



## TRIBE IN MAKING: A STUDY ON ORAON TRIBE IN BARAK VALLEY REGION OF ASSAM

Nabarun Purkayastha

Department of Sociology, University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya (USTM)

### Abstract

Oraon in large number live in Chhotonagpur plateau in Indian since centuries. They used to maintain eco-friendly life depending entirely on forest and hill. Their life started to become miserable when they came in contact with outsider as well migrated to different regions owing to overt and covert reasons. Particularly in British colonial period their life became so miserable that many of them found no place in their ancestral homeland to maintain a normal life. They probably found an alternative to income when tea planters of Assam gave a lot of promise for better future in tea plantation work. Accordingly, believing on planters and their brokers they migrated to Assam without knowing that in immediate future they would lose their all bonds of homeland, kith and kin and even their own tribal identity. This study examines intricate relationship between Oraon identity and society in its historical context.

**Keywords:** Oraon, Migration, Barak Valley, Non-Oraon, Exploitation, Regional Setting, New identity.

### Introduction

Oraon is one of the largest tribal communities in India. They are Dravidian tribe. Oraons are believed to have settled in the Chotanagpur plateau centuries ago. They are also known as Kurukh tribe. Traditionally, Oraon depended on forest for their livelihood. A large number of Oraons came and settled down in Barak valley of Assam during British period. Their economic condition in that period living in middle and central and eastern India became severe and worse to extent. Many Oraon agreed to migrate to different industrial centers including Northeast India in search of employment or to work in tea plantation. They are partly lured by British administrator and company owner in name of employment and work. After arrival in Barak Valley of Assam Oraon have been gradually leaving their traditional religious ritual, dress and ornament and their own language. Their economic and socio-cultural life of Oraons in Barak Valley of Assam became worst due to inhuman exploitation by non-Oraon.

### Oraon in Historical Perspective

Oraon, differently known as **Uraon, Oran** or **Oram**, is an aborigine inhabits in various states across in India as well as in Bangladesh. Majority of them living in Chhotonagpur region of Jharkhand are known as **Kurukh**. Kurukh speaks Dravidian language which is akin to *Gond* and other tribal languages. They used to live at Rohta plateau but dislodged by other people and accordingly migrated to Chotanagpur where they settled in vicinity of *Munda*-speaking tribes.

Traditionally Oraon depended on forest for their livelihood. Subsequently some Oraon became settle agriculturalists. From Chhotonagpur, Oraon immigrated to northeast India during British period, where they mainly worked/employed in tea estates. According to Anthropological Society of India, Konkan is original home of Kurukh tribe from where they migrated to Northern India. Kurukh sub-stratum is very prominent in language of Konkan or Konkani language. Oraon is a nickname of Kurukh assigned by their masters possibly with reference to their migration and proneness for roaming.

Oraons are divided into sub-tribes like Ekka, Tigga, Barla, Kujur, Bara, Lakra, Tirkey, Bakh la, Toppo, Kispotta, Minz and Kerketta. Oraons have no proper sub-tribes in central province. Even Kuda and Kisan who are assumed to be sub-tribes of Oraon, regard themselves as separate tribes and avoid inter-marriage with Oraon. Oraons are divided into many totemic clans. They live in Chota nagpur plateau of central India. In Raigarh, Surguja, Jashpur districts of Chhattisgarh, Ranchi district of Jharkhand, Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal, Sundargarh district of Orissa, also in Bangladesh. Head of Oraon is called *Pannu*, and when an offender is reinstated, Pannu first drinks water from his hand, and takes upon him burden of erring one's transgression. For this act Pannu usually receives small amount of money as fees. Oraons eat almost all kinds of food, including pork, fowl and crocodile and beef. Oraon culture intimately related to environment and accordingly they decide their food habit (Xaxa: 2001).

