

# BAGATA



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# FOREWORD

The cultural heritage of the age-old human society in this fast changing world will become a misnomer if it is not properly documented and preserved for the generation next. This photographic documentation on the life style of the Bagata is a part of the series on the "Tribes of Odisha" published by SCSTRTI. The Bagata is one of the 62 tribes living in Odisha who are very simple and tradition bound. This photo hand book on the Bagata is an outcome of anthropological study reflecting their way of life and living, ecology, culture and the process of change and development.

Numerically a small tribal community, the Bagatas are largely concentrated in Sundergarh district. Though they cite the historic origin of their community name as the devoted warriors (Bhaktas) of the then rulers, because of their occupational diversification at a later period, now, they identify themselves as one of the Telegu fresh water fishermen communities. As such, they have a very good socio-cultural interaction with the Odia fisher folks.

They mostly depend on agriculture and fishing supplemented by wage earning and forest collections for their subsistence. They are very much community oriented and custom bound who faithfully obey the culturally established norms to maintain social harmony. During their leisure time they enjoy their life by performance of traditional dance and songs in different festivals and the marriage ceremony. Both men and women take part in Karma folk dance and songs. As a small tribal group, the Bagatas have preserved their cultural identity.

Although the Bagatas have come across the development process in these days, they have tried to make the best of both the worlds by keeping the time tested values of their culture and at the same time accepting the change that is inevitable. This has brought some noticeable transformation in their life style.

Prof. (Dr) A. B. Ota, Director and Dr. P. Patnaik, Curator of Tribal Museum of SCSTRTI have taken pains in preparing this colourful booklet. My genuine thanks must go to Sri S.C. Mohanty, O.S.D. (Research) for his extra inputs in making the attempt complete and flawless in all respects. I hope this book would be of immense help for the tribal lovers, tourists, researchers and general readers.

**Commissioner-cum-Secretary**  
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# BAGATA



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# IDENTITY

Odisha is home to a number of different tribes most of whom are enlisted as Scheduled Tribes, numbering sixty two. Each tribe possesses its distinct ethnic characteristics in terms of social organization, culture and language.

The Bagata is one of those 62 tribal groups living in Odisha. Bhokta, Bhogata, Bhagata are some of the synonyms by which they are also known. In the neighbouring State of Andhra Pradesh they are known as Kampu. The name 'Bagata', is said to have been derived from the word Bokta which means a person who is not intelligent.

The Bagatas account for their name as Bhakta by referring to the legends and historical traditions that their ancestors were a class of warriors who served the then rulers with great devotion (Bhaktas). During that period they were very influential people and ideal farmers. But in course of time they changed their primary occupation of cultivation and adopted other means of earning their livelihood. They have proved their skill in fishing. They rather identify themselves as one of the Telugu fresh water fishermen communities. As such, they have a very good socio-cultural interaction with the Odia fisher men.



By their faith, the Bagatas constitute mainly two groups i.e. Vaishnavites and Saivites. The former are the worshipers of Lord Vishnu, who strictly follow the rules of Hinduism. This group cremates the dead whereas the latter group, practice burial. The Vaishnavites according to some authors, do not have any surname and sub group. About their origin very little ethnographic and historical data is available. It is believed that they have migrated from Ranchi area of Jharkhand to their present habitat in Odisha during the beginning of the 20th century.

The Bagata are medium-statured having broad nose with good physique bearing some biological traits of Proto-Australoid tribes of south and central India. Serological investigations reveal a slightly higher proportion of blood group A than B.



## Population:

Even though they are numerically a small community, their distribution and occupational diversification are notable. Their population is distributed in all the undivided 13 districts of Odisha but they are largely concentrated in the district of Sundergarh followed by Mayurbhanj, Sambalpur and Baleswar districts. Besides, a considerable number of Bagatas are found in Koraput district also.

The total population of Bagata in Odisha as per 1961 census was 1511 (756 Males, 755 Females), which in 1971 census declined to only 262 (131 Males, 131 Females) probably due to defective enumeration because their population steeply rose by almost 10 times to 2614 (1310 Males, 1304 Females) in 1981 census and to 4806 (2490 Males & 2316 Females) in 1991 census and 6733 (3331 Males, 3402 Females) in 2001 census registering a sex ratio of 1021 females against 1000 Males. Following the trend, there was a positive growth of population in 2011 census with their total population being 8813 (4323 Males, 4490 Females) and a sex ratio of 1039 females against 1000 Males.



