



6. History and Identity of the Bhuyans of Odisha: A Case Study of Mayurbhanj

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India is the abode of 705 number of tribal community in India.¹ After South Africa, India has the largest tribal population in the world. India represents more than 8.6 percent scheduled tribe of the total population. The prominent jungle tribes like the *Kols*, the *Bhills* and the *Santhals*, the *Sabaras*, the *Kharias*, the *Bathudis*, the *Bhuyans* and others were living in the country in the past. The tribes are considered as the original inhabitants of India who carry forward a legacy of rich and distinct cultural traits for centuries.²

The Bhuyans are one of the most prominent and ancient tribe of north Odisha. Their society is an exclusive society. The society witnessed a rich, colourful and fascinating cultural life from a remote past. They have observed their own birth and death rituals. They believe in their own traditional fairs and festivals and marriage system. The dowry system was not a curse in the society. They are the worshipper of nature and worship the natural elements like the animals, trees, stones and crops. The variety in race, language, habitat and economy is fully reflected in their culture. Most of our contemporary cultures owe their origin to tribal oriented customs and traditions.³ Thus the aim of the paper is to focus the history of the Bhuyan community in order to understand the matrix of recent societies.

The name of the community '*Bhuyan*' is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Bhumi' means land or earth, for which *Bhuyans* define themselves as son of the soil.⁴ The *Bhuyans* according to their own version of the studied villages depicts as owner of land, which is further explained that *Bhuyans* were landholders in the past. Pauri *Bhuyan* is defined as the *Bhuyans* belonging to hills and mountains. Paudi or Pauri is the goddess of the *Bhuyans*.⁵ She is worshipped by the *Bhuyans* since a remote past. The *Bhuyans* of Mayurbhanj have constructed a small temple at Bankati where there was a Garh of the *Bhuyan* chief.⁶ Pauri *Bhuyans* define themselves as people of high social status. As they say, their ancestors were strong and powerful people.

Bhuyan tribe is widespread and found in Odisha, Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal, Chhatishgarh, Madhyapradesh and Assam States.⁷ S.C. Roy classified the tribe into two sections, the Southern and the Northern. Orissa is the centre of the Southern section and Chotanagpur is the centre of the Northern sections.⁸

According to Dalton *Bhuyans* belong to the Southern are of Dravidian race.⁹ But S.C. Roy judged them from racial and cultural affinities and classified them under Mundari group. Starling, Russel, Hutton, have also classified them under the Mundari group.¹⁰

The original settlement of the *Bhuyans* is shrouded in obscurity. But the copy of an Odia manuscript of earlier reference has mentioned that the *Bhuyans* originally belonged to the town of Bhojakatak or Bhojpur in Western Bhopal.¹¹ During the reign of Ilutmish due to a conflict with the Muslims they left the place and entered in the Kolhan region. They settled there under a Khandayat Raja named Mandhata, sometime in the 13th century A.D. Since then they established control over the Kolhan.¹² It is difficult to ascertain the extent and area of the *Bhuyan* territory in the Kolhan. However, the country for the most part belonged to the *Bhuyan* sub proprietors. They were a privileged class holding the principal office of the state on a feudatory basis and were organized as a body of militia. The chiefs who held higher position in the *Bhuyan* administrative machinery had no right to exercise any authority till they had received the tilak or the token of investiture from their powerful *Bhuyan* vassals. It is very likely that the supreme overlord of the *Bhuyan* chiefs and sub proprietors was the Raja of Singhbhum. The Raja chiefly depends upon the military support of the *Bhuyans*.¹³

The *Bhuyans* are known to the History as an ancient tribal group living in north Odisha. They claimed that their culture is very old in comparison to other tribes and demands a special rank as that of the Savaras. We found the first reference to the *Bhuyan* in the Buddhist texts.

