

# KOTIA



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# PREFACE

**K**otia is a small hill tribe of Odisha. They live in Koraput, Malkangiri, Phulbani and Kalahandi districts of southern Odisha and in the border areas of adjacent Andhra Pradesh. It is said that the ancestors of both Rana (a caste) and Kotia were sons of the same father but given birth by two separate mothers. Rana became superior to the Kotia, because Rana was employed as soldiers by the then king of ex-State of Jeypore.

Kotia speak a regional *Odia* language called *Desia* and some of them know Telugu. They live in the plains surrounded by forests. They are an endogamous community divided into a number of exogamous totemistic clans (*bansas*) and are identified by their clans used as surnames. In the past the Koita were a hunting and food gathering community. But now they are mainly settled and shifting cultivators who also depend on wage and seasonal forest collections for livelihood.

Kotia profess Hinduism with admixture of animism. They worship all Hindu Gods and Goddesses and observe some Hindu festivals. *Mauli Munda* is their supreme deity who is installed under a *Kendu* tree in the village outskirts. *Betal Bhoirab* is their family deity. They also have the cult of ancestor worship. *Chaiti parab* is their major festival, observed during the month of *Chaitra* (March-April). For enforcement of their customary rules and maintenance of social order they have their own traditional tribal community council at the village level as well at regional level.

Now-a-days, their society and culture is undergoing transformation under the impact of planned change and modernization. Yet, in spite of the impact of modernization, the Kotia have, more or less, retained the core elements of their age-old traditional way of life, which distinguishes them from other tribal and non-tribal communities. But by all standards, they have remained socio-economically backward as compared to the mainstream communities.

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# KOTIA

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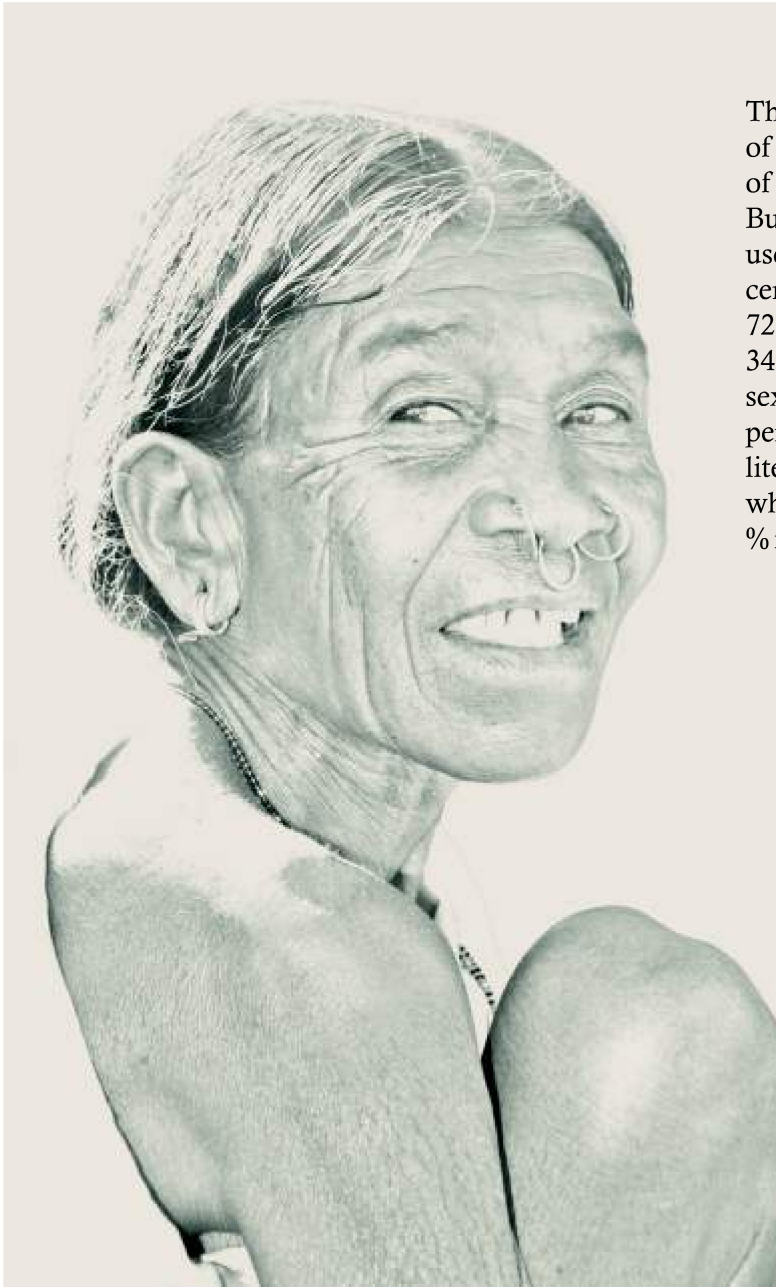
# IDENTITY

