



BINJHIA

**Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes
Research and Training Institute
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FOREWORD

This photo hand book gives an illustrative short account of the Binjhia or Binjhoa - a little known tribe of Odisha. Spread over the states of Bihar, Odisha, West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh, they identify themselves as 'Vindhyaniwasi' or 'Bindhyabasini Khyatriya'. They say that their original homeland was Kolangiri in the Vindhya Valley in the former Central Provinces from which they had gradually migrated to Chhotanagpur of Jharkhand and Chhatisgarh and Keonjhar, Sundergarh and Barasobmar estate of Bargarh districts of Odisha. They were called as 'Binjhia' in Chhotnagpur and 'Binjhawars' in Chhatisgarh. According to their popular myth they had close association with Lord Ram. In Odisha, they are mostly found in Sundergarh district and sparsely distributed in the adjoining areas. They do not have a language of their own and speak a dialect that is a crude mixture of Odia and Hindi.

The Binjhia are non-vegetarians and agriculture is the mainstay of their economy. They do not eat beef and pork but consume alcoholic drinks including the *handia* (rice beer). Since most of them are either landless or marginal farmers, they supplement their livelihood by animal husbandry, seasonal forest collections and wage earning in agricultural, construction, industrial and mining sectors. They prepare umbrella from the *siali* leaf and broom stick from *berna* grass and sell these in the market for cash.

The Binjhia is an endogamous community who are divided into several exogamous *gotras* (clans) ranked in a hierarchical order. In the local social hierarchy, the Binjhias claim themselves superior to other tribes and claim the status of a clean caste equal to the Rajputs.

Like other tribes of north and west Odisha, they profess the Sarna religion, worship their tribal deities seated in the village sacred grove (*sarna*). They observe the festivals like Sarna Puja, Bhai Jiuntia, Pua Jiuntia, Karma, Sarhul, Janisikar etc. with pomp and ceremony. Their traditional community leaders and council is still effective to handle their customary affairs. Development interventions by the government and non-government agencies in their areas have certainly brought noticeable changes in their life style providing them an opportunity to integrate themselves in the national main stream.

This graphic documentation on the life style of Binjhia tribe is a part of the "Series on Tribes of Odisha" published by SCSTRTI, Bhubaneswar. Prof. (Dr) A. B. Ota, Director and Smt. A. Mall, Deputy Director of SCSTRTI have taken all the pains and every care in conceptualizing and compiling this multi-coloured booklet. I would like to thank them both for their earnest efforts. I must extend my special thanks to Shri S.C. Mohanty, O.S.D. (Research) for his engrossed involvement in the appraisal and editing of the handbook by addition of relevant data. Lastly due credit must go to the labours of all others who have contributed even a little for this successful enterprise. I hope this book would be of enormous help as a ready reference for the tribal lovers and the tribal researchers alike.

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

BINJHIA



A.B. Ota
A. Mall

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

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IDENTITY

The Binjhia / Binjhoa, is a numerically small Scheduled Tribe of Odisha. They identify themselves as Vindhyaniwasi or Bindhyabasini Khyatriya. They are spread over the states of Bihar, Odisha, West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh. This tribe is mainly concentrated in the districts of Ranchi and Gumla of Jharkhand State.



They believe that their original homeland is Kolangiri located in the Vindhya Valley in the former Central Provinces (now divided as Madhya Pradesh and Chhatisgarh States) from which they had gradually moved eastwards to Chhotanagpur, Keonjhar, Sundergarh and Barasobmar estate of Bargarh districts. But after settling down at Chhotnagpur, they were called as Binjhia by their

neighbours. They are also known as 'Binjhawars' in some areas, particularly Chhatisgarh area. Their popular myth tells that they are one of the important communities, which had close association with Lord Ram. In Odisha, they are mostly found in Sundergarh district and sparsely distributed in the adjoining areas. They live along with other tribes and castes in the plains.



As per 2011 census, the Binjhia population in Odisha is 11 419, of which males number 5,787 and females 5,632. Their sex ratio is 973 females per 1000 males and decennial growth rate is 20.47%. Their literacy rate in 2011 census is 57.85% ie. 69.98% for males and 45.25% for the females.

