

Mahali

(An Artisan Scheduled Tribe of Odisha)



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FOREWORD

Mahali is a small tribal community of Odisha. They belong to Dravidian race. They are emigrants from Bihar and Bengal, who came to live near the Odisha border and then spread to other districts of the state. They are an artisan group who work with bamboo. They are well known for their traditional skill in producing fine bamboo crafts. Though they are not trained artisans, by their natural talent and skill, they create magnificent pieces of crafts. They have totemistic and exogamous clans and the cult of ancestor worship. Their life and culture is mostly influenced by the neighboring Santal tribe and other Hinduized groups. Like the Santal, they worship 'Marang Buru' as their supreme deity and few other deities who reside in the sacred sal grove called *jahirsthan* situated at the village outskirts. Due to influence of modernization and development interventions by the Government agencies, their traditional belief system has been changed to a great extent and that has brought a perceptible change in their life style. This Photo Hand Book has tried to portray their traditional material culture and their economic, social and religious life and changes at present.

All the snaps presented in this Photo Hand Book have been taken from the Mahali inhabited villages under Khunta block of Udala Sub Division and Jamda block of Rairangpur ITDA of Mayurbhanj district in Odisha.

The efforts of Prof. P. Panda, former Director of SCSTRTI and Smt. A. Mall, Research Officer, SCSTRTI for bringing out this publication is praise worthy. The present Director, Prof (Dr.) A.B. Ota has done everything to complete the work and publish it. The concerned staffs of SCSTRTI namely Shri B.K. Chinara and Shri A.P. Ray have taken the hardship of visiting the Mahali inhabited areas to take the photographs. Shri S.C. Mohanty, OSD (Research) has done the editing work in spite of his several preoccupations. All of them deserve my thanks since they have worked hard to accomplish the task. I hope the learned readers will appreciate this Photo Hand Book and find it useful.

Santosh Sarangi
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INTRODUCTION

Mahali is a Scheduled Tribe of Odisha. The Mahali people live in different states, like Bihar, Odisha and West Bengal of India. Out of 62 Scheduled Tribes of Odisha, Mahali is numerically a small group. They are mainly found in Mayurbhanj and Sundargarh districts of Odisha. They are also known in the different localities as 'Maheli' or 'Mahili.' The name, Mahali, has been derived from the Santal word 'mat' means Bamboo. They belong to Dravidian groups. They are the native of Chhotnagpur and West Bengal states, who usually work as labourers, palanquin bearers and bamboo workers and said to have migrated into the state of Odisha.



The Mahali are divided into five endogamous sections, like Boasphor Mahali, Patar Mahali, Sulunkhi Mahali, Tante Mahali, and Mahali Munda. Each group has several totemic clans who trace their origin to some animate or inanimate object. Socio-culturally, the Mahalis have resemblances with the Santal and Munda tribes. It is assumed that the Boasphor, Sulunkhi and Tante section of Mahali tribe are branches of Santal tribe. Similarly, the Mahali Munda is an offshoot of the original Munda tribe. It is believed that their division from the main tribe is due to their acceptance of lower occupation like palanquin bearing and basket making.

As per 2001 Census, the Mahali population in Odisha is 17,131. Their growth rate is 26.10 per cent and the sex ratio is 1014 females per 1000 males. The literacy rate



shows an increasing trend from 20.68 per cent in 1991 to 37.96 per cent in 2001. They have their own language, which is classified with the Mundari group. They are also well conversant with the Indo-Aryan languages such as Bengali, Hindi and Odia. Now, most of them are bilingual and can understand and speak Odia and Santali languages.

Dress and Ornaments:

The Mahali women wear either hand woven or mill made sarees and the men use short

dhotis or napkins. The young boys and girls put on dresses that they procure from market. Mahali women are not very fond of wearing gold ornaments; however, use of silver ornaments is common among them. They wear both glass and metal bangles, beads or metal necklaces, ear rings, toe rings and armlets (*baju*) on the arms. Mahali women tie their hairs into a knob on the right above the neck. They are fond of tattooing, which they do on the forehead, arm, chin and on ankles.





