

Beliefs and Festivals of Oraon: A Folkloristic Study

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Abstract: Odisha has 62 distinct tribal groups, making it the largest collection of tribal people in a single state in the country. Each of these tribal groups has its own indigenous customs and continues to practice them even today. It is home to India's ancient civilization and most of it is concentrated around the Eastern Ghat hill ranges in the region of Koraput, Sundargarh and Mayurbhanj. The antiquity of Orissa is endorsed by her ancient people who continue to inhabit their traditional dwelling places in remote areas in the deep forests and hilly interiors. Steeped in the mystery that surrounds their ancient ways, the Odishan tribals continue to be a source of deep interests of scholars from various disciplines.

The term "tribe" refers to a type of society and designates a stage of evolution in human society. The English term 'tribe' designating a particular kind of social and political organization existing in all these societies. However in Indian context the term tribe refers to the indigenous Janas. They are commonly designated as Adivasi (Original Settlers), Girijan (Hill-dwellers) Vanyajati (Forest caste), Adimajati (Primitive castes) Jan jati (Folk Communities) and Anusuchit Jan jati (Scheduled Tribes). In Oisha the term Adivasi is commonly used for the tribes.

The tribal people of Odisha express their cultural identity and distinctiveness in their social organization, language, rituals and festivals and also in their dress, ornaments, art and crafts. The tribes believe that their life and work is controlled by supernatural beings whose abode is around them in hills, forests, rivers and houses. Among tribes there are religious functionaries who cater their spiritual needs. Therefore the ceremony and festival of the tribes can be classified into two groups; those that relate to the individual families as whole and those that relate to the village as a whole. the ceremonies and rites relating to the birth of a child, marriage, death and observed family wise, whereas those relating to various agricultural cycle eating of new fruits, hunting etc are observed by the village community.

Considering the general features of their 1) eco-system 2) traditional economy 3) Supernatural beliefs and practices, tribes of Odisha can be classified into six types such as Hunting type, Collecting-herder type, Simple artisan type, Hill and shifting cultivation type and Settled agriculture type. Linguistically the tribes of the India are broadly classified into four categories, namely 1) Indo Aryan Speakers 2) Dravidian Speakers 3) Tibeto-Burmese Speakers and 4) Austric Speakers. And the tribes of Orissa are ethno-linguistically classified into three groups. Munda (Austrosiatic), Dravidian and Indo - Aryan. In Odisha the speakers of the Tibeto-Burmese Language family are absent and therefore Odishan tribes belong to other three language families. A Group wise tribal Languages and dialects may be drawn up as follows:

Munda Group	Dravidian Group	Indo- Aryan Group
Gata (Didayi)	Parji (Dharua)	Desia (Kui, Southern Oriya)
Gutob (Gadaba)	Koya	Bhuyan (Northern/Southern oriya)
Juang	Kui (kondh-Kutia/Domgaria)	Jharia (Southern Oriya)
Koda	Konda/Kubi (konda dora)	Kondhan (Southern Oriya)
Birhor (Mankidia)	Ollari (Gadaba)	Binjhia (Hindi, Chhatisgarhi)

Mundari (Mundari/Munda))	Kurkh/Oraon (Oraon)	Banjara (Hindi)
Santali	Gondi (Gond)	Baiga (Chhatisgarhi)
Sora (saura, Lanjia, Juaray, Arsi)	Madai	Bhunja (Marathi, Western oriya)
Gorum (parenga)	Kuvi (Kondh, Jatapu)	Halbi (Oriya-Marathi- Chhatisgarhi)
Remo (bonda)	Kisan	
Kharia (Kharia/Mirdha		
Korwa		
Bhumija		
Ho (Ho/Kolha)		
Mahaili (Mahali)		

The Oraons of Orissa

Oraon, also known as the Kurukh, is one of the tribal communities found in India, which mainly depends on agriculture for earning their living. They are mainly found in the states of Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal and Orissa. In the ancient days, Oraons used to make their living by chopping timber and selling forest products. Majority of the population of Oraons can be found in Assam engaged in the occupation of tea cultivation. Oraons are believed to have settled in the Chotanagpur Plateau centuries ago. Majority of the Oraon tribes are Hindus and are religious minded people. They worship Gods and Goddesses and a great number of these tribes have adopted Christianity. In the ancient days, this community used to follow Sarna religion. Oraons are further divided into sub-castes like Kudas and Kisans, who follow Patrilineal family customs. There are a total of 14 clans in Oraon tribal community like, Gari, Lakra, Kispotta, Runda, Tirky, Toppo, Linda, Ekka, Kuzur, Bek, Kerketta, Bandi, Minz and Khalkho.

