

BANJARA

(A Minority Semi Nomadic Tribe of Odisha)

Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes
Research and Training Institute
Bhubaneswar, Odisha

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FOREWORD

The Banjara / Banjari is colourful tribe not only of Odisha but also of India found in many States like Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Maharashtra. Also known as Bepari, Mukeai, Laban, they are a semi nomadic tribe of carriers and drivers of pack-bullocks. The name Banjara /Banjari probably had come from two different sources: 'Banijya' - trade or 'Banachara', the forest dwellers. Their principal group's name Laban/Labana is derived from the Sanskrit word *lavannah*, meaning salt as they were salt traders. They are found moving around in different parts of the country especially during fairs and festivals.

The Banjaras of Odisha are believed to have migrated from Rajasthan to different places of the State through Madhya Pradesh and Bihar as evident from their own "Banjari" dialect. Their major concentration lies in Lanjigarh, Dharamgarh, Jay Patna and Nuapara Tahasils of undivided Kalahandi district.

Their womenfolk are distinguished by their very elaborate, colourful and attractive personal adornments comprising *Ghagra*, *Orhni*, *Kanchhi* and *Zhabta* dresses, silver ornaments, tattoo marks and hair style. Their ornaments are different for unmarried and married women and also widows.

Now, the Banjara are primarily agriculturists and animal husbandry is their secondary occupation. They have retained their traditional occupation of selling salt, coconut, stationery goods, etc. at the weekly markets and local fairs. Some of them work as agricultural labourers. In multi-ethnic villages, they live in separate wards called Tanda maintaining their cultural identity. Banjari Devi is their patron deity who is represented by a heap of stones under a shady grove in the village outskirts.

This Photo Handbook on Banjara - a Semi Nomadic Tribe of Odisha is an outcome of academic exploration enriched with field experiences to disseminate through visual documentation the pristine tribal cultures of Odisha among the people who are interested to know about the exotic life styles Odishan tribes. This book would give an overview of Banjara tribe of Odisha highlighting on their social life, political life, and economic life, aesthetic life, livelihood, material culture, religious beliefs and practices, rituals, fairs, festivals, age-old social customs, traditions, change and development. This piece of document is a product of the painstaking exercise of the dedicated officers and staff of SCSTRTI who deserves to be acknowledged.

I extend my sincere thanks to Prof. A.B. Ota, IAS, former Director (ST)- cum-Additional Secretary to Govt. in ST&SC Development Deptt and Director SC &ST Research and Training Institute and his team members who have made a creative endeavour to bring out this wonderful booklet for a ready reference. My special thanks are due to Shri S.C.Mohanty, OSD (Research), SCSTRTI for editing of the handbook and enriching it with relevant data. I hope and wish that this handbook will be appreciated by the booklovers and also by the amateur readers.

Commissioner-cum-Secretary
ST & SC Development Department
Government of Odisha

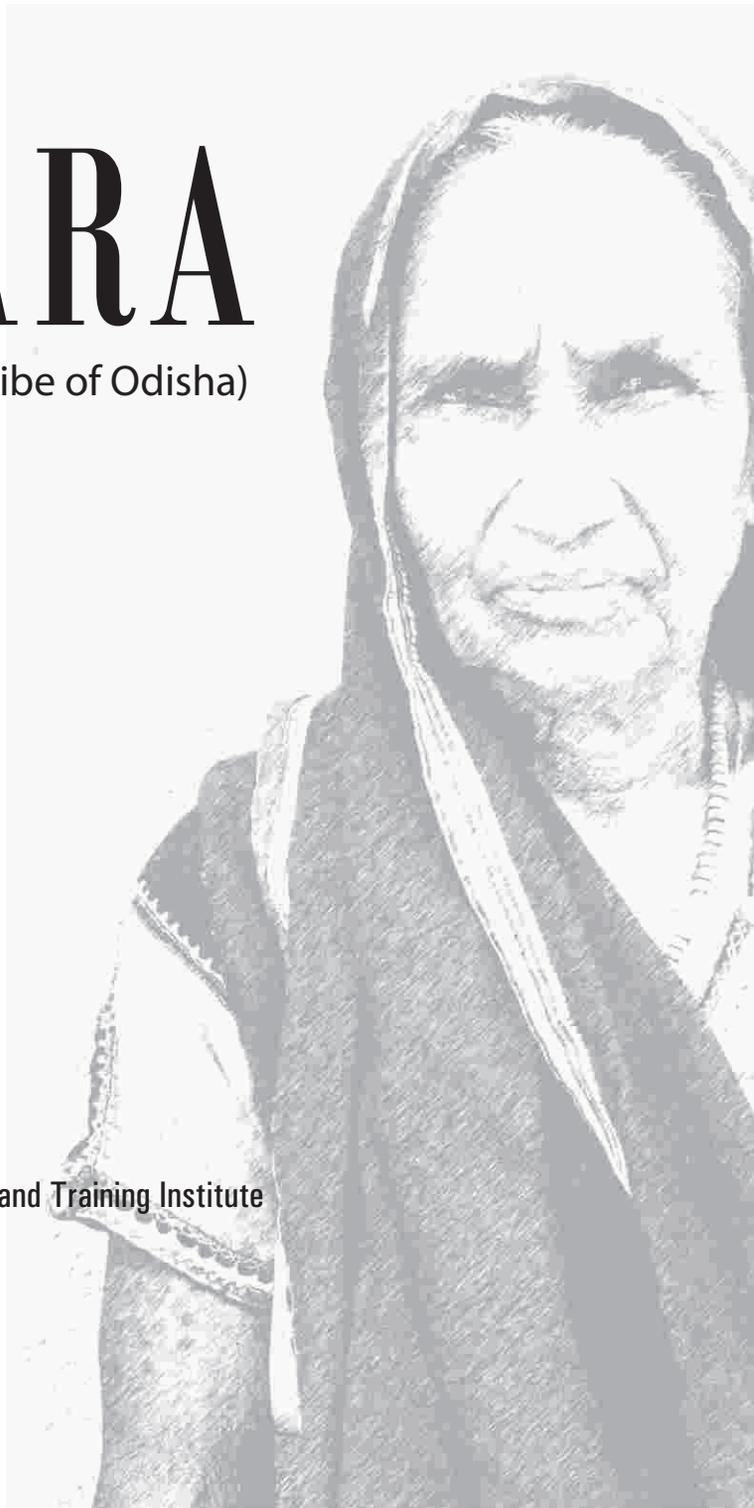
BANJARA

(A Minority Semi Nomadic Tribe of Odisha)