## Literacy :

The literacy rate of the Bagata as per 1961 census was only 8.4%. But from 1981 census onwards their literacy rate has increased steadily. In 1981 census the male literacy has substantially gone up to 24.66 % which rose to 42.62% in 1991 and again up to 52.29 % in 2001 census and up to 64.31% in 2011 census. Likewise, their female literacy rate in 1981 was only 6.44% which rose to 15.27 % in 1991, to 25.17 % in 2001 and jumped to 43.48% in 2011. This shows that the programme of free education adopted by the Govt. of Odisha has a very positive impact among the tribe and especially among their females.



## Language

Odia is their mother tongue with which they communicate with their own people as well as with outsiders. Some Bagatas can speak Laria, Sadri and Hindi also.



## Dress & Ornaments

The Bagata do not have any specific dress to identify themselves like some other tribes. Their personal adornments resembles those of the neighbouring caste people. Males wear Dhoti, Banyan, Shirt or Paijama. Their ornaments are very simple and common such as metallic finger rings and chains around neck which is not customary but depends on personal choice. Besides, they also wear *paita* (sacred thread). Young children put on loin cloths.

Like the women of other tribes the Bagata women do not have distinguishing attire and ornaments. Like the neighbouring caste women they wear *saree*, *saya*, blouse and very little ornaments like earrings, finger rings, toe rings, necklaces etc. Old women have tattoo on their arms and on the feet which is now gone out of fashion among the younger generation.

# HABITAT, SETTLEMENT & HOUSING

The Bagatas live both in multiethnic as well as uniethnic villages located in the plains area as well as in the hilly tracts. The area of their habitation has moderate climate with humidity and medium rainfall.



In multiethnic villages they live with other castes and tribes but reside in separate wards maintaining their cultural identity. Being a tribal community they are not socially discriminated like the Scheduled Castes or by the socially higher ranked castes and tribes.

Their settlement and housing pattern are no different from those of the neighbouring communities. In their wards linear arrangement of houses in parallel rows leaving a



Their traditional houses are simple *kutchha* huts, mud walls with tiled roofs having two or more than two roomed houses with verandah which serves multipurpose. One of the rooms is used as kitchen where lies the sacred seat of their household deities and ancestors. In all family rituals the household head worships the unseen beings by offering food, flower and incense to appease them and get their blessings for the well being of the family. The livestock like goats, poultry are sheltered in separate sheds.



# SOCIAL ORGANIZATION



As an endogamous group, the Bagatas are divided into a number of totemic clans (*bansas*) like Hatiyar, Belhar (monkey), Samudia, Bamia, Tiruar (bird), Sarania (flute), Chumiar and Kuardar. The totemic clan symbols are elephant, monkey, bird and flute etc. The clans are again divided into a number of *kutums* (lineages) which regulate marriage alliances. They use clan names as their surnames

The Bagata believe in Varna system and claim their position as a clean tribal community in the local social heirarchy. Other communities also treat them as higher tribal group in higher order. Scheduled Castes like Pano, Ganda, Domb, Muchi, Ghasi, Hadi, are said to be lower in social position from the Bagata.

Following the traditional rules of inheritance, the paternal property is equally divided among sons but the eldest son gets an extra share (*jesty bhag*). Daughters do not usually get any share from the parental property but may get some shares from mothers' ornaments. Father is the head of the family and after his death, the elder son succeeds him.



# LIFE CYCLE RITUALS

## Pregnancy & Child Birth

Pregnancy is a part of life of every woman and the Bagata women are no exception to it. But some pre and post delivery restrictions in their movement and taking food are strictly observed in their society. A pregnant woman is prohibited to visit the cremation ground and come out of the house during eclipses. She is also forbidden to enter into the temple or place of worship during an advanced stage of pregnancy. Restriction is also imposed on taking dry fish.

During childbirth a local professional midwife (*dhai*) of the Ghasi caste is called for facilitating the delivery and attending to the mother her new born child. A bundle of *sigu* twigs is hanged at the entrance door of the house to indicate birth pollution.

After the child birth, pollution is observed for a period of 21 days for the whole family. Pollution norms are partly relaxed on the seventh day which is known as *uthiari*, when the mother and baby are shifted to another room. The room is cleaned with cow dung and old earthen pots are replaced by new ones. The *sathi* rite is observed in which offerings are made to the Sathi devi. Horscope is prepared for the new born by taking the help of the Nahaka or Jyotisha (Astrologer).



