

## [Tales of Tribals in Transition](#)

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## Tales of Tribals in Transition

### Having Survived Centuries of Conquest, Will India's Ancient Saoran Peoples Succumb to TV and Blue Jeans?

Muslim conquerors and British colonizers came and went. The Saoras hardly noticed. Living almost outside time, this isolated, kind-hearted religious people continued roaming the verdant hollows and hills of Orissa's Eastern Ghats, "sky clad" and sleeping under trees. They worshiped Jagannath as their guardian Deity-yes, the very Jagannath who, in the 12th century, migrated to Puri, now the world-famous home of the Rath Yatra festival. Though called the most "primitive" of India's 100 million tribals, the 3,000-year-old Aitareya Brahmana identifies the Saoras as descendants of the sudra rishi, Viswamitra. Now tending toward assimilation into modern India, 1994 Saora society is an incongruous melange of forest dwellers and urban survivors. In the same family, a son prays to Jesus, his sister, newborn on her hip, prays to Titiyunsum, "Goddess of flowing milk" and their parents worship Krishna. They ceremoniously sacrifice a buffalo for a lost loved one and watch The Bold and Beautiful on a friend's TV. To find out how they are coping at this time, Hinduism Today correspondent Sri Mangala Mohanty went and met with them and filed this report.

By Sri Mangala Prasad Mohanty, Calcutta

Today there are two main groups of Saoras. One, the Sudha, "pure" Saoras, live in plains and fully assimilating into mainstream Orissan society. They can be found in almost any profession. But the term sudha, "pure," applied to them is confusing as these plains Saoras are giving up the old pure tribals ways and thinking. They mostly live near the Vansadhara river, stretching from Parlakhemundi of undivided Ganjam district to Gunpur of Koraput district, Orissa.

The other group, the Lanjia Saoras, or "Hill Saoras," live in tiny villages in the

hilly region near Potrasing, 35 kms away from Gunpur. It is they whom I visited and interviewed (sidebar at right). Set picturesquely amidst steep slopes and terraced fields, Lanjia Saora villages are very beautiful and very small-sometimes only a few houses. Each home adjoins a neighbor's home, with a common veranda. Everywhere are little gardens where tobacco, maize, (corn) and ginger are grown. Sago and date palms are grow all over.

Saoras are an especially affectionate and sociable people, hospitable to strangers like myself. I was impressed right away how spotlessly clean they kept their sturdy, thatched-palm/mud/rock houses. They bathe regularly and both men and women work very hard. They told me that a man who does not work is considered a thief. Prostitution is unknown. Women play a dominant role in socio/cultural/ religious life. They welcome and host guests and hold a much higher status in tribal society than women hold in typical Indian society. In fact, half of their priests, shamans, are women. Women enlarge the lobes of their ears and have a tattoo mark on the forehead.

They told me that once both men and women wore no clothing. But later on, women started wearing leafy skirts. Then they learned weaving and began wearing simple, attractive skirts and the men wore loincloths and a narrow half-skirt in front. Today most women wear simple saris and choli blouses and most men wear pants and shirt.

The Saoras do not fry. Rice, millet and legumes and crab, chicken, etc., is boiled in a pot together along with legumes, unhusked in their skins, and meat and vegetables as well. Saoras place a few grains on a leaf for the ancestors and gods when cooking. They drink salap, a palm wine.

The marriage ceremony is simple and economical. A shaman makes offerings to the ancestors and it culminates with a big feast and dance. After the marriage, the husband builds his own house and sets up a seperate establishment.

Big and Little Soul

According to Saoras, a man has two souls-the suda puradan, "big soul," and samna puradan, "little soul." The little soul gives life to the body and terminates at death. The big soul, which can leave the body in dreams and after death, eventually becomes an ancestor. An old man, Moan Gomango, explained to me that when a soul leaves the body, it goes down to the underworld for a short period but it returns to the earth plane and wanders until it can be admitted to the ancestral dead which is aided by the Guar ceremony when a buffalo sacrifice is performed. The Saora word for the Supreme God is Sonuman. They believe their many demi-Gods are great wanderers through the heavens.

The Saoras attitude to reincarnation is not clear. Some Saoras believe in rebirth and children are named after the ancestors. Some old Saoras insist that there is no reincarnation, not a rebirth, only the name returns.

Saora music is religious. The band consists of four types of percussion instruments and gogerajan (bamboo stem), the memerajan (breasts instruments), the kuranrajan and doddurajan (bamboo musical rasps).

