

Cultural Resilience and Environmental Interaction: An Ethnographic Study of the Juang Tribe in Odisha

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Abstract: This ethnographic study investigates the cultural resilience and environmental interaction of the Juang tribe, one of Odisha's Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). It explores the tribe's traditional lifestyle, shifting cultivation practices, and artisanal crafts, highlighting their profound connection to the forest ecosystem. Despite their rich cultural heritage, the Juangs face significant socio-economic challenges, including land displacement, limited access to education and healthcare, and the impacts of deforestation spurred by modern development. The research underscores the tribe's sustainable practices, particularly in non-timber forest product (NTFP) harvesting and handicrafts, which are critical not only for their livelihoods but also for maintaining their cultural identity. The study further emphasizes the need for targeted interventions to address the vulnerabilities faced by the Juangs while promoting policies that empower them and safeguard their traditional knowledge and rights. By emphasizing the importance of recognizing and supporting the ecological and cultural values of the Juang tribe, this research contributes to the broader discourse on sustainable development and the rights of indigenous communities in India.

Keywords: Scheduled Tribes (STs), India's Tribal Communities, Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), Cultural Diversity, Traditional Knowledge, Socio-economic Challenges, Tribal Livelihoods, Forest Rights Act, 2006, Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP), Educational Marginalization, Healthcare Access, Sustainable Development, Odisha Tribal Communities, Juang Tribe, Shifting Cultivation, Artisanal Work, Cultural Heritage Preservation, Land Displacement, Deforestation Impact, Economic Vulnerability, Traditional Practices, Juang Art and Crafts, Tribal Identity, Community Structures, Odisha, Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs), shifting cultivation, Podu cultivation, forest-based economy, sustainable harvesting, bamboo crafts, leaf plates, traditional knowledge, cultural heritage, ecological balance, sustainable livelihoods, land rights, biodiversity conservation, Sal leaves, Siali leaves, tendu leaves, handicrafts, eco-friendly products, forest ecosystem, food security, traditional medicine, indigenous practices, resilience, climate adaptation, inclusive policies.

BACKGROUND

India is home to a vast and diverse population of tribal communities, officially categorized as Scheduled Tribes (STs) under the Indian Constitution. These communities are among the oldest ethnic groups in the country and have contributed significantly to the cultural mosaic of India. Each tribal group possesses its own unique languages, customs, social structures, and traditions, many of which have been preserved for centuries. These tribes play an important role in India's heritage and cultural richness. Most of the tribal population is concentrated in geographically isolated regions, such as dense forests, mountainous terrains, and remote hilly areas, often far from the reach of mainstream urban development. Their primary sources of livelihood traditionally include subsistence farming, hunting, and gathering forest products, as well as small-scale handicrafts and artisanal work. In many cases, these tribes live in harmony with nature, utilizing sustainable practices that reflect their deep connection to the land and environment.

Despite their cultural diversity and valuable traditional knowledge, tribal communities in India continue to face substantial socio-economic challenges. Living in remote areas has contributed to their social and economic marginalization. Poverty is widespread among tribal populations, and access to basic services such as quality education, healthcare, and infrastructure remains limited. The literacy rates in tribal areas are significantly lower than the national average, and a lack of educational facilities often results in high dropout rates among tribal children. Healthcare infrastructure is also inadequate, leading to high mortality rates, malnutrition, and limited access to essential health services. Furthermore, economic development opportunities in these regions are scarce, with tribal communities often relying on low-income traditional activities that are vulnerable to external pressures such as deforestation, land displacement, and changing climate patterns. These challenges have kept a significant portion of India's tribal population on the fringes of society, struggling to integrate into

the mainstream economy while preserving their cultural identity.



