

MIRDHA



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2017

FOREWORD

Considered to be an endogamous section of Kisan tribe, Mirdha is now a separate Scheduled Tribe in Odisha enlisted as "Mirdhas". Etymologically, the term 'Mirdha' means 'head collie'. Since the people are expert earth workers, they are called 'Koda' or 'Kuda' in Angul, Sambalpur and Bolangir districts. But in Sundergarh district they are known as Mirdha. Numbering about 76, 000 persons as enumerated by Census 2011, they are largely concentrated in Anugul, Sambalpur, Bargarh and Bolangir districts of western Odisha.

The Mirdhas identify themselves as 'Kunhar' and speak a Dravidian tongue "Kun Boli", the mother tongue of Kisan. Not only in language but also in their other socio-cultural traits the Mirdhas show a greater similarity with the Kisan.

Their traditional occupation is earth digging. They are hired for digging of tanks, ponds, wells, plinth etc. and also for construction works. Besides, they take up agriculture, animal husbandry, seasonal forest collection as their supplementary source of livelihood.

Like other tribes they acquire bride for marriage by negotiation, capture, elopement and service. The girls and boys enjoy ample freedom in selecting their mates. Their society permits polygyny, levirate and sororate type of marriages and divorce for marital incompatibility and mal-adjustment in deserving cases.

They have the cult of ancestor worship and besides that, they propiate a number of deities of their own. Because of prolonged culture contact with the neighbouring castes, they have adopted many Hindu deities into their pantheon and observing many local and regional Hindu festivals apart from their own.

In recent times, due to multifarious development interventions, both by the Government and Non-Government agencies, the Mirdhas are undergoing a phase of transition. But they are struggling hard to retain their time tested values, customs and traditions against the onslaught of modernity.

I extend my heartiest thanks to Dr. A.B. Ota, IAS, Commissioner-cum-Director, Shri S.C. Mohanty, Consultant (R&P) and Shri B. Chinara, former Research Assistant of SCSTRTI who have laboriously conceived and produced this colorful photo handbook.

I hope this book will be interesting and useful for the researchers, tourists, academicians, laymen and everyone who are inquisitive to know about our tribal brethren as well as understand, admire and appreciate their simplicity and genuinity.

Commissioner-cum-Secretary
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MIRDHA



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IDENTITY

Out of 62 Scheduled Tribe communities of Odisha, Mirdha is one. Etymologically, the term 'Mirdha' implies "head collie". The Mirdha people are expert earth workers. Mostly they are engaged in the work of digging and carrying earth for which they are known as Koda or Kuda in Sambalpur and Bolangir districts but in Sundergarh district they are known as Mirdha. Some researchers are of the opinion that Mirdha is a section of Kisan tribe and Mirdha, Kisan, Koda/Kuda are offshoots of a common ethnic stock.



Population and Concentration:

The Mirdhas are largely distributed in Anugul, Sambalpur, Bargarh, Bolangir, Keonjhar and Sonepur districts of Odisha. According to 2011 census the total population of Mirdhas in Odisha is 75,940 including 37,757 males and 38,183 females registering a favourable sex ratio of 1011 females per 1000 males. Between 1991 and 2001 censuses, their population has registered a growth rate of 4.62% and between 2001 and 2011 the growth rate is phenomenal i.e., 135.26%. This has happened due to enumeration of a large number of people of the tribe who are known as Koda or Kuda after their inclusion in ST list of Odisha in 2002-03 as synonym of Mirdhas.

Literacy

Their literacy rate in 2001 was 51.17% and it has risen to 62.31% in 2001. The male and female literacy that was leveled at 67.70% and 34.49 %, respectively in 2001 has increased to 73.53% and 51.27% respectively indicating a substantial rise in female literacy- a positive indication of development.





Language:

The Mirdha people identify themselves as 'Kunhar' and speak "Kun Boli", the language of Kisan. Not only in language but also in their socio-cultural traits, they show a greater similarity with the Kisan. Besides their "Kun Boli" language, now most of them are conversant with the regional language Odia.



Physical Characteristics

They are of medium to tall stature having oval to square-shaped faces with a broad nose, thick lip, well developed zygomatic bones and dolichocephalic head. They also possess straight or wavy hair with a dark complexion. Their chins are narrow with a little prognathism.



