



## 'Patta mela' (*Leaf fair*): Unique tribal marriage fair in India

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### Abstract

Tribal fairs serve as a reflection of the community's cultural and historical legacies. These fairs are associated with visualizing tribal cultural diversity despite being geographically and sociably isolated. They have developed socially and economically by preserving their originality and authenticity through their customs, traditions, clothing, music, and dance. These events are beneficial to the nation's development as well. Bihar is one of the states of India that exhibits various colours of culture, customs, and tradition. This state has different tribal communities and each of them have distinct customs and traditions. They have also a unique tradition of marriage system in their community. 'Patta-Mela' (Leaf-Fair) is unique and one its own kind of tribal marriage system prevailing among the tribes of Maliniya village, Banmankhi sub-division, Purnea district of Bihar, India. This fair is organized in April each year with the Sirwa festival in Bihar. This is the first time we have reported this unique tribal fair ceremony based on the available information collected from various reports of media houses and others about Patta-Mela. This fair acknowledges the originality of this one-of-a-kind tribal fair and serves as a showcase for tribal culture in this region of India. This paper aims to contribute to indigenous rights, cultural preservation, and sustainable development discourse. It underscores recognizing and supporting tribal festivals as vital to India's diverse cultural landscape. It emphasizes the need for collaborative efforts between government agencies, communities, and stakeholders to leverage these festivals to improve tribal societies.

**Keywords:** Tribal fair, tribal-culture, tribal-marriage, Patta mela, cultural heritage

### Introduction

Marriage is a social system that facilitates stable, cooperative, and mutually supportive relationships between individuals in a community. It's a significant reorganization of the social order to grasp its operation. We need to look at how it brings people together through shared interests and feelings, as well as how it prevents or at least mitigates potential conflicts resulting from such differences (Mibang and Behera, 2006) <sup>[11]</sup>. Marriage is one of the most fundamental social institutions because it allows people to start families, essential to maintaining a society. Symbols and rituals give shape to this social dynamic. Marriage and the family are central to every culture, so it makes sense that they would use routines and objects to express their beliefs and norms (Geertz, 2017) <sup>[8]</sup>. Marriage and the social system in India are deeply rooted in cultural and traditional practices, varying across regions, religions, and communities. India is a diverse country with a rich history, and this diversity is reflected in its marriage customs and social structures. Marriage in India is considered a sacred institution, and it plays a vital role in the social fabric of society. In traditional Indian culture, marriages are not just the union of two individuals but the coming together of two families (Dhar, 2013 <sup>[7]</sup>; Narzary *et al.*, 2017).

India is a diverse country with a rich cultural tapestry, and tribal communities are essential to its social fabric. These tribal communities, also known as Adivasis, are indigenous people who have inhabited various regions of India for centuries (Prabhakar *et al.*, 2023 <sup>[16]</sup>). Their distinct languages, traditions, customs, and belief systems set them apart from mainstream Indian society. India is home to over 700 different tribal groups, comprising around 8.6% of the country's total population, according to the 2011 census (Priyadarshini and Abhilash, 2019 <sup>[17]</sup>). They can be found

across different states, primarily in the central, eastern, and northeastern regions and some parts of southern India. Historically, tribal communities have depended on agriculture, hunting, gathering, and forestry for their livelihood (Kala, 2005 <sup>[9]</sup>; Singh *et al.*, 2010 <sup>[21]</sup>). However, with the increasing influence of modernization and urbanization, many have diversified their occupations to wage labor, artisan work, and small-scale businesses. Each tribal group in India has its unique cultural practices, languages, festivals, and art forms. Some well-known tribes include the Gonds, Santhals, Bhils, Todas, Nagas, Oraons, and many more, each with a distinct identity (Srivastava, 2009) <sup>[23]</sup>. Marriages in tribal communities in India are quite diverse, reflecting the cultural and regional variations among different tribes. Each tribal group has distinct customs, traditions, and social norms, making it challenging to generalize marriage practices across all tribes. However, some common elements can be observed in many tribal marriages. Tribal marriages are often elaborate and involve various rituals and ceremonies. These rituals have significant cultural and religious significance and are performed to ensure the couple's happiness and prosperity (Sonam, 2022) <sup>[22]</sup>. Like in many traditional Indian communities, arranged marriages are prevalent among tribes. Families take an active role in finding suitable matches for their children. Factors such as lineage, clan affiliation, and compatibility are considered when arranging a marriage. In some tribal societies, customs like paying a bride price or giving dowry to the bride's family are observed (Chandrakantha, 2014) <sup>[3]</sup>.

