



Cultural Identity and the Role of Forest among the Malhar Semi-Nomadic Tribe in and Around Kalapat Reserved Forest Area, Keonjhar

Ramanarayan Patra¹ & Sumant Kerketta²

¹Research Scholar, PG. Department of Anthropology, Sambalpur University, Jyoti Vihar, Odisha

²Assistant Professor, Department of Business Administration, Sambalpur University, Jyoti Vihar, Odisha

E-mails: patraramanarayan@gmail.com, sumantkerketta@gmail.com

Abstract: Since the prehistoric period, the symbiotic relationship between humans and forests has shaped the cultural identity of human populations. Forests have held a significant place in their survival as well as in the practice of their cultural life through hunting, gathering, shifting cultivation, and many other activities. Forests also play a central role in their spiritual values, which guide tribal belief systems. The present paper focuses on the Malhar tribe, a semi-nomadic tribal group residing in the Kalapat Reserved Forest Area of Keonjhar district, Odisha, and examines how they have lost their cultural identity in recent decades due to various factors, such as deforestation, legal restrictions, ecological changes, and the commercial exploitation of forest resources. The scarcity of forest resources faced by the Malhar tribe has led to the erosion of their indigenous knowledge, further exacerbating the challenges of maintaining their forest-based livelihoods. The present paper explores the cultural significance of forests for the Malhar tribe and examines the importance of preserving cultural practices to maintain both cultural identity and environmental sustainability in the region. Data were collected through extensive fieldwork among the Malhar tribe using methods such as participant observation, group discussions, and catchment analysis. The study also investigates the various tools and technologies used by the Malhar tribe, providing a clear understanding that the loss of forest resources is not merely an economic issue but also a cultural crisis.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Forest, Semi-nomadic, Catchment Analysis

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From time immemorial, human populations have forged deep relationships with their surrounding natural environment, embodying a symbiotic relationship that spans

generations. Forests have shaped human culture and ecology since prehistoric times through the interrelationship between forests and humans. This relationship is not only essential for the survival of the species but also for the development of human culture and society. The role of forests is not limited to providing livelihoods; rather, they foster a stewardship relationship that nurtures various social institutions and sustains human life. Even in contemporary society, the identities of both forests and humans continue to influence and shape each other. For many indigenous communities, forests are a core component of their spiritual beliefs, historical narratives, and cultural identity. Many tribal societies consider forests sacred; therefore, they have a deep sense of belonging to them. The ecosystem provided by forests defines the identity of tribal communities through the various resources and shelter it provides. The reciprocal relationship between forests and humans has continuously evolved under the influence of cultural, ecological, and economic forces. The well-being of forests is closely linked to the well-being of human societies, and vice versa.

Forest resources form the backbone of tribal societies, often guiding their way of life and playing a pivotal role in shaping their cultural identity. Tribes in India have a unique identity, with distinct cultural, territorial, social, economic, political, and traditional practices (Subramanyam & Rao, 2022). Across the ages, tribal communities have navigated the delicate balance between adaptation and preservation in their relationship with the natural world. The economy and culture of these communities are guided by forest resources, relying on both material and spiritual connections to the land for their survival, identity, and resilience. Forests are natural resources and valuable economic assets (Panda & Chakrabarty, 2022). These resources provide tribal communities with both income and sustenance (Saha & Sengupta, 2014). However, nowadays many tribal groups face challenges in reclaiming their ancestral ecology, which affects their cultural and social identity. Tribal identities vary across different regions according to their geographical location and social stratification, distinguishing them from other human groups (Chopra, 2016). The existence and survival of tribal communities depend on the resources available in forests, as these societies have traditionally maintained a close relationship with nature, unlike communities living in towns and cities. These communities are also referred to as Indigenous peoples, Primitive peoples, Adivasis, Janjati, Scheduled Tribes, or Aboriginal communities, as they have resided in forest areas since time immemorial (Shrinidhi, 2018). In addition, several terms are associated with tribal groups, such as nomadic and semi-nomadic groups. Unlike nomadic tribes, a semi-nomadic lifestyle is characterised by mobility but

