Odisha has the unique distinction of having the largest concentration of colourful tribes. ‘Parajas’. The population of the Paraja tribes in the state according to 2011 Census was 374,628. Majority of them are concentrated in its Eastern Ghat. This tribe has maintained a healthy sex ratio of 1000 males to 1080 females. The concentration of this tribe is more in undivided Koraput district. The overall literacy percentage of the tribe is 34.92%. 46.44% of males and 24.44% of females of this tribe are literate.

The nomenclature, ‘Paraja’, is a ‘local odia and desia term, which appears to have been derived from the Sanskrit word ‘Praja’ which literally means the common people; who are citizens under King or Raja. The term ‘Paraja’ also has another meaning in Odia denoting the tenant or the Royat.

Majority of the Parajas are concentrated in the district of Koraput. Semiliguda, Pattangi, Lamtaput, Laxmipur, Kundra, Boipariguda, Jeypore Blocks of the Koraput district are native places of Parajas. In Koraput region the Parajas live with Gadaba, Kondha, Rana and Domb. There are four types of the Paraja in this region i.e. 1. Bada Paraja or Sodia Paraja; 2. Pengo Paraja ; 3. Jodia Paraja and 4. Selia Paraja. Generally, the first two groups comprise the Bada Paraja and other two groups the Sana Paraja.

The Parajas live in big and small settlements in the company of other communities. The Paraja villages lie in the plains, on the foot hills and nearby forests in close proximity to hill streams. Inside the village there are two important places called Berna Munda and Nissani Munda. Berna Munda is the place comprising stone slabs where the village headman and leaders sit at dawn to discuss village affairs. Nissani Munda is the seat of the village deity called ‘Hundi Debta’.

A Paraja village has its own sit of traditional village functionaries, where ‘Jani’ is the sacred head and he is the custodian of the religions and moral life of the village community. The ‘Muduli’ is the secular head of the village who is assisted by ‘Challan.’ Besides these Disari, Gurumai, Gunia and Bhatta Nayak are the important functionaries.

Family is the smallest unit in the Paraja Society. The family is patrilineral and patriarchal. The Parajas have a number of totemic sects such as Bagh (tiger), Kachim (tortoise), Bokda (Goat), Netam (Dog), Godhi (Lizard), Pandki (Dove) and so on. They highly respect their totemic species and observe taboos against killing them. Lilen cloth and napkins for men and cheap sarees for women are the traditional dress of the Paraja.

Paraja observe many seasonal festival with pomp and ceremony round the year. Among
these, the important ones are Asadha Parab, Nuakhia, Diali Parab, Push Parab, Chaita Parab etc.

Dance, song and music are the characteristics of Paraja aesthetic life. Dhemsa dance, Khadumara dance, Dungdunga dance are some of the popular dance of the tribe. The male members use the musical instruments like dhola, tamaka, dungdunga & mahuri. Among the Paraja every one is a musician and a poet. They sing different types of song on the occasion of Puja & festivals. Their dance, music & songs are highly inspired by the beautiful elements of nature like the Sun, the Moon, the sky, the wind, the rain and the trees, streams, flowers, birds and animals etc.

Each Paraja village has two separate dormitories at the end of the village; known as ‘dhangda basa’ for boys and ‘dhangdi basa’ for girls. Grown up unmarried boys and girls of the village come to these ‘basas’ spend the evening there, know each other and engage in dance and music till late night. These dormitories help in creating an intimacy between the boys and girls to select their life partners. Besides, these dormitories are the centers of socio-cultural activities of the Paraja society.

The marriage within the clan is prohibited in Paraja society. Monogamy is the rule, although in the exceptional cases polygamy is practiced.

The staple food of the Paraja is rice and is supplemented with millets, maize, pulses, seasonal fruits, roots and meat, egg, fish etc. Some of the important trees of the Paraja are mahula, salap, kendu, mango etc. They collect flowers, juice and fruit from these trees. They also use (mohua liquor) mahuli, landa (mandia liquor), salap (palm liquor) etc. It is an integral part of their life. Even they offer liquor to their deities and spirits.

The economy of Paraja tribes are primarily agro and forest based. Their lands are not so fertile, mostly unirrigated and are of low productivity. So they are marginal & small farmers. Many of them are landless. Whatever is produced is consumed. They adopt primitive method of cultivation. They adopt both wet cultivation and shifting cultivation.

A careful study of the socio-cultural life of the Paraja tribe shows that they lead a very simple and joyful life. The traditional economic organisation of Parajas, their marriage and kinship system, political set-up, magico-religious life, as well as their folk-culture and world views have changed to some extent with the changing times, but it still continues to function effectively. Modern men have to learn a lot from these gullible tribals. They should be allowed to develop their own genius and we should not impose anything on them in the name of development. Only then can we preserve their rich cultural heritage for our bright future.

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