The Kotia also known as Kotia Paik and Kutia is numerically a small hill tribe inhabiting Koraput, Malkangiri, Kalahandi and Kandhamal districts of Odisha and in the border areas of adjacent Andhra Pradesh. They are one of the endogamous sections of Paika community who are known for their past history of military service under the then kings and feudal chiefs of south Odisha. Most of the Kotia are found in Mathili Police Station of Malkangiri district. In the Madras Census Report, (1901-1902:163) the Kotias are described as a section of Odia cultivators found mainly in Vizagapatnam agency and are identical with *Kotia Khonds*. But as per the opinion of J.K. Das (1961) the tribe is more allied to the Bhumias than the *Kutia Khonds*.





As regards their origin, the Kotia people opine that the ancestors of both Rana (a brother caste) and Kotia were sons of the same father but given birth by separate mothers. According to K.S. Singh (POI, Vol.III, P.621), "It is believed that their name has been derived from their place of origin, Kotapad in Orissa."



The Kotia have no separate language of their own and speak a corrupt form of local Oriya language called Desia. But some of them know Telugu. They use Odia script for writing. As per 2011 census the total population of Kotia is 7232 out of which male population is 3466 and that of females is 3766. The sex ratio among them is 1087 females per 1000 males. The percentage of literacy was 24.60% in 2001 census which remarkably increased to 44.36 % in 2011 census.



## DRESS AND ORNAMENTS

In the past Kotia men put on two pieces of napkins as their dress and women mainly worn three yard long traditional hand woven coarse sarees made by the local Dom weavers. Now-a-days the men are wearing clothes like *dhoti* with shirt /banyan and *lungi* and the women are wearing coloured mill-made clothes. They usually wear long saris when going out for marketing, visiting their relative's house and during festive occasions. Small children under five years of age go naked. Children above six years of age wear a narrow strip of loin cloth called *gochior koupin*.



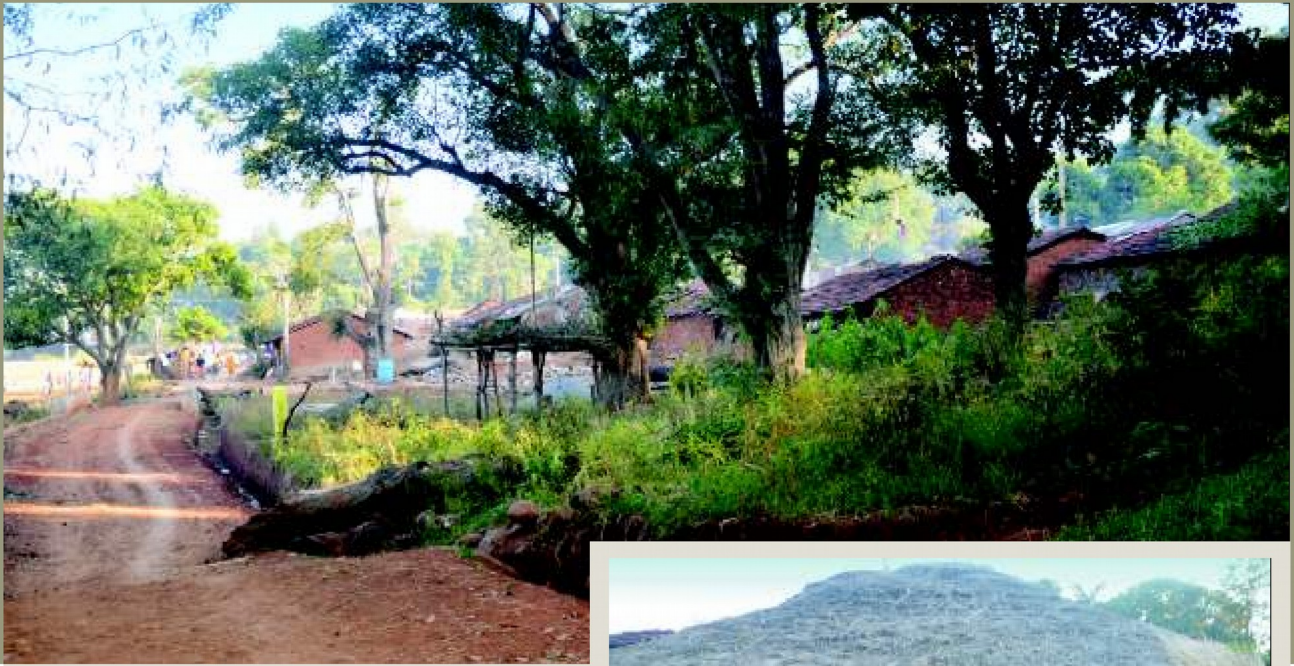
In these days, under the impact of modernity their dress pattern has changed. Kotia living in urban areas wear dresses like pants, shirts, frocks, blouse and petticoats etc. purchasing from the local market. The traditional ornaments of Kotia women are the *Kadu* and *Pahnri* made of brass or aluminum, which are now replaced by gold and glass bangles. *Nanguli* or nose ornaments are no longer used and have been replaced by the *Khanja* and *Phuli*. The *Nothu* and *Dandi* are mostly made of gold. The *Kala Sorisa mali* and *Nanpatti* are used as neck ornaments. They wear *Pahnri* on their ankle. Tattooing has become an old fashion and is not in vogue now-a-days. The sacred thread is worn by Kotia men at the time of marriage, but it is not compulsory to wear it later on. Perhaps they do not place so much sanctity on this sacred thread.





