



BAIGA

(A little known tribe of Odisha)

Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Research
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Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India

P R E F A C E

The Baiga is numerically a very small and little known tribe of Odisha. As per census 2011, their population is 338 only in Odisha. They identify themselves as Bhumiraja or Bhumijan meaning "lord of the soil" or "son of the nature". They speak *Baigani*, a dialect of Chhatishgarhi belonging to the Indo-Aryan family of languages. Mostly they inhabit Balasore and Sundergarh districts of Odisha.

They are settled agriculturists. They depend upon shifting cultivation and minor forest products for their livelihood. Their scanty clothes and unique tattoo marks decorating different parts of their body distinguishes them from others.

The Baiga community is divided into number of endogamous groups i.e. Binjhwar, Bharatia, Narotia or Nahar, Raibhaina, Kathbhaina, Kondwan or Kundi, Gondwaina, Kurka-Baiga, Sawat-Baiga, and Dudhbhaina.

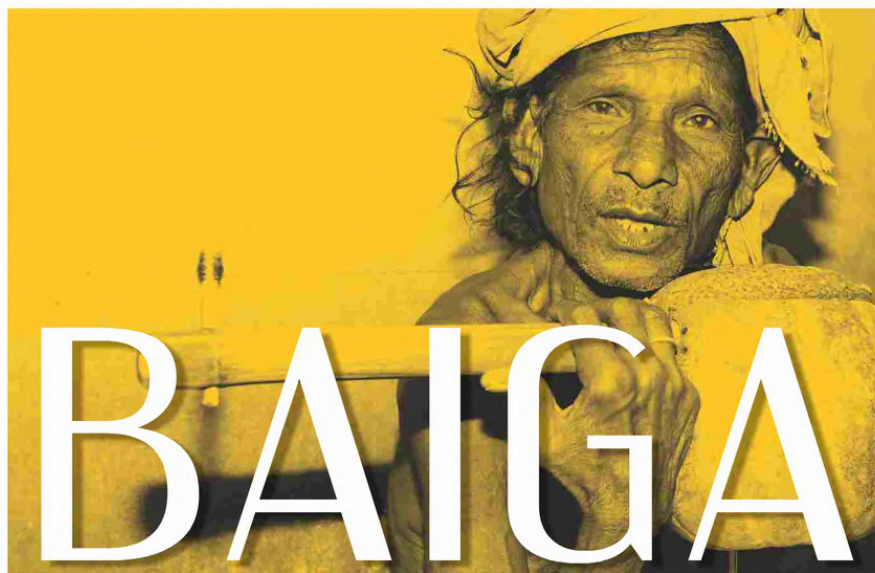
Adult marriage and monogamy is common in the community. Marriage by negotiation (Mangni marriage) is considered as ideal and prestigious. They consider death as an unnatural event and usually practice burial for the dead. Mourning and death pollution lasts for ten days. Purificatory rite *Chotakam* and *Dosakarma* is observed on the 3rd day and 10th day respectively after death.

Baiga religion is an admixture of animism and Hinduism. They worship a number of deities and observes different rituals and festivals like *Bidri*, *Cherta*, *Dusshera*, *Diwali* etc. round the year. They perform songs and dances such as *Karma*, *Seila*, and *Bilma* during rituals and festivals. *Bilma* reflects their cultural identity. Tribal development programmes and different socio-economic activities implemented by the government have brought changes in their socio-cultural and economic life.

The photographic documentation of Baiga life style is a part of the series on the tribes of Odisha. My heartiest thanks goes to Shri Khirad Kumar Turk, Research Assistant, Ms. Moushumi Nayak, Assistant Director and Mrs. Kabita Pattanaik of SCSTRTI for preparing the basic text for this colorful handbook. My special thanks are due to Shri S.C. Mohanty, Consultant (R & P) and Shri B.K. Paikray, former Research Assistant of SCSTRTI for guidance and editing this handbook. I hope that it will be useful to all who are interested on the tribal culture of Odisha.

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IDENTITY



The Baiga is numerically a very small and little known Scheduled Tribe of Odisha. The term 'Baiga' means priest. The Baiga identify themselves as Bhumiraja/Bhumijan, meaning "Lord of the soil" or "Son of the nature". They are a Mundari or Kolorian people widely distributed in central Indian States of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha and West Bengal. Russell and Hiralal (1916) stated that the Baiga were earliest settlers in Chhattisgarh and later on migrated to the other States. They speak Baiganiaan on-literary language of Indo-Aryan family belonging to Western Odia section inter related with the dialect of Chhattisgarhi. They are multi-lingual and speak Hindi for inter community communication.

Numerically, they are a small ethnic group in Odisha. As per 2011 census, the total population of the Baiga in Odisha is 338 i.e., 0.0035 per cent of the total tribal population of the State. They are found mostly in Balasore and Sundergarh districts of Odisha. Their sex ratio is 954 females per 1000 males. Their level of literacy is 67.25 percent which is 78.77 percent for males and 55.07 percent for females.





Dress and Ornaments

Their dress is simple. The male folks wear a string around their waist and wrap a small piece of loin cloth called *lengoti* with the help of that waist string just to hide their genital parts only. The women wear a small piece of cloth called *dhutia*. It decently covers their body from their shoulder to knees.

At present due to modernization and culture contact with the other ethnic groups changes are seen in their dress pattern. Now-a-days, the males are wearing dhoti or *lungi* in place of *lengoti* and shirt or *bandi* or *baniyan*. They are also wearing trouser, half trouser, shirt and jacket and women are wearing coloured and printed saree, blouse etc.



