

MALHAR

A young woman with dark hair, a bindi, and a nose ring is the central focus. She is wearing a vibrant green sari with a large yellow and red floral motif and a geometric pattern. The background shows a rural village with several huts made of mud and thatched roofs. A dirt path leads through the village, and other people can be seen in the distance. The overall scene is bright and sunny.

Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Research and Training Institute
(SCSTRTI), C.R.P. Square, Bhubaneswar-751003

2015

FOREWORD

The Malhar are a semi nomadic Kolharian tribe of Odisha. They are also found in Thane district of Maharashtra where they enjoy ST status as Koli and Malhar. In the Scheduled Tribe list of Odisha, Malhar has been enlisted being clubbed together with Koli at Sl.36 as 'Koli, Malhar'. But Koli and Malhar are two separate communities and bears apparently no regional or ethnic affinity. The Malhar are a numerically minor community distributed in Sambalpur, Dhenkanal and Keonjhar districts of Odisha. They are bilingual and are well versed with the local tongues, Odia and Sadri. They use the Odia script for inter group communication.

The Malhars live a life of hunters and food gatherers as mainstay of their subsistence which they supplement with allied pursuits like wage earning, seasonal forest collection, fishing and livestock rearing. They profess their autonomous tribal religion based on 'animism' which is amalgamated with few elements of Hinduism. Their pantheon also includes a number of deities. Their traditional priest Patiar worships the deities.

They possess their own traditional community council (*jati panchayat*) both at village as well as at regional level. The council adjudicates cases pertaining to family disputes, partition of family property among sons, theft, rape, adultery, incest and arrangements for village level rituals and festivals. The office bearers i.e., Pradhan, Malik, Gosain and Patiar succeed to their seat on hereditary basis where as the messenger Dakua is appointed through nomination and is paid remuneration for his service annually. Their traditional community council acts as the custodian of their traditional norms and customs and the office bearers are respected in their society. The council is empowered to award punishment to offenders and can excommunicate the culprits on extreme cases. Now the educated Malhar youths of present generation have become very much conscious of their democratic rights and responsibilities.

I extend my sincere thanks to Dr. A.B Ota, IAS, Director, Shri S.C. Mohanty, OSD (R) and Shri B.K. Paikray, Research Assistant (retd.) who have laboriously conceived, and produced this colourful Photo Hand Book.

I hope this book would be immensely helpful for the researchers and the general readers as well.

Commissioner-cum-Secretary to Government
ST & SC Development Department
Govt. of Odisha

MALHAR



A.B. Ota
S.C. Mohanty
B.K. Paikray

Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Research and Training Institute
(SCSTRTI), C.R.P. Square, Bhubaneswar-751003

2015



IDENTITY

The Malhar are a semi nomadic Kolharian tribe of Odisha. They are also found in Thane district of Maharashtra State where they enjoy ST status. In the Scheduled Tribe list of Odisha they have been enlisted with another community Koli at Sl.36 whereas, Koli and Malhar are two separate communities and bears apparently no regional or ethnic affinity. Being listed under one serial, they are jointly enumerated by the census for which the

individual population figure of Malhar Tribe in Odisha is not available. The Malhar are numerically a minor community and are distributed in Sambalpur, Dhenkanal and Keonjhar districts of Odisha.

The Malhars are named after their deity *Malharideo* and are also called *Panbhari*, which means water carrier. But in Thane Gazetteer p.173, it is stated; Malhar, the name has been probably derived from the Dravidian word *Mala* meaning hill. But early





ethnographer, Sir Risley (1891) in his literature "Tribes and Caste of Bengal" (Vol-II, P.51), described Malar as a sept of Mundas and Ghasis of Chhotanagpur. The actual name of the tribe appears to be "Mal and Maler" and according to Lieutenant Shaw, the name of the tribe Malar is the third person plural of the name Mal and Maler.

