

Journal of Kolkata Society for Asian Studies : Vol. 10. No. 2, Dec. 2024

Forest, Religious Practice and Festival: A Study among the Hos of Jharkhand, India

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Abstract :

The indigenous communities of India intricately weave their religious beliefs with the natural environment, perceiving the forest as a divine entity. Living in close proximity to the forests is essential for the survival of the majority of indigenous peoples, shaping their way of life, economic activities, socio-cultural systems, and religious practices. The Ho people view the forest not merely as a resource but as a deity, embodying a spiritual essence deeply embedded in their way of life. The study aims at comprehensively exploring the symbiotic relationship between the Ho community of West Singhbhum district in Jharkhand, India and their forest environment, specifically investigating the intertwining dynamics of religious beliefs, socio-cultural systems, and ecological practices. Through ethnographic methods, interviews, and participant observation, the objective is to provide nuanced insights into how the forest shapes the spiritual identity, rituals, and festivals of the Ho people, contributing to a deeper understanding of their unique human-environment interactions. The forest, regarded as a sacred entity, plays a pivotal role in sustaining the livelihoods of the Hos. From sourcing food to constructing homes, crafting tools, gathering firewood, and obtaining various essentials; the forest is an integral part of their daily existence. Additionally, their spiritual connection extends to perceiving ancestral spirits within the forest's landscapes and other natural elements, including bushes, hills, trees, animals, birds, and sacred groves. All of which are subjects of reverence and worship. The Ho people's festivals, intricately linked to nature, underscore their Eco-centric worldview. Examining their socio-cultural system reveals a commitment to environmental conservation through totemic clans and taboos, showcasing indigenous awareness and sustainable practices.

Key Words : *Forest Ecology, Tribal Religion, Symbiotic Relationship, Sacred Grove, Festivals, Indigenous Knowledge.*

Introduction :

The intricate tapestry of the forest and tribal religion is woven with threads of inseparable unity. Within this belief system, the forest is not merely a landscape; it is revered as a maternal entity, cradling the Ho tribe as its children. Their entire way of life; encompassing religious, socioeconomic, and sociocultural dimensions; intricately interlaces with the forest environment. The symbiosis is so profound that the terms “tribes” and “forests” become interchangeable, reflecting a profound fusion of existence (Sabar 2017:316). Ingrained in their consciousness is the conviction that the spirits of

their ancestors find abode in the midst of the trees, hills, streams, and the myriad lives within the forest ecology. This profound connection harks back to ancient times when these indigenous communities, once hailed as the custodians of the forest, lived in complete harmony with nature (Purabi 2012: 665). Top of Form

In the heartland of Jharkhand, where the rhythmic rustle of leaves orchestrates a symphony of ancient tales, unfolds a captivating exploration into the symbiotic embrace of the Ho tribe and the enchanted forest. This journey transcends the mundane, delving into the mystical realm where religion intertwines with the very essence of nature. Comprising 26.2% of Jharkhand's demographic fabric, the state boasts a tapestry of 32 distinct tribal communities, featuring notable groups like Santal, Munda, and Ho (Singhal, 2021:2278). These indigenous societies, deeply ingrained in rich cultural traditions, assume a pivotal role in upholding the ecological richness of the region. Their spiritual convictions; interwoven with tenets of totemism, veneration of sacred trees, and the sanctity of groves; emerge as a robust force in the preservation of the landscape (Ormsby and Bhagwat, 2010: 324). Nevertheless, the encroachment of modernization and commercialization, coupled with the gradual waning of time-honored belief systems, presents a formidable challenge to the sustainable conservation of floral and faunal biodiversity (Rowkith and Bhagwan, 2020: 549). Recognizing the influential role of religion, it becomes imperative to safeguard the sanctity of indigenous communities' religious values and associated taboos from erosion, ensuring an unwavering commitment to the quality and longevity of environmental conservation efforts. The research reveals that the tribal lifestyle is intricately woven into a psycho-spiritual and socio-ecological cosmological worldview, shaped by generations of indigenous existence. Their unique spirituality venerates nature, prioritizes family bonds, and embraces celebratory rituals, forming an integral part of their psyche (Thakur, 2009: 65).

