

## Cultural Dimension of Ethnic Identity: A Study on the Oraon Tribe of North Bengal

*John Breakmas Tirkey*

*The term 'ethnicity' has its origin in the distant past but it has acquired new significance and dimension in recent times, which, in broad sense, encompasses a form of social organization, sense of kinship, group solidarity, language, tradition and culture, identified objectively and subjectively. The present paper attempts to study the cultural dimension of ethnic identity of the Oraon tribe of North Bengal, which is one of the largest and the earliest inhabitants among the tribal communities in the region. The Oraons have a very rich stock of cultural heritage and tradition- real and mythical, which forms the basis of their ethnic identity, which has acquired a new significance in recent times in the new world order.*

**Keywords:** self-ascription, cultural property, mythological origin, bonding mechanism, solidarity, ethnic consciousness, cultural specificities, symbolic association.

North Bengal, consisting of six northern districts of West Bengal, bordering Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet, is the home of many ethnic groups, each having its distinct social and cultural features. Each ethnic community exhibits its own distinct identity in terms of their cultural features - language, dialect, dress, food, habits, customs, traditions, origin and self-perception. Among the various ethnic groups inhabiting in the northern region of West Bengal, the Oraons constitute the dominant ethnic community. However, before entering into the discourse on the subject 'ethnic identity', it requires some definitional clarifications for a broader understanding of the terms 'ethnicity', ethnic identity and ethnic group.

The origin of the term 'ethnicity' goes back to 1950s in English language and over the periods several interrelated terms and concepts such as 'ethnicity', 'ethnic identity', 'ethnic category',

'ethnic group' etc. have been used to denote socially and culturally distinct human groups. The term 'ethnic' is adopted from Latin *ethniscus* and Greek *ethnikos* (in early 15<sup>th</sup> century), meaning nation or national.

In Handleman's perception the ethnic group is marked first by perceived cultural differences between the group and the outsiders and a sense of boundary between them and second, by maintaining a network where there is regular interaction between ethnic group members (*cf.* Hutchinson & Smith, 1996).

Schermerhorn considers ethnic group as a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of shared historical past with focus on cultural elements while dealing with the theories of ethnicity (Hutchinson & Smith, 1996). Shills (1957) attaches importance to certain kind of social bond, personal and primordial. Geertz (1963) attaches importance to religion, blood, race, language as the bases of ethnic group formation. Nash Manning (1996) takes cultural categories such as language, dress, tradition etc. as the building blocks of ethnicity. Enloe (1996) observes that both subjective and objective cultural elements are very vital for formation and continuance of ethnic identity. Ethnicity requires a sense of belonging, group solidarity and awareness about distinct boundaries between members and non-members. From anthropological perspective ethnicity can be defined as social classification used to create groups on cultural features such as religion, language, dress, food, family and art. Roy Burman (1990) observes that an ethnic group consists of those who conceive themselves as being alike by virtue of their common ancestry, real or fictitious, and they are to be so regarded by others. They are united by emotional bond. However, there is no consensus as to what constitute ethnicity or ethnic identity. Despite differences there is a growing agreement on ethnic group of people whose members identify with each other on some common attributes such as common tradition, language, common culture and religion.

The question of ethnic identity has drawn serious attention of the scholars for its wide-range social and political implications. In the present paper I have discussed the social and cultural dimensions while keeping the political aspect aside. I reckon, ethnicity develops primarily as a result of a group's anxiety to protect its cultural

identity. It conveys a sense of belongingness to a definite group of people with common origin and ancestry, distinct cultural, linguistic and religious traditions with which the members of the groups identify.

In the present paper the term 'ethnic identity' is used to refer to group identity of the Oraons living in different districts of North Bengal. The Oraons living in the region nurse a strong sense of belongingness and express solidarity with the fellow members of the group since they share a distinct way of life, or culture, tradition, and common ancestry. One can thus focus on the cultural properties, symbolic and objective, which distinguish the Oraons from other ethnic groups, even from other tribal groups of the region.

The present paper on cultural dimension of ethnic identity is based on the observations and discussions that I had with the members of the Oraon community. I carried out a fieldwork in the rural areas of Bamangola Block in Malda District covering 494 Oraon households where the working members were either cultivators or agriculture labourers. I have also used the preliminary findings of a recent study on 60 households in Hatighisa village, in Darjeeling District, where the working members are unskilled labourers in tea plantation and partly agriculturists.

