

## Marginalization and Development of Indian Tribal Society: An Ethno-historical Study of the Sabars

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**Abstract:** *The Constitution of India has designated a class of people 'Scheduled Tribe' who are geographically isolated from the mainstream of Indian population and have distinctive culture of their own. They follow primitive way of life, mostly relying on forest and natural environment. Often they are called 'backward'. They do not follow any division of labour or caste hierarchy. The main concentration of them is found in and around Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Assam, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal. The highest concentration is found in the North-East regions including the States of the Seven Sisters while the lowest is found in Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. This paper aims to throw light on the condition of one of the earliest known tribes of this continent- the Sabars. It has tried to focus on the socio-economic life of this tribe in an Ethno-historical purview along with the study of marginalization and development on the part of the society as a whole and the efforts of the State and Central Governments.*

**Keywords:** *Adivasi, Marginalization, Sabar, Munda, Ethno-historical, Totemistic, Proto-australoid, National-policy, Empowerment*

### Introduction

A large section of the population of the Indian subcontinent has been designated as Scheduled Tribes or 'Adivasis' (indigenous people) in the Constitution of India. These people have their distinctive culture being geographically isolated from the main stream of Indian population. These tribal people are characterized by their primitive way of life, shyness to mix with the main Indian culture. They mostly rely on forest; their particular ancestral land connected with supply of water for sustaining their life and livelihood. They have their own distinctive culture having community orientation along their natural environment. They do not have any taboo for food. They eat whatever is available in the nature. Furthermore, they do not have any division of labour

and caste hierarchy. Women are free to work with men as well.

The main concentration of these people appears to be the regions in and around Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and West Bengal. However, the highest concentration of this is found in the North-Eastern region comprising the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura, while the lowest concentration is to be found in the regions of Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu.<sup>1</sup>

In this article attempt has been made to throw light on the condition of one of the earliest known tribes of this sub-continent- the Sabars from the time of early history to the present state taking into account the importance of these people in Indian society. From the very early period they are variously known as Saora, Sabara, Soara, Sora, Shabar, Sabar, Sambara, Sour, Sar, Sayar, Suir, and so on. They are mostly found in hilly tracts and jungles. If Pandit Nilkantha Das is to be believed "the aboriginal remnants of these Austriens are still there in Eastern India, such as Kols, Santals, Khasis, Nagas etc. Thus, the gradual migration of these Sabar people was by these land and sea routes, as has been indicated, towards Indonesia and further islands, perhaps to America."<sup>2</sup> According to the writer they were cultured people, who after the advent of the Dravidians and then the Aryans were forced to migrate to the hills and jungles and made their strongholds in those regions.

It is interesting to note that almost all the references to these people make it clear that the Sabars wear leaves. Varaha Mihira, writing in 550 C.E., speaks of Parna-Sabar 'leaf clad Sabar'.<sup>3</sup> These people are found in a vast area covering Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Bihar, Jharkhand and large parts of West Bengal and Bangladesh.

### **Literary and Historical Records**

Literary references to the Sabars are many which claim that they were powerful tribes. Pliny's reference to Suari and their connection with Mount Maleus has been considered to be the Saoras (Sabars) and the mountain Malaygiri or Mahendragiri.<sup>4</sup> Ptolemy's geography puts the Sabarai near the Ganges where diamonds could be found in abundance.<sup>5</sup> Tespion and Karikardama were two important towns of the region. According to Cunningham the saoras lived in a place to the South-west of the Gangetic delta very near to the sea coast.<sup>6</sup> Scholars are not unanimous in placing the Saoras in a particular area. According to Yule (Sastri, S. M. cited Yule, p. 173) this could be Dosarene near Sambalpur where diamonds are found, while Oldham puts Karikardama somewhere in Singbhum area. Oldham however takes the territory of the Saoras to have been the hill and jungle region of the Ranchi District in Jharkhand.<sup>7</sup>

Coming to ancient Indian texts we find the Sabars (saoras) being classed with the tribes like the Andhras, Pulinda, Pundra and Mutibas in the Aitareya Brahmana. They are stated to be the outcastes living beyond the Aryan settlements.<sup>8</sup>

The thirteenth Book of the Mahabharata also speaks of the Sabars along with the outlandish barbarians like the Andhras, Pulindas, Pundras, and Mutibas.<sup>9</sup> According to Cunningham, who, quoting from Muir's Sanskrit texts II, 62 the Sabars were a well-known indigenous tribe who had a dialect of their own at the time of the Mahabharata.

