



Jananglasum Idital

## The Sauras and Their Panoramic Paintings

*Dr. C. B. Patel*

Orissa is efflorescent with rich tribal cultural assemblage. Of the sixty-two types of tribal communities the Sauras are one of the oldest tribes of India. Out of these, seven tribes have beautiful mural painting tradition on the walls of their houses. The Sauras are specially famous for rich variety of their paintings based on religious and ceremonial themes. Their deity *IDITAL* commands great religious devotion from the tribal people. Each Idital contains various symbols and signs and convey special meaning for which it is meant. The pictograms are categorized into different sections as per their meaning and purpose. These paintings convey great aesthetic sense. Verrier Elwin was the first scholar to study the Saura pictograms. This form of art is mostly found in Rayagada, Gajapati and Koraput districts of Orissa. A study of their arts and painting traditions reveals the rich ancient tribal art idiom, which is still in vogue with popular appeal. Even the painting activities are getting commercialised now a days. As a result the role of artist has changed from religious painter to interior decorator. Specially, the Lanjia Sauras continue the old artistic diction in its original form. In this paper an attempt has been made to study the various aspects of icons with special reference to its iconology, iconography and painting tradition of the Sauras of Orissa.

The Sauras constitute a very important and ancient tribe of our country. We find graphic account of this tribe i.e. Sauras or Savaras in the Ramayana and Mahabharata. The devotion of Savari to Rama in Ramayana is an epic folk lore of India. In the Mahabharata we find mention about Jara Savara who pierced an arrow to Krisna and killed him. His body flowed into Mahodadhi i.e. sea near Puri in the form of a wooden log from which the present Triad of Jagannath is said to have been built. Prior to that, tradition says that Savara chief Viswavasus was worshipping Nilamadhava Visnu in the unknown blue hill of Orissa i.e. Nilachal. Ekalavya learnt archery observing the teaching technique of Guru Drona from a distance and excelled Pandavas and Kauravas in archery. His devotion to Guru and his sacrifice for satisfaction of his Guru is unparalleled in mythology and history. Such is the noble Savara tradition in Mahabharata. In the Hathigumpha inscription of Kharavela dated to 1st century B.C. Savaras of Orissa were called Vidyadhardhivasas. They constitute an important segment of his turbulent army which victoriously marched over South and North India. Asoka had no control over the Savara territory which was called Atavika Kingdom in the 3rd century B.C. Thus the Savara tribes of Orissa have a hoary glorious past.



Jananglasum Idital

The Sauras are widespread in Orissa and are found in almost all the districts. However, their main concentration, we find in Ganjam, Gajapati and Koraput districts.

They are called by various names like Sabara, Saur, Sora and Saura etc. They have their racial affinity to the Proto-Australoid physical features found dominant among the aborigines of central and southern India. At present they are found in Bihar, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and West Bengal. In the North-East States like Assam and Tripura, they have quite sizable population. The term Saura has been derived from two words namely Sagories means the Scythian words for axe and Saba Raye meaning Sanskrit term for carrying a dead body. Their language is an uncultivated one without any standardization. It varies between individual to individual and region to region. In fact it belongs to Austric family of languages to which Mundari is assigned. According to Verrier Elwin "the Sauras who give the impression of being rather matter of fact and prosaic are surprisingly picturesque and metaphorical in their speech."

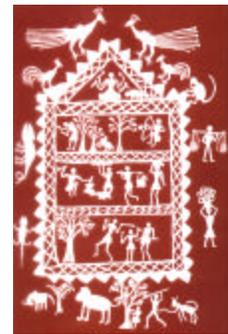
The Sauras are a measure tribe of Orissa. Their population in the following census year are presented below:

1951	-	19,401
1961	-	3,11,614
1971	-	3,42,797
1981	-	3,70,061

These census reports show that the Saura population is increasing. As per the 1981 report they constitute 6.26 per cent of the total tribal population of the state and on the basis of their numerical strength they occupy 3rd position among the 62 tribes. The sex ratio comes to 1030 females per 1000 males. They are educationally and socially backward. From their appearance, they resemble the Pre-Dravidian tribes. They have long heads, flat noses with expanded alae. The brow ridges are prominent and there is depression at the root of the nose. Facial prognathism is vivid. Their hair is wavy and curly. Some have plain hair as well. The skin colour is brown to dark brown but fair complexioned are also not rare. They are not strongly built like the Kondhas. The noteworthy feature is that they are very efficient in climbing, running and walking on hills. From their appearance they appear Pre-Dravidian.

Their dress consists of loin cloth of about 6 feet long and about two inches in breadth. It is plain and at times we find decorated with red tarsals at the border.

