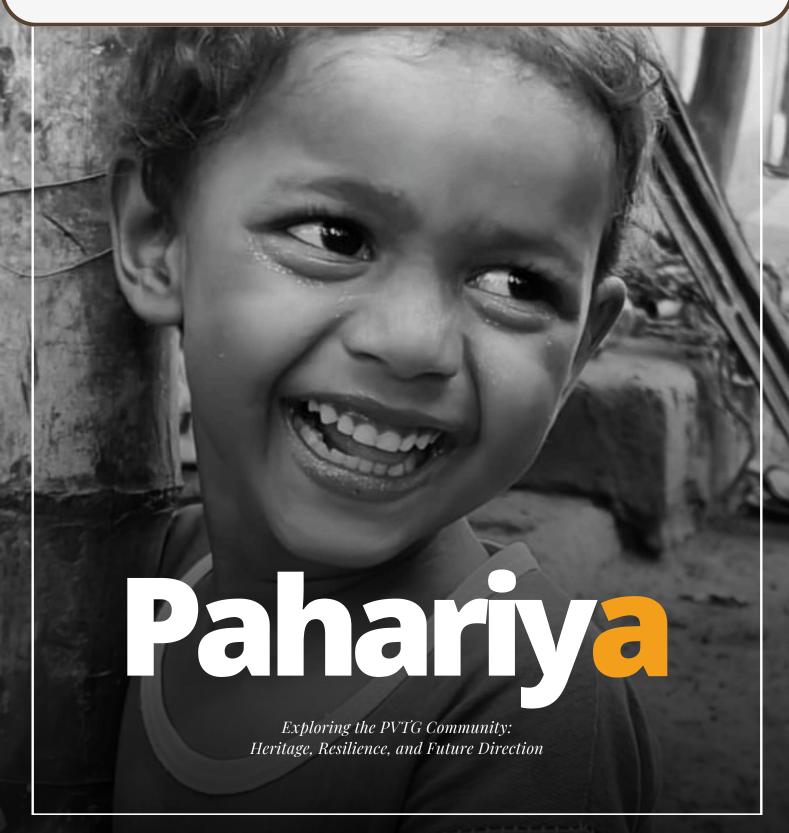


TRADITION, TRANSITION, AND TOMORROW VOL. 5

Special Edition of Newsletter on the Pahariyas: Stories, Studies, and Reflections



Honouring the Past, Engaging the Present, Shaping the Future...

"Am pahanhe soror' at, ama tan khe at am jivon khe or." (We are children of the hills, our roots are here, and so is our life.) — Malto saying.

The Pahariya community, among the oldest and most resilient indigenous peoples of India, has lived for centuries in the rugged embrace of the Rajmahal Hills. Their lives are deeply intertwined with the forests, streams, and the red soil of this land. They are cultivators of millet and memory, keepers of rituals that predate the history books, and storytellers whose language carries the heartbeat of the hills. Yet, they have also lived too often at the margins—margins of economic opportunity, public services, and the imagination of mainstream development.

This Special Volume of our newsletter is not an attempt to romanticize their struggles or cast them as relics of a bygone era. Rather, it seeks to place the Pahariya people at the center of the narrative—holders of wisdom, history, and dignity, whose stories must inform and guide the path of inclusive, culturally rooted development. cross these pages, you will find more than reports or

project updates. This is a collective act of listening. We have gathered oral histories passed down over generations, ethnographic insights that reveal the nuances of their ways of life, field practitioner reflections shaped by daily engagement, and accounts of quiet resilience that rarely make headlines. We bring to light the intricate fabric of Pahariya existence: their shifting cultivation practices adapted to the rhythm of the land; the slow erosion of forest-based livelihoods under restrictive policies; the unrelenting battle for land rights; and the emergence of local leadership in areas such as education, women's empowerment, and climate-smart agriculture.

Every contribution in this volume holds up a mirror; sometimes reflecting the remarkable resilience of a people, other times exposing the systemic gaps that have left communities vulnerable. These gaps are not the result of chance. They are the outcomes of historic neglect, fragmented policy attention, and a development lens that has too often overlooked cultural context. For the Pahariyas, losing their forest is not simply a matter of losing an income source; it is losing a library, a pharmacy, a temple, and a history all at once

Editorial Note

The editorial journey for this volume has been profoundly humbling. As we read the stories from the field of mothers ensuring their daughters attend school against all odds; of youth clubs reviving traditional songs and dances while advocating for modern opportunities; of farmers who experiment with zero tillage or drought-resistant crops to face an uncertain climate—we are reminded of a core truth: meaningful development cannot be delivered from the outside in. It must be co-created, with the community as both architect and custodian.

This volume, therefore, is more than a publication. It is a bridge. A bridge between policymakers and the people whose lives are shaped by policy; between researchers and the lived realities their studies attempt to capture; between the forest trails of Littipara and the corridors of decision-making in faraway capitals. Our hope is that this bridge will be well-travelled. That it will spark conversations in panchayat meetings, in district planning sessions, and in policy circles. That it will inspire programmatic that move us towards "broadstreaming" development, where indigenous knowledge, dignity, and cultural continuity are not side notes, but the very starting point.

As you read, we invite you not only to observe and learn but to carry forward the responsibility that comes with knowing. The future we shape must be one where communities like the Pahariyas no longer have to choose between survival and identity; where their children can dream without having to abandon their roots; and where their heritage is seen not as a fragile artifact, but as a living, evolving force that enriches us all.

With deepest gratitude to all contributors, including community members, field practitioners, scholars, and colleagues, who lent their voices, stories, and insights.

-Dr. Mahua Ghosh Sengupta

Dy. Director, MEAL and Knowledge Management

4S India



FIELD DIARIES: INSIGHTS AND EXPERIENCES

BETWEEN FOREST AND FUTURE: UNDERSTANDING THE PAHARIYA COMMUNITY'S STRUGGLES, STRENGTHS, AND PATHWAYS FORWARD



DR. MAHUA GHOSH SENGUPTA, DY. DIRECTOR, 4S INDIA



Context:

The Pahariya community, comprising the Mal Pahariya, Sauria Pahariya, and Kumarbhag Pahariya sub-groups, represents one of the oldest and most resilient indigenous populations in eastern India. Despite their official recognition as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) by the Government of India (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2020), they remain among the most socio-economically marginalized communities in Jharkhand, Bihar, and West Bengal. This edited volume brings together field narratives, scholarly reflections, administrative insights, and community voices to explore the heritage, resilience, and future possibilities of the Pahariya people. Predominantly settled across the Rajmahal Hills, a rugged terrain historically known as Kohistan, the Pahariya population, estimated at around 1.25 lakhs (Census 2011), has developed a distinct identity through millennia of forest-dependent living, spiritual autonomy, and resistance to external control. Classical anthropologists such as S.C. Roy (1915) and W.G. Archer (1946) described them as proud hill people, deeply connected to their environment, yet resistant to assimilation by dominant cultures. This edited volume brings together field narratives scholarly reflections, administrative insights, and community voices to explore the rich heritage, ongoing struggles, and future possibilities of the Pahariya people.

Historical Foundations and Resistance:

This Edited Volume begins by retracing the community's deep historical roots and long legacy of resistance. "Roots and Resilience: Tracing the History and Origins of the Pahariya Community" explores the transformation of the Mal Pahariyas from forest guardians to displaced settlers, particularly during the colonial period. Similarly, "The Enduring Spirit of the Souria Paharia" traces the tribe's cultural continuity and fierce opposition to Mughal, Maratha, and British powers. Historical figures such as Tilka Manjhi (Jabra Paharia) and Ramna Aadhi emerge as symbols of tribal sovereignty, echoing the broader narratives of anti-colonial Adivasi resistance (Elwin, 1944; Xaxa, 1999). British administrative records (Hunter, 1877) and later ethnographic studies confirm the strategic displacement of the Pahariyas through mechanisms such as the Damin-i-Koh settlement (1838) and the Santhal resettlement policies, which led to demographic erosion and the disintegration of indigenous territorial control. The divide-and-rule strategies not only disrupted land ownership but also sowed long-term inter-tribal tensions, especially between the Santhals and Pahariyas (Mukherjee, 2009).

Present-Day Struggles and Lived Realities:

Today, the Pahariyas face a host of intersecting vulnerabilities: extreme poverty, low literacy, poor health outcomes, and fragile livelihoods. As highlighted in "Tribes in Transition: The Sauria Paharia Experience," the shift from forest-based economies to wage labour, and the decline of traditional institutions, have been compounded by deforestation, land alienation, and climate change-all of which threaten both survival and cultural continuity. Another article- "Sustainable Living or Under Threat?" by Ankit Kumar and Chama Munda, provides an indepth field-based analysis of the Mal Paharia community in Littipara block of Pakur. The study reveals a grim scenario of environmental degradation, unproductive widespread malnutrition, high health expenses, and the erosion of forest-based livelihoods. It highlights how deforestation, land degradation, and climate change intersect with institutional neglect and poverty, pushing the community into cycles of distress migration and disempowerment. Educational attainment remains alarmingly low-around 25% for Mal Pahariyas and less than 15% for Sauria Pahariyas, with female literacy often in single digits (Census 2011; Jharkhand Human Development Report, 2020). In remote areas, schools are inaccessible or linguistically alienating. Studies such as UNESCO (2012) and NCERT (2019) advocate for mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE), yet implementation remains limited.

Health indicators are equally concerning. NFHS-5 data for Jharkhand highlights high rates of anaemia, malnutrition, and maternal mortality in tribal-dominated districts. Articles in this volume document how Pahariya communities continue to rely on traditional healers, while access to modern health infrastructure is sporadic or absent. The hybrid health-seeking behaviour reflects both cultural preferences and systemic neglect (Ekjut, 2016). The Mal Paharia study further underscores this crisis, urging localized, community-rooted health systems that integrate traditional and biomedical approaches.

Stories of Intervention and Agency:

Despite these systemic barriers, this volume presents compelling stories of community-led transformation and NGO interventions rooted in trust, respect, and cultural understanding. "Empowering Change: Rescuing and Rehabilitating Vulnerable Lives in Littipara" offers a powerful case of Jan Lok Kalyan Parishad (JLKP) rescuing a trafficked Pahariya girl and supporting her rehabilitation through education, psychosocial support, and leadership training. This illustrates the role of civil society in child protection and empowerment, especially in contexts where state systems are absent.

Other articles such as "Navigating Vulnerability and Prosperity" and "Empowering the Paharia Community in Kathalpada" highlight the work of 4S India Foundation and local groups in promoting sports, SHGs, gender equity, and climate-resilient agriculture. These initiatives show how even isolated communities can forge paths of self-reliance and social cohesion when given supportive ecosystems.

"Walking with the Pahadiyas" and "Rebuilding Trust and Institutions" offer reflective insights into the ethical dimensions of working with marginalized groups—revealing how long-term and co-creating solutions.

Broadstreaming Development: A Framework for the Future:

The concluding section of this volume proposes a "broadstreaming" model of development—a framework that moves beyond assimilation and instead centres cultural preservation, self-governance, and context-sensitive interventions. This approach aligns with current discourse on indigenous rights and decolonial development (Cornell & Kalt, 2007; Escobar, 2012).

Key recommendations include:

- Recognition of traditional governance systems alongside statutory institutions (PESA Act, 1996)
- Securing land tenure and community forest rights under the Forest Rights Act, 2006

- Expansion of mother tongue education, adapted to Pahariya linguistic realities
- Strengthening primary health services, with integration of traditional healing knowledge
- Enhancing NTFP value chains and creating market linkages rooted in indigenous skills
- Promoting cultural revitalization through festivals, documentation, and youth engagement

Models from Kudumbashree (Kerala) and Dongria Kondh initiatives (Odisha) provide valuable lessons in culturally-rooted, gender-sensitive, and ecologically sustainable development.

Conclusion: A People of Enduring Spirit:

The Pahariya community has survived centuries of upheaval—colonial betrayal, ecological displacement, and administrative neglect—yet their identity remains intact, their spirit unbroken. Exploring the Pahariya Community: Heritage, Resilience, and Future Directions is both a tribute to that resilience and a roadmap for a more equitable, inclusive, and respectful development paradigm.

By drawing on lived experiences, grounded research, and institutional memory, this volume offers not only an archive of survival and change, but also a call to action. It invites policy-makers, scholars, civil society actors, and community leaders to co-create futures where justice is rooted in cultural recognition and where development is measured not just in income or infrastructure, but in dignity and belonging.

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MIHIR SAHANA, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, 4S INDIA

As dawn broke over Pakur, ushered in by a monsoon downpour, our expedition into the secluded hills of Sundarpahadi began. The Rajmahal Hills, veiled in mist and lush greenery, presented an almost ethereal landscape—serene, untamed, and breathtakingly beautiful. Yet, beneath this captivating façade lies a harsh truth: a profound lack of development, particularly for the Pahadiyas, one of India's Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). Their existence is a delicate balance between nature's abundance and persistent systemic neglect.

Our destination lay deep within the Sundarpahadi block, where paved roads give way to rugged, rocky trails, and the touch of modernity is barely felt. We reached Ghadiyal Chowk in Bada Sinduri Panchyat, a bustling hub not of commerce, but of tribal families who had trekked for hours. They were there to collect their food rations under the Dakiya Yojana, a government scheme designed for doorstep delivery. The irony was stark: for many, "doorstep" meant a journey of 2 to 15 kilometers. "There are no roads, only footpaths. The ration can't be carried up by vehicles," explained a field worker from JSLPS. We watched as elderly men and women painstakingly hauled 35-kilo sacks of grain uphill through dense forest paths. This scheme, intended to ease their burden, had inadvertently made survival in these hills even more arduous.

Unveiling the Development Gap: Tilaiapara and Sharmi:

From Ghadiyal Chowk, we made our way into Tilaiapara village, home to 26 families. Accompanying us were Illias, a civil engineer and local mobilizer, and Johan, a local change-maker. The scale of the development gap quickly became apparent. Illias highlighted the inactivity of local Self-Help Groups (SHGs) due to a complete lack of follow-up support. Basic amenities were virtually nonexistent: no health facilities, no proper access roads. Most villagers were, in fact, at Ghariyal Chowk, collecting the monthly rations that serve as their lifeline. As we ascended to Sharmi, a village perched on a ridge overlooking the valley, the challenges intensified. The steep climb over slippery stone paths tested our endurance. Yet, midway, something shifted within me. The untouched forest, the pristine

hills, the clean air—all began to rejuvenate my spirit. It reminded me of my treks in Darjeeling and Sittong, but this felt even more profoundly peaceful and unspoiled. Higher up, we observed a farmer clearing the hill slopes, preparing to sow maize, bajra, sutri, arhar, and barbatti—rain-fed crops cultivated on the slopes for sale as cash crops. He explained that each household typically owns about two bighas of hill slopes, which they clear and cultivate annually.

We sat with a group of men and women, listening to their stories that painted a grim reality. Drinking water is a precious commodity, fetched from a stream 1.5 km downhill. In summer, they wait for hours for a single pot to fill.

Emergency situations, like childbirth, are perilous. Ambulances can only reach the foot of the hills, requiring a dangerous 30-45 minute descent. During rain or at night, this becomes impossible, making institutional deliveries a distant dream. There have been tragic instances of miscarriages and even deaths of mothers and newborns. Brain malaria is rampant, yet villagers are forced to rely on quacks who demand up to ₹3,000 for treatment—an amount often borrowed at usurious interest rates of 200%, which can double to 400% if not repaid, trapping families in a vicious cycle of poverty.

Other sources of income are scarce, primarily limited to a Pahadiya pension of ₹1,000. Villagers cultivate maize, bajra, sutri, arhar, and barbatti, selling these crops to buy essentials like spices, vegetables, and occasionally paddy. Paddy cultivation has become increasingly uncertain, with most villagers abandoning it, finding it too risky and unrewarding, especially now that they receive 35 kg of rice monthly. The women shared that two SHG groups exist in the village, but for the past two years, there have been no savings or meetings due to a lack of follow-up from JSLPS. They also reported instances of the bookkeeper misappropriating their savings. Villagers frequently borrow between ₹2,000 and ₹5,000 for emergencies or agricultural needs.

