



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Arts

SOCIAL LIFE OF ODISHAN TRIBAL ARTISTS

KEY WORDS: TRIBES, ODISHA, COMMUNITY, SOCIAL

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ABSTRACT

There are 62 tribes in Odisha, spread over different parts at different levels of socioeconomic development. In Odisha one can find almost a new dialect, culture, and different people after moving one tribal area to another. Likewise the tribal population is also very much varied and diversified. Each of the tribal communities belongs to distinctive communities either migrated from another place or the original inhabitants of the land. The distinctiveness of the tribes lays their rituals, cultures, beliefs and above all the harmony in which they survive in unison with nature. Though the tribes of Odisha belong to three linguistic divisions, yet they have lots of socio-cultural similarities between them. These commonalities signify homogeneity of their cultures and together they characterize the notion or concept of tribalism. Tribal societies share certain common characteristics and by these they are distinguished from complex or advanced societies.

There are sixty-two tribes inhabiting Odisha. As per 2011 census they constituted 22.13% of the total population of the state. Their decadal growth has declined since 1981 upto 2001 as 22.43%, 22.21%, and 22.13% in 1981, 1991 and 2001 census respectively. As per the Census 2011, the state of Odisha has the third highest percentage of tribal population in the country which stands at 9590756. The state has the unique distinction of having 62 different tribal communities spread over 30 districts and 314 blocks. They constitute 22.85% of the total population of the state and contribute 9.17% to the total tribal population of the country. The growth and distribution of ST population have got special significance. The amazing conglomeration of traditions, beliefs, sorrows and philosophies that together constitute and vitalize the rituals and festivals of the tribes, has descended from antiquity and has been preserved unimpaired to the present day.

Every facet of their life covering round-the-year activities 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. Among the tribes there are religious functionaries who cater to their spiritual needs. For example, the hierarchy of priests among the Saoras may be divided into three categories. The Buyya is a priest who presides at agricultural festivals and offers sacrifices that especially characterize these occasions. The Kudan is a shaman who combines the functions of priest, prophet and medicine-man. The sacerdotal head among the Juang is called Nagam or Buita, Pujari or Sisa among the Bondos and Jani among the Kondhs. The post of these officials are mostly ascribed but not achieved. The ceremonies and festivals of the tribes can be classified into two groups, that is, those that relate to the individual families and those that relate to the village as a whole. The ceremonies and rites relating to birth of a child, marriage, death are observed family-wise whereas those relating to various agricultural cycle, eating of new fruits, hunting, etc. are observed by the village community. The tribes of Odisha, despite their poverty and their pre-occupation with the continual battle for survival, have retained the rich and varied heritage of colorful dance and music forming integral part of their festivals and rituals.

Among them, the dance and music is developed and maintained by themselves in a tradition without aid and intervention of any professional dancer or teacher. It is mainly through the songs and dances the tribes seek to satisfy their inner urge for revealing their soul. The performance of these only give expression to their inner feelings, their joys and sorrows, their natural affections and passion and their appreciation of beauty in nature and in man. The joy of free life finds expression in tribal art and craft. It is through this

endeavor their cultural self-image and aesthetic sensibilities are visualized. The artistic skill of the tribal people is not only manifested in their dance and music but also in their dress and ornaments, wall paintings, woodcarvings and decorations, etc. The beautiful wall-paintings and floral designs of the Santals and the ikons of the Saoras which depict geometric designs and stylistic figures of plants and animals are the best example of tribal art. The multicolored designs and relief figures of animals and human beings which decorate the walls of Mandaghar in Juang society are indeed works of very high order. Similar wall paintings and decorations as observed among the Mundari group of tribals are also very attractive. Each tribe of Odisha has its own culture which distinguishes it from other. Jewellery, Textiles, Metal crafts, Organic food products, Cane and bamboos work, Terracotta and stone pottery, Paintings, Dance And Music, Gift and novelties these all indicate different kinds of expressions of the culture of the tribes. But the most important aspect of tribal culture is their music and dance. Among certain tribes one would not find brides unless they acquire special skill in dance and music. Dance and music are primarily meant to propitiate gods and goddesses. In social functions like marriage and feasting dance is the essential part of celebration. No festival or celebration are considered complete without dance and music. Each tribe has its own pattern of dance and music. They use different kinds of costumes and musical instruments to make their performance beautiful.

