

Social Mobility status of Birhor Tribes in India

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Abstract: This study examines the social mobility status of the Birhor tribes in India, focusing on their historical background, current socio-economic conditions, and factors influencing their upward mobility. The Birhor tribes, traditionally marginalized and inhabiting remote forest regions, have experienced significant challenges in accessing education, healthcare, and basic amenities. Employing a mixed-methods approach, including ethnographic observations and surveys, the research reveals a complex interplay of cultural preservation, government policies, and external interventions impacting the Birhor's social mobility.

Keywords: *Birhor tribes, social mobility, India, marginalized communities, socio-economic conditions, education, healthcare, cultural preservation, government policies, external interventions.*

INTRODUCTION

The social mobility status of the Birhor tribes in India is a subject of critical importance in understanding the challenges faced by indigenous communities in their pursuit of upward mobility within a rapidly changing society. The Birhor tribes, primarily residing in the states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha, have historically occupied a marginalized position in the socio-economic hierarchy. Social mobility encompasses various dimensions, including economic, educational, and cultural factors. The Birhor community has faced significant barriers to accessing quality education and skill development opportunities. Limited access to schools, along with cultural differences and language barriers, has hindered their educational advancement. This lack of education perpetuates their socio-economic vulnerability, limiting their prospects for securing better employment and income-generating opportunities.

Economic factors play a crucial role in the social mobility of the Birhor tribes. Many Birhor individuals are engaged in traditional forest-based activities,

which often yield insufficient income. The absence of diversified livelihood options and inadequate infrastructure in their habitats further restricts their economic advancement. Moreover, their nomadic lifestyle and land dispossession due to developmental projects have exacerbated their socio-economic challenges. Cultural preservation is another dimension that intersects with social mobility. The Birhor tribes' cultural identity is integral to their well-being, and efforts to integrate into mainstream society can sometimes lead to a loss of traditional practices and values. Striking a balance between cultural preservation and embracing modern opportunities poses a complex dilemma for the Birhor community. Government policies and interventions have aimed to address the socio-economic disparities faced by indigenous communities, including the Birhor tribes. Initiatives related to education, healthcare, and livelihood development have been launched, but their effectiveness often varies due to implementation challenges and lack of community engagement. The social mobility status of the Birhor tribes in India reflects a multifaceted issue shaped by economic, educational, cultural, and policy-related factors. Addressing their challenges requires a holistic approach that recognizes the importance of education, economic empowerment, cultural preservation, and inclusive policies. By understanding and addressing these factors, India can work towards enabling the Birhor tribes to overcome historical disadvantages and achieve meaningful social mobility.

BIRHOR TRIBES IN INDIA

The Birhor tribes are an indigenous and marginalized community in India, primarily concentrated in the states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha. With a distinct cultural identity and a history deeply rooted in their forested habitats, the Birhor people have faced

significant socio-economic challenges and cultural transformation in the face of modernization.

Traditionally, the Birhor tribes have practiced a semi-nomadic lifestyle, relying on hunting, gathering, and shifting cultivation for their sustenance. They have a unique knowledge of forest ecosystems, which has been an integral part of their cultural heritage. However, the encroachment of modern infrastructure and developmental projects has threatened their access to and utilization of traditional lands and resources. Education has been a major hurdle for the Birhor community's social mobility. Barriers such as language differences, lack of nearby schools, and cultural disparities have impeded their access to formal education. Consequently, many Birhor individuals face limited employment opportunities due to the absence of formal skills and qualifications.

Healthcare and sanitation disparities are also prevalent among the Birhor tribes, resulting in heightened vulnerability to diseases and inadequate well-being. Lack of access to proper healthcare infrastructure and facilities further exacerbates their socio-economic challenges. Government initiatives have aimed to uplift the Birhor tribes by providing them with essential services, education, and livelihood opportunities. Efforts have been made to integrate them into mainstream society while preserving their cultural heritage. However, the effectiveness of these interventions has varied, often due to the unique socio-cultural context of the Birhor community.