The Binjhia speak a crude type of Hindi known as Jaspuri in Chhatisgarh. Those living in Odisha do not have a separate language of their own. They speak a dialect that is a crude mixture of Odia and Hindi. Now, most of them speak Odia language and use Odia script. They can also understand and speak Sadri language.



Dress and Ornaments:

The dress pattern of the Binjhia is very simple. The males wear dhoti and *kurta* and the females wear *saree* and blouses like other neighbouring castes. Like other tribes, the Binjhia women adorn themselves with varieties of ornaments made of gold, silver, brass, nickel and aluminium. They are also fond of wearing different types of bead necklaces around their neck. The male children use shirts and pants and the girls use frocks, skirts and *shalwars* purchased from the local market. The adult males of older generation keep long hair and knot them at the back and put on sacred thread and bead necklace around their necks. The Binjhia women make tattoo marks in the upper side of the palm, arm and forehead as a symbol of beauty.



SETTLEMENT AND HOUSING



The Binjhias mostly reside in multi-ethnic villages, but in separate hamlets keeping their distinct ethnic identity. They like to construct their houses adjacent to their paddy fields. Their houses are rectangular in shape consisting of two rooms with a front verandah. The walls of the house are either made of mud or wooden/bamboo frame plastered with mud and cow dung. The gable shaped roof is either thatched with straw or *khappar* (country made tiles).





Site selection for construction of a new house is done by the traditional priest (Pahan / Kalo) who puts some rice in the selected site and covers it with a banyan leaf. The next morning, if the grains are found undisturbed, they consider the site auspicious for construction of a new house. After selection of the site, the Pahan conducts puja in the place and fixes a pole and a branch of a mango tree on the ground as an auspicious sign before laying the foundation of the house. The rich persons in their society construct pucca houses. The Binjhias paint their walls in different colours on the belief that, it protects the evil energy to enter into the house.



Household Materials

Bell metal, aluminium, iron and brass utensils, earthen pots of different sizes, bamboo baskets, agricultural implements and some fishing and hunting weapons are found in a Binjhia house for day-to-day use. Coming in contact with other caste people, now they possess modern gadgets like TV, Fans, two wheelers, cell phones etc and these are very popular among them.



LIVELIHOOD





Agriculture is the mainstay of the Binjhia economy. They are very laborious. Labour cooperatives are found among them. They grow paddy, maize, *ragi*, pulses, oil seed in their fields to get their food. They also keep cattle for cultivation and milching purpose. Though Binjhias are agriculturists, they also work as daily labourers in industries, construction sites and sale minor forest produce collected from the jungle to supplement their income. They prepare ropes and mats from the *sabai* grass. Besides, they prepare umbrella from the *siali* leaf and broom stick from *berna* grass and sell these in the market for cash. Now, many among them prefer to work in industries and mining quarries that fetch them more income.



Food and Drinks:

They are non-vegetarians but do not eat beef and pork. Beef eating is strictly prohibited. Their staple food is rice. Watered rice is very popular among them which they like to take in the morning with onion, salt and tamarind. Besides, they take *suan* and *ragi* gruel, different types of pulses, vegetables, fish, meat, egg in their meal. They collect different types of fruits, roots, tubers, leaves from the forest, hunt birds and animals and catch fish from the streams, canals and ponds for their consumption. They grow various types of vegetables and fruits in their kitchen garden. Unlike some of the tribal communities, they take cow's milk.





They prepare cakes from rice and beer (*handia*) from rice, *ragi*, *suan* and consume these during festive occasions. They also prepare a non-alcoholic drink from the bark of *charei-gudhi* tree for their consumption. They believe that taking the flesh of birds like pigeon (Peruan) and dove (Pondki) cures tuberculosis and that of bat cures asthma. The kids and women are prohibited to take flesh of any kind of sacrificial animals and birds.



Now-a-days, they have added *chapati* prepared from wheat, *ragi*, maize or *bajra* to their traditional menu. They do not take non-vegetarian food items during Diwali and Nuakhai festivals. They like to chew betel and tobacco and some of them also smoke tobacco.

