Life of a Lanjia Saora - a Case Study

Pradyot Mohapatra

The following is a case study of a key informant of Tidasing village, a village close to Lanjia Saora Development Agency (LSDA) at Seranga in the district of Gajapati. The study had been made a decade ago during a fifteen day period in February-March 1997; but the author believes that it is relevant even today as throwing light on many of the facets of life of the Lanjia Saora.

Our key informant is Gulsan Raita. He is a cultivator; he practices both the cultivation of the plain land and that of hill slopes (bagada). Apart from that his subsidiary activities include animal husbandry, horticulture, mat weaving and broom making.

The economic activities of Gulsan Raita are subsistence oriented; it is reflected in his food consumption and the observance of festivals. He takes cooked rice mixed with water (known in Oriya as pakhala) in the morning. This is taken along with a little bit of tamarind and chilly. Lunch and dinner are a little heavier. He consumes the products obtained from slash and burn cultivation along with rice. Not to become too scientific, we give the names of minor millets, beans and other vegetables as the Saora names them: jana, mandia, kandula, ganga, khosala, ganthia, jhudunga, baragudi, kauria, baila. Apart from these self-produced items he buys from the market cooking oil, onion, potato, salt. On special occasions he consumes meat, fish and a curry prepared from jackfruit. He also consumes home grown fruits such as mango, pineapple, lemon, jackfruit, tamarind and banana. (Banana is so cheap that one of my guides arranged a whole kandhi for Rs.12/- only; in the interior twenty lemons sell for Re. 1/- only and tamarind is also very cheap.) Mango and tamarind are available in plenty and about them the Saora says in Oriya that "tike beshi miluchi" (it is available in plenty).

Lanjia Saora festivals also reflect the subsistence nature of his economy. The grain offering ceremony is held in the month of February for one day. On this day funds are raised for the local church, and everybody contributes and participates. The fruit offering ceremony is held in the month of June at the church and everybody participates. But the most important ceremony is Christmas which is observed for seven days both at home and at the church.

Apart from subsistence agriculture, the next most important economic activity for the Lanjia Saora is the construction of his house. New houses
are required for newly wed Saora couples. In the construction of a house, members of the birinda or the extended family help. The Lanjia builds his bungalow with a mixture of both old and new construction materials. Traditional materials are preferred for the structure, walls: new materials are required for the roof and the floor. The preference for traditional materials is owing to lower costs; otherwise, new material is preferred for all purposes. Indira Awas Yojana, which uses modern construction materials, is the preferred choice over houses using traditional construction materials. Many Saoras have been rehabilitated in a colony near the LSDA office. These are pucca houses. Annual maintenance expenditure on houses comes to around Rs.200/- to Rs.300/-. For wall, stone, mud, straw, and wood are used. For roof straw is the second choice. It is used if asbestos sheets are not arranged. Floor is made of earth, beaten to level it. The structure is made of wood. The materials are available locally. The universal Lanjia Saora design is to construct two rooms. There is a main room, and behind it is another room used for cooking. There is a loft in the cooking room used to store food grains. Household articles are stored inside the house. However, agricultural tools are stored in a corner of the cowshed located outside the house. Gulsan Raita is a Christian and therefore there is no place for the traditional family god in his house.

The next most important thing for a Saora is health. Malaria, TB, typhoid, and dysentery are the main diseases. Cold, cough, and fever are the minor diseases. Some persons are said to have died after a prolonged fever of 6 to 9 years. The cause of such fever is unknown. Gulsan Raita's father Jenari Raita is said to be 70 years old.

Treatment for diseases is available at the Christian hospital at Seranga, Home of New Hope. The government had carried pulse polio immunization programme in January 1997. Gulsan Raita spends about Rs.500/- yearly on medical expenses.

Marriage, kinship, and inheritance of the Christian Saoras are as follows. The age of marriage nowadays is higher than they were in the past. In the past boys used to marry at the age of fifteen and girls at the age of twenty. Nowadays boys are married at about the age of twenty and girls at about the age of twenty-five. As Gulsan Raita is a Christian, there is no caste system in his village. The marriage is either negotiated or takes place by mutual consent. Individual preference in the choice of mates predominates. Widow marriage though allowed is rare. The faster of the church conducts the marriage. Traditionally there was a preference for cross-cousin marriage; it is not the preferred choice at present. Whatever be the form of marriage, it is always considered legitimate. Household property such as land, house, and household articles are inherited by sons; all Sons have equal right in parental property. Married daughters have no right in their father's property. Widows have a right over their husband's property and women after divorce enjoy property rights. After divorce, the children stay with the father; the mother stays in a separate room.

The Lanjia Saora observes certain rites and rituals. After puberty girls are not permitted to do religious activities during the period of confinement. Meeting of couples is held on the second day after marriage. Women in pregnancy are not allowed to do heavy work. There are certain restrictions associated with child birth: after the birth of a male child, the mother is required to
stay away from the church for sixty days; after the birth of a female child, eighty days. No special ritual is observed after cremation. No animals are sacrificed. The faster of the church does the minimal rites. Christian Saoras have distanced away themselves from medicine men and traditional priests. The yearly expenditure on rituals is considered low. Apart from contribution to the church on special occasions, on every Sunday they contribute some amount to the church which varies from Rs.2/- to Rs.10/-.

Development intervention in the Lanjia Saora area has included family oriented benefits apart from the infrastructural facilities such as electricity, road, water etc. The Lanjia needs loan for consumption purposes, repayment of old loans, agriculture, marriage, disease, and house improvement. The Saora needs loan for many purposes; but, he gets little. The State Bank of India located at Seranga is the chief source of loan. Apart from that, there is a non governmental organization named Khirndi Multipurpose Development Society at Parlakhemundi that provides loans to them. The rate of interest on loans is around 12%. The term "subsidy" is almost familiar to every Saora in that area. However since the government provides loans for productive purposes only, they depend on private moneylenders for loans to meet consumption purposes. (The report is based entirely on fieldwork.)

Pradyot Mohapatra is a Formerly Research Fellow, National Institute of Social Work and Social Sciences (NISWASS), Bhubaneswar.