

AN INSIGHT INTO THE INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM OF THE LANJIA
SOURAS OF SOUTH ODISHA- A NOTE ON SPELLS, SORCERY AND MEDICAL
THERAPY

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Abstract

The Souras (Sabaras) are one of the oldest hill tribes of Odisha. They find mention in the Epics like Ramayan and Mahabharat, Puranas and other ancient texts for more than four thousand years. 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 and manifested Himself as one of the greatest Gods of the world. They are mostly concentrated in Rayagada and Gajapati districts of Orissa which can be called as “Soura country”. Souras are divided into two broad classes i.e. 1. The Hill Souras or the Maliah Souras also called as Lanjia Souras. 2. The low-land Souras or Suddha Souras.

The ancient knowledge system of the Lanjia Souras of Odisha by applying tantras, mantras (spells), inorganic medicines, secret herbs, animal products, magic cords, amulets and venoms form a fascinating chapter in the tribal history of India. The fragmentary remnants of Agadatantra (use of poisons and venoms in curing diseases and treatment of bites of poisonous animals) and Bhutavidya (black magic and treatment of mental diseases and possessions) called as Sabari vidya acclaimed high recognition in the tribal hinterlands of Odisha. But it is secret and unknown to the other world. This Research article is a humble attempt to unveil and explore their traditional knowledge system especially in the field of Medical Therapy.

Keywords: *Agadatantra, Bhuta vidya, Sabari vidya, Idital, Bejuni, Tantra, Mantra, guni, garedi, Buyya and Kudan.*

Introduction-

In the primitive days the vast majority of settlers of the hilly and mountainous region were cut off from all kind of formal or rational medical care. The competent physicians were also remained beyond the reach of a vast segment of the tribal population. Being deprived of these benefits, the tribals of the hinterland used folk medicines, tantra, mantra, guni, garedi or Sabarividya derived from time honoured and age-old traditions.¹

Their villages are situated on the hill slopes or in foot of the hills mostly lie hidden in forest. Leading an isolated life from the main stream modern civilization, they are the most conservative and traditional loving people. Their Socio-religious life is peculiar. Peculiar still are their marriage system, rites and rituals, wall paintings, folk medicines and folk method of treatments which may exhibit to the world the distinct nature of their indigenous knowledge system.

The religion and the religious life of the Lanjia 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. In different parts different Gods are considered Supreme.²

Although the Soura's pantheon has incorporated within itself a number of gods, goddess and demi-gods, their original belief system centres round the worship of ancestors and spirits. All the varied aspects of their environment are associated with some god or goddesses. To satisfy and worship all these deities, they sacrifice hens, goats, sheep, pigs and buffalos. Therapeutic treatment through magic or Sabari Vidya is prevalent among them. They use indigenous or folk medicines like herbal roots, fruits and leaves for treatment of diseases. Magical powers are often attributed to the village physicians known as *Shamans, Bejunis, Kudans and Desaris*.³

According to Verrier Elwin “the Souras eschatology is confused and its doctrines vary from place to place”. The concept of supreme God is almost non-existent among the Souras. G.V.

Sitapati has recorded 7 kinds of deities and three kinds of priests. i.e. (1) *Buyya*- who presides over agricultural festivals; (2) *Kudan* who performs the functions of priest, prophet and doctor and (3) *Kudanboi* who performs an important role in marriages and children delivery. They offer many gifts, clothes to the priests because of their blind beliefs and superstitions.⁴

The Soura gods differ from one another in composition, function, character and nature. Some are benevolent; some are neutral and some others are malevolent. All these gods and spirits have constant demand on the living beings. If their demands are not full-filled they can cause havoc. The malevolent spirits and gods are cared more than their benevolent counterparts as they can bring misery. When their depredations become unbearable, the benevolent gods are approached.⁵

Apart from these devils, those who died in the house appear in the dreams and direct that they should be given the offerings. Sometimes these devils with a view to make known their anger would enter the cattle sheds and kill cows and oxen.