SOCIAL LIFE

The Binjhia is an endogamous community. They are divided into several *gotras* (clans) such as Kaensa, Kainsaba, Nag, Amrut, Dadual, Kusha, Bhairab Kapil, Kashyap, Koshik, Agnihotri etc. These clans are ranked in a hierarchical order with the Nag and Kaensa occupying the highest position and others remain lower to them. Amrut and Bhairab *gotras* are accorded the lowest position. The Nag *gotra* is divided into three distinct sub groups such as Pradhan, Ganju and Badek. Marriage or sexual relationship within one's own clan is strictly prohibited because members of the same clan regard themselves as brothers and sisters as they are the descendants from a common ancestor.

The Bhunjia tribe has patrilineal, patrilocal and patriarchal pattern of family. Any son can inherit the father's traditional social position. The inheritance of paternal property and succession goes from father to sons. The oldest son receives a bigger share. The daughters are not entitled to have share in their parental property. In absence of a male child, the father has the right to make a gift of his property to his wife and daughter. Parents without any issue may adopt the nephew or keep the son-in-law as *ghar jammai*, who may inherit their property.





Both nuclear and joint families are found among the Binjhias. Though patrilocal rule of residence is followed after marriage, neolocal residence is becoming common now-a-days because of change of place by employment and migration. However, at present the rules are not strictly followed. The eldest member acts as the head of a group of paternal families. A widow generally enjoys the right over the property of her husband until her death, but forfeits her claims if she leaves the house by remarriage.





The Binjhias claim themselves superior to other tribes and claim the status of a clean caste in the local social hierarchy, next to Brahman and Gosain and equal to the Rajputs. However, they accept water from Brahman, Gauda, Bhuinya, Bhokta, Agaria and Rautia. But the Binjhia women do not take cooked food from any other caste except Brahmin caste. Sometimes, they enter into the bond of rituals kinship such as *Dharam Bhai* with members of other communities irrespective of their social status.



The Binjhias keep good relations with their neighbors who belong to Munda, Oraon, Bhumij, Gond, Kumbhar, Kamar, Tanti, Rautia, Khadia, Ahir, Muslim and Brahmin communities who help each other at the time of need and participate in the socio-cultural functions and community feasts.

Life Cycle

Pregnancy and Childbirth

Family is one of the important units of social organization. After marriage, every couple expects child in due course of time. When a married woman becomes pregnant, she has to observe some socially prescribed taboos such as to visit the jungle and to take the flesh of sheep (*bhedi*) and goat (*boka*), big fish, spicy food, alcoholic drinks and the like. A sorcerer (*guniya*) is called to examine the omens and declare the future events that may be crucial in the life of the expected child.

Experienced and elderly women from Ghasi or Domb community act as midwives at the time of delivery of the baby. The presence of the elderly woman of the family or the neighbourhood is also needed during this time. After the delivery, the umbilical cord is cut by the midwife and buried outside the house. Then, the newborn baby is bathed and the mother cleans her body with tepid water. A pot full of rice bear (*handia*) is presented to the midwife for her service.



The special foods like rice, *dal* and various cooked vegetables are fed to the parturient mother and she is restricted to take watered rice, sour items, spicy food, brinjal, parched rice and beer. She is given gourd and papaya for lactation. It is believed that if the mother takes the milk of the tiger with gruel, then lactation will be more. The baby takes the mother's milk for one year.

They observe birth pollution for 21 days. During this period, the family is tabooed against attending any socio-religious function and the mother is not allowed to do any household chores. On the twenty-first day, purificatory rites are observed followed by the name giving ceremony. A name is given to the baby by a Brahman priest after performing due ceremonies.



The first rice feeding ceremony is performed when the baby becomes seven to eight months old. They give non-veg items to the kids after he attains two years of age, but they are totally prohibited to take any types of intoxicants. In case of male child, a sacred thread ceremony is performed before he attains the age of twenty without which he cannot marry.



Puberty

The Binjhia girls usually attain puberty at the age of 13 to 15 years. At that time, the girl is considered unclean and is restricted to take part in any social and religious activities or touch any household articles. She is kept secluded in a room. Pollution period is observed for 5-7 days. During this time, children and men are not allowed to go to the girl and the girl is not allowed to go out and do any manual work. A ceremonial bath takes place after the pollution period is over and then, she is allowed to resume her routine activities.

