

Ethnic Tribes in India

1. Asur tribes are usually found in the state of Jharkhand in the eastern part of the subcontinent of **India**. One of the thirty major **tribes** is **Asur** in Jharkhand who have made the state of Jharkhand their home. The people of this **tribe** form quite a big part of the total population of the state of Jharkhand. **Asur people** are a tribal/Adivasi people living primarily in the Indian state of Jharkhand, mostly in the Gumla, Lohardaga, Palamu and Latehar districts. Asurs are traditionally iron-smelters. They were once hunter gatherers, having also involved in shifting agriculture. However, majority of them shifted into agriculture with 91.19 percent enlisted as cultivators. Their indigenous technology of iron smelting gives them a distinct identity; as they claim to have descended from the ancient asuras who were associated with the art of metal craft. When smelting, the Asur women sing a song relating the furnace to an expectant mother encouraging the furnace to give a healthy baby, i.e., good quality and quantity of iron from the ore; and were thence, according to Bera, associated with the fertility cult (Bera 1997). The modern Asur tribe is divided into three sub-tribal divisions, namely Bir (Kol) Asur, Birjia Asur and Agaria Asur. The Birjia are recognized as a separate schedule tribe.

The Asur religion is a mixture of animism, animatism, naturalism and ancestral worships. They also believe in black magic like bhut-pret (spirits) and witchcraft. Their chief deity is Singbonga. Amongst the other deities are Dharati Mata, Duari, Patdaraha and Turi Husid. They celebrate festivals like Sarhul, Karma, Dhanbuni, Kadelta, Rajj karma, Dasahara Karam. The Asur follow the rule of monogamy, but in case of barrenness, widower and widow hood, they follow the rule of bigamy or even Polygamy. Widow remarriages are permissible.

2. Birhor people are a tribal/Adivasi forest people, traditionally nomadic, living primarily in the Indian state of Jharkhand. They speak the Birhor language, which belongs to the Munda group of languages of the Austroasiatic language family.^[1]

The Birhors are of short stature, long head, wavy hair and broad nose. They claim they have descended from the Sun and believe that the Kharwars, who also trace their descent from the Sun, are their brothers. Ethnologically, they are akin to the Santals, Mundas, and Hos.

Birhors are found mainly in the area covered by the old Hazaribagh, Ranchi and Singhbhum districts before these were broken down into numerous smaller units, in Jharkhand. Some of them are also found in Orissa, Chhattisgarh and West Bengal. They are one of the smaller of the thirty scheduled tribes inhabiting Jharkhand. They speak the Birhor language, which belongs to the Munda group of languages of the Austroasiatic language family. Their language has similarities with Santali, Mundari and Ho languages. Birhors have a positive language attitude. They freely use the languages prevalent in the areas they move around and use Sadri, Santali, Ho, Mundari, Hindi and Oriya. Literacy rate in the first language was as low as 0.02 percent in 1971, but around 10 per cent were literate in Hindi.¹ The temporary Birhor settlements are known as *tandas* or *bands*. These consist of at least half a dozen huts of conical shape, erected with leaves and branches. The household possessions traditionally consisted of earthen utensils, some digging implements, implements for hunting and trapping, rope making implements, baskets and so on. In recent times aluminium and steel have found their way into Birhor huts.^[4]

3. The Katkari are an Indian Tribe mostly belonging to the state of Maharashtra. They have been categorised as a Scheduled tribe. Other names and spellings include Kathkari, Kathodi and Kathodia. They are bilingual, speaking the Katkari language, a dialect of the Konkani language family, with each other; they speak Marathi with the Marathi speakers, who are a majority in the populace where they live.^{[5][nb 1]} In Maharashtra the Katkari have been designated a Particularly vulnerable tribal group (PVTG), along with two other groups included in this sub-category: the Madia Gond and the Kolam. In the case of the Katkari this vulnerability derives from their history as a nomadic, forest-dwelling people listed by the British Raj under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871,^[10] a stigma that continues to this day. The Katkari were at one time a forest people living in the Western Ghats of Maharashtra, with a special relationship to forest creatures such as the tiger or 'waughmare', (waugh = tiger, mare = slayer; so tiger slayer) a common Katkari surname. The name Katkari is derived from a forest-based activity – the making and sale of catechu (katha) from the khair tree (*Acacia catechu*). Weling drawing on census data from 1901, notes that the Katkari were 'thickly scattered' in small communities throughout the hill ranges and forests of Raigad and Thane districts in the present day state of Maharashtra. Some also lived

in hill areas in the southern part of the current state of Gujarat, and in the forests of what are now Nasik, Pune and Dhule districts.