SETTLEMENT AND HOUSING

The Mahali people mostly reside in multi-ethnic villages. But they live in separate hamlets. The house in the hamlet usually situated on both sides of the lane. They keep their houses, streets and lanes fairly neat and clean. There is a sacred *sal* grove called *Jahirsthan* situated at the village outskirts where their supreme deity 'Marang Buru' and few other important deities reside.

Site selection for house construction starts with divination and rituals which are akin to those of the Santal tribe. They put some rice, paddy, cow dung and vermilion on the new site at night and

observe in the next morning. If the grains are found undamaged, they consider the site as auspicious for





construction of a new house. On the contrary, if the grains are damaged or disturbed, they abandon the place and attribute the site to be controlled by bad omen. After completion of the construction of a new house, the family members venerate their ancestors before entering into it.

Usually a typical Mahali house has two to three rooms. The houses are commonly mud walled and its roof is thatched with straw or *naria*-tiles. The larger room is partitioned by mud wall, one portion of it is used as kitchen and another, as a bedroom





and storeroom. They have separate cow sheds. On festive occasions, they plaster the floor and walls with clay mixed with fresh cow dung. Drinking water is fetched from the wells and sometimes from the nearby streams.

Stringed charpoy, bell metal, aluminium utensils and a few earthen pots are their main household appliances which they purchase from the nearby market. They make bamboo

baskets and other household materials for their own use. Now, with development of modern technology, some of them possess Radio, Watch, TV, Fans, Two Wheelers, Cell Phones, etc.





LIVELIHOOD

Their main occupation is bamboo work. It is supplemented by cultivation and wage earning. They collect bamboo from the forest. They weave basket of various sizes and shapes using small knife, axe and hand-axe with a long wooden stump support. Apart from these, they also make wattle fences, fish traps and broom sticks and other usable items and articles out of bamboo.

A few Mahalis are small land holders and grow paddy using traditional methods and techniques. Mahalis also pursue forest collection, hunting, fishing, and wage earning to supplement their income. Presently, the part-time avocations like hunting and fishing have declined significantly. Those who cannot cope with their traditional occupation and are landless, take up wage-earning wherever there is scope to do so.



Bamboo Crafts

Art is an integral part of the most of the tribes and it reflects in every aspect of their lifestyle. Though the Mahalis are not trained artisans and rely on natural talent and skill, they create magnificent pieces of





bamboo crafts to earn their livelihood. They prepare the baskets varying from very small size to very large size for different uses which have heavy demand in their locality as well as in the out side. Both men and women are expert in preparing the bamboo basket. They prepare small sticks of different size from a big bamboo either brought from the forest or bought from the locality with the help of knife and give them different shapes. The cost of a bamboo purchased from the local market vary from Rs.50 /- to Rs.80/-. Most of the



tribal and non tribal community in the area depends on this tribe for their requirements of baskets and other bamboo products. Besides preparation of baskets, they also show their artistic skill in preparation of flower vase of different sizes, fences, fish traps, broom sticks and other usable items and articles out of bamboo.

Besides, on periodic basis every year, the Mahali artists are invited to participate in the Live Demonstration Programme organized at the Tribal Museum of SCSTRTI, Bhubaneswar and show their artistic skills in bamboo crafts. SCSTRTI had recently organized such a Live Demonstration Programme. The following are the some of the live demonstration photographs of bamboo crafts of the Mahali tribe at the Museum premises of SCSTRTI.



Live Demonstration Programmes of Mahali Tribe at the Museum Premises of SCSTRTI





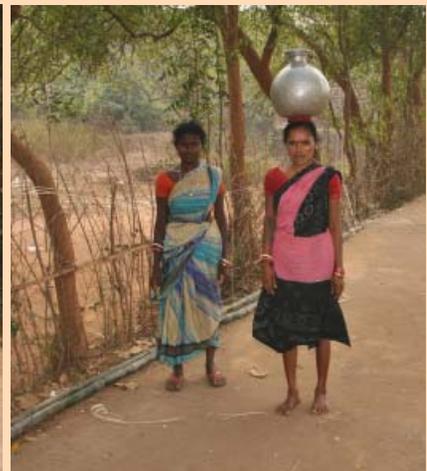
Live Demonstration of Crafts of Mahali Tribe at the National Workshop at SCSTRTI





Food and Drinks:

Rice is the staple food of Mahali. They are generally non-vegetarian and eat mutton, fowl, fish etc. The beef eating practice among them has been abandoned. They use mustard and *Mohua* seed and oil for cooking. In the Mahali society, the totems are worshipped and respected and not killed or eaten. As for example, the Mahali regards pig as their totem and thus, as a social taboo they do not eat pork.





