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**Anil Ota**  
Consultant,  
Impact Assessment and  
Planning, ERM India Pvt.  
Ltd. Asyst Park, 4<sup>th</sup> Floor, GN  
37/1, Sector V, Salt Lake City,  
Kolkata-700091, India.

**Correspondence**  
**Anil Ota**  
Consultant-Impact Assessment  
and Planning ERM India Pvt.  
Ltd. Asyst Park, 4<sup>th</sup> Floor, GN  
37/1, Sector V, Salt Lake City,  
Kolkata-700091, India.

## **Disappearing Material Culture of Tribals in India: The Case of a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group of Southern Odisha**

**Anil Ota**

### **Abstract**

This paper seeks to explore the material culture of the Lanjia Saora, a section of the Saora Tribal community in the Eastern Indian State of Odisha. One of the 13 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) of Odisha, the Lanjia Saora, like most other 75 PVTGs of the Country stand in the cross roads of traditionalism and modernity. Through the present paper which has been formulated on the basis of a comprehensive review of available literature and extensive field study, the author has endeavored at documenting the largely indigenous ornaments, weapons, agricultural implements, household materials and musical instruments that are used by the community. The various exogenous factors affecting the material culture of the community and their wider implications on the disappearance of the traditional tools and implements have also been analyzed.

**Keywords:** Disappearing Material Culture, Eastern India, Indigenous, Lanjia Saora, PVTG

### **1. Introduction**

The Tribals of Eastern India or for that matter, members of the community inhabiting anywhere in the Indian Sub-Continent are better known for their cultural vibrancy<sup>[1]</sup> and distinguished social life forms that they lead which is often manifested by the wide array of festivals they celebrate<sup>[2]</sup>, their unique dressing pattern comprising of indigenous ornaments<sup>[3]</sup>, jewellery etc. and the household materials<sup>[4]</sup> that they use. Most of the material culture of Tribal Communities<sup>[5]</sup> in the said area apart from being unique are actually native to the region for which the term, "Indigenous" has been used in the preceding sentence. It is pertinent to mention here that the material culture items comprising of; (i) agricultural and hunting implements<sup>[6]</sup>, (ii) household appliances<sup>[7]</sup>, (iii) weaponry<sup>[8]</sup>, (iv) ornaments and dress forms<sup>[9]</sup>, (v) musical instruments<sup>[10]</sup>, (vi) handicrafts etc. have also witnessed a gradual evolution process wherein the manufactured objects have undergone modifications and adjustments for refining and polishing. In fact, even within the Study Area, minor deviations with respect to the shape, size and nature of material culture items being manufactured and used by individual Tribal Communities can be observed. This variation from the mainstream material culture of the region pertaining to Tribals arises primarily owing to the changing patterns of food quest and social lifestyles being led by different Tribal Communities which is often determined by their geographical habitat or contours/ landscape of habitation.

### **2. Review of Literature: The Lanjia Saora Highlanders**

The Lanjia Saora Highlanders are a sub section of the notable Saora Tribe. They are also one of the most picturesque PVTGs of Eastern India. They inhabit the mighty and scenic mountains of Southern Odisha stretching across the Gunupur and Parelakhemundi Subdivisions of Rayagada and Gajapati districts respectively<sup>[11]</sup>. This scenic territory with its undulating terrain, rolling hills, terraced paddy fields, perennial hill streams and patches of lush green forests lies at an average elevation of 2000 feet above the sea level. It forms a natural geographic unit, comprising fertile valleys of river Vasundhara and its tributaries between the mountain ranges of the Eastern Ghats.

The Lanjia Saora who are called the *Hill Saora* by some noted ethnographers like Verrier

Elwin, constitute an archaic section of the Tribe. The Highlander Saoras were initially referred to as *Lanjia Saora* and even as *Lambo Lanjia* <sup>[12]</sup> by their caste neighbors on account of the striking clothing form adorned by the male members, a term which went on to signify the community. In fact, the Lanjia Saora man traditionally wore a *Male Loin Cloth* <sup>[13]</sup> in a pattern wherein the two red/ dark-maroon colored embroidered ends hang down on the front and back like a tail (tail in Odia language is referred to as *Lanja*).