### Religious Life

Traditionally Oraons followed *Sarna Dharma*. But due to influence of Hinduism some they started Sarna Dharma in Hindu way. Varieties of Sarna Dharma existed due to Hindu influence. These are *Bishnu Bhagat*,

*Bacchinda Bhagat, Karmu Bhagat and Tana Bhagat.* Sarna followers perform religious rituals under shade of a sacred grave. They worship Sun as *Biri* and Moon as *Chanda*. Chanda and Biri are words which are used in Sarna Puja. They call earth as mother. A large number of Oraons abandoned their original beliefs of Sarna. In fact, in 19th and early 20th century Oraons faced tremendous trouble due to exploitation of British traders. Christian missionaries found Oraons depressed and without food. They influenced many Oraons to accept Christianity. Among Christian Oraons, there are Roman Catholic Oraons and Protestant Oraons, the latter having several denominations.

## Family, Marriage and Kinship

Traditionally Oraon prefer to marry an Oraon only. Christian Oraon often marries other community like Munda, Kharia and Santal due to influence of Christianity. Sarna Oraon prefers marry within Oraon following tradition. Marriage is arranged by guardian in family, but opinion of bride and groom is respected. Child marriage is not recognized. Divorced as well as widow women and men can marry again but married men and women are not allowed a second marriage. Sexual intercourse before marriage is tacitly recognised and is so practiced that no Oraon girl remains virgin at time of marriage (Risely: 1915). Within Oraons, indeed idea of sexual morality hardly exists and unmarried Oraons were not far removed from condition of modified promiscuity which prevails among many of Australian tribes. Provided that exogamous circle defined by totem is respected, an unmarried woman may bestow her favour on whom she wills. If she becomes pregnant, arrangements are made to get her married without delay, and she is then expected to lead a virtuous life. According to Dalton, liaison between boy and girl of same village seldom end in marriage. But bringing a bride from distant place is preferred in community. This appears to arise from rule of exogamy that marriage should not be allowed between those who have been brought up together. Young men can choose partners for them. After selection they can dance together, can move in festival and other social gathering freely. Boy offers girl flower for putting on hair and present grilled field-mice. Oraons consider these mice as the most delicious food. Father Dalton said that matches were arranged by parents, and bride and bridegroom have nothing to say in this matter. Boys were usually married at sixteen and girls at fourteen or fifteen. Girl thus has only about two years of preliminary flirtation or *Dhumkuria* life before they are settled.

## Festival

Festivals have been part of life for Oraons since ancient time. *Sarhul* and *Karma* are two main important festivals of Oraons. Spring festival, known as *sarhul*, is celebrated when *sal* tree is in full blossom. In this festival Oraons perform symbolic marriage of sky with earth. This is done to ensure fertility of mother earth. On this day a propitiatory sacrifice is offered to old lady (the village goddess) who is believed to abide in sacred grove of village. *Phaggu* is a festival which is observed towards the end of February or the beginning of March. On previous evening of festival, a young castor plant and a *semar* (*Bombax malabaricum*) branch are planted in an open place. Around these some hay, firewood and dry leaves are heaped. Village priest sets fire to hay. When fire burns at its brightest the young castor shrub is cut into pieces with an axe. Immediately the young boys of the village light torches from the bonfire and throw beam of torches at fruit of trees, saying, 'Be loaded with good fruit' (Roy: 1971).

## Dance and Music

Oraons have a rich and vast range of folk songs, dances, tales as well as traditional musical instruments. Both men and women participate in dance which is performed at social events and festivals. They pass their time in music and dance. They sing folk songs in which their life style emerges. Their dances and songs are deeply rooted in their social and cultural life. Mandar, drums, Nagara and Dholak and flute are main musical instruments. *Jhumur* songs of Oraons reflect their lifestyle and their religious philosophy. There are seasonal festivals of Oraons which are celebrated by them on singing and performing dances. All religious ceremonies and seasonal festivals of Oraons such as Basundhara in month of *Baishakh* (April-May), *Bhadri* in Bhadra (August-September), *Jejuti* in *Agrahayan* (November-December), *Itu* in *Falgun* and *Sarhul* in *Chaitra* (March) are linked to agriculture. Marriage song and dance is different from seasonal dance and song. Famous dance and song of Oraons are *Karma*, *Sharhul*, *Jhumar*, *Damkach*, *Bhadri*, *Jejuti*, *Itu* and *Jatra* (Dalton: 1872).

## Ecological Profile

Construction of house, household item and other artifacts show a close linkage of Oraon with environment. Oraon's house is usually made of mud wall and tile roof. All same house construction requires use of timber and bamboo.

