



THE ABHJUMADIYA OF CHHATTISGARH: CULTURE, SOCIETY, AND THE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

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Abstract

The Abhujmadiya, also known as the Abujhmaria or Hill Maria, are one of India's most isolated and culturally distinct Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), inhabiting the remote Abujhmar hill range in the Narayanpur and Bijapur districts of Chhattisgarh. Classified as a PVTG by the Government of India since 1975, the tribe's relative geographical inaccessibility has historically preserved their distinctive social institutions — most notably the *Ghotul* youth dormitory — their animistic religious practices, and their forest-based livelihoods. This paper draws on ethnographic literature, government reports, peer-reviewed scholarship, and news reportage to provide a comprehensive examination of the Abhujmadiya across nine thematic dimensions: geographical habitat, historical identity, social structure, economic practices, cultural life, religion, contemporary challenges (including the Maoist conflict, forest rights, and health and education deficits), and policy recommendations. The paper argues that the Abhujmadiya's future depends not on conventional development models but on the genuine recognition of their rights, the protection of their cultural institutions, and their empowerment as the primary stewards of the Abujhmar forest ecosystem.

Keywords: Abujhmaria, Tribal Society, Social Structure, Kinship System, Ghotul Institution, Indigenous Knowledge, Cultural Identity, Social Change, Modernization, Tribal Development, Chhattisgarh.

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Introduction

India is home to over 700 officially recognized Scheduled Tribes, constituting approximately 8.6% of the national population (Census of India, 2011). Within this already marginalized category, 75 communities have been designated as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) — formerly called Primitive Tribal Groups — on the basis of criteria including pre-agricultural technology, stagnant or declining population, extremely low literacy, and subsistence-level economies (Government of India, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2023). The Abhujmadiya of Chhattisgarh are among the most studied, and yet most neglected, of these PVTGs.

The Abhujmadiya inhabit the Abujhmar (meaning "the unknown hills" or "hills of the ignorant" in local parlance) — a thickly forested plateau in the southern part of Chhattisgarh, straddling the Narayanpur and Bijapur districts. This region, covering approximately 4,000 square kilometres of dense sal (*Shorea robusta*) and mixed deciduous forest, was never fully surveyed or brought under revenue settlement during the colonial period and remained outside effective state administration well into the post-independence era (Sundar, 2007). The combination of geographical remoteness, political marginality, and the intensification of the Maoist insurgency in the region from the 1980s onwards has meant that the Abhujmadiya have remained among the least-served tribal communities in India, despite their PVTG status and constitutional protections.

This paper is organized into nine sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 describes the geographical and ecological context of Abujhmar. Section 3 examines the historical origins and demographic profile of the Abhujmadiya. Sections 4 and 5 analyse social structure and economic practices respectively. Sections 6 and 7 examine cultural life and religious practices. Section 8 addresses contemporary challenges, including the Maoist conflict, forest rights, and health and education deficits. Section 9 presents conclusions and policy recommendations.

2. Geographical and Ecological Context

2.1 The Abujhmar Region

The Abujhmar hill range forms a distinctive ecological zone within the larger Bastar plateau of southern Chhattisgarh. Geographically, the region is bounded by the Indravati River to the north, the Godavari basin to the south, and dense forest tracts to the east and west. The terrain is rugged, with elevations ranging from approximately 600 to 1,000 metres above sea level, dissected by numerous seasonal streams and rivers. The forest cover is among the densest in central India, comprising primarily sal forest interspersed with teak, tendu (*Diospyros melanoxylon*), mahua (*Madhuca longifolia*), and a rich understory of medicinal plants, tubers, and fruits.

The region falls within the administrative jurisdiction of Narayanpur district (primarily the Orchha block) and parts of Bijapur district in Chhattisgarh. Road connectivity to the interior of Abujhmar is extremely limited — many villages are accessible only by foot or, in some areas, by motorcycle on forest tracks. The nearest major town, Narayanpur, is itself a small district headquarters with limited infrastructure. The combination of poor connectivity, difficult terrain, and the security situation created by the Maoist insurgency has made the Abujhmar one of the most inaccessible inhabited regions in India (NITI Aayog, 2021).

