



BHUMIHARS: A Story of Lost Tribal Identity

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Abstract. *This paper examines the sociological and constitutional basis for the claim that the Bhumihar community of Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh (Purvanchal) represents a case of "lost tribal identity" rather than an organically constituted upper caste. Using the five-fold criteria formulated by the Lokur Committee (1965) for the identification of Scheduled Tribes — primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact, and general backwardness — the paper evaluates the historical and socio-economic profile of the Bhumihar community against each parameter. It argues that the community's association with forest-clearing and agrarian expansion in the hilly and plateau tracts of Gaya, Kaimur, Rohtas and Nawada during the colonial period, together with its documented exclusion from Brahmanical ritual status, endogamous isolation, and continuing economic backwardness, are consistent with a tribal origin obscured by colonial-era Sanskritization. Drawing a comparative parallel with the Meena community of Rajasthan — a Scheduled Tribe that nonetheless produced ruling lineages the paper contests the assumption that tribal status is incompatible with landholding, political power, or upper-caste social positioning. The paper situates this argument within the broader history of revisions to India's central and state Scheduled Tribe lists, and notes recent political articulations of the demand, including its invocation by Bhumihar youth on social media and by an elected legislator in the Bihar Legislative Assembly in 2026. The paper is offered as a contribution to academic debate rather than a definitive ethnographic claim.*

Keywords: Bhumihar; Scheduled Tribe; Lokur Committee; Sanskritization; caste and tribe; Meena tribe; Bihar; Purvanchal.

Introduction

The classification of communities as "caste" or "tribe" in India is not merely an anthropological exercise but a constitutional and administrative one, carrying significant implications for reservation, representation, and social identity. While the Scheduled Tribe (ST) list has been periodically revised since 1950 to include communities whose historical circumstances meet the criteria for tribal status, certain communities that underwent early or thorough Sanskritization have, over time, come to be classified as "upper castes" despite retaining features historically associated with tribal life. This paper examines the case of the Bhumihars — a landholding community concentrated in Bihar and the Purvanchal region of eastern Uttar Pradesh — and argues that the community's historical trajectory, cultural practices, and continuing socio-economic profile warrant re-examination of its caste classification against the established criteria for Scheduled Tribe status.

The paper proceeds in five parts. It first outlines the constitutional and administrative framework governing Scheduled Tribe classification in India, including the criteria formulated by the Lokur



Committee. It then examines the Bhumihar community against each of these five criteria in turn. Third, it addresses a common objection to this argument — that landholding, kingship, and caste-like social status are incompatible with tribal identity — through a comparative case study of the Meena community of Rajasthan. Fourth, it situates the argument within the historical pattern of revisions to India's Scheduled Tribe lists. Finally, it notes the contemporary political articulation of this demand by Bhumihar youth and elected representatives.

Constitutional and Conceptual Framework for Scheduled Tribe Classification

The Constitution of India does not define "Scheduled Tribe" through a fixed set of substantive characteristics. Article 366(25) instead defines a Scheduled Tribe procedurally, as such tribal communities as are declared by the President of India to be Scheduled Tribes under Article 342. Under this mechanism, a state government, acting through the Governor, forwards a recommendation for the inclusion of a particular community in the Scheduled Tribe list; the President is empowered to notify the recommended community. The Constitution further entrusts Parliament with the authority to include or exclude a community from the list by law.

In the absence of an explicit constitutional definition of "tribe," the Lokur Committee, constituted by the Government of India in 1965, formulated five criteria that continue to guide the Office of the Registrar-General of India in evaluating claims for inclusion in the Scheduled Tribe list. These are: (i) indications of primitive traits, understood as traditional or archaic lifestyles and pre-agricultural or rudimentary economic practices; (ii) a distinctive culture, encompassing language, religious tradition, folklore, and social custom; (iii) geographical isolation, typically habitation in remote, hilly, forested, or otherwise inaccessible terrain; (iv) shyness of contact, referring to a demonstrable reluctance to interact and integrate with the wider community; and (v) general backwardness, understood in social, educational, and economic terms relative to the general population. The following section evaluates the Bhumihar community against each of these five criteria.

Examining the Bhumihar Community Against the Lokur Criteria

3.1 Primitive Traits and Pre-Agricultural Practices

The Bhumihar community's shift toward settled agriculture is closely tied to the clearing of forest tracts under British colonial rule. Prior to and during this period, the hilly and plateau areas of Gaya, Kaimur, Rohtas, and Nawada in the Magadha region of southern Bihar — lying in proximity to the Chota Nagpur Plateau — were covered by dense forest. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the colonial administration undertook large-scale deforestation in this region, both to obtain timber for railway construction and to expand cultivable land. The Indian Forest Act of 1865 formalized colonial control over these forest tracts, and it is notable that the term "Bhumihar" itself first appears in official records in the same year. This coincidence is read here as suggestive of a community whose transition from forest-dwelling to settled agrarian life, and whose very nomenclature as a distinct caste, is a product of the same colonial process, rather than evidence of a long-standing agrarian caste identity.

3.2 Distinctive Culture

Bhumihars are distinguished from Brahmins by a number of cultural and ritual practices. Unlike Brahmins, Bhumihars have not historically served as temple priests, nor have they accepted ritual gifts or alms (dakshina) from other communities; rather, they perform sacred rites and offer sacrifices for themselves. Despite undergoing a process of Sanskritization during the colonial period, Bhumihars were



never fully accepted by Brahmin communities as ritual equals, and were, like the Meena community of Rajasthan, historically subjected to caste-based rejection and derision by upper castes in Bihar notwithstanding their landholding and economic standing.