About the origin of Malhars, Dalton opined, "According to their legend, in ancient age when man race was first created, only seven brothers were created who were food gatherers and were vegetarians in their habit but the seventh brother was born sick and unable to travel distant places when edible fruits and tubers in one place of their habitat become scarce, but he managed food by killing animals which were then abundant in the locality; for which the elder brothers out casted him and left and he after his marriage to a woman established in isolated hill area. From him, many

children were born and in due course of time, their number raised and during Aryan people invaded the area, they were divided into two groups of which one section moved towards Rajmahal hill, the other seek the high lands as their place of refuge. They dwell also in West Bengal where they are referred to as *dhokra* or *dokra* since they are an artisan group and are engaged in making tinkering bells (*ghungur*) and measuring pots for grains such as *pai* and *pua* in brass metal and many other *dokra* items such as deer, peacock, other animals with *Lakshmi* and images of Gods and Goddesses."

Malhars in Odisha identify themselves as Malhar or as Jara Sabar to glorify their identity but others call them as *madhu walla* or *mallya*. The term *madhu walla* has been derived from the word *madhu* meaning honey and *walla* meaning the person who professes its trading. They speak their own mother tongue, a non literacy dialect, interrelated

genetically and structurally with proto Munda group of languages and schematically classified as Northern Munda family of Languages. They are bi-lingual and are well versed with the local tongue Odia and Sadri and also use the Odia script for inter group communication. Malhar use Dehuri, Pradhan, Malik, Laru, Bahera, Baru, Sabar, Naua and Patiar as their surname.

Personal adornments

During early days, their dress pattern was in primordial stage due to their isolation and ignorance during their food gathering state. At that time males wear only a loincloth (*langoti*), a short piece of worn out cloth to conceal their pubic regions and females wear a short piece of coarse old cloth which had not been washed days together, around their waist which covered their waist to knee only leaving the upper portion completely bare. The males of well to do family sometimes wear sleeveless shirts (*bandee*). Little children up to seven years of age go completely naked.

At present due to the process of acculturation with the modern



civilization, their dress pattern has been greatly influenced by the trend of modernity. Now their males wear pants, *dhoti*, *lungi*, shirts, banyan etc and females wear coloured and printed *saree*, *saya* and blouse etc. Women love to adorn themselves with varieties of ornaments in order to enhance their beauty.

Malhar women wear varieties of coloured, glass, iron and brass bangles i.e., *bangadya* /*patalya* on their wrist, beautiful designed bead necklaces on their neck such as *garsoli*, *barmal* and *putali* etc, aluminum *tada* and armllets like *kade*, *pabachi* on their arms, *bandaria* on their wrist, *goda mudi* (*tode*) on their legs' fingers, imitation ornaments such as necklaces like *cargota*, *cartoda*, bangles and earrings, nose stud, *fuli*, finger ring (*anguthi*) etc on their neck, wrist and earlobes, nose helix and fingers respectively. They decorate their buns with wild

blossoms and coloured ribbons to beautify themselves. Malhar women bear tattoo on their arms and legs with different pattern of beautiful emblems done by experienced women belonging to their own community in order to enhance their beauty. At present tattooing is regarded as an old fashion by the younger generation.

Population & Distribution:

The tribe is mainly distributed in Sambalpur, Dhenkhal, Keonjhar districts and its adjoining areas in Odisha and in Thane district of Maharashtra and Medinapur district in West Bengal. As per 2011 census their population in Odisha along with Koli community is 6423 out of which male population is 3268 and female is 3155. The sex ratio is 965. Their total literacy rate is 57.57% out of which male literacy is 65.27% and female literacy is 49.56%.



HABITAT, SETTLEMENT & HOUSING

Malhar habitat is located amidst picturesque topography with amazing landscapes surrounded by deep forest, hill terrain or hill slope having the climatic condition of medium humidity and rainfall. They settle near the perennial hill streams which provide them drinking water throughout the year.

Malhar settlements are always homogeneous and are located near foot hills or hill slopes amidst deep forest where the perennial hill streams are flowing from which they can fetch their drinking water throughout the year. In heterogeneous settlements they always dwell in separate wards maintaining distance with other ethnics, keeping their own identity in tact. As they are nomadic in nature, they do not settle in one place permanently and shift from one forest area to another in search of forest produce and honey.







