

Indigenous Beliefs and Rituals: A Study on the Savara tribe of South Odisha

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Abstract: Human civilization has evolved since one lakh years before. It is very difficult to take any conclusion on the date of the beginning of the human being in the world. According to the theory of Charles Darwin man is the descendant of a monkey. If we consider that the present hominid is an evolution of the indigenous life. Then every aspect of the present belief and practices has come out from the indigenous people. In every corner of the world, there exist a few indigenous groups which still believe in their rites and rituals. Odisha is one of the largest inhabitation of indigenous people in India. Odisha is the largest group of tribal inhabited in India, and the second populated tribal state after Madhya Pradesh. Among the 62 tribal groups, the Savara tribe is one of the ancient primitive tribes that still existed in Odisha, which is reflected in the various ancient Hindu scriptures. The tribe is at present inhabited in the foothills of Mahendragiri mountain of Eastern Ghat and it sounding mountain ranges of Eastern Ghats. The indigenous people still struggle for their existence in the present society they have their own beliefs, religion, and customs which are still prevalent among the community. The primitive society inhabited in south Odisha, which is now due to globalization, modernization, Christianization, and Sanskritization impacts many changes taking place but there is some indigenous practices are still cultured.

To understand the beliefs and rituals we should focus on their practices such as Animism and natural worship, Ancestor worship, festivals and celebrations, shamanism and healing practices and rites and passage.

Keywords: Indigenous, ancestor, culture, ritual, animism, shamanism

Introduction

The tribal world is particularly living its traditions and beliefs. The scholars believed that the tribal is Animism which is described in the recent years by the Anthropology conceptualise as an alternative

to modern-western naturalistic notions of human-environment relations. It refers to ontology or worldviews which assign agency and personhood to human to non-human beings alike. Currently the standard notions of animism, based on hunter-gatherer and horticultural societies in other regions, examine the roles of the life forces, souls and spirits and can influence in local cosmologies and indigenous religion (Guido Sprenger & Kaj Arhem-2010). According to the Cambridge dictionary, animism is the belief that all natural things, such as plants, animals, rocks and thunder, have spirits and can influence human events. The traditional beliefs of the tribal of south Odisha in general Savara tribe in particular would influence the Odishan culture at present. All the indigenous people have their course of thinking and re-examining their belief systems and their traditional religious practices. The Savara tribe is one of India's oldest tribes which is reflected in the textual pieces of evidence of ancient and medieval periods of India. They have very primitive beliefs in their thinking and also they still practice in their daily life in the socio-cultural and religious aspects. At present the tribals are mostly in modernized well dressed in the twenty-first century. Although some of their belonging adopted the non-indigenous beliefs, and modern culture, the Sankritization, and Christianization in contact with western people and non-tribes. Still who are untouched by modern culture, cannot assimilate them with new thoughts. The indigenous people mostly lived simple lives, with nature, and the environment surrounding them. They are the safeguard of the environment, nature etc. Their beliefs and culture are insisted on these thoughts. In this paper, I will make a humble attempt at the religious customs and their practices. Their content of religion is based on nature, and the surroundings where they live [Rowkith & Bhagwan, 2020]. They always flee and hide from natural calamities such as drought, flood or any type of endangered things. They are all worshipper of their surroundings like the sun and moon their activities. The clouds, the sky, the mountains, forests, the earth, etc. every aspect surrounding them think of god. Accordingly, they have their festivals. Like all other civilizations, the savages had their form of indigenous beliefs. The main aspects of their religion are to respect their forefathers who were dead the safeguard of their welfare and the danger surrounding them. All aspects of natural dangers were eradicated by the underworld who were already dead. So in every festival of their life started with a calling to their ancestors. The foremost important beliefs is the Animism and nature worshipers. Since humans live as bipedalism or humanoid, the man was very conscious about their surrounding environments which later evolved as the culture of primitive which is still prevalent among the various tribes at present days.

Aim and Objective of the Study

This study aims to explore and document the indigenous beliefs rituals practices of the Savara community in south Odisha. Through the study shedding light on their cultural heritage and spiritual practices. By conducting research, we tried to contribute to the preservation and understanding of the unique traditions of the Savara people also providing insights into a broader field of indigenous knowledge systems.

- To investigate the religious and spiritual beliefs of the Savara community including cosmology, deities and mythological narratives
- To document the rituals and ceremonies performed by the savaras, including rites of passage, seasonal festivals and healing practices.

