

Kothaghar: Village unity and integration in Ganjam district of Odisha

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Abstract

Indian society comprises of three sub-societies - the urban, the village and the tribal. Among these the village society always dominates in anthropology and sociological theoretical and methodological investigation. Though, villages are found since time immemorial, they still dominate in the life of Indians in the rapid global changing scenario. This is due to its socio-economic, self-sufficient and inter-groups solidarity characteristics. There are certain traditional institutions in the village which binds different sections of the village and maintain village solidarity for its stability. One such kind of institution is the “Kothaghar” of Ganjam district of Odisha. It maintains mechanical and organic solidarity in Ganjam villages. Kothaghar is a unique village institution found in almost every villages of the district. There is no written or oral record on how and when Kothaghars were formed. It is a single caste based institution which controls the common resources of the village and use them for the fulfillment of social, cultural, economic, emotional and religious needs of the villagers. It helps in maintaining village unity and integration by sharing incomes from the common resources among various sections of the village. The number of Kothaghar in village depends on the number of castes residing in the village. Traditionally, it is located in the middle of the village so that, it is accessible to all community members. For its smooth functioning Kothaghar consists of three tier committee systems-i. The Adhikari is the head, ii. The committee members are at in second rank and iii. the commoners are at the lower layer. The main objective of the Kothagharis to maintain the village’s common secular resources and organize annual fairs and festivals. Besides, Kothaghars is also used as the public place for village meetings, village guest house, village recreational centres and at night it serve as youth dormitory. In the evening the kothaghar is used by the village youths to learn the martial art and practice theatre play. While giving out the lease of common resources and organizing the secular activities the Kothaghar plays equal opportunities to all castes. However, while organizing functions like village annual religious ceremony, the lower castes are not allowed to participate. Change in common resources management from community level to government, have left the Kothaghars with meager fund. This leads to decline in community ceremonies and social activities of the Kothaghar which used to play a vital role in maintaining village unity and integration. It is in a dying state. Death of such village institution not only hampers the village life but also adversely affect the nation building processes because people are detaching from the community sense of living. Therefore, it is important that government agencies and the volunteer organizations should come forward to revive the kothaghars.

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

In India since, immemorial time villages are found and its existence is mentioned in the *Rig Veda*. In the *Rig Veda* it is mentioned that society is developed by a series of ascending formation that is starting from *Griha/ Kula* (family), and gradually extending to *Grama* (village), the *Vis* (Clan), the *Jana* (people), and the *Rastra* (country). With the passage of time, the village system in India still continues to have many of the characteristics as mentioned in the *RigVeda*. The reason for persistence of village are due their clear-cut structural differences from the towns and urban, a high degree of economic self-sufficient, a political solidarity and sense of ritual integrity. (Srinivas 1951, p1051, Miller 1952, p160, Gough1`952,p 534 and Bailey, 1953, p327). Whatsoever the reasons, for the existence of villages in India in the 21st century, to an Indian, village is his/her identity. For an Indian, village is not just the physical entity exhibited itself as a conglomeration of houses huddled together amid surrounded by fields (Chouhan, 2003, p-410) and little away from the main habitation area (Karve, p- 189), rather it is an identity. Whenever an Indian away from his home and visited to other place in India the first enquiry is “what is your village Sir”? Not what is your caste, clan, name etc? A person’s village must be known before anything else about him can significant before any other claim can be validated (Mckim Marriott, 1955, p-177).

Owing to its importance to the Indians and its continuation in the present century, villages have attracted many social anthropologists and sociologists for the study. However, Robert Redfield (1897 – 1958), a social anthropologist of Chicago University, Chicago, for the first time introduced the social relevance of villages in the human society. To explain the importance of the small societies different from the tribal societies he introduced the concept of “folk society”. According to him folk society has four distinct characteristics such as “distinctiveness”, ‘smallness”, “homogeneity”, and “self-sufficiency” (Robert Redfield, 1955, p-4). Later his followers like Oscar Lewis, Mckim Marriott, Milton Singer, Model Baum, F.G. Bailey, M.N. Srinivas, S.C. Dube etc. used his concept of folk society to explain Indian villages. Their studies added new concepts such as ‘rural cosmopolitan’, by Oscar Lewis (1958), ‘universalisation and

parochialisation’, ‘little tradition and great tradition’ by Mckim Marriott (1955), ‘sacred complex’ by Milton Singer (1975), ‘sanskritisation’ and ‘dominant caste’ by M.N. Srinivas in village studies. These concepts were given methodical and theoretical inputs. Even after half century passed on village studies since 1960’s no new concepts introduced in this field. When we are in modern developed society, our understanding of village community is heavily anchored in the intense studies carried out during second half of 20th century (Chouhan, 2003, p-410). In this context, village studies needs to retrospect of these old concepts in the light of rapid changes taking in village communities with advancement of technology and modernization process and to develop new methods in Indian village studies.

