

It is assumed that in societies based on patrilocality, patriarchy and patrilineal norms of social organisation, women tend to have a lower status. But surprisingly, in a society where the opposite systems, (matrilocality, matriarchy and matrilineality) are prevalent, women also do not enjoy a superior status to their male counterparts. They are undervalued, illtreated and even exploited by men, both in the household as well as in the community. In many tribal societies, irrespective of the rules of residence, authority and inheritance system, women are treated as equal with their male counterparts because of their greater social as well as economic importance within the household as well as in the community.

In Bonda society women are highly respected and valued. They are most often the final decision makers within the family, even though the community is neither matriarchal nor matrilineal. This is not only due to their greater participation in and contribution to daily economic activities but also related to a number of deeply rooted Bonda cultural practices and customs.



### The Bonda People

The Bonda highlanders comprise a population of only 5313 people as per the survey carried out by the Bonda Development Agency in 1996. They are confined to 32 villages located on the hilltops at heights of about 3000 to 4000 feet above sea level in the remote and steep hill ranges of the Eastern Ghats. These villages fall under the Khairput Block of Malkangiri District, covering an area of approximately 130 square kilometers. These villages are collectively known as Bonda Hills or *Bonda Ghati* in the regional dialect.

## A Reversal of Family Roles

### Societal Patterns of the Bonda Tribals of Orissa

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The people here claim to be the original inhabitants of the region and are very reluctant to mix with outsiders. They believe that the whole of human civilization has originated from them. Therefore, they do not appreciate people from outside their community intruding into the region, trespassing on their properties or interfering in their personal matters and often retaliate aggressively against those who do so.

The Bondas are described by those who have studied their society as 'aggressive and unyielding to authority'. Early British government reports speak of the Bondas as 'ex-criminals.' A recent report published by the government of Orissa states, "the Bondas use a variety of dreaded weapons. Amongst these weapons, mention may be made of the exceptional use of bow and arrow for which they are famous all over the world." Bonda men are said to spend most of their time on *sindibors*<sup>1</sup> after consuming *sago* palm juice in the mornings. During the busiest hours of a woman's day, the early morning, the men congregate there.

Some of the most striking features that characterise this community are:

- Stagnant or very slow population growth;
- Pre-agricultural level of technology combined with a very

- low level of literacy and awareness of the outside world;
- Abrupt manner of expression;
- Spirit of independence and sense of freedom;
- Frequent aggressive and violent homicidal propensities;
- Large consumption of *sago* palm juice and other country liquors and spirits;
- Unconventional costume of the women;
- Unhygienic and unhealthy living conditions; for example, baths are infrequent;
- High participation of women and girls in daily economic pursuits and low participation of males;
- Marrying of much younger boys to older girls;
- Dormitory life; and
- Willingness to eat carrion as well as items such as date palm grubs and even half eaten, stale animals left over by tigers and other predators.

### Rules of Residence

Marriage is an important economic and reciprocal tie. In Bonda society marriage does not take place primarily for satisfying the sexual urges of individual but rather for supporting each other economically in different ways at different stages of the life of the married couple. Patrilocality, patriarchy and patrilineality rules residence, authority and descent among the Bonda. Even though their society appears to be totally male-dominated, in practice women are more

<sup>1</sup> *Sindibor* is the village meeting pandal owned by a clan or village in Bonda territory. It has various ritual and religious functions.

powerful than their male counterparts in several vital facets of life, both at the familial as well as the community level. Some important characteristics and features of women's social lives have great socio-cultural, economic and religious significance and thus regulate Bonda society.



### **Bonda Women's Attire**

If a woman neglects to attire herself in the traditional manner Bondas believe that her family may suffer serious mishaps that may even sometimes lead to the death of family members and their hunting dogs and cattle. Traditionally, Bonda women shave their heads and are dressed in scanty attire. They only wear a bead necklace on the upper half of their body and a self woven rectangular piece of cloth called *Nodi* that measures less than one foot in breadth and two to three feet in length on the lower half of their body. They look semi nude as this piece of cloth hardly reaches their thighs. Bonda women are not semi-nude owing to their poor economic condition. Rather they dress this way because it is part of their tradition, their way of life.

They relate a legend to explain their attire: they have been required to use that attire because Sita cursed them and ordered them to dress in this manner for their discourtesy towards her. Hence, they cannot deviate from this attire.

Goddess Sita, while she accompanied Lord Ramachandra and Lakshman during their banishment for 14 years, is believed to have taken shelter in the Bonda country for a few days. One day, while she was bathing completely naked in a perennial stream at the bottom of Mudulipara Hill, a group of Bonda women, wearing leaf-clothes, happened to pass by. Seeing Sita naked they laughed at her. Sita felt insulted and cursed them always

to live nude and shaven headed that they might be a laughing stock. She decreed that any attempt by them to deviate from this attire would bring disaster to their family, crop failure, destruction of the village, loss of their animal herds, and death of family members, who would be eaten by predators. The Bonda women begged to be forgiven but the curse could not be taken back. Sita then relented slightly and tore off the border of her saree and gave it to the women, but the fragment was only long enough to partially conceal the lower part of their body. Since then Bonda women have been using such a short piece of cloth.

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Bonda women remain careful about their attire. They do not like to break the tradition. The Government of Orissa reports that over the years, except for a few girls, the women stick to their traditional clothes. Earlier, Elwin wrote that "there is an absolute taboo on a Bonda woman wearing any other kind of cloth round her waist, and those who have broken it—under the influence of a so called reform in the villages in the plains—are regarded as untouchables and classed with Doms." However, recently some younger women have started growing their hair longer and wearing sarees provided by the Bonda Development Agency. But whenever they face a crop failure or if family members fall ill, the older members blame these women and compel them to return to their traditional manner of dress. Moreover, no boy likes to

associate with or marry a girl who wears her hair longer or wears a saree, as the men believe that as a result of this deviation, trouble may befall them after marriage. Thus, the attempt of a few younger women to wear a saree has not become prevalent.