Acknowledged for their extraordinary skills in shifting and terrace cultivation, the Lanjia Saoras within the Tribal Societies and even among the wider Non-Tribal Societies of Odisha and Eastern India, exhibit an exceptionally successful and time-tested system of labor cooperative <sup>[14]</sup>. They are also famous for their expertise in terrace cultivation, shifting cultivation, elaborate religious lifestyle, artistic skills for producing beautiful wall paintings, pictograms popularly known as icons and their peculiar traditional male dress-style. With a total population of 4, 73,233, according to the Census of India Report 2001 <sup>[15]</sup>, the Saoras are the 5<sup>th</sup> largest amongst the 62 Tribal Communities of Odisha. Found to be frequently mentioned in Hindu Mythological Texts, they are widely spread across the States of Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and West Bengal besides Odisha.

### 3. Context Setting and Research Methodology used

Primary survey in the study area for interacting with members of the Lanjia Saora community was carried out in two phases. While, the first phase of the study (from 04 May 2013 – 08 May 2013) intended to obtain a first-hand account of the traditional material items of the community and their contemporary usage pattern so as to supplement and validate the information acquired through literature review of pertinent publications, the second phase of the study (from 07 September – 09 September 2014) was more of a follow-up exercise wherein the material aspects of the community that were not studied in detail in the first phase or the ones that were left out from the initial phase were covered.

The study with the sole major objective of documenting

down the traditional material culture items and their contemporary usage pattern of the Lanjia Saora was undertaken in 12 Villages of 2 Gram Panchayats of the Gunupur Subdivision of Rayagada District in Southern Odisha. The 150 respondents of the study area constituting the sample of the study were selected using simple random sampling technique so as to ensure that the process does not suffer from any bias. A participatory methodology was adopted for the study wherein both the study team led by the Researcher-author as well as the sample respondents were facilitated with a platform of interactive enquiry and learning through which a two-way flow of information and perceptions occurred. To be precise, a variety of field work techniques were employed for obtaining information, primarily from the sample respondents such as; (i) individual interview (open ended) technique, (ii) participant observation technique, (iii) focused group discussion (FGD) technique, (iv) case study technique, (v) transect walk technique and (vi) participatory rural appraisal (PRA) technique. Apart from the sole major objective (as indicated above), the other associated objectives with which the study was carried out are as follows;

1. To outline a brief Anthropological appraisal of the Lanjia Saoras.
2. To identify the major material culture items used by the community and sketch their usage pattern.
3. To identify the plausible contributing factors for the disappearance of traditional material culture (items) of the Lanjia Saoras in the study area and its implications on the identity of the community.

### 4. Material Culture of the Lanjia Saora

#### 4.1. Ornaments and Dress Forms

The Lanjia Saoras are recognized by the distinctive dress of their men. The white loincloth with red fringes draped by the men hangs in front and back like a tail giving this group the name *Lanjia* meaning 'tail'. The women though plain in attire wear a number of distinctive ornaments, some of which are believed to increase their magico-religious powers.



**Long Tailed Loin Cloth for men (*Arsi Oilkan*)**



**Loin Cloth for women (*Gatunkab*)**



**Peacock Feathers (*Marabit*)**



**Brass Bangle (*Khadu*)**

**Fig 1: Ornaments and Dress Forms of the Lanjia Saora**

- **Long Tailed Loin Cloth for men (*Arsi Olikan*):** Made from coarse cotton cloth, this garment has a creamy white body with richly embroidered borders. As indicated earlier, it is worn in a manner that both the embroidered ends hang down in the front and back like a tail (*Lanja*). The draping of this garment gives the community the name *Lanja Saora*. The men wear few ornaments which are usually purchased from the local market.
- **Loin Cloth for women (*Gatunkab*):** This coarse cotton skirt has a background of white and red borders. It is about 3 feet in length and reaches up to the knees. The upper part of the body is covered with another piece of cloth which is held in place by tying a knot over one shoulder.
- **Peacock Feathers (*Marabit*):** Like other Tribal people, the Lanjia Saoras are fond of dance and music. While dancing in group, the young women hold in their hands a bunch of peacock feathers. At the slightest opportunity, they twirl to the tempos of music flow showing the feather bunch on and off. It supplements