Though Baiga are poor, they have sense of beautification and ornamentation. They do like to wear both metallic and non-metallic jewellery. The women wear *nathni* (nose ring), *laung* (nose pin) in nose, bindi or tikli on forehead, *kan-phoolin* ears, hair lock in head; *sutiya* (neck-band), *havel* (string of silver coins) and *munga* (necklace of red bead) around neck, *baju* band (armlets) in arms, silver belt around waist, todar and pair in their ankle and *bhicchiya* in their toe fingers.

Baiga women are distinguished for their decorative tattoo marks depicting moon, triangles, crosses, dots, etc. on forehead, dots or small lines or long stripes of parallel lines on the cheek and chin, long parallel lines, human forms, peacock, magic chains, crosses, etc. on the back and in between breast and neck and flies, flowers and fish bones on their thighs, legs and hands in order to enhance their beauty and look attractive.



SETTLEMENTS AND HOUSING

Baiga settlements are compact and in general exclusively unclan and homogenous. They like to dwell in separate wards maintaining distance from other communities and keeping their own cultural identity. They live near foot-hills or hill slopes surrounded by the hills and forests. The perennial hill streams flowing nearby provide them drinking water throughout the year.

Baiga village structure is in the form of a large square and linear pattern having a broad space between the lines approximately 30 feet wide forming the village street. The houses are made nearer to cultivable lands. The village boundary *mero* is clearly marked by piles of stone and in most of the villages the burial grounds are just inside the *mero*.

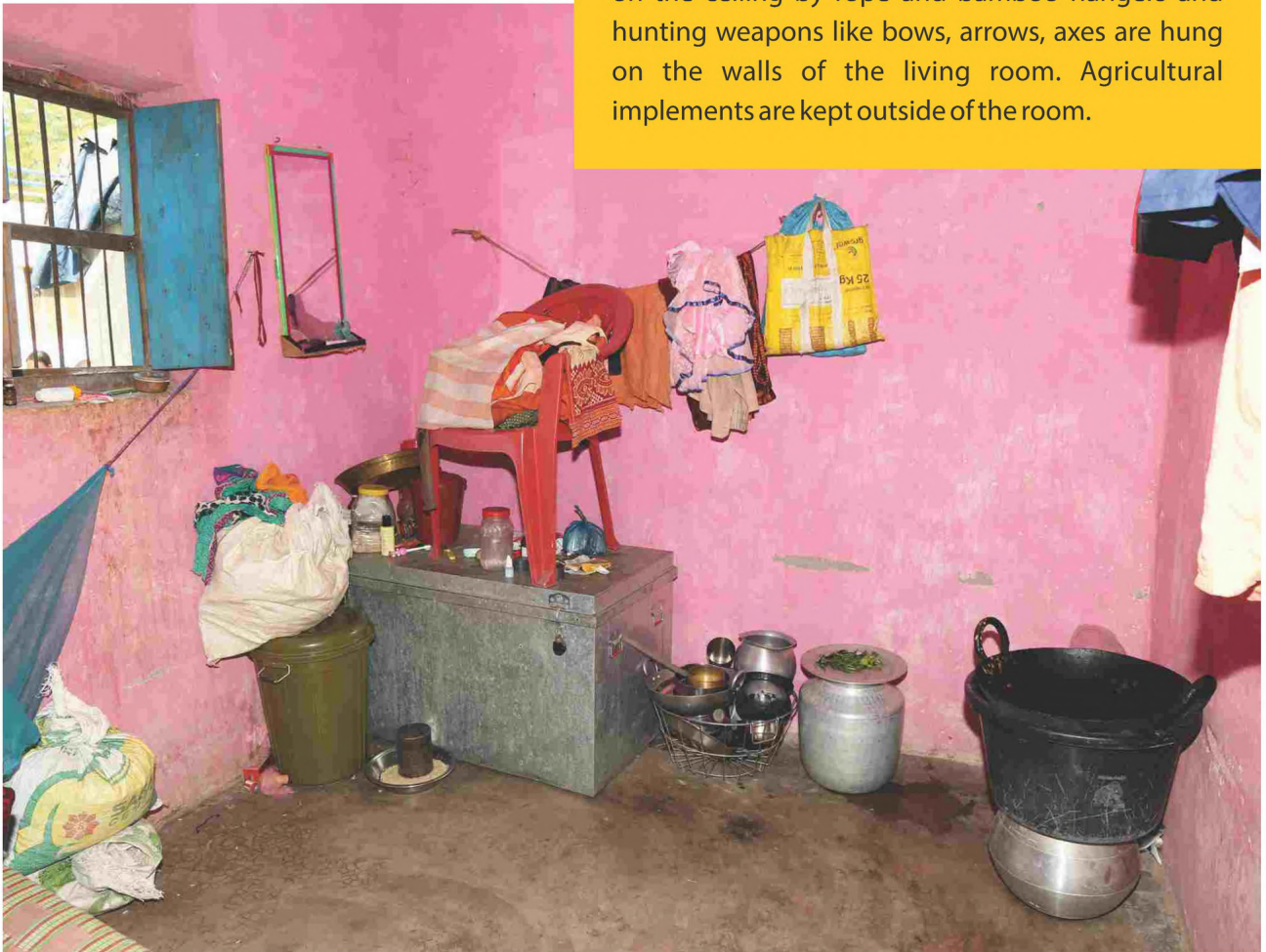




Their houses are made of wood and bamboo and plastered with mud. Now-a-days, they also use bricks to construct their houses. Houses are rectangular in shape. The number of rooms depends upon the economic status of the owner. It varies from single room to four or five rooms. In a single roomed house, they establish their kitchen in its eastern corner and in the other they install their household deity. The doors are made of wood or bamboo.



