

**The Saora Tribe Of Odisha: Their Society And Culture, A Brief Study.**

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**ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER TITLED THE SOARA TRIBE OF ODISHA: THEIR SOCIETY AND CULTURE, A BRIEF STUDY.**

Due to the impact of education the psyche of the soara tribe has drastically changed and most of the youth have joined govt. jobs and have started business entrepreneurship in their localities. Their economic condition has also turned into a new shape. The intervention of modern scientific cultivation has also transformed and motivated them to produce the agricultural commodities in a productive manner. Most of them also have adopted the organic farming which is also praiseworthy. Due to their hard work and perseverance they could earn money for the subsistence of their family. The availability of modern medical facility in their localities has benefited them and the age old practice and belief in nature and totemism has gradually perished from their community as they have understood the effectiveness of medical science, but still the blind belief and superstitious practices persisted in their community which is very minimal. The influence of western culture and the cultural nuances of the localities have tremendously transformed them into a new fold of life style. The cultural acculturation is also found in their manner, food habits, dresses, aesthetics, rituals and customary practices, etc. They are no more segregated or isolated and they have also been merged in the main stream. However, their identity and cultural nuances and value system should be preserved, the days to come.

Key words- *Soara, Savara, Purans, Saura, Sahar, Sabara, Saur, Sora, Sagories, Kandha, Lanjia Soara, Gasadasum, Kitungsum, birinda, elusine corocana, penicum liliale, penicum italicum, sorghum vulgare, penisetum typhoideum, cjlanus cajan and dolichos biflorus, bagado, bagado chas, Kapu, Jati, Sudho, Jadu, Jara, Arsi, Duara or Muli, Kindal, Kumbi, Basu, Lanjia , kulthi, jyanum, mohul, salap, Ramphal, sitaphal, kapu, anital, gomango, Buya, karji, jani, mandal, Disari, Barik, kundan ,Beju*

The “Saora” or “Savara” are a great ancient tribe. They are not only numerically important but also a historically and culturally significant tribal community of the State. They have been mentioned quite frequently in Hindu mythology and ancient classics, epics, *purans* and various other scriptures. Especially in Orissa, they have been very intimately associated with the cult of Lord Jagannath, who according to a legendary tradition originated as a tribal deity and was later brought to Puri under royal patronage. The tribe is called by various names such as Saura, Sabara, Sahar, Saur, Sora, etc and has their racial affinity with the proto-Austroloid stock, which is dominant among the aborigines of Central and Southern India. They are widely found

all over the Central India comprising the States of Bihar, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and West Bengal.

The term Saora is having two connotations, one is derived from the Sagories, the Scythian word for axe, and the other is from Saba Roye, the Sanskrit term for carrying a dead body. Both of them fit well with their habit of always carrying an axe over their shoulder and their primitive occupation of hunting and living on the spoils of chase. They speak an ancient Mundari dialect of their own which is called 'Sora'. It is an uncultivated language, and has no recognized standard. According to Rammurti, the authority on the Saora language that it varies considerably not only between villages but also between individuals. It belongs to the Austric family of languages to which Mundari belongs. There are no doubt poetic themes in the language. Verrier Elwin says that the Saora who give the impression of being rather matter of fact and prosaic are surprisingly picturesque and metaphorical in their speech'. Recently a script has been invented for this language.<sup>1</sup>

Their population as per 2001 census was 4,73,233 accounting for 5.81 percent of the total tribal population of the state. Their decennial growth rate (1991- 2001) was 17.28 per cent and sex ratio, 1007 females per 1000 males in 2001 showing numerical superiority of their women over men. Educationally, they are backward with only 41.13 per cent literacy in 2001. In appearance the Saora resemble the other pre-Dravidian tribes. They have long heads and flat noses. The brow ridges are prominent but not to a great extent like the Kondhs. There is a depression at the root of the nose. Facial prognathism is marked. The hair is generally wavy and curly. Some individuals have epicanthic folds in the eyes. Skin colour is generally brown to dark brown, though there are quite a number of fair complexioned individuals with yellowish shades. The Saora are not strongly built like the Kondh, but they are better in body build in comparison to the tribes of north Orissa. The most remarkable point is their efficiency in climbing and walking on hills.<sup>2</sup>

