

LANJIA SAORA



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FOREWORD

Countless gods and spirits hold sway over their mundane existence. They are worshipped with fear and anxiety. Their male and female Semans get into trance to communicate with unseen and know what they want because it may be dangerous and even fatal to displease them. Their demands – be it flesh and blood of buffalo, goat or fowl and liquor or any thing else – are to be met at any cost through appropriate rituals. To keep the supernatural in good humour, they make their famous and beautiful wall paintings or icons known as idital inside the house. Not only the art of icons but also the art of taming the mountains with trees and terraces for survival have made the tribesmen famous.

They are the Lanjia Saora Highlanders, a fascinating primitive tribe of Orissa. They inhabit of a picturous mountains territory stretched across Rayagada and Gajapati districts of southern Orissa. They are shifting cultivators and at the same time expert terrace cultivators. They exhibit a high degree of indigenous skill, ingenuity and technological outfit for preparing the terraces with inbuilt water management system. Their success comes from their hard work and team spirit. To help each other at the time of need they have ansir, their traditional system of labour cooperative.

SCSTRTI has endeavored a photographic documentation of this colourful tribe. It is the first booklet in a Series on five Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs). The authors have taken pains to bring out this publication. They deserve my thanks. I hope learned readers will appreciate this work.



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LANJIA SAORA

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INTRODUCTION

THE SAORAS are one of the most ancient tribes of India. Frequent references to the tribe are found in Hindu mythology and classics. More often, they find mention in the Sanskrit literature, the epics, the *Puranas* and other religious texts. They are called by various names such as Savara, Sabara, Saur, Sora, etc. and have a racial affinity with the proto-Australoid stock which is dominant among the aborigines of central and southern India. Their dialect called *Sora*, comes under the Austro-Asiatic family of Munda group of languages. They are widely found all over Central India comprising Bihar, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and West Bengal.



The Saora is also an oldest known major tribe of Orissa. They are found all over the State but, are largely concentrated in the highlands of Gajapati District and Gunupur subdivision of Rayagada District forming a contiguous territory i.e., Saora Country.



According to 2001 Census the total population of the Saora in Orissa is 4,73,233 i.e., 5.81 per cent of the total tribal population of the State. Numerically they are the 5th largest tribe among 62 tribes. Their sex ratio comes to 1007 females per 1000 males. Their level of literacy is 40.13 percent i.e., 56.74 percent for males and 25.74 percent for females. Between 1991 and 2001 Census their population have registered a growth rate of 17.28 percent.



LANJIA SAORA constitutes one of the primitive sections of the Saora tribe. They are so called by their neighbours for their distinct style of male dress in which the long and narrow strip of male loincloth is worn in such a fashion that both the red embroidered ends hang down in front and back like a tail (*Lanja*). Occasionally a man wears a bead necklace

The traditional dress of a Saora woman is a coarse waist cloth with gray/red borders about three feet in length and about two feet in breadth which hardly reaches the knees. In chilly weather she covers the upper part of her body with another piece of cloth tied at the back with a knot. Saora women do not use too many ornaments. They wear a few bead necklaces, metal neck rings, round wooden plugs in ear lobes, spiral rings made of brass, bell-metal or aluminum in the fingers and toes, little rings in the alae of the nose and metal anklets. These are purchased from local markets.



Gatungkab : Female Loin Cloth



ARSI OLIAKAN : Male Loin Cloth





Lanjia Saora, besides their traditional style of dress and ornaments and dialect, are distinguished by certain other cultural traits :-

- Their women greatly enlarge their ear lobes to wear rounded wooden pegs and have a characteristic tattoo mark down the middle of the forehead.
- Have scattered housing pattern on hill slopes.
- Install the village guardian deities represented by wooden posts at the entrance of the village.
- Pursue shifting cultivation and ingeniously prepare stone bounded terrace fields with inbuilt water management system for paddy cultivation.
- Have their typical traditional labour cooperatives, *ansir*, for helping each other for strenuous and labour intensive works.
- Have no clans but lineage organization called *Birinda*.
- Have male and female shamans to serve their magico- religious needs.
- Famous for their attractive wall paintings, *Idital*.
- Observe *Guar*, the secondary burial ritual to commemorate the dead by sacrificing buffaloes and by erecting menhirs.