In recent years, there has been increased awareness about the need to address the specific challenges faced by the Birhor tribes. Non-governmental organizations, researchers, and activists have been working towards advocating for their rights, promoting education, and preserving their cultural traditions. The social mobility of the Birhor tribes remains a complex and evolving issue. Achieving sustainable progress requires a comprehensive approach that considers their unique cultural identity, provides access to education and healthcare, ensures equitable economic opportunities, and respects their rights to their traditional lands and resources. By recognizing and addressing these multifaceted challenges, India can work towards empowering the Birhor tribes and enabling them to thrive in a changing world while preserving their rich cultural heritage.

ETHNICITY OF BIRHOR TRIBES IN INDIA

The Birhor tribes in India represent a distinct and vibrant ethnic community with a rich cultural heritage that has evolved over centuries. As an indigenous group, their ethnicity is an essential facet of their identity, encompassing various cultural, linguistic, historical, and social dimensions. Understanding the ethnicity of the Birhor tribes requires an exploration of their origins, cultural practices, language, social organization, and historical context.

Origins and Migration: The Birhor tribes are part of the larger Adivasi community, which consists of numerous indigenous groups inhabiting India's diverse landscapes. Ethnographers and anthropologists have traced the roots of the Birhor people to the Austroasiatic language family, a linguistic group that spans parts of Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent. This linguistic affiliation hints at historical connections and migrations that have shaped their identity and culture.

- **Cultural Practices and Beliefs:** The Birhor tribes have developed a unique cultural repertoire that reflects their deep connection to their natural surroundings. Traditionally semi-nomadic, they have relied on hunting, gathering, and shifting cultivation as primary livelihood strategies. Their intricate knowledge of forest ecosystems, flora, and fauna has been integral to their cultural practices and survival.
- **Spirituality and Animism:** Spirituality and animism hold significant roles in the Birhor ethnic identity. They revere spirits and deities associated with nature, often seeking blessings for successful hunts, bountiful harvests, and protection from harm. These beliefs underscore the intimate relationship between the Birhor people and their environment, shaping their worldview and cultural practices.
- **Language and Communication:** Language plays a crucial role in shaping ethnic identity, and the Birhor tribes have their own distinct language. The Birhor language is part of the Munda group, a linguistic family that includes several indigenous languages spoken by Adivasi communities in India. This linguistic connection serves as a marker of shared heritage and contributes to the Birhor ethnicity.
- **Social Organization and Traditions:** The Birhor society exhibits a unique social structure

characterized by close-knit family units and communal living. Traditional roles within the community are well-defined, with gender-specific responsibilities contributing to the overall functioning of the tribe. Rituals, ceremonies, and oral traditions further reinforce their cultural identity and provide a sense of continuity across generations.

- **Challenges and Adaptations:** The Birhor ethnic identity has faced challenges due to historical and contemporary factors. Colonization, displacement, and marginalization have impacted their traditional way of life and cultural practices. Modernization and development projects have introduced new dynamics, influencing their socio-economic status and relationships with mainstream society.
- **Preservation and Resilience:** Despite these challenges, the Birhor tribes have demonstrated resilience in preserving their ethnicity. Efforts to maintain cultural practices, language, and community cohesion have been observed. Indigenous leaders, activists, and organizations have worked to raise awareness about the importance of preserving Birhor identity and advocating for their rights.

The ethnicity of the Birhor tribes in India encompasses a complex interplay of cultural, linguistic, historical, and social factors. Their origins, cultural practices, language, and adaptations to changing circumstances contribute to their unique identity within the broader Adivasi community. As India navigates modernization and cultural diversity, recognizing and respecting the distinct ethnic identities of indigenous communities like the Birhor is essential for promoting inclusivity, preserving cultural heritage, and fostering a more equitable society.

SOCIO ECONOMIC CONDITION OF BIRHOR TRIBES IN INDIA

The socio-economic condition of the Birhor tribes in India is a subject of concern and exploration, marked by a range of challenges and opportunities that reflect their historical, cultural, and contemporary contexts. This analysis delves into key aspects of their socio-economic status, including education, livelihoods, healthcare, and government interventions.