Dress and Ornaments:

In dress pattern the Mirdhas are very simple and similar to those of Kisan, Matya and Oraon tribes. The women usually wear traditional costumes like small coarse sarees and the male folk use "dhoti" hand woven by the neighbouring weaving community known as "Ganda". But at present the Mirdha men use modern dresses like trousers, shirts and banyans and women use sarees with petticoat and blouse. The Mirdha women also adorn themselves with various ornaments like earrings (Gunthia, Jhala), nose ring (Guna, Naka Pukti), neckband, bead necklace (Khagla, Gunjamali) etc.



SETTLEMENT AND HOUSING

The Mirdhas live in multi-ethnic villages where they dwell in separate hamlets maintaining their socio-cultural identity. The arrangement of houses in a Mirdha settlement follows no fixed pattern. In some settlements the houses are arranged in a linear fashion but in some other settlements the houses are clustered together or sparsely distributed in an irregular fashion. The pattern of housing is also not the same throughout the locality.



For selection of a new site whether suitable or unsuitable for making new houses, they perform a ritual. At the selected site they keep seven grains of rice (*arua chaula*) covered with a *pippal* leaf. In the following morning it is observed whether the grains are disturbed or remained the same as are kept. If it is found to be disturbed, the site is considered to be inauspicious and if it is found undisturbed, the site is considered to be suitable for construction of a new house.

Houses are made on a rectangular ground plan. Each house consists of two rooms; one is used as bed room- cum- store room where in one side of the room they keep their agricultural produce and the other one is kitchen room. Besides these two rooms, usually a small shed is constructed for the cattle and fowl at the backside of the house. They also have a small kitchen garden where they grow a variety of fruits and vegetables for domestic consumption.







The walls of the house are made of bamboo mats or dried twigs thickly plastered with mud. The roof of the house is thatched with straw or Naria tiles known as *jhikar*. RCC roofed houses are very rare. The rooms of the houses are attached with one door and windows are conspicuously absent in the house but small windows are also found in few houses.



Household Articles:

The household possessions of the Mirdhas are very few and reflect their economic backwardness. As they are expert earth workers and mostly employed in the work of digging and carrying of earth, in almost all houses, they keep spade (*kodi*) and crowbar (*gauti*) for digging and bamboo basket (*dola*) and carrying pole (*bhara*) for carrying the earth. Besides these, they keep utensils made of clay or aluminum pots, plates of different sizes for their use at home and hearth. They keep bamboo baskets of various sizes for storing food grains. They also have stone implements like the grinding stone (*sila*). The other household implements are different agricultural implements like plough, yoke, leveler, sickle, etc. They also have different types of fishing and hunting implements such as bird traps, rabbit traps and nets, fishing traps and nets, bow & arrow etc. The other household articles are ropes, string cots, wooden cots, broom sticks, winnowing fans etc.



LIVELIHOOD

The traditional occupation of the Mirdhas is to work as earth diggers as they are expert in this work. The men do digging work and women assist in carrying soils. Side by side, they also depend upon agriculture as their secondary source of livelihood. Mirdha land owners grow rice, millets and other cereals and pulses on their own land while the landless people are employed as agricultural labourer. The Mirdhas grow different types of vegetables in their kitchen garden for their own consumption and sell the surplus in nearby markets. Usually, they grow pumpkin, brinjal, green pea, tomato, onion etc in their kitchen gardens.





Like other tribal communities the Mirdhas prefer to domesticate cows, bullocks, buffaloes for agricultural work and transportation. They also raise poultry, goats and sheep for sacrificial purpose in rituals and festivals and also for their own consumption.

To supplement their food basket and earn extra income, they go to the forest to collect minor forest produce like edible roots and tubers, *sal* leaves and seeds, *mahua* flowers, fruits etc as well as fire wood. They also make leaf cups and plates from the *sal* leaf and sell those in nearby market. Occasionally they also go for hunting and fishing to supplement their food. Now-a-days, a little change is also marked in their occupation. Some of them are employed in private and government sectors and some are engaged in small business.





