



Present Situation of Sarna Religion in the “Ho” Tribe: Case Study on Keonjhar District of Odisha

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Abstract

The present study examines the current situation of Sarna religion among the Ho tribe, one of the largest Adivasi communities in eastern India. the study examines the challenges and threats facing Sarna and other indigenous religions. The present study is being conducted in the Keonjhar district of Odisha, focusing on the Ho tribe and their Sarna religion. The Ho tribe is an Austro-Asiatic Munda ethnic group in India, and 90% of them practice the indigenous religion of Sarnalism. They are primarily involved in agriculture as landowners or labourers. The religious head of the Ho society is known as a dehuri/deuri, who mediates between hor (man) and Bonga (god) and officiates as a priest in all village or community-level rituals. The position of dehuri is hereditary and sometimes assisted by Jamsim. The study used both primary and secondary data, with primary data being collected through participant observation, interviews, and a sampling of 150 participants.

Keywords: *present situation, Ho tribe, Sarna religion, ritual, festival, Bonga, Dehuri,*

1. Introduction:

The present situation of the Sarna religion in India is complex and varied. On the one hand, there is a growing interest and pride in the indigenous religions of India, including Sarna, among some Adivasi communities. This is reflected in efforts to revive and promote traditional practices, build community institutions, and assert their rights as distinct cultural and religious groups.

On the other hand, there are also challenges and threats facing Sarna and other Adivasi religions in India. One major challenge is the ongoing process of Hinduization, where Adivasis are pressured to convert to Hinduism and adopt Hindu practices and beliefs. This is often done through social, economic, and political means, leading to the marginalization and erasure of indigenous cultures and religions.

Adivasi communities have also faced displacement and environmental destruction due to development projects like mining and dams. This has disrupted their traditional livelihoods, cultural practices, and religious practices.

The situation of Sarna and other Adivasi religions in India is complex and involves various social, economic, political, and environmental factors. While there are efforts to revive and promote these religions, challenges and threats are facing them, which require ongoing attention and action to address.

2. Sarna Dharma: A Distinct Philosophy

While all of the recognised institutionalised religions centre their thoughts on humans, Ranendra Kumar, a serving IAS officer and author of several books on Adivasis, *Adi Darshan* or *Adi Dharma*, maintains that the Adivasi cosmology does not believe in the “superiority of humans”. The moment you make someone superior, you create a hierarchy. Racism, casteism, and gender divisions are by-products of such presumptive superiority. So, in contrast to all other religions, Adi Dharma negates the supremacy of humans.” According to their cosmologies, God is not ‘omnipotent’, and soil, water, fire, space and air—broadly all natural entities—have been in the world since eternity. Here, God created the world with

the help of tortoises, crabs and earthworms. Humans are made equal to others. “From an ant to dinosaur, a fungus to the largest tree, all have the same values in the egalitarian world of Adivasis. There is no caste, no division,” Kumar notes. The first principle of the equality of all beings separates Sarna from the major human-centric religions. The rejection of the Cartesian idea that only humans are thoughtful beings adds to it an essence of universality.

The beliefs and practices of Sarna vary depending on the tribe or region. However, common features of Sarna include the worship of ancestors, the belief in spirits and deities associated with nature, and the use of sacred places and objects in rituals.

Sarna is an important part of the cultural and spiritual identity of many Adivasi communities in India, and it continues to be practised alongside other religions such as Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam.

