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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### INDIGENOUS PRACTICES AND COGNITION FOR SUSTAINABLE HABITAT OF BIRJIA: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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#### ABSTRACT

The article analyzes the complex interrelationships among the Birjia community between indigenous practices, cognitive frameworks, and sustainable habitat development. Over millennia, the indigenous Birjia people—who mostly inhabit the forested areas of Jharkhand's South Chotanagpur division and Palamu division—have created distinctive customs that are intricately entwined with their surroundings. This state is home to eight different kinds of PVTGs, or particularly vulnerable tribal groups. Birjia is from one of those groups. Based on thousands of years of observation and involvement with their environment, the Birjia people demonstrate a deep grasp of their natural surroundings. The indigenous ecological knowledge passed down orally, through ceremonies, and community behaviors are included in their cognitive frames. These knowledge systems emphasize reciprocity and harmony with nature, which helps with resource management and cultivates a spiritual bond with the land. Reciprocity, the idea that human acts have reciprocal effects on the environment, is fundamental to Birjia's sustainable habitat practices. The Birjia people's methods for using resources are shaped by their knowledge perspective, which encourages resilience and conservation in their ecosystem. This philosophy of sustainability is reflected in traditional land management practices, which guarantee resource regeneration while reducing ecological damage. Moreover, Birjia cognition encompasses social organization and cultural identity in addition to practical resource management. The interdependence of Birjia society and their environment is emphasized by communal decision-making procedures and community land ownership, which promote sustainable behaviors through shared stewardship and accountability. Understanding and appreciating Birjia knowledge systems is essential for advancing sustainable habitat development in light of current issues including deforestation, climate change, and encroachment on indigenous territory. This article highlights the importance of indigenous viewpoints in influencing environmental issues and conservation efforts, arguing that the acknowledgment and protection of Birjia's cultural legacy should be a fundamental component of initiatives for sustainable development.

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## INTRODUCTION

The globe is looking to indigenous tribes' knowledge and customs for answers that might balance human existence with the natural world in the face of growing environmental difficulties. Deeply ingrained in their profound knowledge of the natural world, these resilient communities have maintained their distinctive ecologically conservative customs for millennia. Indigenous knowledge systems are rich sources of sustainable practices that emphasize the need to protect ecosystems, conserve biodiversity, and strike a careful balance between human demands and the health of the environment. A person who was born in a particular country or region or who lived in a territory or nation before other people is referred to as "indigenous." Indigenous peoples are not defined legally by international law. International law does not provide a legal definition of indigenous peoples. Indigenous Peoples are defined as people who were present on their territories before colonial powers claiming them through dubious legal theories of invasion, occupation, or other reasons. Awareness of indigenous populations' sustainable way of living, together with the deterioration of the conditions of the planet, has recently developed the interest of the international community in indigenous knowledge and practices. Indigenous knowledge has thus become a sort of 'remedy for many of the problems by development strategies during the last decades' (Agrawal, 1995). The Birjia communities, who are classified as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in the Indian state of Jharkhand, provide an engaging case study of the complex interactions that exist between indigenous practices, cognitive frameworks, and the creation of sustainable habitats. The Birjia, who live in Jharkhand's forested regions, have developed a close bond with their surroundings because of their

ancestor's indigenous ecological expertise. Their way of life, which is intricately linked to the cycles of the natural world, is evidence of the inventiveness and tenacity of indigenous civilizations in surviving in challenging environments. Due to historical marginalization, socioeconomic inequality, and encroachment on their native grounds, the Birjia group has specific challenges as a PVTG. The Birjia indigenous knowledge systems, however, endure despite these obstacles, providing important insights into long-term, sustainable habitat management techniques that have supported their communities. Hence, indigenous knowledge can be defined "as the specific, traditional, local knowledge that has grown up around the particular circumstances faced by indigenous men and women in a certain region" (Behera, 2000). Birjia's sustainable habitat practices are based on a profound respect for the natural world and its resources. Their cultural ethos is based on the idea of reciprocity, which holds that human actions reciprocally affect the ecosystem. The Birjia people have refined their knowledge of the local flora, wildlife, and ecological processes through rituals, oral traditions, and community activities, allowing them to adapt and flourish in their surroundings. As we know since indigenous knowledge is essential to their cultural survival, indigenous peoples have maintained that they have fundamental rights to it. This claim is progressively being acknowledged by international law. Several material and immaterial values are combined into "traditional resource rights" to form these rights (Posey 1996). Also, Birjia's conceptual frameworks incorporate spiritual and cultural aspects in addition to utilitarian ones. They view land as a sacred object that is inextricably related to their identity and sense of belonging, not just as a commodity. The interdependence of Birjia society and its environment is reflected in communal decision-making procedures and common land ownership, which supports sustainable practices through shared stewardship and responsibility.