The roof is made of wood and bamboo frame and thatched with straws or grasses. Wooden and bamboo poles are fixed vertically to raise the roof in such a way to make it sloppy on both the sides. Floor of the house is made of hard mud and is polished by their women folk using red soil and rubbed with polished stone for glazing. They hang their clothes on the ceiling by rope and bamboo hangers and hunting weapons like bows, arrows, axes are hung on the walls of the living room. Agricultural implements are kept outside of the room.





LIVELIHOOD

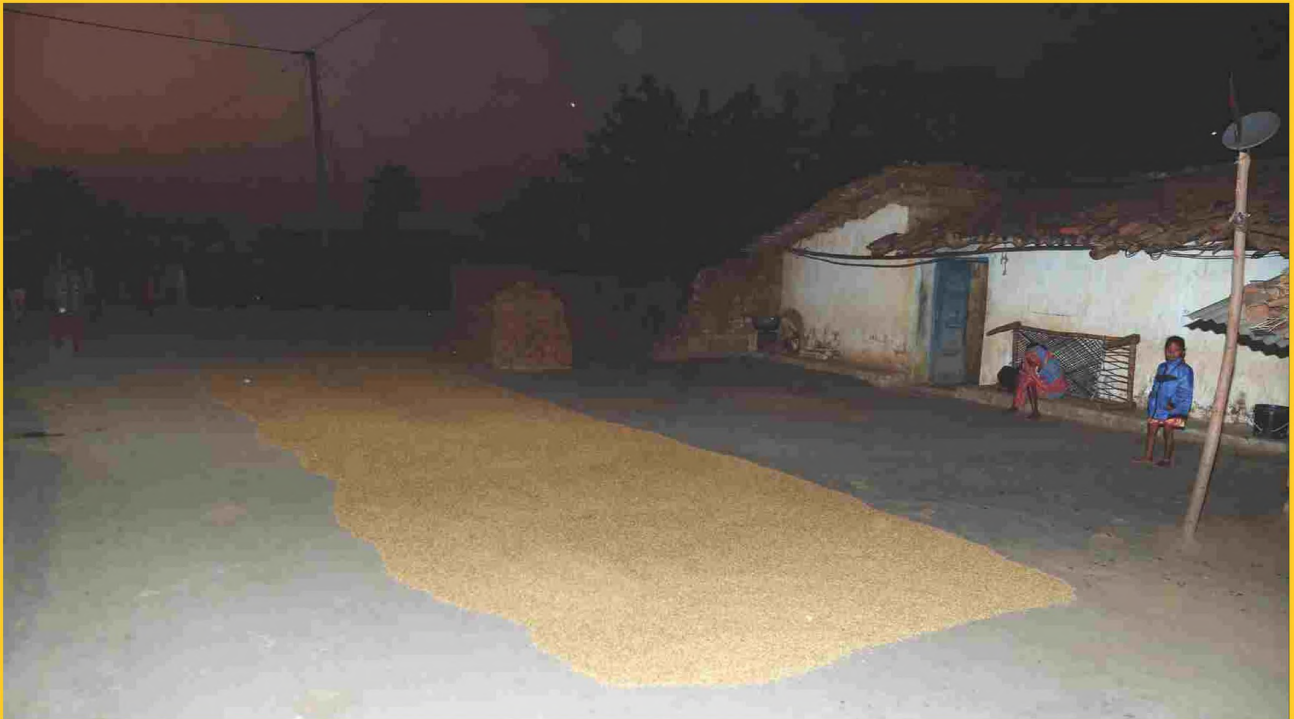
The Baiga depend mainly on cultivation and collection of minor forest produce for their livelihood. They also work as agricultural and non-agricultural wage earners to supplement their income

They practice shifting cultivation. For that they select a plot in hill slope where they practice slash and burning type of cultivation. The rain water spreads the fresh ashes into the soil. Hoe is used to dig the soil. Then the land is used for cultivation for two or three years during which different mixed crops are sown in succession. Usually they produce maize, *ragi*, minor millets, mustard, tobacco, tea and til etc.



After three years of cultivation, the soil nutrients are rapidly depleted and the land becomes infertile to grow crops. Then Baiga finds new sites for cultivation and the old site left fallow at least for three years for recuperation.

They collect varieties of seasonal forest produce like edible fruits, roots, tubers, *sal* seeds, leaves, mushrooms, honey, medicinal herbs, timber, fuel wood and grasses and fodders to meet their own needs and to sell the surplus in the local market. Baiga are expert wood cutters and skilled in wood carving, basketry and mat making. They sell their products in the local weekly markets.



Food and Drinks

They are generally non-vegetarians. They relish on meat, chicken, eggs, pork, fish and dry fish, but abstain from taking beef as they consider it unclean. Rice and ragi are their staple food which is taken with other dishes. They also take maize, pulses like khesri and masoor along with vegetables.

Both males and females are addicted in drinking and smoking. Drinking is considered as most auspicious during festive occasions and marriage, birth or death rituals. They use country liquor mahuli, self-brewed rice beer handia, pachi and offer it to their guests and relatives during festive occasions and also use it for ritual offering to deities. They also grow tobacco in their backyards.





