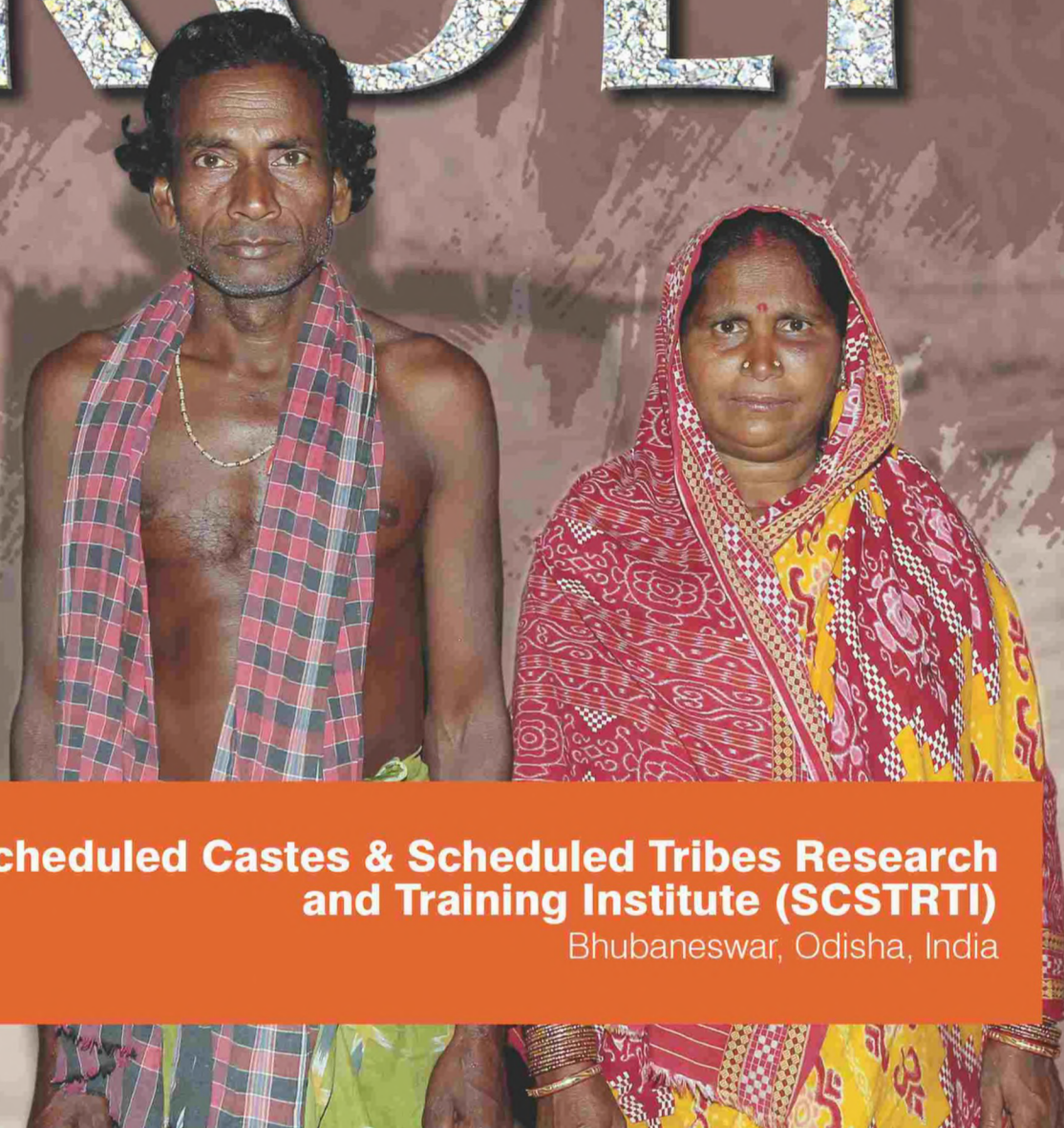


# KOLI



**Scheduled Castes & Scheduled Tribes Research  
and Training Institute (SCSTRI)**

Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India

# PREFACE

Koli is numerically a small tribe notified as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) along with Malhar at serial number 36 of the ST list of the State of Odisha. Though notified together, the Koli and Malhar are ethnically two different tribes. While the Malhars are a forest dwelling semi-nomadic tribe whose main occupation is collection of honey, the Kolis are a class of cotton carders and weavers otherwise known as Kori, Tulabhina or Bhina. Koli being a highly Hinduised community, their social status is much higher than that of the other tribal communities in Odisha. The Kolis numbering 6423 persons along with the Malhars in 2011 census are largely concentrated in the districts of Ganjam, Dhenkanal and Jajpur. They do not have any tribal mother tongue but speak local Odia language

Their dress and ornaments are just like those of the neighbouring people. They follow the neighbouring caste customs in the events of life. They enjoy the status of a clean caste and as such are served by Brahman priest, barber and washerman. They profess Hinduism, worship Hindu deities and observe Hindu festivals. The most important village deity is Thakurani, who is worshipped on Makara Sankranti day. The presiding deity of each household is called Ista Debata or Isana.

