

An Overview of the Korwa Tribal Community of Jharkhand

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Jharkhand is a culturally diverse region where numerous tribal communities coexist, each having distinct traditions, languages, and belief systems. Despite this diversity, they share a common dependence on nature for their livelihood, culture, and social practices. These communities follow their own customary laws, religious systems, and occupations, which often contribute to their vulnerability. Within them, certain groups remain highly isolated—geographically, socially, and economically—characterized by low literacy, poor health conditions, declining populations, and reliance on primitive agricultural practices.

Such groups were earlier identified as *Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs)*, now known as *Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs)* since 2006. These communities continue to live in remote areas with minimal infrastructure and limited access to administrative support, resulting in slow socio-economic development. Their identification began with the recommendations of the Dhebar Commission in 1961, which classified them as the most backward among tribal populations. Later, the Shilu Ao Committee emphasized the need for targeted development schemes.

Guidelines for identifying these groups were formalized through discussions in 1975 workshops and tribal conferences. The key criteria include a pre-agricultural level of technology, very low literacy rates, and stagnant or declining population. Since the Fifth Five-Year Plan, the government has taken steps for their planned development. The identification of PVTGs remains crucial, as it helps policymakers design focused interventions to address their complex socio-economic challenges.

The **Korwa PVTGs** are a Munda ethnic group of India. They live mostly within the border between Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. But at some extent the small population of Korwa are also living within the Mirzapur district of Uttar Pradesh. The tribe is divided into several subdivisions: the Agaria, Dandh, Dil and Pahadi Korwas.

Historical Background - According to popular legend, the Korwa were the original inhabitants of the Surguja region of Madhya Pradesh and held positions of leadership until stronger invading groups displaced them. Over time, they came to be viewed as a wandering group. The Korwa are divided into two distinct sub-groups: the Diharia (Kisan), who are settled farmers, and the Paharia (Benwaria), who inhabit hilly areas; these groups do not intermarry. Recognized as a Scheduled Tribe by the Government of India, they receive special support to improve their socio-economic conditions. The Korwa are found across the hills, forests, and valleys of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh. While they traditionally spoke the Korwa language, many now use regional languages such as Telugu.

Lifestyle of the Korwa Tribe

The Korwa tribe primarily depends on subsistence agriculture known as *jhoonga kheti*. This traditional method involves clearing parts of the forest to cultivate crops, especially lentils. Earlier, medium-sized trees were cut and burnt, but due to stricter forest regulations, they now clear only shrubs and bushes. Instead of burning, the organic matter is used as natural fertilizer. Farming is done with minimal or no tools, and each family typically produces around 20 kg of lentils—just enough for basic survival until the next season.

To supplement their livelihood, Korwa families craft *supas* (bamboo rice-cleaning tools), which they sell or use locally. Their diet is diverse and seasonal, including forest produce such as *mahua*, *kanda*, *sihar*, and *burju* fruits. They also consume various types of meat depending on availability.

Settlement Pattern

The settlement pattern of the tribal community is primarily of three types based on morphological studies.

Typology	Description of Settlement	Major Characteristics
Type I: Farmer-Dominated Village	A village predominantly inhabited by farming communities.	Agriculture-based livelihood; relatively organized settlement pattern.
Type II: Linear Settlement	A comparatively smaller settlement with up to 100 dwellings arranged in a linear pattern.	Houses aligned in rows facing each other along a street or pathway; structured layout.
Type III: Hilly/Forest Settlement	Settlements located in hilly areas, primarily inhabited by tribal communities dependent on forest produce.	Scattered dwellings without defined pathways; clusters of 3–4 houses; clusters located at varying distances due to uneven terrain.