does not entirely depend on a transient way of life. These semi-nomadic groups practise a semi-permanent settlement pattern or maintain a home base from which they exploit their surrounding environment for their livelihood. They may engage in hunting, gathering, or pastoralism and share their products with neighbouring communities. Such exchange of products is essential for the survival of semi-nomadic tribes within a particular geographical region. However, due to modern developmental encroachments into their traditional territories, semi-nomadic tribes often face challenges in procuring forest resources. Thus, forests are viewed as providers for these communities, whose members inhabit, cultivate, harvest, and utilise forest resources, while these economic activities simultaneously shape their cultural identity.

Objectives

- To analyse the relationship between the forest and subsistence patterns among the Malhar.
- To examine how settlement patterns are influenced by the forest in shaping the Malhar's cultural identity.
- To document the traditional knowledge of the Malhar related to the forest resources within a catchment area.

Methodology

The present research gathered data from a wide range of sources using a variety of methods. The household survey was an important method that helped to understand the concentration of the Malhar tribe in the study area. This data collection provided information on the age, sex, occupation of family members, family types, and marital status of the Malhar households in the Kalapat Reserved Forest Area.

Data were collected through observation, interviews, group discussions, and schedules. Photography was also used to document the behaviour and customs of the Malhar community and to understand both the past and the present. The catchment analysis method helped to study the limits of influence in the surrounding physiographic area. The catchment area was defined by drawing a circle around the study site. In this regard, the topographic map was essential for locating activity areas within the catchment.

Using the cultural ecology approach to study the subsistence pattern, environmental factors such as fauna, flora, and avian species were considered essential variables in this model. Most of the data on these aspects were obtained from the District *Gazetteer* of

Keonjhar district and the Odisha Geo-Spatial Data Centre, Survey of India. A library-based study of the ethnographic accounts of the Malhar tribe was also carried out to establish historical continuity in the study area and to determine the degree of influence of cultural contact on traditional subsistence practices.

Study Area



(File: India Odisha Kendujhar district. Svg)

