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# Economic Subsistence and Transition Among the Mankidia Tribe of Mayurbhanj District, Odisha

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**Abstract -** The Mankidia are a semi-nomadic subgroup within the Birhor tribe, recognised as one of the most primitive and least known communities inhabiting the forested regions of India. This small nomadic tribal community is primarily located in the state of Odisha, specifically within the districts of Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Balasore, Jajpur, Deogarh, Sundergarh, and Sambalpur. In Mayurbhanj district, the Mankidia predominantly engage in hunting and foraging, with a notable presence in the ecological zones surrounding the Similipal hills. Their subsistence strategies reflect a profound interaction with the natural environment, which is profoundly shaped by the geographical and cultural contexts of their habitation. Traditionally, the Mankidia relied on the forest as their primary habitat, with their economic activities heavily centred around the utilisation of forest products. These products were often consumed directly or prepared for sale in nearby markets. Among their various occupations, rope-making emerged as a key economic activity, wherein the Mankidia crafted ropes from *siali* fibres for sale in regional markets. The enactment of regulations prohibiting access to deep forest areas within the Similipal Tiger Reserve significantly impacted their traditional economic activities, hindering their ability to procure *siali* creepers, which are essential for rope production. Additionally, the Mankidia have historically experienced a degree of isolation from mainstream society, rendering their survival increasingly precarious in the absence of the forest. Currently, the Mankidia reside in small communities on the forest's periphery and are beginning to establish connections with mainstream societies, where they have adapted to alternative occupations. This research examines their traditional economic activities, the modern occupations they currently pursue, and the effects of modernity, globalisation, and integration with mainstream society on the evolution of their economic lives. Thus, the central theme of this study is a comprehensive analysis of the Mankidia's economic life across various historical contexts.

**Keywords:** *Mankidia (Mankirdia), PVTGs, Mayurbhanj, Siali, Tribal Economy, Similipal Tiger Reserve, Rope Making*

## I. THE MANKIDIA

The Mankidia are a semi-nomadic subgroup of the Birhor tribe, distinguished by their unique way of life that revolves around the rich, forested landscapes of India. This community is recognised as one of the most primitive and lesser-known ethnic groups, relying on their deep knowledge of the forest for sustenance and survival while adapting to the challenges of their environment. According to the 2011 census, the Mankidia population comprises 2,222 individuals, including 1,144 males and 1,078 females, resulting in a sex ratio of 942 females per 1,000 males (Census of India Website: Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India). The literacy rate within this community is notably low, recorded at 21.14% (A. B. Ota et al., 2018, p. 95).

Geographically, the Mankidia are referred to by various names in different regions; for instance, in the districts of Kalahandi and Sundergarh, they are called 'Mankidi,' while the term 'Mankirdia' is used in Mayurbhanj and Sambalpur. This varied nomenclature reflects their traditional specialisation in trapping and consuming monkeys, a skill sought to mitigate the adverse effects of monkey populations on agricultural productivity.

Linguistically, the Mankidia primarily communicate in a dialect belonging to the Munda language family, although some community members are conversant in Odia. Their lifestyle is characterised by mobility; they traverse forested landscapes in small groups and establish temporary settlements known as *tandas*. These encampments typically consist of dome-shaped huts, locally known as *kumbh*, constructed from natural materials (Fig. 1). They possess extensive ecological knowledge and maintain a cyclical relationship with their environment, wherein they extract raw materials, produce goods, and engage in commerce at local markets.

Their settlement patterns are influenced by factors such as proximity to water sources, the location of weekly



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markets, and the availability of raw materials such as *siali* fibres, *sabai* grass, jute, and monkeys.

The revocation of their habitat rights within the core area of the Similipal Tiger Reserve (STR) was carried out under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act of 2006. The State Forest Department opposed their claims to habitat rights, citing concerns that wild animals, particularly tigers, could pose a risk to tribal members. Consequently, the Mankidia were compelled to relocate to the peripheries of the jungle, transitioning from a nomadic lifestyle to a more settled existence. Following the designation of the area as a biosphere reserve, governmental initiatives have aimed at relocating tribal communities from their ancestral habitats to mitigate anthropogenic pressures and reduce human-wildlife conflict.

This displacement has resulted in significant distances between forests and their newly established settlements, with the average distance to viable forest resources estimated at 2-3 kilometres for other Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). Previously engaged in the production of ropes and household commodities from *siali* creepers, the resettlement has constrained their access to jungle resources, thereby limiting their capacity to procure materials for traditional crafts. The fear of venturing into the jungle has further inhibited their opportunities to gather raw materials. Nonetheless, dependence on forest resources remains evident; typically, male members of the community seek employment far afield, while females engage in economic activities nearer to their residences.

