SAORA DESCENT GROUP

Study of descent group is one of the curious corners of kinship study. Descent group defines the affiliation of the members of a given society. As Murdock (1949) has stated, “all societies face the problem of defining the of kinsmen with which an individual shall have the closest ties.” This is achieved through rules of descent. An important variable is assigned membership, and therefore one can claim membership in a particular group. These rules define simultaneously all other members of this group. The rules of descent, by including certain members of the society in the individual kin group, automatically exclude others. “Descent” is termed differently by different authorities. Murdock has defined it as “A rule of descent affiliates on individual at birth with a particular group of relatives with whom he is especially intimate and from whom he can expect certain kinds of services that he can not demand from non-relatives or even other kinsmen.” According to Mayer Fortes “Descent” is fundamentally a jural concept (Radcliffe Brown, 1935). We see its significance, as the connecting link between the external and the internal or domestic aspects. It is the latter context, that kinship carries maximum weight. First as the source of title to membership of the groups or to specific jural status and secondly as the basis of the social relations among the persons, who are identified with one another in the Corporate group (Fortes, 1953). Fortes (1959) also says that “Descent” is descriptively defined as a genealogical connection recognized between a person and any of his ancestors or ancestress and qualifies his descriptive definition by limiting ancestor to any genealogical predecessor of the grandparental or earlier generations. Rivers (1924) says “I will begin with Descent whenever I use this term it will apply to membership of a group and to this group only.” While discussing
the characteristics of Descent, Fortes (1959) argues that since descent confers attributes of status relating to a person’s place in the external social structure it is bound to operate by placing persons in categories or group. The two principal ways people around the world trace their descent are unilineal and bilateral (or cognatic). Unilineal descent occurs in one or two forms, patrilineal and matrilineal descent. The patrilineal form is more common. There are three additional descent patterns that combine patrilineal and matrilineal descent in unique ways. These rare systems are bilineal, parallel, and ambilineal descent. The idea of filiation is used in at least two senses (Barnes, 1962) and is not to be confounded with filiation (Fortes, 1959, Furth, 1957). According to Fortes (1959) the dictionary meaning of filiation is “the fact of being a child of a specialized parent.” The reference is not to a simple physical relationship, either in the actors or in the observer’s eyes, to a relationship that is culturally possible and socially validated, so it seems Fortes (1959) also writes that “the fact of birth is only a necessary, not a sufficient condition for kinship and descent state and it is because most societies give jural recognition to the parenthood of both parents that filiation is normally bilateral.” In societies with bilateral descent patterns, people usually see themselves as being members of two related nuclear families: the one in which they are a child i.e. family of orientation and the one in which they are a parent i.e. family of procreation (Figure 5.1).

![Figure 5.1 Nuclear family of orientation and procreation.](image-url)
Thus in the light of the above discussion I have tried to analyse the Saora kinship and the role of descent in it.

5.1 Ideology and composition of Saora Descent Group

5.1.1 Succession of Descent groups

Property involves the rights and obligations of a person or group as its owner as against all other persons and groups in respect of something valuable and scarce. Property is conceived in terms of control of man over things, a control which is recognized by society, more or less permanent and exclusive. Properties not only refer to the things owned but also the rights, which constitute the ownership. Property has two basic characteristics: i) it is a social institution as it is rooted in our custom and is protected by law, and ii) it is exclusive because it differentiates what is mine from what is thine.

Inheritance, on the other hand, means a transfer of status, based upon a pre-existing relationship between the predecessor and the successor. Radcliffe Brown (1935) stated that “in general, though there are a few expectations, transmission of property follows the same line as transmission of status. The reason is that transmission of property is transmission of status. It follows that if most kinds of status are transmitted down one line or another, property statuses will be along the same line. Therefore, a close correlation of type of social organization and devolution of property will naturally occur.”

Inheritance of property may be of four types: (a) Equal sharing (b) Primogeniture (c) Ultimo geniture and (d) Collateral Inheritance. Among Saoras, the inheritance of property is based on the first type—equal sharing. But the office of the headman is based on the primogeniture principle. When the father dies, his property is being equally shared among all the
sons of the father/person. But the office of the priest and the village headman “Gamango” is inherited by the eldest son of the concerned ‘Karji/Buayya” or “Gamango” respectively. The daughter inherits nothing of father’s property. Occasionally, she inherits her mother’s ornaments.

