



KORA

**Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes
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PREFACE

The Kora also known as Koda or Kuda is a little known numerically small Dravidian tribal community in Odisha. Ethnographers believe that ethnically Koras are akin to the Kisan and Mirdha tribes. They are mainly concentrated in Dhenkanal, Sambalpur and Keonjhar districts of Odisha. They are also conversant in local Odia language.

The name Kora, Koda, Kuda or Kura seems to be a generic name signifying the occupation of earth digging. Economically and occupationally, the Kora are noted for their traditional skills and specialization in digging tanks and doing other kinds of earth works. In course of time some of them have added the trade of catechu (*khaira*) making for which their neighbours called them Khaira or Khayra. But now-a-days, besides earth works, they depend on cultivation to earn their livelihood. Many of them are share croppers.

They are mainly distributed in the districts of Anugul, Dhenkanal and Nayagarh. Their habitat is located in hilly terrain of Dhenkanal district which slopes down towards the north of Keonjhar and Sambalpur districts. Like other tribes they are an endogamous community and are identified by their clans and surnames. They give importance to their '*Jatisabha*' which settles their disputes. Their religion is animism with admixture of elements of Hinduism. Goddess '*Istadevi*' (the Earth Goddess) is their Supreme deity.

Now-a-days, due to culture contact, modernization and development intervention their way of life is undergoing transformation. The traditional culture and value system of Kora are gradually losing their meaning to the young and educated Koras.

The photographic documentation of the life style of the Kora tribe is a part of the series on the Tribes of Odisha, published by SCSTRTI. Shri S.C. Mohanty, Former Joint Director and now Consultant (R&P) and Shri S.C. Pattnaik, Research Assistant of SCSTRTI have provided important input for this colourful booklet. Lastly I hope it would be useful for all those who are interested in the tribal culture of Odisha.

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IDENTITY

Kora also known as Koda and Kuda is one of the little known and numerically small tribe of Mundari group. (According to Risley, 1891) Kora are akin to the Kisan tribe and are also known as Kora -Kisan, Kuda-Kora. The Kora is derived from the word 'Kuda' which means 'digging of earth'. Some other ethnographers opine that they are basically Hindus who have been influenced by prolonged contact with the aboriginals. Russell and Haralal (1975: 300) believed that they belong to the *Oraon* tribe. Prof. U.C. Mohanty has the view that Kisan has "different names in different areas such as *Koda* in the districts of Sambalpur and Bolangir." Their traditional occupation "is digging and carrying of earth and hence they are known as *Koda*" (1964 : 181).



The name Kora, Koda, Kuda or Kura "seems to be a generic name signifying the occupation of earth digging". SCSTRTI recent field study also show that *Koda* or *Kuda* appear to be same as *Kisan*, *Mirdha*, *Kora* and *Matya*. Marriages take place among them freely. Economically and occupationally, the *Kora* are noted for their traditional skills and specialization in digging tanks and doing other kinds of earth works. It establishes the fact that *Koda /Kuda* who are also known as *Mirdha*, *Kisan* and *Matia/Matya* are synonymous to *Kora* which is a phonetic variation of Koda. In course of time they have added the trade of catechu (*khaira*) making for which their neighbour called *Khaira* or *Khayra*.





The district Gazetteer, Sambalpur mentions, "A Mirdha is generally referred as Kuda meaning an earth digger". They "speak 'Kun Boli'... the dialect of the *Kisans*..." Their main occupation "is digging the earth and other works connected to it. Generally they work in groups. The headman is called *Mirdha*. In course of time the whole tribe is known as *Mirdhas* or *Kunhar* as is called in their mother tongue ... They have many similarities with *Kisan* and are believed to be a section of the *Kisan* tribe" (1971 : 118). Now they are well versed with Odia and speak Odia and use Odia script for inter-group communication. Some of them are conversant with the *Laria* language also.

