

An Anthropological Study of Dances and Musics of Northern Odisha's Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs)

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Abstract: This study explores the rich cultural expressions of dance and music among the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) of Northern Odisha, with a focus on communities such as the Birhor, Lodha and Kharia. These art forms are not merely aesthetic practices but serve as vital expressions of identity, spirituality, and social cohesion. Through an anthropological lens, the research investigates how traditional performances are integrated into the life cycle rituals, seasonal festivals, and belief systems of these communities. It further examines how gender roles, oral traditions, and local cosmologies are embedded in musical instruments, movements, rhythms, and song texts. The objectives **to identify and select** specific PVTG communities known for their unique musical and dance traditions and to examine how dance and music preserve collective identity, pass down oral traditions, and foster social cohesiveness in the neighbourhood. The study has been conducted in Mayurbhanj PVTGs of Odisha. Fieldwork methods such as observation, interviews, and audio-visual documentation are employed to capture these performances in their lived contexts. The study also addresses the challenges posed by modernization, cultural assimilation, and inter-community influence, which are gradually reshaping traditional practices. Ultimately, the research aims to contribute to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage by highlighting the significance and evolving nature of dance and music among Odisha's most marginalized tribal populations.

Keywords: Dance, Music, PVTGs, Intangible Culture, Mayurbhanj

Introduction

Not much work has been done to study the interaction of traditional dances form of the Particular Primitive Tribal Groups (PVTGs). In the present paper an attempt has been made of study the different PVTG traditional dances and songs elaborate in India (Misra & Kapoor, 2004).

In the Indian Subcontinent, dancing is used in so many different and extensive ways for symbolic and ritual purposes that we are forced to limit our discussion to a few broad points. The choreutic ritual tradition of the PVTGs, an indigenous group from several parts of India, is documented in this article. The essay draws attention to the difference between the modern performances during the capital's tribal festival (Adivasi Mela) and the traditional ritual motions. The latter are performed endlessly without any religious significance (Beggiora, 2016). The funeral dance, which is proudly performed in traditional attire by indigenous delegations visiting urban regions, is akin to a plea for the identity of a quickly vanishing indigenous culture.

Literature Review

Anthropologists and ethnomusicologists have long emphasized the role of music and dance in Indigenous societies as forms of **non-verbal communication and social memory**. According to **Elwin (1944)**, in his study of central Indian tribes, including Baigas and Birhors (now classified as PVTGs), music and dance are integral to rituals surrounding birth, marriage, harvest, and death. These performances are deeply **communal and participatory**, often involving entire villages and reflecting a close relationship with **nature and seasonal cycles**.

Xaxa (1999) also highlights how tribal music and dance embody Indigenous worldviews, especially their **animistic beliefs** and **cosmic order**, which are often expressed through rhythmic drumming, body movements, and repetitive chants. For example, the **Dongria Kondh** of Odisha use music not only in festivals but also in everyday tasks, often combining **song and labour** in cooperative settings. However, critics such as **Basu (2011)** argue that many state-led preservation efforts treat tribal arts as **static or exotic**, rather than supporting **community-led revitalization**.

There is also a growing need for **inclusive education and cultural programming** that respects tribal epistemologies. As **Kujur (2018)** points out, empowering tribal youth to engage with their own musical and dance traditions through schools and cultural spaces can serve both as a form of **self-expression** and **cultural resilience**.

Objectives

1. **To identify and select** specific PVTG communities known for their unique musical and dance traditions.
2. To examine how dance and music preserve collective identity, pass down oral traditions, and foster social cohesiveness in the neighbourhood.

3. **To understand the cultural and social significance** of music and dance in the daily life, rituals, and festivals of the PVTG communities.
4. **To identify the key instruments, rhythms, songs, and movement patterns** used in PVTG music and dance practices.