The wisdom ingrained in Birjia's traditional knowledge systems is extremely relevant in the context of contemporary environmental issues including deforestation, climate change, and biodiversity loss. We can design a route toward more inclusive and sustainable approaches to habitat development that respect the rich heritage of communities like the Birjia while preserving the biodiversity and ecological integrity of our world by acknowledging and appreciating indigenous perspectives. That's why academicians and decision-makers should be more aware of the legitimacy and worth of indigenous knowledge and practices for development. The concepts of 'sustainable development' have hinted at and integrated indigenous knowledge and practices as a body of knowledge. The Indigenous knowledge and practices are valuable in and of themselves to humanity in general, for several reasons as expressed in the words of Barnhart, "the depth of indigenous knowledge rooted in the long inhabitation of a particular place offers lessons that can benefit everyone, from educator to scientist, as we search for a more satisfying and sustainable way to live on this planet" (Kawagley, 2005).

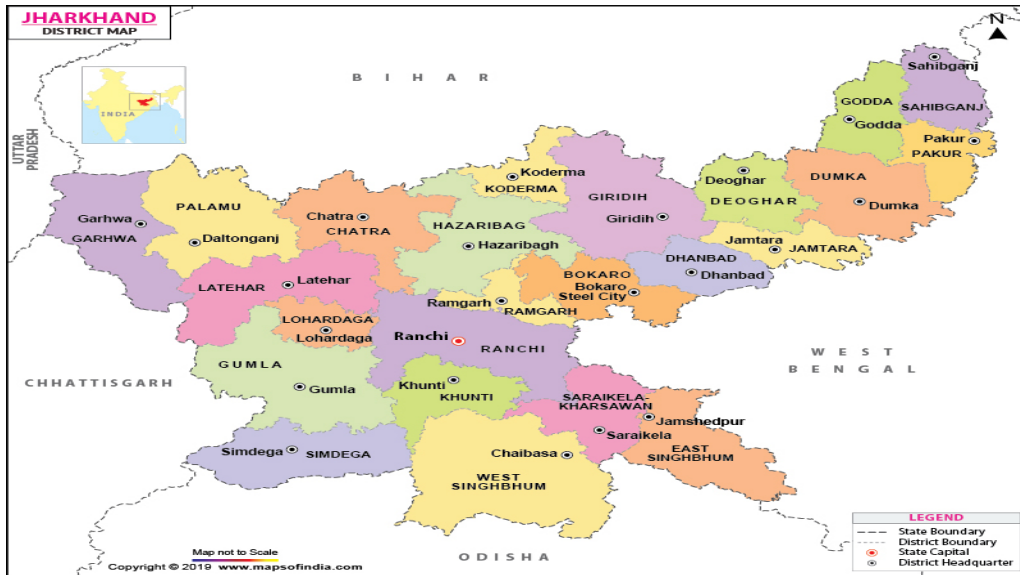
**Objectives:** This paper has the main objectives of exploring the indigenous practices and cognition of the Birjia tribe about their habitat, territorial development, and sustainability. The paper also describes their indigenous knowledge of soils and protection methods.

