MYTHS AND ORNAMENTATION OF BONDA WOMEN: A CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

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ABSTRACT: The Bondos / Bondas are habituated to live in the forest at a high attitude of 3,000 feet. In Khairput block of Malkangiri district, they concentrated in the north-west of Machakund River in the Malkangiri district. The Bondo / Bonda women are known for wearing the multiple colors of beads from neck to naval to cover their semi-naked body. The mini skirt (rinda or nadi) is home-woven to proclaim the elf identity. Their attire is symbol of sacrifice and continuity to shield their cultural identity. They are the torch bearers of their community and continuing the rich traditions. The characteristic of semi –nakedness is nothing but genesis of their existence and social status too. In this scenario an ethnographic study was conducted on their ornamentation with special emphasis on beads. The present paper speaks about various myths regarding their semi-nakedness and pattern of ornamentation. During the study different age groups of women were considered in 12 villages to understand the usage of ornaments, number of color bead chains they wear and the reasons behind.

KEY WORDS: Remo / Ringa / Myths/Ornamentation

INTRODUCTION

Odisha is the south eastern state of India which occupies a unique position in the ethnographic map of India and land for having 62 tribal communities divided into two groups that is Proto-Australoid and the Proto-Dravidian (Anadi Sahu 1999). Though they are found throughout the State, more than half of their total strength is found in the districts of Koraput, Rayagada, Naurangpur, Kalahandi, Nauapara, Kandhanal, Baudh, Keonjhar, Sundargarh, Mayurbhanj and Malkangiri. As per the 2011 census, their population is 95,90,756 which accounts of 22.85 % of the total population in the state and 9.17% in the country. It is recorded that in every five persons, one is scheduled tribe in the state. All the 30 districts are having the tribal population and among these, Malkangiri district has its own importance for having number of primitive tribes such

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as Paraja, Dharua / Durua, Matia, Bhumia, Bondo, Kandh, Gadaba, Halwa and Didayee. In terms of tribal population Mayurbhanj district has the largest population followed by Sundargarh and Keonjhar districts. Numerically the Odisha state has the largest number of scheduled tribe population and only next to Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra.

Each tribe living in the state has its own unique religious beliefs and customs dress codes, languages, social systems, and cultural practices which either acquired or inherited through cross cultures. The amazing conglomeration of traditions and indigenous practices made them exceptional comparatively to the rest of the tribes in the country. At present these distinctive community groups are in the mode of changing due to interaction with non-tribal communities and their migration to urban centers in search of education and livelihood.

Review of Literature:

E. Thurston (1909) Verrier Elwin (1950) introduce them as, they belong to the Asiatic race and speak the Austro-Asiatic language which belongs to Mundari\(^2\) group. The geographic region which they live known as Bonda Hills. The Bondas are categorized into three groups on the basis of their place of living. The Upper Bondas or Bara Jangar group who lives on the slopes of the hill, the Lower Bondos lives in the foot hills, and the last group Gadaba-Bondos live along with Gadabas in the same altitude with the upper Bondos. An account on Bonda women given by Prathiba Ray (1997) that the role and status of women in Bonda society, and their independent role and economic control, political and religious rights. She also states that the women are expert weavers, involved in the development of their society in terms of producing more children for more paddy. And suggests further that, the Bonda women need to be educated for development process. Biyotkesh Tripathy (2005) defines that characteristically the people have rude and ruthless manner of expression, they like to have sense of independence and freedom. Their excessive drinking of palm wine often leads to criminal propensity. A.B. Oota and S.C. Mohanty (2007) have documented the cultural life of Bonda community and mentioned some that they have striking features of spirit of independence and sense of freedom, rude and ruthless manner of expression. Rekha Das and Padmalaya Mahapatra (2017) had given their analytical perspective on tribal women of Odisha with special reference to Bonda women. Banith Behra (2018) has given special emphasis on the ethnic wear Ringa, and myth behind this garment.

METHODOLOGY

Out of 35 Bonda villages, 12 villages have been visited from the Mudilipada and Andhrarahal panchayats\(^3\) for the present study. Through the intensive observation the data is collected on Bonda women dress code and on the prevailing myths connected to their semi-nakedness. The ornamental patterns and wearing number of chains and various colorful beads

\(^2\) The language Bondas speaks is Remo which belongs to Mundari group under Austroasiatic languages. The tribal languages of Orissa are categorized into two board divisions i.e., Mundari and Dravidian groups. The Mundari group has a northern branch which spoken by Santals, Mundas, Birhors, Ho's and other tribes. The Southern Mundari branch includes Saora, Gadaba (Gutob), Remo, Pareng, Juang, etc.

