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# **Kalahandi drought lore**

**by**

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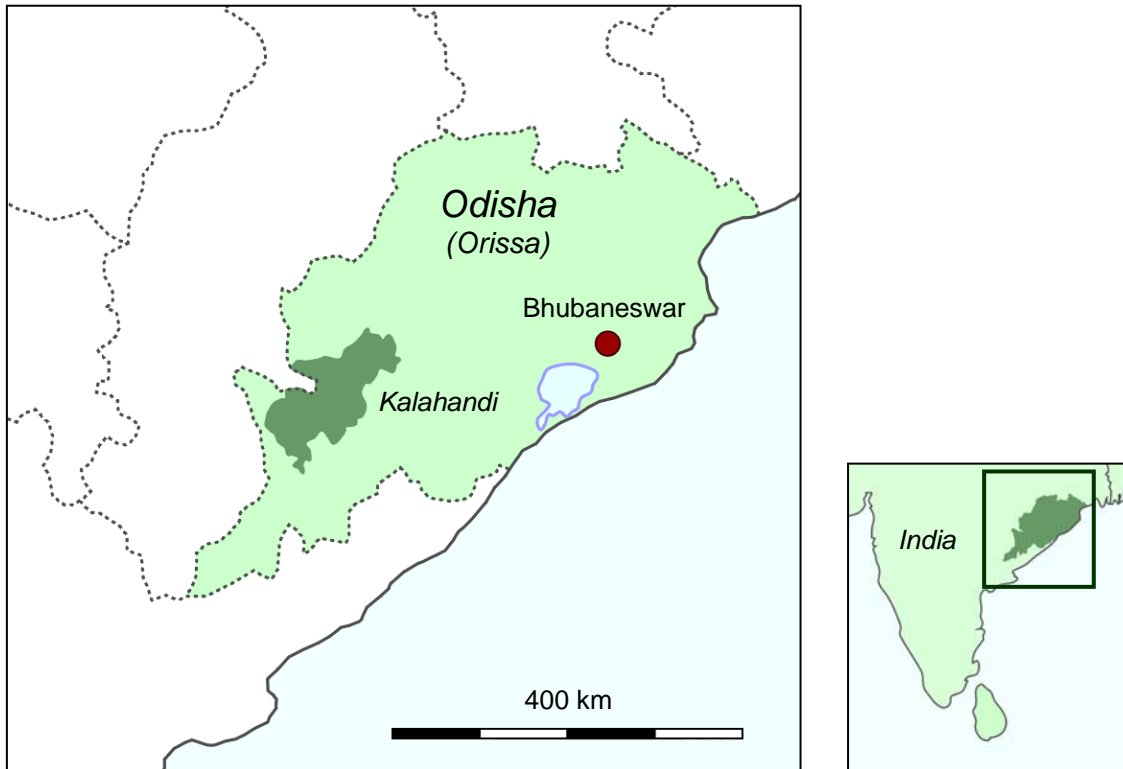
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## Location map



## Summary

Kalahandi District in the Indian State of Odisha (Orissa) has a long history of severe drought events. Drought occurs once every three or four years, with particularly severe events roughly once in a decade.

Kalahandi was known as Mahakantara (Great Forest) in ancient times. Once famous for its bumper paddy cultivation, this land used to be self-sustaining with abundant forest products and ample harvest. Today, there is scarcity of food and fuelwood. Along with the drought, there are problems such as rural unemployment, lack of industrialization, population growth and deforestation. With few means of subsistence, the rural people have either migrated or chosen a destitute life in the wastelands.

Being affected by drought, the people have tried to compensate their natural loss in their imagination. This is a culture where miracles are expected as solutions for social problems, through the socio-political process or some supernatural forces. Drought is widely reflected in the folklore and traditions of Kalahandi. The folk song tradition is alive and vibrant, with frequent relations to the pitiable conditions of the drought-affected people, and occasionally with a political twist.

This paper introduces some traditional reflections of drought in tales, songs and proverbs.

# 1 Introduction

Traditional tales and beliefs are important cultural heritages.

This paper introduces some traditional perspectives on drought in Kalahandi District in the Indian State of Odisha (Orissa).<sup>1</sup> It has been compiled by extracts from several papers by the author, published on his website:<sup>2</sup>

- Drought in the folklore of Kalahandi.
- Oral epics in Kalahandi.
- Folk songs of Kalahandi.
- Influence of the Ramayana tradition on the folklore of Central India.