The community is divided into different exogamous totemic septs. Their family is mostly nuclear, patrilocal and patrilineal. Family is predominantly monogamous, and marriage by negotiation is commonly practised. Cross-cousin marriage, junior levirate, junior sororate, remarriage of widows and widowers are socially permitted. No bride price is paid. The remarriage of widows and widowers is allowed.

Their age old traditional occupation is weaving and cotton carding. They generally weave coarse type of clothes for the rural people. Both the sexes are engaged in this pursuit. To supplement their income they take up marginal farming, animal husbandry, petty trade and wage earning.

This photographic documentation of the life style of the Kolis is a part of the series on the tribes of Odisha. Shri S.C. Mohanty, former Joint Director who is now working as a Consultant (Research), Shri B.K. Paikaray, former Research Assistant, Ms. Madhusmita Sahoo, Assistant Director and Mrs. Kabita Pattanaik of SCSTRTI have provided inputs in preparing this colourful booklet. I thank them profusely and hope that it will be useful to all who are interested for knowing the tribal culture of Odisha.

**Prof. (Dr). A.B. Ota**  
Advisor-cum-Director & Special Secretary

# KOLIT

A. B. Ota  
S. C. Mohanty  
B. K. Paikaray  
Madhusmita Sahoo  
Kabita Pattanaik

**Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Research  
and Training Institute (SCSTRI)**

C.R.P.F. Square, Bhubaneswar -751003

2021

# IDENTITY



The Koli is a Kolarian tribe. According to early ethnographers Russell and Hiralal the social traits of Koli resemble that of the Bhil tribe. Another theory explains that the term KOLI is derived from KOL and most probably they are offshoots of the tribe KOL or Munda. Koli is synonymous with Kori and in Odisha they are a weaver caste. The term Koli also means fisherman in Andhra Pradesh.

According to their folk legend they are descendants of the black dwarf that had evolved from the dead body of the pious emperor Vena of ancient era. They also claim to be the offsprings of *Rishi Valmiki* - the author of the great epic Ramayana. Their origin, as narrated in *Skanda Puran* describes their ancestor as the son of a Brahman who was brought up by a *Kirata*. After growing up he adopted the way layer activities of the foster Kirat father and noticing his aberrant activity the sage Valmiki designated him as Koli.





## Population and Distribution

In Odisha, the Koli is numerically a small tribe notified as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) along with Malhar as Koli Malhar at serial number 36 of the ST list of the State. The Koli and Malhar though notified together are ethnically two different tribes. While the Malhars are a forest dwelling semi-nomadic tribe in Odisha whose main occupation is collection of honey, the Kolis are a class of cotton carders and weavers otherwise known as Kori, Tulabhina or Bhina. Koli being a highly Hinduised community their social status is much higher than that of the other tribal communities in Odisha.

According to 2011 Census the population of Koli, Malhar in the State is 6423, comprising 3268 males and 3155 females. Their total literacy is 57.57% out of which male literacy is 65.27% and female literacy is 49.56%. This is higher than that of all the tribes of Odisha that is 52.24%. The community has registered a sex ratio of 965 females per 1000 males. They are largely distributed in the districts of Ganjam, Dhenkanal and Jajpur.



## Language

The Koli does not have a language of their own. They speak Odia the local Indo-Aryan language and use its script for intra and inter group communication. They are also bilingual and majority of them who have migrated from Andhra Pradesh in the past and reside in southern Odisha are well conversant in Telugu language.

## Personal Adornments

During the past, their dress pattern was very simple. The males were wearing only a loin cloth (*lenguti*) around their waist just to conceal their private parts leaving the upper parts fully uncovered but on market days or during visit to relatives' house they were putting on a sleeveless shirt (*bondee*) with a short piece of towel (*gamcha*) over their shoulders. Females were wearing only a short piece of hand woven saree covering up to their knee only without any under garments.

At present their dress and ornaments are just like those of the neighbouring people. Due to the trends of modernization, their dress pattern has changed. Now-a-days, their males wear pants, shirts, *dhotis*, *lungis*, banyans etc. and females wear coloured and printed saris with under garments such as sara and blouse etc.