Religious beliefs and practices constitute universal aspects of human society, characterized by diverse expressions across societal dimensions. Max Muller (1889:12), the founder of comparative religion, posited that cults and myths stem from the poetic personification of natural phenomena. He argued that religion emerged from the emotional responses of early humans to natural occurrences evoking wonder, awe, and fear. Scholars like Spencer (1876:45), Tylor (1871:103), and Frazer (1922:99) approached religion from an intellectualist perspective, interpreting it as a mechanism for explaining events with divine attribution. While contemporary terminology assigns "religion" to a specific realm of life and institution, it remains an integral facet of tribal existence, influencing domains such as hunting, agriculture, science, and art (Friess and Schneider 1965:12). Religion encompasses diverse public and private methods through which individuals and groups engage with deities, spirits, and ancestors. As Melford Spiro (1966: 17) elucidates, religion is a culturally molded association involving culturally postulated superhuman entities. In brief, religion entails the belief in supernatural forces appeased by individuals who attain spiritual empowerment through rituals and sacred performances, as highlighted by Mibang et al. (2004:56). It manifests through the acknowledgment of both natural and supernatural powers, the training of religious specialists, and the enactment of ritual practices. Religion encompasses ideas, attitudes, and actions prevalent at all cultural levels, be it primitive or civilized. The relevance of the sacred grove in tribal life, as well as its social and ecological value, has been demonstrated by Gadgil and Vartak (1981:59). The many scheduled tribal communities are

found in almost all states of India and make up about 8.6% of the country's total population (Census of India, 2011).

The Ho tribe, an indigenous community predominantly residing in the state of Jharkhand, India, is characterized by a distinctive cultural heritage and traditional practices. Linguistically, they communicate in the Ho language, which belongs to the Munda subgroup of the Austroasiatic language family (Roy, 1918:15). Engaged primarily in agriculture, the Ho people cultivate staple crops such as rice, millets, and pulses, supplementing their livelihood with animal husbandry. Their societal structure is organized around clans, each affiliated with a totemic symbol, and is led by a village headman known as the *Munda*. The Ho people had their own good and malicious spirits, which they referred to as *Bongas*. As per Majumdar (1950:76), these *Bongas* are believed to inhabit the nearby hills, forests, and village environs, representing a broad term encapsulating gods and spirits endowed with unique forces or powers. The Ho community relies on village priests owing to their perceived natural prowess in pacifying these deities during times of affliction, epidemics, or to ensure agricultural prosperity and livestock health. Sir S.C. Roy (1918:1) provides insights into their religious framework, denoted as the "*Sarna*" religion. It is characterized as a regulated emotional state system encompassing their lifestyle, involving veneration of deities and ancestral spirits. The central deity, regarded as the creator of the planet, assumes legendary status, accompanied by a retinue of gods and goddesses, some of whom are considered malevolent.

The primary objectives of this study among the Ho community in Jharkhand, India, are to comprehensively examine the intricate relationship between the forest environment and tribal religious practices and festivals. The study aims to elucidate the significance of the forest in shaping the Ho people's way of life, religious rituals, and cultural festivities. Specifically, the research seeks to identify and analyze the religious patterns, traditional belief systems, and practices embedded in the Ho community's connection with the forest. Furthermore, the research endeavors to explore how these religious activities contribute to the conservation of natural resources and the maintenance of ecological balance. By focusing on the Ho community in West Singhbhum, the study aspires to provide valuable insights into the interplay between indigenous religious beliefs, forest ecology, and cultural practices, contributing to a broader understanding of the intricate dynamics between human communities and their natural surroundings.

This study's uniqueness emerges from its profound investigation into the symbiotic relationship between the Ho community of West Singhbhum, India, and their forest environment. By seamlessly integrating religious beliefs, socio-cultural systems, and ecological practices, the research offers a nuanced understanding of how these elements intricately shape the fabric of Ho people's lives. Focused specifically on the Ho tribe, the study delves into their distinct religious rituals, festivals, and socio-cultural norms, avoiding broad stereotypes associated with tribal communities. Utilizing environmental ethnography, the work illuminates the Ho people's intimate connection with the forest, going beyond mere descriptions to reveal the forest's perception as a deity, a mother, and an indispensable part of their daily existence. Emphasizing the eco-centric worldview of the Ho community, the study highlights their sustainable practices and conscious efforts, such as the protection of specific tree species, to maintain a harmonious relationship with nature.

Exploring the historical roots of Ho beliefs provides a temporal dimension to their cultural and religious expressions, enriching the analysis with insights into the continuity and evolution of their traditions. The study adeptly weaves together religion and ecology, illustrating how Ho religious practices and festivals are deeply embedded in their ecological surroundings. Moreover, by documenting specific rituals, festivals, and associated practices, the research adds a practical dimension, offering a tangible portrayal of the Ho community's cultural expressions. In essence, this work significantly contributes to understanding indigenous cultures, environmental practices, and the interconnectedness of belief systems and ecology.

