

# Jharkhand Tribals in An Urban Situation: A Study on The Oraons of Kolkata

**Key words:-** Jharkhand Tribes, Oraons, Munda, Oraons of Kolkata

*The present paper focuses on a tribal group, the Oraons who have come from Jharkhand to long back and now settlement in and around Kolkata. The Oraons were found to live in cluster and fighting to maintain their own cultural identity.*

The new state Jharkhand created in 2000 stands for .the land of forest, the name given to the forest highland of Chotanagpur plateau. The state has got a significant proportion of tribal population primarily including Munda, Oraon, Ho, Santhal, Pahariya, Birhor, Asur, Mal Pahariya and others constituting of 26.3% of the total population in Jharkhand (2001 Census). Many of them have migrated from Jharkhand to other states, specially from rural to urban areas for different reasons. The worsening vulnerability of tribal population in this region is contributed by shrinking avenues of economic emigration to other states, that they had earlier resorted to historically, coupled with displacement, dislocation, and disruption of their livelihood patterns, apart from their increasing relative deprivation in healthcare and education. Large scale tribal displacement took place during post-independence period which resulted in forced out migration of the tribal populations (Maharatna & Chikte, 2004). In recent decades people migrated to the neighbouring state of West Bengal in search of better economic opportunities. Other factors included exploitation by the non-tribals and losing property. The people living in rural areas are attracted to the cities with the hope of better living. There a few tribal settlements in Kolkata who have emigrated from the rural areas of West Bengal as well as neighbouring state of Jharkhand. The question is whether these groups could retain their cultural identity or not.

Chotanagpur plateau is said to be the original homeland of the Oraons. The studied population have come from Ranchi district and other parts of Jharkhand. Out migration of the tribals had started in the second half of the 19th century. Under the colonial rule, with the introduction of taxation on land, thousands of Oraons and Mundas were dispossessed of their lands and forest causing massive exodus to the tea gardens of Assam and West Bengal as labourers (Bhowmik, 1981). The system of emigration continued thereafter.

In Kolkata there are few tribal settlements in different pockets. They are mostly Oraons and the Mundas. The Oraons of Kolkata have come here long back. The present generation even doesn't know when their ancestors began to settle here. But their history says that they are living here from three generations. Before that they were in Sundarban

areas. They were brought by the British for clearing jungles.

The study was done on the Oraons of Uttar Gargacha. They were the victims of different urban projects. They lost their cultivable land as well as homestead land for the sake of urbanisation process. Their tradition and culture had undergone changes after coming in contact with the non-tribals.

**Methodology:**

This study was conducted on the Oraons settled in a cluster of living in Uttar Gargacha area near Garia station in Kolkata. There were 43 Oraon families in this area inhabited by 190 individuals. Primary data were collected through structured schedules with both open and closed ended questions. Interviews and group discussions were conducted for collecting data on their cultural tradition; past and present. Key informant interviewing was done to know about the problem of land. A major part of this research was based on observation.

**Location of the area:**

Uttar Gargacha Adivasi Para comes under the jurisdiction of Sonarpur Police Station. It is under Alipore subdivision, word number 1 of Kolkata Municipal Corporation. Being a part of megacity Kolkata, this area has connection with other parts of Kolkata through bus, train and other vehicles.

**The studied population:**

Among the Dravidian speaking tribes of Chotanagpur plateau, the Oraons or Kurukh are the most important tribe. The word 'Oraon' is probably derived from horo meaning human, a Munda word, as is also Kurukh, from Koro (Roy, 1985). The Oraon are the agricultural tribe found in Orissa, Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal. It is believed that British brought the Oraons to West Bengal from Bihar and Orissa. They are the most prominent tribe of New Mal, which lies in the Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal. The Oraons constitute 14% of the total tribal population in West Bengal.

The settlement of Uttar Gargacha is quite old. This area was under the then Zamindar Photik Sarkar. He handed over this land to Haripada Oraon. Later on he distributed it to other villagers. Now, many of them have sold their lands and few still have, but they are unable to cultivate it.

The Oraon population of the studied area are as follows.

**Table: 1 - The studied population**

Population	No	Percent
Male	87	45.79
Female	103	54.21
Total	190	100

The total population of the Oraons living in Uttar Gargacha was 190 including 45.79% male and 54.21% female. The sex ratio was 1184 (per 1000 male).

**Education:**

Education is considered as a key to the achievement of status and positions in a society. The national literacy rate of the Scheduled

Tribes was 45.61 percent including 59.14 percent male and 34.75 percent females. In general literacy rate in urban areas remains higher than rural areas. The tribal people who are living in urban areas since long are expected to be more literate than their rural counter parts. They get better opportunities for education. In this context literacy rate and standard of education of the studied population was documented.

