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The Universe of the Oraons

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Abstract

Tribals are one of the indispensable parts of Indian society in which they are vulnerable in all aspects. They are poor economically but culturally rich in the sense of social formation. So, it will be obvious to reveal the underlying structures and relationships of thoughts and experiences of the tribal folk that constitutes social reality. Concise Oxford English Dictionary states that tribe is a social division in a traditional society consisting of linked families or communities with a common culture and dialect. On the other hand, a tribe considers as a group of people in the primitive or barbaric stage of development acknowledging the authority of a chief and usually regarding them as having a common ancestor. The last census of India has shown that the tribals constitute 8.61% of the total population of the country, numbering 104.28 million, and cover about 15% of India's area. It would be necessary that the tribal world has been explored for the country's betterment. For this purpose, the paper has gone through the Oraons world with qualitative and quantitative research methods.

Keywords: *Oraons, De-tribalization, Dharmesh, Karam, Parha Raja.*

1. Statement of the Problem and Objectives: The choice of my study has been influenced by many a factor. The tribal is the earliest settler in our country and yet they still represent the most backward segment of all Indian communities. The backwardness is multidimensional. They are backward in economic aspects: they have very low average income; their standard of living is deplorable. Most of them maintain a hand-to-mouth existence. They live in indecent houses with little amenities. These people are mostly uneducated and ignorant. They are, moreover, subject to hatred of the people of higher strata in our society and also governmental apathy. In short, despite the country's independence of seven decades the tribal are lagging economically as well as socially. These pitiable socio-economic conditions are likely to generate a strong sense of deprivation in them that might lead to their resentment against the political order. Given the present state of deprivations of the tribal and their resentment against the political administration, they are highly susceptible to be the prey of outside forces. Given such an

explosive backdrop, it is highly pertinent to study the tribal universe for a better understanding of India's most vulnerable segments. The objective of the study is to assess the patterns of the tribal world especially the *Oraons* that would reflect the public administration's attitude towards them. The study, undertaken for research-oriented investigation is expected to shed much light on government policymaking and its implementation.

2. Review of the Literature: A review of the writings and publications of several authors on voting participation will help the study and it can underline the major trends of research in tribal political behaviour on the other the scope for further research on the problems of the tribal.

Man is a tribal animal¹. One who explored that tribalism in sex and courtship, aggression and war, sports, and many other facets of society based on the statement. Following these views have derived from the features of the tribes are conjointly find in entire human society. In that way, we examine the presence and significance of tribal folk in both aboriginal and modern cultures. Here we have to argue the tribal research. The tribal research deals with the approaches, constraints, structures, and techniques of the tribal research². One study deal with the approaches and problems to the study of tribal societies in India such as (a) unemployment; (b) poverty; (c) reduction to the minority; (d) deprivation of their traditional means of livelihood; (e) de-tribalization etc³. *Tribal Society in India*⁴ focuses on the manifold aspirations of tribal society. *Tribal Movements in India, Vol – I*⁵, and *II*⁶ discuss the various ethnic and tribal movements in India and highlight the tribal exploitation by the non-tribals and the tribe's agitation against it. A study on the tribal agitation tries to understand the tribal protests against the colonial masters, zamindars, and money lenders through subaltern academic parleys, particularly in Midnapur district during the first three decades of the twentieth century on the light of Adivasi politics in Midnapur⁷. Another study also has pointed out the protest story of the tribal people living in Jharkhand⁸.

It is important to discuss some literature on *Oraons* to explores their unique world. E. T. Dalton⁹ described the life and times of the *Oraons* in the nineteenth century. He described the *Kurukh* or *Oraons* of Chutia Nagpur as the people best known in many parts of Indian as *Dhangars*. S. C. Roy¹⁰ in his seminal works has discussed in detail the *Oraons* and brings them into the limelight of the Indian political system. In *Oraon Religion and Customs*¹¹, the author describes a painful picture of the tribal exploitation by money lenders, merchants, and landowners, who used to take advantage of the ignorance and faiths of the aborigines and uproot them of their land. Father Dehon¹² tells on the religion and social customs of the *Oraons* in his *Religion and Customs of the Oraons*. He highlights the *Karma* and *Sarhul* are the two main religious festivals of *Oraons*. The *Karma* festival is celebrated when the rice is ready for planting out and it is the renewal of vegetation. The *Sarhul* festival cannot be done till the Shal tree gives the flowers for the

ceremony. *Sarhul* is associated with praying for the fertility of the land and a good paddy harvest.