Tattooed face & wooden Pegs in Ear Lobes



Neck Ring



Brass Anklets



Rounded Wooden Pegs
for Ear Lobes



Khadu-Brass Anklet of Saora



Brass Bangles

HABITAT



Lanija Saora inhabit the Saora country in Gajapati and Rayagada Districts. Lying to the western side of the Eastern Ghats, this is a picturesque territory with rolling hills, undulating meadows, lush green forests, roaring rapids, darting hill streams, enchanting water falls, gaping valleys, terraced paddy fields and varied flora and fauna. The Lanija Saoras with their colourful costumes and adornments, scintillating dance and music display their spirit of freedom and spontaneous joy of life in close harmony with nature.



STONE BOUND TERRACES

SETTLEMENT



Water Source

Lanjia Saora love to live on slopes. Therefore their villages are situated on the hill slopes or foothills- often inaccessible, and mostly lie hidden in forest-clad hills. When founding a new settlement they select high lands and hill slopes which are free from water-logging and lie near the natural water sources. They generally live in small villages. In large villages they live in several hamlets. The terraced paddy fields exhibiting the Saora's skill and ingenuity in contour bunding, revetment and water management radiate in all possible directions.



Mandua Sum: The Village Deity

In Lanjia Saora villages, the houses are either scattered or arranged in rows. "All around the villages are little gardens... Not too far away are the burning grounds (swiddens) and groups of menhirs. In the streets and down the paths leading to the village boundary is shrines for gods or ancestors. ... Everywhere are sago or date palms, and many villages are well shaded by great trees..... There is nothing of nomad about these substantial villages, with their strongly built houses, the endless stone walls piercing the forest on every side, the wonderfully constructed terraces, the menhirs whose number often suggests considerable antiquity". (Elwin, 1955; 38-39)



MENHIRS



VILLAGE STREET

HOUSING



HIGH PLINTH HOUSE

Lanja Saora houses built on a general plan upon high plinth are rectangular in shape. The roof is proportionately low. The walls of the houses are made of stone and mud or of upright pieces of wood or bamboo and covered with a thick plaster of mud. The walls are painted red with red earth and the veranda is painted black.

There may be a single **door** or in some houses a back door, right in line with the front door. There is a high front verandah. The verandas, which are rather narrow, are usually at least three, and may be as much as six feet above the ground, and are reached by a flight of stone steps. Built into the veranda there is often a pigsty though this may be located on the back veranda instead.



WOODEN DOOR



PIG STY



ANIMAL SHED



Inside the house is a **large loft** resting on wooden pillars and covering about three-quarters of the house, which is used for storing most of the household articles from food grains, utensils and clothes to tiny tidbits. The open space is meant for husking grains with pestles and dining.

The ever **burning hearth** is located under this loft at one end adjoining a wall. The household utensils are kept near the hearth. In winter and the rainy season all family members and visitors sleep under the loft. In summer some people may sleep on the verandah.



From the roof hang a number of objects like baskets, gourd vessels, bundles of clothes, umbrellas, spears, bows, arrows and earthenware pots. Agricultural implements are piled up at one corner of the house. The dedicated pots, gourds and baskets containing the special clothes of the ancestors and tutelary deities are hung on the wall, which is decorated with **italons** or **ikons** representing men, archers, gunmen, mantle-bearers, kings, queens, elephants, horses, dogs, etc. A cowshed is built on one side of the house.

Wall Painting (Ikon)

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

Lanjia Saora social organization is unique for lack of any clan or sib organization common in most of the tribal societies of the country. Their smallest social unit is family and the largest, the extended family called **birinda** formed of the descendants of a common ancestor four or five generations back.

Marriage is prohibited within a birinda, whose members stand to each other as blood brothers and sisters.

They participate in the **Guar** and **Karja** rituals with their contributions. When one member dies the birinda performs the funeral rites and even the secondary Guar ceremony, after which the dead is admitted to the underworld.

Significantly a woman's membership of her father's **birinda** does not change after her marriage and she remains as such till her death after which her own birinda kins may claim the right to perform her funeral rites. The same principle applies to those migrated to other places. After death their bones, etc. are brought to his original village for performing the last rites. The birinda also inherits the property of an heirless member.