Figure 1: Map of Keonjhar district of Odisha

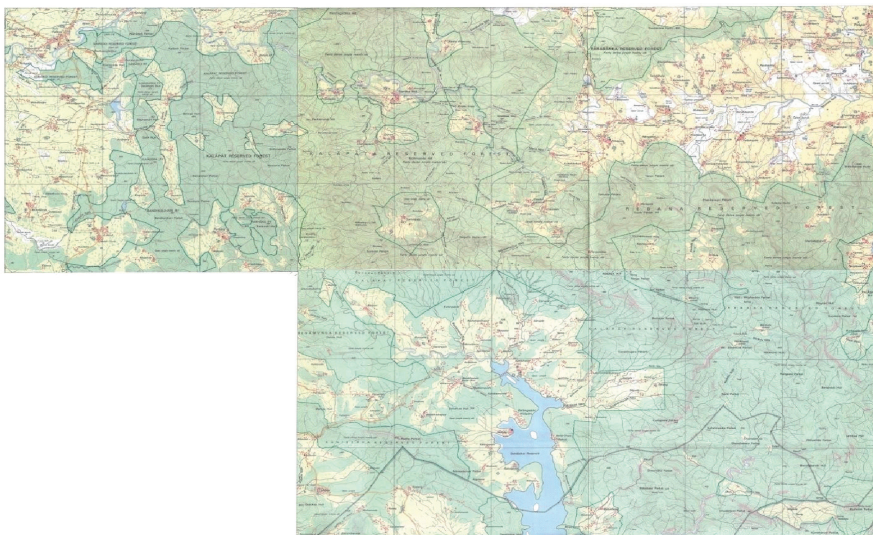


Figure 2: Topographic Map showing Kalapat Reserved Forest Area, Keonjhar, Odisha

The study area in and around the Kalapat Reserve Forest in Keonjhar district lies between 21°7'30" North Latitude and 21°22'30" North Latitude, and between 85°22'30" East Longitude and 85°45'00" East Longitude. The study area covers approximately 38.64 km × 27.31 km, extending 38.64 km from 85°22'30" East Longitude to 85°45'00" East Longitude, and 27.31 km from 21°7'30" North Latitude to 21°22'30" North Latitude. The area is represented on Survey of India Topographic Map Sheets Nos. F45N12, F45N11, and F45N7, at a scale of 1:50,000.

Geomorphologically, the study area is located north of the Dandadhar Reservoir, which falls within Dhenkanal district, Odisha. From a topographical point of view, the area includes the revenue villages of Harichandanpur Block in Keonjhar district on its eastern side and the revenue villages of Telkoi Block on its western side. It is bounded by Barabanka Reserved Forest to the north, while Rebana Reserved Forest is located on its eastern side. The study area mainly consists of rich alluvial soil, whereas the highlands are composed primarily of detritus and are intersected by numerous hill streams. The area is well watered by streams, which become raging torrents during the monsoon. Several seasonal streams, such as Shrabantargar Nalla, Banan Nalla, Nipania Nalla, Banakula Nalla, Patrajhori Nalla, Haguri Nalla, and Pechamundi Nalla, flow along the southern side of the study area. Sapua Nalla, Tankapani Nalla, the Samakoi River, and the Samarsingha River, which are the major streams and rivers in the area, flow along its northern side. Khajuria Nalla, Ghantla Nalla, Churgunia Nalla, and Sankoi Nalla flow along the western side of the Kalapat Reserved Forest Area.

These streams mainly originate in the hilly tracts and flow into the plains, carrying a large volume of water during the monsoon. During summer, they almost dry up. Their beds are generally rocky, rendering them unsuitable for navigation. The entire study area is covered with fairly dense forest, predominantly Sal (*Shorea robusta*). Except for isolated hills and undulating tracts, the area is generally open and occupied by several villages and numerous hamlets. Some of the principal peaks of Keonjhar district, such as Meghananda (1,054 m) and Ranga Parbata (897 m), are situated to the south-west of the study area. The study area also contains some artificially constructed water bodies developed under minor irrigation projects. One is located near Somakoi Reserved Forest on the western side of the study area, while another, Sapua Dam, is situated south of Barabanka Reserved Forest. Several revenue villages within the study area were surveyed, including Kharaba, Ostiapasi, Baraguda, Galada, Pithagola, Similipal, Panga, and Kuladera.

The Malhar

Odisha is home to various nomadic tribes, such as the Mankiria, Birhor, Bajikar, Ghusuria, and Sabhakia, who live in different parts of the state adjacent to nearby forests (Subbarao, 2017). Nestled within the natural environment, the Malhar are a semi-nomadic Kolharian tribal group of Odisha. With a history stretching back over centuries, the ethnographer Sir Risley (1891) described them as a sept of the Mundas and Ghasis of Chhotanagpur. This tribal group is distributed across the districts of Sambalpur, Dhenkanal, and Keonjhar in Odisha and constitutes a numerically small community. In Thane district of Maharashtra, they enjoy Scheduled Tribe status.

The Malhar tribal group in Odisha identify themselves as Malhar or Jara Sabar to affirm their identity, whereas neighbouring communities refer to them as Malhar or mahuwalla (honey collectors). Although they collect honey from the surrounding forests and trade it with neighbouring communities, their collection is not limited to honey alone; they also collect Sal (*Shorea robusta*) resin, lac, and other forest products. They speak their own mother tongue, a non-literate dialect that is linguistically classified under the Northern Munda family of languages. The Malhar are generally bilingual and are well versed in the local Odia language.