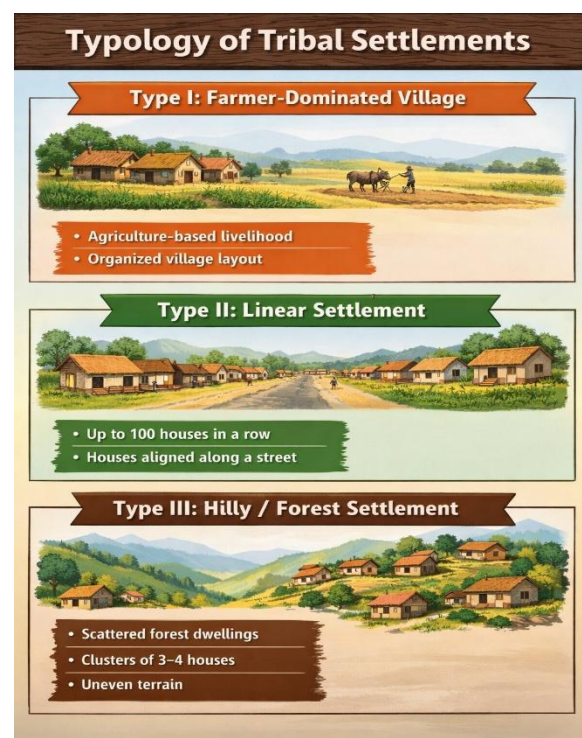
Explanation of Typology of Tribal Settlements

The above table and illustration present a **classification of tribal settlements into three major typologies**, based on livelihood patterns, geographical location, and settlement structure. This typology has been discussed in Indian anthropological and settlement studies, particularly in the works of L. P. Vidyarthi and B. K. Rai, and further elaborated by K. K. Dhote, P. Onkar, and S. Das (2012).

The first typology, referred to as the *Farmer-Dominated Village*, represents settlements where agriculture is the primary occupation. These villages tend to have a more organized and compact structure, with houses located near agricultural fields. The layout reflects relative permanence and dependence on land-based subsistence, aligning with the agrarian adaptation model discussed by L. P. Vidyarthi.

The second typology, known as the *Linear Settlement*, is comparatively smaller, generally consisting of up to 100 dwellings. The key feature is its linear arrangement, where houses are constructed in rows along a pathway or road. This pattern often develops due to accessibility needs and social interaction, representing a transitional form of settlement organization.

The third typology, identified as the *Hilly or Forest Settlement*, is typical of tribal groups inhabiting rugged and forested terrains. These settlements exhibit scattered housing patterns, with small clusters of three to four houses located at varying distances due to undulating landforms. The inhabitants rely heavily on forest-based livelihoods, which reflects an ecological adaptation model also highlighted in the studies of Nadeem Hasnain.



Overall, this typology demonstrates the strong interdependence between environment, livelihood, and settlement patterns in tribal societies. It provides valuable insights for understanding spatial organization and is particularly relevant for studies on tribes such as the Korwa, who inhabit forested and hilly regions.

Demographic and Social Profile of the Korwa Tribe

Category	Details
Population Distribution	Majority of the Korwa population resides in northeastern Chhattisgarh (129,429). A significant minority lives in western Jharkhand (35,606).
Presence in Uttar Pradesh	In Uttar Pradesh, Korwas are mainly found in the southern parts of Mirzapur and Sonbhadra districts.
Habitat	They inhabit hilly, forested, and undulating regions.
Sub-Groups	The community consists of four sub-groups: Agaria Korwa, Dam Korwa, Dih Korwa, and Pahar Korwa.
Clans	They are divided into seven exogamous clans: Guleria, Haril, Huhar, Leth, Munda, Mura, and Pahari.
Livelihood Pattern	Most Korwas are still hunter-gatherers and are among the most isolated communities in Uttar Pradesh. Some have adopted settled agriculture and are gradually assimilating into Hindu society.
Religious Practices	They worship their own deity known as <i>Dih</i> . Each settlement has a shrine dedicated to the goddess called a <i>Diwar</i> .
Population in Uttar Pradesh (2011 Census)	The Korwa Scheduled Caste population in Uttar Pradesh was 1,563 according to the 2011 Census of India.