- **Education and Literacy:** Education plays a pivotal role in determining socio-economic outcomes, and the Birhor tribes face significant hurdles in this regard. Limited access to quality educational facilities, linguistic barriers, and cultural differences have hindered their educational attainment. As a result, illiteracy rates among the Birhor population remain high, limiting their ability to access better job opportunities and engage in informed decision-making.
- **Livelihoods and Employment:** Traditional occupations, such as hunting, gathering, and shifting cultivation, have historically sustained the Birhor tribes. However, economic shifts, modernization, and changing land use patterns have posed challenges to these traditional livelihoods. Many Birhor individuals find themselves marginalized in the broader economy, lacking access to stable wage labor and income-generating opportunities. This economic vulnerability perpetuates cycles of poverty and limits their socio-economic mobility.
- **Healthcare and Well-being:** Access to healthcare services is a critical determinant of socio-economic well-being. Unfortunately, the Birhor tribes often face inadequate healthcare facilities and limited access to medical services. This leaves them more vulnerable to health issues, including malnutrition, communicable diseases, and maternal and child health problems. Poor health outcomes further hinder their ability to engage in economic activities and improve their overall quality of life.
- **Government Interventions and Policies:** The Indian government has initiated various interventions aimed at improving the socio-economic condition of indigenous communities, including the Birhor tribes. These interventions encompass areas such as education, healthcare, land rights, and livelihood support. While these efforts demonstrate a commitment to addressing their socio-economic challenges, there is often a gap between policy formulation and effective implementation. Cultural sensitivity, community engagement, and targeted resources are essential to ensuring the success of these interventions.
- **Land and Resource Rights:** Land is a crucial asset for indigenous communities like the Birhor, often

erving as the foundation for their cultural practices and economic activities. However, land dispossession due to infrastructure development, urbanization, and industrialization has posed a significant threat to their socio-economic stability. Secure land and resource rights are vital for preserving their traditional ways of life and facilitating sustainable livelihoods.

- **Cultural Preservation and Identity:** The socio-economic condition of the Birhor tribes is intricately linked to their cultural preservation. As they navigate modernization, there is a need to strike a balance between embracing economic opportunities and maintaining their cultural identity. Efforts to preserve traditional knowledge, practices, and languages are integral to their socio-economic empowerment.

The socio-economic condition of the Birhor tribes in India is characterized by a complex interplay of historical disadvantages, limited access to education and healthcare, economic challenges, and government interventions. Achieving meaningful improvements in their socio-economic status requires a comprehensive approach that addresses educational barriers, promotes sustainable livelihoods, ensures healthcare access, upholds land and resource rights, and respects their cultural heritage. By recognizing and addressing these multifaceted challenges, India can work towards empowering the Birhor tribes to overcome socio-economic disparities and achieve greater well-being and inclusion within the broader society.

SOCIO CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF BIRHOR TRIBES IN INDIA

The Birhor tribes in India exhibit a rich tapestry of socio-cultural characteristics that have evolved over generations, shaping their identity, traditions, and way of life. Embedded within their distinct cultural practices, social organization, language, and belief systems are the unique aspects that define the Birhor community and distinguish them within the broader social landscape.

- **Nomadic Lifestyle and Habitat:** The Birhor tribes have historically embraced a semi-nomadic lifestyle, often moving within forested habitats in search of resources and sustenance. This lifestyle is deeply intertwined with their cultural identity, as it reflects their intimate connection to the

natural world. Their mobility patterns are guided by the availability of food, water, and other essentials, reflecting their deep ecological knowledge and adaptation to diverse environments.

- **Traditional Knowledge and Practices:** The Birhor people possess intricate knowledge of forest ecosystems, plants, animals, and natural resources. This knowledge forms the foundation of their survival strategies, including hunting, gathering, and shifting cultivation. Their practices are characterized by sustainable resource use and a profound understanding of the delicate balance between humans and nature. Birhor cultural practices are often rooted in their dependence on the environment and the need for harmonious coexistence.
- **Language and Communication:** Language is a cornerstone of cultural identity, and the Birhor tribes have their own unique language, which is part of the Munda linguistic family. This language serves as a vessel for transmitting traditional knowledge, cultural narratives, and communal values across generations. Language plays a crucial role in preserving their distinct heritage and strengthening their sense of belonging.
- **Social Structure and Kinship:** The Birhor social structure is centered around close-knit family units and extended kinship networks. Traditional roles and responsibilities within the community are well-defined, contributing to a cohesive social fabric. Elders hold a respected position, serving as repositories of cultural wisdom and knowledge. Birhor society is characterized by mutual support and cooperation, vital for their collective well-being.
- **Spirituality and Animism:** Birhor spirituality is rooted in animism and a deep reverence for the spirits inhabiting the natural world. They believe in a complex array of deities associated with various natural elements, seeking their blessings and protection. Rituals, ceremonies, and practices are often dedicated to appeasing these spirits and maintaining harmony between the human and supernatural realms.
- **Cultural Expressions and Artistry:** Cultural expressions play a crucial role in reinforcing identity and fostering a sense of belonging. The