The Oraons under study are an immigrant community in North Bengal. They constitute one of the major tribal groups that inhabit the Chota Nagpur plateau in central India region consisting of the contiguous areas of the states of Bihar, Jharkhand (their main concentration being Ranchi, Hazaribag, Gumla, Simdega, Lohardaga, and Palamau districts), Orissa (mainly in the districts of Balasore, Sambalpur, and Sundargarh), Madhya Pradesh (in the district of Jashpur, Raigarh, and Surguja) and Chattisgarh state. Outside central India they are found in large number in Assam in the North-East. The main concentration of Oraon population in North Bengal is in the districts of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur and Malda.

Numerically, the Oraons constitute the dominant immigrant tribal community amongst all ethnic groups in North Bengal. They nurse a rich cultural heritage in their native place Chota Nagpur in the central India. However, in the process of migration and adaptation

in new and unfamiliar places, where life and neighbours are substantially different from what they had in their native place, they have lost many of their culture traits and acquired many new ones. The migration of the Oraons was not just a physical movement, it has also been a process of drifting away from the socio-cultural features that gave them an identity and a sense of solidarity.

Some scholars of antique try to identify Vanara followers of Ram Chandra with the ancestors of Oraons (Risley, 1998). It is believed that they had a long association with more civilized Dravidians from whom they learnt cattle breeding and agriculture, and use of metal implements. After a long wandering in northern India they established their suzerainty and named the country *Karus-desh* under their chief *Karakh* and finally took possession of the North-Western portion of Chota Nagpur plateau (Roy, 2002, 2004; Risley, 1998). Thus the Oraons had a long tradition prior to settling down in the Chota Nagpur plateau in central India to which the immigrant Oraons in North Bengal associate themselves both subjectively and objectively. The subjective association here denotes a sense of belonging and attachment to their mythological origin, myths, folklore, ancestor worship, nature worship, religion, language etc. The objective aspect of their association denotes various rites and rituals, songs and dances, musical instruments, land, agricultural implements, and so on.

The Oraons call themselves *Kurkhar* and their language is called *kurukh* (Oraon language). *Kurukh* is classified as Dravidian language (Risley, 1991) the mythical origin of which is the mythical hero-king *Karakh*. This Oraon kingdom had an ancient name *Karus-des*, which was located in the present Sahabad district. The *kurukh* language of the Oraons thus has a mythical origin. Thus the Oraons distinguish themselves as *Kurkhar*. The language has had a unifying impact on its members. However, *kurukh* language is finding it difficult to maintain its purity and distinct identity amidst influence of lingua-franca 'Sadri' and the 'mainstream' language Hindi. This crisis has generated an urge among the Oraons of North Bengal to preserve their linguistic identity.

By tradition the Oraons are animistic. Their religion and religious life centers on the beliefs in numerous gods and goddesses, deities, ancestor worship and so on based on their own belief system. Belief

in village deity is a part of their religious life which is propitiated to seek blessings for the well being of the entire village community, cattle and crops. The notion of ancestor worship, called *khunt deota*, is another distinctive feature of their cultural and belief system. The ancestor worship is a cultural practice that brings all the clan members together from far and near and cements the community solidarity.

Cultural properties serve as the base of self-identity and self-awareness which ensures the continuation of their ways of life. The Oraons associate their distinct identity to the material and symbolic aspects of their beliefs, ritual practices, customs and traditions. There are numerous folk tales, dance forms and songs which are unique of the Oraons. The traditional musical instruments (locally called *mandar*, *nagara*, *dhak*, etc.) are used at different seasons with different tunes and rhythms, which symbolise the change of season. The dance forms and tunes of songs vary along with change of seasons. After migration to North Bengal the Oraons live in a new social, ecological, occupational environment, which is significantly different from the social and natural setup of their native land. In such new environment many of the past cultural elements, rituals and practices have become outdated but are not completely forgotten. For example, people living in tea plantations do not have much scope to observe rituals and festivals related to agriculture since they do not own land and do not do cultivation. However, they maintain subjective and symbolic association with their customs and traditions. The uses of traditional musical instruments in social events, festivals, and marriage ceremonies are also to some extent losing their importance among younger generation. Differences in cultural practices and belief system are also observed between Christian and non-Christians sections of the Oraons. However, Christian Oraons retain much of the Oraon traditional cultural practices as their Hindu counterparts do. The Church also supports the cultivation of the traditional cultural symbols. It approves retention of tribal names, clans, and surnames. A common symbolic structure of the Hindu and Christian Oraons helps maintain the distinctive Oraon identity, different from other tribes who also have migrated from central India. The immigrant Oraons are aware of the culture, traditions and customs of the native land and associate themselves with those at least symbolically. The Oraons are asserting their

ethnic group identity not in a massive but a relatively small way, through conscious revival of their cultural properties.

