

The Koyas : A Socio-Cultural Study

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Malkangiri District has the unique distinction of having the largest concentration of colourful tribes. The Koyas are an important tribe among the 62 tribes of Odisha. This tribe is rich in primitive customs, tradition, art and culture. Except Malkangiri of Odisha they are also found mainly in Andhra Pradesh and Chhatisgarh. However their concentration is more in Malkangiri than in Andhra Pradesh or Chhatisgarh.

These primitive offsprings of forest likes to establish themselves as integral to the Dravidian race. They are intimately familiar with the hills and forests, river and rivulets, open meadows, the birds soaring in the sky and the wild animals roaring in the dense forest. The march of civilization has little effect on this tribe and they still maintain their social customs and traditions in their own way. Now it is an attempt to throw light on various aspects of the socio-cultural life of the Koya tribe of Malkangiri.

Archaeological studies reveal that they had migrated from “Koi” and “Gondwana” regions of Baster district in Chhatisgarh and their roots had gone deep into the soil of Malkangiri since time antiquity. As this area is close to the land of Telegu and Chhatisgarh, the language the Koyas speak is a peculiar admixture of both. Most of their words have a Telegu origin. But the spoken dialect has no alphabet of its own. The Koya tribe,

call themselves “Koyiee” and they speak a Dravidian dialect.

The study of eminent researches reveals that the Koyas belong to the family of “Austic”. As they have hailed from the “Koi” region, they are known as Koyas. In their tribe also, there are divisions. They are “gattera”, “metatara”, “gamminar” etc. The gattera Koyas dwell in Podia Black. The Koyas use five kinds of surname like - *Madkami, Podiami, Madhi, Kawasi, Sodi*. They inhabit at places like Podia, Kalimela, Mathili, Korukanda in the district of Malkangiri. Their number is more than two lakhs in the entire district.

The Koya villages are situated nearby the hill slopes where hill streams are available and suitable for shifting cultivation. Houses in Koya village do not conform to any pattern. A koya house is built on a square ground plan and the wall around it is a bamboo lattice work either plastered with mud or kept bare. A kind of locally grown grass or straw is set on the roof for thatching.

The chief of every Koya village is called “Peda”. The chief priest of the village deity “Disari” who is a key person of the village, plays a vital role in the life of the Koyas. He is a leading figure in all festivals like the functions of thread ceremony,

marriage etc. As they have not yet imbibed full faith in modernity and one hesitant to welcome it, the ‘Disaris’ appease the common men by reciting to their conventional belief in sorcery and magic.

Koya people are good looking and have perfect physique. They have sharp nose, thin lips, broad shoulders and their women are sleek and smooth with well-built. Koyas are the men of moment. They do not think of tomorrow. Both male and female are hard working. They are most simple, truthful, freedom loving and honest. A guest of one family is regarded as the guest of the whole village.

Dhoti, shirt and gamchas for men and coarse and cheap sarees for women are the traditional dress of the Koya community. Women wrap the saree around the waist and it hardly covers their knee. This is to facilitate free movement of the feet while working and dancing. Children up to 3-4 years of age go naked. In some villages boys wear ‘*koupuni*’ - a small piece of cloth.

Koya women are fond of ornaments. Their common ornaments are bangles, armlets, bracelets, necklaces, rings, hairpin etc. These ornaments are usually made of silver, aluminium, brass and sometimes gold. ‘*Khadu*’ is an important ornament used by married women. Men of the tribe use dresses fitted with bison-horn in their marriages and festival dances.

The Koya women enjoy greater freedom. They believe in mutual respect. There is no dowry system in the Koya society. Rather the bridegroom has to pay bride price to the father of the bride. After marriage a Koya woman starts working in the field with her husband, collect *Mahua* flowers, *Kendu* leaf etc. So birth of a girl child is not a burden rather it is a blessing for a Koya family.

Each Koya village has two separate long halls at the end of the village. One is ‘Dhangada basa’ for boys and the other is ‘*Dhangadi*’ for girls. Grown up unmarried girls and boys of the village come to these houses, spend the evening there, know each other and engage in dance and music till late night. The boys and girls communicate their idea and feelings through romantic love songs. After song and dance the boys and girls sleep in their respective dormitories. These dormitories are the socio-cultural centres of the Koya society.

Dance, song and the music are the part of the koya’s aesthetic life. ‘*Dhemsas*’ dance is the popular dance of the koya tribe. The male members use the musical instruments like *dhola*, *tamaka*, *Dungdunga* and *mahuri*. Their dance, music and songs are highly influenced by the beautiful elements of nature like the sun, the moon, the sky, the rain and the trees, flowers, birds etc. Among the Koya everyone is a musician and poet. They exhibit pleasure and happiness by composing songs. These songs describe the history of goods, the process of creation, some epic stories, romances, humorous, acquisitions and anger. These songs are handed down from generation to generation with slight variation when considered necessary.