This is tied around the hip which hangs down into two strips, the one in the rear being longer. Often they wear single necklace of beads. The Saura women put a waist cloth with grey borders that reaches up the knees. The skirt is generally 3 feet long and about 2 feet broad. In winter season, she covers the upper part with another piece of cloth. The cloth is woven by the Dombs. At present mill made and ready made dresses are being used. The women do not put



Kittung Sum Idital

heavy ornamentation. A few necklaces of beads, wooden plugs, spiral rings made of brass, bell metal or aluminium in the fingers and toes, little ring in the alae of nose and metal anklets are worn by them. These are generally purchased from the local market.

The Saura villages are mostly situated in the dense jungle area. Often it is seen hidden in the forest clad hills making it difficult to approach. A zigzag steep hill paths approach the village. In summer, they sleep on the verandah.

The houses are built in the slopes or foot hills. They live in small concentration of about 200 households. In case of big village we find a series of hamlets scattered here and there. There is nothing like nomadic way of life. The terraced field exhibiting Saura's skill in contour bonding, reversionment and water management, are located close to the settlements at one corner. However their villages do not conform to any specific type of settlement pattern. Houses are built in row leaving a street in between. In many cases the houses are jumbled up and there are narrow lanes and small openings to which the door of the houses are fixed. The houses are rectangular in shape and are fairly high. The plinth is very high in proportion to roof. The walls of the houses are made of stone and mud with a high verandah. In some cases houses are built of bamboo and wood plastered with mud. The walls are coloured red with red earth. There is an elevated store to keep household items. The open space is used for husking rice. The hearth is found near a wall in one side. The fire goes on burning constantly. Near the kitchen the household utensils are kept. Earth ware vessels are used for cooking and storing. They sleep on mats made of palm leaf. Large number of baskets of various sizes are also found. Well to do men or headmen use cots.

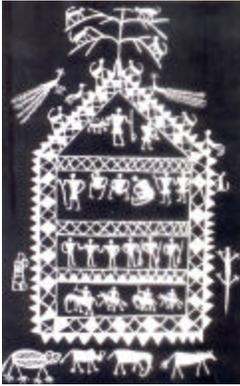
Their economic life rests on shifting cultivation. Hunting and fishery are some other sources of economy. They are in fact famous for terraced cultivation. They are also unique due to absence of clan or sub-organisation. They are very fond of their children. Their marriage is a simple affair. They cremate their dead and their religion is very enchanting and elaborate. They worship their ancestors for peace, tranquillity and prosperity.

The Sauras work in the field with a piece of hoe called Gubla. They generally do not use plough in the Swiddens. The calendar of agricultural activities are presented below.

<u>Months</u>	<u>Nature of work</u>
November and December	Forest cleaning
March	Firing
April	Sowing
July	Weeding
August and January	Harvesting

The Sauras are best known for their wall paintings called 'ikon'. We find a set of sketches elaborately drawn on their walls. They have invariably religious association for which they are called *italons* or *ikons*. It is difficult to define the perfect symbolic meaning of ikons which consist of human being, horse, elephant, gun men, aeroplane, cycle, sun, moon, etc. It is generally made to appease the Gods and ancestors. At frequent intervals, they are replaced by substitutes on different occasions.

These paintings are conspicuous for their elegance, charm, aesthetic and ritualistic association. In fact these pictograms are their literature and philosophy. The clear meaning becomes apparent when the priests or the picture men interpret. The paintings of Lanjia Sauras of Puttasingha region of Orissa are unique and interesting.



Sargaisan Abdsur Idital

Each *icon* or *idital* conveys a separate message. The minute details of pictograms reflect real everyday life pattern of Sauras. Few examples of *iditals* are presented below:

### (1) *Jodisum*

*Jodisum* are two wooden poles with human form installed at the cross road of Saura village. It is the village deity. It is drawn to worship *Jodisum* during the new yearly eating ceremony of redgram. The Sauras do not eat the newly harvested crop of the year without this ceremony. They first offer these to God and their forefathers. The study of the pictogram is interesting. On the top, seven lady priests (*idaibois*) are seen praying to God *Jodisum* to guard and protect the village from evil spirit. On the left a priest pouring wine and a helper taking a hen for sacrifice are seen. In the lower portion we notice five people praying the deity holding bunches of redgram while a priestly Saura bringing a goat for sacrifice. Below this, seven persons are playing trumpets (flute), drums and gongs. Three monkeys adorn each side of the composition. On the right side two damsels are seen carrying worship materials in closed baskets. Below this is a tiger which is represented as the vehicle of earth deity. On the left two male priests (*idaimar*) are seen along with a jungle lizard. Elaborate ritual generally follows this ceremony.

