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The Oraons of Bangladesh: An Anthropological Up-to-date

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Abstract

The Oraons are an ethnic minority group living in the remote regions of Northern Bangladesh and India. They have their own language, colorful social rituals and popular culture, and follow different religious traditions. A detailed and comprehensive study on the origin and livelihood of the Oraon will facilitate an understanding of how a minor community can maintain its distinctive identity in a multi-cultural and multi-religious country. To justify this fact, in this article, the origin and updated livelihood of the Oraons of Bangladesh are discussed.

Keywords: Oraons, Kurukh, Sadri, Hāriā, Dharmes, Chotanagpur, Buddhist, Bangladesh

1. Introduction

Oraon community is a microscopic ethnic group in Bangladesh. They are identified in recent law *Khudra Nri-gosthi Sanskritik Pratisthan Ain 2010* (The Small Ethnic Groups Cultural Institution Act 2010) as *Khudra-Nrigosthi* (small ethnic groups). They also introduced in different terms, such *Upajati* (tribal) and *Adibasi* (indigenous people). They have their own language, folk belief or tradition, social norms and customs. However, nowadays, they belong to three religions. Some of them follow Hinduism and considered as lower caste Hindu. Some follow Christianity and other follow Buddhism. In this article I will focus on the origin and

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livelihood of the Oraons. But special attention is paid to the Oraons who have taken refuge in Buddhism in Bangladesh. The main objective of this article is to contribute to the anthropology and knowledge of the Oraons of Bangladesh up to date. Especially, the origin and their present livelihood that has been changed culturally in many ways will be explored. To explore the theme, I have adopted two methods: content analysis and observation methods. The content analysis method is adopted to identify the historical facts within texts, such as books, essays, interviews, discussions, historical documents etc. On the other hand, the observation method is adopted to collect the data directly from fieldwork.

2. Nomenclature, Origin and Meaning of the Word ‘Oraon’

Oraon is one of the oldest indigenous communities in Bangladesh, but their origin is still unclear. Scholars are also divided as to the origin and the meaning of the word ‘Oraon’. According to the tradition of Oraons,

The first parents of the Oraon, called *Bhāiyā-Bhāyin* (brother and sister), were born from the blood of the chest (Sanskrit, *Uras*, *Ur*) of a holy ascetic. As they were born from the *uras*, their descendants came to be known as *Urāgon Thākurs* or Oraons. In those olden days they were quite as respectable as the Brahmins and wore sacred thread. When, later the Oraons fell from their high state, and began to eat indiscriminately whatever food, clean or unclean, that came to hand, they forfeited their claims to the name of *Urāgon Thākurs*, and came to be called simply Oraons. (Vidyarthi, 1981: 4)

In this regard S. C. Roy comments, this story narrated by the Oraons is complimentary to them because it gives them a respectable ancestry and an honorable occupation. (Roy, 1915: 16-17) He says further,

The Oraons in their own language call themselves *Kurukhs*. The origin of this national name of the Oraons is sometimes traced to one of their mythical hero-kings called Karakh. To this personage tradition ascribes the origin of the ancient name *Karus-des*, which roughly comprised what is now the district of *Sahabad*, a former home of the Oraons. (Roy, 1915: 3)

According to the legend,

Oraons previously known as *Kurukh* lived in *Rohtas-garh* Fort. From there they fled to *Chotanagpur* due to the oppression of Aryans, and they took shelter within the *Munda* community. At that time the *Mundas* were taking part in *Dangri Pujā* (*Dangri* Worship) by coloring their bodies and shaving their heads. The escaping *Kurukhs* also shaved their heads and pasted color on their bodies, took part in the *Pujā* and hid themselves among the *Mundas*. Then the Aryans asked the *Mundas* whether they saw the *Kurukhs* and which way they escaped. The *Mundas* showing their body color asked the Aryans, what color the *Kurukhs* were. *E-rang* (this color?) *na* (or) *u-rang* (that color). But the Aryans failed to understand their language and to continue their search they went away. After that the *Mundas* jokingly called the *Kurukhs* ‘*E-rang-na-u-rang*’? From this the word ‘*Uraon*’ or ‘*Oraon*’ is derived, and from that time they came to be known as ‘*Oraon*’ instead of *Kurukh*. (Khalkho, 2009: 2-3)

There is a very popular song sung by the Oraons that also indicates the origin of Oraons. The song runs thus. (Kujur, 1993: 2):

<i>Nāmhāi purakhār rāhecār re,</i>	(Our ancestors once lived,)
<i>Rohitās pātenā nu rāhecār-2</i>	(In <i>Rohtas</i> Patna they lived-2)
1. <i>Sindh ghātiti ittiyār;</i>	(1. Having come from Indus Valley)
<i>Gangā-Yāmunā bārcār</i>	(They arrived in Ganges-Yamuna.)
2. <i>Pātenāti ittiyār</i>	(2. Having come from <i>Patena</i>)
<i>Rohitā nu ukkiyār</i>	(They entered <i>Rohtas</i>)

The above-mentioned song suggests that Indus Valley was the original homeland of Oraons. Fleeing, they came and settled in the Ganges-Yamuna basin. Again, from there they went and settled in the *Rohtas* plateau or the present *Rohtas* district of the state of Bihar. (Koonathan, 1999: 106-107)

Another legend holds that the word ‘*Oraon*’ derives from the word *Orgorā* which means Hawk or Falcon, because, the behavior of Oraons is very similar to that of *Orgorā* or Hawk. If a hawk catches something it does not release it under any circumstances. Like this, if Oraons have a goal, they attain it at any cost. (Khalkho, 2009: 1-2)

G. A. Grierson holds, “Hindus says that the word ‘Orao’ is simply the Indo-Aryan *urau*, spendthrift, the name being an allusion to the alleged thriftless character of the people to whom it is applied.” (Grierson, 1906: 406) Ferd Hahn state,

The word ‘Oraon’ may be derived from the words *urāpai*, *urāpo* and *urāng*, which in the Dravidian dialects of *Kaikādi* and *Burgaṇḍi* mean ‘man’. Hence ‘Oraon’ also probably means ‘man’. This meaning is quite probable since it is quite common for pre-literate peoples to call themselves simply ‘man’. In a similar vein, *Kurukh* could simply mean ‘speaker.’ (Hahn, 1986: xii)