They are mainly distributed in the districts of Anugul, Dhenkanal and Nayagarh. According to 2001 census the population of *Kora* tribe is 11,340, but during 2011 this increased to 54,408 (27,173 males and 27,235 females). Their sex ratio is 1002 females for 1000 males. Their total literacy rate is 68.54% in which male literacy is 80.14% and female literacy is 57.04%.



Dress and Ornaments

The Koras do not show any peculiarity in their dress and ornaments. In old days men worn loin clothes and women, sarees and inner garments. Women wear ornaments like bangles, ear rings, anklets and *pahuda* as traditional ornaments. Some old women have tattoos on their arms and feet. Now-a-days, due to modernization their dress pattern has been changed. Now men wear *dhoti*, *lungi*, *banian* and women wear short sarees and under garments purchasing from local venders. During market days and during visit to relative's house or on festive occasions they put on their best dresses.



SETTLEMENT & HOUSING

Koras live in the hilly terrains of Anugul and Dhenkanal districts which slopes down towards the north of Keonjhar and Sambalpur districts. Their settlements are generally homogeneous and are located near the foot hills, plains and inside forest where perennial hill streams are flowing to provide them drinking water throughout the year. Their houses are arranged in a linear pattern leaving a narrow space as their village street.





Their houses are very simple in structure and are made of mud walls, low roofs thatched by paddy straw or with the *naria* tiles. They live in small house which is rectangular in size and have one or two rooms. The bigger room is used as their living room and to store their grains. The smaller one is used as kitchen room. There are no windows for ventilation. They construct a separate shed in the rear of the house to accommodate their livestock. The houses have wide verandah polished with black clay which is found to be higher than the plinth of their house. It is used as sitting place and to provide shelter to their guests.

They use very limited households articles like earthen pots made by the local potters, aluminum or bell metal utensils, water vessels, wooden ladles, leaf umbrella and wooden bells for cattle. They use agricultural implements like, sickles, ploughs, levelers, yoke, spades, pick-axe and hunting implements like bows (*Dhanu*), arrow (*Tir*) and traps. To catch fish they also use fishing net and other fishing implements.





LIVELIHOOD

Koras are primarily earth diggers and it was their only source of income. But now-a-days, besides earth works, they depend on cultivation to earn their livelihood. Many of them are share croppers. Apart from that, a few of them earn their livelihood through small business, pig rearing and wage earning. Kora women also work in agriculture fields and construction works.





Seasonal forest collections provide them supplementary source of livelihood. They mostly collect edible leaves, roots, fruits, tubers from the local forest for food. The surplus is sold in the market.

Some of them have taken up catechu (*khaira*) making as their profession which involves the following procedure. They cut down a catechu tree from the forest. Its inner tree rings are cut down into small pieces and are boiled with sufficient water for four days. After that it turns into a thick black paste. The water is let out and the residue is collected. The procedure involves the engagement of both men and women. It also depends on the availability of the catechu plant near at hand. After the trees are exhausted in one place, they shift their camps to another place where such trees are available.

In their kitchen garden they produce vegetables such as pumpkin, brinjal, green leaves to supplement their foods.





Food and Drinks

Koras are mainly non-vegetarians. Rice is their staple food which is taken two to three times a day with a side-dish of green leaves or vegetables. During lean period they consume different kinds of pulses, roots, tubers, vegetables and flowers etc available from the forest and in their kitchen garden. Besides they eat fish, chicken and other delicious foods like *ragi* cakes during the festive occasions. They avoid eating beef as they consider it as unclean food.

Rice beer and *mahua* liquor are the common alcoholic drinks. They are habituated to smoking *bidi*, chewing betel leaf and to take tea occasionally. Both men and women use '*Gurakhu*' (Tobacco paste) regularly.

SOCIAL LIFE

Life Cycle

Pre-delivery

Koras become happy when a married woman in their society gets pregnant. So they offer various sweet meats to the pregnant woman according to her will as they believe that some ancestor might take rebirth in their family. For the well-being of the pregnant mother and the baby in her womb certain taboos are followed by the pregnant woman. Her movement in the outside is restricted. She is not allowed to go to the burial ground or out of the house during an eclipse and even she cannot visit a temple during the advanced stage of pregnancy and is not allowed to take dry fish etc.