A.B. Ota
S.C. Mohanty
Kalpana Patnaik

Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Research and Training Institute
(SCSTRTI), C.R.P. Square, Bhubaneswar -751003

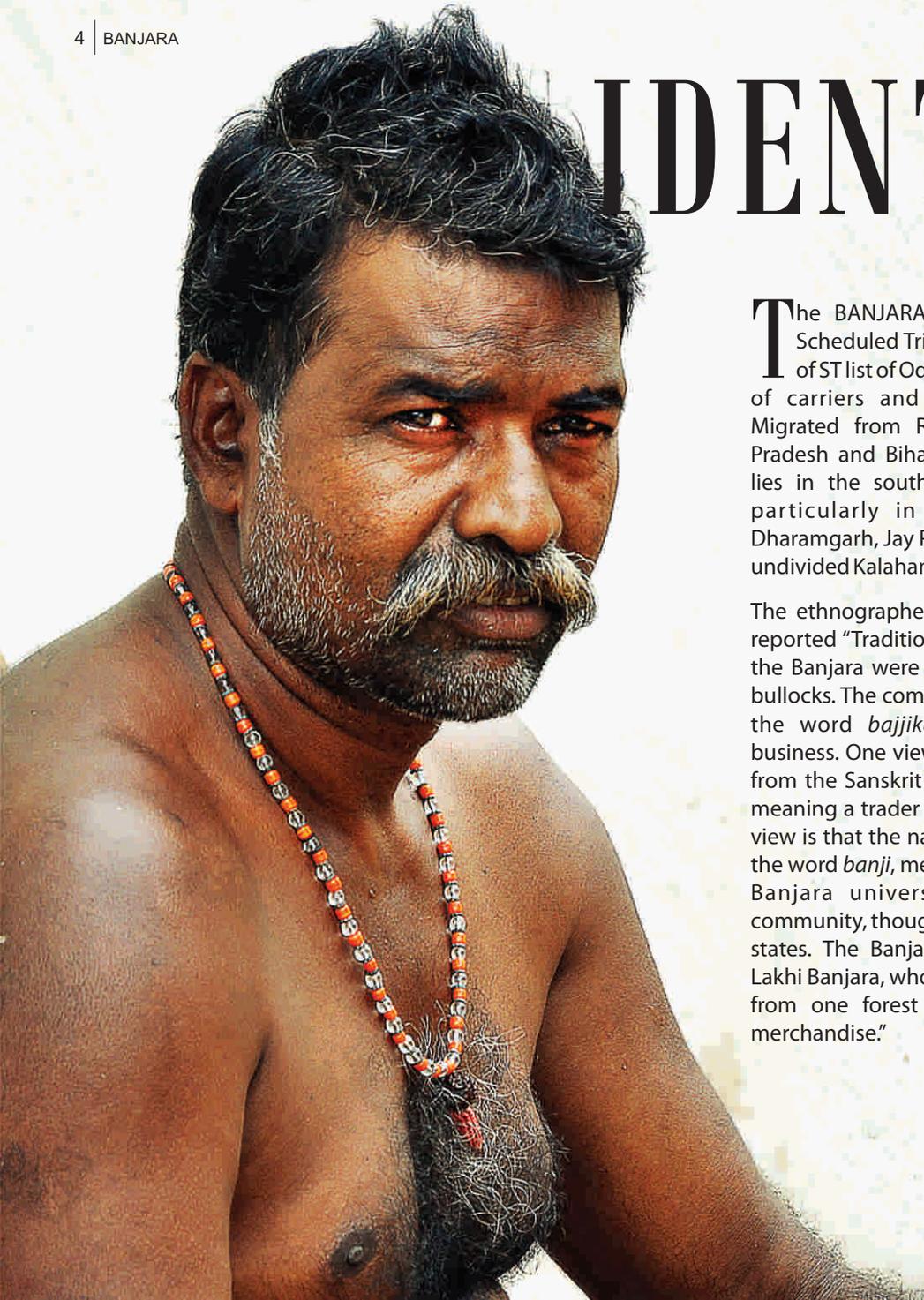
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IDENTITY

The BANJARA or BANJARI notified as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) being placed at Sl. 03 of ST list of Odisha, are a semi nomadic tribe of carriers and drivers of pack-bullocks. Migrated from Rajasthan through Madhya Pradesh and Bihar, their major concentration lies in the southwestern part of the State, particularly in the areas of Lanjigarh, Dharamgarh, Jay Patna and Nuapara Tahasils of undivided Kalahandi district.

The ethnographers like K.S. Singh (1998) has reported "Traditionally a nomadic community, the Banjara were carriers and drivers of pack-bullocks. The community name is derived from the word *bajjika*, which means trade or business. One view is that the name is derived from the Sanskrit word *vanijya* or *banijyakara*, meaning a trader or merchant, while the other view is that the name Banjara is a derivative of the word *banji*, meaning a peddler's pack. Now, Banjara universally means the trading community, though the root word differs across states. The Banjara trace their descent from Lakhi Banjara, who, as recounted, used to move from one forest (*ban*) to another with his merchandise."



Crooke (1896) describes them as a tribe whose primary occupation is, or rather used to be, that of grain carriers and suppliers for armies in the battlefield. Risley (1891) states that the term 'Banjara' is applied to a grain and cattle merchant who moves to different markets. Ibbetson (1891) opines that they and the 'Labana caste are generally said to be identical being called Banjara in the eastern districts and Labana in the whole of Punjab proper'.