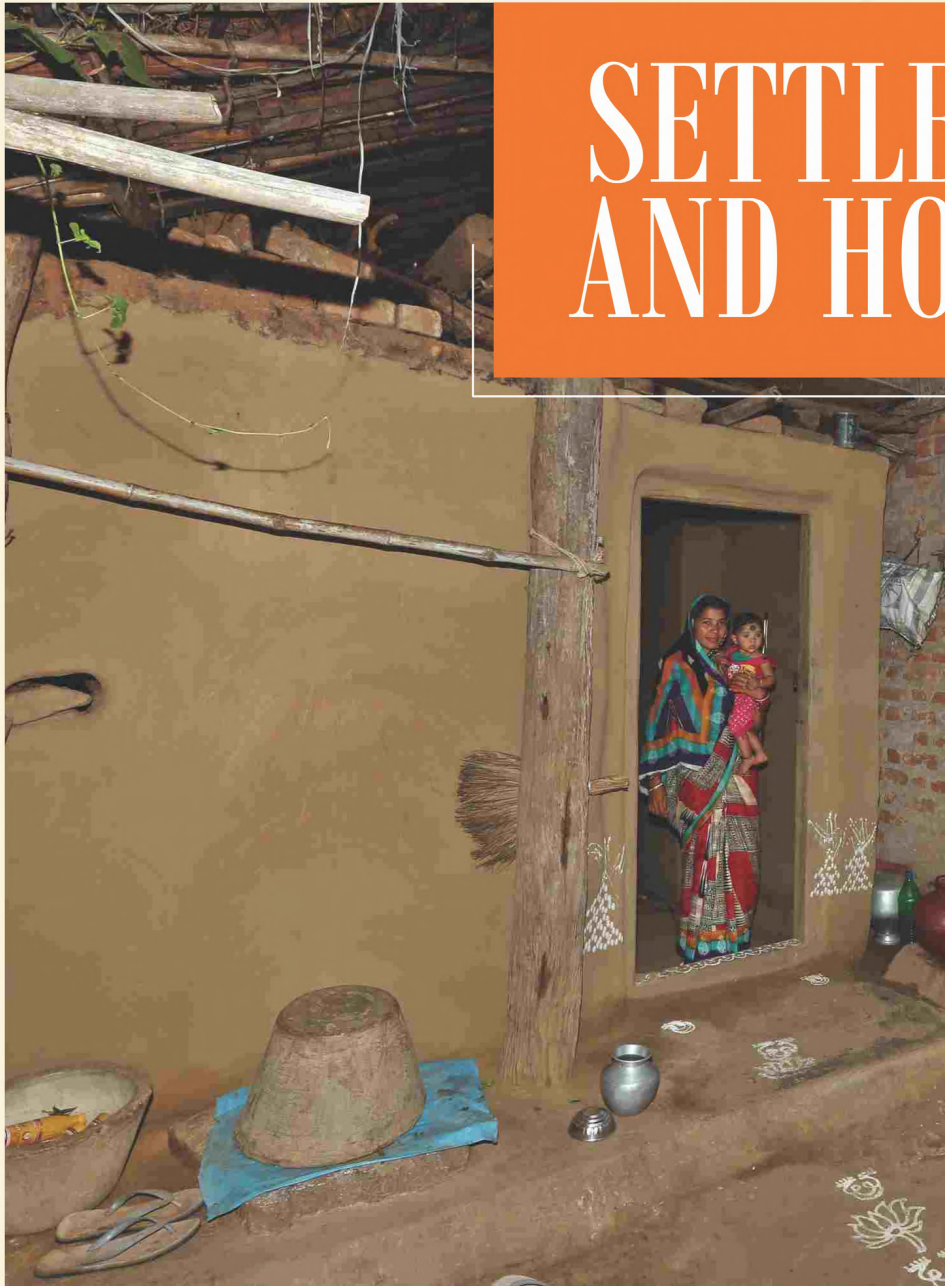
Koli women like to adorn themselves with varieties of ornaments to look beautiful and charming. Married women wear glass bangles on their wrists and toe rings (*jhunita*) on their leg fingers as symbol of marriage. The other ornaments they wear are *besari*, noli on their nose helix and *dandi* on their nose lobe, *kanphul* on their ear lobes and ear rings on their ear helix. All of these nose and ear ornaments are made of gold. They put on thick wristlets *khadu* and *chudi* on their wrists and *balla* on their anklets made of silver. They wear finger rings *anguthi* and coloured ribbons on their bun.

Tattooing is an old fashion. Women like to tattoo their arms and legs with beautiful designs made by professional tattoo makers of Ghogia community who are remunerated in cash for their services. At present the younger generation of females has discarded this fashion as they think that the tattoo marks are disfiguring their natural appearance.