2.2 Ecological Significance



The Abujhmar forest is of exceptional ecological significance. It forms part of the Central Indian Highlands biodiversity hotspot and serves as a critical wildlife corridor connecting the forests of Bastar with those of Maharashtra and Odisha. The region is home to tiger, leopard, sloth bear, gaur (Indian bison), wild boar, and numerous species of deer, as well as a rich avifauna. The Indravati National Park and Tiger Reserve, established in 1978 and designated a Project Tiger reserve in 1983, covers a substantial portion of the Abujhmar region, creating a complex overlay of conservation mandates and tribal rights that has been a persistent source of conflict (Padel, 2009).

The ecological knowledge of the Abhujmadiya — their understanding of forest ecology, medicinal plants, water sources, and seasonal patterns — is a form of intellectual capital that has been accumulated over generations and is of significant value for biodiversity conservation and forest management. However, this knowledge is rarely recognized in formal conservation planning, and the tribe's role as forest stewards has been undermined by the imposition of external conservation regimes.

3. Historical Origins and Identity

3.1 Ethnonymy and Classification The Abhujmadiya are a sub-group of the larger Maria Gond community, itself a branch of the Gond tribal cluster — one of the largest tribal groups in India. The Maria Gonds are broadly divided into the Bison Horn Maria (found in the Bijapur and Dantewada areas) and the Abujhmaria or Hill Maria (found in the Abujhmar hills). The Abhujmadiya are the hill-dwelling branch, and their relative isolation has led to the development of distinct cultural, linguistic, and social characteristics that differentiate them from other Maria sub-groups.

The term "Abhujmadiya" is a localized administrative and ethnographic designation meaning "people of the Abujhmar." In academic and government literature, they are also referred to as "Abujhmaria," "Abujh Maria," or simply "Hill Maria." The Chhattisgarh government and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, recognize them as a PVTG under the category of primitive tribal groups requiring special developmental attention.

3.2 Historical Background

The historical record of the Abhujmadiya is sparse, largely because their territory was never effectively brought under the revenue settlement of either the Maratha confederacy or the British colonial administration. The Bastar region, of which Abujhmar is a part, came under British paramountcy in the nineteenth century, but the interior hills remained effectively autonomous. British political agents occasionally noted the existence of the "Hill Maria" in gazetteers and administrative reports, but systematic ethnographic study did not begin until the mid-twentieth century.

Verrier Elwin's fieldwork in the Bastar region, conducted between the 1940s and 1960s, remains among the most comprehensive early ethnographic accounts of the Maria Gonds. Elwin documented the Ghotul institution, social organization, and cultural practices of the Maria with sympathetic detail, and his work brought the tribe to national and international attention (Elwin, 1947). His advocacy for a "leave them alone" policy of non-interference with tribal communities influenced Indian tribal policy in the Nehruvian era, though this policy was later criticized for its paternalistic assumptions.

The post-independence period saw the integration of Bastar into the Indian Union and the gradual extension of state administration into previously autonomous tribal territories. The



creation of Chhattisgarh as a separate state in 2000 brought renewed administrative focus on tribal development, but the Abujhmar region continued to remain on the margins of effective governance, partly due to its remoteness and partly due to the intensification of Maoist insurgency in the area from the 1980s onwards.

3.3 Population and Demographic Profile

Reliable population data for the Abhujmadiya is difficult to obtain, as census enumeration in the interior Abujhmar villages has historically been incomplete. Estimates from various government sources suggest a population of approximately 35,000 to 50,000 individuals, though some scholars place the number higher. The 2011 Census of India recorded the Maria tribe (including all sub-groups) as one of the larger scheduled tribe populations in Chhattisgarh, but disaggregated data for the Abhujmadiya specifically remains limited (Census of India, 2011).

