

INTREPETING THE TRIBAL SUPERSTITIONS, BELIEFS AND MYTHS OF EASTERN INDIA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE SOURAS

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Abstract:

The Souras are one of the ancient most tribes of Eastern India. They find mention in the epics, purans and other religious texts. The religion and religious belief of no other tribe is so elaborate and complicated as that of the Souras. Their socio-religious life is an enigma. More enigmatic are their rites, rituals, festivals and myths which may exhibit to the world the distinct nature of their socio-cultural life. An attempt has been made here to portray the *Superstitions, Beliefs and Myths* of the Soura society only.

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India has the largest concentration of tribal population in the world and Orissa occupies a unique position in the ethnographic map of India for having the largest variety of tribal communities next to undivided Madhya Pradesh. The tribal population of the state constitutes 22.21 percent of the total population of Orissa. The Soura population according to 2011 Census in Odisha was 5, 34,751.1

Beliefs in superstitions, myths, spells, sorcers, cure deities, amulets, magic cards are the common phenomena among the rural folk. But this is more in case of the tribals particularly the Souras. Scholars have tried to conceptualize the intricacies between the religious beliefs and practices on the one hand and the life style on the other. Needless to say, that religion takes into consideration three aspects, namely (a) beliefs in the supernatural agencies, (b) specialists who create such beliefs and (c) deities, spirits, ancestors who receive it in various forms. An attempt has been made here to portray the *Superstitions, Beliefs and Myths* of the Soura society only.

Different tribal communities inhabiting different parts of Orissa have maintained their cultural identities by virtue of their distinctive racial traits, languages, habitats, life-style as well as customs, myths and superstitions. Among them Souras are considered as the most primitive tribal groups of Orissa. They are found in almost all the districts of Odisha and in some areas of Andhra Pradesh, Chhatisgarh and Madhya Pradesh but their main concentration lies in a contiguous mountainous territory in Rayagada and Gajapati districts of Odisha which is known as "Soura country".

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 demigods, 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, sorrows and

sufferings. They treat the ancestors as living member of society and consult them and worship them in every walk of life. This concept of ancestors is the basic subject of Soura paintings. The wall paintings of the Souras known as icons 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 and are called *italons* or icons. They are making drawings on the walls of houses in honour of gods, goddesses, ancestors (*Dumba*) and spirits to get their blessing, to avert diseases and natural calamity, to promote fertility and for the overall well-being of the family and the society.

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 ancestors for which offerings are being made by the Souras are only imaginary in the sense that they do not have any particular shape and not visible to the naked eye. Inside the house on the walls one often finds a group of sketches elaborately drawn, which are of religious significance and therefore called *italon* or icon. The exact symbolic meaning of the icons which consist of various sketches of human being, horse, elephant, Gun, man, aeroplane, cycle, sun, moon, 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. Belief in the underworld and the life after death is an integral part of the religious faith of Souras. Here *Kudans*, both male and female play important role. Through them the spirits of the dead ancestors unfold their intentions and demands which are met by the family, with sacrifices of buffalo, goat or fowl. By the western scholars and Anglicized language the *Kudan* is termed as *Shaman* and his occult practices as *Shamanism*. The *Shaman* is a tribal priest generally felt to be possessed by a spirit or deity and hence to have supernatural powers. He may also act as the tribal ruler or judge. In this context, the Soura may be grouped among the first human beings inhabiting the earth at the very dawn of civilization.²

The concept of *Idital* (wall painting) is very unique in Soura community. Here the role of *Kudan* (painter) is held in high esteem. The inner wall in the corner of the room meant for storing the corns is well plastered with cow-dung paste by the women of the house. Then the *Kudan* is invited who passes the night there with milk and liquor. In the night he falls into dream and whatever figures he sees in the dream, he draws there on the wall with the watery rice paste prepared by the house-wives. These figures are never removed and held as pious and devoted as gods. Directions of gods and ancestors to the *Kudans* are held authentic before the Souras.³ 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.⁴

To satisfy and worship all these deities, they sacrifice hen, goats, sheep, pigs and buffalos. At every stage of their agricultural operations, they also sacrifice birds and goats and offer clothes to different deities and spirits.⁵ 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. In this case, the artist comes to the house and spends a night there before beginning work. In the evening the householder places a small basket of rice and a pot of palm wine on the ground before the wall on which the picture is to be made. If necessary his wife washes the wall with fresh red earth and water to provide a good background. 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".⁶

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 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.

To the Souras every part of agricultural process is religious act, his field is a temple, hill clearing of jungle is a shrine. Various types of *Iditals* are drawn to propitiate their related gods and ancestral spirit-seeking blessing for enriching fertility of the soil and for bumper crop. 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.

This is the most important and distinct feature of Soura culture to draw art or icons on the walls of houses in honour of gods, goddesses, ancestors (*Dumba*) and spirits to get their blessing, to avert diseases and natural calamity, to promote fertility and for the overall well-being of the family and the society. 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 Gondas, Bondas, Kandhas, sandals, Hos or by any other Indian tribes. Regarding the amazing wall paintings of the Sabaras Elwin remarks "The wall paintings of other tribes are more or less decorative in nature but, of Souras are meaningful with a religious purpose".

Piers Vitebsky's study "*Dialogues with the Dead*" focuses upon a unique form of dialogue between the living and the dead, conducted through the medium of a *shaman* in trance among the Soura. The dead sometimes nurture their living descendants, yet at other times they inflict upon them

the very illnesses from which they died. Through intimate dialogue, the Soura use the occasion of death to explore their closest emotional attachments in all their ambivalence.⁷ A person who dies immature and unnatural death becomes a *sonum*. Virtually all illnesses deaths are said by the Soura to be caused in some way by sonums. In attacking the living, the dead seek to transfer to them certain experiences which they themselves underwent at the moment of their deaths. They do this by 'eating the soul' (*puradan jum-*) of the living victim in order to absorb him, thereby causing in him a kind of symptom or of death which is analogous to that which was undergone by the attacker himself. However, the dead do not only attack the living and harm them: they also nourish and protect them. It is the interplay of these two contradictory attitudes, respectively aggressive and nurturing, which lies at the heart of Soura thinking about their dead.

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. They also advice their clients to invite guardian deities and in such worship they often prescribe birds like pigeon, cock and animals like he-goat or buffalo to be sacrificed.⁸ Different tribal groups are specialists in different treatment, as for example, *Sauras* are expert in dealing with evil spirits, *Kandhs* are experts or specialists in the treatment of drowned, night goblin, labour pain and pain in mother's breast. 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.⁹ 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*.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ But whoever practices it, does it in secret. 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. Thus, the religion of the Souras is full of blood with animal and bird sacrifices. Thus, religion and the religious life of the Sabaras is an enigma. Perhaps the religion of no other tribe is so elaborate and complicated as that of the Souras. Although the Sabaras 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. All these Gods and spirits have constant demand on their living beings. If their demands are not met they may cause harm to them. To satisfy and worship all these deities, spirits and ancestors, the Souras sacrifice hen, goats, sheep, pigs, buffalos; offer liquor pots and clothes. This was the root cause of their poverty and deprivation.

They 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 of our society. These are the traditional heritage of the Savaras. But the pity is that these unique heritage of the Souras are fast disappearing from the society.¹²

The growing industrial development, displacement, modernization are main hindrances in this field. 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 of the centuries will disappear from their society very soon.

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