\(^3\) The word Panchayat is the village administrative unit.
have been observed from the close quarters by staying in their villages, and interviewing the elders and Knowledgeable Bondas.

THE BONDA WOMEN

The Bonda women are well known for beautiful ornamentation in the form of beads and shells. They enjoy a privileged position in their hierarchy and play a vital role in terms of collection of foods for the family. The matriarchal practices are very much in control to preserve certain norms in the community. The Bonda women marry the younger ones who are at least five to ten years younger than them. The attire of Bonda women is a combination of myths and nature. Their semi-nude appearance speaks the power of supernatural powers which cursed them to be like that forever. Their obedience and dedication towards the supernatural power (Maha Prabhu4) prepared them to be strong forever.

ATTIRE:

Their clean shaven head decorated with head-band of Palmyra strips and plaited fillets of Caryota fiber. They wear only beads form of neck to naval point to cover the body and to respect the cultural identity. The other ornaments made of aluminum and brass used as neck, nose and ear rings. And the tiny cloth around their waist known as rinda5 is mostly self woven to cover the lower part of the body up to thighs. Their nakedness revolves around their local myths that make them typical in appearance.

The following two myths are regarding the culture of weaving ‘rinda’ narrated by the villagers of Dumripada village in Khairput block is as follows (Verrier Elwin 1950):

MYTH-1

A woman of Mudalipada village, the wife of the eldest of the first twelve brothers’ went to fetch water at Kingu Bodak grove. The goddess of the spring was bathing with her thin cloth clinging to her body. The women saw the breasts and laughed. When the goddess asked why, she replied, ‘because your cloth looks thin as a spider’s web’. The goddess said, ‘this is not a spider’s web, but it is silk shining like the sun, and because you have mocked at the sun go live naked in the jungle. As the goddess said this the women’s hair shriveled on her head and the cloth from her body. She hid herself in a hole beneath a rock.

4 Maha Prabhu is also known as Phatkanda Maha Prabhu who is the Chief God of Bonda tribe.
5 It’s a scanty cloth woven and wear around their waist by Bonda / Bondo women which is made of Kerang fibre, usually with the standard size of 2-3 ft long in length and 8-9 inches width.
When the brothers after hunting returned each went to their wives, but the eldest brother could not find his wife. After a long search the elder brother’s wife was found in the cave and she narrated what had happened. The brothers went to Maha Prabhu and the eldest wept before him. When the wife of Maha Prabhu saw tears, she measured a bit of her own bark cloth against her arm and tore it off. She gave it to the eldest brother and said, ‘your wife and the rest of your women folk must wear this forever; otherwise your race will be destroyed’. Since then the descendants of the eldest brother have been called Nasli Bondos.

Another version from Mudilipada village is modernized and the characters were retained.

In those days when Rama, Sita and Lakshman were living in the forest, Rama used to go secretly to the village and listen to what the people were saying. There was a poor potter, one day his wife was late preparing food, and her husband fell on and abused her. She said to him, ‘very well, come and lick my private’s. The potter replied, ‘that is not my work, it is Rama who does that sort of thing’. Rama heard this and went home and ordered Lakshmana to take Sita away, and feels that he is not a fit person to have a wife.’ But Lakshman said how I can take her as she is carrying. Rama said ‘if you don’t take her, I will take her myself. When Rama ordered Lakshman to take Sita to her home, on the way they reached the Kingu Bodak grove and rested there. Lakshman prepared their food and Sita went for bath. Her cloth clung to her body and her breasts and swollen belly could be seen. Some women came from Mudalipada for water, and they saw Sita bathing naked and they clapped and laughed, for they were excited at seeing the wife of such a great Raja bathing naked like them. When Lakshman heard them he became furious and cursed them. ‘Mund-Landi, Phen-Bandhi’ be shaven above and naked below. At once the hair was burnt from their heads and the cloth from their waists. They hid themselves weeping among the stones round the spring. But Sita was sorry when she saw what had happened and called them. She tore off the coloured border of her sari and gave it to them. Wear just this much, she said ‘weave it with your own hands. If you wear more than this or if you buy from the bazaar, your race will be destroyed’.

MYTH-II

Another legend says that there is no offence and no curse; the Bondo skirt is a gift of Maha Prabhu’s mercy. It is at least an advance on complete nakedness.

6 Rama is one of the Chief Gods of Hinduism
7 Wife of Rama
8 Younger brother of Rama
One day Maha Prabhu and his wife went to a village to beg for fire. A Bonda woman was sitting naked and preparing Honda – a special kind of sweet. When she saw Maha Prabhu she covered her privates with one hand and gave him fire with the other. When Maha Prabhu’s wife saw this, she tore off a bit of her own cloth and gave it to her. Maha Prabhu laughed and said ‘she is not a Honda women; she is a Bonda women’. Since then they are been called Bonda.  