The table presents a comprehensive overview of the demographic distribution and socio-cultural structure of the Korwa tribe across different regions of India. It highlights that the majority of the Korwa population is concentrated in northeastern parts of Chhattisgarh, while a considerable section resides in western Jharkhand. A smaller population is found in the southern districts of Mirzapur and Sonbhadra in Uttar Pradesh, indicating a geographically dispersed yet regionally clustered settlement pattern. This distribution reflects their historical movement and adaptation to forested and hilly terrains.

The habitat of the Korwa tribe is primarily characterized by hilly, forested, and uneven landscapes, which has significantly influenced their lifestyle, economic activities, and level of isolation. Their settlement in such remote areas has contributed to limited interaction with mainstream society and restricted access to developmental resources.

Socially, the Korwa community is internally organized into four major sub-groups—Agaria Korwa, Dam Korwa, Dih Korwa, and Pahar Korwa—each with distinct identities. Further, their division into seven exogamous clans such as Guleria, Haril, Huhar, Leth, Munda, Mura, and Pahari plays a crucial role in regulating marriage alliances and maintaining social order within the community.

In terms of livelihood, most Korwas continue to depend on traditional practices such as hunting and gathering, making them one of the more isolated tribal groups, especially in Uttar Pradesh. However, a gradual shift is observed as some members adopt settled agriculture and begin integrating with the broader Hindu social framework.

Religious life among the Korwas is deeply rooted in indigenous beliefs, with the worship of a local deity known as *Dih*. Each settlement typically has a shrine, called a *Diwar*, dedicated to this goddess, reflecting the importance of localized spiritual practices.

Anthropological Framework	Key Thinkers	Explanation / Application to Korwa Tribe
Structural–Functionalism (Social Order & Cohesion)	A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, Bronisław Malinowski	Cultural practices maintain social stability. Sept divisions (Hezda, Samati, Edikhar, Madikhar) regulate marriage through exogamy, preventing conflict. Interdining strengthens unity. Religious worship (Satbahini Devi) reinforces shared beliefs. Clustered housing promotes kinship bonding. Overall, Korwa society functions as a self-regulating system ensuring group survival.
Cultural Ecology (Human–Environment Interaction)	Julian Steward	Korwa lifestyle reflects adaptation to forest and hilly environments. <i>Kumba</i> huts are climate-suitable and resource-efficient. Use of mud, grass, and sal leaves shows sustainable resource use. Settlement patterns indicate ecological dependence. Food habits align with forest cycles, reflecting eco-centric living.
Symbolic & Interpretive Anthropology (Meaning & Identity)	Clifford Geertz	Culture is a system of meanings. Tattoos symbolize identity, adulthood, and belonging. Placement of tattoos reflects symbolic use of ornamentation. Worship of Satbahini Devi expresses spiritual beliefs. Architectural forms like <i>kumba</i> symbolize harmony with nature. Korwa culture represents a “web of meanings.”
Linguistic Anthropology (Language & Continuity)	—	The Korwa language (<i>Bhashi</i>) reflects ethnic identity and historical continuity. Use of Sadri and Chhattisgarhi shows adaptation and interaction. Multilingualism indicates negotiation between tradition and modernity. Language acts as both identity marker and integration tool.
Acculturation & Social Change	—	Korwa society is undergoing gradual change due to external influences. Adoption of new languages and housing shifts indicate cultural contact. Interaction with mainstream society modifies traditions, yet core elements (septs, rituals, beliefs) persist. This reflects selective adaptation and cultural resilience.
Material Culture & Subsistence Linkages	—	Material culture is closely tied to livelihood. Minimalistic housing reflects economic conditions and mobility. Use of natural materials shows low ecological impact. Cultural practices are directly linked to survival strategies and subsistence patterns.

Finally, the table notes that according to the 2011 Census of India, the Korwa population classified under Scheduled Castes in Uttar Pradesh was 1,563, indicating their relatively small and marginalized presence in the state. Overall, the table provides insight into the Korwa tribe’s demographic spread, social organization, economic practices, and cultural identity.