**Table: 2 - Standard of education among the studied population**

Popul.	Illiterate	I -IV	V-X	XI-XII	Grad.	Total
Male	24 (27.59)	43 (49.43)	16 (18.39)	3 (3.45)	1 (1.15)	87 (100.00)
Fe- male	41 (39.81)	53 (51.46)	7 (6.80)	2 (1.94)	-	103 (100.00)
Total	65 (34.21)	96 (50.53)	23 (12.11)	5 (2.63)	1 (0.53)	190 (100.00)

Among the studied population 34.21% were illiterate, rest being literate. There were more illiterate female than males. Most of the literate men and women got primary level education followed by secondary level education. There were many students also. Only one male did graduation. There were a few male and females who were studying in class XI-XII after passing Madhyamik (Table: 2). But unfortunately there were dropouts also.

**Table: 3 - Dropout rate among the studied population**

Population	I-IV	V - X	XI-XII	Total
Male	20 (71.43)	7 (25.00)	1 (3.57)	28 (100.00)
Female	32 (86.49)	3 (8.11)	2 (5.41)	37 (100.00)
Total	52 (80.00)	10 (15.38)	3 (4.62)	65 (100.00)

The rate of dropout was higher among the females (37 - 56.92%) than in males (28 -43.08%). Most of the males and females dropped at primary level that is in class - - IV (80%). At the middle school level (V-X) 25% of the Oraon male and only 8.11% of the females dropped. A few also dropped at XI-XII standard (4.62%) (Table: 3). Majority of the dropout cases were found among the middle age group population. These people could not continue their studies due to economic reasons. They had to give economic support to the families. But at present the trend of completing education could be found among the Oraons of the studied areas.

**Occupation:**

One of the reasons for tribal movement from rural to urban areas is economic. Varied economic opportunities drive them towards cities. At the same time the urban living tribal people get different opportunities that were unknown to them previously. Educated tribal men and women get the benefits of reservation in Government jobs.

The following table shows the number of workers among the studied population.

**Table: 4 - Number of workers in respect of total population**

Population	No. of workers	Percent to the total population
Male	44	50.57
Female	32	31.07
Total	76	40.00

There were 50.57% male workers in the studied area, while there were only 31.07% female workers (Table: 4). The nature of occupation of the studied population is given below.

The nature of occupation of the Oraons shows that most of the men of Uttar Gargacha were service holders (8.95%). There were more self employed women (5.26%) than men (3.68%). The women had stalls at the roadside. There were day labourers also they formed 11.58% of the total working people. The others category included carpentry, fishing, crafts making, maidservants etc (Table: 5). It was interesting

**Table: 5 - Nature of occupation among the studied population**

Nature of occupation	Male	Female	Total
Service	17 (8.95)	3 (1.58)	20 (10.53)
Self Employed	7 (3.67)	10 (5.26)	17 (8.94)
Day labour	12 (6.32)	10 (5.26)	22 (11.58)
Others	8 (4.21)	9 (4.74)	17 (8.97)
Total	44 (23.16)	32 (16.84)	76 (40.00)

to find that many of the males and females in the studied area were working in Government sector.

**Effect of urbanisation on the studied population:**

Urbanisation has influenced the living condition of the tribal people in different regions of India. In case of the Oraons of Kolkata the scenario is not an exception. Their economy, land use pattern as well as social tradition has been greatly influenced by the process of urban development.

**Changing land use pattern:**

The main problem of urbanisation is related with land. The problem of land alienation has been rampant in all the states containing tribal population. In relation with the problem of land alienation among the tribals, Roy Burman (1982) noted that in India most of the tribals look upon land not only as source of livelihood, but also as the inevitable

nexus of their identity and it is a symbol of the social organization of the community.

Land alienation of the tribal people is a common scenario in India. Land is not only related tribal economy, but it is a part of their life as many social traditions are associated with the land. Land is also associated with their identity. According to the latest statistics nearly 88% of the Scheduled Tribes are engaged in agriculture. The Oraons of Uttar Gargacha were also agriculturists. Presently they are facing problem of land alienation due growth of urban areas.

The Oraons of Uttar Gargacha migrated from surroundings areas of Jharkhand around 100 years ago. They started living in this place by clearing the jungles. Previously the agricultural land belonged to the Zamindars, but later Zamindars transferred his land to the head of the Oraon community to look after it. The Oraons were working under their head and he allotted pieces of land to every Oraon family for agricultural purpose.

