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INTERPRETING THE INBUILT WATER MANAGEMENT SYSTEM AND METHODS OF CULTIVATION OF THE LANJIA SOURAS OF ORISSA

Dr. Gokulananda Patro

Head, Department of History
K.M Science College
Narendrapur, Ganjam, Odisha, India

Abstract

The Souras or Savara are one of the oldest tribes of India. The name of this amazing tribe is found in the puranas, epics and other scriptures. In Orissa they have been very famous for their connection with the worship of Lord Jeganath, who according to a legendary tradition originated as a Sabara deity in the dense forest and was later brought to Puri under royal patronage. The Scattered housing pattern on hill slopes shifting cultivation and ingeniously prepared stone bounded terrace fields, worship of ancestors and spirits and attractive wall paintings are the main features of the Souras. But their inbuilt water management system and methods of cultivation are very fascinating and peculiar. With pride, they called themselves as Paraja logo (first hill cultivators or forest dwellers). A humble attempt has been made in this paper to exhibit their talent by which they could reclaim rugged mountains, high and undulating terraces with inbuilt water management system for paddy cultivation within a few days.

Keywords: Paraja Logo, Pudo Chasa, Paridi or Benta, Bagada, Dangara, Akhanda Paridhi, Birinda

Introduction

The Souras (also called as Savara, Sora, Sabara) are one of the ancient most and fascinating hill tribes of Eastern India. Souras find mention in the epics, puranas and other religious texts. In Orissa they have been very famous for their connection with the worship of Lord Jeganath, who according to a legendary tradition originated as a Sabara deity in the dense forest and was later brought to Puri under royal patronage¹. No doubt they inhabitant in some forest and hilly regions of Andra Pradesh, Madya Pradesh, Chattisgarh and West Bengal, but mainly concentrated in Rayagata and Gajapati districts of Odisha. Being a laborious highlander, they live in the remote mountains of Eastern India. They are so hardy and enterprising that they can reclaim rugged mountains, picturesque terraces with inbuilt water management system by raising vast orchards for paddy cultivation within a few days. They are mainly divided into two broad classes i.e. The Hill Souras or the Maliah Souras also called as Lanjia Souras, The Low-land Souras or Suddha Souras².

Scattered housing pattern and hill slopes shifting cultivation and ingeniously prepared stone bounded terrace fields, worship of ancestors and spirits and attractive wall paintings are the main features of the Souras.

The Souras are very fond of to live on hill slopes. With pride, they called themselves as Paraja logo (first hill cultivators or forest dwellers). Therefore their villages are situated on the hill slopes or foot hills mostly lie hidden in forest and valley of the mountains. In olden days, hunting animals and trapping birds was the main occupation of the Souras. Hunting system of the Souras are divided in to three categories (1) mass hunting or akhanda paridhi or benta, (2) small group hunting (paridhi), (3) individual hunting or Sikar. They adapted hunting practiced to get meat, for safety of domestic animals and their own community and for amusement³.

But, with the passage of time, due to rapid deforestation, restrictions imposed by the government and the non-availability of sufficient animals for hunting, the Souras converted into a settled agricultural community. After that, agriculture and horticulture became their chief means of livelihood. Since then, Souras practically depended on cultivation as it provides them food⁴.

Land and forest of the life- line for the Souras. They followed two kinds of cultivation i.e., i) the podu cultivation or shifting cultivation (dangara chasa or bagada chasa); ii) wet cultivation through the sowing of seeds in wet lands and through transplantation. But, their main source of livelihood was bagoda chasa. They are traditionally podu cultivators and at the same time have expertise in terrace cultivation. They exhibit a high degree of indigenous skill, ingenuity and technological outfit for preparing the terraces with inbuilt water management system. Mainly they grow rice in terraced fields and a variety of minor millets, cereals, and pulses in the swiddens.⁵

Soura villages had well-defined boundary and its inhabitants carry on shifting cultivation in the hills located within the village boundary. Some hills are close to the village and others at a distance. Traditionally, the hills were distributed on the basis of Birinda or extended families, Members of a particular Birinda used to have swiddens exclusively in a hill and no outsider was allowed



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to share the hill for shifting cultivation⁶. An individual who has been cultivating a particular plot continues to own it as long as he is capable of cultivating it. Thus, individual ownership of swiddens on hereditary basis is in vogue among the Souras. With the increase in population and outmigration there notices some change in the distribution of swiddens in a particular hill. Today cases of outsiders, cultivation of hills belonging to a Birinda other than their own are not unknown.⁷

For shifting cultivation, a hill slope was divided into several plots, demarcated and distributed for cultivation. The farmer who had been cultivating a particular plot of land continues to own it as long as he was capable of cultivating it. When he failed to do so, the plot was allotted to the needier. In no case were the plots left fallow nor was a plot already owned by one capable of cultivating it, allotted to anyone else. Thus, individual ownership of the swidden plots was recognized on hereditary basis⁸.

