

Omanatya



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FOREWORD

According to their legendary tradition, their ancestor served as a minister (Amatya) in the royal council of lord Shri Ram at Ayodhya and after Shri Ram went to heaven, there was no one to look after them, so they took to agriculture for sustenance. Now they are popularly called Omanatyo, Amanatya, Omanaito, Omaito and wear sacred threads at the time of marriage remembering their glorified ancestry.

They are a small and distinct tribal community of Odisha mainly concentrated in districts of Koraput and Nowarangpur. Their total population in the State was 23 364 and their level of literacy was 21.20% in 2001 Census. They speak Odia language.

Though they live in heterogeneous villages, they reside in separate wards maintaining their separate cultural identity. They construct their houses in a linear pattern in clusters leaving a wide open space as village-street. Their women adorn themselves with varieties of ornaments.

They live in a close-knit society with intimately bonded kin groups who help each other at the time of need. They prefer to marry their maternal uncle's daughter. Like other tribes, they pay the bride price for acquiring a bride.

They are settled cultivators. They carry out intensive agriculture using simple implements and grow a variety of cereals, pulses, oil seeds, vegetables and also tobacco by taming the undulated terrain. They make their own ploughs and other agricultural tools. Besides, like the neighbouring tribes, they also collect minor forest produce, go for occasional hunting and fishing to supplement their livelihood.

Typically being a tribe, they worship their deities very dedicatedly, observe rituals and festivals round the year and enjoy these occasions with song, dance and music. Though in these days changes have taken place in their way of life, they have still maintained the core of their culture.

This photographic documentation of their life style is a part of the series on the Tribes of Orissa. Dr A.B. Ota, Director and Shri A.K. Gomango, Deputy Director of SCSTRTI have worked hard for preparing this colourful booklet. I thank them sincerely and hope that interested readers will find this literature useful for looking at the tribal culture of Odisha.

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OMANATYA



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INTRODUCTION

OMANATYA also called as Omanaty, Amanatya, Omanaito, Omaidto is a numerically small Scheduled Tribe of Odisha. They are an Odia speaking cultivating tribe largely concentrated in south Odisha.



The name "Omanatya" is derived from the popular traditional name, *amanatya*, or *amatya* meaning a minister in the ancient Indian principality. According to their legends they claim that their ancestor was a minister in the royal council of lord Shri Ram at Ayodhya and after Shri Ram went to heaven, there was no one to look after them, so they took to agriculture for sustenance.





The community is divided into two endogamous sections called *bodo* (big) and *sano* (small). The latter is said to be the illegitimate child of the former by Bhotoda, Gond or other community women.

Population & Concentration

They are mainly concentrated in districts of Koraput and Nowrangpur. According to 2001 census their total population in the State was 23 364, out of which 11 692 were males (50.04%) and 11672 (49.96%) were females. Their level of literacy according to 2001 census was 21.20% out of which male literacy is 39.02% and female literacy is 10.20%. The sex ratio was 998 females for 1000 males.



Dress and Ornaments

Their dress pattern resembles that of their neighbouring castes. Males wear dhoti, lungi, banian and shirts etc. where as women use both handloom and mill made saris with saya and blouse.

Females also adorn themselves with varieties of coloured bead and coin necklaces like, kanthimali, sukimali, adhulimali and takamali. They wear gold or brass nolis and phulis in the ears, kanphul in their earlobes, phasia in their ear helix, dandi, guna in their nasal septum, a silver armlet (tad) in their arms, khadu and glass bangles in their wrists, antador in waist and pahud, painri and godabala in their ankle and jhuntia and pauji in their leg finger and dimsui, chipna and mundaphul over their hair. Poor among them use ornaments made of brass and aluminium, by purchasing from local market but well to do females wear silver and gold ornaments designed by the local goldsmiths.





Young girls and married women wear coloured glass bangles. Tattooing (jhonti) done by their own women artisans in the past is now out of fashion. The men also wear nolis in their ears.





SETTLEMENT & HOUSING



The Omanatya live in heterogeneous villages keeping socio-economic ties with other communities. They usually live in separate hamlets by maintaining their cultural identity through traditional pattern of life while keeping distance from other ethnic groups.





Their settlements are usually located on hill slopes or foothills where water sources like perennial hill streams are flowing to provide them drinking water. They construct their houses in a linear pattern in clusters leaving a wide open space as village-street.

Their houses are made with mud wall and floor and roof thatched with piri grass or country made tiles (khopar). The walls and floor of the houses are plastered with cow dung paste and the walls are beautifully decorated by plastering its borders with red soil. The house has verandahs both in front and back which is plastered with black soil. It consists of two rooms and has no windows for ventilation. The bigger one at the entrance is usually used as living room and to store their grains whereas the other one is used as kitchen. In one corner of their rear verandah they construct a small shed to accommodate their livestock.





