

Ritual Life of the Sabara Community: A Study of Life-Cycle and Agricultural Practices in Jajpur District, Odisha

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Abstract

Sabara community of the Odisha is one of the tribal communities that retained a social cultural identity through practices of rituals and beliefs. The study explores the ritual life of Sabara community of Badacahana block, Jajpur district of Odisha, particularly life cycle and agricultural rituals of Sabara community, the study area is five Sabara villages Neliasahi, Duburi Sahi, Bali Sahi, Guljarnagar Patana and Kesarapada (Darpani) of Darpan gram panchayat in Badachana block. The aim of this study is to describe and analyse the major life-cycle rituals practiced by the Sabara community in Jajpur District, to study agricultural rituals and their cultural significance in the socio-economic life of Sabara people and to explore the changes and continuities in the life-cycle and agricultural rituals practices under the influence of modernization and non-tribal cultural forces. This study focuses tribal community particularly on the Sabara tribe in Jajpur district of Odisha. Sabara tribe is mostly believed in worship the village deity. They believed that their all tradition is blessing from Goddess and consider it their duty to follow all rituals with due observance.

Keywords: Rituals, Agriculture, tribe, Sabara community, life cycle rituals.

1. Introduction

The Sabara tribe is an ancient tribe of India who are also known as Soara, Sora, Saora, Sahara, Soura, Shabara, Saura etc. This tribe has a rich mythological origin deeply rooted in Indian epics and traditional lore. According to mythology and religious texts, the Sabaras are often associated with forest-dwelling tribes who played significant roles in spiritual and cultural narrative, epically in the Ramayana and Mahabharata. This study focusses the Sabara community in Jajpur district of Odisha, according to 2011 census data Sabara population is **5,34,751** in Odisha approximately 5.58 percent of the total number of schedule tribe population in the state. There is a female to male ratio is approximately 50.56: 49.44 or sex ratio of approximately 1023 females per 1000 males. Analysing the overall ST population of Jajpur District the Sabara population is 4.02% (6093) and out of the male are 3126 and females are 2967. We all are depend upon each other in the society and every person is identified in their society by their lineage,

family, religion, tribe and cast and basic structuring, interaction and relationships of a collection of people is called customary to think of society (Majhi & Mohapatra, 2023, p. 204). A group of people who represent same types of culture and rituals is called a “community”. The tribal groups perform various rituals and observe festivities in response to seasonal changes and the sense of new life keeping harmony with the nature as well as reflecting the existence of the bestowing supernatural powers which are invoked to secure the goodwill of the benevolent spirits and to avert the displeasure of the malevolent ones. This Sabara tribe group, with their livelihood patterns, have developed certain patterns of ritualistic behaviour. These are vibrated in the rites and festivals on the basis of the physical and social environment, regional influences and the cultural milieus. Thus, the organisation of festivals and arrangements of rituals or worships are the complexes of norms, customs, traditions, ethos, attitudes, worldviews etc. and are controlled by the productivity of the crops. In the Sabara community they all come together to celebrate any festival like Birth to death all life cycle rituals and social and also agricultural festivals also they celebrate together. As their activities in the agricultural cycle give the full rhythm and measure of the seasonal sequence of the year. Good many festivals are associated with agriculture, and so as such, the tribes who are engaged in agriculture perform this festival. Again, a good number of religious observances are well done by the pre-agricultural tribal groups (Debnath, 2003).

1.1 Objectives of the Study

- To describe and analyse the major life cycle rituals practiced by the Sabara community in Jajpur district.
- To study agricultural rituals and their cultural significance in the socio-economic life of the Sabra people.
- To explore the changes and continuities in the life-cycle and agricultural rituals practices under the influence of modernization and non-tribal cultural forces.