Russell and Hiralal (1916) described the tribe as having migrated from Rajputana and its surrounding places. Formerly they were migratory in their habit and sold commodities in various places moving in a large group and carrying the goods on their bullock-carts. It is reported from history that the Banjaras were employed by the Hindu as well as Muslim kings to carry necessities for the soldiers to the war front. It appears that the tribe in course of time migrated to different places of Orissa through Central Province and Bihar.





The Banjara of Orissa are also known by several synonyms such as Banjari, Wanjari, Vanjari, Brinjari, Bepari, Mukeai, Laban etc. The community name probably had come from two different sources: *banijya* - trade or *banachara*, the forest wanderer. Their principal group's name Laban / Labana is derived from the Sanskrit word *lavanah*, meaning 'salt' as traditionally, they were salt traders. The members of the tribe do not take offence to being called as Adibasis or to being identified as members of the Scheduled Tribe.

Besides Odisha, this tribe is found in many other States of India with different social and constitutional status. They have been notified as Scheduled Caste in Himachal Pradesh as Banjara, in Chandigarh, Haryana and Punjab as Bhanjara and in Karnataka as Banjara, Lambani. They enjoy ST status in Bihar in the name of Banjara. In the States of Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Delhi, Andhra Pradesh they are called Banjara, Laban etc and do not come under ST or SC category. They are found moving around in different parts of the country especially during fairs and festivals.

Language

They are multi-lingual. Their mother tongue is 'Banjari'. Besides, they are also conversant in regional languages like Odia, Hindi, Telgu, Tamil, Kannad, Marathi etc depending upon their place of residence as they move here and there for trading.

Population & Literacy

As per 2001 census, the Binjhia population in Odisha is 18 257, of which males number 9126 and females, 9131. Their sex ratio is 1001 females per 1000 males and decennial growth rate is 15.06%. Their total literacy rate in 2011 census is 62.28% that is 75.56% for males and 49.14% for the females.



Personal Adornments

The Banjaras and particularly their womenfolk are distinguished by their very elaborate, colourful and attractive personal adornments, hair style and tattoo marks. The regular dress of the adult Banjara male consists of a loin cloth (dhoti) which hangs from the waist to the knee joint. They use a turban as headdress on special occasions. Men always wear a *fatei* (the traditional shirts) or *kurta* (short with many folds). They put on warm clothing for the winter. These clothes are designed specially for protection from harsh climate in deserts and to distinguish them from others.

The costume of Banjara women is the most colourful and elaborate among the other tribal communities in India. They are identified by their *ghagra*, *orhni*, *kanchhi* and *zhabta* dresses, silver ornaments, distinguished hairdo and tattoo marks.

They wear the costumes of *ghaghra* and *choli* (a blouse). Ghaghra is a full length skirt made of red, black and white cotton, embellished with pieces of mirrored glass with borders embroidered in mustard and green thread. They wear *phetiya* (as ghagra) and *kanchalli* (as top) and have *mehendi* tattoos on their hands. Silver, brass, gold, cowries, ivory, animal bone and even plastic are used in making a Banjara wardrobe. Their dress is considered fanciful and attractive by Western cultures.





The Banjara women also wear *sarees* of 12 feet length for everyday use. With it they wear petty-coats above which the one end of the *saree* is wrapped through shoulder and inserted to the right waist.

Traditionally, Banjara women are very fond of ornaments and they are never tired of wearing and collecting so many and so heavy ornaments. The women wear a variety of ornaments on different parts of the body as stated below.

Hair Ornaments	Ghugri
Nose Ornaments	Bhuria Phule, Notha
Ear Ornaments	Sinkuli, Fasia
Necklaces	Waute, Har, Cheed, Hasla, Mali
Armlets	Bandiya
Bangles & Wristlets	Chodus, Moterabalia, Balia
Finger rings	Winte, Phula
Anklets	Khas, Ghode, Wankdo, Bahu Kankana
Legs & Toe-rings	Chuda, Kuncia, Gazera, Kusotia

Notha, i.e., the nose-ring is worn in the nose and a chain called *sinkuli* is attached to the ear. One ring worn in the upper earlobe is called *fasia*. Golden necklace or bead necklaces called, *mali* are worn in the neck. Balia (wrist let) made of tusk of the elephant is worn in the hand but bahu kankana (arm let) made of silver is worn in the ankles. Chuda on Jhunjara is put on in the leg which creates tinkling sound while walking.

Most of these ornaments are made of silver, except the rings in the nose and the ears which are of gold or brass. Their ornaments are made of silver rings, coins, chain and hair pleats tied together at the end by *chotla*. In fact, these ornaments add more beauty when these are worn with red-coloured sarees.

Womens' adornments distinguish unmarried from married and married from widowed women. Married women wear horn / ivory bangles (*chodur*) between wrist and shoulder, whereas, unmarried women wear these up to the elbow from wrist. Married women use hair ornaments called ghugri which distinguish them



from unmarried women and widows who are prohibited to wear these. A widow can wear *ghugri* if she is married again. *Ghugri* is a silver ornament and looks like a pendant made of a tube with small silver beads hanging. It is attached to the hair on both sides with a pin. Covering this pin is a clamp shaped silver disc. The silver beads almost touch the cheeks. *Ghugri* is indicative of the marital status of a woman.

Women wear necklace and finger rings made of old silver coins. They wear *khas*, a bell metal anklet round in shape with different designs drawn on the surface. It is worn by both married and unmarried women. But *ghode* and *wankdo* type of anklets are worn by only married women. *Kusotia* is a small cloth belt, bedecked with glass beads on the upper side and cords of cowries

and glass beads hanging from the side. This belt is used only by married women to tie both shoulders. Whereas *kuncia*, a decorative piece made of red coarse cotton cloth put into a triangular shape and the lower edge of the cloth are attached glass beads of different hues and cowries, is worn by unmarried girls hanging it on the wrist. The maidens also wear black bead necklaces which are taken off at marriage.

The hair style of traditional Banjara women is quite different from that of others. They part their hair sideways so that the hair may fall on both cheeks and on these they fix hair ornaments.