# SETTLEMENT AND HOUSING PATTERN





Most of the Kotia villages are situated in forest area near perennial hill streams which provides them drinking water throughout the year and they channel its flow to their crop fields for irrigation. Now many Kotia villages are electrified and individual consumers are provided domestic connection. Before construction of a new house, they worship *Matipadmini* or the earth goddess and consult with their traditional magico-religious functionary, *Disari* to determine the sanctity and suitability of the site. On the selected house site, a small peg of country liquor, *Mohuli* is placed and a little turmeric paste is kept on it. A chicken is sacrificed in honour of the earth goddess.





Kotia mostly have two-roomed houses. One room is used to store grains and the other is usually divided in to two parts by a mud wall; the smaller one is used as kitchen and larger one, as living room. An adjoining verandah is a common feature that is used for sitting and occasionally sleeping during summer and to provide shelter to their guests. The walls of the house are made with mud and cow dung, which is polished with red ochre paste. The floor and the courtyard are cleaned regularly by their women. They use bamboo, timber, mud and straw for house construction. Their house usually contains two doors, one in the front and the other in the rear.



They have limited household assets consisting of earthenware pots, aluminum and bronze vessels, wooden ladles, axes, sickles, leaf cups and plates and their hunting weapons such as axe, bow, arrow and traps etc.

# SOCIAL LIFE

Kotia is an endogamous community and divided into a number of exogamous totemistic clans (*bansas*) like *nag* (cobra), *honu* (monkey), *sukri*, *pangi* (kite), *dora*, *talab*, *majhi*, *godanga*, *khara*(sun), *nayak*, *khimundit*, *arlab*, *burudi*, *macha* (fish), *hantal*, *kurlati*, *tangul*, *guntha*, *anjar*, *khinbudi* (deer), *goripitta* (a bird), *killo/pulli* (tiger) etc. They use their clan name as their surname.

In Kotia community the family is exclusively nuclear patrilocal, patrilineal and patriarchal in structure. Father is the head of the family. After marriage of sons, the residence is patrilocal for a year or so and then the married couple establishes a separate household by constructing a new house of their own. The brothers help in building the new house. The landed property is not divided among the sons but cultivated jointly. Kotia men and women work hard in their farm land.



# LIFE CYCLE

## Pregnancy

Kotia consider pregnancy as a divine blessing as they think that some ancestor might take rebirth in their family. Restrictions are imposed on some food items and the movements of the pregnant woman. She is forbidden to eat molasses, bananas or sweets, sleep alone, travel in pitch dark night, touch a corpse, be exposed during lunar or solar eclipses and go near the cremation ground alone, lest she and the fetus in her womb might be affected fatally by the evil spirits.