# SETTLEMENT AND HOUSING



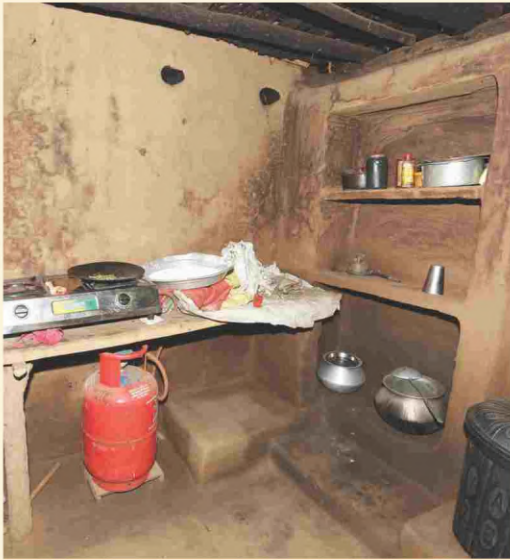
Koli lives in heterogeneous settlements in rural areas having communication links to nearby towns from where they can purchase their raw materials such as cotton, silk or woolen yarn, dyes etc. necessary for their profession of cotton carding and weaving. In multi ethnic villages they dwell in separate wards maintaining distance from other communities and there by maintaining their cultural identity.

Koli houses are arranged in a linear pattern leaving wide space as the village street. They make hang-glider frames using bamboo poles in that space to sun-dry their coloured fabrics. Koli houses are rectangular in ground plan with gable shaped thatched roofs. The walls are made of wooden logs, bamboo splits and mud plastered and polished by cow dung paste. The house has a single door but no windows for ventilation.

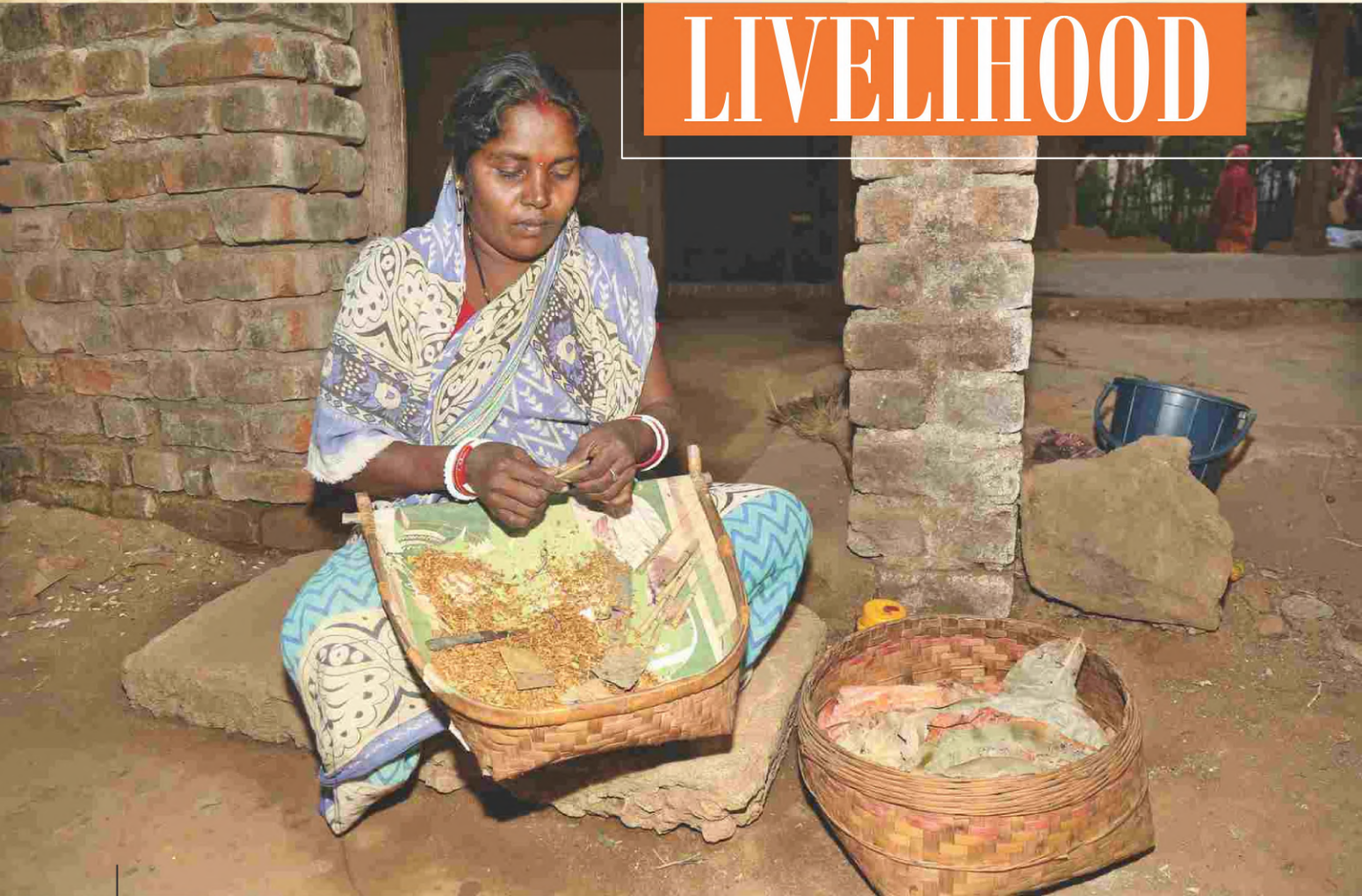
Their houses are generally two roomed. The entrance room has verandah both in front and rear side. This room is invariably bigger where they install their loom. The side room is their living room. They construct their kitchen in the rear verandah where they cook food. Their cowshed lies at the backside of their house where they accommodate their livestock. Their ancestral spirits Ista are installed in the corner of the kitchen and are propitiated by the females of the family.

