

# REFLECTION ON WEST ODISHAN TRIBAL SOCIAL LIFE THROUGH SAMBALPURI FOLK SONGS AND DANCES.

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**Abstract:** West Odisha comprising the districts of Sambalpur, Jharsuguda, Bargarh, Deogarh, Bolangir, Kalahandi, Sundargarh, Nuapada, Sonepur, Boudh and Athmallik sub-division of Angul district. This part of Odisha is very rich in tribal heritage. The rich cultural traditions of these tribals are manifested by magnificent art and crafts of different kinds. One of the manifestations of rich artistic skill of the tribal communities is the performing art or the unique songs and dance forms. Their songs and dances are very rhythmic and meaningful as well which reflects the social as well as their cultural life. The present paper is an attempt to give a vivid description on tribal social life through Sambalpuri folk songs & dances.

Western Odisha is regarded as a 'melting point' of races and cultures. It presents a true picture of modern times co-existing with rustic lifestyle. On one hand we have a developed urban city that has tall buildings, fast life and all amenities. On the other hand we see a stark contrast in the form of the tribal culture of West Odisha. This vibrant and colourful side is making its mark in urban lifestyle as well in the form of enthusiastic folk dances, songs, art & craft, poems and tattoos. The tribal culture of West Odisha has acclimatized itself to many Hindu traditions of India. It has mixed those customs with its traditional practices and has given birth to an entirely new cultural lifestyle amongst the tribe. The main features of their culture are the vibrant songs and dances. Any occasion, be it birth, death or marriage, has an elaborate song and dance performance. This is what adds happiness and liveliness in their harsh lives. The tribal people live a life without any luxuries that the urban city provides and yet are content with it. The tribal culture is very simple and portrays a subtle side of West Odisha. Being God-fearing people, they worship numerous deities for their well-being. The festivals are celebrated with much excitement and happiness and the traditional rituals are closely followed in order to please the Gods. The different customs and lifestyle is what makes the tribal culture truly distinctive and fascinating.

There is a sizeable tribal population in Western Odisha. More than half the population of Sundargarh district is tribal. In this district there are approximately 40 tribal communities. In Sambalpur, there are 44, in Bolangir there are 31 and in Kalahandi there are 46 such communities. A few important ones are described here.

The *Bhatada / Dhatada* very efficient cultivators are found in Kalahandi district.

The *Bhuyan / Bhumia / Bhumij* tribe is concentrated in Bonai subdivision of Sundargarh district. A fun-loving tribe, the young spend their evening in dance and music. As the name

indicates, the Hill *Bhuyan*, live in hills in classical tribal environment and live on shifting cultivation.

*Bhunja* are concentrated in Kalahandi and Nuapada region. The tribe speaks a dialect resembling Hindi. It has two sub-groups-*Chinda Bhunja* and *Chaukhutia Bhunja*. The community worships the Sun and pays special reverence to the tortoise. They subsist on cultivation and agricultural labour.

The *Binjal / Binja* community are largely found in Sambalpur, Nuapada and Kalahandi regions. The Dal, an agricultural tribe are mostly found in rural areas of Nuapada and Kalahandi districts.

The *Gonds* are very large tribe found in Western Odisha districts. At one time it was a very powerful community which lent its name to Gondwana. The *Gonds*, by and large, akin to their neighbours in their day-to-day lives and speak Sambalpuri as their mother-tongue.

The *Kandha* tribe concentration is in Kalahandi district though they are also found in small numbers in other districts of West Odisha. This tribe has three divisions- *Desia, Dangaria or Malia* and *Kutia*. These communities still speak *kui* language among themselves. They live on hilly tracks closer to the forest and subsist on shifting cultivation.

The *Khadia / Mankidia* are one of the most primitive tribes largely found in Sambalpur and Sundargarh districts of West Odisha. They are almost nomadic and live on food gathering and hunting, the favourite game being the monkey. Because of this habit, this community is known as *Mankidia*.

The *Kisan* is a tribe of cultivators in West Odisha with concentration in Sundargarh district and Kuchinda subdivision of Sambalpur district. The *Mundas / Kolha* are found in almost all district of Odisha but the highest concentration is in Sundargarh district.

