

BINJHAL



Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes
Research and Training Institute
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Foreword

With the passage of time human societies undergo change and the old ones give way to new ones. The time tested old ways need to be properly documented and preserved for the future use before they are lost in antiquity. The tribals living in remote areas located on mountain slopes, valleys, rain forests, desert fringes etc and eke out their living with much difficulties and hazards at the expenses of their body energy.

The Photo Hand book on the Binjhal one of the 62 Tribal Groups of Odisha is the outcome of an anthropological study reflecting the tribe's physical surrounding, ecology, society, culture and development.

The Binjhal are a small tribal group, simple and innocent in nature. They are largely concentrated in undivided Sambalpur district. Once upon a time, they were shifting cultivators but now they are settled agriculturists. Besides, they depend upon hunting and gathering, fishing and daily wage for their subsistence. The life and culture of the Binjhal revolve mostly round fishing, agriculture and as daily wage labourer.

But they are very faithful and committed to their society. They have their culturally established norms by which they live with social harmony and have belief and devotion for supernatural beings. During their leisure time they enjoy their life by song, dance or merry making.

Persistent efforts by the Government have brought about development of the Binjhals. Their youngsters are happy as development provides them better opportunities to earn more and to enjoy life. Now the educated youths are quite conscious of their democratic rights, duties and responsibilities. Even some Binjhals have held political posts also. Though they are advancing with time, they still love their habitat, culture, community, traditions and customs.

This photographic documentation of their life style is a part of the series on the Tribes of Odisha. Dr A.B. Ota, Director and Dr. P. Patnaik, Curator of SCSTRTI have endeavoured for preparing this colourful booklet. Shri S.C. Mohanty, OSD (Research) has contributed a lot by enriching and editing this document with useful data input. I thank them sincerely and hope that the eager readers will find this literature useful for their quest into the tribal world of Odisha.

Commissioner-cum-Secretary
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BINJHAL



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IDENTITY

The Binjhal one of the 62 tribal groups living in Odisha, who come in between settled agriculturists and hunter-gatherer stages of economy. They are largely found in the Bargarh district or more particularly in the undivided Sambalpur district of Odisha. Besides, they are also scattered in the neighbouring districts like Bolangir, Sundargarh and Kalahandi.

The community name 'Binjhal' is the combination of two terms 'Bin' and 'Jhal'. 'Bin' means 'without' and 'Jhal' means 'sweat' which connotes that they are capable of taking great strains, facing hazards and doing hard labour without sweating. Some of the Binjhals say that, their name is derived from Bindhyabasini, their tutelary deity. According to ethnographers namely, Russell and Hiralal (1916), the community is synonymous to Binjhwars inhabiting Raipur and Bilaspur area of Madhya Pradesh and are offshoot of the Baiga tribe but are comparatively civilized than the latter group. 'O' Malley also describes them as Binjhwars.

Linguistically, they are said to be of Dravidian origin or an ethnic group branched out from a tribe inhabiting Raipur and Bilaspur districts of Chhatisgarh. In Orissa they speak in the Sambalpuri dialect of Oriya except a few Binjhals of Sundargarh district who have retained their own dialect. The Binjhals living in Kalahandi district have adopted Laria as their mother tongue. They use Bariha or Singh Bariha as their surname.



They are of medium statured, long-headed with a tendency towards mesocephaly. They have a very high nasal index suggesting a flat nose on a broad face Their skin colour varies from dark brown to fair.

Regarding the origin of this tribe, ethnographers have different opinions. Some opine that, the Binjhal came from the Bindhya, Satpura and Aravalli hills of Madhya Pradesh to their present

habitat in the district of Sambalpur, Odisha, where they are mainly found. According to Russell and Hiralal (1916:Vol.II, 329), the Binjhals are the offshoot of the primitive Baigas but are comparatively a more civilized tribe. O'Malley (1932:88) who refers them as Binjhal or Binjhwaris is of opinion that they are of aboriginal descent who appears to have been among the earliest inhabitants of the district of Sambalpur, Odisha.