1.2 Methods

The study follows a qualitative and descriptive research design. It focuses on understanding the ritual practices, beliefs and their socio-cultural meaning within the Sabara community of Jajpur district. The fieldwork was carried out in selected villages of Badachana Block, Jajpur District, Odisha, where the Sabara population is concentrated and where both traditional customs and emerging modern influences coexist, providing an ideal context to examine cultural continuity and change. Purposive sampling was employed to identify key participants, including priests, elderly men, women and other individuals actively involved in ritual activities. Data were collected through a combination of Personal interviews and focus group discussion to capture diverse perspectives and community experiences with 120 elders both male and female, male respondents are 65 and female respondents are 55 and the age group is 60 above. Participant observation was also an essential method, enabling the researcher to directly observe rituals, ceremonies and communal events and focus group discussion were particularly useful for gathering shared views regarding shifts in rituals practices and the impact of contemporary social dynamics. The collected data were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis, identifying key themes such as types of rituals, symbolic beliefs, spiritual practices and patterns of continuity and change.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents (N=120)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age Distribution	60-69 years	79	65.83
	70-79 years	32	26.66
	80 years and above	9	7.50
Marital Status	Married	71	59.16
	Widow	38	31.66
	Widower	10	8.33
	Divorced	1	0.83
Educational Qualification	Illiterate	96	80%
	Primary	17	14.16%
	Matric	7	5.83

Table 1 presents the profile socio-demographic profile of 120 respondents based on three key variables: age distribution, marital status and educational qualification.

Age distribution: the respondents are primarily concentrated in the 60-69 age group, which constitutes 65.83% of the sample. This indicates that most participants belong to the younger segment of the elderly population. The 70-79 age group accounts for 26.66%, while only 7.5% are aged 80 years above. This age group account that the study population is largely composed of older adults, with a comparatively smaller proportion of the oldest-old.

Marital status: a majority of respondents (59.16%) are married, reflecting the prevalence of stable family structures among the elderly. Additionally, 31.66% of the participants are widows, which may indicate gender differences in life expectancy. A smaller proportion (8.33%) are categorized as widower and only 0.83% are divorced. The marital status profile highlights a community where most older individuals have lived in long-term marital relationships, with widowhood being common due to age-related factors.

Educational Qualification: the educational profile shows significantly low level of formal education among the respondents. A large majority (80%) are illiterate, reflecting historical limitations in educational access for older tribal populations. Only 14.16% have completed primary education and 5.83% have studied up to the matriculation level.

2. Discussion

Ritual Practice of the Sabara Community

Rituals in the Sabara society are performed to maintain harmony between humans, nature and the spirit world. they believed ritual celebration is most important part of life because it's given by God. Sabara tribe is mostly believed in worship the village god/goddess. They also believed that their all tradition is blessing from God and consider it their duty to follow all rituals with due observance. That's why the people of Sabara community celebrate all the life cycle rituals like birth rituals like *panchupati*, *sathi puja*, *ekousia*, name given ceremony and puberty ceremony, marriage ceremony and death rituals etc. and also,

they most carefully celebrate agricultural rituals like *anukukula*, *Akshaya trutiya*, *garbhana sankaranti* etc. they believed that if they don't do their rituals carefully their village goddess (*maa bhuasuni*) will be angry.

2.1 Life-cycle rituals

2.1.1 Birth rituals:

When a child born in a family, some rituals are performed to celebrate for the new born child. Firstly, on the fifth day after the birth of a child, fifth day rice (*Panchuati Chaula*) brought from the mother's house is distributed among the community. This Panchuati rice mixing roasted *aura* (*Arua*) rice or urad (*Usuna*) rice with moong, Coconut, jaggery and sweets etc. The period from birth to 6th days is called '*Chhutikiya*'. After this, sixth day after birth of a child performed Shathi puja. Since according to the scriptures, it is believed that the fate of every person is written by the goddess Shathi, therefore, the goddess Shathi is worshipped for the good fortune and happiness of the child. On the seventh day, according to tradition, newborn baby is bathed for the first time. After that, on the twenty first day after the birth of the child, *Ekoesiaa* puja (21st day of birth) is performed, which is performed entirely by mother's brother (*Mamu*) and the *Mamu* (Mother's brother) also gives the name of the child. This all process of celebration is only for the first baby child. After the first child if male baby is born then can it's also celebrated but if the next baby is girl child, then this celebration is not preferable.