Tattooing

Traditional tattooing is found among the Banjara women, which are done since childhood. Men usually get their names tattooed and the figure of scorpion is commonly seen on their forearms. They believe that if they have the figure of scorpion tattooed on their body scorpion will never bite them and if by chance it bites them, it will not be fatal. Women have tattoo marks on their hands, forearms, on legs, on their backs and on their face as well. The tattoos are of different kinds of designs drawn, some very complicated and some are very simple. These tattoos among women are mainly for the beautification and some said that tattooing relieves the body joints from pain and exertion.



HABITAT, SETTLEMENT & HOUSING



In western Odisha, the Banjara settlements are found on the hills, forests and mostly on the plains. In multi-ethnic villages, they live in separate wards called, 'Tanda' maintaining their distinct cultural identity. Their *tandas*, established outside the main village may be as far as one or two miles away from the main village. Characteristics of nomads still persist with them. Traditionally being nomadic traders, they had settled temporarily in places outside the main village, where they could find plenty of space to keep their cattle and exclusiveness to carry on their activities without any hindrance from outsiders. Even after they left their

nomadic style of life and properly settled down, they still continued to raise their settlements outside the main villages.

It is more usual to find that the Banjara settlements lying amidst mango and jack fruit groves as a single unit. They have no well-defined boundaries. At the village outskirts their patron deity *Banjari mata* is installed under a tamarind or a banyan tree.

Generally, each *tanda* consists of 15 to 20 households. There is no definite pattern of arrangement of their houses in a *tanda* - in some places houses arranged in parallel rows facing each other leaving a street in between and in some other places, houses scattered here and there. These are one or two central paths to which the houses face. These paths usually go round in a northerly -southerly direction and are often winding. The lanes are narrow and dirty.

The Banjaras build houses like neighbouring caste Hindus. The shapes of their dwellings are rectangular

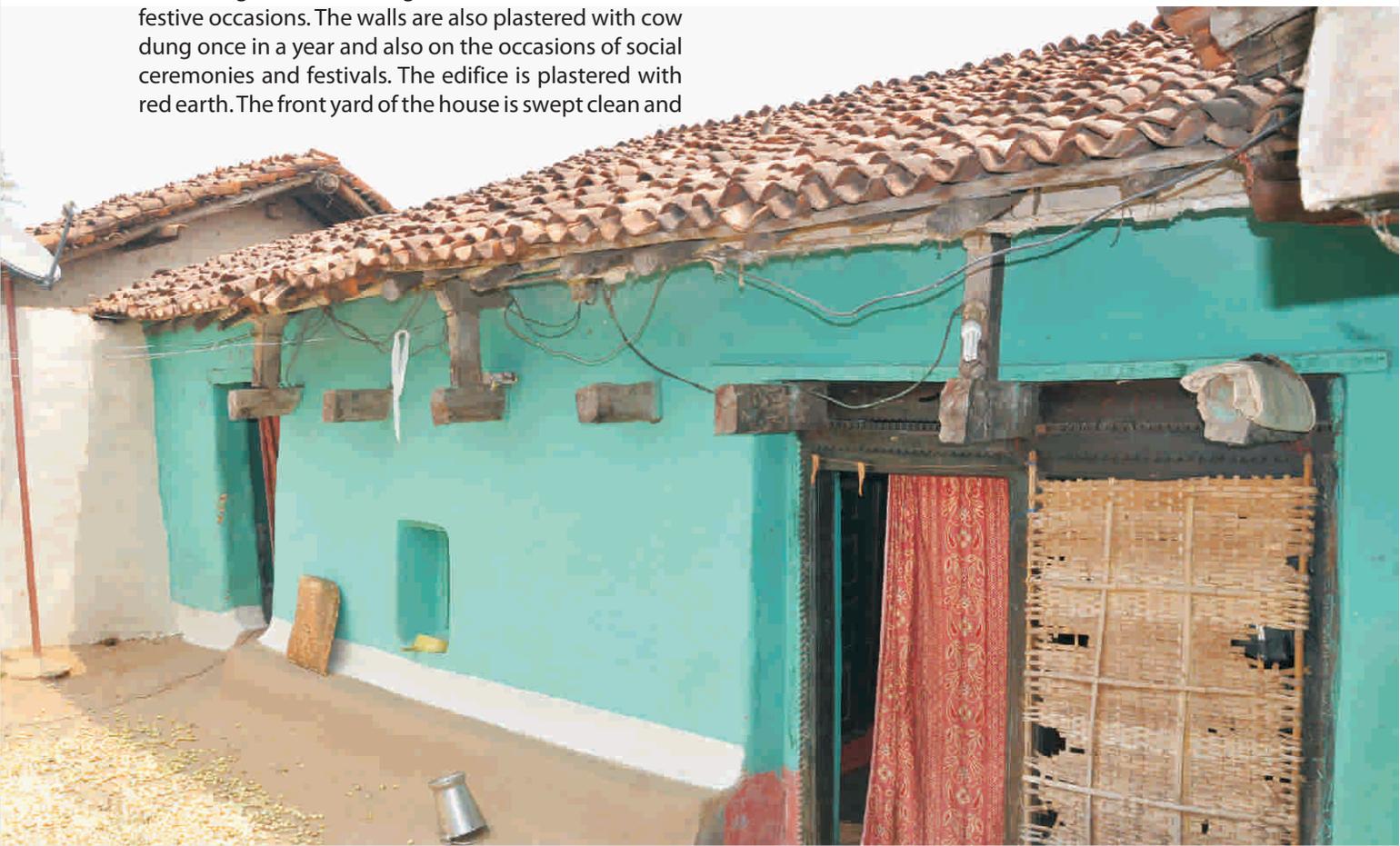




with a tiny single entrance made with wattle or bamboos within a wooden frame and without windows. These are made of brick walls of about two feet thick plastered with mud, having a tiled or straw thatched roof laid out on bamboo poles and a fairly large courtyard. The inside and outside of the mud walls, the floors and the courtyard are plastered with a mixture of cowdung and coloured clay. The houses are not of the same height. There are no beams to support the roof structure instead, poles are used to hold on the roof inside the rooms as well as in the verandahs.