Area of Study and Methods

This study explores the rich cultural expressions of dance and music among the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) of Northern Odisha, with a focus on communities such as the Birhor, Lodha, Mankidia and Hill Kharia. The present qualitative study has adopted different anthropological methods for both primary and secondary data collection. This study has been conducted in month of February, 2025. Fieldwork methods such as observation, interviews, books and audio-visual documentation are employed to capture these performances in their lived contexts. The study also addresses the challenges posed by modernization, cultural assimilation, and inter-community influence, which are gradually reshaping traditional practices. Ultimately, the research aims to contribute to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage by highlighting the significance and evolving nature of dance and music among Odisha's most marginalized tribal populations.

Discussion and Results

The Birhor

There is a small tribe known as the Birhor, or jungle folk, who speak a dialect of Kolarian. They mostly live as wild nomads or semi-nomadic people in Jharkhand's highlands and forest. They move around in small groups of three to ten families, hunting and crafting strings for a meagre living. They have very little money (Kujur & Topno, 1996). Little branches and leaves make up their dwellings. When their resources for survival run out, they go from forest to forest.

Origin

According to Chaudhary (1961), the Birhors affirm, that they and the *Kherwars* are of the same race and have descended from the sun. According to a myth, there came seven brothers from Khairagarh (now it is called *Kaimur* hills); four went to the east, and three brothers remained in the Ramgarh district. One day when the three brothers were going out to fight against the chiefs of the country, the head gear of one of them got entangled in a tree. He decided it was a terrible omen and stayed in the forest. Without

him, his two brothers defeated the chiefs, and when they returned, they saw that their brother was working to cut the chop's bark. In response, he said that he would rather rule the forest as a Birhor than hang out with such arrogant brothers. The other two brothers rose to become Rajesh of Ramgarh, a nation.

The Birhor Dances

Like other tribes, the Birhor Tribe has a very rich cultural history. There are various strategies to strengthen the ties of community life in their otherwise unstable lives. Some of the social mechanisms to maintain the cohesiveness of their tribe include celebrations, festivities, social gatherings, etc. In addition to providing them with a means of decompressing and having fun after a hard day of labour and survival, dances also very clearly convey their philosophy of life, which holds that life is a celebration for them despite the anxieties, frustrations, deaths, pains, suffering and evil they encounter on a daily basis. It should be mentioned that the bulk of Bihors reside in the district of Hazaribagh and Palamau. Given that many ethnic groups predominate in both areas, they have a significant influence on the songs, dances, feasts, festivals, signs and symbols that are specific to the Birhor people. For example, the Korwa and Oraon communities in Palamau have a great deal of influence over the Birhor, who have adopted certain of their festivals that they would not have otherwise celebrated. The similar situation has also occurred in Hazaribagh, where a substantial Santal population resides. The Birhor live in their vicinity and it is quite obvious that their modes of celebrations cannot but be influenced by the Santals.

Types of Dances

The Birhor tribe's dances can be categorised according to the steps, feasts, and season. Certain dances are considered seasonal since they are only performed during certain specific times of the year; similarly, seasonal melodies share similar qualities. They can only be performed at a specific season due to their unique sound and melody. There are dances that can only be done during the season of a feast or while celebrating it, and songs are connected to feasts. It should be mentioned that every dancing style has a standard movement that can be either forward, backward, or both. Though dances can be classified on the basis of the criteria given above, they cannot really be separated from one another as it would lead to compartmentalisation which is uncharacteristic of tribal culture. Here we identify the Birhor dances on the basis of the feasts they celebrate. According to Roy (1925), Bihors keep the following *Kolarian* festivals:

(a) *Magh-Parab* in January, (b) *Phagun* - the Hunting festival, in February, (c) *Sarhul* in March, (d) *Karam* and *Jittia* in September, (e) *Dasai* and *Sohrai* in October. The details about the Birhor dances are scanty, yet the dances at various festivals are classified as follows:

1. **The Lujh'ri Dance:** They dance the *Lujh'ri* at the *Karam* and the *Jittiya*.
2. **The Jarga Dance:** The *Jarga* dance is performed at the *Phagua* and *Sarhul*.
3. **The Sautari Dance:** The *Sautari* dance of the *Birhors* is performed at other times.