They possess scanty household assets like some aluminum pots, tin lamps and lanterns; mats, winnowing fan, bamboo baskets, earthen wares and gourd vessels which they keep in the kitchen near their hearth. They hang their clothes, on a bamboo pole. Their hunting weapons like bows, arrows, spears and axes are also hung on the walls of the living room. Their agricultural implements such as hoes, ploughs and yokes are kept at the front verandah. At the entrance of their living room they keep their wooden mortar and pestle (*paurani*) for husking the grains. They keep a stone disc on their courtyard to grind the spices.



SOCIAL LIFE



The tribe is divided into two endogamous sections i.e. Bado (big) and Sano (little or small) which again is divided into a number of exogamous totemistic septs (*bansa*) such as; *bagh* (tiger), *nag* (cobra), *kachhap* /*kachhima* (tortoise), *sua* (parrot), *kumuda* (pumpkin), *kukur* (dog), *mankar* (monkey), *dudh* (milk), *sila* (stone), etc. They use surnames like Omanatya, Pradhani, Pujari, Majhi, Pakhna and Choudhury.





Their family- the basic unit of their social organization is mostly nuclear, patrilocal, patriarchal and patrilineal. Few cases of extended families or joint families are found in their society which gradually breaks down after marriage of sons. A family having no male issues adopts a *gharjoian* (resident son-in-law) or any male heir who later on enjoys the same rights and privileges as a son.



LIFE CYCLE

Pregnancy & Child birth

During 7th month of pregnancy they observe pre-delivery ritual *sukhaprusab puja* by offering arua rice, egg, country wine (*mohuli*) and tobacco (*nasa*) for easy delivery and to avert ill omens. The pregnant woman is tabooed to visit crematoria, exposure to lunar and solar eclipses etc.





They engage a midwife (sutrani) from their own community to assist the mother for easy delivery of the child. The naval chord is cut off using a knife and disposed off outside the doorstep (uchhana) wrapped with siali leaves and the pit is covered with a stone.

The sutrani continues to stay with the mother to take care of the mother and the new born baby till the purificatory rite is completed. During this time fire set in a broken earthen ware (entudi) is ignited and to keep the new born baby warm.



Birth pollution continues till the naval cord is dried and dropped. After that the purificatory rite haudibaulu /handibaura is observed. They pair their nails, clean their house with water and polish the floor and walls using cow-dung paste. All the used earthen wares are thrown away and replaced with new ones. The baby and the mother are given a ceremonial bath.





Their traditional priest *Disary* presides over the purificatory rite. He collects mango barks and after grinding and mixing it with water he sprinkles it over the family members and inside the house for purification. During birth pollution the family is tabooed to observe rituals and festivals and to offer cooked food to others.



On the evening of the ninth day, they observe the name giving ceremony conducted by the *Disary* through the rice divination method uttering the names of the ancestors of the family. After this the tonsure ceremony and the first cereal feeding ceremony are conducted on this day. Ear piercing and nose piercing is conducted after the baby attains one year of age.





Puberty

The community observes puberty rite (*yubatman*) for adolescent girl attaining her first menarche. The girl is segregated in an isolated room for a period of seven days during which she is looked after by an experienced woman of her lineage and she is tabooed to look or talk to the male persons.



On the dawn of the eighth day, the girl accompanied by her girl friends goes to the nearest hill stream, where she takes purificatory bath anointing oil and turmeric paste and wears new clothes presented by her parents. The villagers and relatives also present new cloths and cosmetics to the girl. In the evening the family hosts a non vegetarian feast with country liquor.





Marriage

The boy is considered adult when his moustache grows. Then a bride is sought for him. Cross-cousin marriage being the general rule, a man has the first claim to the maternal uncle's daughter in marriage.



Adult marriage and monogamy is common among the Omanatya. They regard marriage, arranged through negotiation is most prestigious mode of acquiring a spouse. Other modes of marriages are by service, by capture, by elopement and by service which are very rare. Polygyny is not altogether ruled out and resorted to where the first wife is barren. The custom of bride price (jhola) is prevalent and is paid both in cash and kinds. Junior levirate, junior sororate, remarriage of widow, widower and divorcee are permitted in their society.





In negotiation marriage, groom's parents visit bride's home with some sweetmeats to putforth the marriage proposal. If the proposal is accepted their priest disari fixes an auspicious day on which a mahal keria (mediator) is sent to the bride's home with some sweets and some money as a presentation to the friends of the bride after which the bride price (jholla) is fixed which amounts a jar of country liquor, some rice, paddy, bangles, a clothe for the bride's mother and one for each unmarried sister and the marriage proposal is finalized.