Oraon household includes item like mat, cot, wooden tool, basket, cup, plate, cushion, rope, mortar and pestle and oil pressers. All of these are made up of forest products. Hunting implements such as bow and arrow, sling, spear and sword are made from forest products. Similarly, fishing tools such as baskets and traps of various kinds are made of bamboo. Fishing nets are made of twine. Umbrellas are made with the handle and ribs of bamboo covered with *gungu* leaves. Even hooded waterproof coat is made of *gungu* leaves.

Major rituals among Oraons, as with any other community, are connected with birth, marriage and death. There are many customs preceding marriage with which environment is very closely connected. There is custom of

men going to forest to fetch firewood and women to fetch *sal* leaves for preparing cups and plates. Preparation of marriage mat and marriage baskets of various sizes is another custom. Setting up a *marwa* is, however, the most significant. Nine *sal* saplings with leaves on top are planted in the courtyard in three rows. Middle one of second row differs in its height. Other things are branches of bamboo, *sidha*, *bhelwa*, mango and *mahua*. Mango suggests perpetuity of descendants, bamboo symbolises progeny, *sidha* fidelity of husband and wife, *bhelwa* protection from the evil eye and the *mahua* enhance love between couple. Marriage ritual would be incomplete without this invocation of trees and plants.

During funerals Oraons practice burial and cremation. Bodies are buried when crops stand in field. In this custom, various shapes of branches cover bottom of grave, lengthwise and crosswise. Important festivals of Oraons are pertaining to forest, hunting, agriculture and cattle. Besides these, there are socio-religious gatherings known as *jatras*, which take place at commencement of different seasons.

### Health Profile

Oraon also have vast Knowledge of indigenous method of treatment of diseases. There are about 34 kinds of diseases which are treated with indigenous medicines. These include pain, fever, wound, constipation, diarrhea, dysentery, epilepsy, rheumatism, insomnia, tetanus, eczema, etc. These diseases or symptoms of diseases are treated with medicines based on leaves, root and bark of plant which grow wild in jungle. Some plants used for treatment are grown by Oraon in their own field. Tribal system of medicine mostly based on herbs. However, Oraons have faith in magic, witchcraft, sorcery etc. for cure of disease.

### Oraon in Barak Valley: Contemporary Perspective

During ancient time historic and socio-cultural life of Oraon, as already mentioned earlier, was rather within ambit of their tribal value and identity. Initially they lived their life peacefully without intervention of any force or institution. Coming to new situation Oraon are getting accustomed with dominant culture of Barak Valley. Their occupation, language, religion, food habit and institution of family marriage are no longer remaining same as their homeland. Rather a new culture has become dominant in Barak Valley which governs entire way of life of Oraon. Their house, settlement, socio-cultural institution, family, kinship and marriage are of different nature. In Barak Valley Oraon continuously interact with non-Oraon or other people. It's rather very irony to note hardly any Oraons original identity is seen in Barak Valley.

### Occupation of Oraon in Barak Valley

Occupation is a socio-economic process through a person can get his everyday requirement in return of his work for survival. Traditionally, Oraons were agriculturists. After their migration in Barak Valley region they were engaged in a completely different profession that is highly industrialized. The main occupation of the Oraons in Barak Valley is tea garden worker. But now some of them engaged in other activities. Occupation of Oraon is shown in table no:-1

**Table no: 1  
Occupation**

Occupation	No of Respondents		Total	Percentage
	Male	Female		
Tea Garden worker	76	94	170	56.66
Retired Person	16	16	32	10.67
Farmer	15	7	22	7.33
House Wife	-	20	20	6.67
Student	13	4	17	5.67
Petty Business	15	-	15	5.00
Unemployed	5	7	12	4.00
Govt. Employee	7	-	7	2.33
Wage earners	3	2	5	1.67
<b>Grand Total</b>			<b>300</b>	<b>100.00</b>

*Source: Field Survey*

Data indicate more than fifty percent of Oraons (56.66%) are tea garden worker while 10.67% of the Oraons are retired person. Beside these 7.33% are farmer, 6.67% are house wife, 5.67% are student, 5% are petty businessman, 4% are unemployed, 2.33% are Govt. employee and a little segment that is 1.67% of the Oraons are daily wages worker.

