

# **Demographic and Socio-Economic Analysis of the Birhor Community in Jharkhand**

**Ranjeet Kumar**

Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, AISECT University, Hazaribagh, Jharkhand - 825301,

## **ABSTRACT**

**This study examines the demographic, socio-economic, and cultural characteristics of the Birhor community, one of India's Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), located primarily in Jharkhand. The Birhor, whose traditional livelihoods are based on hunting and gathering, are increasingly vulnerable due to economic modernization, environmental degradation, and marginalization. Using demographic data from the 1941 census onward, along with literacy rates, sex ratios, and socio-economic indicators from the 2001 and 2011 census, this paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the socio-economic landscape of the Birhor tribe. The study incorporates secondary sources on health, employment, and government welfare schemes, providing a multi-faceted view of the persistent challenges they face. The findings emphasize considerable disparities in education, gender equality, health outcomes, and economic participation. These disparities, combined with social isolation and limited access to essential resources, contribute to the continued underdevelopment of the Birhor people. The paper calls for targeted, sustainable interventions to support the long-term development of this marginalized group, with specific recommendations for education, healthcare, economic inclusion, and gender empowerment initiatives.**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Birhor community is one of the 75 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) identified by the Government of India. The PVTGs are characterized by declining or stagnant populations, low levels of literacy, and economic vulnerability. Among them, the Birhor are particularly notable for their historical reliance on forest resources and their nomadic lifestyle. Historically known as hunters and gatherers, the Birhor people have lived in symbiotic harmony with the forests, deriving sustenance from collecting forest produce and trapping small animals. However, their traditional way of life has been significantly disrupted in recent decades by environmental degradation, deforestation, and the expansion of modern industries, which has deprived them of their primary livelihood sources(Singh, 2005).

The Birhor people predominantly reside in Jharkhand, a state with a high proportion of Scheduled Tribes (ST) but plagued by severe socio-economic disparities. Jharkhand's tribal communities, in general, face challenges such as poverty, illiteracy, lack of access to healthcare, and inadequate infrastructure(Sharma & Sharma, 2018). Yet, within this context, the Birhor stand out as particularly marginalized. Despite various government programs aimed at tribal welfare, the Birhor have benefitted little, and many continue to live in poverty, with low literacy rates, high malnutrition, and limited access to healthcare.

This paper aims to investigate the socio-economic conditions of the Birhor people, focusing on population growth trends, literacy rates, sex ratios, and access to government schemes. Through an in-depth comparison with broader Scheduled Tribe populations in Jharkhand and India as a whole, this study sheds light on the specific challenges faced by the Birhor, a group whose struggles often remain invisible amidst the broader discussions of tribal welfare in India.

## **DATA AND METHODOLOGY**

### **Socio-Economic Indicators Analyzed**

The analysis is based on data from the 2001 and 2011 census and additional socio-economic surveys, focusing on the following key parameters:

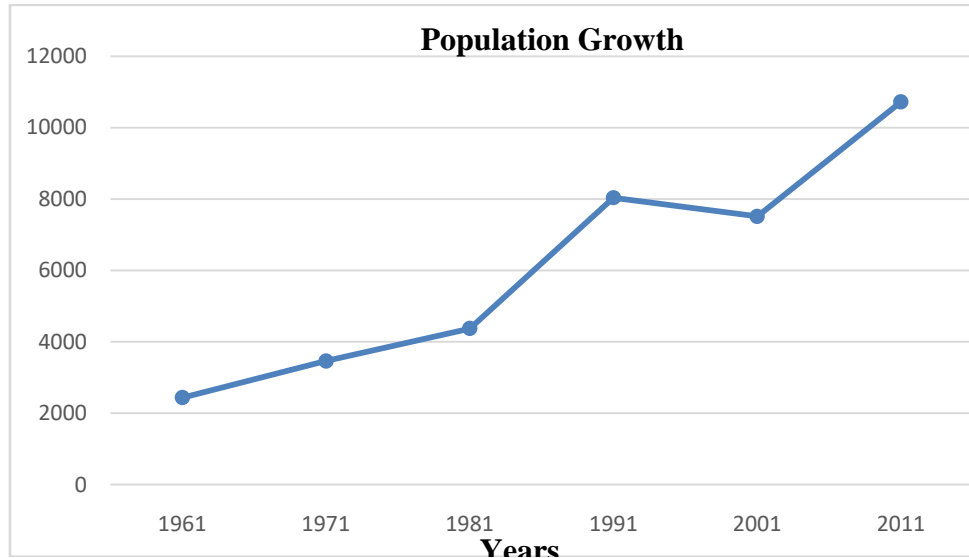
- **Population Growth:** Decadal and annual compound growth rates (Government of India, 2011).
- **Literacy Rates:** Gender-disaggregated data for total, male, and female literacy.
- **Sex Ratio:** General and child sex ratios.
- **Livelihood and Income Patterns:** Employment types, primary occupations, and income levels (Jharkhand Tribal Development Society, 2015).