Saoras do not have temples and there is no formal priestly hierarchy. Each home is in a sense a temple, for nearly every ritual begins indoors. For example, when building a new house, the Saoras put rice and wine in the hole dug for the first log post with an offering to Labosum, the Earth-God, who is urged to repel ants from eating the wood. Then they tie to the post a little bundle of rice wrapped in a mango leaf for Uyungsam, the Sun-God, to prevent the house from catching fire. When the building is complete, a shaman is called to offer wine to the ancestors and bless the house. Every house has a store of the old clothes and ornaments of their ancestors which helps keep them psychically connected to the family.

The younger generation loves the "modernizing" adventure. For them, it translates as education, money, buying power. And there's so many things to buy! Most youth now worship only Hindu Gods, not tribal Gods, and many are becoming Christians. The older generation, though not objecting, still cling to most tribal ways. There are no serious efforts by non-governmental organizations pushing for preservation of tribal heritage. The merging of the Saora into mainstream India seems irreversible. On the bright side, the Saora's industrious, friendly and fair-minded nature will surely inject a civilizing influence into a modern Indian society increasingly plagued by social behavior-dowry and wife abuse, female infanticide, violent theft and graft-that the word "primitive" more deservingly

describes, not the Saora.

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#### Sidebar: Pantheon

The following are a few of the 126 traditional Gods, and Goddesses worshiped by the Saoras:

Adununkisum (Uyungsum)-Sun God; Ajorasum-A snake God who lives in streams; Angajan-Moon Goddess; Argatta Kittung-Hinduized Saoras identify Him as Lord Krishna; Arsi basum-Monkey God; Babusum-The guardian God of each village. He moves freely through the village at night on a horse; Bomersum-God of the marketplace; Ilinbongasum-The Rainbow God; Ringesum-The Wind God; Saptungtongsum-God of Dancing. At marriages and other ceremonies Saoras dance to please this God; Tobardasum-God of the banyan tree.

#### Sidebar: Tribal Echoes of the Past

Sri Giridhar Gomango, Honorable Minister of Planning and Programme Implementation (interviewed at his New Delhi residence): "I am a Saora. Saora tribe is the most primitive tribe in India. In the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, Upapurans, Vedanga, etc. the word Sabar or Saora is there. In holy Ramayana, a young Saora woman fed fruit to Lord Rama.

"Prior to modern Hinduism, Sanatana Hinduism was there in written form. But before this, there was tribalism in oral form and tradition. In Orissa, we have a Hindu temple at Puri, but the God is our tribal God. Most of the tribals stayed here in the hills and worshiped in their old tribal way. They did not convert to Hinduism nor did they migrate down into the plains. All Saoras believe that Lord Jagannath is their

God, installed at Puri. Roughly, we worship 126 Gods.

"In the process of time, many of us adapted to Hinduism. From the eleventh century, the period of Saora chief Chola Ganga Dev, the process of assimilation started. The process of modernization also includes modern education. The result is socio, cultural and economic development of the Saoras. But our unique tribal value system has been preserved without change.

"We have our language and script. We worship the scripts, the Sabda Brahma, letter worship. In 1935-36, my grandfather, Late Malia Gomango, invented these letters. All the letters represent tribal gods.

"Women play a dominant role in our society. Many of our priests are women. This feature is not there in Hinduism in Orissa. The transformation from tribalism to Hinduism is a natural and smooth process of assimilation. It has enriched the culture and religious tradition of Orissa and India. From me, my fellow tribal masses expect protection-protection of their socio-economic/political/cultural interests. They want to be free from all types of exploitation. The culture, customs and traditions are eroding day by day, at a very fast pace. It has to be preserved, that is very important. If we remain tribals, we are called 'primitive.' If we develop, we are called 'modern.' The government has given legal protection for preservations of the tribal tradition.

"Nowadays, Saoras live in a synthesis of many religions, a unique combination of Hinduism, Tribalism, Jainism (in Koraput dist.), Buddhism (in places like Nagavali, and Bansadhara) and Christianity (we have churches there). But the Lanjia Saoras in the hills still very much preserve the unique culture and tradition."

Lava of Sogeda village: "I worship Ugungsum, the sun. He is located in sky. Angaiboi, moon, is wife of Sun God. The stars are their children. I worship Ganurboi, Goddess of Rain, for good harvest. We do not have shortage of water. I work hard, worship God and wish happiness of my family and rest of the world. God lives in my house also. I also worship Rama, Sita, Maprusum. Mahaprabhu (Lord Jagannath) is our ancient God. We dance in festivals. I beat dollun, drum. Dreams are real. When our ancestors are hungry, we dream of the bear, then we offer food. When a tree falls, it means the person or somebody from the family will fall sick or die."