The final purificatory rite called *ekosia* is observed on the 21st day. A local Brahmin priest is invited to perform the Satyanarayan Puja and name giving ceremony. The baby is named in consultation with the parents, maternal uncle and other kinsmen. After the ritual, the invited kinsmen are entertained with special food like *khiri* (rice porridge), pitha (locally prepared cake) etc. Among them for the girl child, a special rite called *bararatri* instead of *ekosia* is observed. No specific ceremony is observed for *anna prasanna* (first eating of rice by the baby). The first hair cutting (*balapaka*) ritual is held without any ceremony when the child is 02 years old.



## Puberty:

Puberty rite of a girl is observed like other tribal communities as soon as the girl attains her first menarche. She is kept confined in a room for seven days so that no male members can see her face. In the early morning of the seventh day, she after anointing her body with turmeric paste takes full bath and puts on new cloths to get rid of the pollution. Thereafter, she visits a Siva temple and offers a coconut to the deity and resumes her routine activities.



## Marriage:

The Bagatas strictly follow their customary rules for marriage. They follow the rules of community endogamy as well as *bansa* and lineage exogamy for marriage. The marriageable age has been restricted by the community, which for boys varies from the age of twenty to twenty five and for the girls from eighteen to twenty five years. In the past, child marriage was in vogue, but this is no longer practised.

The Bagatas generally prefer three types of marriages such as marriage by mutual consent, elopement and marriage by service. Negotiated marriages are common but marriage by elopement also takes place in few cases. In case of marriage by negotiation, when the proposals come it is finalized in presence of members of the traditional community council.

Preferably one should marry one's maternal uncle's daughter. Levirate, widow remarriage and sororal polygyny are practised and divorce is allowed. Widow remarriage or *bidhaba bibaha* is permitted in their society.

The institution of bride price (*oli*) which was in vogue in the past is slowly giving way to dowry (*varakatnam*) due to culture contact with the neighbouring Hindu castes. However, the parents of the groom have to give sufficient jewellery to the bride.

Marriage ceremony is conducted at bride's village in a *mandap* (marriage booth). The Fixation of the date



and time of marriage (*laganpatrika*) is fixed by the *nahaka* or *jyotisha*. The local Brahmin or the village priest of the Bagata community performs the wedding rite. A marriage feast is hosted by the bride's family for the guests. The custom of *nirbandha* or *pindani* (betrothal) rite, *hastaganthi* (ritual joining of the hands of the couple) and burning of sacred fire (*homo*) is performed. The bride and groom are not allowed to see each other or meet before the observance of *chouthi* (nuptial) ceremony is over and after worshiping of the ancestral spirits and family deities. The concluding ceremony of the wedding is the celebration of *astha mangala*, held

on the eighth day.

The putting of vermilion on the forehead, use of *lac* bangle or shell identifies a married woman. A marriage badge *Mangal Sutra* (*thali*) around the neck symbolizes the marital status of a girl.

The Bagatas prefer monogamous type of family. But when the first wife found to be barren, the husband can go for second marriage but with the consent of the first wife and at the same time, with the approval of their traditional community council. In such a situation one may prefer to marry the younger sister of his wife (*sorrhate*).

Patrilocal residence is the rule of the Bagata society and after marriage a girl goes to live in the husband's village. Divorce is accepted with the approval of the caste council on the grounds of adultery, maladjustment, suffering from serious diseases etc.

## Death:

Dead body is generally buried. Death pollution is observed up to the eleventh day. The eldest son,

who throws soil into the pit, becomes the chief mourner. On the fourth day, the house of the deceased is dabbed or smeared with cow dung water, all the old earthen pots are replaced by new ones and cloths are washed. Like the Hindu rite, all the male members of the family get shaved and women get their nails pared off by the barber. A Brahmin priest is called for to perform the Sradha rite on the tenth day. On the eleventh day a community feast is hosted.



# LIVELIHOOD

**A**griculture and fresh water fishing are the main source from which the Bagata derive their livelihood to a great extent. They possess and cultivate small land holdings and also resort to collection of forest produce to supplement their income. The Bagatas of the Kotpad area of Jeypur sub-division depend on shifting cultivation

for their survival, whereas in Cuttack and Balasore they are famous for catching fish in fresh water. The Bagatas also work for wages. It can be seen that the Bagatas have adopted different types of occupation according to their environment and the availability of natural resources.