MYTH-III

Another modified legend (from Onagelu ) which is also common among Indian folklore. This is the motif of a sudden and drastic descent below the earth, leaving the hair sticking up above ground. This is in Ho, Santal, Manjhi, Birhor and Oran stories, an attempt to account for the origin of Sabai grass and usually associated with the murder of a sister by her brothers. In Bondo tradition also the motif is connected with the relations, not of murder but propriety, between a brother and sister.

The Bondo repeat the tale with different characters to explain various aspects. One day it is Pathkand Maha Prabhu and his sister to show why Pathkhand lives as a sword and his sister as a rock, another time it is Bhima10 and his sister as a story explains the existence of a small creator with two exit’s on the Cherubinding hill. The Gadaba’s narrated stories about their Bondo neighbors, and Elwin also gives his narration from the Gadaba village of Onagelu, not far from Andrahal village.

Long ago the sister of Lakshman Maha Prabhu was sitting naked in front of her house, busy husking rice. She had thrown off her skirt and only had a scrap of cloth to wipe the sweat from her body as she worked. When Lakshmana Maha Prabhu came along the path carrying two mountains over his shoulders. He saw his sister working naked, so he put down his load and shot a pellet at her as a warning of his approach. But she took no notice, so he fired an arrow. It stuck in the ground before her, but she still took not notice. At last lakshman sent his dot then she realized that her brother was near at hand. She could not reach her skirt in time, so she jumped into Mortar holding her scrap of cloth in her hand. She went down the earth. After knowing what had happened to his sister Lakshmana Maha Prabhu went in search of her. At Kangu Bodak he found her still below the ground and only her hair sticking out above it. He took hold of it to pull her out and it came away in his hands. He threw it away and it turned into thatching grass. Then his sister appeared without hair on her head and dressed in nothing but a little scrap of cloth. As she stood behind, the brother he said, ‘because your head is shaven and you are wearing that tiny skirt; your children will be called Bondo. In the Bondo version of the story, recorded at Goyiguda village, the characters are not named, and the brother pulls off the hair as his sister jumps into a pit, not mortar.

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9 Literally it means naked in their language.
10 A mythical character in their culture.
When she reappears, Dharmo (the sun) curses her to live always like this. The brother does not recognize her in her new garb and they become man and wife.

These are the taboos on a Bondo woman wearing any other kind of cloth round her waist. Those who under the influence of outside culture, has show some change. The origin of the prohibition is given in a number of slightly different stories which may be divided into three cycles. In the first, the shaven head’s and half-clad bodies are the result of a curse, the penalty for laughing at a bathing goddess; In the second, the scrap of cloth is regarded not as a punishment but as an advance on complete nudity; In the third, a women who has removed her cloth to husk grain on a warm day, jumps below the earth to avoid being seen as nude by her brother. Although curse stories are known in connection with cloth, Elwin mentions that these legends in their particular form are not found elsewhere. Each cycle includes some tales in which the protagonists unnamed, but in others the chief characters are Rama, Sita and Lakshmana made influence in Bondo’s lives (Verrier Elwin 1950).

The Attire of Bondo Women: With Rinda and Other Ornaments:

The scantiness of their attire gives a glimpse of just a piece of cloth known as ‘rinda’ which is made of Kerong bark, made by them or purchased from the market. But in most cases they wave it for their need only. The mini skirt (rinda or nadi) is home-woven and patterned in vertical candy stripes of about 2 feet in length and 1 foot in width with a wide range of colors. In most cases these dimensions are same with result that the skirt does not meet around the hips and given the appearance of being split upon side. The rinda, moreover, it hangs low over the buttocks so that the upper part remains uncovered. A brass chain or two cords of beads serve as a girdle. It is passed around the waist, over the skirt in front and around the bare skin at the back. She wears no cloth to shield her modesty either by the masses of beads that fall over her knees manicuring her skirt to meet the exigencies of the situation. While our visit to Bonda settlements during the feast and festivals, the Bondo women put on the same ‘rinda’ at lower level of the body and to cover the upper portion of the body an extra bunch of clothes over beads used as wrapper to protect from the chilly nights. The genesis of this pattern is rooted in a myth. The illusion of ugliness is largely created by the shaven heads. The shaven heads and half clad bodies are the result of a curse, a penalty for laughing at a bathing goddess.