Marriage

The Bhunjias practice clan exogamy, monogamy and adult marriage. Normally marriage takes place when a boy attains the age of 20-25 years and the girl, 18-20 years. Though there are several modes of selecting a bride, marriage by negotiation is common among them and considered prestigious way of acquiring a mate, though it is an expensive affair. Still, marriage by capture, marriage by elopement, love marriage is in vogue in their society. Cross cousin marriage is also allowed among them. Marriage with father's sister's daughter or a girl from mother's sept is preferred.

In arranged marriages, an intermediary negotiates and settles the matrimony. One day before and during the day of marriage, the parents of the couple do not take food from any body's house and non veg items. On the wedding day, the bride groom accompanied by a party comes to the house of the bride. The

wedding rite is performed by a Brahman priest (Purohit). Putting vermilion on the bride's forehead (*sindur dan*) and knotting the clothes of the bride and bridegroom together are essential rituals of marriage. A grand feast is arranged for the guests after the marriage ceremony is over.

The bride price (*dam-gani*) is in vogue among the community. It includes 4 to 5 quintals of rice, clothes for bride's family members, pots, ornaments and a goat and some cash for drink. Coming in contact with other neighbouring communities, dowry (*daija*) system are now introduced in their society, which includes a few paddy containers, baskets, pots and ornaments depending upon the economic position of the bride's parents.

Polygyny, widow remarriage and divorce are prevalent in the Binjhia society. Divorce may be initiated either by the wife or the husband on the grounds such as barrenness, adultery and laziness. In case of fault of the wife, her parents have to pay compensation to the husband before divorce is allowed. A younger brother can marry the widow of his elder brother. After death of his wife, the husband can marry his wife's younger sister but not her elder sister.



Death Rites

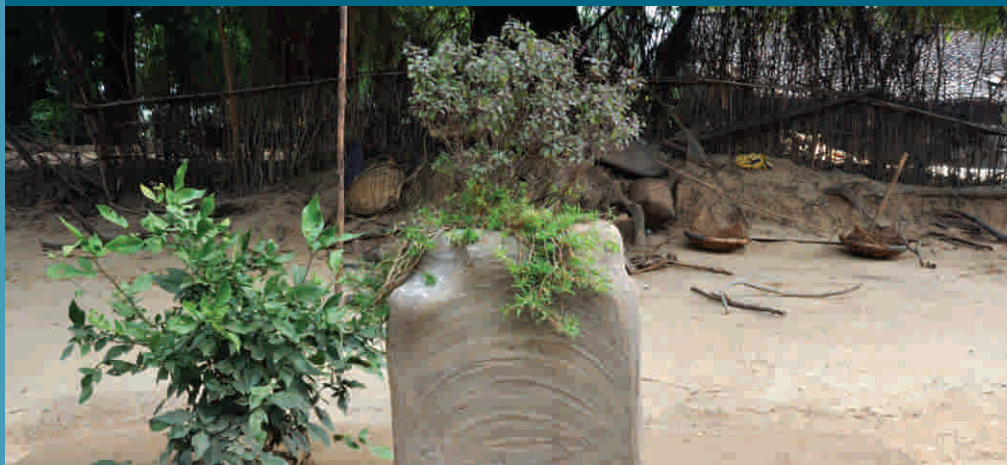
After the death of a person, they cremate the dead body. The dead bodies of the children and persons dying of unnatural causes are buried. The head of the dead is placed towards north and the pyre is lit by a senior kin of the deceased.

The period of mourning and pollution lasts for ten days. In the deceased's family, cooking is restricted up to ten days until the purificatory rites are over. During these days, they take cooked food from their neighbors belonging to their own community, except non veg items. On the 10th day, barber shaves the male relatives of the deceased and mortuary rites are performed according to Hindu traditions. The Brahmin priest performs the death rituals and it extends up to the twelfth day. A feast is arranged for the guests and relatives by the deceased's family. In some cases, five bones of the dead are collected from the funeral pyre and thrown in the Triveni at Prayag or in the Ganges at Kashi after few days. Some also offer pinda to their dead at the river Gaya.