## METHODOLOGY

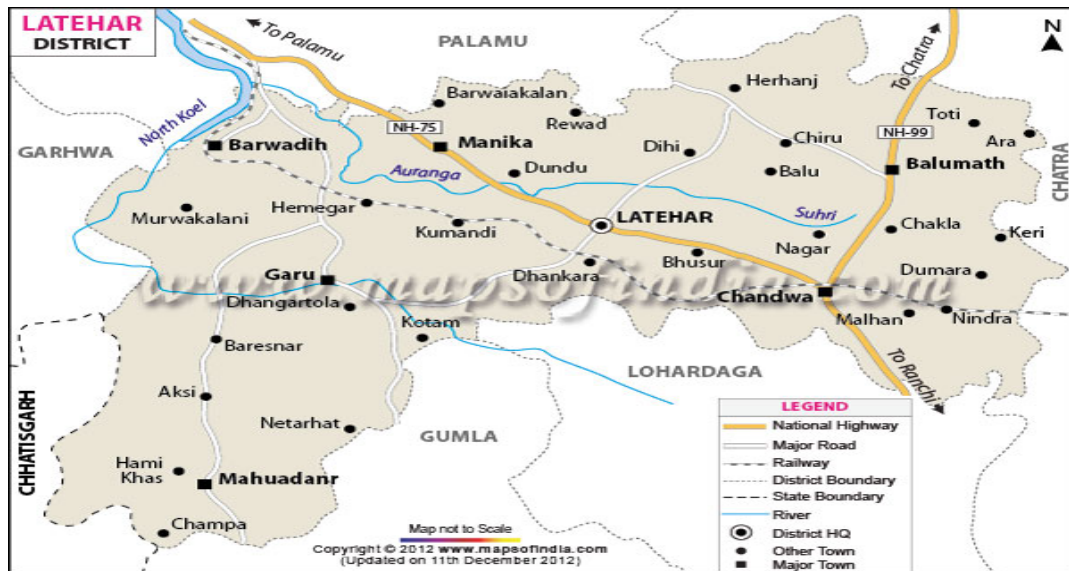
This research paper focuses on the Birjia tribe residing in the Netarhat region of the Latehar district of Jharkhand state. Method of the writing this paper is descriptive analysis. Data has been collected from primary sources through field studies from Participant observation to group and personal interviews. Also, prepare a schedule for questioning and use non-probability sampling like snowball sampling under the purposive sampling method technique used to identify and recruit participants through referrals from existing participants. And different secondary sources like books, research papers, newspapers, and especially field reports on the Birjia tribe of Latehar district of Jharkhand state.

**Land and People:** In eastern India, a state called Jharkhand means "The land of the forest". It is 79,714 km<sup>2</sup> in size (30,778 sq mi). In terms of area, it ranks 15th, and in terms of people, it ranks 14th. The Birjia tribe mainly lives in this state. There are eight PVTGs in Jharkhand state, and the Birjia tribe is among them. Birjia tribe has the lowest population among all the PVTGs of Jharkhand. According to the Census of India, 2011 there were 488,494 PVTGs population in the state of Jharkhand. In Jharkhand, the Birjia community's population stands at 6,276 individuals, with 3,174 being male and 3,102 female. The majority of the Birjia population resides in rural areas, totaling 6,197 individuals, comprising 3,133 males and 3,064 females. A smaller portion of the Birjia community, numbering 79 individuals, resides in urban areas, with 41 males and 38 females. The Birjia tribe exhibits a sex ratio of 977, indicating a slightly higher proportion of females. Remarkably, their child sex ratio stands at 997, reflecting a slight preference for female children. However, literacy rates are relatively low, with a total literacy rate of 50.2%, with males at 61.7% and females at 38.4%. These statistics offer insight into the distribution of the Birjia population across Jharkhand, highlighting a predominantly rural presence with a minority residing in urban settings. Their population is a matter of deep contemplation. The Birjia tribe mostly lives in Netarhat and its surrounding areas in the Latehar district. Currently, Netarhat is developing as a tourist destination in Jharkhand State. Latehar, situated in the state of Jharkhand within the Palamu division, spans an area of 3,622 square kilometers. Positioned at a longitude of 84.5119 and latitude of 23.74, its district headquarters serves as a focal point for administrative activities. The district has nine blocks and two subdivisions, Latehar and Mahuadand. Interestingly, there are a lot of remote villages scattered over the terrain, tucked away among rough mountains, thick jungles, and lush farmlands. Latehar sustains a population of 726,978 individuals, with 369,666 males and 357,312 females.