In the Buddhist work called "Majjima Nikaya" the *Bhuyan* tribe is mentioned as the Bhainyans or Bhayans or Ukkala Bassa.¹⁴ It is significant to note that the Ukkalas or the people of Utkala had been *Bhuyans* since the time of Goutam Buddha and were agricultural people. The *Bhuyans* believe that their first ancestor sprang miraculously out of the mother earth and hence the tribe is named *Bhuyan* or earth born and on the ridge of the hills and forests of north Odisha.¹⁵

According to 'Anguttara Nikaya' Tapasu and Bhallika who first heard the sermons from Buddha were two Bhuyan traders from Utkal.¹⁶ They met Buddha in the jungles of 'Uruvella' in their way while carrying the goods to 'Majhimadesha'. They gave honey and cake to Buddha who had not touched food for two months just after his enlightenment. Lord Buddha got satisfied and explained his doctrines to them. Tapasu and Bhallika are respected as the first Buddhists of the world. After that they worked hard to make Buddhism popular in Utkal and Kalinga.¹⁷ It is also stated in an Odia booklet in a poetic form that,

*Atita Utkale Bhanjabhumi Sthiti
Deichhi Sanketa Boudha Dharma Prati,
Banijya Udesyhe Sehi Janajati,
Rajagruha Mukhe Karuthile Gati.
To Kole Janami Tapasu Bhallika,
Bisware Banile Prathama Vikhyuka.¹⁸*

It means Bhanjabhumi which is a part of Utkala was famous as a center of Buddhism in the past. Tapasu and Bhallika the two merchant brothers of this community met Lord Buddha in their way to Rajagriha and became famous as the first disciples of Buddha.

According to H. H. Risley, "Some of the leading Bhuyan families have come to be the chiefs of the petty states of Orissa and have merged their identity in the claim to quasi-Rajput descent".¹⁹

Krushna Chandra Panigrahi, the prominent historian of Odisha expressed the views that the Bhaumakaras of the 6th and 7th century A.D. were a non-Aryan tribe who were the fore-runners of the Bhyans and still reside in the mountains and plains of Odisha.²⁰ The opinion expressed by Panigrahi was also supported by H. K. Mahatab in Odisha Itihas.

There is some reference about the *Bhyans* in the Madalapanji, the chronicles of the temple of Lord Jagannath at Puri. The Gajapati king Anangabhima Dev of the Ganga dynasty of Orissa defeated the *Bhyans* and got huge quantities of gold as booty. He considered it as a glorious work and declared, "Kingdom like this I conquered and defeated the *Bhyans* by sword, by the mercy of the lotus-feet, Lord Jagannath and the blessings of the Brahmins." Again he said "I conquered the '*Bhuyan Puranas*' by my hand and besides this the wealth brought to the royal treasury was 40 lakh marks of gold."²¹

It appears from this royal declaration of Ananga-bhima dev in Madalapanji that the *Bhuyans* were well known and established as a brave atavika tribe parallel to the kingdom of Orissa of the Ganga age. They had separate state of their own and were highly rich and prosperous. Hence they might have given huge quantities of gold to satisfy Anangabhim dev or he might have looted them and got the gold.²²

Bhuyans are the pioneers of rich Atavika kingdoms (forest kingdom) with their rich culture and civilization. Now if we mark them, we will see that they are living in the hilly and forest regions and they also collect their means of life from the forest. In the ancient times they had also a state and culture of their own like the Savaras. During the accession of Chandragupta Maurya in 322 B.C., Kalinga was very strong and its border was marked by the river Ganga in the north and Godavari in the south. The western hilly region of Kalinga was known and famous for the Atavika kingdom. Though Chandragupta Mayurya spared his kingdom in the north-western region from Hindukush to Mysore in the southern region he did not conquer Kalinga. His grandson Ashoka had conquered Kalinga but he did not dare to conquer the Atavika kingdom, which was situated in the western region of Kalinga.⁸⁰ Many warriors and politicians of the defeated Kalinga were taken shelter in the Atavika kingdom and probably they were organizing the people of that region against Magadhan Empire. Hence Ashoka's aim was to satisfy the people of that and for this purpose only he excavated one edict in Khapingal hills. In this edict he addressed them as Anta Avijita (undefeated border people). Kharavela was also referred to them in the Hatigumpha inscription as 'Aduddha pubba' (never Defeated).²³

