

Tradition, Livelihoods, Sustainability and Aspirations: The Ho Tribe Perspectives

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Abstract—This article explores the complex socio-economic life of the Ho tribe in the Mayurbhanj district of Odisha. With roots tracing back to the Proto-Australoid racial group and deep cultural ties to the forested lands of Jharkhand and Odisha, the Ho community represents both traditional tribal resilience and contemporary struggles in transitioning to modernity. Through an extensive review of literature, field data from Nipania village in Thakurmunda block, and demographic analysis, this article discusses the evolution of the Ho tribe's livelihoods, family systems, social organization, religion, and their interaction with external forces such as colonialism and modern state mechanisms.

Index Terms—Ho tribe, Mayurbhanj, socio-economic life, tribal livelihoods, Odisha, forest economy, Warang Chiti, Singhbonga.

I INTRODUCTION, LITERATURE REVIEW OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The Ho tribe is an indigenous group primarily located in Odisha, Jharkhand, and West Bengal. Their name, "Ho," meaning "man" or "people," traces their origin to the Munda family, with strong linguistic roots in the Proto-Munda language and influence from Vedic and Indo-Aryan languages. Historically known as Kolha, the Hos were significantly impacted by British colonialism, which altered their traditional village systems. Though initially isolated, the Hos were later governed directly under British rule, transforming their socio-economic and political structures.

British colonization led to the assimilation of traditional tribal governance, with Mankis and Mundas becoming state functionaries. This shift disrupted the communal balance, leading to the loss of autonomy and land to non-tribal outsiders (Dikus).

Traditional shifting cultivation practices were replaced with settled agriculture due to demographic pressures and forest conservation laws. These changes narrowed the Ho economic base, intensifying dependence on agriculture and eroding their access to forest resources. The legal recognition of Dikus further marginalized tribal rights, creating social fragmentation and elite capture of tribal institutions.

Hebbar (2005) emphasizes the invisibility of women in the discourse of land rights within the Ho community. Through ethnographic engagement, Hebbar illustrates how Ho women, though integral to agricultural and forest-based activities, are excluded from land ownership. The marginalization of women undermines the community's claim of egalitarianism and ecological harmony. Recognizing women's contribution would strengthen tribal identity and redefine social structures toward greater gender equality.

Linguistic studies by Anderson & Gordon (2005) and Harrison (2007) focus on the endangered status of the Ho language, a Munda language spoken by over one million people. Despite its vitality in oral form, literacy in Ho is extremely low. The unique Warang Chiti script, developed by Lako Bodra in the 1950s, remains largely excluded from digital platforms due to lack of font support. Efforts such as the Ho Talking Dictionary aim to preserve and promote the language by creating online access and scholarly tools.

Ota and Mohanty (2011) describe the Ho as a Kolarian tribe sharing ethnic roots with the Munda and Kol. Their settlements feature dancing arenas (Akhara), sacred groves (Sarna), and ancestral tombstones. Social life is shaped by exogamous totemic clans (killi) and marriage customs that

include capture, negotiation, and elopement. Tattooing is prevalent among Ho women, and Singbonga (Sun God) is central to religious life. The village deity Dessauli resides in the Sarna, and earth-digging, basketry, and rope-making are common skills.

Patnaik (2008) identifies Ho people by their physical characteristics—short stature, dark complexion, and broad features. Housing is constructed with mud and thatch, often on elevated terrain with defined village boundaries. Traditional tools, hunting weapons, and fishing equipment reflect their close ties with the environment. The Ho continue to rely on a subsistence agriculture economy, growing rice, maize, and vegetables, and practicing mutual cooperation for farming activities.

Ota and Mohanty (2011) also detail life-cycle rituals including childbirth, puberty, and death. Birth is sacred and associated with Singbonga. Adolescent girls observe strict taboos during menstruation. Modern clothing is replacing traditional attire due to urban exposure. Divorce is culturally accepted and adjudicated by traditional leaders. Cremation is practiced for natural deaths, while burials are reserved for unnatural deaths like suicide or snakebites.