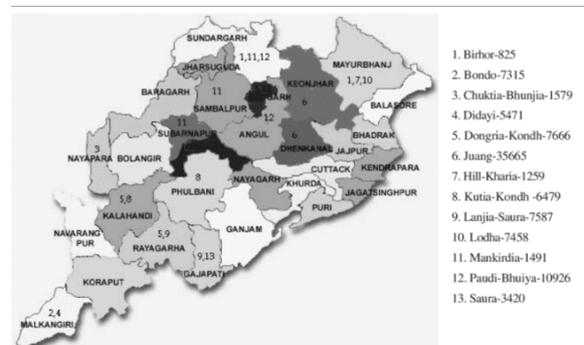
In recognition of these challenges, the Government of India, along with state governments, has implemented numerous policies and welfare programs designed to improve the living conditions of tribal communities. These initiatives focus on enhancing access to education, healthcare, livelihood opportunities, and infrastructure in tribal-dominated areas. Programs such as the Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) aim to allocate financial resources specifically for the development of tribal regions, ensuring that the benefits of growth reach these underserved communities. Additionally, the Forest Rights Act, 2006, is a landmark law aimed at safeguarding the land and forest rights of tribal people, empowering them to manage and protect the resources on which they depend. Government efforts also include schemes to promote traditional arts and crafts, enabling tribes to earn sustainable incomes while preserving their cultural heritage. Despite these initiatives, achieving comprehensive socio-economic development for India's tribal communities remains a complex task. Continued research and focused interventions are needed to ensure that these communities are not only uplifted economically but also supported in preserving their unique identities within the broader framework of national development.

INTRODUCTION TO PVTGs

India has identified 75 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), spread across 18 states and one Union Territory. These groups are diverse in their cultures, languages, and ways of life, reflecting a wide range of traditions and practices. Despite their rich

cultural heritage, PVTGs face significant common challenges, particularly in terms of economic vulnerability and limited access to essential services like education and healthcare. The majority of PVTGs are concentrated in states such as Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra, which have the highest numbers of these groups. The total population of PVTGs is estimated to be around 2.7 million, according to census data and various reports. However, the literacy rate among PVTGs is notably lower than the national average for Scheduled Tribes, highlighting a major gap in educational attainment. Additionally, PVTGs often experience high levels of malnutrition, child mortality, and a higher incidence of diseases, primarily due to inadequate healthcare facilities and challenging living conditions. These issues underscore the need for targeted interventions to improve their quality of life and ensure that they have access to necessary resources and support.

Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) are a distinct subset of Scheduled Tribes (STs) in India, identified by the government as facing a higher degree of vulnerability compared to other tribal communities. These groups are characterized by their reliance on primitive technology, stagnant or declining population, extremely low literacy rates, and a subsistence-based economy that primarily depends on pre-agricultural practices such as hunting, gathering, and shifting cultivation. Due to these socio-economic and cultural factors, PVTGs are considered to be at a greater risk of marginalization. In 1975, the Government of India identified 52 such groups based on specific criteria that included their level of isolation and backwardness. By 1993, this number increased to 75 PVTGs, as the government recognized the need to expand protection and support for more vulnerable communities.



Source: Research Gate

PVTGs exhibit distinct characteristics that set them apart from other Scheduled Tribes. They are often geographically isolated, residing in remote, hilly, or forested regions far from urban centres, which limits their interaction with mainstream society. Their small population size, coupled with a unique cultural identity, adds to their vulnerability. These groups often rely heavily on the natural environment for their survival, with little or no access to modern amenities such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure. The lack of integration with the wider economy and society has made it challenging for PVTGs to cope with the demands of modern life, resulting in their continued marginalization. In response to this, both the central and state governments have introduced targeted welfare schemes aimed at addressing the unique needs of PVTGs. These programs focus on providing access to education, healthcare, food security, and livelihood support while ensuring the preservation of their cultural heritage and traditional ways of life. Government interventions also seek to empower these communities by recognizing their rights over land and natural resources, thus helping to secure their livelihoods and protect them from displacement. Through these efforts, the government aims to not only safeguard the existence of PVTGs but also promote their sustainable development and social inclusion within the broader fabric of Indian society.

PVTG of Odisha

Odisha is home to one of the largest concentrations of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in India, with 13 officially identified groups. Despite various efforts by the state government to improve the living conditions of these communities through special development programs, PVTGs in Odisha remain among the most vulnerable populations. These communities are spread across remote and isolated regions of the state. The estimated population of PVTGs in Odisha is between 250,000 to 300,000, as per Census 2011 data. However, the literacy rate among these groups remains alarmingly low, ranging from 20% to 40%, depending on the tribe, and many continue to struggle with poverty, land alienation, and limited access to education and healthcare.