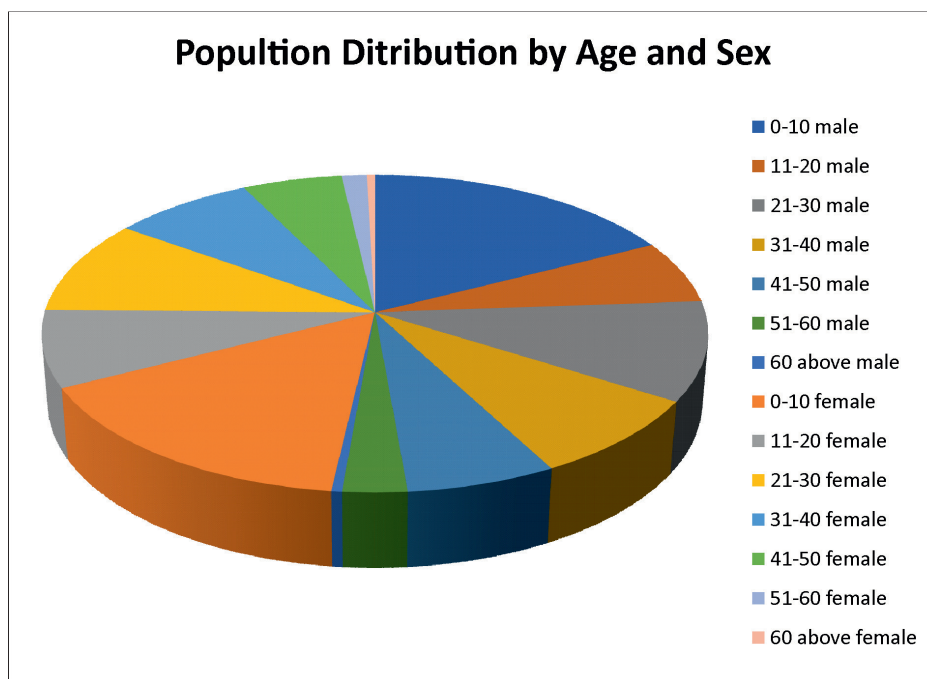


Figure 3: Pie chart showing the age and sex distribution among the Malhar

The Malhar People in the Study Area

The Malhar people in the Kalapat Reserved Forest Area live in the Telkoi and Harichandanpur Blocks of Keonjhar district. Within this geographical area, a total population of 218 Malhars was recorded. Of these, 113 are males, and 105 are females. The highest proportion of males belongs to the 0–10 years age group (17.43%), whereas the highest proportion of females also belongs to the 0–10 years age group (15.59%). The lowest proportion of both males and females is found in the 60 years and above age group (0.45% each).

Importance of Forest in Malhar Cultural Identity

From the very beginning of prehistory, human populations have been viewed as an integral component of their natural environment, deeply intertwined with and dependent on the surroundings in which they lived (Smyntyna, 2004). The Malhar people living within the Kalapat Reserved Forest Area are mostly semi-nomadic in nature. This reserved forest plays a vital role in shaping the identity of the Malhar community, influencing their way of life, belief system, and survival strategies. Their subsistence and settlement patterns particularly highlight their close interaction with the forest.

Subsistence Pattern

Traditionally, the Malhars have practised gathering activities, although they occasionally engage in hunting. However, hunting is limited because of forest rules and regulations implemented by the government. The dietary habits of the Malhar people are predominantly rice-based. Their group hunting is restricted to specific animals, such as wild boar, porcupine, monitor lizard, and forest rat, as the meat of other animals is strictly prohibited in their culture.

The use of plant foods is highly valued by the Malhars, as these make a significant contribution to their diet by providing essential nutrients, vitamins, and minerals. Through their indigenous knowledge, they collect a wide variety of young shoots and leaves available in different seasons from the forest. These include *Melothria heterophylla* (Bana Kunduri), *Antidesma diandrum* (Marmuri), *Basella alba* (Ban Poi), *Alternanthera amoena* (Madaranga), *Leucas cephalotes* (Pitta), and *Amaranthus viridis* (Marshi Sag).