The tradition of the Binjhal associates them with the Vindhya hills and their former habitat is believed to have been Ratanpur in Chhatisgarh, from where they moved east ward in the district to Borasambar area of Sambalpur district. The legend is that their original ancestors (twelve archer brothers) were the sons of Vindhyabasini. The popular epithet – 'Bariha' by which a Binjhal takes pride in calling himself is derived from the heroic pursuit of 'Barha' a wild boar as narrated in the legend

Population

The population of Binjhal as per 1991 census was 1,19,929 (Males 60,979 and Females 58,950) registering a sex ratio of 967 females for 1000 males. This has decreased marginally by -1.51% in 2001 census in which there are total 1,18,116 persons of the tribe including 59,635 males and 58,481 females with the sex ratio improving to 981 females per 1000 males. In 2011 census their population has risen to 1 37 040 comprising 68 810 males and 68 230 females registering a sex ratio of 992 females per 1000 males and decadal growth rate of 16.02 per cent. Their population is largely concentrated in the districts of Sambalpur and Bolangir.



Literacy

The literacy rate of the Binjhal as per 1961 census was very low i.e., 8.20 percent (males 14.45% and females 2.05%) indicating that importance was not given for education and more particularly for female education. It rose up marginally to 10.50 percent in 1971 (males 18.26%, females 2.98%), up to 13.80 percent in 1981 (males 23.84%, females 3.83%), jumped up to 24.13 percent in 1991 (males 36.35%, females 11.68%), substantially went up to 41.49 percent in 2001 (males 52.71%, females 25.50%) and in 2011 it has reached 57.16 per cent (68.07 percent for males and 46.21 per cent for females). In the present day context the people both male and female have shown interest to educate themselves which is indicated by the pattern of growth in their literacy rates over successive censuses.