Das Gupta (1978) and Majumdar (1950) analyze religious transformations in Ho society. While the Ho traditionally worship Bongas (spiritual forces), they have adopted several Hindu practices and deities, including Manasa Devi (snake goddess), Satamai, and Chandi. These deities are worshipped in tribalized forms, using hybrid rituals that combine tribal and Hindu elements. The influence of Hinduism is evident in the rise of spirit doctors (Deonwas) and mantras derived from Hindu traditions, taught in local Akhara (training centers).

Majumdar (1950) further critiques how the malevolent Bongas in Ho belief is often adapted versions of Hindu gods like Kali, Rahu, and Chandi. The terminology and ritual forms bear linguistic and symbolic resemblances to Hindu practices. Tribal worship now includes rice beer, bananas, and vermilion—elements seen in both tribal and Hinduised rituals. Mantras and spiritual chants are sung in Oriya-accented Bengali, taught by Hindu gurus.

Although the literature reviewed provides rich insights into Ho culture, economy, and religion, there

are notable gaps. No previous study has focused specifically on Nipania village in Mayurbhanj district. Female perspectives, especially regarding livelihood, health, water, and sanitation, remain underrepresented. This study seeks to fill that gap by prioritizing women's voices and focusing on a micro-level ethnographic context.

The objectives of the article are multi-faceted and grounded in an in-depth exploration of the community. The first objective is to examine the origin and settlement patterns of the Ho tribe to understand their historical presence and spatial distribution in the region. The second objective is to document the socio-cultural dimensions and family structures that define their traditional lifestyle. The third objective focuses on analyzing their economic activities, including agriculture, forest product collection, and wage labour, which serve as the primary sources of livelihood. The final objective is to assess the social changes, development indicators, and cultural transformations that are reshaping the Ho tribe's identity amidst growing modern aspirations and external influences.

The study employed a qualitative and quantitative research approach to explore the socio-economic dimensions of the Ho tribe in Mayurbhanj. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, informal discussions, and direct observations conducted in Nipania village of Thakurmunda Block. Respondents included a diverse group comprising tribal members, government employees, NGO representatives, and social workers, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the community's conditions. A total of sixty Ho men and women participated in the primary survey, selected purposively to represent various age groups, occupations, and social statuses. The collected data were systematically coded and processed using SPSS software for statistical analysis and interpretation.

II HISTORICAL ROOTS AND CULTURAL TRADITIONS OF THE HO TRIBE

The study contributes to understanding the transitional life of the Ho tribe, highlighting their strengths and vulnerabilities. It emphasizes the importance of cultural continuity amidst socio-economic change and aims to support policy design and academic inquiry. Ethical considerations

included informed consent and proper attribution of secondary sources.

Ho families are patrilineal, patriarchal, and patrilocal. The village is the fundamental social unit, where clans (called "killi") operate under totemic symbols, prohibiting intra-clan marriage. Mutual cooperation, reciprocity, and collective life are deeply embedded. Men plough, and both genders engage in other agricultural tasks. Main crops include rice, maize, and millets, along with vegetables grown in home gardens. Forest gathering, hunting, and fishing complement agriculture. Physically, the Ho are of short stature with dark complexions, but are noted for their courage, intelligence, and martial heritage.

The Ho religion, called Bongaism, centers on Bonga spirits, especially Singhbonga, the sun god and life-giver. Bongas are believed to inhabit natural entities like rivers, trees, hills, and animals. Religious leaders, known as Dehuri, serve as intermediaries between the community and these spirits. Rituals involve offerings of rice, hens, goats, and rice beer (diang). Death is believed to result from spiritual causes, and burial practices emphasize southern orientation to align with the journey to Singhbonga. Sasandhiri (memorial stones) mark ancestral graves, reflecting deep spiritual ties to land and ancestors.