The literacy rates stand at 71.8% for males and 50.26% for females, underscoring the need for further educational initiatives. Additionally, Latehar's demographic makeup is characterized by a significant tribal population, accounting for 45.54% of its inhabitants. In Latehar, the Birjia population stands at a total of 4,124 individuals, comprising 2,098 males and 2,026 females. Within the rural areas, the Birjia community constitutes the majority, with a population of 4,110, consisting of 2,089 males and 2,021 females. In contrast, the urban Birjia population is considerably smaller, with only 14 individuals, comprising 9 males and 5 females. Although there are certain urban areas in Latehar, the majority of the Birjia population lives in the rural areas. So far as the name of Birjia is concerned, 'Bir' stands for 'Forest', and 'Jia' means 'Dwellers'. Earlier Birjia was being considered as a sub-division of the Birjia tribe. But now Birjia is recognized as a separate tribe by the Government of India. Birjia is identified under the *Proto-Austaroloid* race. They belong to the *Austro-Asiatic* language family. The language used by this community is called 'Birjia'. They also speak Hindi and Sadri and use Devanagari script whenever required. Birjia initially came under the category of hunter-gatherer and food-gathering tribes, but gradually they turned towards the agriculture and labor sector. At present, broadly their economy is dependent on agriculture and labor.



Map Source. <https://www.mapsofindia.com/maps/jharkhand/jharkhand.htm>

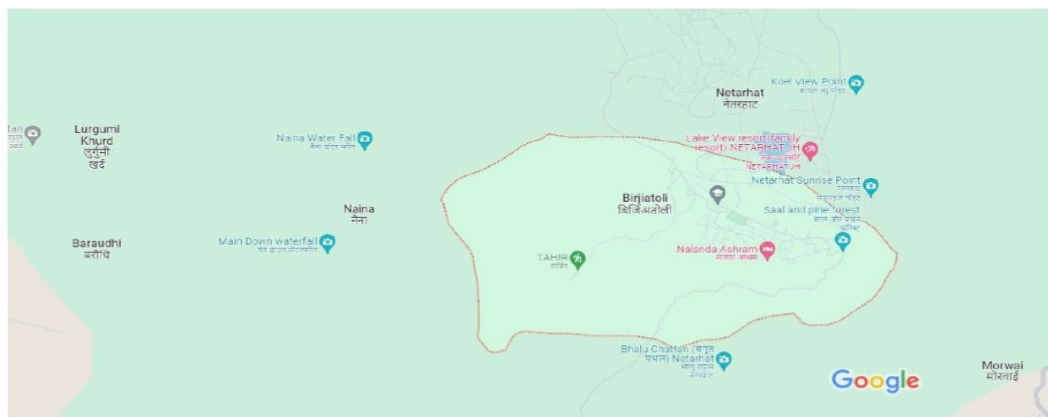


Map Source. <https://www.mapsofindia.com/maps/jharkhand/districts/latehar.htm>

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Birjatioli - Google Maps

Google Maps Birjatioli



Map source. <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Netarhat,+Jharkhand/@23.490605,84.2135643,12.25z/data=!4m6!3m5!1s0x398b08073b9e73e9:0x27447d0d1c7e558f8m2!3d23.485434!4d84.2647522!16zL20vMDVraDNs?entry=ttu>

## DISCUSSION

In Birjia, indigenous knowledge and customs are held collectively and are closely associated with the management of habitat and the exploitation of natural resources. By fostering the development of local identities across the region, economic clusters based on the preservation and enhancement of this link are providing novel avenues for augmenting the contribution of indigenous knowledge to their environments. All of these approaches, despite some differences, support the idea that cultural elements and expressions connected to indigenous knowledge seem crucial for preserving a rich nature at the territorial level. They may also serve as the foundation for novel revenue-generating ventures that support the preservation of biodiversity and sustainable resource management, both of which have the potential to increase the sense of ownership that local communities have over their identities and cultures. To know about their indigenous practices, we have to know about some forest and land-related rules of their region. The Indian Forest Act of 1878 delineated the forests of India into three distinct classifications, each serving specific purposes within the ecosystem and for local communities. Firstly, Reserved Forests were designated areas where villagers were prohibited from extracting any resources for personal use. These forests were safeguarded to preserve their ecological integrity and biodiversity. Secondly, Protected Forests were areas where limited access and usage were permitted. Villagers were allowed to utilize forest products for essential needs such as building homes or procuring fuel, but under regulated conditions to ensure sustainability. Lastly, Village Forests served as communal resources managed by local communities. Here, villagers had the authority to gather forest products for their consumption and livelihoods, contributing to their socio-economic well-being while maintaining a balance between human needs and environmental conservation.

