

## Myths of the Chuktia Bhunjia Tribe of Western Odisha: An Anthropological Analysis

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**Abstract:** Myths are stories derived from cultural traditions or legends, which have a deep symbolic meaning and usually involve a lesson which will be helpful to the listener or reader. Myths typically hold particular formulas which storytellers use to explain a natural phenomenon give a moral lesson or tell about a legend. This formula allows storytellers to change details such as characters, or settings but maintain the rhythm and style of the story. The present study on the myths of Chuktia Bhunjia tribe focuses on documentation, interpretation and socio-religious significance of the myths in the Chuktia Bhunjia community. Looking at the changing scenario in the tribal areas due to acculturation and modernization, intangible cultural traditions are gradually vanishing. Information on myths were collected from aged sections (both male and female), priests and shamans. Data were collected through interview and observation methods. Interpretations of the myths collected from field reveals that myth affects socio-cultural and religious life of the tribe. The origin of myth of the tribe reveals that Bhunjia tribe has descended from Halba and Gond tribe. The strict taboos and prohibitions associated with Lalbangla (sacred kitchen) has direct link with Lord Rama, Sita and Laxman. Apart from that few characters of Mahabharat and deities of Hinduism in the myths indicate orientation of the tribe with Hinduism. The study basically highlights the reflection of material culture, knowledge on flora and fauna in the Chuktia Bhunjia myths.

**Keywords:** Myth, Diety, PVTG, Lalbangla

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## Introduction

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Myth has been an integral part of every human society and culture. The term “myth” is derived from the Greek word ‘mythos’ which has a range of meanings from

'saying', 'story' and 'fiction' (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/myth>). According to Percy S. Cohen (1969:337), myth may be characterized as "a narrative of events; the narrative has a sacred quality; the sacred communication is made in symbolic form; at least some of the events and objects which occur in the myth neither occur nor exist in the world other than that of myth itself and narrative refers in a dramatic form to origins or transformation". Anthropologists such as James Frazer, Franz Boas, Malinowski and Levi Strauss have done significant researches on myths of different tribal communities and presented varied approaches and theories to interpret and understand the myths and mythology. According to Levi-Strauss (1955:430) "myth always refers to events alleged to have taken place in time: before the world was created or during its first phases. Specific pattern described gives myths an operative value which is everlasting. It explains the present and past as well as the future". Theories of myth may be categorized into seven main types; "Theory which treats myth as form of explanation and in particular, a form which occurs at a certain stage in the development of human society and culture; theory which treats myth as form of symbolic statement which has the function, not explanation, but of expression as an end in itself and which reflects a particular type of thought, the mythopoeic; theory which treats it as an expression of the unconscious; that which accounts for it in terms of its function in creating and maintaining social solidarity, cohesion etc.; theory which stresses its function in legitimizing social institutions and social practices; theory which treats it as a form of symbolic statement about social structure, possibly linked ritual and lastly the structuralist theory" (Cohen, 1969:338). Malinowski said that "myth and social reality are functionally interrelated" (James Weiner, 2002:583).

In most of the cases myths are transmitted from one generation to other orally. Over the period of time through the process of transmission, it loses the original narration, but meaning remain same in the society. The existence and continuity of myths in any society depend on the teller and through each audience which hears and actively engages them. There are also local variations of the myths or legend and within that individual variations are also observed. For example, two individuals of the same tribe may use different "words and gestures" for the same story (Brown, 1922:186). Mythological figures are considered as "personified abstractions, divinized heroes or decayed gods" (Levi-Strauss, 1955:428). In every tribal community, certain individuals are considered to be the authorities of myths, story or legend. Among the Andamanese, "the individuals known as 'oko-jumu' in the North Andaman and 'oko-paiad' in the South are believed to have special knowledge to spirits and as to the magical efficacy of remedies for sickness and authorities on the legendary lore