They are distinguished by their characteristic style of dressing especially the long ended loin cloth of males about six feet long and about ten inches in breadth that hangs at the front and back-the rear end being longer than the front end. This may be plain or may be decorated with red tassels at the ends. Occasionally a man wears a single necklace of beads. The traditional dress of a Saora woman is a waist cloth with gray borders which hardly reaches the knees. The skirt is about three feet in length and about two feet in breadth. In chilly weather a woman covers the upper part of the body with another piece of cloth. These cloths are woven by the Dom weavers from the yarn, hand spun by the Saora themselves. They wear a few necklaces of beads, round wooden plugs, spiral rings made of brass, bell-metal or aluminium in the fingers and toes, little rings in the alae of the nose and metal anklets. Now men wear dhotis, shirts, banyans, pants and women wear sarees, blouses, petticoats etc.<sup>3</sup>

The Lanjia Saora villages are found in the inaccessible interiors and in most cases lie hidden in the forests making it difficult to reach them except through zigzag footpaths. Their villages are generally small, the average size varying from 200 to 800 people. Whether small or big, the Lanjia Saora villages are long established in their present sites. The settlements have come up in undulating terrain and houses remain scattered. When founding a new settlement they select high lands and hill slopes which are free from water-logging and lie near the natural

water sources. Close to the settlements megaliths are erected to commemorate the dead kins. Two wooden posts, called Gasadasum or Kitungsum installed at the entrance of the settlement, represent the guardian deity of the village. The terraced field exhibiting the Saora's skills in contour bunding, revetment and water management surround the settlement presenting an enchanting view.<sup>4</sup>

Saora villages do not conform to any particular type of settlement pattern. Houses are often built in rows with a street left in between. In some villages there are several rows of houses with streets crossing each other at right angles. Often, houses facing the same direction are arranged in rows one above the other like terraces. In many cases the houses are jumbled up, and there are narrow lanes and small openings on to which the doors of the houses open. In these days due to the impact of development and modernization, many remote Saora settlements have got a facelift. Approach roads connect them and inside they have concrete street roads and paths. Modern *pucca* houses have replaced their tiny old huts. A typical house is a one-roomed thatched rectangular dwelling having stone and mud walls with low roof and high plinth front verandah. The walls are coloured with red earth. There may be a single door or in some houses a back door, right in line with the front door. Inside the house a large loft resting on wooden pillars and covering about half of the interiors, is used for storing most of the household articles from food grains to tiny tidbits and clothes.<sup>5</sup>

Under this loft lies the hearth at one end touching a wall. The fire is kept burning constantly. The utensils are kept near the hearth. The open space is used for husking grains with pestles and dining. From the roof hang a number of objects like baskets, gourd vessels, clothes, umbrellas, spears, bows, arrows and earthenware. Agricultural implements are piled at one corner. The pots, gourds and baskets containing the ancestors' clothes and tutelary deities are hung on the wall, which is decorated with icons for which they are famous. Sometimes a fowl pen and a shelter for the pigs are provided on the verandah. A cowshed is built on one side of the house.<sup>6</sup>

The Saora depend upon land and forest for their subsistence. Their livelihood rests primarily on slash-and burn agriculture like shifting cultivation and importantly on terrace cultivation. They are traditionally shifting cultivators and at the same time have expertise in terrace cultivation. They exhibit a high degree of indigenous skill, ingenuity and technological outfit for preparing the terraces with inbuilt water management system. Mainly they grow rice in terraced fields and a variety of minor millets, cereals, and pulses in the swiddens. Every Saora village has a well-defined boundary and its inhabitants carry on shifting cultivation in the hills located within its boundary. Traditionally the hills are distributed on the basis of the *birinda* or extended family. Members of a particular *birinda used to have swiddens* exclusively on one hill and no outsider was allowed to share it for shifting cultivation. The shifting land is called *bagado* and the cultivation is called *bagado chas*. Each and every family has a few patches of swiddens, either on the hill slopes or hill tops. The land itself, timber, fruit trees and game animals are as dear as life to the Saora. For shifting cultivation a hill slope is divided into several plots, demarcated and distributed for cultivation. The farmer who has been cultivating a particular plot of land continues to own it as long as he is capable of cultivating it. When he fails to do so, the plot is allotted to someone else who has needs. In no case are the plots left fallow nor is a plot already owned by one capable of cultivating it, allotted to anyone else. Thus, individual