Ornaments

Ornaments of Bonda women consist of a large number of bead necklaces which hang down to the naval, aluminum bands around their neck, head bands made up either of grass or bead, aluminum or brass bangles, nose rings, ear studs, etc. Head is decorated with fillet of palmyra, or a string with olive shells or little scarlet seeds on it.
Neck Rings

Around their necks the Bondo women wear metal rings along with the bead chains. The metal rings resemble necklace like thing around their necks. Most of them are made of aluminum and at some cases a thinner iron metal also seen. That means both aluminum and iron metal used as alloy in preparation of the neck rings. Sometimes we find currency coins as pendants at the centre point of small bead chains around their necks.

Nose Rings

Among the Bondo people nose rings are not familiar. Only the evidence is available at Bondapadu and Andrahal villages. Usually the metal used is aluminum, shape is circular or round. Each ring has some pendant down. The practice of piercing nose is not found in young women. Whereas old women have nose rings in traditional pattern.

Ear Rings

Next to neck rings, the most beautiful ornament of Bondo is ear studs or hangings. They vary in sizes and shapes. Some are very small in size and some are as big as a bangle which made of aluminum. The Bondo people pierce the ear from tender age itself. Ear rings worn in upper part of the ear is known as ‘Thinkodit’, middle part ‘Surkoda’, lower part is ‘Jinh Jinglo’ respectively.

Bracelets

Bangles are known as ‘Sumarai’ in Bondo language which never known worn by Bondo women for a long time. The belief is that the Demi Gods’ did not let the Bondo women conceive; their protagonist Maha Prabhu advised them to wear bangles on the hand or arms, so that they will have more children and get good harvest as bangles have a magical effect of child bearing. It appears wearing bracelet is a taboo for Bonda women. On their wrists they wear plain bracelets in the form of aluminum. Generally the ornaments on their wrists are about 2cm thickness.

Anklets

Wearing anklet is also a taboo among the Bondo, the reason is that there was a person by name Naiko with a son and a little daughter whom he loved very much. When their mother was died, and the son got married and the girl used to live lonely in the house. They had a neighbor by name Dom in the village He too had a daughter. This girl made friends with Naiko’s daughter. The Dom girl had anklets on her feet and the Bondo girl was envious of them and wanted to wear it too. The Naiko’s daughter bought some anklets in exchange with grains from anklet seller. When she put them on she fell ill, as Dagoi (devil) was angry. The following day she died. Since then the Bondo women do not wear anklets.
Tattoo

Tattooing is one more way of beautifying their body. In the hilly village the custom of tattooing has almost disappeared, though Elwin (1950) observed a few old women with the marks in Andhrarahal and Mudalipada villages. In the plains, the Bondos tattoo one another with thorns and a mixture of charcoal and the sop of the *Bassia Latifolia*. At Andhrarahal there was a vague tradition that – formerly the *Doms* used to tattoo them but one day *Maha Prabhu* asked them to show their hands and said those who had tattoo marks on the back of their hands be caught and dragged away. Since then custom of tattooing has vanished.

Bead Chains and the Wearing Pattern: Observations during the study

Ornamentation of the neck and bosom of Bondo women consists of a great mass of brass and bead work; so heavy that she does not usually carry herself very well, to the weight of the ornaments. There are heavy brass collars of several different patterns; a woman may wear six of these at once. Brass chains long enough to hang in half a dozen loops. Eight foot strings of colored beads looped round the neck with beads arranged in regular pattern murices style, string of shells and beads, down to end even below the naval covering the chest of the woman. The prevailing colors of these decorations are green, blue, yellow, red occurs especially in some villages. A girl often has a regular ruling color, so that the visitor can speak of as ‘the red girl’ or ‘the blue women’ and ‘yellow girl or women’.

Generally wearing about 50 to 100 chains around the neck which hangs up to waist is common tradition by any Bondo woman. However, there is a variation in number of chains, which at times ranges from 100 to 300. The other surprising observation is that all these chains are not of same colour, but of a wide spectrum of colours.

The length of chains, irrespective of numbers and colour vary according to their body height (sitting height) and the social class. Mostly single colored chains are of same length in proportion to sitting height. If there are multiple colored chains, each bunch of chains belongs to one colour. Colourful bead chains spread over the abdomen and cover the chest camouflaging the body, thus creating no obscenity. Moreover, the weight of the beads keeps the chains suspended when the user leans, sits or bows, thereby keeping their ‘private parts’ absolutely private. Wearing of bead chains in the light of myth could be viewed as a visible cultural alternative to keep the species distinct from the rest of animal kingdom.

The bead chains worn by the Bondo women have something to do with the socio-cultural practices. The number, the colour and length of bead chain against the age groups have been collected from twelve (12) Bondo villages with a view that this cultural trait has variation among its users.

