

Tribes of Odisha

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta** • March 1, 2017 • Updated October 10, 2026 • 9 min read

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Culture guide · Odisha's first peoples

Tribes of Odisha: *peoples of the hills and forests*

A guide to Odisha's 62 Scheduled Tribes — who they are and where they live, their languages, faiths, festivals and arts, the 13 particularly vulnerable groups, their history of resistance, and the questions of land and forest rights they face today.

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta**, MA (Gold Medalist) Updated **October 2026** **14 min** read

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- **62** Scheduled Tribes
- **13** PVTGs
- **22.85%** of Odisha's people
- **14** linked articles

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01 · Overview

Who are the tribes of Odisha?

Odisha's tribes in 60 seconds

- Odisha has **62 Scheduled Tribes** — more distinct tribal communities than any other Indian state.

- At the 2011 Census tribal people numbered about **95.9 lakh**, or **22.85%** of the state's population.
- The largest communities are the **Kandha (Khond)**, **Gond** and **Santal**.
- **13 groups** are classed as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), including the Bonda, Juang and Dongria Kondh.
- Tribal languages belong to the **Austroasiatic (Munda)**, **Dravidian** and **Indo-Aryan** families.
- Tribal communities led some of Odisha's strongest **resistance to colonial rule** and remain central to debates on land, forests and mining.

Long before the kingdoms of Kalinga and Utkala, Odisha's hills and forests were home to the peoples now called its **tribes** (*adivasis*). Their gods, crafts and customs run deep in Odia culture — the worship of Jagannath itself is widely traced to tribal roots — yet each community keeps its own language, land and way of life.

- Scheduled Tribes **62 communities**
- Population (2011) **About 95.9 lakh · 22.85%**
- Share of India's tribals **About 9%**
- Largest tribes **Kandha, Gond, Santal**
- Vulnerable groups **13 PVTGs**
- Scheduled Areas **Large parts of the state under the Fifth Schedule**

02 · Geography

Where Odisha's tribes live

Tribal communities live mainly in the hilly, forested interior along Odisha's northern, western and southern borders, and in the Eastern Ghats. Large parts of these districts are Scheduled Areas under the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution.

- **The north**Mayurbhanj · Keonjhar · SundargarhHome of the Santal, Ho, Munda, Oraon, Kolha, Bhumij and Bhuyan, and the Juang of the Keonjhar hills.
- **The south**Koraput · Rayagada · Malkangiri · NabarangpurParaja, Gadaba, Koya, Bonda, Didayi, Dongria Kondh and Gond communities of the Eastern Ghats.
- **The central hills**Kandhamal · Kalahandi · GajapatiThe heartland of the Kandha, and of the Saura in the Gajapati and Rayagada hills.
- **The west**Sambalpur · Bargarh · BolangirGond, Binjhal, Kisan and other communities of the Mahanadi uplands.

03 · Speech

Tribal languages of Odisha

Odisha's tribes speak dozens of languages from three of India's great language families. Many people are bilingual in Odia or in a regional link language such as Desia in Koraput.

- **Austroasiatic (Munda)**Northern & southern OdishaSantali, Ho, Mundari, Kharia, Juang, Saura (Sora), Gutob (Gadaba) and Remo (Bonda).
- **Dravidian**Central & southern hillsKui and Kuvi of the Kandha, Gondi, Koya and Kurukh of the Oraon.
- **Indo-Aryan**Link languagesDesia, Bhatari, Sambalpuri and other regional speech used across communities.
- **OI Chiki**Santali scriptCreated by Raghunath Murmu of Mayurbhanj; Santali was added to the Eighth Schedule in 2003.

04 · Profiles

Major tribes of Odisha

A short introduction to some of the best-known communities. Each is far more varied than a single paragraph can show.

