



Brewing Belief: The Cultural and Political Life of *Hadia* and *Sarhul* in Jharkhand

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Abstract

Hadia is a traditional rice beer widely consumed by various indigenous communities in India, particularly in the state of Jharkhand. It is made from fermented rice and a mix of natural herbs known as *ranu*, which act as fermenting agents. *Hadia* holds significant cultural and social value, especially during festivals, rituals, and community gatherings. It is not just a beverage but a symbol of communal harmony and shared heritage among the *Adivasi*¹ people. This research explores the intricate relationship between traditional food practices and cultural identity, focusing on *Hadia*, a rice beer, and the Sarhul² festival in Jharkhand. *Hadia* is more than just a beverage; it is deeply intertwined with the social and spiritual fabric of indigenous communities, particularly during the Sarhul festival, which celebrates the arrival of spring and the worship of nature. Through a comprehensive analysis, this study examines how *Hadia* and Sarhul serve as cultural cornerstones that reinforce communal bonds, sustain indigenous traditions, and assert identity in a rapidly changing world. Additionally, the research delves into the policy implications of these practices, investigating how local and national policies impact the production, distribution, and consumption of *Hadia*. By situating *Hadia* within the broader cultural and policy landscape, this paper seeks to highlight the importance of preserving indigenous food traditions in the face of globalization and modernity. The findings underscore the need for culturally sensitive policies that protect and promote traditional practices, ensuring the continued vitality of Jharkhand's indigenous communities' rich heritage.

Keywords: *Hadia*, Food, Rituals, Sarhul, Tribals, Jharkhand



¹ The term "Adivasi" is derived from the Hindi words "adi," signifying "from the beginning," and "vasi," meaning "inhabitant" or "resident." This term was introduced in the 1930s, primarily as a result of a political movement designed to establish a unified identity among the various indigenous communities in India.

² *Sarhul* festival is also called *jangkor*, *Khaddi*, *Baha*, or *ba* which is a grand festival of Jharkhand, celebrated by Munda, Oraon, Santhal, Ho, and other tribal communities of Jharkhand.

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Introduction

Jharkhand, a state in eastern India, is celebrated for its rich tribal culture, mineral wealth, and dense forests. Established on November 15, 2000, as the 28th state of India, it was carved out from Bihar. The state is home to diverse Indigenous communities, including the Santhals, Mundas, Oraons, and Ho, among others. These tribes form the backbone of Jharkhand's cultural identity, which is deeply rooted in their symbiotic relationship with nature. Their worldview, often described as animistic and eco-centric, views forests, rivers, soil, and sky not merely as resources but as living entities endowed with spirit and agency. Anthropologists such as Verrier Elwin (1955) and Nirmal Kumar Bose (1941) have noted that Adivasi cosmology in central and eastern India emphasizes coexistence rather than domination, constructing an ethical relationship between humans and the natural world. This worldview manifests vividly in their festivals, rituals, and foodways, which operate as both ecological and cultural systems.

Festivals like Sarhul, Karma, and Tusu are not merely seasonal celebrations but ritualized expressions of ecological balance. During *Sarhul*, the Sal tree (*Shorea robusta*) is worshipped as a symbol of fertility and renewal, and offerings such as *Hadia* are made to Singbonga, the supreme deity. Such acts embody what Roy (2014) calls "the ritual ecology of gratitude," wherein food and drink become mediators between the human and the cosmic. These gatherings reinforce community values of reciprocity, collective responsibility, and spiritual kinship with the landscape.

Indigenous food and drink practices are integral to the cultural identity of these communities, carrying layers of social, spiritual, and historical meaning. In Jharkhand, *Hadia*, a fermented rice beer is a cornerstone of Adivasi life. Brewed with locally sourced rice and ranu tablets, *Hadia* embodies the community's ancestral knowledge and deep connection to nature. Beyond being a traditional beverage, when this drink is used for religious purposes, it is known as *Tapawa*. It is also called *Illli* in Mundari language. *Hadia* holds profound cultural significance, particularly during the Sarhul festival. As a symbol of gratitude to ancestors and nature, it reinforces Adivasi identity and plays a central role in community rituals.