Despite the hardships, nature thrives in this desolation. Mangoes, jackfruits, custard apples, and guavas hang abundantly from trees. Black Bengal goats graze freely, though many perish due to a lack of veterinary care. The paradox is stark: these forested hills, rich in ecological wealth and fostering a low-carbon way of life, are utterly failed by the state's development architecture. The Pahadiyas' official recognition as a PVTG has regrettably not translated into meaningful systemic support. Programs exist only on paper; roads, schools, health centers, and clean drinking water remain elusive. Yet, they persevere, living with dignity, preserving their culture, language, and simple way of life. Later that day, we visited Madni village, where the situation was equally dire. We returned to Tilaiapara by 8 PM, exhausted but deeply moved and grateful for the glimpse into the real lives of the Pahadiyas and the dedicated work of our colleagues.

Day 2: Jalo-Where Life Meets the Forest:

The next morning, we embarked on another journey, climbing to Jalo, a hilltop village where another colleague resides. It was a challenging 90-minute trek through steep, forested paths. Despite its inaccessibility, our colleague chose Jalo as a base, committed to building relationships and guiding the community towards sustainable development.

We walked through the village, met with families, and held a community meeting to understand their needs. Along the way, we shared a fresh, ripe jackfruit—sweet and juicy. It was surprising to see so many fruits lying uneaten on the ground; with no markets, villagers simply have more than they can consume.

Jalo is incredibly beautiful peaceful, verdant, and full of potential. Unlike many other villages in these hills, Jalo has electricity, a rare luxury, but little else in terms of public infrastructure. Water remains scarce, and there are no health or education facilities. Yet, the villagers extended a warm welcome to us. We felt that eco-tourism could be a wonderful avenue for generating income while simultaneously preserving their culture and land. Small eco-stays, guided treks, local food, and cultural exchanges could benefit both visitors and villagers.

After a long meeting, we descended. Back in Tilaiapara at nightfall, as we dried our clothes and recounted the day, I felt a profound shift within me. I had witnessed the raw face of deprivation, yes but also a community fiercely connected to their land, their culture, and their ecology.

As global policy discussions increasingly focus on sustainability, climate justice, and inclusion, the Pahadiyas offer invaluable lessons. Their carbon footprint is negligible. Their agrarian, low-consumption, forest-symbiotic lifestyle epitomizes sustainability. Yet, they lag behind in every development index—health, education, nutrition, and access.

This must change. Development is not merely about GDP; it's about human dignity. It's not just about services; it's about solidarity. My colleagues are doing something truly special: living among the people, understanding their struggles, and collaboratively planning small, impactful changes.

Final Reflections:

This journey was far more than a field visit; it was a deeply immersive experience into another world—a world brimming with beauty, hardship, strength, and peace. The Pahadiyas, though officially designated as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), are much more than a label. They are resilient, deeply rooted to their land, and rich in natural resources and indigenous knowledge.

Their lives are undeniably tough, yet they face their challenges without complaint. Their simple requests are for basic dignity: a road, clean water, healthcare, and schools. And they deserve so much more.

As a development professional, a nature lover, and a citizen, I returned humbled. These hills, forests, and the people within them have a profound lesson to impart: life does not demand much to be fulfilling, but it absolutely demands respect.

Let us hope that their voices are finally heard, and their lives are touched not just by the monsoon rains, but by genuine care, unwavering attention, and much-deserved justice.





BAJRANG SINGH, FOUNDING DIRECTOR, BADLAO FOUNDATION

The Souria Paharia tribe, one of India's most ancient indigenous communities, holds a deeply rooted cultural and historical legacy in the Santhal Pargana region of Jharkhand. Known as Kohistan to the Paharias, this rugged terrain has been their home for millennia, providing both a refuge and a foundation for their identity. Historical records, including accounts by Chinese travelers Fa-Hien and Hieun Tsang, highlight their unique societal structures, language, and customs that have stood resilient against external influences. The Paharias' early relationship with the forest and their strong sense of autonomy not only shaped their way of life but also defined their cultural ethos, setting them apart as steadfast custodians of their land and traditions.

Early Origins and Cultural Identity:

- Ancient Roots in Jharkhand's Santhal Pargana: The Souria
 Paharia tribe, one of India's oldest indigenous communities,
 has a deeply rooted history in Jharkhand's Santhal Pargana,
 an area they traditionally call Kohistan. Tracing their
 ancestry back to at least 302 BCE, the Souria Paharias have
 lived and thrived in this rugged terrain for millennia. Their
 early cultural identity was centered around their
 relationship with the forested mountains and their strong
 sense of autonomy. The Chinese traveler Fa-Hien, and later
 Hieun Tsang, documented the presence of the Paharias,
 who had distinct customs, language, and societal
 structures.
- Cultural Distinction and Self-Sufficiency: The Paharias were known for their forest-based lifestyle, relying on hunting, gathering, and small-scale farming. Over centuries, they developed a unique socio-cultural identity characterized by deep respect for nature, spiritual practices tied to their environment, and a fierce commitment to their land. Their connection to the forest played a crucial role in sustaining their independence and helped them resist external influences.

Early Conflicts with Foreign Empires:

- Resistance to Aryan and Indian Empires: From the beginning, the Paharias maintained a distinct identity, resisting influences from early Aryan settlers. Their rugged homeland provided a natural defense against incursions by larger empires, which were primarily interested in fertile plains. The Paharias also initially allied with regional rulers, like King Shashank of Gauda, to preserve their autonomy and form strategic alliances when threatened.
- Surviving the Medieval Period: Maratha and Mughal Encounters: The 15th and 16th centuries saw intensified incursions by various powers, including the Marathas and the Mughals, who sought control over Jharkhand's resource-rich lands. The Paharias became formidable opponents, utilizing guerrilla tactics and their knowledge of the forests to resist. The forested regions of Jungaltari, as their homeland was also called, were nearly impenetrable, which further protected their sovereignty against external forces.

Impact of British Colonization:

- Arrival of the British East India Company: The British East India Company, which arrived in India in the 1600s, fundamentally altered the Paharias' way of life. By 1765, the British gained administrative rights over Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, which included Paharia lands. Their dual-governance system—where the British controlled revenue collection but left judicial matters to local rulers—led to socio-economic turmoil in the region. This model destabilized local systems, especially as the British aggressively pursued taxes and resources, causing widespread resentment.
- IThe Bengal-Bihar Famine and British Distrust of the Paharias: The famine of 1770 had catastrophic effects, but the Paharias, due to their forest-based resources, were less impacted. This led British officials to view them with suspicion, labeling themas resistant and "primitive" for their refusal to assimilate into British economic systems.

The famine deepened British prejudice, which subsequently fueled harsher treatment and control over the Paharias.

The Rise of Paharia Warriors and Resistance Leaders:

- Ramna Aadhi and Early Guerrilla Resistance: Under the leadership of warriors like Ramna Aadhi, the Paharias fiercely resisted British control. Despite being underequipped, they used their knowledge of the terrain to engage in effective guerrilla warfare, fighting to protect their lands and way of life. Ramna Aadhi mobilized around 1,200 fighters, and although he was eventually overpowered due to British tactics like biological warfare, his legacy inspired future resistance.
- Jabra Paharia (Tilka Manjhi) and the Legacy of Rebellion:
 Jabra Paharia, also known as Tilka Manjhi, emerged as a
 formidable leader, becoming a symbol of resistance. He
 led multiple attacks on British forces, including an
 ambush that killed Augustus Cleveland, a notorious
 British collector. Tilka Manjhi's capture and public
 execution in 1785 left a lasting impression, making him a
 martyr for Paharia freedom. His legacy has since
 symbolized the tribe's indomitable spirit and commitment
 to autonomy.

British Pacification Attempts and Divide-and-Rule Tactics:

- Augustus Cleveland's Limited Appeasement Efforts: Augustus Cleveland, a British official, recognized the limitations of military control over the Paharias and attempted a more diplomatic approach. Cleveland offered Paharia leaders monthly wages, small honorary titles, and nominal positions in British forces, creating a Paharia Council to resolve internal disputes. This strategy aimed to co-opt the Paharias into British governance while maintaining order, but its success was limited and shortlived
- The Policy of Divide and Rule: After Cleveland's death, the
 British shifted from appeasement to a divisive strategy,
 pitting the Paharias against neighboring communities,
 especially the Santhals. They incentivized Santhal
 migration into Paharia lands, encouraging the Santhals to
 adopt agriculture and tax compliance. This policy
 escalated tensions and led to land conflicts, entrenching
 hostilities between the two communities that would have
 long-lasting consequences.

The Creation of Damin-e-Koh and Santhal Migration:

- Establishment of Damin-e-Koh: In 1838, the British created Damin-e-Koh—a designated area of 1,338 square miles exclusively for the Paharias, allowing them tax-free access to cultivate the land. However, most Paharias continued their forest-based lifestyle and resisted adopting agriculture, which the British saw as unproductive. The British encouraged Santhals to migrate to this area to settle and cultivate the land, leading to rapid demographic shifts.
- Displacement of the Paharias and Santhal Uprising: The influx of Santhal settlers drastically changed the region

leading to the establishment of over 1,400 Santhal villages by 1851. The Paharias were increasingly marginalized as Santhals took over the land, which the British encouraged. The oppressive British taxation and exploitation of the Santhals eventually led to the Santhal Hool, a large-scale uprising against British forces in 1855. However, this rebellion intensified the strained relations between the Santhals and Paharias, who were now viewed as distinct and sometimes opposing communities.

Legacy of British Colonial Impact:

- Decline of Paharia Autonomy: British colonialism ultimately disrupted the Paharias' socio-economic structure, eroding their traditional way of life. Their population declined as their resources and lands were stripped away, and they struggled to adapt to new socio-political systems that clashed with their values. British policies left them disenfranchised, and their legacy of resistance was overshadowed by the socio-economic hardships they faced.
- Current Challenges for the Souria Paharia: Today, many Souria Paharias live in isolated mountain areas with limited access to essential services. Their long history of autonomy and resistance has left a legacy of resilience, but it has also hindered their ability to integrate into modern systems that provide healthcare, education, and economic opportunities. The tribe faces issues like poverty, lack of education, and limited access to clean water and healthcare. The British policy of divide and rule has left a lasting impact, with residual socio-political divisions and an enduring fear of cultural erosion.

Conclusion: Preserving the Legacy and Rights of the Paharias:

Sustaining Cultural Identity in Modern Times: Despite centuries of colonization and marginalization, the Souria Paharias maintain a deep cultural pride and strong identity. Their history, marked by resilience and resistance, is a powerful reminder of their strength and commitment to their land and heritage. Efforts to support the Paharias must prioritize their rights to land, resources, and cultural preservation while addressing their socio-economic needs. The story of the Paharias is not only one of historical endurance but also of an ongoing struggle for dignity, respect, and self-determination in a rapidly changing world.

The legacy of the Souria Paharias is a testament to resilience in the face of adversity, from resisting foreign empires to enduring the socio-economic upheavals of British colonization. Despite the challenges, their cultural pride and deep connection to their heritage remain unshaken. Preserving this rich legacy requires a focus on empowering the community through land rights, cultural preservation, and access to essential services, including education and healthcare. The story of the Souria Paharias is not just one of survival but of ongoing resistance and adaptation, symbolizing the enduring spirit of indigenous communities striving to retain their dignity and identity in a rapidly changing



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VIJOY PRAKASH, IAS(RETD.): CHAIRMAN, BIHAR VIDYAPITH & BOARD MEMBER OF 4S INDIA

Abstarct:

This paper explores the socio-economic and cultural challenges of the Sauria Paharia, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) in Jharkhand's Rajmahal Hills, India. Based on the author's experiences as the former Deputy Commissioner of Sahebganj, the study highlights the community's historical marginalization, poverty, and limited access to resources, despite government efforts. The Sauria Paharia, one of Jharkhand's oldest tribes, maintain a unique cultural identity rooted in shifting cultivation, forest-based livelihoods, and animistic traditions. However, deforestation, land alienation, and climate change increasingly threaten their way of life.

The paper examines the community's socio-economic practices, governance structures, and historical resilience, while addressing critical issues such as low literacy rates, poor health indicators, and population decline. These challenges are exacerbated by socio-economic marginalization and environmental degradation. The paper advocates for a "broadstreaming" approach to development, which integrates the community's cultural heritage and traditional knowledge, rather than imposing mainstream models that risk eroding their identity.

Key initiatives include cultural revitalization through events like the Paharia Adivasi Mahotsava, educational programs tailored to the community's linguistic and cultural context, sustainable agricultural practices, and healthcare interventions that bridge traditional and modern medicine. The paper emphasizes the importance of securing land rights, promoting culturally inclusive education, and creating economic opportunities aligned with traditional skills.

The findings underscore the need for community-led, culturally sensitive development to ensure the Sauria Paharia's survival and prosperity. The study contributes to the discourse on inclusive development, offering policy recommendations for integrating indigenous knowledge into development frameworks while preserving cultural diversity. This approach not only addresses the community's socio-economic needs but also safeguards their unique identity in the face of modernization.

Introduction:

During my tenure as Deputy Commissioner of Sahebganj, Jharkhand (June 1989 – March 1991), I had the rare opportunity to work closely with the Sauria Paharias, a particularly vulnerable tribal group (PVTG) inhabiting the Rajmahal Hills. Despite being one of the oldest indigenous communities in Jharkhand, they remained largely untouched by mainstream development efforts. Their marginalization, coupled with their unique cultural identity, presented both challenges and opportunities in efforts to improve their living conditions.

India's vision of inclusive national development cannot be realized without the empowerment of its most vulnerable communities. The Sauria Paharias, despite various government initiatives—including the introduction of the Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) in the Fifth Five-Year Plan—continued to struggle with poverty, isolation, and limited access to resources. Their plight demanded special attention and tailored interventions to bridge the gap between traditional ways of life and modern development opportunities.

This essay reflects on my experiences, observations, and initiatives aimed at uplifting the Sauria Paharias. It provides a firsthand account of their challenges, the strategies implemented to address them, and the lessons learned in striving for a development model that respects their identity while fostering empowerment.

Initial Encounters:

My first encounter with the Paharia community was unexpectedly urgent. One early morning, around 6 AM, a group of approximately twenty-five Paharias arrived at my residence, distraught and under the influence of alcohol. Despite the unusual circumstances, I chose to meet them, understanding that their presence indicated an urgent need.

The group shared a distressing issue: a young girl from their community had been raped, and local authorities had failed to take action. Feeling powerless, they sought justice from the "Marang Saheb," the district's highest authority i.e. Deputy Commissioner.

Recognizing the gravity of the situation, I immediately contacted the Superintendent of Police to ensure swift action. Concurrently, I tasked the Special Paharia Officer, Mr. Anurajan Kumar, to document their concerns and understand the underlying reasons for their hesitation in approaching officials. This encounter marked the beginning of my commitment to the community. I started to learn about the community.

Through my interactions with the community and insights from Mr. Anuranjan Kumar, Special Paharia officer, and other officials, I gained a deeper understanding of the Sauria Paharias' challenges and lifestyle. The community faced numerous challenges that required targeted interventions to improve their condition:

Tribes in Jharkhand:

The tribes in Jharkhand were originally classified by the Indian anthropologist Lalita Prasad Vidyarthi based on their cultural practices:

- Hunter-gatherers: Birhor, Korwa, Hill Kharia
- Shifting agriculturists: Sauria Paharia, Mal Paharia
- Simple artisans: Mahli, Lohra, Karmali, Chik Baraik
- Settled agriculturists: Bhumij, Ho, Oraon, Munda, Santhal, etc.