Dance and music is an important part of tribal culture which being continued from the ancient times. Because the living style of the tribal people was different from developed people and they abhorred any contact with the civilized people, it took time to bring their art to the mainstream culture. During the source of the time as their contact with the art and culture of the civilized people and other tribal communities increased, they got the opportunities to observe performances from the other culture and perform in front of them. Gradually even the government has started organizing tribal festivals in different parts of the state, where the tribes come in contact with each other and perform in front of them. These factors helped in improving and developing their own art forms and as well as their costumes. Odishan tribal culture is prevalent among the tribal people of Odisha; majority of which is to be found in the tribal villages. To the villager the old culture is instinctive, a part of his being and a pattern of his life. In tribal culture the basis is religious and so also the village life is primarily religious. There is much more superstition about village religion but the villagers are familiar with the great truths of tribal worldview and in their own ways they express them in

worship, in rituals, in songs, dance and drama. There are four hundred tribal languages, which mean that most of the tribes have their own languages. However, in a majority of cases, these languages are unwritten ones. In Odisha the speakers of the Tibeto-Burmese language family are absent, and therefore Odishan tribes belong to other three language families. The Indo-Aryan language family in Odisha includes, Dhehki-Odia, Matia, Haleba, Jharia, Saunti, Laria and Odia (spoken by Bathudi and the acculturated sections of Bhuiyan, Juang, Kandha, Savara, Raj Gond etc).

The Austric language family includes eighteen tribal languages namely, Birija, Parenga, Kisan, Bhumji, Koda, Mahili Bhumji, Mirdha-Kharia, Ollar Gadaba, Juang, Bondo, Didayee, Karmali, Kharia, Munda, Ho, Mundari and Savara. Within the Dravidian language family there are nine languages in Odisha. There was a general misconception that tribal communities did not possess languages but dialects. But with extensive study of tribal languages linguists have come to the conclusion that tribals do possess languages. The tribes of Odisha, though they belong to three linguistic divisions, have lots of socio-cultural similarities between them. These communities signify homogeneity of their cultures and together they characterize the notion of tribalism. Tribal societies share certain common characteristics and by these they were distinguished from complex or advanced societies. In India tribal societies had apparently been outside the main historical current of the development of Indian civilization for centuries. Hence tribal societies manifest such cultural features as signify a primitive level in socio-cultural parameter. A major portion of the tribal habitat is hilly and forested. Tribal villages are generally found in areas away from the alluvial plains close to rivers. Most villages are uniethnic in composition, and smaller in size. Villages are often not planned at all. Tribal economy is characterized as subsistence oriented. The subsistence economy is based mainly on collecting, hunting and fishing (e.g. the Birhor, hill Kharia) or a combination of hunting and collecting with shifting cultivation. Even the so-called plough using agricultural tribes do often, wherever scope is available, supplement their economy with hunting and collecting. Subsistence economy is characterized by simple technology, simple division of labour, small scale units of production and no investment of capital. The social unit of production, distribution and consumption is limited to the family and lineage. Subsistence economy is imposed by circumstances which are beyond the control of human beings, poverty of the physical environment, ignorance of efficient technique of exploiting natural resources and lack of capital for investment. It also implies existence of barter and lack of trade. Work is distributed among the family members according to the ability of individual members. However, the head of the family assumes all responsibilities in the practice and operation of shifting cultivation.

The adult males, between 18 and 50 years of age undertake the strenuous work of cutting tree, ploughing and hoeing, and watching of the crops at night whereas cutting the bushes and shrubs, cleaning of seeds for sowing and weeding are done by women. Shifting cultivation is not only an economic pursuit of some tribal communities but it accounts for their total way of life.

Their social structure, economy, political organization and religion are all accountable to the practice of shifting cultivation. However, shifting cultivation has certain demerits. Whenever shifting cultivation is carried out on a steep slope, it invariably invites land erosion and degradation. By deforestation soil loses its water retention capacity. The sub-soil gets washed away and the rocks and boulders are gradually exposed. Slowly and steadily the shifting cultivation process causes the streams down to hill to dry up. It also brings down heavy silts into the river basins and valleys. The

extensive deforestation affects rainfall. It affects the life of animals and forest resources, and it also leads to nomadic habits among the practitioners. There were two traditional systems of land tenure prevalent among the tribes of Odisha. Among the tribes of northern Odisha land and other resources were communally owned, and thus the annual distribution of plots on the hill slopes for shifting cultivation were being done in a corporate manner. The tribals, therefore, now have limited land and forest resources for the practice of shifting cultivation and for carrying on hunting, collecting and gathering activities.

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