Animism and Nature Worship

The aboriginal tribes of India elsewhere, have been pushed, by every encroaching civilization, into the more remote sections where they live uninfluenced in custom and religion by invading

races. The aboriginals' religion, originally sun-worshipping and animistic, has been, in some districts, permeated and perverted by Hinduism. The wilder tribes are still unabsorbed by outside, religious influence, and still cling to their old Nature-worship; its fetishes, its devils, its taboos and superstitions (Lily Strickland, 1929). The Savara tribe lived a simple and pastoral life; their weapons, utensils and implements of agriculture were of the most primitive sort. They worship the forces of nature in trees, stones, rivers, and all forms of animate and inanimate life. Their seasonal life is marked by seed planting and harvesting, and these they celebrate with festivals, in which music plays an important role. One of the important concepts of the aborigine, which still exists here in India at large and the tribe savar in particular i.e., particularly practice of magic and witchcraft. The tribe who was giving medicine was a wild and fantastic dancer, who in posturing to drum rhythms, excited the audience to imitation, and so he may have been the father of all devil dances.

The animists worshipped Nature, visible and invisible, and the people both forms of life with spirits. Forests, mountains, rivers, stones, reptiles, birds, and animals were all regarded as part of the omnipotent system. There came into being created by his imaginative and superstitious brains, a host of devils djinns, fairies, goblins and such creatures of an Elder World (Virtebsky- 1993). The savaras of the Gajapati district who were not converted still practice the animistic beliefs. The tribal religion is also called as animism, primitive religion, indigenous religion and by a host of other vernacular terms. Scholars like Weber, Freud, Nietzsche and Spencer heralded the demise of religion, which they superseded by reason and scientific temper. The theory of tribal or primitive religion occupied a prominent space in the development of anthropological thought. According to Tylor 'animism' was divided into two dogmas: first, the belief in the existence of soul; and second, the belief in the pantheon of spirits extending up to a powerful almighty god [Tylor, E. 1958].

Ancestor Worship

Ancestor worship, which is one of the significant aspects of the human being is worshipped and believed to date by most of the races of the world. The Savara tribes have inhabited the forest region, which is probably made dependent on the nature and forest. Nature gives them life, and for that causes, they might believe that the nature surrounding them is worshipped. The plants and animals contribute to the life of the forest dweller the savara tribe. The plant contributes greatly to various practical human needs such as food, medicine, material culture, ritual and so on (*Terashima, African study monographs*- 2001). The Savara tribal culture is mostly evolved from nature worship and the spirit. The savara are believed the dead parents as sonum which is a casual relation with the dead person in their belief. The dead people who died is called as Ancestor-Sonum, retaining his role within the lineage and something of his personality and nurturing descendants. The Savara moved around various landscapes, he may encountered sonums and become involved with them. This happened at random but as a development of his long-term relationships with various dead persons. Though his encounters with Sonums may cause illness, they do not constitute a medical history of his states of mind concerning other persons. An illness in a living person is a reflection of a mood or attitude in a dead person, and the rite which heals a sick person is also a rite to acknowledge the claims of Sonum who has attacked him [Vitebsky, 1993]. The ancestor worship among the Savara tribe is still practised among the non-converter who are not converted to Christianity particularly.

Important Beliefs and their Practices

The Indigenous Savaras had still some of the Indigenous beliefs which are practised to date. As per their primary concern, the natural surroundings of their village, such as the mountain god, stream god, village god, sun god, and moon god are the chief Gods of the Savara village. Besides to safeguard their nomads they have certain festivals arranged by their village priest which are practised according to the primitive culture. The Savara tribe worships nature like the mountains surrounding their villages, the streams the trees and plants. The high mountain in their village is called the chief mountain where they worshipped by keeping reserved some parts without cutting the trees which is called *Barupar* (Baru) mountain worship. The important mountains of the village are considered the houses of the underworld (the dead ancestor's house). Besides it, the various sites of the village are residing places of various dwelling places of the tribal deity.