On the wedding day, the bridegroom is conducted to bride's village in a procession.

On the marriage alter their traditional priest the disari links the fingers of bride with the groom together in marriage tie, while the women throw rice smeared with turmeric water over them.

Then the newly married couple is dressed up in new clothes presented by the father-in-law. The bride's party hosts a feast along with country liquor and the marriage festival is celebrated elaborately amidst dancing and singing.





The next day the bride is led to the groom's house accompanied with her friends and relatives. At the village entrance, the groom's mother sprinkles turmeric water over the newly wedded couple. The *disari* ties the married couple with the cloth ends; after which they go around seven times the sacred poles before entry into the home.



The next day they observe kado festival, in which mud and turmeric water are thrown around by their kinsmen, guests and relatives, and after that they bath in the stream. Then the bride is carried to home on the shoulder of the groom. The groom's family hosts marriage feast to kinsfolk, guests and relatives.





In their society a system of pseudo marriage is prevalent in which the girl is married to a mahul tree post adorned with vermilion, kajal, etc and tied with seven sheaves of turmeric and mango leaves placed in the courtyard. The bride is brought to the pandal. The marriage ceremony ends by pouring water on the mahul post, which is held tightly by the women. Then a feast is hosted. No stigma is attached to the girl.



Divorce

Divorce is permitted and either party can divorce his/her spouse for the reason of mis-understanding or maladjustment in conjugal life, cruelty, extra-marital relationship, alcoholism, poor maintenance, suffering from serious diseases, impotency or barrenness etc.



Divorce cases are adjudicated by their community council. After divorce, taking food and water from each others house is tabooed. If wife divorces the husband, repayment of bride price is obligatory. No other divorce compensation is allowed.





Death

They practice both burial and cremation to dispose off their dead. In case of unnatural deaths occurred by snake bite, tiger attack, small pox, pregnancy and child birth, suicide, accident and premature death of small children the corpses are thrown away in the jungle, piercing an iron nail near the heart, to be devoured by the wild beasts, as they believe that the departed souls might have some unfulfilled desires and in order to fulfill those, they might be transformed into evil spirits or ghosts and cause harm to family members and villagers.



The death news is sent first to the deceased's sister's house and after that to all other relatives. After all the relatives and kinsfolk assemble, the dead is anointed with turmeric paste and castor oil and bathed. After that they cover it with a new cloth and the pal bearers belonging to their own community carry the dead to the crematoria placing it on a cot with all the deceased's personal materials like used utensils umbrella, walking stick and some tobacco leaves etc. During cremation they place the corpse in sleeping posture keeping the head towards north. After



Mourning continues for ten days and the family does not cook food and pursue their profession during this period. Their kinsfolk provide food for the bereaved family. During this period relishing on non-vegetarian foods, worshiping of deities, observance of rituals and festivals, sexual union and offering food and water to others are tabooed.

At the end of the pollution period the bereaved family members shave and replace the earthen cooking pots with new ones. On the eleventh day, the purification ceremony is observed with a community feast.





LIVELIHOOD



Settled cultivation is the mainstay of their subsistence economy. It is supplemented by wage earning, animal husbandry, forest collection, hunting, fishing and khali stitching etc.





They prefer to cultivate paddy in their wet lands located near the hill slopes, irrigated by perennial hill streams. They also raise sugarcane, tobacco, *padadhan* (hill paddy), maize, pulses like *kandul*, *biri* (black gram), *kolthi* (horse gram), kating, oil seeds such as *tila* (nizer), *rasi* and grow minor millets i.e. *ragi*, *kueri*, *kangu*, *janna*, spices like ginger and turmeric in their high and dry lands.





They grow chilly, onions, potatoes, garlics *jhudung*, *baragudi*, *lau* (gourd), *kumuda* (pumpkin), *kakudi* (cucumber), *patalghanta* (tomato), *jhata* (pea), brinjal, *saru* (colacasia), ladies finger and green leaves in their kitchen garden.





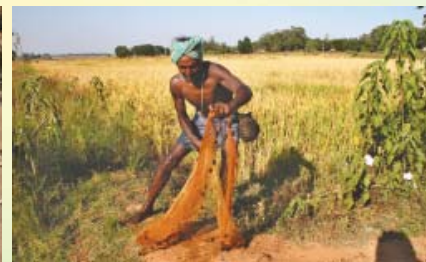
They rear cow, buffalo, goat, sheep, poultry but not pigs in their houses. They are fond of rearing bullocks.