The Soura society is full of shamans (medicine man) sorcers called as *Kudan* (Male) and *Kudanboi* (female). They play a great role in curing all types of illness and diseases. The Souras do not conceive of any cause of illness other than the robotization of evil spirits. When illness happens, it is the shaman's chief function to determine which god or ancestor is dissatisfied and the kind of animals required to be sacrificed so that they might be conciliated. This is the main cause of their poverty and scarcities.⁶

Social Hierarchy-

Like most of the primitive societies, group cohesion and intra-tribal solidarity is maintained among Souras. There are three grades in the traditional leadership in social precedence i.e. the 'Gamango', the 'Buyya' and the 'Parja' (general mass) The Gamango is the civil head of the village. The Buyya is the religious head. 'Desari' another religious functionary of Souras attend for fixing up of auspicious days for the performance of both social and religious ceremonies.⁷

Similarly, the hierarchy of priests, who cater to the spiritual needs of the Souras, may be divided into three categories. The *Buyya* is a priest who presides over agricultural festivals and offers the sacrifices that are required on these occasions. The *Kudan* is the shaman who combines the functions of priest, prophet and medicine man. His female counter part is the *Kudanboi*. While the position of *Buyya* is hereditary, that of the *Kudan* is not. The process of becoming a full-fledged *Kudan* is arduous.⁸ There are training systems among them.

Buyya is the village priest who performs the ceremony of investiture of the *kudans*. When a *kudan* becomes too old or dies, his eldest son takes over the hereditary office from his father. *Buyya* performs this ritual informing the sun god about the appointment of a new *kudan*. For practical purpose, the *Kudanmaran* or the Shaman, is the most important religious figure in a Soura village. He has the power not only to diagnose the source of trouble and disease, but to cure it. He is doctor as well as priest, psychologist as well as magician, the repository of tradition, the source of sacred knowledge. The work of *Idatal maran* is entirely concerned with the funerary rituals. At these places he acts as an assistant to the Shaman.⁹

Among the Souras, specialists for conducting the religious ceremonies and rituals do not get the knowledge by professional training. As per the orders of the God in the dream, one enters into the job and becomes professional. The different specialists associated with religious life of the Souras are: 1. *Desari*: who fixes the *muhurtams* (auspicious time) for conducting all the religious performances, 2. *Kundan/kudanboi*: who conducts the ceremonies and 3. *Ittalmaran*: who is a specialist to make paintings on the walls.¹⁰

Religious Functionaries and Physicians-

'*Kudan*' is also a religious functionary who recites hymns and conducts social and religious ceremonies.¹¹ The festivals of first eating of the crops (*Nuakhai Parba*), propitiation of the deities and ancestral spirits are made. In the name giving ceremony are some of the ritual functions performed at which '*Kudan*' recites hymns, conducts rituals and offers sacrifices. He chants hymns while playing on a musical instrument called '*Kudansngrai*'. Souras propitiate various deities and ancestral spirits.

Their belief in gods and goddesses, ghosts, witchcraft, magic, illness or misfortune is attributed to the displeasure and malicious acts of the supernatural forces and malevolent spirits.¹²

There are three interlinked worlds in which the Souras believe: the world of nature, the world of gods and spirits, and the world of ancestors. The happy life depends upon a proper balancing of man's world with these other worlds. Among the Souras, superstitions do play an important role. Due to their superstitious beliefs they very often do not take any medicine to cure the disease, on the contrary, they mostly believe in offering sacrifices for the cure of a particular disease and spells and sorcery.

They have their own cultural tradition. There should not be any imposition from the outside forces in the process of orientation and improvement of social conditions. Their local customs and traditions should not suffer so that they could maintain their independence, identity and thereby preserving their indigenous language, animistic religion and tribal customs and traditions. The amazing conglomeration of traditions, beliefs, sorrows and philosophies that together constitute and vitalize the rituals and festivals of the Souras has descended from antiquity and has been preserved unimpaired to the present day.¹³

Ancestor Worship-

Their religion is intricately tied with their social organizations. Death is not the end and the past is not dead. The dead survives in the relationship of the living. Souras are convinced of the survival of the human soul after death. The belief in the transmigration and reincarnation of the soul is fairly widespread among them.¹⁴

There is no concept of 'heaven' or 'hell' and reward or punishment for moral and immoral acts during lifetime of the Souras. They believe in rebirth. After death, the soul is called back to join the ancestral spirits in the sacred domestic tabernacle. There is belief in reincarnation and religious beliefs of transmigration of souls in various forms of life, trees, birds, animals, etc. The Gods, spirits and the ancestors are indeed ever present realities for these people. The ancestors are always remembered and offerings are made to them by the head of the household on every ritual occasions.¹⁵

The uniqueness of Lanjia Soura culture is the worship of ancestors what they call Dumba with a belief that they are living in other world for some years (after death) who are closely looking after the well-being of the family. Souras think that, it is a great sin to forget the ancestors in their festive occasions, sorrows and sufferings. They treat the ancestors as living member of society and consult and worship them in every walk of life. This concept of ancestor worship is the basic subject of Soura paintings and elaborated in their pictograms.¹⁶