Scene of Marriage by Capture (Zing-Zing- Boi)

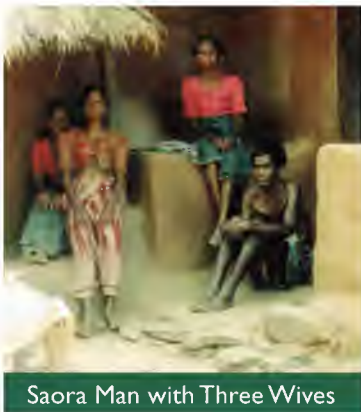
Lanjia Saora **marriage** is a plain and simple affair. Among different forms of marriage prevalent in their society, viz. marriage by arrangement or negotiation, by capture or by service, they have accepted the first form as the rule and others as exceptions.

Polygyny is widely prevalent. The Saora say that a man having more fields to cultivate, must have several wives. Industrious Saora women work hard to enhance family income.

To marry the selected woman, the man pays the bride price (panshal) in both cash and kind. On the appointed day, the groom's party visits the girl's house for the betrothal, taking along nine pots of wine.

On this occasion, they are entertained with feasts consisting of rice, buffalo meat and liquor. After one year, the bride is brought to the groom's house. The day is celebrated by dancing and drinking, and from that day, they are recognized as husband and wife.

The Lanjia Saora society also permits sororate, junior levirate types of marriage and divorce and remarriage of widows, widowers and divorcees. That means a man can marry his deceased wife's younger sister and a woman can marry her deceased husband's younger brother.



Saora Man with Three Wives



A Session of Drinking



Karja Ritual

Lanjia Saora **family** is mostly nuclear and patrilineal, generally comprising parents and unmarried children. Women and children being treated as important social and economic assets, enjoy special position in the family as well as the society. Besides house keeping and child rearing women work hard to undertake a major part of subsistence activities as well as trade and barter.

The Saora **cremate their dead**. The corpse is carried to the cremation ground accompanied by a musical band. The next day, the bereaved family members examine the ashes at the cremation ground to discover sign of the cause of death. In the evening, a fowl is killed there and cooked with rice and bitter leaves and the meal is shared by the mourners of the village.

Children from a very tender age start to help their parents in all works and develop self-sufficiency. Therefore women and children are loved, respected and allowed a great deal of freedom. Lanjia Saora say, "Life is not worth living without children"

After a year or two the Guar ceremony is observed. On this occasion menhirs are planted and a large number of buffaloes are sacrificed.

This is generally followed by three successive Karja rituals every 2nd or 3rd year- generally observed in March or April, to commemorate and honour the dead.



ECONOMIC EXISTENCE

The Lanjia Saora thrive on a **subsistence economy** founded on land and forest. Traditionally they were hunters, food gatherers and shifting cultivators. “Since generations living in hill slopes and mountain terrains they have been deriving nourishment from the resource bases of the hills and forests in multiple of such ways satiating small needs and making a bare minimum living.... Up until the time the hilltops and hill slopes were having verdant forest growth, the Saora were exploiting the hills and swiddens with mirth and furry. Swidden cultivation was their way of life. ... With the depletion of forest growth and the underwoods, swidden cultivation did not pay dividends and the Saora started preparing terraced fields by stone bunding method in an ingenious way” (Nayak, 1992:36).



Saora Hunting Party



Vegetations in Hill Slope cleared for Slash and Burn Cultivation



Firing the Site



Stone Banded Terraces



Ansir

The subsistence economy of the tribe rests on **slash and burn** and **terrace cultivation**. It is supplemented by seasonal forest collections, wage earning, occasional hunting and fishing. Among many landmark features of their socio-economic life is their traditional system of **labour cooperative - ansir** that ensures them labour supply for labour intensive operations like swidden cultivation, house construction, terrace making and cultivation, and other community activities in the village.

Agriculture - the mainstay of the Lanjia Saora economy has in recent times taken precedence over shifting cultivation – their traditional mode of subsistence, which no longer remained profitable under the cumulative impact of deforestation, ecological imbalance and decline of land/man ratio due to pressure of growing population. Since cultivable land is in short supply in their area for undulating nature of the hilly terrain, they have found an answer to this problem by mastering the art of

preparing and cultivating terraced paddy fields on the lower hill slopes and bottoms, which they call 'Saroba'.

