



---

## Indigenous Tradition and Modernity: The Oraons of North Bengal

**Punam Kujur**

Research Scholar, Department of History, University of North Bengal, Darjeeling, West Bengal, India

Email: punamkujur300@gmail.com

---

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18962942>

---

### ARTICLE DETAILS

**Research Paper**

**Accepted:** 27-02-2026

**Published:** 10-03-2026

---

**Keywords:**

*Oraon Community, Cultural Conflict, Cultural Adaptation, Tradition and Modernity,*

---

### ABSTRACT

The concepts of globalization and urban development have expanded rapidly across the world over the past few decades, bringing significant transformation to indigenous societies. These processes created new opportunities in the spheres of economic growth, innovation, and culture exchange. At the same time, they have also generated concerns regarding social inequality, environmental degradation, and the erosion and transformation of local culture. Indigenous communities are particularly affected, as they continuously negotiate between preserving tradition and adapting to modern influences. Culture is not static; it is dynamic and ever-changing. Transformation in belief systems, livelihood patterns, education, and social values bring visible changes in community life and culture practices. In this context, the present study focuses on the Oraon community of North Bengal, an important indigenous group known for its rich culture heritage, traditional institutions, rituals, and festivals. The primary objective of this paper is to examine the continuity of indigenous traditions among the Oraons and to analyze the impact of modernity and urbanization on their socio-culture life.

---

### Introduction:

The Oraon community is one of the most ancient indigenous groups of the Indian subcontinent, possessing a rich culture heritage shaped by long historical experiences. Evidence of their antiquity is



reflected in their traditional mythological narratives, particularly the “Creation Myth” (Srishti Puran Katha), which provided insight into their origin, cosmology, and worldview. Anthropologically, the Oraon have often been classified within the Proto-Australoid racial group. They are generally characterized by distinct physical features such as dark or deep brown hair, thick lips, a comparatively small and receding forehead, and a broad, flat nose, as noted by colonial ethnographer H.H. Risley. While such racial classification is now critically re-examined in modern anthropology, they remain historically significant in tracing early ethnographic documentation of the community.

Linguistically, the mother tongue of the Oraons is Kuruk, which belongs to the Dravidian language family. The language functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a carrier of oral traditions, songs, rituals, and collective memory. Traditionally, the Oraons were an agrarian and forest-dependent community whose livelihood was closely tied to land, shifting cultivation, forest produce, and pastoral activities. However, colonial economic expansion and the growth of plantation industries in eastern India brought major transformations in their occupational structure. Over time, large sections of the Oraon population migrated or were recruited as laborers in the tea plantations of North Bengal, gradually becoming part of the region’s agro-industrial workforce. Despite this occupational shift, a section of the community retained its ancestral attachment to agriculture. Some Oraon families left the tea estates, established settlement, and adopted settled cultivation as their primary livelihood. Through these processes, they developed an intimate relationship with the natural environment of North Bengal. Forest, rivers, streams, hills, agriculture fields, and tea gardens became integral components of their socio-economic and cultural life. Nature continues to shape their rituals, festivals, belief systems, and everyday practices.

For more than a century, a substantial proportion of the Oraon population has been engaged as tea plantation laborers in the green tea belt of North Bengal through successive generations. In recent decades, their demographic presence within West Bengal has steadily increased. According to the Census of India 2011, the total Oraon population in the state stood at 643,510. Of this, the majority—approximately 440,900—were concentrated in the districts of Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling, reflecting the historical linkage between tea plantations and Oraon settlement. Additional populations were recorded in Malda (13,232), Dakshin Dinajpur (43,427), Uttar Dinajpur (15,423), and Cooch Behar (6,722). This demographic distribution highlights both plantation-based concentration and gradual spatial dispersal of the community across North Bengal.



### **Origin and Settlement of the Oraons:**

Scholars have long attempted to trace the origin and original homeland of the Oraon community through the etymology of the term “Oraon” itself. The word “Oraon” is associated with a number of mythological narratives as well as historical interpretations. According to a popular traditional legend, the Oraons are believed to have originated from the thigh or chest blood of a sage or divine figure known as “Urao Gant.” From this mythological account emerged the ethnonym “Oraon.”<sup>1</sup> Sarat Chandra Roy, regarded as the father of Indian anthropology, in his classic work *The Oraons of Chot Nagpur*, referred to a story from the Ramayana and attempted to link the origin of the Oraons with the lineage of Sugriva.<sup>2</sup> Other speculative theories suggest that the community’s name evolved from “O-Ravan,” implying descent from the lineage of Ravana. However, alternative linguistic interpretations also exist. An Oraon scholar, Joel Lakra, has argued that the more authentic pronunciation is not “Oraon” but “Uraon.” In the Dravidian linguistic context, “Ur” means village and “Awan” denotes inhabitants; thus, the term collectively signifies “those who live in villages.”<sup>3</sup> The community also prefers to identify itself as “Kurukh,” which is their ethnolinguistic self-designation. The word bears resemblance to the Sanskrit root “Krs(krish), meaning agriculture, reflecting their traditional agrarian way of life.