The Paharias: A Unique Indigenous Community:

The Paharias, an indigenous community inhabiting the Rajmahal Hills, are divided into two branches: the Maler (also called Malo or Sauria Paharias), who live in the northern part of the hills, and the Mål Paharias, who reside in the south and other forested areas. The term Maler is believed to derive either from "Male," meaning "he is a man," or from the Dravidian word Mala, meaning "mountain," indicating their identity as hill dwellers. While the origins of the name Sauria remain uncertain, some theories link it to the term Savala Pahar, used by Hindus for the Rajmahal Hills. The Santals refer to them as Maler Mundas, whereas Hindus simply call them Paharias (hill people). The Sauria Paharia, one of the oldest and most primitive tribes of Jharkhand, primarily inhabit the districts of Sahebganj, Pakur, Godda, Dumka, and Jamtara in the Santhal Pargana division. Smaller populations are also found in Ranchi, West Singhbhum, and Dhanbad districts of Jharkhand, as well as Saharsa, Katihar, and Bhagalpur districts of Bihar. The northern part of Damin-e-Koh (mountain lap) in Santhal Pargana, dominated by the Rajmahal hills, is the heartland of this tribe.

Origins and Isolation:

Historical accounts suggest that the Maler may have descended from a Dravidian group that migrated from the Carnatic region, traveled along the Narmada River, and settled in Bihar along the Son River. Facing displacement by the advancing Muhammadans, they split into two groups—one moving toward Chhotanagpur (now the Oraons) and the other settling in the Rajmahal Hills, becoming the ancestors of the Maler. The natural barriers of the Ganges to the north and east, and dense forests to the south and west, have left them largely untouched by outside influences. Their language, social customs, and settlement patterns remain distinct from surrounding communities.

Governance and Social Organization:

The Maler inhabit small village communities in the northern Rajmahal Hills, primarily on hillsides, having been pushed out of fertile valleys by the more industrious Santals. Villages typically consist of 10 to 50 houses and are governed by a manjhi (headman), who receives a stipend from the government. In addition, tikri manjhis or tikridars oversee specific land patches known as tikris, often obtained through personal labor or clearing forests. Larger village clusters fall under the jurisdiction of sardars (chiefs), assisted by waitas (sub-chiefs), both of whom are government stipendiaries responsible for reporting criminal activities and vital statistics. The sardars claim ownership of the villages under their control, collecting annual dues and shares of agricultural profits.

Livelihood and Cultivation Practices:

The Maler sustain themselves through the jhum or kurdo method of shifting cultivation, where forest patches are cleared with fire, seeds are sown in the ash-covered soil, and the land is abandoned after a few years to regain fertility. However, this practice has led to large-scale deforestation, leaving some areas barren. While the Maler also rely on hunting, they are not highly skilled archers or hunters

Apart from agriculture and shifting cultivation, the Sauria Paharias depend on forest-based activities, livestock rearing, wage labour, and small-scale trade for their sustenance.

- 1.Forest-Based Economy: The tribe collects firewood, bamboo, medicinal plants, and forest fruits such as mahua, amla, and tamarind, which they sell in local markets. Honey collection is another significant occupation, with traditional honey-hunting methods being passed down through generations.
- 2.Livestock Rearing: Many Sauria Paharias raise pigs, goats, chickens, and cattle, which serve as both a source of food and income. Livestock sales provide a financial cushion during lean agricultural seasons.
- 3.Wage Labor and Migration: Due to limited agricultural productivity, many Sauria Paharias work as daily wage laborers in nearby villages and towns. Some migrate seasonally to work in brick kilns, construction sites, and farms in Bihar, Jharkhand, and West Bengal.
- 4. Handicrafts and Traditional Art: Women engage in making bamboo baskets, mats, ropes, and rudimentary tools, which they sell or barter for household necessities. Some also create traditional ornaments and textiles for local consumption.
- 5.Small-Scale Trade: Many Sauria Paharias participate in weekly haats (markets) where they buy and sell essential goods such as grains, spices, and household items. Some have also taken up petty trading, setting up small kiosks selling tea, snacks, and grocery items in roadside settlements

These additional sources of livelihood have become increasingly important as traditional subsistence farming faces challenges due to deforestation, land scarcity, and climate change. Efforts to integrate the Sauria Paharia into government livelihood schemes, self-help groups, and skill development programs could further enhance their economic security.

Physical Characteristics and Ethnic Identity:

Physically, the Maler exhibits features typical of the Dravidian race. They are short-statured with long limbs, light brown skin, flat and broad noses, and distinct beady eyes. Their hair is long and ringleted, often neatly tied in a topknot and well-oiled. According to anthropologist Sir Herbert Risley, their nasal index is one of the highest recorded in Bengal, closely resembling that of the Negroid racial group.

Education:

The Sauria Paharia tribe has historically faced challenges in accessing formal education due to their remote settlements in dense forests and hilltops. Traditionally, they have relied on an informal education system through Kodbah Aada, a youth house serving as an educational institution. This system includes Masarmak Kodbah for young men and Pelmak Kodbah for young women, where they receive training in social, cultural, religious, and economic aspects of life. These institutions played a vital role in shaping their identity as a resilient and self-sufficient tribal community.

Despite governmental efforts to promote literacy through initiatives such as Paharia Welfare Schools, Residential Schools, the National Adult Education Programme, the Non-Formal Education Programme, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, and Integrated Child Development Schemes, progress has been slow. The literacy rate among the Sauria Paharias was recorded

at 6.87% in 1981 and 13.29% in 1991, highlighting the need for continued efforts. The 2001 Census reported an increase in literacy to 27.31%, but the community still lags behind national averages. According to the 1981 Census, the distribution of educational attainment among the Sauria Paharia was minimal, with only a handful of individuals reaching higher education levels. There were only five graduates recorded at that time. There remains a critical need for dedicated, honest, and well-implemented educational programs to integrate the Sauria Paharia into the broader social and economic framework of the nation.

Political Life:

The governance of Sauria Paharia villages follows a traditional structure, where the Manjhi (village head) holds administrative and religious authority. The village Godait (Bhandari) assists in community affairs, while the Kotwar (village watchman) is responsible for law and order. At a broader level, each group of 15–20 villages has a Nayak (regional leader), and larger territories (70–80 villages) fall under the jurisdiction of a Sardar.

The village council handles social disputes, economic matters, and religious affairs, enforcing customary laws. The Sardar functions as the chief arbitrator and maintains order within his jurisdiction. The Manjhi, Nayak, and Sardar roles are hereditary, usually passed down to the eldest son. However, the introduction of modern democratic governance, Panchayati Raj, and statutory laws has gradually diminished the authority of traditional leaders. The political landscape of the Sauria Paharia community has undergone transformations due to state interventions, forest laws, and increased interactions with legal institutions.

During British rule, the East India Company attempted to suppress tribal resistance by offering stipends to Sardar and Nayak leaders, integrating them into colonial administrative systems. The British also assigned them roles in tax collection and law enforcement, weakening the tribe's autonomy.

In modern times, Sauria Paharias have increasingly engaged with electoral politics. Political parties actively seek their support during elections, recognizing the collective strength of tribal votes. Despite political participation, the community remains marginalized in decision-making processes, necessitating stronger representation and policies that address their unique socio-economic challenges.

Religious Practices:

Religious beliefs among the Sauria Paharias are deeply rooted in animism and ancestor worship. They believe in the rebirth of the soul and a spiritual world inhabited by deities and ancestral spirits. British anthropologist Rijle (1891) categorized their religious system as animistic due to their worship of natural elements.

Key deities in the Sauria Paharia pantheon include:

- Beru Gosai The Sun God
- Vilp Gosai The Moon God
- Laihu Gosai The Supreme Creator
- Darmare Gosai The God of Truth
- Jaramatri Gosai The Deity of Birth

They also believe in supernatural beings and spirits residing in hills, forests, and water bodies. Sacrificial offerings, including chickens, pigs, and goats, are commonly made to appease these deities. The Kando Manjhi, Kotwar, and Chalve are religious figures who conduct rituals and are believed to possess supernatural powers.

Religious Festivals and Rituals:

The Sauria Paharias celebrate major festivals tied to agricultural cycles, marking key moments of sowing and harvesting:

- Gangiyardya Celebrated after harvesting maize
- Osra Adya Held after the ripening of grains
- Punu Adya Observed after harvesting millet

During these festivals, the village priest (Kotwar) offers sacrifices at the sacred groves (Jaher Than) and invokes the blessings of deities for prosperity and protection. Community feasts and dances follow the rituals, reinforcing social unity.

Another major ritual is Saliyani Puja, performed in Magh or Chait months, dedicated to the Kandi Gosai. Every six years, a Karra Puja (buffalo sacrifice) is conducted as a grand offering to the deity.

Impact of Christianity:

The influence of Christianity among the Sauria Paharia remains minimal. According to the 1981 Census, only 2.59% of the Sauria Paharia population identified as Christian. Missionary efforts have been largely unsuccessful in converting the majority of the population, as their deep-rooted religious traditions and remote settlements have shielded them from external religious influences. However, Christian missionaries have provided education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, leading to some cultural shifts in certain villages. Christian converts often abandon ancestral worship and animistic beliefs, adopting Christian customs and prayers while maintaining aspects of their traditional identity. Impact and Influence of Christianity.

According to Rama Paharia, who runs an NGO working with the community, nearly half of the Sauria Paharia population has now adopted Christianity. This marks a significant shift in religious practices and cultural identity among the tribe.

Missionary efforts have led to widespread conversions, bringing changes in traditions, burial practices, and community celebrations. Many Christian converts observe Sunday as a day of rest, celebrate Christmas, and participate in church-led gatherings while distancing themselves from ancestral worship and animistic beliefs.

Despite these changes, a large portion of the community still adheres to their traditional faith, creating a dynamic interplay between indigenous religious customs and Christian influences. The growing Christian presence has also introduced educational and healthcare improvements, though it has contributed to the diminishing role of traditional tribal governance and religious authority.

In recent decades, Christian missionaries have made inroads into the Sauria Paharia community, leading to noticeable cultural transformations. Many Sauria Paharias have converted to Christianity, influenced by missionary efforts that provide education, healthcare, and economic support. As a result, some have adopted Christian customs, including changes in burial practices, the celebration of Christmas, and the observance of Sunday as a day of rest.

While Christianity has introduced literacy and medical assistance, it has also led to a decline in some traditional rituals. Christian converts often abandon ancestral worship and animistic practices, replacing them with Christian prayers and hymns. However, a large segment of the community continues to adhere to their traditional religious beliefs, creating a complex interplay between old and new faiths within Sauria Paharia society.

The Sauria Paharia's education, political structure, and religious practices reflect a community deeply connected to its traditions yet facing the challenges of modernization. Despite government and NGO efforts, literacy rates remain low, and access to education is limited due to geographical isolation and socioeconomic barriers. Politically, the community is transitioning from traditional governance structures to democratic participation, though their representation remains weak. Religiously, they continue to follow animistic and ancestor worship traditions, with only minor influences from external faiths like Christianity.

For meaningful progress, education initiatives must be effectively implemented, respecting their cultural sensitivities while promoting economic self-sufficiency. Similarly, political empowerment and cultural preservation should go hand in hand, ensuring that the Sauria Paharia community is not only included in modern governance but also retains its unique identity in the face of rapid societal changes.

The Sauria Paharia community, one of the oldest tribal groups in Jharkhand, maintains a unique and rich social and cultural life deeply intertwined with nature and tradition.

Settlement and Housing:

Most Sauria Paharia villages are located on hilltops and forested slopes rather than in the plains, reflecting their deep connection to nature. Their villages are small and scattered, with around 10 to 40 families in each settlement.

Their houses are typically rectangular huts made of bamboo, straw, and mud, often with a single room that serves as a sleeping area, a kitchen, and a storage space for food. The hearth is placed in a corner, and maize cobs are hung from the roof to protect them from pests. In some cases, food is stored in raised bamboo structures outside the house.

Traditional Attire and Ornaments:

The Sauria Paharia traditionally wear simple yet functional clothing. Men wear dhotis, ganji (vests), and turbans, while women wear saris and topeware (a traditional covering cloth). However, with modernization, many have adopted shirts, pants, blouses, and petticoats. Women adorn themselves with brass jewellery, including rings (Anguti), nose pins (Muan Anguti), necklaces (Hansuli), bangles (Kaddu), earrings (Kadve Anguti), and anklets (Kokto). The tradition of tattooing (Godna) is also prevalent among Sauria Paharia women.

Social Structure and Family System:

The Sauria Paharia society is patriarchal, with inheritance passing through the male lineage. Families are mostly nuclear, though some joint families exist. After marriage, a couple usually establishes a separate household. While monogamy is the norm, polygamy is also observed in some cases. Women are considered hardworking and play a crucial role in both household and economic activities. They actively participate in agriculture, trade, and market transactions, demonstrating a high degree of economic independence. However, despite their active role in daily life, they are excluded from religious rituals and village council meetings.

Kinship and Marriage Practices:

Unlike other tribal groups, the Sauria Paharia do not follow the gotra system. Instead, kinship relationships determine marriage alliances. Marriages between close relatives (within three generations) are strictly prohibited. Their kinship terms include Pipo (father's elder brother), Peni (his wife), and Kali (mother's younger brother's wife). Formality governs relationships such as those with in-laws and elder siblings' spouses, whereas joking relationships are observed between brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law.

Birth Rituals:

The birth of a child is considered a significant event in the Sauria Paharia community and is marked by the ritual called Sank Sheti (Chhathi) on the fifth day after birth. Until this day, the mother and child are considered impure and are restricted from touching household items or participating in communal activities. During this period, the father assumes responsibility for caring for both the mother and the child, refraining from shaving or engaging in other daily routines.

On the fifth day, a special feast is organized, and the newborn is given a formal name, often derived from the names of ancestors like grandparents, uncles, or aunts. Additionally, an alternative or "spirit" name is given to deceive malevolent spirits, as the community believes that spirits may try to harm the newborn if they know its real name.

Death Rituals:

The Sauria Paharias perform both burial and cremation, depending on circumstances and beliefs. If a person dies from contagious diseases like cholera, smallpox, or leprosy, their body is left in the forest rather than being buried or cremated. Otherwise, the deceased is either buried or cremated with their head facing west. The burial or cremation site is prepared with great care, and items such as the deceased's clothes, weapons, and personal belongings are buried alongside the body, as it is believed these will be needed in the afterlife.

Following the burial, food offerings, including sacrificial meat and maize, are made at the gravesite to appease the departed soul. The mourning period lasts five days, during which the family observes strict rituals and avoids any social or economic activities. At the end of the mourning period, a purification ceremony is held, where all family members bathe in a nearby river or pond. A special feast is organized to mark the end of mourning, during which rice beer (Hadia), and meat are

consumed. A final annual death feast is observed a year later, after which widows are permitted to remarry.

The Paharias, particularly the Maler, have preserved their unique identity despite centuries of isolation. Their simple way of life, strong community bonds, and deep-rooted traditions make them an integral part of India's diverse cultural fabric. However, as modernization encroaches upon their traditional lands, efforts must be made to balance development with the preservation of their rich heritage. Protecting their unique customs and ensuring sustainable development will allow the Paharias to maintain their cultural identity while adapting to contemporary challenges.

Sauria Paharia Community in the lens of history:

During his visit to India in 302 BCE, Megasthenes, the Greek ambassador to Chandragupta Maurya, documented the existence of primitive tribes in the lower regions of the Rajmahal hills. He referred to them as the Malli (Manav) or Sauri, now known as the Maler or Sauria Paharia. The tribe is distinguished by their short stature, broad noses, long skulls, light brown complexion, and curly or wavy hair, reflecting their Proto-Australoid racial ancestry.

The Sauria Paharia are believed to be one of the earliest inhabitants of the Rajmahal Hills, having lived in isolation for centuries, preserving their unique culture and traditions. They primarily speak the Malto language, which belongs to the Dravidian language family and bears similarities to the Kurukh language spoken by the Oraon tribe. Some scholars suggest that the Sauria Paharia are an offshoot of the Oraon tribe, tracing their migration from South India along the Narmada River and into the Gangetic plains before settling in the Rajmahal hills.

Historically, the Sauria Paharia practiced shifting cultivation (Jhum), relying on slash-and-burn techniques to grow crops such as millets, pulses, and maize. Their economy was supplemented by hunting, gathering, and barter trade with neighboring communities. Due to their geographical isolation, they remained relatively autonomous from external political influences, though they occasionally interacted with larger kingdoms such as the Mauryas and the Guptas.

