



A TRIBAL COMMUNITY IN EASTERN INDIA: A CASE STUDY OF ORAON TRIBE

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Abstract: India is a democratic and sovereign country, where people of all religion live together. As per the Constitution of the Republic of India; there are total of 645 district tribes. The term "Scheduled Tribes" refers to specific indigenous peoples whose status is acknowledged to some formal degree by national legislation. The Oraons (commonly pronounced as *Uraons*) are one of the five largest tribes in South Asia. They live in the forested uplands of east-central India, occupying the Chota Nagpur region of Jharkhand and adjoining states. Chota Nagpur, the homeland of the Oraons, is the name given to the northeastern section of the great peninsular mass of India. This is an attempt to explore the origin, migration and present habitat of the Oraons, from the Folkloristic point of view. Hopefully, the learned readers will appreciate this research paper and find it useful.

Keywords: Oraon, Scheduled Tribe, Chota Nagpur, Kurukh, Adivasi.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Oraons are a Dravidian language speaking people, representing the largest indigenous group in Jharkhand with roughly 19.60 percent of the total population. The Oraons are found in in the districts of Ranchi, Gumla, Lohardaga, Latehar, Palamu, Garhwa, Hazaribagh, Dhanbad, Santhal Pargana and Singhbhum. According to the tradition, Konkan is said to be original home of the Oraons. Owing to the over-population and external pressure, they migrated from the west coast of India to north India. After some time, they settled down as agriculturists and landowners in the Shahabad district of Bihar. Driven by successive external settlements, they took shelter on the Rhotas plateau. They fortified the place but could not make it impregnable. Probably they were driven out by the Cheros.¹

Oraon, aboriginal people of the Choṭa Nāgpur region in the state of Bihār, India. They call themselves Kurukh and speak a Dravidian language akin to Gondi and other tribal languages of central India. They once lived farther to the southwest on the Rohtās Plateau, but they were dislodged by other populations and migrated to Choṭa Nāgpur, where they settled in the vicinity of Munda-speaking tribes.²

The Oraons of West Bengal have their largest concentration in Jalpaiguri district (55%) and a majority of them live and work in the tea gardens of this district which stretches in a long strip from east to west in the Duars and Terai in the sub-Himalayan West Bengal. In almost every tea garden of this district the Oraons form a significant number of the labour force. They form a substantial number of inhabitants in each tea garden. In some gardens, they are the overwhelming majority, while in others, they form certain proportions, small or large among the workers and inhabitants. In tea gardens, the labourers are mainly resident workers. The Oraons living in the tea gardens are in an entirely different socio-economic environment from their homeland. In the garden they have to keep inter-ethnic relationship with the other tribal and non-tribal groups working in the garden. Another thing is that the Oraons are traditionally cultivators but in the tea gardens they are engaged both in plantation work as well as in its manufacturing.³

II. ETHNIC BACKGROUND:

The origins of the name "Oraon" are unclear. Some Oraons say that the name is derived from Ur (chest), because they believe they were born of the blood from the chest of a holy man. Many see the name as a disparaging one given by caste-conscious Hindus who considered the tribe to be unclean. The Oraons themselves use the name "*Kurukh*", possibly after a mythical Oraon king called Karakh.⁴ Oraons are, as a rule, short of stature and dark-complexioned, broad-nosed, and thick-lipped. They are considered to be of Proto-Australoid stock, descended from a race that influenced the peoples and cultures of a wide area of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the islands of Polynesia. In South Asia, the Proto-Australoids form an old, pre-Dravidian element in the population. The physical traits associated with this group are found among tribal peoples and also, to varying degrees, among the lower castes of the Hindu populations of peninsular India.⁵

According to the history and traditions of Kurukhs, once they were lived in "Indus Valley Civilization" before 2500 B.C., peacefully and sophisticated life with another people of Indus valley. The earliest cities Mohenjodaro and Harappa to be remained at Indus Valley of Sind. Further up the another ancient cities were discovered, as Rupar near Chandigarh, and Lothal near Ahmadabad etc. These cities had been made with carefully planned houses and streets built. Houses were built of brick.⁶

III. MAJOR OCCUPATIONS:

Traditionally, Oraons depended on the forest and farms for their ritual practices and livelihoods, but in recent times, they have become mainly settled agriculturalists. Many Oraon migrated to tea gardens of Assam, West Bengal and Bangladesh as well as to countries like Fiji, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago and Mauritius during British rule, where they were known as Hill Coolies. They are listed as a Scheduled Tribe in seven Indian states for the purpose of reservation system. Originally, the Oraons relied on the forest and its goods for an economic livelihood. Unlike many other communities of Jharkhand which practice *jhum*, the Kurukh community uses

plough agriculture. At the turn of the 20th century however, due to the policies of the British colonial government, most of the tribe worked as agricultural labourers for the Zamindars on their own lands.⁷

Additionally, many members of the Oraon tribe have diversified into other occupations, including trade and commerce, and some have taken up professional jobs. However, agriculture remains a significant part of their livelihood and is deeply intertwined with their cultural identity.⁸ The Oraons in their place of origin had been agriculturists and they developed a culture over many years and generations that was land-based. Agriculture had different seasons and different crops and the Oraons practised different rites, rituals and festivals at different stages and seasons of cultivation. Some of these agriculture related festivals are *dhanboni* (sowing of seeds), *dhangari* (rituals, festival connected to transplanting of seedling), *khalian* festival (festival related to paddy threshing floor specially) etc. The ownership of land is also an essential component of Oraon identity. Being settled cultivators for generations the Oraons had emotional and material attachment with land. Land, for them, is not only a means of livelihood but also offers symbols of ethnic identity. The Oraons collectively value land in a particular way; land gives them identity and status.⁹