SOCIAL LIFE

The Baiga community is socially divided into ten endogamous groups, i.e. Binjhar, Bharatia, Narotia /Nahar, Raibhaina, Kathbhaina, Kondwan/ Kundi, Gondwaina, Kurka-Baiga, Sawat-Baiga, and Dudhbhaina. Each section is again sub-divided into two territorial subgroups like Garhand Goti. Each sub-section is further divided into various totemistic septs like, Bastaria, Belghasria, Tijaria, Amthuria, Kathodia and Kulharia etc.



Family is the most basic social institution of the Baiga community. The Baiga family is exclusively nuclear in structure which consists of a man, his wife and their unmarried children and is partilocal and patrilineal in nature. Inheritance always follows the rule of equigeniture in male line only and ancestral property is divided equally among all the sons. Though women do not inherit the parental property, a widow can inherit her deceased husband's property. If a family have no male child it can adopt a male child from the nearest patrilineage who later on can inherit the adoptee father's property and office. Junior levirate and junior sororate and cross cousin marriage are allowed but parallel-cousin marriage is strictly prohibited in their society.

LIFE CYCLE

Pregnancy, Child Birth and afterwards

New born baby is considered as a rebirth of family ancestor/ancestress in Baiga family. A pregnant Baiga woman has to observe a number of taboos. When a woman is going to face the first delivery she receives advice from experienced women about various taboos specifically for her diet and daily activities for the well-being of herself and her child to be born. The woman and her relatives often make promise to offer sacrifices to the deities to ensure smooth and safe delivery of the child.

The pregnant woman is prohibited to climb a ladder, sit on a grinding stone, step over the narrow open receptacle, stand and sit on the doorway, sleep on a sack, sleep alone, touch a corpse, go near the burial ground, travel alone in dark night and go out during lunar or solar eclipses. Her husband is tabooed to kill animals.



The Baiga women take part in routine activities till the advanced stage of pregnancy. On the day of child birth they engage an experienced elderly woman or mid-wife of their own community to attend the pregnant woman for smooth and safe delivery of the child.

When mother's labour pain starts she goes into the house with any women who is with her and shuts the door. No male members are allowed inside the lying in chamber but wait outside the house. After the delivery, the umbilical cord is cut off using a sharp bamboo blade or sharp broken earthenware by the midwife. Then they dig a hole in the floor on the very spot where the child is born and bury the umbilical cord in that pit. They cover the pit with soil and place the nuptial fire over it. The mother and the baby remain polluted and secluded inside the house until the naval cord dries up.



Birth pollution continues for a period of fifteen days and on the last day, the maternal uncle shaves the hair of the new-born baby. Then he gives the name. The name is given as per the name of the month or a day of the week or physical peculiarity of the child. Bad name is given to the child if he or she is in critical condition. To save the child, the parents ritually sell the baby to a couple of Agaria or Gond community for adoption.

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Puberty

The Baiga girls usually attain their first menarche when they reach the age of twelve to fifteen years. But they have no tradition to observe puberty rite.



Marriage

The marriage is the most important event in the life of the Baiga as it terminates the bachelorhood and promotes him to become a responsible member of the community. Marriage within the same sept is strictly prohibited. In the Baiga community, adult marriage and monogamy is the common practice. Marriage by negotiation (*Mangni*) is considered as ideal and prestigious mode of marriage. The other modes of acquiring mates are by capture, by service (*Ghar-jowain*), by elopement (*Uthwa*) and by intrusion (*Pathul*).

Cross-cousin marriage is given preference in the community in which a man marries to his father's sister's daughter or mother's brother's daughter. Remarriage of widows, widowers and divorcees, junior levirate and junior sororate are also permitted. A younger brother can marry the widow of his deceased elder brother or a man can marry to his deceased wife's younger sister in their community.



When the boys and girls reach marriageable age, their parents set the norms. Generally, the marriage proposal comes from the bride's parents. The father of the girl or maternal uncle after taking consent of their girl initiates the proposal with a bottle of *Mahua* liquor presented to the boy's father. If the boy's father accepted the proposal, then the *sagaio* negotiation is celebrated in the presence of lineage members. The payment of bride price is obligatory. It is given in shape of cash i.e. Rs 18 or Rs. 25 and in kinds. At the time of payment, the boy's parents give a large feast known as Barokhiat the girl's house and the date of wedding is finalized then and there.

On the appointed day, the wedding procession starts from the bride groom's house and received by bride's side outside the village. Both the parties embrace each other and proceed to the marriage-shed. The two *Dosis* (bride's and groom's parents and uncle) and two *Suasin* (young unmarried girls or sisters of both the sides) have great role in the marriage ceremony. The *Dosis* perform the wedding rites and *Suasin* have to remain in constant attendance. When the marriage ritual begins, the *Dosis* go to the shrine of Thakur Deo and offer fire and incense with a lamp before him. The *Suasin* is asked to bring pot of water and some rice. To ascertain whether marriage is auspicious or not, the *Dosi* utters mantra and drops two grains of rice into the water. The marriage is considered highly auspicious if the tips of the grains meet, swing round and float side by side immediately. If the grains do not come together, the marriage is considered unsuccessful and it is believed that the couple will quarrel in their married life and that the bride will return to her father's house.



The bride and bridegroom throw fried rice at each other until they are tired and then go three or seven times around the marriage altar with their clothes tied together. The newly married couple spends their first night in the jungle. On that night, the husband must provide some gifts to please his bride otherwise he might be ridiculed by his spouse or he will become impotent later.

Generally, divorce happens on the grounds of misunderstanding in conjugal life, misconduct, extra marital affairs, cruelty etc. Divorce cases are adjudicated in their traditional council. If the case is not settled by the council and the female lives separately in the same village, then the husband is responsible for maintenance of her with her children.