of the Andaman” (Brown,1922:186). Herskovits systematized the folklore studies in anthropology and advocated five premises that take place “in the myths and folktales of all the societies” which are “catastrophe, slaying of monsters, incest, sibling rivalry and castration” (Herskovits, 1955). Anthropological Survey of India (1954), and ‘Man in India’ (1921), an Indian anthropological journal initiated the systematic research on the tribal cultures where the documentation of folklores, legends, and other literature became important components (Sengupta, 1986). Interest in the research on “folklore” progressed after the foundation of journal ‘Indian Antiquary’ (1872) in Bombay and editor in chief was James Burgess. In this journal special emphasis was given to the study and publication of “myths, folktales, folksongs and popular traditions” (Vidyarthi & Rai, 1976). Verrier Elwin’s significant works on folklore with reference to Orissa deserves special mention. He spent years among the tribals and brought out a monumental volume entitled ‘Tribal Myths of Orissa’ (1954). Looking at the changing scenario in the tribal society and culture due to acculturation and modernization, intangible cultural traditions are rapidly vanishing. Narrations by grandparents to grand children on different myths, legends and stories have reduced significantly in the present context. Immediate documentation is required before they die out with the death of older generations who are the store house of the intangible cultural tradition.

### **Area of Study and Methods Used**

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The study is conducted among the Chuktia Bhunjia tribe of Sunabeda village, which is located in the Komna Block of Nuapara district. The present study on the myths of Chuktia Bhunjia is a qualitative study. This paper is a part of the ethnographic research on the tribe. Primary information was collected by application of different anthropological techniques. Interview and observation methods were adopted. The key informants of the study were aged sections (both male and female), priest and shaman who were identified at the beginning of the study. They were interviewed and systematically myths were recorded. Data on myths were cross checked by listening to the same myth from different individuals of the same community. Observation method was used to understand the significance of the myths in different socio-religious rituals and ceremonies.

### **Objectives**

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The present study tries to:

- Discuss on the different myths of the Chuktia Bhunjia tribe

- Focuses on documentation and interpretation of myths.
- Highlights the socio-religious significance of the myths in the Chuktia Bhunjia community.

### **Chuktia Bhunjia: A Brief Outline**

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Chuktia Bhunjia is one of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) of Odisha mainly concentrated in Sunabeda plateau of Nuapada district. There are two sections of Bhunjia tribe; Chuktia Bhunjia and Chinda Bhunjia. They belong to Proto-Australoid racial group and they speak a mixed dialect Baiga and Chhatisgardi. The dialect they speak belongs to Dravidian group. The Chuktia Bhunjias are divided into two exogamous moieties; Netam (a group of consanguineal relatives) and Markom (a group of affinal relatives). The term “Bhunjia’ means ‘growing out of land’(N. Patnaik, et al, 1984:1). Earlier, the Chuktia Bhunias were shifting cultivators, but at present they are settled cultivators. For the overall development of Chuktia Bhunjia, during 8th Five Year Plan under Micro-Project Chuktia Bhunjia Development Agency was established in Komna Block of Nuapada district in the year 1994-96. Under the Micro-Project, 14 Chuktia Bhunjia villages in 2 Grampanchayats have been covered. As per the 2007 survey, the total population of Chuktia Bhunjia population in Sunabeda micro-project area was 2269 (Male 1124 and Female 1145) with the Sex ratio of 1018 females per 1000 males.

### **Origin Myth of the Chuktia Bhunjias**

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Bhunjias are divided into two main sections i.e. Chinda Bhunjia and Chuktia Bhunjia. The Chuktia 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. Below is mentioned a few popular versions of myths of the Chuktia Bhunjia tribe.