5. Madia Gonds or Madia or Maria are one of the endogamous Gond tribes living in Chandrapur District and Gadchiroli District of Maharashtra State, and Bastar division of Chhattisgarh State India. They have been granted the status of a Primitive tribal group by the Government of India under its affirmative action or reservation programme.^[2] The Madia Gonds are strongly affected by Naxal activities.^[3] The Madia Gond use the self designation Madia, and call the area where they live Madia Desh. They speak the Madia dialect of Gondi.^[5] The shifting agriculture of madia is known as jhoom. A study mentions living megalithic practices amongst the Madia Gonds.^[6] One of the findings of The Bench Mark Survey done in 1997–1998: 91.08 percent of Madia Gond families lived Below Poverty Line.

Madias today are doctors, teachers, government employees and naxalites. Performance of school going Madia children is on par with other children of Maharashtra state, a Madia girl student has figured in the merit list of candidates at the state level. The following are the descriptions of the Madia Gond as recorded by the British Rulers in the District Gazettes, which has been carried in the Gazettes of independent India.

6. Korwa pahari- Korwa people are a community of India. They live in the hills and forests of Chhotanagpur, which lies on the border of the states of Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand. A small number of Korwa are also found in the Mirzapur district of Uttar Pradesh. The Indian Government has implemented several facilities for them, such as roads to their settlements, boys hostels for education, providing agricultural aid, etc.^[c] The Korwa in Uttar Pradesh are found mainly in the southern districts of Mirzapur district and Sonbhadra. Their habitat is a hilly, forested and undulating area. The community has four sub-groups- the Agaria Korwa, Dam Korwa, Dih Korwa and Pahar Korwa.

7. Kattunayakan are a designated scheduled tribe in the Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The word *Kattunayakan* means *the king of the jungle* in Tamil. The Kattunayakan are one of the earliest known inhabitants of the Western Ghats, who are engaged in the collection and gathering of forest produce, mainly wild honey and wax.^[2] The members of this community are short, have black skin, and have protruding foreheads. The men wear short dhotis and half sleeved shirts. The women attach a long single piece of cloth round

their body just below the neck, leaving the shoulders and arms bare. Child marriages were common before the 1990s, but now the girls marry after attaining puberty. Monogamy is the general rule among the Kattunayakan community.

Kattunayakan believe in Hinduism and have a language, which is a mixture of all Dravidian languages. The main deity of the tribe is Lord Shiva under the name of *Bhairava*. They also worship animals, birds, trees, rock hillocks, and snakes, along with the other Hindu deities. Kattunayakan are non-vegetarians and are fond of music, songs, and dancing. They are also called *Cholanaickan* and *Pathinaickans*.

8. Todas- The **Toda people** are a small pastoral tribal community who live on the isolated Nilgiri plateau in hill country of Southern India. Before the 18th century and British colonisation, the Toda coexisted locally with other ethnic communities, including the Kota, and Kuruba, in a loose caste-like society, in which the Toda were the top ranking.^[1] During the 20th century, the Toda population has hovered in the range 700 to 900.^[1] Although an insignificant fraction of the large population of India, since the late 18th century the Toda have attracted "a most disproportionate amount of attention because of their ethnological aberrancy"^[1] and "their unlikeness to their neighbours in appearance, manners, and customs."^[1] The study of their culture by anthropologists and linguists proved significant in developing the fields of social anthropology and ethnomusicology. The Toda traditionally live in settlements called *mund*, consisting of three to seven small thatched houses, constructed in the shape of half-barrels and located across the slopes of the pasture, on which they keep domestic buffalo.^[2] Their economy was pastoral, based on the buffalo, which dairy products they traded with neighbouring peoples of the Nilgiri Hills.^[2] Toda religion features the sacred buffalo; consequently, rituals are performed for all dairy activities as well as for the ordination of dairymen-priests.

9. The Toto is an isolated tribal group residing only in a small enclave called Totopara in the Alipurduar district of West Bengal, India. Totopara is located at the foot of the Himalayas just to the south of the borderline between Bhutan and West Bengal (on the western bank of Torsa river). Geographically the location is 89° 20'E 26° 50'N. The Totos are considered as Mongoloid people, with flat nose, small eye, broad and square cheeks, thick lips and small eyes and black iris. Their complexion is rather on the darker side, which reflects their nearness to the equator. They are generally endogamous and marry within their own tribe. Though they make their main food from marua (a kind of millet), the staple food of the

Totos now includes rice, chura (parched rice), milk and curd. They also eat meat, generally goat, pork, venison, poultry and fish of all kinds. Women eat the same food as men and there are no restrictions of any kind on the widows. Totos also drink a fermented liquor called Eu, made from fermented marua, rice powder and malt, which is served warm in Poipa (wooden glasses). Eu is drunk on all occasions.