Death Rites

Death is considered as a great event of misfortune in Baiga community. They believe that witchcraft, ghosts, spirits or breach of taboos etc. are the causes of death. The Baiga usually practice burial for their dead.

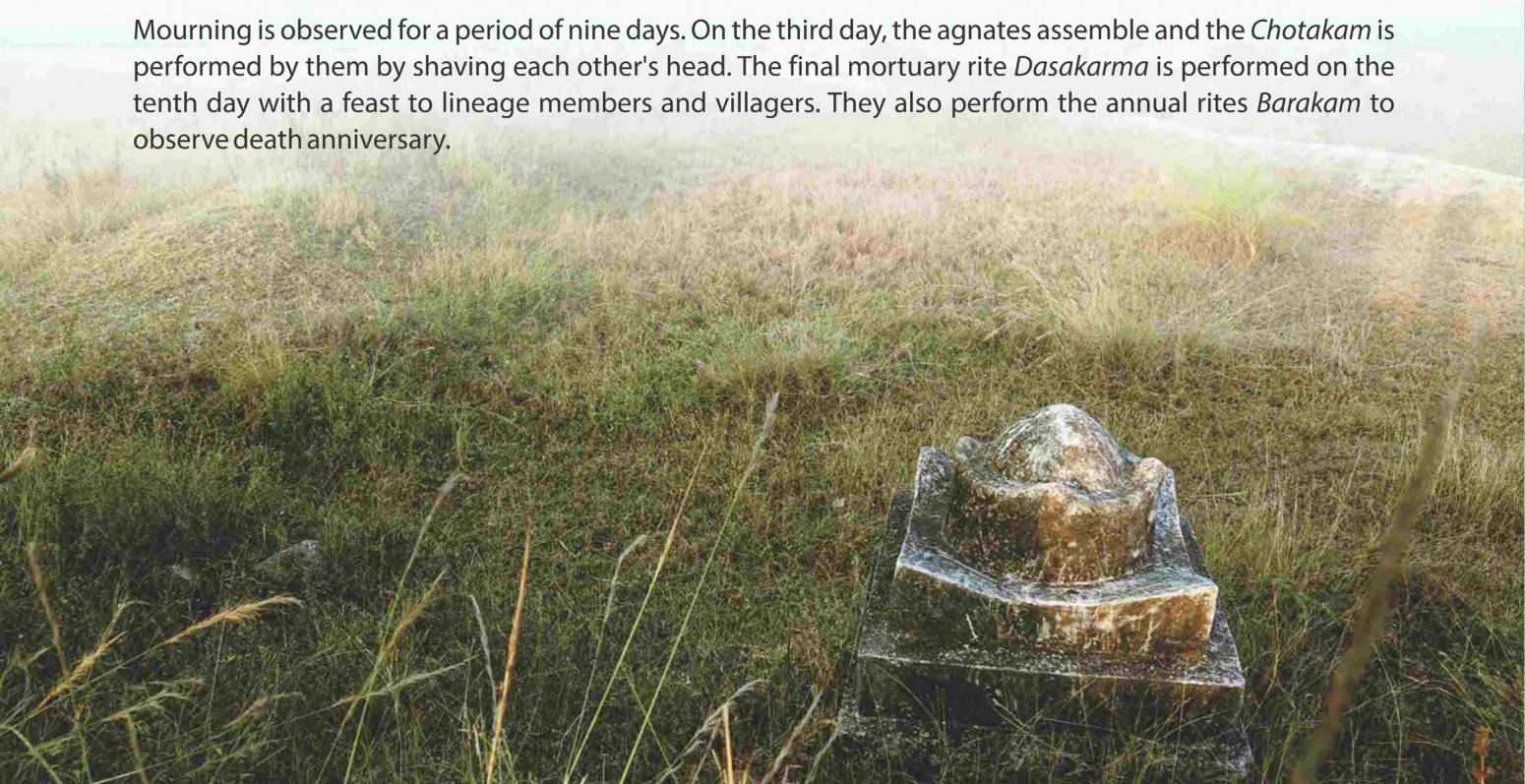
When a person dies his wife washes the floor with a cloth dipped in cow-dung water. Then the corpse is laid down on the floor by the relatives who put sweetmeat or a coin in its mouth.

After death of a person his/her spouse only removes the clothes of the dead. If the man is a widower, then his son may do this. In case of death of a woman, her mother or sister bathes her. After bathing the corpse is anointed with turmeric paste and oil and wrapped with a new cloth. The dead man's son pulls some straw from the roof over the door and spreads these on the pre-prepared bier. The body is laid upon it and four men carry the pall to the burial ground.

A grave is dug waist deep. The bier is circled three times around the grave and placed down on the ground little away from the grave. The dead body is laid naked in the grave with the head pointing towards south and his daily use personal items like tobacco, coin, axe etc. are placed near the grave. The corpse is laid down keeping face downward in the grave and in case of woman, it is upward. The dead man's son ties a bit of new cloth in waist and takes bath in the nearest stream or pond and comes back to the grave. He stands back and first throws a handful of soil into the grave. Then all mourners fill soil in the grave.