Usually, each Banjara house consists of two or three rooms. The bigger room is used for living and sleeping and the smaller, to store grains and other articles. In three roomed houses belonging to well-to-do families, the third room is used as drawing room. There is a spacious back verandah enclosed by mud walls, which serves as kitchens and dining space. Some households put up a middle wall with a door in the verandah to separate the kitchen from the dining area. In their house the kitchen is the sacred place as it is the abode of the ancestral spirits.

The interior of the house is very dark and without ventilation. The floor of the house is kept clean by bedaubing with cow dung once in a month and on festive occasions. The walls are also plastered with cow dung once in a year and also on the occasions of social ceremonies and festivals. The edifice is plastered with red earth. The front yard of the house is swept clean and





sprinkled with water mixed with cow dung once in a day and decorated with *rangoli* / *muggu* (decorative lines drawn with white flour) to give a better look to the house. The walls of the house, both inside and outside, the floor inside the house, the partitions inside the house are painted with *rangoli* which lasts at least for six months. The whole house with all these decorations, gives an ethnic look.

They domesticate animals like bullocks, cows, goats and sheeps. Bullocks, buffaloes and cows are kept in a cowshed and goats and sheeps, in another shed. Fowls are also domesticated for sacrificing and appeasing the deities.

The back-yard of the house is well fenced to grow vegetables for domestic consumption. One remarkable feature in the construction of these houses is that wood is rarely used because it is not readily available in the forest.

Before constructing the house the Banjaras contact the astrologer to test the auspiciousness of the site. Before entering into the new house the owner offers cooked rice with a chicken in a new pot to the ancestral spirits and entertains kinsmen with a sumptuous feast.





Household Articles

For their traditional nomadic style of life, they used to possess scanty household items to meet their bare minimum necessities of daily life. Those who have settled down to a sedentary life, more or less, have acquired extra household assets required for the changed style of life. These articles are kept neatly arranged and give a clean look to the outsiders.

Their household items include aluminum pots, pans and utensils, earthen pots, wooden boxes, wooden almirahs /cupboards, small aluminum trunk, grinding stone, pestle, kerosene light, mat, quilt, blankets, gunny bags, knife, axe, spade, spear, sickle, rope, *utti* (hanging frame), cots made with bamboo tubes and *sutli* (rope) etc. Beds and cots are used for sleeping. Only well-to-do families keep chairs and tables. They make mat, basket, broom, tray from the grass available in the forest. They also have *lathi*, *bhala*, *bher*, *khanti* and axe which they use as their weapons. On the verandah, the Dhenki (rice-husker) is fixed for husking and pounding food grains.



ECONOMIC LIFE

Traditionally, the Banjaras were semi-nomadic rural traders who traded salt and other commodities driving pack-bullocks. In course of time, when they permanently settled down in the villages of Kalahandi district, the then Zamindars appointed some of them as revenue collectors granting them rent free lands. Some of them reclaimed forest lands for settlement and cultivation. Some others either continued with their traditional occupation of trading by opening petty shops in the villages or by becoming peddlers. The rest i.e., those who could not pursue their traditional occupation became wage earners. Some of them who were little educated became service holders.

Now the Banjaras are mostly agriculturists. The land in this area is of three types such as wet land, up land and kitchen garden. Paddy is their major crop. Other than paddy, jute is also produced in the wet land. Crops like groundnut, sugarcane, arhar, black gram, green gram, horse gram are also raised as cash crops. Seasonal vegetables and tobacco leaf are produced in the kitchen garden for family consumption. Since there are no irrigation facilities in the area, no high yielding varieties of crops are produced.

Animal husbandry is their secondary occupation. They rear livestock which include cow, bullock, buffalo, sheep and goat. Fowls are kept for sacrifice to the deities on festive occasions. They take milk and milk products. When necessity arises they sell sheeps and goats for cash.

Some of them still retain their traditional occupation of selling salt, coconuts, stationary goods etc at the weekly markets and local fairs. Some of them work as agricultural labourers. Both the male and females go for wage earning. When the females are mostly engaged as agricultural labourers, the males, generally opt for road construction and forest works with the contractors.

They are experts in traditional hand embroidery with mirror works. Artwork of Banjara has a good demand in the market in the various States of India. Articles made of materials like silver, brass, gold, cowries, ivory, animal bone and even plastic, adorn the wardrobes of fashionable urbanites.

They gather fire wood, house building materials, leaves, varieties of mushrooms, edible roots, fruits and tubers from the nearby forest to meet their consumption needs. This is done by both the sexes.



Food & Drinks

The Banjaras are non-vegetarians and eat almost everything. Their staple diet consists of ragi, jowar (millet) and rice. They also eat pulses like gram, *moong*, *kulthi* and use mustard and groundnut oil as cooking medium. They are considered as experts in making *dal* and *roti*. They prepare a dish called Daliya using many cereals, such as wheat or jawar. They generally live on vegetable diet because they cannot always afford to eat meat and fish. From rice they prepare cakes of different varieties. They prepare curry with different vegetables which they produce in their own kitchen garden. They make *biryani* and *puri* occasionally. They eat various types of fruits such as, jack fruits, guava, plantain, blackberry, tamarind, papaya etc. On festive occasions and social ceremonies, they make elaborate dishes which include sweet dishes.

They relish animal food very much. Traditionally, beef and pork are prohibited. But they eat a large variety of non-veg foods made from meat of sheep, goat, fowl, mouse, hare, deer, rabbits etc. Among birds they eat the meat of pigeon, peacock etc. Insects and red-ants are also eaten by them. They prepare a unique non-vegetarian dish called *salo*, made from goat blood and other goat parts. If they can afford they would like to eat non-veg everyday.

Their everyday dishes are very simple with veg curry, chutney, pickle, *rasam*, buttermilk etc. They are also known for preparing spicy food. Milk is very much utilized for preparing curd and butter. The butter-milk is also drunk by them. Generally, they take tea.

