



Transformation Of Religion Among the Saura Tribe: A Historical Perspective

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Date of Submission: 25-09-2025

Date of Acceptance: 05-10-2025

ABSTRACT

This research paper deals with the Saura tribe in the district of Rayagada, Odisha. The Saura tribe is an ancient tribal group of Odisha and one of the major 13 primitive tribes. This tribe is distinct from other tribes due to its unique features. They are not only numerically important but also historically and culturally a significant tribal community of Odisha. Religion is a belief and practice generally held by individuals and communities, involving adherence to codified rituals.¹ Every tribe has its religious practices. The religion practiced by tribal people in India was regarded as animism.² The paper gives a historical perspective on the current scenario's transformation of religion, beliefs, and traditions. The prime objective of this research paper is to study the religious transformation of the Saura tribe in Colonial Odisha, to highlight the role of different colonial agencies in promoting the Western culture among the Saura tribe, to explore the popular response towards the Western culture by the Saura people and to analyze the effects of religious change on the life of the Saura tribe. The methodology refers to the historical approach employed by the investigator in their work. The work has been accomplished by collecting data from both primary and secondary sources, including various books, journals, magazines, and articles. The investigator interviewed the local people, Jani (*Priest*), and the tagged section of the tribe to learn about the traditional religious beliefs and practices of the Saura tribe. Later on, I also interviewed the young generation to identify the traditional religion and the modern Christian religion. The major findings of the paper are to find out the causes of the adoption of Christianity by most of the Sauras and its effects on their day-to-day life.

Keywords: Religion, Transformation, Animism, Christianity, Traditional, Primitive.

I. Introduction:

The Sauras are one of the ancient ethnic tribes of India. They are found in the southern district of Odisha. They are mainly spread over the Gajapati,

Rayagada, Koraput, and some parts of western Odisha. The two major subdivisions of Odisha, Paralakhemundi and Gunupur, being adjoining, form a compressed Saura land, and they are called different sub-names such as Sabar, Saura, Sora, and Savar.³ Religious beliefs and practices have been a common feature of human civilization. The concept of religion is found everywhere in the ancient world, as well as in contemporary society, and it is a kind of belief and tradition that existed earlier. Unlike the mystic faiths of advanced culture, the Orissa tribes have their own religion. The defied ancestors who are perpetually vigilant about the actions of the living generation and countless beneficent and malignant deities comprise the Saura Pantheon. Any neglect or omission by the surviving Sauras results in illness, demise, or problems for the household and community. According to **E.B. Tylor** in his book 'Primitive Culture', 2 Vols. Published in 1871, it has "the belief in spiritual beings," and all known societies share it. He claims that the belief in the soul, known by the name "anima," is where religion first emerged.⁴ **Durkheim Emile**, in his book, 'The Elementary Forms of Religious Life' (1976), unified the system of faith and practices that are essentially tied to consecrated objects. Every tribe has a unique system of worship, and so also among the Sauras. Additionally, religion provides meaning and comprehension for the mysterious powers of nature.⁵

II. Review of Literature:

Mr. Koyu Mohan, in his paper, 'Faith and Belief System of Adi: Continuity and Change: A Case Study of Adi of East Siang District.' Published in 2011, highlighted the way the youth of the tribe visualize Christianity. According to him, young people enjoy living a Christian's modern, Westernised lifestyle. The traditional music, festivals, and culture were negatively impacted by the advent of Christianity. The converts also celebrate Nuakhai, Meriya, Chaitirai, etc., in addition to declining to engage in culture and festivities. Because the customs of the traditional holiday, which involve drinking wine and



eating sacrificial meals, are in opposition to Bible preaching, they view it as unholy.⁶ **Prof. K.L. Sharma, in his book** 'Social Stratification and Mobility,' published in 2002, has rightly observed that partially deprived Dalit and tribal communities frequently converted to Christianity or other religions in the hopeless pursuit of a better life, access to contemporary education, and a respectable social position. The socio-economically deprived groups search for chances to improve their standard of living.⁷ **Prof. Biswajit Sen** (2000) in his book, 'Tribal Religion-Change, Continuity, and Conflict: Souras of Orissa'. According to him, Souras used to communicate with Hindus. Even though they were both affected and impacted by Hinduism, they maintained their Soura identity up until the point at which they were persuaded to become Christians by the promise of free healthcare, medicine, and education. The Christian Missionaries, through lucrative gifts and presents attracted the Souras towards Christianity.⁸ **Geetanjali Baruah**, in his research paper 'Religious beliefs and practices of Kharias in Assam -A Changing Scenario,' draws attention to how historical and spatial circumstances have influenced the religious beliefs and practices of the Kharias. The Kharias moved from their original settlement in and around Chotanagpur and lived in the Assamese tea gardens. He discovers that they are influenced by Christian missionaries' activities and Hindu influences as a result of their interactions.⁹ **D.K. Bora, in his article**, 'Traditional Nishing Religion and the Change,' addressed changes in several facets of religious life and institutions as well as the characteristics of the Nishing religion as a tribal religion. He ascribed the shifts to communication with non-tribals, education, the impact of the media, and conversion to Christianity.¹⁰ **Keshari N. Sahay** wrote a paper, 'Impact of Christianity on the Uraon of the Chainpur Belt in Chotanagpur: An Analysis of Its Cultural Processes'. While some Indigenous people may have been deeply impacted by Christian teachings, the majority of them were driven to become Christians by benefits like protection from landowners and other advantages rather than the teachings themselves. Thus, the missionaries modified their approach and started luring people in by offering them advantages related to time, which ultimately resulted in a widespread conversion to Christianity.¹¹