The collection of roots and tubers is also an important practice among the Malhars in this region. Different species of *Dioscorea*, such as *Dioscorea oppositifolia* (Pani Alu), *Dioscorea bulbifera* (Pita Alu), and several others, are collected from the forest, and each

yam has its own method of preparation. These *Dioscorea* species, with their nutritional and antioxidant properties, not only enrich the diet but are also ethnomedicinally important. The techniques used by the Malhar community provide valuable evidence of early root and tuber utilisation in the region and are similar to Dounias' concept of "paracultivation" (Dounias, 2001).

Using their indigenous knowledge, the Malhars also collect several species of mushrooms during the rainy season, including *Russula cyanoxantha* (Gachha Bedha), *Volvariella glandiformis* (Bali Chhatu), *Lycoperdon* sp. (Anthua), *Tuber* sp. (Desi Rutka), *Russula emetica* (Patra Chhatu), *Termitomyces* sp. (Bihuduni), and *Russula virescens* (Angarua).



Figure 4: In this picture, an old woman is digging in the earth with the help of an iron crowbar in the vicinity of her house. This old woman regularly practices digging in the nearby area of her house for digging wild yam (*Dioscorea*)

Although the Malhars collect several forest products, they are primarily known as honey collectors, as honey collection is their main occupation. Using indigenous methods, the process begins with gathering information, followed by preparation for the activity, collection of honey from the honeycomb, and finally the purification of the honey. Honey collection provides an important income-generating opportunity and has long been the primary means of sustaining their livelihood. Although they collect honey, they consider it a prohibited food for themselves because of beliefs that have been passed down from generation to generation. They sell the collected honey

in nearby local markets and, most of the time, use the barter system to exchange it for commodities such as rice and oil.

Resin is one of the most important non-wood forest products and one of the oldest tree products used by humans for various purposes. Like honey, the Malhar people today place great importance on collecting Sal (*Shorea robusta*) resin, as it is abundantly available in the Kalapat Reserved Forest Area. Resin is a sticky, organic substance that hardens upon exposure to air, forming a brittle, amorphous solid. Owing to their close interaction with neighbouring Hindu communities, who use resin for religious purposes, the Malhar people also collect resin from the forest. Both male and female members of the Malhar tribe are engaged in resin collection.



Figure 5: This picture shows a man vertically clinging and collecting Sal (*Shorea robusta*) resin with the help of an Axe and a bamboo basket. There is a traditional method of the Malhar tribe for climbing into a tree called tapping. This tribe uses this specific tapping method to climb into any tree

The resources collected by the Malhar community are deeply intertwined with the forest. This forest, as we see it, is not merely a physical space; for the Malhars, it is a source of tradition and sustenance. The Kalapat Reserved Forest provides a variety of products that shape their way of life and sustain their semi-nomadic lifestyle. These forest products are not only used for survival but also hold symbolic significance, representing the interrelationship between the forest and the Malhar community. The way they procure these resources is deeply imbued with cultural meaning. Certain

foods, such as yams, mushrooms, and leaves, are associated with social bonding. The traditional knowledge of collecting these products is commonly referred to as paracultivation, a way of maintaining sustainability. Knowledge of where and when to collect these products is passed down from one generation to the next, ensuring the continuity of their traditional ecological knowledge. The practices of climbing tall trees and hills to collect honey and Sal (*Shorea robusta*) resin are honed over time and reflect a deep respect for the environment. Most of the resources they collect are exchanged for tools, textiles, and other essential commodities. These exchanges foster relationships with neighbouring communities and integrate the Malhars into the broader economic and cultural systems without compromising their cultural identity. By living in harmony with the forest, the Malhars have shaped traditions, social structures, and a way of life that celebrates their close connection with the forest.