The cultural significance of fermented beverages is not confined to Jharkhand. Across Northeast India, similar drinks, *Apong* among the Adi in Arunachal Pradesh, *Zutho* among the Angami Nagas, and *Chuak* among the Tripuri, serve as ritual offerings and social lubricants (Nongbri, 2016).

This paper explores the dual significance of *Hadia* as a traditional beverage and a cultural emblem. It focuses on three key aspects: (1) *Hadia's* role in strengthening Adivasi identity, (2) the stories and oral traditions that surround it, and (3) the policies influencing its production and consumption.

Literature Review

Existing studies, such as *Food, Identity, and Indigeneity* by Singh (2018), emphasize how traditional beverages like *Hadia* are intertwined with rituals and festivals, while Mahato (2020) highlights its spiritual importance during Sarhul. However, limited attention has been given to the oral narratives surrounding *Hadia* and the policy

challenges it faces. This study seeks to address these gaps, aiming to provide a holistic understanding of *Hadia's* cultural and policy dimensions, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on indigenous food practices and their role in community cohesion and identity assertion.

Begrich (2013) offers a critical perspective on the intersections of morality, governance, and indigeneity in Jharkhand. In his doctoral dissertation *"Inebriety and Indigeneity: The Moral Governance of Adivasis and Alcohol in Jharkhand, India,"* Begrich examines how discourses surrounding alcohol—particularly traditional beverages like *Hadia*, have been shaped by colonial, missionary, and postcolonial state interventions. He argues that these external forces often constructed Adivasi drinking practices as markers of "moral weakness" or "backwardness," thereby legitimizing social control and assimilation policies. His analysis situates *Hadia* not only as a cultural and ritual substance but also as a site of political negotiation, where questions of identity, morality, and state regulation intersect.

This perspective provides a valuable counterpoint to cultural studies that focus primarily on *Hadia* as a symbol of community and spirituality (Singh, 2018; Mahato, 2020). While those works emphasize the internal meanings of the drink within Indigenous epistemologies, Begrich (2013) highlights the external discursive constructions that have historically marginalized Adivasi practices. Together, these studies reveal the dual dimensions of *Hadia*: as a cultural heritage under threat and as a contested symbol within broader debates of governance, identity, and autonomy. This duality underscores the importance of exploring not only the ritual and symbolic aspects of Indigenous beverages but also the policy and moral frameworks that shape their perception and regulation in contemporary Jharkhand.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach to explore the cultural, ritual, and policy dimensions of *Hadia* among Adivasi communities in Jharkhand. Fieldwork was conducted in Brambe Village (Ranchi District) and Burhadih Village (Khunti District), two regions known for their vibrant celebration of *Sarhul* and continued practice of rice-beer brewing. These sites were selected for their cultural significance and community accessibility, providing diverse insights into both ritual and everyday uses of *Hadia*.

Data collection involved participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and oral narrative documentation between local brewers, community elders, and festival participants. Emphasis was placed on understanding how *Hadia* is prepared, consumed, and narrated within the context of festivals like *Sarhul*, as well as how community members perceive government regulations and changing social attitudes toward traditional brews.

Alongside field data, this research draws on secondary sources to situate findings within broader socio-political and cultural contexts. These include archival materials and government reports (e.g., Tribal Research Institute documents, Jharkhand Excise Policy 2017–2023, Census of India 2011), academic literature and dissertations (Begrich, 2013; Singh, 2018; Mahato, 2020; Elwin, 1955; Roy, 2014), and media and

NGO reports addressing alcohol regulation, women's roles in brewing, and the commodification of traditional beverages. This multi-source approach ensures that the study integrates lived experiences with documented policy and historical realities. By integrating ethnographic observation with policy analysis, this methodology aims to produce a holistic understanding of *Hadia* as both a cultural symbol and a contested public discourse. It allows the study to move beyond textual representation toward lived experience, emphasizing the voices of those for whom *Hadia* remains a sacred and everyday presence.

***Hadia*: A Brew of Tradition and Community**

Hadia derives its name from the Hindi word *Handi*, referring to the traditional earthen pot in which it was originally prepared. *Hadia* is prepared using fermented rice and *ranu*, a blend of herbs that catalyzes fermentation. The process involves steaming rice, mixing it with *ranu*, and letting it ferment in clay pots over several days. This traditional method reflects an ecological harmony, utilizing local resources sustainably.