The well known story of the acceptance by Rama of the offering of wild plums by Sabari, a woman of the Sabar clan is proof of the Sabars as living in forest and acceptance of them by the upper class. E. T. Dalton, cited a tradition in which the Cheras were expelled by the Sabars from their land in Sahabad. After which the latter came to rule that area from 500 to 900 C.E. They were later ousted by the great Bhoja Raja.<sup>10</sup>

The Harshacharita of Banabhatta states that Harshavardhana was helped by a Sabar chief when he searched for his sister Rajyasri in the Vindhyan mountains.<sup>11</sup> The renowned poet Vakpati (7th century C.E.) referred to a temple of a Sabar goddess in the Vindhyachala (near present Mirzapur) where the leaf-clad Sabars used to pay their homage with human sacrifices.<sup>12</sup>

According to a copper plate grant (Korni) Karmavarna belonging to the Kalinga-Ganga dynasty defeated and killed one Sabaraditya in 720 C.E. at the eastern side of Mount Mahendra. Elwin states that "in the Udayendiram plates of the twenty first year of the Pallava king Nandivarman Pallavamalla, he is said to have defeated the Saora king Udayana and captured his mirror banner made of peacock feather. This was A.D. 736."<sup>13</sup> The use of peacock feathers and tail to decorate themselves by the Sabar women associated with large earrings has been referred to by R. C. Majumdar. The Naihati grant of Vallalaseana (dated about 1200 C.E.) speaks of the children of his enemies were forced to live in the house of Sabars.<sup>15</sup> H. B. W. Garrick places the domination of Sabars as far as the present Azamgarh and Ghazipur.<sup>16</sup>

Whatever might be the case it is clear that the Sabar tribe had their stronghold in eastern India including Bihar, Jharkhand, Assam, Odisha and the hilly region of Bengal (undivided) including Bankura, Medinipur, Purulia, Bardhaman and upper part of present Bangladesh.

The Buddhist edifice at Paharpur, showcases many terracotta plaques depicting Sabar men and women engaged in their day to day life.<sup>17</sup> One very interesting plaque shows a leaf-clad woman with her prey. The Sabar women are shown wearing a leaf garland to cover their lower part only. They are seen to be wielding bow and arrow, sometimes with a child and a dagger in her hand. The best representation is found in the plaque where the leaf-clad woman is carrying the carcass of a wild animal (Fig. 1), sometimes the lady is found in association with her male counterpart (Fig. 2). The male figure generally bearded, are seen to carry a quiver with arrow at their back and a bow. They are also found to wear leaf apron (Fig. 3).



Fig.1: Sabar woman carrying her prey,

Fig.2: Sabar Couple

Fig.3: Sabar Hunter with quiver and bow

Sources: Memoirs Of the Archaeological Survey of India, No. 55, Excavations at Paharpur, Bengal by Rao Bahadur K. N. Dikshit, K. N., Published by The Director General, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, 1938, (Reprint 1999), Plate XLIX Fig, a, e & c

It thus appears that by the 7th/8th century C. E. the Buddhists afforded the Sabars in their fold. The appearance of Parna-Sabari form of the goddess of epidemic from several places proves the importance of the tribe in that period. The images of Parnasabari found from Nayananda, Tangibari (Fig. 4) and Vajrayogini (Fig.5), Munsiganj, Bangladesh, preserved in the Bangladesh National Museum, show the goddess as trampling upon the heads of the prostrate figures of to males having circular marks on their body (supposedly small-pox). The leaf-clad, pot-bellied figure is attended by Sitala riding an ass and carrying a broom and her consort Jvarasura (horse headed) on either side. Importance of the image lies in the figure of Hindu god Ganesha, in the attitude of flight, placed on the pedestal. All the Brahmaniical deities are seem to be afraid of the might of Parnasabari. The particular name of the Buddhist deity makes it clear that she has been conceived as aboriginal in origin, specially the Sabars. Absorption of this goddess into the Buddhist fold is evident of the importance attached with the Sabar tribe in the Socio-cultural scenario of the period.<sup>18</sup>



Fig. 4: Parnasabari, stone, Nayananda, Fig.5: Parnasabari, stone, Vajrayogini, Munsiganj, Tangibari, Munsiganj, Bangladesh National Museum Bangladesh National Museum

Sources: Sharmin Rezowana, 'Parnashabari: The Goddess of Small-pox from Bengal and Bihar' *Pratnatattva*, Journal of the Dept. of Archaeology, Jahangirnagar University, Vol. 25, June 2019 pp. 124, Fig. 1 & 2

Moreover, it may also be noted that in some legends the Hindu goddess Durga gets the epithet Parna connecting her with leaves or vegetal world.