Some of the key PVTGs in Odisha include the Bonda, Dongria Kondh, Juang, Kutia Kondh, and Lanjia Saora. The Bonda, with a population of approximately 12,000, are one of the most isolated tribes in India, residing in the Malkangiri district. They practice shifting cultivation and have their own language,

Remo. However, they face severe poverty, low literacy (around 8-10%), and poor healthcare. The Dongria Kondh, with a population of about 10,000, inhabit the Niyamgiri Hills in Rayagada and Kalahandi districts. Known for their horticultural expertise and worship of the mountain deity Niyam Raja, they have faced threats from industrial projects, such as bauxite mining, which have endangered their land and livelihood. The Juang, numbering around 50,000, live in the Keonjhar district and are known for their traditional shifting cultivation practices. However, they face significant challenges such as deforestation, land displacement, and malnutrition. The Kutia Kondh, with a population of around 11,000, reside in the Kandhamal district and are deeply connected to nature through their subsistence farming and animist traditions. Yet, they struggle with poor healthcare, illiteracy, and displacement due to development projects. Lastly, the Lanjia Saora, with a population of approximately 27,000, are concentrated in Rayagada and Gajapati districts. They are known for their terraced farming and beautiful wall paintings but face economic vulnerability, healthcare issues, and exploitation by non-tribal populations. Despite their rich cultural heritage and traditions, these PVTGs remain vulnerable, highlighting the need for continued focused interventions to support their development and safeguard their rights.



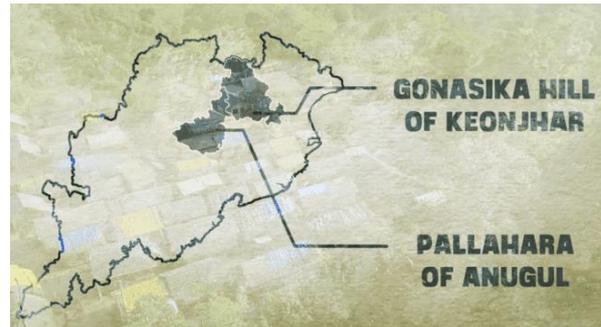
Challenges of PVTGs

PVTGs in Odisha face numerous challenges that threaten their survival and cultural identity. One of the most pressing issues is land displacement. With increasing industrial activities, mining operations, and widespread deforestation, many PVTGs are being forced off their ancestral lands. This displacement not only strips them of their primary means of livelihood, which is often based on agriculture and forest resources, but also erodes their deep-rooted cultural and spiritual connection to the land. The loss of their traditional territory results in severe economic instability and dislocation from their cultural practices. Healthcare is another significant challenge for these

communities. PVTGs experience high rates of malnutrition, along with maternal and child mortality that far exceed national averages. Diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis, and other preventable illnesses are prevalent due to poor healthcare infrastructure and a lack of medical services in remote areas. Access to quality education is similarly problematic. Low literacy rates, compounded by inadequate educational facilities, create a cycle of limited opportunities for advancement. Schools in tribal areas often suffer from poor infrastructure, and the lack of resources contributes to high dropout rates, especially among children. Livelihood challenges further compound these issues. Most PVTGs rely on subsistence agriculture, shifting cultivation, and the collection of forest produce for their survival. However, environmental degradation and deforestation are increasingly threatening these traditional ways of life, making it difficult for them to sustain their communities. These interconnected challenges highlight the vulnerability of PVTGs in Odisha and underscore the need for targeted interventions to improve their living conditions, protect their rights, and preserve their unique cultural identities.

About this paper

This paper presents an in-depth exploration of the Juang tribe, focusing on various aspects of their lives, including their rich culture, traditional lifestyle, unique cultivation practices, artistic expressions, and food habits. The Juang, one of Odisha's Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), have a unique way of life shaped by their connection to nature, traditional practices, and strong community bonds. Through this study, we aim to highlight the Juang's cultural customs, from their clothing and jewelry to their ceremonies and festivals. Additionally, we examine their traditional lifestyle, which includes their social structures, housing styles, and the role of community centers in daily life. This paper also delves into the tribe's cultivation methods, such as shifting agriculture and use of kitchen gardens, showing how these practices have adapted over time to balance both traditional knowledge and modern influences. Further, the Juang's art and craft, including their skill in bamboo and wood carving, are discussed as expressions of their heritage and identity. Finally, the paper explores their food habits, which are closely tied to seasonal crops and forest resources, offering insight into their diet and the role of nature in their sustenance.