Exploring Methodologies and Study Region

The research employs a combination of qualitative methods, including participant observation, in-depth interviews, and ethnographic fieldwork. The use of participant observation allows the researcher to immerse themselves in the daily lives and rituals of the Ho community, fostering a nuanced understanding of their religious practices. In-depth interviews serve as a valuable tool for eliciting detailed insights into the beliefs, customs, and perceptions of the community members. The researcher conducts open-ended interviews with key informants, religious leaders, and participants in festivals. This approach facilitates the elicitation of rich narratives, providing insights into the symbolic meanings attached to the forest, religious rituals, and festive celebrations. Additionally, ethnographic fieldwork involves prolonged engagement within the community, facilitating the collection of contextual data and the establishment of rapport with the participants. Additionally, case studies were conducted, focusing on religious individuals and priests to gain a deeper understanding of their beliefs and practices. The selection of case studies was intentional, aiming for diversity and depth in perspectives. The researchers opted for structured schedules to maintain consistency and facilitate quantitative analysis of demographic and religious data. Case studies allowed for a qualitative exploration of individual experiences, providing depth and context to the broader findings. The documentation of forest resources, including trees and folk beliefs, was integral to the study, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the Ho tribe's intricate relationship with their environment. The selection of case studies was likely based on criteria such as expertise, influence, or unique perspectives, ensuring a well-rounded exploration of religious beliefs and practices within the community. Archival research is also undertaken to complement contemporary observations, providing a historical dimension to the study. By employing this multi-faceted approach, the research aims to offer a holistic and in-depth analysis of the intricate connections between the Ho tribe, their natural surroundings, and their religious and festive expressions.

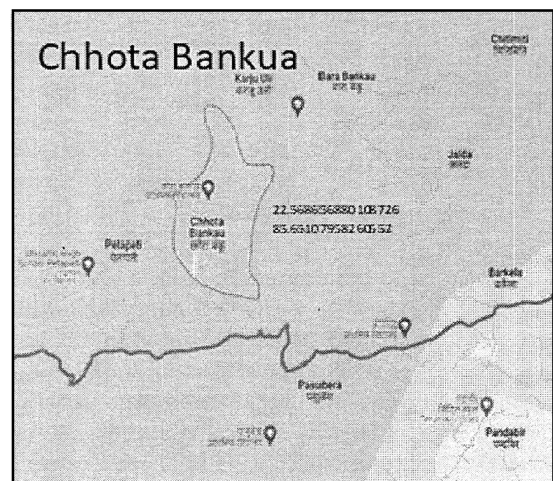
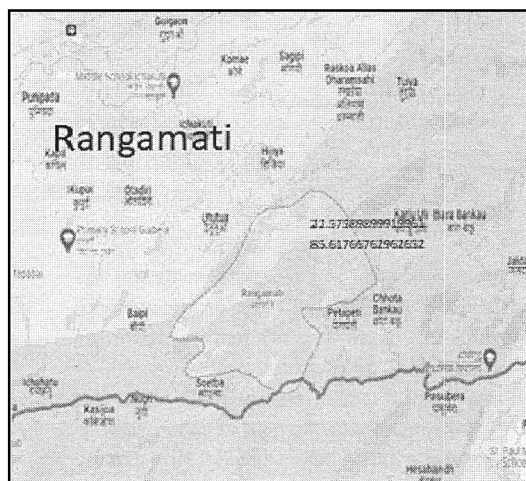
Hence, this study was conducted in the West Singhbhum District of Jharkhand, India, a region characterized by its significant tribal population. Jharkhand, being one of India's youngest states, is prominently inhabited by indigenous communities that have established their presence in the area for an extensive period. According to the 2011 Census of India report, the scheduled tribes in the state constitute a substantial portion, accounting for 26.20% of the total population, with a recorded figure of 8,645,042 individuals. The study site specifically lies within the Kolhan Forest Division, encompassing 700,042 hectares in the West Singhbhum District of Jharkhand. This district, situated in the eastern part of India, is recognized for its Ho tribe settlements, referred to as the Kolhan area

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(FSI, 2015), where the Ho community, one of the largest tribal groups in the state, resides. Geographically, the Ho tribe is widespread across West Singhbhum, Seraikella-Kharsawan, East Singhbhum districts, dwelling in diverse environments including urban, rural, and forested areas.