Each Ho village maintains a sacred forest patch called jahira, home to the village deity Desauli. This deity is central to the Ho claim of Khuntkatti (founder's) rights. Some Ho villages also worship non-tribal deities like Pauri, reflecting cultural accommodation and adaptation. Worship rituals are closely linked with agricultural cycles and village festivals. The social organization revolves around religious and seasonal functions that maintain cultural identity.

Despite participation in agriculture, forest collection, and wage labor, the Ho continue to face poverty, underdevelopment, and educational backwardness. While government welfare schemes and economic modernization have introduced some change, their benefits remain uneven. Mining, industrial labor, and civil works have opened new income streams, yet tribal land alienation, low literacy, and lack of permanent jobs persist as structural barriers. The key concern is whether development is enhancing their quality of life or creating new forms of dependency.

III DISTRICT PROFILE: LIVELIHOOD PATTERNS AND ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES

Mayurbhanj, once a princely state ruled by the Bhanja dynasty for over a millennium, merged with the Indian Union in 1949. It is Odisha's largest district, known for its rich biodiversity (especially the Similipal forest) and vibrant tribal culture, including the renowned Chhau dance. Geographically, it is bordered by Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Odisha districts like Keonjhar and Balasore, encompassing hills, plains, and fertile valleys.

The district has a diverse topography of central hills dividing the east and west plains, with red and laterite soils. Agriculture dominates the economy, supported by red loamy and clay-loamy soil varieties. Mayurbhanj has a hot, moist sub-humid climate with an average annual rainfall of 1,648.2 mm, mostly during July–September. Temperatures range from 4°C in winter to 41°C in summer.

The population increased from 2.22 million (2001) to 2.52 million (2011), with a sex ratio improving from 980 to 1006. STs constitute 58.7% of the population, SCs 7.3%, marking Mayurbhanj as a tribal-dominated district. Thakurmunda block shows an especially high ST population (72.4%). The district has 4 subdivisions, 9 tehsils, 26 blocks, and 3,966 villages.

Mayurbhanj's land use has seen a decline in net cultivated area and a rise in non-agricultural and fallow lands. Small and marginal farmers dominate (86.5%), yet they control just 58.6% of cultivable land. Land productivity is hindered by acidic, erosion-prone soils, prompting efforts like vermicomposting. Forests (42% of the district) provide timber and non-timber resources, such as sal seeds and sabai grass. Similipal Tiger Reserve harbours diverse flora and fauna.

Road, rail, and communication infrastructure remains underdeveloped, especially in hilly tribal areas. In 2009, only 69% of villages were electrified. Drinking water is largely available via tubewells, though sanitation coverage is low (only 25.85% of households have toilets). Banking services exist but cooperatives underperform due to loan defaults. Irrigation is limited—only 35% of cultivable land is covered—hampering year-round agriculture.

Despite progress through programs like SSA and DPEP, literacy in Mayurbhanj remains below the

state average. In 2011, overall literacy was 63.17% (male: 73.76%, female: 52.71%). ST women’s literacy remains particularly low at 22.88%. There is a high rural-urban and gender disparity. Infrastructure issues like a lack of school buildings, toilets, and learning materials persist, though enrolment at primary levels is improving.

The healthcare infrastructure is weak with overcrowded facilities, insufficient doctors, and limited PHCs. MMR was 320/100,000 and IMR 42/1,000 in 2008–09. Malaria, TB, and malnutrition are prevalent. NRHM has introduced mobile units, health camps, and PRIs involvement to improve maternal and child healthcare. Tribal populations often rely on traditional healers due to cultural beliefs and poor access.

Tribal communities retain distinct identities with varied housing, food habits, marriage practices, and religious beliefs. Cultural change is evident due to urban migration and exposure, but traditional customs like communal labour and festivals endure. Artistic traditions such as mural painting and Chhau dance are notable. Urbanization and industrialization have led to cultural syncretism and gradual modernization.