## Child Birth

The pregnant woman continues her routine household chore still her labour pain starts. Child birth usually takes place in one of the living room, specifically arranged as a lying in chamber, into which entry of male members are prohibited. An experienced old woman of their own community assists the mother for easy delivery of the child. The naval cord of a male child is cut off using an arrow and of female child with a knife. The placenta is buried in the backyard of their house. After delivery of the baby, the mother and the infant are given bath in tepid water anointed with oil and turmeric paste. They administer an herbal medicine, *Pala Konda* (a tuber) to the mother with hot boiled rice and salt for quick relief of pain.



## Post Delivery Rituals

Birth pollution continues for twenty one days and after that both mother and baby are given a purificatory bath. Then they observe the purification ceremony (*handidharani*). The new born baby wears two black beaded strings, one in his/her neck and the other on waist to be saved from the evil spirits. After observance of the ritual the mother is allowed to preform her routine household chores. The name giving

ceremony is performed by their traditional priest *Disari*. No special feast is held, but the woman who has assisted in delivery is served with delicious foods as remuneration for her service.

When a newborn becomes six months old rice gruel is fed to the baby for the first time. The occasion is called *pejakhia*. Till this time the mother should avoid eating sour items and garlic. When the baby becomes one year old they observe the tonsure ceremony availing the services of a *Bhandari* (barber). This is known as *batabiba*. For his service the barber is remunerated with Rs.5/- in cash and a new cloth. A feast is given to the community members, relatives and friends who attend the ceremony with their presents in shape of rice and vegetables and gifts for the new born.



## Puberty Rite

Kotia observe puberty rite (*kanyauthani*) when a girl attains her first menarche. The pollution period continues for seven days. During the period she is segregated in an isolated room and prohibited to look or talk to the male persons. She eats rice and molasses only during these days. On the eighth day she accompanied by her girlfriends goes to the nearest hill stream and takes a purificatory bath anointing her body with turmeric paste and put on new clothes presented by her relatives and friends. The *Disari* purifies her by sprinkling ritualized water with flowers. Family deities are also worshiped on this occasion.





## Marriage

In Kotia society the marriage, arranged through proper negotiation is considered as ideal and prestigious: although this form of marriage is more expensive. For negotiation the groom's parents take the initial step and visit the bride's house accompanied by their Naik (traditional village chief) to put forth the marriage proposal. A few days after they proceed again to the bride's residence taking with them the items of bride price consisting of some *putis* of rice, a buck, a fowl, a saree with some cosmetics for the bride and finally put forth the marriage proposal. If the bride's father accepts the offerings then it is considered that the proposal is accepted and then on the third day after the acceptance of the bride price the marriage date is fixed in consultation with their traditional priest *Disari*. Generally they perform their marriage ceremonies during the months of Baisakh, Kartika, Magh or Phagun.

On the marriage day five persons from the groom's village go to the bride's house, carrying with them molasses and flattened rice and return in evening with the bride accompanied by her relatives, lineage members and girl friends to the groom's village singing their marriage folk songs. In an auspicious moment the *Disari* performs the wedding rites. The bride groom and the bride sit touching each other's feet concealed by a piece of cloth and the women sprinkle water drops over the couple. After that the hiding cloth is removed and women anoint the newly wedded couple with turmeric paste. A feast is given to the guests and all the relatives and lineage members celebrate the occasion by marry-making, drinking and dancing. Consummation of marriage takes place on the third day. After four days the new couple visits the bride's father's house and stay there for three days.





The other forms of marriage prevalent in Kotia society are marriage by capture (*Jhika*), by elopement (*Udulia*) or love marriage. In *Jhika* type of marriage, the girl is abducted forcibly by the boy who takes the girl to his house and obtains her consent for marriage which is very important without which the marriage will not be possible. When the father of the girl comes in search of his daughter, if the girl is willing to marry the boy, the father of the girl is presented with the bride price consisting of some rice, fowl and goat. Then their marriage is socially recognized.

*Udulia* marriage takes place when the boy and the girl fall in love and want to marry but the bride's parents do not agree or demand huge bride price which the groom's parents are unable to meet. In this situation the boy and the girl elope to a distant place and live together as husband and wife. After some time they return to groom's village. Getting the news, the girl's father visits to the boy's house with his villagers to demand the bride price. In a joint meeting of the villagers of both the sides the matter is settled and the bride price is paid in kinds of one putti of rice, a he goat, a fowl, a saree and some cosmetics for the bride to the girl's father. Thereafter, a non-vegetarian feast with country liquor is held in the girl's village in which both parties participate.