ownership of the swidden plots is recognized on a hereditary basis. A piece of land is used for cultivation for two to three years during which period different crops are sown in succession. Then the land is abandoned to recuperate. A mixed crop of cereals, minor millets and pulses such as *elusine corocana*, *penicum liiare*, *penicum italicum*, *sorghum vulgare*, *penisetum typhoideum*, *cjlanus cajan* and *dolichos biflorus* are grown. This practice of growing mixed crops is dictated by their food habits and the ecological conditions. The shortening of recuperative cycle, which is due to the shortage of land and population explosion, has caused more damage to the swiddens. The Saora work the soil using a hoe called a *gubla*.<sup>7</sup>

In recent times settled agriculture has taken precedence over shifting cultivation – their traditional mode of subsistence which no longer remained profitable under the cumulative impact of deforestation, ecological imbalance and decline of land /man ratio due to pressure of growing population. Since plain cultivable land is scarce in their area for undulating nature of the hilly terrain and population growth, they have tried to find an answer to this problem by mastering the art of making and cultivating terraced paddy fields on the lower hill slopes and bottoms called *saroba*. Now, their settled agricultural practices mainly revolve around their *saroba*., which they regard to be their valuable productive asset. The Saora are the best terrace cultivators. The terraced fields in which water flows throughout the year are locally exclusively meant for paddy cultivation. The upper terraces which are dry are locally called *jyanum* and used for cultivating *ragi* (*elusine corocana*), *biri* (*phaseolusmungo*) and *kulthi* (*dolichosbiflorus*). The terraces are built right up the beds of the hill streams and extend many hundreds of feet from the depths of the valleys to the hill slopes, in some places rising up to the hill tops. The terraces are works of great engineering skill. The platform of each terrace is flat throughout and the fall of each terrace is packed with stones. The construction of the terraces is so ingeniously and skillfully done that no soil is carried down with the water that flows from the higher terraces to the lower. The terrace fields are privately owned and handed down from father to sons.<sup>8</sup>

With the simplest implements such as a hoe and a small axe, they are able to raise crops in their *bagado* and *saroba* sufficient to maintain their families. Their success in agriculture depends upon their extensive knowledge of the crops suitable for cultivation on the hill-slopes, upon the geographic conditions of the locality, and last but not the least, upon hard work with a team spirit. Being tree lovers, the Saora take all care to preserve the fruit plants like date palm, mango, jackfruit, tamarind, Mohul, Salap, Ramphal, Sitaphal etc in their villages, hills and swiddens. Besides, they raise orchards and kitchen garden in their backyards. Presently, following the diminishing returns from agriculture, shifting cultivation and forestry they have found a dependable supplementary source in horticulture. They have started growing new horticultural crops introduced by themselves as well as the development agencies.<sup>9</sup>

Besides the development of kitchen gardens and backyard plantations, mixed orchards and commercial cash crops, cashew have been raised in wastelands and hill slopes covering parts of degraded swiddens. The cashew plantation drive has been very popular for its low maintenance and high profitability. Now, they are growing cashew on their own initiative and many families own cashew orchards from which comes a good part of income. Helping them to enhance their level of income, it has emerged as a gainful pursuit, gradually pushing shifting cultivation to the back stage. They supplement their earnings by occasional hunting, fishing,

wage earning and round the year forest collections. They also rear animals like bullocks, buffaloes, cows, pigs, goats and poultry for agriculture, ritual and consumption purposes. A very remarkable feature of their socio-economic life is their traditional system of labour cooperative called *ansir*, which ensures them supply of labour for labour intensive operations like swidden cultivation, house construction, terrace making and a host of other activities in the village.<sup>10</sup>