Koli possess limited household assets. These consist of their aluminium utensils, earthen jars, glass tumblers, grinding stone, string cots, wooden pillows, kerosene lamps, umbrella, grass grain bin, knives, loom and carved wooden vessel to colour the yarns. Some of them rear goats, poultry birds and those who possess cultivable lands have plough bullocks, ploughshare, hoe, leveler, sickles etc.





# LIVELIHOOD



Koli economic life centers around cotton carding and weaving. They generally weave coarse type of clothes which has less market value for which face difficulty to earn their living. The work of weaving in which members of both the sex are engaged goes through a number of stages and a Koli family is engaged for a number of working days to weave a piece of standard size cloth. Cotton yarns are purchased from the nearby market or co-operatives. The women assist their male members in every stage of weaving. Many women weave themselves.

They also prepare wicks for kerosene and oil lamps and sacred threads for Brahmans. To supplement their income they take up other pursuits such as wage earning, cultivation, livestock rearing etc. All of them have small kitchen garden adjacent to their house where they raise various vegetables such as brinjal, gourd, pumpkin, chili and green leaves etc. for their household consumption. Those who have land either cultivate it or let it out for share cropping. Previously, they used to rear goat and poultry. Now-a-days these are practiced in a limited scale.

Koli women besides attending to their routine household chores contribute substantially to their family income by participating in weaving, cultivation, wage earning and collection of fuel woods, roots, tubers and green leaves and seasonal fruits from the nearest forest.



## Food and Drinks

Koli are mostly non-vegetarians. Rice is their staple food. Besides that they also consume fish, meat, chicken, eggs, crabs etc. but abstain from taking beef and pork. During scarce season they manage with edible roots, tubers, green leaves etc. Groundnut oil is used in the preparation of curry. Although drinking is deemed as a taboo for the community yet some of them occasionally drink Mahuli or Chauhi liquor. Unlike other tribals they do not offer liquor to their deities in the religious ceremonies. They smoke hand rolled cigar (*pika*) and both males and females chew *pan* and tobacco paste. Drinking tea has become very common in these days and it is also offered to the guests.



# SOCIAL LIFE



Koli is an endogamous community which is segmented into various exogamous totemistic clan divisions. The clans are again sub-divided into many exogamous totemic *gotra* groups. Members of a clan consider themselves as brothers and sisters as they believe to have been descended from a common ancestor. Therefore marital relation among the members of the same clan is customarily prohibited and Gotra exogamy is strictly observed. The members of a clan group revere their totemic object and abstain from doing any harm to it.





## Family

Family in Koli society is predominantly nuclear consisting of husband, wife and unmarried children. Joint families and vertically extended families are also seen in rare cases. Koli society is patrilineal. They follow the rule of patrilocal residence after marriage and the rule of patrilineal descent. The eldest son succeeds the father. The father exercises authority over the family and after his death property is divided among the sons. Inheritance of ancestral property follows the rule of equigeniture in male line only. In the family having no male successor, the married daughters inherit the property. An issueless family may adopt a male child from the nearest partilineage who later on may inherit late adopted father's property as well as his office.

# LIFE CYCLE

## Pre delivery rituals

The Kolis do not observe any pre delivery rituals for their pregnant women but strictly impose certain restrictions regarding their food and movements for the wellbeing of the mother and foetus. A pregnant woman is tabooed to expose herself during lunar and solar eclipse, to eat the flesh of the ritually sacrificed animal and sour food items, to sleep alone or travel alone in dark night, to touch a corpse or go near the cremation ground etc.