The *Oraons* are the major tribes of West Odisha concentrated in Sundargarh district. Agriculture is the mainstay of the community. The *Paraja / Parja* literally meaning subjects, seem to be drawn into a group from different tribal communities. Occupationally, the tribe depends on agriculture and agricultural labour. This tribe is fond of dance and music. The young boys and girls spend their evenings dancing and singing.

The *Saoras*, a very widespread tribe of the *Kolarian* family mostly live in Nuapada, Jonk, Jaypatna areas and Koraput district. In West Odisha, two groups of *Saoras* are encountered – one having adopted the language and folk culture of its Sambalpuri speaking neighbours and the other is *Laria*-speaking. Agriculture is their principal occupation. The *Lodha / Sabara*, also referred to as *Sabara*, is numerically the third largest tribe in Kalahandi. Occupationally, the community is one of cultivators and agricultural labourers. Some supplement their living from forest collections.

A large chunk of the West Odishan highland is mainly inhabited by tribals. The so-called upper caste people who are migrants, the aboriginal depressed community and some tribes dwell together in the plain areas of the region. Though the privileged community people are more intelligent, educated and lead a sophisticated life, the real culture of the region has been shaped by the illiterate, unsophisticated tribal folk. Tribal people have both directly and indirectly

shaped the cultural life of these regions through the long centuries. In other words, the culture of this region may be characterized as a tribal based folk culture. Each of the ethnic group has its own language, but they speak and understand *Sambalpuri* language.

The main objective of this brief study is to focus attention on the social identity of the tribals lifestyle of West Odishan region through their dances and songs. The dances and songs of the tribals are extremely rhythmic. They are very meaningful as well.

### **Role of Dances and Songs in Tribal Societies**

In all tribal communities dances and songs are an inseparable feature. Dancing and singing are integrally connected with every phase of activity. The advance of civilization has so largely displaced the necessity for dancing as a form of self-expression and auto-intoxication that we have to turn to primitive societies to discover its real value. Among primitive societies the ascription of super-neutrality to the phenomena of nature gave rise to the celebrations of every event of significance in the life cycle of the individual and of the group as an affair of ritual as well as of social movement. These celebrations are frequently accompanied by the ritual of protection or dedication as well as by ceremonies of purely tribal significance and personal expressions of joy and grief. That these rites should have found form in dances is entirely logical, for even the natural movements, when backed by intense feeling, assume larger dimensions and stronger stresses and as the outgrowth of a particular purpose instead of merely generic excitement, slip naturally into rhythm and form.

### **Different types of Dances and Songs among the Tribals**

One of the most universal types of dancing with group significance among primitive people is that which accompanies labour activities requiring unity of action. The practice of working to rhythmic beating or chanting in order to achieve greater unity and efficiency of movements has been very general through the centuries and is widely prevalent at the present time.

#### **Warfare Dance**

The dance serves a similar practical purpose in matters of warfare. War dances not only constitute a popular form of entertainment but serve at the same time to crystallize group solidarity and in the absence of formal military organization, to provide training and drill for actual fighting.

#### **Magical Dances**

The faith of the tribal in these dances to propitiate angry deities or to destroy hostile men or influences probably arose from the realization of the effect of dancing upon himself and his observation of its effects on others. In agricultural dances the rain and the sun are invoked mimetically, and phallic symbols are carried in processions and dances to insure fertility.

#### **Dance connected with Death**

It is natural that death should be surrounded by elaborated rites and dances. Among primitive men funeral dances are generally performed for the welfare of the departed spirit and for the protection of the survivors from evil influences.

## Dance and Marriage

Marriage is a cause for much dancing of a different character, largely concerning itself with sex practices and fertility.

## Pastime Dances

Pastime dances are largely mimetic and except for those which are designed for sexual stimulation usually recount past experiences or look forward to future ones in battle, the hunt or other daily practices. These dances which deal with more personal problems provide an emotional release not only for the dancer but, through kinaesthetic sympathy, for the onlooker as well and are the root of both the art dance and the drama.