Kalinga was famous as the dwelling place of the pulindas and Savaras from the age of Mahabharat. The *Bhuyan* tribe of Keonjhar district of Orissa state is a very ancient tribe and hence it is not impossible that they had a kingdom and civilization similar to that of the puliindas and Savaras. Many people from the forest dwelling tribes were promoted to Kshatriya caste of the Arya-Chaturvedna rites. But they were generally known as the 'Atavikas'.²⁴ It is appeared from this that they were gradually aryanised. It is known from the inscriptions written below the Nataraj status found from the Asanpat village of Keonjhar of King Satru Bhanja's time that the Naga Kings bearing the 'Bhanja' title were reigning in the Vindhyaavati Kingdom in third century A.D. and ruled over the modern Keonjhar, Mayurbhanja and Singhbhum districts together. The undefeated defense force of Kharavela was collected mainly from this region.²⁵

During the rule of imperial Guptas there were a lot of Atavika kingdoms or the tribal states in the south west of his empire. Various tribal communities living in the small valleys of the hills and forests had formed their own states and governed themselves in a democratic way. Samudra Gupta conquered some of the tribal kingdoms in the central province and annexed in his empire. Romila Thapper thinks that Samudra Gupta's conquest of the tribal republics wrecked their military power. Thus it was a victory of castes over the tribes.²⁶

As the descendants of a strong Atavikas tribe, the *Bhuyans* have retained their tradition till 19th century. At first Keonjhar and Mayurbhanja were ruled together under the Bhanja dynasty. The *Bhuyans* were very obedient to this dynasty. But it was inconvenient in the case of *Bhuyan* to go to the capital Mayurbhanj crossing the long dangerous hilly way through the dense forests to give taxes etc. Hence they kidnapped one royal child and made him the king of Keonjhar.²⁷

Bhuyans are not only the obedient subjects of the King, but they are active participants in the politics of Keonjhar. When the administration and royal accession became corrupted, they revolted against the king from time to time. During 1861-63, after the death of King Gangadhar Narayan Bhanjdeo, there was *Bhuyan* revolt in Keonjhar.²⁸ The Juangas of Keonjhar also cooperated with them. After the death of king Gangadhar, his widow queen who had no son and who was alive and two sons of kept-queen of kind Gadadhar were also alive. Dhanurjaya, who was one of those two sons of kept-queen, was made king by the Dewan of Keonjhar. But after some days, Jadunath Bhanja, the king of Mayurbhanj expressed that his grandson Brindavan was adopted by the late king Gadadhar before his death as his successor.²⁹

Though the commissioner of Cuttack did not conceive with Jadunath Bhanja, he sent his grandson Brindavan secretly to Keonjhar and the widow queen made him the king with the help of some chiefs of the State. But the commissioner recognized Dhanurjay as the king of Keonjhar. Dhanurjay was not accepted as the king of Keonjhar by the *Bhuyans* as he was the sons of kept queen of Gadadhar. Protesting on the issue of succession of Dhanurjay, the *Bhuyans* revolt became severe. Ratan Nayak and Nanda Nayak took the leadership of this revolt.³⁰ The *Bhuyans* imprisoned the king and murdered the Dewan of Keonjhar. They disarmed the British soldiers and looted Keonjhar town. After this, armed British police came from Singhbhum and through Dhekanal from Chotanagpur. They suppressed the *Bhuyan* revolution and the revolutionary *Bhuyan* and Juanga leaders were arrested and

also they surrendered in large numbers. Six leaders of the mutiny were hanged and hundreds of them were imprisoned. Being inexperienced in the British war skill, the *Bhuyans* were defeated. Thus, the royal successor was chosen with the help of British gun against the view of the common people.³¹

Later, the severity of *Bhuyan* mutiny under the leadership of *Bhuyan* Sardar Dharanidhar was described in the autobiography of Fakir Mohan. Whatever may be the root cause and the moral background of this mutiny, it indicates the unity of the *Bhuyan* tribe and their boldness in expressing their views, which is the age old and very natural characteristics of this tribal people. Dharanidhar had a dream of building a State for the *Bhuyans* and even now *Bhuyans* believe that Dharanidhar is still leaving secretly in disguise of a *Sanyasi* in the jungles and he will come out one day and give leadership to them.