## 2 The context

### 2.1 Kalahandi

Kalahandi was known as Mahakantara (Great Forest) in ancient times. But now, it is little more than a wasteland. Once famous for its bumper paddy cultivation, this land was once self-sustaining with abundant forest products and ample harvest. The multi-village interdependent economy shaped an integrated worldview in respect of social, economic and ideological spheres. Today, the people lack firewood and have food problems.

Kalahandi is also known as Karunda Mandal, possibly due to the availability of corundum. The district is a treasure of precious stones like ruby, garnet, aquamarine, blue sapphire and alexandrite.

*Figure 1: Tribal village in Kalahandi*



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<sup>1</sup> The state was officially re-named from Orissa to Odisha in 2011

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.asgporissa.org/mahendra/>

## 2.2 Drought exposure

The area has a long history of drought, covering more than a century. Severe drought occurred in 1868, 1884 and 1897. The famine of 1899 (known as '*Chhapan Salar Durbhikshya*') influenced the people to such an extent that even today, if a child hankers for food, the mother tells the child '*why are you hankering like a drought-affected child of Chhapan Sal*'? The effect of the famine, according to the District Gazetteers, '*were of a magnitude unprecedented in any previous famine.*' and left a terrible socio-economic gloom. In 1919-1920 another drought occurred followed by cholera, influenza and malnutrition due to lack of foodstuff. Subsequent severe droughts occurred in 1922-1923, 1925-1926. 1929-1930 1954-1955 and 1955-56.

In 1965-66, another drought totally broke the economic backbone of the people. Due to lack of rain, three-fourths of the crop production failed. The effect of the drought continued to be felt in 1967. The following description from the District Gazetteers is worth quoting.

*'The bulk of the population which constituted the landless agricultural labourers became unemployed due to suspension of all sorts of agricultural operations. The worst sufferers were the landed gentry, who, because of the drought, could not reap a harvest nor could they take to manual labour to which they were not accustomed. The pastures lost the greenery and the bovine population therefore was equally starved. Everywhere there was an acute shortage of water.'*

The Bureau of Statistics and Economics, Orissa has analyzed the rainfall of South Western Kalahandi and has reported that '*there is an year of drought in every three or four years*'. There were particularly severe droughts again in 1974-75 and in 1985, like the human census occurring once in ten years.

## 2.3 Social impacts

Frequent droughts have caused crop failures, and people became poorer and poorer.

After the droughts of 1965 and 1966, the rich cultivators of this area came down to the status of middle class cultivators and the middle class cultivators into ordinary ones. Many turned into sukhbasis (daily wage labourers) (meaning those who live happily). (A proverb for 'sukhbasi' runs thus: '*The men without cattle have happy sound sleep*').

While Kalahandi became known for its misfortunes due to drought, merchants from distant places of India and abroad arrived to build up their good fortunes, exploiting the native soil for precious stones. At the same time, the native people, being incapable of providing food to members of their poor families, are leaving their motherland, migrating to other parts of India. About one lakh<sup>3</sup> residents of Kalahandi and Bolangir districts of Odisha have settled down in Raipur town of Madhya Pradesh, where a slum is known as Raipur ka Narak (the hell of Raipur).

Besides a long history of drought, the socio-economic traditions are the main cause behind the class distinction among the people of Kalahandi. Agriculture in rural Kalahandi is controlled by urban businessmen. Certain traditional forms of loans, mortgage and labour systems have added to the problems of peasant life.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> 1 lakh = 100,000

<sup>4</sup> Extraordinary financing can be needed for weddings, illness in the family, or to overcome a drought. If such social events coincide, like two successive droughts, it can severely strain the capacity of the household.

Along with the drought, there are problems such as rural unemployment, lack of industrialization, population growth and deforestation. With few means of subsistence, the rural people have either migrated or chosen a destitute live in the wastelands.

### 3 Tales of drought

Being affected by drought, the people have tried to compensate their natural loss in their imagination. This is a culture where miracles are expected as solutions for social problems, through the socio-political process or some supernatural forces.