The district has limited irrigation facility. Cultivable land only gets irrigated during Rabi season results in low cropping intensity (129% vs state’s 158%). Due to various reasons soil erosion, deforestation, and land encroachments threaten sustainability, especially in Rairangpur.

Unemployment is one of the major challenges that faces the community. Middle age male and youth look for seasonal work. There are some underdeveloped industries led to regular out-migration. The use of modern technology especially JCB impacted National Rural Employment Guaranteed scheme.

Agriculture is the mainstay, supported by animal husbandry, horticulture, mining, and cottage industries. However, industrialization is limited. Women engage actively in handloom, sal leaf craft, and household industries. The per capita income is below the state average, and the district contributes only 4.4% to Odisha’s declining from 5.3% in 1993 NSDP (2011).

In 2011, the workforce was 1.22 million (WPR: 48.6%). Women’s participation is high, especially in agriculture and informal sectors. However, 66.13%

are engaged in farm work, with declining interest in farming due to poor returns. Wage disparities persist—female wages remain below male counterparts and state averages. A large portion of workers are marginal, and non-farm employment opportunities remain scarce.

Agriculture is dependent on monsoon rains. Paddy occupies 65% of cropped land. Traditional crops like millets and oilseeds are grown in pockets. However, productivity is low due to traditional methods and poor seed quality. Fertilizer usage remains below state levels, and Seed Replacement Ratios (SRRs) are inadequate, especially for paddy and pulses.

IV SUSTAINABILITY, ASPIRATIONS AND CHALLENGES AMONG HO COMMUNITY

This section presents the results of a primary field study conducted in Nipania village of Thakurmunda Block, Mayurbhanj district, Odisha, focusing on the socio-economic and demographic profile of 60 Ho tribal households through surveys and observations.

Nipania village has 60 households with a population of 295 (Census 2011), featuring a sex ratio of 1092 (higher than the state average) and a literacy rate of 45.6% (lower than the Odisha average of 72.87%). Male literacy (67.52%) far exceeds female literacy (26.32%). Most of the population belongs to Scheduled Tribes.

Table No.I Age of the Respondents

Sl. No	Age	Frequency	Per cent
1	20-25	3	5.0
2	26-30	10	16.7
3	31-35	9	15.0
4	36-40	8	13.3
5	41-45	16	26.7
6	46-50	8	13.3
7	51-55	3	5.0
8	56-60	3	5.0
Total	60	100.0	

Source: Field survey data

Table No.I The majority of respondents fall in the 41–45 age group (26.7%), and most are male (83.3%). About 85% of respondents are married, while 10% are widows. Family structures are largely joint (61.7%), and 33.3% of families have five members.

Educational attainment is low: 36.7% of respondents are illiterate, while only 1.7% are graduates. Elementary and high school attendance was reported at 18.3% and 20% respectively. Occupationally, 53.3% are cultivators, followed by daily wage labourers (18.3%) and agricultural labourers (16.7%). A few are involved in salaried jobs (5%) or small businesses (6.7%).

Table No. II. Status of education of the respondents

Sl. No	Education Level	Frequency	Per cent
1	Illiterate	22	36.7
2	literate	12	20.0
3	Elementary (1-5)	11	18.3
4	High School (9-10)	12	20.0
5	Intermediate/ Plus Two	2	3.3
6	Graduate	1	1.7
Total		60	100.0

Source: Field survey data

In responses to housing structure, 58.3% live in Katcha houses, while only 3.3% have Pucca houses. Drinking water access is primarily on tubewells (68.3%). Sanitation coverage is high (93.3%), but 6.7% lack toilet facilities. Electricity is accessible to 95% of households. Cooking fuel is still primarily firewood (55%), though 41.7% use both wood and gas.