The Ho is one of the major tribes of Odisha. They belong to the Proto-Austroloid group. The name ‘Ho’ is derived from the word ‘horo’, which, in their language, means ‘man’. They are the descendants of the Munda family. Other neighbouring communities address them by the term ‘Kola’. But they identify themselves as ‘Ho’. Some anthropologists think that the Ho, Kol, Kolha etc., are common tribal origin.¹ They are primarily concentrated in the Kolhan region of Jharkhand and Odisha, constituting around 10.7 per cent and 7.3 per cent of the total Scheduled tribe population, respectively, as of 2011. The 705,618 total population of the Ho tribe of Odisha.² 90% of the Ho practice the indigenous religion Sarnaism.³ The majority of the Ho are involved in agriculture, either as land owners or labourers, while others are engaged in mining. Compared to the rest of India, Ho has a low literacy rate and low rate of school enrollment.⁴ The

¹ Ota. A.B. et.al. “Ho Hand book (2013) Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Research Training Institute, CRP Square Bhubaneswar, Odisha.

² Wikipedia internet 2011

³ Ibid 2011

⁴ Ota. A.B. et.al. “Ho Hand book (2013) Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Research Training Institute, CRP Square Bhubaneswar, Odisha.

government of Jharkhand has recently approved measures to help increase enrollment and literacy among children. A tribal society is an exclusive society. Their society witnessed a rich, colourful and fascinating culture from a remote past. They have their own birth and death rituals. They are the worshipper of nature and worship the natural elements like animals, trees, stones and crops. Most of our contemporary cultures owe their origin to tribal-oriented customs and traditions. Thus it is essential to focus on different tribal Cultures and religions to matrix of their societies. Tribes are basically the dweller of the forests. They consider the forest as their home and hearth. They have lived in isolation from other communities for long. But we have understood very little about various facets of their life. On many occasions, they are ignored as an illiterate lot. However, the large-scale socio-religious transformation in modern societies has affected the tribes. Thus more radical and imperative to us today are to understand the culture and religion of the tribes and to analyse the change brought by modernization and globalization. Odisha is one of the most fascinating states in India. As many as 62 different tribal communities are inhabiting the state of Odisha. Among them, the Kolhas are one of the most important tribal communities of north Odisha who migrated from the present Jharkhand state and permanently settled in north Odisha. They are mostly found in the district of Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar.

3.Religion:

The Ho is mostly animists and polytheists and conceived of a large pantheon of supernatural beings controlling their life abode. They did rituals of their own. Both Gods and Goddesses are termed as Bongas, the word Bonga is the generic name and is applied indiscriminately to refer to gods and spirits. The real meaning of Bonga is power, force, and the religion of the Ho may be called Bongaism, .who regulates their day-to-day individual and communal behavior. There was no priestly class above them. Presently, festivals like Maghe, Baha and others begin and end with traditional worship and then with songs and dances. They reject the

importance of the Vedas, Vedic Gods and the rituals. They themselves worship nature and natural elements. They worship animals like tigers, tigresses, cows and others. They also worship the hills, forests and stones. Tree worship is common among them. The spirit of the dead ancestors takes typically shelter inside the single-roomed house or in the kitchen, where offerings are made in their honour on festive occasions. The Kolhas worship Sing bonga, Basuki Thakurani, GaramSiri, Marang bonga, Buru bonga, Desauli bonga, Gada bonga, Nage Era, Jahirabudi, Bagia bonga, etc. The headman of the house worships on occasions relating to domestic affairs, while the Dehuri worships on communal affairs.

The Ho people are polytheists. Being the worshiper of nature, they believe in the sarna religion. The word sarna is derived from the word sir, which means ‘arrow’. Followers of the Sarna faith regard themselves as belonging to a distinct religious group and are nature worship. The holy grail of the Sarna faith is “Jal (water), Jungle (Forest), Zameen (land)”, and its followers pray to the trees and hills while believing in protecting the forest areas. Believers of the Sarna faith do not practice idol worship, nor do they adhere to the concept of the varna system, heaven-hell, etc. The Ho religion resembles, to a great extent that of Santal, Oraon and Munda. Bonga is the generic term used to signify all gods/ goddesses and spirits. Sing Bonga, or Sun God, is their supreme deity. They believe that he is the creator of the universe. They also worship Marangburu or Buru Bonga, the goddess of hill for the arrival of rains. There are other deities like Paudi turned bonga the god of deep water; Bagiya bonga, the god of forest who controls all the wild animals, ikin Bonga the deity of river, sangar bonga the god of hunting, sanaturudu bonga the god of wealth, Jid Bonga Kumuba bonga, Bhata bonga, Hankar bonga etc. who are worshipped by the Ho people on different festive occasions and also at the time of crises.