By the 18th century, with the decline of Mughal authority, the Rajmahal Hills became a contested region. The Marathas attempted to invade in 1742 but were met with resistance from the Sauria Paharia. British colonial rule further disrupted their way of life, as zamindars and British officials encroached upon their lands, leading to frequent conflicts. Warren Hastings, recognizing their resistance, initiated military campaigns against them in 1772.

A shift in policy occurred under Augustus Cleveland, the Collector of Rajmahal (1779–1784), who sought to integrate the Sauria Paharia into the British administrative system through conciliation rather than coercion. His initiatives included granting them autonomous governance, promoting economic self-sufficiency, and establishing tribal courts to resolve disputes under customary laws. However, after Cleveland's death, British policies became increasingly exploitative, culminating in the loss of Sauria Paharia lands to zamindars and the forced resettlement of Santals in Damin-i-Koh.

Despite these challenges, the Sauria Paharia fiercely defended their identity and territory, employing guerrilla tactics against British forces. Their resistance continued well into the 19th century, even as they faced economic hardship due to deforestation, forced taxation, and displacement. They are now recognized as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), requiring special governmental support to preserve their cultural heritage and improve their socio-economic conditions. Today, the Sauria Paharia stand as a living testament to the resilience and enduring heritage of one of India's oldest tribal communities. Their history, deeply intertwined with the rugged landscapes of the Rajmahal hills, reflects their struggle for survival and their commitment to preserving their identity in the face of external pressures.

Crisis of Identity and Population Decline:

The Sauria Paharias faces an identity crisis compounded by historical socio-economic marginalization. Census data revealed a stark population decline:

Population
47,066
62,734
55,600
59,891
58,654
55,606
59,047
39,269
65,629
31,050
46,222

Note:* In 1951 Census the Scheduled Tribes population was not captured. $\,$

** In 1981 Paharia tribe population was not separately captured, so in 1988 special drive was undertaken by the district administration to capture the population data about Sauria and Mal Paharias. The decline of population in the last century is a matter of grave concern. This decline was driven by habitat loss, malnutrition, and lack of healthcare access.Designated as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), the Sauria Paharias required focused interventions to address their challenges.

It is important to note that in the census reports of 2011, in Sauaria Paharia out of 46222 people, only 152 live in urban areas, and the rest 46070 live in villages. It is also interesting to learn that there are 22970 males and 23252 females indicating a sex ratio of 1012 females per thousand males. Ministry of Tribal Affairs in its annual reports has also highlight the challenges faced by PVTGs, including low population growth rates, poor health indicators, and limited access to education and livelihoods. A 2018 report by NITI Aayog identified PVTGs as the most marginalized group in India, with significant gaps in development indicators compared to other tribal and non-tribal populations. I could somehow feel that the community was facing a serious identity crisis.

Identity Crisis and Psychological Alienation:

The Sauria Paharia, like many other Indigenous communities, are experiencing a profound identity crisis and psychological alienation due to the following reasons:

1. Loss of Cultural Identity

 Erosion of Traditional Practices: The Sauria Paharia's traditional way of life, including their language, rituals, and customs, is under threat due to external influences and modernization. Younger generations are increasingly adopting mainstream cultural practices, leading to a loss of connection with their heritage.

- Language Decline: The Sauria Paharia language, which belongs to the Austroasiatic family, is at risk of disappearing. Language is a critical component of cultural identity, and its loss contributes to a sense of alienation and disconnection from their roots.
- 2. Displacement and Disconnection from Land
- Land Alienation: The loss of ancestral lands due to encroachment, deforestation, and development projects has severed the Sauria Paharia's connection to their traditional territories. For indigenous communities, land is not just a resource but a core part of their identity and spirituality.
- Psychological Impact: Displacement from their lands has led to a sense of rootlessness and psychological trauma. The inability to practice traditional livelihoods, such as shifting cultivation and forest-based activities, has further exacerbated feelings of alienation.
- 3. Marginalization and Social Exclusion
- Stigma and Discrimination: The Sauria Paharia often face stigma and discrimination from mainstream society, which views them as "backward" or "primitive." This marginalization contributes to low self-esteem and a lack of pride in their cultural identity.
- Lack of Representation: The Sauria Paharia have limited representation in political and social institutions, reinforcing their sense of invisibility and powerlessness.
- 4. Intergenerational Trauma
- Historical Oppression: Centuries of exploitation, displacement, and marginalization have left a legacy of intergenerational trauma. This trauma manifests as a lack of hope, low motivation, and a sense of resignation among community members.

Other Key Factors Contributing to Population Decline:

While identity crisis and psychological alienation are critical, they are part of a broader set of challenges that collectively contribute to the decline of the Sauria Paharia population:

- 1. Socio-Economic Challenges
- Poverty: High levels of poverty limit access to basic necessities such as food, healthcare, and education, leading to poor health outcomes and high mortality rates.
- Lack of Livelihood Opportunities: The disruption of traditional livelihoods and limited access to alternative income sources have pushed many Sauria Paharia into economic hardship.
- 2. Health Issues
- Malnutrition: The NFHS-5 reports that 42% of tribal children under 5 years are stunted (low height for age), and 45% are underweight. These figures are significantly higher than the national averages.
- Infant Mortality Rate (IMR): The IMR among tribal populations is 44 deaths per 1,000 live births, compared to the national average of 28 (NFHS-5).
- Access to Healthcare: Only 30% of tribal households in rural areas have access to healthcare facilities within 5 km, according to the 2011 Census. Remote locations and lack of healthcare infrastructure make it difficult for the Sauria Paharia to access medical services. High rates of malnutrition, infant mortality, and preventable diseases further reduce population growth.
- 3. Environmental and Developmental Challenges
- Deforestation: Jharkhand, home to the Sauria Paharia, has lost over 50% of its forest cover in the last century due to mining, industrialization, and infrastructure development (Forest Survey of India, 2021). The destruction of forests and loss of land due to mining, industrialization, and development projects have disrupted the Sauria Paharia's traditional way of life

- Displacement: According to the Environmental Justice Atlas, over 2.5 million tribal people in India have been displaced due to development projects since independence. Many of these displacements have occurred in Jharkhand and other tribal-dominated states.
- Climate Change: Changes in weather patterns and environmental degradation have affected agricultural productivity and access to natural resources.
- 4. Migration and Displacement
- Urban Migration: Many Sauria Paharia, particularly the younger generation, migrate to urban areas in search of better opportunities, leading to the fragmentation of communities. The 2011 Census reports that 30% of tribal households in rural areas have at least one family member who has migrated for work. This trend is likely higher among PVTGs like the Sauria Paharia, who face severe economic hardships.
- Displacement: Forced displacement due to development projects has disrupted social structures and cultural practices.
- 5. Cultural and Demographic Challenges
- Cultural Erosion: A study by the Anthropological Survey of India (2018) found that over 40% of PVTGs are at risk of losing their traditional languages and cultural practices due to assimilation and modernization.

The Interplay of Factors:

The decline in the Sauria Paharia population is the result of a complex interplay of psychological cultural, socio-economic and environmental factors. Identity crisis and psychological alienation exacerbate the impact of other challenges, creating a vicious cycle of marginalization and decline. For example:

- Poverty and lack of opportunities lead to migration, which further erodes cultural identity.
- Environmental degradation disrupts traditional livelihoods, contributing to economic hardship and psychological distress
- Social exclusion and discrimination reinforce feelings of alienation, reducing the community's ability to advocate for their rights and improve their conditions.

Addressing the Root Causes:

To reverse the decline in the Sauria Paharia population, a holistic approach is needed that addresses both the psychological and material dimensions of their challenges:

- Cultural Preservation: Efforts to document and promote the Sauria Paharia's language, traditions, and cultural practices can help rebuild a sense of identity and pride.
- Land Rights and Livelihoods: Ensuring access to ancestral lands and supporting sustainable livelihoods can restore the community's connection to their environment and traditions
- Mental Health Support: Providing mental health services and community-based support systems can help address the psychological trauma and alienation experienced by the Sauria Paharia.
- Education and Awareness: Promoting education and awareness about their rights and heritage can empower the Sauria Paharia to advocate for themselves and participate in decision-making processes.
- Inclusive Development: Government policies and development programs must be designed in consultation with the Sauria Paharia to ensure they are inclusive and address the community's specific needs.

My Deeper Associations with the Community:

Geographically, Paharias were isolated, residing on hilltops and relying heavily on forests for sustenance. While this self-sufficiency was admirable, it also fostered a deep reluctance to engage with outsiders.

The main problem was to bridge the gap between Paharias and the rest of the community, The real question was how to do it. Their cultural practices were vibrant, with music and dance playing a central role in their lives. Festivals and rituals reflected their profound connection to nature and their ancestors.

However, deforestation and habitat destruction severely disrupted their way of life. Historical records reveal that the Rajmahal forests, once abundant with wildlife, had been significantly degraded, displacing both the Paharias and the animals they depended on.

To bridge the gap between the administration and the Sauria Paharias, I initiated a series of visits to their villages, often accompanied by officials. These visits played a crucial role in building trust and fostering familiarity with the community. Recognizing the cultural barriers, I occasionally brought my family along, which significantly comforted the women in the community. This gesture was so well received that in some villages, the Paharias voluntarily cleared forest roads to ensure the safe passage of officials to their hilltop settlements. These efforts nurtured mutual respect and laid the foundation for deeper collaboration.

During my interactions, I found the Paharias to be hardworking and independent-minded—honest and lawabiding. One of my officers, B. K. Shrivastava, the Deputy Development Commissioner, Sahibganj often recounted an incident that exemplified the integrity of Paharias.

He shared that while serving as a Circle Officer, he used to distribute Taqabi (farm loans) to farmers during times of famine. The village Manjhi (headman) was typically entrusted with collecting loan repayments from the villagers. On one such visit to a Paharia village for loan collection, he found the manjhi unwell. Upon inquiry, the Manjhi revealed that he had not eaten for three days and had survived only on water. To suppress his hunger pangs, he had tied a cloth tightly around his stomach.

When asked about the loan repayments, he confirmed that he had collected the money from the villagers. Curious, Mr. Shrivastava asked where the money was, to which the Manjhi responded that he had wrapped the currency notes inside the cloth around his belly—to keep them safe from theft.

When asked why he hadn't used the money to buy food for himself, his response was striking: "This money belongs to the government. How can I use it for myself?" He chose to endure hunger rather than misuse government funds, even to save his own life. Such was the depth of honesty and self-respect among the Paharias.

I also observed that the Paharias had minimal material needs and lived contentedly without great ambitions. Their simplicity and integrity stood in stark contrast to the modern world's relentless pursuit of wealth and status.

Cultural Integration:

The real challenge was how to address this deep sense of alienation. I believed that promoting their culture could serve as a bridge to assimilation while preserving their identity. To foster inclusivity, we began incorporating their cultural expressions into official functions, providing them a platform to showcase their traditions.

Efforts were made to integrate the Paharias into the mainstream without eroding their heritage. Dance and music performances at government events celebrated their rich traditions and helped foster a sense of belonging. As a significant step, a Paharia dance troupe from Bakkudi village near Teen Pahad was sent to Delhi for Bihar Foundation Day, offering them exposure to urban life while instilling pride in their cultural roots.

Organizing the Paharia Adivasi Mahotsava:

We planned a cultural fest centered around the key role of Paharias. The Paharia Adivasi Mahotsava stands out as one of the most impactful and symbolic initiatives aimed at celebrating and revitalizing the cultural heritage of the Sauria Paharia community. This three-day festival was meticulously designed at the initiative of the district administration not only to uplift their self-esteem but also to foster a sense of unity, pride, and belonging among the community members. Held at the Sahebganj Stadium, the Mahotsava brought together representatives from every Paharia village, creating a vibrant tapestry of their traditions and artistic

expressions. Over two hundred dance teams participated with immense enthusiasm, and 72 stages were set up to accommodate the diverse performances that highlighted the community's rich cultural legacy. Each team came with whatever best they had to offer. They performed best to their abilities. The best part was that once started, they kept on dancing for hours and hours. I still remember the dance performance of a team that performed amazing dances and activities standing on sticks. Each team went with a great sense of fulfillment and achievement they never had in their lives.

A key feature of the Mahotsava was the active involvement of government departments, which set up stalls to educate the Paharias about various welfare schemes tailored for their benefit.

These stalls provided a unique opportunity for the community to interact directly with officials, breaking down barriers and fostering trust between the administration and the people. The festival was carefully curated to create an inclusive and celebratory atmosphere, ensuring that the Paharias felt valued and respected.

As this was a new programme, we didn't have the funds for the event. To fund the event, a souvenir Aayaam was published. Most of the activities were done by volunteers. My wife, Mridula Prakash, volunteered to decorate the stage. She made a remarkable contribution by creating a stunning about 200-footlong and 10-foot-wide floor painting in front of the main stage. This vibrant artwork became the centerpiece of the festival, symbolizing the cultural richness and resilience of the community. Local artists led by a young Shyam Vishvakarma further enhanced the event's significance by inscribing the name of the Mahotsava on nearby hills, making it visible from miles away and leaving a lasting mark on the celebration. Today Shyam Vishvakarma is a leading artist in Jharkhand and the country.

The enthusiasm of the Paharias was truly overwhelming. Many villagers danced their way to the stadium, their joy and excitement palpable. The Mahotsava became a beacon of cultural celebration and unity, leaving a profound and lasting impact on the community. Beyond the festivities, the event served as a powerful platform to strengthen their cultural identity, connect them with government initiatives, and inspire hope for a brighter future. It was a testament to the power of cultural preservation and community engagement in fostering empowerment and resilience.

Promoting Education and Awareness:

The literacy rate among the Sauria Paharias was alarmingly low. In 1981, it stood at 6.87%, which, though still dismal, rose to 13.27% by 1991 due to various interventions aimed at promoting education in the community. In 2001, it rose to 27.31%. Despite establishing Paharia Kalyan Vidyalayas and residential schools, education had not penetrated deeply, mainly due to their residence in inaccessible jungle environments on hilltops and slopes. Government schemes such as the National Adult Education Programme, Nonformal Education Programme, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, and the Integrated Child Development Services Scheme attempted to address this gap but had limited impact.

To tackle the community's alarmingly low literacy rates, several educational initiatives were launched. Literacy drives and awareness campaigns were organized in collaboration with NGOs. Efforts were made to admit Paharia children to residential tribal schools.

To bridge the gap in awareness at my initiative, a film titled Pune Asra was produced in the Malto language with Mal Paharias as actors, highlighting the benefits of Gram Sabhas and showcasing alternatives to exploitative moneylenders. The film was photographed by a local photographer Dipu.

The film was screened in the local markets, garnering enthusiastic engagement. The paharias were excited to see their brethren for the first time on the screen.

Development of language:

One critical concern in this regard is the development of the Malto language. During the interaction, we found that very few names were available for naming their children. So large number of people were of similar names. I found that they had rich traditional knowledge but they are gradually vanishing as they are preserved only through oral traditions. There is a pressing need to create books and reading materials in the local language to promote literacy and preserve linguistic heritage.

Improving Livelihoods Through Agriculture:

The economy of the Sauria Paharia tribe is primarily based on agriculture and forest resources. They practice Kurwa farming, a traditional form of shifting cultivation, on the hills. Their main crops include corn, millet, ghanghra (barbati), pigeon pea, and suthni. This farming method relies entirely on monsoon rains, leaving the tribe vulnerable to famine during droughts. After cultivating a plot for two to three years, the land's fertility diminishes, and it is left fallow for four to five years to regenerate.

The Kurwa farming process begins in February or March, when a forest area is selected, and bushes are cut and dried after performing religious rituals. Before the monsoon arrives in May-June, the dried bushes are burned, and the ashes are spread to enrich the soil. In July-August, seeds of corn, sorghum, millet, and barbatti (ghanghra) are sown using a Khanta (pointed stick). Families, including children, participate in this labor-intensive process. To protect the crops from wild animals, huts are built in the fields, and villagers guard them day and night. By December, the crops are ready for harvest, and after performing rituals to honor the field spirits, the tribe leaves the area. The harvest, known as Baj, begins in December, marking the end of the farming cycle.

