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The Enigmatic Saura Culture: Its Sacred Ties to the Rituals of Lord Jagannath

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Abstract

The Saoras, an ancient tribal community of Odisha, occupy a vital place in the state's cultural and spiritual history. Belonging to the proto-Australoid stock and speaking the Mundari language "Sora," they preserve a rich heritage rooted in tradition. A deep connection links the Saoras to the Jagannath cult, as legend holds that Lord Jagannath was originally a tribal deity later adopted into mainstream worship. This association is evident in their shared medicinal and ritual practices. The Daitapatis of Puri, believed to be Saora descendants, use traditional herbal remedies during the Anasara period of Lord Jagannath—methods strikingly similar to Saora ethnomedicine. Such parallels reveal the tribe's profound influence on Odisha's spiritual life. The Saoras thus represent more than an indigenous community; they are custodians of ancient knowledge that continues to shape Jagannath traditions, symbolizing the harmonious coexistence of tribal and classical elements in Odisha's cultural identity.

Key words

Soara, Antebasi, Sagories, SabaRoye, Nabakalebara, Daitapati, Anasara, Dasamula modak, Phuluri oil. Saoras Ancient tribe, Proto-Australoid stock, Mundari language, Sora language, Jagannath cult, Indigenous knowledge, Inclusive heritage, Shared tradition

Introduction:

The Sauras, one of India's oldest tribal communities, are known by several names—Savara, Sabara, Saur, and Sora—and hold immense cultural and historical significance, especially in Odisha. References to the Sauras appear in ancient Sanskrit literature, the epics, and the Puranas. In the Mahabharata, Jara Savara is the tribal hunter who accidentally kills Lord Krishna, while the 7th-century text Amarkosha describes the Sauras, along with the Nisada, Kirata, and

Pulinda, as Antebasis—people dwelling in peripheral regions of society.

In Odisha, the Saoras share a profound link with the Jagannath cult. Tradition holds that Lord Jagannath was originally worshipped as a tribal deity before being brought to Puri under royal patronage. A prominent legend speaks of Viswabasu, a Saora king, who worshipped Lord Vishnu in the form of Neelamadhava inside a forest cave. When King Indradyumna of Puri learned of this, he sent the Brahmin Bidyapati to locate

the deity. Bidyapati married Lalita, Viswabasu's daughter, and through this connection, the tribal worship of Neelamadhava was integrated into mainstream Vaishnavism. The descendants of Viswabasu, known as Daitas, still play a vital role in

Jagannath rituals, especially during the Rath Yatra and Nabakalebara, when they transfer the divine essence (Brahma) from old idols to new ones.

During the Snana Yatra, the deities are bathed with 108 pots of sanctified water, after which they enter the Anasara period—symbolizing illness and recuperation. During this time, they are treated with Dasamula Modak, a traditional herbal preparation made from ten medicinal roots such as *Aegle marmelos*, *Gmelina arborea*, and *Tribulus terrestris*, mixed with milk, honey, and ghee. The deities are also anointed with Phuluri oil, prepared by infusing sesame oil with fragrant herbs like *Vetiveria zizanioides*, *Pandanus foetidus*, and *Santalum album*, stored underground in clay pots. These sacred practices beautifully illustrate the enduring fusion of Saura ethnomedicine, ritual traditions, and the spiritual essence of the Jagannath cult.

Objectives:

- To investigate the relationship between the Saura tribe and the Jagannath cult, emphasizing their shared historical and spiritual connections.
- To study the traditional medicinal practices of the Saura tribe, especially their ethnomedicinal knowledge related to plant-based remedies.
- To analyze the similarities between the Sauras' indigenous healing practices and the rituals performed during the Snana Yatra festival for Lord Jagannath.

Comparative Study of Plants Used in Jagannath Cult and Saura Tribe

The study of traditional practices reveals a deep connection between cultural rituals and the use of medicinal plants. Both the Jagannath cult and the Saura tribe of Odisha exhibit unique yet overlapping utilizations of flora, deeply rooted in their respective traditions. This comparative analysis highlights the similarities and differences in their plant use. Plants Used in Dasamula Modak

Dasamula Modak is a traditional Ayurvedic formulation that incorporates a combination of potent medicinal plants, each with unique therapeutic properties. Below is a detailed account of the plants used in Dasamula Modak, including their botanical and vernacular names, family classification, parts of the plant utilized, modes of use, and the diseases they address.