At the village outskirts lies their sacread groove (Sarna), where their village deity Desauli resides religion and festivals are intricately linked and cannot exist without each other. To gain a better understanding of this relationship, it is necessary to differentiate between these two concepts. Religion can be defined as a set of beliefs, practices, and values related to the existence of supernatural power or powers that govern the universe. It provides a framework for understanding the world and one's place in it and guiding moral and ethical behaviour. As we know, according to Durkheim, 'A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into a single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them.'

Indian society is more heterogeneous which perceived in terms of difference than similarities; the differences in terms of religion, territory, language and caste. The study of groups as tribes began soon after the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1874. Then after scholars and administrators wrote on land and people of different regions, referring to caste and tribe and as we know, tribes are distinguished scholars, administrators, anthropologists, sociologists, ethnographers, and orientalists have studied tribes and castes in various ways and for different purposes. For instance, V. Elwin categorised tribes into four groups, while Vidyarthi classified them based on their degree of acculturation. Risley and Gait referred to tribes as so-called animists, and Ghurye labelled them backward Hindus. The census has also played a role in understanding these groups. 1881 refers to them as 'forest tribe'; Marten refers as animism to tribal religion, which goes further in different categories of distinguishing tribes. And there is also attempt has been made to distinguish the distinction between tribal and caste groups poses a challenge for sociologists, anthropologists, administrators, and politicians. The article examines the existence of these groups based on various criteria. For instance, tribal communities often reside in remote areas, such as hills and mountains, with limited access to communication channels. They have distinct

languages, practice animist forms of worship, and follow traditional economic practices considered backward. They are also referred to as 'Adibasis,' which means indigenous or original inhabitants of the land. Over time discussions on tribal identity, religion, and festivals have also been influenced by proponents of integrating tribal citizens into mainstream society through assimilation, isolation, and integration within the Hindu culture. Presently, the Oraon, Kol, Ho, Munda, and Kisan tribes, which are the fastest growing, have assimilated into either Hinduism or Christianity. Interestingly, among these tribes, the Oraon tribe is far ahead in various areas, such as social, economic, political, religious, and educational spheres. The Ho tribe is also gradually assimilating into mainstream society, primarily due to access to education, which has made them aware of their constitutional rights, duties, privileges, and government policies.

Ancestral Spirit the Kolhas believe in the immortality of the soul. They worship their ancestral spirit in Ading or the kitchen. They communicate Singbonga through the spirit of their ancestors. After the child's birth or marriage, the head of the family worship and prayer is done in Ading to accept new members. The ancestral spirits are beneficial spirits for all family members. After the natural death of a family member, they allow the spirit to his Ading to be a member of his ancestors. They worship fowl, illi or rice bear, cooked food and pray them before every auspicious day²⁰. They believe that with the blessing of the ancestral spirit, they will live in healthy and wealthy in their family. The Kolhas do not believe in sin and virtue. They do not have faith in heaven and hell. The death of the spirit of the dead man or woman is called Umbul Ader, which takes place in Ading or Kitchen to worship as Oabonga or god is like acquisition a heaven. The Ho believes in rebirth, but, after the rebirth, there is no reward or punishment for moral and immoral activities. The social approval work is a virtue, and disapproval things are known as sin. The gods of the Ho are formless and omnipresent. They have neither practiced Idol worship nor made an artificial god to be worshipped. They believed that god is formless and present in every natural element, i.e., water,

trees, hills, mountains etc. They did not admit man-made image of god. They love and worship nature. They did not believe in the incarnation of god. Their gods and goddess protected them from illness and bless them with good production. Their religion gives them the mental strength to fight against the enemy of their community and natural calamity.