color to the dancing spree and the embellishments to the overall dance programme. They collect the feathers usually from the forest where the peacock sheds it.

- **Brass Bangle (*Khadu*):** It can be worn by women of all ages and is seen as a status symbol when worn by married women. It is purchased from local smiths. While the shape of the anklet remains constant, the intricate motifs made on its surface may vary.

#### 4.2. Agricultural and Hunting Implements

There are a large number of tools and implements associated with the agriculture practiced by the Lanjia Saoras. Though they are made up of simple materials such as wood, bamboo etc. making them relatively less attractive, they constitute an integral part and reflect almost every aspect of the Lanjia culture. The agricultural tools and implements, known for their ethnic authenticity are also used for defense purposes during external aggression or when the Lanjia territory is intruded by neighboring Tribal and non-Tribal populations.



**Billhook (*Lolkuru*)**



**Sickle (*Katia*)**



**Husking Lever (*Andri*)**



**Bird Trap (*Kukurphasa*)**

**Fig 2:** Agricultural and Hunting Implements of the Lanjia Saora

- **Billhook (*Lolkuru*):** It is a multi-purpose agricultural cutting and digging tool. The tool is made up of a wooden handle and an elongated iron blade. Three major variants of the implement were found to be used in the study area such as; (a) Round-shaped handle with elongated blade, (b) Oval-shaped handle with elongated and slightly pointed blade and (c) Pistol-grip handle with elongated, sharp and pointed blade. While during digging, the hooked front of the blade prevents the edge of the implement from hitting the ground, the tool is also occasionally used for cutting shrubs, bushes and branches of trees.
- **Sickle (*Katia*):** It is a reaping tool and is mostly used for reaping paddy during the harvesting season. It is also used for cutting fresh or dried hay to feed the livestock.

The tool comprises of a wooden handle and a bow-shaped iron blade. The width of the iron blade varies from one sickle to the other and is dependent on the purpose for which it is being used. While sickles with a thin blade are used for reaping purposes, the ones used for cutting of shrubs and bushes are generally thicker.

- **Husking Lever (*Andri*):** Generally made up of bamboo or mango wood, husking lever is an agricultural implement used for removing husks from paddy. The process involves systematic beating of the paddy until the outer skin of the reaped crop is removed. The duration of the exercise depends on the solidity of the paddy. While it is essentially an agricultural implement, during the non-farm season, husking levers are also used for a variety of household purposes such as cleaning of

clothes by beating.

- **Bird Trap (*Kukurphasa*):** With increasing stringency of forest officials in matters relating to animal hunting and logging; and a simultaneous decline in faunal presence in the Lanjia country, the Bird Trap is perhaps the most widely used tool for hunting by the community. The roughly 'D' – shaped bird trap is made up of bamboo sticks and threads. The hunter places the trap in the cornfield or any eating-place for catching the bird. When the birds come to the cornfield to take food they fall into the trap unwittingly. This trap protects the cornfield from the bird. For the Lanjia Saoras, the main fowling season is autumn. While native birds serve as a supplementary source of food, their feathers are often used for adornment and making cloaks. However, the art of bird hunting is fading away, primarily due to the lack

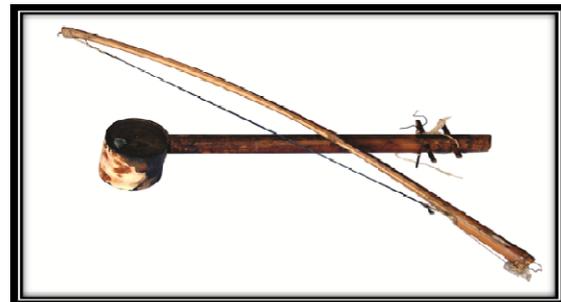
of knowledge concerning the use of various indigenous hunting implements traditionally used by the community, especially amongst the youth.