Marriage is often seen as an institution that strengthens community bonds, fosters unity, and reinforces social cohesion. Community members come together to celebrate the union, and traditional dances, music, and feasting are

common elements of the marriage celebrations. Each tribe has its unique rituals and ceremonies associated with marriage. These may include pre-wedding rituals, exchanging of gifts, sacred chants, and blessings by tribal elders or religious leaders (Mitra, 2008<sup>[12]</sup>; Suresh, 2009)<sup>[24]</sup>. However, it's important to note that this practice varies among tribes, and some tribes may not follow these customs at all. Many tribal communities practice exogamous marriages, where members are required to marry outside their own clans or lineages. This practice strengthens social bonds between different clans and avoids inbreeding (Mibang and Behera, 2009)<sup>[11]</sup>. Tribal marriages are often community affairs involving the participation of the entire tribe. Many tribal societies prioritize communal values over individualistic ones. Tribal marriages in India often involve elaborate ceremonies and rituals that vary widely across tribes. These rituals typically reflect the community's unique cultural heritage and beliefs (Sharma *et al.*, 2023)<sup>[20]</sup>. Certain tribes could hold marriage fairs or festivals to celebrate the union of couples from their community, but these events are usually localized and specific to the particular tribe. Folklorists have long considered festivals one of the most significant genes of folklore. Festivals are a substantial part of social and folk customs worldwide. The length of time that folk traditions have been passed down and the symptoms of social cohesion impact the structure and content of social life. Celebrating rites and religious holidays that honour god and practices, scripture recitation, and honouring the great saints must all be morally correct (Kumar and Chander, 2017)<sup>[10]</sup>. In this research study, we are reporting about 'Patta mela', one of the unique tribal marriage fair celebrated in the state of Bihar in India, an integral cultural heritage reflecting the rich socio-culture diversity and uniqueness of the tribal customs and practices in India. The research also focuses on socio-economic concerns in preserving this heritage in today's context using suitable methodology and techniques.

### Materials and Methods

The databases of Google scholar and SSRN, Elsevier were used to collect the information about tribal customs and marriage system. No information were available in the research databases about Patta mela therefore, various reports of reputed media houses were used to collect the information focusing on its history and significance in tribal culture and traditions.

### Patta mela (Leaf fair): A unique tradition of tribal marriage fair in India

The four-day Patta Mela (Leaf Fair) is held in the Maliniya village (25.955°N 87.233°E) of the Purnea district (Figure 1.) in the Indian state of Bihar every April, immediately following Baisakhi. This festival has a long history of honouring nature, and Hindu deity Lord Shiva, and her wife goddess Parvati. The tribal group in this area periodically celebrates this fair, which has a tradition dating back more than 150 years. The Bihar Santhal tribe is the main celebrator of this occasion. Participants in this celebration come from neighboring states, including Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odhisa, and neighboring Nepal (Dainik Bhaskar, 2023)<sup>[4]</sup>. This celebration is particularly well-known for marriage proposals, in which a boy proposes to marry a girl by giving her Paan (betel). The proposal is deemed accepted if the girl eats the Paan (betel), at which point the boy is