The tribe is classified as a PVTG partly on account of concerns about population stagnation or decline in earlier decades, though more recent data suggests a modest population growth. High infant and maternal mortality rates, limited access to healthcare, and nutritional deficiencies have historically depressed demographic growth among the Abhujmadiya. Government health schemes such as the Janani Shishu Suraksha Karyakram (JSSK) have been extended to the region, but their reach and utilization in the Abujhmar interior remain limited (Indian Journal of Public Health, 2019).

4. Social Structure and Kinship Organization

4.1 Clan System and Lineage

The Abhujmadiya society is organized around a patrilineal clan (*gotra* or *soyam*) system. Each individual belongs to a clan defined by descent through the male line, and clan membership determines rules of marriage, inheritance, and ritual obligation. The clan system is exogamous — marriage within the same clan is strictly prohibited, and violations of this rule are subject to social sanctions including fines and, in extreme cases, expulsion from the community.

The HNLU study on Tribes of Chhattisgarh notes that the Abujhmaria's economic organization and social life are deeply intertwined with their clan structure (HNLU, 2019). The clan serves not merely as a kinship unit but as an economic cooperative, a ritual congregation, and a political unit for dispute resolution. Clan elders hold significant authority in village governance, mediating disputes and presiding over ceremonies.

4.2 Village Organization and Governance

The basic unit of Abhujmadiya social life is the village (*gond* or *ata*), typically consisting of a cluster of households linked by kinship and proximity. Villages in Abujhmar are generally small — often comprising between 20 and 100 households — and are located near water sources and agricultural fields. The village headman (*mukhia* or *patel*) is the primary administrative and judicial authority at the local level, though his authority is customary rather than statutory.

The village council functions through customary institutions and plays an important role in regulating land use, adjudicating disputes, and organizing collective labour. Decisions are typically made by consensus among adult males. The Panchayati Raj (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) mandates the recognition of tribal customary

governance, though its implementation in Abujhmar remains partial (Ministry of Law and Justice, 1996).

4.3 Marriage Practices and the Taladopa Tradition

Marriage among the Abhujmadiya is governed by rules of clan exogamy and, in some communities, cross-cousin marriage preferences. Bride price (*deja*) rather than dowry is the prevalent practice, reflecting the social value placed on women's productive and reproductive labour. Marriage ceremonies are elaborate affairs involving multiple stages of negotiation, ritual exchange, and community feasting.

One of the most distinctive material elements of Abhujmadiya marriage culture is the *Taladopa* — a piece of cloth that holds deep symbolic significance in the marriage rituals of the Abujhmar forests. As reported by ETV Bharat (2023), the Taladopa tradition remains central to marriage ceremonies in the Abujhmar forests, with elders emphasizing that the rituals surrounding its exchange must be preserved even as other aspects of life change. The cloth is not merely decorative but represents the social contract between the families of the bride and groom, and its exchange marks the formal solemnization of the marriage alliance.

4.4 The Ghotul Institution

Perhaps the most celebrated and most misunderstood institution of the Abhujmadiya social world is the *Ghotul* — a youth dormitory that serves simultaneously as a social institution, a school of traditional knowledge, and a space of cultural reproduction. The Ghotul is a community house where unmarried young men (*chelik*) and young women (*motiari*) live together, learn traditional crafts, music, dance, and social norms, and develop the social bonds that will sustain community life.

Academic research published in the Journal of Social Development and Communication (JSDC) has examined the Ghotul as an institution where religious activities, rituals, and beliefs of the tribe are organized and transmitted. The Ghotul also regulates the marriage system through the clan structure, ensuring that young people are socialized into the rules of exogamy and appropriate partner selection. Verrier Elwin's detailed documentation of the Ghotul emphasized its role as a democratic, self-governing institution that gave young people agency in their social and cultural development (Elwin, 1947).