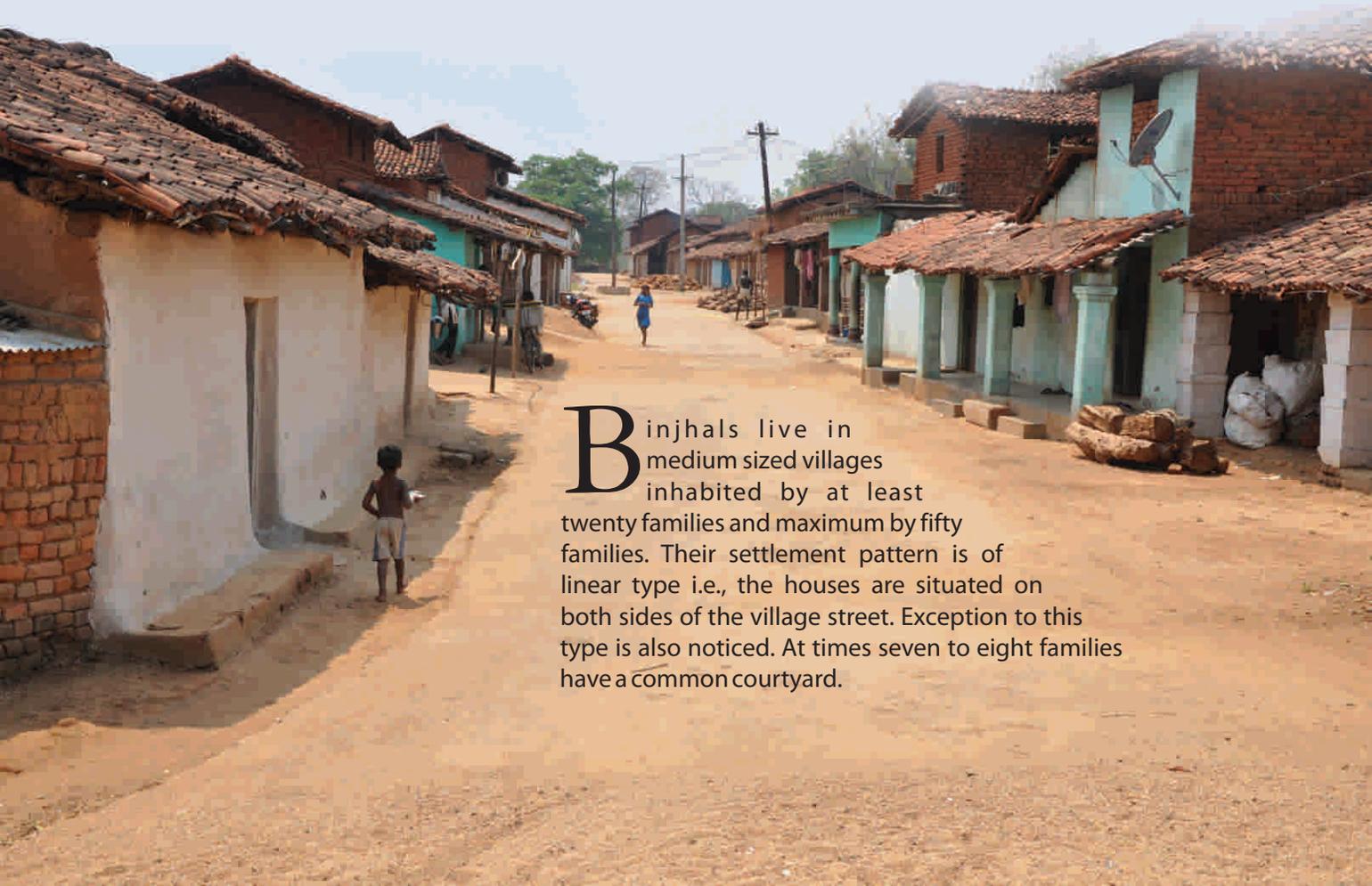
Dress and Ornaments

The Binjhal are identified by their traditional dress, ornaments and tattoo marks. Male members wear coarse dhoti around their waist which goes down to the knee. One end of the dhoti is kept hanging like a tail from the waist at the back. In addition they tie a napkin around the waist and invariably carry a bow and arrows as weapons as a mark of their heroic pursuit when they go to interior regions. Binjhal women wear coarse saree (*kopta*) around the waist covering up to the knee. One end of the saree is thrown over the shoulder cross wise to cover the upper portion of the body. They use bangles called *bandasia*, *chudi*, *kataria* and *khagla* (neck band) which are made of silver. Khagla is

their favourite ornament although in addition to that they use necklaces of beads. Use of *bahasuta* and *baha toda* around the arm and *painru* made of silver around the heels is a mark of tradition. The children go naked up to five or six years, then they use rags as napkins. School going children wear shirts, frocks, shorts. Now-a-days, with the change of time, the affluent women are using gold ornaments and the males wear shirt and banyan when they go to the market or relative's house. Glass and plastic bangles and silver necklaces have become very much popular among the Binjhal women.



SETTLEMENT AND HOUSING



Binjhal live in medium sized villages inhabited by at least twenty families and maximum by fifty families. Their settlement pattern is of linear type i.e., the houses are situated on both sides of the village street. Exception to this type is also noticed. At times seven to eight families have a common courtyard.



They have small houses consisting of one or two small rooms with verandah both in front and back side of the house. Some people construct small kitchen room but most of the people enclose one portion of the verandah to be used as kitchen while on the other side paddy is pounded. The walls are plastered with mud and cow dung. The gable shaped and straw thatched roof is supported by bamboo and wooden structure. Traditional village houses were small and without any window for passage of light and ventilation. Interestingly, like some other tribal groups the Binjhals keep their fowls and goats in the living room. Cattle are sheltered in separate sheds.

The Binjhal live in unhygienic condition. Their small houses having no window lack ventilation and lighting. The keeping of fowls and goats in the bed room makes it dirty. As the courtyard belongs to a number of families nobody cares to clean it. The garbage is dumped at the backyard making the surrounding filthy.





The Binjhal households have a variety of possessions. They possess some important and productive economic assets like agricultural implements, domestic animals, silver and brass metal articles for their daily use, storage bin to store seeds of different kinds. For husking paddy the Binjhals have a heavy and hollow wooden mortar, which is thrust into the floor with a long wooden pestle whose lower end is fastened with an iron band. They use earthen cooking pots. Ladles and utensils are made of brass and bell metal or aluminum. They use several types of basket traps for catching fish. The affluent ones have modern accessories like T.V., electric fan, radio, bicycle or bikes etc.