### **Economic Relationship**

A Bonda woman undertakes to support her husband during the first half of her life. In turn, her husband is supposed to provide food for her during her old age. Bonda marriage and family are based on this arrangement. As a result, a woman of about 25 generally marries a boy of about 10, usually maintaining an age gap of around 15 years. If a boy remains unmarried at the age of 13 to 14 years, he is considered too old for marriage. A woman acts as the guardian of her husband at the initial stage and takes responsibility for bringing him up on her own. No thought is given to sex during this period of their arrangement. She wakes up early in the morning, feeds her child-husband and enters deep into the forest in search of the next day's food, while her husband plays during the day. This arrangement continues until the husband becomes an adult. An adult husband takes responsibility of looking after his wife after he grows up.

The explanation for this unusual form of marriage, according to the people of Buda Kirsani of Badapada, is that such marriage practices began when the Bonda people came to inhabit dense forests and wanted young boys to be safe from predators and other wild animals. The Bondas evolved their system of marrying older women to younger boys to be helpful to each other during periods when they were vulnerable to the ravages of predators— in childhood for husbands and old age for the wives. Perhaps for this reason, both men and

women are very skilled in fighting off wild animals including tigers, bears and wild boars. They are also good hunters, even though the women do not take part in ritual hunting expeditions.

Bonda men are not trained from their childhood to earn their own livelihood. On the other hand, a girl is socialized under the keen guidance of her parents to earn daily food for herself as well as for her family. Adult women are well acquainted with hard labour. They take responsibility for feeding their child-husbands. Wives do almost everything to earn a livelihood for their child-husbands. They continue to work as long as they can. In no case do they suddenly decline to work after their child-husband becomes an adult. Adult-husbands normally go straight to their *sago* palm trees soon after they leave their beds early in the morning. They are addicted to its juice. Occasionally they undertake major economic activities like preparing paddy terraces for cultivation and cutting big trees from swidden patches during peak periods of the agriculture season. Other agricultural activities are normally carried out by their wives. Thus, lack of compulsion to work until adulthood, combined with easy availability of food and liquor, result in many Bonda men turning very sluggish.

The alcoholism of many Bonda men is traditionally attributed in legend to an irresponsible act of a mythological woman in the remote past, as well as to a miracle concerning a *Sago* Palm tree. The legend, kept alive by the oral tradition, goes that when the earth was empty, a boy and a girl came from heaven, and in course of time gave birth to twins beneath a *Sago* palm tree in the dense forest. During the woman's labour pain the man saw a deer and followed it to kill it. The deer drew the man a long way. But at last, the deer was killed and the

man ate its raw flesh since he was very hungry, having previously been attending to the woman during her labour. After delivery the woman felt very hungry and searched for the man. After some time, she found the man eating the deer's flesh. She ate so greedily that she died on the spot. At that point, the babies felt very thirsty and began to cry. The palm tree could not bear the distress. Its roots went deeper into the soil towards the sea to bring sweet juice and the tree poured down the juice into the mouth of the crying babies drop by drop. Day by day the babies grew up consuming the sweet juice of the palm tree. Whenever they felt thirsty or hungry, they looked to the same source of food until they could learn how to earn and prepare their own food. That is how the Bonda men are supposed to have gotten addicted to this juice, and whenever it is scarce or unavailable, they arrange to obtain other alcoholic beverages which they prepare out of various cereals, fruits, nuts and berries. Thus, they argue that had their mythical mother not left them in such a helpless situation under the *Sago* palm tree, and had they not been addicted to the sap of the palm tree, their personality and character would have been different. However, even now the Bonda consider *sago* palm juice as milk and feed it to their infants, mainly to their male babies. Most pregnant women consume it as a nutritious drink. A boy begins to taste the sweet flavour of palm wine while he is still at his mother's breast, and as he grows up, it is a proud moment when he is at last allowed to accompany his elders to the family palms where he is first sent up the tall tapering trunk to bring down the pot of sap. Often at funerals, the distraction of family feuds, the worries of an official visit, and during other troublesome periods, the *sago* palm serves as an effective anesthesia. As a result of this the Bonda become

addicted to it from their birth or even before, since the women consume it during pregnancy.

### Control of Male Offences

Bonda women understand some of the reasons why their men are aggressive and ill-tempered. Therefore, they are very alert and careful to try to control the anger of men during conflict situations and inter-village war. In their society, very often inter and intra-village conflicts occur. Whenever there is such a struggle, the males rush to fight with their enemies with all their dreaded weapons. The women immediately follow them with their axes to fight alongside them—but especially to try to save their husbands from being killed by the enemy. In such cases, there is a risk that they themselves might get wounded. In order to avoid this they have traditionally added a handful of bangles made of aluminum on either arm and a bunch of neck rings of the same materials. The bangles and the neck rings are believed to have magical, religious and economic significance. For example, they are reputed to aid in child bearing and obtaining a good husband. An important reason for wearing a large number of bangles and neck rings is their use as a protective shield. However, this practical usage is not witnessed so much these days and most Bondas now use them as decorative items. So far the bondas have remained an isolated small inbreeding community. It is to be seen whether women's position and status will improve or deteriorate and whether the power balance shift in favour of males once they are exposed to 'modern' education and the culture of other urban and rural communities. □

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