Malhar houses are arranged in linear pattern leaving space as Village Street. Individual houses are usually made with wattle of tree branches and bamboos and plastered with mud and are polished by females using cow dung paste.

Their houses are generally of one room with a small verandah where they invariably cook food for the family. They possess few household assets such as aluminum dishes like plates, cups, jugs to fetch water, mug, pots for cooking food and a tumbler and their hunting weapon bows and arrows etc. They only rear goats and fowls for their own consumption purpose as well as to be sacrificed during magico-religious functions.





LIVELIHOOD

The Malhar are nomadic in nature and live a life of hunter and food gatherer as mainstay of their subsistence which they supplement with allied pursuits like wage earning, seasonal forest collection, fishing and livestock rearing. All of them possess a small patch of kitchen garden

adjacent to their house where they produce different vegetables like brinjal, *jhudunga* (cow-pea), *semi* (pea) *lau* (gourd), *kumuda* (pumpkin), maize, chili and green leaves for their own consumption.





Malhar females contribute substantially to their family income by participating in wage earning and by collecting minor forest produce like seasonal fruits, green leaves, mushrooms, flowers, fuel woods, tubers and wild grasses to thatch their house besides their household chores.

Food and drinks:

The Malhar are purely non-vegetarian. Rice and ragi are their staple diet. Besides that they also relish on fish, meat, chicken, eggs and dry fish etc. but abstain from taking beef or pork. During lean seasons, they consume different edible roots, tubers, leaves, mushrooms and fruits which they collect from forest. They are addicted to consume alcoholic beverages like country made wine (*mohuli*), rice beer (*handia/pachhi*), sago palm juice (*salap*) and toddy etc. Both males and females smoke hand-rolled cigar (*pika* or *bidi*) and chew tobacco paste. They do not take milk or milk products.



SOCIAL LIFE

The tribe Malhar is an endogamous community which is divided into two sub-groups such as *baraghor*/*badaghor* and *chhotghori*. In social hierarchy within the tribe the *barghor*/*badaghor* division are regarded higher and the *chotghori*, lower. These sub-groups are sub-divided into four sections such as *ghantar*, *khadar*, *khudka* and *dang*. Each of these sections are again sub-divided into many clan (*gotra*) groups like *bagh*, *nag*, *kachhap*, *barha*, *baansa*, *kerketa*, *toppo*, *kujur* and *tikur* etc. Within the clan are various lineage groups (*gusti / handipaka*) namely *rajmaral*, *kuliar*, *chowdhuri*, *charmundi*, *tokoyar* and *nagpuria* etc.

These clan groups are totemistic and exogamous in nature. The members of a clan regard themselves as descendants of a common ancestor. To regulate their matrimonial alliances, they practice their sub-groups and section endogamy and lineage and clan exogamy. The members of each clan revere their totemic objects and observe taboos in honour of their totem and refrain from causing any harm to it, but do not observe specific rituals in honour of it.



Family:

In Malhar community, adult marriage and monogamy is the traditional norm. Child marriage was a past tradition, which is not practiced now. Polygamous families are also found in rare cases where the first wife is found to be a barren or physically handicapped or suffering from contagious disease.

Malhar families are predominantly nuclear although vertically extended families and joint families are found among them in few cases. They follow patrilocal rule of residence after marriage and patrilineal rule of descent. Inheritance of ancestral property follows the rule of equigeniture in male line only. In the family having no male successor, the married daughters inherit the parental property and an issueless family may adopt a male child from the nearest lineages who later on inherits the property.



Life Cycle

Pre delivery rituals:

The Malhars do not observe any pre-delivery ritual for the pregnant woman but certain taboos. During pregnancy, the woman is prohibited exposure during solar or lunar eclipse. She is also forbidden to travel near the cremation ground, to move solitarily during deep night or to sleep in isolated rooms.