## Religious Dances

Among activities designed primarily to stimulate rather than release energy may be cited the production of frenzy which has made dancing a part of the practice of many religious sects and their votaries. Priests and prophets of many tribes dance themselves into delirium in order to induce possession by their particular deities, and in these states of frenzy deliver their oracles. Frequently the ability to accomplish this type of ecstasy has been the test of priest-hood.

## Courtship Dances

Courtship dances are undoubtedly motivated by sex and are an almost universal practice. The function of the dance in these cases is not only to give expression to sexual impulses but also to excite them, both in the dancer and in the onlooker. Dancing as a means of sexual selection was recognized and consequently both attacked and defended down through the Middle Ages and even into modern times.

## Dalkhai Song

*Dalkhai* is the most popular form of the folksongs in these areas. This is sung mainly on a religious occasion called '*Dalkhai Osha*' which is observed by young girls on the eighth day of the bright-moon day in the month of *Aswina*. *Dalkhai* being the presiding deity of this occasion, the above song is addressed to her. The song is followed by a group-dance with folk music. The main *Rasa* inspiring this variety is *Sringara*. The following lines are representative,

*Dalkhaire ...../ Janhapade Ghana Ghana*

*Jendinu katha laagla dhana /*

*Dalkhai Duti lo / naibujhe mor mana / ki Dalkhaire .....*

The meaning of these lines is like this, the beloved says that her mind is disturbed and she is unable to think of anyone other than her lover, since the time when the two of them talked.

## Rasarkeli Song

*Rasarkeli* is another popular form of tribal song. The title itself signifies that '*Sringara*' is the main *Rasa* expressed in this song. It is sung on various religious and non-religious occasions. Although these erotic songs may appear obscene to some, they in fact express profound aesthetic



feelings as experienced by the tribal folk mind. As in *Dalkhai*, dance and music are the chief components of *Rasarkeli* too. Here is a stanza of *Rasarkeli*,

“*Rasarkeli re...../ Rasake*

*Rasia kire Dhanaphula Kasia,*

*Kahebu belese ghinidemi kanara phasia,*

*Kanara phasia kene hajinasi jiba,*

*Aan toke gunichi demi, nani go / juge juge thiba kain /*

*Rasarkeli re.....”*

The meaning of the above stanza is that, a lover presents a waist-ornament instead of an ear-ring to his beloved since the latter might be get lost, for the waist-ornament, worn more intimately, will not be easy to lose.

### **Ghumra Geet**

*Ghumra geet* is named after the folk-drum, *ghumra*. It is a group song in which each singer plays the *ghumra*. It is believed in the primitive men that this instrument is used by the demon king Ravana in the battle field.

### **Ghudka Geet**

It is named after the musical instrument *ghubkudu*. As this is a duet performance, it involves one male partner and a female partner. The male sings while strumming his *ghubkudu* and the female sings and dances according to the rhythm of the music. These songs describe the social and economic life of the tribal folk.

### **Karma**

The songs meant for *Karma* dance is known as *Karma* songs. Although the dance is preceded by an opening song, an invocation to goddess *Karamsani*, the presiding deity of this quasi-religious dance, other songs of all sorts are gradually introduced in accordance with the mood of the leading singer. The others follow him to the best of their capacity.

### **Suggestions**

A culture and its environment are inter-dependent. They condition each other. Mankind is proceeding towards greater and greater homogeneity racially, culturally and linguistically. This march encompasses a variety of dimensions and some agonising implications. Oldest cultures are either dying or being exterminated. In such a broad category comes a great segment of primitive, tribal, indigenous, aboriginal, native and so on. Some major characteristics of these groups have been: simple pre-machine economy, unsophisticated rituals and social customs, lack of a script for their speech which itself is not developed, small local community organization and homogeneity. The primitive of yesterday have come into contact with their more civilized neighbours and are coming to lose their primitive character. Industrial civilization is now completing its destruction of technologically simple tribal cultures. The author has tried to highlight

the popular songs and dances forms of these primitive people here in this paper. The extremely rhythmic and meaningful songs and dances are gradually losing their traditional forms and slowly vanishing. There is dearth of documentation of the tribal dance forms in Odisha. It is urgent to document the dying tribal performing arts or else it will remain as unrecorded history.

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