Traditionally, rice beer (*handia*) is their favorite drink. They brew *handia* for their personal use and offer the popular drink to their deities, ancestral spirits and guests and relatives. 'Handia' is taken to enjoy on special occasions like religious ceremonies, birth, marriage and death rites. In the past, they did not consume milk and its products. But, now- a- days they have developed the habit of taking tea prepared with milk. Now, the milk-flavored tea is a popular drink among them. Previously, many of them used to take food in home-made leaf-cups and plates prepared by them. At present they use to serve food and drinks in aluminium or steel utensils such as bowls, plates and tumblers.





SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

In Mahali society, nuclear family is the smallest social unit composed of married couple and their legitimate unmarried children. They have patrilineal descent, patrilocal residence and patriarchal family. The rule of inheritance of property is patrilineal. In the Mahali society, the property of a deceased person is equally shared among his sons and if he is issueless, the property goes to the nearest paternal kin as decided by the tribal council. The right of ancestor worship is conferred upon the eldest son. The Mahali maintain social relations in the village community and ritual kinship bonds with their neighboring communities. All public places including temples and crematoria in the locality and beyond are shared by them with others



The Mahali, are divided into a number of totemistic clans called '*killi*' which are

exogamous in nature. These are Charbar (a tree), Duagri (wild pig), Kathar gach (jack tree), Kerketta (a kind of bird), Murumar (nilgai), Topowar (a bird), Tirk (bull), etc. The members of a clan are forbidden to kill or cause harm to the totemic plant or animal. The totems may not be killed or eaten. Marriage is also





contracted outside the totemic clan. Activities among *killi* members are based on mutual cooperation and help, and ceremonial exchanges strengthen ties and maintain a cordial and reciprocal relationship among themselves.

Life Cycle

Pregnancy, Child Birth & Post Rituals

Mahali believe that the life of a person begins in the mother's womb and ends at the cremation ground. After marriage, the couple expects a child. Cessation of menses and a feeling of nausea indicate pregnancy. This makes a woman feel proud, as she will become a mother. During pregnancy, a woman has to observe certain taboos and restrictions for the safety and well-being of herself and her infant. A Pregnant woman is not allowed to remain alone and if she is alone, she has to carry an iron implement such as knife to avoid the evil influence of malevolent spirits.

At the time of delivery, an experienced old woman of the community or from neighbouring Scheduled Castes assists in the process of delivery. Immediately after the baby is born, the female assistant cuts the umbilical cord either with a bamboo split or with an iron knife and burys it outside the house. Then, the baby is given a bath and the mother is washed with like warm water.

After the birth of a child, the Mahali observe a 9-day pollution period. For eight days the mother and the baby are kept confined in a room under strict observation of pollution. From delivery to the end of the pollution period no adult males are allowed to come in contact with the mother. Consumption of meat or fish is totally restricted in the house during this period. The purificatory rites as well as the **name giving ceremony** take place on the 9th day. On this day the mother, accompanied by the female relatives, goes to take a purificatory bath by anointing turmeric paste and oil. The baby and the male members of the family are shaved and take a bath.

The baby's name is selected through a grain divination method and the *Naya*, the traditional priest performs the rite. The kith and kin are entertained with a feast. The female attendant is given food and rice beer and remuneration in cash for her services.

Marriage

The Mahali tribe is endogamous and their clans are exogamous. Infringement of this customary rule is viewed seriously in their society and their traditional tribal council punishes the offenders which lead to heavy punishment like ex- communication from the tribe.





Both child and adult marriage are practiced in their society. In selection of spouse, the Mahali follow principle of endogamy at the tribe level and rule of exogamy at the clan level. In addition, the rule of village exogamy is also followed.