SOCIAL LIFE

Being an endogamous tribe the Binjhal is divided into a number of exogamous divisions called Bansas (clans). The clan structure is very strong. The main function of these Bansas is to regulate the sex and marriage and it is a taboo to have sexual relationship among the members of the same Vansas. Amori (immortal), Bagh (tiger), Nag (cobra), Endga (male sexual organ), Duduka (of little intellect) and Keshra (bison horn), Khusal, Duguke, Kamati, Mahalinga, Marthi and Bentakar are some of their bansa names which are used as surnames also. The other surnames are Lartha, Mullick, Lahar, Samni, Kharsel, Mahi, Bariha, Singh Bariha etc.



Each Bansa is divided into a number of patrilineages, which embrace all the agnatic male descendants of a common ancestor, their wives and children. These lineages have names like Suryabanshi, Rajput, Chauhan, Nagbanshi etc. After marriage a woman loses the membership of her paternal lineage to become a member of her husband's lineage. Again a lineage is sub-divided into a number of families. The descent is traced through male line only.

The Binjhal family is mostly nuclear and patrilineal. It consists of a man, his wife, unmarried sons and daughters and sometimes the brothers, sisters and the grand children. The family property and surnames are transmitted from father to son. The family functions as an economic and social unit under the supervision of the father who is the head of the family. On important issues the father may consult his wife and grownup children before taking his decision. After the death of the father the eldest son becomes the head of the family.



Women play a great socio-economic role in the Binjhal family. They participate in agricultural operations, animal husbandry, fishing, collection of firewood from the forest, besides, attending to routine household chores like fetching of water for domestic consumption, cooking, child care and housekeeping. But the Binjhal women do not enjoy equal status with their male counterparts. A woman has no right to inherit property so long as there is at least one male issue of her parents. She cannot take part in the deliberation of tribal councils at different levels. Yet for her major contributions for the family, she holds an influential position. She is always consulted in any vital issue. She enjoys the liberty of selecting her spouse and if she cannot pull on well with her husband she can divorce him and remarry another man of her choice.



In a Binjhal family, both the husband and wife bear the responsibility of rearing the children, giving them training and arranging their marriage. Grandparents are paid due respect by the younger members in the family. The relationship between grandparents and grand children and between younger brother and his elder brother's wife, between a girl and her elder brother's wife's brother is of joking. The relationship between the elder brother and his younger brother's wife is of avoidance. They are not allowed to touch each other. The father-in-law and mother-in-laws are respected by a daughter-in-law who does not utter their names. A married woman addresses her husband not by his name but as father of so and so.



LIFE CYCLE

Child Birth

In the Binjhal society, pregnancy followed by child birth is one of the most important event in the life of a woman. The main purpose of marriage is to make a family by begetting children for the purpose of continuity of the family line. More over to become a mother is the ever cherished desire of a married woman in a tribal society. A child is a binding force who bridges the relationship between the husband and wife. Like all other societies in the Binjhal society, children are the source of joy and future hope of the parents. They became the economic assets of the parents.

The birth of the child usually takes place in a separate room. An elderly experienced woman of the community called *Dhai* attends normal delivery cases. She cuts the umbilical cord with an arrow blade and buries it with the placenta in a pit dug in the backyard. A stone is kept on the pit so that animals cannot open it. The child is bathed in tapid water. The mother and the child remain segregated for seven days. In the lying-in-room, a fire is kept burning for seven-days to give warmth to both mother and the child.

When a child is born, birth pollution is observed for a period of twenty one days. The first purificatory rite (*chathi*) is held on the sixth day and on the

second, on the twenty first day (*ekusia*) as post-delivery rituals. Till the observance of *chathi* rite the mother is not allowed to touch anything or enter the kitchen. On the sixth day, both mother and child take a purificatory bath. Their clothes are washed and the house is cleaned. The occasion is celebrated by a feast hosted for the kith and kin.