However, some Bagatas are engaged in business and trade. They prepare different types of basket as well as mats out of date palm leaves for their own use. Women play various roles in social, economic and religious spheres but not at the political level. They engage themselves in all sorts of household chores like fetching water, cooking, cleaning the house and cowshed, taking care of children and the domestic animals and entertaining guests. Collection of firewood, wage earning and helping the male members in the field is their outdoor economic activities. They control the family expenditure. Women also prepare puffed rice in their house for sale in the market. Child labour is never encouraged by the family. Both barter and cash system are prevalent at the village level but those who live near the urban areas use cash as their



## Food & Drinks :

The Bagatas are non-vegetarians. They take fish, goat, chicken, egg but do not take beef or pork. The Vaishnavite section among them is purely vegetarian. Rice is their staple food and it is taken with dal and vegetable curry. Red and green grams invariably form the major items of their diet. Niger seed oil (*valasa nune*) is used for seasoning the dishes. They are fond of seasonal fruits available in their locality. In festive occasions, they prepare Khiri (rice porridge) and *pitha* (local cake). Consumption of pulses, vegetables and fruits has increased among them. Some Bagatas have developed the habit of taking chapatti (wheat bread) at night instead of rice.



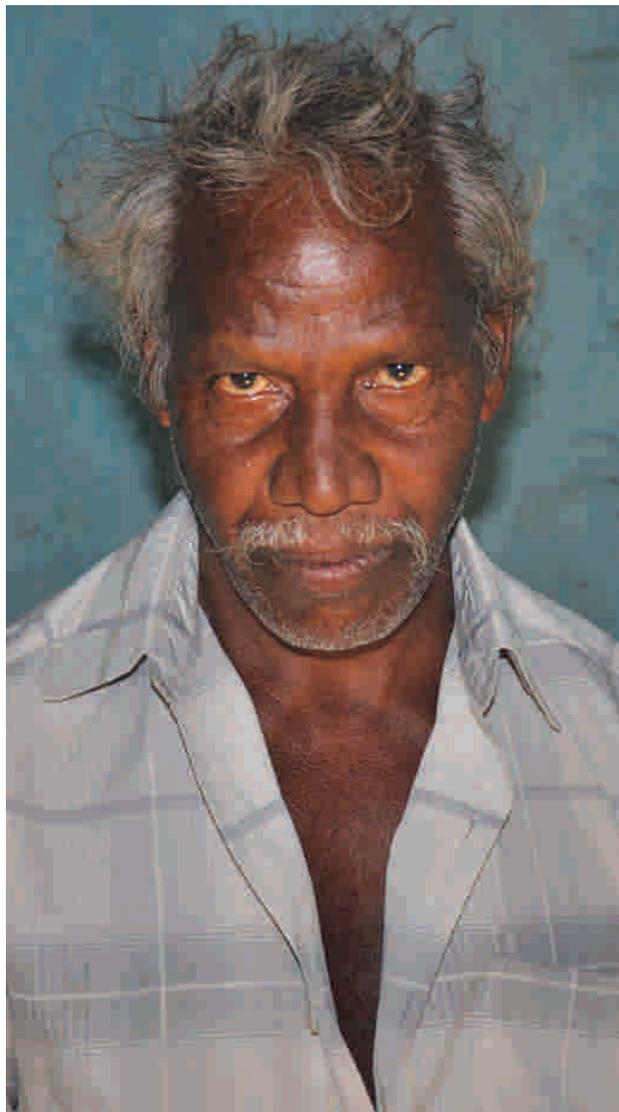
Occasionally, men take *handia* (rice beer), *kushno*, *modo* (*mahua* liquor) and *todi* purchasing from the local market. The Bagatas take tea, smoke tobacco and chew betel. Both men and women use *gurakhu* (tobacco paste) for cleaning their teeth. Young boys and girls now-a-days are using tooth brush instead of *Karanja* or other twigs to clean their teeth.