Settlement Patterns

Various types of semi-nomadic settlements have been established by the Malhar people in the Kalapat Reserved Forest Area, reflecting their dependence on and relationship with the forest. As the Malhars typically move from one place to another, the design of their houses varies according to their way of life and the availability of the forest resources they collect. Their settlement pattern depends largely on these forest resources, which are essential for their survival.



Figure 6: Wattle Daub House



Figure 7: Reed Thatch House



Figure 8: Seasonal Camp of Malhar



Figure 9: Foraging camp of Malhar

The Malhar people are semi-nomadic in nature, which is reflected in their settlement pattern. The ecology of the Kalapat Reserved Forest Area is highly favourable for these tribal people to construct different types of settlements. These habitation structures vary in size and method of construction depending on the location, time of year, length of occupation, and the number of people using them. Based on their functions, there are two main types of settlements: permanent settlements and temporary settlements. Permanent settlements foster a dynamic interaction with culture, allowing traditions to evolve in a more structured manner. These settlements provide a platform for an adaptive and resilient form of cultural identity among the Malhars. The Malhar people in the Kalapat Reserved Forest Area mainly practise two types of permanent settlements: rectangular wattle-and-daub houses and reed-thatched houses. These settlements provide stability, allowing traditions and practices, as well as economic activities such as gathering and preservation, to become more deeply embedded within the Malhar community. Most of these houses have been constructed as a result of cultural changes and a desire for modernity.

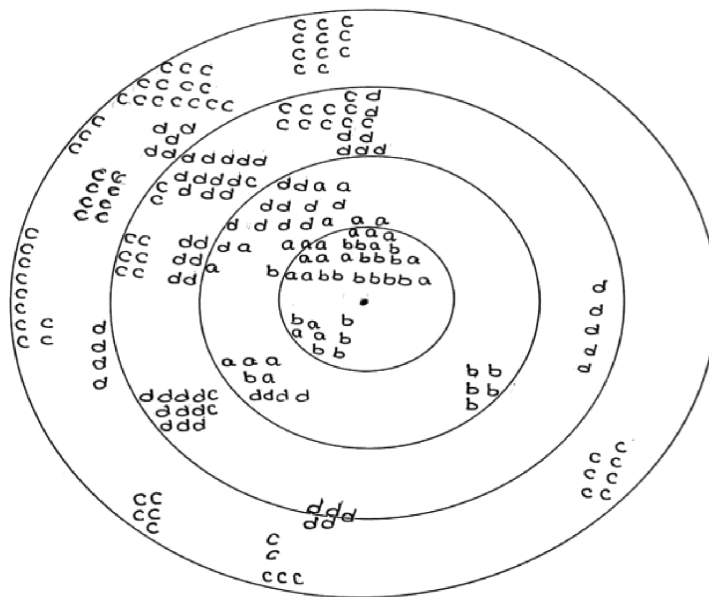
In contrast, temporary settlements are divided into two types: seasonal hamlets and foraging camps. Seasonal hamlets are mainly used during specific seasons in particular geographical areas where forest resources are readily available. These hamlets

are usually located near the foothills of the forest. The Malhar people in this region generally occupy these settlements for subsistence activities and trading purposes. Most of these hamlets are used during periods of honey collection, the gathering of wild tubers, and while undertaking daily wage labour in nearby villages. Foraging camps are mostly located inside the forest, where the Malhars can rest temporarily. During the survey of the Kalapat Reserved Forest Area, the author observed one type of foraging camp consisting of a naturally formed shelter situated in a dense forest at a high altitude. They store the gathered materials inside these shelters to protect them from wind and rain.

Catchment Analysis

Catchment analysis involves studying various physical, ecological, and socio-economic aspects to understand the significance and functions of a particular area. In this context, forest resources collected from different parts of the forest influence the culture of the Malhar community. The forest supports the Malhars in maintaining their indigenous knowledge within the catchment area and fosters a sense of social bonding among them.

