

Religious Identity of Saraks: Problems and Prospects

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Sarak is a little-known minority community. Etymologically Sarak is a derivative of Sravaka of which Sra (sraddha) means respect, Va (vivek) means consciousness and Ka (kriya) means work. That is how; an Sravak is defined as a person who happened to be a respectful and conscious worker. Again, Sravak in Sanskrit means a listener.

The estimated population of Saraks in Dhanbad district of Bihar and Purulia, Bankura and Bardhaman districts of West Bengal may be around 34,000.

Strictly vegetarian, thrifty and simple, Saraks remained more or less tied to agriculture and animal husbandry. They do not even take-up any occupation, which either involve any kind of violence or impurity. They preach and practice non-violence in their day to day living.

Their gotras, food habit, occupational preferences, taboos and prejudices are indicative of Jainism, though they also worship Hindu and Tribal Gods. They are confused regarding their own religious identity. Their recent inclusion in O.B.C. notwithstanding the question looms large as to what exactly are their religious origin and the present state of religious connections of Saraks.

Official records do not enumerate them as a distinct community. Hindu Jativarna system does not also include them. Being a microscopic minority surrounded by overwhelming majority of Hindus and Tribals, they also participate in various rites and rituals of the Hindus and Animists.

In order to know their position in the Hindu fold vis-à-vis present influence of Jainism in the life and culture of the Saraks information were collected from knowledgeable persons and leaders of the Sarak communities as well as from other communities. In all, 94 Sarak and 54 non-Sarak knowledgeable persons were interviewed. From such a study, it was revealed that Saraks not only preach non-violence but also do actively

practice it in day-to-day life. In spite of their poverty they do not even take the job of a policeman or any such occupation, which might involve some, kind of violence. Does this adherence to non-violence proved their faith in Jainism? They would not worship the Goddess Kali or the God Viswakarma (martial gods) although they would participate in worshipping other Hindu Gods and Goddesses. Do these religious practices essentially denote their aversion towards cult of Shakti and weapons? Do these make them Hindu or distinguish them as Jaina? They do participate in Hindu festivals. But Hindus never participate in Saraks' annual offering of Juri (rice with milk) to Tirthankar. Saraks also practice Animist religious festivals like Bhadu, Tushu, Goru-khuta but do not participate in Karam Puja or Shikar parab where there is some kind of violence. Do these make them Animist or distinguish themselves as Jain?

While most of the respondents among Saraks did not claim themselves as Jain, no non-Sarak respondent (Hindu or Animist) held Saraks to be of their religion. All these questions create confusion regarding the religious identity of Sarak. The confusion become worse confounded when Sarak youths organised deputations for their inclusion as S.C, S.T or Other Backward Class.

As aforementioned, most of the Sarak respondents did not firmly claim themselves to be Jain. The Pre-history of this identity question evidenced that Saraks pretended to be Hindus during the invasion by the Bargis and allowed Brahmins to build up Shiva temples by removing Jaina shrines. Because of this, the Saraks of Dhanbad district look down upon the Saraks of Purulia because of their Hinduization and as a result, marriage between Dhanbad and Purulia Saraks were stopped. The Sarak's of Purulia who visited the Jain sacred centers like Madhuban in Giridih, Powapuri in Nawoda were subjected to boycott by their counter parts living in Bihar and were also pressurised to adhere to Jain religion. A good number of Saraks were educated in the school run by Jain organisations. But they were forced to leave the school as their families were under the influence of Hinduism. Moreover, sometimes punishment in the form of shaving of hair was also imposed on them. Can these phenomena be termed as Saraks re-conversion from Hinduism?

On the other hand, the recent establishment of Jaina Temple at Jhapra and the annual meetings exclusively of the Saraks at Dapunia Shiva temple for discussion of Saraks' own socio-economic and religious problems, may be an attempt towards preservation of their own identity. Can this again be interpreted as reconversion?