The name giving ceremony is held either during the *chathi* on the sixth day or on *ekusia* on the 21st day. The service of *Gunia's* (sorcerer) is sought for to select the name of the child. Generally a male child takes the name of his grandfather or great grandfather and a female child, the name of her grandmother or great grandmother. The *Gunia* utters mantras and shakes some paddy in a winnowing fan. He then utters the name of the ancestors and throws paddy on the floor. He repeats the act till two paddies fall jointly and the name uttered at that



time is selected for the child. Then the elders present there bless the child and take part in the feast hosted by the family.

The mother takes care of the child. When the mother goes out for attending to out-side chores, she leaves the child in care of grand parents or elderly children in the family. As long as the child is breastfed, the mother may arrange a substitute to feed it when she has to go out. Weaning take place at the age of 2 to 3 or after the second child is born. Even after this, occasional suckling is not denied to the child. No efforts are made to teach the child to talk nor it is given any toilet training. The child learns the habits by observing others as he/she grows up.



Puberty

A girl among the Binjhal tribe, at the age of 6 to 7 years is traditionally made to marry to a Mahua tree in a ceremony called Kundanbari. When the first menstruation (Puspabati) occurs in the girl, she is kept confined into a room for 7 days. During that time she never comes out in front of any male member of the village. After 7 days she takes a bath with turmeric paste and puts on a new saree and bangles. She is also given a special garland. The occasion is celebrated with feasting and marry-making by other girls of the village.



Marriage :

The Brinjhal are endogamous and follow the rule of exogamy at clan and lineage levels. The clans and the lineages primarily regulate marriage alliances and indicate descent and social status. Cross-cousin marriage with mother's, brother's, daughter is not allowed and hence, punishable in their society. Junior levirate and sororate marriage is allowed. Monogamy is the usual form of marriage but in some cases polygyny including sororal and non-sororal polygamy is permitted. Child marriage is not preferred.





They prefer adult marriage. A boy can marry at the age of 18-22 and a girl between 16-20 years. Marriage by negotiation "*biha*" is commonly preferred and practised by them. Other modes of acquiring mates that are also in vogue are marriage by service (*ghar jnoi*), love marriage (*udlia*), marriage by capture (*ghicha*) and marriage by intrusion (*paisa mundi*). Bride price is customary and it is paid both in cash and kinds before the marriage ceremony.

The wedding rite is performed at the bride's residence and a feast is hosted by both the families, In the evening bridegroom along with his party returns to their village. The nuptial ceremony (*asthamangala*) is performed at the groom's residence on the eighth day. A married woman can be recognized if she wears lac bangles.

Divorce

Divorce though rarely occur is socially permitted by the Binjhal society. It generally takes place due to maladjustment or misunderstanding between the spouses. Sometimes infidelity or sterility of the wife also leads to divorce. If the wife is found guilty her parents have to return the bride price. When the husband is at fault the bride price is forfeited. Children of a divorced couple mostly remain with their father. Remarriage is allowed for widower, widows and divorces.

Death

Like many other tribal communities, the Binjhal bury the dead. They have a strong belief that when a man dies his soul remains in and around his family members and take rebirth as grandsons and granddaughters. The death ritual among the Binjhal is observed for ten days. All socio-religious observances of the bereaved family remain suspended during this period. On the third day following death the first purification ceremony called *Tela* is observed. The house and courtyard are washed with cow dung mixed in water and the old earthen cooking pots are thrown away. The male mourners get themselves shaved by a barber and take a purificatory bath. The female mourners pair nails and take bath after anointing turmeric paste.

For the final mortuary rite on the 10th day, the members of both the paternal and maternal side of the deceased are invited to attend the ritual. A community feast (*karanjia*) is arranged on the eleventh day. After one year the secondary death ritual (*barsokia*) is observed.

LIVELIHOOD

The Binjhal pursue settled cultivation, hunting and gathering, animal husbandry and fishing in the streams and rivers. But they are settled agriculturists. Agriculture is their main source of livelihood. For them land is not only of great economic value but it also accords social



prestige. Some of them also work as agricultural and construction labourers. The majority of them being marginal landholders, the number of agricultural and casual labourers is increasing. Presently some members of tribe are found to be engaged in services in Government and Non Government establishments and actively participate in modern politics. Some of them work as daily labours and agricultural labourers.