Child birth

An experienced mid-wife (*Dhai*) of the *Ghasi* community is engaged for safe delivery of the child. The child birth usually takes place in a separate room used as their lying-in chamber where male members are not allowed to enter. A bundle of *siju* twigs is kept hanging at the entrance door of the house as a symbol of child born in that particular house. After the birth of the child both mother and child take bath in tepid water mixed with turmeric paste. The umbilical cord is cut off by *Dhai* and the placenta is buried outside the house. Birth pollution continues for twenty one days.





Post Delivery Rituals

The *sasthi* rite is observed on the evening of the sixth day of child birth by worshipping Sasthi devi. On the seventh day the mother and the baby are shifted to another portion of the house. After ceremonial bath of the mother and baby anointed with turmeric paste, the house is cleaned with cow dung paste and all the used earthen pots are replaced with new ones. The horoscope of the baby is prepared with the help of a *Jyotisha* or *Nahaka* (Astrologer). On the twelfth day the mother pares her nails and after purification she is allowed to touch the water for family's use but not allowed to cook food for family up to twenty one days.

On the twenty first day, final purificatory rites i.e. *Ekoisia* is observed. A Brahman priest is invited to perform '*Satyanarayan Puja*' and give a name to the baby. Kinsmen are invited to the function and they are served special dishes like, rice porridge and cakes and celebrate the function with great enthusiasm. In case of birth of a female child, *Bararatri* is observed in place of *Ekosia*. When the child is about one year of age they observe the tonsure rite and the ear piercing ceremony. There is no provision to celebrate thread ceremony but they perform it before the marriage of the boy.



Puberty Rite

Koras observe 'Puberty rite' for the adolescent girl on her first menarche. A girl on attaining puberty is kept segregated for a week. She only steps out clad with cloth and accompanied by women to attend the call of nature. Food is served to her by a female member of her family. In the early morning of the seventh day she anoints turmeric paste and mustard oil, takes a purificatory bath and wears a new saree. Their traditional priest sprinkles holy water over her after which she becomes purified to resume her routine activities. Then she visits a Siva temple for worship. In the evening her family hosts a non-vegetarian feast to guests and relatives.



Marriage

Kora community strictly follows the principle of community endogamy and clan exogamy. Marriage within the same clan and outside the tribe is strictly forbidden. Marriage is strictly prohibited within the clan group and the members of the same clan are regarded as brothers and sisters as they believe that they are descendants of the same ancestor. Koras follow adult marriage. A boy can marry at the age of 18-25 and girl at the age of 16-21. The earlier practice of child marriage has been stopped.

They consider marriage through negotiation as the most ideal and prestigious mode of acquiring a life partner. At the time of marriage negotiations members of traditional community council are present to finalize the proposal. Marriage ceremony is held at bride's residence on the auspicious date and time fixed by the astrologer. A Brahman priest is invited to officiate in the

marriage ritual and in some cases tribal priests are present. At the time of marriage bride price (*Jholla*) is given by the groom to the bride's parents and this amount usually varies from Rs.50/- to Rs.500/-.

The priest presides over the marriage rite and unites the hands of the couple who later move around the marriage altar seven times. Then the groom puts vermilion mark on the forehead of the bride. The bride wears glass, lac or shell bangles as symbol of marriage. The groom puts a cowry (shell of a sea snail) with some fruits in a ditch of mud and water and the bride tries to find it out and offer it to the groom. Thereafter the groom agrees to give some gifts as demanded by the bride with the promise to provide her lifelong company. As soon as the demand is fulfilled, the bride and the groom along with their friends make amusement by dancing and singing their traditional amorous wedding folk songs and cutting jokes by smearing the mud and water on each other's face. Then they go to the nearest river and bathe and the bride is carried back on the shoulder of the groom. After that the groom's parents host a non-vegetarian feast along with country liquor (*mohuli*), rice beer (*handia*) and ragi beer (*landa*) to the guests, relatives and the bride's party.