5. Economic Practices and Livelihood Systems

5.1 Shifting Cultivation (*Penda/Bewar*)

The Abhujmadiya have historically practised shifting cultivation, locally known as *penda* or *bewar*, as their primary mode of food production. In this system, a patch of forest is cleared, the vegetation is burned to fertilize the soil, and crops are cultivated for one or two seasons before the plot is abandoned to regenerate. The tribe then moves to a new plot, returning to the original site after a fallow period of several years.

The crops grown under this system include millets (particularly *kodo* and *kutki*), maize, pulses, and various vegetables. These crops are well adapted to the thin, lateritic soils of the Abujhmar hills and require minimal external inputs. The HNLU study specifically notes the economic organization of the Abujhmaria in the context of their shifting cultivation practices, highlighting how this system is under threat from both legal restrictions and demographic pressure (HNLU, 2019). The Forest Rights Act, 2006, has opened some pathways for the recognition of community forest rights, but implementation in Abujhmar has been slow and contested (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2006).

5.2 Forest Produce and Gathering

Alongside cultivation, the collection of minor forest produce (MFP) is a critical component of Abhujmadiya livelihoods. Mahua flowers are collected in spring and used both as food and as the base for a traditional fermented beverage. Tendu leaves are collected and sold to the state cooperative for the manufacture of *bidi* (hand-rolled cigarettes), providing one of the few sources of cash income for many households. Honey, lac, resin, medicinal herbs, tubers, and fruits are also collected for household consumption and sale.

The tribal cooperative societies established by the Chhattisgarh government are the primary institutional channel through which Abhujmadiya households access markets for their forest produce. However, the remoteness of Abujhmar, the limited road connectivity, and the presence of middlemen in the supply chain mean that the tribe often receives prices well below the market rate for their produce (Government of Chhattisgarh, 2020).

5.3 Hunting, Fishing, and Animal Husbandry

Hunting and fishing have traditionally supplemented the Abhujmadiya diet, providing protein in an otherwise carbohydrate-heavy subsistence system. The tribe keeps domesticated animals including goats, pigs, and poultry, which serve both as food sources and as ritual offerings. Buffalo are kept for agricultural labour and as markers of social status and wealth.

Hunting has been significantly curtailed by the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, and the establishment of wildlife reserves and national parks in the Bastar region. The tension between traditional subsistence rights and conservation mandates remains a live issue in Abujhmar, with the tribe's customary hunting practices increasingly criminalized under state law (Padel, 2009).

6. Cultural Life: Music, Dance, Art, and Material Culture**6.1 Music and Dance**

Music and dance are central to Abhujmadiya cultural expression, permeating every aspect of social and ritual life. The tribe is renowned for its rich musical traditions, which are transmitted through the Ghotul and performed at festivals, agricultural ceremonies, marriage celebrations, and funerary rites. Traditional instruments include the *bana* (a string instrument), *timki* (a drum), *tudubudi* (a small drum), and various wind instruments made from bamboo and horn.

The dances of the Abhujmadiya are characterized by vigorous, rhythmic movement and communal participation. Unlike performance-oriented dance forms, Abhujmadiya dance is participatory — the boundary between performer and audience is fluid, and community members of all ages join in. The *karma* and *saila* dances, performed during agricultural festivals, are among the most widely recognized.

6.2 Material Culture and Crafts

The material culture of the Abhujmadiya reflects both their forest environment and their artistic sensibility. Traditional architecture consists of mud-walled, thatched-roof houses decorated with geometric patterns and animal motifs in white lime and red ochre. The Ghotul itself is often the most elaborately decorated building in a village, its walls adorned with carvings, paintings, and symbolic objects.

The tribe is skilled in the production of bamboo and cane crafts, including baskets, mats, and storage containers. Bell metal (*dhokra*) casting, using the lost-wax technique, is a

distinctive craft tradition of the Bastar region that has Abhujmadiya and Maria Gond practitioners. These artifacts — depicting animals, deities, and human figures — have gained recognition in national and international art markets, though the economic benefits to tribal artisans remain limited (Sharma, 1990).