Conducting field research focused on investigating the role of the forest in the religious life of the Ho tribe, the study targeted three villages situated in remote forest areas. The selected villages, Rangamati, and Chota Bankua (positioned within a forest area), were situated in the Khuntpani block and Chota Khunta (proximate to a forest), a small hamlet under Khunta village were situated in the Chaibasa block. The sampling method employed could have incorporated elements of purposeful and stratified sampling, considering the deliberate inclusion of villages with varying proximity to the forest. The rationale for selecting these specific locations is grounded in several considerations. First, the study area aligns with the predominant habitation of the Ho people, facilitating a concentrated examination of their unique cultural dynamics. Second, the deliberate inclusion of villages with varying proximity to forests, Chota Khunta being near a forest and Rangamati and Chota Bankua situated in forested areas, allows for a nuanced exploration of how different environmental contexts influence religious practices. Additionally, the presence of the territorial chief (*Manki*) as the arbiter of inter-village disputes introduces a governance dimension that may influence religious dynamics. The traditional village priest (*deuri*) playing a central role in religious ceremonies, festivals, and sacred performances further justifies the choice of this study area, as their involvement signifies the integral link between the Ho people's religious practices and their cultural identity. The selection of Chaibasa and Khuntpani blocks and the specific villages within them reflects a strategic approach to capturing the diverse facets of the Ho tribe's religious engagement with the forest environment.

Area Map showing three studied villages:



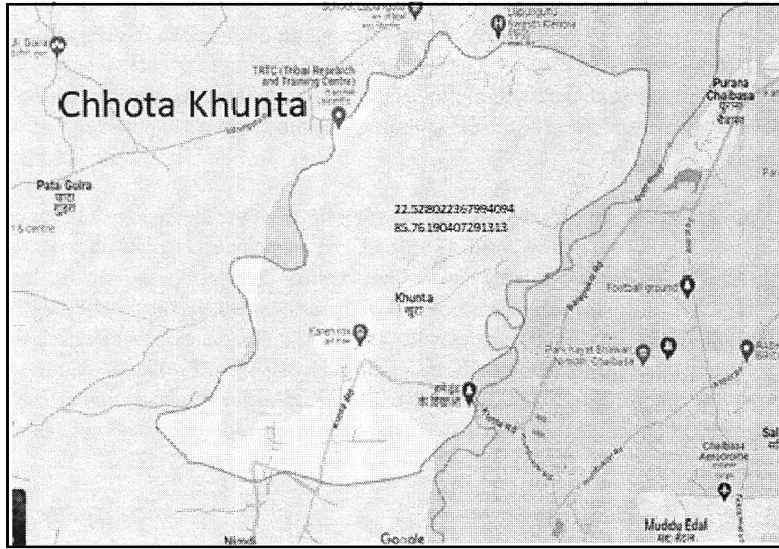


Table No. 1: Population Distribution of the Studied Ho community in the Studied Three Villages:

Block	Village	No of Family	Male	Female	Total
Khutpani	Rangamati	50	135 (48.04%)	146 (51.96%)	281 (100.00%)
	Chota Bankua	93	252 (49.90%)	253 (50.10%)	505 (100.00%)
Chaibasa	Chota Khunta	98	246 (51.04%)	236 (48.96%)	482 (100.00)
Total		241	633 (49.92%)	635 (50.08%)	1268 (100.00%)

The presented Table No 1 encapsulates demographic data for three villages—Rangamati and Chota Bankua in the Khutpani block, and Chota Khunta in the Chaibasa block—focusing on the number of families and the gender distribution within Ho community. In Rangamati, out of 281 individuals across 50 families, males constitute 48.04%, while females make up 51.96%. Chota Bankua, with 505 individuals in 93 families, demonstrates a near balance with 49.90% males and 50.10% females. Chota Khunta, comprising 482 individuals distributed among 98 families, exhibits a slight male majority at 51.04%. Cumulatively, across all three villages, the total population amounts to 1,268 individuals, with a relatively balanced gender distribution (49.92% males and 50.08% females). This data provides a foundational understanding of the demographic composition of these villages, offering valuable insights for further socio demographic analyses.

Symbiosis of Woodlands and Traditional Spiritual Practices:

The intricate symbiosis between woodlands and traditional spiritual practices among this community is notably characterized by the veneration of the forest as a divine entity. Functioning as custodians, their commitment to forest preservation is deeply rooted in religious doctrines, societal structures, and ancestral traditional wisdom (Khan 2008: 282). The forest assumes a paramount significance in their religious ethos, conceptualized as a maternal figure, and the community, in turn, identifies as progeny of the forest. Embedded within their religious framework are distinctive beliefs and rituals, overseen by designated priests. Moreover, their religious activities and ceremonies demonstrate a profound interconnection with forest ecology and the broader environment. The centrality of the forest extends beyond religious dimensions, significantly influencing their economic pursuits and socio-cultural fabric. This holistic integration underscores the indispensable role of the forest in shaping their religious, economic, and socio-cultural paradigms.