Traditionally, their cooking utensils are earthen pots. They feel that the food cooked in earthen pots tastes good. They take their meals in aluminum plates and for drinking they use bell metal or aluminum tumblers. Only, head of the family eats in brass plate brought by

daughter-in-law in marriage. Majority of Banjara families cook their food with the help of *chula*. In urban areas, they use kerosene stoves.

The drinking of country liquor (*mad*) is common. They take alcohol regularly. Among them, it is customary for both the sexes to take liquor on certain occasions. After a long hard working day, at night they eat, drink and dance exotically. Visiting relatives is rare among them, but whenever they meet it is customary to eat non-veg dishes and drink liquor by both the sexes.

The Banjara drink *chauli* (rice beer) on festive occasions. Chauli is prepared from the cooked rice and is as good as *handia* (rice-beer) prepared by the tribes of north Odisha. This is ritually offered to their ancestor spirits and to other gods and deities and also used as a medicine for curing various ailments. Besides, they drink *mahuli* which is purchased from the liquor shop.

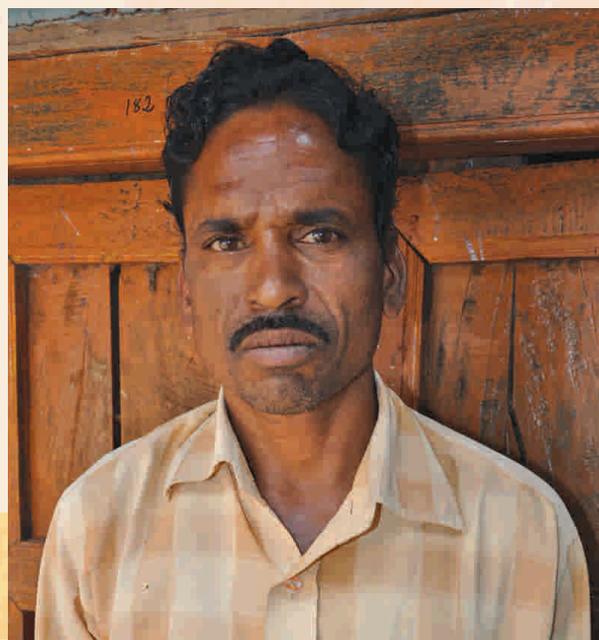
They are inveterate smokers. The indigenous method of smoking is to take some pieces of dried tobacco leaf, wrap them in a *sal* leaf, and smoke it like a cheroot. The manner, in which tobacco is most commonly used, is by chewing dried tobacco with lime.



SOCIAL LIFE



The tribe is divided into several hierarchically graded exogamous clans or septs (*bansas*) namely Rathor, Chouhan, Pamar, Odtia, Turi etc. having their respective tutelary deities who are ceremoniously worshiped during the Dasahara festival. Again each sept is subdivided into sub-septs or *gotras*. For example, Rathor sept is divided into six sub-septs and this clan claims to be the superior most in the hierarchy because they are completely vegetarians. Moramanai and Tulja Bhavani are the tutelary deities of the Rathor clan. Ashwani and Danteswari are the tutelary deities of the Chauhan clan. All these deities belong to their place of origin where from these people have migrated. The boys and girls of the same clan are treated as brothers and sisters and therefore, sex and marriage among them is strictly prohibited.



Family

Generally two types families, such as; nuclear family and extended families are found among the Banjaras. Ordinarily the sons with their wives live with their father, mother and grandparents. The married sons sometimes establish their own separate house.

Family is patrilineal and patripotestal. In the individual family the father or the senior most male members is the head. Property is inherited though the male line and the females are not entitled to get any share. Till marriage the daughter enjoys equal status with the sons but after marriage she cannot claim any right over their paternal property.

The Banjara women enjoy an important status in their society. Though they are debarred from certain religious and administrative functions, their economic status is very high. It is they who generally go to market, do the bargaining in their sale transactions and they make over the sale proceeds to the male members for the sustenance of the family. They are the repositories of the moral and religious traditions of their society. There is a genuine mutual respect between husband and wife. The husband consults his wife in all important matters. The relation between the parents and children among the Banjaras is also of a sweet affectionate type.



LIFE CYCLE

Birth

The conception and birth of a baby is considered a prestigious event among the Banjaras. Pregnant woman is given special prestige and care. When the labour-pain starts the pregnant woman is confined to a room and an experienced woman of the community acts as midwife. After child birth, umbilical cord is cut by the midwife with a snail by placing a coin beneath it, which is afterwards taken by the mid-wife. The placenta is then buried in a pit at the backward of the house.

After the child birth, the house considered to be polluted. The pollution is over on the seventh day in the case of a male child and on the ninth day in the case of a female child. During this period, the mother and the baby are kept secluded. After the pollution period is over, the mother takes bath and washes her clothes. All the inmates of the house are shaved by the village barber. The polluted clothes are given to the washer man of the village. The midwife brings the child near the barber to cut a few locks at hair from different parts of the head of the child, which are put in a leaf-cup. She then ties the snail with which the umbilical cord was cut with two threads. All the relatives then take their bath in the nearby stream. The midwife carries the child together with the mother to the bathing place. There the midwife throws the locks of hair and one of the threads in the water. After bathing, they come back to the house. The midwife brings with her the second thread and the snail. This thread is then smeared with turmeric paste and tied round the waist of the child. The

relatives who assembled at the house are entertained with a feast with liquor.

It was customary to give a name to the new born baby on the occasion of Holi festival. But now this practice has been changed. Name-giving ceremony of a baby is observed on the 21st day and a Brahmin priest is invited to officiate in it. In case of a son, he takes the name of his grandfather. The second son takes the name of his maternal grandfather or the paternal grandfather's brother and for the third boy, the maternal grandfather's brother and so on. The same procedure is followed for the girl naming them after their feminine relations in the same order. The first hair cutting ceremony of the baby is performed in the month of Chaitra (March–April).