Odisha in general and south Odisha in particularly, village studies by anthropologists are rare. Many foreign and Indian anthropologists visited Odisha, but except F.G. Bailey no other studied Odisha village social system as detail as other part of the country. It may be because; tribal population dominates Odisha. Domination of tribal population in Odisha is evident from the Hunter’s description that the “first inhabitants were hill tribes and fishing settlements belongs to non-Aryan stocks. Describing the physical features of Odisha people Hunter (1956) quoted from the Chinese Traveler Hioun – Thsang, who visited Odisha in the 7th century “the inhabitant of Odisha as tall stature, black skinned, of rude habits and speaking a clear ringing language different from the tongues of inner India (Hunter, 1956, p-53). Even in present days the influence of tribal culture is found in the village culture of Odisha. In south Odisha particularly, number of autochthonous goddesses (*Thakuranis*) have been introduced in their religious activities. These *Thakuranis* have played an important role in the village and regional culture of Ganjam. However, tribals worshiped these aboriginal deities in earlier times. Gradually these goddesses were Hinduised and transformed from tribal cult to ‘Sakti’cult in the village systems (A.K.Rath, 1987, p-110). Therefore, many scholars believe that “the culture and society of Orissa cannot be defined or explained without mentioning the contribution of tribal heritage to it”.

Apart from the village communities in Odisha, there are certain traditional institutions, which play a significant role in village unity for all functional purposes. These

institutions irrespective of caste and economic status play various socio-economic political, and religious roles for the strengthening of the village's vertical unity. *Kothaghar* is one such institution found in Ganjam district of southern Odisha, which maintain village vertical unity irrespective of caste ranking and economic status. The present paper explores the Kothaghar institution of Ganjam, which is not been explore so far.

Area under study and research methods:

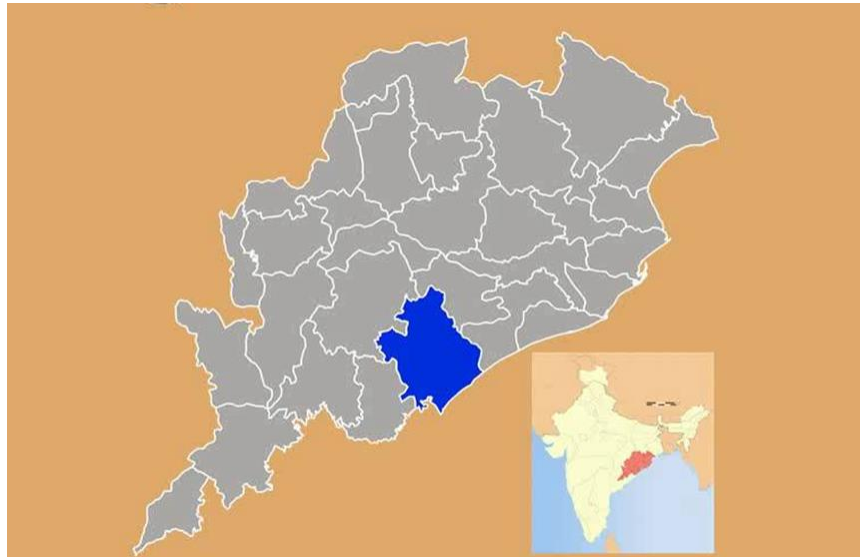
Ganjam district is located southern direction of Odisha. Its Latitudinal extent is 19°4"N to 20°17" and longitudinal extent is 84°7"E to 85°12"E. The district is 180 Km away from the state capital Bhubaneswar. It is bounded by Khurda district in East, Gajapati district in West, Phulbani district is in North and Bay of Bengal is in South.

The district is well connected by road and rail with rest of Odisha and the country. The National Highway No.5 between Kolkata and Chennai passes through this district. The main rail link between East to South is also passes through Ganjam.