6.3 Oral Literature and Language

The Abhujmadiya speak a dialect of the Gondi language family, classified under the Dravidian language group. Their oral literature — comprising myths, legends, proverbs, riddles, and songs — is an extensive repository of ecological knowledge, social norms, and historical memory. The oral tradition is primarily transmitted through the Ghotul and through ceremonial singing and storytelling. With the decline of the Ghotul, this oral tradition faces serious risk of erosion.

7. Religion, Beliefs, and Ritual Practices

7.1 Animism and Nature Worship

The religious world of the Abhujmadiya is rooted in animism — the belief that natural objects, places, and phenomena are inhabited by spiritual forces that must be propitiated and respected. The forest, rivers, hills, and specific trees and animals are considered sacred, and a complex system of rituals, taboos, and offerings governs the tribe's relationship with the natural world.

The supreme deity of the Maria Gonds and Abhujmadiya is *Bhimsen* (associated with the Mahabharata hero Bhima), along with a pantheon of village deities (*gram devata*), clan deities (*kul devata*), and forest spirits. Each village has a sacred grove (*sarna* or *devgudi*) where communal rituals are performed. The village priest (*pujari* or *baiga*) mediates between the human community and the spirit world, performing rituals at planting, harvest, birth, marriage, death, and times of communal crisis (Elwin, 1943).

7.2 Festivals and Agricultural Rituals

The Abhujmadiya ritual calendar is closely tied to the agricultural cycle. The major festivals include *Hareli* (the green festival, marking the beginning of the agricultural season), *Karma* (a harvest festival involving the worship of the Karma tree), and various clan and village-specific ceremonies.

The *Karma* festival is particularly significant for the Abhujmadiya and other Gond communities. Young men go into the forest to bring back branches of the Karma tree (*Nauclea parvifolia*), which are planted in the village and worshipped with songs, dances, and offerings. The festival celebrates the fertility of the earth and the bond between human communities and the forest. It is also an occasion for the Ghotul members to demonstrate their musical and dance skills (JSDC, n.d.).

7.3 Death Rituals and Ancestor Worship

Death rituals among the Abhujmadiya involve both burial and cremation practices, with the specific rite determined by the circumstances of death and the deceased's status. Ancestor spirits (*pittar*) are believed to remain active in the lives of their descendants and must be propitiated through periodic offerings and ceremonies. Memorial posts (*menhirs* or *gudumba*) are erected in honour of the dead, serving as tangible links between the living and the ancestral world.

The influence of Hinduism on Abhujmadiya religious practice has been gradual and uneven. While some Hindu deities and practices have been incorporated into the tribal religious

repertoire — a process anthropologists call "Sanskritization" — the core animistic worldview and the authority of the traditional priest have been maintained in most Abujhmar communities (Sundar, 2007).

8. Contemporary Challenges: Development, Conflict, and Rights

8.1 PVTG Status and Government Schemes

The designation of the Abhujmadiya as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) by the Government of India in 1975 — following the recommendations of the Dhebar Commission — was intended to ensure that the most marginalized tribal communities received targeted development support. The PVTG Development Scheme, administered by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, provides funds for education, health, housing, livelihood, and infrastructure in PVTG habitations (Government of India, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2023). As reported by Insights IAS and EduRev, the PVTG Development Scheme aims to address the multi-dimensional vulnerability of communities like the Abhujmadiya through integrated development plans. However, the actual delivery of scheme benefits to Abujhmar villages has been hampered by poor road connectivity, the security situation, administrative capacity gaps, and the reluctance of government functionaries to work in conflict-affected areas. A NITI Aayog assessment of Narayanpur as an aspirational district noted that the Orchha block (Abujhmar) faces the most severe development deficits in the district, with particularly low scores on health, nutrition, and education indicators (NITI Aayog, 2021).