The Ho sacred place of worship, referred to as *Jaherthan* or *Jaherera*, is essentially a consecrated grove comprising a diverse array of trees, typically situated on the periphery of a village. Within the villages scrutinized, a total of five extraneous sacred groves were discerned, each encompassing various tree species. Notably, these trees hold significant medicinal and economic value. The study documented thirteen distinct tree species present in these sacred groves, as detailed in Table 2. Each tree species holds unique significance within the cultural and religious framework of the Ho community. The Ho people exhibit a steadfast commitment to the preservation of these trees, refraining from any felling or harm, thus maintaining a delicate ecological equilibrium. The symbiotic relationship between the Ho's religious and ceremonial practices is intricately woven into the fabric of these sacred groves.

Table No. 2 : Trees in Sacred Groves

SL No	Local Name	Scientific Name	No
1.	<i>Sarjom or sakhua</i>	<i>Shorea robusta</i>	15
2.	<i>Harra</i>	<i>Terminalia chebula</i>	9
3.	<i>Kend</i>	<i>Diospyros melanoxylon</i>	3
4.	<i>Kurchi</i>	<i>Holarrhena antidy</i>	2
5.	<i>Dho</i>	<i>Anogeissus latifolia</i>	4
6.	<i>Pia Sal</i>	<i>Pterocarpus morsupium</i>	4
7.	<i>Beela</i>	<i>Semecarpus anacardium</i>	7
8.	<i>Bhur-ru</i>	<i>Gardenia gummiifera</i>	7
9.	<i>Neemu</i>	<i>Azadirachta indica</i>	3
10.	<i>Asan</i>	<i>Terminalia tomentosa</i>	5
11.	<i>Jojo</i>	<i>Tamarindus indica</i>	4
12.	<i>Sisum</i>	<i>Dalbergia latifolia</i>	5
13.	<i>Behara</i>	<i>Terminalia bellirica</i>	6

Table 2 presents a diverse array of tree species within the sacred groves of the Ho community. Notably, *Sarjom* or *Sakhua* (*Shorea robusta*) emerges as a predominant species, emphasizing its central role in these sacred spaces. The table underscores the biodiversity and cultural significance of the sacred groves, with various tree species contributing to the ecological, cultural, and economic fabric of the community. Beyond their religious importance, certain trees hold medicinal properties, reflecting a dual cultural and health significance. The deliberate conservation practices, particularly the protection of *Sarjom* as guardians of the sacred groves, highlight the Ho community's commitment to ecological balance and cultural preservation.

The Ho people engage in the worship of a diverse array of deities inhabiting the hills, forests, farmlands, and village grounds. Within their kitchens, they have a designated space for venerating ancestral spirits, *Bura* and *Buri*. Prayerful gestures are directed toward various gods and goddesses residing in the adjacent forests and hills. The Sun God, or *Sing Bonga*, holds the pinnacle as their ultimate deity, responsible for crucial aspects such as annual rains, harvests, and the sustenance of life. Additional deities, including *Marangburu*, the hill god, are also objects of worship. Notably, strong beliefs in both benevolent and malevolent spirits are observed among the studied individuals.

The collective term “*Bonga*” is used by the Ho to refer to all their gods, described as formless yet potent beings. Participants in the study reported that these *Bongas* can be perceived in nearby forests and mountains. Consequently, “*Bonga*” encapsulates both the concepts of power and spirit. Among the significant *Bongas* of the Ho are *Marang Bonga*, *Singh Bonga*, and *Dessauli*. The religious leader, known as the *Deuri*, assumes the role of a priest officiating at all village or community services. While the direct understanding of a *Bonga's* role in daily life eludes the Ho, revelations about the roots of disease, drought, and other misfortunes occur through dreams. The worship of the *Bonga* god is integral to seasonal festivals, childbirth, weddings, and post-death rituals. During these occasions, the community dedicates offerings such as flowers, rice, vermilion, and the sacrifice of black chickens as a homage to honor the *Bongas*. This intricate system of spiritual beliefs and practices forms an integral part of the Ho cultural and religious landscape.