What may be the possible explanations may possibly be explored from the following information.

An elaborate festival is held for three to four days at Dapuniya on Chaitra Sankranti (last day in the month of Chaitra) in the Shiva temple campus. Since 1950, Saraks from different places of Purulia attend the festival. Serious discussions have been taking place regarding social and economic problems of the Saraks are now facing can not be eradicated or solved to any extent without their economic upliftment. These meetings also resolved against any dowry during marriage. It has also been decided that no criticism is to be made if a Sarak spend less on the occasion of Sraddha ceremony. In April-May 1973, educated youngsters of Gobag (PS.- Neturia), Bhagabandh (PS.-Raghunathpur) and Para(PS.-Para) organised a movement to includes Saraks in the State list of Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribes for getting the benefits as prescribed under the rules and pressurized the older to support their movement. A meeting attended by 70 to 80 Saraks including elder Saraks namely Late.B.S of village Jhapra, T.M of village Nanduara, F.M of village Khajura, P.M of village Gobag, M.M of village Bero was held at Dapunia in 1973. The decision, which was taken in this meeting, was against launching of any movement to include their community in the list of S.C/ S.T. It was decided that this attempt would definitely devalue their position in social hierarchy.

Senior Saraks namely M.M of village Natundih, B.M of village Khajura, M.M of village Ichar, Late. M.M of village Bagicha and others thus requested the political leaders during seventies for granting them some kind of minority status. During this period S.S, a Member of Parliament (Loksabha) and S.M, a State minister intervened into the matter. The Saraks organised several deputations to these two leaders for arranging jobs for them. However, in spite of sincere efforts of S.M and S.S, Saraks were not included in the list of Minority Groups now termed as Other Backward Class.

In 1980, a few young Saraks once again pressurised the Sarak Samaj to launch a movement for their inclusion in the list of S.C/S.T. Thus, an ideological gap was created between older and younger generations. The members of older generation were in favor of putting themselves in very high social position similar to or even higher than the Brahmin. On the contrary, the younger generation for their development and increasing job and educational opportunities tried to put themselves in the list of S.C/S.T. However, their inclusion in O.B.C list was a recent phenomenon.

Two Saraks M.B and P.B had tried to popularize Jainism among Saraks. S.M during late seventies accepted 'Sanyas' at Powapuri and was named as Sujash Muni Maharaj by Jain-Samaj. About two years later, M.M of Jhapra village in Purulia and G.G of Belut in Dhanbad became disiples of Sujash Muni Maharaj. After this they were known as Binit Prabha Muni and

Chandrasekher Sagar respectively. On 27 February, 1994, a seventeen year old boy V.S and fourteen year old S.S of Dhadkidi village in Purulia accepted 'Sanyas' and were known as Binoy Prabha Muni and Soumya Prabha Muni respectively, both of them became Sadhus during the inauguration of a Jain temple at Jhapra. A sum of rupees 10 Lakhs was spent for construction of the Jain temple. The temple was constructed by the effort of T.M, President of Jain Sarak Sangha and other Saraks. A good number of Jains of Bombay and Calcutta donated generously for the construction of the temple.

During the inauguration of the Jain temple the Saraks of Jhapra and other neighboring villages actively participated. The temple was put under the management of a registered religious organization, Sri Jain Sarak Sangha (Registration no. S-64274-Cal) having its head office at Bombay, Maharashtra. As desired by the National President of Jain community organization who is also the president of this local organization, nominated G.S of Jhapra as Secretary of the local organization and formed a steering committee of 10 members out of which 8 members are from Sarak community. The inauguration ceremony was held between 21st and 28th February, 1994. It is interesting to note that 19 female Saraks participated as female volunteers during this ceremony. This is a striking feature as during this festival the Sarak women for the first time actively participated in any public function. The teachers of Jhapra High School also participated in this function. Jain Sarak Sangha donated a sum of rupees fifteen thousand for the repairing of the school and assured further grants for the development of the school in near future. During this festival Saraks from 90 villages of Purulia were invited. Moreover, the Jain saints who joined the ceremony visited the neighboring Sarak villages like Senera, Gobindapur, Bhaghabandh, organised religious programs and requested the Saraks to provide them with land so that they can build more Jain temples, schools, free-library etc. in their respective villages. They also promised some grants for the economic development of the Saraks.

