

# Endangered Traditions: The Decline of Asur Culture in Modern India

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## INTRODUCTION

The Asur tribe, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) primarily residing in Jharkhand, India, faces significant threats to its cultural heritage. With a population of approximately 23,000 as per the 2011 census, the Asurs are known for their historical iron-smelting expertise and unique cultural practices, including their language, festivals, and religious beliefs. However, their culture is at risk due to language loss, economic challenges, social stigma, and limited access to basic amenities. This research journal explores the Asur tribe's history, cultural practices, current challenges, preservation efforts, and the role of government initiatives in addressing their plight, aiming to highlight the urgent need for cultural preservation.

## BACKGROUND OF THE ASUR TRIBE

### Demographic and Geographic Context

The Asur tribe predominantly inhabits the districts of Latehar, Gumla, Lohardaga, and Palamu in Jharkhand, with smaller populations in Bihar, West Bengal, Assam, Odisha, and Meghalaya. According to the 2011 census, their population in Jharkhand is approximately 22,459, with 4,129 in Bihar, totaling around 33,000 across India (PW Only IAS, 2024). As one of the nine PVTGs in Jharkhand, they are recognized for their vulnerability to socio-economic and cultural decline.

### *Historical Context:*

Historically, the Asurs were hunter-gatherers whose lives were closely tied to the forests. The British-enacted Indian Forest Act of 1865 restricted their access to these resources, forcing a shift to agriculture (Hindustan Times, 2016). Their traditional iron-

smelting, using crushed iron ore and charcoal, provided a distinct identity linked to ancient Asuras known for metal craft. However, modern steel plants have rendered this practice obsolete, pushing many Asurs into agricultural labor or mining jobs.

## CULTURAL PRACTICES

The Asur culture is rich and multifaceted:

*Language:* The Asuri language, part of the Austro-Asiatic Munda family, is spoken fluently by only 7,000–8,000 individuals, making it "definitely endangered" according to UNESCO (Empower IAS, 2024).

*Festivals:* They celebrate festivals like Sarhul, Karma, Dhanbuni, Kadelta, Rajj karma, and Dasahara Karam, which are integral to their cultural identity (Testbook, 2021).

*Religious Beliefs:* The Asurs practice a blend of animism, animatism, naturalism, and ancestral worship, venerating Singbonga as their chief deity alongside others like Dharati Mata. Their unique veneration of Mahishasur, whom they claim as an ancestor, leads them to observe "Mahishasur Dasain" as a period of mourning during the Hindu festival of Durga Puja (Indian Express, 2016).

*Social Structure:* The tribe is divided into three sub-tribes—Bir (Kol) Asur, Birjia Asur, and Agaria Asur—and 12 clans named after animals, birds, and food grains (e.g., Aind-Eel, Dhan-Rice) (Wikipedia, 2024). They follow strict endogamy, with penalties for non-compliance, and maintain a community council (jati panch) for dispute resolution.

*Traditional Practices:* Asur women sing songs during iron-smelting, likening the furnace to an expectant mother, a practice tied to a fertility cult. They use herbal medicines and live in mud houses with paddy

straw roofs, reflecting their close connection to their environment.

### FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO CULTURAL DECLINE

The Asur culture is considered "dying" due to several interconnected factors that threaten their traditional way of life:

#### *Language Endangerment*

The Asuri language is at severe risk, with only about one-third of the tribe (7,000–8,000 individuals) speaking it fluently. The younger generation increasingly adopts regional languages, and only a few elderly members remain fluent, signaling a potential loss of linguistic heritage (The Hindu, 2020).

#### *Economic Marginalization*

The obsolescence of iron-smelting due to modern industrial advancements has left the Asurs economically vulnerable. Bauxite mining in their regions has disrupted their agricultural economy, leading to displacement and migration. Many now work as day laborers in mines, a significant shift from their traditional self-sufficient lifestyle (Hindustan Times, 2016).

#### *Social Stigma and Religious Tensions*

The Asurs' veneration of Mahishasur, considered a demon in Hindu mythology, has led to social stigma and occasional religious persecution. This has prompted some, particularly in West Bengal, to convert to Christianity to escape discrimination, with over 90 of 101 families in Jalpaiguri's Carron tea estate converting by 2016 (Indian Express, 2016). Public criticism, such as remarks by HRD Minister Smriti Irani in 2016, has further marginalized their beliefs.

#### *Loss of Traditional Knowledge*

Younger generations are not learning traditional skills like iron-smelting or herbal medicine, and cultural practices such as the asura dance and specific rituals are fading as economic pressures force migration to urban areas (Lifegate, 2021).

#### *Lack of Basic Amenities*

The Asurs face significant barriers to accessing healthcare, education, transportation, and clean water. For example, the nearest health center may be 50 km

away, and potable water requires a 4 km trek, exacerbating their marginalization (Hindustan Times, 2016).

#### Current Challenges

##### *Environmental and Economic Impact of Mining*

Bauxite mining in Jharkhand's Pat region has displaced communities and encroached on agricultural lands. Mining companies exploit resources without providing adequate benefits to the Asurs, as noted by tribal leader Subhash Asur (Hindustan Times, 2016).

##### *Human Trafficking*

Poverty has led to human trafficking, particularly of minor girls, highlighting the severe socio-economic challenges faced by the tribe (Wikipedia, 2024).

##### *Educational Barriers*

Low literacy rates persist due to distant schools and lack of educational support. Most Asur children do not attend school, despite a positive attitude toward education (Joshua Project, 2024).

##### *Cultural Erosion*

The shift to wage labor and urban migration has distanced younger Asurs from their cultural roots, with traditional skills and practices at risk of being forgotten.

#### Preservation Efforts

##### *Community-Driven Initiatives*

*Mobile Radio:* The Asur Tribal Wisdom Centre in Jobhipat village, Jharkhand, broadcasts programs in Asuri, including songs and news, to revive the language. The first program aired on January 19, with 16 broadcasts since (The Hindu, 2020).

*Cultural Organizations:* The Jharkhandi Bhasha Sahitya Sanskriti Akhra, part of the Pyara Kerketta Foundation, has worked since 2003 to preserve tribal traditions (The Hindu, 2020).

*Individual Efforts:* Sushma Asur, a young tribal member, is actively reviving traditional songs, dances, and skills to maintain cultural identity (Wikipedia, 2024).

##### *Government Initiatives*

*Educational Programs:* Following the 1954 Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Commission report,

schools were established in Asur villages, and the 1955–66 Community Oriented Scheme built residential junior schools in Sakhuapani. However, educational attainment remains low due to insufficient support (Jharkhand Culture, 2024).

**PVTG Status:** As a PVTG, the Asurs are eligible for special government programs to improve socio-economic conditions and preserve culture, though implementation has been limited (PW Only IAS, 2024).

**Scheduled Tribe Recognition:** In Jalpaiguri, the Asurs were recognized as a Scheduled Tribe in 2014, granting access to certain benefits after years of struggle (Indian Tribal Heritage, 2016).

### CONCLUSION

The Asur tribe's culture is at a critical juncture, threatened by language loss, economic displacement, social stigma, and systemic marginalization. While community efforts like radio broadcasts and individual initiatives show promise, broader governmental and societal support is essential to address these challenges. Recognizing the Asurs' unique identity and implementing targeted policies are crucial for their cultural survival and socio-economic upliftment.

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