1. *Aegle marmelos* (L.) Corr.

Family: Rutaceae

Vernacular Name/Local Name: Bela (Kulpad)
Parts of Plant Used and Mode of Use:

- 25 millilitres of leaf juice taken twice daily.
 - Burnt unripe fruit mixed with jaggery is consumed.
 - Ripe fruit pulp is eaten.
 - Leaf juice combined with black pepper is taken every day.
- Diseases Treated:
- Lowers blood sugar.
 - Cures dysentery.
 - Treats constipation.
 - Alleviates gas and indigestion.

2. *Gmelina arborea* Roxb.

Family: Verbenaceae

Vernacular Name/Local Name: Gamhari (Seni)

Parts of Plant Used and Mode of Use:

- Juice of unripe fruits combined with pomegranate juice is taken.
 - Leaf juice is applied to the forehead.
 - Decoction of stem bark with honey is consumed twice daily.
- Diseases Treated:
- Treats anemia.
 - Relieves headache.
 - Improves erectile dysfunction.

3. *Cissus quadrangular* L.

Family: Vitaceae

Vernacular Name/Local Name: Hadabhanga (Sujang)

Parts of Plant Used and Mode of Use:

- Smashed tender stem applied to fractured bones.
 - Juice of the stem is used as ear drops.
 - Juice is dropped into the nose to stop bleeding.
- Diseases Treated:
- Corrects bone fractures.
 - Treats ear ailments.
 - Stops nasal bleeding.

4. *Stereospermum chelonoides* (L.f) DC

Family: Bignoniaceae

Vernacular Name/Local Name: Pateli (Suge)

Parts of Plant Used and Mode of Use:

- Paste of leaves mixed with coconut oil applied to joints.
 - Decoction of leaf and bark with coriander and dried ginger is consumed.
 - Flowers smashed with black pepper are used.
- Diseases Treated:
- Provides relief from joint pain.
 - Treats acidity.
 - Melts and expels cough.

5. *Premna corymbosa* (Burm.f) Rottl .&. Willd.

Family: Lamiaceae

Vernacular Name/Local Name: Agnibathu

Parts of Plant Used and Mode of Use:

- Decoction of leaves is prepared.
 - Paste of roots is consumed orally.
 - Root paste applied to the skin.
- Diseases Treated:
- Cures fever.
 - Treats skin diseases.
 - Relieves inflammation.

6. *Desmodium gangeticum* (L.) DC.

Family: Fabaceae

Vernacular Name/Local Name: Shalaparni (Tamsargi)

Parts of Plant Used and Mode of Use:

- Decoction of stem with sugar is consumed.
- Ash of burnt stem mixed with oil is applied to abscesses.
- Decoction with cow urine and black pepper is taken.

Diseases Treated:

- Removes worms in children.
- Treats abscesses.
- Relieves jaundice.

7. *Uraria picta* (jacq.) Desv.ex

Family: Fabaceae

Vernacular Name/Local Name: Krushna Parni (Tamarul)

Parts of Plant Used and Mode of Use:

- Decoction of stem with rice grains and water is consumed.
- Dried root powder mixed with goat milk and sesame oil is taken.
- Root tied with a red string during the Pusya Nakshatra.

Diseases Treated:

- Relieves piles.
- Corrects constipation.
- Treats fever.

8. *Solanum indicum* L.

Family: Solanaceae

Vernacular Name/Local Name: Labinga Koli

Parts of Plant Used and Mode of Use:

- Root decoction is consumed.
- Fruit juice mixed with honey is applied externally.
- Seed paste is applied.

Diseases Treated:

- Treats asthma, bronchitis, and cough.
- Addresses alopecia.
- Enhances erection.

9. *Solanum virginianum* L.

Family: Solanaceae

Vernacular Name/Local Name: Ankaranti (Ebadae)

Parts of Plant Used and Mode of Use:

- Stem decoction with long pepper powder is consumed.
- Balls of dried fruit paste are taken with asafetida and honey.
- Stigma of flower mixed with honey is given.

Diseases Treated:

- Cures all types of cough.
- Relieves asthma.
- Treats chronic cough in children.