In the case of an arranged marriage, the initiative is always taken from the boy's side. The boy and his family members look for a beautiful girl having expertise in household activities while selecting a bride for marriage. Similarly, the girl prefers to marry a handsome and industrious boy who can support her in life. The boy's side first consults the astrologer to find out whether the match will be a suitable one. If he declares in its favour, they send a *raibar* (go-between) to start the negotiations with the girl's side. He pays a visit to the girl's family and makes the proposal. If he receives a favourable reply, a date for the visit of the boy's side is fixed. On the appointed day, the boy's father along with his relatives, goes to the house of the prospective bride. On arrival, they are received and served with drinks. During this visit the bride price is settled and the date of the wedding is fixed.

On the day of the wedding, the invited kith and kins are served with food and drink. Then the bridegroom is taken to the bride's house in a procession accompanied by dance and music. On reaching the house of the bride, the party is greeted and mats and charpoys are provided to them to sit down. The bride and bridegroom sit on a plank in one room of the house. Then the bridegroom puts a vermilion mark on the bride's forehead about five times. After this, the party is served with cooked food and rice beer. Finally the occasion is celebrated with dancing and singing.





Before marriage, the rites are performed. The groom's party has to pay the bride price which comprises two sarees, one dhoti, two cows and Rs. 100/- in cash. The *Naya*, the traditional priest of the village officiates in the marriage ceremony. On the day of wedding, the invited kin members are served with a feast including delicious food and home brewed liquor. After marriage, the bride groom returns to his village along with the bride. The *raibar* is presented a *dhoti* after the marriage.

Monogamy is a common practice in Mahali society though polygamy is allowed in rare cases if the first wife is barren. Levirate and sororate types of marriage are also vogue. Now, marriage by service and marriage by capture are obsolete.

Termination of marital bond is allowed in the Mahali society and divorce is permitted on special grounds like extra-marital relationship, quarrelsome nature of either of the spouses etc. with prior permission of the traditional tribal council. In case a husband wishes to divorce his wife, he, as per the norms, is bound to give her some rupees and then he is permitted to take away the iron-armlet that was presented to her during the wedding ceremony.



Death Rite

The custom of disposal of the dead is almost similar to that of the neighboring Hindus. Mahalis either bury or cremate their dead. Generally, the deceased adults are cremated, but the babies and children are buried.

The dead body is carried on a bier. Relatives and Mahali neighbours carry the corpse and no one belonging to other castes or tribes is allowed to touch it. Usually the eldest son of the deceased leads the funeral procession. On the way to the funeral ground the bier is lowered and kept over the ground at a crossroads. In case of burial, a pit is dug and the eldest son brings a pitcherfull of water from the nearest stream, with which the corpse is washed after being anointed with turmeric



paste and oil. A new piece of cloth is wrapped around the body, after which the eldest son puts a mark of vermilion over the deceased's forehead. The body is then lowered into the pit and positioned with its head pointing towards the north and its face upward. The eldest son first throws a handful of earth into the pit. The process is repeated by the pallbearers and others present at the ground. All those attending the funeral then take a purificatory bath and return to the house of the deceased, where they are fed rice along with salt and onion.

The death pollution is observed for a period of ten days. On the tenth day, the kith and kins and the members of the deceased's family are shaved and take a bath after offering food and alcohol to the departed soul. Then a feast is arranged for the relatives by the deceased's family. In case of cremation, a piece of bone is collected from the cremation ground, kept in turmeric water. In case of burial of the dead body, a piece of bone is collected from the ground after six to eight months of burial and kept in turmeric water. In both the cases, performance of certain rites are followed. The family members arrange to offer small quantity of rice beer and then the bone of the deceased person is thrown into the nearby river.