Like other tribes marriage within the clan is prohibited in Koya society. Monogamy is the rule, although in the exceptional cases polygamy is practiced. The different types of marriage of the Koya community are 1. *Maga Vibha* (arranged marriage) 2. *Udulia* (Love marriage), 3. *Jhika Vibha* (by capture) 4. *Paisamundi* (widow or divorced woman marriage). The *Udulia Vibha* is now common in Koya society. Bride price or ‘*Kanya Jhola*’ is a must for every type of marriage. It is given by the boy’s side consisting of wine, cow, pig, rice, some money etc.

A child irrespective of sex is always welcome to a *Koya* family. Both male and female child are economic assets to the family. During pregnancy a *Koya* woman has to observe many restrictions. She should not eat any sacrificial meat. She is not allowed to touch a corpse nor visit the burial ground. At the time of delivery, she is attended by an elderly and experienced woman. *Gurumai* the female priest is summoned to conduct rituals for smooth delivery. Usually the *Koya* name their children after 21 days in consultation with the disari.

The staple food of the *Koya* is rice and it is supplemented by millets, maize, pulses, seasonal fruits, roots and tubers. Non-vegetarian items like meat, chicken, fish, egg are also taken by them. Irrespective of sex and age they consume liquor. It is also offered to friends and relatives as a mark of social courtesy. *Mahuli, landa, handia, salap* etc. are their various kinds of liquor but *salap* is the most favourite drinks.

The *Koyas* observe a number of festivals. Most of their festivals are community oriented, these festivals are *Chaiti Parava, Push Parav, Magha Parav, Bali Yatra* etc. The *Chaiti Parava* is celebrated in the month of March-April. It is celebrated in three phases. Last phase is most important. It is community hunting (*Bento Shikar*). All the male members of the village have to go for hunting with their traditional weapons. The men can't return without a kill. The hunted animal is brought in procession with garlands on its neck. The flesh of the hunted animal is distributed equally among the villagers. The whole night is spent on dancing and singing accompanied by the drum and *dungdunga*.

The *Koyas* practice both cremation and burial to dispose of the corpse. On the tenth day *buda* ceremony (*dasaha*) takes place. "Menhir" or memorial pillar are constructed outside the

village in the name of the dead; somewhere a simple wooden pillar or tall flat stone is placed in upright position.

The *Koyas* have deep faith in gods and goddesses. They worship them for their wellbeing. The most important deities are *Nissani munda*, village deity; *Jhankara Devata*, the earth goddess; *Donga Devta*, the forest god; *Mahpuru*, the supreme god etc. They also pay much respect to *Duma Devta* the dead ancestors. They sacrifice hen, pigeon, pig to appease these gods and goddesses.

There are weekly markets located at convenient places in the *Koya* area. Both men and women from far off and nearby villages visit these market centres to sell whatever surplus agricultural and forest produce they have and buy whatever things they need in their day to day life. The things which the *Koyas* sell at the market mainly are chilli, brinjal, mahua, millet, horse gram, rice, tomato and tobacco leaves. All these things are sold by *Koya* women.

The life of *Koyas* is a systematic one. Because it is more devoted to agriculture than hunting. An agricultural calendar of the *Koyas* is prepared and shown in Appendix-I.

A careful study on the socio-cultural life of the *Koya* tribe shows that they lead a very simple and joyful life. Government has planned to make them educated, to expose them to the light of modernity and bring them to the mainstream of social life. Text books of their language have been prepared in Odia alphabets. Some of them are trying to carve out a separate identity of their own either in the political sphere or in government service. All the same they have not forgotten the captivating moments of *Dhamsa* dance, nor the time of shedding of *Mahua* flowers. They love their life with pleasant mode of beating sound of *Dung Dunga*.

Appendix-I

Koya Month	English Month	Activities
<i>Push</i>	January	Harvest of late paddy, maize and millets, collection of a kind of grass millets, collection of a kind of grass used for thatching.
<i>Magh</i>	February	Worship of <i>Bimdu Pandu</i> (Rain God)
<i>Phagun</i>	March	Collection of <i>Mahula</i> and <i>Kendu</i>
<i>Chait</i>	April	Collection of <i>Mahula</i> , <i>Kendu</i> , Observance of <i>Ikka Pand</i> (New <i>Mahula</i> eating ceremony).
<i>Semiti (Vaisak)</i>	May	Collection of <i>Mahula</i> and <i>Kendu</i> , Seasonal fruits (Mango, Jackfruit), observance of <i>Bijja Pandu</i>)
<i>Padman (Jyestha)</i>	June	Ploughing of field and sowing ceremony. Fencing of kitchen gardens, cleaning and burning of dangar land where seeds and <i>suan</i> are sown.
<i>Burdabata(Aasadha)</i>	July	Sowing of <i>Paddy</i> of rice fields and pulses.
<i>Mundkhol(Sravana)</i>	August	Collection of roots and tubers from jungle.
<i>Kani (Bhadrav)</i>	September	Observance of <i>Kurum Pandu</i> or the new <i>Suan</i> eating ceremony.

Dasra (Aswina) October Harvesting of early *Paddy* and new rice eating ceremony (*Nuakhia*)

Devali (Kartik) November Harvesting of early *Paddy* and observance of *Sikud Pandu* or new bean eating ceremony, watching wild animals and birds to same crops.

*Pand(Margasira)*December Storing of *Paddy*, harvesting of maize, *Suan*, pulses and oil seeds.

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