## Child Birth

In Koli society the first delivery of a woman generally takes place at her parents' house and the subsequent deliveries, at her husband's house. The delivery generally takes place in a separate enclosure or hut constructed at the back side of house specifically to be used as the lying in chamber. In the past an elderly Bauri woman used to act as midwife (*dhaima*) to assist the mother for safe and easy delivery of the child but now it is done by the midwife of the local maternity centre.

The umbilical cord is cutoff using a sharp knife or shell and the placenta is buried in the threshold of the lying in chamber by an elderly woman of the family to avoid the spell of black magic by sorcerer or evil spirits. The midwife is remunerated with a new saree and some money for her services. After the delivery the mother is given warm Kulthi water mixed with garlic and medicinal spices to drink for relief from the delivery pain and to keep the mother and the newborn safe from cold.

## Post delivery ritual

They observe birth pollution for twenty one days. The first purificatory rite *bardinia* is observed on the twelfth day after which the lineage members become pollution free. On this day the family and lineage members take purificatory bath. Then the mother is allowed to touch others but she cannot enter into the kitchen.

They observe the final purificatory rite *ekoisia* on the twenty first day on which both the mother and child take bath, their clothes are washed and house is cleaned. The newborn baby is presented with dresses and ornaments by the relatives. The name giving ceremony of the child is held on that day and a feast is arranged for the occasion. They also perform the ear piercing ceremony on this day or later according to their convenience.

After the new born becomes three months old they observe the first cereal feeding ceremony. They observe tonsure ceremony when the child attains one year of age. The mother is not allowed to eat marine fish or dried fish during the period of lactation.



## Puberty rite

The rituals associated with puberty of a girl in Koli society are observed rigorously according to the traditions of the local caste communities. When a girl attains her first menarche she is kept segregated for seven days. She is confined in isolation for a period of seven days. During this period of pollution she is forbidden to move out of the room and to see the face of any male person.

On the early morning of the eighth day she goes to the water source escorted by her mother or by any elderly woman of the family where she takes her purificatory bath anointing her body with turmeric paste and oil. Then she throws away her used clothes, wears new clothes presented by her family and returns home. When she approaches home her maternal uncle presents her new dresses and then she accompanied by her mother or girl companions goes to the temple of the village goddess for worship. In the evening her family hosts a non vegetarian feast to entertain their lineage members and kinsmen. In subsequent menstruation periods segregation is not observed so strictly. However, she is not allowed to touch anybody for seven days and not allowed to enter into the kitchen.





## Marriage

In Koli socially, adult marriage and monogamy is the rule. Polygene is found in rare cases where the first wife found to be barren or physically or mentally disabled. Child marriage was a past tradition which is not practiced now-a-days. Marriage within the same gotra is forbidden though this rule is not strictly followed these days.

They consider marriage arranged through proper negation (*Biha*) as an ideal and prestigious mode of acquiring a spouse. The Kolis being a highly Hinduised community, they unlike other tribes do not resort to other modes of marriage such as by mutual consent, by capture, by elopement and by service. The Kolis of south Odisha consider cross cousin marriage (marriage with mother's brother's daughter) as preferential mode of marriage but parallel cousin marriage is strictly tabooed. Junior levirate and junior sororate, remarriage of widows, widowers and divorces are also permitted in their society.

They unlike other tribes do not have the custom of payment of bride price. Unlike the caste Hindus there is also no system of dowry but the girl's parents give presents to their son-in-law, according to their financial capacity.

## Divorce

In their society divorce is allowed and either party can divorce his/her spouse on the grounds of maladjustment in conjugal life, impotency, barrenness, indulgence in extra-marital relationship, poor maintenance, cruelty etc. Their traditional community council is the authority to finalize the divorce cases. Such cases are adjudicated in a special session of their traditional community council constituted of the traditional office bearers and village elders in presence of parents of the divorce seeking couple and the couple. Generally, the appellant arranges for the refreshment of the participants.

After the divorce the liability of maintenance of children lies with the former husband but the woman may keep her breast feeding children for their nourishment and she has to return them to their father after they are grown up.