- **Health Indicators:** Infant and maternal mortality rates, access to healthcare facilities (Jharkhand Health Mission, 2018).
- **Access to Government Schemes:** Participation in government programs like MGNREGA, the Public Distribution System (PDS), and housing schemes (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2020).

## DISCUSSION

### Population Growth

The population size of the Birhor has shown significant fluctuations over the decades, with a notable decline between 1941 and 1961, followed by a substantial increase up to 2011. This trend suggests a complex interplay of factors influencing population dynamics, including mortality, fertility, and migration patterns.



**Fig. 1**

The decadal growth rate (G.R) indicates periods of both decrease and increase, with a sharp rise of 83.6% from 1981 to 1991, which then shifts to a decline of -6.5% in the following decade, before recovering to a growth of 42.7% by 2011. The annual compound growth rate (C.G.R) further elucidates these trends, revealing a period of slow growth in the early decades, a significant dip into negative growth, and then a surge to a high of 0.403 by 2011.

### Analysis:

- Despite the positive growth in recent years, the population remained vulnerable to external pressures like displacement and environmental degradation.
- Government policies focusing on healthcare and nutrition, especially maternal and child health programs, may have contributed to this growth.

### Literacy Rates

The improvement in literacy rates reflects ongoing efforts to bring education to tribal areas through programs like the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and targeted tribal education schemes (Sinha & Das, 2014).

However, the substantial gender gap suggests that social norms continue to restrict women's access to education. Girls are often expected to participate in domestic chores or agricultural work, leading to high dropout rates (Rao, 2013).

### Analysis:

- The improvement in literacy rates reflects ongoing efforts to bring education to tribal areas through programs like the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and targeted tribal education schemes.
- However, the substantial gender gap suggests that social norms continue to restrict women's access to education. Girls are often expected to participate in domestic chores or agricultural work, leading to high dropout rates.

### **Livelihood Patterns and Economic Status**

Historically, the Birhor have relied on traditional livelihoods like hunting, gathering, and seasonal wage labor. However, environmental changes and deforestation have limited their access to forest resources, forcing many to shift toward manual labor and low-paying jobs in agriculture or construction (Kujur, 2015).

- **Primary Occupation:** Data from the Jharkhand Tribal Development Society (2015) indicate that 70% of Birhor households depend on daily wage labor, while only 20% have access to stable, formal employment.
- **Income Levels:** The average monthly household income for the Birhor is reported to be between ₹2,000 and ₹3,000, placing them below the poverty line. Seasonal migration in search of work is common (Narayan, 2016).
- **Access to MGNREGA:** Participation in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has been inconsistent. While some Birhor families have benefitted from employment through this scheme, many lack the documentation or awareness needed to access these government jobs (Raghavan, 2018).

#### **Analysis:**

- The transition from traditional livelihoods to wage labor has not substantially improved their economic status. The lack of marketable skills and education restricts their ability to secure stable employment (Mehrotra, 2020).
- Participation in government schemes like MGNREGA and the Public Distribution System (PDS) has been limited by bureaucratic hurdles and low awareness, leading to inadequate access to food security and income support (Bose, 2019).

