

The Incredible Cultural Heritage of Gadaba Tribe of Koraput District

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Tribal Society is an enigma to the world of culture and heritage. In the broad sphere of Indian society, the tribal communities represent an important social category of Indian social structure. They are considered as the original inhabitants of India, who carry forward a legacy of rich and distinct cultural traits for many decades. Tribal society displays a fascinating profile of ethnic diversity. The tribals belong to different racial stocks, speak language of different families and show considerable variations in basic economy. The variation in physical and biological environment of their habitat is equally amazing. This bewildering variety in race, language, habitat and economy is fully reflected in their culture, which like a mosaic evokes the admiration of social scientists to study the dynamics of their society.

As per the Constitution (Orissa) Scheduled Tribes Order (Amendment) 1976, Orissa is one of the Scheduled Areas. Orissa occupies a unique position in the ethnographic map of India for having the largest variety of tribal communities. It is believed that the very name Orissa is derived from "Ordes", a predominant tribe. Being one of the fascinating ethnographic states of the country, it has been the homeland of as many as sixty two different tribal communities and all have been enumerated at 2001 Census. As per 2001 Census, the Scheduled Tribe (ST)

population in the State of Orissa is 81,45,081. This constitutes 22.13 percent of the total population of the State and 9.7 percent of the total tribal population of the country. The state holds 3rd and 11th rank among the States/UTs in terms of ST population and the proportion of ST population to total population of the State respectively. Although the tribals are found in all the districts of the state, yet more than half of their total strength is found in three undivided districts of Koraput, Sundargarh and Mayurbhanj.

Gadaba Tribe:

Orissa has a great variety of tribal population. The Constitution (Orissa) Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes order (Amendment) 1976 enlisted 62 tribal communities and Gadaba tribal community is one of the prominent tribes among them. The Gadaba is one of the colourful tribes of Orissa, classified as speakers of Mundari of Kolarian language. They are seen in adjoining mountainous tracts of Andhra, Orissa, Chhatisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. In Orissa, they are distributed mostly in eight different districts, viz Koraput, Malkangiri, Nabarangapur, Kalahandi, Rayagada, Khordha, Sundergarh, and Nayagarh. However, Koraput has the highest Gadaba population in the district. They inhabit 3000ft. plateau of Koraput region and are mostly found

in the southernmost part of the state in the district of Koraput. In Koraput district they are found in large concentration in Blocks of Lamtaput, Semiliguda, Potangi, Nandapur and Baipariguda.

Origin of Gadaba Tribe:

No precise theory is in existence to prove the origin of Gadaba community. But however the Gadabas are considered as one of the early settlers of our country and trace their origin to the time of Ramayan. It is believed that their ancestors emigrated from the banks of river Godavari and settled in Nandapur, the former capital of the king of Jaypore of present Koraput district in Orissa. It is also said that the Gadabas migrated from the Godavari valley to settle eventually in Gadabapada, a village in Lamataput Block of Koraput, wherefrom they again migrated to different places of the district in search of land. Another migration theory is also currently suggesting that the Gadabas, who once belonged to the Munda group of tribals, were originally inhabitants of the Bindhya hills. The name "Gadaba" seems to have been derived from the word "Gada", name of a brook in the region. Later, on dislocation of tribal population, the Gadabas might have migrated to Visakhapatnam region, and then to Koraput. According to Mitchell, the word Gadaba signifies a person who carries loads on his shoulders. The Gadabas were also employed as palanquin bearers in the hills. Thurston and Rangachari say that the Gadabas are the primitive tribe of agriculturists, coolies and hunters. They are also employed as palanquin bearers in the hills of the former rulers of Jeypore and thus known as "Bhoie Gadaba".

Language:

Broadly, there are two main types of Gadabas. One is "Bodo Gadaba" or "Bada

Gadaba" and the other is "Sana Gadabas. They are found mainly in the Blocks of Lamataput, Semiliguda, Potangi, and Nandapur in Koraput district. They have a dialect of their own called "Gutab" or "Gutob", although they also use the local Oriya language as well. The Bada Gadabas still speak the tribe's original Gutab language of the Munda language family whereas the Sana and Ollar/Ollar Gadabas converse in what they call the Ollar tongue of the Dravidian language family. Most Gadabas can also speak Desia, the Koraput tribal version of Oriya as well as Telugu. So, mostly Gadabas are trilingual or bilingual.