Food Habits:

Rice is their staple food which is supplemented by the dish of vegetables, green leaves, edible roots and tubers, mushrooms collected from nearby forest. They cook food with *tole* oil and *sargi* oil which are extracted from *mahua* and sal seeds respectively. Usually, they take meals thrice a day. In the early morning they take watered rice with salt, green chili and fried green leaves and vegetables and in lunch and dinner they take boiled rice with a side dish of *dal*, green leaves or vegetables. Like other tribal

communities they also prefer to eat non-vegetarian foods prepared out of chicken, mutton, eggs and fishes. Besides their daily intake of food, they also prepare and enjoy special foods like cakes of different types and different non vegetarian items on festive occasions.

The Mirdha male folk enjoy drinking the country liquor like rice beer, mahua liquor and date palm juice (*tadi*). Besides, they also prefer to smoke and chew tobacco.



SOCIAL LIFE

Mirdha tribe is divided into different clans like Minj, Bahala, Lakada, Panna, Wada, Matia and Kinda etc. Each clan has a totem of man and animals to which the clan members ascribe their origin. These clans are exogamous in nature. Marital ties between families of the same clan members are strictly prohibited as they believe that they are related to each other as brothers and sisters. There exists a strong sense of reciprocity among all the members of each clan.

The family in Mirdha community is an important social unit. It is small in size and composed of two

to four members. Their family type is mostly nuclear, patrilocal, patrilineal and monogamous. Few cases of extended families and polygynous families are also found. Usually after marriage, the son leads a separate family life with his newly married wife. Father is the main authority of a family. He receives the highest respect and exercises power in all family affairs. The mother plays an important role in the process of socialization and is regarded as the main economic asset of the family. All major decisions pertaining to marriage and other rituals are made in a joint consultation of wife and husband.



Life Cycle Rituals:

Pregnancy and Child Birth:

The birth of the child in a Mirdha family brings an immense pleasure among the family members. The Mirdha society prefers the birth of son as he will continue their family line. During the pregnancy period the care of the mother is taken by the family members. She observes some taboos and restrictions regarding her food and movements.

Usually, the birth of the child takes place in a corner of the living room and an experienced woman of their tribe assists in the delivery. After the birth of the child, she cuts the umbilical cord with a knife and buries it along with the placenta in a pit in the backyard of the house. During the post delivery period, the mother observes restrictions in her diet and takes vegetable soup and boiled rice.





Birth pollution is observed for seven days by the family members. On the seventh day, the purificatory rite is observed. On this day the house and its surroundings are cleaned and smeared with a mixture of cow dung and water. On the 21st day of the child birth the final purificatory rite is performed when a final cleaning of the house, clothes and utensil is done. The mother cuts her nails, takes a complete bath and takes *tulsi* (*Osimum Sanctum*) leaves with water for her purification. The child is also given a bath.

On this day, the name giving ritual is celebrated in which the child is given a name by the father or grandfather. The name is selected through the process of rice divination. At the time of name giving two grains of rice are dropped into turmeric water with uttering of the names of dead ancestors, from paternal and maternal sides. When both the grains float and meet each other, the name being uttered at that time is given to the child. After naming, both the grains of rice and the naval cord that has already been cut are buried together under the doorway to the bedroom. Some *kusuna* (rice beer) is also mixed with it. On the eve of the name giving ritual all the kith and kin are invited and a mini feast is hosted by the child's family.



Puberty:

In Mirdha society when a girl attains puberty no restriction is imposed on her. Even no seclusion taboos are observed during subsequent menstruations. The whole affair goes unnoticed and there is no formal recognition of such an important critical stage of the life cycle.

Marriage:

Marriage is an important event in the life cycle of the Mirdhas. Mostly, they prefer adult marriage and monogamy. Several forms of marriage are practiced in Mirdha society like marriage by negotiation, marriage by capture (*jhinka*), marriage by elopement (*udulia*) and marriage by service. Besides these, sororate and levirate marriages are also in vogue to some extent. The girls and boys in Mirdha society enjoy due freedom in selecting their spouses.

Out of the above forms of marriage, marriage by negotiation is the most common and prestigious form of marriage. This form of marriage is negotiated and finalized by



mediators locally known as '*kanihra*' on whom both the bride and grooms party depend to finalize all the details of the marriage until it is finished.

