



Thampi Thomas Panangatu

**Comparative study of religious traditions
of the Saora tribe of Orissa
and the influence of Christian traditions**



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Foreword

The influence of the Christian mission in Orissa, especially among the Saora tribe, is a good example for the efforts made by missionaries to uplift subaltern people in different parts of the world. Often such good contributions go unnoticed or forgotten. It has long been my desire to research and record such initiatives, to make future generations aware and to correct misconceptions concerning Christian missionary activities.

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May the good God bless all of them abundantly and the good missionaries in their sincere effort to spread the liberating good news of Jesus Christ.

Winnenden, March 2009

Thampi Thomas Panangatu

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Introduction

Socio-cultural history of Orissa

India is a land famous for the rich variety of ethnic groups and categories of people. A major portion of the population in different federal states of India consists of various Tribal groups. As per the Scheduled Tribes order of 1950 which was amended by the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes¹ orders (Amendment Act 1976) there are 437 'Tribes' officially recognized by the government of India.² These tribal groups together form 7.7% of the total population of India. Each of these Tribes can be identified by its own habits, customs and traditions, unique to each individual Tribe. Numerically the state of Maharashtra has the highest number of Tribal groups second in position is Madhya Pradesh and Orissa stands in third position with 62 Scheduled tribes living in different parts of the state.

Orissa, situated in the central-eastern part of India, is a land famous for its rich Social, Religious and Cultural heritages. It is one of the richest states of India spread over 155,777 square kilometres with 30 civil districts. Paradoxically it remains the second least developed state in the country. It is a beautiful land with amazing landscape, art, architecture, various socio-religious monuments and history. The people in general are highly religious and deep rooted in their Hindu beliefs and practices. The majority of them practise the popular Jagannath cult, (a Hindu cult) unique to Orissa. The famous Jagannath Temple of Puri in Orissa is one of the five holiest places for Hindus all over the world.

1 Scheduled Caste (SC); Traditional Hindu Indian society is based on a social system which categorizes people into different castes. Basically there are four castes namely, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaysya and Sudra according to the hierarchy. All these categories of people are hereditarily destined to definite professions in the society prescribed for each caste by virtue of birth. All those people who do not come under any of these four castes are generally classified as 'out Caste' or officially Scheduled caste. They are considered to be the lowest section in society. They were also considered as untouchables. In modern times they are also called Dalits, Subaltern etc .

Scheduled Tribes (ST); Tribes or Tribals too are a section in the scheduled caste. But they are considered to be people belonging to a particular tribe with common features as classified in Anthropology. They are considered to be the earliest dwellers of India and live mostly in interior areas with their own traditions and customs. But in the Indian context many of them may not have all the general Anthropological features as prescribed. They are also called Adivasi, Girijan etc.

2 Pati, 2002: 41.

The history of Orissa can be traced back to the pre-historic period. The aboriginal tribes, the Buiyas and the Gonds, originally inhabited Orissa. They confined themselves to the forest and hills when the Dravidian race settled here. The region now known as Orissa was known in ancient times under various names, the most prominent of which were Kalinga, Utkala, Odra and Kosala. In the history of Orissa, the Kalinga war (261 BC) is a very significant event because it had a great impact on Ashoka, the emperor who fought the war. After the war on seeing the horrors of war he was struck with remorse and embraced Buddhism and began to spread peace – Dharama both in India and outside of India.

In the second century AD, Kharavela established a strong rule and later the Guptas dominated the region in the fourth century A. D. Later the Bhaumakara dynasty ruled the country until 10th century, followed by the Soma dynasty. From the 11th to the 12th century the Gangas became prominent. The Muslims Sultanate established their influence in Orissa during the 13th and 14th centuries. This influence continued until 1568. This was followed by the rule of the Mughals, which lasted until the death of Aurangzeb. After his death the Mughal Empire began to decline and the Marathas came to power. They continued to exercise sovereignty, until the British gained dominance in 1803. When India became independent in 1947, Orissa was made a state under the Federal Indian Union.

The total population of Orissa consists of over 36,706,920 million people belonging to different socio-religious ethnic groups. The upper Caste Hindus³ form the single major religious and social group in Orissa. However, a great majority of the population of Orissa belong to various Tribal groups with unique customs, practices and religious beliefs. They differ from one another in their socio-religious traditions and practices. Originally the popular Hindu cults and beliefs have nothing in common with the cultural practices of these ancient Tribes.