Fair and Festivals and Celebrations

The tribal had various fairs and festivals throughout the year Such as Kondempar(wild rice), Gangapar(Millet), (Dossehera), Tamiysang, Ragapar (Harad) Kandola/Barupar (Maoutain) (Magha), Dolapar, Udapar (Mango), Kadopar(Mud)/Godapar, Muadapar/ Kitungpar, and Chaitrapar/Chercher. Like all other cultures savaras had started their festival during the sowing of land, which is mostly during the end of the summer season when the rain had started and start their cultivation such as the cultivating the land. Preparing land for cultivation, like cutting jungles and cleaning the fields with all the villagers participating in that. The land was prepared in the days and ended in the evening with marriage-making, drumming, singing songs and dances performed by the people who were taking part in the work and backed to home in the evening before the sunset. The Festival is generally during rowing and showing of the forest land during the summer and end of the summer, particularly through shifting cultivation. When they go to work they take various musical instruments such as (*Panum*) the mrudangam type, (*tudum*) drum and flute are mostly used. When they finish the work in the evening they are all joyfully back with dance songs to their family. The festival at Odia's society known as Raja Sankranti also falls in June and July. Every civilization had its own beliefs, that made their concept up to their riches since the very beginning. The early civilizations like Egypt civilizations, Indus civilization, Mesopotamian civilizations and Chinese Civilizations according to their nature, ecology and environments, have their society and culture which is a human tendency. The things which are not understood by human beings come to belief such as blind belief, and supernatural powers at last man comes to god what men had formed the religion. The religion itself comes from the belief of primitives. The Savaras of south Odisha are one of the distinct tribes from ancient India. The science and present culture are also an evolution of the primitive thought of the human mind.

At the present age, the Savara's culture is an admixture of Hindus and Christians around them, but despite this, they are celebrating various indigenous festivals. The festivals celebrated among the Savara tribe are intended to call their ancestors and talk with them to save their lives from various dangers that occur by nature and give them to live happily in their social life. The festivals and fairs in tribal society are related to worship of the nature and festivals specifically for producing new crops. The festivals in the Savara tribe may be classified into two categories those are institutional festivals which are celebrated with the whole village fixed the date by the chief priest of the community, such festivals are mostly crop production time. The second type of festival which are related to nature worship (in these festivals there is no such gathering taking place it is performed by the priests and

their groups. Festivals in the Savara tribe often include not only worshipping but also eating drinking, dancing, singing and merry-making. The central purpose of institutional festivals of the Savara tribe is celebrations may be solemn and joyful. It is not like Odia festivals, the festivals were conducted according to the season, it were fixed by the chief priest of the Savara village.

The religious faith of Savara generally governs the supernatural forces. The belief and culture of the primitive arose when failed to understand natural phenomena. Western scholars have called it 'Animism', it is a religious belief which has no definite code of conduct. They had their own beliefs with constant movements and changes in the world things. The things that affected their life much, are animated it with their concepts. They conceived the beliefs that surrounded them as a ghostly company of powers. All elements and tendencies is interpersonal in their character which is shapeless fanaticism no such image can be made and no proper idea may not be formed. India has consisted of various plural societies although it is unified in its culture, there is various diversity according to its geography, and environment. Despite this, ethnic diversity has been widely accepted among Indian tribes to maintain their ethnic identity.

The Savara tribes have some indigenous beliefs which are still prevalent among them. If we look at their fairs and festivals then we can easily assume the indigenousness. Throughout the year, the tribes have different fairs and festivals which are Indigenous, and they have practised the rituals and practice of Hinduism or Christianity. The main festivals of the Savara tribes can be divided into various heads such as the Hindu practice. The indigenous beliefs are mostly concentrated on the nature surrounding them. The cropping festivals, reaping, stream worship, mountain worship, land etc.

The savara's are mostly lived with the shifting cultivation. During the clearing, the forest for the making of the soils is found in May and June. While preparing the soil for the cropping, the men and women were engaged in the daytime both men and women were engaged with marriage-making with music and songs. And when they return to the home they are returning with rejoice with the songs and drums and flute. That is the start of the year of the tribe. In every soil preparation period, they enjoy festivals.

The reaping festivals generally fall in September and October. Generally, the tribes are reaping the crops such as mountain rice, and many other pulses. The festival is fixed by the village priests and all the villagers are engaged in music and dance the festival is known as *Kondempar*. The festival is mainly to reap the crops in this season. The *Kondempar*(wild rice) is celebrated during August and September when crops like wild rice, various fruits like oranges, and many wild roots are worshipped. The aim of the festive is to respect the foodstuff that grows around them.