**Rules of Village Forests:** The State Government holds the authority to allocate to a village community the rights previously held by the Government over any land designated as a reserved forest, with the ability to revoke such allocation. These designated areas will be termed village forests. The State Government is empowered to establish regulations governing the management of village forests. These regulations will outline the terms under which the community receiving the allocation may access timber, forest resources, or grazing land, as well as delineate their responsibilities for safeguarding and enhancing the forest. And, all provisions within this Act about reserved forests will apply to village forests, provided they do not conflict with the established regulations.

**Indigenous Knowledge about Habitat:** The Birjia tribe primarily resides within or near forests, which holds significant importance in their indigenous knowledge. When The Forest Act (1927) was implemented in India, the British government imposed restrictions on forest rights and various associated aspects for tribal people. Consequently, tribes are confronting a multitude of difficulties, with the division of their territories being a particularly significant issue. Many tribal territories fell within reserve forests, leading to the deprivation of their rights. In return for their original territory, they were provided with parcels of land situated beyond the confines of the reserve forest. After that, The PESA Act-1996, generally also known as the *Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act*, gives Indian tribal groups the authority to manage natural resources and govern property acquisition within their jurisdiction. Enabling *Gram Sabhas* to organize and carry out socioeconomic development initiatives fosters local autonomy and self-governance. Article 243(b) of the Indian Constitution defines the term "Gram Sabha". The PESA Act gave tribal villages the authority to organize Gram Sabhas, which control land usage, manage natural resources, and protect customary rights. In addition to encouraging self-governance and the preservation of tribal culture, this autonomy promotes equitable benefit-sharing, sustainable management, and conservation activities. As a result, the Gram Sabha now has jurisdiction over the territories that the Birjia people inhabit, particularly 'Chhopad'. A similar arrangement was made for the Birjia tribe, where the allocated land in the new area became known as Village Forest. Typically, these lands were of poor fertility. The Birjia tribe received a 'LalPata' (kind of document) granting them ownership rights to these plots, a document issued to each individual who received land in another location. They were allocated lands in areas unsuitable for growing edible plants. In response, utilizing their traditional knowledge, they initiated the cultivation of diverse trees and plants on these lands. These communal forests of the Birjia tribe are referred to as 'Chhopad' (*chh-oh-pahd*) and are exempt from taxation. Within the Birjia tribe, each family possesses its own Chhopad, where they cultivate various trees and plants. In these Chhopads, once the plants have grown a bit over a specific period (typically one to one and a half years), they undergo pruning near the stem, a practice known as 'Chhopna' (*chop-nuh*). Each year, some plants are ready for pruning, sustaining this cycle. It is believed that through this process, the plants will have an extended lifespan and evolve into high-quality trees over time. The trees and vegetation flourishing within this Chhopad serve as their sole means of sustenance. Whether for constructing shelters or fulfilling other needs, they rely on the resources from this area. Their daily activities revolve around the Chhopad, and their dwellings are situated nearby. They perceive the well-being of the Chhopad as integral to their survival. Consequently, their indigenous knowledge encompasses strategies to preserve the Chhopad.

**Knowledge of Soils and Protection:** The hills covered in trees encircle the research area. The hills are made up of small plateaus with narrow valleys and flat tops. Beneath the Netarhat Plateau lie two different types of land: *ghats* (slopes) and *pats* (plateaus). The Pat region is found to consist primarily of Deccan Lava, which has been transformed into laterite and bauxite soils. Because of these soil characteristics, the majority of their land in the Pat and Ghat regions is of the tann or tan variety, which is less fertile and only allows for very limited agricultural activities (Dasgupta, 1994). The Birjia tribe, renowned for their profound knowledge of the land and its resources, protects their special soil through the adoption of sustainable techniques like Agro forestry and Polyculture. They ensure soil health for future generations by using iron ore from hematite and bauxite to build homes and paint walls. Their sustainable practices are a result of their in-depth knowledge of the land and its resources.

### Agroforestry

Planting a range of crops next to trees is known as agro-forestry, and it is practiced by the Birjia tribe. The trees improve soil fertility through nitrogen cycling, offer shade, and stop soil erosion.

**Fruit Trees:** Fruit-bearing trees such as mango (*Mangifera indica*), guava (*Psidium guajava*), jackfruit (*Artocarpus heterophyllus*), and sweet lemon (*Citrus limetta*) provide food and shade and contribute to soil health.