There are 62 Scheduled Tribes in Orissa in comparison to the 437 Scheduled Tribes in India. Together they constitute a total of 5.07 million tribal population in Orissa. They form 23.11 % of the total population of the state. Even though they are a vast majority, many of these tribes remain aloof from the mainstream society and live in their primitive life style and belief systems even today. They are yet to know of a world beyond their mountain ranges and fields. Faithfulness to their ancestral customs and beliefs, and its transmission to the younger generations, in

3 The category of people who enjoy the higher ranking in the Hindu Caste system.

spite of the social and political developments around them is remarkable. The chain of communication from the older generations to the new remains unbroken. The richness of these Tribal cultures, their simple approach to life and nature around them are totally ignored by the developed societies in India. There have been occasions of cultural subjection of these cultures by the dominant cultures and due respect and appreciation of these cultures are denied by labelling them as subaltern or primitive customs. An analytical study of these primitive tribes and their practices remains a neglected aspect of history and sociology even today.

In this context I will concentrate on the Tribal situation of Orissa with special focus on the tribe of Saora as the central theme of my study. Interactions with the Tribal Christians of Orissa have provided me with opportunities to experience their rich traditions and cultural heritages. These experiences have stimulated a personal curiosity to explore and to record the religious and cultural traditions of this Tribal group for further study and knowledge. I feel that genuine knowledge of the socio-cultural traditions and religious practices of such Tribes can widen our view further, to understand and to accept the rich socio-religious heritages of various cultures labelled as subaltern. Moreover I consider it a social responsibility to record such facts of history for deepening our knowledge about tribal religions and cultures for future generations.

The Saora socio-cultural context

Saora is one of the most ancient tribes of India having more than 278350 members living mostly in the hilly areas of south central Orissa and the north-western border of Andhra Pradesh. Important features of 'social, cultural and religious' beliefs preserved since time immemorial make it a unique tribe. Many of the social and religious structures like the Sobha, Pooja, social customs and traditions have remained intact even after many generations. The world famous Jagannath-cult of Puri temple of Orissa has been adopted from the religious practices of this Tribe.⁴

The Saora Tribe, though one of the ancient tribes in India, remains backward in many areas. Modernization and developments in different aspects of Indian society have hardly motivated in them the process to a normal life. For centuries together the Saoras remained secluded from the mainstream society and have lived with their primitive ways and methods. Their attitude towards life and ancestral beliefs kept them away from the people around them. Various socio-psychological factors

4 Dash, 1988: 39.

such as hard life situations, low rate of literacy, stubborn tribal attitudes, inaccessible areas, lack of exposure to others communities and distance to foreigners have kept the Saoras away from the world outside their limited surroundings. Such factors have made the possibilities of progress in life, social development and better living conditions inaccessible to them.

Saora is the main language (dialect) spoken among them. They live mostly in the mountainous regions and are fully involved in their primitive methods of mountain cultivation and cattle rearing which are the main sources of their income. Literacy is very low among the Saoras (42%). Due to lack of written records and sources a great deal of knowledge and information about this ancient Tribe is unknown to the world.

Saora culture and religious beliefs

When I speak about the Saora culture, in short what I mean is the world-view of the Saoras; their understanding that life is spread out in two different worlds, the present one where human beings live and the other, in which the spirits of the dead ancestors live. Human beings are called to live a simple life in union with nature based on social values and practices that have been handed down by their ancestors. It stands for a life based on strong human relationship between the members of the same community now living and the members who are already dead but continue to live in the world of spirits. It is also a culture, which foster social and human values based, not on religious sanctions or life after death, but based on life here and now on earth. All the Saora traditions correspond to this concept of life.

Distinct from such traditional cultural beliefs during the past few decades there have been tremendous changes in the life and social structure of the Saoras. The Saora Tribal community is slowly moving away from its authenticity and indigenous nature mainly due to modernization and social developments on the one hand and on the other hand due to lack of self-realization and awareness within the tribe itself. Many indigenous practices are avoided and non-Saora traditions are adopted as ideal models of life and culture. Many of the meaningful social and religious structures of this tribe are being lost or abandoned in the name of change and development. The need to preserve the socio-religious history of this tribe and its uniqueness, without being lost in the course of modernization and developments, is an important need of the day.

It is also important to note that, due to various socio-political motives there have been attempts to claim that the Tribal communities and religions too are part of the popular Hindu belief and social system. Such

attempts will destroy the individuality and originality of Tribal cultures. I hope, based on such current developments this attempt to look into the socio-religious traditions of the Saoras and the influence of Christianity within this tribe will help us to become aware of some of the important facts about this Tribe.

