

CHAPTER II

THE KONDH TRIBE: THEIR CULTURE AND EDUCATION

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The state of Orissa has an area of 155.7 thousand square kms with a total population of 263 lakhs according to 1981 census . There are 62 tribes, constituting 22.43% of the total population of the state i.e. about 59 lakhs. More than one third of its area, nearly,59,963 square kms is covered with hills and dense forests where the aboriginals have taken shelter. The Kondhs constitute one of the major tribes of Orissa with a population of 9,89,342 according to 1981 census. Their literacy rate is 2.3% and they are famous in history for their Meriah (human) sacrifice.

According to Captain Macpherson (1846), the word Kondh means " mountaineer", derived from the Telugu word ko or ku, signifying a hill or mountain. These tribals still continue to call themselves as 'Kui people' and their hills as 'kui country'. The kondhs are a Dravidian tribe but no mythology or legend yet discovered, furnishes any clue to their origin or place of descent. They think that probably, their forefathers were driven from their settlement in the richer and fertile coastal plains of eastern India during the Aryan advance. However, they believe themselves to be in Orissa, from the beginning of human civilization.

At present the Kondhs are identified as Desia Kondhs, Dongria Kondhs and Kutia Kondhs. Desia Kondhs are found in and around Phulbani district, where as the Kutia

Kondhs are mostly seen in Baliguda subdivision of Phulbani district. Dongria Kondhs inhabit Koraput district of Orissa. The kondhs had never come under foreign domination of the Hindus, the British or the Muslims. The Kutia Kondhs who are the hillmen still retain their primitive tribal customs. Although they have acquired a tincture of Hinduism over the years, by staying in close proximity of the Hindus of the plains. The Kutia Kondhs are so called, because they used to break the skulls of animals when they killed them for food. The word Kutia means one who breaks or smashes.

General Features: The Kondhs have good physique. They are not much dark in complexion. Among them some fair skin persons are also noticed. The men are slim, active and of average height. The women, though short, are robust and sturdy. The Kondhs are very simple, frank, naive and credulous by nature. Their behaviour is pleasant and they are extremely hospitable. They are found to be very courageous before the fierce wild animals but extremely sober before an unarmed stranger (District Gazetteer, Phulbani, 1984).

The Kondhs speak kui. Kui belongs to the Dravidian group of languages and has considerable resemblance with Telugu, Kanarese and Tamil in grammar. Kui does not share any commonality with Oriya which is of Indo-Aryan origin and is spoken by the Oriyas, the neighbours of the Kondhs. Kui still remains a good example of a Dravidian language almost

unaffected by non-Dravidian elements. Nevertheless, several Oriya words are used in Kui language because of close interaction between the two settlements.

Earlier because of difficulties in communication and their habitation in inaccessible mountainous terrains, the Kondhs suffered from an unusual degree of isolation from the dwellers of the plains. At present, the Government of Orissa is taking a lot of interest to preserve and popularise the Kui language. In fact, the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT), Orissa, has succeeded in publishing books in Kui language using Oriya script, with the assumption that this would facilitate the comprehension of subject matter taught to Kondh children at the primary level of schooling.

The Kondhs live in houses made of wooden walls and split bamboos. The roof is thatched with forest grass and leaves of date palm. Their houses are generally neat and tidy and the women folk take pride in keeping them clean. Though clean, it lacks ventilation and often domestic animals, fowls etc. are all huddled together in two or three rooms.

The district headquarter of Phulbani and its subdivisions like Boudh, Phulbani, Balliguda are well connected with Cuttack, Bhubaneswar and Berhampur etc., the major towns of the state. But interior villages have few road links with the plains. Daily several buses both

Government and private owned, run to some of these small towns in the district.

Rice is the staple food of the Kondh people. A few people use wheat. Besides rice and wheat, people also take ragi, mandia, kandul, maize, mushrooms and various kinds of roots, tubers and green leaves and vegetables. Fish and meat are eaten when available. Every tribal household generally reserves mango stones, tamarind seeds and jackfruit seeds for eating in the off season. Very few Kondhs have metal dishes and use Siali leaf cups as utensils. Liquor is an important item for every social and religious function and social etiquette demands that guests and visitors are offered liquor.