Saora people’s property include their house area, cultivated land, both dry (bagada) and wet, salap trees, ornaments, buffaloes (Podha) and other domesticated animals like goats and pigs. Property in joint ownership is very rare. Sons live with their parents till their marriage. After the marriage the sons get separated from the parents and also get their property share and live in a completely separate establishment. However, work sharing for cultivation of land and other labour intensive work continues. In fact, co-operation in labour called “Anseer” is very much prevalent in Saora culture. In Anseer, members of lineage group, affinal group, neighbours and friends take part.

Adoption of son is not very common in Saora society and takes place on rare occasions. Usually after the death of a person, his property is shared among the sibling brothers and their sons. But in any case, daughter do not inherits her father’s property. Daughter only inherits the ornaments of her mother in the above situations. Thus, property inheritance is purely patrilineal. Some households now prefer the son-in-law to manage the property if the person has no son. Besides, the village headship, function of priest and political representation are also inherited but limited to only the eldest son of the concerned Gamango (Village head), Karji/ Buayya (Priest) and Mandal/ Dalbehera (Political representative). Now, Dalbehera/ Mandals have become non-functional but Gamango and Karji are continuing with their traditions. Village art specialists is called “Idaimar” and the village priest is called “Idai Buayya”. They usually transfer their profession to their sons.
For distribution of property, a village level meeting is usually held under the village headman. The decision is made concerning both the successor and predecessor. In case of status position, the successor worships the Idtal or Ikon and then inherits the position from the predecessor. Inheritance of name is one of the peculiar and formidable features of the Saora society. It deserves a special mention in the study of descent group. However, newly born babies are exceptions, where the rule of inheritance of name is not strictly followed.

Newly born babies are usually given names after forty (40) days of their birth. Apart from inheritance of name, there are other five ways by which a person is given a name. Those are, a) the day on which the child is born (i.e., Sambra, Mangda, Buda, Lakia, Suku, Sania, or Adu for male child) and Sanbari, Mangdee, Budee, Lakì, Suki, Santari or Raibari for female child), b) according to the names of animals such as Gandei for male and Gundapi for female, c) according to the names of birds, d) according to the names of insects (paper-grasshopper etc.) and e) according to the names of flowers.

The above procedures of name giving suggest that a person can have more than two names. Usually on the name giving ceremony, the Kudan or Karji/Buya worships the ancestors through his spiritual power. As the priest (kudan or Kudanboi) knows which ancestor/ancestress has taken birth and accordingly the name of that ancestor is repeated with the newborn. This shows that Saroas believe in rebirth i.e., life after death. In case the Priest/Priestress is unable to spiritualise the ancestor/ancestress then the name is given according to the day on which the baby is born. Afterwards, when the maternal uncle carries his niece/nephew to move around the village, other procedures of name giving are usually followed.

The inheritance of title such as Gamango, Dalbehera/Mandala, Karji/Bhuya and Raita are strictly from father to the children. However, girls after their marriage can change to their
husband’s title but traditionally it was not followed. Though these titles were given by the “Bison”, the representatives of the then Paralakhemundi Kings, these are perpetuating among the Saora society through inheritance of title. However, there are instances, where Gamangos have changed to Ruta because of their poorness and not able to justify the role of Gamango. Presently, the Christianised Saora people do not follow the principle of inheritance of name and the names are given in the church by the priest.

5.1.2 Ritual Performances

The credence in ancestor worship is the egregious feature of Saora religion and rituals. The patrilineal descent is more prominent in religious and ritual performances than the chattel inheritance. It is very much commodious for the study of Saora descent group.

The eldest son performs the death rituals of his father. The second death ritual or Guar festival is the prime aspects of death rituals and the eldest son plays the important role. But in name giving and initiation ceremonies, patrilineal kins do not play important role whereas the maternal uncle plays leading role. Similarly, in various religious occasions such as worship of Idasum, Lebasum, Kamasum etc. though the individual family has the specific role but the patrilineal kins are the unavoidable participants.

In marriage occasions, Kulam (affinal km) members play specific role, like that of maternal uncle. Patrilineal kins make all necessary arrangements for the marriage. Thus, role of different km members is pictorial in arranging the bride price. Besides, the kinship obligations regulate the patrilineal kins in various rituals and religious occasions.
5.2 Descent group type: Unilineal Group- Rules of Descent

The descent is the ecstatic edify which gives its member proper and appropriate space to occupy. This assigns the membership in a particular group. Through its prescribed rules it includes certain members of the society in the individual’s kin group while it automatically excludes others. The Saora society prescribes for itself the unilineal principle of descent. When a unilineal descent principle is used, people are most often members of multi-generational groups of close relatives called unilineages. These may be matrilineages, or they may be patrilineages, depending on whether the links are traced through women or men. The unilineal principle is again governed by the patrilineal principle. The patrilineal descent is shown in Fig 5.2.