The Saora society is divided into as many as 25 subdivisions such as Kapu, Jati, Sudho, Jadu, Jara, Arsi, Duara or Muli, Kindal, Kumbi, Basu, Lanjia, etc. It is based on occupation, food habit, social status, customs and traditions. According to Thurston's (1909) classification the Saora have been divided into two broad classes, that is, the Hill Saora and the low country Saora. The Saora social organization is distinguished by absence of exogamous totemic clans, phatries, and moieties unlike most tribal societies of the country. Without a clan they lack the complementary institutions of totemism and taboos in marriage relationships. The main exogamous unit is the extended family descended from a common male ancestor. This unit is called *birinda*, which is based on patrilineage.<sup>11</sup>

Marriage is prohibited within a *birinda*, whose members stand to each other as blood brothers and sisters. They participate in the *guar* and *karja* ceremonies with their contributions. When one dies the *birinda* performs the funeral rites the *guar* and *karja*, after which the dead is admitted to the underworld. Even when a *birinda* member migrates to another village he retains his own *birinda* membership, and after his death his bones, etc. are brought to his original village for final mortuary rites. The *birinda* also inherits the property of a heirless member. A notable feature of the *birinda* is that a woman from birth to death belongs to her father's *birinda*. Her *birinda* membership does not change even after her marriage. After her death her own *birinda* members may claim the right to perform her funeral rites and *guar*. Such claims are ungrudgingly accepted by her husband's family. The family is mostly nuclear and the well to do practise polygyny. Generally a family comprises parents and unmarried children.<sup>12</sup>

The Saora love their children very much. If wife proves to be barren, her husband may marry another woman or adopt a child. A pregnant woman does her usual work up to the time of delivery. When the labour pains start she is confined in a corner of the house. At the time of delivery, an experienced elderly lady helps as midwife. Then the mother and the new-born baby take a bath in tepid water. The pollution period is observed for seven days. On the seventh day the woman takes a bath and cooks food which is shared by the women of her family. Usually they prefer the names of ancestors for the child.<sup>13</sup>

Saora marriage is a simple affair. Out of the different forms of marriage prevalent in their society, marriage by arrangement, capture, elopement or service, the Saora have accepted the first form as the rule and others as exceptions. Polygyny is widely prevalent. The Saora say that if a person has more fields to clear, he can have several wives, as each wife can clear a patch of land, thus increasing the economic condition of the family. The parents and relatives of the groom take the initiative in arranged marriages. Generally negotiations are undertaken according to the socio-economic status of the two parties. In some cases it is noticed that a man from a lower *birinda* has married a woman of a higher *birinda* by offering more pots of liquor to the bride's parents. The boy's father, accompanied by some kinsmen, visits the girl's house with a pot of wine. If the girl's parents approve the proposal the wine pot is accepted and

drunk in the presence of some important people of the village. However, in this type of marriage the girl's opinion is also sought. Thereafter, the groom's party pays several visits to the bride's house with pots of liquor. On one such occasion an arrow is taken and the engagement is finalized, while on another occasion the amount of bride price (*panshal*) is discussed and finalized. The bride price is generally paid in both cash-the amount of which varies from time to time and kind, eight pots of liquor. On the appointed day, the groom's party visits the girl's house for the betrothal, taking with them nine pots of wine. On this occasion, they are entertained by the bride's family with a fest of rice, buffalo meat and liquor. One year thereafter, the bride is brought to the groom's house. The day is celebrated by dancing and drinking, and from that day, they are recognized as husband and wife. In the past, marriage by capture (*Ding Ding Boi*) had been fairly common in the Saora society. But now-a-days very few cases of capture are taking place because this practice is not considered very honourable. The Saora also believe that their dead ancestors do not appreciate this practice. Remarriage of widows, widowers and divorcees is permitted in their society. They also practise sororate and levirate forms of marriage, a man can marry his deceased wife's younger sister and woman can marry her deceased husband's younger brother. The Saora cremate their dead, except those dying of cholera and smallpox who are buried. The corpse is carried to the cremation ground accompanied by a musical band. On the next day, the family members of the deceased visit the cremation ground to examine the ashes and discover a sign of the cause of death. In the evening, a fowl is killed at the cremation ground and cooked with rice and bitter leaves and the meal is shared by the mourners of the village. After a year or two the elaborate and expensive *guar* ceremony is observed. On this occasion menhirs are planted and number of buffaloes are sacrificed. This is generally followed by three successive *karja* ceremonies every second or third year to commemorate and honour those who have died in that particular period. This ceremony is generally observed in the month of March or April when agricultural activities are over.<sup>14</sup>