Beliefs and Festivals of Oraons

No tribe is devoid of customs, traditions and festivals. Important festivals of the Oraons pertain to the forest, hunting, agriculture and cattle. Besides these, there are socio- religious gatherings known as jatras, which take place at the commencement of different seasons. Few festive events are cited below for the purpose of illustration.

The spring festival, known as sarhul, is celebrated when the sal tree is in full blossom. In this festival the Oraons perform the symbolic marriage of the sky with the earth. This is done to ensure the fertility of mother earth. On this day a propitiatory sacrifice is offered to the old lady (the village goddess) who is believed to abide in the sacred grove of the village. Phaggu is a festival which is observed towards the end of February or the beginning of March. On the evening previous to the feast, a young castor (Palma christi) plant and a semar (Bombax malabaricum) branch are planted in an open place. Around these some hay, firewood and dry leaves are heaped. The village priest sets fire to the hay. When fire burns at its brightest the young castor shrub is cut into pieces with an axe. Immediately the young boys of the village light torches from the bonfire and throw the burning torches at fruit trees, saying, 'Be loaded with good fruit'.

The major customs among the Oraons, as will any other community, are connected with birth marriage and death. The linkage of customs with the ecology is best reflected in customs connected with marriage and death. There are many customs preceding marriage with which the environment is very closely connected. There is the custom of men going to the forest to fetch firewood and women to fetch sal leaves for preparing cups and plates. The preparation of the marriage mat, and marriage baskets of various sizes are other customs. Setting up a marwa is, however, the most significant. Nine sal saplings with leaves on top are planted in the courtyard in three rows. The middle one of the second row differs in its height. Also planted are branches of bamboo, sidha, bhelwa, mango and mahua, where the mango suggests perpetuity of descendants, the bamboo symbolises progeny, the sidha fidelity of husband and wife, the bhelwa protection from the evil eye and the mahua, love between the couple. The marriage ritual would be incomplete without this invocation of trees and plants. Similarly,

during funerals the Oraons practice burial and cremation. Bodies are buried when crops stand in the field. In this custom, various shapes of branches cover the bottom of the grave, lengthwise and crosswise. Therefore birth and death in a family are celebrated as community festivals.

As they practice agriculture in some form or the other, and as rest others have a vital stake in agriculture, sowing, planting, first-fruit eating and harvest rites are common amongst them. Their common cyclic rites revolve round the pragmatic problems of ensuring a stable economic condition, recuperation of the declining fertility of soil, protection of crops from damage, human and live-stock welfare, safety against predatory animals and venomous reptiles and to insure a good yield of annual and perennial crops. All the rituals centering agricultural operation, first-fruit eating, human, live-stock and crop welfare are observed by the members of a village on a common date which is fixed by the village head-man in consultation with the village priest.

Thus the ideological system of the Oraons like other tribes of the region, surrounds supernaturalism. The pantheon consists of the Sun God, the Mother Earth and a lower hierarchy of Gods. Besides there are village tutelary, nature spirits, presiding deities and ancestor-spirits, who are also propitiated and offered sacrifices. Gods and spirits are classified into benevolent and malevolent categories. A peculiarity of the tribal mode of worship is the offering of blood of an animal or a bird, because such propitiations and observance of rites are explicitly directed towards happiness and security in this world, abundance of crops live-stock, plants and progenies. Sickness is not considered natural to a tribal as an out-come of the machination of some evil spirits or indignation of ancestor spirits or gods. Sometimes, sickness is also considered as the consequences of certain lapses on the part of an individual or group. Therefore, riddance must be sought through propitiation and observance or rituals.

Religious Beliefs

A large number of Oraons abandoned their original beliefs of Sarna. In fact, the 19th and 20th century troubles were mainly due to the hoarding malpractices of the British traders. These led to indirect deaths of poor. The Christian missionaries found the Oraon community depressed and without food. Due to their missionary activities, many of them turned Christians. But it is true that the Oraons believe that their lives are greatly influenced by the natural surroundings, gods goddesses, supernatural forces, spirits and many unknown and mysterious forces, including the souls of their deceased ancestors, who look after their tribe's interests. Surrounded by the natural world, it is instinctive for Oraons to name their benevolent gods and goddesses on the forests, hills, sun, water, rains, fires, light, etc. The gods and goddess are independent of the material world but he has dominion over the entire universe. They are omniscient, omnipresent, eternal, and compassionate; they always try to help out the humanity. The religion of Oraon is based on their belief in nature and its supernatural power. According to the belief of the Oraon community, the world is inhabited by numerous spiritual beings of different kind; and the Oraons consider themselves as living and doing everything in close association with these supernatural beings.