Non-tribal food habits have increasingly influenced dietary practices within the Mankidia community. In response to their resettlement, the government has implemented various welfare initiatives to support the Mankidia, facilitating their access to essential resources and programs that enhance their livelihoods.

However, on September 22, 2024, the Mankidia received recognition of their forest habitat rights, with permissions granted for the utilisation of limited forest products (Down to Earth, FRA Implementation, September 24, 2024).

With the restoration of these rights, the Mankidia can once again access the Similipal Tiger Reserve to gather forest products essential for their economic sustenance and daily

dietary needs, including *siali* creepers, fuelwood, roots, fruits, leaves, herbs, honey, and more.

## II. GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION

The Mankidia community is primarily located in the eastern Indian states of Odisha, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra. In Odisha, the Mankidia are represented by small nomadic groups predominantly found within the districts of Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Balasore, Jajpur, Deogarh, Sundergarh, and Sambalpur.

Focusing on Mayurbhanj district—geographically defined by coordinates ranging from 85°40' to 87°10' East longitude and 21°17' to 22°34' North latitude (Lenin Mohanty, Dec. 2010, p. 155)—it is bordered to the north by Jharkhand, to the south by Balasore district, to the east by West Bengal, and to the west by Keonjhar district within Odisha.

The Mankidia in Mayurbhanj engage predominantly in hunting and food-gathering, particularly in the ecological zones surrounding the Similipal hills. Their subsistence activities are indicative of a profound interaction with their natural environment, intricately shaped by the geographical and cultural contexts of their habitation. This relationship not only underscores the community's adaptability to their surroundings but also highlights the significance of traditional ecological knowledge in sustaining their way of life.

## III. METHODOLOGY

### *Uthani Sahi: The Studied Village*

The Mankidia colony, situated in Uthanisahi village within the Kapatipada block of the Mayurbhanj district, serves as the primary sampling unit for this research. Uthanisahi, a tribal village in Odisha (21°33'52.47"N; 86°27'57.01"E), lies within Hill Block No. 171 and is geographically delineated by Sarbanaghaty and Nandursahi villages to the east, Talapadia Samil Jiatikar to the west, and Dadagasahi, along with Jayantipatta Samil Jamudiha to the north.

The Sarbanaghaty Hill marks the southern boundary blocks No. 172 and 173. Notably, the Thakurmunda-Udala road bifurcates the area, with the northernmost section predominantly comprised of agricultural land, whereas the



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southern expanse constitutes the periphery of Hill Block No. 171, characterised by dense forestation. This village is the focal point of the Mankidia population, with the Similipal Tiger Reserve Forest located less than 4 kilometres to the west of the colony (Map 1).

Historically, the Mankidias resided within this forest. However, following their designation as a World Network of Biosphere Reserves in May 2009, new forest legislation was enacted that precluded their continued settlement in the forested areas. Consequently, the government established several rehabilitation colonies adjacent to the forest, including Uthanisahi.

### ***Sampling and Identification***

This research employs purposive sampling, enabling the targeted selection of individuals who can yield significant insights into the Mankidia tribal community. An intensive case study approach was adopted to delve into the life histories of the Mankidia people, thereby facilitating the collection of qualitative data on this specific population. The Mankidia colony studied comprises 72 households, all of which are included in the research framework. Respondents were selected from each household to ensure a comprehensive representation of the community. Data collection was conducted through informal interviews, utilising open-ended and unstructured questionnaires.

### ***Study Design and Settings***

This study employs a qualitative research design, incorporating various methods such as interviews, case studies, and focus group discussions. Data analysis is conducted descriptively, with inferential analysis applied to explore specific cases and historical experiences. Through the application of a life history approach, this research aims to elucidate the Mankidia community's economic perceptions, daily economic practices, financial needs and expenditures, modes of livelihood, the impact of habitat relocation, and the influence of modernity on their economic lifestyles, all while aligning with the existing socio-economic model within the community.

## **IV. ECONOMY**

Economic primitiveness has a profound impact on Mankidia's way of life. For forest-dwelling and hunter-gatherer communities, their socio-economic status relies heavily on daily activities such as exploring the jungle to

gather raw materials for their crafts, collecting leaves, fruits, roots, and hunting small wild animals and birds to meet their dietary needs. Unfortunately, these activities often do not yield sufficient income to satisfy their daily financial requirements. Moreover, profit margins on selling items such as ropes in local markets are extremely low, leading to significant financial hardship.