3.3 Geographical Isolation

The British colonial administration first encountered the Bhumihars — described in colonial records as a "martial race" — in the hilly, plateau, and forested tracts of the Magadh and Jharkhand regions. This physical separation from the wider population persists in demographic terms: Bhumihars constitute only 2.87 percent of Bihar's population and remain concentrated in a limited number of districts within Bihar and Purvanchal, rather than being widely dispersed.

3.4 Shyness of Contact

Notwithstanding the effort to incorporate Bhumihars into the four-fold varna order through Sanskritization, the community remains what this paper terms "avarna" in practice: there is no significant evidence of intermarriage between Bhumihars and other caste groups, a pattern consistent with the endogamous isolation associated with tribal communities.

3.5 General Backwardness

Bhumihars have historically sought recognition as Brahmins, a status consistently denied to them by Brahmin and other upper-caste groups, who have at times mocked or questioned the community's origins. This pattern of denied status parallels the trajectory of the Meena community of Rajasthan, whose elevated social position is similarly attributed to Sanskritization of an originally tribal identity. Economically, Bhumihars remain the poorest among the communities classified as upper caste: according to the Bihar Caste Census Report (2023), 27.58 percent of Bhumihar households fall below the poverty line. This economic backwardness, combined with the community's localized presence in Bihar, Purvanchal, and a small number of adjoining areas, is read here as consistent with an unassimilated tribal origin rather than with the historical trajectory of an established landed caste.

Addressing the Objection: Can Tribal Communities Be Kings and Landlords?

A common objection to the argument advanced above is that landholding, political authority, and elevated caste-like status are incompatible with a tribal identity. This objection can be addressed through the comparative example of the Meena community of Rajasthan, a community that holds Scheduled Tribe status while having historically produced ruling lineages. The kingdom of Bundi, in present-day Rajasthan, is recorded as having taken its name from a Meena ruler, Bunda Meena, before the territory passed to the Hada Chauhan dynasty under Rao Dev Hara in 1342. Similarly, the areas of Khohgong and Amber were ruled by early Meena rulers, including Rao Chanda Meena and Alan Singh (Ratun Singh) Chanda, prior to their annexation by the Kachwaha Rajputs. The Meena community further traces its lineage to the ancient Matsya kingdom, associating itself with the early governance of the Dhundhar region and surrounding tracts.

Scholarship on caste organization in rural Rajasthan situates the Meena within the "high" caste category alongside Brahmins, Mahajans, and Thakurs, distinguishing this group from "clean," "unclean," and "untouchable" caste categories in the same locality. That the Meena community occupies a high caste position in local social hierarchies has not been treated as a bar to its recognition as a Scheduled Tribe. On the same reasoning, the Bhumihar community's classification as an upper caste, and its historical association with landholding, need not be treated as an obstacle to the reinstatement of a tribal identity.



Historical Revisions to the Scheduled Tribe List

The Scheduled Tribe list has undergone repeated revision since Indian independence and currently comprises more than 705 notified ethnic groups. The Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Orders of 1950 established the initial state-wise baseline lists. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Lists (Modification) Order of 1956 reorganized these lists following the reorganization of state boundaries. In 1976, the list was substantially amended and expanded to absorb regional and sub-community identities drawn from state lists. Between 1990 and 2015, more than 289 individual community entries or synonyms were incorporated into state lists through successive presidential notifications.

More recent additions illustrate the continuing pace of revision. In 2022, the Union Cabinet approved the inclusion of the Hatti tribe of the Trans-Giri area in the Sirmour subdivision of Himachal Pradesh; the Narikoravan and Kurivikkaran communities of the Tamil Nadu hills; the Binjhia community of Chhattisgarh; five subcategories of the Gond community in Uttar Pradesh, namely Dhuria, Nayak, Ojha, Pathari, and Rajgond; and the Betta-Kuruba community of Karnataka, recognized as a synonym of the existing Kadu Kuruba community. These examples demonstrate that the Scheduled Tribe list remains an evolving instrument, open to the inclusion of communities whose historical circumstances are subsequently found to meet the Lokur criteria.

Contemporary Political Articulation

The arguments outlined above have found expression in contemporary political mobilization. Younger members of the Bhumihar community have increasingly articulated what has come to be termed the "Maheen" demand on social media platforms, calling for the community's reclassification as a Scheduled Tribe. This demand has also found legislative voice: in July 2026, Tarari MLA Vishal Pandey raised the same demand in the Bihar Legislative Assembly.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the Bhumihar community of Bihar and Purvanchal against the five criteria used by the Office of the Registrar-General of India to evaluate claims for Scheduled Tribe status, and has argued that the community's colonial-era transition from forest-dwelling to settled agriculture, its distinctive ritual practices, its continuing geographical concentration and endogamy, and its persistent economic backwardness are jointly consistent with a tribal identity obscured by historical Sanskritization. The comparative case of the Meena community of Rajasthan demonstrates that landholding, political authority, and upper-caste social positioning are not, in themselves, incompatible with tribal classification. Set against the historical pattern of continuing revision to India's Scheduled Tribe lists, and against the backdrop of an active contemporary political demand, the case for re-examining the Bhumihar community's classification merits further academic and administrative attention. This paper is intended as a contribution to that academic debate rather than as a conclusive ethnographic or legal determination, and further empirical research — including fieldwork-based ethnographic study and detailed archival research into colonial-era records — is recommended.



References

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