



BHUMIA

**Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Research and Training Institute
Bhubaneswar, Odisha
2015**



FOREWORD

The Bhumia tribe inhabiting the undivided Koraput district has a rich cultural heritage and is also considered to be the most heroic of all tribal communities of the State. They are believed to be a sub-caste of the Baiga tribe living in Madhya Pradesh and Chhatisgarh. The name Bhumia is derived from the word 'Bhumi' meaning 'soil' because according to their legendary tradition they were the first community to start farming in the highlands of Koraput. They speak Desia, a lingua-franca of Koraput spoken by other castes and tribes.

Generally, they live near the forest from where their basic needs are soundly met. In multi-caste villages they live in separate hamlets maintaining their ethnic identity. In the past, they derived a major part of their subsistence from the bountiful forest. They collected fruits, vegetables, roots, tubers from the forest, fish and crabs from the streams and rivers for their consumption. Now, they are settled agriculturalists.

The tribe is divided into two groups: *bada* and *sano*, each of which is again divided into a number of totemistic exogamous clans called *bansa*. Customarily families of one *bansa* reside in a single village. There are separate hamlets for different *bansas*. Marriage within the same *bansa* is strictly prohibited.

Budhi Thakurani is their village deity who is worshipped on all important occasions. Once a year, during the month of *Chaitra* (March-April), a goat is sacrificed before the village deity. They also worship other village deities like *Nisani*, *Mauli* and *Gram Devta*. The main festivals observed by them are *Balijatra* during which elaborate fertility rites and rituals are observed. During this festival young girls dance in a trance and act as medium of a spirit called *Devata*. *Hundi Devata* and *Budhimai* are the chief deities. They observe *Dulla Puja*, *Ashari Puja*, *Vadhan Parab*, *Nuakhai Parab* etc. They also sacrifice various animals like goat, sheep, pig and fowl to satisfy their deities and spirits. They believe in the efficacy of white and black magic.

Now-a-days due to impact of planned change and modernization, the Bhumia society are undergoing a process culture change. This change has been reflected in their cultural, social and economic life.

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I hope this book will be helpful to all interested readers who like to know about different tribal cultures of Odisha.

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

BHUMIA



**A.B. Ota
P. Patel**

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IDENTITY

The Bhumia tribe of Odisha has a rich cultural heritage and is also considered as the most heroic of all tribal communities of the State. It is believed that the Bhumias are a sub-caste of the Baiga tribe living in Madhya Pradesh and Chhatishgarh. There is no legend to suggest as to when, how and from where these Bhumias came to inhabit Koraput (undivided district). As per their old belief, the name i.e. Bhumia suggests their origin from the soil (*bhumi*). Their legend and tradition confirm



that they were the first to start farming in the highlands of Koraput. That is why they believe that they have the first and the foremost claim on the soil and that their ancestors ruled over the land from the ancient time. The Bhumias, unlike other tribes, speak 'Desia', a lingua-franca of Koraput rather than a separate tribal language.



According to 2011 census, their total population in Odisha is 1 25 977 out of which 61 360 are males and 64 617 are females. Their sex ratio 1053 females for 1000 males. Their total literacy rate is 41.94 per cent ie, 54.21 percent for the males and 30.45 per cent for the females. Their decadal growth rate between 2001 to 2011 is 21.67 per cent.



The Bhumias generally use dress like their neighbouring Hindu castes. The males use *kasta*, *dhoti* and *gamucha* and the females use *kasta saree*. Small children up to the age of 3 to 4 use no cloths. When they grow up they use small *gamucha* as *kaupini*. Now the younger generations are using readymade garments and foot wears which are generally purchased from the local markets. They are now using modern dresses, such as pant-shirt, colored *sarees*, *ribbons* etc.