They possess three kinds of farmlands – (i) **Saroba**, the terraced paddy fields, their valuable productive assets, (ii) **Baseng**– the up and dry land not as fertile as the Saroba and (iii) **Bagado**. Mainly they grow rice in terraced fields and a variety of minor millets, cereals, pulses, oilseeds and vegetables in the swiddens (*Bagado*) and Baseng:

Traditionally for the Lanjia Saora, **Shifting Cultivation (Bagado Chas)** has been their way of life. Most of them possess a few patches of swiddens inherited individually, to grow a mixed crop of cereals, minor millets and pulses as dictated by their food habits. In their attitude there is all the proud possessiveness of the landowners in the plains who vigorously defend their rights against any illegal encroachment. The land itself, timber, fruit trees and game animals are as dear as life to the Saora. Generally speaking the focal point of all activities in Saora society is land, and they strongly resist land alienation.



Saroba



Every Saora village has a well-defined boundary and its natives carry on shifting cultivation in the hills located far and near within the boundary. Traditionally the hills are distributed among the *birindas*. Members of a birinda possess swiddens exclusively on one hill and no outsider is ordinarily allowed to share it.

Normally a **bagado** plot is 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 of cultivation. The more the regenerative fallow period, the better is the fertility and productivity. Now these conditions are deteriorating day by day.

With the depletion of forest and soil, this practice has become uneconomical. Now the Saora have learnt in a hard way that this age old mode of subsistence would no longer

sustain their growing population. While trying to reduce their dependence on this less productive enterprise and looking for alternatives, they are yet to abandon the practice altogether.

Diminishing Returns from Bagad Chas



Hill Slopes Cleared for Shifting Cultivation

Settled Terrace Cultivation

The Lanjia Saora are expert terrace cultivators. They exhibit a high degree of indigenous skill, ingenuity and technological outfit for preparing the terraces with inbuilt water management system. The terraces- works of great engineering skill- are built right up the beds of the hill streams and ascend hundreds of feet from the depths of the valleys to the hill slopes and even up to the hill tops. The platform of each terrace is flat and the fall of each terrace is packed with stones. The terrace fields are privately owned and inherited from father to sons



Their settled agricultural practices mainly revolve around their Saroba. The upper terraces which are dry are locally called jyanum and used for cultivating ragi (*elusine corocana*), biri (*phaseolus mungo*) and kulthi (*dolichos biflorus*). In the lower terraces where adequate irrigation is available they raise a second paddy crop in Saroba during summer months.

Horticulture :

The Lanjia Saora love trees and take care to protect the fruit plants like datepalm, tamarind, jackfruit, mango, *Mohul*, *Ramphal*, *Sitaphal Salap*, etc in their villages, hills and swiddens. Besides, they raise kitchen garden in their backyards or in

the vicinity of their houses and orchards if suitable sites are available. They usually grow pumpkin, cucumber, bean, pineapple, tobacco, maize and ginger in their kitchen gardens. Presently, following the diminishing returns from agriculture, shifting cultivation and forestry, they are seeking for a dependable alternative in horticulture. They have started growing new horticultural crops introduced by themselves as well as the development agencies. This programme, introduced as an alternative to swidden cultivation, has become popular.



Now besides the development of kitchen gardens and backyard plantations, mixed orchards and commercial cash crops, they have raised cashew in wastelands and hill slopes covering parts of degraded swiddens. The **cashew plantation** drive has been very popular for its low maintenance and high profitability. Now, they are growing cashew on their own initiative and so, many families own cashew orchards from which comes a good part of their income. Helping them to enhance their level of income, it has emerged as a gainful pursuit, gradually pushing shifting cultivation to the back stage.



Cashew Plantation



With the gradual degradation of forests and natural environment, and growth of population their dependence on traditional sectors such as, hunting, shifting cultivation, animal husbandry and collection of minor forest produce have declined. Gradually, they have taken up pursuits like settled cultivation, horticultural plantations and wage labour. Now they are exhibiting a trend of temporary seasonal migration, in the lean seasons, to far-off states like Maharashtra, Assam, Arunchal Pradesh etc to earn higher wages by their engagement in unskilled and semi -skilled avocations such as carpentry, masonry, plumbing, auto-driving, machine operation, construction works, tea garden works and the like. They return to their native places before the onset of agricultural season bringing with them the new ideas and acquired modern skills as well as the accumulated savings out of their incomes.