According to Arun Khalko,

The word ‘Oraon’ derives from the word ‘Uran.’ *Uran* means extravagant, imprudent expending, wastage, unnecessary expenditure etc. The ‘Kurukh’ used to spend much more; they used to indulge in imprudent expending or unnecessary expenditure. For this characteristic, the *Kurukh* came to be known as Oraon. (Khalkho, 2009: 1-2)

In Bengali there is a word *Urancandi*, which means a person who indulges in unnecessary expenditure. Arul Khalko perhaps taking the meaning determined the derivation. On the other hand, S. C. Roy holds, the Hindus, seeing how prolific they were, compared the *Kurukhs* to the progeny of the legendary monster-king *Rawana* of Rāmāyaṇa fame, and called them *Rawanaput* (progeny of *Rawana*). Thus, from *Rawana*, pronounced with an arrested ‘O’ sound at the beginning, we have “O-rawana”, and finally Oraon. (Roy, 1915: 13-14) Dalton, former Commissioner of *Chotanagpur*, states, “Oraon appears to have been assigned to them as a nickname, possibly with reference to their many migrations and proneness to roam. (Dalton, 1872:245)

The scholars did not arrive at any conclusive agreement regarding the etymology and origin of the Oraons. Two proverbs are found regarding the origin of Oraons. (Singha, 2001: 164) i) The Oraons originally used to live in the bank of *Kanka* river of Deccan of South India. They started their journey from the bank of *kanka* river and they stayed some days in Karnatak of India and from

there they came to Bangladesh; ii) They started to come here by the oppression of Muslims during the period of *Mughal* (Jalil, 1991: 103) From then they used to live in the districts of Bangladesh permanently. But we do not know certainly when they came here to live due to the lack of historical evidence.

However, anthropologists currently subscribe to two different theories about their origins. (Gain, 2011: 227): (a) The Oraon of Bangladesh primarily originated in Orissa, Chota Nagpur, Ranchi, Bihar and the *Rajmahal* Hill Tracts and settled in the Bangladesh area after being dispersed during the period of the *Mughals*. (b) The original settlement of the Oraon was at *Karush*, in the south-eastern bank of the Ganges.

Experts also believe that the Oraons might also be a part of groups of communities that migrated to these regions during British rule. Some explain that local landlords of the *Barind* Tract brought in many workers from ethnic communities in Bihar and other nearby places to clear the forests for agriculture. After the establishment of the rail network people from the ethnic communities of Ranchi and *Santal Pargana* among others also begun to arrive as seasonal workers.

3. Anthropological Identity

Oraons have dark complexions. Their noses are flat and their hair is black and almost curled; the skull is oblong and slightly round. Usually, their faces are long with broad features and height is medium. Most of the indigenous groups living in Bangladesh belong to the Mongoloid group, but considering the above-mentioned characteristics of Oraons, as Herbert Hope Risley states, “No signs of Mongolian affinities can be detected in the relative positions of the nasal and molar bones, and average nasal-molar index for a hundred Oraons measured on the system recommended by Mr. Oldfield Thomas”. The average anthropometric indices for a hundred Oraons measured by Risley are given as follows: (Risley, 1892: 139)

- 1) Stature:
Average ----1.621 m.
Maximum-- 1.744 m.
Minimum --1.480 m.
- 2) Proportions of the head:
(Glabeio-occipital)Length:- Extreme breadth:- Cephalic Index:-
Average----184.6 Average----139.3 Average----75.4
Maximum—198 Maximum—158 Maximum--87
Minimum---165 Minimum---131 Minimum---67
- 3) Proportions of the Nose:
Height:- Breadth:- Orbito-nasal Index:-
Average----46.2 Average---39.8 Average----86.1
Maximum—53 Maximum—47 Maximum--113
Minimum---38 Minimum---34 Minimum---70

According to Risley and V. P. Koonathan, both linguistically and ethnically Oraons are Dravidian. (Risley, 1892: 138; Koonathan, 1999: 104) But, Toru holds, “anthropologically they are Austric, but linguistically Dravidian.” (Toru, 2008: 92) G. A. Grierson and Guha considered the Oraons as one of the important branches of *Mundas* who belong to the proto-Australoid group. (Grierson, 1906: 406; Guha, 1944: 42) However, considering the physical structure of Orans they are generally considered to belong to the Dravidian ethnic group.



Source: Photos were taken by the author during field work.

4. Clans

Though the Oraons are a microscopic community, clan identity constitutes a vital part of the society. Two interesting myths are found as to the origin of their clan. According to one myth, at first there was no system of clan in Oraon community. One day, *Pahan*, a village lay priest, went to the chief of the village called *Dewan* and told him, “Every community has the system of clan and identity for smooth running of the society, but why we do not have? It is difficult to run the society without a clan system. So, please introduce the system.” Hearing the words of *Pahan*, *Dewan* ordered all the villagers to gather in one place. After gathering he told them, “Go in separate directions, collect the thing that you see first and hang the thing from the branches of the Banyan tree of the village.” According to his advice, people spread out in all directions. Someone collected tiger, someone collected a monkey, someone collected a mouse, someone collected a crow, someone collected paddy, someone collected fish, someone collected iron, and they all hung the things from the branches of the Banyan tree. After that *Dewan* opened the collected things in front of them one after another and gave each a clan name according to the collected thing. Each collected thing was also declared as the symbol of their clan. Thus, a clan system was introduced in the Oraon community. (Toru, 2008: 16-17)

Another myth reports as to the origin of the *Kūjūr* clan. According to this myth, once an Oraon was sleeping under a *Kūjūr* tree (A kind of fruit). Some ferocious animals attacked him, but a creeper of *Kūjūr* tree protected him from the ferocious animal. From that time, he and his descendants came to be known as the *Kūjūr* clan, and the *Kūjūr* tree became the symbol of their clan. (Toppo, 2004: 15; Roy, 1915: 327)