R. O. Dhan¹³ has shown us the wide cultural aspirations of the *Oraons* subset. The *Oraons* do not admit outsiders into the tribe. There is no offense for which a man is permanently put out of caste, but a woman living with any man other than an *Oraon* is expelled. The *Oraons* eat almost all kinds of food, including pork, fowls, and crocodiles, but abstain from beef. Their status is very low among the Hindus; they are usually made to live in a separate corner of the village and are sometimes not allowed to draw water from the village well. Edmund Champion¹⁴ seeks to understand the history of *Oraons*, basically the social ceremonies and social customs. The book is regarded as the cultural survey of *Oraon* tribes, which captured how a particular tribe attempts to use social power to overcome their fears of socio-economic-political subordination by the so-called civilized community. S. Toppo¹⁵ focuses on their educational scenario. There were very few schools to cater to the educational needs of the *Oraons* have been established before the Independence in Chhotanagpur. Today there are several schools in the area run by both governments, private and religious agencies. Rajasri Basu¹⁶ was concerned with how the psychology of the ethnic social groups acted as the influencing factor to their political participation in Indian politics. She seeks to understand from the perspective of the Jharkhand Movement the inter-relation between psychology and political participation in the context of a tribe named *Santals*.

3. The void Area: The brief account of the existing literature on the study of the tribal given above highlights that despite the existence of various books on tribal in general and studies on *Oraons* in particular, one finds a serious lack of a comprehensive study on the universe of the *Oraons*, particularly their changing attitude towards the Indian society. The available literature on the tribal shows some bias towards a few particular subsets and neglects others. More works have been done for exploring the societal behavior of *Santals* ignoring the other tribal groups. The present study seeks to cover this relatively unassessed field and fill in the void in respect of an exploration of the life patterns of the *Oraons*.

4. Methodology: Qualitative and quantitative methodologies have been used to understand the universe of the *Oraons*. Data and information from both primary and secondary sources have been gathered for this study to arrive at conclusions. The schedules, documents, manifestos, memoranda, official correspondence, government reports, official documents will be the primary sources of study. The responses from the tribe particularly the *Oraons*, have been gathered, studied, and analyzed and the results help to reach a certain end. Various books, journals, periodicals, census handbooks, etc. regarded as the secondary sources of the study.

5. Universe of the Oraons: The universe of the *Oraons* has to be unfolded not to mere academic purpose but it is very natural to understand our complex-ridden society is obvious. They are one of the biggest tribes in India that have migrated from Maharashtra and Chhotanagpur plateau to West Bengal. The *Oraons* belong to the Proto-Australoid ethnicity.

Their mother tongue is *Kurukh* but *Oraon* children know little about *Kurukh*, but nowadays the adults speak among themselves in *Kurukh* but use Bengali and Hindi while communicating with the outsiders¹⁷. Sir H. Risley¹⁸ states that the color of most *Oraons* is the darkest brown approaching to black, the hair being jet-black, coarse, and rather inclined to be frizzy. Projecting jaws and teeth, thick lips, low narrow foreheads, and broad flat noses are the features characteristic of the tribe. The eyes are often bright and full, and no obliquity is observable in the opening of the eyelids. On the *Oraon* youths, Dalton states, though with features very far from being following the statutes of beauty, are of a singularly pleasing class, their faces beaming with animation and good humor.

5.1. Society: The term *Oraon* probably came from *Orgora* (Hawk) or *O-Ravan*. They have several exogamous totemic clans, which are as follows. *Ekka, Minz, Kujur, Bura, Tirkey, Beck, Khess, Bandh Bakura, Bahulla, Khakha, Tigga, Toppo, Lakra, Bakhla, Khalko, Kindo, Kispotta, Munjini, Pana, Runda*. They use community names and clan names as surnames¹⁹. The *Oraons* are a peace-loving tribal social group. They lead very peaceful lives to maintain a very harmonious and cordial relation with their neighbor.

The patrilineal unit directs the *Oraon* society in which the joint and nuclear families are prevalent. The *Dhumkuria* (the bachelor dormitory) is regarded as the traditional *Oraon* social organization, where all the bachelors of the village, from the age of about nine and above, would sleep at night. It has made the prosperous and disciplined social life among the *Oraons* but nowadays they do not give importance to the *Dhumkuria* life. Dance and music of *Oraons* have not once pleased, but there has a definite social end. Here some kinds of dance have been put in the pitch named *Karma, Jaudra, Sarhul, Bheja, Panky, Angnai, Jatra, Damkach*, so on. There are following some marriage songs and dances but which is different from seasonal dances and songs. The *Jhumar* songs reflect their lifestyle and their religious philosophy.