Marketing

The Lanjia Saora are generally self sufficient in meeting their minimum needs and they procure few items from external sources. The sources are local hawkers, peddlers, weekly markets and towns. They also trade or barter their surplus produce to these sources.

A number of weekly markets sit on different week days in and around the Saora Country. They love to visit those markets to trade their products and buy their necessities like salt, chilies, tobacco, dry fish, cosmetics, clothes, etc. Market day is a holiday for them. They get an opportunity to meet their friends and relatives and spend happy times together



RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

Apparently there is hardly any tribe who has such complex religious beliefs and practices and such elaborate and dynamic pantheon of countless deities and spirits- both benevolent and malevolent as that of the Lanjia Saora. They are worshipped with fear and anxiety and offered sacrifices to provide safety and wellbeing of the people. Religion permeates all aspects of their life.

Sonnum or *sunnam* is the general name for the Saora deities and spirits. They have no concept of a supreme deity. In

Manduasum, the God of the Dead installed outside village- for protecting the villagers



different parts different gods are considered s u p r e m e . Moreover, there

can be no standard catalogue for these gods, for the list continually changes, as new ones are introduced and old ones forgotten. But all the varied aspects of their environment are associated with some god or other. The gods differ from one another in composition, function, character and nature. Some are benevolent, some neutral and some malevolent.



Icon of Labasum – The Earth God



A Male Shaman (Kudan)



All these gods and spirits make constant demands on the living. Those who die in the house appear in dreams and demand certain offerings. Sometimes devil spirits enter cattle sheds and make cows and oxen ill in order to make their displeasure known. If their demands are not met they can cause harm. Malevolent spirits are therefore more cared for than the benevolent ones.

In this mystic domain of “man-nature and spirit complex”, there are very important intermediaries between humans and supernaturals. They are shamans – both male and female, called *Kudan* and *Kudan Boi* respectively. They act as diviner-cum-medics who can establish direct communication with the unseen world in a trance and cure illness and ward off mishaps and misfortunes caused by the wrath of evil spirits. Interestingly every shaman has a female tutelary and every shamanin has a male tutelary. The relationship between them and their respective tutelary is the same as that between husband and wife.

To keep the gods and spirits in good humour the Saora make their famous wall paintings, or icons known as *italons*, initial or *idital* inside the house. The icons, which contain sketches of human beings, aeroplanes, cycles, plants, animals, hills, forests, sun, moon, etc., are very difficult to understand.



Jodi Sum- Deities at the Village Entrance



Shamanin (*Kudan boi*) performing a rite to cure a sick child.



Shamanins in trance before the Icon

An icon is painted to flatter and please the gods and ancestors so that they may spare members of the concerned family from their invidious attention. Periodically an icon may be repainted or replaced by another depending on the circumstances and the conduct of the god or ancestor. These unique beautiful wall paintings expressing the unique artistic talents and skills of the Lanjia Saora and are done by the artists who may be a shaman or any one who knows the art.

To appease the unseen, the Saora perform many ceremonies festivals and rituals. The ceremonies and rites connected with child birth, marriage and death are observed by individual families, whereas those relating

to various agricultural operations, and the biennial or triennial secondary mortuary rite- *Guar* (laying of stone slabs in memory of the deceased) are observed by the village community. Performing *Guar* is an expensive affair involving sacrifice of buffaloes, drinking, dancing, feasting, entertaining friends, relatives and villagers. While the shaman conducts the magical rites, another religious functionary called *Buyya*, presides over agricultural festivals, Some of the important festivals observed by the Saora are



Guar

Stone Slabs to Commemorate the Dead



Some of the important festivals observed by the Saora are as follows:

1. *Buroy-n-a-Adur* (relating to a kind of millet)
2. *Ganugey-n-a-Adur* (relating to sweet potato)
3. *Kondam-n-a-Adur* (relating to a hill grown coarse variety of corn)
4. *Kuroj-n-a-Adur* (relating to a kind of gram)
5. *Osa-n-a-Adur* (relating to a minor millet)
6. *Rago-n-a-Adur* (relating to red gram)
7. *Tanku-n-a-Adur* (relating to storing of mango fruit)
8. *Uda-n-a-Adur* (relating to ripening of mango fruit)

AESTHETIC LIFE

The Lanjia Saora are a very artistic people. Being children of nature they derive inspirations, ideas and ingredients from their natural environment for their creations. Their artistic talents and skills find expression in their colourful and enchanting wall paintings, dance and music.