Cultural celebrations enacted by the Ho community

The Ho people observe distinct religious ceremonies corresponding to different seasons, with festivals holding paramount significance within their religious practices. Traditional festivals encompass the veneration of animistic spirits, apparitions, and deities, marked by rituals involving the offering of various colors of fowl (*Sim*) and goat (*Marom*). These offerings, made during celebrations, serve as acts of supplication to appease these spiritual entities and seek their blessings for the prosperity and well-being of the community, individual families, or lineages. Notably, the communal aspect of these festivals is underscored by the active participation of relatives from neighboring villages. To alleviate the routine aspects of their lives, the studied community commemorates diverse festivals throughout the year, aligning with their daily responsibilities. Given the agrarian nature of the Ho community, their primary festivals are intricately linked to the agricultural cycle, spanning from the sowing of seeds to the harvest. These festivals serve as occasions to worship multiple deities, aiming to safeguard and enhance their agricultural yields.

Table No. 3 delineates the ceremonies, religious practices, and festivals observed by the Ho community, elucidating their connection to the forest. Predominantly centered around agricultural pursuits, the principal festivals include *Maghe*, *Ba* or *Baha*, *Hero*, *Jomnawa*, and *Kakamolam*. *Maghe* stands out as the paramount festival in the Ho community. The ensuing discussion delves into the nuances of these traditional Ho festivals.

Table No. 3: list of month wise festivals of the studied community

Festival Name	Time	Duration	God (<i>Bonga</i>) Worship	Trees Connected (with local name)	Reasons for Worship
<i>Maghe</i>	January-March	Five days	<i>Dessauli</i>	<i>Sarjom</i> (<i>Shorea robusta</i>)	Traditional festival for the welfare of the villagers
<i>Baha</i>	March-April	Two days	<i>Dessauli</i>	<i>Sarjom</i> (<i>Shorea robusta</i>)	During New Year when new flower comes out and worshiped in the village level.
<i>Hero</i>	June-July	One day	<i>Dessauli</i> and <i>Jaheraburhi</i>	<i>Bel</i> (<i>Limonia acidissima</i>) and <i>Sarjom</i> (<i>Shorea robusta</i>)	For sufficient rain and good crop
<i>Bahatuli</i>	June-July	One day	<i>Dessauli</i>	<i>Tiril</i> or <i>Kendu</i> (<i>Diospyros melanoxylon</i>)	For the protection of paddy fields from external agencies.
<i>Jomnawa</i>	September-October	One day	<i>Dessauli</i> and <i>Sing-Bonga</i>	Rice plant (<i>Oryza Sativa</i>)	New Rice taking ceremony in family level
<i>Kalamkarsa</i>	December-January	One day	<i>Dessauli</i> , <i>Sing-Bonga</i> and <i>Marang-Bonga</i>	Rice plant (<i>Oryza Sativa</i>), Tulsi (<i>Ocimum tenuiflorum</i>) and Mango (<i>Mangifera indica</i>)	Purification of Paddy straw before threshing.

The table 3 presents a fascinating glimpse into the cultural and religious tapestry of the studied community, where festivals are intricately woven into the fabric of their lives. The seasonal alignment of each festival reflects a deep understanding of and harmony with the natural cycles. Notably, the choice of specific trees and plants for worship, such as *Sarjom*, *Bel*, and *Tiril*, suggests a nuanced ecological consciousness. These aren't merely symbolic choices but are integrated into practical aspects of the community's existence, from protecting paddy fields to ensuring bountiful crops. The festivals are more than ceremonial; they embody a shared cultural identity and foster community bonding through collective participation. The rituals, ranging from traditional ceremonies for welfare to the purification of paddy straw, likely carry profound cultural significance, passed down through

generations. Moreover, the festivals underscore a pragmatic approach, where spirituality and practicality intersect seamlessly, reflecting a community deeply rooted in both tradition and environmental stewardship. In essence, the critical analysis of the table reveals a community where cultural heritage, ecological mindfulness, and practical considerations are interwoven into the very fabric of their festivals.

Festival wise Discussion

Maghe, the main festival celebrated by the Ho community, holds significant cultural and spiritual importance. Taking place over five days, its timing is determined by a joint meeting of the village priest (*Deuri*), village chief (*Munda*), and elders. The festival revolves around worshiping deities like *Sing Bonga*, *Gram Siri*, and *Budhipat* for the prosperity of the village. Emphasizing the importance of the forest, the festival kicks off with the village chief planting *Sal* tree branches collected from nearby woods. These trees play a crucial role in the rituals and offerings. The festival includes various ceremonies, each with a unique purpose. Notably, *Guri* festivals involves worshiping the deity in the sacred grove outside the village, highlighting the sacred connection between the community and the surrounding natural environment. The use of natural elements, such as red chicken sacrifices and offerings of flowers from the *Palash* (*Butea monosperma*) tree, underscores the intertwined relationship between the Ho people and their ecosystem. One distinctive aspect of *Maghe* festivals is its role in community bonding and societal dynamics. The festival incorporates drinking rice beer and dancing, providing a platform for the youth to choose marriage partners. The communal nature of the celebration reflects a deep connection between cultural practices, spirituality, and the environment. The festival not only underscores the practical use of forest resources in rituals but also symbolizes the community's reliance on and gratitude towards the natural world for their prosperity and well-being.