Fig. 1. Kuiry, Hare Krishna. *Hadia* Preparation during the Sarhul festival, Brambe, Ranchi, Jharkhand. 13 April 2021.

Hadia transcends its role as a beverage. It is central to social gatherings, where it fosters dialogue and unity. During weddings, funerals, and festivals, sharing *Hadia* symbolizes equality and collective joy. It serves as a medium of hospitality, offered generously to guests.

***Sarhul*: The Festival of Spring and Nature Worship**

The tradition of nature worship is widespread among Indigenous communities across India and the world. Globally, Indigenous peoples have historically maintained spiritual practices that honour rivers, mountains, forests, and animals as sentient entities or embodiments of divine forces. In India, for example, Gond and Baiga communities

worship trees, hills, and rivers as sacred, while the Naga tribes of Northeast India observe rituals to honour the spirits of the land before sowing or harvesting. Similarly, the Bhils, Kols, and Todas integrate ecological knowledge into ceremonial life, reflecting a worldview that sees humans as part of an interdependent natural order rather than separate from it. Following this broader Indigenous tradition of nature reverence, Sarhul is celebrated by tribal communities such as the Oraon, Munda, Ho, Santhal, Birjia, and Korwa. The festival falls on Chaitra Shukla Tritiya, the third day following the new moon in the month of Chaitra, which corresponds to the final month of the Bengali solar calendar and the first month of the Hindi solar calendar. Sarhul, celebrated during spring, marks the onset of the agricultural season and the worship of nature. The festival is a vibrant amalgamation of dance, music, and rituals, with the *Sal* tree at its center. Offerings of *Hadia*, flowers, and other items are made to deities, seeking blessings for prosperity. *Hadia* is an essential offering during Sarhul, symbolizing gratitude to ancestors and nature. It is first presented to Singbonga and then shared among community members, reinforcing collective bonds. In Sarhul lore, the *Sal* tree spirits awaken during spring, and villagers offer *Hadia* at the tree's roots. This offering is believed to ensure fertility, harmony, and protection. The ritual unites the community, emphasizing their respect for nature.

***Hadia* in Adivasi Identity and Heritage**

Hadia is also believed to facilitate shamanic transformation and spiritual communion; during rituals like *Sarhul*, it is offered to deities and consumed in ceremonial contexts to invoke blessings, enhance trance states, or connect with ancestors. Thus, the drink functions simultaneously as a subsistence commodity, a cultural artifact, and a sacred medium, reflecting the interweaving of ecological adaptation, social organization, and spiritual practice in Adivasi life. For Adivasi communities, *Hadia* is a marker of cultural identity. It encapsulates their connection to the land, their ancestors, and their unique traditions. In a globalized world, where indigenous practices face erasure, *Hadia* serves as a tangible assertion of Adivasi heritage. The commercialization of *Hadia* threatens its cultural sanctity. Increasingly, it is viewed as a commodity rather than a sacred drink, altering its role within Adivasi communities. Additionally, younger generations are losing touch with the traditional knowledge required to prepare it. *Hadia* was once a symbol of unity and celebration, shared openly to bring people together in joy. Over time, its deeper meaning has been overshadowed, as it is now often treated as a commodity. However, during Sarhul, its true significance reemerges, a profound offering of thanks to the divine and the ancestors.

Hadia occupies a gray area in regulatory terms. While traditional brewing is permitted within Adivasi communities, restrictions on its sale pose challenges. These regulations often fail to consider its cultural importance, treating it solely as an alcoholic beverage. According to Adivasi folklore, *Hadia* was a divine gift from Singbonga, the Creator. He noticed humanity's disconnection and gave *Pilchu Haram* and *Pilchu Buri* the knowledge to make *Hadia*. This drink became a bridge between humans and gods, reminding people to honor their roots and foster community. There are many narratives related to *Hadia*.

Narrative 1: Singbonga and Admi Maa created the first humans, Pilchu Buri and Pilchu Haram. They were warned not to drink a special drink called Mera. One day, while fasting since morning, they became hungry and tasted the Mera. After drinking it, they engaged in intercourse, and from this act, human progeny began. To show gratitude, the Adivasi people started offering Mera, which later became known as *Hadia*, to their ancestors and gods during festivals, honoring their origins and connection with the divine. (B. Oraon) This narrative emphasizes *Hadia* as an integral part of creation, linking it to human existence and the gratitude expressed through offerings during festivals.