We do not know how far these myths are correct. No evidence is found to support the information of the myths. But we found many clans in Oraon community. However, scholars differ from each other as to the number of clans. According to S. C. Roy, Oraons are divided into 68 clans and eight totems. Roy’s classification is given below: (Roy, 1915: 325-327)

A. Clans belong to Beast Totem

- | | | |
|---|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| i. Addo – Ox | ii. Allā - Dog | iii. Bāndo - Wild cat |
| iv. Barwa - Wild dog | v. Chidrā – Squirrel | vi. Chiglo - jackal |
| vii. Ergo – Rat | viii. Gāri –Monkey | ix. Hālmān –Baboon |
| x. Khoeā -Wild dog | xi. Kiss or Suār – Pig | xii. Lākrā - Tiger |
| xiii. Osgā – Rat living in agriculture land | xiv. Rundā - Fox | |
| xv. Tiggā – Monkey | xvi. Tirkī -Young Mice. | |

B. Clans belong to Bird Totem

- | | |
|--|--|
| i. Bākulā - Paddy-Bird | ii. Dhechuā - A small black bird with a long tail. |
| iii. Gārwa - Stork | iv. Gede - Duck |
| vi. Gislihī - A species of bird. | v. Gidhī - Vulture |
| vii. Khā khā - Raven | viii. Kokro - cock |
| ix. Kerketā – Hedge-Sparrow | x. Orgorā - Hawk |
| xii. Tappo - A species of bird with long tail. | xi. Tirkuār - bird; |

C. Clans belong to Fish and other aquatic Totem

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| i. Aind - A subdivision of the eel; | ii. Ekkā - Tortoise |
| iii. Goddo - Crocodile | iv. Kena - A species of fish |
| v. Khālkho - A species of fish | vi. Kinduār - A species of fish |
| vii. Kusuār - A species of fish; | viii. Kusuwā - A species of fish |
| ix. Lindā - Fish | x. Litā - A species of fish |
| xi. Minji - eel | xii. Sāl - A species of fish |
| xiii. Tiru - A species of fish. | xiv. Beāh – A large fish with thorns on the back; |

D. Clans belong to Reptile totems

- i. Khettā or Nāg - cobra

E. Clans belong to Vegetable totem

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| i. Bāklā - Grass | ii. Bārā or Bar - Tree |
| iii. Bāsā-A type of tree | iv. Gondrārī - Tree |
| v. Kāndā - Sweet potato | vi. Kāithi - A curry Vegetable |
| vii. Kendi – A kind of tree | viii. Kindā -Date palm |
| ix. Kājār – A kind of Fruit | x. Kundaarī - Vegetable |
| xi. Mādgi – Tree (Mahua) | xii. Mūnjiār - Creeper |
| xiii. Pusrā - Tree (Kusum) | xiv. Keond – A kind of fruit |
| xv. Kheksā – vegetable | xvi. Pūtrī – Treexvii. Rorī- Tree |
| xviii. Angal tappo - A kind of bush | xix. Khes – Paddy. |

F. Clans belong to Mineral Totem

- | | |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| i. Pānnā - Iron | ii. Bekh - Salt |
|-----------------|-----------------|

G. Clans belong to Place Totem

- i. Bāndh - An embanked reservoir of water;
- ii. Jūbbi – A marsh or surface-spring

H. Clans belong to Split Totem

- i. Amrī - Rice-soup
- ii. Kispottā - Intestine of the pig

Considering the opinions of S. C. Roy, Koonathan holds, “The Oraons are divided into exogamous, patrilineal, totemic clans or *gotar*, which derive their names from some animal, fish, bird, plant or tree, and even some minerals. They show respect to their own totem symbols, and observe certain taboos.” (Koonathan, 1999: 138)

Arun Khalko also holds the same opinion regarding the clans of Oraons of Bangladesh. (Khalkho, 2009: 7-9) in this regard I held an interview with some Oraons who are now engaged in non-government organizations and working for the development of ethnic communities in Bangladesh. They did not agree with the opinion of S. C. Roy and Arun Khalko and termed their opinions as exaggeration. They also hold that all the clans mentioned by them are not found in Bangladesh. They may also have counted the clans of the Oraons of India and other ethnic communities, such as *Munda*, *Santal*, *Mahato*, *Malo*, etc., who have similarity and relation with Oraons. According to them, at present 20 to 25 clans are found in Oraon society of Bangladesh. However, Mazharul Islam Taru mentions 18 clans. They are: (Toru, 2008: 16)

1. Bekh - Salt; 2. Bāklā - Grass; 3. Barwa - Wild dog; 4. Ekkā - Tortoise; 5. Kerketā - Hedge-Sparrow; 6. Kūjūr – A kind of Fruit; 7. Khes – Paddy; 8. Khālkho - A species of fish; 9. Khā khā - Raven; 10. Kispottā - Intestine of the pig; 11. Lākrā - Tiger; 12. Lindā - Fish; 13. Minji - eel; 14. Pānnā - Iron; 15. Tiggā – Monkey; 16. Tappo - A species of bird with long tail; 17. Tirkī -Young Mice; 18. Bāndo - Wild cat;

According to my own survey, the following clans are found in Oraon Buddhist community:

1. Ekkā - Tortoise; 2. Kerketā - Hedge-Sparrow; 3. Kūjūr – A kind of Fruit; 4. Khālkho - A species of fish; 5. Lākrā - Tiger; 6. Minji - eel; 7. Tiggā – Monkey; 8. Tappo - A species of bird with long tail; 9. Tirkī -Young Mice;

S. C. Roy holds following opinion as to the totemism of the Oraons,

There seems to be no definite tradition about the origin of totemism among the Oraons. Totemism may be the remnant of what may be called the hunting and food-gathering stages of Oraon culture, adapted to the needs of the more complex agricultural village-communities of later days. The reason for the adoption of a particular totemic name could be for reason of their human ancestors protecting or being protected by their eponyms. (Roy, 1915: 324)