The ancestors' spirits called Pitar (Benevolent) and the latar (Malevolent), who are also worshipped. According to Oraons' religious belief, their dead - ancestors' souls (atma or aikh or naad) reside in Patal Lok, below the earth's surface. Newly deceased persons' souls do not want to leave their homes and want to stay close to their family members. Therefore, the Oraons pray to their deceased family member's soul to join the family of Pitar (Pach-Balar) at Patal Lok or else it may unite with the family of latar and create trouble for not only the immediate family but also the other denizens of the village. The amazing conglomeration of traditions, beliefs, sorrows and philosophies that together constitute and vitalise the rituals and festivals of the tribes, has descended from antiquity and has been preserved unimpaired to the present day. Every facet of their life covering round-the-year activities is intimately connected with religious beliefs and ritual practices. It is these aspects of their culture that give meaning and depth to their lives, and solidarity to their social structure. And therefore both the beliefs and the celebration of festivals are interconnected and together they form an integral part of the Oraon life. Among the them there are religious functionaries who cater to their spiritual needs.

Scope of Research

Tribes in India observe several festivals and religious ceremonies throughout the year. They are mainly agriculturalists and their life is confined to land and spirits. They believe that n objects exercise a beneficent influence on their life and happiness. All their festivals invariable components of their lifestyle. The natural environment on which they are born and brought up compels them to believe on certain omniscient powers who reveal themselves through several deities. Since time immemorial they worship certain deities of their own. But would seem that their religious beliefs and practices have undergone changes during last few decades only because of the influence of different religions. Even it, they propitiate the spirits of their deceased ancestors on festive occasions and whenever confronted with critical situations. Since their culture moves around nature, so also owes and amusements move around it. In course of life they have developed a life cycle based on seasons and months in which their amusements and sorrows, works and leisure, have given birth several religious beliefs and festivals. But these festivals are not always religious some of them are seasonal and entertainment oriented.

Methodology

The methodology of present study proposes an extensive fieldwork with an aim to collect information from various places and remote Oraon pockets of Odisha. It includes visiting places where such practices are followed now and active participation of the investigator along with the village folk. Besides these, interviewing of religious heads and common people to know how they understand practices and rituals in general (the process includes audio/video recording, photography and note taking) and celebration of the festivals in particular. Such observation will provide scope to understand how they practice and how important are such practices in the society.

Published research materials on belief and festivals of Oraon and neighboring tribal communities will be considered as the secondary source.

Analysis of the data will be done on specific established approach used in folkloristic students. Different approaches have been suggested by the folklorists around the world but for the present research functional approach suggested by Bascom (1981) will be taken for analysis as I believe that any folkloristic material survives in the society only for its functions not for any other reason. The four functions of folklore suggested by Bascom are as follows.

1. The social context of the folklore, its place in the daily round of life of those who tell it. Its function in cultural context or the relationship between folklore and other aspects of culture. Folklore is considered as the mirror of culture and the folklore of people can be fully understood through knowledge of their culture.
2. The second function of folklore is that the role it plays in validating culture, in justifying its rituals and institutions to those who perform and observe them.
3. The third function of folklore is that its use in education particularly, but not exclusively in non-literate societies.
4. The fourth function of folklore is that it fulfills the important but often overlooked function of maintaining conformity to the accepted patterns of behaviour, more than simply serving to validate or justify institutions, beliefs and attitudes. Some forms of folklore are important as means of applying social pressure and exercising social control.

Key findings & discussion

Socio-cultural life of the Oraons of Odisha

They adhere closely to rituals, ceremonies, and feasts related to birth, marriage, and death within their homes, accompanied by community members and relatives.

In the case of a first pregnancy, a sacrifice is conducted to sever the woman's connections with her paternal ancestor spirits and village deities. Following the birth, a chicken is sacrificed. The days immediately after childbirth are considered impure, necessitating careful measures to protect both

mother and child from malevolent spirits. After four or five days, a ritual purification takes place for the mother, newborn, and the household. The name-giving ceremony occurs anytime from a few weeks up to a year after birth; until this event, the infant is referred to by the day of the week they were born or named after any festival if their birth coincided with one.

Marriage practices consist of strict clan exogamy paired with tribe endogamy. Their unique methods of invitation, greetings, feast organization, and gift-giving during marriage ceremonies distinguish them from neighboring tribal groups. Since marriage signifies a social bond between two families, their etiquette in inviting several other families into kinship illustrates their cultural values.

The Oraons either bury or cremate their deceased. As the body is transported to its final resting place starting at the first crossroads, they scatter rice along the path leading to the grave or pyre. This act is intended to guide the soul of the departed back home. Prior to burial or cremation, cooked food and small amounts of money are placed in the mouth of the deceased.

Religious Beliefs of oraons.

Oraons adhere to a form of worship rooted in Hindu traditions, yet their deities do not appear in the sacred Sanskrit texts associated with Hinduism. Many of their gods, such as Chandi, Chauthia, Dadgo Burhia, Gaon Deoti, and Jair Budhi, possess a distinctly local essence and are unique to their culture within India. The religious beliefs of the Oraons can be characterized as an amalgamation of magical practices, traditional animistic customs, and elements derived from Hinduism.