The Juang Tribe

The Juang tribe is one of Odisha's Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) and lives mainly in the Keonjhar district, with some populations in the adjoining district of Dhenkanal. This tribal community is rooted in the hills and forests of southern and western Keonjhar, with some settlements in the plains, particularly in areas like Pallahara to the east and Angul to the south. The Juang people hold the area of Gonasika as sacred, as it is the source of the holy Baitarani River and considered their ancestral birthplace. The Juang community is organized into four main regions, known as "Pirhas": Jharkhand, Sathkhond, Rebena, and Kathua. The Juang of Sathkhond and Jharkhand, living near Gonasika, see themselves as keepers of tradition, often considering themselves superior to the Rebena and Kathua Juangs, who have settled in plains and interact more with the outside world. Additionally, the tribe is divided into two groups based on territory: the Thaniya Juangs, who are natives of the Gonasika area, and the Bhagudia Juangs, who migrated to nearby areas like Pallahara. The Thaniya Juangs believe they are the original inhabitants, while the Bhagudia Juangs are viewed as having left their homeland.



The Juang tribe name means "man" in their language, and they claim to be among the first humans, descending from their legendary ancestors, a couple named Rusi. In the past, they were known as "Pattuas" because they traditionally wore clothes made from

leaves. Today, most Juang people speak both Juang (from the Munda language family) and Odia, which is common in the region. Juang clothing is simple. Men wear a dhoti, while women dress in plain or colorful sarees. Women wear limited jewelry, usually just bangles and a toe ring, and children often wear minimal clothing. In their villages, Juang settlements are scattered across the hills, forests, and plains.

Dependency on Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs)

Traditionally, the Juang tribe of Odisha has practiced a unique form of shifting cultivation known locally as podu or toila. In this method, they cultivate crops in one area for a few years and then move to a new plot once the land's fertility is exhausted. In the past, they even moved their entire village along with their farms when a farming site could no longer sustain them. This practice, deeply rooted in their culture, is not only a means of survival but also reflects their close connection to the forest and its resources. The Juangs view the forest as an extension of their home and life, relying on it for food, medicine, and income while respecting it as a part of their cultural identity and knowledge system. Their way of life embodies sustainable living, as they carefully balance the use of resources with the preservation of the forest ecosystem. This approach ensures that the forest remains healthy and abundant for future generations.



The Juangs gather a wide variety of non-timber forest products (NTFPs), which form the core of their diet, economy, and traditional medicinal practices. These forest products include wild fruits, roots, honey, bamboo, resins, and an assortment of medicinal plants. Each of these resources serves a specific and important role in their lives. Fruits and roots provide essential nutrition, honey adds sweetness and offers medicinal value, while bamboo and certain leaves are used to

make handicrafts and functional items. NTFPs are also a primary source of income for the Juangs. They collect, process, and sell these forest items in local markets, allowing them to earn a livelihood without leaving their native environment. This forest-based economy enables them to maintain their traditional way of life while supporting themselves financially.



Among the many forest resources, they gather, sal, siali, and tendu leaves are of particular significance. These leaves are skilfully crafted into eco-friendly plates, a traditional practice that has gained economic importance over time. Typically, Juang women gather these leaves and stitch them together to create plates and bowls. These biodegradable products are popular in local markets, especially as they are considered sustainable alternatives to plastic. The leaf plate-making activity not only generates income but also demonstrates the Juangs' deep knowledge of renewable resources. They collect only mature leaves, ensuring they do not damage the trees, which in turn maintains a continuous supply for future use.



By leaving enough leaves behind for plants to thrive, the Juangs show a sustainable approach to resource collection, where they benefit from the forest without depleting it. The Juangs are well-versed in the seasonal

cycles of the forest, which allows them to gather resources in ways that do not harm the ecosystem. For example, they know the ideal times to collect fruits and honey when these resources are plentiful. This careful timing ensures that their harvesting activities do not hinder plant growth or disrupt the animals that depend on these resources. This seasonal knowledge forms the basis of what is known as "sustainable harvesting." They gather only what they need, leaving enough behind to allow the forest to regenerate naturally. In this way, they protect the forest's health and longevity, ensuring it continues to provide for their needs year after year. This wisdom is passed down from generation to generation, with each community member learning about the forest cycles, correct methods of gathering, and the importance of conservation. The forest is also an essential source of food for the Juangs, especially during lean periods when agricultural yields may be low. Wild fruits, edible roots, mushrooms, and tubers serve as important supplements to their diet, providing them with nutrients and sustenance. These forest foods are especially vital during the monsoon season when farming activities are limited. The Juangs' knowledge of edible plants, roots, and mushrooms enables them to find food throughout the year, reducing their risk of food shortages. This reliance on forest food has allowed the Juangs to be largely self-sufficient, minimizing their dependence on outside food supplies and enhancing their resilience to seasonal fluctuations in agriculture.