The Hill or Pauri *Bhuyans* of Orissa are much primitive than the other groups living in the state. *Bhuyan*-Pirth is the original dwelling place of the *Bhuyans* is situated in the Keonjhar district of Orissa State.³² Of late; the growing population pressure compelled them to migrate to the neighbouring districts of Sundargarh, Mayurbhanj and Dhenkanal of Orissas. It was easier to enter in the hilly areas of Mayurbhanj as both were governed by a single King and a capital Khiching Kott. When the large state had been divided and river Baitarani became the boundary of both the states.

Again both the states had cordial relations in the past. So the *Bhuyans* migrated to Bhanjbum and settled in the hilly and forest areas. They are called Hill *Bhuyans* or Pauri *Bhuyans*.³³ The area of this section of the tribe is situated roughly between 21^o to 22^o North latitude and 85^o to 86^o longitude. This homeland of the Pauri *Bhuyans* is the watershed area of Baitarani, Brahmani, Budhabalanga, Khadkhai and Katra rivers.

The base of the *Bhuyans* in Mayurbhanj was the Uparbhag pragana which is situated in the extreme north of the state and covers a vast area. There was widespread discontent in 1866 in Bamanghati and Uparbhag. The Uparbhag pragana comprises 12 Pirs or group of villages and each Pir was headed by a Sardar or headman.³⁴ Most of the headmen were Dharias, the Santals and the *Bhuyans*. As the Uparbhag was dominated by the *Bhuyans* they were also the head of *Bhuyan* dominated villages. The people had claimed a sort of undefined and hereditary rights in the soil and had objected the entrance of non-tribals to this area.

In Uparbhag there were four out of 12 Pirs were in a state of great disorder and confusion. The entire non-tribal populations of these Pirs were driven out of their villages and their possessions carried off. They were so much terrified by the activists of the plunderers that even T. E. Ravenshaw found it difficult to persuade them to return to their villages.³⁵ The causes of disturbance were the oppression of the survey and settlement officers, Tax burden on the people, extortions of the Amalas, the scarcity of food. Another factor which accelerated the disturbance was the unbounded ambition of Bhagaban Das Dharua of Bamanghati. Madhava Das, the father of Bhagaban Das was the Sarbarakar of Bamanghati and Uparbhag Pragana. On the issues of misconduct, open resistance to Raja and embezzlement of revenue Madhava Das was removed from the post of Sarbarakar. As a descendent to his father it was great shock for Bhagaban Das. He successfully united the tribals of Uparbhaga and prepared to take revenge against the Raj and the Raja.

The Sardars of both the Pirs met at a conference at Bamanghati. They demanded for the reinstate the old Sardars and Zamindars of Bamanghati and Uparbhag.³⁶ During the whole period of plundering in Uparbhag, Bhagaban Das remained in Bamanghati taking part in the council and sharing the plundered portion, which he forwarded to his house at Bankati. By the order of Bhagaban his sons and servants took active part in plundering in Uparbhag. Kashi Sardar of Kusumbandh was conducting the investigation, prepared a report of the case and proceeded to the Raja at Baripada along with the prisoners.³⁷ Bhagaban rescued prisoners and forcibly took away all the papers related with the case. Kashi Sardar somehow managed to escape but his house at Kusumbandh and those of other non-tribals were plundered by a tribal mob of 500 led by two notorious dacoits Nuru and Deba. Most of the plunderers came from Bamanghati. Bhagaban's son Madan Das with a party of armed paikas participated in the plunders. The Raja stayed 13 or 14 days at Kusumbandh but could not able to tackle the situation.³⁸

T. E. Ravenshaw apprehended the ring leaders including Bhagaban Das, his sons and others. The culprits were severely punished. Then Krushna Chandra Bhanj the nephew of the king remained in charge of Uparbhag with full powers. The local head men and Zamindars were given power to fix up rent and to collect from the people. A police station at Bankati was established in the year 1882 primarily to act as a post of observation and to ensure peace and order in the Pargana by preventing

illegal assemblies likely to lead to the breach of peace. The police station at Bankati was the first of its kind in Mayurbhanj.³⁹

The episode of the Sardar Jagannath Bhuyan of Dandu in Sareikala gives some ideas of the Bhuyan tribes under the Raja of Sareikala, Abhiram Singh. Jagannath Bhuyan was a great devotee of Lord Shiva. Every Monday he comes to Simela near Bankati to worship Simileswar Mahadev riding his horse. He chanted the Mantra like Ravan of Ramayana age in worshipping Lord Shiva. He was blessed to be a great warrior and would die according to his will and only by his sword.⁴⁰ Then the Sardar became ambitious and declared Dandu fort as his capital. The fort was very strong and spacious under grounds to hide the weapons. He also declared himself as an independent ruler of his Zamindari area.