### Socio-Cultural life of Oraon in Barak Valley

Socio-cultural activities of Oraons in Barak Valley had started getting new form in due course of their settlement and life. Their interaction with people living nearby their settlement or work place made them to come in

contact with non-Oraon people. Socio-cultural life of Oraon is based on local socio-cultural environment. Oraon is generally performing all socio-cultural activities followed by local people in Barak Valley. In spite of that upper castes are not interested to keep relation. They are told to be *men eater* and *inferior caste*. Hence it can be said that upper caste people in this valley always try to keep themselves far away from any social contact. The traditional cultural aspects like nativity, caste, community, religion, informal organisation, symbolic expression and status determinant are totally lost by Oraon community. Thus traditional cultural aspects of Oraon in Barak valley are totally lost in new relation.

### Oraon Identity in Barak Valley

After arrival in Assam Oraons lost their *Scheduled Tribes Status* and thus they are deprived of educational, economic and political privilege granted by constitution of India. Central Government of India classifies some of its citizens based on their social and economic condition as Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and Other Backward Class (OBC). OBC list presented by commission is dynamic (caste and community can be added or removed) and will change from time to time depending on Social, Educational and Economic factors. Ever since India becomes independent Oraon lost their Scheduled Tribe status in Barak valley and they are deprived of their educational, economic, and political privilege guaranteed by constitution of India. Thus, all Oraon in Barak valley belongs to Other Backward Class. Due to change in old value of Oraon they face new problem and challenge to lose of tribal identity. Oraon with their organisation still put their demand to government to get back their ST status which they lost after arrival in Barak Valley. Because they think that reason of losing their tribal identity is poverty and illiteracy. Thus, their tribal identity is lost forever. Politics of convenience made them as OBC in the region. But Oraon are not satisfied with the identity as they many time resisted and protested against such an imposed identity. They like to retain their own tribal identity. Assam Pradesh Kurukh Sangha, an organisation of Oraon, which looks after their interest, of view that government, should change its decision for giving them tribal status considering their long tradition of exploitation and backwardness.

### Language used among Oraon

The first language of a human being comprises a part of their personal, social and cultural identity. Another impact of the first language is that it brings about the reflection and learning of successful social patterns of acting and speaking. It is basically responsible for differentiating the linguistic competence of acting Mother tongue is the most important identification of human beings. Kurukh is the traditional dialect of the Oraons. But in the present context, most of the people have forgotten their mother tongue. Hardly any Oraon speak Kurukh language. But a few aged Oraon speak Kurukh language occasionally. It is observed that no Oraon speaks Kurukh language regularly. Thus Kurukh language is gradually vanishing from their society in Barak Valley. In Barak valley Oraons are using non-Oraon language. Language spoken by Oraons is shown in table: 2.

**Table- 2**  
**Oraon using non-Oraon language**

Language	No of Respondent		Total	Percentage
	Male	Female		
Bagani (Bhojpuri mixed Bengali)	103	123	226	75.34
Sadri	32	20	52	17.33
Bengali	11	4	15	5.00
Hindi	4	3	7	2.33
<b>Grand Total</b>			<b>300</b>	<b>100.00</b>

*Source: Field Survey*

Data indicate that most Oraon (75.34%) use Bagani language. *Bagani* language is generally used in tea garden as well as neighboring areas. It is a mixed language of Bhojpuri, Oriya and Bengali. And a little less than one-fifth (17.33%) use *Sadri* language. Beside these 5% use Bengali and only a small segment that is 2.33% speak Hindi language for communication.

### Traditional Ornament of Oraon

Oraon women wear different traditional ornament namely, *Baju, Nakfuli, husle, hathpatta, Sherbondi, Dul, Churi, Hikhhol*. Women peak up their hair on head and wear a tikli on forehead. But now in Barak valley only few aged woman use their traditional ornament. Use of traditional ornament is shown in table: 3

**Table- 3**  
**Traditional Ornament use by Oraon**

Use of Tradition Ornament	No. of Female Respondent	Total	Percentage
Occasionally	6	6	4.00
Rarely	4	4	2.67
Never	140	140	93.33
<b>Grand Total</b>		<b>150</b>	<b>100.00</b>