The Kondh women wear sarees now and the men wear dhotis. Men living in town areas have started wearing shirts and trousers. Kondh women have intense love for ornaments. They wear gold and silver necklaces, ear rings, nose rings and hair ornaments. Coloured beads are highly prized in their society and are generally used in necklaces.

Social Life: Another section of the population known as the 'pans' the low Hindus, live at one end of most of the Kondh villages. They are notorious for their wiliness and are cunning enough to seize every opportunity to exploit the Kondhs to their advantage by playing upon their simplicity. Indeed they play a very significant role in the life and living of the Kondhs. They have adopted the beliefs of the

Kondhs and a majority of them can speak 'Kui', the language of the Kondhs. They do speak Oriya, when needed, for trade and other business transactions with the Oriyas. They act as the middlemen between the Kondhs and the Oriyas on tradings. They also act as the priest of the Kondhs. In the event of a death in a Kondh family, the 'pan' has to perform certain functions like the slaughter of the sacrificial animal which is a taboo for the Kondhs. Until sixties, they managed the whole commerce of the hills and till today, less visibly but more powerfully, they act as money lenders to the Kondhs.

Kondhs are of religious nature. Like other cultures, religion is the hard core of Kondh culture. The Kondh pantheon consists of innumerable malevolent and benevolent deities. They too offer prayers to their ancestors, for they believe that their ancestors along with the Gods, watch the behaviour of the living generations. They observe a number of ceremonies in order to please the Gods and ancestors by offering sacrifices. Of all Gods, the Goddess Earth, is considered as most important.

Kondhs have no caste system. They maintain a social distance by an observance called 'bisa'. This is strictly observable with regard to cooking, eating and marriage among Kondhs. In some villages, priests and shrine keepers keep themselves pure by maintaining a distance from the pans, the low caste Hindus and Gahi(sweepers) groups.

Patrilineal descent is the rule of all Kui people.

Cousin-marriage on either the maternal or paternal side is considered impossible. Girls are usually chosen for marriage from a different village. However, there is no territorial exogamy. Marriage is settled after the bride price is fixed. Generally it is paid in the shape of money, ornaments, buffaloes, cows, goats, utensils and other articles. The Kui folk do not look for a beautiful woman as a bride, they rather look for an industrious, hard working housewife. Nuclear type of family is found common among the Kondhs.

The tribe celebrates three principal festivals in a year namely, the semi jatra, the mohua jatra and the chawal dhua jatra which stand for eating the new crops of beans, roasted mahua preparations, and new rice respectively. These days the Kondhs observe several festivals of the Hindus. The notorious practice of human sacrifice, formerly in vogue among the Kondhs, is fully abandoned now, and substituted by buffalo sacrifice. Boal (1982) in her in-depth and extensive study on the Kondhs noted the condemnable incidences of human sacrifice. Human sacrifices were offered to the Earth-Goddess to propitiate her. It was believed by Kondhs that this would ensure good crops and keep the village free from diseases, accidents and untimely deaths. British officers made a sincere, committed and dedicated effort to put down the human sacrifices and finally succeeded in their mission. Another inhuman custom known as infanticide, which was born out of the socio-religious superstitions among Kondhs and

prevailed during the 19th century (Sahu, 1989), has also been given up now.

In the mid 50's the christian missionaries started assisting and influencing the Kondhs in various ways. The missionaries care for treating the diseased, their concern for humanity, helping attitudes towards the poor, destitutes and downtroddens and soft spokenness won the hearts of the tribals.

The pans were the first to get converted into christianity. Kondhs became christian at a later stage discarding their own religious practices. At present, there are several Kondh christians in Phulbani district. Churches are found in good number. Yet Kondhs do not show any change in their basic philosophy concerning the manipulation of mystical power and the importance of their collective identity as Kondhs.

Political Life: Besides the external form of administration, Kondhs practise their own traditional system. These administrative units are based on the concept of clan or gossi which are exogamous groups. The head of the gossi enjoys a place of dignity on every public or ritual occasion. There also exists another distinct organization in every village consisting of the Kondh headman, a priest and a local council made up of the head of each family in the village. At the local level, the council has retained its useful function over the years. It decides petty cases of

family or social conflicts and misunderstandings, encroachment problems and accusation of witchcraft. It too decided on accepting christianity in the late '50s and '60s. Women as well as men in Kondh society have the right to be present and voice opinions in the council, though the heads of households make the ultimate decision.