The Souras are the first terrace cultivators of India. They prepare the terraces right up to the beds of the hill streams and extended many hundreds of feet from the depth of the valleys to the hill slopes and even to the hill tops. The terraces are the works of great engineering skill. The platform of each terrace is flat throughout and the fall of each terrace is packed with stones. The construction of the terraces is so ingeniously and skilfully done that no soil is carried down with the water that flows from the higher terraces to the lower. The terrace fields are privately owned and handed down from father to sons. These are valuable assets to the Souras. But sometimes they mortgage these to local money lender and paddy lenders, which is one of the causes of their poverty.

A variety of crops like kangu, ghanthia, suan, ragi, jana, gangoi, maize, pulses like kandula, jhudunga, pea, bargudi, black-gram, horsegram, greengram; oil seeds like til, castor, mustard; spices like turmeric, ginger, cinnamor, chillies and vegetables like pumpkin, cucumber, kankada, ghiagerda, maragudi, godagai, etc. was grown in the swidden. But turmeric was their most profitable and favourite cash crop.⁹

A variety of crops are grown by them in mixed cultivation process simultaneously and also one after another in this manner they never leave land or plot fallow. One after another crops become ready for harvesting. Normally a bagada plot was cultivated for 3 consecutive years for growing different crops in succession and left fallow for 8-12 years for rejuvenation for sustaining the next cycle. But because of the large scaled destruction of forests the Government discouraged the Souras to adopt shifting cultivation. Hence fourth, the Souras have learnt in a hard way that this age-old mode of subsistence would no longer sustain their growing population. So, they undertook horticulture by the impact of British Government.¹⁰ The economic life of the Souras resolves round both shifting and settled cultivation. The 1981 census revealed that among the Souras as a whole the workers comprised 41.2 per cent and among the working population the cultivators comprised 41.2 per cent, agricultural labourer 49.5 per cent. The remaining 9.3 per cent were engaged in livestock rearing, forestry, fishing and hunting.¹¹

The Souras carry on cultivation in four types of land. These are homestead land around their houses, undulated dry land along the foot of the hills, terraced land and the swiddens in the hill slopes and hill tops. The techniques of cultivation and the types of crops grown in different types of land show variation. In the little garden around the residential houses they grow maize, tobacco, chilly and vegetables like pumpkin, gourd, bean, brinjal, etc, during rainy season. Papaya, banana, lemon and orange plants are also grown in the kitchen garden. Coconut plants which are also found in the area are recently introduced. In and around the village settlements jack-fruit, mango, tamarind, mohua, date-palm and sago-palm trees which are individually owned are seen.

In addition to wet or terraced cultivation the Souras practise shifting cultivation quite extensively. The shifting cultivation is known by the term Bagada Chasa among the Souras and each and every family has a few patches of swiddens either in the hill slopes or at the hill tops yielding mainly minor millets and pulses.¹²

The Souras are one among the few tribes of Orissa who practice shifting cultivation extensively. Being the chief source of their income, it has become a way of life for these people. The Government has imposed restriction on shifting cultivation since it is considered to be the root cause of deforestation, harmful and disadvantageous for environment and society. It is a fact that, due to repeated cutting and burning of forests, not only the forest is affected, but also the productivity of the land has considerably been reduced adversely affecting the economy of the Souras. Even under such circumstances the Souras show a considerable doggedness in sticking to this type of cultivation.

There is acute shortage of water in Souras area. The problem is more acute in the villages located in the hill-slopes and hill-tops than in the villages located in the plains. The innumerable small and big hill streams dry up mostly in February. In the absence of adequate number of drinking water wells the people have to depend upon tiny springs for their requirement. Water in those places get dirty and contaminated by various germs. The Souras have to drink that water and as such they suffer from various diseases.



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Therefore, priority should be given for providing safe drinking water to each and every hamlet and village. If necessary, a ground water survey. There is may be conducted in the whole belt to locate the water level.¹³

Paddy is mainly grown in wetland. Vegetables except brinjal, Plantain and pumpkin, are seldom grown either for own consumption or for cash. Tamarind and Karanja trees are plenty in the area. They collect the fruits of these trees in summer and sell for cash. They grow sagopalm and mahua flower for wine. Souras in general earn more than other neighbouring tribes but lead miserable life due to chronic indebtedness to meet the expenses of innumerable feasts, festivals sacrifice for appeasement of God, ancestors, spirits and for treatment of diseases. Hunting is a popular pastime. They use bows and arrows, and varieties of axes and knives in hunting. But now days after the banning of hunting and killing of wild animals by the Government they face many problems for maintaining their livelihood.¹⁴

Living in an isolated life from the main stream of modern civilization, Lanjia Souras are the most primitive and tradition loving people. Once upon a time, the Souras particularly the Lanjia Souras called themselves as Paraja logo (Hill cultivators or forest dwellers) and hated the Pada Desia (outsiders) which kept them isolated for generations. Though they are very illiterate and backward, but they are the best shifting cultivators and horticultures. They exhibit a high degree of indigenous skill, ingenuity and technological outfit for preparing the terraces with inbuilt water management system. This should be a model for people of other regions India.

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