10. Konda reddy tribes residing in Bhadrachalam of Khammam district, India.

11. The Sentinelese (also called the **Sentineli** or **North Sentinel Islanders**) are the indigenous people of North Sentinel Island in the Andaman Islands of India. One of the Andamanese peoples, they resist contact with the outside world, and are among the last people to remain virtually untouched and uncontacted by modern civilization. The Sentinelese maintain an essentially hunter-gatherer society subsisting through hunting, fishing, and collecting wild plants. There is no evidence of either agricultural practices or methods of producing fire.^[3] The Sentinelese language remains unclassified and is not mutually intelligible with the Jarawa language of their nearest neighbors.^[4] The Sentinelese are designated as a Scheduled Tribe.

12. Bharia is one of Dravidian-speaking tribes of Madhya Pradesh in India. The Bharias live in Patalkot, which is completely isolated valley some 400 metres below Tamia in Chhindwara district of Madhya Pradesh. This valley is the source of Dudhi River. Patalkot is totally inaccessible by road and one enters along a foot-path only. But recently The Madhya Pradesh government established good road inside the Patalkot valley. There are hundreds of medicinal plant species in the Patalkot valley, and the Bharias have a deep knowledge of the herbs and medicinal plants growing within their valley. Herbal healers from Bharia community are known as Bhagats. According to Deepak Acharya, Bhumkas can treat various human disorders.

13. Munda people are an Adivasi ethnic group who originated in the Chota Nagpur Plateau region of north-east India. They originally spoke the Mundari language, which belongs to the Munda subgroup of Austroasiatic languages. The Munda are found across Jharkhand and in adjacent parts of Assam, Odisha, West Bengal, Chhattisgarh, Bihar and portions of Bangladesh. The group is one of India's largest tea tribes. Munda people in Tripura are also known as **Mura**, and in Madhya Pradesh they are often called **Mudas**. Their late-20th-century population was estimated at nine million.^[4] According to Ricio et al. (2011), the Munda people

are probably descended from Austroasiatic migrants from southeast Asia.^[5] Nomadic hunters in the India tribal belt, they became farmers who were employed in basketwork and weaving. With the listing of the Munda people as part of the Scheduled Tribes (Adivasi), many are employed in various governmental organizations (particularly Indian Railways).^[6] Munda religion is a blend of Sarnaism and Christianity, and they are not part of the Indian caste system. Although the Munda have preserved much of their pre-Christian culture, they have absorbed a number of Christian traditions. They have many folk songs, dances, tales and traditional musical instruments. Both sexes participate in dances at social events and festivals. The naqareh is a principal musical instrument.

14. Baiga is a tribe found in Madhya Pradesh and population 250,000, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand states of India. The largest number of Baigas is found in Baiga-chuk in Mandla district and Balaghat district of Madhya Pradesh. They have sub-castes – Bijhwar, Narotia, Bharotiya, Nahar, Rai Bhaina, and Kadh Bhaina. The Baiga tribes practice shifting cultivation in the forest areas. They say they never ploughed the Earth, because it would be akin to scratching the breast of their Mother, and they could never ask their Mother to produce food from the same patch of earth time and time again – she would have become weakened

15. Great Andamanese- The **Great Andamanese** (Hindi: अण्डमानी *Anḍamānī* in Hindi) are an indigenous people of the Great Andaman archipelago in the Andaman Islands. Historically, the Great Andamanese lived throughout the archipelago, and were divided into ten major tribes. Their distinct but closely related languages comprised the Great Andamanese languages, one of the two identified Andamanese language families.^[3] The Great Andamanese were clearly related to the other Andamanese peoples, but were well separated from them by culture and geography. The languages of those other four groups were only distantly related to those of the Great Andamanese and mutually unintelligible; they are classified in a separate family, the Ongan languages.

16. Bonda- The **Bonda** (also known as the Bondo, Bondo Poraja, Bhonda, or Remo) are an ancient tribe of people numbering approximately 12,000 (2011 census) who live in the isolated hill regions of the Malkangiri district of southwestern Odisha, India, near the junction of the three states of Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and Andhra Pradesh.. There are two different Bonda tribes: the Upper Bondas with a population of 6,700 who are the most isolated from

mainstream Indian society, and the Lower Bonda with a population of 17,000. Upper Bondas have almost no connection to the outside world.

Some suggested books/journals:

1. **Indian Ethnobotany: Emerging Trends** by Prof. A. K. Jain
(ISBN: 9788172339609; E-ISBN: 9789386102126)
2. **Current Trends in Ethnobotany (Editorial)** *Tropical Journal of Pharmaceutical Research*, Vol. 8, No. 4, Aug, 2009, pp. 295-296.