#### **Myth-1**

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Once while fishing in the Pairi River, Bhatra Gond named Bachar cast a net and a stone was brought out. After throwing the stone back into the river, he cast the net again. Surprisingly, second and third time also that stone was caught in the

fishing net. He put the stone on the bank of the river and returned to his home. He had a dream in the night reflecting that the stone was 'Bura Deo' the great God of the Gonds. Bachar said, "If the dream is true, tomorrow I would cast the net again and a deer should be in the net for an indication". Bachar went to river with his net and found a body of deer in the net. The Gond was requested by the stone to worship him as "Bura Deo" which was refused by Bachar Gond and agreed to arrange a substitute worshipper. Bura Deo agreed with a condition; that is the substitute has to marry the daughter of Bachar. The Gond stated searching an individual and in the Lafandi village found a Halba whose name was Konda who was a cripple, deaf and dumb, blind and a leper. Konda was brought by Bachar near the stone and surprisingly all the problems were cured immediately. Looking at this miraculous incident, Konda consented to worship Bura Deo. After that as per the condition he married to the daughter of Gond and they were blessed with a son whose name was Chuktia Bhunjia who is considered to be the ancestor of Chuktia Bhnjia tribe (Russel R.V. & Hiralal, 1916; Sabar, 2014:100). This myth indicates that Chuktia Bhunjia descended from Gond and Halba tribe. Russel and Hiralal in their book "The Tribes and Caste of Central Provinces" stated that the "Bhunjias have originated from the union between the Gonds and the Halvas" (N. Patnaik & et al, 1984:1). Though it is difficult to prove scientifically, but there are certain similarities observed with respect to economic life, social organization, material culture and religious life with Gond tribe. The river mentioned in the myth 'Pairi' is tributary of Mahanadi River.

## Myth-2

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The Chuktia Bhunjia community believes that the tribe started with the blessing of Goddess Sunadei and there is a story behind it that how the Bhunjia people came into existence. Dhamdagarh is a village, where seven 'Gond brothers' were living. An old man named 'Bargey' or in their local term he was known as 'Bargey Budha' was living in Sunabeda of Nuapada district. 'Bargey Budha' was a religious person and he used to worship the Goddess Sunadei. In the name of family, the old man had seven unmarried daughters and he had no other family members. As he was a great devotee of the Goddess Sunadei, the Goddess always helps and protects him from various problems. To help the old man, Goddess Sunadei decided to conduct the marriage of his seven daughters and she converted herself into a sambar (a type of deer) and went to Dhamdagarh where the seven Gond brothers were living.

The Goddess in the form of wolf went to their garden and destroyed their farm and crops every night. The seven brothers tried hard to catch the deer but they did not succeed. At last they decided that they will wait for the deer to come into the garden and after that they would kill the deer. When the deer entered the garden, they run behind the animal to kill and they finally succeed in their plan and killed the deer with an arrow. And while they were running they reached to Sunabeda where the old man was living. The seven Gond brothers cut the wolf and clean it. They divided the flesh of the wolf into seven portions but by the grace of the Goddess the share automatically gets divided into nine equal portions. The bothers thought that there may be someone else in this place and that's why it is divided into nine portions. So, they asked "Is there anyone?" and a boy came to that place. After that they asked the old man Bargey Budha to come and join them. The old man invited the seven brothers to his house for taking the utensils to cook the flesh of the deer. Two brothers went to his house and they saw the seven unmarried daughters of Bargey Budha. The two brothers discussed the matter with their rest five brothers and finally they all agreed to the matter and married the seven daughters of Bargey Budha. On the next day, when they were returning to Dhamdagarh, Goddess Sunadei entered into the youngest brother's body and narrates the whole story that she came in the form of deer and brought them to Sunabeda to marry the seven daughters of the old man (Bargey Budha). And finally the seven Gond brothers married the seven daughters of the old man in a chronological order. People believed that, after the seven Gond brother's marriage with the seven daughters of Bargey budha the Bhunjia community started.