Narrative 2: Long ago, the Creator Singbonga noticed that humans, though industrious, lacked joy and unity in their lives. He decided to bestow a sacred gift upon them. Singbonga appeared to Pilchu Haram and Pilchu Buri, the first humans, and revealed the process of making *Hadia*. He taught them to gather rice from their fields and mix it with herbs from the forest, creating ranu, the fermenting agent. When the couple shared the first pot of *Hadia* with their village, it brought everyone together in song and laughter. From that day, *Hadia* became central to Adivasi rituals and celebrations, a symbol of gratitude to Singbonga and the unity of the people (Singh 38; Oraon 45). This narrative underscores *Hadia's* role in strengthening social bonds and as an enduring token of divine benevolence.

Narrative 3: In a village surrounded by dense forests, an ancient Sal tree was believed to house a protective spirit. During Sarhul, the villagers gathered at the tree's base, offering *Hadia* and singing songs of gratitude. It was said that during these offerings, the tree would come alive, its leaves swaying to the rhythm of the songs. One year, a drought struck the village, and the people could not prepare *Hadia* for Sarhul. They feared the tree spirit's anger but decided to explain their plight. As they sat silently under the tree, a gentle hum emerged from its branches, carrying a melody of forgiveness and hope. Inspired by this divine sign, they resumed their rituals with renewed devotion once the rains returned (Mahato 124; Toppo 93). This narrative connects *Hadia* to ecological harmony and the deep respect Adivasi people have for the natural world, showcasing the drink as a bridge between humans and their environment.

Narrative 4: In a modernizing village, the knowledge of brewing *Hadia* had almost disappeared. Elders lamented that the youth, preoccupied with city life, showed little interest in their ancestral practices. A young woman named Karmi, however, felt a strong connection to her roots. One night, she dreamed of her ancestors, who revealed the secret recipe for ranu and urged her to revive the tradition. Guided by her vision, Karmi ventured into the forest to gather herbs. She brewed *Hadia* using her ancestors' instructions and shared it with her village (Oraon 87; Murmu 58). This narrative reflects the resilience of Adivasi traditions, emphasizing the role of individual agency in preserving ancestral wisdom in a rapidly changing world.

Narrative 5: Once upon a time, there was a saint who had four beloved pets: a myna, a parrot, a tiger, and a boar. He loved and cared for them deeply, treating them as his family. One day, the saint passed away. His loyal pets, overwhelmed with grief, gathered to perform his last rites. They burned his body on the bank of a river.

Stricken by sorrow and devotion, the pets decided to sacrifice their own lives in the same fire, honoring their master. As time passed, the spot where the saint and his pets were cremated transformed into a lush Sal grove.

Many years later, some villagers came to the grove to cut down the Sal trees. However, as they worked, they grew tired and decided to rest under the shade of the trees. Two of them chewed on the bark out of curiosity and soon felt a peculiar intoxication. Intrigued, they gathered more bark, mixed it into a pot of rice, and let it ferment. After a few days, they discovered the mixture had turned into a brew.

When they drank it, something extraordinary happened, they began to mimic the behaviors of the saint's four pets. Depending on how much they consumed, some spoke like the myna or parrot, while others roared like the tiger or grunted like the boar (Barayud, 2018).

This brew, born of devotion, nature, and mystery, became a part of the local tradition, carrying the spirit of the saint and his pets into the lives of those who partook in it. The story of the saint and his pets elevates the brew to a cultural artifact imbued with symbolic meaning, weaving together themes of devotion, nature, community, and transformation. As a cultural brew, it not only sustains traditions but also nurtures a sense of belonging and spiritual continuity, ensuring that the past remains an integral part of the present.

Narrative 6: During Sarhul, it is believed that the spirits of ancestors return to partake in the festivities. Families leave bowls of *Hadia* and plates of food outside their homes as offerings. In one village, a curious boy decided to stay awake to see if the spirits would come. As the night deepened, he heard faint laughter and the clinking of cups. Peering outside, he saw translucent figures enjoying the offerings. By dawn, the spirits had vanished, leaving empty bowls and a faint aroma of *Hadia* in the air. (Mahato 131; Singh 45). This narrative portrays *Hadia* as a sacred offering, a means of honoring and connecting with ancestors during pivotal rituals like Sarhul.