Even though regions such as South India, the western coastal belt of India, the Harappan and Mohenjodaro civilizations, and the Rohtas Plateau of Bihar are sometimes considered in speculative discussions of early habitation, the Chot Nagpur plateau historically functioned as the principal and permanent homeland of the Oraon community. According to H.H. Risley “a Dravidian cultivating tribes of Chota Nagpur”.<sup>4</sup> It served as their primary agriculture base and settlement zone. During the colonial period, however, British zamindari land policies and forest conservation laws led to the large-scale alienation of the Oraons from their traditional rights over water, land, and forests. Deprived of their customary resource base, many Oraons were compelled to migrate in search of livelihood.

This process of displacement gradually transformed them into permanent settlers in the Terai-Dooars region and other adjoining areas, particularly within the tea plantation belt. Over time, the Oraon population spread not only across West Bengal but also to other Indian states such as Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Tripura, Jharkhand, and Orisha. Their migration extended beyond India as well, leading to the presence of Oraon communities in Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. This wide geographical dispersal reflects both the historical impact of colonial economic policies and the adaptive resilience of the Oraon community in establishing new settlement landscapes.



### **Cultural and Traditional Life of the Oraons:**

The Oraons follow their traditional religion, commonly known as Sarnaism, which is fundamentally based on nature worship.<sup>5</sup> As worshippers of nature, they are also described as Animists. They believe that the divine exists in every element of nature- stones, trees, rivers, streams, animals, and all living beings. Dharmes (the sun deity) is regarded as their supreme god, worshipped as the creator and protector of the universe. Alongside, Dharmes, belief in ancestors, village deities, and various spirits constitutes an integral of their religious and social life. It is perhaps in this context that J.F. Gruning has observed that “the religion of the Oraons is a composite nature.”<sup>6</sup> Idol worship is traditionally prohibited in Oraon society; there is no institutional role of temples or Brahmin priests, and the caste system is absent within their indigenous religious framework.

The festive life of the Oraons is vibrant and diverse. Major festivals include **Sohrai** (associated with the Kartik season and cattle worship), **Sarhul**, **Gram Banda**, **Hunting festivals**, **Karam**, **Jitia**, and auspicious rituals such as **Danda Katra**. These festivals are deeply connected with agriculture, forests, animal husbandry, seasonal cycles, and collective social unity. Celebrations are marked by elaborate rituals, community feasting, and collective participation. Since time immemorial, the Oraons have possessed a rich tradition of folk songs, dances, oral narratives, and indigenous musical instruments.<sup>7</sup> Traditional instruments include the **Mandar** (Madal), **Nagara**, **Shehnai**, and **Kartal**. In the Kurukh language, songs are called “Dandi,” and singing is referred to as “Dandi Pardna.” Men and women participate together in dance and music performances, reflecting communal harmony.

In matters of dress and adornment, beads, wood, and metal ornaments are commonly used. The Oraons also decorate their bodies with tattoos, which function as markers of identity, religious belief, aesthetic expression, and social custom.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the social structure of the Oraons is clan-based, governed by strict marriage regulations, strong kinship bonds, and collective decision-making processes that help maintain social cohesion and community solidarity.

### **Continuity of Tradition:**

Folk traditions such as oral narratives, folk dances, festivals, rituals, and family values continue to form the foundational base of Oraon culture even today. It is true, however, that at present a section of the Oraon community in North Bengal has come under the influence of Hindu religious and cultural traditions, while another significant section has embraced Christianity. Consequently, as some scholars note, “only a few claim themselves to belong to the Sarna religion.”<sup>9</sup> Despite this religious



diversification, evidence from past and present literary works, cultural practices, and reports published in Bengali and Hindi periodicals indicates that indigenous festivals, rituals, and ceremonial observances continue to be widely practiced across North Bengal.