10. *Tribulus terrestris* L.

Family: Zygophyllaceae

Vernacular Name/Local Name: Gokhara (Kakatame)

Parts of Plant Used and Mode of Use:

- Various parts like leaf, root, and fruit are used.
- Diseases Treated:
- Relieves chest pain.
 - Treats kidney stones.
 - Addresses skin and eye disorders, asthma, inflammation, constipation, and sore throat.

These plants, with their diverse pharmacological properties, are integral to the efficacy of Dasamula Modak, showcasing the depth of traditional Ayurvedic wisdom.

Preparation of Phuluri Oil

The preparation of Phuluri oil involves a combination of various medicinal plants, each chosen for its specific therapeutic properties.

1. *Sesamum indicum* L. (Rasi/Jate) from the Pedaliaceae family is used in the form of leaves, flowers, seeds, and oil to treat indigestion, piles, eye diseases, vomiting, and headaches.
2. *Vetiveria zizanioides* (L.) (Bena) from the Poaceae family contributes its roots, which are effective for arthritis, stings, burns, joint pain, muscle pain, insomnia, epilepsy, and jaundice.
3. *Aganosma caryophyllata* (Roxb. Ex Sims.) (Malati) from the Apocynaceae family provides leaves, flowers, and flower buds to address cough, vomiting, and skin infections.
4. *Pandanus foetidus* Roxb. (Ketaki/Gadainsar) from the Pandanaceae family uses its flowers, pollen, and roots for alleviating headaches, epilepsy, female infertility, and rheumatism.
5. *Pandanus fascicularis* Lam (Kia/Tulab Anesuda), another member of the Pandanaceae family, employs flowers and roots to treat weakness, head discomfort, and ear pain.
6. *Mimusops elengi* L. (Baula Phula/Kurjat) from the Sapotaceae family uses its stem bark, leaves, flowers,
- 7.

and berries for curing mouth ulcers, promoting female fertility, and strengthening teeth.

8. *Oryza sativa* L. (Krushnabhoga Dhana/Saar) from the Poaceae family provides grains that are useful for treating blood dysentery, fever, vomiting, and as a face mask.
9. *Jasminum auriculatum* Vahl.(Jui) from the Oleaceae family employs roots, leaves, and seeds to address urinary and renal problems, wounds, headaches, and eye disorders.
10. *Jasminum grandiflorum* L. (Jai) from the Oleaceae family uses leaves, flowers, and roots for baldness, alopecia, skin diseases, eye disorders, fever, scabies, and itching.
11. *Jasminum sambac* (L.) Ait. (Malli) from the Oleaceae family contributes leaves, flowers, and roots to treat redness in the eyes, mouth ulcers, and dysentery.
12. *Santalum album* L. (Chandan) from the Santalaceae family utilizes leaves, stem bark, and oil as a nerve relaxant and to relieve headaches, insomnia, inflammation, and leukemia.

These plant parts are infused in sesame oil, sealed in earthen pots, and stored underground for a ritualistic period, ensuring the sacred preparation of Phuluri oil. This traditional process emphasizes the integration of botanical knowledge with cultural and religious practices.

Conclusion

The Saoras, one of the oldest tribal communities of India, hold a profound connection to the cultural and spiritual heritage of Odisha. Historically inhabitants of the coastal regions of ancient Kalinga, they were predominantly Sun worshipers. Their reverence for the Sun, closely linked to the Vedic deity Vishnu, demonstrates a fascinating blend of tribal and

classical Hindu traditions. The Sauras' practice of worshipping Neem wood (*Azadirachta indica*) images of the Sun and Vishnu, often placed on a pillar, bears striking resemblance to the Jagannath culture.

Even today, among the Sauras residing in the jungles and villages of Odisha, Sun worship persists as a significant tradition. The presence of Neem wood pillars, carved with a head and two hands and painted with facial features, serves as a tangible link to their ancestral practices. These totems reflect their ancient spiritual beliefs and align closely with the imagery and rituals associated with Lord Jagannath.

This cultural continuity highlights the Sauras' vital role in shaping and preserving Odisha's unique religious and cultural identity. Their practices offer valuable insights into the evolution of Jagannath culture, illustrating a seamless integration of tribal spirituality and broader Hindu traditions.

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