Whatever be the origin of totemism among the Oraons, today it serves a useful function in their society. It serves to enforce clan exogamy, to avoid social irregularities such as promiscuity, to preserve the purity of the tribe and also to foster communion with the other clans of the tribe. (Toppo, 1979: 145-146) Today, totemism among the Oraons has little connection with religion, but according to Roy, there are indications to show that at one time religion was intimately associated with totemism. (Roy, 1972: 59) He also holds that apart from the connection to religion, totemism among the Oraons is a social organization with specific social ends in view. Practices and taboos connected with the totems help the members of the clan to remember their clan identity and the need to preserve a healthy social life in the clan and in the tribe. (Roy, 1972: 1)

Every clan has their own taboo. They use the clan's name as surname. For example: Shapon Ekkā, Jagesh Tappo, Suresh Khālkho etc. Here Ekkā, Tappo and Khālkho are used as surnames. Nevertheless, every clan is sympathetic to each other; basically, their feeling of brotherhood is strong. They consider members of the same clan as brother and sister, and marriage within the same clan and same blood relations is forbidden. (Singh, 2004: 1588)

As per patrilineal custom, the clan's name is inherited down the father's line and the women change their paternal clan after marriage. However, if a widowed or divorced woman takes a second husband, the biological children of the previous husband cannot obtain the clan's name of the new husband.

5. Language

Bangladeshi Oraons use two languages: *Kurukh* and *Sadri*. *Kurukh* was their main language. However nowadays, according to educated Oraons who studied at Dhaka University, only about 40% of Oraons speak *Kurukh* language. On the other hand, 60% of Oraons speak *Sadri*.¹ Mazharul Islam Toru suggests that the Oraons who live in *Thakuragaon*, *Dinajpur*, *Naogaon*, and *Rangpur* regions speak *Kurukh* and those who live in *Gaibandha*, *Bogra*, *Joypurhat*, *Sirajgonj*, *Natore*, *Rajshahi* regions speak *Sadri* Language. (Toru, 2008:66)

Linguistically, 'Kurukh' is identified as a Northern Dravidian Language. (Hahn, 1986: xiii) It is the sixth most widely spoken language amongst the Dravidian languages. (Gain, 2011: 228) *Kurukh* is not a literary language and has no written character. (Grierson, 1906: 411) Many words of Tamil, Hindi and Bengali languages are found in *Kurukh*. In this regard G. A. Grierson asserts, "It has borrowed much of its vocabulary from the Aryan Language in the neighborhood." (Grierson, 1906: 406)

On the other hand, linguistically *Sadri* is considered part of the Indo-Iranian language family. According to Mazharul Islam Toru, "Sadri is a simple language. It is originated from the mixing of *Kurukh* with Farsi, Hindi, Urdu and Bengali. As a result, it can be termed as a mixed language that bears a clear stamp of a compromise of various dialects." (Toru, 2008: 66)

Alphabets of neither language are found in Bangladesh. In ancient times they preserved their history orally through folk songs. Nowadays, they use the Bengali and English alphabets to write the languages. Similarities and dissimilarities of words are given below:

Bengali	Hindi	Sadri	Kurukh	English
din	din	dinā	ullāh	day
rāt	rāt	rāti	māthā	night
sakāl	subah	bihān	pāiri	morning
ālo	jyoti	ujālā	billī	light
sūrja	sūraj	suruj	Bi-di	sun
tārā	tārā	tārakā	binko	star
nadi	nadī	nādi	khāṛa	river
danta	dānt	dāta	palle	tooth
hasta	hāth	hāt	khakkhā	hand

Below similarities and dissimilarities of sentences are given:

Sadri: *hāmār bāp-māya khubhe bhālo ābdin.*

Kurukh: *enghāy inggīyo embās kaṛe ā-lār.*

English: My father and mother are good people.

Sadri: *semān kekru khati nei kārāyanā.*

Kurukh: *āra ne-khāyahu mālādāo mā-nānnār.*

English: They do not harm others.

Sadri: *hāmni hāmāniker bāp-māyake sraddhā kerilā.*

Kurukh: *ema emahāya unggīyo embārin ohamā nāndām.*

English: We respect our parents.

6. Social Structure

The social structure of the Oraons is patriarchal and patrilineal. Family is the basic social unit for the Oraons. They form the family in a socially recognized way. Joint family is also found, but nowadays the custom of joint family is declining. As patriarchal society, father is the head of the family. After his death or in his absence, the mother or the eldest son of the family becomes the head. Usually, sons have the right to inherit family property. However, in the absence of sons, daughters are allowed to inherit property. Though Oraons are divided into many clans, caste system is not found in their society. However, like other religious communities of Bangladesh social divisions are noticeable based on the occupations of the different families in different areas.

Bangladesh Government formed Union Council to regulate the villages of Bangladesh. The members of the council are elected through an election directed by the government. The Oraons readily accept the arbitration of the members of the Union Council. However, though they have every respect to Bangladeshi national jurisdictions, they solve all sorts of social disputes under their own leadership. In Oraon villages, the villagers elect an appropriate individual as the head, who is known *Mondal*. He is the traditional head of the village social council and responsible for settling nominal disputes. However, he is not recognized by the state. The Oraons follow their societal norms strictly. No Oraon can act beyond his or her rights without social approval, and those who break social rules or regulation are strictly penalized. Punishments can range from fines and thrashing to social ostracism. (Gain, 2011: 229-230) The Oraons maintain a sense of mutual respect, cooperation, and benevolence among themselves. Any form of altercation is looked down upon as severe indecency and such confrontations within and between households are very rare. The neighbors are considered close relatives. They adopt a lifestyle characterized by simplicity and sincerity. Burglary or other crimes in their regions is largely absent. Considering the patriarchal system and the leadership, Uttam Kumar Das and Debendra nath Oraon termed Oraon society as hierarchically structured. (Gain, 2011: 229)

In the case of Oraon Buddhists, Buddhist monks play a vital role in social activities. For example, they help to mitigate quarrels, land disputes and misunderstanding. Nowadays, Oraons have founded many secular organizations in a view to look after the economic and social development of the community and to promote their own culture. These organizations also play a vital role to mitigate their social problems. Among them the following are noteworthy:

- a) Bangladesh Oraon Foundation (BOF), established in 2004
- b) Bangladesh Oraon Research and Development Association (BORDA), established in 2005
- c) North Bengal Adibasi Buddhist Federation (NBABF), established in 2003

- d) Bukkyo Adibasi Development Foundation (BADF), established in 2003²
- e) Bangladesh Oraon Students Association (BOSA), established in 2007



Some social organizations distributing educational materials and warm clothes to the Oraons

Source: Photos were collected by the author during field work.