Marriage

The Banjaras are strictly endogamous. Any marriage outside the group is considered incestuous and the offenders are punished with ex-communication. Members of the same gotra cannot marry as they are considered brothers and sisters by a term known as *bhaipana* (brotherhood). Members of different *gotras* may marry, and this is known as *kai-laageni* (not related). A boy may marry in any other clan or *gotra* to which his mother belongs. Marriage within the same clan is possible if there is gap of three generations. Traditionally, the *jaaths* (caste structure) of prospective couples are checked by experts known as *dhadi bhaat* who know about the *gotra/jaath* system and could identify proper matches.

Girls and boys are married as adults. The bride may be younger or older, or of equal age with the bridegroom. Pre-sexual laxity before marriage is not tolerated. In case a boy attempts to capture the girl of his choice, he would be liable to severe punishment along with a cash fine. Moreover, he is publicly beaten with shoes for seven times.

Monogamy is the accepted norm of the community but polygamy is allowed in exceptional cases like barrenness, insanity and incompatibility of the wife. Except the junior levirate and the sororate they do not have parallel or cross-cousin marriage as preferential type of marriage. Marriage with one's mother's brother's daughter, wife's younger sister and husband's brother is permitted.

The normal way of acquiring mates is by arrangement through negotiation and mutual consent of the prospective boy and girl which is the rule and is more prevalent in their society. The usual practice is that the girl's father first initiates the marriage proposal. A



marriage broker is appointed to negotiate with the groom's side. If the groom is found suitable, the bride is taken to the groom's house to ascertain his family position and economic condition. In the second phase arrangements are made so that the bride and the groom select themselves finally in a fair or in a market place. In the third phase, the matter of giving dowry by the bride's father is decided. Besides the dowry, the customary bride price to be paid by the groom's side to the bride's side is also settled during the process of marriage negotiation. It is paid in cash and kinds.

In the fourth phase, the wedding day is fixed in consultation with the local astrologer. The groom goes to the bride's house for marriage. The bridegroom along with his father, headman of the village, a few relatives and co-villages set out for the bride's house in a procession. At the outskirts of the groom's village a *puja* is offered to the ancestral spirits. The groom puts on a crown on his head, keeps a sword hanging at his waist and catches hold of a spear in his hand. That is the usual marriage attire when the bridegroom goes for marriage. Instead of going on a camel, which was the traditional practice, the bridegroom goes on a horse at present with the accompaniment of beating of drums.



A Brahmin priest officiates in the performance of wedding rituals. An altar constructed for this occasion in the court-yard of the bride's house is beautifully decorated with plantain trees, mango twigs and multi coloured papers. On the altar they place two rice-pounding pestles, around which both the bride and the groom move in seven turns. Among the Banjaras the marriage rituals resemble the usual Hindu type. The priest secures the nuptial tie and performs *homa*. He makes a knot by tying up the ends of clothes of the bride and groom, and they walk round the fire. This solemnizes the wedlock. The occasion is

celebrated with a community feast.

On the next day, the bride is brought to the groom's house where both the bride and groom are ceremoniously received. There two small brass vessels are given to the bride in which she cooks food and serve it to all the inmates of the house. By that the bride is formally admitted into the clan of the groom.

Banjara marriages are frequently held in the rains, a season forbidden to other Hindus. This is most convenient to them, as in the dry seasons, they are usually out for their business as peddlers.

Other types of marriage like-marriage by elopement, marriage by capture, marriage by exchange etc are not prevalent in the Banjara society. Widow re-marriage is in vogue. A widow is seldom allowed to go out the family. When her husband dies she is taken either by his elder or younger brother. If the widow prefers another man and runs away to him, the first husband's relatives claim compensation.

Divorce is allowed with the approval of the informal village council. When a woman seeks divorce to marry elsewhere, the first husband is paid compensation by the new husband. If the woman is found guilty then her parents have to refund the bride price paid at the time of marriage. If the husband is found guilty the bride price is not paid back. After divorce, the children if any, are to stay with the mother till they are grown up.

Death Rites

The Banjaras generally cremate their corpse. However, they bury the dead bodies of the unmarried persons and those dying of small-pox and cholera. Before carrying the corpse to the cremation ground, it is bathed and wrapped with a new cloth. The corpse is placed on the pyre with its head towards north. The eldest son, or in his absence any male member of his family first lightens the pyre.

They observe death pollution for twelve days. On the eleventh day, purificatory rites are performed when the entire house is besmeared with cow-dung and the old earthen-pots are thrown away. The Hindu barber shaves the male members. The washerman too, washes the polluted clothes. The members of the bereaved family take purificatory bath in the stream. The head of the family cooks rice added with the fowl's meat in a new earthen-pot and offers a little of it to the departed soul at the cremation ground. The Brahmin priest performs

the mortuary rites and offers pinda (cooked rice) to the departed soul and ancestral spirits. No animals are sacrificed on this occasion. A grand feast is arranged to entertain the relatives and the villagers.



RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

The Banjaras are animists and polytheists. Their religious beliefs and practices, like those of other tribes, center round the propitiation of gods, goddesses, tutelary deities, spirits, names and natural objects. They believe in the existence of a number of Gods and Goddesses. They rever “Banjari Devi” as their supreme deity, represented by a heap of stone under a shady grove lying at the village outskirts. Other tutelary deities are – Menma Mai, Tulja Devi, Kamkali Mata, Ashawani, Danteswari, Wagjai etc. Each clan has its tutelary deity, for example, Kamkalimata is the deity of Pamar clan, Merama Mai and Tulja Bhabani are deities of Rathor clan etc. Other than this, they also believe in Hindu gods and goddess. They visit the Mahadev temple in the village and perform Laxmipuja with all purity and devotion.

The Banjara still worship their pack-cattle. When sickness occurs they lead the sick man to the feet of the bullock called Hatadiya. They believe in the existence of



ancestral spirits and worship them on important festivals to get their help against danger and distress. The head of each family acts as the priest while worshipping the ancestral spirits.