To support the economic upliftment of the Sauria Paharia, initiatives were introduced to promote the cultivation of barbatti (ghanghra), a cash crop well-suited to the local climate. Access to quality seeds and fertilizers was facilitated to enhance productivity. Additionally, barbatti recipes were showcased at government events and private functions like birthday and marriage parties to boost market demand.

Gram Sabhas were established in villages to ensure equitable distribution of agricultural inputs, reducing reliance on moneylenders and ensuring fair prices for produce. Under the Meso (Micro Economic Social Organisation) Project, irrigation facilities were improved by constructing check dams, providing better water availability for farming and strengthening the tribe's agricultural resilience.

Healthcare Initiatives:

Healthcare was another critical area of intervention. Many Paharias relied on traditional healers and avoided modern healthcare due to mistrust. To bridge this gap, health camps were organized in villages to provide free medical care.

Community animators were engaged as liaisons between the community and healthcare officials. Awareness programs were undertaken to educate the community about the importance of modern medicine while respecting their traditional practices.

Serious Health Concerns:

The community suffered from diseases such as tuberculosis, leprosy, malaria, and malnutrition. These health issues were exacerbated by poverty, lack of clean water, and inadequate healthcare facilities. Targeted interventions, including health camps and awareness campaigns, were essential to mitigate these challenges.

Respecting Cultural Preferences in Housing:

Sauria Paharias live on the hilltops or slopes filled with forest. Very few people live at the base of the hill. The villages are small,

scattered, and sparsely populated. They normally have one-room rectangular thatched or mud houses. The same room is used for sleeping, kitchen and store. The government's earlier approach of building brick houses at the base of hills had failed as the Paharias preferred traditional mud houses and they deserted such brick houses. Recognizing this, financial support was provided to help them construct homes that aligned with their cultural and environmental preferences. This ensured 100% occupancy and empowered the community to take ownership of their living spaces.

Representation in Government Jobs:

At that time, the participation of Sauria Paharia in government jobs was almost negligible. So, it was decided to give Paharia candidates priority in class IV government jobs to enhance their representation.

Strategic Approach for Development: Broadstreaming over Mainstreaming:

One critical shift in our developmental strategy for the Sauria Paharia was adopting the broadstreaming approach rather than the conventional mainstreaming model. Broadstreaming emphasizes inclusivity, recognizing the inherent value in the distinct cultural, social, economic, and ecological attributes of tribal populations. Unlike mainstreaming, which tries to integrate tribal communities by imposing dominant socioeconomic norms, broadstreaming respects and nurtures the community's values, traditional skills, and lifestyle.

Principles and Practices of Broadstreaming:

Broadstreaming acknowledges the limitations and adverse impacts of mainstreaming, such as cultural erosion and socio-economic marginalization. It promotes sustainable development by respecting and enhancing indigenous knowledge, traditions, and livelihoods.

The key elements of our broadstreaming approach for the Sauria Paharia included:

- 1. Cultural Respect and Preservation
 - Promoting the Malto language as a medium of instruction and documentation to preserve linguistic heritage.
 - Celebrating and institutionalizing traditional festivals, arts, and crafts to sustain cultural identity and pride.
- 2. Sustainable Livelihoods Aligned with Traditional Practices
 - Strengthening traditional economies through forestbased enterprises such as honey collection, medicinal plants cultivation, and minor forest produce, ensuring economic self-sufficiency.
 - Enhancing shifting cultivation methods through support and modern inputs without displacing traditional practices.
- 3. Integration of Traditional Knowledge in Healthcare
 - Merging indigenous healing practices with modern medical services, thereby bridging cultural gaps and improving community trust in healthcare.
 - Addressing nutritional issues through locally available traditional foods, avoiding alien diets and promoting sustainable health outcomes.
- 4. Contextualized Educational Approach
 - Establishing residential tribal schools incorporating both modern curricula and indigenous knowledge systems.
 - Training local youth as teachers to maintain cultural sensitivity and relevance in education.
- 5. Securing Land Rights and Empowering Local Governance
 - Legally securing traditional land rights to protect against displacement and external exploitation.
 - Strengthening Gram Sabha and local governance mechanisms to empower communities in decisionmaking processes.

This approach facilitated empowerment by creating an inclusive development framework that respected and enriched their cultural heritage and traditional knowledge.

Conclusion: A Journey of Empowerment Through Broadstreaming and Cultural Resilience:

My tenure as the Deputy Commissioner of Sahibganj was more than an administrative assignment; it was an immersive experience that reshaped my understanding of development. The Sauria Paharia community, one of India's oldest and most marginalized tribal groups, demonstrated incredible resilience in the face of historical neglect and socio-economic challenges. Their struggles—ranging from land alienation and poverty to cultural erosion—demanded a development approach that was not just inclusive but also respectful of their unique identity.

The Broadstreaming approach, which we adopted instead of traditional mainstreaming, played a crucial role in our interventions. Unlike mainstreaming, which often compels Indigenous communities to conform to dominant socioeconomic structures, broadstreaming seeks to integrate development within the community's existing cultural and ecological context. It acknowledges and builds upon the community's traditional knowledge, skills, and social structures, ensuring that growth does not come at the cost of cultural extinction.

This approach was reflected in several key initiatives:

- 1. Cultural Revitalization The Paharia Adivasi Mahotsava was a landmark event that not only celebrated their heritage but also instilled a sense of pride and belonging. It provided a platform for the Paharias to showcase their traditions while fostering deeper engagement with the broader society.
- 2. Education Rooted in Indigenous Identity Rather than imposing an alien system, efforts were made to incorporate the Malto language and traditional knowledge into literacy programs, ensuring that education became a tool for empowerment rather than assimilation.
- 3. Sustainable Livelihoods and Agriculture Recognizing the importance of land and nature in their lives, we worked towards improving Kurwa farming techniques and promoting cash crops like barbatti (ghanghra) to enhance economic stability without disrupting their ecological balance.
- 4. Healthcare with Cultural Sensitivity Bridging the gap between modern medicine and traditional healing practices helped build trust, making healthcare interventions more effective and accepted within the community.
- 5. Participatory Governance Strengthening Gram Sabhas and increasing representation in local governance empowered the Paharias to take charge of their own development.

The broadstreaming approach proved that development does not require communities to abandon their heritage; rather, it thrives when their unique identity is preserved and leveraged as a strength.

The Road Ahead:

Despite the progress made, challenges remain. Deforestation, displacement, lack of healthcare access, and declining population continue to threaten the Sauria Paharia way of life. The alarming decline in their numbers highlights the urgency for sustainable, community-led interventions.

Going forward, it is essential to:

- Institutionalize the Broadstreaming Model Future policies should be designed to integrate indigenous knowledge and traditions into development frameworks.
- Ensure Land and Resource Rights Securing legal ownership
 of ancestral lands will prevent displacement and allow the
 community to sustain itself.
- Expand Culturally Inclusive Education and Healthcare Schools and healthcare services must be adapted to the needs of the Paharia community, with participation from local leaders and healers.
- Create Economic Opportunities Aligned with Their Skills Developing sustainable, forest-based enterprises will enhance livelihoods while preserving their ecological heritage.

The Sauria Paharia's journey is one of resilience, adaptation, and unwavering commitment to their roots. True empowerment comes not from imposing external models but from understanding, respecting, and co-creating solutions with the community itself. The broadstreaming approach offers a viable pathway for inclusive and sustainable development—one that ensures the Sauria Paharia not only survive but thrive, preserving their identity while embracing the opportunities of the modern world.

Their story is not just about a marginalized community—it is a reminder that India's strength lies in its diversity. By safeguarding their traditions while fostering growth, we reaffirm our commitment to an equitable, just, and culturally rich future for all.

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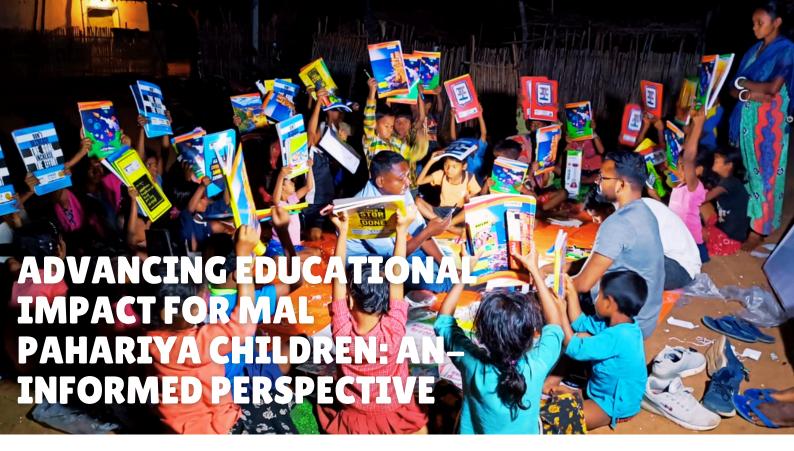
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DEBANJAN CHAKRABORTY, REGIONAL HEAD: JHARKHAND, 4S INDIA

In the 10 PVTG across Karmatarn and Littipara Panchayats, classrooms are doing more than teaching letters and numbers — they are keeping alive the hopes of Mal Pahariya children from pre-school to Class VIII towards continued education. In community halls and under churches, remedial and bridge classes run by passionate local changemakers have become safe spaces where children can learn, ask questions, and dream beyond the boundaries of their hamlet.

But the road is not easy. Week after week, teachers notice empty mats in the classroom, parents who don't turn up for meetings, and restless children distracted by social media on mobiles. And beneath these day-to-day struggles lie deeper, more complex challenges: the tradition of early marriage, dropouts in the middle years, and a quiet resignation to cycles of poverty and illiteracy.

Barriers to Learning — Through Lived Realities and Fact-Findings: A. Early Marriage and Dropout Rates:

Peer-reviewed study affirms that early marriage remains a formidable barrier to continued education for tribal girls in Jharkhand and similar regions. As documented by the International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research in Science, Engineering and Technology, "Early marriage exerts a profound impact on the school attendance and dropout rates of tribal girls. Many girls are compelled to discontinue their education prematurely upon entering into marriage, as societal expectations prioritize domestic roles over schooling. Consequently, early marriage often leads to a significant decline in school attendance rates among affected girls". During the 2nd Phase of intervention, team's observations reinforce this concern, reflecting that married girls are "10 times more likely to drop out than their unmarried peers," with the highest dropout rates observed in Grades VII and VIII.

As one local teacher Lakhinder Sahu, Jhapri, Upgraded Primary School, puts it, "When a girl gets married, we lose not just a student, but also her future — and often, her younger sisters follow the same path."

B. Remedial Classes and CSO Efforts:

Rigorous evaluations of remedial after-school classes, such as STRIPES in India, demonstrate that "students in the parateacher intervention arm scored 0.75 standard deviations

higher on mathematics and language tests than the control group," reflecting major learning gains attributable to supplemental tutorial support. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) enhance these outcomes through advocacy, resource provision, and community mobilization, establishing libraries, providing learning materials, and facilitating teacher training to sustain quality education. One bridge-class facilitator, Naresh Pahariya, Rokso, shared, "We don't just revise lessons — we rebuild confidence in children who thought they couldn't learn."

C. Importance of Teacher Capacity Building

The need for ongoing professional development among teachers, whether in government schools or local coaching setups, is critical. Research reviewed in IRJHIS (2024) underscores, "Teacher training and capacity building are crucial for successful educational innovations in tribal contexts...capacity-building modules targeting language skills, child-friendly pedagogies, and collaborative teacher forums have transformed the classroom environment, helping children relate curriculum to their lived realities".

A survey in our intervention area on the tribal educators revealed that "teachers' competency, expectations, and methods of teaching influence students' academic achievements. Tribal teachers score, less in all those dimensions, which is responsible for low academic performance in tribal areas". Hence, effective teacher training courses— including culturally responsive pedagogy and technology integration workshops—are pivotal for building teacher confidence and bridging the achievement gap.

D. Pathways Forward: Collaborative and Evidence-Based Action

- Robust Partnerships: District and block administrations must collaborate with CSOs to harmonize monitoring, training, and outreach, tailoring interventions for local conditions.
- Strategic Capacity Building: Structured teacher development programs should focus on pedagogical innovation, language sensitization, and inclusive classroom practices.

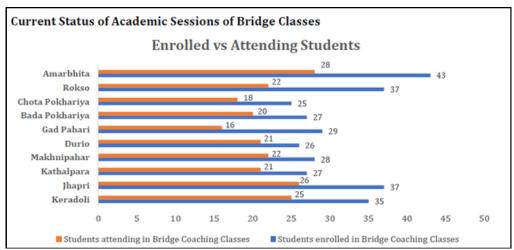


Figure 1 Across the 10 villages, enrolment in bridge coaching classes is consistently higher than actual attendance. Amarbhita has the highest enrolment (43) and attendance (28), while Gad Pahari shows the lowest attendance (15). Rokso, Jhapri, and Keradoli report significant gaps, with 9–15 fewer students attending than enrolled. Smaller villages like Chota Pokhariya, Bada Pokhariya, and Makhnipahar also face proportional declines. This indicates persistent challenges such as lack of ward's interest, parental disengagement, mobile addiction, and household choirs.

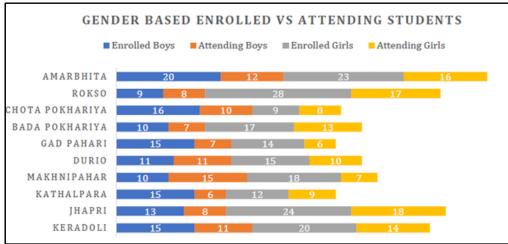


Figure 2 illustrates Gender-wise trends show girls generally outnumber boys in enrolment, notably in Rokso (28 girls vs 9 boys) and Jhapri (24 girls vs 13 boys). Attendance declines for both genders, but boys' dropouts are more severe in Kathalpara (15 enrolled, 6 attending) and Gad Pahari (15 enrolled, 7 attending). Girls' attendance also lags, particularly in Makhnipahar and Bada Pokhariya. Amarbhita and Jhapri maintain relatively better gender parity in attendance. The data suggests socio-cultural norms, household responsibilities, and safety concerns for girls, alongside economic or behavioural issues for boys, are affecting participation. Addressing gender-specific barriers can improve consistent attendance.

- Community Engagement: Active involvement of parents and tribal leaders in educational planning can counter poor attendance and curb dropout rates.
- Addressing Early Marriage: Holistic schoolbased campaigns are required to sensitize families about the risks of early marriage and emphasize the value of education for girls.
- Fostering Digital Literacy: Training students and parents in responsible technology usage can mitigate the adverse impacts of mobile addiction.

Conclusion:

Progress here is possible — we are seeing glimpses of it already. A boy, Bechga Pahariya, Keradoli, who once skipped school to herd goats now dreams of becoming a teacher himself. Snehlata Malto from

Makhni Pahar stood up in a village meeting to speak against child marriage, because "I want to continue education and career., till I feel self-reliant." These are not just anecdotes; they are the seeds of transformation.

Data and policy matter, but so do the small, everyday acts of encouragement — a teacher walking an extra mile to visit a dropout's home, a mother decidingher daughter will study one more year, a child's excitement on reading their very first storybook. If we can keep blending the insights with community empathy, and policy intent with grassroots action, the Mal Pahariya children of Pakur will not just attend school — they will learn, grow, and write new stories of their own.



MIHIR SAHANA, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, 4S INDIA

Introduction: Learning by Being There:

After the disruptions caused by COVID-19, while the world was beginning to recover, we at 4S India received a different kind of opportunity from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation (PHF). It was not a typical project request. Instead, PHF asked us to first become part of the Malpahadiya community—to observe and understand how they live, think, and survive, before trying to do anything for them.

The Malpahadiyas, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), live in the Rajmahal Hills spread across Pakur, Godda, Dumka, and Sahebganj districts in Jharkhand. They remain among the most isolated and under-served communities. This invitation gave us a chance to rethink development—starting not with action, but with presence.