allowed to accompany the girl and her parents to his house. The marriage later starts with tribal rites and customs. For this reason, young tribal people anxiously anticipate the event in hopes of finding their ideal partners there. There is one very specific condition that applies to this marriage is that the proposal shall be accepted when this marriage shall be performed in accordance with the customs of the tribe. In other words, if the girl agrees with the boy's proposal, the two of them will be married in line with the traditions of their tribe. This is a cherished tradition that cannot be changed. The married pair is supposed to seek spiritual guidance from the natural world. The tribal community has strict sanctions for anybody who chooses not to wed after meeting someone they like at the fair. For the last 150 years, the famous Patta Mela has been organized in Maliniya, Purnea, Bihar. Many ancient traditions are seen in this unique fair of tribal. At this fair, where on the one hand, a glimpse of tribal culture is seen; on the other hand, like *Swayamvar*, people of tribal communities from far and wide come here and like boys and girls and also arrange marriages. This fair is keenly anticipated by Shiva enthusiasts and bachelors (News18, 2023)<sup>[15]</sup>. For 150 years, this fair has been conducted each year, and both Shiva and Parvati are worshipped in this. An unusual attraction at the fair is a Shiva devotee who is suspended from a 40-foot bamboo bat. This devotee must complete a 40-foot circumambulation of the earth to prove his devotion. Adoration was allegedly offered to Lord Shiva and Mother Parvati in legendary times for four days during the fair. Sadhakas and devotees are expected to fast for two or three days in accordance with this custom. The devotees of Shiva also put their dedication to the test by committing themselves to their gods while they were tied to a bamboo tower with bamboo bats which served as a test of their devotion (Navbharattimes, 2023; ETV Bharat, 2023)<sup>[14]</sup>.

It has been said that the fair is the conductor of culture. However, gradually the culture of the fair is becoming extinct. But still, there is some unique fair like Patta Mela where a glimpse of tribal culture has been seen. Tribal marriage fest like Patta mela plays a vital role in preserving the cultural heritage of these communities. Through these ceremonies, the younger generations learn about their customs, traditions, and values, ensuring the continuity of their cultural identity. It's important to understand that India is home to many tribal communities, each with its distinct practices. Therefore, marriage customs can vary significantly from one tribal group to another. Unfortunately, with modernization and exposure to mainstream society, some tribal communities have experienced changes in their marriage practices, incorporating elements from the surrounding culture while still holding onto their unique traditions. The encroachment of mainstream culture threatens the authenticity and integrity of tribal fairs and festivals like Patta mela. The appropriation of tribal rituals, music, and art forms without proper understanding dilutes the essence of these events. Due to these issues, this unique festival is slowly losing its cultural significance, and with change in time, the participation of the tribal community is becoming significantly less. Therefore, steps must be taken to protect this artistic expression from misappropriation considering the conservation of intangible heritage in mainstream.

### **Preservation of Patta mela as cultural heritage: challenges and future perspectives**

In the olden times, when people did not have the right to choose their life partner, tribal society has been thinking so far ahead. This tradition is still alive today, and Patta Mela is celebrated to keep this tradition alive. Therefore, Patta mela festival has deep historical roots, often dating back centuries. It encapsulates the customs, beliefs, and mythologies passed down through generations. By participating in this event, tribal communities connect with their ancestral heritage, fostering a sense of belonging and cultural pride. It also catalyzes social cohesion, bringing together community members from different tribes. These events provide opportunities for interaction, exchange of ideas, and fostering social bonds. They also promote harmony and peaceful coexistence among diverse groups. Tribal festivals like Patta mela offer a platform for tribal communities to assert their cultural identity and rightful place within the broader societal framework. These events strengthen the self-esteem of tribal individuals and communities, contributing to their overall empowerment. This festival is closely linked to ecological cycles, agricultural practices, and the worship of natural elements. These events instill a sense of responsibility and respect for the environment.

By preserving these traditions, we encourage sustainable practices and promote ecological conservation. Tribal festivals often celebrate the rich biodiversity of the regions they inhabit. They recognize the significance of various flora and fauna, creating awareness about their conservation. It is essential to remember that tribal societies are diverse, and their customs can change over time due to various factors, including globalization, modernization, and exposure to external influences. As a result, some tribal communities may have adapted certain aspects of contemporary marriage practices while preserving elements of their traditional customs. It is essential to approach discussions about tribal marriage with cultural sensitivity, respect, and an understanding that practices may differ significantly between tribes and regions (Das and Kujur, 2022)<sup>[6]</sup>.