They perform certain rites and ceremonies round the year to appease the supernatural forces by offering sacrifices in order to achieve peace and progress for the individual as well as for the entire community. Animals such as, goat, lamb and fowl are mainly sacrificed to appease the deities. Sweetmeats and chauli (rice beer) are considered as ritualistic food. Bunning of incense powder, joss-sticks and flowers are very common features in any form of ritual. The Banjaras also quite often make votive offerings to various goddesses for fulfillment of desires. Vow is taken by the sufferer to sacrifice animal before the concerned deity or spirit. But the nature of sacrifice differs according to gravity of suffering.

They observe religious rites and festivals connected with economic pursuits and important occasions. All these occasions are celebrated with communal dancing and singing. They have devised their own festival calendars of Hindu origin. In the month of March they observe Fagu or Holi festival when all the crops are harvested. It is a thanks-giving ceremony to Banjara devi for giving them different crops. She is ceremoniously worshipped by the entire community with the sacrifice of five goats.

Sitala puja is observed in the month of Asadh (June - July). On this occasion, a pit is dug on the front yard of the village. The womenfolk after taking purificatory bath assemble there with a pitcher full of water each and different cereals mixed together in a leaf-cup. Each one of them pours water in the pit. The senior most member of the community acts as priest and offers different cereals in a leaf-cup as ritualistic food to Sitala Mata and her seven sisters. Three fowls are sacrificed to appease the deities. After the ritual the cereals are eaten for the first time as ritualistic food. This is called Nabarna ceremony. With the three ritualistic fowls, other fowls are also sacrificed and added to it and eaten



ceremoniously by all the members of the community. The women devotees move round the pit with their hands interlaced throughout the night and sing songs. The males remain busy for the whole night in playing with sticks among themselves.

Sibabhaiya and Meraban are considered very dreaded deities and are worshiped ceremoniously in the "Tij" festival which commences on the first day following the full moon day in the month of Shravana (July - August). The worship is conducted by a bachelor of the Rathor clan to ensure heavy rainfall for bumper crops. Two lambs and one goat are sacrificed on this occasion. It continues for nine days during which, the all the community members cook and eat together and spend nights dancing and singing.

On Dasahara festival in the month of October, Banjara Devi - the supreme deity is worshiped. On this occasion

the sword, representing their warrior status is worshiped before Banjara Devi with of pomp and ceremony to ensure good health both for the people and animals. The vow takers sacrifice animals on this occasion.

On the day of Deepawali in the month of Margashira (October - November), Girigobardhan Puja is organized in the Hindus fashion for keeping their cattle epidemic-free.

The Banjaras are terribly afraid of witchcraft. There are two classes of magicians called Bhagats - Nimbu-katna, the white magician and Janta, the black magician. The role of the white magician is very important as he cures persons suffering from various diseases and attack of malevolent spirits with the help of herbal medicines, prayers and incantations. As against this the black magician takes complete help of his guardian-spirit and practises contagious magic. He collects hair or nails etc. of the victim with which he applies magic and torture the victims.



Music & Dance

The Banjaras perform a special kind of dance -popularly known as *lambadi* - a folk dance which involves participation of their women who bedeck themselves in colorful costumes and jewelry. Female dancers dance in the tune played by the male drummers to offer homage to their deities. Another popular form of folk-dance is *danda khelna*. They play musical instruments like *dholak*, *dhapra*, *chikara* etc.



SOCIAL CONTROL

The Banjara Tanda is composed of families related to each other by kinship tie. Each family acts in conformity with the accepted mode. The mode though authoritative is guarded by custom. Authorities are exercised at the family level, clan level and village level. The leaders of the village shoulder all responsibilities, participate in all social activities and affectively influence the life of their fellowmen. In this process this becomes an institution and office turns hereditary. The traditional leadership is based on hereditary status and position.

The Tanda is a socio-political unit having its own set of traditional leaders. They have a say in the village affairs. The Naik is the formal head of the Tanda council. All important matters are brought to his notice for opinion and intervention. His post is hereditary. No ceremony or function is held for his selection. He does not receive any honorarium for his services but he gets a major share of the meat of sacrificial animals during communal worships.

The Karvanri is the village messenger. He holds a very key position in the leadership organization of the Banjara community. He summons people to the village meetings and acts as the custodian of cash and kind collected for all festivals and fines collected from the offenders.

The Bhagat is the sacerdotal leader in each Banjara *tanda*. He is equally respected by the community members.

In the event of any dispute in the *tanda*, these leaders decide the cases. The members of the community still consider these leaders very important in their customary affairs. Hence, they pay more allegiance to their traditional leadership than the modern leadership imposed by the statutory *panchayati raj*.



DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS AND EFFECTS

Changes have occurred in Banjara culture during last few decades. Some of them are the result of education and influence of external environment. Besides, Banjaras have picked up many new cultural elements from the neighboring castes and tribes in course of their long contact with them. Few of them follow Hindu social and religious traditions and try to live like caste Hindus.





Government has launched development programmes for tribal areas and tribal people by which the Banjaras are also benefitted. Development interventions made through programmes of education, agriculture, communication, drinking water, housing, health, nutrition and sanitation, income generation, skill up gradation, SHGs, social security etc. have a positive impact on their socio-economic life. Awareness has been created among them under the environment of planned change and modernization. Noticeable changes have taken place in their way of life. They have 'more or less' settled down giving up their nomadic style of life.



The ST and SC Development Department, Government of Odisha under the aegis of Ministry of Tribal Affairs has established a Tribal Museum in the premises of SC and ST Research and Training Institute, CRPF Square, Bhubaneswar for preservation of material culture of different tribes. Few ornaments, personal belongings, traditional implements, and musical instruments and selected photographs of Banjara tribe have been preserved in this museum. Besides, SCSTRTI had made a documentary film on the socio-cultural life of the Banjara of Odisha.





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@SCSTRTI, Bhubaneswar

CRPF Square, Bhubaneswar - 751003

Web site-scstrti.in, Email- scstrti@yahoo.co.in,

Telephone : 0674-2563649/2561635

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