The principal crop grown by the Binjhals in their fields is paddy. Besides, they cultivate pulses, summer and winter vegetables such as brinjal, tomato, chilly, cucumber, and pumpkin in their Bari land. Some Binjhal farmers also grow til and sugarcane.



Food & Drinks

The Binjhals not very much dependent upon outside market except some essential articles like salt, kerosene, tobacco, dry fish, cloth, etc. for which they have to go to the local weekly markets. They consume what they produce. Fuel is collected from the forest. Oil prepared from the seeds of Mahua known as Tal is used for cooking.

They are mostly non-vegetarian (ambissi) rice and wheat are their staple cereals. They usually use mustard oil for cooking but sometimes use Mahua oil (tole-tel). They are in the habit of eating snake, rat, pork and red ant, besides fowls, goats and pigeons. A small section of them who have become 'Bhagat' (devotees) have turned pure vegetarians (bissio).

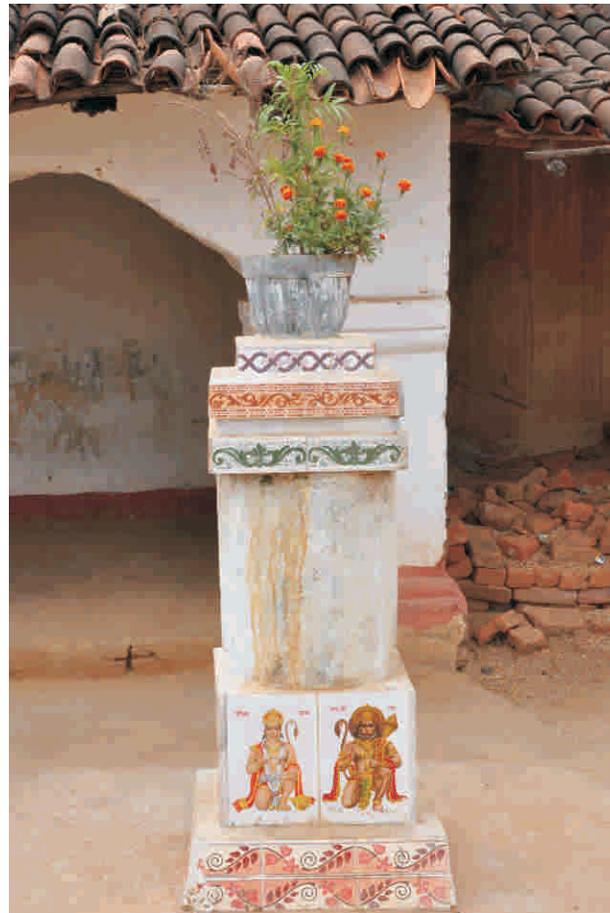
Both men and women occasionally consume alcoholic beverages either homemade or brought from the market. During social and religious functions they drink liberally and smoke tobacco. Men mostly use narcotics like guraku (a paste prepared with tobacco dust mixed with molasses) and smoke cigarette, bidi and an indigenous cheroot (pika). The people also chew betel leaves and offer it to the guests who visit to their house as a mark of respect.



RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

The Binjhal profess a religion of animism with admixture of elements of Hinduism as they have been considerably influenced by the religious beliefs and practices of the caste Hindus. Bindhya Basini is their supreme deity. Her original abode lies in the Bindhya Hill of Madhya Pradesh. Their mythological ancestors - Barabhai Bentakars (twelve brothers who were archers) brought the deity from Bindhya hills and installed her on the Nrusinghanath Hills in Sambalpur district where a stone in shape of a woman represents the deity. She looks after the welfare of the Binjhals and protects them from all dangers.