**Shade and Erosion protection tree:** By providing shade to crops, trees like pine help to protect them from the heat and keep the soil from drying up. Pine trees serve as erosion prevention trees in a variety of ways. Many pine trees have deep roots that act to stabilize the soil and prevent erosion caused by wind and water. Another is bamboo (*Bambusoideae*), a multipurpose plant utilized in agro-forestry systems for building, crafting, and erosion management.

**Polyculture:** The practice of growing multiple crops simultaneously to mimic natural ecosystems and increase biodiversity can improve soil health and lower the likelihood of crop failure. The Birjia tribe engages in a wide variety of tree planting for their Polyculture farming. These are:

Sl. No.	Name of Native Trees	Botanical name	Benefits in the ecosystem
1.	Amaltas	<i>Cassia fistula</i>	Amaltas is prized for its vivid yellow blossoms, therapeutic qualities, and ecological significance as a pollinator nectar source.
2.	Amla	<i>Phyllanthus emblica</i>	Fruits from the Amla tree are rich in nutrients. Microorganisms and soil fertility may benefit from their presence.
3.	Arjun	<i>Terminalia arjuna</i>	Bark from Arjun is well-known for its medicinal properties. Its inclusion in the ecosystem can aid in preventing soil deterioration.
4.	Asan	<i>Terminalia tomentosa</i>	Asan is renowned for its tasty leaves and fruits. Beyond their edible offerings, asan trees bring value by improving soil fertility.
5.	Bael	<i>Aegle marmelos</i>	The fruit, leaves, and bark of the bael plant are highly valued in ayurveda medicine for their digestive and therapeutic qualities.
6.	Bija	<i>Pterocarpus marsupium</i>	Bija trees are utilized in traditional medicine and provide excellent timber. Their leaf litter adds nutrients to the soil.
7.	Bayer	<i>Ficus benghalensis</i>	The stately bayer fig tree has aerial roots and is important to ecology because it provides food, habitat, and cultural significance.
8.	Gamhar	<i>Gmelina arboria</i>	It is renowned for its durable timber and medicinal properties.
9.	Harra	<i>Terminalia chebula</i>	The Harra tree yields fruits that are used in medicine. The organic materials and leaves of this plant enhance soil health.
10.	Imli	<i>Tamarindus indica</i>	Imli/Tamarind trees yield edible fruit, and their dropping leaves recycle nutrients and organic debris.
11.	Jamun	<i>Syzygium cumini</i>	The Jamun tree yields tasty fruits and keeps the soil moist with its shadow. The soil is also improved by fallen leaves.
12.	karam	<i>Adina Cordifolia</i>	Karam trees improve soil fertility, supporting sustainable agriculture and ecological equilibrium.
13.	Karanj	<i>Pongamia glabra</i>	Leguminous trees like karanj are prized for their ability to produce biodiesel, for enriching the soil by fixing nitrogen, and for their medicinal properties.
14.	Kend	<i>Diospyros tomentosa</i>	Kend trees enhance soil fertility through nitrogen fixation.
15.	Keonjhi	<i>Sterculia villosa</i>	The native tree keonjhi is a deciduous species. Its timber is utilized in buildings, and its seeds are employed in traditional medicine.
16.	Kusum	<i>Schleichera oleosa</i>	In addition to producing oil-rich seeds, Kusum trees improve soil fertility by cycling nutrients through their leaves.
17.	Mahua	<i>Madhuca longifolia</i>	Edible blooms and seeds are produced by mahua trees. Additionally, by fixing nitrogen and producing leaf litter, they contribute to improving soil fertility.
18.	Paisar	<i>Pterocarpus marsupium</i>	Well-known for its therapeutic qualities, it promotes increased fertility while generating important therapeutic chemicals.
19.	Palash	<i>Butea monosperma</i>	Flame of the Forest, also known as Palash, is a plant with vivid red blossoms that is employed in many customs. The soil is made healthier by the leaves and blossoms of this plant.
20.	Pair	<i>Buchanania latifolia</i>	Edible fruit and seeds are produced by pears, which is good for agriculture and ecosystems.
21.	Pipal	<i>Ficus religiosa</i>	Pipal is valued in their culture and has ecological, therapeutic, and cultural significance.
22.	Saja	<i>Terminalia tomentosa</i>	In addition to offering shade, Saja tree leaves nourish the earth. For the Birjia tribe, they hold cultural values as well.
23.	Sal	<i>Shorea robusta</i>	Sal trees are valuable wood species that offer shade. Their leaves fall to the ground and add to the soil's organic matter and nutrition cycle.
24.	Semal	<i>Bombax ceiba</i>	Semal is a plant that is well-known for its enormous, eye-catching blooms and is used in the Birjia tribe's customs. With its wide root system, it can aid in preventing soil erosion.
25.	Sissam	<i>Dalbergia Latifolia</i>	Sissam is a highly valued tropical tree that contributes to biodiversity and ecosystem services through the use of its superior timber in musical instruments and excellent carpentry.
26.	Teak	<i>Tectona grandis</i>	Teak is a highly valued type of wood. Its presence can enhance local biodiversity and the structure of the soil.
27.	Tendu	<i>Diospyros melanoxon</i>	Indigenous cigarettes and traditional rolled leaf plates are made from Tendu leaves. The cycle of nutrients in the soil is aided by the falling leaves.