# SOCIAL CONTROL

The mechanism of social control has a two-tier system among the Bagata - one at the village level and the other at the regional level. The Pradhan is the head of the Jati Sabha (traditional community council) at the village level who is assisted by the Dakua (messenger) and Bhala Bhai / Bhadrakok - the village elders. The regional council is known as Mahasabha headed by officials like Sabhapati (President), Sampadak (Secretary) and Treasurer who handles the financial matters of the council. The posts of the village Headmen and Messengers of different villages under Regional Council are hereditary whereas other posts are by election but mostly by voice vote.

The main function of the community council is to regulate marriage and other customary tribal matters at the village and inter-village level and to settle disputes arising there in. Severe punishment is imposed on the offenders in cases of incest, adultery, breach of traditional norms, insult to the authority of caste council, killing of cow etc. The offenders in such cases are punished with heavy cash fine or social boycott (*jati bahar*). With the introduction of statutory Gram Panchayat system by the Government after independence, the importance of traditional community council is gradually declining.



# RELIGIOUS BELIEFS & PRACTICES

The Bagata believe in animism as well as Hinduism and worship the Hindu Gods and Goddesses. *Ista devata* along with Bura and Buri are considered as family deities. Gramasiri is the village deity. They also visit temples of Hindu gods and goddesses in the locality. Important Hindu festivals like Laxmi Puja, Kali Puja, Makar Sankranti, Nuakhai, Push Punei, Sital Sasthi, Janmastami, Karma etc are observed by them with full devotion. On the Dussera day they worship the fishing baskets and also a kind of trident. The trident is probably the fishing spear which the Bagatas use for fishing.

On festive occasions, houses are cleaned and walls and courtyards are decorated with ikons / *jhoti* (design drawn with rice flour). Special delicious foods are prepared and offered to the deities. Pahan or Kutum Ganga (village tribal priest) is invited to perform the *puja*. But with the change of time they are inviting Brahmin priest for the purpose. The Bagatas participate in local fairs and festivals like Rathayatra, Dussera and Dola yatra etc.

The Bagatas have some traditional songs for different festive occasions and marriage ceremony. Both men and women participate in these occasions. Sankirtan, which is a popular devotional programme in the village performed during evening among the caste people is now-a-days being participated by the Bagatas. Musical instruments like Kholo (Murdung) Madal (Bigdrum), Gini, Harmonium, Banshi (flute) etc are used by them. Karma folk dance which is their traditional dance is performed both by men and women.

They observe certain restrictions and norms with regard to their traditional inter-community relationship. They accept both *kachha* and *pucca* foods from castes like Brahmin, Karan, Khandayat, Mali, Gudia but maintain social distance from the communities considered lower to them. Inter community marriage is not allowed by the community.



# CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT

The interface between tradition and modernity controls the compatibility of the cultural components of ends. For the traditionalist Bagata, social, cultural and intellectual expressions are deeply rooted in their culture and thus are tradition bound. These are strongly linked with the notion of cultural heritage, social identity and historical continuity in their society. On the other hand, development stands for economic growth and social development. Economic and social developments are complimentary to each other. In the context of tribal development, the development agency or the Government has to strike a balance between economic and social aspects and has to be culture specific so that development efforts should have a holistic prospective.

Now, in the context of the Bagata, development efforts by the Government have a positive effect even though the Bagatas are tradition bound. Their poor economic condition now never stands in their way and the Bagatas show interest in educating their children and accepting the development programmes. Because they have realized that the

spread of education among them has a pride of place in the priorities of developmental needs of the people. It brings knowledge to the community and helps in acquiring a new strength to face the necessities and the challenges of the dynamic and developing society. Earlier, their low economic conditions did not allow their children goes beyond the level of primary school and the girls, mostly dropped out at the primary level. This situation has changed now.



They are well aware of various development and welfare programmes introduced by the Government which has brought noticeable improvements to their socio economic conditions. Introduction of modern agriculture, supply of improved variety of seeds, irrigation facility, market support for their surplus produce by the Government have brought confidence in them which has led to a remarkable change among them. Use of indigenous methods for their ailments and health care has been changed and they are now

using both modern and traditional method of treatment but more inclined to modern methods of treatment. Attitude towards family planning is positive and favourable. But usually women get sterilized. The Bagatas prefer small family of two or three children. They have improved their sanitary habits and get drinking water from tube wells, sanitary wells and other safe sources. Some well-to-do people possess radios, televisions, motor cycles, modern furniture and educated persons read newspapers. They are undergoing a phase of transition.





## Photo Handbook on Tribes of Odisha, Series 35 “BAGATA”

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