Objectives of this study

There has been much discussion through out the world about modernization and post-modernization in relation to different societies. To understand these two terms in brief:

Modernity is a notion generally held to have come into existence with the Renaissance and was defined in relation to antiquity. The term modernization is often used to refer to stages of social developments, based on industrialization. It is the diverse unity of socio-economic changes generated by scientific and technological discoveries and innovations, industrial upheavals, population movements, urbanization, the formation of the nation-state and mass political movements, all driven by the expanding capitalistic world market. Modernity implies the progressive economic and administrative rationalization and the differentiation of the social world. In short, modernity can be taken as a summary term, referring to the cluster of social, economic and political systems brought into being in the West from around 18th century onwards.

Post-modernity suggests what came after modernity; it refers to the incipient or actual dissolution of those social forms associated with modernity. Post-modernity emphasizes diverse forms of individual and social identity. It is now widely held that the autonomous subject has been dispersed into a range of plural, polymorphous subject-positions inscribed within language. Instead of a coercive totality and totalising politics, post-modernity stresses a pluralistic and open democracy.

To a large extent this came about in India too, generated by the British colonization. But unlike Europe and other developed nations in Asia, this form of modernization in India is restricted mostly to few main cities and did not have any effect on the vast majority of masses living in the rural areas of India especially the Tribals and Dalits. They remain even today unpolluted by the after effects of industrialization and modernization.

So when I speak of modernization and development among the Saora tribe it can never be considered parallel to the meaning it has in other societies around the world. While modernization in other parts of the world stands for individual freedom, self realization, emancipation from social clutches such as religion, traditions, availability of opportunities,

or latest information technology what it signifies for the Saoras is the normal change of attitude towards life and living conditions in the simplest way possible within this tribal community. It is a modernization or development in terms of a normal life as human beings with dignity and self worth. It is the growth brought about through changes in everyday thinking and approach towards life and beliefs within this Tribe or group of people during the past few decades. For the Saoras it means the slow transition from the primitive methods of life to a normal qualitative life.

There have been different Laws and regulations guaranteed by the Indian constitution for the welfare of the Tribals. For example, Article 46 of the constitution of India requires the state (both Central and state Governments) to promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections and in particular, of the Scheduled castes and Scheduled Tribes, and to protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation.⁵ The positive aspects of welfare and development motives of such regulations for the modernization and progress of the less privileged groups were hardly utilized by the Tribals themselves due to various social circumstances. That is to say even after 60 years of such directives by the constitution of India, except for minimum growth in certain pockets, the living conditions of Tribals, especially the Saoras are not very encouraging.

An impartial analysis will make it clear to us that the religious freedom as guaranteed by the Indian constitution and the influence of different religions and cultures have brought about great socio-religious changes among different indigenous cultures, especially among the backward castes and tribes living in remote areas of India. One can courageously state here that when we look into the history of the Saora tribe and their progress and development, besides Govt. policies, the influence of Christian missionaries has been of immense value. Their contributions towards social conscientisation among the Saoras have been a matter of great importance. I would say not only among the Saoras: rather there have been explicit changes and progress in various levels within Tribal and Dalit communities all over India during the last 60 years of this century wherever Christianity was actively present. Christian missionaries have caused great deal of 'change in attitudes' among these people, which is one of the most important factors needed for the growth and development in any society, group or culture.

5 Pati, 2002: 68.

Social changes are a gradual process, the result of constant effort and support. It cannot be compared to chemical reactions or sudden occurrences. Changes in societies have occurred only when they were ready for such a change in attitudes and thinking patterns. From our own personal life we experience how difficult it is to change even the ordinary thinking patterns. This hard fact is better understood in the words of Kusum Nair, "people do not always believe what they should believe or are expected to believe. Their beliefs are often obsolete – the product of dogma and tradition the reason for which have long ceased to exist. It may sometimes be easier to build a million-tonne steel plant – with borrowed money and hired know-how, if necessary – than to change a man's outlook on such matters as the use of irrigation water, fertilizer, or contraceptives. It is necessary, therefore, to be fully acquainted with the prevailing value systems underlying the behaviour patterns in any human community if one is to understand the nature of factors likely to be involved in that community is economic growth and development."⁶

Religious conversions to Christianity among the Saoras have stimulated gradual growth in general awareness and change in attitudes within this community through the efforts of the missionaries. The Saoras were able to bring about an overall new worldview in their epistemological thinking based on reason and practicality. The question of poverty, not only in material and economic growth but also in relation to lack of opportunities, right attitudes towards life, awareness etc. are being addressed rightly within their own society. Today they are considered as issues within their society, which the Saoras themselves fight to overcome as a result of the initiatives and awareness, brought about by the Christian missionaries. These facts are vivid when we observe the difference in the style and quality of life among the Christian and non Christian Saoras.