In response to these challenges, the Union Cabinet has approved a new methodology for identifying households eligible for the Below Poverty Line (BPL) list, setting the income threshold for qualification at approximately Rs. 27,000 annually (The Hindu, August 18 2016). This innovative approach benefits the Mankidia community by improving access to food subsidies through the public distribution system, ensuring that families listed as BPL can obtain essential food items.

### ***Agriculture***

Traditionally, the Mankidia tribe has lived a semi-nomadic lifestyle as hunter-gatherers in the depths of the jungle. Agriculture was not originally a part of their existence; however, relocating away from the jungle has transformed their economic and occupational circumstances. Today, some Mankidia individuals own land, and a limited scale of agricultural activities has emerged within the community. This agricultural land is quite small, typically consisting of their homes and a modest courtyard at the front, which is bordered by bushes and ropes. This courtyard functions as their kitchen garden (Fig. 2), where they cultivate seasonal vegetables and a few fruit trees, such as bananas and guavas.

Additionally, some individuals work as agricultural labourers on farms owned by other communities. They predominantly migrate to neighbouring villages to earn wages in paddy fields. Both men and women actively participate in collecting nuts from surrounding areas and engage in seasonal agricultural tasks.

### ***Animal Husbandry, Labour, and Driver***

The Mankidia community is involved in the domestication of animals such as goats, poultry, and pigs to improve their food supply and income. Many members work as labourers across various sectors, including industry, construction, and prawn processing. Additionally,



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numerous young individuals have taken on roles in commercial driving, particularly as tractor drivers. These various occupations serve as important sources of income for the community.

### *Handicrafts as Economic Ventures*

This study reveals that members of the Mankidia community participate in a wide range of activities to sustain their livelihoods. They craft household items and tools from *sabai* grass (Fig. 4) and continue their traditional practice of rope-making with *siali* creepers (Fig. 3), alongside modern alternatives such as plastic threads derived from cement bags (Fig. 5). Furthermore, they weave mats from date palm fibres for personal use (Fig. 6). The various craft activities provide limited economic advantages, yet they are insufficient to meet the broader financial needs of the individuals involved.

### *Forest as a Source of Economy and Daily Life*

The Mankidia tribe has historically depended on the forest as its primary habitat, with its economic activities predominantly focused on utilising forest resources. However, recent policy changes have led to the abolition of their forest dwelling and imposed restrictions on access to deeper forest areas, culminating in a ban on the extraction of forest products. As a result, the community faces significant challenges in sourcing these materials, although they have managed to gather forest products from the fringes of the Similipal Forest. The collected products are often consumed directly by the community or prepared for sale in local markets.

Rope-making has emerged as the principal occupation of the Mankidia, who skilfully craft ropes from fibres of the *siali* creeper. The collection of this creeper remains dependent on the forest ecosystem, allowing artisans to transform these natural materials into various household tools, including *sika* (sling) and ropes, which local farmers frequently utilise for agricultural and domestic purposes.

Rope-making is a foundational component of the Mankidia community's subsistence economy. Artisans proficiently extract high-quality fibres by cutting and peeling the bark of mature *siali* fibres (Fig. 3). This process typically occurs in outdoor workshops situated in front of their residences or beneath large trees. The processing of *siali* fibres involves tearing them into assorted sizes, followed by twisting and braiding to create

a diverse array of finished products, including ropes, slings, nets, bags, and small baskets, colloquially known as *topa*. One of the traditional applications of these products is for oil extraction, achieved through an indigenous method in which oil seeds are placed between two wooden planks and pressed by members of the tribal community to yield oil. Notable products produced include *sika* (sling), *pagha* (halter for cattle), *chheli pagha* (halter for goats), *jaunli* (rope used during harvest), *barjao* (rope for drawing water), and *panda chhati* (halter for buffalo) (Ota & Mohanty, 2015).

During fieldwork in the studied village, I observed the Mankidia engaged in their traditional craft of rope-making using cement bags (Fig. 5). The artisans procure these bags and diligently extract the threads to produce ropes intended for use in cattle sheds, which are subsequently sold in local markets. However, the transition from traditionally sourced materials to purchased raw materials has adversely affected their profit margins, as they now incur acquisition costs rather than benefiting from free access to forest resources. Additionally, apprehensions regarding potential repercussions from forest officers deter them from venturing into deeper forest areas to gather essential materials, thereby undermining their capacity to sustain this important traditional practice.