One of the most progressive tribes, they are engaged in agriculture and rural crafts like carpentry, tile and brick moulding, rope making and weaving of date palm leaf mats besides also finding employment in mining, quarrying, manufacturing industries.¹⁰ With the passage of time, they have migrated to different parts of the country during pre and post Independent era in search of their livelihood (as manual labour).¹¹

The Oraons of West Bengal live in three major economic realms viz., farming, plantation and urban. The sedentary agricultural tribal community had migrated from Chhotanagpur plateau during the period of extreme distress - A majority of them had migrated to North Bengal Primarily to work as tea garden labourers. Subsequently they had to move to the neighbouring farmlands also. Another segment of the Oraon population had moved to the Sundarbans, mainly for the purpose of clearing forests. Some of the Oraons put up their settlements in the rural areas in the western part of the State adjoining their hearthlands. As agriculture is their main occupation, these traditional farming community could easily adapt themselves in the new environment. The Oraons in the tea gardens of the Duars and Terai find themselves in an entirely different socio-economic set up.¹²

IV. CULTURE AND FOOD HABITS:

Oraons worship natural objects. They believe that there is a creator of the universe named *Dharami* or *Dharmesh*, who exists in the sun. Under this concept, they also consider the sun as a god. Oraons offer worship to their creator Dharmesh to keep him satisfied. They also celebrate '*Dandakanta*' festival dedicated to him. Oraons belief in the existence of evil spirits including the souls of their dead ancestors and offers worship to the evil spirits to make them pleased. Influenced by Hindu religion, them also worship the goddess Lakshmi and Saraswati. The Oraons decorate their body with tattoo. Tattooing is considered as a religious ritual for every Oraon boys and girls before attaining adulthood. They believe that god will be angry upon dying without having tattoos on their body and shall be thrown to eternal hell.¹³

Traditional dresses of Oraon were earlier very short. Male used to wear a single cloth called nengti and women had an additional piece of small cloth called fata to cover the top of the body. But now Oraon males wear lungi and dhuti as well as shirt or punjabi. The educated Oraon boys and girls wear shirt-pant and salwar-kamij, sari respectively. Oraon women like to wear ornaments of different designs like *karma shikri* (ornamented nose-pin), *paira* (ornamented attires), *muddies* (to decorate foot-fingers) and *khangsho* (a hair clip made of silver) etc.¹⁴ The Oraons observe all the festivals collectively. The community celebration of social festivals helps reproduction of a common identity, a community that shares a common culture and a shared history. Numerous festivals represent cultural specificities or elements providing substance to it and ultimately promote continuation of customs, tradition and culture. Their culture and way of life foster ethnic identity and a sense of group solidarity. Observance of their traditional cultural practices rituals is seen as symbols of their ethnic identity.¹⁵

Food consumption is an intensive social activity and can be considered a cultural artifact, reflecting the intricate process of sociocultural differentiation in shaping eating habits. The food practices of the Oraon tribe, are characterized by their rich cultural traditions and the utilization of locally available resources and techniques.¹⁶ Their staple cereal is rice, supplemented with maize, wheat, Madua and Gondli. Both men and women consume alcohol, and they also prepare rice beer commonly known as *hadiya* at home. Generally men chew tobacco and women smoke the *Hookah*.¹⁷ The Oraon have distinct characteristic features unlike other tribal communities of the area. Their manner of invitation, salutation, organizing feast as well as gift offering on the marriage occasion, differentiate them from other neighboring tribals namely *Munda*, *Mahali*, *Chick Baraik*, *Lohra* and *Kharia*. They receive their guests in a manner, which reflects their warm feeling towards others. The refinement of Oraon culture can be exemplified from the intricacies of their marriage customs. As marriage involves social tie between two families, the etiquette of inviting many other families into kin bondage, highlights their cultural standard.¹⁸

V. SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION:

It is the result of different socio-economic groups living together in the same place inter-acting with each other. As a result, influence of modernism in lifestyle, is obvious in matters of dress, food habit, domestic affairs, etc. In urban area, it has been found that religious faith in animism is quickly disappearing along with animistic rituals and worship in favour of Hinduism. Cultural infiltration is bound to occur in an environment where they live and work in most cases, for generations together.¹⁹

VI. CONCLUSION:

The Kurukh people are majorly found in the Chotanagpur plateau and in Northern parts of Bengal and adjoining Assam. One of the major concerns of the Oraons is the preservation of their culture, which under changed circumstances are open to multiple forces of change. The progressive loss of land has come as a challenge to their culture which was agriculture-based. Loss of land means they have to try some unconventional occupations and move to different places, which also can have an unsettling impact on their way of life and solidarity. The chief measures taken by Government are as many but they have to be developed at the root level and should be

dealt with extreme care for the overall development of Tribes in India. It cannot be a one man show; it has to be carried forward by one and all. Also, ignorance, lack of education, however, stands as a major obstacle towards further socio-economic development. Lack of social awakening could not help them to get rid of the drunken habits and this habit again, push them back to the perpetual ignorance, hunger and malnutrition for their children. However, with the improvement in primary education facilities, literacy has improved. Even some of the young aspirants have started going outside for higher school education. Along with it, social awakening has also improved encouraging these people to earn better for a better living.²⁰

It is also noted that the adivasi population are struggling for their rights to self-determination. Their conditions, experiences and struggles need to be dealt with separately and with an extra care. The Government must lay greater emphasis for the development of tribal areas. These tribal rich socio-culture traditions need to be preserved. These are our indigenous cultures and traditions and form tribal identity.

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