Childbirth:

In Malhar society, the birth of a child is conducted in a separate hut specially constructed for the purpose in the backside of their living room or in an enclosure set up in the rear verandah as lying-in room. They engage an experienced woman as midwife (*dai*) from Hari or Maghaya Dom community to assist the expectant mother during child birth for easy delivery of the child. The umbilical cord is cut by using a sharp bamboo splinter after the base tied by a thread. The placenta is buried at the backside of their house by the midwife to avoid the effect of black magic. The midwife attends the mother and child for a period of five days and is remunerated for her service with a *tambi* of rice or millets, salt, some money and a *saree*.



Post delivery ritual:

They observe birth pollution (*chhut*) after the birth of a child. The pollution period continues for six days and during the pollution period, observances of festivals and rituals are tabooed. On the sixth day they observe the cleansing rite *chhetti* on which the mother and the new born baby take the purificatory bath.

The name giving ceremony of the newborn baby is observed on the 21st day, in which the baby is given a name through the rice divination method. They perform the first hair cutting ceremony *telikatta/mundan* after two months. On this day they also conduct the first cereal feeding ceremony *muhjutti* conducted by their traditional priest the *gosain/patiar* and their traditional barbar, the *naua*.



Puberty Rite:

The Malhar observe puberty rites for the girl on attainment of her first menarche. The pubescent girl is segregated in an isolated hut or in a separate enclosure for a period of five to seven days and within this period she is socio-religiously prohibited to look or be looked at by any male person. After the pollution period is over she takes purificatory bath at the dawn, in the near by hill stream, anointing turmeric paste and castor oil accompanied by her friends. The girl disposes her used clothes there and wears new clothes presented by the family after which the pollution lapses. When the girl approaches home, her maternal uncle presents her new cloths and some cosmetics. In the evening her parent hosts a non vegetarian feast with country liquor to their kinsmen, guests and relatives.



Marriage:

They consider marriage arranged through proper negotiation (*biha*) as an ideal and prestigious mode of acquiring a life mate. The other modes of marriages are by mutual consent (*manaraji / raji khusi*), by elopement (*udulia*), by capture (*jhikka*), by service (*gharjammain*) by exchange (*badal kania*), by intrusion (*ghar pasa*), junior levirate (*ditia ghara*), junior sororate (*sali biha*) and cross-cousin marriage. Remarriage of widows, widowers and divorcees are also permitted in their society.

Payment of bride price (*kaniamul*) is obligatory, which is paid both in shape of cash and kinds, depending upon the socio-economic status of the groom's family. It consists of goats, fowls, some grains, money and dresses for the proposed bride and her mother. After negotiation, they consult their traditional astrologer (*ganak*) to select an auspicious date and moment for performing marriage rites.



The marriage rites are held in the residence of the bride which includes the rites of *aiburobhat*, *gayhalud*, *kaniadan*, then *sindurdan* and lastly *baubhat* respectively. The groom's parents proceed to the bride's house with the groom, their kinsmen, relatives and villagers in a marriage procession along with the tune of music provided by the drum beaters belonging to Dom community. The bride's family entertains the marriage party with non-vegetarian wedding feast along with country liquor *mahuli*. Their traditional priest the *gosain* belonging to *rajmoral* section or in his absence, village leader of the the community conducts the marriage rites.

The following morning the bride with the groom and his party return to the groom's residence in a procession with the tune of music played by the Dom musicians. The marriage is consummated on the fourth day at the groom's patrilocal residence. In the evening the groom's family hosts a non-vegetarian feast to guest's relatives, villagers and kinsmen along with country liquor (*mahuli*).

Divorce:

Divorce is allowed in their society and either party can divorce his/her spouse on the grounds of maladjustment in conjugal life, barrenness or impotency, cruelty, suffering from contagious diseases or indulgence in extramarital affairs etc.

Generally a special session of their traditional community council, comprising the traditional office bearers, village elders and parents of divorce seeking couple and both the appellant and accused take part in the proceedings. The appellant seeking the divorce generally arranges the refreshment for the participants.