2.1.2 Puberty/adolescence:

In the Sabara community, when a girl reaches puberty for the first time, her family and others observe various rituals and customs as per tradition. When it is first discovered that a girl has menstruated, her grandmother or sister-in-law (*Bhauja*) takes her to the pond for the bathe. If the girl does not have any grandmother or sister-in-law, then her elder mother and aunty take her to bathe, but the mother of this girl never be allowed to take her. While bathing in the pond this girl uses cow's dung, turmeric powder and oil, because they belief its very pure (*Sudha*). On the way back, she is asked to touch the banana tree and also touch cow dung cart on the feet. After this, the girl was kept completely locked up in a room for 7 days. During those seven days, she is not allowed to touch anyone or look at a man's face. It is said that if she looks at a man's face, it will be bringing bad luck or misfortune to the girl. In addition, the girl eat only rice with jaggery for 6 days and is not allowed to eat any kind of curry or salt and pepper. On the third day of menstruation, the girl's family members inform all their relatives specially mother's family (*Mamu Ghara*) and invite them to come on the seventh day. When inviting others, it is not said that the girl has reached her periods, but rather that the girl has grown up, hid in the house or untouched and so on. After this, on the seventh day, all the relatives and neighbours gather together. On the seventh day, the first thing they do is take the girl out of the house in the early morning and take her directly to the pond to bathe and the house where she stayed was well-paved with cow dung. They also take everything she have used in these six days, like the blanket, bedsheets etc., with them to the pond and throw away all those things. In the pond, first bathes the girl in cow dung water, then she can bath with soap and turmeric powder with oil and they asked her to wash herself properly. Then she is asked to wear the red clothes which was brought from her mother's house, along with ornaments and the most important thing is wear the *Alata* on the feet in the pond. After that, the girl is taken directly from pond to the *Mahadev* temple for the *darshan* but one should be careful that while going to the temple, the girl does not see the anyone else's face or no one else even don't see the girls face that's why this program is done in the early morning. After seeing Mahadev, the girl is asked to seek the blessings of the elders (*Gurujana*). After that, a feast

is organised at home. In the feast, Puri, Khiri, Dalama etc. are made in any form, but out of all these dishes, Khiri is most important. First, seven small babies are given to eat Khiri on eggplant (*Baigana*) leaf. These rituals are performed only on a girl's first menstruation, not on the second or third.

2.1.3 Marriage

2.1.3.1 Normal Marriage:

In the Sabara community, a normal marriage begins with the girls meeting and this is initiated by the man's family. If the man's family likes the girl, then they invite the girl's family to come and meet the man. If the girl's family like that man, then the boy come to the girl's house for meet the girl and on that occasion, all the female members of the girl's family also get an opportunity to meet the boy. After this, if both boy and girl like each other, after that from the boy's house bring saree, chudi, makeup cosmetic and also along with a gold or silver jewellery (e.g. mangalasutra or sankhi) and some sweet (*Bhara*). Then these saree and jewellery are worn by the girl and sit in the *puja*. On that day fix the wedding date and time by *purohit*. This occasion is called '*sukara*' and '*lagna*'. From those days the girl becomes her groom's wife. After that all the relatives of both bride and groom's family are invited to the wedding. The day before the wedding, the girl invited by the maternal uncle (*mamu*) and her uncle and aunty gives her new clothes and also give sweet, chicken mutton etc. to eat and this is called '*mangulti*' ceremony. After that in the girl's house on that day also, seven women who may have been girl's sister-in-law in relation and '*dehuriani*' (wife of priest), they are celebrate *Haldi*, *Mehendi* and *jairagada* ceremony, after that they all are go to the *thakurani sala* for the worship of goddess of the village and after worship the goddess they are collect water from seven house for the bathing of bride. After that bride's brother go to the invite to groom for coming and marriage his sister, that is called '*bara-baruni*' ceremony. After that the groom is come and then complete the wedding according to rituals. Then, give the food for eat both bride-groom and after that bride's farewell '*jhia bida*' was held. After that rest more ceremony was held in groom's house. Four days after the wedding celebrate again 4th marriage (*Chaturthi*). In that day, the girl's father's family comes to the girl's mother-in-law's house with the dowry. After seven days of wedding '*saptamangala*' and eight days of wedding '*astamangala*' ceremony was held. On this '*astamangala*' ceremony the bride comes to her father's house and is given good veg-nonveg food what she like to eat and also give new clothes to wear the bride and again she taken back to her mother-in-law's house and dropped off.