The Malhar people are characterised by seasonal and temporary movements in search of forest resources. This mobility shapes their cultural identity. Their movements



a = Male (Individual), b = Female (Individual), c = Male in group, d = Female in group

Figure 10: Catchment analysis showing Male and Female activities among Malhars

for collecting forest resources influence their social structure and cultural expression. Their cultural ethos guides them to live with minimal impact on the forest, which has become a defining aspect of their cultural identity. These practices are crucial for preserving their cultural identity, as their subsistence and settlement patterns are central to their way of life. The catchment analysis of Pithagola village has provided insights into patterns of resource exploitation, long-distance trade, and interactions with the natural environment and neighbouring social groups.

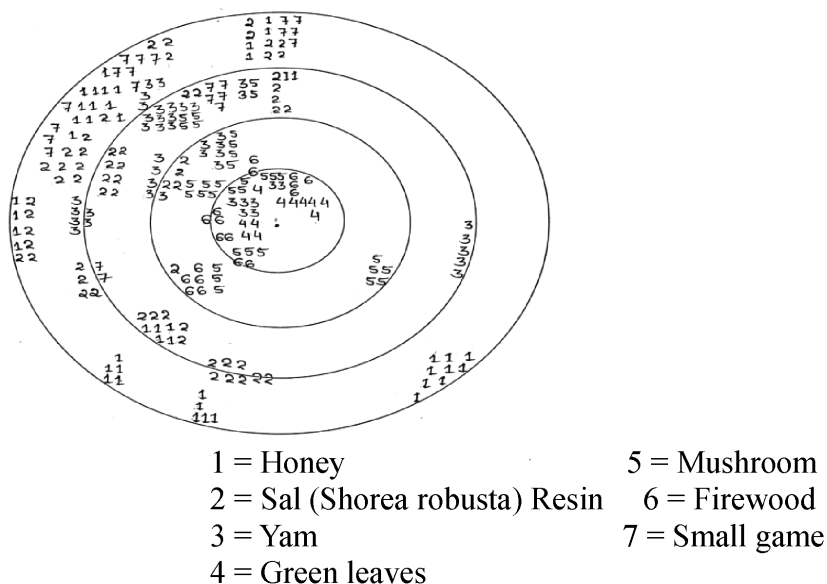


Figure 11: Catchment analysis showing collection of forest resources by Malhars

The Malhar people primarily practise gathering activities in the nearby forest and occasionally engage in small-game hunting of animals such as monitor lizards, porcupines, large rats, and wild boars. However, they do not practise agriculture. Within a range of 10 km, both male and female members undertake various activities individually as well as in groups. This range varies for males and females. Towards the north-west, within 2.5 km of the site, both male and female members individually carry out gathering activities. They mainly collect mushrooms, green vegetables, and firewood from the forest. A quarry site is located approximately 2.5 km south of the study site. They collect different types of coloured soil, such as white and red soil, for decorating their houses. Some male members occasionally travel up to 5 km to collect poles for constructing their settlements. Within this range, both male and female groups undertake gathering activities for their

subsistence. Female groups are more actively involved than male groups in collecting different forest products, such as yams, fruits, and flowers.

Towards the west, up to a distance of 7.5 km, female groups occasionally undertake gathering activities, whereas male groups are more actively involved in collecting forest products such as Sal (*Shorea robusta*) resin and occasionally engage in small-game hunting. The Malhar people mainly depend on forest products such as honey, Sal (*Shorea robusta*) resin, and yams, which they sell in nearby local markets to earn an income. For this purpose, they sometimes travel beyond a 10 km radius, and both male and female groups stay in the forest for 2–3 days. Both male and female groups actively participate in these collection activities.