![Patrilineal Descent Diagram]

Figure 5.2: Principle of Patrilineal Descent

After a child is born he/she is affiliated into the patrilineal kin group i.e. “Kheja”. This patrilineal principle is strengthened through inheritance of property, inheritance of name, by religious and ritual performances, rules of adoption and other possible codicils.
Societies that have unilineages also often define larger, more inclusive kin groups called clans. These are groups of people who claim unilineal descent from a common ancestor but who cannot specify all of the actual links. Such distant, non-human ancestors become identifying symbols of the clan. Anthropologists often refer to these fictional clan originators as totems or totemic emblems. Often, there are cultural rules requiring that clan members show respect for the totemic animal or plant and observe a prohibition against killing or eating it. The ancestor is genealogically so remote that he or she is thought of often as a mythical being. The uniqueness of Saora society is that it is a clan less society and hence no totems.

5.2.1 Rules of Residence

Residence is the basic cluster upon which other superstructures like different kin groups are usually built up. This clustering is both a cause and result of group formation. Man always projects his attention for the perpetuation of the society, as man and society are indispensable to each other. For the perpetuation or continuation of the social process, he follows the rules of residence as the fundamental criterion for the formation of a family.

The rules of residence are based on the patrilineal principle, which ultimately result in patrilocal residence in the Saora society. After marriage, the couple is allowed to reside in groom's locality. Saora people have rarely more than one room and hence after marriage of a person, a new house is constructed by the patrilineal kins, specifically by the father of the groom. These newly constructed households are often independent in their day to day functions.

5.2.2 Rules of Adoption

As defined in the International encyclopedia of Social Sciences (VoI-I) "Adoption is the institutionalized practice through which an individual belonging by birth to one kin group
acquires new kinship ties that are socially deprived as equivalent to the congenital ties.” The rule of adoption prevails among the Saora. There are two basic reasons for which this adoption rule perpetuates among the Saora society. Those are:

(a) Due to the occurrence of orphanage, some persons like to adopt the orphans in order to alleviate their hardship as well as promote their welfare. The orphan is known as “Kuadrasi.”

(b) Secondly, when one is child less, he prefers to adopt a male child in order to continue his progeny. The child adopted in this case is called “Limdrenn.”

Thus, Saora principle of adoption is sporadic type and not customary.

Usually, the non-parenthood provokes the Saora couple to adopt a child. Specifically, a Saora adopts a son, as Saoras are strictly patrilineal. Before stepping for adoption, Saoras follow certain principles. A child of the “Kheja” member or other near kindred is decided to be adopted. Then considering the decision the child adoption takes place. If the would be adopted child has several other siblings to look after father’s property, then the child is usually given the consent for adoption. There is no strict rule that a child, after he is adopted has to reside in his adopter’s home. But this adoption is followed by a religious ritual at the “Idital” or Ikon where the adopted child is being recognized to the ancestors of the adoptee. After this the adopted child is incorporated into the concerned man’s residential group. On this day he inherits the property and rights over other articles, and takes part in different rituals and activities. Also, he gets the right to worship the ancestors of the adopted father. Thus adoption links the adopted child to another descent group by placing him in that family setting. But among the Saora the adoption of a child is decided within the patrilineal descent group. The child less female is called “Anjeboi.”
5.3 Functions of Descent Group

The Unilinear fabric of the Saora culture has its colourful manifestation for the smooth running of its cultural matrix. The Unilinear descent group which results from this Unilinear principle has four functions in the Saora society.

(a) The first and foremost function of Unilinear descent group of Saora is the regulation of marriage in society. It permits the settlement of marriage beyond one's own unilineral descent group- (Kheja). The analysis shows that the Saora society lacks the feature of clan organization.

(b) Secondly, it helps to decide the proper management of property through the rules of inheritance of property.

(c) Thirdly, it defines the role of kin members, specifically the consanguines i.e., the "kheja" members. Particularly the interesting fact is that the female member even after her marriage retains the recognition under the "Birnda" or "Kheja".

(d) Fourthly, it lays the platform of the social rules, while including some and excluding some other members to descent group. In other words, it tries to systematically fabricate the society, discharging certain political function within the descent group. Thus, the descent group helps to ascend a commodious social structure through its obligatory functions. Starting from the conflicts of property distribution and selection of spouse it even clarifies the personal misunderstandings.

The importance of descent members are enchanted even after they are dead and the 'kudan' and the 'kudanboi' are the proprietors of those dead persons, their names and their descent line of "kheja" or "birnda"