### *A Source of Herbal Medicine*

The Mankidia community relies heavily on forest ecosystems, which serve as an invaluable source of herbal medicine. Adherents to traditional practices employ these natural remedies to fulfil their healthcare needs. The forest operates as a crucial reservoir of medicinal plants, significantly influencing the health and well-being of this tribal population. Research conducted by Brahma and Mudgal indicates that the Mankidia, residing in geographically isolated villages, rely heavily on wild fruits, roots, and leaves for their nutritional needs. This community exhibits a deep-rooted faith in traditional medicine and local healers, often choosing not to disclose their health issues to outsiders because they fear such revelations may disrupt their established lifestyles and belief systems. Moreover, the Mankidia possess extensive ethnomedical knowledge of local flora, which is integral to their healthcare practices.

### *A Source of the Daily Diet and Beverage*



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The forest is essential to the Mankidia people's daily lives, providing a diverse range of food and beverages. Leveraging knowledge transmitted through generations, they adeptly gather firewood necessary for cooking and collect a variety of leaves and twigs that serve practical purposes in oral hygiene and cultural rituals. As they traverse the verdant undergrowth, they forage for naturally sweet honey concealed in tree hollows, as well as a vibrant assortment of berries and fruits that enhance both their nutrition and culinary enjoyment. Their acute observational skills facilitate the identification of diverse leaves, mushrooms, and other flora, with certain varieties recognised for their culinary and traditional medicinal significance. This ritual of gathering not only nourishes their bodies but also strengthens their connection to the land and cultural heritage.

### ***A Source of House-Building Materials***

The Mankidia inhabit regions adjacent to dense forests and skilfully source materials from them to build their homes. They primarily use robust timber for construction, meticulously selecting materials that can withstand local environmental conditions. Branches and colourful leaves are ingeniously woven into their building practices, contributing both practicality and aesthetic appeal to their structures. Among their architectural forms are the distinctive kumbha, or leaf huts, which seamlessly integrate with the natural environment. Observational accounts frequently highlight Mankidia individuals diligently gathering fallen wood and other natural resources from the forest, exemplifying their commitment to crafting residences that honour their connection to the land.

### ***A Source of Firewood Fuel***

The Mankidia use a traditional cooking stove, a chullah, for meal preparation. This rudimentary stove, typically made of clay or stone, accommodates open flames, facilitating effective cooking. The community's daily routine prominently includes collecting firewood from the forest, which is pivotal for their cooking needs. Each morning, community members gather twigs, branches,

and other combustible materials deemed suitable for meal preparation. This gathering activity not only fulfils essential cooking requirements but also reinforces their relationship with the forest, as local environmental knowledge guides the identification of appropriate materials. Once sufficient firewood is collected, it is arranged within the chullah, and a fire is ignited, providing warmth and light. The resulting flames accompany the preparation of meals largely composed of locally sourced ingredients, including vegetables, grains, and, on occasion, meat.

### ***A Source of Handicrafts Industries***

The forest plays a crucial role in sustaining the handicraft industries of the Mankidia tribe, providing a diverse array of raw materials essential to their traditional craft practices. The Mankidia are skilled at extracting and utilising natural resources from their environment, enabling them to create handmade products that are integral to both their daily lives and cultural expressions. A significant material employed by the Mankidia is the *siali* creeper, a climbing plant abundant within their forest habitat. This resource is harvested and processed to produce robust and durable ropes. The tribe has honed the techniques of twisting and weaving fibres from *siali* creepers, resulting in ropes with practical applications, including securing goods and crafting tools.

In addition to ropes, the Mankidia manufacture mats from date palm leaves (Fig. 6). Their reliance on forest resources for these raw materials underscores their deep-rooted connection to nature and their commitment to traditional craftsmanship. Each handmade item crafted by the Mankidia exemplifies their expertise and knowledge, reinforcing the continuity of their cultural heritage.

### ***Source of Non-Vegetarian Diets***

From an ecological perspective, the Mankidia community exemplifies a traditional hunting-gathering lifestyle, dedicating considerable time to navigating the forest in search of sustenance. Their profound understanding of the forest ecosystem enables them to hunt a variety of animals proficiently, including monkeys, birds, squirrels, and rabbits. While traversing the jungle, they remain astutely



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vigilant, attuned to the movements and sounds of wildlife. Hunting serves as a fundamental aspect of their subsistence strategy, employing simple yet effective tools such as handmade traps, bows, and arrows to capture prey. These hunting expeditions typically take place during the early morning or late afternoon, which aligns with peak periods of animal activity.