Anthropological Analysis of Korwa Cultural Practices

The table provides a structured yet comprehensive way to understand the cultural life of the Korwa tribe through different anthropological perspectives. It should be read as an integrated framework where each row contributes to a deeper and layered understanding of the community rather than as isolated pieces of information. The column on anthropological frameworks introduces the theoretical lenses used to interpret culture, while the column on key thinkers connects these perspectives to established scholars such as A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, Bronisław Malinowski, Julian Steward, and Clifford Geertz, thereby grounding the analysis in recognized anthropological theory.

The explanation column forms the core of the table, illustrating how these theoretical approaches apply to the lived realities of the Korwa people. It reveals that their social organization, such as the division into septs and marriage rules, contributes to maintaining order and cohesion within the community. At the same time, their housing patterns, food habits, and settlement choices demonstrate a close and adaptive relationship with the natural environment. Cultural expressions like tattooing and religious practices are shown not merely as traditions but as meaningful symbols that reflect identity, belief systems, and a deep connection with nature. Language further adds another dimension by preserving cultural continuity while also enabling interaction with neighboring communities through multilingual practices.

When viewed as a whole, the table highlights that Korwa culture is not static but dynamic, balancing tradition with gradual change. It demonstrates how their way of life is socially organized, ecologically adapted, symbolically rich, and continuously evolving under external influences while still retaining its core identity. This integrated reading helps transform the table from a simple presentation of information into a deeper anthropological understanding of the Korwa tribe, making it especially valuable for academic interpretation and research analysis.

Cultural Profile of the Korwa Tribe

Category	Details	Explanation
Religious Beliefs	The Korwa tribe worships Satbahini Devi as an important deity.	Their religious belief reflects a strong connection with nature and local deities. Worship of Satbahini Devi indicates indigenous faith systems where spiritual life is closely linked with environmental and community well-being.
Social Structure (Septs)	The Pahadia Korwa are divided into four septs: Hezda, Samati, Edikhar, and Madikhar, which intermarry and interdine. The Deharia Korwas have three septs: Dewanihar, Dhanuhar, and Majhi.	The sept system regulates marriage alliances and promotes social harmony. Intermarriage and interdining strengthen unity and prevent social isolation, ensuring cohesion within the community.
Housing Pattern	Hill Korwas live in mud huts with a central room and verandahs. Some houses have two rooms. The <i>kumba</i> is a small round hut with a conical roof made of grass and sal leaves, with a low door and fencing.	Their housing reflects adaptation to the forest environment and economic conditions. Use of local materials shows sustainability, while simple structures indicate a subsistence lifestyle and climatic suitability.
Body Art and Dress	Both men and women practice tattooing on wrists, neck, chest, legs, and ankles. Men traditionally wear a loincloth.	Tattooing serves as a cultural identity marker and may symbolize social status, tradition, and aesthetics. Simple dress reflects environmental adaptation and limited material resources.
Language	The Korwa language (Ernga/Singli), locally called <i>Bhashi</i> , belongs to the Munda branch of the Austroasiatic family. They also speak Sadri and Chhattisgarhi.	Language preserves cultural identity and heritage. The use of multiple languages shows interaction with other communities and gradual integration while maintaining their linguistic roots.

Conclusion

From an anthropological perspective, the Korwa tribe exemplifies a society where social structure, ecology, and culture are deeply interconnected. However, the process of acculturation is gradually transforming their traditional way of life. While some have adopted settled agriculture and partial integration into mainstream society, core cultural elements remain intact, reflecting resilience and continuity.

In conclusion, the Korwa tribe represents both the richness of indigenous knowledge systems and the pressing need for inclusive development. Addressing their challenges requires culturally sensitive policies that respect their traditions while improving access to health, education, and sustainable livelihoods. Such an approach is essential for ensuring balanced development without eroding their unique cultural identity.

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