Sri Jagli Sabar 26 years-old, of Rayagarha Dist. Orissa: "At home, we worship images of an elephant, horse and tigers painted on our walls. We also have different types of Hindu pujas like worship of Goddess Thakurani, the village deity. At home, we put three earthen pots filled with rice and hang them near the picture. On the festival day of Meria puja, we eat new rice and kandula, a local cereal. We also offer a goat on this day. We consider Lord Jagannath as our God. Our forefathers used to worship Jagannath. I have been to Puri thrice to offer sraddha, offerings, to my ancestors. We have a Jagannath temple in Padampur and every year we celebrate car festival just like they do on a larger scale in Puri.

"In the village, most of the people are becoming modern. TV is there. Girls are going to Oriya schools. Most of us wear modern pants and shirts. Only during religious festivals do I wear dhoti and gamucha, a special kerchief. We now observe marriages in the modern Hindu way but play our traditional musical instruments like budki, dhampa, tudmu (drums), mahuri, (flute)etc. Only a few people still wear traditional dress. We take normal food like rice, khuda, broken rice, mandia, a type of pulse, kolatha cereals, vegetables. We consume a lot of liquor. We offer wine to our Gods and Goddesses. We worship Hindu Gods like Lakshmi and Shiva. In my village, a little temple of Radha/Krishna is there. I am a Hindu. But I remember our old ways of worshiping. People used to worship bows and arrows. Now also we hunt peacocks during the Mayur Kedar festival. I know it is bad to kill animals, but this is a part of our tradition. Even the elected sarpanchs, chiefs of local self-government, do this. This is not to say that we are unkind to animals or nature. During Rudri Keda, we take all our animals-cows, buffalos, sheeps and goats-to the river and give them a cleaning. And you can see for yourself how we have preserved our forests."

Sri Moan Gomango of Dung Dungara village: "I am an old man. I am a born Hindu. Saoras are Hindus. We have a great religious tradition. We have many Gods and Goddesses. Whenever I get a fever I worship Sonata God. Every disease has a Gods who cures it. I have never taken foreign medicine, I never go to the hospital. Whenever I feel sick, I worship God. We sacrifice pigs, hens, eggs. I drink salap, wine. My son was Hindu in his childhood. Now he goes to Christian Church. But we stay together, family. Kuraitung is the greatest God. He created Sun God and the world."

Kumari Indri Sabar of Rejinkal: "When somebody in the family dies, we go far away and get a special big size stone. We dig the earth and put it in. We worship it. I worship God Titiyungsum, who puts a lot of milk in my breast. I feed my child well. I do not go to church. My friend asked me to come to church. Only once a year I go

to Gunpur for Car Festival of Mahaprabhu Lord Jagannath. I work in my fields."

Sri Monosi Raika, of Manikpu: "I know how to weave our traditional dress. The ones we are wearing are made by us. But not many people know how to weave it. The Doms used to weave it for us. The costume costs more, so people don't wear it. Only during festivals and religious ceremonies do we wear it. I visited Delhi once to participate in the Republic Day parade, and met many important people. But I love my place. I will never migrate to the plains. What is the difference between the Hindus and Saoras? We are old Hindus. Lord Rama visited us. Modernization is good but we love our tribal culture and religion. Education, medicine, etc., are good. We need little medicine. I am healthy. God takes care of us. We think good and do good works. So why should we become ill?"

Kumari Supra Gomango of Rejinkal: "Gomango means 'head.' My husband is head of the village. He is also married to another woman. We wives live in two different houses but work together and share the income equally. I am a tribal. I am Saora. You could see my ears with enlarged lobes. Inside I put wooden jewelry. I have traditional dress, but I wear this sari and blouse most of the time. I worship goddess Thakurani and Mahaprabhu, God Jagannath. I know how to draw our sacred ittalan (pictographs). We sacrifice hens for ancestor Gods. I have my father-in-law ancestor's dress. He visits us in spirit form."

Mr. David Edison Lima of Puttasing: "I am a graduate. I won as the chief of the local unit of self-government. For our self-development, I became a Christian. In my village, Puttasing, most people are Christians. We go to church. Jesus is kind. He gives us peace. Christianity encourages good education, modernization which results in development of the individual and the society. But because we are simple, others exploit us. In the modern times, people must read and develop. I am the chief organizer of the annual cricket tournament."

Kumari Malti Raika: "I am Christian. Church gave us education. I am a teacher. We teach Oriya language to old people as well as to the young fellows. I am Saora and know Saora language. If they do not learn Oriya and read, how can they progress?"

Sidebar: Jagannath, Tribal God

According to palm-leaf chronicles of the Jagannath temple, Puri, the deity there was earlier worshiped by the Saoras. The wooden murthi was originally in the charge of Basu, a Saora tribal. In the same chronicles, the deity is described by a 16th century Oriya poet Dinakrishna Das. It says the God Jagannath appeared to Saora Basu. The king of Orissa built the temple in the 12th century installing Jagannath as the presiding deity.