



RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE SOURAS OF ODISHA

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ABSTRACT

The Souras are an ancient folk inhabiting the mountainous regions of southern Odisha. Leading an isolated life from the main stream of modern civilization, they are the most conservative and traditional loving people. The religion and the religious life of the Souras is an enigma. More enigmatic are their system of worship, religious ceremony and rituals. Perhaps the religion of no other tribe is so elaborate and complicated as that of the Souras. Although the Soura's pantheon has incorporated within itself a number of gods, goddess and demi-gods, their original belief system centers round the worship of ancestors and spirits. An attempt has been made in this paper to exhibit to the world the distinct nature of their religion and religious belief.

KEYWORDS: *ancient folk , system of worship, religious ceremony and rituals.*

INTRODUCTION

The Souras are a very ancient tribal community with a long history. They find mention in the Sanskrit literature, the epics, the puranas and other religious texts. Especially, in Orissa, they have been very intimately connected with the worship of Lord Jagannath, who according to a legendary tradition originated as a Sabara deity and was later brought to Puri under royal patronage. Being hardy highlanders, they live in remote mountains of different places of Eastern India i.e. Odisha, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal. But, they are mostly concentrated in Rayagada and Gajapati districts of Orissa which can be called as "Soura country".

No human society exists without the belief in supernatural entities. The religious and superstitious phenomena are deep rooted in each and every known human society on this earth. But this is more in case of the tribals particularly the Souras. The Souras are mainly divided into 2 broad classes i.e. the Hill Souras and the Low-land Souras. The Hill Souras also known as Lanjia Souras who live in inaccessible hill regions, whereas, the Low-land Soura inhabit the plain country adjoining the areas of the civilized people.

Although the Soura pantheon has incorporated within itself 170 gods, goddess and demi-gods, their original belief system centers round the worship of ancestors and spirits. The uniqueness of Soura culture is the worship of ancestors what they call *Dumba* with a belief that they are living in other world (after death) still closely looking after the well being of the family. Souras think that it is a great sin to forget the ancestors in their social functions.

An important and characteristic feature of *Soura* religion is the custom of making drawings on the walls of houses in honour of the dead, to avert disease, to promote fertility and on the occasion of certain festivals. It is popularly known as *idital*. The word has been probably derived from the roots of the *Soura* language *id* means "to write" and *tal* means *Kitalan* or wall. Thus, *Idital* means "Writing on the wall".¹

The wall paintings of the Souras known as *Idital* are very attractive, lively and fascinating. Inside the house on the walls one often finds a group of sketches elaborately drawn which are significant from religious point of view. The Souras believe in four categories of spirits which are mainly based on their pattern of relationship with men. These are; (1) Protective Spirits, (2) Benevolent Spirits, (3) Malevolent Spirits, and (4) Ancestral Spirits. Every facet of their life covering round the year is intimately connected with religious beliefs and ritual practices. It is these aspects of their culture that give meaning and depth to their lives and solidarity to their social structure.

The exact symbolic meaning of the icons which consist of various sketches of human being, horse, elephant, Gun man, aeroplane, cycle, sun, moon, spirits, etc. are very difficult to understand. An icon is meant for the edification of gods and ancestors. The general idea is that an icon is done to flatter and please the gods and ancestors so that they may spare the members of the house hold from their invidious attention.

The concept of *Idital* is very unique in Soura community.² The drawings on the wall representing the "house of the God" contain pictures of all the objects which a Sabaras would come across and has had some encounter. The pictures of the rocks (representing hills), the crops grown on podu lands, the animals they hunt, the forest produce they collect, and some other material cultural items receive prominence in such drawings.

All the varied aspects of their environment are associated with some god or other.³ To satisfy and worship all these deities, they sacrifice hen, goats, sheeps, pigs and buffalos. At every stage of their agricultural operations, they also sacrifice birds and goats and offer clothes to different deities and spirits.⁴ Therapeutic treatment through magic or *Sabari Vidya* is prevalent among them.

The blind believes, superstitions, custom and rituals are centering round the Sabara's wall paintings. When an icon is to be made, the householder may either paint it himself following the inspiration of his dreams, or he may search for a *shaman* or an *ittalmaran* and ask him what has to be done. The artist offers the rice and wine to the god or ancestor concerned and says:

*"I am an ignorant fellow; I know nothing; but I have been told to make a house for you. If I make any mistakes, do not punish me, for it will not be my fault".*⁵

The reference to the house is significant. The icons are the one dimensional homes of the spirits. "A spirit, it is said, sits in his picture as a fly sits on a wall". The same idea is emphasized in the icon.

They believe in witchcraft, dream, spirits, ghosts and the effect of their wrath on the family and society. Souras feel that the super natural power, spiritual thinking and true worship, control the worldly affairs. They seek the blessings of gods and invisible power by invocations and sacrifice. If anything goes bad they blame themselves for anything wrong in their rituals and the system of worships. They also believe that an unseen force guides the Universe and their society exists because of the total control of both good and bad by those supernatural powers. When the Souras face troubles, sufferings and natural calamity they offer sacrifices to appease the gods, ancestors, spirits in order to free from its evil look. They feel that these invisible forces dwell with the ancestors. To remind and worship them daily, they place these forces at home in shape of icons on the wall.