2.1.3.2 Tola Kanya Marriage:

In this type of marriage, the groom's family brings the bride from his home and marries her to the groom. In this marriage, the girl's family does not give any dowry to the groom's family. All expenses are incurred in this marriage, only groom's family are bears the expenses.

2.1.3.3 Dhara Bara Marriage:

In this type of marriage, the bride's family brings the groom from his house and marries with the bride and then drop both bride-groom at the groom's house. Whatever expenses are incurred in this marriage, the bride's family are bear the expenses.

2.1.3.4 Exchange Bride Marriage (*Badala Kanya*):

In this type of marriage, if there are two sons and two daughters in two families and they want to bring each other's daughter for their son. Since the daughter is exchanged, it is called exchange marriage.

2.1.3.5 Ghara Jwain Marriage:

in this type of marriage, the bride's family brings the groom from his house and after the marriage, they keep him in bride's house. In this marriage, the bride does not stay in the groom's house, but the groom

stays in the bride's house forever. Sometime that groom is called '*uthapahia*' means who is depend upon wife's family.

2.1.3.6 Widowed Marriage:

Here is a girl or boy already married if her/her husband or wife is died, then she/he is called widow/widowed. and then she/he marries with other man/women then it's called widowed marriage. In this type of marriage if married boy marries with another girl this is acceptable if a married girl marry with another boy this is not acceptable, it's very problematic in our society. No one can accept this girl as a member of man's family. All are believed that girls are bad luck for our family or society.

2.1.3.7 Divorced Marriage:

In this marriage already divorced men or women marries with another men or women. Here if a divorced men was married with another girl, its acceptable. If a divorced women are married with another men, then the girl is facing some problem in her new mother-in-law house. Here she is called '*thaiaani*' or '*chhaderi*'.

2.1.4 Death and remembrance:

In Sabara community death ritual is a very important part of the culture. When a member of a family in the Sabara community dies, funeral rites are performed with many rituals. First the dead body was washed, then dressed in new clothes, then fed with rice, then a coffin is made for it with bamboo and rope, then the dead body is buried in mustard and new clothes and all the old clothes that he used when he was alive are put in it. The family of the deceased comes one by one and put a little bit of soil on his head. After that, the men take him to the cemetery is being buried, they sprinkle *khai*, *kaudi* and coin in front of the dead body and a woman throws cow dung water behind them. After that, everyone takes the body to the cemetery but the woman who threw the cow dung water stays at the pond at the end of the village because women are restricted to go the cemetery. Then everyone digs a hole in the cemetery and buries the dead body and everything that belongs to it. After that all are come to the pond and every one of his family and relatives all immerse their heads and bath in the pond. After that everyone returns home. After that, every day for 12days, until the purification is complete anyone his son, nephew (brother's son or sister's son) are takes food or water for that died person at the crematorium to feed him. Whoever does these rituals, he also does not touch anyone or eat or drink with anyone for 12days. It is believed that the person who performs all these actions, the soul of the deceased, reside on his shoulders. After the third day of death, all the friends and relatives are invited to join the purification, on the seventh and ninth day of death hole house are wiped and the clothes are washed. For the nine days, no one in the family eat salt, oil, nonveg and also don't use turmeric powder in the food. For these nine days, everyday only one time cooked and everyone eats only once and no matter how big family, there cooked in one stove and one kitchen for all member of whole family. On the nine days of death all relatives are come for celebrate purification rituals. On the tenth day no one can eat before the purification rituals, on that day, everyone to the pond and the *bhandari* shaves all the men, trims their nails and the *bhandari*'s wife trims the nail of all the women. They cut off the hair from their heads and put it in a banana leaf and float it in water, women apply turmeric powder and oil on their body and use *alata* on their feet. After that, everyone dips their heads in shop, oil and immerses them in pond and everyone comes home in wet clothes. Meanwhile, the *purohit* of Sabara community in the house recites the *homa* inside the house and when they come back to bath from the pond, they are fed with *limba pita*, holy water is poured on everyone. Apart from this, hole house, well, tap well, chimneys (*chaunra*) and puja house all the places are sanctified by pouring holy water. Agfter this, everyone eats *chuda chakata*. On the eleventh day, all the food is given to relatives and friends and