**Past situation:**

The Oraons had 68 bighas of agricultural land behind Peerless Hospital. They had two major types of land, the high land (Unchu jomi) and the low land (Nichu jomi). These two types of lands have different water holding capacity. They used to cultivate varieties of paddy. Since the land was fertile, they cultivated thrice in a year. The varieties of paddy included Jaya, Pattnai, Masuri, Pankaj etc. They mostly used the rice mostly for consumption purpose. They also stored rice for future. There was proper irrigation facility in this area as the main canal had connection with the river Ganges. They prepared small channels connecting the main canals for irrigation. Rainwater also supplemented the need for water in the field. System of hiring labour was not there. Several brothers used to cultivate together.

**Present situation:**

The scenario has changed from during last few years. Two multinational companies Ambuja and Sahara group made their appearance and took the agricultural land from the Oraon families either partially or completely. The companies used the lands for some urban projects like building housing complexes, shopping malls etc. In return of the lands they promised to give with Rs. 4 lakh as compensation for 1 bigha of land. The Sahara group gave compensation to some extent but Ambuja group hasn't given single penny compensation to the landowners till date. The Oraons who still have cultivable lands in surrounding areas they could not cultivate due to developing urban projects as the main canal system connection to the river has been disconnected. In absence of irrigation facility they had to depend on rainwater for cultivation. Under this situation the Oraons who are doing jobs in government and non-government sectors are economically better in position. But those who didn't get any compensation for the land given or any kind of job were facing economic problem. They are still expecting the compensation. Present land holding pattern of the Oraons of Uttar Gargacha is given below.

**Table: 6 - Land holding pattern of the studied population**

Total number of families	Number of families having cultivable land	Number of families do not have land
43 (100.00)	23 (53.48)	20 (46.51)

Among the 43 Oraon families 23 families (53.48%) possessed cultivable lands. Among them a few families have lost their land for the urban projects.

Due to urban development projects in the studied areas 17 families (73.92%) have lost their lands. Among them 4 (17.40%) families lost 10 kathas of cultivable

**Table: 7 - Families affected due to urban developments**

Families having cultivable land	Families retaining their land	Families lost their land partially (10 katha)	Families lost their land completely (4 bigha)
23 (100.00)	6 (26.08)	4 (17.40)	13 (56.52)

land which was considered as partial loss. On the other hand 13 (56.52%) families lost 4 bighas of land that was a complete loss to those families. The multinational companies did not take land from 6 (26.08%) families as their land was not in proper position to take up urban development projects (Table: 7). But they were not even in position to cultivate their land. Losing land was painful to them. At the same time it resulted in economic crisis to the families. This has also affected their traditional practice. Traditionally in past they buried the deceased, but now due to lack of space they started cremating the deceased in the near by cremation ground.

#### **Changing social tradition:**

The Oraons were influenced by the urban living condition. Among many integrative traits the language, religion and customs, kinship and marriage customs were observed to have undergone changes.

#### **Religion and festivals:**

In the past the Oraons used to organise their rituals and festivals around the agricultural cycle giving harmony to their socio-cultural life. But in the urban set up their traditional economic practice has been transformed and so the rituals. Though still it emits the scent of their soil. They used to observe Sarna religion (animism) of typical tribal character. But now they follow a mixed type of religion. The Oraons of Uttar Gargacha still perform some of their own cultural tradition and some they have adopted from the neighbouring Bengali community. They perform Chaitra Sankranti and Paila Baisakh i.e the last and the first day of Bengali New Year in their own way. On these two eves they

offer new fruits to the ancestor. It is performed at their house.

In the month of Bhadra (August-September) they perform Karam puja. During this festival all the Oraons of Kolkata meet together at a place and perform it. In Kartik (October-November) they perform Goal puja on the courtyard. It is performed after Kali puja. This is meant for worshipping the household cattle. They bathe their cows, feed them with Kalai (pulse) and offer oil and vermilion to their horns. Since the people of Uttar Gargacha do not have cattle of their own, they borrow cows either from market or from neighbours for this festival only. This festival is performed clan wise.

The Oraons of Kolkata perform Sitala puja with full enthusiasm. They worship goddess Sitala as village deity once in a year. There is a Sitala temple near Uttar Gargacha. They prepare rice beer and enjoy it together after the performances. They also perform Bhite puja. In this occasion they memorise their ancestors. It is performed generation wise. This is rarely performed with the gap of at least 10-12 years, because it is quite expensive.

Since long they are residing in close vicinity to Bengali population which influenced them to adopt rituals and customs of Bengali people. They worship Devi Manasa in front of a cactus tree with the belief of being protected from the snakes. They enjoy Durga puja as the Bengalis do. They perform Lakshmi puja and Saraswati puja at their home. Even few families perform Ranna puja, cooking worship.

It is a significant change, even in case of unity of the society. Previously the land holders were related together, but as their land was lost, their unified works have been shattered.