Nuptial ceremony (*chouthi*) is performed on fourth day at the bride's patrilocal home for consummation of marriage. After marriage the bride lives in her husband residence.

In their society a man is permitted to keep more than one wife if the first wife is found to be barren or physically handicapped. In some cases well-to-do persons having more landed properties prefer polygyny as they think that more women in family will support the family in cultivation and allied pursuits. The widow is not bound to marry her deceased husband's younger brother unless she is willing. Junior sororate and junior levirate are permitted but rarely takes place. In some cases marriage by mutual consent, by pseudo capture, by elopement and by service are also allowed and inter caste marriage is strictly prohibited.

Marriage by capture is resorted to avoid the complexity and expenses of arranged marriage. Similarly sometimes a poor boy who is unable to afford the expenses of arranged marriage and payment of the bride price seeks relief by resorting to marriage by service.



Divorce

In the Kora society either of the spouses can demand divorce on the grounds of maladjustment in conjugal life, indulgence in adultery, barrenness or impotency or cruelty etc. This can be effected with the approval of the traditional community council. Usually wife gets the divorce compensation from the husband and children are the liability of the father. When a husband is found to be guilty he is liable to pay compensation to the wife as imposed by the community council but if a wife is found guilty she is ostracized from the community and forbidden to remarry.

Death Rites

Previously Koras buried their dead and death pollution was observed up to the eleventh day. But now-a-days, they follow caste customs. Some well-to-do families cremate the corpse. After death the corpse is anointed with turmeric paste and is carried to the cremation ground in a bier or a charpoy. The eldest son first sets fire to the pyre. After that he collects the bones and observes mourning. After cremation the pal bearers take bath and return to the deceased's house where they purify themselves.

The bereaved family observes mourning for ten days (*Barapatri* rite) and abstains from eating non-vegetarian diet. On the tenth day houses are swabbed with a mixture of cow dung and water. All the earthen pots are replaced and clothes washed. The male members get shaved and female get their nails pared off by the barber. On the eleventh day a *Sradh* is performed and the family hosts a non-vegetarian feast to the relatives and villagers. They observe an annual *Sradh* ceremony for the deceased on the day of '*Mahalaya*'.



RELIGIOUS BELIEFS & PRACTICES

The Koras profess their autonomous animistic tribal religion amalgamated with few elements of Hinduism. They worship different gods and goddesses representing objects of nature. *Istadevata* is their family deity; '*Mangala*', '*Pitabali*' and '*Gramasree*' are their village deities. They believe in the existence of benevolent and malevolent spirits. The latter can cause the diseases and misfortune affecting their crops and domestic animals. To appease them, they seek services of their witch doctor (*Gunia*) and offer rice, sugar, plantain and sacrifices of fowls and goats. The traditional magico-religious head (*Dehuri*) or low ranked Brahman priest is called to officiate in rituals and pray for the mercy of the concerned deities and spirits for the betterment and well being of humans as well as their domestic animals.

Like Hindus they observe *Dasara*, *Kartik Purnima*, *Laxmipuja*, *Pus Purnima*, *Holi*, *Rakhi Purnima* etc. They also worship Hindu deities like 'Lord Jgannath', 'Lord Siva', '*Durga*', '*Kali*' and '*Laxmi*' etc.