Every Saora is a musician who can coin a song instantly and sing it. Both women and men cultivate the art of dancing and singing as a matter of natural habit. In their songs, one can find a great deal of humour, romance and melody in combination of the words.

Lanjia Saora dance creates riot of colours, rhythm and music that fills their sylvan surroundings and echoed in the hills.



Woman Singer & Musician Playing Her Fiddle





Men and women dance together. The dancers and musicians including pipers, flutists, violinists, gong players cymbal players, drummers, etc advance towards each other in alternation to the rhythm of the music.

Their dance costumes are colourful. Men and women dance wearing colourful attire with white fowl feathers on their heads and holding peacock plumes in their hands. Men tie turbans of coloured silk or cotton and wrap a long piece of the red cloth around their chest. While dancing they carry sticks, umbrellas, swords, other implements and blow whistles and make peculiar sounds.

They play a variety of **musical instruments** such as of drums of various sizes, flutes, pipes, cymbals, clarionets, gongs, rasps and string instruments.



Lanjia Saora Piper





Pipes



Bells



Circular Drum



Clarinet

The **drums** are of three types, kettle drum, double membrane drum and large drum.

There are also **brass cymbals, pipes and clarionets, brass gongs and hide gongs**. The noisy percussion instruments are usually used at certain agricultural festivals.

Fiddles are popular at weddings. There is a two-stringed fiddle consisting of a bamboo stem with half a coconut shell serving as a resonator. It is played by running a bow across it. A second kind of two-stringed instrument, somewhat like a guitar, also has a bamboo stem, but here the resonators are two gourds.

A third musical instrument, very popular at weddings, is a **rasp**. This is made from a segment of bamboo and has a slit cut longitudinally down its middle portion. The slit is corrugated, and when scraped with stick emits a grating sound.



Rasp



Fiddle

SOCIAL CONTROL

Traditionally, Lanjia Saora villages are self-governing and the traditional *panchayat* plays an important role in maintaining law and order and village solidarity. In every village the people are under the influence of two elders, *Gomang*- the secular headman and *Buyya*- the religious headman. The offices of both are hereditary and occupied by the members of one and the same family. Officials designated as *Mondal* and *Dalbehera* assist them in handling the village affairs. Besides, there is the village astrologer called *Disari*, a post which is achieved rather than ascribed. Anyone who acquires knowledge of stars and predicts events can function as an astrologer.

The annual schedule of festivals is decided unanimously in the village meeting. Disputes relating to the partition of property, sale and mortgage of land, marriage, bride price, divorce, adultery, and other social matters are decided in the traditional *panchayat* as per customary rules and principles. The *Gomang* presides over the meeting, initiates discussions and take decisions in consultation with the village elders. Ordinarily the offender is asked to pay the penalty in kinds of pots of liquor and goat, etc. and to feed the villagers with these. The quantum of penalty depends on the gravity of the offence.



Village Chief - Gomang



CHANGING WORLD



Since the remote past, the Lanjia Saora lived undisturbed in their remote hill habitat. In modern times, exposure to Christianity, the changing socio-cultural, political and economic climates as well as the external modern world have influenced the Saora way of life.

After independence, the welfare Government is initiating various welfare measures to improve the lot of the Saora. During the 5th Plan, Tribal Sub Plan (TSP) approach has been adopted and Lanjia Saora identified as one among 13 Primitive Tribal Groups (PTG) in Orissa.

For their all round development two Micro Projects, one located at Puttasing in Rayagada district and another at Serango in Gajapati district have been established. The Micro Projects have adopted the basic approach of Tribal Sub Plan, that is, location and community specific holistic development of the target area and the people.

The objective is to raise the living conditions of the Lanjia Saora and change them from a primitive and pre agricultural stage of shifting cultivation to modern agriculture and the culture of such other beliefs and practices. The impact is visible in changes effected in their way of life. Now the Lanjia Saora are passing through a phase of transition.





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