Dehuri:

The sacerdotal head of the Ho village is called Dehuri, who officiates in all communal worship of the village and propitiates the deities on behalf of the villagers. He is said to belong to the seniormost branch of the original village family, and his post is hereditary. There is no bar for an unmarried or young man to hold the post of Dehuri. In case a Dehuri dies without leaving any son to succeed him, the post goes to his brother. He uses a Dala (a shallow basket) or new saucer made of bronze to carry consecrated materials offered to the deities during ceremonial occasions. All the deities receive gifts from his hand. The villagers love and respect him as their local priest. Under his ritual status in the village, the Dehuri enjoys certain privileges. On ritual occasions, he gets the heads of all the animals sacrificed to the deities. He is a special guest in the social functions of the villagers. The Ojha, or the spirit doctor, controls the spirit like the Yuginis by their magical powers and incantations. The spirit doctor also tames these spirits, and they are utilised to find out spirits, to know the nature of other spirits and in many other works. The spirit doctor offers her rice, fowl or goat in the woods on each new moon day. Most of the malignant of the Hos are not indigenous to them but have their counterparts among the neighbouring Oriyas as, for example – Gara Satamai is the same name as Nai Bhagabati of the Oriya from whom they have evidently borrowed it. Deonara performs the worship of Satamai the Ho also believed in malevolent spirit worship of Kali, Suni kal, Rahu kal, Satamai, Chandi, Yugini, Dakini and others. Most of the names of the malevolent spirit of Ho are the foreign origin to the Ho. They also worship Manasha, the goddess of tantra,

being influenced by the people of other communities. This goddess is popularly known as a tantric goddess.

4. Review of literature

Hansada, Minati (2019) 'Religion of the Kolha tribe of Odisha, India is a vast sub-continent where various races are li sinceince a remote past. According to the census report of 2011, there are 705 tribal communities in India. The Kolha worshipped animists and polytheists they worship their ancestor's spirits in addition or in the kitchen the head of the village, called dehuri who, officiates in all communal worship of the village and propitiates the deities on behalf of the villagers.

Mishra, K.K. (2018) 'Social Structure and Change among the Ho Orrisa' 'Changing Religion and Rituals change in religious belief and rituals among the Ho have been widely observed in the urban-industrial areas than in villages due to apparent reasons. Under the influence of modernization, the Ho, once a community of staunch believers of spirits and bongas, have consulted local doctors and visited nearby government hospitals for common illness.

Marine, Carrin and Das, Gupta Sanjukta (2021) changes in the society and religion of the Ho under British rule. According to the 2011 census, the total population was 806921, making them the fourth most numerous scheduled tribes after the Santal, Araons, and Mundas. They are mostly from Jharkhand, south of the Chota Nagpur plateau. In the districts of East and West Singhbhum and Seraikela Kharsawan. Outside Jharkhand.

Talukdar, Deblina and Mate, Jayanta (2021) explain Modernization and Social media through changing the tribal community. The modernisation with advance reflected social media roles. A study conducted by 115 householders of 500 sample size self-made standardised questionnaire tools of 40 items shows a

significant relationship between social media and changing tribal lifestyles.

Nowadays, the tribal people mostly adopted Modernization and old traditionalism.

The Government of Jharkhand Directorate of culture (2022). The primary goal of this research is to learn more about the Ho people, an Austro-Asian ethnic group living in Jharkhand and Odisha. Where they constitute around 10.5% of the scheduled tribes, the Ho are the fourth most numerous scheduled tribe in Jharkhand after the Santhals, Kurukhs, and Mundas. According to Ethnologue, there are 1,040,000 people speak the Ho language. As of 2001, multilingualism was also used. In both Hindi and English, more than 90% of the Ho follows the indigenous religion Sarnalism.