Abhiram Singh, the Raja of Sareikala attacked Dandu fort and defeated Jagannath Sardar. The Sardar was severely wounded in the battle and rolling on the ground. He was no more wanted to live in that condition. Lastly he called Chakradhar Singh, the commander in chief of the King. He said to the commander to bring the sword from his resting hall and to kill him because no any weapon enters in his body. Chakradhar then killed Jagannath Bhuyan and completely destroyed the fort. Presently the Dandu fort is remained in the name of Dandudungri.⁴¹

Along with other tribes the Bhuyans of Uparbhag were one of the most prominent tribal communities. In some Pirs of Uparbhag the Bhuyans were working as Zamindars and Pradhans or the head of the villages. Not only the *Bhuyans* of Uparbhag region, but also in many other villages of the district the *Bhuyans* were acting as Zamindars and Pradhans. Some of them were acting as local priest known as Dehuri, who worship their gods and goddess.⁴² The other communities living in the village obeyed and respect the authority of the *Bhuyans*. At that time the *Bhuyans* were the owner of the lands in most of the villages. The *Bhuyans* and the Bathudis were frequently coming to the Bhanja royal court as touchable community and also doing internal works. The other tribal communities had no right to enter into the palace. They were working as a labour outside the palace or in the royal park.⁴³

The Bhuyans had a Garh or fort at Bankati near present Bangiriposi in the district of Mayurbhanj. The fort was situated beside the scenic beauty of river Budhabalanga. A small hill was behind the Garh. At that time Bankati includes a vast area of the periphery hilly region. It was densely populated where all sections of tribes were living. The tribes of Bamanghati had close relations with the tribes of Uparbhag.

The worship of their presiding deity Paudi Devi is still continuing in that village.⁴⁴ Unfortunately the Garh has been destroyed and there are no any archaeological remains of the fort. The history of the Bankati Garh became a folk tale or the oral literature of the Bhuyan community in particular and the people of Mayurbhanj in general. The literary evidences say,

*Upara Bhagara Banakati Grama,
Bhuyan Janajati Basati Prathama.
Tathyabali Kahe Uparabhagara,
Sasanare thila Bhuyan Adhikara.*⁴⁵

It means the Bhuyans for the first time settled at Bankati village of Uparbhag region. They played active part in the administration of Uparbhag. In course of time the Bhuyans are divided into various groups and lost their unity. The Bhuyan Community of Odisha is divided into 16 Sections. Among them the Paudi Bhuyan who are represented as Des Bhuyans or Mal Bhuyans are most backward and they live a community life.

The different sections of the Bhuyans are as follows:-

1. Des Bhuyan or Mal Bhuyan represented mainly as Pauri Bhuyan.
2. Parja Bhuyan or Rautali Bhuyan.
3. Bathudi Bhuyan.
4. Santali Bhuyan.
5. Dandasena Bhuyan.
6. Rajkuli or Bar Bhuyan.
7. Saontia Bhuyan.
8. Khandait Bhuyan or Pawanbans Bhuyan.
9. Kathi or Katti Bhuyan
10. Naksiya Bhuyan.
11. Hake Bhuyan
12. Dake Bhuyan
13. Rikhiasan Bhuyan
14. Mehra-tari Bhuyan.
15. Mushhar Bhuyan.
16. Ghatwar Bhuyan.⁴⁶

Among these sections of Bhuyan tribe Pauri Bhuyans, Santal Bhuyans and Saunti Bhuyans speak their (Bhuyan) dialect as their mother-tongue. There are some legends about the origin of this names.⁴⁷