They collect varieties of seasonal forest produce like edible roots and tubers, fruits, green leaves, *baunsa karadi*, mashrooms, honey, *jhuna*, lac, salap juice, *salap kanda* and varieties of wild medicinal herbs from the jungle throughout the year. Women contribute substantially in the field of cultivation, animal husbandry, fishing, besides their household chores.



They also carry out fishing and occasional hunting. They make their own ploughs and agricultural tools. They also own the *barsi*, screwdriver, sickles, plough, *ankudi*, *kodi*, *kodal*, *katuri*, etc. Their implements include cane baskets, rope, string cots, knife, storing pots made of straw and other earthenware vessels, small fishing nets and traps, including bows and arrows for hunting purposes.





Food habits
Omanatya are non vegetarians. Rice and ragi are their staple cereals. They relish on meat, fish, pork, chicken and eggs etc. Both men and women consume alcoholic drinks and smoke handmade cigarettes.



RELIGIOUS BELIEFS & PRACTICES





Omanatya profess Hinduism with admixture of animism. They worship all local Hindu gods and goddesses and observe all Hindu festivals. Their pantheon includes *thakurani*, *chamaria devta*, *dangerdevta* and many other deities of nature. Their household deity, *istadevi* is installed in a corner of their kitchen and is worshiped by females.



They believe in existence of benevolent and malevolent spirits and ghosts which they think cause diseases and mishaps. In order to gratify these evil ones they resort the help of local witch doctor called *gunia*.



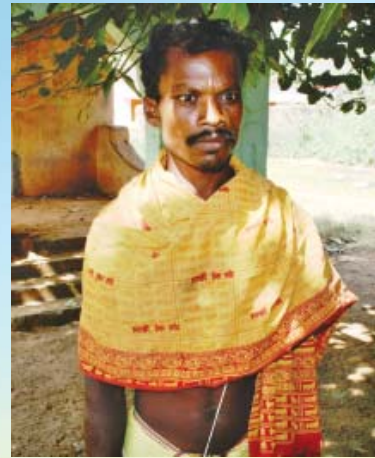
Their major festivals are *kandul yatra*, *akhi muthi* in Baisakh, *gamha, amus* in Sravan, *dhan nua/nuakhia, guluchinua*, in Bhodua, *dasara* in Asin, *diwali, bali jatra* in Kartik, *laxmipuja* in Magusira, *puspunia* in Pusa, *magha jatra* in Magh, *holi* in Phagun, *dangar puja* and *mahulnua, chait paroba, amnua, bisu sikar* and *sarhul* in Chaitra.





Pujari and *disari* are their sacred specialists who perform their family and community rituals. At marriage, a *Omanatya* assumes the sacred thread for the rest of his life.

They have preserved their rich oral tradition of folk songs such as *chait parab geet*, *kutni geet* and their folk dance i.e. *junia nach*, *chera chera nach* which they perform on various festive occasions like wedding ceremony, *pusa punia*, *chait parab* etc. Both men and women sing and dance with the tune of music provided by *Dom* musicians.



SOCIAL CONTROL



The *Omanatya* has its own traditional community council both at village level and in regional level to handle their customary affairs. The village council is headed by *naik*, and the regional council (*Desh*), by the *bhat naik/kul naik*. The other office bearers are *pujari* and *disari*, and a messenger (*barik*) who is appointed from *Dom* community. The offices of *naik*, *bhat naik/ kul naik*, *pujari* and *disari* are hereditary where as the post of *barik* is through nomination.





The community council arranges meetings to settle social disputes and deals with cases of excommunication, for getting sores, causing go-badha (cow death) or kidnapping of girls from other communities and adjudicates cases pertaining to theft, rape, incest, premarital pregnancy, family disputes, and partition of ancestral property and divorce affairs.

The community council is empowered to punish the guilty by cash or can take penal action like excommunication for breaking social norms and the offender may return to the society by offering a feast. It also organizes their rituals, festivals and community feast.





CHANGE & DEVELOPMENT

Like many tribal societies in India, the society of Omatyia is in a state of flux for the rapid changes at the macro level that the country witnessed since the early nineties. They are also influenced by it and therefore changes are witnessed in their every walk of life. One can find these changes in their social, political, cultural, economic and religious spheres.



While the benefits of globalisation process have largely accrued to the urban sector growth the tribal and rural sector has not been left behind. They are experiencing change in their life style, aspirations and value orientation



Various developmental programmes introduced by government to uplift the tribals to bring the tribals to the mainstream have effected planned changes in the way of life of the Omatyia. As bulk of their population is concentrated in Tribal Sub Plan area of South Orissa, their development aspects are being looked after by various development agencies like DRDA, ITDA etc.

They need the development in situ and attainment of sustainability through optimum utilisation of resources so that they donot become victims of negative impact of change and live with the pride of their cultural identity.



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