Saraks who took Sanyas tried to preach the ideas of Jainism among other Saraks. Late. B.S of Jhapra village stated that Jainism is more acceptable to the Saraks than their inclusion in the list of O.B.C. This is a venture to rescue the community from downward mobility in terms of social status. Hence, Late. B.S on behalf of the Sarak community offered letter of honour to the Jain saints namely B.P.M of Jhapra in Purulia, S.M.M of Domgarh in Dhanbad and M.P.M of Maharashtra for their adherence to Jain religion.

Hence, it seems that the Saraks for sheer-economic gains moved towards inclusion under the O.B.C. Again at the same time for social prestige they

intend to remain in the Jain-fold. In this regard it can be said that economic crisis has been influencing their religious trait. They are faced with a dilemma as to how to cope with their belief in the face of such external influences.

With this dilemma in view, it is pertinent to ask whether ethnic identity question is relevant for a community seeking its identity on one hand and getting economic benefit on the other.

Except four (4) respondents from among Saraks who claimed their religion as Jainism, all the remaining ninety (90); respondents thought that they had become Hindus by now. When asked in which caste-category of Hindus they fit in, the respondents had wide differences of opinion. 80 percent (72) of them believed that their position was next to Brahmin and only 6.67 percent (6) claimed even a higher status than that of the Brahmins, while 13.3 percent (12) held that they were equal to Brahmins.

Those who claimed to be Jain, indicated that their sect is Swetambar, while the others pleaded ignorance about such sectarian division in their religion. What we observed was that nobody wears a vail in his face as the Digambors do. If this is a distinguishing indicator then all the respondents who claimed to be Jainas were Swetambar.

To a query as to which social category did the respondents would like to belong to, majority of the respondents preferred to be included in Other Backward Class (O.B.C). But during our investigation none was willing to get enlisted as Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribes. By that time Saraks claimed their status as O.B.C to the relevant Commission and later, very recently were granted the same by the govt. of West Bengal. It may be pointed out here that the kin groups of Sarak inhabiting in Dhanbad district of Bihar were not included among O.B.C.

In the foregoing paras it was reported about Saraks' endeavor of gaining the benefits of reservation for which they pleaded with the political personalities. They were agreeable even to become S.C or S.T in order that they could have socio-economic benefits such as job reservation, Bank-loan, subsidy etc. But while we interrogated them as to whether they want to be treated as S.C or S.T their response was negative. Most of the respondents who wanted to be treated as superior or equal to Brahmins raised no objection while their leaders pleaded for O.B.C status to the Government of West Bengal.

How one explains such ambiguities in their responses as well as the dilemma referred to above. If one considers their socio-economic status and their cultural as well as religious status as disjoined no explanation can possibly be found out. But their behavior can be explained if one correlates the two kinds of status.

The fact remains that they want to enjoy their high socio-cultural status and at the same time also want economic protection and social security. But the provisions made by the Government do not give them both. That is the reason for their dilemma.

After they were granted O.B.C status they feel (the present researcher consulted many Saraks including the young men and women) that job opportunities would be available to them. In cases of other O.B.C also such expectations are prevailing. But academics, planners and politicians who are aware of the employment policies of the Government can easily see that all such communities, we are afraid, would be disillusioned very soon, because of the employment crunch of the present Governments at the States and the Center. However, the ethnic identity of Saraks as a separate and distinct community is still claimed by them and has been accepted by the Government at least in principle. So, the present researcher does not find any identity crisis of the Saraks, although their claim is not free from some ambiguities. This observation can possibly be further corroborated from the responses collected by me.