According to Sahu (1995, p.140), they celebrate the following festivals: (a) *Phagu*, (b) *Sarhul*, (c) *Karam*, (d) *Jitia*, (e) *Dashhara*, (f) *Sankrant*, (g) *Bonjha*, (h) *New Jam*, etc. During festivals, the offerings are given to different deities either at family level or at *Tanda* level. The *Naya* (Religious Head) either assists in the worship or himself performs for the benefit of the entire *Tanda*. Sahu's study being more recent than that of Roy, shows the impact of festivals.) non-Birhor influences on the Birhor festivals.

Roy (1925, p.503-507) mentions about Birhor songs and dances. According to him, the Birhors have two principal varieties of dances:

1. The Dong dance
2. The Mutkar Dance

Furthermore, it appears that the *Jaghi* segment of the tribe has included the *Jadur* (featuring *Gena*) and *Karam* (with *Khemta*, *Jhumar*, and *Hansda*) dances from nearby tribes. There are also a few Uthulu groups that can be seen doing the *Karam* dance. The proper songs for each of these dances are called the *Dong siring*, *Lagre siring*, *Mutkar siring*, etc. Three traditional Birhor dances the *Dong*, *Lagre*, and *Mutkar* are performed during wedding rituals to the accompaniment of marital songs. A few specimens of the songs are given below:

Dong Siring (Dong Song)

Kita-latar-re jik
Bunung-latar-re harba
Tui-alangmehale jik do
Therang-alangmehale harba.

(Under yon palm tree was a porcupine; within yon ant-hill was a *harba* (small animal with scaly skin), with our arrow we have shot

Mutkar Siring

*Gara bera dokta roa ledaing;
Dokta do panddu-ana.
Pandu buri honte kuri
Sindur batikiaing.*

(Tobacco by the river side I sowed, the tobacco with heat turned white. The white-headed old dame's girl, I seized and her forehead with vermilion smeared.)

The Lodha

Dance is an integral part of tribal life and their culture. It is percussion with songs and music. Therefore, tribal people perform these and for many purposes like to follow their traditional culture, mythological beliefs, cosmological importance and recreational purposes and so on. These things are centred on their traditional life and culture (Duary, 1996). In two Lodha-inhabited (exposed and less exposed) villages in the western section of the Medinipur district of West Bengal, the author conducted fieldwork for the current study. The DE Notified Tribe is the name given to this tribe. They are essentially woodland inhabitants who rely on the economy of hunting and food collecting. They are classified as a Primitive Tribal Group (PTG) in West Bengal and are now in the pre-agricultural stage of the economy. It was noted throughout the fieldwork that the Lodhas continue to uphold and practise their ancient customs. They have also adopted a lot of the cultural practices of the Hindu neighbours. However, the Lodha perform ceremonial dances mainly for recreational purpose. This article briefly discussed their ethnographic aspect as well as their songs, music, dances and the changes, that are taking place.

The hunter-gatherer Lodha is a tribal community in West Bengal and Odisha. They are mainly concentrated in Western rural forest fringe area of Medinipur district in this state. These tribal people have migrated from forest areas of South India and settled in Bihar, Bengal and Orissa (Bhowmick, 1963).

Lodha identified themselves as Saver or Lodha Saver. According to 1981 census their total population is 53,718 and the literacy rate is only 9.27%. However, on occasion they also rely on the forest for sustenance. For the Lodhas, nuclear families are the norm. Their surnames are the nine exogamous totemistic clans that they belong to. Married Lodha women wear iron bracelets and apply vermilion to their foreheads. These people follow customs related to birth, marriage, and death. Three key posts make up the ancient village council of Lodha: the Paramanik village chef, the *dakua* or *Kotal* village messenger, and the *mukhia* or village headman. They resolve conflicts in