RELIGIOUS BELIEFS & PRACTICES



The Mahalis believe that supernatural powers control their life and fate. Mahali worship *Marang Buru* as their supreme deity and few other deities who reside in the sacred sal groove called *Jahirsthan* situated at the village outskirts. Besides, they worship *Bana Kuanri* before proceeding on hunting expeditions, *Maneiko Tureiko* for bumper crop and *Goddess Bada Chandi* and *Ranga Chandi* to ward off epidemics. They also worship Hindu deities like *Lord Mahadev*, *Ahira* and *Garaya* for welfare and prosperity of their family. They observe certain Hindu rituals and festivals, like *Holi*, *Sri Ram Navami*, *Rathajatra*, *Laxmipuja*. They offer home made food and drink to the spirits of the dead ancestors on different festive occasions and new eating ceremonies for their appeasement who are believed to give them protection from different diseases and mishaps.

They believe that witches, sorcerers and malevolent spirits cause diseases, sufferings and other misfortunes. The traditional method of treatment through Magico-Religious practices is still in vogue among them in which the spiritual specialists are called upon to diagnose and treat. The educated Mahalis prefer to go to the hospital for treatment.



Fair and Festivals:

The religious festivals of Mahali are mostly communal in nature. They celebrate Baha Parab, Saharae, Bandana, Ma-Mane for general welfare and prosperity of the village. The Naya (the village Priest) who generally belongs to Santal tribe, worship the village deity and officiates at village festivals.

Most of the festive occasions are celebrated with communal dancing and singing as it forms an important part of their lives, without which they feel dull and lifeless. All able-bodied persons, irrespective of sex and age, participate in the dancing and singing and relax. The sound of drums and the sweet songs attract the young boys and girls in particular, who suspend their activities and participate in the event. In villages where the Mahali live side by side with the Santal, they observe the festivals jointly.





POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

The Mahali have their traditional tribal council of their own, which exercises social control over the members of the community at the village level. The council is constituted of Naya (the Priest), the Majhi (the Secular Headman), Gadeat (the Messenger) and the village elders for handling the customary matters and settling the cases of disputes relating to serious violation of the norms, values, customs and traditions of the society, and other intra village disputes.

The traditional *panchayat* has exclusive power to excommunicate persons from the society for grave offences like incest and also to grant permission for the readmission of expelled members. The decision of the village council is final and the offenders are invariably punished with a fine in cash and kinds. The amount of fine imposed depends on the severity and nature of offence.





DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES



The close association of Mahali with neighbouring tribes and castes, coupled with various welfare measures taken up by Government for their upliftment, has brought noticeable changes in their way of life. After Independence, the State Government, in its pursuit to bring about socio-economic development of the ST communities, have launched special programmes, which include legal aid, rehabilitation of victims, housing facilities, establishment of special employment exchanges, reservation in employment, establishment of residential schools and hostels etc.

The establishment of schools for ST students by the ST & SC Development Department Govt. of Odisha in their area and implementation of Right to Education Act (2010) are noble interventions for desired transformation of Mahali Tribe in the social sector. Development of infrastructure facilities and socio-economic support through different development agencies ranging from construction of Aganwadi Centers,





PDS Centers and provision of houses under IAY, safe drinking water, Mobile Health Unit along with subsidy linkage loan, vocational and orientation training to the tribe in the area has brought an immense change in the life of the tribe. Most of them are engaged in Organized or Non Organized sectors to earn their livelihood.

The Mahali women have been roped into SHGs and getting financial assistance from ITDA and DRDA which has opened new arena of economic opportunity for better livelihood. Besides, financial assistance





to individual entrepreneurs has expanded the scope for individual as well as community development. 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.

Conservation of Culture:

The ST and SC Development Department, Government of Odisha under the aegis of Ministry of Tribal Affairs has set-up a Tribal Museum of Tribal Arts and Crafts in the Premises of SC and ST Research and Training Institute, CRPF Square, Bhubaneswar for preservation of material culture of different tribes including the Mahali. The ornaments, personal belongings, hunting weapons, fishing implements, and musical instruments of Mahali tribe have been exhibited in the different show cases in the Tribal Museum reflect their inherent talents, skills and ingenuity in bamboo crafts.



Besides, the live performance of Mahali dance in National Tribal Dance Festival, Bhubaneswar and in the open air pendal of Annual State Level Adivasi Exhibition every year, the replica of Mahali house in the ITDA stall and Live Demonstration Programme on Tribal Arts and Crafts organized by SCSTRTI, aims at conservation and promotion of their material and non-material culture.





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