all the villagers for a feast. Along with, some elders of the community are invited and a *brahmana bhojana* is served. On the twelfth day of after death, the villagers do not invite, only the relatives and family members are eaten non-veg on that day. After this, if *Puskara* is affected, then it is done on the fifteenth day of death. *Puskara* means how a person was died, on the death time in which direction his head and whether his feet were ground or on the bed. All this is observed by *nahaka or purohit* on the process of worshiping. This priest (*nahaka and purohit*) says whether the fault of *Puskara* has been committed or not and remove this fault the *Puskara shanti* is organised and that's done on the night time not day time. On the worship time one can see or hear this worship that's why that was organised in night time. After this, the purification is completed and exactly after one year, on the same date, the *pindadana and barsakiya* is celebrate for the peace of soul (*atma shanti*) and also remembrance of that person.

2.2 Seasonal and agricultural rituals

Agriculture forms the backbone of the Sabara community's livelihood and their rituals calendar is closely linked to the cycle of nature, rainfall and crop production. These rituals not only express gratitude to deities but also ensure harmony between humans, land and spirits. The Sabara community of Jajpur district primarily depends on paddy cultivation and their agricultural calendar is closely linked with a series of traditional rituals that mark key stages of farming.

2.2.1 Anukula:

In the month of *Magha* (Jan- Feb), the Sabara being the farming season with a ritual called "Anukula". Villagers go to the field carrying kajala (eyeliner), *sindoora* (vermilion), offering (*bhoga*) and incense sticks (*Agarbat*) to perform a small puja (prayer ceremony). On the same day, they also carry out a preliminary ploughing of the field, marking the official start of cultivation. After the field ritual, villagers prepare *pitha* (rice cakes) at home and distribute them door to door within the community, symbolizing sharing and blessing for a fruitful season.

2.2.2 Akhaya Trutiya:

In the month of *Jestha* (May-Jun), the community celebrates a festival called "Akhaya Trutiya". On this occasion, a ritual known as "Akhi Muthi" is performed in the fields. The villagers carry paddy seeds wrapped in cloth (*Gauni*) along with puja materials such as kajal, *sindoor*, *gua*, milk, Lamp (*dia*), incense and flowers. A small portion of soil is collected in the field, mixed with some paddy seeds and the offerings are scattered. During this ritual, if the person performing the puja is wearing a gold ring, the rotate it round the soil, symbolizing that the paddy in the field will be as precious as gold. This ceremony marks the beginning of actual paddy sprouting in the field.

2.2.3 Chittau Amabasya:

During the month of *Asadha* (Jun-Jul), a special new moon called "Chittau Amabasya" is observed. On this day, villagers carry *Chittau Pitha* along with all puja materials to the field and perform rituals specifically dedicated to snails, crabs and snecks etc. this ritual is believed to protect the crops during cultivation, ensuring that these creatures do not harm the paddy or disturb the farmers.