The practices of human sacrifice (called *otanga* or *orka/urka*) are the remarkable features of *Oraon* society. It is extremely rare; evidence suggests the phenomenon is most prevalent in the Ranchi district. *Otanga* has been made to satisfy *Anna Kuari* or *Mahadhani* who is the cruelest and repulsive deity of all. The primitive people believe that the goddess can give good crops and make a man rich instead of she requires human sacrifice. During the nineteenth century, British officials reported a much broader incidence, occurring among the *Munda, Oraon, Gond, and Santal* tribes. Police records show that even as late as the 1980s there were a couple of sacrifices in a year among the *Munda, Maria, and Oraon* tribes, and perhaps slightly more if one assumes that not all cases reached police attention. Despite all the vigilance of the authorities, there are still human sacrifices in Chhotanagpur. As the vigilance of the authorities increases, so also does the carefulness of the *Urka* or *Otanga* increases. They choose for their victims' poor waifs or strangers, whose disappearance no one will notice. The human sacrifices usually occur in remote places around the beginning of the sowing season (the *Otanga/Urka* are at work in April and May) and the associated festival of *Sarhul*. The last item is presumably a part of

the human offering that the sacrificed will bury in his field. Sometimes blood of the sacrificial victim is mixed with seed grain before it is sown.

5.2. Food: *Oraons* are taken boiled rice along with pulses or vegetables, fruits, fish, and meat. Generally, two principal meals are taken, one at midday and the other at night, and besides, they often take breakfast in the morning. Freshly cooked rice is also taken as breakfast. They eat the meat of goat, pig, fowl, some wild animals, and birds, etc. K.S. Singh²⁰ cited they prefer to take country alcohol like *haria*, *daru*, *mahua*, *illi*, *chulai* (in all are indigenous liquor).

5.3. House: The *Oraons* make their houses with a mud wall and flat roof of a dry plate call *Khapra* and other materials are woods, bamboos, sticks, and dry hay though the rich people make their houses with bricks, iron bars cements sand and stone chips. Their house includes some items as mats, cots, wooden stools, baskets, cups, plates, cushions, rope, mortar, pestle, and oil presses. All of these are made from forest products. In direct household activities they are depending on *Lohar* (blacksmith) for metal households, *Chhuttar* (carpenter) for wooden households, and *Kumar* (potter) for mud-made pots.

5.4. Garments and Ornaments: *Kurukh* men and women wear simple dresses. Women wear a blouse, *sari*, when men wear the *Dhoti* (a long piece of cloth worn around the loins by males), *Genji* (underwear), and the *lungi* (kind of male wear). Poor men wear the *Gamchha* (indigenous towel) and poor women do not use a blouse to cover the upper part of the body, a *sari* is sufficient for it. The solvent and educated *Kurukhs* wear shirts, trousers, and Coat, etc.

The *Oraons* like to wear metallic and wooden-made ornaments. The ornaments are made of gold, silver, brass, and copper for their earrings, bracelets, bangles, and ornaments made of wooden for their earrings, called *Bindyo*. They use a silver-made ornament for the neck, which is called *Hansli*. The *Oraons* are use ornaments a lot but the spiritual concept of ornament is very different. They believe that all ornaments are human-made and are mortal. Therefore, they invented tattoos as permanent ornament called *Godna*. They have three parallel vertical lines on the forehead which form a distinctive mark, and other patterns on the arms, chest, knees, and ankles. It is believed that *Godna* is the only ornament that goes with them after death which carries as an *Oraon* at his death when they go into the haven.

5.5 Marriage: The first ceremony for marriage is known as *pan bandhi* (the settling of the price for marriages) for which the boy's father accompanied by some men of his village goes to the girl's house. When the marriage day comes, the bridegroom proceeds with a large party of his friends, male and female, to the bride's house. After this, they have a feast till late in the night. The next morning bread cooked by the bride's mother is taken to the village spring, where all the women partake of it. When they have finished, they bring a vessel of water with some leaves of the mango tree in it. Meanwhile, the bride and bridegroom are in the house, being anointed with oil and turmeric by their respective sisters. When this is complete, Dalton states a gun is fired and then by some arrangement vessels full of water, placed over the bower, are upset, and the young couple and those near them

receive a drenching shower-bath, the women shouting, "The marriage is done". Now the time for the special customs of a marriage ceremony. Father Dehon continues, comes the last ceremony, which is called *khiritengna handia* (story of the indigenous liquor), and is considered by the *Oraons* to be the true form of marriage that has been handed down to them by their forefathers. Divorce prevails and widow-marriage is a regular practice in the *Oraons*. Father Dehon states, the first time a widow marries the bridegroom must pay Rs. 3-8 for her; if successive husbands die her price goes down by a rupee upon a fresh marriage, so that a fifth husband would pay only eight annas. But the adultery cases are comparatively rare.