Here I would admit that along with evangelisation the main concept of development introduced among these people is a form of development based on Christian values and teachings. However most of the Christian values introduced were not new to the social and religious values of the Saoras; rather they were mutually supportive of a new system in the society. This fact has greatly motivated the Saora-Christians towards a system change, through which many of their socio-religious traditions are reinterpreted in view of better living standards. The majority of the Subaltern population especially the younger generation accept this process of awakening as a major contribution of Christianity to their commu-

6 Nair, 1969: 23.

nity. It is a transition where they feel that they are men/women with dignity, able to adapt to a normal thinking pattern in a larger global society. At this point of transition the course of activities has to be guided and directed so that this culture may not turn out to be a photocopy of modern western civilization, as feared by sociologists. Rather this society should continue as Indian, Saora and Christian, without losing its originality through proper socio-religious integration. This would help the Tribe to become an integral part of the larger Indian society.

Christianity in India and evangelisation among Saoras

The presence of Christianity in India can be traced back to the year 50 A.D. with the arrival of St. Thomas, an Apostle of Jesus in the present state of Kerala. This period can be considered as the first phase of evangelisation in India. This period, which began with the arrival of St. Thomas, was limited to the ancient Malabar Coast and did not spread further. This did not have much impact on the north Indian states.

The second phase of missionary activities in India can be dated from the time of the arrival of European missionaries along with the colonizers to India in the 16th century. During this period Christianity found entry into most parts of India. The missionary activities of this period were limited mainly to the European traders and settlers and the high caste Hindus. The attempts to spread the message of Jesus Christ among the high caste Hindus, did not bear much fruit and many of the mission stations established during this period were deserted due to lack of follow up. There were also some traces of evangelisation done in Orissa during this period (1625 A.D.) especially along the coast of the Bay of Bengal. But the fruits of this mission too did not last long.

The arrival of different congregations of missionaries since 1837 can be considered as the third phase of evangelisation in India. The MSFS⁷ Missionaries were one of the major congregations who came to Orissa during this period (1845). It was during this period real evangelization attempts progressed in Orissa. The Christian presence in the different territories of present day Balasore, Berhampur and Bhuwaneswar dioceses can be mostly attributed to the hard labour of these missionaries. The Congregation of the Missions (CM) Missionaries in 1922 A. D. replaced the MSFS Missionaries in south West Orissa. (All these missionary groups had their own missionary methods and were guided in ac-

7 Missionaries of St. Francis de Sales.

cordance with the mission understanding of the universal Church during these periods. These aspects will be dealt with in chapter 4.)

The work of Catholic Christian evangelization among the Saora tribe began almost 47 (1960) years ago. It is a fact that there were already some Protestant missionaries working among this tribe before the Catholics entered the field. It was due to the sincere efforts of the Vincentian Fathers that Catholic evangelisation among the Saoras progressed. According to the present statistics 30% of the total Saora community have accepted Christianity and profess their belief in one or other Christian denomination.

To come back to the main objectives of this study, based on the above mentioned aspects of the Tribal situation and the activities of Christian missionaries, this research is an attempt to study the socio-religious traditions of the Saora Tribe in Orissa and the changes brought about through the influence of Christianity in these fields. Since religious beliefs and the social traditions of this tribe are inter-linked to the core of daily life and practices, emphasis will be placed on the study of the Saora belief system, sacred rituals, traditions, and social systems to arrive at the real areas of Christian influence for growth and modernization within this tribe. This study also aims at recording the real elements of faith and belief among this major Tribal group in Orissa. For this I have focused on the social, cultural and religious changes that have occurred among the Saoras of Gunupur area as the result of Catholic missionary activities.

Although there have been a few books dealing with various sociological and anthropological researches done among the tribe of Saora, in general the question of modernization and changes brought about within this tribe has not yet been addressed. During the last 30 years the Saoras have been going through a transition process from their primitive ways and attitudes to the initial stage of modernization within the society. Along with these aspects of the social life of the Saoras my main focus of study and analysis will be – What are the elements that have helped the Christian Saoras to be progressive and rational in their growth and development? What are the areas that have undergone real changes within the present Saora society? What has been the contribution of the missionaries to the growth and improvement among these people? How can one further preserve the good and meaningful culture and traditions of this tribe without their being lost in the course of religious conversions and social developments? These are some of the real issues to be studied seriously. They need to be addressed impartially in order to remove the many political and sociological misconceptions that circulate in Christian missionary activities in the Indian society today.