To Souras the Kudanmar is the person who can control the invisible evil spirits. They are able to master the external problems of disease and death caused by ancestors. He has control all over the village. He holds a respectable position in the society and leads a dedicated life. He also acts as *Iditalmar* or Painter. The Kudanmar also directs the *Iditalmar* in the composition of required *Idital* and its concentration.

On the whole *Idital* play an important role in the life and religion of the Souras. Each *Idital* contains a message. It should not be visualized from its figures and lines but it should be studied from philosophical and philanthropic point of view because the supreme objective of the *Idital* is the well being of the human being.

The religion and the religious life of the Soura is an enigma. More enigmatic is their system of worship, religious ceremony and rituals. Perhaps the religion of no other tribe is so elaborate and complicated as that of the Souras. To satisfy and worship all these deities, spirits and ancestors, they sacrifice hen, goats, sheep, pigs, buffalos; offer liquor pots and clothes. This was the root cause of their

poverty and deprivation. But, the system of human sacrifice was not prevalent among them which was once up on a time rampant among the Kandhs.

The significant wall paintings of Souras are unique in comparison to any other tribes of the state or country. The Souras carry the practice far beyond anything imagined by the Gonds, Bondas, Kandhas, Bhuyans, Santals, Kols or by any other Indian tribes. Regarding the amazing wall paintings of the Sabaras Elwin Verrier remarks "The wall paintings of other tribes are more or less decorative in nature but, of Souras are meaningful with a religious purpose".

It is believed that all disease in men and animal are caused by the mischief of some evil spirits or due to the curse of a guardian deity. If, these spirits or deities are appeased properly and the evil spirits can be driven away by force or so, there will be no danger of disease. Keeping this in view, the magic-doers or *shaman* apply charms, amulets consecrated water, salt, oil, *jhara-phuka*, etc. Practice contagious magic at the crossing of three, four or five rods and so on. They also advice their clients to invoke guardian deities and in such worship they often prescribe birds like pigeon, cock and animals like he-goat or buffalo to be sacrificed.⁶

Different tribal groups are specialists in different treatment, as for example, *Sauras* are expert in Sabari Vidya dealing with evil spirits and witchcraft. Kandhs are experts or specialists in the night goblin. They had a particularly strong belief in that exercise of the art which enabled witches to transform themselves into tigers, leopards, wolves and so on, and in this shape to attack human beings or their cattle.⁷ They believed that witches had the faculty of transforming themselves into tigers called as *Pulta Bagha*. John Campbell himself had come across such cases of *Pulta Bagha*.⁸

Different spells are used for curing different diseases. Generally the male members of the society practice sorcery, but a few female members also practise it. The womenfolk who practise it, is called *Dahani* or *Dankini*. Some people practise magic. It is an institution to them where, there are both professional and non-professional magicians and exorcists. Professional one learns the art of sorcery or magic from a *Guru* or a preceptor. Non-professional exorcists are generally those persons who are informed in a dream by a deity or a spirit to act as advised and he acts accordingly. He cannot generally teach the art of magic, or his secret, it is his own specialization. But a professional exorcist learns the art by practise.⁹ But whoever practices it, does it in secret.

The religious life of the Souras is very complex and enigmatic. The religion of no other tribe is so elaborate and complicated as that of the Souras. The concept of Supreme God is almost non-existent among them. Every facets of their life covering round the year is intimately connected with religious beliefs and ritual practices. In different places different Gods are considered important. Moreover there can be no standard catalogue for these Gods as their names are changing and new ones are introduced and old ones are forgotten.

The Savara religion is otherwise known as 'Animism' because the Souras worship every aspect of nature as living being and believe that some agents of nature with ghostly power always surround them with malignant intentions. Although the religion of the savaras is full of blood with animal and bird sacrifices.

The religion and the religious life of the Sabaras is an enigma. More enigmatic is their system of worship, religious ceremony and rituals. Perhaps the religion of no other tribe is so elaborate and complicated as that of the Souras. The Sabaras believe that, if the demands of the ancestors and spirits are not fulfilled they may cause harm to them. To satisfy and worship all these deities, spirits and ancestors, they sacrifice hen, goats, sheep, pigs, buffalos; offer liquor pots and clothes. This was the root cause of their poverty and deprivation.¹⁰ But, the system of human sacrifice was not prevalent among them which was once up on a time rampant among the Kandhs.

The Souras should not be blamed or branded as barbaric and savage people. Their spells, charms, amazing *idital* (wall painting), folk method of treatment and medicine, their art of dialogue with the dead, sorcery, witchcraft, *Savari Vidya* (*Black magic*) are the invaluable wealth for our society. These are the traditional heritage of the Savaras. But the pity is that on the wake of the modernization, industrialization and the spread of education these unique heritage of the Savaras are fast disappearing from the society.¹¹ So

the necessary steps may be taken to preserve all these unique culture of the Souras in the form of VCD, DVD, E-Library. A joint effort with inter-disciplinary approach may be made by the anthropologist, sociologist, linguistics, historian and art historian etc to interpret and record all the above mentioned oral literatures of the Souras otherwise the tradition or the valuable wealth of the centuries will disappear from their society very soon.

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