Economic Life: The most honourable occupation of the Kondhs is agriculture and Kondh families live by the sweat of their brow, raising whatever crop is possible on the hill slopes. They have a very strong attachment to their lands and hills. The Kondhs are famous for their turmeric harvest which they used to sell to the people of the plains. They also grow horsegram, hillgram, blackgram, ragi, redgram, jowar, sweet potato etc. In the space between the foot hills and the village, fruit bearing trees are planted like mango, jackfruit, papaya, mahua, tamarind etc.

Shifting cultivation or 'podu chas' is widely practised by the local tribal farmers. This is a wasteful method of cultivation which has caused acute soil erosion and depleted valuable forest wealth in the area, which also affects environmental conditions. The hill tribes are constantly persuaded to take up settled cultivation. But it is difficult to change this habit of the tribals, because of their deep rooted traditions.

The Kondhs earlier had a simple non-monetised system of economy. The barter system was the yard stick of their

economy. Though today, money economy is prevalent in the entire Kondh hills, still the exchange system works in internal transactions within the villages or/and between the villages. The poorest use the paltry cash they earn by way of wages to buy rice for everyday living. The Government has opened several cottage industries, training-cum-production centres in the Kondh hills. Kondhs are encouraged to make sleeping mats with reeds and sweeping brooms which are extremely appreciated and purchased by the people of the plains. They also make leaf plates and deep bowls with large siali leaves and supply them to dwellers of the plains. They collect leaves of teak trees and sell. These are used for cigarette manufacture.

Division of labour is based on sex among the Kondhs. Men and women do their work as prescribed by their sex. Jobs like ploughing the land, felling of heavy timber, hunting etc. are considered exclusively mens' work. Females look after household works, upbringing of children, levelling the paddy fields, sowing of seeds, reaping and harvesting etc.

Education: In the post-independence period special measures have been taken to wipe out illiteracy among the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes of Phulbani also, who were quite in dark and did not have access to modern education in past despite the efforts of the British Government.

Special schools such as, Sevashrams, Ashram schools,

Kanyashrams (for girls) and High schools have been established in these areas. Study materials like books, slates, pencils etc. and uniforms are supplied free of cost to school children. All the students belonging to the SCs and STs who are studying in residential sevashrams and ashram schools are provided with food, lodging, clothing and medical facilities free of cost. For education in other institutions, stipend and lump grants are given to these students. Primary schools have been opened in every village of the Kondh hills. Kondh parents are however, still sceptical about the value of education of children and illiteracy prevails on a large scale. Poor school conditions and absence of teachers in interior schools make the situation still worse.

The progress of primary education in the district over the years, showed that the district has made some progress in general and in tribal education. However, the progress is far from satisfactory. The following table gives a picture of the growth of primary schools and teachers in Phulbani district.

Table - 2.1

Growth of Primary Schools and Teachers in Phulbani District

Year	No. of schools	No. of teachers			No. of ST teachers	
		M	F	Total		
1978-79	1734	2912	257	3229	584	18.08%
1979-80	1764	3041	267	3308	584	17.65%
1980-81	1772	3139	282	3421	582	17.01%
1981-82	1777	3144	290	3434	573	16.68%
1982-83	1777	3144	290	3434	573	16.68%
1983-84	1777	3144	297	3441	587	17.05%

Table Contd.

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Year	No. of schools	No. of teachers			No. of ST teachers	
		M	F	Total		
1984-85	1777	3144	316	3460	587	16.96%
1985-86	1810	3144	398	3542	591	16.68%
1986-87	1890	3213	398	3611	672	18.60%
1987-88	1890	3417	407	3824	672	17.57%
1988-89	1890	2685	581	3266	672	20.57%

Source: Educational statistics in Orissa, Government of Orissa, 1989.

As seen from the data, over a period of 10 years, only 156 new primary schools have been opened in Phulbani district. Though there has been little change in the total numbers of teachers, the number of female teachers has increased considerably from 257 to 581. Indeed the strength of female teachers has doubled within a decade. Scheduled tribe teachers still have a poor representation. Their number is only 672 (20.57%) against 584 in 1978-79.