### (2) *Jananglasum*

It is also worshipped along with village deity when first eating ceremony of sweet potato (jungle roots) is made. The deity is also

prayed to cure diseases and to bestow blessings. The *icon* or *idital* made on this occasion is a complex one. It is divided into 5 divisions with a triangle shaped shrine at the top being surrounded by many a symbol. At the centre of the triangle, a man is being blessed by *Jananglasum* and a lady priest is seen with a garland standing on the right side. On the right three guards with *danda* are noticed. On the left we notice three lady worshippers with oblations. In the first row from top, the *buya* (male priest) is seen offering a pig to the deity visible as a heap of stone. Behind him we find a number of devotees with various offerings like fowl, wine, water and goat. The second part shows the driving out of the evil spirit amid flute playing and other formalities.

The third row shows hoeing earth by eight persons symbolising fertility cult. In the other scene we notice two *ildas* (ancestral spirits) riding on horse and elephant and marching with their retinues and servants. In the lowest block garden lizard, crab, scorpion, snail and porcupine, the pets of Goddess earth are painted. Two farmers are seen driving out the monkeys with their bow and arrows and other weapons from the redgram field. On the right, a couple with their items and three guards of *Jananglasum* are seen and a ferocious tiger attacking a man is noticed. On the left two priests, a couple with oblations and one *ilda* (benevolent spirit) driving out the malevolent ones. This painting programme in fact needs further elucidation by the tribes themselves. Like these, there are a series of different pictograms for different social and religious occasions.

Some other important paintings are of *Andumjappur* meant for seed sowing ceremony, *Sarpalassum*, the God of path, *Sidangpur* for

good crop, *Gangsum* for preventing smallpox and *Isarsum* for the departed soul entering the underworld.

The art heritage of Sauras is dominated by religious themes. It is observed that cults and myths have great bearing on artistic creations of the Sauras. Their whole theological system is being dramatised in the wall painting traditions. The richness, variety, antiquity and the ritual base offer a conducive field for further study. In fact an *ikon* is done to flatter and propitiate the Gods and ancestors so that the members of the family are saved from evil influence.

The Sauras are a languishing tribe now. Their problems are manifold. They are ignorant about their environmental conditions. Above all they suffer from malnutrition. To add to this, they are consigned to the exploitation of Doms. However, they are famous among the tribals for their unique and exuberant paintings. It has now become a fashion among the well to do people to paint their houses and offices with Saura paintings.

#### References:

1. Tribes of Orissa : H & T.W. Department, Government of Orissa.
2. Aiyanger, K. : *Beginning of South Indian History*, Madras -1918.
3. Cunningham : *The Ancient Geography of India*, Calcutta -1924.
4. Elwin, V. : *Tribal Art of Middle India*, London -1951.  
*Religion of an Indian Tribe*, Bombay-1955.
5. Fawcett : On the Saoras (or Savaras), an Aboriginal Hill People of the Eastern Ghats of the Madras Presidency, *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Bombay*, Vol.1.
6. Mahapatra, S. K. : *Tribal Wall paintings of Orissa*, Bhubaneswar -1991.
7. Mallebrein, C. : Constructing a House within the House, in *Jagannath Revisited*, Ed. H. Kulke and Schnepel, Delhi -2001.  
Tribal art : Continuity and Change, in *Orissa Revisited*, Bombay, Marg Publication, Vol.52, No.3, 2001.
8. Mc. Chrindel : *Ancient India as Described by Ptolemy*, Calcutta-1927.
9. Pradhan, S. S. : *Rock Art in Orissa*, Delhi -2001.
10. Pliny : *Natural History*, London, 1855-56.
11. Rajguru, S.N. : *Inscription of Orissa*, Vol.V, Bhubaneswar.
12. Ramdas, G. : Aboriginal names in the Ramayana, in *Journal of Bihar Orissa Research Society*, Vol. XI, 1925.
13. Ramamurti, G.V. : *A Manual of the So : ra (or savara) Language*, Madras-1931.
14. Risley, H.H. : *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, Calcutta-1891.
15. Russel & Hira Lal : *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*, London-1916.
16. Sitapati, G.V. : The Soras and their Country, *Journal of the Andhra Historical Research Society*, Vol. XII-XIV, 1938-43.
17. Stirling, A : An Account, Geographical, Statistical and Historical of Orissa Proper, or Cuttack, *Asiatic Researches*, Vol. XV, 1825.
18. Sukla, H. L. : *Lanka Ki Khoj*, (Hindi) Allahabad -1977.
19. Truston, E. : *Castes and Tribes of Southern India Madras -1909*.
20. Vitebsky, P. : *Dialogues with the Dead*, Delhi -1993.
21. Yeatts : *Census of India*, 1931, Vol. XIV, Part-I.
22. Ramayana : Gita Press, Gorakhpur.  
*The Youth World*, Saura Painting Special, Issue No.18, September 2003, Balangir.
23. D. P. Kar & S. N. Agarwal : Saura paintings of Orissa, Mahalaxmi Publication, Bhubaneswar, 2004.

---

Dr. C.B. Patel is the Superintendent of Orissa State Museum, Bhubaneswar.