7. Places of Habitation and Population

The largest populations of Oraons live in Bogra, Dinajpur and Naogaon Districts of Bangladesh. However, the community can also be found in Rangpur, Rajshahi, Pabna, Sirajgonj, Thakurgaon, Panchagarh, Joypurhat, Natore, Gainbandha, Chapai Nawabganj, Khulna, Sylhet and Gazipur. In India Oraons mainly live in Chota Nagpur, Ranchi, Bihar, Rajmahal Hill Tracts, Assam, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Gujrat.

There are wide discrepancies between the population numbers provided by the government and non-governmental organizations. Bangladesh census report of 1991 has shown that the number of Oraons of Bangladesh is approximately 11,296. But a survey of the Oraon community and published by the Oraon Youth Foundation Program in 1997 claims that the total number of Oraons of Bangladesh is 85,041. The report also mentioned that a sizeable population of the Oraon community – 1,133,000 live in the neighboring districts of India. Again, a member of the Oraon Student Union of Bangladesh informed me during an interview in

2014 that they are about 100,000 in number. But *Banglapedia*, a national encyclopedia of Bangladesh, mentions their population as 102,000. Regarding the number of 1991 census report, Uttam Kumar Das and Debendra nath Oraon said,

It should be noted that the name Oraon has been misspelled as *Urang* in the 1991 census report. *Urua* mentioned as a separate ethnic community is also presumed to be Oraon. So, the Oraon population size mentioned above as a government figure is a combined figure of the Urang and Urua. Several sources highlight that government census statistics are erroneous. These discrepancies suggest that statistics provided by publication from non-government organizations probably provide more accurate data about the Oraon population. (Gain, 2011: 228-229)

During my fieldwork conducted between the times of July 2013 to March 2014 I have found 1156 Oraon families follow Buddhism, and the total number of Oraons Buddhists was 5,909.

It is to be noted here that not all Oraons are Buddhists. Many of them took refuge in Christianity, many follow Hinduism and animism. Below total Oraon population and Buddhist Oraon population are given per district.

7.1. District-wise Oraon population in Bangladesh

District	No. of families	Men	Women	Total Population
Panchagar	38	102	100	202
Thakurgaon	285	663	582	1245
Dinajpur	1348	3239	3020	6259
Rangpur	2632	5930	5735	11665
Sirajganj	1172	2450	2364	4814
Natore	661	1616	1475	3091
Bogura	82	186	185	371
Joypurhat	1198	2814	2704	5518
Chapai Nawabganj	1165	2773	2631	5404

Rajshahi	2227	5995	5223	11218
Naogaon	6804	16599	15635	31834
Gaibandha	11	27	29	56
Gazipur	27	68	39	103
Hobiganj	370	943	888	1831
Maulvibazar	269	764	666	1430
Total	18295			85,041

Source: Survey Report by the Oraon Youth Foundation Program in 1997. ³

7.2. District wise Oraon Buddhists population in Bangladesh

District	Village	Name of Buddhist Monastery	Number of families	Population
Dinajpur	Harirampur Chatnipara	Harirampur Chatnipara Ananda Bowddha Vihar.	22	112
Dinajpur	Dakkhin Pachpukuria	Pachpukuria Salbon Rajbari Bowddha Bihar	50	257
Dinajpur	Bahabaldighi	Timpu Tigga Bowddha Vihar	15	76
Joypurhat	Barakandri	Barakandri Sukumar Singha Sarbojanin Bowddha Vihar	100	503
Joypurhat	Surjapur	Ucai Gyanasri Mahathero Bowddha Vihar and Complex	160	810
Joypurhat	Pirpal	Pirpal Paddabina Bauddha Vihar	25	130
Joypurhat	Nurpur	Upa-Sangharaj Dr. Gyanasri Bowddha Vihar	30	147
Naogaon	Uttar Cakbeni	Sangharaj Joytipal Mahathero Bowddha Vihar	70	359
Naogaon	Voyalpur	Biswanath Bowddha Vihar	30	146
Naogaon	Madhabpara	Addapok Gyanaratna Bowddha Vihar	100	513

Rangpur	Kacua	Madhuban Bowddha Vihar	25	122
Rangpur	Kurapara	Nabo Salbon Bowddha Vihar	40	219
Rangpur	Somnarayan	Kanakcaitya Bowddha Vihar	23	114
Rangpur	Sekpara	Hiroyeshi J. S. Fukui Bowddha Vihar	55	277
Rangpur	D h a r m a d a s Kutipara	Sangharaj Dharmananda Bowddha Vihar	110	560
Rangpur	Canpur	Jetabon Bowddha Vihar	40	217
Rangpur	Sahapur	Mahaban Bowddha Vihar	40	211
Rangpur	Amodpur	Tapoban Bowddha Vihar	38	197
Rangpur	Mithapukur	Benuban Bowddha Vihar	143	723
Thakurgao	Jagannathpur	Takkashila Bowddha Vihar	40	216
Total			1156	5,909

Source: Author's field work data collected between the times of July 2013 to March 2014

8. Livelihood

The Oraon leads a colorful livelihood, which helps them to keep their indigenous identity. In this section I will introduce their housing, dress and attires, food and drinks, ornaments, occupation and economy, education.

8.1. Housing

There are no major differences between the houses of Oraons and Bengalis. Mainly Oraons use clay, bamboo and one kind of straw to make their house. But regarding house pattern, the height of their house is a little bit lower than the houses of Bengalis. Every house has a yard and most of the houses have a clay boundary wall. However, a few brick and concrete houses are also found in the Oraon community.



Source: Photos were taken by the author during field work.