*Source: Field Survey*

The above data indicate only 4% of female Oraon occasionally use their traditional ornament and 2.67% rare using their ornament. Beside most respondent 93.33% never use their traditional ornament. Hence, it is observed Oraon women do not use their traditional ornament regularly. **Family, kinship and marriage**  
Oraon family mainly consists of two types: joint and nuclear. Nuclear family refers to a group consists of husband, wife and their unmarried children. While in joint family members of more than one nuclear unit stay together and have a common hearth. Family structure of Oraon is shown in table: 4

**Table no.4**  
**Types of Oraon Family**

Types of family	No. of Respondents		Total	Percentage
	Male	Female		
Joint	100	81	181	60.33
Nuclear	50	69	119	39.67
<b>Grand Total</b>			<b>300</b>	<b>100.00</b>

*Source: Field Survey*

Above table indicate majority of respondent (60.33%) have joint family. Beside more than one-third (39.67%) have nuclear family structure.

### Inter-Caste Marriage

After settlement in Barak Valley, institution of marriages among Oraons becomes more or less a personal affair and lost its hold from family and community. They do have socially recognized institution of marriage which prefers endogamy. Unlike their traditional forms of marriage, inter-community marriages are taking place very frequently among them. Offenders are excused by society by keeping some amount of money as fine. Divorce and widow marriage is also not uncommon. It may be said whole traditional norms regarding marriage has got changed in oraons living in Barak Valley. It has been observed that to some extent the loss of traditional control result laxity in sex life and irregularity in marital union. Social relation on the other hand also changing from relatively closed in kinship type to an open community sentiment. Some of kinship terms are borrowed from neighbouring non-oraon communities with whom they come in regular contact. In Oraon society inter-caste marriage is strictly prohibited. They think that if they get married by inter-caste they have lost their Oraon identity because they think that other non-Oraon do not understand their culture. But in present age, some Oraons are getting marriage in other caste. So it is essential to know their opinion about inter-caste marriage. Oraon's opinion about inter-caste marriage is shown in table: 5

**Table-5**  
**Oraon and non-Oraon marriage**

Inter-caste marriage	No. of Respondent		Total	Percentage
	Male	Female		
Yes	46	4	50	16.67
No	104	146	250	83.33
<b>Grand Total</b>			<b>300</b>	<b>100.00</b>

*Source: Field Survey*

The above data show majority of the Oraon (83.33%) do not support inter-caste marriage. while only (16.67%) of respondents favour in inter-caste marriage.

## Religious Continuity

Religion plays important role in any society and any sociological study can be termed incomplete without a proper understanding of the religious identity of the respondents. All the Oraon respondents in Barak Valley are Hindus and they follow all the ritual functions of the Hindus. In terms of festivals Oraons celebrate different Hindu festivals like Durga puja, Kali puja, Laxmi puja etc with non-Oraon neighbourers. In Hindu festival, Oraon also participate with other castes and tribes. But case of their own religious festivals they do not get same response from non-Oraon people residing near to them and feel hesitant to invite them too. Thus it is observed that despite of celebration of festival of Hindu they express their unwillingness to call upon caste people as Oraon puja is performed by their priests and not by caste priests.

## Methods of Data Collection

The study was mainly ethnographic based on field observation. The data collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data collected through participant observation, interview guide and case study method. Secondary collected from various secondary sources such as books, periodicals, journals, Magazines, Published and Unpublished research studies conducted by different organizations. The total sample size was 300. The criteria of sampling 'Random', taking 100 people, fifty males and fifty females, from each district. The Unit of sample was tea gardens and villages where Oraon live. As Oraon are spread out in entire Barak Valley region of Assam so data collected from exclusively Oraon inhabited tea gardens/villages of different localities of three districts of Barak Valley.

## Conclusion

Thus from above discussion it is said that Oraon have their own culture, custom, language, religion etc but after arrival in Barak valley of Assam they started following custom and tradition of other castes and due to this, their tribal identity vis-à-vis cultural pattern attained a new form. Presently they inter-mix with local community in Barak Valley and adopt their culture, custom and religion etc. Their original Oraon identity is gradually getting replaced by new identity in Barak Valley of Assam.

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