**Language:**

The main trunk of Kurukh has been identified as Kera Mundari, Sandri and Hindi (Lakra, 1999). Almost all the Oraons in this locality had the knowledge of their traditional language Sandri and they also had the knowledge of colloquial Hindi. Bengali was one of the most important languages they speak. Bengali was the most common medium of communication in educational institutions, market places, offices and other common places. The younger generation has picked up this medium for communication and a few of them were found to speak in English very often. In general they spoke Sandri with their parents and other kin groups. Speaking in their own language made the older generation nostalgic about their traditional values. Process of social transformation inevitably involved such tension. This was also influenced by the process of urbanisation. The sense of superiority in speaking Bengali, English and other non-tribal languages was gradually preoccupying the minds of many Oraons in the studied area.

Learning a different language is not only pragmatic, but gradually it brings about mental and attitudinal change. The Oraons began to delink themselves from their country sides where tribal languages are spoken.

**Kinship and marriage custom:**

Endurance of any language can be traced through kinship terms. Among the Oraons of the studied area strong kinship bonds were found to exist even though they were not living together, although the traditional kinship terms have changed considerably. For example, in Kurukh language mother is addressed as aayo, but the present

generation of the Oraons did not call their mother as aayo, rather they call ma (Lakra, 1999). They adopted the terms of neighbouring Bengali communities.

The Oraons of the studied area were found to practice tribal endogamy and clan exogamy. Marriage between the Oraons and non-tribals was not accepted by the society. Such marriage union was subjected to ex-communication from the society. Tribal endogamy was enforced to safeguard the Oraons to retain their own identity. The arranged marriages were organised by the community and the spouses were selected from surrounding areas of Kolkata like Madhyamgram, Sodepur, Bhangor, Sonarpur etc. Cases of inter-tribal marriage were not found in the studied area. Their mode of transaction during marriage has also undergone changes as they shifted from bride price to dowry. To them marriage was a means of communication among the Oraons living in urban areas.

#### **Solidarity and identity:**

Group solidarity and identity could be dependent on economic and non-economic factors. Transformation from homogenous economy to diversified economy can influence group solidarity negatively. On the other hand religious practices, common ritual performances and language can help to maintain identity and solidarity (Chaudhuri, 1992). Traditional religious practices are the means of keeping bonds between the same tribal communities living in distant areas. Though the Oraons of Kolkata has influenced by Hinduism, but they tried to retain their cultural practices. They were homogenous in terms of religion, language and customs. Social solidarity was visible during festive occasion like Karam puja, Goal puja etc. where all the community members took part. This solidarity was the result of living together as minority group among the Hindu Bengali neighbours. The Oraons of the studied area were well united within their own community and lived in harmony with non-tribals.

Diversification of occupation has negative effect on the solidarity, because it brings social ranking and eventually leading to status formation. In urban setting the Oraons were employed in almost every sector, though most of them were found to work as unskilled labourers. Those who were employed in Government sectors were mostly clerks or fourth grade staffs. Previously the land holders were related together, but their unity was affected by the incidence of losing land to the urban developers. Different life style and growing social class among the Oraons have encouraged the heterogeneity among the Oraons of Kolkata.

#### **Conclusion:**

The Oraons are one of the major tribes of Eastern India. They have migrated from Jharkhand to Uttar Gargacha around 100 years ago and settled here. They were actually brought by the Zamindars for clearing jungle land and transforming them into cultivable lands. They got ownership of some lands from the Zamindars of the area. They used to cultivate rice thrice in a year, because the land was quite fertile. They were traditionally agriculturists. Now their economy has been transformed. Many of the Oraons in the studied areas were either service holders or self employed. The Government policies to ensure reserved seats in service sector have influenced the economic life of the Oraons.

Many of them were working in service sectors and their children were studying with the aim of getting Government jobs. A number of people were also labourers. The young fellows were found to give importance to education, though the dropout cases were mostly seen among the middle aged people. With time the situation has changed and the life of the Oraons has also undergone many changes. The tribal land was taken by two multinational companies to extend their urban development projects. Many families lost total land they possessed and many lost partially. Most of them did not receive any compensation from the companies. Few people who still had some amount of land could not cultivate due to lack of irrigation facility and thus they were facing economic crisis.

Urban development not only led to transferred economic rights over land, but rights to perform rituals associated with the land were also influenced. Their traditional customs and festivals have also undergone changes. They accepted the Bengali Hindu festivals as their own. They were trilingual having the knowledge of Sandri, Hindi and Bengali. Presently, the younger generation were learning English in educational institutions. Rising expectations among the youth seemed to be in the natural course of development living in a multi-ethnic society. They were trying to maintain their tribal identity through marriage customs and performance of traditional rituals within their own community. The tribal people began to compare one community with another and one class with another. But they were continuing their tradition in this changing urban situation.

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