the community. Nonetheless, a distinct village committee is in charge of planning group celebrations. Three people make up this committee: the *deheri*, or village priest; the *talia*, or priest's helper; and the *hantakari*, or percussionist. The Lodhas worship certain Hindu gods and goddesses in addition to their own customary deities, ghosts. They have faith in spirits and unseen forces. Their ultimate deity is *Bhagawan*. They worship the *Basumata* throughout the marriage ritual. Since Dharam Devata is associated with truth, they honour these gods at all celebrations and rituals. They honour the *Sitala*, *Chandi*, and *Manasa*, who guard them against snakebite, wild animals, and diseases, respectively. A strong deity is the *Baram Devata*. As a result, they revere the earthen (burned) elephant as a representation of *Baram* for the good of their community. They even firmly believe in the terrifying spirit *Yugini*. In addition, the Lodha celebrates a variety of Hindu minor festivals related to agriculture, such as *Bandana*, *Lakshmi*, *Tusu*, and *Jhumur* (dancing). They offer sacrifices of hens and goats to all deities, with the exception of *Lakshmi*, *Bhagawan*, *Basumata*, and *Tusu*. The Lodha conduct traditional dances accompanied by music and melodies during festivals and social rituals such as marriages. But the only people in their society who can engage in this performance art are men.

Dance and Music

They claim that, in the genuine sense, Lodha people perform dance, music, and songs for fun. Through socialisation, they learn this performance talent from the elders of the village. However, it is a reality that the younger Lodhas have little interest in preserving their cultural legacy. All members of the community do, however, take part in dancing during the group festivals and even at private social events. They have no particular place for dancing. They usually dance on the village lane or another public area of their community. However, the Lodhas are required to dance in front of the deity at the *Baram* festivals, or at the *Baram* Than location. These indigenous folk offer prayers and reverence to Dharam Devata before engaging in any dancing performance. When there is dancing, they play a single percussion instrument along with a few other extremely basic musical instruments. These are either *Bi-Kundali* or *Chagal* instruments. Flute and *Madal*. The *Chagal* is a special kind of skin drum used in percussion that is supported by a flat, rounded wooden frame. One side of it is exposed. In this state, this instrument is exclusive to the Lodhas. This instrument is not their own, probably it is borrowed from neighbouring tribal communities. Wind instrument called Bansi or bamboo flute is also used by the Lodha. They play these musical instruments during the communal festivals.

There are six or seven male members of Lodha's dancing squad. Every dancer dons a white banian or shirt along with a Dhoti. With their left hands, they grasp a single *Changal*. Every dancer executes the dance in a single curved line, advancing with their right foot first and then their left. The dancing line always proceeds anticlockwise, from right to left. The dancers always take a heeled step backward. Then they go forward in the same manner. Male members of the society play the music while either sex sings and plays throughout the dance. The music progressively gets louder. Dancers also play the *Changal*. Ceremonial and festival dances of Lodha are mostly same type, but meaning of songs, tune and rhythm, are different from each other. The Lodha performs the dances in the evenings, and continue up to the late night.

The Mankidia

As one of the 13 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) of Odisha, India, the Mankidia are a nomadic tribal people. They primarily inhabit the forested and remote districts of Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Sundargarh, and Kalahandi, living on the fringes of villages or deep inside forests. Their name, *mankada*, which means monkey, reflects their historic occupation of hunting monkeys for royal courts and forest departments. The Mankidia are traditionally recognized for their ability to make rope from *siali* (*Bauhinia vahlii*) fiber.

Economically, the Mankidia are semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers, heavily dependent on the forest for their livelihood. They collect non-timber forest products (NTFPs) such as honey, roots, tubers, medicinal herbs, and firewood. Their traditional knowledge of forest ecology and wildlife is deep and often orally transmitted across generations. However, with the gradual restriction of forest access due to environmental laws and development pressures, their livelihood base has become increasingly vulnerable.

The Mankidia speak a dialect influenced by Mundari (Austroasiatic language family), though many are also conversant in Odia for external communication. They live in small, temporary settlements known as *tandia* made from leaves and branches, reflecting their mobility and adaptability to forest life. Their social organization is simple, usually structured around nuclear families and small kin groups, with a community elder or traditional head acting as the decision-maker in group affairs. Religiously, the Mankidia are animists, worshipping spirits of nature such as the forest, hills, sun, and ancestors. They observe rituals and ceremonies during seasonal cycles, illnesses, or births and deaths, often led by a community priest or healer. While their cultural practices, songs, and dances are less formalized compared to settled tribes, they do possess oral traditions and ritual songs that are integral to their identity.