5.6. Religion: The *Oraon* believes in a traditional form of religion named *Sarna Dharam*. Their main deity is *Dharmes* (who exists in the sun). But some village deities are their religious cultures like *Chala Pacho*, *Kalimai or Chandi*, and *Gaondeoti*. An *Oraon* acts as *Pahan* (the village priest) in most of the villages. The other sacred specialist is *Ojha* or *Mati* who cures diseases by appeasing evil spirits. They celebrate the festivals of *Sarhul*, *Karma*, *Phagun*, *Sohrai*, *Dussehra*, *Jatia*, *Hariari*, *Kadleta*, *Kharhiani*, *Asari*, *Nawakhani*, and a few more. *Karama* is the worship of trees performed symbolically with the *kadam* tree or its branches. *Karma* festival is celebrated when the rice is ready for planting out and it is the renewal of vegetation. *Sarhul* festival cannot be done till the *shal* tree gives the flowers for the ceremony. This takes place at the beginning of April on any day when the tree is in flower. *Sarhul* is associated with praying for the fertility of the land and a good paddy harvest.

5.7. Education: There were very few schools to cater to the educational needs of the *Oraons* have been established before the Independence in the *Chhotanagpur* area. Today there are several schools in the area run by both governments, private and religious agencies. But the *Kurukh* has not been used as a medium of instruction to the *Oraons* in these schools. Though there are constitutional provisions to use minority and tribal language as the medium of instruction where the majority of the students in a school come from one linguistic background. It is often argued that the use of the *Kurukh* language as the medium of instruction will hamper the learning of regional languages which would be the only language used in higher education. Now, it is good news that the *Kurukhs* language has been introduced in the degree courses as one of the Modern Indian Languages at the Ranchi University recently. A training center in basic health education and nursing is opened to train them. The preservation of their knowledge regarding the health system is a must. Training centers for nurses be opened among them. *Ayurvedic* College could be a suitable institution for preserving, promoting their health-related knowledge. Their day-to-day practice in the health system is keeping them fit for daily activity but their economy is unable to support them for a healthy normal life.

5.8. Health: The health status of *Tana Bhagat* also deserves special mention. They are practicing Gandhian treatment systems like "*Mitti Ka Lep*" (clay therapy), use of herbs, roots, and fruits to treat ailment related to fever, headache, anemia, waterborne disease, etc. They use Ayurvedic medicine, therefore, it is suggested that their knowledge of herbs, roots, and fruits be recorded systematically. An Ayurvedic public health system augmented

with the allopathic system also is opened in the villages of *Tana Bhagats* to enable them to keep them healthy. A healthy *Tana Bhagat* will lead healthy Gandhian life. They seldom take allopathic medicine.

5.9. Economy: Farming is the primary occupation of the *Oraons*, in the present time they have entered into public and private service and commercial businesses in our country as well as in foreign countries. But formerly the practice of Hunting was considered a great important profession of *Oraons*, though it has been reduced during the present days to the status of a ceremonial event. Landless *Oraon* men and women work as land laborers. They are involved as fisherman but very few people engage in vegetable cultivation and selling. Women worked harder than men. In a crisis, many people tried to survive by changing their occupations. Some people depend upon selling non-timber forest produce and firewood in nearby villages. Some people join wage laboring for the first time in a compulsive situation. They do not know skilled work due to illiteracy. Lack of job opportunity and bad economic condition of the family, some people are leaving their native land and migrated to a distant metropolitan city and other places to work in a different kind of labor work. Some middlemen or agents are involved in this affair. They give the hope to provide works in that place, but they have been treated worse physically and mentally. Girls, who engaged in maid-servant, are sexually exploited by the so-called civilized countrymen. They have migrated to the state as seasonal or permanent laborers in tea gardens, engaged in the reclamation of the Sunder bans and various construction works.

5.10. Politics: A new approach of tribal politics has to be taking off for understood independently of the framework of tribal folk. Two of the central premises of this new approach may briefly be noted: a) the modern state has an inherent tendency of obliterating and disarticulating the marginal societies including tribals; b) tribal politics is seen largely as a last-ditch attempt at asserting the distinct identity of tribes²¹. The first tendency is very dangerous to understand the tribal folk but in second points they are bound to resist the state in any manner because their identity is in under the threat. In this theoretical light, we try to understand the political condition of tribes the *Oraons*. They think that the root cause of their deplorable condition lies on colonial rulers, zamindars, and money lenders. So, change for the bad socio-economic condition they revolt against the devils but they failed, for that very reasons²².

