

The Saraniya (Sarania Kachari): History, Identity Crisis, and Path Ahead

by Jana Publication & Research

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I. Historical Roots: Ethnography, Culture & Language

1. Colonial Documentation: Endle & Hunter

Sidney Endle's *The Kacharis* (1911) explicitly lists the Saraniyas (Sarania Kacharis) as one of the principal branches of the broader Kachari tribal family, alongside the Sonowals, Dumnas, Phulgurias, Mohaliyas, and Deoris. He affirms that although these subgroups diverged in dialect and custom, they shared a common ethnoracial origin:

"The Kacharis are subdivided into several different sections, of which the principal are the Sonowals, the Saraniyas, the Dumnas, the Phulgurias, the Mohaliyas, and the Deoris..." — (Endle, S., 1911, p. vi)

Similarly, W.W. Hunter, in *A Statistical Account of Assam, Vol. I* (1879), documented the Kachari people in districts like Darrang and Kamrup—now Nalbari, Baksa, and Sonitpur—core regions of Saraniya habitation. While the term 'Sarania' does not appear explicitly, Hunter notes:

"The lower hills and the riverine plains are peopled by a scattered population of Kacharis and Mechs, who live chiefly by cultivation, using the hoe rather than the plough." — (Hunter, W.W., 1879, p. 40)

2. Social Organization & Culture

A 2020 anthropological study on rites of passage among Sarania Kacharis in Baksa (BTAD) highlights their distinct animistic belief system—involving life-cycle rituals for birth, puberty, marriage, and death—centered around village spirits, clan ancestors, and natural elements like water and bamboo. They do not practice Bathouism, which is common among other Bodo groups. Instead, their spiritual traditions evolved independently and later included elements of Assamese Vaishnavism, particularly among households adopting non-ritualistic Krishna devotion.

They inhabit fertile river-valley belts—Kamrup, Nalbari, Barpeta, Baksa, Udalguri, Bongaigaon, Sonitpur—regions cited in both Endle and Hunter's records as Kachari strongholds.

3. Language and Settlement Patterns

While most Saraniyas today speak Assamese due to linguistic assimilation, scholars note retentions of Bodo-Garo phonetic patterns. Their patrilineal clan names, agricultural economy, and ritual life continue to preserve tribal distinctiveness, even under cultural pressure.

Hunter emphasized that Kacharis, unlike mainstream Assamese castes, maintained: “...simple and archaic social customs, with little dependence on Brahmanical authority.” — (Hunter, 1879, p. 44)

II. Administrative Erasure: The ST Status Paradox

1. Constitutional Anomaly

Despite being ethnographically and historically documented, **Sarania Kachari** is **not listed separately** under Assam’s Scheduled Tribes (ST) Order. The Constitution recognizes “Boro”, “Boro-Kachari”, and other subgroups—yet **bureaucratic interpretations omit Saraniyas**, treating them as OBC or non-tribal.

2. Legal Pushback

Between 2018 and 2023, Assam’s Tribal Affairs Department briefly issued ST(P) notifications to Saraniyas. However, the **Bodoland Janajati Suraksha Mancha (BJSM)** challenged these in court, citing that only constitutionally notified groups are eligible.

In *WP(C) 2580/2014*, the **Gauhati High Court ruled** that Saraniyas do not fall within the official ST list—reaffirmed again in 2023.

3. High-Profile Fallout

Lok Sabha MP Naba Kumar Sarania had his ST certificate cancelled in 2024. The Gauhati HC upheld this, citing lack of genealogical proof linking him directly to a notified Bodo-Kachari tribe. The ruling became emblematic of the wider community’s precarious status.

III. Human and Cultural Costs

1. Denial of ST Certificates

Since 2014, protests have erupted across **Nalbari, Baksa, and Sonitpur**, led by the **All Assam Sarania Kachari Students’ Union (AASKSU)**. They report rejection rates of over 60% for ST certificate applicants.

In 2023, **BJSM accused the state government** of violating High Court orders by issuing certificates “illegally” to non-notified groups, including Saraniyas.

2. Loss of Benefits and Identity

Cases like **Dribbleena Sarania** (Baksa), whose provisional ST certificate for medical college was revoked, underline the legal uncertainty the community faces. Without recognition:

- They **lose educational and job quotas**.
- Are **denied land rights** under Forest Rights Act (FRA 2006).
- Experience **cultural disintegration**, especially among youth.

IV. Structural Roots of Exclusion

- **Colonial Overgeneralization:** As Hunter's text shows, colonial surveys bundled micro-identities like Saraniyas into broader tribal groups without detailed classification.
- **Post-Independence Bureaucratic Simplification:** The Constitution's ST schedules reduced diverse tribes into umbrella terms, erasing distinctions such as "Sarania Kachari."
- **Sanskritization & Mislabeling:** Adoption of Hindu names and Vaishnav practices by some Saraniyas led officials to misclassify them as non-tribal OBCs.
- **Pan-Bodo Politics:** Modern Bodo movements, while empowering the broader group, often overlook subgroup-specific identities like Saraniyas, who assert a **parallel but distinct cultural lineage**.

V. Remedies: Legal, Political & Cultural Pathways

1. Use of Historical Sources as Proof

Primary texts by **Sidney Endle (1911)** and **W.W. Hunter (1879)** serve as **ethno-historical evidence** of tribal continuity and Kachari affiliation.

2. Legislative Recognition

Activists urge Parliament to **amend the ST list for Assam** to explicitly mention "Sarania Kachari" or provide a comprehensive Kachari subgroup list.

3. Judicial Advocacy

Saraniya organizations can challenge their exclusion through courts, citing colonial and ethnographic proof of tribal origin.

4. Grassroots Cultural Assertion

Reviving cultural practices unique to the Saraniyas—such as the **Baah Goxain Utsav (bamboo deity worship)** and **ancestral clan rituals**—is essential to asserting distinct tribal identity. Unlike other Kachari groups, **Saraniyas never followed Bathou worship**, which makes it all the more critical to document and preserve **their unique folk beliefs, oral myths, and agricultural festivals**.

Conclusion

The **Sarania Kacharis** are not just victims of bureaucratic oversight—they are survivors of centuries-long administrative invisibility. From Endle to Hunter, colonial-era records confirm their Kachari heritage. Today, their identity is lost in legal grey zones, despite vibrant cultural continuity and tribal memory. Recognition isn't a gift—it's a restoration of rightful history.

The road ahead lies in **corrective legislation, legal intervention, and community-led cultural revival**. Only then can the Saraniyas reclaim their rightful place in Assam's tribal mosaic.

Key Citations

Colonial & Ethnographic Sources:

- Endle, S. (1911). *The Kacharis*.
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