There is no other tribe whose magico-religious domain is as elaborate and complex as that of the Saora. Without understanding their magico-religious beliefs and practices one cannot understand any other aspects of their life. There is no standard catalogue for their gods, for its composition keeps changing, as new ones are introduced and old ones forgotten. But in general the Saora pantheon includes numerous gods, deities and spirits-benevolent and malevolent. The Saora deities are generally called *sonnum* such as Labo Sum, Rude Sum and Karuni Sum, etc. All these gods and spirits make constant demands on the living. If their demands are not met they can cause harm. Malevolent spirits are therefore taken care of more than their benevolent counterparts. They are worshipped with fear and anxiety. People offer sacrifices for safety and wellbeing of the family members. The religious functionaries who cater to the spiritual needs of the Saora are Buyya, who conducts agricultural festivals, Kudan and Kudanboi, the male and female shamans who combine the functions of priest, prophet and medicine men. The position of the Buyya is ascribed, whereas for the Kudan and Kudanboi it is achieved.<sup>15</sup>

In the Saora society Kudan and Kudanboi play a great role in diagnosing and effecting remedies for all kinds of trouble and ailments. A shaman is a diviner-cum-medicine man who can establish direct communication with the unseen world in a trance and cure all types of illness caused by the wrath of evil spirits. Every shaman has a female tutelary and every shamanin has a male tutelary. The relationship between the shaman and tutelary is the same as

that between husband and wife. Most of the festivals revolve round agricultural cycle and life cycle rituals. These are either celebrated by individual families or the whole community. The ceremonies and rites relating to the birth of a child, marriage and death are observed by individual families, whereas those relating to various agricultural operations and the biennial or triennial *guar*— the secondary death rites are observed by the village community. In their society, the most potent factor for ensuring social conformity is the fear of religion, which forms an indispensable part of Saora life and acts as a powerful deterrent against violation of established customs.<sup>16</sup>

The homogenous Saora village is an independent, autonomous and self-sufficient socio-political unit with remarkable cohesion and continuity. The traditional village organization possesses, a well-defined territory, a hierarchy of responsible and respectable aristocracy and leadership and a traditional village council composed of family heads, called “Birinda Neti”. The organization is based upon democratic principles. There are a secular headman (Gomango/Naiko), a sacerdotal headman (Buya /Karji /Jani), headman’s subordinates—(Mandal / Dal Behera), messenger (Barik), astrologer (Disari) and Shaman (Kudan / Beju). By virtue of their knowledge, experience, service and specialization in their respective fields, they have been holding positions of respect and authority in the village. The offices of both Gomango and Buya are hereditary.<sup>17</sup>

The matters concerning the village are decided in village council meetings held under the chairmanship of the Gomango in presence of other leaders and the family heads. It decides the date and time of holding the annual cycle of rituals and festivals, cases relating to the partition of property, sale and mortgage of land, adultery, marriage, divorce and other customary matters. Decisions are reached mostly by consensus and not by majority vote. Punishment for various offences consists of impositions of fines on the offender in forms of cash, liquor, goat, fowl etc. that are offered to the gods and spirits and then consumed in a community feast. Till the recent past, the village headman was yielding vast powers for the maintenance of law and order, peace and good governance in the village. The other leaders were guardians of the cultural, religious and economic norms for their traditional society. Now after the imposition of statutory democratic set up like election, and *panchayat raj*, the situation has changed.

The aesthetic life of the Saora manifests through colourful dance, typical music and the wall paintings, *anital*, in particular. The icons are so skillfully dreamt and drawn that these have made them famous among the scholars and artists of the country and abroad. The Saora are very artistic people. Their artistic skills are not only revealed in their wall paintings but also in their dance and music. Every Saora is a musician who can coin a song and sing it as and when required. Both men and women cultivate the art of dancing and singing as a matter of natural habit. In their songs, one can find a great deal of humour, romance and melody in combination of the words.