## Death

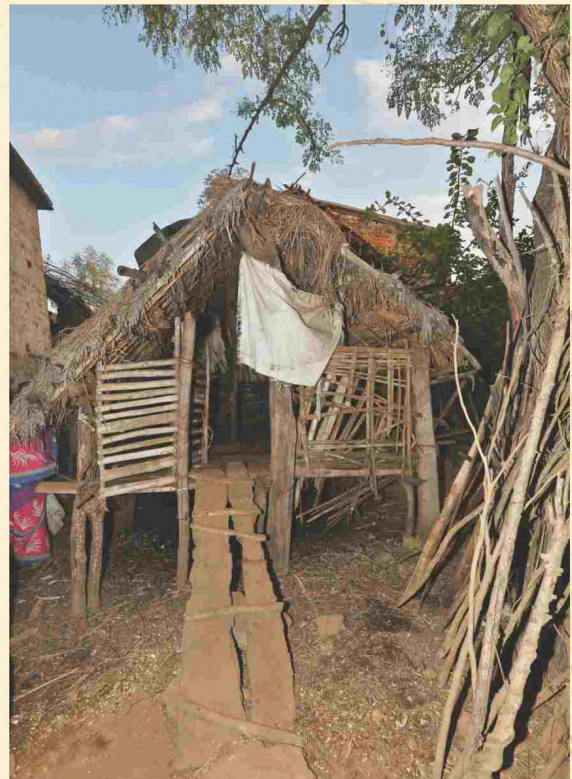
The Kolis generally bury their dead but those who can afford go for cremation. The death news is first conveyed to the sister's house, relatives, clan's men and villagers by a special messenger. The dead body is bathed anointed with turmeric paste and oil and dressed with a new white cloth. Then they keep the body in their courtyard in a sleeping position with its head upward. The pall bearers of their own community make a bier using bamboo poles and *siali* fiber to carry the dead to the burial ground. They dig a burial pit approximately six feet in length, four feet in width and five feet in depth.



They place the corpse in a sleeping position in the grave or pyre with its head towards south and face upwards in case of a male and in case of a female its face is kept downwards. They also dispose of all his/her personal articles like cloth, tobacco and small utensils etc. in the same pit for his use in the upper world. His son throws first a fistful of soil in the pit followed by the pall bearers who fill the pit with soil and cover the top with a heavy granite stone to save the corpse from jackals and bears. If a woman dies during her pregnancy they think that her soul might be a dangerous spirit who can cause harm to the family members and the villagers. Therefore during disposal of her dead body the pall bearers take away the foetus from her womb by incision and bury it and cremate the dead body of the woman. They place thorny branches over the burial or cremation spot that is done by their traditional witch doctor chanting spells in order to prevent free access of the dead soul to human world to commit vengeance over the innocent ones due to her unfulfilled desires specifically for her aborted motherhood.

After completion of the burial/cremation the pall bears take bath in the nearest water sources and return to the house of the deceased where they purify themselves by sprinkling their body with sacred water and warm up their body with the sacred fire burning in front of deceased's house.

Death pollution continues for a period of ten days during which observance of rituals and festivals, visiting sacred places, worshipping sacred shrines, giving alms to beggars, taking non-vegetarian foods are strictly tabooed for the bereaved family members. The lineage members of the dead eat *pitabhat* or bitter rice for 3 days. On the 3rd day, some food stuff is offered to the spirit of the deceased at the burial ground. The purificatory rite is performed on the eleventh day. On this day the floors and walls are washed and polished with cow dung paste and all the earthen pots are thrown away. The males cut their hair and shave their beards and females pair off their nails and take purificatory bath in the nearby water sources where they dispose of their used dresses. The bereaved family provides them new dresses. For the first time after pollution they take ghee and non-vegetarian food. A Brahman priest officiates in the mortuary rite. In the evening the bereaved family hosts a non-vegetarian feast to the lineages members, guests and relatives.



# RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

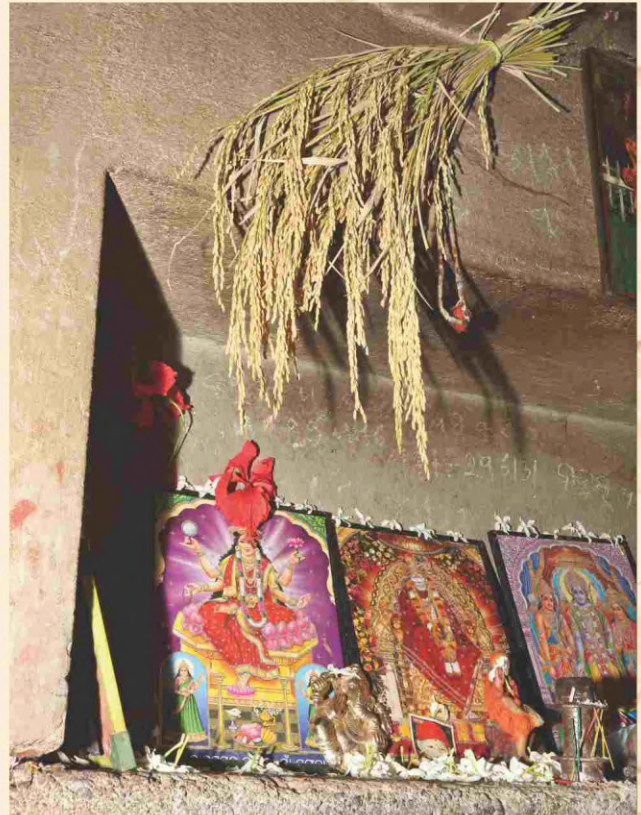
The Kolis profess Hinduism like the neighbouring castes. The Kolis of south Odisha worship Lord *Tumbeswar Mahadeb* as their important deity with great devotion. The other important deities are the *Thakurani* and *Banadurga*. Their village deity *Thakurani* is installed at the outskirts of the village. She is worshiped by a Brahman priest. During *Chaita Purnima* the deity is ceremoniously worshiped and they organize a great communal non-vegetarian feast near the deity praying Her to protect the village from epidemic. The presiding deity of each household is called *Ista Debata* or *Isana*. The deity is worshipped in the kitchen. Special offerings are made to the deity on *makar sankranti* day.