8.2. Dresses and Attires




Oraons use very simple dress. Generally, men wear a garment called *Dhuti* a long unstitched white cloth to cover lower part of the body and use *Panjabi* as upper garment. Nowadays, they also use *lungi* (long gown), trouser, pants, shirt, *Paijāmā*, *Panjabi* etc. Elderly men also still wear traditional *vagoya* (a narrow strip of cloth worn similar to a baby's diaper) while working in the fields and at home. Usually, married women wear *Sharee*, petticoats and blouse. They also use vermilion on their forehead and on the parting of the hair as the sign of married women. Unmarried women use *Salowar* to cover their lower body and *Kamij* for the upper body. Widows use a white *Sharee* with petticoat and blouse and do not use vermilion mark. Thus, women's clothing is basically the same as Bengali women. Below pictures of their dresses are given:

		
An elderly man with <i>vagoya</i> .	Oraon girl with Salowar and Kamij	An Oraon woman with Sharee

Source: Photos were taken by the author during field work.

8.3. Food and Drinks

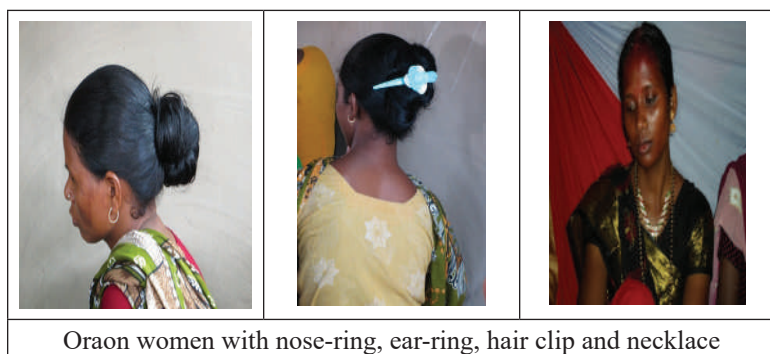
The food habits of Oraons are very similar with that of Bengalis. Like other religious communities of Bangladesh, rice, fish and meat are the staple food of Oraons. Various kinds of vegetables, pulses and other cereals are also among their daily foodstuffs. They do not eat beef since the cow is considered holy, but they eat chicken, pork, frog, turtle, tortoise-meat, mutton, crab, snail, and various kinds of birds and bats. They like to eat all kind of fish. They enjoy tobacco and betel leaf with betel nuts. They like to drink all sorts of soft-drink, but home brewed wine called *hāriā* is very dear to them. All Oraon families know how to make *hāriā* and they enjoy it on special occasions. They also prepare various kinds of cakes and sweets.

		
Hand brewed wine (<i>hāriā</i>)	betel leaf and betel nuts	cooked food

Source: Photos were taken by the author during field work.

8.4. Ornaments

The Oraon women adorn themselves with various ornaments such as bangles or bracelets, necklaces, earrings, nose-rings, bangles etc. They generally use silver ornaments instead of gold due to poverty. Married women use bangles made of conch shell on their wrists, which is called *bālā* in their colloquial language. They wear necklaces (called by them *pune*), tiara (called *tikli*) on the parting of the head, tip on forehead (a spot painted on the forehead), earrings (called *kampasha* or *bāli*), nose ring (called *nākmurti*) and anklets (called *mathia* or *pāirā*). They use lipstick, clips, ribbons etc. They also use vermilion on their forehead and on the parting of the hair. Unmarried women also use above-mentioned ornaments except vermilion and bangles made of conch shell. Instead of bangles they use bracelets made of silver and iron. Women of rich families use bracelets, earrings, nose-ring, tiara, necklace made of gold. Below the pictures of their ornaments are presented:



Source: Photos were collected by the author during field work.

8.5. Occupation and Economy

Majority of the Oraons are dependent on cultivation. Others earn their livelihood as daily laborers. During non-agricultural season, many Oraons, especially men go to the cities and do work as construction workers, rickshaw pullers, day laborers, tea plantation workers, garments workers, hawkers, and small shopkeepers. Nowadays, some Oraons are engaged in government and non-

government jobs. As education is spreading in the society, they prefer to take up white collar jobs. The Oraon women are more hardworking than men. (Banglapedia, 2003: 359) Not only in the domestic activities but also in farming women take part with men. However, they receive lower pay than men. For example, during my field work I asked some woman who are working as daily labor in paddy field and brick-field about their salary. They informed me that a woman worker earns 150-200 Taka per day, while a man earns 300 to 350 Taka. Many women earn their livelihood as maid-servants and garment-workers in the cities. An Oraon, who studied at the University of Dhaka and is now engaged in a NGO, informed me that only two Oraons are serving the Bangladesh government as high officials.

Land is the main economic resource of the Oraons. However, nowadays, only thirty percent of the Oraons have their own land. (Gain, 2011: 232) Previously this percentage was high, but victimized by the neighboring communities, many Oraons lost their land. As a result, they fell behind economically. Caritas, a non-government organization conducted a survey on the Oraons of Dinajpur District in 2005. According to this survey, 60.18% Oraons of Dinajpur District have no agricultural land and 40.60% families are without homestead land. (ICDP-Caritas Dinajpur, September 2005: 23)

There is no information specifically on the economic condition of the Oraons of Bangladesh. Therefore, we used information on the income of the combined ethnic communities of Bangladesh in the 1991 population census of Bangladesh. According to this, of the income of the ethnic communities (including Oraons) 67.94% comes from harvesting, 3.53% from agricultural lands, 2.21% from cottage-industries, 5.78% from business, 0.56% from transportation sectors, 0.55% from construction work, 6.77% from service sector and 12.83% from other work.

They despise begging. Even, the poor, the hopeless and widows who are incapable of earning their livelihood are not found begging. Instead, they work hard to the best of their ability. No kind of labor is disgraceful in this community.

	
Wood-seller Oraon woman	Oraon women working in the paddy field

Source: Photos were taken by the author during field work.

8.6. Education

The Oraons are a backward community in regard to education. Even a few years ago, a high percentage of the Oraon families did not send their children to school after 10 years of age. In 1997 the ‘Oraon Youth Formation Program’ conducted a survey on educational attainment in Oraon populated regions. Below the results are presented:

District	Percentage of Literacy rate
Gaibandha	28.2 %
Thakurgaon	26.6%
Rangpur	18.1%
Joypurhat	17.7%
Dinajpur	17.6%
Sirajgonj	14.1%
Natore	11.6%
Chapai Nawabganj	11.3%
Naogaon	7.7%
Bogra	6.2%
Rajshahi	5.6%
Panchagarh	5.2%

Source: Educational survey report- December 1997 by Oraon Youth Formation Program.