Likewise, there are many references to the Sabars in and around Odisha. The word of Dhenkanal appears to have been derived from the name Denka, a Sabar by that name, who was ousted by Singh Bidyadhara in the 17th century. It is stated that the original image of Lord Jagannatha was found in the land of Sabars where Visvasu, a Sabara by origin, was the priest.<sup>19</sup>

Another epigraphic evidence of the Sabars of Kalinga (Odisha) is found in an inscription in the Kumarvare temple at Sri-kurman in the Srikakulam district which records that the Vaishnava Scholar Narahari Tirtha defended an attack to the temple by the wild Saoras.<sup>20</sup>

As stated by N. K. Sahu the Sabars and Pulindas fought valiantly in the army of Kalinga at the Kurukshetra war. The Hatigumpha lipi testify the fact king Kharavela organized his military resources of the land of the Vidyadhara and with the help of the aboriginals (Atavi) he could crush the Rathikas and Bhojakas. The Atavi people are identified with the Sabaras of Kalinga.<sup>21</sup>

Another important information about a Sabar principality during the time of Sabar Nrisimha of Vijayanagara is gathered from Aiyangar's book.<sup>22</sup> It speaks of Suluva Narasimha's fight with a Sabar leader in order to conquer the area of Prithugiri. The Rajim copper plate inscription of Mahasiva Tivararaja, the king Tivara Deva was an adopted son of Nanna Devi, the granddaughter of Udayana of the Sabara lineage.<sup>23</sup>

Again the Pallavas are seem to have connected with Sabar lineage as evidenced by the fact that Mukunti Pallava was the son of Mahadeva by a girl of the wild mountain tribe known as Censuaras. The Censuaras (or Cen-Sabars) are generally taken to be the modern Chenchu tribes found in the Goomsoor area westward of Srisailam and North and South Arcot districts. The men among this tribe wear animal skins while the women are found to be leaf-clad.<sup>24</sup> Moreover the name of the tribe found near Pulicot, somewhat to the north of Chennai is Centsus, meaning the same as Cen-Sabars.<sup>25</sup>

### **Ethnographic features of the Sabars at present**

From an Anthropometric study among some Sabars in the Ganjam district of Odisha, Majumdar categorically stated that they are proto-australoids.<sup>26</sup> They are generally short or medium in height. Their complexion varies from light brown to very dark brown, sometimes having a lighter shade. They mostly have flattened nose with somewhat flared nostrils and thick lips (Fig. 6) which are slightly everted. Their hair is usually curly, sometimes wavy as well. Majority of the people have the eye slits almost straight, while in some these have medium obliquity. These people are mostly oval-faced, in some round

faces are not wanting, having weak, medium and sometimes high cheek bones (Fig.7).



Fig.6: Sabar male Fig. 7: Sabar male with curly hair and high cheek bone  
Sources: Census of India-1961, Vol. I, Monograph series, Part V-B (iv); The Savar A Scheduled Tribe In West Bengal, Office of the Registrar General, India, Ministry of Home Affairs, New Delhi, Fig. 1 & 2

Looking into the structural pattern of the household of the Sabars it is seen that the Sabars follow a patriarchal policy, the husband is the head of the family living with his wife and unmarried children, sometimes with his widowed mother and unmarried sister/s. Sometime a joint family with the brother and his kins is also discernable from the survey. Generally, the size of the household is small having four to five persons in a single household.

Some sort of clan organization of totemistic nature is found among the Sabars, as are also seen with other tribes. The clan of totemistic nature is named after several pieces of natural flora and fauna. It is interesting to note that the members of a specific clan would not hurt or kill their totem, lest they look upon it with veneration. However, the study on the Sabars of different places, show that their clan organization differs from one area to another. To be most specific the Sabars of West Bengal and Odisha have very little totemistic organization.<sup>27</sup>

With due course the tribe concerned is found living in rural areas surrounded by forests and approachable only after crossing small streams or rivulets. Due to the Tribal welfare department of the state of West Bengal, particularly in the district of Purulia some colonies have developed for them having better communication. They still depend on the forest for their livelihood. Their hut is called Kumba comprising small hut with a sloped roof thatched with leaves and tree branches and without any window. The walls of the hut are also made of tree branches with a mud coat. The entrance to the hut is mostly through a passage and is devoid of any door. In the night it is closed with a portable door of a bamboo frame with straws and leaves.