Besides Bindhya Basini, they worship deities like Nrusinghnath, Ramji, Karam Sani, Durgran, Baralgudha and Ghasin Devi. Other important deities whom they worship are Dongar Devta – the forest god as well as Mulen Devi and Dula Devata who are their family deities. A few bangles kept in the corner of house represent Mulen Devi. She is offered sweets, fruits and sacrifices. A barren she-goat is sacrificed to her when the first child of a couple in the family is born. Dula Devata is





Parab, Nuakhia, Dola Purnima, Janmastami, Dasara and Diwali. The festivals have socio-religious significance. These festive occasions are celebrated with merry making and both the men and women singing and dancing by beating of drums throughout the entire night.

worshipped on all important occasions in the family. Due to their contact with their Hindu neighbours, they have adopted a number of Hindu gods and goddesses and pay reverence to Lord Jagannath, Siva, Laxmi, Kali, etc. The cult of ancestor worship is prevalent among them.

They also worship a number of natural spirits as well as their family, clan and village deities. They have their sacred specialists from their own community or from other communities who perform their life cycle rituals and worship their deities. Their traditional priest is known as Jhankar

Festivals :

The Binjhal observe a number of festivals which include their traditional festivals and a number of Hindu Festivals like Karma, Harali Parab, Pusa Punei or Madhen Parab, Magha Parab, Mahula Bhaja



Their important festival- Karma is observed on the 11th day of Bhadrab (August-September) when the deity, Karamasani is worshipped for their good fortune. Badakarma is held once in every three years in which after worshipping Karamasani, a party of young boys and girls of a group of villages go on a dancing trip to five adjacent villages. They stay one night in each village and dance there. The host villages make necessary arrangements for their food and accommodation.



The Harali Parab meant for welfare of the children is held in the month of Srabana (July-August). On that day different types of cakes and porridges are prepared. Pusa Punei or Madhen Parab is observed in the month of Pausa (December-January) after the harvest of paddy crop. The village deity is worshipped with offerings of rice, pulses and animal sacrifices. In the Magha Parab, Dangar Devta is worshipped by offering sweets and fruits and sacrificing fowls and goats.

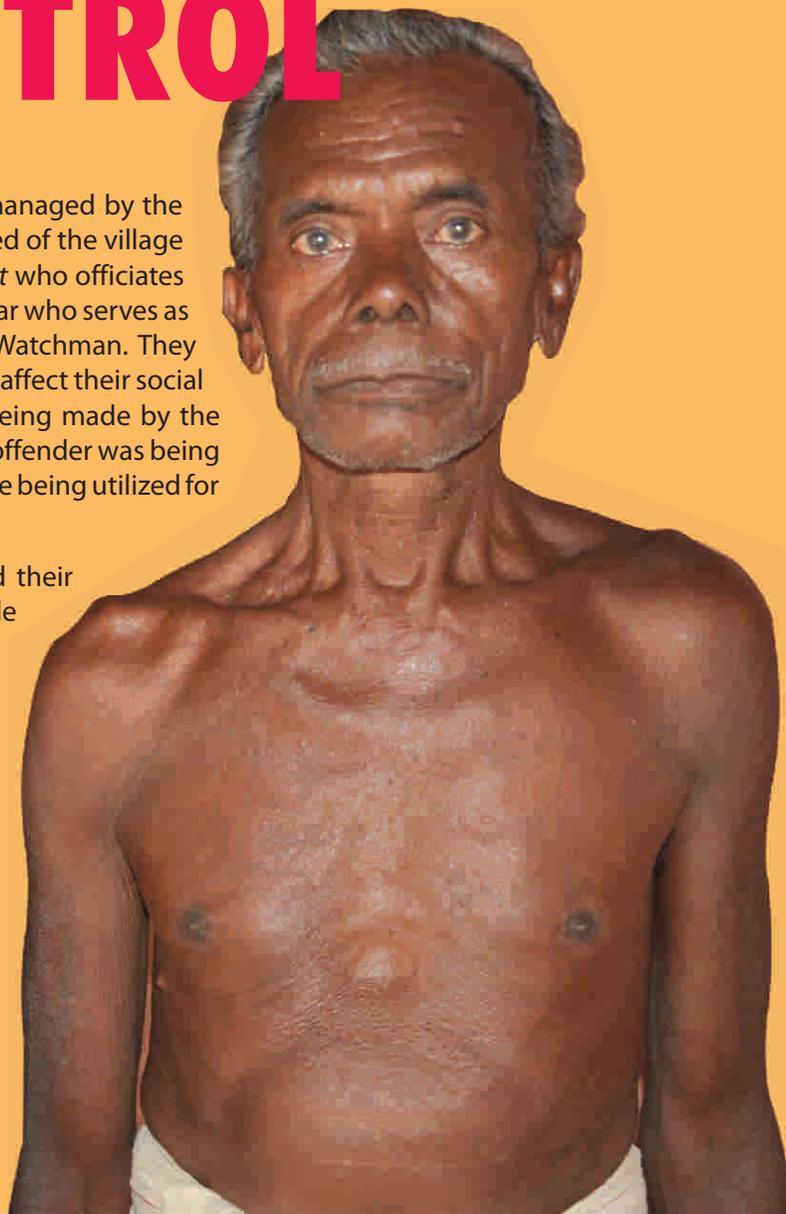
Mahulbhaja Parab is held in the month of Chaitra (March-April) marks the occasion of first eating of Mahua flower. The village deity is worshipped on this occasion by offering Mahua flower.