Caritas, a non-government organization, has also conducted a survey in this regard. According to the Caritas survey, only 27.98 % of the Oraons attained education to class six and above. (ICDP-Caritas Dinajpur, September 2005: 12) However, recently more Oraon children have started receiving education. Some missionary and non-government organizations have established schools giving free education to their children. Some organizations are helping the poor and meritorious students of the Oraon community with financial support for higher education. As a result, many Oraon students now receive education at college and university level. But, the literacy rate among the Oraon girls is much lower than the boys because, boys get priority in Oraon society.

According to the report of the Ministry of Education of Bangladesh 2011, the average literacy rate in Bangladesh is 57.70%. The literacy rate of Oraons is thus lower than the national average.

	
<p>Schools founded by NGO for Oraons</p>	<p>Children are studying at school</p>

Source: Photos were taken by the author during field work.

9. Religion

The religion of the Oraons is not merely a set of rituals and observances to fulfill their religious aspirations. It is a complex system of belief and practice, doctrine and behavior, so it is difficult to classify the religion of Oraons. This difficulty is reflected in S. C. Roy's description of the religion of the Oraons as "a system of

animism or rather spiritism set on a background of a still more primitive and vague animatisms...". (Roy, 1972: 1)

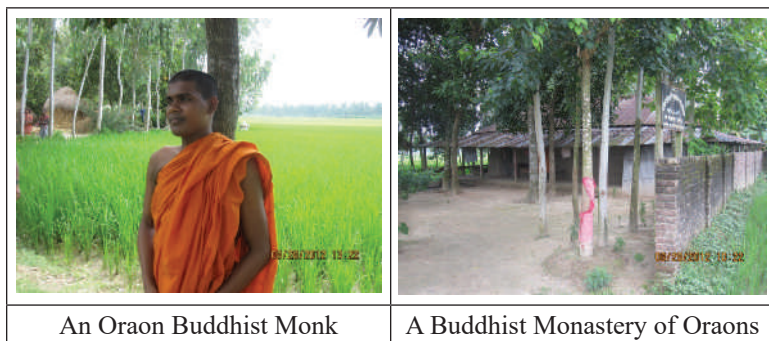
Though many Oraons worship the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon, such as Kali, Durga, Chandi, Kali and Saraswati, their religion has a definite connection to the sacred grove in which some of their religious rituals take place and which is believed to be the abode of spirits. They are also found to attribute an impersonal magic force of nature to living beings, objects of nature and even to objects of human art. Moreover, influences of Totemism and Shamanism are also found in their belief system. So, we can characterize their religion as "the belief in personalized supernatural beings." (Dhavamony, 1973: 51)

S.C.Roy enumerates eight classes of spirits and two classes of impersonal forces in the Oraon belief system. (Roy, 1972: 11) He begins his list of classes of spirits with the Supreme Being or Supreme God Dharmes⁴. Dharmes is the highest divinity recognized by the Oraons. (Toppo, 1987: 44) Under the influence of the Hindus, the name *Bhagavanv* also is sometimes used to refer to Dharmes. The spirits of the dead, *Pachbalar* also form a separate class by themselves. The third class consists of the spirits of an Oraon village, and the tutelary deities. *Chala Pachcho* or *Sarna Burhia* and *Devi Mai* are tutelary deities, while *Darha* and *Desauli* are village spirits. The fourth type is class spirits like *Chandi* the spirit of hunting and war propitiated by young men, and *Achrael* and *Joda* worshipped by women. The next in importance are the *khunt Bhuts* or the clan spirits of each clan of the original founders of a village. They are often the spirits of dead persons. Household spirits *Barnda* and *Chigrinad* constitute the sixth class, to which sacrifices are offered on behalf of individuals families, at least once in a generation. A seventh class called tramp or stray spirits such as *Mua*, *Malech* and *Churel* are mischievous spirits originating from persons dying unnatural deaths. These are not worshipped, but have to be scared away or exorcised by the spirit doctor. The eighth class of spirits called *Pugribhuts* or familiars, often used for anti-social ends, belongs more to the realm of magic than religion. (Roy, 1972: 11-12)

Like animists, the Oraons believe in the existence of a supernatural force or power in certain persons, animals and inmate objects and symbols such as the *Mandar Sala*, the *Jatra Khunta*,⁵ village flags and emblems, totem symbols and so on. Such powers are attributed particularly to weird-shaped natural objects. These powers are not personalized and therefore are not spirits. The belief in evil forces such as *najar-gijar* (evil eye) and *baibhak* (evil mouth) are so deep-rooted in the Oraons, that they live in constant dread of these mysterious occult powers. Although they believe that *Dharmes* can neutralize the evil effects of these powers, the Oraons are highly prone to resort to magic to rid themselves of this fear. (Roy, 1972: 12-13) In this regard E.T Dalton said, “The doctrine of the Oraons is that man best pleases the Gods when he makes merry himself, so that acts of worship and propitiatory sacrifices are always associated with feasting, drinking, dancing and love- making.” (Dalton, 1872: 247)

Oraon religious practices give much importance to dealing properly with the various classes of spirits, so the strong influence of animism on their belief cannot be denied.

Nowadays, many Oraons have converted to Christianity and Buddhism. Though they converted they cannot desert their belief system. For better understanding, I will briefly describe their conversion to Buddhism and its practices in their livelihood in next section.



Source: Photos were taken by the author during field work.