Immersion: Understanding Through Living Together:

PHF supported a year-long ethnographic engagement, allowing us to live within the community. We formed a young team—Soumesh from NERIST, originally from West Bengal; Sonal from Azim Premji University, from Maharashtra; and Amshat, a postgraduate from Chennai. All came with academic backgrounds and a strong desire to learn from the field.

The team chose to stay in Maknipahad village, in modest conditions: a house with basic electricity, one toilet, and three cots. But it allowed them to live close to the community, learn directly, and experience everyday life. They had no pre-decided agenda. They spent their time observing, working in fields, fishing in streams, participating in forest patrols, helping children read, and talking to village elders.

When villagers asked, "What will you give us?"—our answer was honest: "We've come with our time, and to learn with you." At first, this approach created confusion. But it also drew attention and opened conversations. It marked a shift away from traditional development approaches led by donors and targets.

Building Trust: Becoming Part of the Community:

Over time, relationships deepened. The team was invited to join Bichar Sabhas, church services, marriages, football games, and festivals. We didn't bring handpumps or livestock. Instead, we celebrated Adivasi day, Independence day , Women's day together, reopened abandoned village halls for common use, and supported village meetings for SHGs, schoolchildren, and Gram Sabha members. Once these spaces became active, local government actors like JSLPS also started using them, even installing their boards on the buildings.

Still, villagers were cautious. Many remembered earlier NGO efforts that failed—seeds, goats, or chicks that didn't survive, handpumps that stopped working, and health camps that never came back. One elder clearly said, "NGOs gave us seeds, goats, and chicks that did not survive in our conditions. Some even affected our local animals. We won't allow such interventions again." They kept asking what our NGO would bring. We continued to say: "We're not here to give, but to stay, listen, and support what you want to do."

Eventually, the approach made a difference. Through Participatory Rural Appraisals (PRA) and resource mapping, the villagers—both men and women—identified key issues they wanted to work on: water, health, education, debt, and cultural preservation. What emerged was not a set project, but a shared understanding. We identified water and Health as top two priorities on which PHF offered us to work with the community for the next 3 years .

Avoiding the Trap of Targets:

Our approach was different from the usual development models that focus on quick results. One local NGO wanted to set up a model kitchen garden. A target that was given to the NGO worker to put in 35 model demo plots . We helped identify a farmer. But the NGO funded everything—labour, seeds, irrigation.

It looked impressive at first, but the garden didn't inspire others, and the initiative faded.

Another corporate NGO wanted to form a Farmer Producer Company (FPC) allocated under the 10K FPO scheme . We helped hold discussions. But the villagers weren't interested. The FPC was registered but collapsed quickly.

Whenever we asked villagers what changes earlier NGOs had brought, they always replied: "They gave us something. It didn't last." We also noticed very few modern agricultural practices in use. The Malpahadiyas continued their traditional farming methods and crops.

These experiences reinforced our belief that real change can't be handed over from outside—it needs to be built together.

Addressing Water Issues: People Before Infrastructure:

Water scarcity was one of the biggest concerns. The usual solution—borewells—was not sustainable in this region. Instead, we introduced the concept of Water Changemakers—volunteers from within the community trained in water management, who would work without payment.

Many dropped out as they did not receive any remuneration but had to work as voulateers for the good of their own community, but those who stayed learned a great deal and are proud of their enhanced knowledge and understanding about land and water issues . With guidance from water expert Dinabandhu Karmakar and practitioners from Sevabrata (Purulia), and by visiting successful watershed projects, they studied ridge-to-valley planning, water budgeting, and how to prepare micro-DPRs.

These changemakers created detailed water plans and submitted them through the Gram Sabha—half of them led by women—to MGNREGA authorities. Only a few plans were approved in the beginning, but the motivation remained. The following year, 13 farmers built their own water conservation structures—TCBs and LBS—using their own labour and resources.

In Durio village, a spring and pond that had long dried up was revived through collective work. It now provides year-round water—a result of both technical knowledge and strong community involvement. The journey has just begun.

Working on Health: Building Local Leadership:

Health was another neglected area. We trained local Health

Changemakers—volunteers who learned about health rights, maternal and child care, immunisation, nutrition, hygiene, and how to access government services. They gradually started connecting with the health department, arranging camps, and supporting institutional deliveries. Malnutrition cases were detected early and referred to treatment centres. Unqualified healers (quacks) lost influence. ASHA and ANM workers became more responsive, as villagers began actively demanding services.

Moving Slowly, but Steadily:

It has now been three and a half years since we started this journey. There were moments when we questioned ourselves. There were no flashy launches or achievements. What we saw instead was a quiet transformation—growing trust, stronger participation, and ownership by the villagers.

We didn't create big infrastructure. But we helped revive something more important: confidence—among individuals, in their communities, and in their collective ability to make change happen.

Today, villagers are not waiting for someone to help. They are planning, organizing, and taking action. Our team has changed, but the values, the trust, and the process remain the same.

Key Takeaways for Development Practice:

This journey offers a few important lessons for those working in development—whether practitioners, donors, or policymakers:

- 1.Living with the community matters. Sustainable development starts with presence, not projects.
- 2.PVTGs don't need handouts. They have wisdom and aspirations. They need recognition and partnership.
- 3.Let communities lead. Don't fill gaps—build skills and confidence.
- 4. Forget replication. What works in one place may not in another. Stay relevant to the context.
- 5. Focus on dignity and self-reliance. Change is more than immediate increase in income

As development professionals and learners, we must learn to slow down, listen carefully, and allow communities to guide their own path. The Malpahadiya community showed us how. Their journey has now become part of our own.





SHWETANK MISHRA, CONSULTANT, PAUL HAMLYN FOUNDATION

I remember one of my conversations with an NGO friend where he said that "sir we have been trying to promote agriculture and help increase the productivity of farming of Paharias but the offtake is just not there, they are just not willing to learn and quite frankly they are also lazy."

Understanding the Resistance:

This statement started a conversation and reflection on this behaviour of the paharias.

This question led me to have many conversations over a period of time with many tribal groups and similarly placed tribals in remote locations and invariably the opinion of most mainstream people was that the offtake or the uptake of modern solutions and processes is very slow or it does not happen among these groups.

What Could be the possible reason for this behaviour?

As I pondered and reflected and observed, I realised that the solutions that are being offered or the development products-meaning different processes or new ways of farming or health or similar other things, that are being promoted with these groups have not been part of their culture.

When these products are offered, we (development workers) believe we are giving them good solutions but we ignore the fact that these solutions have not been tested in their context by them. So, the risks associated with the implementation or the use of these new products is not known to the Pahadiyas.

The Pahadiyas are using common sense in not listening or having resistance to these products and that common sense was risk minimisation. Like in farming, a very handful of people would take up wary of the fact that if it fails, then food on the plate will be at risk and similarly other risks associated with other development products.

My own experience of implementing interventions with such groups has been that organisations and social workers implementing such products are under a lot of pressure to meet targets in a very limited amount of time and show success. Thus, there is not enough time spent to build and demonstrate the efficacy of these new processes. The fears sitting inside the community is not addressed, trust is not built, benefits not demonstrated.

We also need to remember the historical context of the Paharias. Historically they have been pushed away from there habitations, they have been exploited, they have been violated, they have been abused, and a lot of violence has happened at the hand of outsiders. This historical trauma stays with the community as an intergenerational memory. This memory holds them from trusting people like us. They still see people from the NGOs implementing new products in the same light – as outsiders not easy to trust. So, genuine trust building, demonstration processes have to be an integral part of any program that are being designed with these groups.

Are Our Interventions Responding to Their Needs?

Donors most often have their own vision and mission and look to implement them through NGO partners. Almost always NGOs reach out to communities with a handed down plan of change for the community. Invariably these plans are not aligned to the existing pressing needs of the community. Although in the larger scheme of things they may be needed and good for the community. But without engaging the community, the community is not in a place to see its need. This also is a reason of disinterest amongst the communities to the plans and activities that NGOs take to communities especially like Pahadiyas.

So how does one bring an alignment between larger systemic changes and immediate needs of the community is a question that needs to be worked with by donors.

What I have seen work as a donor is to allow space for NGO partners to incorporate what is called ownership and capacity building processes for communities in the implementation plans.

How to Work with This Group?

An example was an intervention proposed by a partner to improve agriculture in the community through an improved seeds and farming practices approach. The data from the community clearly pointed to a need for this. However, when the intervention started community was not interested in talking about farming. The women in the community sat angry about lack of drinking water in the 4 summer months.

And water was also affecting the farming. But water was not part of the intervention design of the NGO and the donor.

Now creating water security both for households and farming is not a short term intervention. An ecologically sustainable solution is not a deep boring, though a very lucrative and attractive short term one. So, the proposal was changed for sustainable water security. Farming improvement became phase 2 of the work after 5 years.

How many donors would be willing to do this? This shift brough the women on board and they brought the families to listen to the NGO.

The progress was slow to begin with. Since household water need is not something that can be postponed. But deep bore in a water scarce semi arid region is not the solution. But this is an understanding very difficult to help the community understand. Most people believe underground water is unlimited and want that as the solution.

The NGO motivated and convinced the community that if they wanted water, they have to work for it. No incentives to come to meetings, no tea, no snacks, no travel reimbursements. Pure evocation to seeing it as their own responsibility, but NGO willing to be with them. This was very difficult for the NGO workers who were used to mobilise community through incentives. It required a shift in mindsets and needed different skills. Most of the early part of the first year went in helping the NGO team unlearn and relearn a different approach of creating community owned processes. Obviously this needed budget for skilling of NGO team.

They- (NGO and community volunteers), together worked through government systems, panchayats to repair and improve existing water structures to provide short term relief. Simultaneously, they started a process of helping the community understand water, revive their traditional knowledge of water and their cultural connect with it, added modern knowledge of water cycles and geo-hydrology in terminology and language they built together with the community. This needed budgets for skilling and building understanding of community.

In a year, community had tided over water crisis of that year through short term measures. They had started understanding the larger reasons for the water scarcity they faced and how it could resolve.

They were now ready and understood what structures to build, revive and create, their location and how much will each structure take care of the water needs. This is when they needed support in planning and where the Panchayats needed to own it up. Fortunately, the NGO had been involving Panchayat representatives in the process of knowledge and understanding building along with the community.

Another year went in training community on planning, planning the structures and integrating in the Panchayat plans or making applications to the concerned departments. While all along, short-term measures to take care of household water was addressed through repairs or tanker supply and at some places piped water from government scheme.

The water structures which would improve water availability only started getting built or renovated in the third year. Once built they took another two years to start filling up to capacity and start showing in underground water levels and soil moisture.

So, six years is what it took to prepare the whole ecosystem which was ready to support a sustainable shift in farming and agriculture. Six years were spent by the NGO in getting the community on board, helping them see and believe in the solutions suggested. Which majority started believing only by the 5th year when they could see water collecting in the structures and could use in their farms or homes.

These villages are now water secure both for farming and household needs. They do not even need piped water supply. They now do vegetable farming suited to the ecology aided with other interventions has changed the quality of living in these villages. The impact has been on all areas from livelihood to nutrition status and even reduced distress migration.

You as a donor or NGO might have your priority of supporting farming, but to be able to do that you have to be willing to invest in a lot of pre-work before you can achieve sustainable results in farming. Are you willing to be flexible and give time. Every seed takes a different amount of time to germinate and so does every community need a different nuanced planning to reach similar milestones.

The water structures could have been built by the NGO partner as well. But who maintains them after the NGO leaves. Does anyone own it? How is water managed? Will it create a conflict over water use, then how is it resolved? Can this process build capacities of communities making them independent? These and many more questions is what makes an intervention sustainable. Making and counting structures does not. Neither does the benefits last for the community as they don't know how to manage and maintain it. It becomes just another water body that starts dying with time unless it gets integrated in the everyday context, community's memory and cultural context.

Key Elements of Sustainable Change:

- Change takes time.
- It is about unlearning-relearning, building capacities first NGO, Donor teams and then of communities.
- It is about going with an open mind, invest in understanding communities and not start putting labels and stereotype on any community.
- Development is not just about technology and inputs or creating structures, but that people actually use it and continue using it. It is about understanding people, their emotions, their motivations and their aspirations.
- It is not about going and telling "this is good because rest of the world has done it".
- It is about supporting the community in owning the processes. It is about shifting mindsets from seeing all resource as for private use to rebuilding understanding of commons and rebuild community systems and structures to manage common resources.
- Donors need to be flexible in their project design and give space for needs of communities to be incorporated.

Are you as a Donor and an NGO willing to do this? These are the steps towards replication and scalability and not how many inputs and how many technologies need to be spread to a large number of villages or districts. We have to be willing to invest in replicating and scaling these processes. Other things will be taken care of.

Navigating Vulnerability and Prosperity:

A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF LITTIPARA'S MALPAHADIYA COMMUNITY

RAJESH SRIWASTWA, CONSULTANT

I tried to tell what I observe in context to dynamics within the social group of the area we are operational. I am sharing based on my little experience related to project villages and time spent with the local team. It may help you to discuss the way ahead with Malpahadiya beyond the existing project-based framework.

On 21st September 2024, at Gatpahari village meeting, Pradhan of the village told me that around 70 to 75 years back only 15 families were living in Gatpahari village. At present 63 families inhabit Gatpahari. He was responding to my lead question on "how many families were living in Gatpahari during his childhood?" On my next question he was either not sure or was not able to visualize. I asked him "Do you think if treatment under the water component plan as proposed recently is completed and the regenerated forest will be able to meet the household economy of all families of Gatpahri village up to a comfortable level?"

Comprehensive plan was the lead for the above inquiry. For me a comprehensive plan also means covering the majority of the needy families, their diverse needs, with specific focus on their vulnerability. This PVTG group looks like a vulnerable group as a whole but it seems a class structure is evolving gradually.

Families among Malpahadiya also may be categorized as a) comparatively prosperous and b) vulnerable. Gradually category a) families are becoming able to accumulate wealth more quickly in comparison to category b) families. In order to achieve this the comparatively prosperous PVTG families are also exploiting vulnerable PVTG families. This trend risks creating a parallel hierarchy within the marginalized—where internal class divisions could lead to a breakdown of collective resilience. The trust and social reciprocity that traditionally held the group together may slowly erode, weakening any community-based interventions.

An individual, his/her family, community and children vs carrying capacity of village, skill set of family, cash in hand / finance etc. are

some of the factors one may need to understand for knowing more about community.

Most of the factors have some general characteristics which we may observe or capture among the majority of Malpahadiya community members. However, access to information & resources beyond village boundaries and support systems available within the family / community enable an individual to adopt coping strategies to meet the shortfall in household economy. Shortfall in the household economy among these PVTGs families, decreasing carrying capacity of natural resources, exploitation due-to vulnerability etc. are some of the factors generally observed among most of the community members. Level of shortfall, control / ownership of natural resources and nature of exploitation varies from families to families. This may have led to the adoption of an additional skill set by an individual / family a few years or decades back or in the process of adaptation at present as a coping strategy to meet the shortfall from natural resources or desire / aspiration for better standard of living.

For example a person in Gatpahari prepares local liquor, he wears lots of silver jewellery which indicates his better standard of living in comparison to others. His success also points to a community's ability to identify and reward quality within traditional practices. This could be harnessed for designing community-based enterprises where local standards of excellence are already recognized and valued. His liquor is considered safer in comparison to liquor prepared by Santhals or available in market places. I will refer to him again during discussion on health intervention.

Babu of Durio migrated to earn with the support from 4S India local team. He was promoted recently and transferred to a new state. He was not willing to go due to some personal reason. With some counselling support and telephonic meeting with his manager Debanjan motivated Babu to rejoin the company in Tamil Nadu as per company's plan. Despite the salary hike, promotion in role and additional arrangement for free of cost accommodation & food the most appealing factor is the statement of Babu to Debanjan - "I am good looking and smart so I am confident to make new friends as per my need at a new place also". expressions, though personal, signal a shift in self-perception-away from marginality and towards agency. It also reflects changing aspirations among the youth, which development interventions must align with, going beyond traditional vulnerability frameworks. Babu's story reflects that competency of Malpahadiyas is also good in comparison to other social groups. Creating opportunities for them will be helpful. If we look at the journey so far 5 people were

covered by 4S India team and 14 females by JSLPS from the project villages. The success rate is 1 out of 19.