On this aspect, if the wife desires to divorce the husband, her parents have to return the bride price, paid by the groom's parents earlier during marriage negotiation but if the bride deserts her husband and marries another male, the new



husband has to repay the bride price with a penalty which may be stipulated according to the demands of the former husband. The father is allowed to keep the young children after the divorce but the mother is allowed to keep the breast feeding baby with her for nursing and has to return the child after he/she grows up. If the husband divorces his wife on the above ground, no compensation for divorce is paid to her.



Death:

The Malhar usually practise burial to dispose of their dead but at present, those who can afford, go for cremation. The death news (*moda, bartani*) is first communicated to the sister's house of the deceased and then to all the relatives, clansmen and villagers by a special messenger. After they congregate to take part in the mortuary rite, the dead body is bathed, anointed with turmeric paste and castor oil and then dressed with a new white cloth. The pall bearers prepare a pall using sal poles and *siali* fiber to carry the dead for funeral along with all his personally used items such as clothes, umbrella, utensils, tobacco container, tobacco etc.

In case of death of little children having no teeth, smallpox victims and victims of snake bite, tiger attack, suicide or falling from tree, their corpses are buried in a burial pit with its head towards north and face upwards in sleeping position.

The pall bearers dig the burial pit and place the dead body and the eldest son of the dead throws a handful of soil on the corpse avoiding to look at the face of the dead and then returns



home. Then the pall bearer fill up the pit with soil, take bath near the hill stream and return to the house of the deceased, where they drink the water mixed with mango barks for purification.

When a pregnant woman dies, the foetus from her womb is taken by inclusion and is buried but the dead body of the woman is cremated keeping a handful of rice grains on her side lest the departed soul might cause harm to the people. The corpse of man/woman who die untimely are disposed of in a distant isolated place in the forest far away from the village, as they believe that the departed soul might be an evil spirit due to his/her unfulfilled desires and can harm to their family members and also to the inhabitants of the settlement. For that reason, after disposal of the body, the pall bearers keep thorny branches over the burial spot and their traditional witch doctor - the *gunia*, on the day of performance of purificatory rites, visits the burial spot to offer sacrifices of fowls and food items to satisfy the soul of the dead, uttering magical spells.

They observe death pollution for a period of eleven days and within this time, observances of rituals and festivals, visiting sacred places and sacred shrines, giving alms, eating non-vegetarian foods and sexual union are strictly tabooed. On the tenth day, the purificatory rite is performed and they wash their used clothes. The floors and walls of the houses are polished by cow dung paste and all the earthen wares are thrown away. The males shave their head hair and beards and also cut their nails using the services of their traditional barber - the *naua*. The women also cut their nails.

The final purificatory rite is observed on the eleventh day and is conducted by their community leader of the village or by any elder belonging to Rajmoral section. In the evening the bereaved family hosts a non-vegetarian feast to the relatives, guests and lineage members along with country liquor *mohuli* and rice beer (*pachhi*).

They have no tradition to construct any monument to commemorate the dead or to immerse bones of the deceased in holy water for salvation of the departed soul. But they observe the annual *shradh* after a year of the death in honour of the dead.





RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

The Malhar profess their autonomous tribal religion based upon 'animism' which is amalgamated with few elements of Hinduism. They worship lord Dharmesh (the Sun God) and his consort Basumata (Goddess Earth) as their Supreme Deities who are benevolent.

Their pantheon also includes a number of deities. The important deities they propitiate are *karmasain*, *chadrabati* (the moon), *banadurga*, *banarai* or *banaspati*, the forest deity, the jungle spirit whom they appease during *chait punia* to save their life as well as to be successful in communal hunting in the forest. On this month they also worship goddess *barabhai malani*, the deity of small pox by sacrificing a goat and offering coconut to protect them from the disease.

Their village deity Gaondevi is represented by an oblong stone smeared with vermilion (*sindur*) and installed at the outskirts of the village or on the hill top under the shade of a tree. Their traditional priest the Patiar worships the deities.