Tribal communities are increasingly facing displacement due to development projects and urbanization. As a result, their traditional festivals and fairs are disrupted, eroding cultural practices. Policies and initiatives must prioritize the protection of tribal lands and ensure their right to practice their cultural traditions (Alam and Kumari, 2017)<sup>[1]</sup>. In-depth documentation of tribal fairs and festivals is essential to understand their cultural significance and historical context. Ethnographic studies, archival research, and oral history collections contribute to preserving this invaluable cultural knowledge. Conservation efforts must actively involve tribal communities, ensuring their active participation in the decision-making processes (Daniel, 2014)<sup>[5]</sup>. Community-driven initiatives and cultural exchanges can foster a sense of ownership and encourage the transmission of cultural practices to future generations. Raising awareness among the wider population about the importance of tribal fairs and festivals necessary and educational programs, cultural exchange programs, and media outreach can help promote understanding and appreciation for tribal cultures. Tribal cultural heritage represents a rich tapestry of diverse traditions, beliefs, customs, languages, arts, and practices passed down through

generations. It reflects indigenous communities' unique identities, knowledge systems, and ways of life worldwide (Zhang *et al.*, 2019<sup>[25]</sup>; Prabhakar *et al.*, 2023<sup>[16]</sup>).

Preserving this heritage ensures the continuation of a diverse and pluralistic world, promoting tolerance, understanding, and respect for different cultures. Indigenous peoples' cultural heritage has deeply intertwined with their sense of identity and self-determination. It encompasses their history, spirituality, relationships with the land, and community cohesion. Preserving tribal cultural heritage empowers indigenous communities to maintain their distinct cultural identities, strengthen their social fabric, and exercise their rights to self-governance and self-expression (Chaudhuri, 2012)<sup>[19]</sup>. Tribal cultural heritage embodies centuries of accumulated knowledge, wisdom, and sustainable practices in various fields such as agriculture, medicine, ecology, and craftsmanship. This knowledge is often closely linked to the natural environment and offers valuable insights into sustainable living, biodiversity conservation, and climate resilience. Tribal cultural heritage provides invaluable educational resources and research opportunities for scholars, anthropologists, historians, and other researchers. It offers insights into ancient civilizations, social structures, art forms, and traditional knowledge systems (Rani and Agarwal, 2019)<sup>[18]</sup>. Preserving this heritage allows for further exploration and documentation, enabling the transmission of knowledge to future generations and contributing to the global understanding of human history and cultural diversity. Many indigenous communities rely on their cultural heritage as a source of income through sustainable tourism initiatives. Indigenous communities can generate economic opportunities by protecting and promoting their cultural practices, arts, crafts, festivals, and traditional lifestyles while maintaining their cultural integrity. This can lead to improved living conditions, empowerment, and community development, contributing to the well-being and self-sufficiency of indigenous peoples (Bhattacharjee, 2021)<sup>[2]</sup>. In summary, saving the tribal cultural heritage like Patta mela is vital for preserving diversity, cultural identity, traditional knowledge, human rights, social justice, educational opportunities, and sustainable development. It recognizes the inherent value of indigenous cultures and contributes to a more inclusive and harmonious world.

### **Conclusion**

Tribal customs are grounded in centuries of accumulated knowledge and wisdom, handed down through generations, allowing them to preserve valuable aspects of their culture and traditions. Tribal fairs and festivals in India are ephemeral events and crucial repositories of indigenous culture, social harmony, and environmental consciousness. Patta mela is one of its own kinds of unique tribal marriage festivals in India. It reflects the identity, sensitivity, respect, rich tribal heritage, and pride of the rich tribal culture of India. By recognizing their significance and implementing conservation strategies, we can ensure the continuation of tribal fairs and festivals, thereby honoring the vibrant cultural heritage of indigenous communities and fostering social cohesion across the nation. Therefore, preserving tribal marriage heritage is necessary for maintaining indigenous communities' cultural identity, social cohesion, and traditional values.

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### Conflict of research interests

The authors declare no conflict of research interests.

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