 22^{nd} September I was Chottapokhariya. We were waiting for villagers for a meeting. Two young male members, 20-25 years who migrate seasonally for earning, reported that they work in factories. One person works seasonally in a net making factory (Tamilnadu) and another person works in globs making factory in Gujrat. They migrate every year and there are many such men who migrate to fill the shortfall in the household economy. Those two people reported that they pay Rs 2000 to the agent every year for seeking employment there. A skill mapping of seasonal migrants from

project villages will / may lead to a way ahead on exploring employability / engagement beyond natural resource based livelihood. Referring to Babu's story we may conclude the need of soft skill / life skill training for the adolescents and youths above 18 years. Without such non-technical skills, even when economic opportunities arise, youth from these communities may struggle to navigate unfamiliar environments, negotiate fair wages, or access institutional support in destination areas.

More than 30 shops by villagers of project villages at the football tournament indicates entrepreneurial skill / attitude existing in the project villages. This reveals not just entrepreneurial capacity, but also a cultural readiness to engage in public-facing roles. It's a valuable indicator of confidence, especially among marginalized groups often portrayed as passive beneficiaries. I am trying to explore even non-land based livelihoods for reducing pressure on natural resources and distress migration.

Even if we ignore / overlook this aspect a natural process of adaptation of new skill sets is already undergoing. For example, the case discussed yesterday related to incomplete houses under PMAY MUNSHI has emerged. He is from the same village and among the same community. He does everything related to documentation & mobilization of families as well as community etc and taking his share from government funds under the schemes. Such agents, of course Malpahadiya and exploitative too, are operational in most of the villages for majority of government schemes. These actors fill the vacuum left by institutional inefficiencies. exploitative, they also demonstrate the community's capacity to understand and manipulate formal systems-a potential that can be redirected through accountable leadership-building within VDCs. Being Aspirational block this will increase many fold in the coming days.

Father of Duno (well known to most of us) has purchased many tamarind trees for this season's fruit. Nitesh told me when we were taking some rest under the tree at

Chottapokhariya. Earlier the same was being done by moneylenders and middle men of the Littipada marketplace community. The shift from outside to within hints at a growing internal economic agency. But unless matched with ethical norms and collective regulation, this could replicate the same patterns of exploitation, only now under a new local elite. Actually vulnerable families used to take money from such people to meet their consumption or emergency needs. Such middlemen, moneylenders and even quacks use to take advantage of this situation by providing some relief to the needy families. In return they get the NTFP and even other products at much cheaper rates.

As VDC is becoming functional, an arrangement of revolving funds for each VDC may play a game changer in order to protect such vulnerable families. That may create an opportunity for value addition in NTFP and other products. Collective selling will definitely add more income for families and VDC apart from avenues for portfolio diversification and within the portfolio itself.

Fire line during autumn season is most urgently required for regeneration of forest / vegetative cover in higher slope land. Otherwise all the efforts under land and water management activity will sustain for a very short period of time. This reminds us that ecological resilience cannot be an afterthought. Physical interventions must be aligned with natural cycles and local knowledge, or else they risk becoming yet another layer of technical input without long-term impact. Interventions must evolve from project logic to a process logic—where trust, continuity, and co-created knowledge guide long-term transformation. The Malpahadiya are not only recipients of support; they are narrators of their own change. If done properly it will magnify the VDC effort with RF.

During my one year engagement with block team I empathise that Reduction in vulnerability of category b) families will reduce threat on valuable traditional practices and value systems of Malpahadiya's. Its comprehensiveness is key for the prosperity of this social group.





ARPITA MAJHI, PROJECT ASSOCIATE, 4S INDIA

"The land is not ours—we belong to the land."These words, spoken softly by an elder of the Mal Pahariya community, stayed with me long after I left the hills.

The Mal Pahariya are one of the oldest tribal communities in eastern India, known for their deep connection to the forest, their strong sense of kinship, and their quiet resilience. They live in scattered villages tucked into hilly terrain, where roads are often little more than dusty tracks and the horizon is a green ocean of sal and mahua trees.

A Morning in the Hills:

Before the first ray of sunlight touches the treetops, the village stirs. Smoke rises from thatched roofs as women light their clay chulhas, preparing the morning meal. The smell of boiling rice mixes with the cool scent of damp earth. Life begins early here—not because of a clock, but because of the sun. For the Mal Pahariya, time is measured by natural rhythms: the crowing of roosters, the opening of mahua flowers, the changing call of the cicadas as afternoon approaches.

Women dress in bright cotton sarees, often with handwoven borders, and adorn themselves with beaded necklaces, glass bangles, and silver earrings. These are not just ornaments—they are markers of identity, passed down through generations. Some necklaces are strung with coins from decades past, each one carrying a story. Men gather their tools—bamboo baskets, sickles, or

ploughs if the land is ready for sowing. Some head to the fields, others to the forest to collect firewood, fruits, or medicinal plants. Hunting is rare now, but fishing in the streams still continues as a tradition and necessity.

The Philosophy of Belonging:

One of the first things I learned is that the Mal Pahariya don't see themselves as owners of the land. Instead, they believe they are part of it. An elder once explained it to me: "When you stand on the earth, you stand on the body of your mother. Would you hurt her? Would you take more than she can give? The forest gives us food,wood, medicine, and water. We take only what we need, and we give her time to heal." This principle governs everything—from farming to festivals. Fields are cultivated in a way that respects the soil's fertility, often using traditional mixed-crop systems. They still grow hardy millets, pulses, and



indigenous varieties of rice that can withstand the unpredictable rains.

The Strength of Togetherness:

The Mal Pahariya measure wealth not in money, but in relationships. Their greatest security is the certainty that they will never face hardship alone.

If a family's house is damaged by heavy rain, neighbors bring bamboo and thatch to rebuild it before nightfall. If someone is ill, the herbal healer comes with remedies, and others bring cooked food so the family can rest.

As an elder put it, "We do not count coins; we count the hands that will hold us when we fall."

This sense of community extends to farming too. During the sowing season, entire groups work each family's field in turn, ensuring no one is left behind. In return, the host family cooks for everyone—a system of mutual labor that ensures both productivity and unity.

A Life of Ouality:

When I asked one Mal Pahariya woman what a "good life" meant to her, she laughed softly and said: "If there is rice in the pot, clean water in the gourd, the children's laughter in the courtyard, and friends to sit with in the evening—what more is there to want?" It struck me that their sense of quality of life is not tied to possessions but to presence—to being with loved ones, to living in harmony with nature, to having enough to share.

The Fabric of Culture:

- Language: The Mal Pahariya speak Malto, a Dravidian language that connects them to a linguistic heritage far older than many modern Indian languages. The language is rich in metaphors drawn from nature—there are distinct words for different types of rain, and idioms that compare human emotions to the growth of crops or the flight of hirds
- Music and Dance: Music is not a separate art—it is woven into everyday life. The madol drum, bamboo flutes, and ankle bells accompany dances that are performed during sowing, harvest, and festivals. One particularly beautiful tradition is the jhumur song, where a group of women sing in a gentle, repetitive melody while working in the fields. The songs often tell stories of love, nature, and community bonds
- Attire: Traditionally, men wore loincloths and turbans, while women draped themselves in simple cotton sarees, often dyed with natural colors. Bead necklaces and bangles made from brass or forest seeds are common. During festivals, the attire becomes more colorful, with embroidery and ornaments passed down through families.

Challenges they carry:

Life in the hills is beautiful, but it is not without its burdens.

- Land Rights: Many Mal Pahariya families do not have formal legal documents for the land they cultivate. This leaves them vulnerable to displacement and exploitation.
- Access to Services: Healthcare centers are far, and schools are often under-resourced. Many children walk several kilometers to attend classes.
- Migration: During lean seasons, young people often migrate to towns or cities for work. While this brings income, it also risks weakening the cultural fabric. Despite these challenges, their cultural roots hold them steady. Those who migrate return during major festivals,









drawn back by the familiar drumbeats and the comfort of home-cooked food shared under starlit skies.

Paths Towards Empowerment:

Despite these challenges, there is resilience and adaptation. Many Mal Pahariya communities are engaging with NGOs and government schemes to strengthen their economic base while protecting their culture.

Some notable initiatives include:

- Forest Rights Act awareness campaigns to help communities claim legal rights over traditional lands.
- Self-help groups for women, focusing on micro-loans and training in handicrafts like bamboo weaving and leaf plate making.
- Agro-ecology programs that combine traditional farming wisdom with modern soil conservation techniques.
- Cultural documentation projects that record folk songs, dances, and oral histories for schools and archives.

These programs recognize that empowerment does not mean abandoning tradition—it means strengthening the community's ability to make choices about its own future.

What We Can Learn:

From the Mal Pahariya, I learned that leadership is not about standing above others, but standing with them. Sustainability is not a modern invention—it is an old wisdom, practiced quietly for centuries. Love does not always need to be spoken; it can be carved into wood, stitched into cloth, or simply shown through a shared meal.

In a world that often celebrates individual achievement and material success, the Mal Pahariya remind us:

- A community is as strongas the care its membersgive each other.
- A relationship with the land is a relationship with the future.
- Wealth is the ability to share, not just the ability to keep.

Or as one elder said, "We belong to each other just as we belong to the earth. If we forget one, we lose the other."



BUDDHOBAN POND: A 150-YEAR-OLD LEGACY REVIVED BY COMMUNITY SPIRIT



SOUMYAJIT DEY, INTERN, AZIM PREMJI UNIVERSITY



Anecdate:

"This pond showcases the essence of amalgamation – visionary & people's participation at first place and again between villagers and 4S to rejuvenate the water resource for the greater good of the people." – Bandra Pahariya.

Background:

Durio village is situated amidst the hilly terrain of the Littipara block, Pakur district, Jharkhand. The village is predominantly inhabited by the Mal Pahariyas, an indigenous tribal group native to the region. According to the villagers, there are currently around 33 households in the village. However, the community has long been grappling with water scarcity issues due to significantly low groundwater levels in the hilly area. The villagers heavily rely on rainfall for their survival, agricultural activities, and livestock rearing. Unfortunately, the women in the village face the burden of trekking distances up to 5 - 8 kilometers daily to fetch water for cooking and drinking purposes. The lack of access to adequate water resources has resulted in various health problems among the villagers, including vomiting, diarrhea, and excessive sweating. Since the village's survival depends on water availability, the community has been forced to rely solely on forest resources as

 $their means \ of \ livelihood, for \ agriculture \ and \ livestock \ rearing \ require \ sufficient \ water \ availability.$

In response to the persistent water scarcity in Durio village, a comprehensive investigation and documentation exercise was undertaken to understand the complete history, present condition, and potential of the existing pond. The study aimed to uncover details about the pond's original construction, its maintenance over time, and the factors contributing to its deterioration. This exploration served as a critical foundation for planning sustainable solutions for water management in the village. By examining both past practices and present challenges, the initiative seeks to enable the community to make informed decisions, implement effective interventions, and restore the pond as a reliable water resource, benefiting the villagers now and securing their water needs for future generations.

Before Intervention:

Like any other Pahariya village, Durio also relies on seasonal rainwater for agriculture. Due to poverty and water scarcity, their diet mainly consists of leafy vegetables collected from forest, potatoes, onion, rice, and puffed rice. This stereotype and limited variety of vegetables adversely affected their health, as other vegetables couldn't grow in the area due to poor soil quality and lack of water. However, the soil is suitable for growing millet crops like bajra and arhar, which are known as drought-resistant crops. To fulfill their

drinking water needs, they dug the soil 6 to 7 feet deep in the path of a nearby hilly river. During the rainy season, water would flow into these dug-out patches, which served as a temporary water source. The entire village depended on these makeshift arrangements. However, the amount of water collected was very little, taking one to two hours to fill a single bucket.

Intervention Process:

It is crucial to highlight the individual who initiated this transformative endeavor for the entire community. Bandra Pahariya, the current owner of the Pokhar (pond), is now 63 years old. He narrates that this pond was initially constructed by his great grandfather (Chandu Pahariya), who was known as Buddhoban, meaning "clever" among the community. In honor of his great grandfather's wisdom and leadership, the pond came to be known as Buddhoban Pond. Remarkably, this pond has stood the test of time for over 150 years.

Bandra graciously shared the tale of how they discovered the ideal location for constructing the pond. The village is primarily surrounded by hills, and during the rainy season, water flows downstream. Additionally, water gets absorbed by the stones and slowly seeps into the soil, forming what is known as a seepage point. Recognizing this natural phenomenon, the people of the village, led by Bandra's great grandfather, began their search for a suitable site.

The first step they took was to communicate and discuss their idea with the entire community. They emphasized the importance of gathering people together to accomplish this significant undertaking. Teams were formed, and the community members were given instructions on how to locate a suitable spot. They dug the soil, going about 2 to 3 feet deep, and eventually discovered an area with moist soil near the foothills. After some time, they found a location where the stones released water into the soil at a slow pace. This spot served as the perfect capture point for rainwater runoff during the monsoon season. With determination, they continued digging and shaping the soil, ultimately creating the pond, which now sits 1.5 kilometers away from the habitation area of the village.

Outcome of intervention:

The construction of the Buddhoban Pond not only solved the water scarcity issue for the community but also became a testament to the visionary thinking and resourcefulness of Chandu's great grandfather. The pond continues to serve as a lifeline for the villagers, providing them with water for various needs, ensuring better health, and offering opportunities for agricultural and livestock activities.

Factors contributing to the deterioration of the pond:

Even after digging the pokhar (pond), due to negligence and a lack of maintenance led to pond's deterioration. Had the locals been more diligent in their care and maintenance of the pond, they could have prevented or mitigated the effects of erosion caused by rainfall and the accumulation of debris. Deforestation by the locals, driven by the need to use the forest as a source of livelihood, further contributed to the problem. Forests play a crucial role in regulating the water cycle by promoting rainfall and preventing soil erosion. With the loss of trees, the ability of the ecosystem to retain water and control sediment runoff was diminished, leading to increased sedimentation in the pond. As a result, the pond became covered with soil, clay, and stones. The villagers found themselves facing their old problem of water scarcity once again.



Efforts to Address Water Scarcity Challenges:

In the year 2022, in response to the water scarcity issue, the villagers held a meeting to address their concerns. During the meeting, they shared their struggles related to water scarcity and discussed the current condition of the Pokhar (pond) with the 4S organization. Serva Seva Samiti Sastha has been actively involved in various aspects of livelihood, women empowerment, financial inclusion in the area since 2018. Their participation in the meeting and their consent for their commitment to supporting the community in addressing the water scarcity problem led to the process of resurrection of the pond.

Following the meeting, conversations were initiated with various individuals, and the entire village came together and agreed to take turn everyday and monitor the progress and report to the committee. The villagers themselves formed a committee at that place to safeguard the pond for longevity, issued some norms over water usage and labour contribution for bunding the banks of the pond. The pond was thus dug out again by machinery investing a sum of Rs. 1.65 lakh rupees. Currently, the pond is around 12 feet deep and has 4 feet deep water still intact with spring points generating 12 liters per second of water.

Positive Impacts of Pond Rejuvenation on Livelihood and Quality of Life:

The rejuvenation of the pond has brought about numerous positive changes, addressing water scarcity faced by the villagers and their livestock. The accessibility of the pokhar (pond's) water has benefited the local population in various ways. People in the area now have a reliable water source for bathing and other daily needs, significantly improving their quality of life. The women have experienced significant advantages as they no longer have to spend considerable time traveling to collect water. This newfound time can now be utilized for engaging in other productive activities, like engagement of women in leaf plate making unit for economic advantage.