There is another similar myth which has been collected from secondary source. The narration of the myth is slightly different from the above mentioned one. But content and meaning of the myth are same which indicates the origin of Chuktia Bhunjia from the union with the Gonds. This myth goes as- "There lived a Mathier or worshipper of Goddess 'Mata' in Sonabera area. A group of seven brothers of Gond community came from the west in search of wild games and shot a Sambar by means of bow and arrow. The Sambar run away for life and fell dead at the outskirt of Sonabera village. The brothers followed and found the Sambar dead. They divided the hunt into seven shares. Bur surprisingly they found that seven shares became nine. They thought that there might be someone nearby and called for him. The Mathier came out and took the ninth share. Thereafter, the brothers shouted for the unknown inhabitant to take the last share. Lastly a Gond came from the Gatibera village and received the last share. Since he came last, he was called Patdharu. After the shares were distributed, the

brothers found out seven girls in the house of the Mathier who was their father. The brothers expressed their desire to the Mathier to marry his daughters. The Mathier gave his consent under certain terms and conditions that they identify themselves henceforward as Bhunjias, and not as Gonds and live in the place where the Mathier lived. The Gond brothers agreed to follow the terms and conditions and became the Markam, the Bandhu Barag, which can have affinal relationship with the Netam group of Bhunjias to which the Mathier belonged” (N. Patnaik & et al, 1984: 2).

### Myth-3

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The aged population of the Chuktia Bhunjia tribe mentioned that there is a myth which is also related to their identity and significance of the “Lalbangla” (sacred kitchen). Lalbangla is considered as the most sacred kitchen of every Chuktia Bhujia household. The story related to lalbangla is narrated as below:

*“Once upon a time nine brothers accompanied by a dog went to the forest for collection of wood, fruits, leaf and meat. There they met a family (a husband and wife along with their small child) who stay in a hut in the forest. The family members and the nine brothers became very close and eventually the brothers started staying there along with the family. One day both husband and wife went to collect some wood and fruits from the forest after giving all the responsibility of their child to those nine brothers. In the meantime their hungry dog killed the baby. All nine brothers got scared with the unforeseen incident and they got scared about the consequences. They thought what will happen if the parents will get to know about their deceased child. The brothers apprehended that the parents will certainly kill all of them. Then all the nine brothers were thinking about the way to get rid of the problem and they started to run away in different directions. After returning home the parents of the deceased child assumed the entire incident and they became very sad as well as angry. With a heavy heart out of anger they headed to kill all the nine brothers. At that moment one brother was hiding in the stomach of a cow and rest of the brothers were hiding in the cave of a mountain. Then parents of the child reached near the cave and they think all nine brothers are hiding in the mountain hole and they lit the fire near the hole. Then the parents waited there for some more time with the thought that even if the nine brothers come alive from the hole then certainly they will be killed by them. But no one returned alive and the parent of the child went back to their home. Unfortunately all the brothers died in fire, somehow one escaped from the fire. However, half of his body was burnt in fire and gradually he got named as Darpoda Bhunjia. The local term Bhunjia means “to fry with fire”. As one brother escaped from the fire and half of his body was burnt he became known as Poda Bhunjia (half burnt).*

As per the versions of Chuktia Bhunjia people, it is believed that all the above incidents took place in Satya Yuga when Lord Ram, Sita and Laxman went for banbas (exile in the forest) to the forest of Chitrakoot. In the meantime the Poda Bhunjia became well and he reached to Chitrakoot. There he met a girl named Herokanya and her mother who was named as Surekha. The Poda Bhunjia married Herokanya and started living there with his family. During Satya Yuga Lord Sri Ramachandra met with Poda Bhunjia at Chitrakoot and they became very close to each other. One day Lord Shri Ram asked Poda Bhunjia about their food pattern and came to know about various edible tubers and roots collected from the forest. Lord Ramachandra had less idea regarding edible roots and fruits in the forest. Shri Ram felt very happy with the elaboration of Poda Bhunjia and he became impressed with his knowledge. Based on that he cited Bhunjia as right side of his right leg (bhujni god), so after that the term Bhunjia became wide spread. To get cited as the right side of lord Ramachandra, the Bhunjias felt proud and identify themselves proudly as Bhunjia. When Ravan abducted Devi Sita, Ramachandra went in search of her and at that time he handed over the hut to the Bhunjias and asked them to take care of it. Afterwards no outsider was allowed to enter the hut and gradually the hut became popular as Lalbangla. The entry prohibition system to their kitchen prevails till date as it is considered to be the most sacred place for the Bhunjias. As per the instruction from the Lord Sri Rama no outsider enters to the lalbangla. The Bhunjias follow it very strictly in their daily life and still wait for the arrival of Shri Ram to their hut.