They believe in the existence of ghosts, evil spirits and witches who are malevolent and cause harm to humans. They also believe that illness and misfortune are caused due to the wrath of supernatural agencies such as ancestral, cosmological and spiritual forces. In order to avert their ill omen they solicit the help of their witch doctor - Gunia to gratify the forces by offering prayers and animal scarifies.

Apart from their own tribal deities, they also worship many Hindu deities like lord Jagannath, Mahadev, Ganesh, Laxmi, Saraswati, Durga, Kali etc. and observe many Hindu festivals such as *raja*, *gamha*, *nag panchami*, *moulamas*, *diwali* and *holi* etc.

The Malhar possess rich oral tradition of folk tales, folk songs as well as folk dances such as *golwari* which they perform during observances of birth ceremony of a child, the wedding dance, *karma* dance performed at the time of celebrating *karma* festival and *jhumur* dance which they perform at any time of leisure for merry making.



SOCIO POLITICAL LIFE

The Malhar possess its own traditional community council (*jati panchayat*) both at village level as well as at the regional level headed by their secular head such as Pradhan in the village council and Malik at the regional level. The other office bearers are Patiar, the sacerdotal head who conducts their religious functions and their traditional head the Gosain who hails from their Rajmoral section. The Gosain presides over their marriage and death rites. Their village messenger - Dakua hails from Dom community.

The village council adjudicates cases pertaining to family disputes, partition of family property among sons, theft, rape, adultery, incest and arrangements for village level rituals and festivals. Complicated cases which are not settled at the village level council are referred to their regional level council for final decision. Like wise the regional council is also empowered to adjudicate cases pertaining to inter village rifts, divorce cases and can also mitigate intra and inter community disputes.

The office bearers i.e., Pradhan, Malik, Gosain and Patiar succeed to their seat on hereditary basis where as the messenger Dakua is appointed by nomination and is paid remuneration for his service annually in shape of some grains by every individual family of the settlement.



Their traditional community councils act as the custodian of their traditional norms and customs and the office bearers are respected in their society. The council is empowered to award punishments to offenders and can excommunicate the culprits adjudicating the degree of intensity of the crime committed by the alleged.



CHANGING SCENE

Change is a continuous process. With the advancement of science and technology, changes have occurred in Malhar way of life during last few decades. Education plays a great role behind the introduction of such changes in their society. Besides, the Malhars have accepted many new cultural, social and religious elements from their neighbouring castes and tribes as a result of their long association with them. Their material culture and its correlated customs have changed significantly. Their household articles have been replaced by many modern mechanical gadgets. Now many well-to-do Malhar families have radio, cycle, motor cycle, television, mobile phone and modern furniture. The role of science and technology in the life and living of the Malhar tribal community is very apparent in these days.

The role of Government in the sphere of economic upliftment of the tribal groups is very vital and extensive. Government has launched many development programmes for the tribal people including the Malhars through Income Generating and Infrastructure Development Schemes. Government has introduced development interventions through education, agriculture, communication, drinking water, housing, health and sanitation both in Gram Panchayat and Block level. Awareness has also been created among them on different development schemes so that they can







reap benefit from these plans and programmes. At present, obvious change is seen in their life style, economic pursuits, social celebrations, food habits, dressing pattern, cultural and religious activities etc.

The ST and SC Development Department, Government of Odisha under the aegis of Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Gol has established a Museum of Tribal Arts and Artefacts in the Premises of SC and ST Research and Training Institute (SCSTRTI) at CRPF Square, Bhubaneswar for preservation and exhibition of material culture of different tribes. In

this tribal museum, the ornaments, personal belongings, hunting weapons, fishing implements and musical instruments of different tribes including the Malhar have been displayed in different show cases which reflect their inherent talent in creative art and craft.

It is also true that the Malhars still maintain a colourful cultural life in their green surroundings. Their core culture is hardly influenced or prejudiced by the external agencies.