Birhor tribes engage in various art forms, including traditional music, dance, and crafts. These expressions serve as modes of storytelling, conveying historical narratives, and celebrating significant life events. Artistry serves as a means of cultural preservation and a source of pride within the community.

- **Challenges and Adaptations:** While the Birhor tribes have preserved their cultural heritage, they face challenges due to modernization, encroachment on their habitats, and changing socio-economic dynamics. Adapting to new circumstances while preserving their cultural integrity poses a delicate balance. Some Birhor individuals have begun to engage in wage labor and other non-traditional activities, leading to shifts in their cultural practices and social dynamics.

The socio-cultural characteristics of the Birhor tribes in India reflect a unique and intricate tapestry woven from their traditional knowledge, practices, language, social structure, and spiritual beliefs. As they navigate the complexities of modernity, preserving their cultural identity and heritage remains essential for their well-being and empowerment. Recognizing and respecting these socio-cultural attributes is vital for promoting inclusivity, supporting their self-determination, and ensuring the continued vibrancy of the Birhor community within the diverse mosaic of Indian society.

RELIGIOUS LIFE OF BIRHOR TRIBES IN INDIA

The religious life of the Birhor tribes in India is deeply rooted in animism and spirituality, reflecting their intimate connection with the natural world and the unseen forces that shape their environment. Their religious practices, beliefs, and rituals are integral components of their cultural identity and play a significant role in guiding their interactions with the physical and spiritual realms.

- **Animistic Beliefs and Spirits:** Central to Birhor religious life is the belief in animism, the notion that spirits inhabit elements of the natural world. Birhor communities revere a diverse array of spirits that reside in forests, rivers, mountains, and celestial bodies. These spirits are believed to influence human well-being, prosperity, and harmony. Birhor animism is a way of

acknowledging the interdependence between humans and the environment, emphasizing respect for nature and the need to maintain balance.

- **Rituals and Ceremonies:** Birhor religious practices encompass a range of rituals and ceremonies that are conducted to appease spirits, seek blessings, and ensure favorable outcomes. Rituals are performed during important life events such as birth, marriage, and death, as well as before hunting, planting, and harvesting. Offerings of food, incense, and symbolic objects are made to honor the spirits and establish a connection between the physical and spiritual worlds.
- **Shamans and Spiritual Leaders:** Shamans, known as "Ojha" or "Dangar," play a crucial role in Birhor religious life. They serve as intermediaries between the human and spirit realms, conducting rituals, communicating with spirits, and providing guidance and healing to the community. Shamans possess specialized knowledge and are revered for their ability to navigate the spiritual landscape and address both physical and metaphysical ailments.
- **Sacred Sites and Natural Features:** Birhor religious practices are closely tied to specific sacred sites and natural features believed to be inhabited by spirits. These sites, which include groves, rocks, and water bodies, serve as places of worship and pilgrimage. Birhor communities visit these sites to perform rituals, offer prayers, and seek blessings, reinforcing their connection to the spiritual world and their ancestral heritage.
- **Cosmology and Worldview:** Birhor cosmology is grounded in the idea of a holistic universe where the material and spiritual dimensions are interconnected. Their worldview emphasizes the cyclical nature of existence, symbolized by the changing seasons and the interplay of life and death. This cyclical perspective aligns with their sustainable practices and respect for natural cycles.
- **Challenges and Preservation:** The religious life of the Birhor tribes faces challenges due to external influences, modernization, and urbanization. Exposure to mainstream religions and cultural changes has led to shifts in religious practices and beliefs for some Birhor individuals. There is a

need to strike a balance between preserving their animistic traditions and adapting to evolving circumstances.

In recent years, efforts have been made by Birhor communities, anthropologists, and cultural organizations to document and revitalize their religious practices. These efforts aim to ensure that future generations continue to engage with their spiritual heritage, maintain their cultural identity, and uphold their unique relationship with the natural world.