In recent decades, the Mankidia have faced increasing marginalization due to loss of traditional livelihoods, displacement, low literacy, lack of healthcare, and exclusion from mainstream development processes. Their classification as a PVTG underscores their socio-economic vulnerability and the need for targeted, culturally sensitive development interventions. Anthropological studies emphasize the urgency of preserving their knowledge systems and supporting their right to forest-based life while ensuring access to education, healthcare, and secure livelihoods.

Dances of the Mankidia

Unlike more settled tribal communities with elaborate dance traditions, the **dance and music of the Mankidia are minimalistic in form but rich in symbolic content**. Their dances are largely **informal and participatory**, often performed during communal gatherings, festive occasions, marriage ceremonies, and seasonal transitions. These performances typically take place in open spaces near their temporary leaf-and-bamboo shelters (*tandia*), with the community gathering around in a circular or semi-circular formation. The **Mankidia dance forms** are not categorized by strict genre, but rather by **function and context**. Two general types can be identified:

1. **Ritual Dance:** These are performed during religious observances and spiritual rituals, particularly those involving forest deities or ancestor spirits. Movements in these dances are subtle, with a focus on rhythmic foot tapping and hand gestures that symbolize reverence or invocation. These are usually led by the village elder or *deheri* (priest), often accompanied by ritual chants.
2. **Celebration Dance:** Performed during marriage ceremonies, birth celebrations, and collective hunting successes, these dances are livelier and include basic steps executed in coordination with group clapping and chanting. The community, including both men and women, participates freely. These dances serve to strengthen communal identity and social harmony.

The Khariar Tribe

The Kharias have derived their name from *kharkharia*, palanquin or litter according to Russell and Hiralal as found in Singh (1994). According to Singh, they are distributed in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and West Bengal.

The original habitat of the Hill Kharias is unknown and ambiguous. Regarding their origins, the Kharias have a tale. After creating the earth and the sky, God made a peahen that deposited an egg (Kujur, 1996). The egg cracked open. The first ancestor of the Oraons emerged from the egg's membrane; the ancestor of the Mayurbhanj's

ruling *Bhanja* family emerged from the egg's yellow; the ancestor of the Hill Kharias, Adi Kharia, emerged from the egg's shell; and the first Purana, a tribe residing in the Mayurbhanj, emerged from the egg's white. According to reports, this happened today in the *Panchpir* Subdivision of the state of Mayurbhanj, which is known as *Adipur*.

The dances dealt here are of the Kharias, mainly of two states, namely, Bihar and Orissa, where a sizable number of Kharia population resides. The primary sources for this study on the Kharia Dances are Vidyarthi and Upadhyay (1980) and Chattopadhyay (1978). The Kharias are considered to be excellent dancers, according to Chattopadhyay (1978, p. 276-279), who provides a thorough categorization and description of the Kharia dances. They dance a variety of styles. The following characteristics can be observed when analysing the Kharia dances: Youths from Kharia, both genders dancing together. Some dances have the dancers split into two groups, one for men and one for women, and they sing one after the other. Through the song, there seems to be a conversion taking place between the lads and the girls. Men and women will sometimes dance together as well. Teenagers might also accompany them. Typically, the drummers are positioned between the two groups or inside the circle if there are two rows. Regarding the song's beginning while dancing, it is started by the leader or leaders, who then lead the rest in singing the entire stanza while dancing to the song's melody. There's a standard raga for each season. You just cannot sing the tunes of that season outside. In a similar vein, the dances associated with a specific season or event are intended exclusively for that season. The Kharia dances are given below.