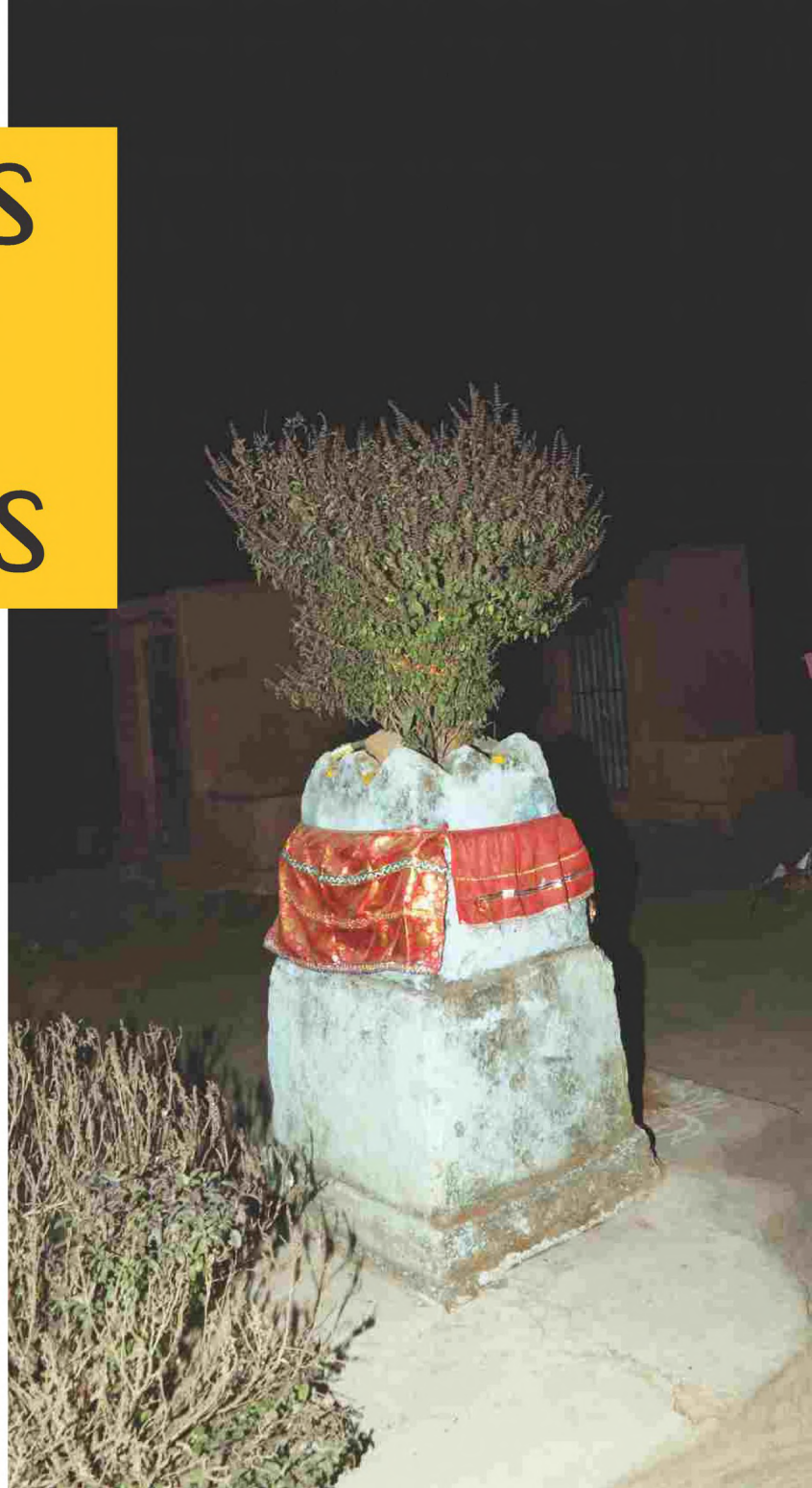
A stone is erected over the grave, which is called the *Bhiri* of the deceased. As per their belief, the *Bhiri* is worshipped during calamities. The mourners return home after the burial work is completed. The *Samdhi* (married son's or daughter's father-in-law) of the dead man waiting with a pot of water sprinkle sit on the mourners. The pall bearers anoint each other with the turmeric paste and oil brought by the dead man's widow for purification.

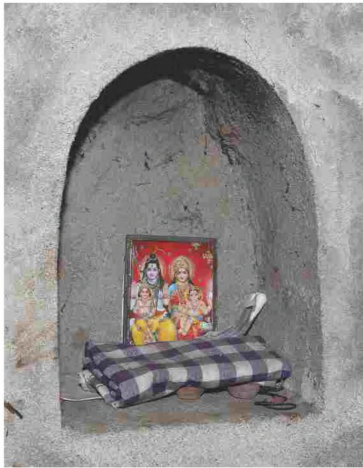
Mourning is observed for a period of nine days. On the third day, the agnates assemble and the *Chotakam* is performed by them by shaving each other's head. The final mortuary rite *Dasakarma* is performed on the tenth day with a feast to lineage members and villagers. They also perform the annual rites *Barakam* to observe death anniversary.



RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

The religion of Baiga is an admixture of animism with Hinduism. River Narmada is regarded as sacred by them. Bura Deo is regarded as their principal deity who resides in *Sal* tree. Their pantheon includes Thakur Deo: the God of village land and boundaries, Dulha Deo: the God, who averts disease and accidents, Bhimsen: the rain God, Dhartimata or Mother Earth who is worshipped for bumper harvest, Narayan Deo: the Sun-God whom they appease for the wellbeing of the humans. They worship their deities with great reverence and pray for their wellbeing. Animal sacrifices are offered to all the deities. They also worship their ancestors.





The village deities are worshipped by the Baiga Priest. Major religious practitioners are Dewar and Gunia. Dewar's status is considered higher than Gunia. Dewar is responsible for the performance of agricultural rites, closing village boundaries and stopping earthquakes. The Gunia deals largely with the magico-religious cure of diseases.