The district is comprised of three sub- divisions namely- Berhampur, Chattarapur and, Bhanjanagar. These three sub-divisions constitute of 22 Blocks. The district consists of 3329 revenue villages.

Ganjam district is spread over area of 8070.60 square km. Physically the district is divided into two broad physical divisions. These divisions are- the coastal plains in the east and hills and plateau in the west. The Eastern Ghats runs along the western side of the district. The coastal plain lies between the Eastern Ghat and Bay of Bengal. The main river of the district is Rusikulya.

According to 2011 census the total population of the Ganjam district is 3, 520,151 persons. It is the highest populous district of Odisha, it shares 8.39 percent of state's population. Population density of the district is 429. The sex- ratio of the district is 981, little above the state's average sex- ratio 978. However, the sex – ratio of the state has shown negative growth. In 2001 census the sex- ratio of the district was 998 whereas in 2011 the sex- ratio is 981. The district was ranked 8th position in state's sex – ratio during 2001 census, while it became 15th rank in 2011 census.



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In the district 71.88% persons are literate. The male literacy rate is 81.85%, while female literacy rate is 61.84%. According to 2011 census, the district's literacy rate is below the state's literacy rate. The state's average literacy rate is 73.45%. Male literacy rate is 82.40% and female literacy rate is 64.36%. In comparison both male and female literacy rate is below the state's literacy rate.

Main castes of the district are Dalua, Klinji, and Brahman who are the general caste. Bauri, Dhoba, Bhandari are the Scheduled Caste. While Kondha, Sabar and Saora are the Scheduled Tribe populations of the district.

Qualitative data are used for this study. Data collected through the sampling and survey methods from the 10 villages of the district. During survey observation, interview, case study and scheduled method used to collect information. Data are processed through simple tabulation and statistical computation techniques.

Kothaghar and its Structure

The Concept

The word Kothaghar is combination of two Oriya words "Kotha" means togetherness or collective body and "Ghara" means house. So Kothaghar means it is a place or house where villagers gathered to discuss and organize community activities of the village. Existence of the word Kotha in Odia literature is evident in Lord Jagannath's literature as the Lord Jagannath is referred as Kotha Bhogkhiya, mean taking of Kotha's Bhog. It is observed that the genesis of "Kotha" comes from the joint estate ownership. In ancient times, a village held some joint properties (lands) for community use either in secular or in religious sphere. The religious estate is known as "Debottar" while the secular estate is known as "Kotha" (Mohapatra, L.K. 1997, p-718). Therefore, the Kothaghar of Ganjam district is an institution, which held village common resources of the village and used those resources for the village cohesion. In Odisha, Kothaghars perform mostly religious activities. However, in Ganjam district it performs both secular and religious functions.

Location of Kothaghar:

Kothaghars are place where community activities take place. Therefore, Kothaghars are located in the middle of the village so that it is assessable to all community members. However, because of its religious nature the lower caste members are not allowed in the Kothaghars of higher caste. Lower castes can have their Kothaghar in their own hamlets.

Structure and administration of the Kothaghar:

Kothaghar has three-tier structure. The three tiers are - the head of the Kothaghar who is known as Adhikari, the committee members and the villagers or hamlet residents.

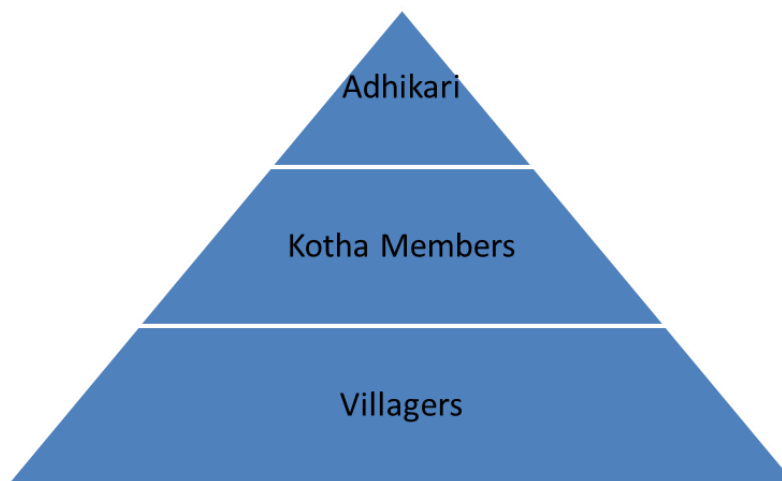


Figure 1: Pyramid structure of Kothaghar

Adhikari

The head of the Kothaghar is known as Adhikari. This post is unisex post mainly held by male person only. This is because in Ganjam district agriculture is the main stay of life where male dominance is prominent and it is visible in Kothagahr administration too. As it said Adhikari post is a caste-based, lower caste member are not given the Adhikari post in higher caste kothaghar. It is found that the Adhikari post is hereditary.