The females are very fond of ornaments. They use various kinds of ornaments such as bangles (*kankana*, *bahuti*, *chudi*), necklaces, rings, hair clips, armllets etc. They also wear flowers in their hair, particularly at the time of wedding ceremonies and festivals. All the ornaments are basically made of silver or brass but some people also wear gold ornaments too. Ear ring (*khanja*) and nose ring (*mudi*) are compulsory for the married women and they wear toe ring too. The glass bangles are becoming popular among the young generation.



HABITAT & SETTLEMENT

The Bhumias live in a close interface with a supportive, plentiful natural world, found in hills, dales and rapids that swirl in the valley in the undivided district of Koraput, Odisha. They live generally near the forest where their basic needs are soundly met. They are concentrated in the districts like Koraput, Malkangiri & Nowrangpur.

Usually the Bhumia settlements are located separately in the outskirts of multi-caste villages. They do not follow any definite settlement pattern. The houses lie scattered here and there. Sometimes they are arranged in two rows facing the principal village road.



Unlike other tribal groups their housing techniques are different. Their houses are rectangular in shape with gabled roofs. The walls are made either of wooden planks or wattle plastered with mud. Their houses may measure 18' in length, 12' in breadth and 10' to 11' in height. The roof is made using either bamboo or wooden rafters thatched with forest grass called *piri*. Their houses are divided into halves having a wall in the middle, the height of which varies from 4' to 5'. The inner part is used as a store room and the outer part, with a doorway on the front veranda is used as kitchen and bedroom. The houses are not provided with windows for cross ventilation. Sometimes the houses are provided with lofts spreading bamboo poles, which serve as an additional storeroom. The cattle sheds are usually located at the side of the living house.





At the time of constructing a new house, the site is customarily selected by Disari, the traditional priest of the Bhumia community. On an auspicious day in the evening three grains of rice are placed at the three corners of the proposed site and covered with leaf cups by the Disari. The next morning these leaf cups are removed and if it is found that the grains are not disturbed, then the site is considered to be auspicious and fit for dwelling. Then the Disari fixes a central pole to lay the foundation of the new dwelling.



Although the Bhumias are economically backward, they are very clean in their habits. The women regularly smear the walls and floors of their houses with cow dung, mud and water. The outer walls are painted with red, white and black soil. Nowadays, however the Bhumia community is losing its traditional cultural traits due to the impact of modernization.



LIVELIHOOD

Agriculture is their primary occupation. Earlier they were largely depending upon forests for their collection of food but due to degradation of forests now cultivation only gives them food security. In course of time, agriculture has become their economic backbone. Paddy is their principal crop. The agricultural activities are supplemented by secondary occupations such as wage earning and the collection of minor forest products, fishing and hunting during the lean months.



They mainly grow gram, oil seeds etc on the high lands and paddy on the low lands. After the developmental intervention most of the Bhumias are taking keen interest in cultivating vegetables like cauliflower, brinjal, beans, carrot, tomatoes and potatoes. Most of them have owned lands, plough bullocks and other agricultural implements for settled cultivation.





They are also expert in making baskets out of bamboo splits for sale. The engagement of Bhumia workers in processing, servicing and repairing works within the industrial sector has shown a rising trend.



Food Habits

Since time immemorial, the Bhumias totally depended upon the forest for their food requirements. They collect fruits, vegetables, roots from the forest, fish, crabs from the streams and rivers. But now with the changing scenario of scarcity of forest resources, their food habits have changed to a great extent. Currently they are settled agriculturalists and rice is their staple food which is taken with other dishes/curries. They are very fond of watered rice, tamarind curry and mandia/jawar gruels. They also take millet and pulses along with vegetables, roots and tubers. They prepare gruel out of *mandia (ragi)* powder, which they take in the morning and evening. They are habituated in taking liquor and *salap* juice as intoxicants.



Liquor has a very special importance in their life and starting from the child, adult to old person everyone drinks liquor. The Bhumias take rice beer, *mahua* liquor and tobacco powder both in ritual and festive occasions and in their day to day life. Rice beer popularly known as *landha* is their favorite traditional drink and it is home made. Guests and relatives are offered with the rice beer. The feasts, festivities, marriage ceremony and other rituals are celebrated with the consumption of the rice beer. The Bhumias are also fond of tobacco and both the males and the females like to chew and smoke tobacco, which they grow in their back yards. Now-a-days tea is becoming more popular as a beverage due to outside contact.