10. Conversion to Buddhism

We are unaware of any authentic written document regarding the conversion of the Oraons to Buddhism. A little information is found in a book named *Uttar Vanger Itihas Oitirjha O Adibasi Oraoder Jibondhara* written by Jagannath Barua. Some sporadic information is also found in several articles published in non-academic journals. According to the information of the book of Jagannath Barua and non-academic articles, two Oraon leaders named Hariram Minji and Dino Minji⁶ came to the Dhaka International Buddhist Monastery from Rangpur in 1994. They informed the high priest of the International Buddhist Monastery that they were Buddhists. Their forefathers were also the followers of Buddhism. But with the decline of Buddhism and by the passage of time, Buddhism became a forgotten creed to them and they became worshippers of nature and Hindu gods and goddesses. They also stated that they were interested to become followers of Buddhism again and asked the high priest to convert them to Buddhism. (Barua, 2009: 170-171)

Historical evidences suggest that Buddhism was a vital force in North Bengal from the time of its inception to the 12th century. (Majumdar, 1974: 522) Many ruins of ancient Buddhist monasteries were uncovered at North Bengal. Among them Sompur Vihar, Vasu Vihar, Jagaddal Vihar, Halud Vihar and Shitakot Vihar were famous for their religious and academic activities. Scholars from abroad used to come here to acquire knowledge on Buddhism. Sompur Monastery is declared as World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1985. Archaeological findings and historical evidences suggest that from 7th Century to the 12th Century Tantric Buddhism overwhelmed the religious life of North Bengal to a great extent. So, the claim of Oraons that they are Buddhist may have authentic grounds.

After discussion with the two Oraon leaders Buddhanandha Bhikkhu, acting high priest of the monastery asked Mr. Jyoti Bikash Barua, an engineer of Roads and Highways of Rangpur District, to inquire about Oraons. After inquiry Mr. Jyoti Bikash

Barua informed to the Bhikkhus of Dhaka that the Oraons do not have any monastery, they do not know Buddhist prayers and do not know the Buddhist rites and rituals. They only recite the name of Buddha. To other religious communities they are known as Hindu and in national census they are counted as lower caste Hindu and Christian.

After this, Jyoti Bikash Barua discussed with the Oraons of Mithapukur (sub-district of the Rangpur district) the possibility of establishing a Buddhist monastery. Inspired by him the Oraons of Mithapukur, Rangpur District became very enthusiastic to establish a monastery at Mithapukur and they declared that they would donate land and render all kinds of help to establish a monastery. Mr. Jyoti Bikash Barua relayed this to the bhikkhus of Dhaka International Buddhist Monastery. Then Sunanda Priya Bhikkhu and Jinananda Bhikkhu headed by Buddhananda Bhikkhu went to Rangpur in 1994 and taught them about Buddhism. After hearing the preaching, an Oraon named Gandu Tapyia donated land to establish a monastery. In 1995 a monastery called Benuvana Bauddha Vihar was established at Mithapukur. It was the first Buddhist Monastery in North Bengal. In this regard, Rev. Shilabhadra Bhikkhu, Dr. Sukomal Barua, Mr. Manulal Barua, Engineer Dibbendu Bikash Chowdhury Barua, Uttam Barua and many leading figures of the Barua Buddhist community played an important role to establish monasteries and spread Buddhism in North Bengal. Specially, Rev. Shilabhadra Bhikkhu visited the villages of Rangpur, Dinajpur, Bogra, Naogaon, Joypurhat Districts. They also sent missionaries to preach Buddhism in those Districts. With their active help monasteries were established at Mithapukur, Chatnipara, Sekpara, Voyalpur, sahapur, Amodpur, Nurpur, Barakandri, Jagannathpur, Kurapara, Dharmadas Kutipara, Madhabpara, Surjapur, Pirpal and other villages. Thus, Buddhism again revived in the North Bengal area of Bangladesh. Nowadays, 21 Buddhist Monasteries and 5909 Buddhists are found in Oraon society. (Author's fieldwork, 2013-2014)

11. Conclusion

In this article I have presented a brief description about the Oraons. The study shows that anthropologically and linguistically Oraons belong to Dravidian group and constitute a patriarchal society. Their original settlement was at Karush, the south-eastern bank of Ganges, presently known as district of *Sahabad*. However, they came to Bangladesh from various parts of India, especially from Orissa, Choto Nagpur, Ranchi, Bihar and the Rajmahal Hill Tracts. They started to come here during the period of Mughal (1526-1707 A.D.) but most of them came as workers during the British period (1757-1947 A.D.). Mainly they live in northern part of Bangladesh. In Bangladesh Population Census they are counted as lower caste Hindu and Christian. However, from 1994 many Oraons converted to Buddhism. In Bangladesh, a multi-cultural and multi-religious country, they maintain their distinct identity as a separate ethnic community from their Bengali neighbors through their language, housing, food and drinks and behavior.

Notes

1. During my fieldwork conducted between the times of July 2013 to March 2014 I am also informed that Kurukh speaking people also can speak Sadri.
2. A Japanese monk named Hiroyeshi J. S. Fukai established this organization.
3. the same data is also found in an unpublished report of Human Resources Development Foundation (HRDF), (see Mazharul Islam Toru, *Bangladesher Adibashi Sangskriti*, Kathaprokash, Dhaka, 2008, p. 91-92)
4. 'Dharmes' or 'Dharme' is the term by which the Oraons know God. 'Dharmes' is the nominative singular of the word 'Dharme'. The word 'Dharmes' is a composite of 'Dharm' (religion) and 'es' (lord), which means 'lord of religion'. Dharmes is God, the Creator, and the Supreme Being for the Oraon tribals. He is the father almighty in the Oraon religious system of belief and is widely respected and feared. There are many myths attributed to him. cf. Reetu Raj Ekka, *The Karam Fes-*

tival of the oraons: An Ethno Linguistic and semiotic analysis; Ph.D. Dissertation, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2005, p. 21; The Oraons believe, Dharami or Dharmes is the creator of this universe. His highness is the Supreme Being and everything happens according to his will. The God exist in the Sun. Sun is believe to be the God in Oraon society and in their various offerings they give importance to the Sun.

5. Groups of villages occasionally hold dancing-meets called *ja-tras*, outside the village in an open ground. They plant a post, five to seven feet in height called *Jatra-khunta* by the side of the ground. *Mandar-salas* are pyramid-shaped mounds of earth, by the side of some *jatra-* ground outside the village. Sometimes fowls are sacrificed to the *jatra-khunta* and *mandar-sala*. See S. C. Roy, *Oraon Religion and Customs*, op, cit., p. 61-62.
6. Details information about these two leaders is not found in any books and articles.

Acknowledgement

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