**Birjia Cognition about their Indigenous Knowledge:** The Birjia tribe, an indigenous community, utilizes cognitive practices to promote sustainable habitat, demonstrating their deep understanding of their ecosystem and traditional knowledge systems. The cognitive framework of the Birjia tribe is profoundly embedded in their cultural practices, having been created over generations of interaction with their natural surroundings. Oral transmission of their Indigenous Habitat Knowledge has an impact on sustainable resource management techniques. This knowledge, which is ingrained in their tradition, guides fundamental activities including land management, hunting, gathering, and agriculture, demonstrating a comprehensive approach to sustainable living. The Birjia tribe's cognitive approach places a strong emphasis on the value of their natural habitat as a landscape steeped in spirituality and culture that supports resilience against ecological forces. Their methods are always changing, with a focus on group consensus and adaptive learning, social justice and ecological stewardship, identity preservation, and sustainable habitat management. The cognitive framework of the Birjia people, which directs their approach to resource management and sustainable habitat development, emphasizes reciprocity and harmony with nature. Their strategy is centered on this complete awareness of human involvement in ecological balance, which informs their everyday decisions and resource management tactics. Addressing issues like biodiversity loss and climate change requires a grasp of these concepts. The cognitive conceptions of the Birjia community impact their collective decision-making procedures and land ownership, giving group interests and consensus-building precedence over individual authority. This tactic creates duties and obligations based on common cultural norms and values, facilitating the equitable distribution of resources. Gaining knowledge of these cognitive foundations helps communities understand interdependence, sustainable practices, and environmental stewardship. The mentality of the Birjia people affects both cultural preservation and environmental management. Promote sustainability, involves changing indigenous people's attitudes, values, and actions through a deep interaction with the natural world and beliefs. The long-term health and vitality of the habitat are ensured by sustainable actions that are guided by this cognitive framework. In the final analysis, the Birjia tribe in Jharkhand's Indigenous activities and Cognition for Sustainable Habitat study's cognitive aspect highlights the complex web of relationships that exist between traditional knowledge, cultural activities, and environmental sustainability. In our increasingly fragile world, valuing and respecting the cognitive frameworks of indigenous tribes offers priceless insights into promoting harmony between people and the environment.

## CONCLUSION

The Birjia tribe, through their indigenous practices and cognition, offers valuable insights into sustainable habitat management. Their deep understanding of soils and their significance for preservation allows them to employ techniques such as crop rotation and organic fertilization to ensure soil health. This not only protects the delicate balance of their ecosystem but also guarantees the durability of their agricultural pursuits. Additionally, the Birjia tribe's proficiency in agro-forestry methods allows them to take advantage of biodiversity, soil conservation, and microclimate regulation by incorporating trees into their agricultural landscapes. This not only increases crop yields but also promotes ecological resilience in their environment. Furthermore, the Birjia tribe's use of Polyculture, growing different kinds of crops on one plot, reduces the risks posed by pests, diseases, and weather changes. This diverse strategy not only ensures food security but also fosters ecological stability. Overall, the Birjia tribe's expertise in soil protection, agro-forestry, and Polyculture is crucial for sustainable habitat management. Their traditional knowledge guides modern environmental conservation efforts and the development of resilient livelihoods in the face of global challenges such as biodiversity loss and climate change. By recognizing and preserving Indigenous knowledge systems, we can gain invaluable knowledge those points towards a more sustainable future for all.

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