The custom of bride price is also prevalent and it is finalized through negotiation by the mediator. It is paid both in kind and cash. Payment in cash varies from Rs.4/- to Rs.6/- and the payment in kind includes a pair of dhotis and two pair of

sarees. But now-a-days, the amount of cash has increased. The month of Magha (February) is believed to be the suitable month and the days considered auspicious to conduct marriage are Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday.

The parents of the groom usually take the whole responsibility to organize the wedding ritual. The different events of the marriage are enjoyed with dancing, singing and feasting in the village. Meat and *kusuma* liquor are lavishly served to guests, friends, relatives and villagers on these occasions. A few days after the marriage, the married son is separated from his parents and establishes a new residence in the same village.



Divorce:

The practice of divorce for marital incompatibility and mal-adjustment is also socially approved. Divorce takes place on the grounds of adultery, mal-adjustment, impotency, sterility and cruelty. The cases of divorces are finalized in their 'Jati Samaj'. Remarriage of divorcees is also socially permitted.

Death:

The Mirdhas practice both burial and cremation for the disposal of the corpses depending upon the socio-economic status of the family of the deceased. After the death of an individual, the news is disseminated to all kinsmen to assemble in the house of the deceased. The corpse is anointed with turmeric paste and covered with a new white cloth. Then it is carried to the cremation/burial ground on a cot by the kinsmen. Usually a pit in the size of 6' x 3' and about 4' deep is dug and the body is placed in south and north direction. Then the eldest son of the dead person throws first hand full of earth to fill up the pit and others follows him. Then ten to



twelve stone-slabs are laid over the pit in order to ward off Jackals and other carnivores. In case of cremation, the eldest son of the deceased lights the fire which comes from the hearth of the deceased.

Then pollution period is observed for nine days. They perform the purificatory rite in two stages in case of corpses disposed of by cremation. In the 1st stage, they observe the preliminary cleansing rite on the 3rd day of occurrence of death. On this occasion all the kin members go to the cremation ground and collect the ash of the dead person offering country liquor and rice to the spirit of the deceased. They throw all the personal belongings of the deceased into the nearby river or stream. After that all the family members take bath and return home. They prepare dry fish curry to offer to the deceased near the cremation ground and also host a feast to all the kith and kin.

On the tenth or twelfth day of death the second and final stage of purificatory rite both for cremation and burial cases is conducted. The eldest son goes to the cremation/burial ground with a small earthen pot filled with water. He cleans the ground, makes a small clay image and brings it home in a pot and buries it in his own house. Later, on the tenth day of Kartika (October-November) in the succeeding year of the death, the dead person's house is cleaned with cow dung and all the clothes and utensils used by the family members are washed. Then all the relatives cut hair and nails and take purificatory bath. Then a small feast is hosted by the family of the deceased for all the kith and kin.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

Like other tribal communities the Mirdha religion is mostly based on ancestor worship and they also believe in existence of different gods and goddesses. Maa Mangala Thakurani and Budha Devata are worshipped as their village deities. 'Kalo' is the sacerdotal head of the village, who officiates in the observance of all rituals and festivals. The post of Kalo is hereditary.

Today, because of prolonged culture contact with their caste neighbours, the Mirdhas have adopted some elements of Hinduism and worship all major Hindu gods and goddesses like





Radha Krishna, Shiva, Parvati, Hanuman, Ram, Maa Durga, Kali and others. Following the Hindu neighbours they are celebrating the Hindu festivals like Kalipuja, Janmastami, Holi, Dussera etc.

The Mirdhas still rely on their traditional magico-religious mode of treatment to cure diseases. When they suffer from any disease, they contact their traditional village shaman locally known as *kukuluku* for diagnosis and treatment. The shaman treats the patients by administering some herbal medicines combined with performance of some magico-religious practices. However, now-a-days, they are gradually going for modern health care in serious cases.

Festivals:

The Mirdhas, like other tribal communities, observe different festivals in the honour of different gods and goddesses. Most of their festivals revolve around the agricultural operations like sowing of seeds, harvesting of crops and eating of new rice and fruits. Some of the most important festivals observed by them are Akhaya Trutiya, Nuakhia, Dussera, Amba Nua Khia etc.