In Kotia society cross cousin marriage, junior levirate, junior sororate and also remarriage of widows, widowers and divorcees are permitted. When a married woman elopes with another man abandoning her husband then her new husband has to pay a penalty i.e. double the amount of expenses the former husband has incurred for his marriage to the concerned woman. This matter is also decided in their traditional community council.

## Divorce

In Kotia society divorce is permitted and either of the spouses can seek divorce on the grounds of maladjustment, impotency, barrenness, chronic sickness, cruelty, adultery, extramarital relationship, poor maintenance and laziness in performing daily economic pursuits and misbehavior in conjugal life. After divorce, the children are the liability of the father and the wife is only allowed to keep the breast feeding children for nourishment for which the husband has to pay some compensation to her. If the wife deserts her husband she gets no compensation. The divorce cases are settled in their traditional community council.





## Death Rituals

Kotia practice both cremation and burial to dispose of their dead. Their death rituals have some resemblance with those of their caste neighbours. In cases of deaths occurring due to small pox or cholera and deaths of children the corpses are buried. The dead body anointed with turmeric paste and oil is bathed in tepid water and placed in a bier. The pall bearers carry it to the cremation/burial ground. When the pall bearers reach the village outskirts the widow of the deceased breaks her bangles and return home after taking bath. The pall bearers place the dead on the pyre keeping its head towards east and face upwards and the maternal nephew sets fire on the pyre. After the cremation is completed all the participants take purificatory bath in nearest hill stream and return to the dead person's house where they sprinkle on their body sacred water mixed with mango leaves for purification. The pall bearers again visit the cremation spot where they make an image of the dead with rice flour and cover it up by a cloth smeared with water mixed with turmeric paste. In order to pacify the dead soul they place a pitcher filled with water having a small hole below, releasing drops of water over the idol, tied by ropes on three *Kendu* twigs planted around the spot.



Death pollution continues for eleven days. During this period, relishing on non-vegetarian food, observance of rituals and festivals, using oil, visiting sacred places, worshipping deities, giving alms to beggars and sexual intercourse are strictly tabooed for the bereaved family. They observe the final purificatory rite *dasa* or *buron* the eleventh day availing the services of their traditional priest, *Disari*. After the purificatory rites are completed the bereaved family hosts a non-vegetarian feast to lineage members, relatives, guests, and villagers in the evening.

# LIVELIHOOD

In the past the Kotia were a hunting and food gathering community but now-a-days they eke out their subsistence by shifting and settled cultivation and agricultural labour. They have small patches of wet lands around the hill stream basin and dry land in hill slopes where they produce different crops like early variety paddy (*padadhan*), *ragi*, *bazra*, *suan*, *minor millets like kangu*, *kosla*, *jawar*, oil seeds such as mustard, *tila*, *nizer*, pulses like black gram (*biri*), green gram (*mung*), horse gram (*kulthi*) etc. Besides that, they also possess small kitchen gardens in back side of their house where they grow varieties of vegetables like plantain, papaya, drumstick, brinjal, pea, tubers, gourd, pumpkin, cucumber etc. to meet their consumption needs and to sale the surplus in market for cash.





Besides agriculture, seasonal forest collection is their subsidiary occupation. From forest they collect fuel wood, seasonal edible fruits, roots and tubers, flowers (*Mohua* flower), seeds (*Mohua* seeds), fodders and grass to thatch their house, fibers for rope making, herbal medicines, honey, lac, mushrooms and green leaves and Sal leaves etc. from which they make leaf plate for household use and sale in market for cash. Women and grown up children participate in collection of forest produces. Women besides attending to their daily routine household chores contribute substantially in economic pursuits like cultivation, wage earning and forest collection etc. while helping for smooth management of the household.

## Food Habit

Kotias are non-vegetarians. Rice and ragi are their staple cereals which they take with pulses, vegetables and in lean season they live on fruits, roots and tubers like *pitakanda*, *darikanda*, *baliakanda* etc. collected from the nearby forest. Mango kernels are also collected and its gruel is taken at the time of food scarcity. They like to eat non-veg items prepared out of fish (*mass*), fowl (*kukuda*), goat (*cheli*), sheep (*menda*), forest animals such as squirrel (*tilmusu*), wild cat (*kada*) goat (*kotra*), rabbit (*kara*) and wild fowls (*dongor kukuda*). Dry fish and tortoise flesh are their favorite food. Eating pork, beef and buffalo meat is prohibited. They use *tola*, *kusum* and *alsi* oils as their cooking medium with onion, chillies, tamarind, turmeric and other species.