The people of Kalahandi have no concrete solutions for a greater social problem like drought. But the impossibility of solutions is compensated by imagination. Traditionally the culture of the people is shaped according to their adaptability. This is exemplified by folk tales.

#### 3.1 Indra and the old man

This tale is as follows: <sup>5</sup>

Once Indra, the rain deity of heaven, was annoyed with the people because he was not worshipped, He promised not to pour rain on the earth for twelve years, which resulted in a terrible famine. The cattle started dying due to shortage of water and grass. Even people started dying from starvation.

Meanwhile, an old farmer called in all his sons to his presence and said that they had spent their time playing and merry-making. He continued that he had become old like the ripen leaves of a dry tree, and he might pass away anytime. So he wanted his sons to learn the technique of cultivation. Ordered by their father, the sons took bullocks and ploughed the field. But the soil was dry and too hard. So the old man took his sons to a river bed, and in its sand he started ploughing. This could teach them to cultivate the fields in the rainy season.

*Figure 2: Not suited for ploughing*




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<sup>5</sup> This folk tale is from Boden Village, where Mr. Rajiv Gandhi, the erstwhile Prime Minister of India, had to cancel his visit due to lack of communication and heavy downpour of rain.

Indra curiously came down to the river in the disguise of a brahman. He saw the old man ploughing the river sand with his sons. He asked the old man why he was ploughing the river bed like an insane. The old man replied that he knew it was futile to plough there; but one should not forget his occupation. Everyone should make his descendants learn his parental occupation.

Indra left the old cultivator and thought that he had opened his eyes.

One should train his sons about parental occupation; otherwise after him they would be nowhere. So Indra ordered his four sons (four clouds according to folk belief) to learn how to pour rain on the earth. Needless to say, the barren earth overflowed with rainwater. Indra now realised how the old cultivator extracted rain from him by a ruse.

### 3.2 Indra and the sage

A similar narrative is found in the epic of Mahabharata:<sup>6</sup>

Once, a terrible famine occurred on Earth. Viswamitra, the sage, sent all his disciples to search for food. They did not find any. Later, they saw a dog lying dead by the roadside. They brought the dead body of the dog and, ordered by the sage, they skinned it and cooked food. Viswamitra, taking the cooked dogflesh, was about to offer it to the gods like Indra, Surya, Vishnu and others. All the gods requested the sage not to offer them such kind of food, and Indra assured rain on the Earth. Thus, Viswamitra brought rain from Indra.

### 3.3 Analysis

In the first story, the old man is the counterpart of sage Viswamitra. The trickery played with Indra by the old man has more propriety than the means adopted by sage Viswamitra. The old man solved his problem in a positive way, whereas the sage adopted a negative approach.

The initial features of both stories are '*real*':<sup>7</sup> Devastation, the failure to plough in barren land, and the occurrence of draught. The following features are unusual or imaginary: Ploughing the river bed, and the appearance of the bramhan (Indra). The concluding features are again real: The desire to train ones descendants with their conventional occupation (both by the old man and Indra), and the heavy downpour of water and the end of the drought.

It is not possible for a human being to think against his God or any supernatural power. So the old cultivator cleverly made Indra compelled to allot rain. The trickery played is nothing but to overcome the real situation of drought through imagination. The motif of this tale is reflects a theory that when a desire is not fulfilled in reality, it is fulfilled in imagination. Such imagination in the mind of a story-teller might have evolved to keep equilibrium between nature and culture.

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<sup>6</sup> Entitled '*Viswamitra Swapaka Samvad*'

<sup>7</sup> According to an analysis method by Claude Levi Strauss; for details, please refer to Mahendra Kumar Mishra: Drought in the folklore of Kalahandi, <http://www.asgporissa.org/mahendra/>

## 4 Folk songs related to drought

The folk song tradition of Kalahandi is alive and vibrant, with frequent relations to the pitiable conditions of the drought-affected people, and occasionally with a political twist. Some contemporary specimens are given below, reflecting events and challenges:

*O companion,  
the top of the castor tree dried up  
Drought appeared in the country  
Indira Gandhi saved us.*

*Sajani,  
jadagachha tipi mala  
Amari desare akalakala  
Indra Gandhi saha hela*

Using motor to irrigate the land has compensated the lack of rain due to drought. The song is as follows:

*O companion,  
a mirror like elephant ear  
Drought, arrived, the rain betrayed  
Purchase motor pump.*

*Sajani,  
hatikana darapana  
Marudi helana thakila pena  
Motara paipa ghenā*

In another song a visit of the former Prime Minister Mr. Rajiv Gandhi, to see the drought situation of Kalahandi in July 1985, has left an imprint on the people, who after his departure sang as follows:

*O companion,  
Drought occurred in this country  
Our Rajiba Gandhi arrived in plane  
Made his station Sinapali  
O new moon, hear me.*

*Sajani,  
desare akalakala  
Amara Rajiba Gandhi ho sate  
Jhaje Utrila, sate Sinapali tesan Kala ho  
Nuati Jana.*

The discontent of the people for the local leaders and gratitude for the Prime Minister is pictured in the following song:

*O companion, our leaders betrayed  
Rajiba Gandhi understood well,  
He gave us food and clothes,  
O new moon, hear me.*

*Sajani Amara Neta thakila  
Rajiba Gandhi ho sate bane bujhila  
Sate Khaida pindhana  
dela ho nuati jana.*

The people of Kalahandi have migrated from their homeland to Raipur, Kashmir, Assam and other parts of India to earn their livelihoods. They are paid lower wages, and are not allowed to return to their homeland without the permit of their contractor. The migration due to drought is pictured in the folksong as follows:

*O leaf eater,  
drought occurred in the country  
Sent us abroad, beyond homeland,  
Unrest for belly, O leaf eater.*

*Dalkhaire;  
desare kala akala  
Ghara duara chhadi bidese ghara  
Dalkhaire peta kaje harabara.*

## 5 Proverbs related to drought

Several proverbs of this region illustrate the imprint of drought as reflected in the culture. Some examples:

*A brother in the battle and a milk-yielding cow in a drought are helpful.*

*Judh bele pithir bhai, akal bele duhagai*

*Drought is a problem for the poor and an opportunity for exploitation for the rich .*

*Garibar kaje akal, mahajanar kaje sukal*

*The food of drought should not be wasted.*

*Akalar adhia*

## 6 Bhima and Kandhen

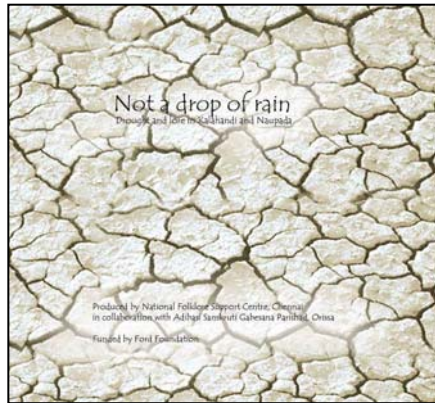
Bhima is a popular rain god worshipped for the sake of plenty of rain and a good harvest.

In response to a drought, Bhima is invited through a shamanistic process and is worshipped for seven days in the villages in a systematic manner. The people believe that only he can bring water from lord Indra. In the folk belief, Bhima is the nephew of Indra, the supreme rain god. As the social status of a nephew commands respect from the uncle, the people believe that Bhima can get water from his uncle Indra without any problem. So in each and every village, Bhima is worshipped along with the goddess Mother Earth. To appease Bhima, they invite the Goddess Kandhen, represented by a young girl of the village, and the two are united ritually. It is a strong belief that hereby, the village will get rain.

## 7 Concluding remarks

Drought is widely reflected in the folklore and traditions of Kalahandi. The traditions are their life-pulse of the people, who share their love and affection, joys and sorrows, pains and pleasures in the community with a sense of belongingness.

## If you want to know more ...



Check the video '*Not a drop of rain: Drought and lore in Kalahandi and Naupada*', produced by National Folklore Support Centre, Chennai in collaboration with Adibasi Sanskruti Gabesana Parishad, Orissa.

The 37-minute video deals with hundred years of drought and lore in the districts of Kalahandi & Naupada in Odisha, and the impact on the lives of Gond and Bhunjia tribes.

Available from YouTube:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=MZY6GIFhQW4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MZY6GIFhQW4)

... or as a 3-minutes trailer:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=hIHFNtvrwh0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hIHFNtvrwh0)

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