#### 4.3. Musical Instruments and Household Appliances

Like other Tribes, the Lanjia Saora are very fond of dance, song and music for which they possess a good number of musical instruments such as drums of various sizes, flutes, pipes, cymbals, clarionets, gongs, rasps and string instruments. The noisy percussion instruments are generally used in agricultural festivals. During festivals and leisure times when Saora men and women dance, they play these instruments. Generally, the instruments are played by the men folk and the women dance with the rhythm of the music by singing songs.



**Trumpet (*Surakamped*)**



**Sarangi (*Gagerai*)**



**Pot Rest (*Chimul*)**



**Brass Wine Dispenser (*Jeri*)**

**Fig 3:** Musical Instruments and Household Appliance of the Lanjia Saora

A typical Lanjia Saora house contains a wide array of articles, and in this respect they are significantly superior as compared to other Tribal Communities. There are varieties of clothes preserved for generations. There are baskets of various sizes which they purchase from *Tankla Saoras* or from the *Doms* (Caste neighbors). Besides, there are metal and earthen pots. A well-to-do Saora house may contain a bell-metal pot, purchased from local traders. They also keep varieties of knives as a Saora will always carry a knife fixed to his loin cloth wherever he goes.

- **Trumpet (*Surakamped*):** It is a wind instrument used for producing an unceasingly vibrating sound generated through circular breathing. They are perhaps amongst the oldest musical instruments and have existed throughout human history. While trumpets are used by almost all Communities, their shape and design vary from one region to the other and have evolved over time. In the Lanjia country, trumpets are funnel shaped and are made up of brass. Earlier the Lanjias were using horn trumpet. It is about one foot in length having a small hole in the middle for blowing air. But the use of

brass trumpet by them shows their material evolution. The local artisans of *Ghasi* caste designed it through lost wax process. These are used both during celebrations such as festivals, marriages etc., for heralding news of glory and victory as well as during battles and external aggressions for which they can also be regarded as a 'Tribal war bugle'.

- **Sarangi (*Gagerai*):** It is another type of string instrument which most of the Saora youths play. Mostly played during life-cycle rituals such as marriage and death ceremonies, it is one of the lesser known and used musical instruments among the Lanjia Saora. While sarangis are found in differing physical forms around the world, a typical Lanjia sarangi is a rudimentary instrument comprising of four parts. The base part is made up of hollow bamboo tube, two bamboo pegs and a coconut cell and some strings. The other part of the instrument consists of a bow shaped structure in which some strings of horse hair is tied from one end to the other. The operator holding the base part of the instrument in his left hand and the other part in the right

hand plays the instrument to produce musical sound. The sarangi shown in the picture is made up of bamboo, iron wire and tin. The instrument may be played on its own or may be accompanied by other musical equipments or at the time of dancing or at times of singing folk songs.

- **Pot Rest (*Chimul*):** It is the most common and amongst the most widely used household appliance not only amongst the Lanjia Saoras or other Tribal Communities but across rural India. It is made up of jute threads and apart from using to rest pots are also used for placing other cooking utensils. It is a fundamental component of the Tribal kitchenette and symbolizes their largely simple and modest living.
- **Brass Wine Dispenser (*Jeri*):** It is a cute and handy wine container-cum-dispenser and is made up of brass metal crafted by local brass smiths using heat and hammer technique. Ornate decorations are carved on the body of the brass container. It is round shaped with an outlet pipe having a narrow end. It is designed in such a

way that the outlet pipe allows the liquid contents to come out in a controlled way. The user may use the outlet pipe to seep the wine slowly and leisurely or let it be shared by a group of people. During performance of rituals, the village priest also uses it to offer liquor to the deities. It is a household object and an item of luxury for the Lanjia Saora. Usually rich and prosperous people use it, primarily to show off their abundance.