#### **Myth-4**

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In Bhunjia community, they have another popular myth which is related to natural calamities and how human being struggled and survived the human life. After that calamity it portrays the survival of the human being and the continuity of present life. The myth says as-

“Once upon a time aged couple were staying in the forest and they had two children, one boy and one girl. They were living a peaceful happy life and were surviving by collecting forest products. The father goes to forest for livelihood while the mother takes care of the children and used to fetch water from the nearby river. And it became the daily routine of their life. One day the mother of the children went to the river to fetch water, and she heard the voice of one frog, one kutura and one fish were dancing and talking among themselves inside the river. They sang the song in local dialect as-



*“Chengti mengti tanatani  
Aij ghudu ghudu kaelke pani”*

It means that they were talking about the upcoming future and how the world will end and how the human life will struggle to survive. The whole earth will be covered with water and the very existence of human will be finished. They were saying that after hundred Fridays and next Tuesday or Wednesday the earth will be flooded with water. So within that time only the clever person(s) will cover the distance of 12 mountains to reach the big kadamb tree and will make a boat out of that kadamb tree. And one hunter (i.e. the old man) will kill the kutura and that will be eaten by the hunter that night. After that heavy rainfall will be started. At that time only two persons can be stayed in that boat. When the lady heard the conversation, she informed the same to her husband after reaching home. Next day both the husband and the wife went there and heard the same thing. Then they became worried for their children’s future and went to search the kadamb tree to make a boat. It was meant to make that boat like a room where all necessary things can be taken safely”.

As per the future predictions of frog and fish, everything happened like that only and finally the old man hunts the kutura and cooked at night. Then heavy rain started and both the old man and his wife arranged the boat with all necessary things like food and wood. The earth got flooded with water, they pushed their children into that boat and they themselves got drowned in flood water. Then the boat was floated in water and both the children stayed in the same boat. They prepared their food in that boat and stayed there. When they reached at the age of 12 to 14 years, they got attracted towards each other. It is believed that the entire human life started after that incident. When earth was flooded with water then all Gods and Goddesses had a meeting at heaven and they decided to send a crow (Kua) to earth to check about the survival of human life. The crow came down to earth and found a wood which was a part of that boat and then it sat on the boat. Then the girl saw that the crow was sitting in their boat, she thought it might be hungry and she gave some rice to that crow. Then the crow took some rice in its mouth and returned to heaven and showed the rice to Gods and Goddesses in heaven. The existence of human life in earth was proved from that incident. Then all the Gods and Goddesses called the King Nala, Garuda, and Bhima. They requested the King Nala for making land and then they call Garuda to rescue the boat where human life was surviving. After that they called Bhima Devata to cultivate the land. Lord Shiva and Parbati made plough for Bhima to cultivate the land.