Together, these narratives illustrate the multifaceted significance of *Hadia* in Adivasi life. It is more than a traditional drink; it is a divine gift, a symbol of unity, a medium of ecological balance, a link to ancestral roots, and a vital element in rituals like Sarhul. These stories remind us of the cultural, spiritual, and ecological dimensions of *Hadia*, emphasizing the importance of preserving such traditions amidst modernity.

Tradition and Policy in Jharkhand Regarding *Hadia*

The brewing of *Hadia*, a traditional rice beer, is deeply rooted in the cultural and spiritual fabric of Adivasi communities in Jharkhand. However, inadequate awareness hinders the transmission of brewing knowledge across generations and creates barriers to community celebrations. These policies also fail to address the ecological

aspect of *Hadia*-making, which depends heavily on forest resources, such as the preservation of specific herbs and roots needed for the production of ranu, a vital ingredient in the fermentation process. To preserve *Hadia's* heritage, policies must acknowledge its cultural and spiritual significance. Community-based initiatives and heritage preservation projects should be encouraged to sustain these traditional practices while aligning with regulatory frameworks. Such efforts can ensure the preservation of *Hadia*-making traditions without undermining its importance to the Adivasi way of life.

Adivasi oral traditions serve as custodians of *Hadia's* essence, with stories about its origin, preparation, and spiritual relevance being passed down through generations. These narratives reinforce cultural identity and maintain a connection to the ancestral past. *Hadia* plays a central role in the Sarhul festival, which marks the beginning of the new year and the arrival of spring. It is believed that offering *Hadia* to the deities ensures land fertility, a good harvest, and protection for the village. According to tradition, the spirits of ancestors and gods partake in the festivities during Sarhul, with *Hadia* acting as a medium through which the living commune with the divine. This beverage is often regarded as a sacred gift from the gods, symbolizing harmony between humans and nature. The preparation and consumption of *Hadia* during festivals are seen as acts of reverence toward the earth and the ancestors, fostering a bond between the living and the spiritual realm. This sacred practice underscores the profound interconnection between cultural traditions and ecological balance.

Phulo Jhano Aashirvad Abhiyan: A Government Initiative

The Phulo Jhano Aashirvad Abhiyan is an ambitious initiative of the Government of Jharkhand, launched in September 2020 under the guidance of Hon'ble Chief Minister Shri Hemant Soren. The initiative was started by the Rural Development Department to end the harmful practice of selling and manufacturing *Hadia* and liquor in rural areas while providing affected women with alternative, dignified livelihood opportunities. Its primary objectives are to rehabilitate rural women involved in the liquor trade by offering sustainable and respectable sources of income, provide technical support and interest-free loans of ten thousand rupees, and ensure that every affected family in remote areas benefits through community-based interventions. The campaign also emphasizes women's empowerment, social inclusion, and community well-being, linking economic independence with enhanced dignity and social recognition. The initiative is transformative in impact: during the first phase, fifteen thousand two hundred eighty four women were identified through a door-to-door survey, and approximately fourteen thousand three women have now transitioned to alternative livelihoods, earning a decent income and leading a more dignified life. By combining rehabilitation with economic support and skill development, the Phulo Jhano Aashirvad Abhiyan addresses the socio-economic vulnerabilities of rural tribal women while promoting sustainable community development.

The scheme, named after Jharkhand's courageous women Phoolo and Jhano³, has begun to yield significant results. Women who were previously engaged in the brewing and sale of *Hadia* liquor out of poverty and necessity have embraced this initiative, transforming their lives with newfound self-confidence and creating inspiring stories of change. While this program seeks to address social and economic challenges, it is essential to differentiate between the cultural and spiritual use of *Hadia* and its commercial exploitation. Striking this balance would enable the preservation of *Hadia's* heritage while fostering the holistic development of tribal communities. The purpose of the Phulo Jhano Aashirvad Abhiyan is to rehabilitate women involved in the production and sale of local liquor, providing them with alternative livelihood opportunities, technical support, and resources to uplift their socio-economic conditions while promoting positive change in rural communities.