RELIGION RITUALS AND FESTIVALS

The Binjhia are followers of the Sarna religion and worship the Sarna deity called Gramsiri installed under a tree in their sacred grove, normally lying at the outskirts of the village. The priest (Pahan/ Kalo) conducts the communal worship of this deity by sacrificing a black goat and hen. Any Wednesday is selected as an auspicious day to conduct worship in honour of Sarna deity. Women and husband of a pregnant woman do not visit the sacred grove of Sarna.





community priests (Pahan/Kalo) as well as the Brahmin priests officiate in different rites, functions and festivals. The Addha and Baiga assist the traditional priest (Pahan/Kalo) in different religious activities. They also maintain temples for worship. The religious places and temples are painted with pictures of gods and goddesses, birds and animals in different colours by the Binjhias.

The Binjhias worship their respective clan deities called Bansa Deota and Samalai Maa - the chief tribal deity of the whole region. They also worship Hindu Gods and Goddesses. As the ancestors of this tribe are believed to be the inhabitants of Kolangiri in the Vindhya valley, they worship Vindhyabasini Devi who is the patron goddess of this tribe. Their traditional





They believe in the existence of ghosts, witches and malevolent spirits which may bring misfortunes, miseries and diseases to them.

The Binjhias observe Hindu festivals like Askhya Tritiya, Raja, Dusera, Gamha Purnima, Ratha Yatra, Holi, Diwali, Sri Ram Navami and Makar Festival. At the time of Dusera, they sacrifice animals and arrange feasts. Besides they also observe the festivals like Bhai Jiuntia, Pua Jiuntia, Karma, Sarhul, Janisikar etc. Their most important festivals are Sarana Puja, Rath Yatra, Diwali and Karma Puja which are celebrated with pomp and ceremony. Each festival is enjoyed by preparation of special meals.



Music and Dance

Their folk songs and tales are still retained. Festive occasions are celebrated with dancing and singing by using musical instruments like drums, flute and string instruments etc.



SOCIAL CONTROL

In the localities of the Binjhia, both traditional village council and statutory Gram Panchayat are in operation. Yet their traditional community Panchayat constituted by the male representative of each family and their village level community functionaries still continues to be effective. The traditional chief of the village called 'Ganju' presides over the village council meetings. The post of their 'Ganju' is hereditary. One of the eldest persons of the village acts as the vice-president and he is called Sian Ganju. Besides, the functionaries like the Katwal / Dakua – the village messenger and the village priest (Pahan/Kalo) and other members participate in the village council meetings.

The traditional community panchayat decides the matters relating to incest, beef eating, ill treatment to parents, adultery, theft etc. It generally awards the punishment to the offender in shape of cash and kinds which is utilized for arranging a community feast along with conducting some prescribed rituals. If one violates the rule of community endogamy, he/she is permanently out-casted from the society.

Now the Binjhias are represented by their elected leaders in the statutory Gram Panchayat and the

cases of disputes except those relating to their customary affairs are solved in that forum. In the present time, the officials of the Gram Panchayat appear to be more powerful and influential as they deal with the government and the planning and implementation of development programmes. Now, the Binjhias are politically more conscious and active than before.



DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGE

Due to modernization, development of infrastructure and other facilities and their prolonged contact with other caste people, changes are occurring in the socio-economic and political life of the Binjhia. Their literacy level has remarkably increased and their children are now enrolled in the schools to get education. Their means of livelihood has also changed. They have shifted their occupation from agriculture to industrial and other works. Though in the economic field, the Binjhias have made some progress, still they lag behind the non-tribals in the field of education.

The village level conflicts excluding their customary matters are now decided at the statutory Gram Panchayat level. They use both traditional and modern medicines for treatment of diseases. They use modern goods and services like electricity, radio, *gobar* gas, cell phone, TV, computer which have made their life comfortable.



Development interventions by the government and non-government agencies in their areas have certainly brought noticeable changes and development in their livelihood pattern and socio-cultural life providing them an opportunity to integrate themselves in the mainstream of the society at large. Yet they are struggling hard to preserve the time-tested values Of their age old culture against the onslaught of planned change and modernization.





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@SCSTRTI, Bhubaneswar

CRPF Square, Bhubaneswar - 751003

Web site-scstrti.in, Email- scstrti@yahoo.co.in,

Telephone : 0674-2563649/2561635



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