#### 4.4. Weaponry

The Lanjia Saora use different kinds of weapons of offence and defence like bow and arrow, spear, sword, catapult, axe, knife, snare, trap, etc. which are different from other Tribal Communities in shape, size, external appearance and pattern of use. Some of these weapons are purchased from the local market. Sometimes, the iron part of the object is purchased from the market and the other elements/ constituents are made at home. There are certain weapons, which are used by the magico-religious specialists, and necessary rituals are offered to certain weapons in different ceremonies for its magico-religious significance.

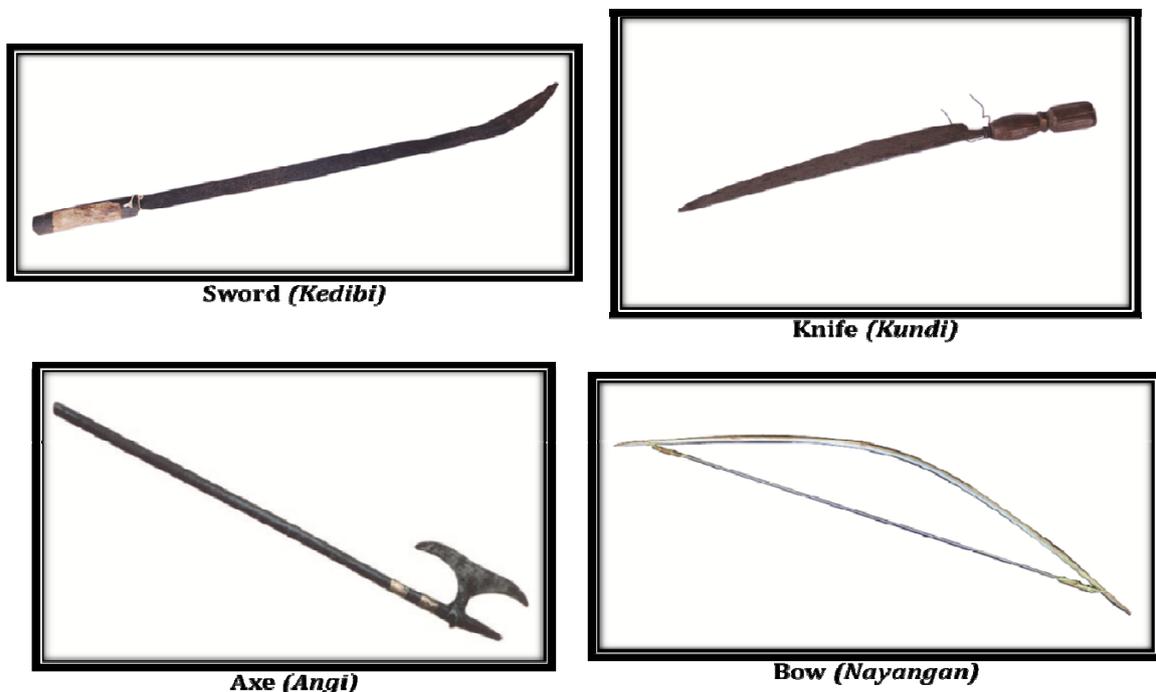


Fig 4: Weaponry of the Lanjia Saora

- **Sword (*Kedibi*):** It is made of iron and wood by the local blacksmiths. Though it is one of their weapons of offence and defense, they use it especially during their hunting expedition and also for animal sacrifices during their rituals and festivals. They worship it and during performance of rituals, they keep it before their traditional shrines in the belief that it will ensure the blessings of their deities for better health and happiness of the concerned family and the community as a whole. While kept inside the individual house, it is revered with utmost sincerity and devotion. It is also used during warfare. Hence, it is a symbol of their pride and valor.
- **Knife (*Kundi*):** It is a small knife made of wood and iron produced by the local blacksmiths and is used multifariously for several purposes such as; (i) clearing

of small vegetations in the kitchen garden and swiddens and (ii) skinning and slicing of vegetables and animal meat. When the Lanjias go into the forest and their swiddens they carry this implement with them.