The religious life of the Birhor tribes in India is characterized by animism, a deep connection to nature, and a complex system of rituals and beliefs that guide their interactions with the spiritual realm. Their animistic worldview underscores their respect for the environment, their reliance on ancestral wisdom, and their recognition of the profound connections between all living beings. As the Birhor people navigate the challenges of a changing world, preserving their religious traditions remains essential for safeguarding their cultural identity and fostering a harmonious relationship with the world around them.

FOOD AND HABIT OF BIRHOR TRIBES IN INDIA

The food habits of the Birhor tribes in India are closely intertwined with their traditional way of life, their deep connection to nature, and their distinctive cultural practices. Their diet is shaped by the resources available within their forested habitats and reflects their adaptation to the natural environment over generations.

- **Foraging and Gathering:** Foraging and gathering are integral components of the Birhor food habits. The forests provide a rich array of edible plants, fruits, nuts, tubers, and roots that form a significant part of their diet. Birhor communities have developed an intricate knowledge of local flora, understanding which plants are safe to consume and how to prepare them. This reliance on foraging emphasizes their sustainable relationship with the environment and the importance of maintaining the delicate balance of ecosystems.
- **Hunting and Fishing:** Hunting and fishing are also essential sources of protein for the Birhor tribes. They use traditional hunting methods, such as

bows, arrows, and traps, to capture small game animals like birds, rodents, and reptiles. Fish from nearby rivers and streams contribute to their protein intake. These practices showcase the Birhor people's skill in utilizing their natural surroundings for sustenance.

- **Agriculture and Cultivation:** While foraging and hunting form the foundation of their food habits, the Birhor tribes also engage in limited agriculture and cultivation. They practice shifting cultivation, a method that involves clearing small plots of land, planting crops, and moving on to new areas once the soil is depleted. Millets, maize, and pulses are commonly grown crops, supplementing their diet and providing additional sources of nutrition.
- **Traditional Cooking Techniques:** The Birhor tribes employ traditional cooking techniques that have been passed down through generations. They use simple tools and methods, such as open fires and clay pots, to prepare their meals. Cooking is often a communal activity, bringing families and communities together and fostering social cohesion.
- **Food Sharing and Cultural Practices:** Food holds cultural significance within Birhor communities. Sharing meals is a way of expressing solidarity, strengthening bonds, and promoting social harmony. Special occasions and ceremonies are marked by feasts that bring the community together to celebrate, share stories, and uphold their cultural heritage.
- **Challenges and Adaptations:** The Birhor tribes face challenges related to changing socio-economic dynamics and access to resources. Modernization, urbanization, and developmental projects have altered their traditional food habits and access to natural resources. Some Birhor individuals have begun to incorporate processed foods into their diet due to increased contact with mainstream society, leading to potential health concerns and nutritional challenges.

Efforts have been made by local organizations, researchers, and government agencies to address these challenges while respecting the Birhor people's cultural practices. Initiatives have aimed to promote sustainable livelihoods, improve access to education about nutrition and health, and empower the

community to make informed choices about their food habits.

The food habits of the Birhor tribes in India are deeply rooted in their connection to nature, their sustainable use of resources, and their cultural traditions. Foraging, hunting, fishing, and limited cultivation have sustained their communities for generations, shaping their identity and fostering a sense of unity with their environment.

FACTORS AFFECTING SOCIAL MOBILITY STATUS OF BIRHOR TRIBES IN INDIA

The social mobility status of the Birhor tribes in India is influenced by a complex interplay of various factors that can either facilitate or hinder their ability to move up or down the socio-economic ladder. Understanding these factors is crucial for addressing the challenges faced by the Birhor community and promoting their upward mobility. Here are some key factors that affect the social mobility status of the Birhor tribes:

1. **Education and Access to Quality Schools:** Limited access to quality education is a significant barrier to social mobility for the Birhor tribes. Inadequate schools, lack of resources, and cultural differences can impede their educational attainment. Without proper education, individuals may struggle to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary for better employment opportunities.
2. **Employment and Livelihood Opportunities:** The availability of suitable job opportunities is crucial for social mobility. Many Birhor individuals are engaged in traditional forest-based activities, but modernization and changing land use patterns can disrupt these livelihoods. Lack of diversified job options and access to stable income sources can hinder upward mobility.
3. **Land Dispossession and Access to Resources:** Displacement due to development projects and land encroachment can impact the Birhor tribes' ability to sustain their traditional way of life and livelihoods. Loss of land and access to natural resources can limit their economic opportunities and contribute to lower social mobility.
4. **Health and Healthcare Access:** Health plays a vital role in social mobility. Limited access to healthcare facilities, malnutrition, and inadequate sanitation can lead to poor health outcomes, affecting an individual's ability to work, pursue

education, and engage in economic activities.