In Saora dances, groups of men and women mix together and the drummers and dancers advance towards each other in alternation to the rhythm of the music. Colourful costumes are worn while dancing. Other decorations include white fowl feathers and peacock plumes. Old coloured cloths of cotton and silk are tied as turbans by men and wrapped

around the chest by women. While dancing they carry swords, sticks, umbrellas and other implements and blow whistles and make peculiar sounds.<sup>18</sup>

The musical instruments of the Saora are not many but consist of drums of various sizes, flutes and string instruments. The drums are of three types, a kettledrum, a double membrane drum and a large drum shaped like a bowl. There are also brass cymbals, brass gongs and hide gongs. All these noisy percussion instruments are usually used at certain agricultural festivals. Fiddles are popular at weddings. There is a two-stringed fiddle consisting of a bamboo stem with half a coconut serving as a resonator. It is played by running a bow across it. A second kind of two stringed instrument, somewhat like a guitar, also has a bamboo stem, but here the resonators are two gourds. A third musical instrument, very popular at weddings, is a rasp. This is made from a segment of bamboo and has a slit cut longitudinally down its middle portion. The slit is corrugated, and when scraped with stick emits a grating sound.<sup>19</sup>

Since the remote past the Saora lived undisturbed in their remote mountainous habitat. In modern times, the rapid changes in administrative set-up and political climate of the country and their exposure to the external modern world have influenced the Saora way of life. For example, abolition of intermediary system has set the Saora free from the clutches of the oppressive feudal lords and their subordinates. After independence, the welfare Government has taken a very benevolent attitude towards improving the lot of the downtrodden tribal people of this country including the Saoras. Various protective, welfare and development measures initiated by the Government have resulted in exposing the Saora more and more to outside contact and pressures of ever-advancing and powerful social, economic and political forces.<sup>20</sup>

During the 5th Plan, Tribal Sub Plan (TSP) approach was adopted and Saora was identified as one among 13 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PTG) in Orissa. For their all round development two Micro Projects, one located at Chandragiri in Gajapati district and another at Tumba in Ganjam district have been established. The Micro Projects have adopted the basic approach of Tribal Sub Plan that is location specific and community specific holistic development of the target area and the people. The objective is to raise the living conditions of the Saora and change them from a primitive and pre agricultural stage of shifting cultivation to modern agriculture and the culture of such other beliefs and practices. These Micro Projects and other development agencies like the local C.D. Blocks, D.R.D.A., I.T.D.A. etc besides implementing various income generating schemes have also tried to develop critical and essential infrastructures and services those are incidental to income generation, like road communication, education, health care, drinking water, housing etc. in this remote tribal pocket in order to improve the general living standards of the people. Many of these schemes, especially those on agriculture, soil conservation, irrigation, horticulture, drinking water, and housing have fared well and yielded good results because of popular acceptance.

This development intervention has affected their dependence on traditional archaic mode of subsistence derived from shifting cultivation and forest collection in favour of better gainful economic pursuits. Though they have not totally stopped shifting cultivation, they have found a profitable alternative in accepting modern agricultural and horticultural practices and more particularly in cashew plantations introduced by the Micro Project raised in their unproductive waste lands, high and dry lands and denuded hill slopes. Of course the Saora

beneficiaries deserve major part of the credit, as they, shedding their ignorance, initial suspicions and inhibitions have come forward to accept and derive benefit out of these schemes for their own betterment. The impact of the political change, election system, adult franchise and local self-government have triggered off various political processes and generated new leadership among them.

Due to the impact of education the psyche of the soara tribe has drastically changed and most of the youth have joined govt. jobs and have started business entrepreneurship in their localities. Their economic condition has also turned into a new shape. The intervention of modern scientific cultivation has also transformed and motivated them to produce the agricultural commodities in a productive manner. Most of them also have adopted the organic farming which is also praiseworthy. Due to their hard work and perseverance they could earn money for the subsistence of their family. The availability of modern medical facility in their localities has benefited them and the age old practice and belief in nature and totemism has gradually perished from their community as they have understood the effectiveness of medical science, but still the blind belief and superstitious practices persisted in their community which is very minimal. The influence of western culture and the cultural nuances of the localities have tremendously transformed them into a new fold of life style. The cultural acculturation is also found in their manner, food habits, dresses, aesthetics, rituals and customary practices, etc. They are no more segregated or isolated and they have also been merged in the main stream. However, their identity and cultural nuances and value system should be preserved, the days to come.

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