However, in Dharakote village has exception where the Adhikari is made by selection on yearly basis. Every year after the DurgaPuja a general meeting of kothghar is called and in that meeting the old committee is dissolved and new committee is formed with new Adhikari.

The role of the Adhikari is same irrespective of their appointment. Adhikari presides all the meeting related to Kothaghar. All decisions are taken in his name. He appoints other committees and its member with consultation the villagers. Besides these work the Adhikari also oversee the Guta (the lease work) of Kothaghar's trees, ponds and other resources. Adhikari can also call meeting of Kothaghar if any person approaches him to solve his dispute in Kotha. However, Adhikari is not the competitive person to hold the inter village or intra village disputes. Such disputes are solved in the village panchayats. If the Adhikari, is an elected representative of the village panchayat then, he can attend such meeting as an elected member of panchayats but not as an Adhikari.

Committee Members

To help the Adhikari for the smooth functioning of Kothaghar, several committees are formed based on the resources of Kothaghar and its activities. It is found that, normally there are two or three committees are found in Kothaghars of Ganjam district. The committee members are selected from the Kothaghar jurisdiction. The committee members are non-hereditary and continue as member till the member wish to continue or till the pleasure of Adhikari.

Kothaghar Committees and their roles:

Unlike the Adhikari, the committees members are selected. Their term is reviewed yearly. If they performed their duties satisfactory they can continue. If their work is not satisfactory the Adhikari can remove them in consultation with villagers. The Adhikari can also call general meeting of Kothaghar to induct new members. At the same time if any member wishes to leave the committee he will inform this during the

general meeting of the Kothaghar. Members of the committees are multi caste based. But, the untouchable caste persons are not allowed in such committees meant for higher castes.

Villagers

Villagers rank third in the Kothaghar structure. But the villagers are the supreme of the Kothaghar. The Adhikari or the committee member cannot take any decision without consulting the villagers. For any activities of the Kothaghar the Adhikari first call a meeting where the villagers discuss the topic. If majority of the villager give their consent then the Adhikari will be carry out the activities. If the majority of villagers go against the activity the Adhkari has to abandon it. So, though the Adhikari is the head of the Kothaghar, he alone cannot take any decision on his own. He has to consult with the villagers before he takes any decision. Hence, the villagers who are in the lower ladder of the Kothaghar structure but they are the real decision makers. Adhikari who is in top only execute the decision taken by the villagers.

Functions of Kothaghar

Kothaghars are formed to maintain the villages' common resources like the unclaimed trees, ponds, land etc and generate resources from these properties. From these resources village Kothaghar organize cultural and ritual ceremonies for villagers. In Ganjam district the Kothaghars perform multi tasks. They organize both religious and secular activities. Some of the major functions are discussed below.

Economic Functions

Economic functions of the Kothaghar are giving out Guta (lease) of the village community resources like pond, trees, shops and lands. During the annual general meeting of the Kothaghar these leases are given. The highest bidder gets the lease. Except untouchable caste, any persons can go for bidding. The one third of the bidding amount is

paid at the meeting and rest amount is paid by three installments. In the bidding process the pond goes of the highest bidding. The amount collected from the bidding is kept with the Adhikari.

Besides these biddings, Kothaghar has also other sources of income. In villages like Kolathigaon and Gunthabandha have brought Handa Handis (Huge vessels needed for the community cooking) form the amount collected from the leases. These vessels are then given on minimum rents to the villagers at the time of their need.

These vessels are given on rent to all irrespective of the castes. Some time it also given to outside the village. A committee is formed to look after these vessels and collection of rents. However, unlike the bidding amount, these amounts are kept with the committee and at the annual meeting they deposit the amount with records to the Adhikari. Apart from these, Kolathigaon village Kothaghar has also other source of income from the shops. This village has constructed three small shops in the vacant space of the Kothaghar and given them on rent. A Dukan (shop) committee is formed by Kothaghar to look after these shops and collect rents. The rent is kept by the committee and at the annual meeting they deposit the money to the Adhikari.