5. **Cultural Preservation and Identity:** Preserving cultural practices and identity is crucial for social mobility. While embracing modern opportunities is important, it's equally essential to maintain their cultural heritage. Striking a balance between cultural preservation and progress can impact their ability to navigate mainstream society while retaining their identity.
6. **Discrimination and Social Exclusion:** Discrimination based on ethnicity, caste, or indigenous status can hinder social mobility by limiting access to opportunities, education, and resources. Overcoming social biases and prejudices is essential for creating a more inclusive environment that enables upward mobility.
7. **Government Policies and Interventions:** Effective government policies can play a significant role in promoting social mobility. Initiatives focused on education, healthcare, skill development, and economic empowerment can provide pathways for the Birhor tribes to improve their socio-economic status.
8. **Infrastructure Development:** Infrastructure development, while beneficial in some cases, can also disrupt traditional Birhor habitats and livelihoods. Ensuring that development projects are designed with consideration for indigenous communities' needs and aspirations can help mitigate negative impacts on social mobility.
9. **Geographic Isolation:** Remote and isolated geographic locations can limit access to resources, services, and opportunities for the Birhor tribes. Geographic isolation can affect their ability to engage with mainstream society and access educational and economic resources.
10. **Community Empowerment and Participation:** Active participation and empowerment of the Birhor community in decision-making processes that affect their lives can enhance their social mobility. Empowering them to take charge of their own development and advocate for their rights can lead to more favorable socio-economic outcomes.

Addressing these factors requires a comprehensive and culturally sensitive approach that takes into account the unique challenges faced by the Birhor tribes. By focusing on education, economic opportunities,

cultural preservation, healthcare, and policy interventions, it is possible to enhance their social mobility and contribute to their overall well-being and empowerment.

CONCLUSION

The social mobility status of the Birhor tribes in India is a complex and multifaceted issue that reflects the challenges and opportunities faced by indigenous communities in a rapidly changing society. The Birhor people, deeply rooted in their traditional way of life and cultural heritage, grapple with a range of factors that impact their ability to move up the socio-economic ladder.

Education emerges as a critical factor, with limited access to quality schools and educational resources hindering their upward mobility. The lack of diversified livelihood opportunities further restricts their economic advancement, especially in the face of modernization and changing land use patterns. Displacement due to development projects and inadequate healthcare access compound these challenges, affecting their overall well-being and prospects for progress.

Cultural preservation stands as both a concern and a source of resilience. Striking a balance between embracing modern opportunities and maintaining their unique identity is a delicate endeavor, as the Birhor people navigate the complexities of societal integration while safeguarding their cultural heritage. Government policies and interventions, though aimed at addressing disparities, sometimes fall short in achieving meaningful outcomes due to implementation gaps and the need for more tailored approaches. Discrimination and social exclusion, often rooted in historical biases, continue to pose barriers to their social mobility, highlighting the need for broader societal awareness and inclusivity.

However, amidst these challenges, the Birhor tribes demonstrate resilience and determination. Efforts to document and revitalize their traditional knowledge, cultural practices, and languages, as well as initiatives that empower their communities, show a commitment to preserving their heritage while striving for a better socio-economic future.

To improve the social mobility status of the Birhor tribes, a comprehensive approach is necessary. This includes enhancing educational opportunities,

providing diversified livelihood options, ensuring equitable healthcare access, fostering cultural preservation, addressing discrimination, and promoting community engagement. By recognizing the unique needs and strengths of the Birhor community and empowering them to chart their own path to advancement, India can work towards a more inclusive and equitable society where all its citizens, including the Birhor tribes, have the opportunity to realize their fullest potential.

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