Now a days the males generally wear a small dhoti or gamcha as a lower garment from the waist to the knee, The bare body is sometimes covered with a vest. The children are generally dressed in small pieces of cloth to cover their

private parts (Fig.8). The elderly women folk usually were a short length saree, while the younger ladies put on a full length one. They generally tie their hair in a tight top-knot, sometimes (particularly the young women) are fond of arranging the hair in different type of chignon (Fig.9). The married women put on an iron bangle as mark of their marital status, while most of the ladies put on glass or metal bangles, occasionally they wear ear studs and nose rings. An interesting feature is noticed on the hands of the male, i.e. a circular scar-mark made from pressing a burning cloth on it when he is eight or ten years of age. The females prefer tattooing on their body.



Fig. 8: Dress of Sabar Children

Fig. 9: Sabar women wearing saree

Sources: Census of India-1961, Vol. I, Monograph series, Part V-B (iv); The Savar A Scheduled Tribe In West Bengal, Office of the Registrar General, India, Ministry of Home Affairs, New Delhi, Fig. 8 & 9

Traditionally they are non-vegetarian taking beef, non-poisonous snakes, toads, frogs, even the flesh of iguana, sometimes chicken and mutton as well. Meat of sheep and boar however are banned for the community. As for the prohibition and tightened restrictions on the part of the Forest Department to use forest produce they are inclined to change their food habits by in-taking cereals and pulses along with vegetables gathered from their kitchen-garden. They also consume liquors mainly handiya (brewed from fermented rice), mahua, sometimes, occasionally, distilled country liquor available in the market.

At present they generally speak in Bengali though their mother tongue appears to be adibhasha Munda or Santhali. They are educationally backward in Bengal as indicated by 1961 Census data only 1.3% of the total population of the tribe are literate.<sup>28</sup>

Male	Females	Total	Literates Male	% to total Males	Literate Female	% to total Females	% of total literate Sabars
1702	479	2,181	23	1.4	6	1.3	1.3

Sources: Census of India-1961, Vol. I, Monograph series, Part V-B (iv); The

Savar A Scheduled Tribe In West Bengal, Office of the Registrar General, India, Ministry of Home Affairs, New Delhi, p.16

### **Welfare programmes of the Government of West Bengal**

For the welfare of different Scheduled Tribes including the Sabars, the West Bengal Government has undertaken several schemes like promotion of education, knowledge of agriculture, putting them under specific colonies, health schemes, proper planning of housing etc. under different Five Years Plans. Interestingly they have taken special schemes for those residing in Purulia District. Three such schemes for colonization are stated to have been started during the first year of the Third Five Year Plan. These included provision for houses at a low price, allotment of agricultural lands, and purchase of agricultural equipments, construction of well for water supply, provision for sheep and goat rearing, poultry birds, construction of primary schools etc. However the tribe concerned is not quite happy with the schemes. More such schemes have been initiated in the census of 2001 and 2011. The most important element on the part of the Government of India is to accord education to all aiming at the reducing of inequalities in affording education to the disadvantaged groups in the backward or fringe regions.

The Indian Government has initiated the 'National Policy of Education' in 1986 by establishing Primary schools in the tribal areas, providing reading material in their mother tongue, sometimes residential schools as well. Despite these efforts the development of the tribe/tribes is not quite satisfactory. The main point of problem is the inability of the surety of giving appropriate jobs for them because of the fact that the former is focusing on the mental skill, while the latter has to deliver manual work. It becomes inferior to the mental skill.

These indigenous people are very much alienated from the various development process undertaken by government. Moreover the isolation and remoteness of their habitat make it difficult to extend direct support by the authority. On the other hand it becomes also difficult for the tribesmen to adapt the trends of modern civilization, despite the efforts conducted by the government for their rights to get similar opportunities as of the mainstream. The recent policy of 'empowerment' extended to the backward classes like, as said earlier, privilege of education through the mother language, colonization of them in a particular area, separate statehood or their rights over land and forest. In fact these policies have not been fully utilized up till now. That is why they are still living secluded and often are called 'outcastes'. It will take much more time to adopt the changes in their livelihood.

As Narayan (2002) shows- "the four key elements of empowerment that must underlie institutional reform" are access to information, inclusion or participation, accountability and local organizational capacity. But all these depend on the success of good governance. Incidentally it may be stated that, in connection with the Sabars in particular, with the formation of the Paschim

Banga Kharia Sabar Kalyan Samiti and the involvement of the famous Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi, the situation of the tribe concerned has changed somewhat. The social media has also contributed to this development. Though they still have grudges for their eviction from forest and nature still they are now regarded as part of Bengal Cultural zone.

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