In the month of Baisakha (April - May), they observe the festival of Akhaya Trutiya. On this day they first sow seeds in their agricultural field. The main objective of this festival is to bring rain in proper times for better harvest. The next most important festival celebrated by the Mirdhas is the Nua Khia in the month of Bhadrab (August -

September). On this occasion newly harvested rice is taken by them for the first time after offering it to the village gods, goddesses and ancestors. All the kith and kin are invited to have a get-together and all share the dish of the newly harvested rice.

Like the Hindus, they also celebrate Dussera festival in the month of September-October. Another festival called Amba - Gundi or Amba Nua Khia is observed on the full moon day of Falguna (March-April). Before this festival they do not eat mangoes. On all the new eating ceremonies, they first offer the new food to appease their gods and ancestors and then they start eating.

The Mirdhas observe and enjoy all the festivals amidst their kith and kin. On these occasions they also sacrifice goat and fowl before gods and goddesses and prepare special dishes like different types of cakes, mutton and chicken that they enjoy along with country liquor. All these festivals are celebrated in accompaniment of their traditional form of dance and music.



Dance and Music:

The traditional dance and music are the main source of recreation of the Mirdhas. Their most colourful and popular dance is Dal-Khai dance. In this dance all the members of their community irrespective of age and sex can participate. They perform this dance in a semi-circular movement. During the dance two dance groups converse with one another singing the Dal-Khai song. They perform this dance with the tune of musical instruments like drums, *tamaka* and *mahuri*. Bodily movements and exposure are of great importance in this dance which is based on the love episodes of the Hindu deities, Radha and Krishna. This dance continues day and night uninterruptedly. In this dance the unmarried girls and boys get the opportunity of choosing their life partners.



SOCIAL CONTROL

The Mirdha socio-political structure is always democratic in spirit and the leaders are mostly traditional in nature. The traditional political council in Mirdha society is known as "Jati Samaj". The main function of this council is to enforce social control to maintain peace and order in the society. The "Jati Samaj" (traditional village council) is constituted of its chief called Sardar or Kotwar or Murda and other elderly members of the village. The post of Murda is hereditary. He presides over all the meetings in "Jati Samaj". While delivering justice and taking a decision in any dispute, he is assisted by other elderly members of the village. The decision of "Jati Samaj" at the village level is final and thus respected and obeyed by all Mirdha people.



The disputes like partition of family property, sale and mortgage of land, violation of customary marriage rules, divorce cases, violation of taboos, suspected cases of witch craft, and other kinds of sexual offences, physical assault and theft are settled in the "Jati Samaj".



Punishment given to the culprits also varies according to the gravity of the offences. Often the culprit is asked to bear the expenses of hosting a communal feast as penalty and sometimes the offenders who are found guilty of serious violations of customary rules are ex-communicated. But now-a-days with the introduction of Panchayati Raj system and modern judiciary system, the effectiveness of the "Jati Samaj" is slowly fading. As such, the Mirdhas are approaching the police and court of law for settlement of disputes.



CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT

With the passage of time as well as their frequent contact with other castes and tribes, the Mirdhas have accepted new cultural elements and changed their way of life to a great extent. After independence the Mirdhas are listed as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) under the provisions of Constitution of India and enjoy all the protective, promotional and welfare benefits being provided by the Government for their all round development.








Now, they also enjoy various facilities like reservation in the public services, admission in the educational institutions, the public representation in the Parliament, Assembly and Panchayat Raj Institutions like Gram Panchayat (G.P.), Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad.

For their welfare as a tribal community, Government has been implementing various developmental programmes through different agencies like ITDA, DRDA, MADA, Cluster Approach Programmes, OSFDC and NGOs etc. These schemes and programmes have effected development in their education, agriculture, irrigation, horticulture, communication, health & sanitation, drinking water supply, electrification etc. Initiatives have been taken at G.P., Block and District levels to create awareness among them about different developmental schemes and programmes of the Government. Changes have been clearly marked in the occupational pattern, living pattern, food habits and dress pattern of the Mirdhas.

Mirdha Women SHGs have played a major role in uplifting their economic and social life. At the same time, these activities have also helped them to protect themselves from the exploitation of the unscrupulous Sahukars. Change in political backdrop, election system and introduction of local self government have ultimately helped them to emerge and promote new leadership among them. The impact of change is visible in all aspects of their life.





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