The Oraons acknowledge the presence of a supreme entity represented by the sun and referred to as Dharmes. This supreme being is regarded as the ruler of everything that exists in the cosmos and governs the destinies of all beings—both corporeal and spiritual. Subordinate to Dharmes is a hierarchy comprising various lesser deities, spirits associated with nature, ancestral souls, malevolent ghosts, and abstract forces representing good and evil.

The realm of these lesser deities and spirits is categorized into multiple groups. Firstly, there are ancestor spirits—the souls of deceased relatives who offer protection to the living during ailments and shield them from troublesome entities. Secondly, there are village tutelary deities (deotas) and spirits (bhuts), which include the benevolent goddess Chala Pachcho, also known as Gaon Deoti; she is revered for her role in safeguarding the village. Additionally, Pat or Pat Raja oversees all village spirits.

The Oraons also hold beliefs regarding harmful influences such as the “evil eye” (najar) and “evil mouth” (baibhak), both capable of bringing misfortune upon individuals. To honor or appease numerous deities and spirits—including those of ancestors—animal sacrifices are commonly performed. Within traditional Oraon society exist several Hindu-influenced cults known as bhagats. Furthermore, Christianity has also found adherents among some members of the Oraon community.

Festivals

The `Oraons' are engaged year-round in various forms of nature worship, a practice they have upheld for generations. They revere elements such as trees, stones, water, the Sun, land, and fire—collectively known as the 'Panchabhutas'—which represent the fundamental components of the universe.

The `Oraon' calendar traditionally commences with the Hindi month of `Magh', aligning with February on the Gregorian calendar. Among their numerous festivals, several notable ones include:

1. ****Fagu****: Celebrating a bountiful harvest on the full day of Phagun (March-April).
2. ****Khaddi (Sarhul)****: A floral festival that occurs in the Hindi months of Phalgun and Chaitra, marking the arrival of spring.
3. ****Dhanbuni****: A religious observance centered around rice cultivation during Baisakh in the Hindi calendar.
4. ****Bangari****: A festival focused on agricultural planting observed in both Baisakh and Jaistha.
5. ****Hariyari****: An agricultural festival associated with Asarh.

6. ****Asari****: Another plantation festival taking place in Asar.
7. ****Karam****: This celebration revolves around work and planting activities occurring in Bhadra.
8. ****Soharai****: A cattle festival celebrated during Kartick.
9. ****Bishu Sendra****: A hunting festival held in Pous.

These events reflect the deep connection of the `Oraons` to their environment and agricultural practices throughout the year.

No Written Records of Folk Stories and Folklore

Folklore has been transmitted orally through generations. During my research, I gathered various folk tales and songs, some of which are included in my thesis.

One well-known tale among the Oraons recounts their expulsion from the ancient kingdom of Rohtas, referred to as Ruidas in Kurukh. According to the legend, the Kurus repeatedly attempted to oust the Oraons from Ruidas but were unsuccessful in direct confrontations. In a strategic move, they sent a milkmaid into the fort to gather intelligence. Upon her return, she informed them that an attack during the Xaddi (Sarhul) festival would catch the Oraon men off guard due to their intoxication from rice beer. The plan was executed successfully; when the Kurus launched their assault, most Oraon men were asleep and drunk. However, led by Princess Singi Dai, the women disguised themselves as men and bravely resisted the attackers. It was only after realizing they were fighting women that the Kurus managed to take control of the fort.

While many Oraons lost their lives in this conflict, one man regained sobriety and escaped. He fled from pursuing Kuru warriors until he reached Chota Nagpur, a region already settled by the Munda tribe. Upon arriving at a village, he pleaded for assistance from some Mundas who were preparing to eat freshly slaughtered meat. The Mundas offered him protection on the condition that he discarded his "sacred thread" and joined them for their meal. The Oraon chose to stay in Chota Nagpur, and his descendants continue to inhabit that area today. Since then, the Oraons and Mundas have lived together for centuries, sharing numerous cultural similarities.

Functional aspects of the beliefs and practices

Tribals serve as guardians of the environment, a role that is evident in numerous instances. Their perspective emphasizes living harmoniously and allowing all creatures to thrive. In the religious practices of the Oraon tribe, their festivals and fairs are intricately linked to the seasonal variations of their surrounding flora and fauna, as well as to climatic conditions.

These events involve discussions, performances, and narratives celebrating the legacy of their revered ancestors. The interactions between these ancestors and divine entities provide guiding principles for religious observances. Additionally, folk tales, legends, ballads, and songs enhance the devotion and enjoyment associated with these celebrations. The observance of these festivals fosters a deep connection between humans, nature, and spiritual beings on various occasions.

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