They 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 Souras are very artistic people. Their artistic talents and skills find expressions in their colourful and amazing wall paintings known as Idital. The concept of Idital is very unique in Soura community. 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 to draw there on the wall the different icons and figures. These figures are never removed and held as sacred as gods, ancestors, spirits, etc.¹⁷

The religious specialists, before performing a ritual, pray to be excused for their mistakes, if any, in the conduct of rituals. As for example, ittalmaran says,

*"I am an ignorant fellow, I know nothing;
but I have been told to prepare a house for you.
If I make any mistakes, do not punish me, for it will not be my fault".¹⁸*

The Soura icons are primarily nine types meant for different rituals-religious functions to propitiate the gods and ancestors. The Soura pictograms can therefore be looked upon both as an art and as ritual. An icon or painting on the wall is a ritualistic temple where, through a "sacred" performance and chant, the Soura family-head or priest installs various gods, goddesses, spirits and ancestors in the act of propitiation.¹⁹

The reference to the house is significant. The icons are the one dimensional homes for 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.

These significant mural paintings of Souras are unique in comparison to any other tribes of the state or country. “The wall paintings of other tribes are more or less decorative in nature but, of Souras are meaningful with a religious purpose. Each Idital differs from another in composition, contents and symbols depending upon the purpose for which it is meant. Thus, this art or pictogram can be categorized according to their meaning and purpose. Each pictogram conveys a message or a legend or a meaning if interpreted or analysed especially by the Soura priest or painter themselves”.

The Idital is such an icon where one can invite all the forces to one place, worship them and offer sacrifice for the well-being of the house and its members. This intellectual and spiritual thought of the Souras are much above the social values and processes.

The Souras believe that the dissatisfied ancestors are the cause of illness and disease. So also, when the gods feel neglected inflict the offender the disease. The Kudanmar is invited to find out the cause of the sufferings. The Shaman invokes the gods and spirits winnowing rice and by bell-leaf test. When a particular spirit is identified the Shaman through incantation summons the spirit to come. Spirit comes to Shaman in trance and through him the spirit speaks for him, asks for a house (Idital) and sacrifice. Then the head of the house contacts the artist Iditalmar for a date to draw the icon.

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 internal meaning of each Idital can better be understood from the feelings and interpretation of the Iditalmar or the Kudanmar, the people and by studying the socio-economic and religious life of the tribes.²⁰

If we compare the Souras with other tribes we see different sorcerers of different tribes are specialists in different treatment. For example, Souras are expert in dealing with evil spirits, in driving away ghosts and curing a patient from the snake-bite. In this treatment they use spells, herbs, magic cords and other materials. They also advice foods which a patient will have to take for quick recovery. The Kandhs are specialists in the treatment of drowned, night goblin, labour pain. 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. They believe 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.²¹

Different spells are used for curing different diseases. 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. He got his training from a teacher or from the appropriate authority. This can also be learnt in hereditary way.

Magic-lore or spells or mantras which comes to the users through oral transmission have no linguistic uniformity. These spells are small but powerful. To ward off diseases or unpleasant behaviour of a person, different magicians may utter different charms or spells. Mantras or spells are not found in written form.²²

In the folk medicine and folk treatment of diseases no degree holder or qualified persons are required. Though they are illiterate, they acquire this knowledge of medicine and cure of diseases through tradition of oral transmission from generation to generation. In the beliefs and practices of the aboriginal Soura tribe of Odisha, a store house of this ancient knowledge can be discerned.

Thus, *Mantra Chikitcha* is an ancient or indigenous knowledge system of the Sabaras of South Odisha. There are certain experts, who cure the different diseases through the Mantras.

Conclusion-

They use tusks of elephants, flesh, (preparing oil), bone of front legs (Bir Hada), nails of tigers, skin of wild lizards, teeth of boars, nail of bears, parts of salia patini, Porcupines for preparation of medicines and magic cords, amulets which posed a great threat to the protection and conservation of wild lifes and biodiversity. In spite of that, their indigenous knowledge system is valuable wealth for us.

But, it is a matter of great regret that, this knowledge system of the Souras is on the verge of decline and death due to several reasons like displacement or migration due to Industrialization, modernization and the opposition of the educated Soura youths. So, necessary steps may be taken to record and preserve their valuable wealth either by Government or Private agencies in the form of documentation or DVD, pen-drive and e-library for posterity. Otherwise, the tradition of the centuries and valuable property of the Souras will be vanished within a few decades.

To sum up the balance-sheet of the indigenous knowledge system of the Sabaras of South Odisha it may appear appropriate to say that, some of their ancient knowledge system are based on blind beliefs and superstitions but others are beneficial for this highlanders who are deprived of modern communication systems and health services even in 21st centuries.

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