Classification of Gadaba Tribe:

Scholars also classify this tribe into five sub-divisions, such as the Bodo Gadaba, the Sano Gadaba, the Parenga Gadaba, the Ollar Gadaba and Kapu Gadaba. Among the sub groups, the Bodo Gadaba group is held superior to all other groups. Thurston and Rangachari (1909) divided the tribe into five sectors viz. (i) Bodo or Gutob (ii) Parenga (iii) Olar (iv) Kathithiri or Kaththara and (v) Kapu. According to them, the last sections, which were found by them to be settled in the plains, originally belong to Bodo (Gutob) sections. Ramdas (1931) also reported a number of classes of Gadaba. The names of the four classes given by him tally with those mentioned by Thurston and Rangachari, but he has specially omitted Kathithiri (Kathathara) from his list, perhaps because, by then, they no longer associated themselves with the Gadaba. Furer-Haimendorf (1943) too has divided Godaba into three distinct groups. He has excluded the Kathakari (Kathathara) and Kapu, and also the Parenga from being counted as Gadaba. He has instead, included the Dedeng Gadaba of the hills surrounding Salur (Andhra Pradesh) among them. In the similar manner Bell (1945) who wrote the first edition of Koraput district Gazetteer noted

three sub-divisions of the Gadaba in the district of Koraput, viz. the Bodo, Sana and Ollar. The Ollar Gadaba was described by him to be a small community, who spoke a Dravidian language, but to all out word appearances they were similar to other Mundari speaking Gadaba. Rao (1965) states about a different type of Gadaba viz. the Khattri (Non-Dravidian speaking) Gadaba who live near Bobbili of Andhra Pradesh adjacent to Koraput district of Orissa. Thusu and Jha (1972) have added another group called Gurram Gadaba in the category of Gadaba community. Majumdar connects the Gadaba with Munda family. He observes that the Gadaba “of Jeypore, Orissa are the only representative of the Munda speaking people” and they are “now a small occupational group of palanquin bearer, living east of Jagdalpur of Chhatisgarh state and whose cultural life may be distinguished from rest of the tribal stock”. He further goes on to write that the Gadabas belong to the Austro-Asiatic linguistic family (Somasunderam: 1949). Though the division of Gadaba varies from person to person, on the basis of language they can be clearly divided into two groups: the Ollar Gadaba from the first group being the Dravidian speaking people and the rest from the Mundari speaking group.

Population and Distribution:

According to 2001 census the total population of Gadaba tribe in India is 116,323. However Orissa has the highest Gadaba population in the country. The Gadaba population of Orissa constitutes 62.74% of the total Gadaba population of the country. It is followed by Andhra Pradesh (31.2), Chhattishgarh (5.43%) and Madhya Pradesh (0.81%).

Eventhough Gadaba tribe inhabits only in four states, it has many precious cultural traits and incredible heritage. Orissa has the highest number

of Gadaba tribe. They inhabit in most of districts of Orissa. The following table depicts the demographic distribution of Gadaba community in various districts of Orissa. The total population of Gadaba in Orissa which was 67,138 during 1991 census went up to 72,982 during 2001 census establishing a growth rate of 8.70 percent over the decade. As per the census 2001, Koraput district has the highest concentration of Gadaba population. Out of the total population of Gadabas in the state, Koraput has 58,559, which constitutes 80.23 percent of the total Gadaba population of the State. It is followed by the Malkanagiri district (14.60%) and Nabarangapur district (03.44%). Other districts of Orissa have either very less or no Gadaba population.

Sex Ratio:

The overall sex ratio of ST in Orissa is 1003. It shows the preponderance of females and is higher than the national average (978) for S.T. The sex ratio among Gadabas in Orissa as per 2001 census is 1011. The sex ratio among the STs of Orissa, in the age group of 0-6 years (979) is slightly higher than that of all STs at the national level (973). However the child sex ratio of Gadaba tribe of Orissa (0-6 years age) is 972, which is slightly less than the national average.

Literacy Rate:

The overall tribal literacy rate in Orissa has increased from 22.3 percent in 1991 to 37.4 percent in 2001. Despite this improvement, it is considerably below the national average (47.1 percent). Male tribal literacy has increased from 34.4 percent to 51.5 percent while female tribal literacy has gone up from 10.2 percent in 1991 to 23.4 percent during 1991-2001. Nevertheless the literacy among the Gadaba tribe is very low, being 3.3 percent during 1971 and 6.5 percent

during 1981; it has gone up to 21.21 percent in 2001 census. There is wide gender disparity found among the Gadabas in terms of literacy rate. While male literacy is 33.01 percent, the female literacy is only 9.64 percent.

Appearance, dress and ornaments:

The art of wearing cloth, decorating their bodies and hairs is one of the remarkable cultural traits of Gadabas. Both men and women tie their long hairs with linseed oil and decorate it with forestry flowers and different ornaments. Gadabas use very scanty cloths. The men folk use a small piece of loin cloth called 'Lenguti' with a flap which hangs down in front. They also use napkin (Gamacha or Lungi). The women use to wear long strip of cloth commonly known as "Kerang" (prepared from Kerang fibre) tied round the waist and second piece of cloth is worn across the breast. But however due to the impact of modernization, now a days Gadabas have started using the normal cloth of general people.