SOCIAL CONTROL

The affairs of the Binjhal were being managed by the traditional village *panchayat* composed of the village elders and functionaries viz, the *Ganat* who officiates in marriage and other social functions, *Jhankar* who serves as village priest and *Chowkidar* - the village Watchman. They hold meetings to deal with the problems that affect their social life. A decision in the village meeting was being made by the consensus of all members present there. The offender was being punished with fine in cash and kind which were being utilized for a common feast.

But since the last century, they have formed their village and inter-village councils which handle their customary matters. Each village has a traditional council of village elders (*beheran*) called *gram jati panchayat* headed by the secular chief-Behera to look after the matters relating to the customary rules and welfare of the community. This village council is very powerful and deal with cases like intra-community disputes and issues like divorce, adultery, rape, elopement, violation of traditional norms or customary rules of their society, disrespect or insult to the traditional village council and theft etc.



Beyond the village level, they have an apex council known as “Saolakh Vidyagiribasi Binjhal Samaja Sangathan”, constituted to ensure unity among members of the community and to bring reforms to their society in the context of the changes occurring in their society in the present times. An annual meeting of the apex council is held for three days every year at Padampur to discuss matters relating to inter-community disputes, divorce, illegal transfer of land etc and other matters those could not be resolved at the village level. This council has the right to ex-communicate persons who committed grave offences, but in case of minor offences the council imposes fines to the offender.



CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT

For all round development of the tribals, the basic approach of the Govt. in its Plans and Programme is to strengthen their socio-economic base by way of modernizing their means and sources of livelihood such as agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry and allied activities by making them more productive and profitable and there by gradually minimizing their dependency on forest based subsistence activities.



The goal is to raise all the target families above the poverty line by raising their socio-economic and educational status and bringing about improvement in their quality of life without sacrificing the best values of their age old culture.



In this early 21st Century when the world is rapidly moving to the age of high technology, the Binjhals cannot remain isolated from the process of external influences and changes. The way of life and world view of the Binjhals has been changing by their exposure to the changing world. They are now aware of the development programmes being implemented by the government and non-government agencies and coming forward to avail the opportunities. It has effected changes in their life style especially in the sectors relating to

education, health and sanitation, communication, livelihood, environment, housing, infrastructure etc. Introduction of modern agriculture by way of supply of improved variety of seeds, irrigation, market support for disposal of produce combined with various poverty alleviation and food, health and livelihood security, women empowerment programmes, etc. have brought remarkable visible changes in their socio-economic life.

Their overall literacy rate including that of their women have increased which indicates that there



is a growing interest developed among them to come into the fold of education. Regarding health care, the Binjhals are becoming inclined to use modern medicines for any critical ailment. They are aware of the good effect of family planning and many of them adopted it. The use of modern appliances like radio, televisions and other modern sophisticated gadgets shows that the Binjhals have developed a passion to change their style of life, living and livelihood in tune with the changing times.

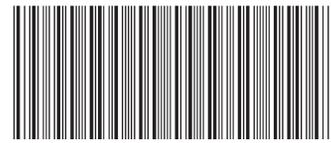




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