Thus, based on these facts and their analysis, I shall argue that the changes and influences in the areas of religious beliefs, social life, education and health care brought about within this tribe are the major contributions of the Church and her stand on social activities. Contrary to the criticism of many fundamentalists I shall also show that, in accordance with the teachings and contemporary approach of the Church to preserve and respect individual cultures the Catholic Church has helped this tribe to retain its original traditions and culture wherever possible. This is also an attempt to stress the need to preserve the meaningful tribal structures in the socio religious fields so that the real identity of this major Tribal group can be preserved without being lost in the process of religious conversions and modernization. I also argue for due recognition for the humanitarian works done for this tribe by the Christian missionaries in different fields.

Viewed from such a socio-political context, this study and research is aimed at recording and preserving the individual cultural heritage of the Saora Tribe of Orissa and the Christian religion. This also will help us to analyze the progress of a society not only from the individual areas of economy or religion, as many of the social theories until now tend to do, but rather, in line with the comprehensive theory of traditions, one should try to analyze a society from its multiple aspects. (For example, until now for most of the sociologists like Max Weber or Karl Marx the main criterion for analyzing a society was either religion or economy). I also intend to show how 'the comprehensive theory of traditions'⁸ proposed by Prof. Dr. Siegfried Wiedenhofer can be applied to understand this tribe and Christian missionary activities within this Tribe in a better way.

Thus the objectives of this research can be summarized as stated below

- To study the religious beliefs of the Saora Tribe of Orissa and to record and register the religious institutions of the Saoras mainly preserved through oral traditions.
- To study the social traditions and practices of this Tribe focusing mainly on social structures, folk arts and belief systems.
- To outline the humanitarian works undertaken by Christian missionaries, which have helped towards modernization and developments within this ancient Tribe of India and to disprove the popular political and sociological accusations raised against Christian missionary activities among the Tribals in India.

8 A social theory developed by Prof. Dr. Siegfried Wiedenhofer.

- To suggest further steps to preserve the identity of the Saora social system with due dignity and recognition so that they may not be abandoned in the process of religious conversions and modernization.
- To demonstrate the positive influences of the Christian religion on this tribe.
- To show the importance and practical side of applying the comprehensive theory of traditions for the real understanding of cultures and societies.

Significance of this research

The aim of every social research is to bring out real facts and truths about a society during a particular period of time and geographical location on which the study is focused. In view of this it is an attempt to unearth and record the socio-religious traditions of Saora tribe of Orissa in India. Systematic research and study of this ancient tribal society of India will have greater significance in the emerging socio-religious changes in India and the international community at large. In the changing scenario of Indian socio-political situation, this will help us to understand this community and religion in a better way. I would put forward the significance of this study in the following points:

- It would help to strengthen national harmony and social coexistence within Indian society by recognizing the social and religious cultural heritage of this tribe as an integral part of the history and socio-religious-cultural heritage of India.
- It would help towards recognition and awareness of the importance of this tribe, which is treated as subaltern in spite of its ancient history and existence.
- It would record and preserve the socio-religious traditions and institutions of this tribe which have been neglected or ignored during past centuries.
- It would help this tribe to become aware of the importance of their socio-religious traditions and to preserve them despite religious conversion and modern trends.
- It would argue against the false and negative ideas propagated about the missionary activities (Catholic) and conversions among the Dalits and Tribals of India.
- It would raise awareness of the contributions of the Christian missionaries to the development and recognition of human dignity for the subaltern people of India.

- It could develop a positive attitude towards the inclusion of local customs and traditions in Christian liturgy and practices in accordance with the teachings of the universal Church so that they can continue to be both Christians and Saoras.
- It would make social researchers aware of the need to study a society/culture in a comprehensive manner, and not to analyse from individual aspects of human life.

Based on the above mentioned aspects the first part of this research consisting of the chapters 1 and 2 will concentrate on the understanding of culture, need of traditions and the comprehensive theory of traditions. A general study of the tribal history of Orissa and the socio-religious traditions of the Saora tribe of Orissa will deepen the understanding of culture and traditions in relation to this study. The second part, consisting of chapters 3 and 4 the main focus will be the detailed study of beginning of Christianity in Orissa and among Saoras. And the third part, consisting of chapters 5 and 6 conscious efforts will be made to study the effects of Christianisation in this tribe, both positive and negative influences of religious conversions within this tribe. Proper methods of integration of Christianity and Saora culture would be sought in applying the comprehensive theory of traditions.

1 Traditions – Importance of traditions and the complex theory of traditions

This chapter deals with the theoretical background of my research and study. As is clear from the title of this chapter, I have concentrated on ‘Culture and Traditions’ as the basis of my efforts to analyse the Christian influence among the Saora Tribe. ‘The comprehensive theory of traditions’ as proposed by Siegfried Wiedenhofer is the main theoretical framework followed in analysing the socio-religious life of this tribe. This chapter has been divided into two main parts. The first part deals mainly with the understanding of culture, traditions, its scope, necessity, and limits in our society and the second part deals with the ‘comprehensive theory of traditions’.