The Gadaba women are fond of wearing a number of ornaments generally made out of brass or aluminium. Traditional peasant jewellery fascinates the Gadaba women for its eloquent design. Even the poorest Gadaba women also wear ornaments. Gadaba males prefer to wear rings in their finger, bracelets in the wrists and ear-rings (guna). Women use different types of hair pins and wear ear rings, nose rings and finger rings made with coins. They use bangles which are made of brass. Some of the commonly used ornaments of Gadaba community are Hair clip (Khosa Dang), Big silver neck rings (Khagla), Nose ring (Dandi), Black Necklace (Taitul), Red Necklace (Bandara), Long Necklace made with Ghunguru (Bid/Gagara) etc.

Food:

Gadabas generally eat thrice a day. They don't take any breakfast. Around 9 a.m./10a.m. they eat boiled rice, curry and a glass of gruel (Pej) made up of ragi flour. The 'Pej' is the most favourite food of all Gadabas. It is a staple food made up of ragi, locally called as Mandia i.e. Elcusine corroconna flour or some other millets. After that they go to agricultural field for cultivation. At about 3 to 4 p.m. they return to their home and again take few glasses of Mandia Pej and then at 8p.m. in the evening they have boiled rice with different varieties of pulses, currying chutney of tamarind, mango, and other roots. During festival occasion they take non-vegetable food like fish, chicken and mutton. They regularly take liquor. Drinking of liquor (pendam) is considered sacred.

Dance and Music:

Gadabas are fond of dance and music. In spite of their grave poverty they try to retain their rich and unique heritage of dance and music which form an integral part of day to day life. These performances give expression to their inner feelings, joys, affection, passion and their appreciation of beauty in nature. They are known for their Dhemsa dance – which is performed by women wearing their famous Kerang Sarees. The main folk play musical instruments while women dance. Their musical instruments consist of big drums, Tal Mudibaja, Madal, Flutes, Tamak and Mahuri. They compose their own songs befitting different occasions and sing these songs while dancing. Sometimes they form a ring by joining hands all round and with a long hop spring towards the centre and then hop back to the full extent of their arms, while they at the same time keep circling round and round. At other times, the women dance singly or in pairs, their hands

resting on each other's wrists. In every festival, Gadabas love to dance. During festivals the women and cheery maidens wear Kerang saree reaching half way to the knee, great rings on their neck, rings on their fingers, brass bell on their toes, heavy brass bangles on hand and various necklaces in their neck and perform Dhems a dance with music, while dancing they sing but usually when they are exhausted after dancing a lot they wish to sing. They sing melodious songs either in Gutob or Ollar language. These songs and dances bring integration among them in the field, forest and village.

Religion, Belief, rituals and festivals:

The amazing conglomeration of traditions, beliefs, sorrows, taboos and philosophies that together constitute the religion of Gadaba tribe has descended from antiquity and has been preserved unimpaired to the present day. Every fact of their life covering round the year activities is intimately connected with religion. The festivals, ceremonies at home and in the Gadaba village are a regular event followed from generation. The important festivals are Gutor Parab, Bandapana Parab, Dasahara Parab, Pusha Parab, and Chaita Parab. Gadabas celebrate these festivals, with care, sincerity, devotion and fear. Before 14/15 days of celebration of festivals, Gadabas under the leadership and guidance of headman (Naik), Priest (Pujari) and Astrologer (Dissari) decide the date of the festival so that all community members can make the necessary arrangements. They try to satisfy the mystical power in order to restore and increase the well-being of their village. In whole it can be said that they have the rituals related to land, man and God. They also performed rituals to liberate evil spirit (Dumas) of ancestor and seek their blessing and co-operation.

Gadabas celebrate many agricultural rituals which are calendared according to different agriculture operations and different crops and fruits available to them. The various operation of seeds, ceremonial germination of seeds of the village, ploughing, seed sowing, protection from diseases, harvesting, thrashing and new crop eating ceremonies, new fruit eating are important. Life destroying situations due to the activities of evil spirit (Duma) are tackled by Gadabas through various rituals. They also believe that due to man's malevolence will, through varieties of terms of witchcraft and sorcery with evil intent some people cause harm to others. They also believe in "Palata Bagha" phenomena where Gadabas think that some evil people due to their witchcraft can turn to tigers and kill and eat people and then change to original human form. To overcome this kind of evil sorcery they perform many rituals and animal sacrifices.

Gadabas believe in many Gods and Goddesses. The chief among them is called Thakurani. They have their clan gods who are worshipped in different occasions. The place of the Thakurani is called Hundi. She is represented by slabs of stone and worshipped by Dishari.