Now, this is the time for discussions on the traditional forms of political systems of the *Oraons*. They have a traditional panchayat at the village level. Mahato or *Moral* is the head of the panchayat. *Mahato's* assistant is called *Charidar* and the messengers are called *Paramanik*. They decided cases of *Parha* or regional council, composed of a member of villages each *Parha* is known by the member of the village it encompasses. The Mahato of the Raja village is known as *Parha Raja*. The others are *Dewan*, *Kotwar*, *Panery*, *Panbharwa*, and *Mukatwa* villages. The *Parha* Organization with the superior position of the original settler family has practically diet out. The new leadership that is emerging draws its sanction from its capacity to tackle government officials rather than supernatural deities. The three-tire panchayat mainly deals with development and welfare activities. The *Parha* council now exists in almost vestigial form. The *Oraon* women do not have any

role in political activities, except exercising their franchise. Very recently, a few *Oraon* women have been elected as members of the three-tier panchayat systems.

The *Oraons* have their traditional community council at the village and regional levels. Their village heads are *Mahato* and at the regional level, the council is headed by *Parha Raja*. The other council of officials is *Dewan Kotwar, Panery* etc²³.

Tana Bhagats is very simple. They do not know anything in polity other than Gandhiji. Most of them are unaware of the political system and political ecology of the center as well as of the state. But there are few like *Tana Bhagat* who was a Member of the Legislative Assembly of Bihar during 1985-1990. He was the lone MLA. In Panchayat except for *Shobha Kujur*, none could win even as a Member of Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti, or Zila Parishad. Miss *Shobha Kujur* won a ward member seat of Chatra Zila Parishad. Most of them feel that election has become very costly. Being a follower of Mahatma Gandhi, they are aware of the polity but are unable to contest due to their financial condition. Most of them believe that there should be reservations for *Tana Bhagat* in each seat of three-tier institutions of Panchayati Raj as well as for the Legislative assembly. A socio-religious movement was initiated by the *Oraon* which is known as *the Tana Bhagat* movement (1913-14). *Oraon* saints *Jatra Bhagat* and *Turia Bhagat* formed *Tana Bhagats*. The *Tana Bhagats* opposed the taxes imposed on them by the British and they staged civil disobedient movement even before Gandhi's infamous movement against the *British Raj*.

6. Findings: Despite the commendable number of tribes in the Indian conglomeration, they are all-rounded lag comparison to general people. The study shows that they are economically poor, and their hand-to-mouth existence bears as the testimony of the black spot of Indian developmental achievements. No administrative initiatives and exertions did not work out to economic upliftment for the tribals in general and the *Oraons* in particular. Most of the *Oraons* do not have agricultural land to live on despite the fact they are the earliest settlers of the land. The *Oraons* have to be obligated to migrate from their residents to different workplaces for their sustainability, that is why their child is bound to reside beyond institutional education. Other observations of the *Oraons* world have to express their distinctive cultures and political institutions. Generally, the tribes are a rich set of the Indian conglomeration. Their living style is the very lesson to the ostensibly developed world because they follow religiously the nature-friendly existence that would be better for our future. They have their political institution that unfolds the way of universal political participation. The *Parha Raja* concept does represent a tiny republic that could be presented as open in political activities. Men and women jointly actively take part in their distinctive political worlds.

7. Concluding Words: The State is known as an institution that attempts to penetrate the socio-economic problems of the people at large and find solutions to fulfill their socio-economic-political aspirations. Under the parliamentary system of politics in India, the elected representatives are in charge of this vital responsibility. If the representatives that form the government are sensitive to the particular needs and aspirations of the people, they are likely to conform to the mainstream political order. However, if the government is indifferent and apathetic to the people's expectations, the different political behavior of the

people is likely to appear. The primordial identities such as the tribals are likely to be satisfied with the running political and governmental system if they find that they are well-represented in the national level or local level of democratic bodies and their legitimate demands are being properly addressed. However, in case their experience is such that they are being neglected either in their representation to the different democratic bodies and/or their aspirations are not being taken care of by the government, they are likely to unrest and fight against the authority. Therefore, by studying the universe of *Oraon* people we may discover whether these people are in favor of the existing political system or against it.

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