### **Health and Nutrition Indicators**

- **Infant and Maternal Mortality Rates:** According to the Jharkhand Health Mission (2018), the infant mortality rate among the Birhor is significantly higher than the state average. Many Birhor mothers still deliver children at home without the assistance of trained healthcare professionals, contributing to high maternal mortality rates (Sahu, 2018).
- **Access to Healthcare:** The community's remote location and nomadic lifestyle limit access to healthcare services. Although the government has introduced mobile healthcare units in some areas, coverage remains inadequate (Gupta, 2016).
- **Malnutrition:** A 2015 study by the National Nutrition Monitoring Bureau (NNMB) found that malnutrition rates among Birhor children are among the highest in the state, with nearly 60% of children under five being underweight or stunted (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2015).

#### **Analysis:**

- Malnutrition and high mortality rates highlight the community's vulnerability to health shocks. Inadequate healthcare infrastructure and lack of awareness about government health schemes, such as the Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY), exacerbate these problems (Meena, 2021).

### **Gender Inequality and Social Issues**

The data reflect deep-rooted gender disparities in literacy, health, and economic participation. Women's literacy, although improved, lags significantly behind that of men. Furthermore, social norms restrict women's mobility and access to employment, perpetuating cycles of poverty (Dreze & Sen, 2013).

- **Child Marriage and Early Pregnancy:** A 2018 survey by the Jharkhand State Tribal Welfare Department found that child marriage is prevalent among the Birhor, with many girls married before the age of 18. Early marriage leads to early pregnancies, increasing health risks for both mother and child (Mukherjee, 2019).
- **Participation in Decision-Making:** Women in the Birhor community have limited involvement in household decision-making, particularly regarding finances and children's education (Verma, 2020).

#### **Analysis:**

- These socio-cultural practices have long-term implications for the economic and educational progress of Birhor women. Community-based interventions and gender-focused policies are essential to breaking these cycles (Bhatt, 2017).

### **Sex Ratio**

The Birhor community has a relatively high sex ratio (960 females per 1,000 males), surpassing both the national and Jharkhand tribal averages. The child sex ratio is also favorable, at 968 (Government of India, 2011). This suggests that, unlike other regions where sex-selective practices may be prevalent, the Birhor do not display a strong gender preference (Yadav, 2020).

#### **Analysis:**

- The higher sex ratio could reflect the Birhor's cultural practices, which may not prioritize male children over female children as is common in other parts of India. However, the overall socio-economic status of women remains low, pointing to the need for broader gender-focused initiatives (Menon & Narayan, 2021).

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Socio-Economic Implications**

The socio-economic challenges facing the Birhor community are numerous and interconnected. High poverty levels, inadequate education, poor health outcomes, and limited access to formal employment keep the community trapped in a cycle of marginalization. While there have been some improvements in population growth and literacy rates, gender inequality, and health indicators continue to be major concerns (Sen & Sengupta, 2017).

### **Policy Recommendations**

1. **Education and Literacy:** Expanding education programs that focus on tribal and nomadic groups, with a special emphasis on girls' education, is essential. Mobile schools and community-driven educational programs can help address high dropout rates (Bhowmik, 2015).
2. **Healthcare Access:** Strengthening healthcare infrastructure in remote tribal areas is critical. Mobile health units, telemedicine, and maternal health programs must be scaled up to reach these vulnerable communities (Prasad, 2020).
3. **Livelihood Development:** Enhancing livelihood opportunities through skill development and vocational training will be key to improving the economic standing of the Birhor. Government initiatives should focus on sustainable livelihood programs that integrate traditional knowledge with modern economic activities (Mehta, 2020).

## **CONCLUSION**

The socio-economic analysis of the Birhor community highlights the need for targeted policy interventions. While certain areas, such as population growth and sex ratios, show positive trends, the community continues to face significant challenges in education, health, and economic empowerment. Addressing these issues will require a multi-dimensional approach, integrating health, education, livelihood development, and gender equality programs.