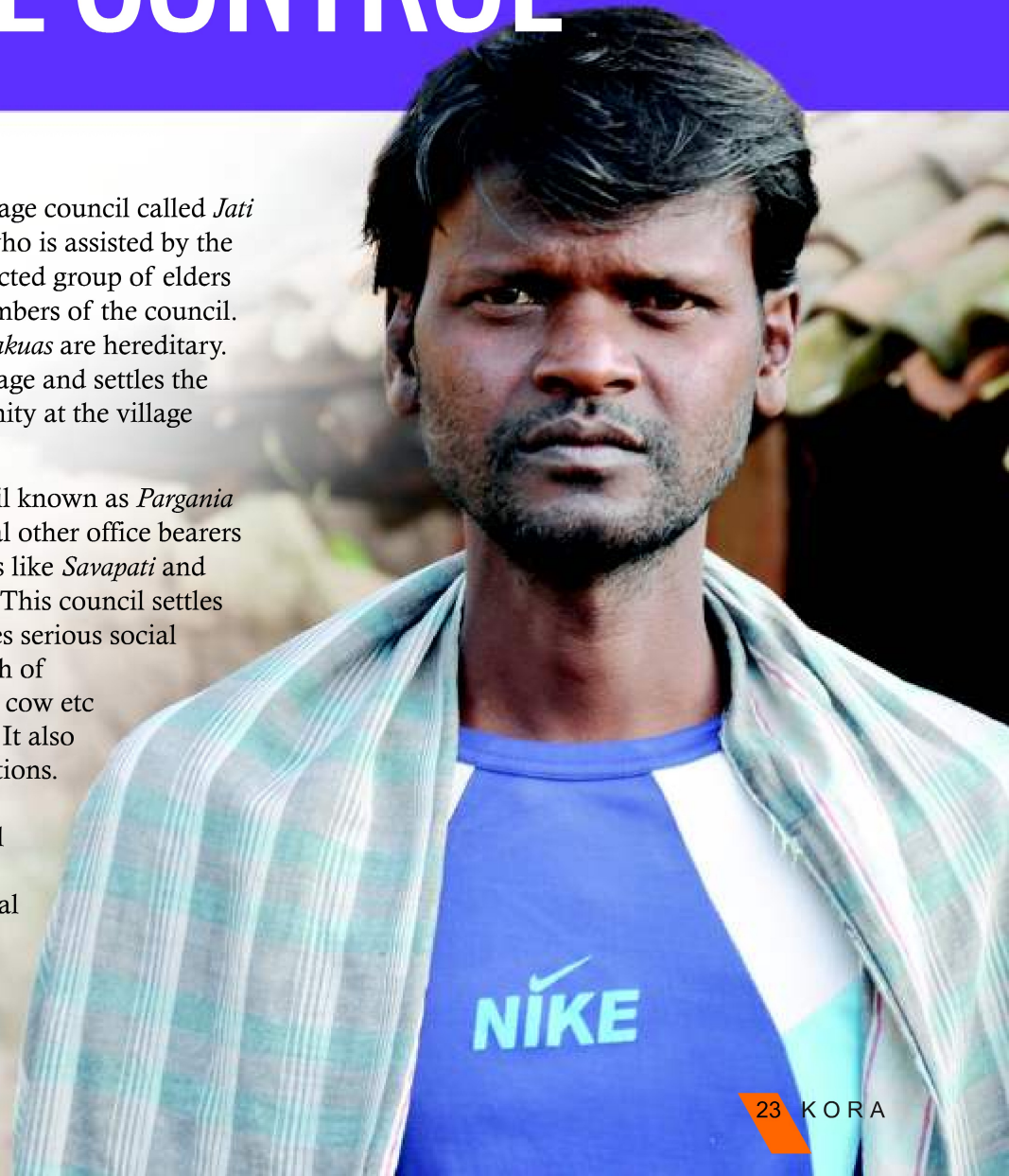
Dance and Music

Unlike many tribal communities of the state, Kora do not have any folk tradition of communal dance and music. Rather as the devotees of Lord Krishna they organise 'Kritans' in which the *Bhajans* of 'Lord Krishna' are sung. During the performance of Kritans they use their traditional musical instruments like mrudang, flute, harmonium, *gini*, *madal*, *dolki* etc.

