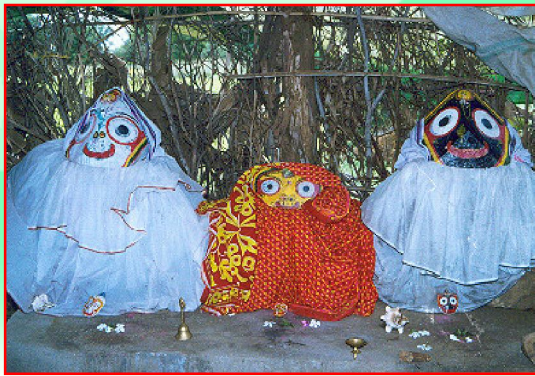




Jagannath and The Tribes

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The legends about Jagannath contained in the *Puranas* and the *Odia works* of Sarala Dasa, Nilambara Dasa, Krishna Dasa and Jagannath Dasa refer to him as originally a god of the tribal Saoras (Savaras).

With regard to these myths, W.W. Hunter wrote : "We find the aboriginal people worshipping a blue stone in the depths of the forest. But the deity has grown tired of the jungle offerings of the primitive people and longs for the cooked food of the more civilized Aryan race. When the Aryan element at length comes on the scene, the rude blue stone disappears, and gives place to a carved image."

Whether the modern Saoras (Savaras) have anything to do with the people mentioned in literature is anybody's guess. For as pointed out by Thomas Burrow, the eminent Oxford Sanskritist, the term Savara has been used in ancient Indian works "indiscriminately" for any and every forest tribe".

The *Utkala-khanda* of the *Skanda Purana* says that no controversy should be raised about the nude wooden forms of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra. It further directs that they should not be viewed without the wrappings of silk cloth. Otherwise people might be scared and suffer from sin, epidemics, famine and loss of progeny. Is this further proof of the non-Aryan character of the images ?

Be that as it may, there are several living links between Jagannath and the tribal people.

There is a place called Seori-Narayan in Bilaspur district of Madhya Pradesh. It is named after an old Bhil hermit named Sawar who is said to have worshipped Jagannath. The Saoras of this region call themselves Seori-Narayan Saoras.

The Saoras of Keonjhar district, who are much Hinduised, are reported to worship Jagannath with offerings of fruits. They have Brahman priests who give them a sacred thread to wear every year after it is worn by god Balabhadra at Puri. They say they are descended, among others, from Vasu Savara, Jara Savara and Lalita who was married to king Indradyumna's Brahman emissary Vidyapati. All these Saoras figure in the legends regarding Jagannath.



In the past the Bhuiyan tribals of Keonjhar supplied logs for making the chariots used in the annual Rath Yatra at Puri as well as ropes made of creepers for pulling them.

The Kharias of the Similipal hills of Mayurbhanj district claim to be descendants of Vasu Savara or Viswvasu. Some Kharia families enjoy the privilege of putting a silk cloth on the chariot of Jagannath during the Rath yatra at Baripada. They style themselves Brahman Kharias. They say they are descended from Jara Savara. They have earned the title of *Patabandha*. Perhaps the Kharias were formerly a branch of the Saora people.

A subdivision of the Saoras, called the Kalapithia, take part in dragging the chariot of Jagannath at Puri, along with others. They live near the town and enjoy rentfree lands. They put on the sacred thread, avoid taking liquor and fowl and regard themselves as members of a high caste.

The Saoras of South Orissa are acquainted with the legends of Jagannath, including the one in which Jara plays a part. This tribe has several subdivisions, one of which is called Jara.

These Saoras have a deity called Jananglo. They hold a festival before Jananglo in the month of Asadha (June-July) - the month associated with the Jagannath chariot festival. Then they engage themselves in agricultural operations.

To the Saoras, Kittung is for all practical purposes the supreme god. There are also a number of different Kittungs. One is the maimed Kittung. He is the discoverer of fire. His image, which is similar to that of Jagannath, is worshipped. The legend about him is as follows : "One day on the Rawangiri mountain, Kittung Mahaprabhu broke open a rock and fire came out. The rock burst and a bit of it flew up and hurt Kittung's head on the left side. So fierce was the fire that Kittung's hands and feet also were burnt; the wounds were so bad that he remained lame and maimed on Rawangiri".

The Saora pantheon contains two other gods who have links with Jagannath. One is Maprusum, probably mahaprabhu or Jagannath. Whoever brings food to the village has to offer a little to him. If not, he will fall sick.

The other god is Orissa-Manjorasum. According to Verrier Elwin, "He is represented in

ikons as two men with a woman between them, an obvious reflection of the images of Jagannath."

Some of the functionaries of the Jagannath temple at Puri appear to have tribal affiliations. It is likely that the Suars, who cook the holy food, have a Saora ancestry. The Daitas claim to be descendants of the Saora fowler Viswvasu.

It is the Daitas who play a leading role in the performance of the rituals of the deities from the day of the bathing ceremony to the end of the chariot festival. For fifteen days, while the gods are being repainted, they are offered only fruits, flowers and leaves and no Mantrams are uttered. The income from pilgrims during this period is appropriated by the Daitas.

When an important person of this community dies, his body is taken near the Lions' Gate of the Jagannath temple. It is subsequently cremated with some fire from the temple kitchen.

Following the burial of the old image in the Koili Baikuntha during the Nabakalebara ceremony when new idols are made, the Daitas observe funeral obsequies. Probably to them Jagannath is not only their god but also a kinsman.

These facts, significant as they are should not be interpreted to mean the definitive or ultimate tribal origin of the Jagannath cult, which has been advocated by several scholars. For, as remarked by A.L. Kroeber, the famous American anthropologist, "the origin of any movement or institution, in the strict sense of the word, is simply not a historically valid conception. A good historian does not really pose the question. It would violate his two fundamental axioms of the uniqueness of all historical phenomena and of the continuity or unity of history."

Nevertheless, the tribal connections of Jagannath are clear. This is nothing to be wondered at in view of the deep interpenetration of tribal and non-tribal cultures in Orissa. In addition, the evolution of Hindu religion has been much influenced by a number of primitive gods and goddesses as a result of Austric or proto-Australoid and Dravidian contacts. Of these, the serpentine deities, the water spirits, Aiyana, Murugan and Siva with his phallic symbol are notable examples.

N.B. : Reprinted from Orissa Review, July, 1969.