Classification of Kharia Dances

1. **The Hario Dance:** January through February are the months when the *Hario* dance is performed. Boys and girls typically dance the *Hario* dance in the *Jatras* or at dancing gatherings that alternate between villages. Several villages send men and women to participate in these dances. The dancers first form columns but occasionally separate into a line, with each dancer laying his or her hands on the neck of the dancer on each side of them. This dance has martial steps. The movements happen quite quickly. At moments, it seems as though the dancers are sprinting. At times, they adopt an upright stance, holding hands and doing circular dances in a row. Men play on the '*mandar*' (traditional drum).
2. **The Kinbhar Dance:** During the Phalgun to Baisakh season, which runs from February to May, the Kinbhar dances are performed. These dances are sometimes referred to as courtyard dances or *angan*. The dancers move in a circle while dancing, but as soon as the verse is sung, they advance and begin to sing "*Ho-re*

Hre” or “*Hir-r-r-r*.” The drummers step backwards as the dancers advance; their faces turned towards the group of dancers. The drummers follow the dancers as they, in turn, retrace their movements. The dancers once more circle around each other as they return to their starting location. In one particular dance, even the drummers stoop during the performance. The slow steps in this dance involve putting one foot on the ground and moving the other foot either forward or backward. In one particular dance, the dancers form two rows, step forward, and then, as they approach each other, stamp their feet angrily on the ground and step back, occasionally stooping along the way.

3. **The Halka Dance:** Similar to a number of other dances, the *Halka* dance is executed in an orderly method by both sexes performing in rows. Two parties are formed out of them. Everybody takes a turn singing. Every dancer in a queue clasps the left arm of the dancer next to them on the right with their right arm and the right arm of the dancer next to them on the left with their left arm. The hands are held slightly forward and connected from the palm to the elbow. The *Halka* dance is notable for the fact that it is performed solely to musical accompaniment in the form of song. Every group circle around the other, bending slightly in the process. The dancers of each party, dispersed in a line and each with a half turn, stop abruptly at the end of a song or verse. They perform two short jumps, a long jump, and a high jump before loudly stamping their feet to the ground and yelling “*Hur-r-r*” or “*Hir-r-r-r*” in unison. Once more, they arrange themselves into lines and, moving ahead with deliberate gaits, dance or rather march, with each group taking turns singing a verse or song. People of all sexes, young and old, dance this dance. We categorise the *Halka* dancing music as ‘*Paru*’. Young men and boys, sitting on hills or meadows, or grazing cattle, also *sing paru* melodies without dancing. The singer’s voice fluctuates between high and low notes. *Jethuari Paru* refers to the songs sung from *Baisakh* and *Jeth* (mid-April to mid-June), whereas *Kuari Paru* refers to the songs sung from *Aswin* to *Pous* (mid-September to mid-January).

The Kasa Kudhing Dances

Men and women dance together in this style, clasping each other’s necks as they advance and retreat in deliberate steps while crouching, with each dancer’s legs rising and falling in unison. The men pounding out the drums face the dancers and move forward and backward in time with them.

The Indrail Kudhing Dances

The *Indrail* dances are another class of *Kudhing* dance. They are performed in the month of *Kuar* or *Aswin* (September-October). They are, again, of three classes:

The Jadhura Dance

Women can do the *Jadhura* dances by themselves or in pairs, holding each other's arms. They assume a low, stooped stance and go forward and backward in controlled steps. Each dancer's legs rise and fall simultaneously in synchronisation. The drummers' legs move in the opposite row in the same manner. As one row moves back during the dance, the other row follows suit. However, when there is just one row of dancers, the drummers move backward while the dancers advance, and vice versa.

Conclusion

This comprehensive ethnographic overview highlights the rich and diverse cultural expressions of several Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in India, such as the Birhor, Lodha, Mankidia, and Kharia communities. Despite differences in language, geography, and livelihood patterns, a common thread among these tribes is the central role of music and dance in their rituals, festivals, and daily life. These traditions are not merely recreational but are deeply tied to religious beliefs, seasonal cycles, and social identity. While groups like the Lodha and Birhor emphasize ceremonial dances tied to feasts and agricultural events, others like the Kharia and Mankidia integrate storytelling and ancestral reverence into performance. The interactions with neighbouring communities and the influence of dominant cultures are also evident in the borrowing of festivals and musical instruments. However, modern challenges such as migration, low literacy, poverty, and youth disinterest are threatening the transmission of these traditions. Nevertheless, the persistence of such expressive practices underlines their cultural resilience and the need for culturally sensitive preservation efforts that empower tribal voices and sustain their intangible heritage.

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