From the point of fixing Saraks' identity in the varnasram system we investigated whether they perceived themselves belonging to any varna namely Brahman, Khsatriya, Vaishya and Sudra.

They do not belong and emphatically denied being Khsatriya, which is a warrior varna practicing violence. They further thought that they are not Sudras who are supposed to serve other varnas and whose occupations are demeaning.

B.S of Jhapra village told that the Saraks are in no way inferior to Brahmin in the ladder of social hierarchy since they possess more sanctified means of livelihood than that of the Brahmin. However, the Brahmins enjoy better social position in regional social hierarchy purely due to the fact that their social position is almost fixed since time immemorial.

The older, educated and affluent sections of Saraks consider themselves as superior or equal to the Brahmins owing to the following reasons.

1. The Saraks lead a sacred way of life.

It is envisaged from their strictly vegetarian dietary pattern and complete absence of the intake of any alcoholic beverages, fish and meat of any kind.

In their dress materials no kind of fur, wood, silk or leather can be found.

2. They are very clean in nature, take bath regularly and wear clean garments.
3. They believe in non-violence, and refrain themselves from immoral activities like theft, decoity, robbery etc.
4. They do not go for any mean profession or any occupation, which has any connection with violence.

Again, most of the Saraks of Talajuri and Senera village stated that they were akin to Vaishyas. The reasons stated by them were as follows:

1. They are very simple and use most ordinary types of dress and ornaments.
2. They do not spend much money in community feast or inhalation.
3. They are agriculturist by vocation and are very thrifty in nature, never wasting money.
4. They invest their savings in money-landing business especially the women folk's are much involved in such investment.

From unrestrained dialogue with many knowledgeable Sarak respondents, I gained an impression that Saraks themselves have no clear idea about their position in Hindu varnasram and more particularly in Hindu caste system. The claims of status within varna or caste were not only hazy but also self-contradictory. If they belonged to the Hindu religion they would be able to exactly articulate their status in varna and caste-system.

It was therefore imperative to understand the perception about Saraks of other communities especially Hindus.

Out of 54 Hindu respondents belonging to 14 villages, 75 percent opined that the Saraks' social status was lower than that of Brahmins. 17 percent of such respondents regarded the Saraks as Jains and about 8 percent respondent expressed their ignorance about Saraks' identity. But none of the respondents recognized Saraks as Hindus.

From the above observations of non-Saraks about Saraks and available literature on Saraks it is clear that the Sarak, in older days actively practiced and professed Jainism, but most of them now a days do not do so. Even then members of Hindu community consider them as Jain.

We also examined the surnames to find argument for their inclusion in other than Jain religious fold. Saraks surnames give rise to problems. Whereas the surnames Majee, Layek and Singh are similar to those of Munda Tribe, Gayen, Mandal and Khan bear resemblance to Scheduled castes.

Again Acharya is the surname for priestly ethnic group, Brahmins. So, they cannot be placed in any particular caste group of the Hindu or Animist by these surnames due to the fact that these surnames are similar to not only of the Hindus but also of the tribals.

The following customs bear the evidences of Saraks' identity as a Jain community:

1. The Saraks are vegetarian.
2. The Saraks like other Jain community drink water after filtering.
3. They would not accept water and food from any community excepting their own community. (However, now a days the Sarak accept, water and food from Brahmin and other Jhalchal castes).
4. They never eat fig and mushroom lest they kill life since insects can occasionally be found in those items.
5. The Saraks never eat any foodstuff if one mentions that it was prepared by cutting anything. They hate the word cut from the core of their heart.
6. The Saraks even today consider onion and garlic as non-vegetarian item of food and refrain from taking the same. In communal feast use of onion and garlic is strictly prohibited.
7. Exchange of girls with other community is strictly prohibited among the Saraks.
8. They never practice widow remarriage.
9. In the past Achraj, or Acharya group of Saraks were engaged in priest craft.
10. The Saraks still bear the name of gotras like Adidev, Dharmadev, and Rishabdev, which originated from the names of various Jaina Tirthankars.
11. Even about 20 to 25 years ago, after setting of the sun no religious minded Saraks would take foodstuff of any kind.
12. They are never involved in theft and begging.