8.2 The Maoist Conflict and Its Impact

The Abujhmar region has been at the epicentre of the Maoist (Naxalite) insurgency in Chhattisgarh for several decades. The Communist Party of India (Maoist) has maintained a strong presence in the region, using the dense forests and difficult terrain as a base for guerrilla operations. The Indian state has responded with counter-insurgency operations, including the controversial Salwa Judum militia movement (2005–2011), which was eventually declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of India.

The Abhujmadiya have been caught between the two sides of this conflict, with both the Maoists and state security forces making demands on the community for support, information, and compliance. The conflict has severely disrupted education, healthcare delivery, and agricultural production in the region (Bhatia, 2005). The Ghotul institution has been disrupted in many villages, as young people are either recruited into armed groups or flee to urban areas to escape the violence. The social fabric of the community, built over generations through the Ghotul and clan institutions, has been severely strained.

8.3 Forest Rights and Land Tenure

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA), was a landmark piece of legislation intended to recognize and vest the forest rights of tribal communities who had been deprived of their traditional land rights by colonial and post-colonial forest laws. For the Abhujmadiya, the FRA offered the potential for legal recognition of their individual and community forest rights (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2006).

However, the implementation of the FRA in Abujhmar has been deeply problematic. Reports from civil society organizations working in the region suggest that many Abhujmadiya households have not received individual forest rights titles. The felling of trees in the Abujhmar forests for the issuance of land titles, as reported by The New Indian Express

(2022), has raised serious concerns about the way in which the FRA is being implemented in the region. There are reports that trees are being cleared to create cultivable land for title distribution, rather than recognizing the pre-existing forest cultivation rights of the Abhujmadiya. This approach risks destroying the very forest ecosystem on which the tribe's livelihood and cultural identity **depend (Bijoy et al., 2010).**

8.4 Health and Education

Health indicators among the Abhujmadiya are among the worst in India. Infant and maternal mortality rates are high, malnutrition is widespread, and the burden of preventable diseases — including malaria, tuberculosis, and diarrhoeal diseases — is severe. A peer-reviewed study published in the Indian Journal of Public Health examining access to and utilization of the Janani Shishu Suraksha Karyakram (JSSK) services in the Abujhmar tribal region of Chhattisgarh found that while the scheme had been extended to the region, its utilization remained low due to geographical barriers, cultural factors, and the shortage of female health workers from the community itself (Indian Journal of Public Health, 2019).

Educational attainment among the Abhujmadiya is significantly below the national average. Literacy rates in the Abujhmar interior are estimated to be well below 30%, with female literacy particularly low. The government has established residential schools (*ashram shalas*) and hostels to provide education to tribal children, but the quality of education in these institutions is often poor, and the cultural disconnect between the school environment and the home environment is a significant barrier to attendance and retention (Xaxa Committee Report, 2014).

9. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

9.1 Summary of Findings

This paper has presented a comprehensive overview of the Abhujmadiya tribe of Chhattisgarh, examining their geographical habitat, historical identity, social structure, economic practices, cultural traditions, religious life, and contemporary challenges. The Abhujmadiya are a community of extraordinary resilience and cultural richness, whose way of life represents a sophisticated adaptation to a complex forest ecosystem developed over centuries. Their social institutions — particularly the Ghotul, the clan system, and the village council — demonstrate a capacity for self-governance and cultural reproduction that has survived centuries of external pressure.

At the same time, the Abhujmadiya face an unprecedented convergence of threats: the Maoist conflict and its counter-insurgency response, the erosion of forest rights, the disruption of traditional livelihoods, the decline of the Ghotul, inadequate healthcare and education, and the predatory interest of the state and market in their forest resources. The designation of the community as a PVTG has not, in practice, translated into the kind of sustained, rights-based, culturally sensitive development that the community needs and deserves.

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