- **Axe (*Angi*):** It is made of iron and wood. The local blacksmith craft the iron part by heat and hammer process and the Lanjias themselves prepare the wooden handle. Though basically a weapon of offence and defense, it has multipurpose use and is accorded high religious value in society. As a votive object, it is kept at the place of worship for animal sacrifice by the priest before the deities during performance of rituals. It is interesting to see that the axe is carried on the shoulder of the Lanjia Saora hanging in balance to be used for self-defense, hunting of wild animals, cutting fire wood

and slashing trees in the swiddens.

- **Bow (Nayangan):** Used to shoot arrows, it is the most common Tribal weapon of offence and defense as well as hunting. The Lanjias make it themselves by using locally available bamboo splits. Both ends of the Bow are fastened with another narrow and thin bamboo split tied to cotton thread. Male members use it and menstruating women are tabooed to touch it.

##### 5. Key Findings of the Study-Factors responsible for disappearance of Material Culture

The material world within which man lives has given birth to his material culture. It is a cultural reality that man has carved out a realm of its own comprising of artifacts and social facts. Change being a universal process also affects the material dimensions of culture which undergo transformation in course of time. It so happens that those who fail to closely follow the competitive process of existence vis a vis their eco-habitat, are out rightly rejected by the dynamic laws of evolution. The same process of accommodation and rejection is found in the components of ethnic cultural moorings of the world that provides the required basis of sustenance to man. The changes set in by different agencies may be cross-fertilization of cultures, changes in geographical and eco-habitat, technological factors, social legislations and development interventions. Mutation in ethnic society without having an outside window beyond their encysted habitations is influenced by these change provoking agencies. They sneak into the placid ethnic society slowly yet steadily.

Between stability and change, human society has always faced the problem of balance. Modes of production have sometimes undergone swift and drastic changes affecting social structures, value-systems and material cultures. The holistic concept of culture embraces within its fold all aspects of life of a community; the way they build their houses, the way they dress, the way they cook and eat, love and die, pray and believe, decorate the human body and the house, suffer from diseases and even death – everything is a part of culture. Their songs, dances, their art objects and artefacts, their settlement plan and value-systems – everything provides a distinct identity of a culture. While societies have changed under the impact of new economic forces and relationships, these forces have acted in their turn on myriad factors that constitute the warp and woof of the social order. Often the forms, the known contours of culture have changed beyond recognition.

Presently, the tribal societies of Odisha are undergoing rapid structural transformation. This is a part of the process of socio-economic renovation designed to bring them into the national main-stream while endeavouring to retain the core aspects of their culture. As we see today, the Tribal's traditional house pattern, dress and ornaments, hunting implements, musical instruments and several other objects of art and artefacts in metal, in textile, in timber, in wood, bamboo and leaves are already undergoing rapid change. Sometimes they are being replaced and sometimes distorted beyond identification. The external market-forces are intruding and the local manufacturer, artisan, artist who did things for his household or the clan or village is facing the challenges of change. The laws of socio-economic change cannot be frozen to retain the earlier cultural forms completely intact. After all, culture is not a static

phenomenon insulated from socio-economic changes. On the contrary, the laws of economic change are inexorable and they destroy and distort traditional cultures and their typical identities.