The Juang Tribe and Their Handicrafts

The Juang tribe lives in the peaceful forests and hills of Odisha, surrounded by an abundance of natural resources like bamboo, sal leaves, siali leaves, tendu leaves, and wood. Their handicrafts reflect their close connection with nature, using locally available materials in ways that ensure sustainability. For the Juangs, crafting is not only a means of income but also a reflection of their deep respect for the environment.

They carefully gather raw materials to minimize harm to plants and trees, and they use traditional methods passed down through generations to process these materials. One of the most well-known handicrafts of the Juangs is their leaf plates and bowls, made from sal, siali, and tendu leaves. Juang women play a major role in creating these items, showcasing their skill and precision. They collect mature leaves from the forest without harming the trees, stitching them together using thin strips of bamboo or plant fibers. These eco-friendly plates and bowls, known locally as pattals and donas, are biodegradable and are gaining popularity as sustainable alternatives to plastic. This craft meets their domestic needs during community feasts and festivals while also providing an important source of income. These products are sold in local markets, and with growing awareness of environmental sustainability, demand for these leaf-based items is rising in urban areas as well.



Bamboo is another essential resource for the Juangs, and their bamboo crafts display both utility and artistry. They make a variety of items such as baskets, mats, fishing traps, and containers, which are important for their daily agricultural and domestic activities. Known for their strength and durability, bamboo baskets are used to carry forest produce, firewood, and crops. Each basket's design varies depending on its purpose, highlighting the Juangs' practical skills. Crafting with bamboo requires time and effort, involving precise cutting, slicing, and weaving of bamboo strips. The Juangs' expertise allows them to create durable, lightweight items that are both functional and visually pleasing. These bamboo products are also sold in local markets, adding to their income. The Juangs also excel in woodwork and carving, using simple tools to create household items like spoons, pestles, mortars, and decorative pieces. Their carvings often feature nature-inspired designs, reflecting their deep spiritual and cultural bond with the forest. These wooden items are not only functional but also hold cultural significance, often being used in festivals and rituals. Handicrafts play a vital role in the Juangs' economy. While agriculture and forest produce form the foundation of their

livelihood, handicrafts provide additional income, especially during non-agricultural seasons. The sale of leaf plates, bamboo baskets, and other crafts in local and regional markets supports their financial stability, helping them meet basic needs. With the growing demand for eco-friendly products, there is potential for the Juangs to expand their handicraft sales beyond their region. Organizations and cooperatives are starting to recognize the value of tribal handicrafts, which could provide the Juangs with better market access and economic empowerment.



Dependency on Shifting Cultivation among the Juang Tribe

The Juang community in Odisha celebrates Pushpuni, a grand and joyful festival observed by almost all tribal groups in the state. Held in December and January, Pushpuni fills the cold winter months with warmth and festivity, lifting the spirits of the Juangs, a particularly vulnerable tribal group renowned for their rich cultural heritage. For the Juangs, this festival not only signifies the end of one agricultural cycle and the beginning of another but also embodies their deep-rooted cultural, spiritual, and symbolic beliefs. It reflects their extensive indigenous knowledge, which guides their lives within the forested landscapes they call home. The Juang people mainly reside in the scenic Bansapal region of Keonjhar district, nestled in the peaceful Gonasika Mountains of the Eastern Ghats. According to their folklore and oral traditions, the Juangs trace their origin back to a legendary Rishi, or sage, whose blessings brought them into existence. Their identity is closely connected with a river goddess who, upon rising from the sacred Gonasika rock, saw the Juangs dancing in nature's attire and instructed them to wear leaves. This earned them the title "Patuas," or "leaf-wearers." Over time, the Juangs evolved into distinct sub-groups, each with unique cultural practices, while still maintaining their connection to nature and ancestral knowledge.