Among these, the Karam festival remains one of the most important cultural celebrations of the Oraons. Recognizing its cultural significance, the Government of West Bengal under Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has officially declared the day of the karam festival as a public holiday.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the festival is celebrated with great enthusiasm not only in North Bengal but across the state. Along with the Oraons, other indigenous communities such as the Bhumij, Ho, Lohara, Santhal, and Kharia also participate in the celebrations. Notably, in the Terai and Dooars regions, even many Christian tribal churches organize karam festivities, demonstrating they have not entirely abandoned their cultural heritage. Similarly, festivals such as **Sohrai**, **Sarhul**, **Jitia**, and **traditional hunting festivals** continue as living expressions of cultural continuity, particularly among Hindu Oraons. **Sarhul**, essentially a festival of the Sal flower, is also known as the Hul festival, Spring festival, or Sarna festival in different localities. The Oraons carried this festival with them from Jharkhand during their migration to North Bengal. Celebrated during the flowering of the Sal tree in the month of Baisakh, the festival often continues for nearly a month.<sup>11</sup> The **hunting festival**, rooted in ancient forest-dwelling traditions, also survives symbolically. On this occasion, Oraon women dress in male attire, ritually “hunt” domestic animals, and the community collectively feasts-preserving the memory of a century of settlement in North Bengal.<sup>12</sup>

In the same way, social customs such as clan and totem reverence, strict clan-based marriage regulations, belief in spirits, and supernatural or witchcraft-related notions continue to exist within Oraon society. Although modernity and processes such as Sanskritization have introduced change, active community participation in religious and cultural ceremonies continues to revitalize and sustain traditional heritage.

### **Agents and Processes of Change:**

The expansion of education, migration and urban development, mass media, technology, government development programmes, and the emergence of a composite cultural environment have collectively contributed to significant changes in the social customs and religious beliefs of the Oraon community. Particularly in the tea plantation belt, the establishment of schools and colleges with Hindi, Nepali, Bengali, and English as mediums of instruction, along with the spread of mass media and modern technology, has encouraged the growth of modern values among the younger generation. As a result, the imprint of modernity is clearly visible among Oraon youth. Children from tea-labour families, through



education, are gradually moving away from traditional patterns of food habits, dress, housing, and language use, aspiring instead toward a middle-class lifestyle.<sup>13</sup> In this regard, Dr. Samarendra Nath Chakrabarti observed that there is little difference between the lifestyle of educated Oraons and that of the Bengali middle class.<sup>14</sup> Educated salaried Oraon youths increasingly migrate to urban areas, participate in festivals such as Holi, Diwali, and Durga Puja, and use multiple languages in everyday life. Consequently, in urban contexts, religious faith in animism has been declining along with traditional rituals, often giving way to Hindu religious practices.

Alongside these developments, the tendency toward conversion to Christianity has also increased among the Oraon community. Religious conversion has become a common phenomenon not only among the Oraons but also among other inhabitants of the tea plantation belt. As earlier observations suggest, “non-Hindu religions have been drawing popular support among tribal communities in districts such as Jalpaiguri, resulting in a gradual shift from traditional religious persuasions”<sup>15</sup>. This transformation has led to the weakening or disappearance of several customary institutions and practices.

Traditional marriage systems, once arranged through negotiations between families, are increasingly replaced by love marriages. The institution of *Dhumkuria* (youth dormitory), where young boys and girls were trained in social norms, cultural values, economic responsibilities, and community leadership, has almost vanished from contemporary Oraon society. Likewise, traditional governance institutions such as the *Akhra* and the *Parha Panchayat* have lost much of their authority. The younger generation often associates governance primarily with the constitutional administrative system of modern India, rather than with indigenous community-based structures.

Furthermore, economic instability in the tea gardens, including closures and low wages, has accelerated migration to urban centres and other states, intensifying socio-cultural change. Thus, the processes of education, religious transformation, migration, economic restructuring, and cultural interaction together function as major agents of change within Oraon society.

### **Cultural Conflict and Adaptation:**

Cultural conflict and adaptation constitute a significant dimension of social transformation within the Oraon community of North Bengal. At present, a visible duality between tradition and modernity is actively shaping Oraon society. Historically rooted in Sarna religion, clan-based organization, and community institutions, the Oraons have long maintained a distinct cultural identity. However, sustained



interaction with Hindu society, Christian missionaries, the tea plantation economy, and modern state structures has generated new cultural pressures.

A section of the nature-worshipping Oraon community has converted to Christianity, while a substantial segment has adopted Hindu rituals and practices. Particularly in tea plantation regions, the spread of education, urban contact, and mass media has accelerated this transformation. As a result, debates over religion, social customs, and community identity have intensified. Religious diversification has sometimes produced tension within families and villages regarding ritual participation and marriage customs. Furthermore, generational differences have deepened the conflict, as the younger generation increasingly gravitates toward modern lifestyles, formal education, and urban employment, often diverging from the expectations of elders who prioritize the preservation of traditional norms.