Marriage and Family:

Human existence is deeply rooted in the institutions like family and marriage and in one way or other inseparably associated particularly with traditionally secluded tribal communities. In other words, these institutions in a traditional society are highly stable. Among Gadabas marriage is always viewed as a sacred institution. Marriage is very expensive in Gadaba society. The concept of "Bride Price" (Jala Dabu) prevails in their community. They prefer to marry their maternal uncle's daughter. At the time of marriage the groom has to pay certain amount of wealth to the bride's family. The amount of bride price is

fixed by the head of bride's family and the groom pays it as a customary rule. They follow exogamous form of marriage and are not allowed to marry within the same clan (Gotra). They follow various forms of marriage like marriage by negotiation (Ludiringnaie), marriage by capture (Ann Ringnaie), Marriage by service (Samandhi Denka Ludki Nangien) etc. Gadabas have nuclear family setup. After marriage a married Gadaba son is separated from his parents and inhabits in a separate nuclear family. Even the land property is also divided among the brothers after their separation. Their family is an egalitarian family, where the women enjoy high social status and also participate in every decision making process.

Village:

Gadabas are permanent settlers who live in a specific village for life long. Communal life with a strong solidarity is one of the most important salient features of Gadaba culture. Gadabas establish their village in the lap of nature always surrounded by green patches and stretches long on a hill side. One can find many jackfruit, mango trees, tamarind trees, banyan trees etc. in there village. Usually Gadabas make platforms in their villages with large slabs of stone in a rough circle under a banyan trees. This is called as Sadar by Gadabas. It is dedicated to Mother Earth or the Village Mother, which is a female deity and an important agent of fecundity. One of the stone is specially considered as sacred to her. Even though it has a sacred character and ceremonial importance, it is used as a club where villages seat and gossip. In this place the village headman (Nayak) settles the problems of villagers, passes his judgment for any conflicting situation and plans the programmes for the village festivals. Agriculture is the prime livelihood option for many Gadabas. So every Gadaba village is always surrounded by cultivated lands. They always like to settle nearby a river or perennial stream (Jhola). They

give a particular name to their village to show respect to their important clan or a sacred element.

Housing Pattern:

The houses are found in close-knit community set-up. These are usually not scattered over a large area. Rather concentrated in a single place. Usually a Gadaba house consists of two or more huts one for the parents and other for the married sons. They also construct a shed for domestic animal outside their residence. Each house follows a homogeneous pattern. The walls are made of mud or stone with a number of wooden pillars supporting the roof, which is thatched with forest grass or paddy straws. Recently they are constructing their roof with tiles. Typically most of the houses do not have windows. In certain villages they have loosely layered stone walls for boundary. When a boy marries he settles in a new house. Newly married couple stays in new house constructed close to the house of other family members.

Communal life and World View:

Gadabas love their surroundings – the village, forest, hills, streams, trees, flowers, there dances and songs. Gadabas are too much attached to their village people and other kith and kin. In the communal life of Gadabas, almost every aspect of life is shared. They never feel lonely, rootless and helpless in their community. They believe in present life and never bother for future. They know that needs, sorrows and sufferings are part and parcel of life. So they prefer to enjoy their present life with great pleasure and happiness without having the anxiety for future.

Recent changes in Gadaba Culture:

All living cultures change. Neither isolation nor simplicity of technology produce complete stagnation and even in the most conservative

culture, change does take place. Human groups change slowly or rapidly under the pressure of internal and / or external forces. As a result different tribal societies at present moment are also going through the critical state of transition. The way our country is passing through the period of transition in its roller-coaster ride towards modernization, the tribals of Koraput in general and the Gadabas of Koraput in particular are slowly but surely becoming aware of and assimilating some of the modern values while continuing their traditions and conventions. Changes in Gadaba culture are clearly visible in their language, dress pattern, use of ornaments, food, health, education, religion, ritual and entertainment aspects. The new generation of Gadabas are forgetting either their Gutob or Ollar language and using Oriya language. Only the elder people of their community are able to speak the original Gadaba language. In some areas the children can't even understand their own language. Previously the Gadaba women were wearing Kerang Sarees. But in recent days one can hardly find a Gadaba woman wearing the traditional Kerang Sarees. Many customary festivals and rituals in Gadaba society is decaying day by day. The well-known Gadaba festival 'Gotar' is almost stopped either because of their severe poverty or strict enactment of government to end animal sacrifice. Modern forces are actively moulding their lives.

To conclude we can say that the whole Gadaba society at present moment is going through the critical stage of transformation. Various modernizing forces have brought rapid transformation in their whole socio-cultural milieu. Cultural intermixture is on increase and this is sure to effect a perceptible change in the life style of Gadabas. Changes brought through modern and scientific attitudes are healthy sign for their development, but at the same time attention should

be paid to preserve their traditional systems which have immense value. The art and culture of Gadabas should be given new orientation and respectability in the overall scheme of cultural development.

The best traits of both the tradition and modernity should be synthesized for their sustainable development.

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