Embedded within Juang culture is a complex system of indigenous knowledge developed over generations. This knowledge is reflected in their ways of life, including their agricultural practices, healthcare traditions, and methods of managing natural resources. In agriculture, the Juangs categorize their land into four types: *Taila* (land for shifting cultivation), *Guda* (dry plains), *Badi* (kitchen gardens), and *Bila* (irrigated lands for paddy). Among these, shifting cultivation—locally known as *Taila Chasa* or *Podu Chasa*—is central to their subsistence. This traditional farming method, which involves clearing and burning forest patches, demonstrates the Juangs' understanding of slope ecology, soil fertility, and climate patterns, knowledge that has been passed down through generations. Shifting cultivation among the Juangs is a detailed process requiring careful planning and collective decision-making. The preparation begins right after the Pushpuni festival, as the community identifies areas with sparse vegetation for cultivation. Decisions on which forest slopes to clear are made collectively, guided by elders and cultural norms. Forest clearing is ideally done in February or March, before the early summer rains. After the forest is cleared, it is left to dry and is then burned, with great caution taken to prevent fires from spreading. The resulting ash nourishes the soil with essential nutrients and helps control pests without disrupting the slope or causing soil erosion. Next, seeds of various crops like cereals, pulses, oilseeds, and vegetables are sown directly into the soil, with some crops planted using the dibbling method. This diversity of crops, growing at different rates, results in a sustainable intercropping system that provides food year-round. The practice highlights the Juangs' eco-friendly and climate-resilient agricultural knowledge, refined over generations. Each crop matures at its own pace, fitting the Juang lifestyle. For instance, maize is harvested in the rainy season, millets in the post-monsoon months, and pulses and tubers provide both nutrition and market income throughout the year.



As soil fertility declines over time, cultivated lands are left fallow for three years after successive cycles, allowing the forest to regenerate naturally. This regeneration restores soil fertility and prepares the land for future cultivation. In addition to shifting cultivation, the Juangs grow paddy on small low-lying plots, adjusting practices based on the local environment and crop requirements. Besides agriculture, the Juangs rely heavily on collecting and selling non-timber forest products (NTFPs) to supplement their income. Their deep knowledge of the forest seasons and sustainable harvesting practices enables them to gather forest products without damaging the ecosystem. They efficiently manage the collection, processing, and storage of these products, ensuring year-round availability. Furthermore, their understanding of medicinal plants and forest herbs plays a critical role in their healthcare practices, reflecting their extensive ecological knowledge. The Juangs' knowledge system is a blend of experience-based and ecologically appropriate practices, developed within a community-centered framework. This knowledge is not formally taught; it is passed down through daily activities and active involvement. Each generation adds to these practices, adapting to new challenges while preserving the tribe's traditional values. For the Juangs, these practices are more than survival methods—they are a way of life, connecting them to their ancestors and ensuring that their heritage is preserved for future generations.



CONCLUSION

The Juang tribe, in particular, exemplifies the resilience and resourcefulness of Odisha's PVTGs. Their dependence on shifting cultivation, non-timber forest products (NTFPs), and traditional handicrafts demonstrates a sustainable way of life that is intricately tied to the forest ecosystem. Through practices such as podu (shifting cultivation) and sustainable harvesting of forest resources, the Juangs maintain a balanced relationship with nature, ensuring both their survival and the preservation of their environment. Their handicrafts, made from bamboo and forest leaves, further illustrate the tribe's ingenuity and connection to the land. These eco-friendly products not only meet their daily needs but also provide an income, supporting the tribe economically. However, despite their self-sufficiency and deep ecological knowledge, the Juangs, like other PVTGs in the region, are increasingly vulnerable. The pressures of modern development, land alienation, and climate change are eroding the foundation of their traditional practices. Without targeted intervention and support, their cultural heritage and sustainable way of life are at risk. The ongoing struggle of PVTGs in Odisha underscores the urgent need for inclusive policies that address their unique needs—ensuring the protection of their land rights, access to quality education and healthcare, and recognition of their traditional knowledge systems.

Therefore, while the Juang and other PVTGs hold immense cultural and ecological value, their survival hinges on a collective effort to protect their rights, empower them economically, and safeguard their cultural identity. It is crucial to create an environment where their traditional knowledge and sustainable practices are recognized, respected, and supported, allowing these communities to thrive in the modern world without losing their cultural essence. By fostering such an environment, we not only help preserve the unique identity of Odisha's tribal communities but also contribute to the broader goal of sustainable development that respects both people and the planet.

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