The percentage of enrolment of scheduled tribe students in primary schools in Phulbani district are presented in Table 2.2.

Table - 2.2

Growth of Enrolment of Scheduled Tribe Students at Primary Stage in Phulbani (Fig. in '000)

Year	General Boy	Girl	Total	Scheduled Tribe	Percentage to total enrolment
1978-79	49	27	76	33	43.42
1979-80	48	29	77	33	42.85
1980-81	49	30	79	38	48.10
1981-82	50	30	80	38	47.5
1982-83	51	30	81	38	46.90
1983-84	51	31	82	38	46.34
1984-85	52	31	83	40	48.19
1985-86	53	31	84	43	50.19
1986-87	52	32	84	43	51.19
1987-88	53	33	86	44	51.16
1989-89	57	39	96	44	45.83

Source: Educational Statistics in Orissa, Government of Orissa, 1989.

Over the years from 1978 to 1989, the enrolment number of scheduled tribe students had gone up from 33,000 to 44,000. In terms of percentage to the general enrolment it remained 45.83%. The decrease in number of enrolment in 1988-89 is striking and in fact the enrolment of scheduled tribe students has declined.

The Present Scene: The Kondhs no more depend on the pans, the middlemen for buying and selling of goods. They now go themselves to buy their household necessities and food stuffs. Banks have opened their branches in the area and there are several government schemes which allow Kondhs to avail various loans for agricultural and domestic purposes.

Electric supply has been provided to several villages, and government primary health centres look after the health of the Kondhs.

In a recent study on 'The Kondhs', Nayak, Boal and Soreng (1990) have reviewed the changing Kondh culture in Phulbani district with special reference of the developmental programmes, their successes and failures, and future course of action. Failures of most of the government schemes in the field of education, economy, health and nutrition are ascribed to faulty ways of formulation and implementation of the policies and programs. In fact, they have emphasized a thorough understanding of the Kondh culture, the people, their values and ecology before plunging into any intervention. High drop out rate, multitude of teacher problems, non-satisfactory functioning of the schools, engagement of children in domestic and field work, have been highlighted in dealing with the problems of education and wide spread illiteracy in the district.

To help the children learn numeracy and literacy, it has been proposed that the recruitment of local teachers be made. Such teachers with the knowledge of kui language can teach children in their mother tongue, which will facilitate students understanding of the subject matter in a much better way. Vocationalization of education has been recommended to give employment to students.

Existing Facilities for Tribal Education

The following facilities are available at present for the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes for the spread of Primary education among them.

1. SC/ST boys and girls of class I to V who stay in school hostels are given a stipend of Rs.90/ per month. All their expenses like food, clothing, medicines etc. are met from this amount. Text books are supplied to them free of cost by the Harijan and Tribal Welfare Department. The supply of other materials like paper, exercise books, pencils etc. is inadequate. They are also supplied one pair of school dress, kerosene, lantern, one silver glass, plate and mug to each boarder.
2. To encourage teachers' commitment to their profession, an annual award is given to the best Sevashram, one best Sevak in each Block is rewarded for best enrolment drive, checking drop-outs etc. The best Sevashram in the block gets an award of Rs.300/ and the best Sevak Rs. 500/.
3. In hostels only SC and ST students are admitted. Out of 40 seats, 35 seats are for STs and 5 for the SCs. In case, the required number of ST students are not available, the seats go to the SC students and the vice versa.
4. For the mid-day meal according to prescribed standard each child should be fed with 70 grams of wheat, 20

grams of dal and 10 grams of jaggery. A sum total of 100 grams of food materials is allocated to each child. This quantity is not always adhered to while preparing the meals. A substantial amount of pilferage by the staff is suspected. Irregular supply of the materials also disrupts the feeding programme at times. The quality of the food items provided is quite poor. For fuel, students usually collect the leaves, twigs and branches from the near-by bushes.

5. In Sevashram hostels, there is a cook to prepare food for the boarders and clean the utensils. Students serve their food on a rotation basis and clean their own plates. But in schools other than Sevashrams everything is done by students. The food is prepared and served and the utensils are cleaned by the students themselves.
6. There is no supply of play materials, story books, magazines, radio sets to enhance the awareness of the students.

Some field photographs on education and social life of the Kondhs are given in Appendix-3