The present data (table-1) indicates the adorning of the body by bead chains is more in the children and gradually decreasing as they attain adolescence but subsequently gains when they pass through the adulthood, between 21 and 40 years of age group. The
adornment, above forty years of age group, is less but not disappeared. Another interesting feature can be observed is that 26% of the Bondo women wear a minimum fifty chains irrespective of age groups.

The data pertaining to the bead colour was collected from different villages across the Bondo land in order to understand the village-wise variation of bead chain characters (table-II). The complexity of data in terms of number of chains and the colour preferences of the individual are presented village-wise and subsequently village preferences of colour are calculated in terms of percentage. The data reveals that the Andrahal women wear more number of chains with an average of 69 followed by Bandiguda (58), Mudilipada (49) and Bodapa (47). Among the villages Padaiguda (43.13%) Bandigada (42.71%) Bodapada (38.54%) Mudilipada (38.48%) and Chalanipada (38.40%) women have shown much preference to yellow colour than the remaining spectrum of colours, while Silaiguda (28.19%) preferred gold spot, Bhansipada (25.63%) white colour and Bondapada (23.72%) red colour than the remaining colours. The other colours preferred are red by the Bandiguda (24.12%) Bodapada (21.76%), Mudilipada (17.49%) and Chalanipada (14.71%) women folk. The next preferred colour is blue by the Silaiguda (19.82%) and Bodapada (12.56%).

THE CONTINUITY AND CHANGES

On their cultural front, the Bonda’s are simple people. The material objects of economic and household nature are of scanty. In terms of their dress pattern men are simple, who are mostly with a loin cloth, and the women with shaven head, bead chains hang from neck to belly, self-made piece of cloth which hardly covers their waist known as Rinda makes them traditionally bound. And the traditional distinction keeps them away from rest of the tribal world. The characteristic of semi-nakedness which has utmost importance to the genesis of their existence revolves around myths. The belief in the myths made them more conscious of their existence. And their philosophy of ‘body-soul’ dichotomy makes them rich in spirits.

Now a days the dressing pattern is still strictly observing in some villages due to their utmost importance to the myth as mentioned earlier. For the women both the small skirt (rinda) and beads are expensive in terms of their livelihood. But they feel proud to have number of chains (malis) on their body. They don’t like to give their bead chains to anybody at free of cost. Some get their bead chains through inheritance and some others prepare them on own after acquiring the raw material like beads and threads. Since they believe in their myths, the Bondo women spend considerable amount of money for adorning their body.

The taboo on wearing anything more than the narrow
strip cloth (*Rinda*) enjoyed in the legends is not absolute, though it is a forbidden to make any variation on skirt. There are times when something more than required are allowed. A woman may use a cloth-sling to carry a baby on a back or hip. In pregnancy when her condition becomes embarrassingly obvious, she may wear a sort of big cloth hanging down over her belly. When it is very cold early in the morning or at night, she wears a shawl. In the plains women wear similar shawls when officials visit a village. Everywhere, even when women go to burial ground, they are expected to put on a roll of cloth like a bandolier. A similar roll may be worn at wedding dances, and it is usually customary for women to put on shawls at advance. Though the *Bondo* women have taboo in wearing nose rings, anklet as per their myth, now they have an inclination in wearing them. As their identity is still going strong in the form of vibrant bead chains and multi-colored tiny cloth *rinda*, the other side, the factors like not able to meet the needs from the forest like men women also migrating to the nearby towns for their livelihood.

**References:**

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Photo courtesy: All Photo Section, IGRMS, Bhopal, Madhya
### Table-1

**Age groups and number of bead chains distribution**

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<th>Age group</th>
<th>No. of Bead Chains</th>
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<td>0-50</td>
<td>51-100</td>
<td>101-150</td>
<td>151-200</td>
<td>201-250</td>
<td>251 and above</td>
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<td>11-20</td>
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<td>51-60</td>
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<td>61 and above</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>50</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
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Table-II
Percentile bead colour distribution against villages

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<th>Green</th>
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<th>Red</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Yellow</th>
<th>W+ Blue</th>
<th>G +W</th>
<th>GS+ W+R</th>
<th>GS+ Blue</th>
<th>GS+ Green</th>
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<td>435</td>
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<td>3.34</td>
<td>12.63</td>
<td>24.12</td>
<td>11.08</td>
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<td>Padaiguda (12)</td>
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<td>2.15</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>7.08</td>
<td>25.32</td>
<td>43.13</td>
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<td>Mudilipada (7)</td>
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(W=White, G=Green, GS=Gold Spot, R=Red)