- **Kandha (Khond)**Kandhamal · Rayagada · KalahandiOdisha's largest tribe, speaking Kui and Kuvi. Their earth goddess is Dharani Penu. Subgroups include the Dongria and Kutia Kondh.
- **Santal**Mayurbhanj · Balasore · KeonjharOne of India's largest tribes, with Santali literature in the Ol Chiki script and festivals such as Sohrai and Baha.
- **Gond**Nabarangpur · Sundargarh · western OdishaA large central Indian people, many of whose communities once ruled small kingdoms.
- **Munda & Ho**Sundargarh · Mayurbhanj · KeonjharMunda-speaking peoples of the north; the Ho celebrate Maghe Parab.
- **Oraon**SundargarhKurukh-speaking farmers of the north-west, known for Karma and Sarhul festivals.
- **Saura (Sora)**Gajapati · Rayagada · GanjamHill farmers famed for their ritual wall paintings (idital) and terraced fields.
- **Bhuyan**Keonjhar · SundargarhA hill people of the north; the Paudi Bhuyan are a PVTG. Their 19th-century risings are a landmark of resistance.
- **Bonda (Remo)**Bonda Hills, MalkangiriA small PVTG known for women's bead and metal ornaments and shaved heads.
- **Juang**Keonjhar · DhenkanalA Munda-speaking PVTG of the Keonjhar hills, known for their Changu dance.
- **Paraja & Gadaba**KoraputPeoples of the Koraput plateau; Gadaba women weave cloth from kerang fibre.
- **Koya**MalkangiriDravidian-speaking people of Odisha's southernmost district.
- **Kolha, Kisan & Bhumij**Northern districtsAgricultural communities of Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar and Sundargarh.

05 · Special protection

Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups

Odisha has **13 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups** (PVTGs) — more than any other state. These small communities, identified for their declining or stagnant populations, low literacy and pre-agricultural livelihoods, receive special development support through dedicated micro-projects.

1. **1**Birhor
2. **2**Bonda
3. **3**Chuktia Bhunjia
4. **4**Didayi
5. **5**Dongria Khond
6. **6**Hill Kharia
7. **7**Juang
8. **8**Kutia Kondh
9. **9**Lanjia Saura
10. **10**Lodha
11. **11**Mankirdia
12. **12**Paudi Bhuyan
13. **13**Saura

06 · Belief

Faith, rituals and festivals

Most tribal religions centre on the earth, the village and the ancestors. Each village has its own shrine and priest; spirits of forests, hills and rivers are honoured with offerings at the turning points of the farming year. Over centuries, tribal traditions and Hindu worship shaped each other — most famously in the cult of Jagannath, whose wooden image and Daitapati servitors are widely linked to Sabara origins.

- **Karma**Munda, Oraon & others · BhadraBranches of the karam tree are worshipped with night-long singing and dance.
- **Sohrai & Baha**SantalSohrai honours cattle after the harvest; Baha welcomes the spring flowers.
- **Maghe Parab**Ho · MaghaThe Ho community's major festival of the new year.
- **Chaita Parab**Koraput region · springA hunting and spring festival of the southern hills.
- **Pus Punei**Many communities · PausaWinter harvest festival celebrated across western and southern Odisha.
- **Nuakhai**Western OdishaOffering of the new rice, shared by tribal and non-tribal communities alike.
- [FaithTribal Origin of the Cult of JagannathThe Sabara roots of Odisha's great deity.Read article →](#)
- [GuideCult of JagannathaHistory, rituals and significance.Read guide →](#)
- [FaithMahima DharmaThe faith of the Kandha poet Bhima Bhoi.Read article →](#)

07 · Hands & feet

Arts, crafts and dance

- **Saura idital**Wall paintingRitual paintings of figures, animals and trees made for the spirits.
- **Dhokra**Metal castingLost-wax cast brass figures, made by artisan communities of the tribal belt.
- **Kapdaganda**Dongria KondhEmbroidered shawls made by Dongria women of the Niyamgiri hills.
- **Kerang cloth**GadabaCloth woven by Gadaba women from forest fibre.
- **Bonda ornaments**BondaLayers of bead necklaces and metal neck rings worn by women.
- **Dhemsas**Southern OdishaLine dance of the Koraput region, also spelt Dhimsa, performed by many communities.

- **Changu** Juang & others Dance to the changu, a broad frame drum.
- **Chhau** Mayurbhanj The vigorous martial dance of Mayurbhanj, performed without masks and rooted in tribal and folk traditions.

The Odisha State Tribal Museum and the SC & ST Research and Training Institute in Bhubaneswar hold major collections of tribal art and ethnography. For Odisha's wider crafts, see [Culture of Odisha](#).