There were 12 types of cultivated land created by Bhima which were called Gada. Those places were considered as villages by now, which are following as follows:

1. Sunabeda
2. Chankurbeda
3. Mangurbeda
4. Kodobeda
5. Kedbeda
6. Ghusurabeda
7. Sarasbeda
8. Gatibeda
9. Patabeda
10. Junabeda
11. Thalipani
12. Nangarsingbeda

These are the major places which were cultivated by Bhima. When the crop gets ready for cutting then he collects all the crops and deposits all in a particular place which is called as “Khala”. Now all places have taken a shape of mountains which are designated as follows:

1. Raj dangar- where he used to store all the rice
2. Bijadangar- where he used to store straw
3. Katha dangar- where he used to store measuring tools
4. Bhutidangar- where Bhima’s mother used to store rice
5. Chaaradangar- where he used to store husk
6. Supadangar- where he used to store Sup (refining tool)

Once Bhima was ploughing in Sunabeda and the iron of the plough touched to a stone which was said to be the Linga of Maa Sunadei. This place exists there now and also people used to worship there. When Bhima completed cultivation and harvested all the crops, then Lord Brahma and Bishnu asked about the total crop gain of that year. Bhima said them that the total crop would last only for two and a half days of maintenance of all the creatures of the world. Also Bhima informed about the insufficiency of crops for maintaining the world and wanted to burn it. Then Bhima became angry and burnt all the cultivated crops and slept in that place, which is called as Ringjhala. Due to that smell of fire and gas all Gods and Goddesses could not stay in heaven. So they all requested Bhima to clear the place with water. Again

Bhima took his pot made up of dried bottle gourd shells (Lau tumba) for collecting water to put up the fire. He took water from different places like Khandardhansa, Baniadhansa, and was able to stop the spread of fire. As a result, the colour of the rice got changed due to fire. After that incident all types of rice was collected and offered to Devi Sunadei in the festival named Bihan Chhina Jatra.

### Concluding Remarks

The myths of Chuktia Bhunjia tribe indicate that myth affects different dimensions of life styles of the tribe. Origin myth of the tribe revealed that Bhunjia tribe has descended from Halba and Gond tribe. The Chuktia Bhunjia myth also connects with the great epic Ramayan. The strict taboos and prohibitions associated with Lalbangla (sacred kitchen) has direct link with Lord Rama, Sita and Laxman. As per the myth, Lalbangla is the hut of the Lord Rama while he was in Banabasa (exile in the forest) along with Sita and Laxman at Chitrakoot. The community is still waiting Lord Rama to return to his hut which has been taken care of by the Bhunjia tribe. Probably that is the reason why the Lal Bangla is located separately from the main house. When any outsider touches the kitchen house, they immediately burn it down and construct the new one. The strictness associated with Lalbangla can be observed even today. So they are maintaining absolute purity of the Lalbangla because they believe that it is the hut of Lord Rama and Sita. This shows the Bhunjia basic personality of honesty and integrity.

The Bhunjia myth also narrates the connection with the epic Mahabharat. Few important characters of Mahabharat are described in the myth which is Bhima, king Nala and Garuda. Agricultural activities by Bhima in different geographical area led to later on nomenclature of villages which are found to exist in the Sunabeda plateau. Another important finding of the study is the evolution of Goddess Sunadei. As mentioned earlier, during Bihan Chhina Jatra, all types of rice after first harvest are offered to goddess Sunadei. In the myth also, role of Hindu gods and goddesses has been reflected. This indicates the orientation of Bhunjia tribe more towards the Hinduism. This might be one of the factors as a result of which Bhunjias have not accepted Christianity. Looking at the religious changes in Western Odisha among the tribal communities, many of them have adopted Christianity. But during our fieldwork, we did not come across any such changes to Christianity. Among the Bhunjia myths, certain material cultures have been mentioned which have vanished from the society. For example, appropriate wood for preparation of boat is 'Kadamba' (*Neolamarckia cadamba*) tree and use of bottle gourd (Lau Tumba) for

collecting water. Myths of Bhunjia tribe are not only having religious or symbolic meanings, but also discuss geography, flora and fauna as well. Myth also indicates the observation of animal behaviours to forecast or predict future events by the community. Myths also control the behaviour of the individual in the society. As we know that the myths are orally transmitted from one generation to other. Since the community does not have documented these oral traditions, these are gradually dying out with the death of individuals. Critical analysis of myths can unravel important hidden facts about the community in particular, but also certain indigenous knowledge in general.

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