Besides they propitiate Lord Jagannath, goddesses Laxmi and Saraswati, Lord Ganesh, Lord Srikrishna, *Radha Madhab* with great esteem. They observe Hindu festivals like *Ganesh Chaturthi*, *Maulamas*, *Diwali*, *Holi*, *Nag Panchami*, *Gouri Sankar Chauthi*, *Raja*, *Gamha*, *Sabitri*, *Dola*, and *Makar* with great festivity. On the day of *Ganesh Chaturthi* their looms are cleaned and placed in front of the Lord Ganesh for worship. Unlike other tribal communities they do not sacrifice animals to appease their deities.

They believe in the existence of evil spirits such as ghosts, spirits and witches who are malevolent in nature. If these spirits are not propitiated properly, they can cause great misfortune to the village. They utilize the services of their traditional witch doctor *Gunia* to gratify these evil forces.







# SOCIO POLITICAL LIFE

The *Kolis* have their traditional community council called *Koli Sabha* both at the regional level headed by their secular head *Jati Behera* and at their village level constituted of caste elites and headed by *Kula Behera* or *Patra* to deal with their customary affairs and maintain social order in their society. Both the councils according to their jurisdictions adjudicate cases pertaining to family dispute, misunderstanding in conjugal life, adultery, incest, molestation, divorce, matrimonial dispute, inter and intra village rifts, breach of their norms and customs and deliver verdict by unanimous decision and punish the offender by cash or kind or by both according to the gravity of offence. Disobedience of the verdict is treated as a serious offence for which the council may outcaste the offender from the community and readmits him into the society after his due penance including a grand feast to be hosted for the community members of the village by the person concerned.

The headman *Kula Behera* or *Patra* is supposed to be the spokesman of the community. It is a hereditary and honourable post. He presides over their caste council called *Koli Sabha*. During *Makar Sankranti* festival he also plays important role and he is especially honoured by his caste people who tie a new cloth on his head every year at the temple of village goddess. A grand feast is arranged on this occasion to honour the *Kula Behera*. Previously the *Kolis* were not engaging the Brahmin priest to perform their rituals and the *Kula Behera* was acting as their traditional priest.



# DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGE

After Independence, Government of India and the State Government have launched many development programmes through the Scheduled Tribe and Scheduled Caste department and other line departments for development of tribal people as well as their habitat. Government has launched many development programmes in different sectors including income generation, education, communication, housing, agriculture, irrigation, drinking water, health and sanitation etc. Initiatives have also been taken both at Block and *Grampanchayat* levels to create awareness among them on different development schemes so that they can reap the benefit out of it and become developed and prosperous.

They have been benefitted from different tribal development programmes. The impact of planned change and modernization are visible in their life style. Changes have been clearly marked in the occupational pattern, living pattern, food

habits and dress pattern of the *Kolis*. The impact of change is visible in all aspects of their life.

Besides, in course of time, the *Koli* society has accepted many cultural, social and religious elements from their neighbouring caste communities due to their long association with them. Now the tribe is highly acculturated and Hinduised and almost attained the status of an artisan service caste i.e., a weaver caste. As such they get the services of Brahman priest, barber and washer man to conduct their rituals. They occupy a higher place like those of weaver castes in the social hierarchy of caste society.



Photo Handbook on Tribes of Odisha, Series-63  
**KOLI** @SCSTRTI, Bhubaneswar



**Scheduled Castes & Scheduled Tribes  
Research and Training Institute**

CRPF Square, Bhubaneswar - 751003

Website : [scstrti.in](http://scstrti.in), Email-[scstrti@yahoo.co.in](mailto:scstrti@yahoo.co.in), Telephone : 0674-2563649/251635

*Photography: Suman Vision, Bhubaneswar*  
*Layout, Design & Printing: Capital Business Service*  
*& Consultancy, Bhubaneswar*  
**ISBN No. : 978-80705-75-0**