Analysis

From the perspective of the subsistence pattern, settlement pattern, and catchment analysis, the Malhar tribe is deeply connected to the surrounding forest, as they depend on it for both subsistence and settlement. Their relationship with the forest shapes their mobility as well as their social structure, ensuring the sustainable use of forest resources. The catchment analysis clearly shows that the forest influences their resource management practices. Their indigenous knowledge also enables them to preserve biodiversity within the catchment area while maintaining a balance between survival and conservation. This indigenous knowledge contributes to biodiversity conservation (Abas et al., 2022). The forest represents a holistic cultural space for the Malhar community, where they interact with both the natural and social environment. Their subsistence system depends largely on the preservation of the forest. Forest products such as timber, honey, resin, lac, yams, and mushrooms are available only when the forest maintains its biodiversity, and the Malhars are well aware of this. These products are vital to the Malhar community for both nutrition and income. Honey and other forest products are not merely resources for survival but also form an integral part of the Malhar cultural identity.

Permanent and temporary settlements play a significant role in shaping and preserving the cultural identity of the Malhar community. These settlements provide insight into how the Malhar people balance flexibility with permanence. Their dwelling patterns reflect their social, ecological, and economic dynamics, all of which play a central role in shaping their cultural identity. Although the Malhars are semi-nomadic in nature, they establish permanent homes in specific locations. The construction of permanent houses often involves multiple generations, with traditional knowledge of local materials and architectural techniques being passed down from one generation

to the next. As the forests in this region are rich in reeds, grasses, and similar plants, reed-thatched houses are common. Despite their permanence, these dwellings do not represent a completely sedentary way of life; rather, they reflect a dynamic balance between mobility and settlement.

Temporary settlements are central to the semi-nomadic way of life. Seasonal settlements are established for the purpose of collecting forest products during different seasons. These dwellings are temporary in nature and are generally constructed using locally available materials. Such camps serve as important centres of cultural continuity. They enable the Malhar people to remain mobile while taking advantage of seasonal forest resources such as honey, Sal (*Shorea robusta*) resin, yams, and leaves. The practice of establishing seasonal camps enables the Malhars to develop a deeper understanding of the forest and its resources, thereby strengthening their cultural identity. In contrast, foraging camps represent the most temporary form of settlement. As these camps are located deep within the forest, they highlight the close relationship between the Malhar community and the forest ecosystem.

The mobility of the Malhar community is shaped by the need to collect forest products such as honey, resin, lac, and yams. Their cultural identity is closely linked to the forest, from which they obtain the resources necessary for their survival. The catchment area they utilise is not merely a physical space but also a landscape that embodies their cultural practices. The forest plays a significant role as both a protector and a provider, sustaining the Malhar community and preserving their traditional knowledge. As the Malhar people practise low-impact resource exploitation, they maintain a harmonious relationship with the forest. However, in recent times, their forest-based activities have faced several challenges, including deforestation, land encroachment, and ecological change, which have disrupted their traditional practices. Their culture largely depends on the protection of the forest, which the Malhar people regard as their home. Their identity is deeply embedded in their relationship with the surrounding forest, their traditional knowledge, their customs, and their social systems.

Conclusion

The Malhar people are deeply connected to the forest ecosystem, which forms the foundation of their subsistence and settlement patterns. The forest not only acts as a provider but also nurtures their cultural values and preserves their indigenous knowledge system, which serves as a protector of the Malhar people in the Kalapat Reserved Forest Area. Their gathering techniques, seasonal movements, and settlement

patterns demonstrate a symbiotic relationship with the forest, emphasising their adaptability and understanding of the forest ecosystem. However, recent challenges such as deforestation, globalisation, and commercial logging have disrupted this equilibrium. In addition, the increasing preference for sedentary lifestyles, land encroachment, and climate change have diminished their traditional practices. As a result, the Malhar people now face difficulties in maintaining their traditional subsistence strategies, leading to an increased dependence on external markets and modernisation. This shift also poses a risk to their settlement patterns, as the Malhar community is increasingly compelled to establish more permanent dwellings, resulting in a gradual disconnection from their traditional ecological knowledge. Thus, it can be concluded that the cultural identity of the Malhar people is inseparable from the forest, and its preservation depends on maintaining a balance between ecological sustainability and cultural continuity.

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