Table No. III Types House of the Respondents

Sl. No	Type House	Frequency	Per cent
1	Hut	2	3.3
2	Semi-Pucca	17	28.3
3	Pucca	2	3.3
4	Katcha	35	58.3
5	Semi Pucca with Katcha	4	6.7
Total		60	100.0

Source: Field survey data

The data on landholding size among the 60 respondents reveals a relatively diverse but moderately concentrated distribution of agricultural land. A significant proportion, 35%, own between 4 to 6 acres of land, followed by 25% owning 6 to 8 acres, and 16.7% holding 8 to 10 acres, indicating that the majority of respondents possess medium-sized landholdings. A smaller percentage, 11.7%, have holdings of 10 acres or more, suggesting the presence of relatively well-off cultivators, while only 1.7% possess 1 to 2 acres and 10% have 2 to 4 acres, reflecting a minor segment with marginal land. This distribution points to a predominantly middle-

peasantry class with a notable minority of large landowners and marginal farmers, emphasizing the importance of land as a critical resource and a determinant of social and economic status within the community.

Table No. IV Landholding Size of Respondents

Sl. No	Land Area	Frequency	Per cent
1	1 acre-2 acre	1	1.7
2	2 acre-4 acre	6	10.0
3	4 acre-6 acre	21	35.0
4	6 acre-8 acre	15	25.0
5	8-acre -10 acre	10	16.7
6	10 acre and more	7	11.7
Total		60	100.0

Source: Field survey data

Households' annual income varied widely from ₹8,000 to ₹70,000. The most common personal income bracket was ₹30,000 (21.7%). Household annual income ranged from ₹10,000 to ₹1,00,000, with the largest share in the ₹50,000 bracket (13.3%). Most families own 4–6 acres of land (35%). Asset ownership reveals that 65% own a pair of bullocks, and 43.3% own no cows. About 38.3% have 4–6 goats/sheep. Only 11.7% own a television, and 6.7% own a radio, while 95% own a mobile phone. Bicycle ownership is common (91.6%), but only 23.3% own two-wheelers.

Table No. V Occupation of the Respondents

Sl. No	Occupation	Frequency	Per cent
1	Cultivator	32	53.3
2	Agricultural Labourer	10	16.7
3	Daily Wage Earner	11	18.3
4	Salaried Employee	3	5.0
5	Petty Business	4	6.7
Total		60	100.0

Source: Field survey data

The occupational distribution of the 60 respondents reveals a predominantly agrarian economy, with 53.3% working as cultivators and another 16.7% as agricultural labourers, indicating that nearly 70% are engaged in the primary sector. Additionally, 18.3% are daily wage earners and 6.7% are involved in petty business, reflecting the presence of informal and insecure employment, while only 5% are salaried employees, highlighting minimal integration into the formal sector. This pattern suggests a rural and economically vulnerable population with limited livelihood diversification, underscoring the need for

targeted interventions such as agricultural support, rural non-farm employment opportunities, access to credit, and vocational training to enhance economic stability and promote sustainable development.

V CONCLUSION: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

The study reveals a complex interplay between cultural continuity and socio-economic change within the Ho tribe. While traditions continue to anchor social life, the pressures and promises of modernity are reshaping aspirations—especially among the youth. A sustainable development approach must balance cultural preservation with responsive policy interventions that address education, livelihood security, and infrastructural needs. Empowering tribal voices in planning and implementation, especially those of women and youth, will be key to ensuring an inclusive and dignified path of progress for the Ho community.

The Ho tribe of Mayurbhanj faces multiple socio-economic constraints including poor education, lack of access to modern technology, declining agricultural productivity, natural disasters, and rising commodity prices. These are compounded by biodiversity loss, depletion of forest and wetland resources, and structural inequalities rooted in colonial history and state-led exclusion.