The amount collected from all these sources are used for the village welfare and entertainments. The annual village Jatra (fair) and village feast are organized from these amounts. In the Jatra and feast all castes participate. However, the untouchable caste (Bauris) is not included in the organizing committee, but they can see the Jatra and enjoy the meals of feast. With the increase of prices of commodities and population, the amount collected from the leases and other sources are not enough to organize such feast and Jatra. Therefore, now for each program village Kothaghar collect money for such celebrations. Another reason for lack of fund is that the government has taken control over the village ponds and its lease.

Under the welfare activities the Kothaghar funds are provided to the poor needy families' medical treatments, construction of house and arrangement of their children's marriages etc. At the time of natural calamities or fire the Kothaghar fund is given to the effected families as assistance. Kothaghar fund is also provided as loan to the needy family. For loan first the loan seeker has to give an application in writing to the Adhikari.

Then, the Adhiakri will call a meeting of Kothghar to discuss the matter with the villagers and modalities of loan. If the full house is agreed to the proposal then the loan is given the person. The loan is given only within the village. Outside villagers are not given loan from the Kothaghar money.

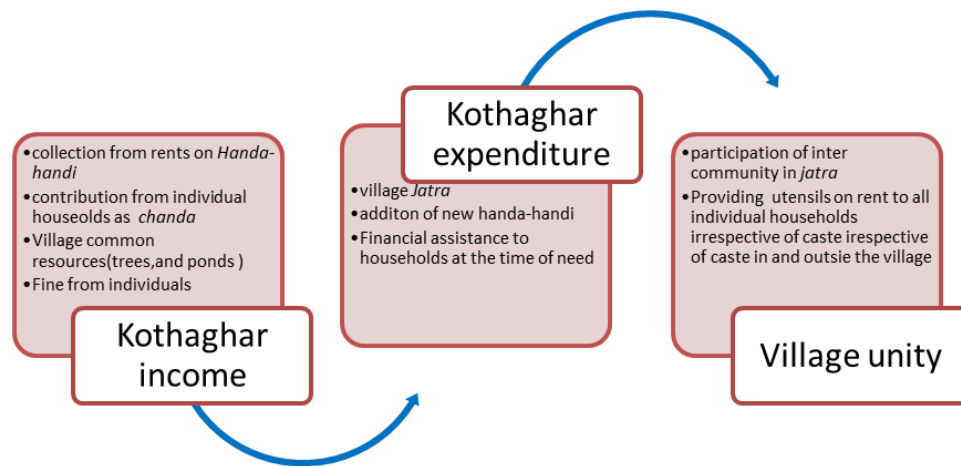


Figure 2: Economic functions of Kothaghar

SOCIO-CULTURAL FUNCTIONS

Kothaghar perform number of socio-cultural activities. First it is the center of the village, hence all village meetings are held at the Kothaghar. Secondly, it is used by the tax collection officials to collect village taxes. Third, since it is the common place in the village so whenever a guest visits to the village he stays in the Kothaghar. Fourth, Kothaghar is used as youth dormitory in the village. The youths practice Akhada (Bravery Art), social plays (Dramas) and Dhengda- Dhengdi (Youth) dance. It also used as youth dormitory. Fifth, Kothaghar also used for hosting marriage reception of

villagers. In small village like Paulapalli it is given free of cost where the excess guests of the family put them in the Kothaghar.

Kothaghar institution also play judiciary role in the village. In Dharakote village it is found that the Kothaghar solved the dispute between two Anganwadi workers. Generally in the village disputes are solved in the village panchayat. But in this case the victim is appealed to the Badasahi Kothaghar committee to solve the matter, because the Anganwadi centre belongs to Badasahi. It is found that when a village has more than one Kothaghars the residents approaches to their concerned kothaghar to solve the dispute. Residents cannot approaches to other Kothaghar than their own. Each Kothaghar has its jurisdiction; they cannot invade to others Kothaghar's matter.

