

SOUNTI



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

The term Sounti in Odia language means “to collect” or “to gather”. Since this community has evolved over period of time by admitting into its fold the members of various clean castes who were socially expelled from their respective original societies for committing serious offences in the past, their neighbours designated them as “Sounti”. The then feudal chief of Keonjhar was kind enough to rehabilitate these outcast families of different princely States in his territory and in course of time their number grew by inclusion of such social outcastes. Due to their origin from different clean castes, they continued to follow their respective caste customs and manners. As a result now they have almost turned into an example of a tribalised Hindu community.

Numerically, the Sounti are a small tribe in Odisha. They are largely concentrated in the districts of Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj. In the Mayurbhanj district there are separate villages or hamlets inhabited exclusively by the Sounti. In the Keonjhar district, they live with other caste Hindu neighbours.

They are primarily agriculturists and their economic life revolves around farming and allied pursuits. Being a Hinduised tribe, the Sounti profess Hinduism with elements of animism and supernaturalism. Their close culture contact with the neighbouring tribes and castes, coupled with various welfare measures taken up by the government for their wellbeing, has brought noticeable changes in their way of life.

This photographic documentation of their life style is a part of the series on the Tribes of Odisha. Dr A.B. Ota, Director and Shri A.K. Gomango, Deputy Director of SCSTRTI have worked hard 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 while entering into the world of tribal culture of Odisha.

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IDENTITY

The term 'Sounti', in Odia language, means 'to gather in'. It denotes the name of the community that has evolved gradually by assimilation of families originated from respectable caste Hindu communities from whom the Brahmans accepted water but were out casted by the then feudal chiefs of various Gadjat States for committing social crimes. These families have fled from their native places and have taken shelter under the ruler of Keonjhar who settled them in Manamata village of his State. In course of time, their number grew forming a new community named Sounti. They are referred to as Bedajal and Berdajhal and also as Sounti by their neighbouring communities. Some also wrongly equate them with the Sauntia- a Scheduled Caste community

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of Odisha, where as they claim to be the offshoot of Khandayat caste. Their mother tongue is Odia and they use its script for both intra and inter group communication.

Numerically the Sounti is a small tribe in Odisha. They are distributed in all the districts of the State, but their major concentration is in the district of Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj. According to 2001 census their population in the State is 92,734 out of which 46,338 are males and 46,396 are females. The community's sex ratio is 1001 females per1000 males. Their population has registered a negative decadal growth rate of -3.65% when compared with 1991 Census data. Their literacy rate is 44.37% out of which male literacy is 59.76% and female literacy is 29.13%.



Dress and Ornaments

Their dress pattern is very simple and resembles with that of the neighbouring castes. The Sounti males wear a piece of loin cloth (*dhoti*) which is about 8' in length and a banyan to cover the upper part of the body. On market days or at the time of visiting the relative's house, they wear shirts. On the other hand, the females wear coloured and printed sarees of about 12' to 15' in length. Women of well-to-do or educated families wear sarees with blouse and petticoats. They also wear varieties of ornaments consisting of necklaces, earrings, anklets, finger rings, toe rings and bangles made of silver to beautify themselves. Some of them also wear golden ornaments. They are also very fond of wearing coloured glass bangles and hair pins purchased from local markets.

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SETTLEMENT & HOUSING PATTERN

Traditionally, the Sounti settlements are exclusively homogeneous and uni-clan in structure and they dwell in multi-ethnic villages. Their houses are situated in a separate hamlet keeping distance from the main settlement and maintaining their own cultural identity. In the district of Mayurbhanj there are separate villages or hamlets inhabited exclusively by the Sounti. In Keonjhar District, they live with other caste neighbours like the Gauda, Kamar, etc.

Individual Sounti houses are arranged in linear pattern in parallel rows running in both the sides of the village street. At one end of the village under bunch of shady trees, the shrine of their village deity *Basuki* is installed.





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Among the Sounti for the construction of a new house, the selection of a house site is the most important factor. For this purpose, they consult their traditional priest, Dehury for selection of an auspicious site through the rice divination method. A rectangle is drawn at the centre of the proposed site and vermilion paste is placed at the center of the rectangle, followed by a handful of rice covered by a leaf cap. Next morning, if the rice is found intact, the site is considered auspicious.

Individual houses built round a central courtyard, consist of two rooms with mud or brick walls, thatched either with paddy straw or with wild grass having narrow veranda both on the front and rear side with a shed at the back side to shelter their domesticated animals. In between these





constructions lies the central courtyard. The bigger room is used as their living room and to store their grains and the smaller one is used as the kitchen. The rooms have no windows for ventilation.