The Plain Bhuyans, Whose ancestors once formed the part of the militia of the state, were known as Paik (Soldier) Bhuyans or Khandait (Swordmen) Bhuyans or Khandait Paik Bhuyans. They go by such title as Naik, Ohdar, Pradhan, Ganzhu, Kotwar, Raut, Barik, Amat, etc. The Praja Bhuyans and in some places the Paik Bhuyans have sub-divisions amongst them known as Eksai-Gharia (100 family groups), Panchsai-gharia (500 hundred family groups), etc. The Rajkuli Bhuyans were reputed to have originated from the union of Bhuyans women with male members of the Raj families were employed as servants in the royal families and some other respected families.⁴⁸

Some of the Bhuyans called themselves “Pawan bans” or the children of the wind and in connection with Hanuman’s title of “Pawn-ka-put “or “the son of the Wind” and were held to be the veritable apes of the Ramayan who, under the leadership of Hanuman, the monkey-god helped the great Aryan hero Rama on his expedition to Lanka.⁴⁹ Again the tribal name “Rikhiasan Bhuyan” was claimed by the Bhuyans. They derived this name from the fact that their ancestors lived on roots and fruits of the jungle, like the ancient Hindu Munis and Rishies (holy sages). Some Bhuyans claimed that their original ancestors were actually the ancient Muns or Munis (Holy Hindu sages).⁵⁰ To quote Risley, "All Bhuyans affect great reverence for the memory of Rikhmun or Rikhiasan, whom they regard, some as a patron deity, others as a mythical ancestor, whose name distinguishes one of the divisions of the tribes. It seems probable that in earliest stage of belief Rikhmun was the bear-totem of a sept of the tribe, that later on he was transformed into an ancestral hero, and finally promoted to the rank of a tribal god."⁵¹ The Khandaits or Paiks were another sub-caste formed from those who became soldiers as a separate caste of fairly high rank. The Praja or subject people were the ordinary Bhuyans probably, living in the Hindu tracts. The Rautali Bhuyans were a territorial group, taking their name from a place called Raotat. Thus it was seen that the Bhuyans of Orissa were known by different names after their place of habitation, occupation and life style.⁵²

The *Bhuyans* of Mayurbhanj are divided into into 16 septs which are given below.

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|-------------|----------------|
| 1. Balmundi | 9. Kopita |
| 2. Banka | 10. Nagbansika |

- | | |
|------------|----------------------------|
| 3. Barangi | 11.Nagri |
| 4. Bardoi | 12. Narangi |
| 5. Beluard | 13. Natakeli |
| 6. Haldia | 14. Ranagi |
| 7. Kasial | 15. Saubjuku |
| 8. Kati | 16. Sanralh. ⁵³ |

During the last part of the Bhanja rule the *Bhuyans* lost their power and position with the advent of Bengali officials and the educated Zamindars, Pradhans and Record keepers from the coastal plains. The Bhanjas replaced the local Zamindars and appointed the educated gentlemen. The ruler had taken such bold steps due to the frequent tribal uprising in the state of Mayurbhanj.⁵⁴ Then the *Bhuyans* handed over their Zamindari to the educated baboos. They also compelled to surrender their huge properties on the issue of nonpayment of taxes for several years. Even the heavy tax burden compelled them to sale their paternal properties to the non tribals. Under these circumstances most of the *Bhuyans* became landless and they work as labour to maintain their family.⁵⁵

Presently a few of the *Bhuyans* are land holders but most of them are landless and economically not so sound. They are identified as one of the most backward tribes with respect to availing social upliftment and modern educational facilities in the state as well as in India. In the recent past massive developmental programmes have been launched by the popular government for the uplift of the weaker sections. Yet the *Bhuyans* are below poverty line till today. A special micro project for the *Bhuyans* in Mayurbhanj should be established to look after their all-round development which would be a great tribute for the community.

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52. R.V.Russell and R.B.Hiralal, *The tribes and castes of the central provinces of India*, vol.ii, London, 1916, pp.314-315.
53. Nilamani Senapati and Nabin Kumar Sahu, *op cit*, p.118.



54. The author met with Sri Ranjan Kumar Dash of village Uania, P.O. Nafri, Dist Mayurbhanj on 25-10-2019 and collected the datas.
55. The author met with Sri Abhay Prasad Naik of Bhugudakata, Baripada, Dist Mayurbhanj on 25-9-2019 and collected the datas.