Besides cropping and reaping the tribes also worshipped various natures such as worship mountains and streams, before the reaping of the crops in the shifting cultivation, the tribe usually worshipped to the mountain to safeguard the crops they planted and produce good crops. Another mountain worship is the cult god of the village which is worshipped during January followed by the Pulse(*Harda*) *Kandola* (*Ragapar*) festival is one of the important festivals among the tribe. They have functioned for three days where the men and women were much enjoying with dance and song. It is the festival of spring season.

After the *Harada*(*Ragapr*) festival another festival is celebrated i.e., the Mango festival (*Udapr*) in April. The mango is also one of the important crops of the tribe. This festival is celebrated for three days instruments such as drums, flutes are mainly used in the festivals. The men and women are both engaged in dance and music day and night.

The main festivals such as reaping festivals, Magha puja (*Ragapr*) and Mango festival. The main festival of the tribe is usually called the underworld (the parents/ dead person). On every festival of the Savara tribe, they called their dead person and gifted new dresses and used articles by the man or women, they were called by the shaman. It is an important practice of the Savara tribe that in every fair and festival, they remember and gifts to the dead person of the family. Besides there are many practices which are celebrated and some of them are Sanskritized.

The Savaras are one of the ancient tribes of India, which are now remained in the southern part of Odisha. Due to globalization and modernization, indigenous beliefs are gradually endangered. The tribes are now forgetting the indigenous due to globalization and modernization. The government has to encourage the people to bring alive the Indigenous practices which are the Indigenous heritage of the human civilization.

Shamanism and Healing Practice

The Savara believes that all type of illness and death comes because of cosmological concepts. When people feel unhealthy their prior belief is because of some active consciousness around them particularly due to the unhappiness of Sonum (ancestor), the underworld(life after death). The illness comes to the Man due to an attack by the sonum. To overcome the illness they are prepared to call the Sonum through various forms, particularly by the *Beju* (Kudambo), who call to the wonder world. The tribal religion is given a varied appearance by the fact that gods and spirits are called by different names, but fundamentally it is everywhere the same. There is always some kind of supreme being, often of rather ambiguous character, who is important for legend rather than for ritual. Beneath him, but not subject to his control, is a vast body of lesser gods- who may well be called demons and furies, for they are in the main malignant. They are often remembered when they bring tragedy to a home. There are some nature gods- of the sun and moon, the sky, the wind and rain- some of them borrowed from Hinduism. There is generally a mother Earth, and many deities of individual villages, hills and forests. All the gods, except possibly the greatest, have to be propitiated by regular sacrifices, and all the tribes observe a ceremonial year which is closely connected with the agricultural operation. Some offerings are made before sowing. Others during the process of growth, and in most cases there are Harvest festivals when the new crops must be given to the gods before they are eaten by men. If offended neglected, and sometimes out of sheer wantonness, the gods attack men with disease. Sickness is nearly always due to the invention of some new spirit in the unseen world; ghosts and ancestors, as well as the gods, have the power of giving it to mortals. In such cases, the shaman is summoned; he divines the cause of the disaster and prescribes the remedy, which is usually an animal sacrifice made with the offering of grain and liquor(Verrier Elwin,1919). According to Verrier Elwin, there was a story regarding shamanism a great magician named Kursu loved to a girl Machho, and he tried to marry that girl but she was not interested. So one day the magician went naked to Muski Hill, where there was a shrine to Umahangisum. Where offered a black chicken and coconut to God and sprinkled him with liquor. And at once love came to her, and that day she was restless and midnight went to the house of the old man (Elwin, 1919). Besides the various nature Gods, the Savara has an ancestor Sonum which is worshipped from time to time. Shamans in the Sora tribe also contain Sonums in sealed pots, wall paintings and their bodies during trance; and they conduct them across ‘formless’ space along threads and the ladders used to link the sun, earth and underworld.

Conclusion

It is very necessary for all human beings that at present day the world is changing very fast. Society has changed throughout the world, which has also affected to Savara tribe. The cultural heritage of the Savara tribe is in danger nowadays. So it is the foremost responsibility of the human being to survive the great cultural heritage. Due to globalization, they are gradually extinct from society. The Savara tribe is gradually Christianised and Sanskritized with the growing civilization surrounding them. Most of the tribes were Christianised, some the them Sanskritized and some of them still practised their culture but very few. In my view, the socio-cultural dynamics of the world is globalized which is adversely affecting the indigenous cultures of the tribe also.

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