Their household assets are very few and limited to some aluminum pots, plates, vessels and some earthen wares, winnowing fans etc. which are stored in the kitchen. They keep their used clothes on a string which hangs in both sides of their roofs in the living room. They keep their agricultural implements such as ploughs, yokes, levelers, hoes etc. in their front veranda and axe, pick-axe and crowbar in their living room.



SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

The community Sounti is divided into a number of exogamous clans (*khilli*). Clan members use their respective clan name as their surname. Each *khilli* is further subdivided into several exogamous patri-lineages (*bansa*) like Doldsia, Bardia, Saura and Tangsaria etc. The members of a *bansa* believe to be the descendants of a common human ancestor and hence consider themselves as brothers and sisters. They have only one *gotra* i.e. Nageswar (cobra) - a snake and revere it as their totemic animal.



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Family is the smallest social unit which is mostly nuclear, patriarchal, patrilocal and patrilineal. Inheritance of ancestral property follows the rule of equigeniture in male line only. Families having no issue or male successor may adopt a son from the nearest agnatic lineages who can inherit the property.



LIFE CYCLE

Pregnancy & Childbirth

The Sounti observe the pre-delivery ritual *sadakhia* on the 9th month of pregnancy in which the kinsmen and relatives offer delicious sweetmeats to the pregnant woman. The birth of a child is usually arranged in a separate temporary enclosure at the rear veranda which is used as the lying-in-room. They engage an experienced woman from Ghasi community as the mid-wife to assist the expectant mother during child birth for ensuring easy and safe delivery of the baby. According to their custom, the umbilical cord of the new born baby is cut using an arrow blade for a male child and with a knife for a female child.



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The birth pollution continues for twenty one days. During this period they observe post delivery ritual – *uthiary* on the 9th day of the child birth. On this day, the walls and floor are cleaned and purified using cow dung paste. The mother and the new born baby take a ceremonial bath. The final purificatory rite -*ekusia* is performed on the twenty first day. On that day the new born baby is given a name and new dresses are presented to the mother and





her baby. In the evening, the family hosts a feast to the lineage members, friends and relatives. After that the mother is purified and she is allowed to resume her routine household chores including cooking of meals for the family. They observe the tonsure (*mundan*) rite when the baby attains about one year of age.

Puberty Rites

The Sounti observe puberty rites for adolescent girls on attainment of their first menarche. This first menstrual pollution lasts for seven days. The menstruating girl is secluded in an isolated room for a period of seven days during which she is looked after by her mother or by an experienced woman. During this period she is tabooed to look or talk to any male person and move outside or do any work. At the dawn of the eighth day, she takes a purificatory bath in the nearby village stream or pond anointing turmeric paste and oil and wears new dresses presented by her family. Thereafter, she resumes her routine activities.



Marriage

In the Sounti community, adult marriage and monogamy is common though child marriages are found in rare cases. Polygyny is permitted when the first wife is found to be barren or mentally unsound. Marriage arranged through negotiation is considered as the most prestigious mode of acquiring a spouse. The other modes of marriages are by mutual consent and by elopement. In arranged marriages, a mediator (*dandia*) from the groom's side is engaged to initiate the marriage proposal to the bride's side. If the proposal is accepted by the bride's parents, they consult their traditional astrologer to fix an auspicious date and time according to the *Odia* almanac for holding the wedding ceremony. Then they conduct the betrothal rite (*pindhani*) in which the groom's parents present sarees, ornaments and some cosmetics for the bride. Payment of bride price is made in shape of cash.





On the appointed day, the groom proceeds to the bride's residence in a marriage procession, composed of his friends, relatives, villagers of both the sexes dancing and singing to the tune of music played by their traditional musicians. The party is cordially received by the bride's family near their village entrance. Wedding rites are conducted in the bride's house where a Brahmin priest conducts the proceedings. The bride's parents offer dowry in shape of various household articles and brass and aluminum utensils etc. to the couple. A non-vegetarian marriage feast is hosted by the bride's father to the kinsmen, guests and villagers. On the next day, the groom returns home with the bride. The marriage is consummated on the fourth day (*chaturthi*). They also observe another rite called *athamangala* on the eighth day of the marriage.



Junior levirate, junior sororate, re-marriage of widows and widowers are permitted in their society. Divorce is permitted on the grounds of maladjustment, impotency, adultery or cruelty with the approval of the society. If the divorce takes place for the man's fault, he is liable to pay the divorce compensation to the woman concerned as mutually fixed by both the sides.

