Voices from the Periphery presents DETAILED SURVEY REPORT ON

A Portrait of Culture, Crisis, and Resilience

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Introduction

Jagdalpur, nestled deep within the tribal heartland of Chhattisgarh, represents a region where tradition and modernity collide daily. Once a flourishing center of the Bastar princely state, today it is home to a mix of tribal and non-tribal populations, predominantly Gonds and other Scheduled Tribes. This survey aimed to understand the lived realities of Jagdalpur's people, especially marginalized groups, through immersive field visits, one-on-one interviews, and group discussions.

Language and Identity

GONDINUNDER SIEGE

Historically, Gondi and Chhattisgarhi have been the linguistic lifelines of the region. However, a major concern identified during the survey was the steady decline in the use of these native languages. A combination of state-led education policies, media consumption, and administrative practices has promoted Hindi as the dominant language, resulting in a significant linguistic shift—what many locals call the "Hindi attack."

In conversation with Sukhdev Madkam, a respected elder from Bastanar, he said, "When I was young, we only spoke Gondi. Now, my grandchildren answer me in Hindi. I feel like my words are becoming invisible."

Teachers in local schools, including Kamala Bai, noted, "We are instructed to use Hindi in classrooms. Some students don't understand properly, but there's pressure to follow state norms."

This trend endangers oral traditions, folklore, and ritualistic vocabulary that are often untranslatable into Hindi. Without serious linguistic preservation efforts, a generation of cultural memory may vanish.

Water Scarcity

THE CRISIS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

One of the most pressing issues affecting Jagdalpur's communities is chronic water scarcity. In many villages, functional hand pumps are limited, and piped water is a distant dream. Women and children walk for kilometers to fetch water —consuming hours of productive time daily.

Sunita Mandavi, a resident of Badekile, shared: "We wake up before sunrise just to get water. If you're late, the hand pump dries up. My daughter misses school often because she has to help."

Local health workers have reported an increase in waterborne diseases, and dehydration is common during summer. Without access to clean water, hygiene, sanitation, and overall public health remain compromised.

Agriculture and Livelihood

BETWEEN HOPE AND HELPLESSNESS

Agriculture is the mainstay for over 60% of the local population. Paddy cultivation dominates the region, supplemented by forest produce like tamarind, mahua, and tendu leaves. However, farming in Jagdalpur is beset by issues such as erratic rainfall, lack of irrigation, poor soil health, and absence of modern equipment.

KEY FINDINGS

71% of farmers surveyed reported they do not receive timely bank loans due to lack of land documents.

58% stated they faced at least one crop failure in the past two years.

43% practice subsistence farming, producing only for their own families.

Interview with Sukhlal Netam, a marginal farmer:

"I applied for a loan three times, but was rejected. They ask for land papers. But this land has been ours for generations—there's no official record."

Tribal farmers without legal titles are excluded from most state welfare schemes. Women farmers face a double burden, often lacking recognition as primary cultivators despite doing most of the work.

Alternative Employment

TOURISM, HANDICRAFTS, AND HOSPITALITY

Though agriculture remains dominant, some residents are turning to tourism and hotel-related jobs in response to farm distress. Jagdalpur's natural beauty, cultural heritage, and festivals like Bastar Dussehra attract tourists, creating opportunities for local guides, artisans, and workers.

Ravi Sori, a hotel receptionist and part-time tribal tour guide, told us: "I earn more during festival seasons. But this job is not regular. During offseason, I go back to farming."

The lack of training and limited formal employment means this sector remains underdeveloped. If properly harnessed, tourism could provide significant livelihood support to tribal youth.

Cultural Continuities

FOOD AND FESTIVITIES

Despite economic challenges, traditional food practices remain resilient. A typical meal includes rice and dal, but seasonal and festive dishes bring out the culinary depth of the region. Common delicacies include:

Chaprah (red ant chutney)

Mahua Iaddus 🔬

Tamavind and mango-based dishes

Bamboo shoot curry

During community festivals, food becomes a collective ritual. However, increasing poverty means many families eat only once or twice a day. Rinku, a school-going boy, shared:

"Sometimes, we just eat rice with salt. But my mother says, 'On Diwali, I'll cook chicken for you." We wait for such days:"

Political Marginalization

A CRY FOR REPRESENTATION

The political landscape is riddled with disappointment. While local elections witness large turnouts, people believe that politicians disappear after votes are cast. Corruption, favoritism, and poor implementation of development schemes were repeatedly cited.

Lalita Gond, a young activist, said:

"We don't want gifts during elections. We want rights—land rights, language rights, water. But who listens?"

There is a deep trust deficit between the local government and the people. Development, when it comes, often fails to address structural issues.

Community Resilience and Recommendations

Amidst adversity, Jagdalpur's communities exhibit remarkable strength. Rituals, songs, collective labor, and oral histories form the bedrock of their identity. However, without state recognition and participatory policies, such traditions face extinction.

Recommendations

LANGUAGE PRESERVATION

Initiate community radio, Gondi-language textbooks, and storytelling programs.

WATER ACCESS

Build rainwater harvesting systems, repair defunct handpumps, and invest in piped supply.

AGRARIAN SUPPORT

Recognize forest dwellers' land rights, provide no-collateral loans, and introduce irrigation schemes.

CULTURAL EMPLOYMENT

Train youth in eco-tourism, tribal handicrafts, and heritage hospitality.

POLITICAL INCLUSION

Establish local grievance redressal platforms and ensure community representation in decision-making.

Conclusion

Jagdalpur is not a "backward area" as often stereotyped, but a land of rich traditions, deep knowledge systems, and resilient people. The challenges here are not due to culture, but due to state neglect and systemic exclusion. As one elder from Lohandiguda concluded,

"We do not want charity. We want justice—with our own voice, in our own language."

The survey reveals not just problems but also the potential for grassroots transformation, if only the nation begins to listen.

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