Between Ritual and Regulation

In the cultural matrix of Jharkhand's indigenous communities, the traditional rice beer known as *Hadia* occupies a deeply ambivalent position both life-affirming and potentially destructive. As Roger Begrich (2013) argues in his ethnographic study of adivasi drinking practices in Jharkhand, alcohol "plays highly contradictory roles in the lives of adivasis. It is in many ways as debilitating or even death-dealing as it can be life-affirming. It can be as destructive as it is constructive." (Begrich, 2013, p. 233) This ambivalence is central to understanding how *Hadia* functions not merely as a beverage but as a cultural practice embedded in ritual, economy, sociality and governance. In situating *Hadia* within the context of the Sarhul festival, which marks the arrival of spring and the veneration of nature, we can see how this liquor becomes a signifier of identity, belonging, reciprocity and contestation.

From a ritual cultural perspective, *Hadia* is intertwined with the symbolic grammar of spring, renewal, and ancestral relationship. Among many Adivasi communities, the brewing and offering of *Hadia* are integral to festive gatherings, communal feasts, and rituals of thanksgiving. The fact that *Hadia* is brewed from rice and a mix of herbal tablets (locally known as *ranu* or *bakhar*) indicates its rootedness in agro-ecological systems and indigenous knowledge (Kujur & Kandir, 2015). Its use during Sarhul reinforces the connection between community, land, forest, ancestry and the seasonal cycle thus making *Hadia* more than a 'drink', but a material articulation of cultural memory and group identity.

Hadia plays a socio-economic role within adivasi livelihoods and community networks. Brewing and selling *Hadia* constitutes one of the few accessible economic activities for many Adivasi families. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, reports noted that many adivasi women in and around Ranchi became almost entirely dependent on producing and selling *Hadia* to support their households (Priyadarshini, 2020). This underscores how the beverage is enmeshed in local economies income, gender roles, labour, village markets—and thus in the reproduction of social life. Begrich (2013)

³ Phulo and Jhano were the first female revolutionaries of the tribal freedom movement. They made significant contributions to the Santhal Hull.

emphasises that to treat adivasi drinking purely as problem (addiction, pathology) overlooks how alcohol functions as a commodity, a means of social exchange and livelihood (Begrich, 2013, p. 35).

Hadia is a site of moral governance and identity politics. Begrich's central theoretical contribution is an "obligations" framework: he suggests that drinking is not simply an individual act of choice or compulsion, but is bound up with myriad obligations, toward ancestors, spirits, deities, the community, and also toward sobriety and reform (Begrich, 2013, p. 35). These obligations often collide: on one hand, social reformers, Christian missionaries, Maoist cadres and state prohibition efforts stigmatise adivasi alcohol use as a marker of backwardness, moral decay, and economic ruin. On the other hand, customs require that *Hadia* be exchanged, shared, offered, consumed to participate fully in cultural life. Thus the brewing of *Hadia* during Sarhul is at once an act of cultural assertion and a site of external moral scrutiny. This tension, where *Hadia* becomes both emblem and target, reflects broader power relations: over what constitutes adivasi identity, who controls customary practices, and how indigenous people negotiate modernity, development and policy.

Conclusion

Hadia, a traditional rice beer, holds deep significance within the Adivasi culture and mythology, particularly in the context of the Sarhul festival. It is not merely a beverage but a powerful symbol of community, unity, and shared heritage. Rooted in ancient tales like that of Singbonga and Admi Maa, *Hadia* represent the sacred connection between humans, their ancestors, and the divine. During Sarhul, it serves as a central offering, embodying gratitude and reverence for the natural world and ancestral spirits. Its consumption is a communal act, fostering harmony and togetherness among the Adivasi people, reinforcing their collective identity and cultural values. *Hadia* represents more than a beverage; it is a symbol of identity, unity, and spirituality for Jharkhand's Adivasi communities. Stories, rituals, and practices surrounding *Hadia* highlight its profound cultural significance. However, modern challenges, commercialization, policy restrictions, and generational shifts threaten its continuity. To ensure *Hadia's* survival, it is imperative to implement culturally sensitive policies, integrate oral traditions into education, and support heritage preservation projects. By doing so, we can honor and sustain the rich heritage of Jharkhand's indigenous communities.

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