

An Oriya Hill Village

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INTRODUCTION

BISIPARA is 100 miles east of Cuttack and forty miles south of the Mahanadi river. It lies on the southern edge of an egg-shaped plain, which is two miles from east to west and a mile from north to south. The plain is 1,750 feet above sea-level and the hills around rise between 500 and 1,000 feet higher. The Salki river runs from south to north through the plain and the village is built in a crook of land between the Salki and a small tributary. Both these rivers have cut channels between ten and twenty feet deep. The Salki is about eighty yards from bank to bank. The smaller stream, where it has not been controlled for paddy fields, is about ten yards wide.

The plain consists of jungle-covered mounds, in height about fifty feet. On one of these Bisipara is built. To the west of the village, the stream is used to water paddy fields. A mile to the north a spring rises and gives water for a wide crescent-shaped belt of fields, which curl along the north-eastern side of the village. On the east side there are levelled "dry" paddy fields, irrigated only in the rains. The edges of the mounds, clearings on other mounds, and the sides of *nalas* are used for dry cultivation of crops other than rice.

The hills around are jungle-covered and infested by tigers and leopards. Bears make the forest paths dangerous. Cerebral malaria kills many children. The area has a reputation as a place 'gloomy and pestilential'

HISTORY OF THE AREA

The hills have been occupied, since time unknown, by Kui-speaking peoples. The Rajas of the Oriya-speaking lowland states had control over nowhere but the foothills. This they achieved by sending warrior chiefs to found colonies. Many Oriya villages were established in this way. The relation of the colonies and the mother state is not clear; but we know that the Hill Chiefs were rather Lords of the Marches, owing allegiance and often refusing it, than proconsuls administering a colony.

The men of Bisipara came originally from Baud in the north, *via*

another hill village, Bolscoopa. The ruling caste are surnamed Bisi, once a title of service under the Orissa kings. Genealogies indicate that they have been in Bisipara for 200 years, but such evidence is approximate. However, at least we know that the Bisis were firmly established here one hundred years ago, and provided leaders against the soldiers of the East India Company.

Between 1840 and 1850 there were expeditions every year into the hills, based on Russelkonda in the south, to suppress the rite of human sacrifice. This was performed by the Kui and by the Oriya settlers. In 1850 a Tahsildar, one Dinabandu Patnaik, an expoliceman, began a regular administration from a headquarters which settled eventually at Bisipara. At the end of twenty-five years he retired with the title of Rai Bahadur and the profits of an administration so conducted with systematic pillage and calculated ferocity that even today I have heard Kui men comment with satisfaction on the extinction of his lineage.

From 1850 onwards Oriyas came from the south to join those who had come many years before from the north. Bisipara became the administrative capital. Policemen and revenue officials settled here. Dinabandu Tahsildar encouraged Brahmins to go into the hills, where land could always be found for them. He built a temple. A market was opened. Bisipara continued to expand until in 1904 A J Ollenbach, then SDO, moved his headquarters to Phulbani. Now there are no officials in Bisipara; the descendants of some remain; other families have gone to the new capital.

In these years, those who profited most were the Sundis, a caste whose traditional occupation was liquor-making. The story of the money-lender and the toddy-seller among the Adibasi is too familiar; but in this area action was taken as early as 1910 when all liquor shops were abolished. Again, in 1920, a land settlement of Oriya villages was made, and, imperfect though it is, it gives force to the law that no one but an Adibasi may buy land, without special permission.

COMPOSITION OF THE VILLAGE

This history is reflected in the siting of the village houses. There are six streets: Kumharsai, Sudosai, Panosai, Sundisai, Khodalsai, and Hatopodera, containing about 750 people.

The street of the potters, *Kumharsai*, is built in the Kui fashion—two lines of houses, not detached, with gardens behind them. At each end of a Kui street there was usually a fence of tall stakes to protect the village at night from enemies and wild animals. The Kumhars are officially Adibasi, and, although now their assimilation to Hinduism is almost complete, we may conjecture that they are the true Adibasis, the first occupants of the site. Their genealogies all indicate long residence. There are no longer any posts at the end of Kumharsai and the houses have been rebuilt in Oriya fashion; but the siting is typically Kui.

The Bisis and others whose ancestors were in the service of the Baud Raja, are by caste Sudos. Their street, *Sudosai*, is built of two parallel lines of continuous houses, demonstrating that they were sited in the days when there were wars and a greater need than now for protection against wild animals. Nowadays the Bisis live in the centre of the street. On the fringes are strangers who have come since 1850. They are: a Gauro (herdsman) schoolmaster, whose father came from the south as a constable; a Brahmin household and a Barber household; a Christian whose father was head clerk; a Gauro; and a Mahanti shopkeeper who arrived last year.

The street of the outcastes, *Panosai*, is set apart from the rest of the village. It, too, is sited in the Kui fashion. Genealogies indicate a similar origin and length of residence as the Sudos, and it is likely that the Panos came to the hills with the Sudos from the north.

Sundisai is built on the same plan, although the decline in its

* Kui houses are built of wide horizontal planks. Oriya houses are made from vertical planks, plastered over with mud. Both have a double roof; of mud, an air space, and then thatch.