Significance of the Research Problem

The research paper has highlighted the religious and cultural practices lost in the present day and how to protect and preserve the Soura culture and traditions.

III. Research Methodology

The methodology refers to the historical approach employed by the investigator in their work. The work has been accomplished by collecting data from both primary and secondary sources, including various books, journals, and articles.

Research Objectives

- To study the religious transformation of the Soura tribe in Colonial Odisha.
- To highlight the role of different colonial agencies in promoting Western culture among the Soura tribe.
- To explore the popular response towards Western culture by the Soura people.
- To analyze the effects of religious change on the life of the Soura tribe.

Tribes of Odisha

India is the homeland of tribals who occupied a large portion of the Eastern Subcontinent. The 2001 census showed that 84 million tribal people are found in all the states and union territories of India. The main concentration of the states of Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Odisha. About 57.12% of the total tribal population of the country. Odisha is dominated by tribal communities. The state has 62 different tribes with a population of over 22.85 million as per the 2011 census. They occupy nearly 33% of the tribal land area of the state. The Janayati or Adivasis of Odisha are considered to be the most aboriginal of the state. According to the word, tribe refers to a type of community and designates a stage of growth in human society.¹²

Historical background of Soura

Savar, Sabara, Sora, Saora, and so on are several names for the term Soura. The Scythian word "Sager," which means axe, is the source of the word "Savara," and they also hold axes in their hands.¹³ The Souras are the most primitive and ancient groups. Frequent references about the Souras originate in Hindu mythology and classics. In India, they are found all over central India, comprising Bihar, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and West Bengal.

Traditional Soura Religion

The two facets of the Soura religion are ancestor worship and soul belief. They think that if the living Souras are careless, it will lead to illness, death, or other problems for the family and society. They face a variety of challenges from the sorceress's work, the deities, and the sorrowful looks of their



forebears. To appease them, they make offerings at different times and locations. The offerings consist of alcohol and rice-based animal sacrifices. These offerings are made both alone and collectively at a variety of socioreligious rites and ceremonies. The Saura finds solace and support in religion throughout his difficult financial times. Knowing that his fields are under the protection of divine sanctions gives him more confidence and drives him to work harder in the fields.¹⁴ The various Gods and Goddesses that are worshipped include Labasum, (*the earth god*), who is worshipped during cultivation; (*Targasum*), the village deity, who is worshipped for the village's well-being; (*Kittungsum*), the god of creation, who is worshipped for the benefit of the people; and (*Genurboi*), also known as the rain god or goddess, who is worshipped for rain and similar reasons. They believe that illnesses are brought on by deities, disobedient ancestors, and enchanters' actions. The underworld is inhabited by deceased ancestors as well as the gods who rule over the land, forest, hill, and dwelling. To express their thanks to the spirits of their ancestors, or Kulbas, who have been allowing them to enjoy peaceful lives, they make offerings to them. But their sacrifice was sacrificing animals and mahua wine (*Abasal*), along with shamanic control.

The Saura and Christianity

Julia Kuhl in his paper (2014), 'History of Christianity in India, the 19th century was the crucial transition period.' In India, religious conversion is a touchy subject. Numerous occurrences have occurred recently about the problem of tribal people in Odisha being converted to other religions.¹⁵ Every hamlet has a church that was constructed using a very typical Saura house design, where people gather on Sundays to pray. Every home in the Church of Saura hamlet has converted to Christianity and abandoned all other forms of worship. Considering the structural modifications to the religious landscape, a church has been erected in every hamlet. The Church's thatch was made of paddy straw, and its walls were built of mud. Males and females sat apart, and everyone arrived with a bible. They have the same modern instruments as every church, the mrudanga and Gini. They had on a little different clothing that day than they usually did. A veil (*Odhoni*) covered the heads of all the married ladies and girls. They were being taught to understand the Saura language by someone who was reading them passages from the Bible. Numerous prayers have been translated into the Saura language, which is understood and used for daily communication by the Saura.