2.2.4 Garbhana Snkranti:

Another significant festival is *Garbhana Sankranti*, during which all puja and offerings for the field are prepared inside the field itself and no food or offering are brought from home. At this stage, the paddy is ready for the harvesting. During harvest, a small portion of paddy in one corner of the field, called *Dhana Gachha*, is left uncut. On the following day, this leftover paddy is collected along with puja materials and a special ritual called "Kheta Badha" is performed. This ritual is believed to ensure the protection of the remaining crop and blessing for continued fertility and prosperity.

These agricultural rituals reflect the Sabara community's deep spiritual connection with nature and their belief that divine blessings are essential for a successful harvest. Each ritual also reinforces community solidarity, combining religious devotion with practical agricultural activity.

2.2.5 First-fruits/harvest rites

The first fruit or harvest festival is one of the most significant rituals among the Sabara tribe. It marks the beginning of the Harvest season when the first yield of crops especially paddy is offered to the village deity (*Grama Debati*) and ancestors before human consumption. This offering symbolizes thanks giving for fertility, prosperity and divine protection. The celebration involves collective feasting, dancing and singing, strengthening social unity within the village.

2.2.6 Ritual specialists and substances

The rituals life of the Sabara community involves specialized individuals and sacred materials that play crucial roles in maintaining the spiritual and cultural fabric of the society. Rituals specialists act as mediators between the community and the spiritual world, while rituals substances serve as symbolic media to communicate with deities and ancestral spirits.

2.2.7 Role of Ritual Specialists:

Among the Sabara's ritual specialists told respected positions within the community. The most common figures include the *Dehuri/Dehuri-ani* (village priest), *Nahaka* and *Baida* (traditional healer).

- The *Dehuri* is responsible for conducting village level rituals, especially those related in culture, village deities and festivals.
- The *Nahaka* is perform some rituals such as marriages, death rituals, Puskara shanti, atonement for sins etc. in the Sabara community only.
- The *Baida* performs divination, healing and protection rituals, identifying causes of illness or misfortune through spiritual means.

The ritual specialists inherit their knowledge though lineage or apprenticeship and their roles are marked by both spiritual authority and social responsibility. They called upon during crises such as epidemic, droughts or conflict to perform appeasement rituals and restore balance in the community.

Conclusion

The study of the ritual life of the Sabara community in Jajpur district reveals the deep-rooted cultural continuity and symbolic richness that social fabric of this tribal society. Life-cycle rituals ranging from birth ceremonies to puberty, marriage and death rites reflect a holistic worldview in which every stage of life is sanctified through spiritual observances. These practices reinforce kinship bonds, gender roles, social responsibilities and intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge. Likewise, agricultural rituals such as *anukula*, *akhshaya trutiya* and *garbhana sankranti* celebration demonstrate the Sabara community's intimate relationship with land, seasons and natural forces. Agriculture is not viewed merely as an economic activity, but as a sacred process that requires divine blessings and harmonious coexistence with nature. The findings show that despite the pressure of modernisation, education and interaction with non-tribal communities, many traditional rituals continue to hold their significance. While certain customs have undergone changes particularly in areas such as marriage practices, gender norms and ritual performance core value such as reverence for village deities, respect for elders and communal participation remain intact. The role of ritual specialists like *dehuri* and *nahaka* continues to be central in maintaining cultural order and addressing spiritual or social crises. Overall, the study highlights that the Sabara

community's ritual tradition are not static but dynamic, adapting to contemporary realities while preserving their fundamental cultural ethos. These rituals continue to serve as powerful expressions of identity, collective memory and social cohesion. Understanding them is essential not only for appreciating the cultural diversity of Odisha's tribal communities but also for safeguarding intangible heritage in a rapidly changing socio-cultural environment.

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