Religious Function

Under the religious activities, each village organizes either village's annual Thakurani Jatra or Asthaphar (Nam Sankirtan) or Kothisala Puja or Ganes puja or Makar Sankranti or Durgapuja. However, village like Dharakote organize Durgapuja as well as the Makarsankranti. The number of activities depends upon the resources of the Kothaghar. Apart from the annual ceremony Kothaghar of Kolathigaon village organizes weekly religious ceremony like Thrinatha Mela.

The Asthaphar Committee organizes the annual Bhagbat Puja of the village at Kothaghar. This puja is organized on the Purnima of Kartik month. One week before the Purnima the Adhikari call Kothaghar meeting where all villagers attend to decide the Bhagbat Puja celebration. The Adhikari forms a 10-15 members committee to organize the puja. In consultation with the villagers the committee decides for how many days the puja would be celebrated and the amount to be expend on Puja. All expenses are bear by the Kothaghar, which was given by the villager as annual donation to the Kotha. It is found that earlier two to three days celebration was there, but now it is only one-day celebration. After the days and amount is fixed, the committee visits nearby villages to invite the Kirtan Mandalis to their village for Sankritan on day of celebration. The committee allots the Sankirtan time to the Kirtan Mandalis on the basis of their distances. The committee also arranges food for them on the day of celebration. One day before the

puja, the committee prepares a mud altar outside the Kothaghar and roofed with coconut leaves. The Sankirtan starts with the time of purnima begin by placing the Bhagbat and photo of Radha and Krishna. On the very next day of the purnima, the committee organizes a village feast for lunch where rice, dal, vegetable curry and Khir are served to all irrespective of caste and Kothas. But, Bauris are served at the last. In the evening, the Kothaghar meeting is organized where the committee will produce its report to the villager in the presence of the Adhikari. With the acceptance of the report the committee dissolves.

In this village, apart from the annual Bhagbat Puja, weekly TrinathMela is organized. This puja is mainly seen by the Duckan Committee of the Kothaghar. Every Saturday, alternatively one family and a shop of the Kothaghar are assigned to provide the puja prasads. In the evening the puja is organized at the kothaghar. In this puja except Bauris all caste participates.

The Bauris of this village organize the JhamiJatra at the Badasahi kothaghar during the Vijaya dashami (Durgapuja). This puja is exclusively arranged by the Bauris. They collect money from all the villagers. On the vijaya dashami day they brings the spirit of forest goddess from the nearby the forest and kept in front of the Kothaghar. The Jani (priest) worship the goddess and walk over the fire. After the Jani the other caste people offers to the goddess and walk over the fire. In this lower caste puja all villagers participate.

In Dharakote, Badasahi Kothaghar forms two committees to organize annual Dashera puja. One is Puja committee and another is Chanda committee. Except Bauris the untouchable caste other castes are included in both the committees. The puja committee takes all responsibility of Durga Puja. The Chanda committee assists the puja committee in arranging the fund for the Puja. The Secretary supervises the functioning of these two committees. During the general meeting of the Kothaghar it was decided the how much will spend in puja and how much donation will be asked form each households. The Puja committee will have to organize puja on the prescribed amount. Similarly the Chanda committee will have to collect same amount of donation from each households. One month ahead the puja committee arranges the idol maker to make the goddess Durga.

Than one week ahead the puja committee arranges the pendal and other requirements for three days (Asthami, Nabami and Dahsami) the puja. The Puja committee also looks into the idol emersion and Prasad distributions.

Kothaghar and Village Unity:

Kothaghar's main functions are to maintain the village resources and organize ritual ceremonies for the villagers. To carry out such activities there is Kotha committee. However, the committees alone cannot take all decisions. For any activity, whether it is lease work of the village resources or organizing ceremonies the opinion of whole villagers are taken into consideration. Opinion of each villager is given due important. This makes the unity among the villagers. No villagers can consider as neglected. At the same time for lease of common resources any villager irrespective of his caste ranking is given opportunity to bid for these resources. The highest bidder is given lease irrespective of his caste. To organize ceremony the Kothaghar first forms committees such as the puja committee, Chanda committee etc. Members of these committees include individual from all castes. Even Kothisala puja which is the mainly lower caste puja, but the whole village participate in this puja. All villagers donate cash and kind according to their capacity for this puja. In Kolathigaon village's annual feasts of Kothaghar where all villagers even the Bauris (untouchable caste) participate and have food over there. The Jhami Jatra which is organized by the Bauris of Kolathigaon village but for this puja the general caste Kothaghar is given to Bauris to organize puja there. Even the general caste people offer prayer and puja during the Jami Jatra. Apart from lease and rituals, the Kothaghar also provide Handa Handis to all persons of the village irrespective of their caste. Kothaghar provide financial aid to the need person without considering their economic and caste positions. All these activities indicate that the Kothaghar maintains the village unity and integration.



