

Tribes of West Bengal, Name List, Regions, Culture, History

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West Bengal has 40 constitutionally notified Scheduled Tribes (STs), with a population of 52.97 lakh, accounting for about 5.8% of the State's population as per Census 2011. Major tribes include **Santhal , Oraon, Munda, Bhumij, Kora, Lodha, Toto, Birhor, Sabar, Rabha, Lepcha, Bhutia, Mahali and Bedia**. **Toto, Birhor and Lodha** are the three PVTGs of the State.

Major Tribal Regions of West Bengal

- **Jangalmahal:** Purulia, Bankura, Jhargram and parts of Paschim Medinipur have a high concentration of Santhal , Munda, Bhumij, Kora, Lodha, Sabar and Mahali communities.
- **Dooars and North Bengal:** Oraon and Rabha are prominent, particularly in the tea-garden belt of Jalpaiguri and adjoining areas.
- **Darjeeling-Kalimpong Hills:** Lepcha and Bhutia are the major Himalayan tribal communities.
- **Alipurduar:** Toto, one of the smallest and most vulnerable tribal communities, is concentrated mainly in Totopara.

Major Tribes of West Bengal

Major tribes include **Santhal , Oraon, Munda, Bhumij, Kora, Lodha, Toto, Birhor, Sabar, Rabha, Lepcha, Bhutia, Mahali and Bedia, Toto, Birhor and Lodha etc**

Santhal

Santhal is the **largest Scheduled Tribe of West Bengal** and one of the most important tribal communities of eastern India.

- **Distribution:** Mainly Purulia, Bankura, Jhargram and Paschim Medinipur, with a presence in parts of North Bengal.
- **Language:** Santhali, an Austroasiatic language, written in the Ol Chiki script developed by Pandit Raghunath Murmu.
- **Constitutional status:** Santhali was included in the **Eighth Schedule** through the 92nd Constitutional Amendment Act, 2003.
- **Culture:** Traditional religious practices emphasise nature worship and sacred groves known as Jaher.
- **Historical significance:** The Santhal Hul of 1855-56, led by Sidhu, Kanhu, Chand and Bhairav Murmu, was a major tribal resistance against colonial exploitation.

Oraon

The Oraon are a major tribal community of North Bengal, particularly the Dooars and tea-garden belt.

- **Distribution:** Mainly Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar and adjoining areas, with settlements in parts of southern West Bengal.
- **Language:** Kurukh, belonging to the Dravidian language family.
- **Livelihood:** Agriculture and tea-garden labour are important sources of livelihood.
- **Culture:** Sarhul and Karma are important festivals associated with nature, agriculture and community life.

Munda

The Munda are an important Austroasiatic-speaking tribal community found mainly in western and southern West Bengal and the tea-garden belt.

- **Language:** Mundari, an Austroasiatic language.
- **Traditional organisation:** The Munda-Manki system formed part of their traditional village-level organisation.
- **Belief system:** Nature worship is central, with Singbonga occupying an important place in traditional beliefs.
- **Livelihood:** Agriculture, wage labour and forest-based activities are significant.

Bhumij

The Bhumij are concentrated mainly in the Jangalmahal region and have close historical and cultural links with the Munda group.

- **Distribution:** Mainly Purulia, Bankura, Jhargram and Paschim Medinipur.
- **Livelihood:** Agriculture and forest-based activities.
- **Historical significance:** The Bhumij Revolt of 1832 was directed against colonial land and revenue policies.
- **Culture:** Traditional practices include worship of Sing Bonga and local deities.

Kora

Kora is a relatively less-known but significant tribal community of western and central West Bengal.

- **Distribution:** Bankura, Birbhum, Purulia, Paschim Medinipur, Hooghly and Bardhaman.
- **Traditional occupation:** Earthwork, including soil digging, tank construction and road building.
- **Livelihood:** Agriculture, agricultural labour and wage employment are increasingly important.

The community has historical links with the wider Munda tribal group.

PVTGs of West Bengal

West Bengal has **three Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs)**: Toto, Birhor and Lodha. Their small populations and socio-economic vulnerabilities make them particularly important for targeted tribal-development policies.

Toto

Toto is one of the smallest tribal communities in India and is concentrated mainly in Totopara of Alipurduar district.

- The community has a distinctive Tibeto-Burman linguistic and cultural identity.
- Historically, the Totos depended on agriculture, livestock and local natural resources.
- Their small population makes demographic security, healthcare, education and cultural preservation key concerns.

Birhor

Birhor is a small, traditionally semi-nomadic and forest-dependent PVTG found mainly in Purulia.

- Traditional livelihoods included rope-making from forest fibres, forest collection and hunting.
- Their vulnerability is linked to a small population, limited livelihood opportunities and dependence on natural resources.

Lodha

Lodha is a forest-dependent PVTG concentrated mainly in Paschim Medinipur and Jhargram.

- Traditional livelihoods were closely connected with forest resources.

- The community was affected by the colonial **Criminal Tribes Act, 1871**, resulting in long-term social stigma.
- Although the Act was repealed in 1952, socio-economic marginalisation remains an important concern.

Other Important Tribal Communities

The tribal landscape of West Bengal extends beyond the major groups and PVTGs.

- **Sabar/Savar:** Found mainly in Purulia, Bankura, Jhargram and Paschim Medinipur; traditionally dependent on forests and forest-based livelihoods.
- **Rabha:** Concentrated in the Dooars, particularly Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar; traditionally known for elements of matrilineal social organisation and the Baikho festival.
- **Lepcha:** A major Himalayan tribal community of Darjeeling and Kalimpong, with a strong cultural relationship with mountains, forests and nature.
- **Bhutia:** A Himalayan community with Tibetan origins, strongly influenced by Buddhist traditions and historically associated with the Darjeeling region.
- **Mahali:** Traditionally associated with bamboo and cane craftsmanship, especially basket and mat making.
- **Bedia:** A smaller tribal community concentrated largely in the southwestern parts of the State, with agriculture and wage employment becoming important livelihoods.

Tribal Movements and Historical Significance

West Bengal has an important place in the history of tribal resistance to colonial rule.

- **Santhal Hul (1855-56):** A major uprising against moneylenders, zamindars and colonial administrative structures in the Santhal region.
- **Bhumij Revolt (1832):** Resistance against colonial revenue and land policies in the Jungle Mahals.

These movements highlight the centrality of land, forests, livelihood security and autonomy in tribal resistance.

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