



Sunadei - The Epicentre of Bhunjia Life

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Sunabeda plateau which is the homeland of the Bhunjia tribe lies roughly between 21° 25° North and 21° 30° north latitude and 82° 35° East longitude. It was a part of Khariar Zamindari, which formed the eastern, and the southeastern region of Raipur district of Chhatisgarh division in Central Province till 1st April 1936, when it was transferred to Orissa on its creation. It is now in Komna block of Nuapada district in Orissa.

Nearly 62 tribal groups are living in Orissa, out of which 10 tribal groups may be identified in Nuapada. The Bhunjias, a primitive tribe of Orissa, are found in Nuapada. Nuapada is considered as the homeland of the Bhunjias. 75 percent of the total population of this tribe lives here. They are living in the uphill range of Sunabeda plateau in Nuapada. According to the 1981 Census the population of Bhunjia was 7000 and now it must be around 10000. Accordingly 75 percent of populations i.e. about 7500 Bhunjias are living in Nuapada.

According to the tribe, the term "Bhunjia" means growing out of land or origin from the earth. They speak Halbi language, a mixture of Oriya, Marathi and Chhatisgarhi. However K.C. Dubey analyzing the myth and oral tradition of Chhatisgarh, considers the Bhunjia as a branch of Halbas of Baster, who fled from Baster due to their quarrel with Dhakars.

The Bhunjia, have racial and cultural affinity with the Gonds of Orissa. There are so many myths among the Bhunjia and the Gond, which speak of strong relationship among the Gonds and the Bhunjias. On setting in the Sunabeda plateau, the Bhunjias did not have marital relations with any tribal group, but in course of time, when the Gonds came in to their area, marital relation was established with them. From this the population was divided in to two inter-marrying groups, namely Markam and Netarn. Due to this close proximity with the Gonds, Bhunjias have adopted many of the Gods and Goddesses of the Gonds as their own. The two groups worship God and Goddesses common to the locality such as Budharaja and Sunadei.

Bhunjias are divided in to two main sections i.e. Chinda Bhunjia and Chaukhutia Bhunjia. The Chaukhutia Bhunjia are confined exclusively to the hills of the Sunabeda plateau in ecologically secluded areas for which they maintain distance from the outsiders. But the Chinda Bhunjia generally lives in the plains and have close contact with the tribal and non-tribal communities.

The religious life of Bhunjia is very simple. They believe in many Gods and Goddesses who are worshipped in different months on different



ritual occasions. But they have some differences in their rituals and religious worship when compared to the Aryan or Vedic religion. The differences could be outlined in the following way.

1. The Bhunjia Gods and Goddesses have no anthropomorphic icon.
2. There is no treatise for architectural design of icons.
3. Their Deity enter in to the person of the Dihari and reveal herself to the devotees.
4. They have no written religious text.
5. There is no strict architectural design for constructing Shrines.
6. Animals and Birds are sacrificed to their Gods and Goddesses.
7. Aniconic images such as Tree, Wood stump, Stone and Iron weapons are used.
8. The untouchables also play out assigned responsibility and duty during worship and rituals.

Broadly speaking the native deities of the tribal could be divided in to three categories namely, (1) Caste based deities, (2) village deities and (3) Presiding deity of the locality. Sunadei, the principal deity of the Bhunjia belongs to all these three categories. She is caste-based deity of the Bhunjia tribe, village deity of Sunabeda village as well as presiding deity of the Sunabeda plateau.

There are few myths relating to the origin of Goddess Sunadei. It is believed that being insulted by her brother Budharaja (Budha Deo), Sunadei went to Sunabeda wearing a white saree. She meditated there for a long time. As a result, she became the presiding deity of the plateau. Immitating Sunadei, all the Bhunjia women of Sunabeda plateau wear white saree till date. Another myth, which says that Bhima once

ploughed the Sunabeda plateau for cultivation. Besides Sunabeda he also ploughed Changurbeda, Mangurbeda, Kelbeda, Uhusrabeda, Bhilabeda, Gatibeda, Korrabeda and Saharasbeda. During that time at a place with the touch of his plough blood came out from the earth. Then he dug out the earth and took out Sunadei. He built a temple there for the Goddess, and beside the temple he planted a banyan tree. Since then Sunadei has been worshipped.