SOCIAL CONTROL

Koras have a traditional village council called *Jati Sabha* headed by *Mukhiya* who is assisted by the *Dakua* (messenger). The selected group of elders called *Bhalabhai* are the members of the council. The posts of *Mukhia* and *Dakuas* are hereditary. The council regulates marriage and settles the disputes within the community at the village level.

They have a regional council known as *Pargania* headed by *Behera* and several other office bearers with modern nomenclatures like *Savapati* and *Sampadak* who are elected. This council settles inter village disputes, decides serious social offences like adultery, breach of traditional norms, killing of cow etc and initiates social reforms. It also organizes the religious functions. In the cases of violation of customary rules, the council punishes the offenders by imposing a cash fine or social boycott (*Alak*).



There are some social restrictions for exchange of food and water among various communities. Kora males can accept water and all types of cooked food from higher ranked castes but not from the scheduled caste communities but women cannot accept any food and water from any community except Kisan and Mirdha whom they consider socially at par with them. They maintain inter community linkage through patron client relationship and mutual exchange of goods and services.

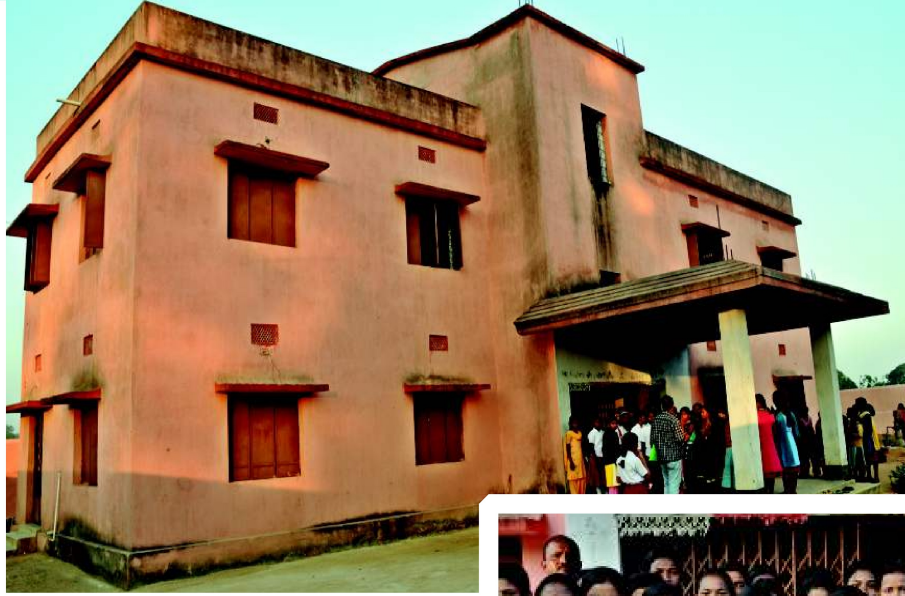




CHANGING SCENARIO

Society is dynamic and the Kora society is no exception to it. Changes have occurred in the Kora society with the passage of time. They have borrowed many social and religious elements from their neighbouring castes and tribes owing to their long association with them.

After independence Government have launched several development programmes exclusively for the tribal areas and tribal people. With the opening of schools and special hostels for the scheduled tribes the Koras have availed formal education facilities for their children. There are a few Kora students who have reached graduate level.



Government has also made massive development intervention for education, agriculture, communication, drinking water, housing, social security, health and sanitation. The Koras are benefitted from various schemes for tribal development, community development and infrastructure development as well as for Self-Employment, Child Welfare and Immunization and the Public Distribution System (PDS). At present the banking facilities are made available in their localities. Now they adopt both modern and indigenous medicines. Their women have also accepted family planning programme. They now prefer to have two to three children.



Kora women have formed *Mahila Mandal*, SHG etc. and taken up economic and social welfare activities. Some well-to-do Kora families have modern gadgets like radio, mobile phone, watches, television, motor cycles, modern dresses, wooden and synthetic furniture.





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