Photo Handbook on Tribes of Odisha, Series 36 “MALHAR”

@SCSTRTI, Bhubaneswar

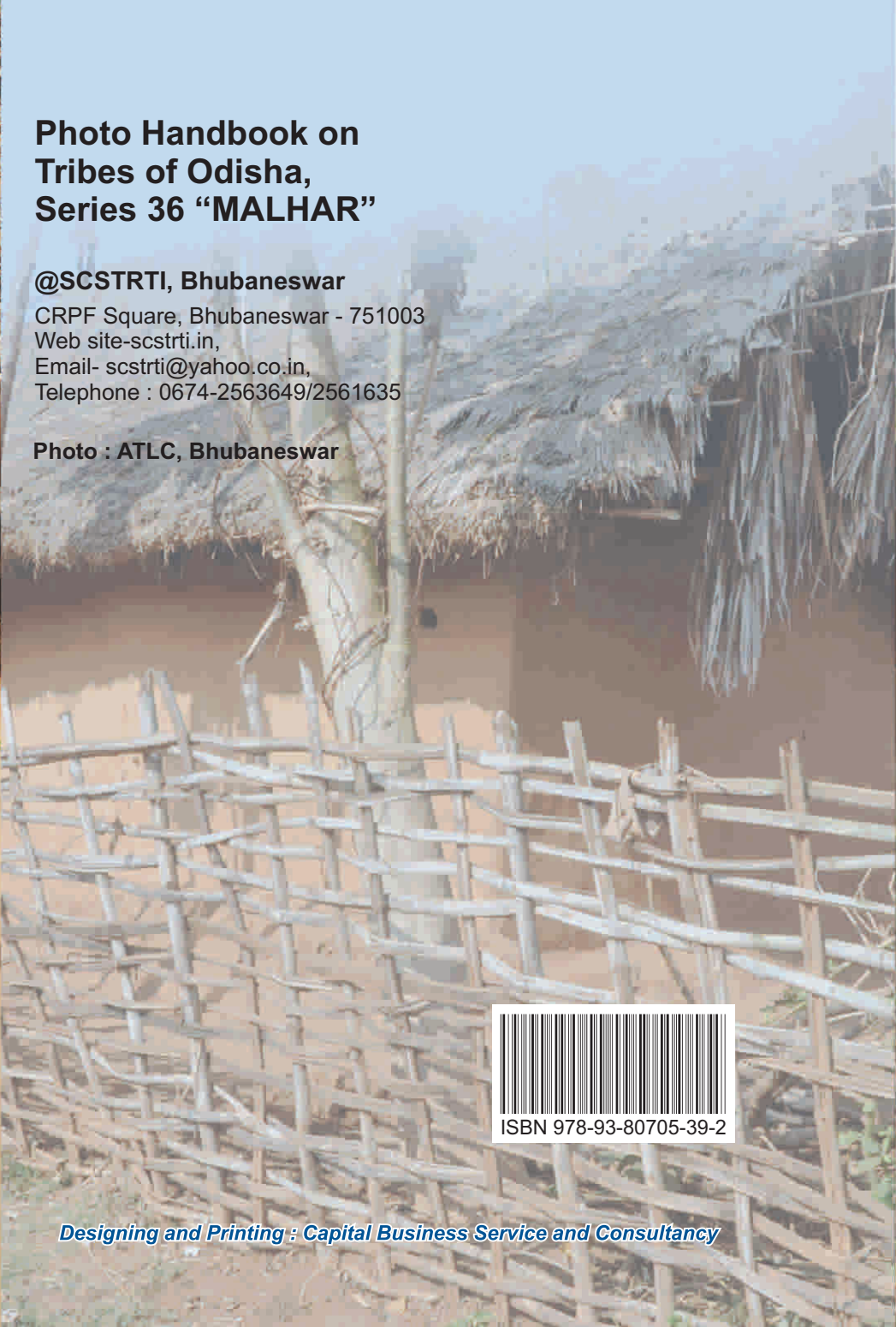
CRPF Square, Bhubaneswar - 751003

Web site-scstrti.in,

Email- scstrti@yahoo.co.in,

Telephone : 0674-2563649/2561635

Photo : ATLC, Bhubaneswar



ISBN 978-93-80705-39-2

Designing and Printing : Capital Business Service and Consultancy