Yet, this process cannot be understood merely as cultural disintegration. Alongside conflict, there is a strong tendency toward cultural resilience and adaptation. Many Hindu Oraons celebrate Holi, Diwali, and Durga Puja, while simultaneously observing community festivals such as Sarhul and Karam. Even Christian Oraons, especially in tea garden areas, celebrate Karam within church premises in modified forms. This selective incorporation of external elements into traditional frameworks reflects a process of cultural hybridization rather than cultural replacement. Changes are also visible in social practices. Earlier, festivals and ceremonies involved widespread consumption of *haria* (traditional rice beer); today, although alcohol consumption continues, it is more regulated and socially moderated. Traditional customs such as inviting guests with betel leaves and rice persist, even as printed invitation cards become common<sup>16</sup>. Naming practices illustrate similar adaptation. Earlier, children were named according to the day of birth—Somra, Mangra—or traditional names such as Bindi and Lalo. In contemporary times, Christian Oraons adopt names like Francis, John, Julius, and Joseph, while Hindu Oraons prefer Ajay, Pawan, Muna, and Suman. Nevertheless, despite these changes, clan identity and totemic beliefs remain deeply respected. As noted by Bimlendu Majumdar in his study of North Bengal's tribal communities, the Oraons consider their clan symbols sacred and never harm or consume their totems<sup>17</sup>. Totemic clans—such as Ekka (tortoise), Lakra (tiger), Minj (fish), and Kujur (a creeper)—continue to structure social identity and marriage rules.

Scientific education has also challenged traditional superstitions. While certain customary beliefs persist, there is a growing reliance on modern medicine and rational thought. This indicates not merely the erosion of tradition but its reconstruction within a new socio-cultural context. The transformation



occurring within Oraon society thus reflects a process of identity negotiation, where tradition is reinterpreted to accommodate modern aspirations.

In this ongoing reconstruction of culture, Oraon women play a central role. Beyond household and agricultural responsibilities, they actively participate in religious and social activities, transmitting folk songs, rituals, dress patterns, and moral values to younger generations. Through oral traditions, they sustain cultural continuity. With expanding education and participation in NGOs and community organizations, Oraon women are increasingly assuming leadership roles. Their contribution ensures that cultural knowledge is not only preserved but also dynamically redefined. Therefore, women in Oraon society are not merely custodians of tradition; they are pivotal agents in maintaining cultural continuity amid change.

### **Conclusion:**

The study reveals that Oraon society in North Bengal is undergoing a complex process of cultural transformation characterized by both continuity and change. The coexistence of tradition and modernity has become a defining feature of their contemporary social life. While religious conversion, economic restructuring, migration, and modern education have significantly reshaped social institutions and cultural practices, these forces have not resulted in cultural disappearance. Instead, the Oraon community demonstrates remarkable cultural resilience through selective adaptation and reconstruction of tradition. Clan identity, totemic beliefs, community festivals, and collective solidarity continue to provide a strong foundation for cultural continuity. At the same time, modern influences have generated new forms of identity negotiation and hybrid cultural expressions.

Thus, the preservation of Oraon culture is not a static inheritance from the past but a dynamic, evolving process shaped by interaction between historical legacy and present realities. For the future, systematic documentation and institutional preservation of the Oraon language, ritual practices, and indigenous knowledge systems are essential to safeguard their identity for subsequent generations.

### **Reference:**

- .Majumdar, Bimalendu, Uttarbanger Adibasi, Kolkata: Gangchil,2020, p.159
- Bhattacharya, Krishnopriyo, Pashehimbanga Janajati, Calcutta: Ananda publishers private limited, 2024, p.97



- Sen, Suchibrata, Bharater Adibasi: Samaj, Paribesh O Sangram, Kolkata: Bookpost publication, 2021, p. 129
- Dep, Ranjit, Uttarbanger Upojatir Itibritto, Kolkata: Mainstream publication, 2014, p.269
- <https://www.trijharkhand.in/on/Oraon>.
- Gruning, Jhon, F., Eastern Bengal and Assam District Gazetteers, Jalpaiguri, Allahabad: Printed at the pioneer press, 1911, p. 36
- [https://en. Wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurukh-people](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurukh-people).
- International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts, Volume 12, 1 January 2024, p.991
- International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts, Volume 7, January 2020, p. 206
- Bhattacharya, Krishnopriyo, Achena Tarai Ajana Duars, Kolkata: Indiana, 2022, p.68
- Debnath, Mahendra, Uttarbanger Prantabhumir Janajati Itihas O Sanskriti, Kolkata: Pragatisil publisher, 2014, p.203
- Ibid.
- Gaji, Abdur Rahim, Tarai-Duars Lokosanshkriti, Kolkata: Bangiya sahitya samsad, p. 60 editor Arabind Kar, Jalpaiguri District Collection, Volume 2, p.667
- Bhattacharya, Krishnopriyo, Silent Departure: A Study of Tribal Predicament in Bengal Duars, Kolkata: Indiana, 2007, p. 92
- Gaji, Abdur Rahim, op.cit, p. 62
- Majumdar, Bimalendu, op.cit, p.162