The Baiga calendar of rituals and festivals is agricultural in nature. They also observe Hindu festivals like *Chaitra Navami* in April, Dusshera in October-November, Kuanr (Kuanr Purnima), Holi, Diwali, Hareliat the family level in different months of the year. Dusshera is the occasion during which the Baiga hold Bida rite, a sort of sanitizing ceremony in which the men dispose off spirits that have been troubling them in past years. The Cherta festival (a children feast) is observed in January; the Phag festival (in which the women are allowed to beat men) is held in March; the *Bidri* festival is celebrated in the month of June for protection of crops; the Hareli festival is observed in August to ensure good crops; and the Nawa feast i.e. the thanks giving festival is observed in the end of rainy season.



Dances and Songs

Baiga dance and songs are integral parts of their culture. Still these folk traditions remain undisturbed in the present times. Baiga songs and dances have different forms such as, *Karma*, *Sheila* and *Bilma*. *Bilma* is performed by both children and adult males during *Chaitra* festival wearing wooden masks. The dance and song, its music and basis are purely natural. The simple sweet lyrics, dancing and singing accompanied by the play of traditional musical instruments like *Mandar*, *Timki* and *Bansuri* is enchanting and it distinguishes their cultural identity. *Karma* song is named after deity, *Karmasani*. *Sheila* is a male dominated form of dance and song competition between the groups of two villages performed for entertainment.



SOCIAL CONTROL



The Baigas have their own traditional political institution called as Jaati Panchayat at the village level. It is held in the village headed by the village chief called *Mukaddam*. The panchayat also called "Panchs" comprises five members *Mukaddam*, *Diwan*, *Samrath*, *Kotwar* and *Dewarall* of them belonging to the Baiga tribe only. The decision of 'Panchs' is obligatory for all the Baigas of a village.

The Baiga society has given special importance to the *Mukaddam*. It is a hereditary post. The *Mukaddam* is assisted by another functionary called *Diwan* whose post is also hereditary. In the absence of *Mukaddam*, his work is done by *Diwan*. The other functionary is *Samrath* whose post is also hereditary. His main job is to host the common guests of the village like visiting Government officers and others. The *Kotwar* or the village watchman looks after the security of whole village. He maintains the village records regarding birth and death. *Dewar* is a traditional ethno-medicinal doctor.

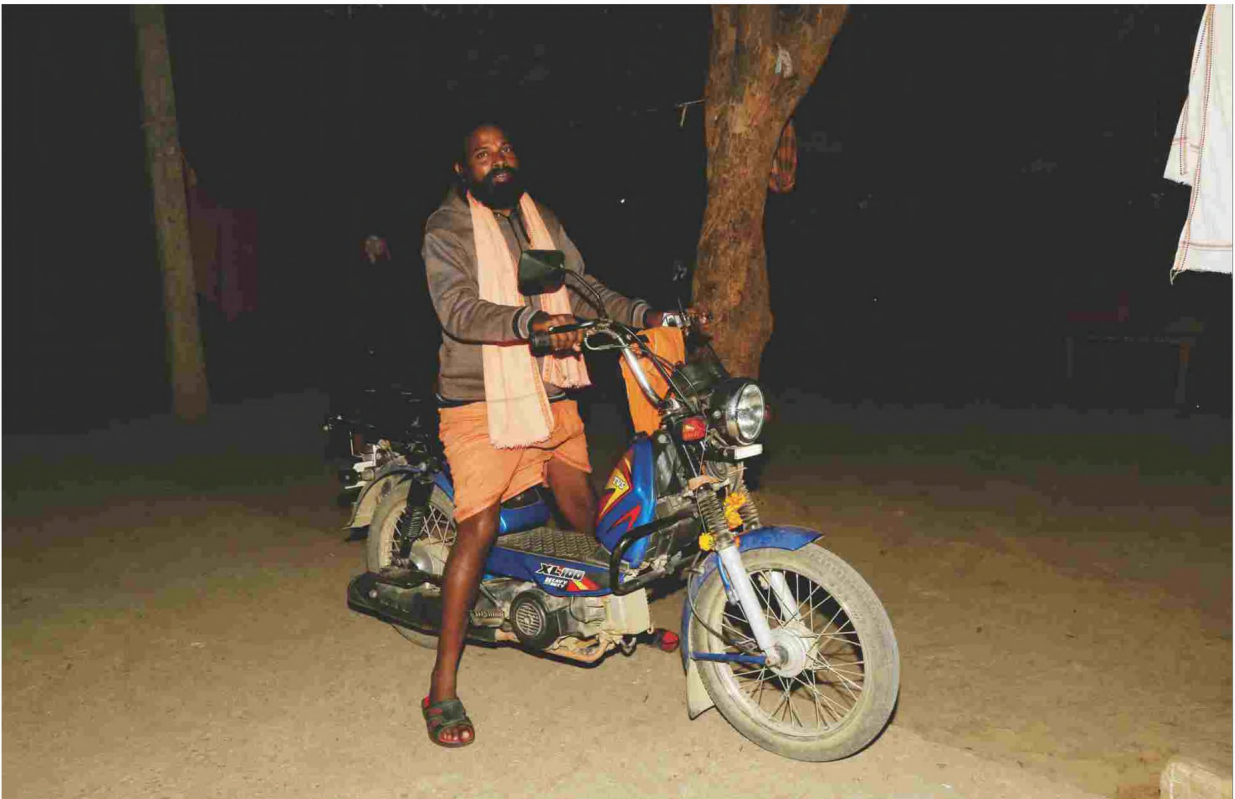
The panchayat acts as the guardian of their customary affairs and adjudicates the cases pertaining to family disputes, immoral love affairs, marriage disputes, divorce, family partition, intra and inter village disputes.