08 · Against the Company and the Crown

History and resistance

As British rule pushed into the hills in the 19th century — with new revenue demands, forest laws, police and missions to suppress customs such as the Kandha *meriah* sacrifice — tribal communities fought back. The Kandhas of Ghumsar rose under **Dora Bisoi** and **Chakra Bisoi**; the Bhuyans of Keonjhar under **Ratna Naik** and **Dharani Dhar Naik**; and in the Quit India movement **Laxman Nayak** of Koraput was hanged for leading his people.

- [Kandha · 1830s Ghumsar Rising under Dora Bisoi](#) Resistance in the Ghumsar hills. [Read article →](#)
- [Kandha Kandha Rising under Chakra Bisoi](#) A long struggle in the Kandha hills. [Read article →](#)
- [Bhuyan · 1867–68 Bhuyan Rising under Ratna Naik](#) Keonjhar's first Bhuyan rebellion. [Read article →](#)
- [Bhuyan · 1891–93 Bhuyan Rising under Dharani Dhar Naik](#) The second Bhuyan rising. [Read article →](#)
- [1857 Revolt of 1857 and Surendra Sai](#) Sambalpur's war, fought with tribal allies. [Read article →](#)
- [1942 Quit India Movement in Odisha](#) Including Laxman Nayak's movement in Koraput. [Read article →](#)

- [1930s–40sThe Prajamandal MovementPeople’s movements in the princely states.Read article →](#)

09 · Today

Land, forests and rights

Much of Odisha’s mineral wealth lies under tribal land, so questions of development and rights are central to tribal life today. The Constitution’s **Fifth Schedule** protects Scheduled Areas; the **PESA Act (1996)** gives village assemblies a say over local resources; and the **Forest Rights Act (2006)** recognises the rights of forest-dwelling communities. In 2013 village councils of the **Dongria Kondh** in the Niyamgiri hills, consulted after a Supreme Court ruling, rejected a proposed bauxite mine — a case followed around the world. Dams, mines and industries have also displaced many communities, and tribal districts still lag in health and education.

- [MiningEconomic Growth or Environmental Fallout? JSW in KeonjharIndustry and its costs in a tribal district.Read article →](#)
- [DisplacementIndravati’s Forgotten VillagesCommunities left behind by a dam project. Read article →](#)
- [HistoryBritish Relations with the Princely StatesThe Garjat states of the tribal hinterland. Read article →](#)

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11 · [FAQ](#)

Frequently asked questions about the tribes of Odisha

How many tribes are there in Odisha?

Odisha has 62 Scheduled Tribes — the largest number of distinct tribal communities of any Indian state — including 13 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups.

What share of Odisha's population is tribal?

At the 2011 Census, Scheduled Tribes numbered about 95.9 lakh people, or 22.85% of Odisha's population — roughly 9% of India's tribal population.

Which is the largest tribe in Odisha?

The Kandha (Khond) are Odisha's largest tribe, concentrated in Kandhamal, Rayagada, Kalahandi and Koraput. The Gond and Santal are the next largest.

What are the PVTGs of Odisha?

Odisha's 13 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups are the Birhor, Bonda, Chuktia Bhunjia, Didayi, Dongria Khond, Hill Kharia, Juang, Kutia Kondh, Lanjia Saura, Lodha, Mankirdia, Paudi Bhuyan and Saura.

Where do the Bonda people live?

The Bonda (Remo) live in the Bonda Hills of Malkangiri district in southern Odisha. They are a small Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group known for their distinctive ornaments and Remo language.

What is the link between tribes and Lord Jagannath?

Many historians trace the cult of Jagannath to the worship of a wooden deity by the Sabara people. Tradition tells of the Sabara chief Viswavasud, and the Daitapati servitors who claim descent from him still play a central role in the temple's rituals. See [Tribal Origin of the Cult of Jagannath](#).

Who were the tribal leaders who fought British rule in Odisha?

Leaders include Dora Bisoi and Chakra Bisoi of the Kandhas, Ratna Naik and Dharani Dhar Naik of the Bhuyans, and Laxman Nayak of Koraput, who was hanged in 1943 for his role in the Quit India movement.

Sources & further reading

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3. Elwin, Verrier. *Bondo Highlander*. Oxford University Press, 1950.
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