Moreover, hunting is deeply embedded in the Mankidia's cultural identity, representing an ancestral practice transmitted across generations. Their inherent respect for the forest fosters a sustainable approach to hunting, in which they acquire essential resources for survival while maintaining a delicate balance with the natural environment that sustains them.

### V. OCCUPATION

The Mankidia community engages in a variety of occupational endeavours, prominently including rope making, which serves both agricultural and domestic purposes for local farmers. Additionally, the community produces *tupa*, small baskets crafted from *siali* fibres, which are vital for oil pressing. The collection of *siali* fibres is heavily dependent on access to forest resources; however, recent government-imposed restrictions have significantly obstructed their ability to gather these essential materials, consequently complicating their rope production activities. To counter this challenge, the Mankidia community has resorted to using threads from discarded plastic cement bags, which cost five rupees. This adaptation allows the production of ropes marketed at between ten and twenty rupees. Nevertheless, this shift has led to lower profitability than under their traditional practices.

In an effort to enhance their livelihoods, members of the Mankidia community have diversified their economic activities to include the crafting of household items from *sabai* grass, agricultural labour, construction work, and, for some individuals, truck driving.

Engaging in multiple economic ventures facilitates greater interaction with mainstream society, thereby fostering greater awareness of available governmental resources. It is important to note that a significant portion of this community remains illiterate, which renders them

susceptible to exploitation by contractors and other entities.

Within the studied village, the Mankidia population predominantly exists below the poverty line. Out of seventy-two households, fifty are engaged in various labour-intensive occupations, while twenty serve as tractor drivers, earning approximately 250 rupees per day. Employment opportunities tend to be inconsistent, averaging 12 to 15 days per month, translating into a monthly income of 3,000 to 4,000 rupees. While they occasionally participate in agricultural work and labour in neighbouring villages, on days without employment, many remain at home. Some women in the community have voiced the financial difficulties they face in their daily lives. Approximately 20 households are headed by elderly individuals who have become estranged from their sons and whose livelihoods hinge primarily on traditional rope-making practices.

The occupations within the Mankidia community can be categorised into traditional and contemporary segments. Traditional professions include monkey catching, the collection of forest products, and rope making, while modern roles encompass labour in agriculture, industrial work, daily wage positions, and vehicle operation.

#### ***Monkey Catching***

The Mankidias are adept at monkey catching, employing large nets made from *siali* fibres. In addition to monkeys, they capture a variety of wildlife, including birds, squirrels, hares, deer, and other animals, utilising traps and nets as their primary tools.

#### ***Rope Making and Handicrafts***

This study has intentionally documented the rope-making process utilising *siali* creepers to illustrate the traditional occupational structure. The image depicts an individual drying the creepers in preparation for rope production.

This raw material is integral to crafting ropes used in domestic applications, such as *sika* (a farm implement) and halters for cows, goats, and other livestock, known as *pagha* in Odiya. However, restrictions on access to deeper forest areas have severely reduced the availability of *siali* creepers, leading to a reliance on plastic cement bags as a substitute. This shift is concerning because it signals a



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transition from traditional raw materials to a less sustainable alternative.

### *Labor Work*

In addition to their traditional roles, which are insufficient to sustain their livelihoods, the Mankidia s have adopted a variety of occupations across different sectors, primarily as labourers in agricultural, industrial, and wage-based positions, as well as commercial vehicle drivers.

### VI. CONCLUSION

The Mankidia tribe is recognised as a Primitive Tribe and categorised as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG). This classification underscores their unique socio-economic challenges and cultural heritage. Historically, the Mankidia people have been forest dwellers, relying heavily on the abundant natural resources of their environment. Their primary economic activities are centred around the collection of *siali* and other creepers, which they intricately weave into ropes and other essential domestic products. This traditional craftsmanship reflects a profound understanding of their ecological surroundings.

As hunter-gatherers, the economic viability of the Mankidia is intrinsically linked to their daily engagement with the forest ecosystem. Their activities include extensive foraging for raw materials used in their crafts, as well as the collection of a diverse array of natural resources, such as leaves, fruits, and roots. Additionally, they hunt small wild animals and birds to meet their dietary requirements. Despite their commitment and resourcefulness, the income from selling their handmade ropes in local markets remains alarmingly low, resulting in substantial financial precarity.