Since the remote past, the Lanjia Saora lived undisturbed in their remote mountainous habitat “...*deriving subsistence from the resource bases of the hills and forests. Employing crude and labour intensive methods and a small number of simple implements they were satiating their small needs and making a bare minimum living. The main modes of living devised and adopted by them were swidden cultivation, hunting and food gathering. In those days, the nature's bounty was abundant and the population was small. So long as the hilltops and hill slopes were having verdant forest growth, the Saora were exploiting the hills and forests with mirth and furry and bagadochas was their way of life. Establishing small settlements nearer to the swidden fields was the practice; and moving the settlement site alongside moving into virgin swidden plots was the norm. As forests started receding and swidden cultivation and forestry did not pay dividends, the Saora started preparing terraced fields for paddy cultivation. They learnt in a hard way that their age-old mode of subsistence would no longer sustain their growing population. They also sought alternatives in horticulture and seasonal migratory labour.*”<sup>[16]</sup>. Their gradual transition from the pre-agricultural stage to agricultural stage though effected some changes in their material culture; it still remained simple and indigenous by and large till the recent past.

During British regime the habitat of the Lanjia Saora were mostly secluded. Except Christian missionaries, petty traders and a few government officials, hardly did any other outsiders enter into the areas. However, after independence, the Tribals began to be exposed to the forces of development and modernization though in a slow and halting pace. Various welfare measures initiated by the Government have resulted in exposing the Saora more and more to outside contact and pressures of ever-advancing and powerful social, economic and political forces. This has led to some changes in their society and material culture. The major factors responsible for the change are: (i) opening up of their remote habitat by improved communication facilities, (ii) impact of mass media resulting in their increased exposure to the external world, (iii) spread of education and awareness, (iv) ecological changes in their natural habitat due to deforestation and (v) conversion. The first three have mostly emerged out of tribal development interventions made by government and non – government agencies that has brought socio-economic changes in varying degrees among them.

Consequent upon the cumulative action of several causative factors, the material culture of the Lanjia Saora is rapidly changing. For example, destruction of forests has affected the traditional house construction. Now under development schemes they are being assisted to build and live in *pucca* and fire proof houses with modern assets and amenities. Their traditional household articles and implements are being replaced by objects of steel, aluminum, bronze, plastic, and fiber materials available in the local markets. Moreover, the net worth of the Lanjia Saora households has risen. It has led to the conspicuous improvement in their household asset ownership position. Now in their villages, some small and beautifully designed *pucca* houses have replaced old huts. Besides land, trees, houses and animals, they now possess modern articles like radios, flashlights, bicycles, watches,

wooden and plastic furniture etc. The additional income from cashew plantations, settled agriculture and wage earning and especially that from seasonal migratory labour has helped them to acquire such new ideas and assets.

Changes in the acquisition of new habits and styles are noticed in their dress and ornaments. The traditional Tribal dress and ornaments are now giving place to contemporary clothing forms, especially among the younger generation. They are perhaps as aware or even more cognizant concerning cleanliness, health and hygiene practices compared to their neighboring non-Tribal counterparts. In the past, both men and women used traditional ornaments made by local smiths including bangles, earrings, finger rings, necklaces, nose rings, toe rings, armlets and anklets mostly made of brass and Aluminum metals. The ornaments of the new generation include bangles, ear-rings, finger rings, necklaces and nose rings of gold, silver, glass and jade. This change is mainly due to the influence of market economy and lack of knowledge and interest of the new generation about the technology of making the traditional cultural outfits. Those who wear their traditional mode of dress and ornaments are very few and majority of them come from the older generation. The market economy and consumerism have also impacted their way of life. One can notice a modern outlook on life of the people of the Tribe.

The present generation of Lanjia Saora is undergoing the process of acculturation effected by various agents of planned change and modernization. Rapid changes are taking place in their life style due to changes in their eco- habitats. Earlier the process of mutation was very slow but the ongoing process of globalization, the information technology revolution, planned development interventions and several other internal and external factors have made their cumulative impact on the overall transformation of the Lanjia Saora Culture. This has caused the tectonic plates of Lanjia Saora ethnicity to be impacted heavily. It is worthwhile to take note of the changes in the traditional Saora society and ethnicity in all spheres of their socio-cultural and economic existence and act accordingly to conserve the traditional material culture elements of the community without compromising with their socio-economic developmental needs.

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