The Flower Festival, or *Ba/Baha*, holds significance in the Ho community, occurring in March or April when *sal* trees bloom. This two-day celebration involves collecting *sal* flowers from the forest for offerings at the sacred grove, *Jaherthan*. The taboo of abstaining from new jungle fruits or using *sal* leaves underscores the festival's cultural and spiritual importance. Rituals include a traditional hunt, homage to ancestral spirits, and the sacrifice of red chickens and black He goats led by the village priest. The festival signifies a harmonious relationship between the community and nature, with communal celebrations featuring drinking, dancing, and feasting. This highlights the Ho people's deep respect for the environment and their cultural practices intertwined with the natural world.

The festivals of *Batauli*, *Hero*, *Jomnawa*, and *Kakamolam* within the Ho community reveal a deep intertwining of agricultural practices with cultural and spiritual rituals. *Batauli* festivals, held in July, focuses on protecting paddy fields from pests through worship of the *Dessauli* god, showcasing a pragmatic blend of tradition and agricultural concerns. *Hero* festivals, occurring after sowing in July, involves village-wide ceremonies following the initial worship by the village priest, underlining a communal agricultural ethos. *Jomnawa* festivals celebrates the harvest with offerings to *Sing Bonga*, combining ancestral spirit worship with festivities. *Kakamolam* festivals, held in December and January, emphasizes family-oriented agricultural rituals, symbolically linking the worship of deities with farming implements for a successful harvest. These festivals highlight the Ho community's holistic approach,

where agricultural sustainability, spiritual beliefs, and cultural practices converge seamlessly in a cyclical celebration of their agrarian way of life.

The Interplay Between Forests and the Socio-Cultural Fabric

The forest and the way of life of the tribes are connected. Their economy, religion and socio-cultural life are closely intertwined. They worship trees as a deity. Since prehistoric times, trees have been an indispensable part of the life of the studied people. The forest, consisting of trees, plants, hills, valleys, streams and rivers, was the life force of the animal world. Frazer (1922:130) cited the examples of tree worship in India, Europe, Australia, Africa, China, Japan and other countries showing different shades of belief and different rituals and customs associated with different tree species.

Socio-cultural life of the tribes is closely related to forest ecology. The presence of sacred groves is noticeable in most tribal groups. According to the people studied, *Jaherthan* is the home of a spirit, and it can leave and return there at will. The female spirit that lived in the grove was *Jahiraburi*. She is believed to be *Dessauli's* consort, and she is worshiped along with her consort as she sows seed and reaps grain. They weren't allowed to touch the tree because it was forbidden. The ghost can change shape and takes on the shape of a human. The spirit was believed to have rightful ownership over the tree, which eventually becomes the forest god.

The tree cult was associated with the practice of totemism. During the study, the people studied were found to have more than fifty exogamous totemic clans (Chatterjee and Das, 1927:72; Majumdar, 1950:123). They believe that the totemic plants or animals help and protect clan members in many ways. Ironically, it can be said that they are reasonable enough in selecting species for food and other uses. Such people are firmly convinced that they come from either a certain animal, bird or natural object. They form subgroups with a common ancestor. The clan-specific distribution of totem and taboo among the populations studied is presented in the table no 4.

Sl No	Name of the Clan	Plant/Animal connected to Clan	Taboo
1.	<i>Lugun</i>	<i>Lugum</i> or <i>Tusser</i>	Don't touch and eat
2.	<i>Deogam</i>	A type of Bird	Do not touch or eat the bird
3.	<i>Purty</i>	A type of flora	Don't touch and eat
4.	<i>Melgundi</i>	<i>Peepul</i> tree	Do not touch or cut the tree
5.	<i>Kaika</i>	A kind of tree	Do not touch or cut the tree
6.	<i>Kudadah</i>	Blackberry	Don't touch and eat
7.	<i>Jamuda</i>	A type of paddy	Don't touch and eat
8.	<i>Tupid</i> (Mouse)	Animal	Do not touch or eat the animal
9.	<i>Charad</i>	stone	Do not touch
10.	<i>Charabayad</i>	Fish	Don't touch and eat
11.	<i>Hasada</i>	A type of Mud	Do not touch
12.	<i>Tesa</i>	Bird	Do not touch or eat the Tesa bird.