Sunadei has 12 sisters and She is the eldest among them. Her father is Niranjan and mother Adimata. Budharaja is her only brother. Sunadei is the supreme deity having shrine at the center of Sunabeda village, where all the functionaries of the deity reside. The Bhunjia tribe has been divided in to two main groups. Each group is sub divided in to a number of barags and each barag has got a specific designation. Each of the designation is associated with the worship of the particular deity. For example, Sunadei has ordained the Pujhari as the priest and no other section of the community has any right to encroach upon this prerogative. The second category of the ritual functionary is called Chhatriya, whose duty is to hold umbrella open at the time of worship. The third category is Katariya, who sacrifices animals and birds. Dihari is another barag to whom the deity enters and appear to the devotees. Beside these four categories there is a musical band party consisting of Dholia, Muhuria and Lisnia. The band party comes from the Dom caste. Beside Bhunjia, other caste and tribes, who have access to the deity- worship, play their functional part during worship. For instance the Teli provide oil, Mali garlands. Paharia necessary goods made of bamboo for the deity. All the tribes have their own responsibilities towards Sunadei. But this type of co-operation and participation from among the lower caste in the worship of the deity is not seen in the Hindu religion. The so-



called lower castes, who are treated as untouchables by the so-called upper caste are not allowed to co-operate in the Aryan rituals and worshipping.

Annual festival or Yatra of Sunadei is held in the month of October and November every year. Sunadei's festival continues for 15 days long. On each day of the festival a lamp is kept burning at the shrine of Sunadei. Bhunjia tribe worships Sunadei mainly because of (1) having sufficient rain and bumper crops and (2) for blessing the barren women with children. On this occasion Bhunjias of all the villages assemble at Sunabeda village and on the last day of the festival, large gathering is seen at the shrine. During the time of festival, the Bhunjia offer Buck, Duck and Pigeon to Sunadei. Besides this they also offer Wine, Coconut and Incense stick to Sunadei. Inside the temple of Sunadei there is no statue. The icon of Sunadei is one sword and a wood stump, when her ceremonious procession is taken out, the sword is also carried by the pujhari. Sunadei was also patronized by the zamindar of Khariar estate for which he himself established swords in many tribal temples, beside the Pathkhanda temple inside the Palace. The Kings donated the agricultural lands in the name of different tribal God and Goddesses.

Each shrine of Bhunjia was assigned with 24 surrounding villages (Each village is called a Tikri) and the deity presided over the religious life of the people of all 24 tikris. These 24 tikris constituted an administrative and religious unit. Sunadei of Sunabeda has also 24 tikri. They are Sunabeda, Koked, Gambherpein, Jamgaon, Gatibeda, Suimundi, Salpada, Korrabeda, Gorapada, Junapein, Sanbahali, Kotenpani, Kechhapakhan, Jharlaaam, Dhikunpani, Chinmundi, Soseng, Gotma, Rupian, Deosil, Adar, Jalmadei, Bhaosil, and Tataveta. During 15 days-

long festival Goddess Sunadei reveals herself through the Dihari and goes round all the 24 villages or tikri under her suzerainty. Most probably tikris of Sunadei have now increased to about 84 villages. This makes their faith more earthly and vibrant. The shrine of Sunadei registers the most undiluted indigenous religious practices.

The faith on the deity has fashioned their outlook on life. For example their supreme mother Goddess has prohibited them from using three things. Firstly, use of country made husking lever (Dhenki). Secondly, use of any kind of cot (Charpai). And thirdly, use of tiles (Khapars). The Bhunjia obey the injunction laid down by the Goddess. They sleep on the floor and do not use any tiles, instead thatch their house with a kind of wild grass. Every festival of Bhunjia tribe- be it Religious, Agriculture or Social- is held in the temple of Sunadei. Hence the entire village life revolves around Sunadei. She is the epicenter of Bhunjia life. In the month of March-April a ritual is observed which is called sanctification of seeds (Bihan chhina). On this occasion the Chhatriya of the Deity supplies 5 Kgs of paddy seeds for the purpose. These seeds are sanctified before Sunadei and distributed among the Bhunjias of the villages. Besides, there is other festivals related agriculture such as Mahul Jatra, Chait Jatra, Bihan Chhina Jatra, Asadh Khena Jatra, which are celebrated in her shrine.

Besides Sunadei, each village has its own village deity. But Sunadei, the tutelary deity of the Bhunjia, which has religious suzerainty over the plateau of Sunabeda, where one of the most primitives, the Bhunjia, worship her with all religious fervour.

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