SOCIAL LIFE

By the influence of the neighbouring castes the Bhumia tribe is sharply divided amongst themselves into two groups- *bada*, the higher and *sano*, the lower. The higher section of the Bhumias even refuses to touch water from the hands of the lower Bhumias.



Each of these groups is again sub-divided into a number of totemistic exogamous clans called *bansa* which are known as *nag* (snake), *bagh* (tiger), *cheli* (goat) and *surya* (sun). Customarily families of one *bansa* reside in a single village. There are separate hamlets for different *bansas*. But now-a-days it is slowly giving place to multi-*bansa* villages or hamlets, although marriage within the same *bansa* is strictly prohibited.



LIFE CYCLE

Pregnancy & Child Birth

After marriage, a Bhumia woman and her family members expect a baby irrespective of any gender prejudice. When it is confirmed that a woman is pregnant, she has to observe certain taboos in respect of her food, works, movements and other activities with devotion and sincerity.





Experienced and elderly women of their tribe act as midwives at the time of delivery. After the delivery the new born baby is bathed and the mother cleans her body in tepid water. Birth pollution generally continues for 8 days but it differs from locality to locality. During this period the family does not take part in any ritual activities. No member of other families accepts food from this family. The pollution continues until the stump of the umbilical cord dries up and drops off. Then the midwife takes the umbilical cord and puts inside a hole and covers it with mud. Then she performs a ritual/*puja* in front of the hole. This ritual is meant to protect the baby from evil spirits. On this day the house is cleaned and all the clothes, utensils and earthen pots which are used by the mother and the new born baby are thrown outside and are replaced with new ones. Then all the family members worship the deity for the wellbeing of the mother and her baby as well as the whole family. The name giving ceremony is held after 15 days of the birth.



Puberty

On the day of her first menstruation, a girl is considered ritually unclean and forbidden to take part in any socio-religious activities till she is ritually purified through puberty rites. During this time she is kept in seclusion to avoid the sight of males. When the menstruation period is over, she takes bath, wears new clothes and becomes clean to take part in all normal day-to-day activities.



Marriage

In the Bhumia society, the institution of marriage has always been held in high esteem. The clan system regulates marriage and adult marriages are in vogue. Boys above 18 years of age and girls after attainment of puberty are considered fit for marriage. Child marriage was a past tradition. In most cases they practice monogamy. Marriage by negotiation is regarded as ideal, prestigious and it is the most common type of marriage. Bride price is paid either in cash or in kind, in the form of food grains, goat and *mahua* liquor. Acquiring of mates by capture, by service, by intrusion, by elopement, by exchange and by capture are also in vogue in their society. Remarriage of divorcee, widow, and widower as well as levirate, sororate and cross-cousin marriage are also permitted in their society.



Death

Death is generally considered a tragic event and when a person dies in a family, pollution continues up to 3-9 days. During this time the family members of the deceased have to go through certain taboos and restrictions. They observe the purificatory rituals and offer a feast to the kinsfolk and villagers. Poor people can perform the death ritual within a year, starting from the day of death.



RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND PRACTICES

The Bhumia pantheon consists of a number of Gods and Goddesses. *Budhi Thakurani* is their village deity who is worshipped on all important occasions. A platform with a thatched roof is set up at the centre of every Bhumia village, where the Goddess *Budhi Thakurani* is seated. Once a year, during the month of *Chaitra* (March-April), a goat is ritually sacrificed before the village deity. They also worship other village deities like *Nisani*, *Mauli* and *Gram Devta*.