Both men and women are addicted to various alcoholic drinks such as *mahuli*, *pendum*, *landa*, *chauli* (rice beer) and *salap* (*sago* palm juice) etc. which they prepare at home or purchase from the local venders. They offer the drinks to their relatives, guests and deities in festive occasions to appease them. Both the sexes smoke handmade *picka* and *suta* or *bidi* and chew tobacco leave/ paste.



# RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

**Kotia religion** is animism which is amalgamated with some elements of **the religion** of the neighbouring castes. *Mauli Munda* is their supreme deity who is installed under a *Kendu* tree in the village outskirts. *Betal Bhatrab* is their family deity installed in a corner of their kitchen and worshipped by their females. Their Pantheon also includes *Nissaniguda* which according to their belief protects them from small pox and many other epidemics and is worshipped along with the family deity *Mauli Munda* in the month of *Chaitra* during observance of *Chaiti parab* festival by their traditional priest, *Disari*.



*Chaiti parab* is their major festival, observed during the month of *Chaitra* (March-April) on the date fixed by the *Disari*. During this festival they also observe the *Aam Nua* festival for the new eating of mango, offering it first to the deities. They observe new rice eating ceremony (*Nua Khai*) in the month *Sravana* (July-August) after the harvest of early variety of paddy. In the month of *Asadha* they observe the *Asarh Jatra* in which they gather all the domestic animals of the village in one place and worship the deity by offering animal sacrifice for the welfare of their animals.

As their religion is influenced by Hinduism to a great extent they worship Hindu deities like Lord Jaganath, Gupteswar, Lord Ganesh, Goddess Laxmi, Parbati, Saraswati etc. and also make pilgrimage to worship Lord Jaganath. They observe Hindu festivals like *Ramanavami*, *Raja*, *Gamha*, *Ganesh Puja*, *Ratha Yatra*, *Basanta Panchami*, *Dola*, *Holi* etc. with great reverence.



They believe in black magic and existence of ghosts and spirits among whom some are benevolent and some, malevolent who cause disaster in human life by their evil powers. In order to gratify the evil spirits the Kotia appease them with the help of their witch doctor by offering animal sacrifices along with country liquor at the time of crisis and also during festive occasions.



# SOCIAL CONTROL

Kotia have their own traditional tribal community council at the village level as well as in regional level to deal with their customary matters. The village council is headed by their secular head called *Naik* who is assisted by the priest-Pujari, witch doctor-Disari and the messenger called *Chalan*. The posts of *Naik*, *Pujari* and *Disari* are hereditary whereas the post of messenger is by selection. The *Naik*, *Pujari* and *Disari* are from their own community whereas *challan* is from Dom (SC) community and appointed for a term of one year or till he remains in confidence of the village elites and leaders. The *Chalan* gets remuneration in kinds like food grains for his services on annual basis which he has to collect from every Kotia household in the village.



In their community council sessions, cases of family dispute, theft, rape, molestation, misbehavior, marriage, bride price, divorce, adultery, violation of customary norms, partition of family property, intra village disputes are adjudicated. Verdicts are given upon unanimous decision based on the merits of the cases and the offender is awarded punishment accordingly which are final, the disobedience of which results in social excommunication. The inter village disputes are referred to their regional community council for adjudication and settlement. The members of their traditional community council are highly respected persons in the society.

# DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGE



In modern times due to planned change and modernization as well as their prolonged and close contact with their neighbouring tribes and castes, the Kotia society is undergoing a phase of transition. Different development works of the Government and non-government agencies has brought changes in their way of life. After Independence, various tribal welfare and socio-economic development programmes have been lunched which include legal aid, rehabilitation of economically poor, housing facilities, establishment of residential schools and hostels, introduction of modern agriculture, horticulture and irrigation, road communication etc. It has made some impacts in their life and living. Now they are using different types of modern gadgets like television, radio, mobile phone, motorcycle, watch etc. Many of their villages are electrified.





The Kotia are no longer isolated from the outside world. Yet, in spite of the impact of the forces of modernization, the Kotia have, more or less, retained the core elements of their age-old traditional way of life, which distinguishes them from other tribal and non-tribal communities. But by all standards, they have remained socio-economically relatively backward as compared to their non tribal counterpart.



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