The Panchayat has the right to punish an offender making him to pay the penalty in cash and in kinds of hosting feast for the villagers. The amount of financial punishment depends upon the gravity of offence committed by the offender. The council can ex-communicate the deviant if he/she disobeys its decision and can also restore him/her after due penance and hosting a feast to the villagers with country liquor *mohua*.

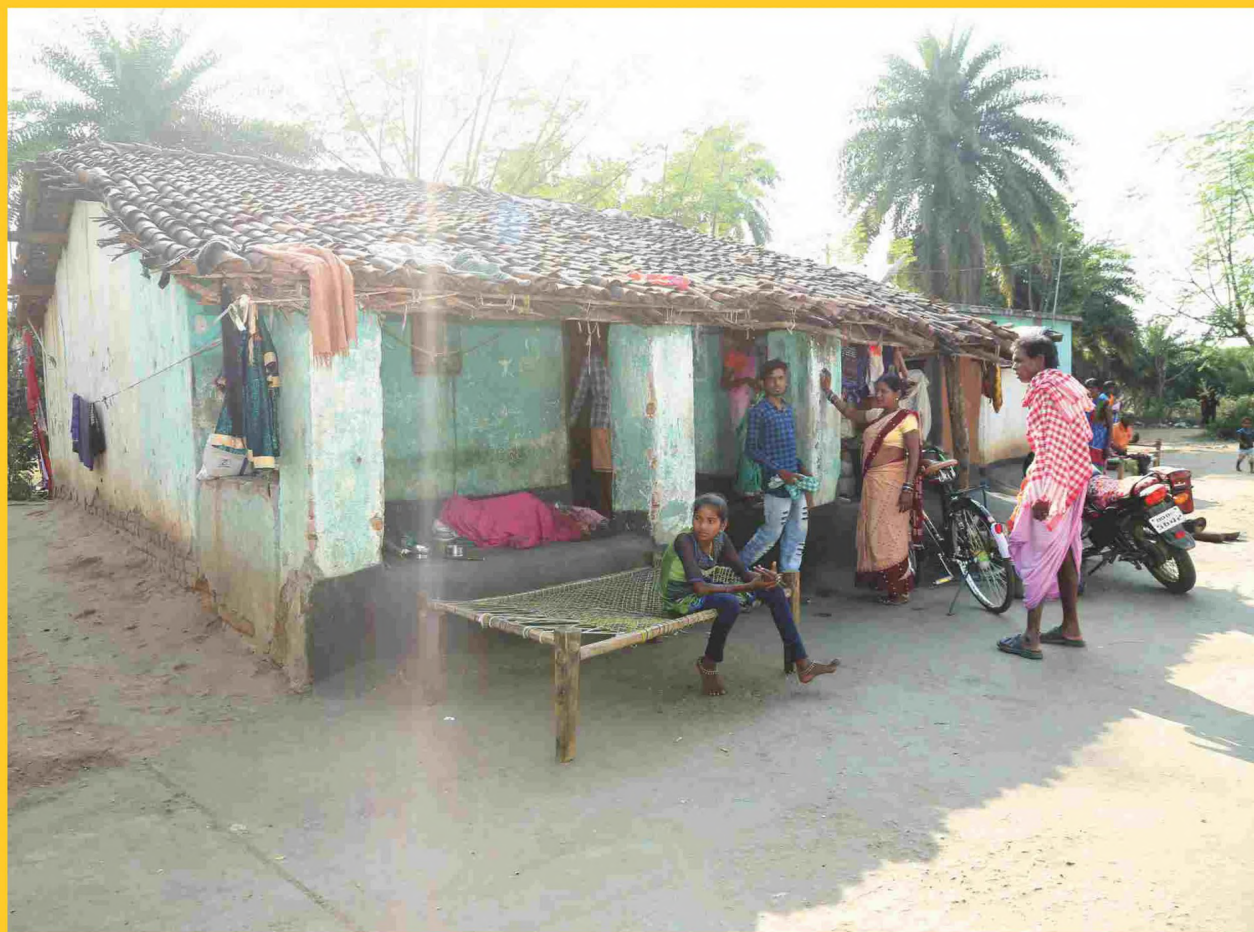


CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT

The Baiga live in remote villages. The different socio-economic developmental activities implemented by the government have brought visible change in their socio-cultural life. They are no longer isolated from the outer world. Their economic condition is better than before and their level of literacy has also increased. Introduction of modern agriculture, multiple cropping, use of high yielding variety of seeds have brought changes in their economic life.



The residential schools established by the ST & SC Development Department and Education Department of Odisha Government have been a noble intervention for desired transformation of the Baigas in social sector. Similarly, by creating infrastructure facilities through development agencies and units like Anganwadi Center and PDS centers, etc. at the village level, the Govt. of Odisha have been trying to create a sustainable socio-economic support system ranging from food security and safe drinking water to mobile health units to empower the Baiga community.



Towards ensuring the livelihood enhancement and women empowerment, the Baiga women have been roped into Self Help Groups (SHGs) by extending financial assistance by the ITDAs and DRDAs. Individual assistance to women entrepreneurs for running grocery shop, petty business has opened up new areas of the economic opportunity for individual family and community development.

Although they have been greatly influenced by Hinduism, their practice of animism is unabated. They have undergone perceptible changes due to influences of education, development interventions, Hinduisation and modernization.



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