1.1 Introduction: culture and tradition

The word TRADITION has perhaps one of the most enigmatic characteristics in present day society. It remains more misunderstood than correctly understood. In present society the notion ‘tradition’ often stands for the ancient practices and ideas that existed in a society, which have no relevance in our society today. Often it has a negative connotation rather than anything positive attached to it. However, the fact is that everyone, young or old, modern or orthodox, literate or illiterate, is tied to different traditions from the moment of his or her birth. Even the most modern ‘sects’ which originate with the aim of liberating themselves from traditions establish their own traditions from the very beginning. That is to say, as human beings have no choice regarding their birth and family, so also they are bound by traditions without choice. We are compelled to accept the traditions and practices of the society in which we live and grow and have no choice in this matter.

Before we go further we need to get a clear picture of the terms CULTURE and TRADITIONS as they are interconnected. Often people tend to become confused about the use of these two terms. The popular concept of culture stands for the qualitative standard of external behaviour of an individual person or a community in relation to the other people in society. For example, we often remark things like “He/She has no culture”, or “uncultured person”. Basically culture stands for the worldview of a particular community of people who share similar views about life and the world. It is their outlook and understanding of different elements that constitute his/her life in that community, in the family, relationship to one another, beliefs and conviction about the supernatural, philosophy and nature in his/her given environment and locality. These

aspects are important because nature, environment, climate, and geographical situation too have a great influence on ones thinking and approach towards life.

Culture summarises the total understanding of life derived from the experience of many previous generations, philosophers, sages, and great men in its totality and its transmission to new generations. So when I speak about Indian culture or Christian culture what I refer to is the Indian or Christian understanding of human life and society. This understanding and approach towards life differs from one society to the other based on different factors as mentioned above. In this way different cultures come into existence. This also explains why the cultures of Asia differ from those of Europe or Africa; or again how within the same continent, cultures differ, or in countries, states, regions and ethnic groups.

The criteria with which good or bad, right or wrong is judged also depend on the cosmic view of each culture and are subjective. We can only hope for certain universal values, which should encourage or discourage certain elements in every culture. When we evaluate or study society and cultures we need to take all these elements and not any one particular aspect like economy or social behaviour or religious belief alone into consideration. It has to be taken in its totality; in other words a comprehensive view of understanding is important to study a culture in the correct manner.

This worldview or culture of a particular community in different situations is expressed through different symbols and daily social practises. They are the external expressions of this outlook towards life and the world and we call them 'Traditions'. They are the common external expressions of a particular culture. Both culture and traditions go hand in hand and are mutually complementary. They do not contradict each other, rather they support each other. So when I speak about the Saora traditions I try to highlight the cosmic understanding of the Saoras on different aspects in their personal and social life. Thus traditions are an integral part of every culture and carry with it a definite meaning, and the social thinking of a society. That is why traditions are important to understand a culture or a society. It is the most meaningful expression acceptable to the members of a society about a particular aspect and its understanding in life. For example, while receiving a guest a German may present a bouquet of flowers; but an Indian (in most Indian societies) would receive the guest with a garland of flowers put around the guest's neck. The symbolism used in the act of welcoming a guest is basically the same, but the mode of expression is different. So ultimately the question: which expression is more meaningful or important has no

relevance. The meaning and significance of such expressions are subjective: to compare cultures as to what is important or which is better is a question to be answered subjectively rather than objectively.

1.1.1 Elements of tradition

The term tradition carries with it different meanings and stands for different notions in social and religious sciences. For example, 'tradition' in ancient Roman society referred to the mode of transferring private property ownership. Also in the early stages of Christianity it referred to the practices of Christian faith and theology as it was handed down to new generations. However anthropologists and scholars have tried to define and visualise tradition in different ways and from different points of view. From these we can specify two important elements of traditions and their transmission.