The current situation in this village is challenging due to the insufficient water supply provided by only one pokhar (pond) and one chapakal (hand pump). The pokria is located 1.5 km away from the village, and the road leading to it is in poor condition, especially considering the hilly terrain. This poses a significant problem, particularly for women who need to traverse these difficult roads to access water. Moreover, the chapakal water level is decreasing day by day, further exacerbating the issue. The community relies heavily on this limited water source, causing a considerable strain on their access to an adequate water supply. Therefore, it is imperative to take initiatives for ground water recharge, such as staggered trenches, 30-40 model, TCB through MGNREGA to facilitate the slow replenishment of water underground, which would greatly assist in water recharge and alleviate the water scarcity issue in the village. Recently, recently 3 acres of BIRSA HARIT GRAM YOJNA - AAM BAGWANI (FY 23-24) under MGNREGA has been sanctioned under MGNREGA attracting a sum of Rs. 11,250,000 as convergence fund (3.75 lakhs per acre over period of 5 years). Furthermore, it would be crucial to educate the villagers about efficient water usage and management techniques to reduce wastage and promote sustainability. Implementing rainwater harvesting systems and promoting water-efficient agricultural practices can also contribute to addressing the water scarcity challenges faced by the community.





DIYA DEY, INTERN, AZIM PREMJI UNIVERSITY

Anecdote:

"This is not the first Dikus came and documented our tale, few even promising support and others duped but we are yet to behold any such comfort".

Background:

This case study presents the lived reality of five-year-old Divya Malto, a child with severe developmental delays, from Bara Pokhriya (Jata Tola) village in Littipara block, Pakur district, Jharkhand. Divya belongs to the Malto tribal community and lives with her parents, elder sister, and grandfather.

Divya was born on 18th August 2018 at the Littipara Community Health Centre (CHC). Just two days after birth, she began experiencing epileptic seizures—an early sign of underlying neurological issues. However, the attending doctor failed to provide a proper diagnosis or refer her for further care, instead prescribing temporary medicines. Over time, her parents noticed that she was not developing like other children: she could not speak, walk, understand, or engage in any normal cognitive or physical activity.

Divya's father, Ramesh Malto, is a small farmer and the main earning member of the family. He, along with his father, practices scattered cultivation on their limited land during the kharif season, growing maize (makka), bajra, and arhar. Their annual income from agriculture is approximately ₹20,000, which is further constrained by chronic water scarcity affecting their fields. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Ramesh worked as a seasonal migrant labourer. In 2020, he migrated to Goa and worked on construction sites for one and a half years. However, the returns were meagre and failed to significantly improve the family's financial condition. "In 2020, I migrated to Goa to work as a construction labour for about one and a half years, earned some money but it was not that fruitful for the family's wellbeing," Ramesh shared during an interview. Most of whatever little money he earned was eventually spent on Divya's treatment. At present, he seeks local daily wage opportunities, such as digging soil for ₹220 per 10 feet.

Divya's mother, Sonali Malto, contributes to the family's survival by collecting firewood from the forest for household

use and selling the surplus in the weekly market. She also gathers and sells various Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs), including mango, mahua, ber (Ziziphus mauritiana), mushrooms, and bitter sticks, depending on the season. Though her earnings are modest, they help ease the family's financial burden.

The family's hardship is worsened by a lack of awareness, absence of accessible and quality healthcare, and vulnerability to misinformation. In a desperate attempt to cure their daughter, they fell prey to multiple unverified treatments, fake doctors, and costly traditional remedies—spending their limited resources without any improvement in Divya's condition.

This case study aims to highlight not only the consequences of delayed and inappropriate treatment but also the socioeconomic vulnerabilities that push tribal families like Divya's into cycles of exploitation and despair.

Health History of the Child:

The child was born on 18th august 2018 at Littipara CHC and faced physical problems after the second day of birth. The child experienced by the "epilepsy" (Mirgi), which was the first symptom of the disease. The doctor did not diagnose the disease or referred and gave temporary medicine for the newborn baby. After several months passed parents recognized their child did not behave like normal children (meaning healthy brain and proper nerve function) or behavioral pattern was changed. Then parents decided to start private treatment of the child at age of land half years. They went to the Rampurhat in West Bengal for their child's treatment in private clinic of child specialist doctor name Dr. K N Biswas, the doctor identified the situation by sharing that the child's brain system works slowly and nerves are weak, and prescribed medicine for approximately one month and referred the child to another specialist, Neurosurgeon, at Kolkata Park Clinic.

After that, the parents returned to their village with the prescribed medicine and continued administering it for one month. However, due to financial constraints, poverty, and a desire for instant results, they did not purchase the medicine for the second time or visit the specialist doctor.

In 2020, as the child's father migrated to Goa for work at a construction site to earn money, the child's mother and grandfather seeking a quick outcome, met a street vendor who came with his car and sold the organic oil, and had his temporary shop location at Littipara Market (chowk). According to that individual, the oil message on child's body would enable her to walk within a month and priced a bottle at 12000 rupees. However, due to their poor economic condition, the guardians bargained and negotiated the organic oil within 6000 rupees along worth a crate of 30 pieces of egg (desi). After one month they did not see any improvement and again came to the temporary organic shop for further treatment. Then the individual again promised them, if they used one bottle extra for next one month, she would become normal. With elevated expectations, the second time they invested 7000 rupees in the organic oil and gave the same result. In between lockdown they invested money multiple times and spent approximately 15000 rupees for this type of wrong treatment.

In the year 2021, two men arrived in the village on a bike claiming to be from a pharmaceutical company. They expressed an interest in learning about the health issues faced by the villagers and offered an initial payment. Later that evening or the following morning, a woman referred to as "didi" arrived with medicine and equipment. The mother of the child shared all the details and they proposed a condition of providing an upfront payment of 15,000 rupees. Subsequently, the "Didi" conducted a massage on the child, resulting in them walking. However, when the mother attempted to negotiate the payment, they settled on 8,000 rupees for the treatment. The individuals requested an initial payment of 2,000 rupees, with the remaining amount to be given to the "Didi." The mother handed over the money, and in return, the individuals provided her with peanuts infused with turmeric, instructing her to give them to her child along with a glass of water. Later that evening, the mother waited for the "Didi" to return, but she did not show up. The mother tried to

call her several times, and eventually, the "Didi" answered the call. She explained that she promised to come. However, when the mother continued waiting for her, the "didi" appeared to be engaged in another call, leading the mother to suspect that her number might have been blocked. After all these incidents happened, they tried harder and visited the local private clinic in Littipara and Pakur but the condition remained the same and for that the family lost hope and stopped the treatment of the special child.

Present Situation:

According to the parents, there were no changes physically and mentally in the child. Throughout the treatment journey they took steps and tried to provide good health facilities. But, due to lack of knowledge/awareness created challenges for them. On the other side "quack" (fake doctors) is most popular in the area (Littipara), the child family followed the quacks treatment and consumed wrong medicine, due to weak diet (rice with water and some leafy vegetables) led to health difficulties of the child. Due to a lack of proper guidance and limited access to quality healthcare facilities, the parents of the child spent their hardearned savings on misguided treatments, gradually losing hope for their daughter's recovery. Their pursuit of unverified methods and reliance on quacks drained a significant portion of their financial resources, yet yielded no improvement in the child's condition. This ongoing struggle not only exhausted the family's income but also deepened their emotional distress. The case highlights how vulnerable families-especially in remote tribal regions-are easily misled in the absence of reliable medical support. According to Divya's parents, if they received assistance or financial support through government schemes or other means, it could ease their economic burden and give them hope for the future. Similar cases of disability have also been observed in nearby villages such as Gad Pahari, Durio, and Bada Pokhriya, while Chota Pokhriya alone has reported two cases of deaf and mute children.



Medicine given by the Quack (fake doctor) and Organic oil by the temporary street shop person

FIELD ECHOES: REFLECTIONS OF PRACTITIONERS



Swarup Nag

Team Leader, Littipara, Pakur



"Working with the PVTG Mal Pahadiya community has been one of the most meaningful chapters of my professional journey. Their history, resilience, and hardworking spirit reflect a rich heritage that inspires me deeply. Living in remote hilly terrains, they have very limited livelihood opportunities, which makes education and healthcare critical for their progress.

The community's shy nature often makes it difficult for them to express their emotions in larger forums. This has taught me the importance of approaching my work through their perspective. My eight years in community development have strengthened my commitment to address these challenges. I believe there is still much to achieve, and I remain dedicated to contributing meaningfully to their growth and empowerment."

Sushmita Malto

Project Associate, Littipara, Pakur

"I am Sushmita Malto, a proud daughter of the Mal Pahariya tribe from Sonadhani village in Littipara block of Pakur, Jharkhand. Life was never easy—born into extreme poverty, I faced many hardships growing up. But I held onto one belief: that education and dignity could change my life and my community.

Despite the many taboos and limitations placed on girls in our society, I completed my studies while also supporting my family. The journey was tough, but every challenge strengthened my resolve to stand on my own feet and contribute meaningfully to the lives of others around me.

After graduation, I spent five years working with my own Pahariya community, creating awareness about the importance of children's education, health and hygiene, women's empowerment, and access to government schemes. I have always believed that tribal voices matter, and I did everything I could to make those voices heard.

Today, I continue this journey through 4S India, once again working for my people. My story is not just about personal struggle, it's about rising together. If I could break the barriers, so can others. I hope my journey encourages young girls, especially from tribal areas, to believe in themselves. We are not weak; we are the changemakers."









Shubham JhaDistrict Manager, Sitamani, Bihar

"Living with the Pahariya community in the hills of Sunderpahari, Jharkhand taught me many deep lessons. Even with very few resources, people here live with peace, dignity, and a strong bond with nature. What touched me most was their spirit of togetherness — they help each other, share responsibilities, and stand united in every situation. This sense of community is rare in towns and cities. I realised that real development is not just about roads or buildings — it's about respecting people, understanding their lives, and learning from their unity and strength."

Debanjan Chakraborty Regional Head, Pakur, Jharkhand

"Working with the Mal Pahariya community in Littipara over the past three years has been a journey of learning, patience, and mutual respect. Their relationship with the forest (dependence), their resilience at those hilltops amidst hardship, and their collective spirit have shaped my understanding of sustainable and simple living with cultural rootedness. While discussing any new ideas around health, education, and livelihoods, I realized the importance of first listening and observing rather than imposing. Trustbuilding took time, but once earned, it opens up the door to genuine collaboration. Despite systemic neglect, the community's self dignity and quiet strength continue to inspire me. Each day reaffirms that meaningful change grows from within and our role is to walk beside, not ahead."



Md. Musleuddin Ansari

Project Associate, Littipara, Pakur



"When I met, interviewed and listened to the Mal Paharia community, I felt a range of emotions — respect, empathy and concern.

I was overwhelmed by their lives and deep connection with nature. Their devotion to the forest, land and traditional knowledge is a lesson for today's modern world.

But at the same time, I was saddened when I heard about their hardships — lack of education, unavailability of health services and social neglect. It is sad to see a community with such a rich culture still outside the mainstream of society"



Ilias Mondal

Project Associate, Littipara, Pakur



"Spending some days living with the PVGT community was a deeply enriching and humbling experience. During this time, I witnessed their strong sense of unity, mutual support, and deep connection to nature. Despite facing many challenges such as limited access to basic services, health,Road, electricity, drinking and irrigation water,they maintain a life of dignity and resilience through their traditional knowledge, collective work, and simple lifestyle.

One of the key lessons I learned was the power of community solidarity. Whether it was farming, cooking, or celebrating festivals, everything was done together, reflecting their collective spirit. Their respect for elders, harmony with nature, and sustainable living practices inspired me to rethink modern approaches to development.

This experience reminded me that development must be inclusive and rooted in cultural understanding. True progress lies not only in infrastructure but also in preserving identity, values, and community bonds."

Arpita MajhiProject Associate, Littipara, Pakur

"When I met the Mal Paharia community, I didn't just witness a culture—I encountered a story of resilience woven into the hills."

My journey with the Mal Paharia community began on a quiet morning in a remote village tucked away in the hills. As I walked through the winding forest paths, I was welcomed with warm smiles, humble greetings of "Jai Masi," and a deep, almost sacred, connection to the land. What touched me most was not just their simplicity, but their unwavering bond with nature, tradition, and one another.

The Mal Paharias carry an ancient legacy—rich in oral traditions, spiritual depth, and a way of life shaped harmoniously with the forested hills they call home. Though they have long been pushed to the margins and denied many benefits of mainstream development, what stood out was their quiet strength and dignity. They are not a forgotten people; they are a community that endures—with pride, with grace, and with deep roots.

Spending time with them taught me something profound: the power of listening before acting, and of understanding before intervening. Their challenges are real—limited access to healthcare, insecure livelihoods, and barriers to education—but so is their wisdom. Their knowledge of the land, their community values, and their way of sustainable living offer lessons the modern world desperately needs.

As I reflect on $my\ time\ with\ them,$ I carry this thought with $me\ always:$

"The strength of a people lies not in how visible they are, but in how deeply they are rooted."

And the Mal Paharias are deeply rooted—waiting not for sympathy, but for solidarity. Not for rescue, but for respect.







Dharmendra Sriwastawa

Director-Operation & HR



The Malpaharias, recognized as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), are the original inhabitants of the Rajmahal Hills in the Santal Pargana region. Despite the passage of time and exposure to outside influences, they have retained much of their traditional culture. However, a significant proportion of the community has embraced Christianity, incorporating some new practices into their way of life.

Their livelihood continues to rely heavily on natural resources. Yet, with environmental degradation over the decades, many have begun migrating to distant areas in search of wage-earning opportunities. Among the youth, there is a growing fascination with social media and mobile technologies, though primarily for entertainment purposes rather than skill development or entrepreneurship.

Overall aspirations within the community appear modest, with many expressing contentment with their current circumstances. Unfortunately, market-driven skills are largely absent, limiting their participation in wider economic opportunities.

Kumar GauravDeputy Director- Program & Fund Raising

When I first began working with the Mal Pahariya community in Littipara, Pakur, it was just an idea taking shape—a simple study to understand who they were, how they lived, and what they needed. I was gathering facts, reading history, and trying to put together a solid proposal. But somewhere along the way, this stopped being just "work."

I learned that the Mal Pahariyas were once warriors—strong, proud, and deeply connected to their land. Over time, they were pushed into the hills, losing not only their homes but also their place in society. And yet, they survived. They built their own ways of living in those hills, holding on to their identity in quiet defiance. But as the world outside moved faster, they were pulled into it—often unprepared, and in the process, pushed into deep marginalization and vulnerability.

I wasn't the one on the ground every day, but I was there in other ways—standing with our team through their highs and lows, cheering them on, helping them stay focused, and reminding them why we started. The dedication they showed, despite challenges, has been truly inspiring. Together, we've seen real changes in the community.

Today, people who once thought government benefits were "not for them" are confidently accessing them—health camps in the villages, visits from doctors, safe drinking water through the Jal Jeevan Mission, and more. Women in particular have left a deep impression on me. I've seen in them a fierce desire for their children to have better education and health. That hope, that determination—it's what keeps me going.

But I'll be honest—I'm not completely satisfied. There is still a long way to go. Littipara has become one of our organisation's most important field areas, and my role has been to keep our team anchored to the core vision we began with. Whether that was always right or wrong, I don't know—but I felt it was necessary.

The biggest change I see now is in the way the community itself responds. They are starting to lead, to take ownership. My dream is to see them fully self-reliant—respected for who they are, not dependent on small handouts from outside.

I have deep respect for the Mal Pahariyas. They've taught me resilience, patience, and dignity in the face of hardship. This journey has been as much about learning from them as it has been about working with them. And as I look ahead, I feel hopeful—because I know that change is no longer just something we are bringing to them; it's something they are beginning to build for themselves.





Special Thank I would

Between Forest and Future

This special volume is a journey into the heart of the Pahariya community—their struggles, their strengths, and their dreams for the future. It is a celebration of resilience, a reminder of histories too often forgotten, and a call to action for inclusive, respectful, and community-led development.

May these stories travel far beyond these pages — from the quiet villages of Littipara to the tables where decisions are made — carrying with them the voices, hopes, and wisdom of a people deeply rooted in their land.

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