One notable aspect of their subsistence strategy is their expertise in trapping and consuming monkeys, a practice that not only provides nutritional sustenance but also serves a vital ecological function by mitigating the negative impacts of monkey populations on local agricultural practices. However, despite this specialised skill set, the Mankidia continue to experience significant socio-economic adversity.

Empirical research indicates that the Mankidia tribe's economic condition is severely deficient, leading to a multitude of interrelated challenges that adversely affect

their overall quality of life. Many members experience inadequate access to nutritionally sufficient food, yielding detrimental dietary outcomes. Furthermore, their living conditions are characterised by substandard housing, insufficient clothing for protection against environmental elements, markedly limited educational opportunities, and inadequate healthcare provision. These factors contribute to a precarious existence, rendering the tribe vulnerable to a range of health issues.

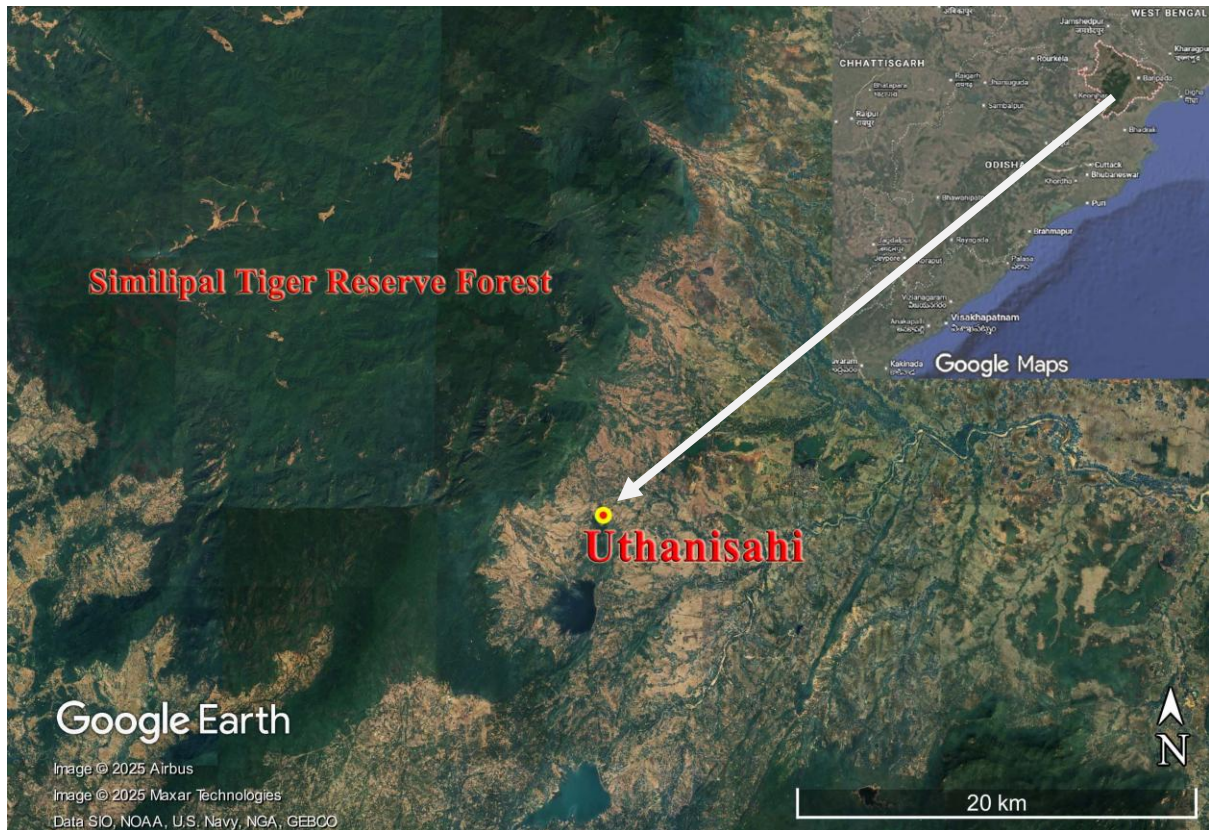
In conclusion, the situation of the Mankidia tribe underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions to enhance their economic stability, ensure the provision of basic necessities, and safeguard their cultural identity. This multifaceted approach is essential for fostering sustainable development while respecting their traditional ways of life.

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Courtesy: Google Earth and Google Maps



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



**Fig. 3**



**Fig. 4**



**Fig. 5**



**Fig. 6**