Figure 3: Secular and religious activities of Kothaghar

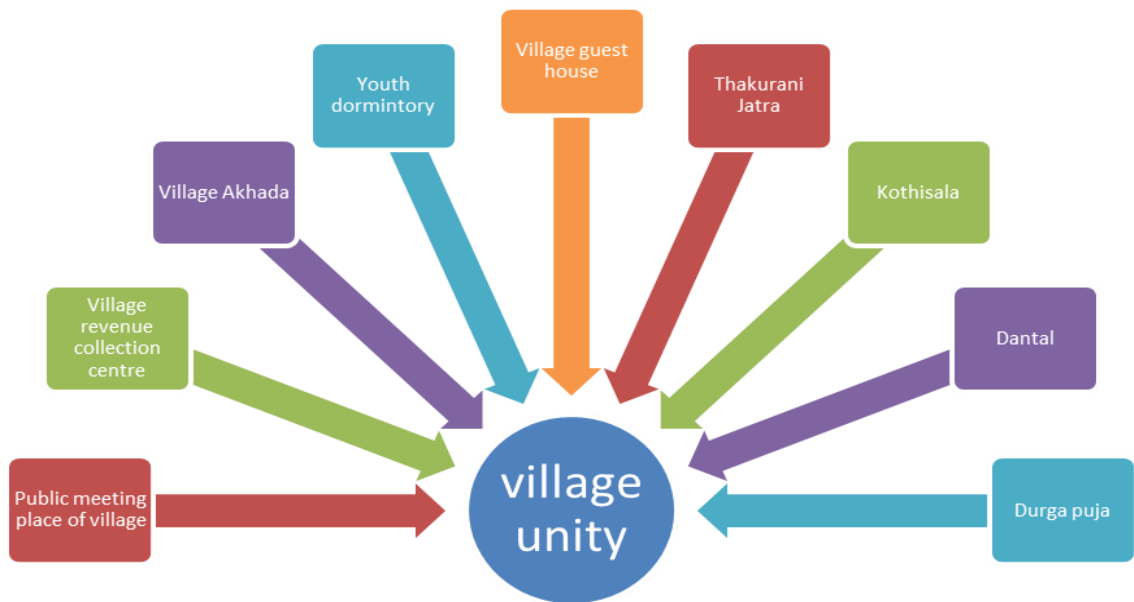


Figure 4: Kothaghar activities and village unity

CONCLUSION

The main objectives of these Kothaghars are to maintain the village's common secular resources and organize village annual fairs and festivals. Besides this Kothaghars are also used as the public place for village meetings, village guest house, village's recreational centre and even in the night it serve as youth dormitory. In the evening village youths learn the martial arts, practice theatre plays and sleeps in there. In religious activities of higher caste lower caste people are not allowed. However, while the untouchable caste (Bauris) organizes Kothisala Puja, the higher castes not only donate cash and kind to the Puja but also provide the Kothaghar and decorate it. They also participate in prayer and eat prasads. This indicates that though the common resources of the village is maintained by the dominant caste members but income from these resources are shared among the whole villages. It implies Kothaghar which is gender and caste biased but it maintains the unity among various sections of the village.

This important social institution of the Ganjam villages is now in the decline process. A decade years ago when there was Kothaghar meeting people used to participate in large. But at present hardly any villagers comes for such meeting. The Adhikari and its members with the presence of hardly ten to fifteen villagers organize all ceremonies. In some villages, though Kothaghar are present but no Kotha Committees to look after it. During research I found that two reasons behind the decline of such institution. First, the government has taken charge of the village common resources like ponds which used to provide maximum income to Kothaghar. So the Kothaghar is lacking resources. This leads to decline in community ceremonies. Second, migration-young generations are migrating to cities and metros in search of employments. Hardly have they spent any time in Kothaghar for recreation. This resulted decline of the Kothaghar activities. Death of such village institution not only hampers the village life but also hamper the nation building processes because people are detaching from the community sense of living. Therefore, the government agencies and the volunteer organizations should come forward to revive this village level institution.

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