Despite various commissions and welfare schemes, tribals, including the Ho, remain economically and socially marginalized compared to the mainstream population. Their identity as original dwellers (Adivasis) continue to define their socio-political positioning. Many Hos have migrated from Jharkhand and now co-exist with Santals, Bathudis, and Kharias in multi-ethnic villages.

Ho women are central to both household and fieldwork. They collect forest produce, make baskets, participate in hunting and farming, and shoulder major economic responsibilities. Despite their hard work, they remain excluded from property rights and decision-making in land use. Cultural norms restrict their access to forest resources such as sandalwood, even as they excel in archery and traditional crafts. Girls' dropout rates are high due to early workforce participation and limited educational infrastructure.

The Ho community is governed by a patrilineal social structure where founding families monopolize village

leadership roles and control access to resources. This exclusion leads to fragmentation and perpetuates marginality. Magico-religious beliefs support the authority of elite families, fostering communal cohesion while maintaining traditional hierarchies. The descent-based group also holds ritual power in village affairs.

The Ho retain vibrant cultural traditions such as archery, sasandiri (ancestral stones), festivals like Maghe and Jomnama, and rituals linked to agriculture. Despite Hindu influences on some practices, core religious symbols like Singbonga and Desauli remain central. Traditional agriculture, forest-dependence, and craftwork (like silk and lac production) are still significant, although industrialization and urbanization have altered village life.

Based on a sample of 60 households in Nipania village, the study reveals several key socio-economic characteristics of the respondents. A significant proportion (26.7%) of active participants fall within the 41–45 age group, with males comprising 83.3% and females 16.7% of the total respondents. The majority (85%) are married, and educational attainment remains low, with 36.7% being illiterate and only 1.7% having completed graduation. Occupationally, half of the respondents are cultivators, while others work as agricultural labourers, wage workers, or petty traders. Income levels are modest, with most households earning less than ₹30,000 annually. In terms of family structure, 61.7% reside in joint families, while 38.3% live in nuclear setups. Housing conditions indicate that 58.3% live in kutchha houses, and a mere 3.3% in pucca ones. Agricultural expenditure for most household's ranges between ₹5,000 and ₹15,000 annually, and educational spending is notably low, with 21.7% reporting no expenditure on education at all.

Children assist in cattle herding, foraging, and helping their mothers. Women undertake heavy labor, including soil digging, brick making, and fetching water. Men often engage in ploughing, silkworm rearing, and forest work. The division of labor is sharp but women perform nearly all essential functions. Children also contribute from an early age, especially in archery, foraging, and farming tasks. Festivals revolve around rice cultivation, linking agriculture to religious life.

Integrated Tribal Development Agencies (ITDAs) operate across the district, but face issues like staff shortages, parallel bureaucracies, and inadequate fund flow. Despite localized development in literacy and employment in mining-affected zones, systemic gaps remain in addressing tribal-specific needs, especially language inclusion and natural resource access.

The Ho community is witnessing a shift in lifestyle due to external exposure—motorbikes, phones, and road connectivity have penetrated village life. However, the Ho continue to maintain strong identity markers like language, religious rituals, and clan customs. Traditional systems like the Munda-Manki co-exist with formal Panchayati Raj structures.

Key suggestions to improve the socio-economic condition of the Ho community include prioritizing children's education to disrupt the intergenerational cycle of illiteracy and promoting the preservation of clan-based traditions and rituals through community-led socialization. There is a need to advance organic and sustainable agricultural practices that align with the local ecosystem and to increase state support for marginal Ho cultivators. Enhancing market access by establishing weekly tribal product markets can ensure fair trade, while institutional reforms—such as single-window administration and better funding for Integrated Tribal Development Agencies (ITDAs)—are crucial for effective governance. Empowering women through skill training and legal recognition of property rights can strengthen gender equity, and promoting diversified livelihoods like Tasar rearing, basket-making, and eco-tourism can reduce dependency on agriculture and foster economic resilience.

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