- In the ordinary sense 'tradition' derives from 'traditum': anything that is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present'.⁹ It does not specify the different properties of what has been handed down, nor is it concerned about the truthfulness, the originality or the rationality of that which is handed down. The decisive criterion is that, having been created through human actions, through thought and imagination, it is handed down from one generation to the next.¹⁰ In this sense, 'tradition which is handed down includes material objects, beliefs about all sorts of things, images of persons and events, practices and institutions. It includes all that a society in a given time possesses and which already existed when its present possessors came upon it'.¹¹ Thus tradition refers to the process, actions and preservation of behavioural patterns in a society.
- Another important element of Tradition is that it should continue and remain alive. Tradition has to be 'transmitted' or 'passed on' to new generations. It involves actions such as 'receiving' and 'giving'. Such actions of 'passing on' or 'transmission' belong to the trivalent group of verbs that denote acts of giving and taking.¹² It is a mutual action, which involves three different agents namely 1) the one who gives, 2) the one who receives and 3) the element

9 Shils, 1981: 12.

10 Shils, 1981: 12.

11 Shils, 1981: 12.

12 Larbig / Wiedenhofer, 2006: 379.

transmitted – It involves the process of one who gives, the one who receives it and the gift/object itself.

In the Indo-European languages, the word tradition incidentally also contains the verb 'to give' (trans-dare), implying the notion of 'gift', which also has a complex meaning. 'The gift transmitted or transferred may be the object of a concrete legal transaction, a word, an acknowledgement, an offering. The gift may, however, involve the personhood of the human being in a much more crucial way: the gift of physical life from one's parents, the gift of culture from society, the gift of faith from religion and family, the gift of holistic being from the divinity. Gifts of this kind demand a response. They must be accepted or rejected, modified and passed on. In this respect, tradition is an important component of a human being's personhood, her society, her culture and her religion'.¹³

Thus tradition is a vital aspect of human life in society which comprises a passing on, transmission, acceptance, continuation and preservation.

1.1.2 Definitions of tradition

Having examined the important elements of tradition let us look into some of the definitions of tradition according to different scholars.

1. Edward Shills defines tradition as 'whatever is persistent or recurrent through transmission, regardless of the substance and institutional setting. It includes orally transmitted beliefs as well as those transmitted in writing. It includes secular as well as sacred beliefs. It includes beliefs, which were arrived at by rationalisation and by methodical, theoretically controlled intellectual procedures, as well as beliefs which were accepted without intense reflection. It includes beliefs thought to have been divinely revealed as well as interpretations of those beliefs. It includes beliefs formed through experience and beliefs formed by logical deduction'.¹⁴
2. Henry Glassi defines it as 'a rich word, lacking an exact synonym, naming the process by which the individuals simultaneously connect to the past and the present while building the future. So tradition can label the collective resource, essential to all creativity, and in adjective form it can qualify the products of people who keep faith with their dead teachers and their living companions while

13 Larbig / Wiedenhofer, 2006: 380.

shaping their actions responsibly. Tradition detractors associate it with stasis and contrast it with a change, but it is rooted in volition and it flowers in variation and innovation'.¹⁵

1. According to Mary Ellen Brown 'Tradition is a constant process across time and in time, linking past with the present, thus ensuring continuity. It is also dynamic and ever changing as culture and social needs alter. One of the elusive but preserving cultural bases which bind people to one another, it unites individuals and refutes the isolation and insularity man as a social being fears'.¹⁶
3. Alan Dundes states that, 'Tradition in folklore, like culture in anthropology, has become a defining and identifying aspect of social life. There is a direct and mutual relation between a group and its tradition. Through experience, interaction, language and history a society builds up a tradition, which in turn functions as its complex identity mark'.¹⁷
4. Tradition is here understood to mean not some static, immutable force from the past, but those pre-existing culture-specific materials and options that bear upon the personal tastes and talents. In the use of tradition such matters as content and style have been for the most part passed on but not invented by the performer'.¹⁸
5. Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin say that 'Tradition cannot be defined in terms of boundedness, governance, or essence. Rather tradition refers to an interpretive process that embodies both continuity and discontinuity'.¹⁹
6. Tradition is 'the cumulative heritage of a society which permeates all levels – a) value system, b) personality structure, and c) social structure. It means habits, customs, attitudes, ways of feeling, modes of life, which get embodied in institutions and they tend to get frozen because of the stability and quasi-autonomous existence of these institutions. Thus tradition implies age and along with it a long period of continuity'.²⁰

14 Shills, 1981: 16.

15 Glassi, 1993: 9.

16 Brown, 1984: XII.

17 Dundes, 1980: 18.

18 Toelken, 1984: 10.

19 *Journal of American Folklore* (97:385), 1984: 120.

