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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE SARANIYA (SARANIA KACHARI): HISTORY, IDENTITY CRISIS, AND PATH AHEAD

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Abstract

This document examines the historical identity, contemporary exclusion, and future prospects of the Saraniya Kachari community of Assam. Drawing on colonial ethnographies (Endle 1911; Hunter 1879), it establishes the Saraniyas as a historically recognized branch of the Kachari tribal family, inhabiting riverine plains across districts like Kamrup, Nalbari, Baksa, and Sonitpur. Their distinct animistic cultural practices including unique life-cycle rituals and non-adoption of Bathouism are highlighted as markers of tribal identity. Despite this historical and ethnographic evidence, the community faces an identity crisis due to administrative erasure: they are excluded from Assam's Scheduled Tribes (ST) list, unlike other Kachari subgroups (e.g., Boro, Boro-Kachari). This exclusion stems from colonial overgeneralization, post-independence bureaucratic simplification, and misclassification as OBCs. Legal battles (e.g., Gauhati HC rulings in WP(C) 2580/2014 and 2023) and high-profile cancellations of ST certificates (e.g., MP Naba Kumar Sarania) exemplify the resulting denial of constitutional rights, educational/job quotas, land entitlements, and cultural security. The document proposes remedies: leveraging colonial records as legal evidence, legislative amendment of the ST list, judicial advocacy, and grassroots cultural revival (e.g., Baah Goxain Utsav). It argues that recognition is essential to rectify historical invisibility and secure the Saraniyas place within Assam's tribal mosaic. Key elements covered 1. Historical roots (colonial documentation, cultural distinctiveness). 2. Core crisis (administrative exclusion from ST status). 3. Impacts (legal, socio-economic, and cultural costs). 4. Structural causes (colonial/post-colonial bureaucracy, identity politics). 5. Pathways forward (legal, legislative, cultural). 6. Overarching argument: Recognition as restoration of historical and tribal rights.

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Introduction:-

Historical Roots: Ethnography, Culture & Language

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

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alongside the Sonowals, Dumnas, Phulgurias, Mohaliyas, and Deoris. He affirms that although these subgroups diverged in dialect and custom, they shared a common ethn racial 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)

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.

One of the most culturally distinct practices of the Saraniyas is the Tuloni Bia, a ceremonial puberty ritual performed when a girl reaches menarche. Tuloni Bia (literally “small wedding”) marks a girl’s transition into womanhood and is observed with traditional songs, a mock marriage ceremony, symbolic offerings, and participation of village elders. While similar practices exist in some Assamese communities, the Saraniyas preserve a tribal version rooted in ancestral customs and clan-specific rites—distinct from the more Sanskritized or Vaishnavite adaptations seen in other groups. This ritual is largely absent among other Kachari subgroups like the Bodos, Sonowals, or Deoris, making it a key cultural marker of Saraniya identity.

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.

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)

Administrative Erasure: The ST Status Paradox

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.

Legal Pushback

Between 2018 and 2023, Assam’s Tribal Affairs Department briefly issued ST(P) notifications to Saraniyas. However, the Bodoland Janajati Suraksha Mancha (BJSJM) 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.

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.

Human and Cultural Costs

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 Saranias.

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:

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

Structural Roots of Exclusion

1.Colonial Overgeneralization: As Hunter’s text shows, colonial surveys bundled micro-identities like Saranias into broader tribal groups without detailed classification.

2.Post-Independence Bureaucratic Simplification: The Constitution’s ST schedules reduced diverse tribes into umbrella terms, erasing distinctions such as “Saranja Kachari.”

3.Sanskritization & Mislabeled: Adoption of Hindu names and Vaishnav practices by some Saranias led officials to misclassify them as non-tribal OBCs.

4.Pan-Bodo Politics: Modern Bodo movements, while empowering the broader group, often overlook subgroup-specific identities like Saranias, who assert a parallel but distinct cultural lineage.

Remedies: Legal, Political & Cultural Pathways

Use of Historical Sources as Proof

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

Legislative Recognition

Activists urge Parliament to amend the ST list for Assam to explicitly mention “Saranja Kachari” or provide a comprehensive Kachari subgroup list.

Judicial Advocacy

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

Grassroots Cultural Assertion

Reviving cultural practices unique to the Saranias—such as the Baah Goxain Utsav (bamboo deity worship) and ancestral clan rituals—is essential to asserting distinct tribal identity. Unlike other Kachari groups, Saranias 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 Saranias reclaim their rightful place in Assam’s tribal mosaic.

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