Death Rites

The Sounti practise both burial and cremation to dispose of their dead bodies. The death news is immediately conveyed to the kinsmen and relatives and they assemble soon to participate in the funeral. The dead body is anointed with oil and turmeric water and the pallbearers carry the corpse to the cremation ground on a bamboo bier or on a string cot. All the kinsmen participate in



the funeral procession. The dead body is kept on the pyre keeping its head towards north and face upward. The elder son sets fire on the pyre. After the funeral is over, the kinsmen take bath after shaving their hair and beard by their barber and return home. All the used earthen wares are thrown away and in the evening the bereaved family arranges a feast to their kinsmen with boiled bitter rice. Death pollution continues for ten days and during the mourning period, the eldest son offers food in a leaf cup for the departed soul near the cremation ground. On the ninth day, the house with all their used clothes is washed and the family members and their lineage members are shaved again. All agricultural operations, observance of rituals and festivals, entry into sacred places, worship of deities, relishing of non-vegetarian foods and giving alms etc during this period are prohibited. The purificatory rite is performed on the tenth day with the help of a Brahman priest. On the eleventh day, the bereaved family hosts a feast for the kinsmen, relatives and villagers.



LIVELIHOOD

The Sounti are primarily agriculturists and their economic life revolves around farming and allied pursuits. Paddy is their major crop which they raise in their low lands. In their highlands they produce *ragi* and other minor millets like *kosla*, *kangu* and *janna* etc., pulses like *kulthi* (horse gram), *biri* (black gram), *mung* (green gram) *arhar* and oilseeds like *til*, mustard etc. In their kitchen gardens they raise maize, chilli and varieties of vegetables. Most of them are poor marginal farmers and share croppers. They engage themselves in different pursuits like wage earning both in agricultural and construction sectors to earn their livelihood. Their women and children



contribute substantially to their family economy by collection of minor forest produce, fuel woods etc. They also domesticate cows, goats and fowls. They occasionally practise hunting and fishing in nearest rivers and *nals*.



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The Sounti are non-vegetarians and relish fish, dry fish, mutton, chicken and eggs etc. but do not take beef or pork. Rice is their staple food. They eat pulses like *moong*, *kulthi* and *biri* and also roots and tubers. Mustard and sesamum oils are used for cooking. Both the men and women consume home-made rice beer (*handia*). They drink milk. Some of them smoke *bidis* and chew betel leaves.



REIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

Being a Hinduised tribe, the Sounti profess Hinduism with admixture of elements of animism. They worship Hindu deities namely Mangala, Thakurani and Basuki as their village deities who are propitiated by their sacerdotal head Dehury during observance of various rituals and festivals. They worship all the Hindu deities and observe all Hindu festivals and rituals round the year. The major festivals they observe are Raja, Gamha, Makar, Dusserah, Kali Puja, Dola Yatra, Holi Parab and Nuakhia.



The Sounti believe in black magic and existence of benevolent and malevolent spirits who cause well being and diseases to human beings and domesticated animals. They seek the help of their shaman belonging to their own community to appease these supernatural powers to protect the village from all mishaps and calamities.



They have their own folk-tradition of music and dance. Now-a-days, following the caste traditions, they perform *sankirtan* during observance of various rituals and festivals.



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SOCIAL CONTROL

The Sounti possess their own traditional community council at the village level headed by the village chief and some influential community members who are assisted by their sacerdotal head Dehury and the village messenger Dakua to deal with their customary affairs. The council adjudicates cases pertaining to family disputes,





theft, rape, incest, divorce etc. It also makes arrangements for organization and management of village level rituals and festivals. They have no regional community council. Therefore to settle the divorce cases, the heads of the family of both the bride and the groom with their agnatic kith and kin and relatives assemble at the groom's village to take part in the decision making process. Their traditional community council acts as the guardian of their traditional norms and customs. Their traditional community leaders are duly respected by their fellowmen in their society.



CHANGING SCENE

The close culture contact of the Sounti with the neighbouring tribes and castes coupled with various welfare and development measures taken up by the government for their upliftment after independence has brought about noticeable changes in their way of life. In the post-independence era, the State Government, in its pursuit to bring about the socio-economic development of the tribal communities, have launched several special policies and programmes which include legal aids, rehabilitation of victims of exploitation and atrocities, health care, housing and drinking water facilities, establishment of special employment exchanges, reservation in employment, economic development, establishment of residential schools and hostels etc.





The establishment of schools for the tribal students by the ST & SC Development Department and School & Mass Education Department of Odisha Government in their area and implementation of Right to Education Act (2010) are significant interventions for desired transformation of the Sounti tribe in the social sector. Development of essential infrastructure facilities and socio-economic support





through different development agencies has brought changes in the way of life of the tribe. The Sounti women have been roped into SHGs and getting financial assistance from ITDA and DRDA which has opened up new arena of economic opportunity for better livelihood. The impact of planned change and modernization are visible in their life style. Still, in their socio-cultural system they have retained some basic tribal features which distinguish them from other ethnic groups.





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