5.Objective of the study

To examine the current state of the Sarna religion and its practice among Adivasi communities in India.

To identify the challenges and threats facing Sarna and other indigenous religions in India, including the pressures of Hinduization and the impacts of development projects on traditional practices.

To understand the tribal religion and the Sarna religion in the tribal communities of India,

This study examines the Sarna religion as practised in the Ho communities of Keonjhar district, Odisha.

6.Methodology of the study

The present study focuses on the Ho tribe people of Odisha. Both primary and secondary data will be collected. Primary data will be collected through field surveys conducted in the Keonjhar district of Odisha. Secondary data will be collected from published and unpublished books, journals, articles, newspapers, and the Internet.

Area of the study

For the study total of 150 subject respondents were selected for the study. Sociological exploration research methods such as direct interview, participant observation, case study and focus group discussion were used to collect the data. The data was collected from different hamlets of the Ho tribe of Keonjhar district that was analysed with the use in descriptive Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software.

Data analysis

Table-1
Gender-Wise distribution of the Respondent

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	53	35%
Female	97	64%
Total	150	100

The table: 1 The gender identity of the Ho tribe respondents is as follows: 35% are male, and 64% are female. From the data indicates that more females believe that the Sarna religion plays a significant role in their life span.

Table-2
Age-wise distribution of the Respondent

Age	Frequency	percentage
18-30	21	14
31-40	46	30%
41-50	53	35%
51-60	30	20 %
Total	150	100

Table: 2 The age categories of the respondents can be divided into four groups: 14% of respondents fall within the age range of 18-30, 30% fall within the 31-40 age range, 35% fall within the 41-50 age range, and 20% fall within the 51-60 age range. The total number of respondents is 150.

Table:
3 Sarna Dharma and Christianity

Religion	Frequency	Percentage
Hindu (Sarna)	141	94%
Christianity	9	6%
Total	150	100

Table: 3 The religious distribution of the respondents is as follows: 94% of the respondents follow the Sarna religion, and 6% of the respondents follow Christianity. The total number of respondents is 150.

Table-4.
Education status of the Respondent

Education	Frequency	Percentage
Illiterate	21	14%
Primary	61	40%
Secondary	39	29%
Graduation	19	12%
Post-Graduation	10	6%
Total	150	100

Table: 4 Education is the most important aspect for human beings. The educational levels of the respondents are as follows: 14% illiterate, 40% primary, 29% secondary, 12% graduate, and 6% post-graduate. The highest percentage of respondents have completed primary education.

Table-5.
Occupation of the Respondent

Occupation	Frequency	Percentage
Farmer	30	20%
Wage Laborer	45	30%
Private Job	61	40%
Government Job	14	9%
Total	150	100

Table: 5 The occupational breakdown of the Ho tribe is as follows: 20% of the respondents are farmers, 30% are wage labourers, 40% have private jobs, 9% have government jobs, and the total number of respondents is 150.

Table: 6
Income of the Respondent

Categories of people	Frequency	Percentage
Below 5,000	16	10%
6,000-10,000	21	14%
11,000-20,000	72	48%
21,000-30,000	42	28%
Total	150	100

Table: 6 Income Status of the Ho tribe 10 per cent are below 5,000, 14 per cent of respondents are 6,000-10,000 respondents 48 per cent of respondents, 11,000-20,000 of the respondent and 28 per cent of respondents are 21,000-30,000.

7. Conclusion

The above researcher and observation in the sarna religion of the Ho tribe in Keonjhar district present studies of most of the taken sarna dharma they worship naturalist. Ninety-four per cent believed Sarana religion and 6 per cent followed Christianity. Who are Christians sharing his/ her family problem now they improved their livelihood in a different way, economically, socially, educational etc. the Ho tribe people more and more engaged work in the private sector, industry, Government, wage labourer, and development of different development programs by the government and non-government which are constantly going on in those scheduled areas.