Table No. 4 : Clan specific distribution of totem and taboo

Table No. 4 presents the clan-specific distribution of totems and associated taboos within the studied community. The analysis reveals a diverse cultural landscape marked by a variety of totems, including *Lugum*, *Peepul* (*Ficus religiosa*) tree, *Tupid* (Mouse), and *Tesa* bird, each linked to specific clans. The corresponding taboos, such as refraining from touching or eating certain plants, animals, stones, or mud, provide insight into the cultural, environmental, and spiritual dimensions of these beliefs. The taboos against cutting specific trees or interacting with particular animals suggest a potential commitment to environmental stewardship. Additionally, these totems and taboos may serve social and spiritual purposes, contributing to the preservation of cultural identity and fostering a harmonious relationship with the natural world. In essence, Table No. 4 reflects the intricate interplay between cultural practices, environmental awareness, and spiritual significance within the community's unique belief system.

Conclusion:

The study of the Ho tribe in Jharkhand, India, presents a rich tapestry of the symbiotic relationship between the community, their forest environment, and their religious practices. The forest is not merely a backdrop but a revered maternal entity, intricately woven into the very fabric of the Ho people's existence. The research illuminates the profound connection between the Ho tribe and their forest environment, emphasizing the interchangeability of the terms "tribes" and "forests." The forest is perceived as a deity, a mother, and a vital component of their daily lives. The intricate religious tapestry of the Ho community, rooted in the "*Sarna*" religion, highlights the veneration of ancestral spirits and deities entwined with the landscape.

An interdisciplinary approach, incorporating environmental ethnography, religious studies, and cultural anthropology, provides a nuanced understanding of the Ho tribe's way of life. The research delves into their unique spirituality, which venerates nature, prioritizes family bonds, and embraces celebratory rituals. Festivals, intricately linked to the agricultural cycle, emerge as dynamic cultural expressions that underscore the Ho people's profound understanding of natural rhythms. The study goes beyond documenting traditions; it serves as a call to preserve the unique legacy of the Ho tribe, navigating the complexities of a changing world and ensuring the longevity of their profound connection with the forest.

The research sheds light on the challenges posed by modernization and commercialization, emphasizing the need to safeguard indigenous religious values for sustainable conservation efforts. The Ho people's conscious efforts in the conservation of specific tree species reflect a holistic integration of cultural identity and environmental stewardship. However, the encroachment of modernization and the gradual erosion of time-honored belief systems present formidable challenges to the sustainable conservation of the forest ecology.

The festivals observed by the Ho community, intricately connected to the agricultural cycle, highlight a pragmatic approach where spirituality and practicality intersect seamlessly. The festivals embody a shared cultural identity, fostering community bonding through collective participation. The study reveals the Ho people's deep respect for the environment, evident in their deliberate conservation practices, such as the protection of specific tree species. Moreover, the totemic clans and associated

taboos underscore a commitment to environmental stewardship and the preservation of cultural identity.

In critically evaluating the research, it is imperative to recognize its significance in contributing to the broader understanding of the intricate dynamics between human communities and their natural surroundings. The interdisciplinary methodology employed, encompassing participant observation, in-depth interviews, ethnographic fieldwork, and archival research, enhances the depth and authenticity of the findings. The study's focus on the Ho tribe specifically avoids broad stereotypes associated with tribal communities, offering a nuanced exploration of their distinct cultural expressions. However, the research could benefit from further exploration of the nuanced socio-economic dimensions and the impact of external influences on the Ho community. The critical analysis of festivals, while comprehensive, could delve deeper into the power structures within the community and the evolving nature of these traditions in the face of modern challenges. Additionally, an examination of how external interventions, such as government policies or globalization, affect the delicate balance between cultural practices and environmental conservation would provide a more holistic understanding.

In conclusion, the study among the Ho tribe serves not only as a documentation of traditions but as a significant contribution to the discourse on indigenous cultures, environmental practices, and the interconnectedness of belief systems and ecology. It calls for a holistic approach to conservation that acknowledges the spiritual and cultural dimensions of indigenous communities, recognizing their role as stewards of the environment. Ultimately, the research urges stakeholders to navigate the delicate balance between tradition and modernization, ensuring the preservation of the Ho people's profound connection with their forest environment for generations to come.

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