It was also clear that Saraks go by and have the basic and distinct tenets of Jain culture. The nature and the way of life of the Sarak community in respect of occupation, food habit, clothing etc. mark them as distinct from other neighboring communities.

Due to their faith in Ahimsa (non-violence), the prohibited occupations among the Saraks are butchery, fishing, brewing, wine trading, gun-making,

military or police service. They do not also practice poultry farming. Saraks are settled-agriculturist and mainly depend on their family labour. They exchange labour among themselves during peak agricultural period, which is an instance of mutual aid. Hardly, one finds wage-labour system among Saraks except as exceptions here and there. Moreover, no one of this community has accepted the profession of maid-servant, porter, daily labour and any such work in spite of their acute poverty.

They are pure vegetarians. Even onion, garlic, lentil, carrot, beet-root believed to be stimulant food-items are not taken by them. They avoid taking any food material, which would have created further life. For example- fig or mushroom etc. Like any other purist Jains, they drink water only after filtering with the aid of a piece of cloth to avoid taking some life-elements. Even now some Sarak families take their super before sunset to remain on safe-side but they devour any living insects or ants unknowingly.

They relating to any food object cannot utter even the word cut. Red colour (symbol of blood) is avoided. For example they don't take red-beans.

It is due to their non-violent nature, the Saraks never wear the fur or silk. They also avoid using any leather garments or shoes as those are made of animal-skins. They are also particular about not wearing any dress, which might have killed any life.

All these observations lead us to conclude that the nature of Saraks conform to the Jaina traits.

Bhattacharya (1986) wrote sacrifice in fire (homa), worship of Ganapati, Barun and Astadas Matrika and offering of food (Naibedya) for Dasdikpal (tutelary deity of the sides) may be considered as the influence of Hinduism. In this regard one can remember the custom of taking gua (areca nut) Paita (sacred thread) for three days at the time of marriage.

Bhattacharya (1986) observed Saraks having gentleman like appearance sober, status conscious, efficient agriculturist, and a small community, which was transforming to a Hindu community. Their rituals include Gajan of Lord Shiva, Drug puja, Kali puja, Laxmi and Saraswati puja and even worshiping Krishna. They even take part in Raksha Kali puja, which is a folk festival. Ritual pollution following the death among the Saraks continues for thirty days. They also dispose bony remains after cremation in the river Ganges and offer Pinda (rice ball) in Gaya. (Bhattacharya, T. 1986).

The above observations depict that since long, many of the Hindu customs have been borrowed by the Saraks.

Dalton (1864-65) observed that the Saraks are peaceful, vegetarian community and do not indulge in any antisocial activities. The account of Risley (1891), and Bhattacharya (1986) also supported the view that the Saraks were previously Jain but now a day was converted to Hinduism. We have shown that they're a combination of Hindu, Animist and Jain rituals in their socio-cultural performances.

Like other agrarian communities of Purulia, the economic conditions of the Saraks are gradually deteriorating. A gradual shift from joint family structure to nuclear family, increase in the population in family have resulted division and redivision of the cultivable land owned by the Saraks. Therefore they are now searching for newer avenues of livelihood. Even then no Sarak would agree to accept a profession which is demeaning or which in any way concerned with use of force or violence. Being circumscribed by the neighboring Hindu communities, they felt vulnerable to change in their status. So Saraks have tried to elevate their status and accommodate their position even in Hindu social fold. But present situation compelled them to think in terms of occupational security and economic prosperity rather than in terms of social or religious identity.

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