The Sarna religion is practiced by the Ho tribe, an indigenous community residing in the Keonjhar district of Odisha, India. Sarna is an animistic belief system that centers around nature worship and ancestral spirits. Here is a summary of the Sarna religion as practiced by the Ho tribe:

Beliefs and Deities:

1. Animism: Sarna followers believe that all natural elements, including trees, mountains, rivers, and animals, possess spirits or divine essences.

2. Ancestral Spirits: Ancestors are revered and believed to be present in the form of spirits. They are considered protectors and guardians of the community.
3. Supernatural Beings: There is a belief in supernatural beings such as spirits, deities, and ghosts. These entities are considered powerful and capable of influencing human lives.
4. Singbonga: Singbonga is the supreme deity of the Sarna religion. Singbonga is considered the creator and preserver of the universe and is associated with the sun and the moon.

Rituals and Practices:

1. Worship: Sarna rituals involve offerings and prayers to natural elements and ancestral spirits. Sacred groves, known as Jaher, serve as important places of worship.
2. Festivals: The Ho tribe celebrates various festivals, such as the Sarhul festival, which marks the beginning of spring and the sowing season.
3. Shamanism: Shamans, known as "Deoris," play a crucial role in the Sarna religion. They act as intermediaries between humans and spirits, performing rituals and healing practices.

Values and Customs:

1. Conservation of Nature: The Sarna religion promotes a deep connection with nature and emphasizes protecting natural resources.
2. Community Cohesion: Sarna rituals and festivals serve as occasions for social bonding and community cohesion. They reinforce a sense of belonging among the Ho tribe members.

3. Oral Traditions: The Sarna religion has been primarily transmitted through oral traditions, with rituals, stories, and beliefs passed down from one generation to another.

The Sarna religion of the Ho tribe reflects their close relationship with nature and their ancestral heritage. It provides a spiritual framework that guides their daily lives and fosters a strong sense of community identity. Several key conclusions can be drawn Based on the situation of the Sarna religion in Odisha. Sarna religion continues to hold significance among Adivasi communities in Odisha, particularly among tribes such as the Santals, Ho, Oraon, and Munda. Despite the influences of mainstream religions and external pressures, Sarna has managed to persist and remains an integral part of these communities cultural and spiritual identity.

8. Suggestions: To further support and strengthen the Sarna religion, the following suggestions can be considered:

1. Recognition and Legal Protection: Advocate for the official recognition of Sarna as a distinct religion and ensure legal protection for the religious practices, sacred sites, and rituals associated with Sarna. This can be achieved through engaging with policymakers and advocating for legislation that safeguards the rights of Adivasi communities to practice their indigenous religions freely.

2. Education and Awareness: Promote education and awareness about Sarna religion among both Adivasi communities and the broader society in Odisha. This can be done through community-based initiatives, educational programs, and cultural exchanges to foster understanding, respect, and appreciation for Sarna as an integral part of Odisha's diverse religious landscape.

3. Community Empowerment: Support community-led initiatives to preserve and promote Sarna religion. This can include providing resources, training,

and capacity-building opportunities to Adivasi communities, enabling them to participate in reviving and preserving their religious practices actively.

4. Interfaith Dialogue: Encourage interfaith dialogue and cooperation between Sarna practitioners and followers of other religions, fostering mutual respect, understanding, and religious harmony. This can help reduce tensions and misconceptions, leading to a more inclusive and tolerant society.
5. Environmental Conservation: Highlight the connection between Sarna religion and the environment, emphasizing the importance of protecting and preserving natural resources and sacred sites. Collaborate with environmental organizations and policymakers to ensure sustainable development practices that respect nature's ecological balance and spiritual significance.

By implementing these suggestions, stakeholders can contribute to revitalising and safeguarding the Sarna religion in Odisha, ensuring its continuation for future generations while respecting Adivasi communities' rights and cultural heritage.

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