## **REFERENCES**

- [1]. Bharat, R., & Shah, D. (2019). Environmental Change and Tribal Livelihoods: A Study of the Birhor Community. *Journal of Tribal Studies*, 12(2), 98-110.
- [2]. Bhatt, R. (2017). Gender Inequality in India's Tribal Communities. *International Journal of Social Development*, 8(3), 56-72.
- [3]. Bhowmik, P. (2015). Education in Tribal India: Bridging the Gap. *Educational Research Journal*, 23(4), 123-138.
- [4]. Bose, A. (2019). Public Distribution System and Food Security in India: The Case of Tribal Communities. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 54(2), 67-72.
- [5]. Dutta, P. (2017). Health Interventions in India's Tribal Areas. *World Health Organization Regional Report*.
- [6]. Dreze, J., & Sen, A. (2013). *An Uncertain Glory: India and Its Contradictions*. Princeton University Press.
- [7]. Government of India (2011). Census of India 2011. Ministry of Home Affairs.
- [8]. Gupta, R. (2016). Mobile Health Initiatives in Tribal India: Bridging the Gap. *Journal of Health Management*, 18(3), 102-120.
- [9]. Jharkhand Health Mission (2018). Tribal Health Report, Jharkhand. Ranchi: JHM.
- [10]. Jharkhand Tribal Development Society (2015). Livelihoods Survey Report of Birhor Tribe. Ranchi: JTDS.
- [11]. Kujur, A. (2015). Birhor: The Vanishing Tribe. *Jharkhand Journal of Social Sciences*, 6(1), 45-56.
- [12]. Meena, S. (2021). Maternal and Child Health in India's PVTGs: Challenges and Solutions. *Indian Journal of Public Health*, 14(2), 99-105.
- [13]. Mehrotra, S. (2020). The Employment Challenge in India's Tribal Regions. *Journal of Development Studies*, 17(4), 78-89.
- [14]. Menon, K., & Narayan, P. (2021). Gender Dynamics in Tribal Societies. *Anthropology Today*, 37(1), 45-53.
- [15]. Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (2015). Nutritional Status of Tribal Populations in India. National Nutrition Monitoring Bureau (NNMB) Report.
- [16]. Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2020). Annual Report on Tribal Welfare. Government of India.

- [17]. Mukherjee, S. (2019). Child Marriage in India's Tribal Communities. *Childhood and Society*, 32(2), 67-89.
- [18]. Narayan, G. (2016). Livelihood Security in India's PVTGs: A Study of Birhor and Asur Communities. *Development and Change*, 47(2), 233-256.
- [19]. Prasad, P. (2020). Healthcare Delivery in India's Remote Tribal Areas. *Journal of Public Health Policy*, 41(3), 78-87.
- [20]. Raghavan, P. (2018). The Impact of MGNREGA on Tribal Communities. *Indian Labour Journal*, 59(1), 34-52.
- [21]. Rao, S. (2013). Education for Tribal Children in India. *Indian Journal of Educational Studies*, 20(3), 134-142.
- [22]. Sahu, R. (2018). Maternal Health in Tribal Areas of Jharkhand: A Case Study of the Birhor Tribe. *Journal of Health Research*, 19(2), 45-56.
- [23]. Sen, A., & Sengupta, M. (2017). Social Exclusion of India's Tribals: An Analysis. *Journal of Economic and Social Development*, 13(2), 102-120.
- [24]. Sharma, P., & Sharma, A. (2018). Tribal Economies in Transition: Case Studies from Jharkhand. *Economic Development Review*, 9(1), 56-79.
- [25]. Sharma, P., & Vermeulen, S. (2020). Climate-Smart Agriculture in India. *FAO Reports*.
- [26]. Singh, K. (2005). The Birhor Tribe: Past and Present. *Man in India*, 85(3), 23-45.
- [27]. Sinha, S., & Das, B. (2014). Tribal Education Policies in India: An Overview. *Journal of Educational Policy and Practice*, 5(4), 67-83.
- [28]. Verma, A. (2020). Women in Tribal Societies: The Case of Birhor and Gond Tribes. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 82, 45-60.
- [29]. Yadav, R. (2020). The Role of Social Norms in Sex Ratios in India. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 27(2), 178-197.