20 Kanjamala, 1981: 7.

7. Anthropologist Edward Tylor states that “Culture or civilization is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”.²¹

Thus from all these definitions of traditions it is clear that culture and tradition deal with multiple angles of human life in society. But it is also evident from the above definitions that they all try to emphasize one or more particular area of tradition. This is a common trend adopted by most social scientists over the past centuries in their analysis of traditions and cultures. They tend to concentrate the analysis based on one or other exclusive point of human life in society such as economy, religion or politics. We see this notion clearly in the cultural theories of renowned social scientists like Karl Marx, Max Weber etc. It is understandable that these particular aspects constitute definitive elements of culture and tradition in a society but not the whole. When we look from the complex nature of tradition and culture, from the multifaceted characteristics of human beings, their existence in the world and society, we come to realize that traditions deal with various aspects of human life in every society. Human beings having complex characteristics take with them also complex elements in their social life. Aspects such as economy, beliefs, political life, and social behaviour together form a complex unity and cannot be considered as individual entities which constitute human social life. As Edward Shils put it “There is a greater need in the world for a better understanding of the nature of tradition and for a better appreciation of its value”.²²

Therefore proper understanding of tradition and its transmission is a challenge for the modern world. Tradition and its transmission through clear concepts and awareness in an appropriate manner is the greatest need of our present world. As Siegfried Wiedenhofer summarises it, “a better theory of tradition should help us to better carry out some of today’s more urgent fundamental intellectual tasks. For instance, it should help us to transmit cultural and religious values to the next generation in a new post-modern context, to interpret traditions adequately both in view of their ambiguity and claims to truth, and to allow cultural religious traditions to

21 Tylor, 1903:1

22 Shils, 1983: VII.

communicate peacefully and fruitfully in a context of globalisation and rationalization.”²³

1.1.3 The importance of tradition

Human beings search for innovations in life and in this process often tradition is considered as hindrance rather than support. Every new generation prefers to experiment with its own ideologies and view of life. The argument in favour of innovations and changes regarding social aspects are stronger because of the negative reputation attached to such elements as ‘old’. “Correspondingly, the traditionality of a belief, practice, or arrangement offers little resistance to arguments which proceed on the presumption of the efficiency, rationality, expediency, up-to-datedness, or progressiveness of their preferred alternatives”.²⁴ Awareness of the significance of tradition in our present society is an urgent need. I would highlight the following to explain the importance of traditions in our society.

- Traditions are important for every society because, like language, traditions also convey and communicate messages and values to every generation: messages and values that are vital for the members of a particular society, which the elders have already experienced and which are important for the younger generation. It deals with human beings and their life in society as it has come down to the present generation. They constitute the summary of individual and common experiences of different generations on matters that are related to human beings in every society. Also it is a record of the growth, and development of thought patterns in various societies.

They also deal with various practices and values in every society, for a harmonious social life. Therefore as it is a matter affecting human life in every age it needs to be assimilated in the right sense and transmitted to the younger generations accordingly. Thus ‘every individual and society is a bearer of traditional as well as modern values in different ways’.²⁵

- Traditions always transmit different standards and values in life. They continue as guiding patterns in private and social life. Our

23 Wiedenhofer, 1981:13.

24 Shils, 1981: 1.

25 Kanjamala, 1981: 7.

ideas and convictions about various events in life are always guided and influenced by these standards considered as the norms for a normal and upright life in a particular society. They are standards concerning practices such as morals, social life, and rituals which are essential components of our life in a particular society. Although man does not follow them exactly, the practices and beliefs attached to them always remain as models to be imitated. These standards are often practices and understanding that have come down to us from the experience and realization of previous generations. Even though the depictions of these values at times appear to be primitive, one cannot deny the great wisdom and lessons they convey in every society. It would be foolish to undermine such experiences and wisdom transmitted through various traditions.

‘These traditions do not prescribe the specific actions to be taken or the particular content of the choices to be made; they are simply prescriptions of the exercise of such modes of actions and judgement’.²⁶ Edward Shils would summarise it: ‘and in all the rational calculation and cognition, there is thus much that is traditional. This does not mean ‘wrong’; it does not mean ‘right’; it means only traditional... in the sense that the end and the technique have been learned from others who taught or exemplified them’.²⁷

So we can say traditions function as guidelines in every society concerning ones personal life and social activities. Although one does not immediately realize their influence they work on us indirectly in our social and personal behaviour and thought patterns.

- Traditions are one of the fundamental necessities of mankind. Even today many occurrences in human being’s life, the nature of different happenings in this world in which we live continue to be mystery for us. Mankind’s continuous search to find answers to such questions leave human beings evermore confused. It might be difficult to find convincing explanation for such happenings. They remind us about the helplessness of human reason and sciences.

In such situations where human beings are confronted between reason and realities the experiences and understanding of former generations who underwent similar situations ahead of us and their management methods can be guiding principles for us even today. Often the better choice we have is to accept such traditions

26 Shils, 1981: 33.

27 Shils, 1981: 33.