Transition from Nature Worship to Christianity

The Saura tribe was living inside the Eastern Ghat mountain range of Odisha. Their religious rituals and beliefs were centered on reverencing the natural world. To promote all-around development, a micro project, as it is known under the Saura Development Agency (SDA), with its headquarters located in the Gajapati district's Chandragiri, was set up in 2016.¹⁶ The Paraja and Kandha tribes live close to towns and are neighboring tribal groups. Through the process of acculturation, the Saura tribe acquired particular cultural characteristics and complexes, including clothing customs, religious rituals, dance and music, clan names, and language. They also absorbed certain aspects of Hinduism, as evidenced by the components they used in their worship. They continued to be in the marginalized groups since, despite being reset, not much had changed. They encountered Christianity in the meantime. They most likely adopted Christianity to raise their socioeconomic and educational standing.

Impact of Christianity on the Saura Tribes

The stratified society of Odisha was the primary focus of Christian missionaries' activity. They made an effort to convert affluent and powerful members of respectable social strata to Christianity to spread the word about it throughout the rest of society. The traditional beliefs and practices of the Saura tribe have changed radically as a result of this religious change. They consume Mahua liquor (*Abasal*), as the converted Sauras are forbidden from consuming any alcohol. They now pay homage to the *father* who converted them to Christianity whenever they experience a natural disaster, a sickness, or a spiritual attack. The positions of the traditional magico-religious roles in the Saura community are directly impacted by this transformation.

The Saura who converted to Christianity are selected from several Saura groups. They have been isolated from the other two groups and other local castes due to the adoption of a new religion. As expected of them by Christianity, the Christian Sauras are not a homogeneous group, though. The communities gather in their churches and practice lineage (*Birinda*) exogamy while maintaining their Christian identity¹⁷. Religious transformation in the Saura community brought about significant modifications in life-cycle rituals, the nature of worship, and other practices.

Education

The adoption of modern education drastically altered the Odishan people's way of life. They



established their missionary schools in different parts of Odisha, and all the Christians who had the opportunity to attend those schools improved their education and became able to speak English, eventually, the youth of the Soura caste could create a distinct identity in the society.

Saura Language

There is a unique language known as the Saura language. The *Sompeng* script, used to write large words, is not the foundation of the Saura people's language. Few of them can speak other languages, such as Oriya and Hindi, and they speak a dialect of the Austric language related to the Mundari family. However, after the adoption of the Christian religion, they could speak the English language because there were many missionary schools established for the Christians.

Dress and Ornaments

Nowadays, it's seen that the younger Saura generation, both male and female, wears dresses like those of contemporary society's men and women, including sarees, blouses, churidars, Langa, trouser sets, and shirts, among other items. During marriage, both bride and groom wear white clothes, and the girl does not wear vermilion on her head and bangles on her hands, but she is adorned with various ornaments; this was their tradition.

Religious Practices

Tribal religion is a symbol of the attractiveness and identity of the tribe. Ancestor worship and soul belief are the two main tenets of the Saura religion. The Sauras have become Christians in recent times, especially the younger generations, and Christian missionaries have expanded far over the region¹⁸. In the early stage, they worshiped nature, but when they converted, their religious sentiments became different as they did not participate in any religious activities of the village.

Saura arts

Tribal art is a symbol of the beauty and identity of the tribe. Saura's creative abilities may be seen in their paintings as well as in their dancing and music. These paintings, titled Idital (Ikon), are intended for various religious ceremonies. Many years ago, the Sauras used to paint various types of paintings to decorate the walls of their houses, but these have since disappeared. It's widely believed that by praising and appeasing God and the ancestors through a symbol, the Saura can save the household members from their vengeful attempts. Under the influence of Christianity, those images have completely disappeared.

Preserve and Protect the Saura Culture

According to Article 29 of the Indian Constitution, all citizens are given many opportunities to maintain their culture and traditions. In India, the Sauras are one of the ethnic groups having a rich culture and tradition, which is gradually disappearing from society. So, to maintain their traditions, we have to implement various measures, viz., Documentary form, creating awareness among them for the betterment of the tribe, preserving religion, language, culture, folk song, and traditions by establishing various agencies with representatives of their society in their particular areas.

IV. Conclusion

This study focuses on the Saura tribe's religious transition and how it has affected the people's lives. There is a close connection between religion and the natural world. As the Saura tribe interacted with their neighbours, they began to modify their religious practices and beliefs. Simultaneously, the Saura Development Agency (SDA) micro-project of the government works to enhance the socio-cultural practices and educational approach of the Saura tribe. Thus, many converted to Christianity in the hopes of enhancing both economic growth and their children's educational standing. As far as we know, the Saura are evolving. Still, the most important point is that this theological shift is mostly to blame for modifications to customs, rituals, and traditional religious beliefs.

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