Since they are agriculturalists, most of their festivals are connected directly or indirectly with agriculture. The main festivals observed by the Bhumia are *Balijatra* during which elaborate fertility rites and rituals are observed. During this festival young girls dance in a trance and act as medium of a spirit called *Devata*. *Hundi Devata* and *Budhimai* are the chief deities. In every village, there is a priest called *Disari* who also acts as a magico-religious specialist. They observe *Dulla Puja*, *Ashari Puja*, *Vadhan Parab*, *Nuakhai Parab* etc. They also sacrifice various animals like goat, sheep, pig and fowl to satisfy their deities and spirits. They believe in the efficacy of white and black magic.

They also worship the Hindu Gods like *Siva*, *Bishnu*, *Laxmi* etc. Gradually they are adopting the Hindu customs and traditions.



Music & Dance

The Bhumia are very fond of dance and music. They enjoy their lives through dance and music. In their young age they are more inclined to singing and dancing. Especially on festive occasions, they compose and sing love songs to impress the young women of their tribe.

The *dhemsa* dance is gaining much popularity among them and in this dance boys and girls dance together. Through dance, song and music they interpret and communicate to the audience the facts of life and narrate each and every aspect of nature which reflects how intimately they are connected with it. They have specific dance and music for different occasions. They play a number of stringed instruments like *Behela*, *Sarangi* and drums like the *Tamak*, *Runji* and *Ghumura* during dance.



SOCIAL CONTROL

For better administration and social control, they have chosen a person as the head of the village. He is popularly known as Naik/Mukhia. The Naik is usually the richest man of the village, who possesses a good number of cattle, acres of land and other productive assets. Above the Naik there is the leader called Bhatnaik at the regional level, who is regarded as a leader of 10 to 12 villages. Both the positions are hereditary. The Bhatnaik settles inter village disputes while petty intra village matters are handled by the village Naik. In certain important disputes, the Bhatnaik calls a conference of village heads and elders to discuss and decide the matter. The Disari is the religious head of the village who conducts the rituals and ceremonies for the individual families and the village as a whole. The Chalan is functions as the messenger of the community who passes the messages from person to person.



In Bhumia villages the institution of youth dormitory was functioning separately for unmarried boys and girls. It was playing a major role in socializing the young and moulding them to become useful members of the community. Now due to the impact of culture change and modernization, this useful social institution has become obsolete. Now instead of attending the dormitory, the Bhumia boys in the age group of 9-15 watch cattle and help their parents in agricultural works. The girls help in household works.



CHANGING SCENARIO

With the passage of time, there are many changes occurring in the Bhumia society. The Bhumias have acquired many new cultural elements from the neighboring castes and tribes in course of their prolonged contact with them. The age old traditional social institutions are declining under the impact of cultural adaptation and modernization. Their occupational pattern and means of subsistence have been changed. Traditional barter system has been replaced by money system. Change has been observed in their living pattern, social customs, food habits and dress pattern. There is increasing use of modern gadgets, mill made cloths, cosmetics etc. The importance of magico-religious functionaries has declined and in many cases the rituals are observed symbolically.





With the development intervention, their life, economic status, communication and living style has changed to a great extent. After independence, various government as well as non-government agencies are launching different development programs, exclusively for the tribal areas and tribal people with two fold objectives i.e. economic upliftment through income generation schemes and infrastructure development

programmes which have brought changes in their life style. The functioning of Integrated Tribal Development Agencies under Tribal Sub Plan approach have made a positive impact in the overall development of education, agriculture, communication, drinking water, housing, health and sanitation. Initiatives have also been taken at Gram Panchayat and Block Levels to create awareness among them on different development schemes so that they can reap the benefit out of it and become prosperous.

The Bhumias have become one of the most progressive tribes in the undivided district of Koraput. Particularly in the field of agriculture now they are using chemical fertilizers, pesticides, improved seeds and modern techniques. They have proved themselves by improving their economic conditions through various special programmes lunched by government from time to time.





**Scheduled Castes & Scheduled Tribes Research and Training Institute
CRPF Square, Bhubaneswar - 751003**

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

Telephone : 0674-2563649/2561635

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