The Oraons in their place of origin had been agriculturists and they developed a culture over many years and generations that was land-based. Agriculture had different seasons and different crops and the Oraons practised different rites, rituals and festivals at different stages and seasons of cultivation. Some of these agriculture related festivals are *dhanboni* (sowing of seeds), *dhangari* (rituals, festival connected to transplanting of seedling), *khalihan* festival (festival related to paddy threshing floor specially) etc. The ownership of land is also an essential component of Oraon identity. Being settled cultivators for generations the Oraons had emotional and material attachment with land. Land, for them, is not only a means of livelihood but also offers symbols of ethnic identity. The Oraons collectively value land in a particular way; land gives them identity and status. In my study in North Bengal, I have found that over the years the Oraons of North Bengal, particularly outside plantations, have lost their land to the non-tribal neighbours. The alienation of tribal land, which has been done violating the law and by fraudulent means, has affected not only their livelihood but also the self-identity of the community. Losing land the Oraons face serious livelihood and identity crisis. Their traditional culture, which was primarily land-based, is also faced with a crisis.

Observance of community festival is the hallmark of Oraon identity. It constitutes an important aspect of common culture which involves a set of shared symbols rituals, norms, worship of common set of deities, and ancestors of mythical origin. Festivals are associated with religion, agriculture (planting and harvesting season). The cattle are also considered to be a part of their livelihood. Of the various festivals observed by the immigrant Oraons the most important are the Sarhul (in Sadri language) and Khaddi (in *Kurukh* Language), which symbolise the marriage of God with mother earth, called '*Dharmesh*' (in *Kurukh* language, meaning the supreme God) the purpose of which is to pray for fertility of earth and good harvest. The Karam or *karma*, which is rooted in mythical tradition, is the most important and the oldest festival of the Oraons, which gives them distinct ethnic identity; this festival, like other ones, helps maintain ethnic solidarity. The festival of *Karam* is named after the name of a tree called *Karam*

(*Nauclea Parvifolia*) which is believed to be sacred and hence venerated. In recent times one can notice a kind of cultural revival in observing *Karam* festival in a grand scale both by the Christian and non-Christian Oraons. This adds solidity to ethnic identity and consciousness. Although at present they do not observe all the rites and rituals of the historical past they preserve them in their memory as a part of their mythical tradition.

The Oraons observe all the festivals collectively. The community celebration of social festivals helps reproduction of a common identity, a community that shares a common culture and a shared history. Numerous festivals represent cultural specificities or elements providing substance to it and ultimately promote continuation of customs, tradition and culture. Their culture and way of life foster ethnic identity and a sense of group solidarity. Observance of their traditional cultural practices rituals is seen as symbols of their ethnic identity. What is important is that the Oraons in a new geo-social setup in North Bengal are open to new forces of change and yet they take care in preserving the core elements of their culture and a sense of community (ethnic) solidarity. Treating ethnicity at the political level one may come across divergent voices from within the community.

### *Conclusion*

The Oraons, one of the earliest immigrant settlers, inhabit two different socio-spatial conditions - one tea plantations and the other agriculture-based villages, both in rural areas of North Bengal. The other intra community division is based on religion; some of them claim to Hindu while a majority of them are Christian. Notwithstanding these differences their culture seems to be the binding force that gives them one common Oraon identity. They maintain a cultural (language, customs, traditions, clans, rituals, names and surnames) boundary with the other tribes who also have migrated from central India. One of the major concerns of the Oraons is the preservation of their culture, which under changed circumstances are open to multiple forces of change. The progressive loss of land has come as a challenge to their culture which was agriculture-based. Loss of land means they have to try some unconventional occupations and move to different places, which also can have an unsettling impact on their way of life and

solidarity. On the whole the new challenges create an urge among the members of the community to fall back on their culture and work for ethnic solidarity. Among Christian Oraons also conscious efforts are there to preserve their culture and foster a sense of ethnic solidarity. The community feeling and consciousness, language, religion, and numerous festivals have become increasingly manifest in recent years as symbols of ethnic group identity.

### References

- Brass, Paul, 1996. 'Ethnic Groups and ethnic Identity Formation', in J. Hutchinson & A.D. Smith (eds.) *Ethnicity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Brass, Paul, 1974. *Language, Religion and Politics in North India*. UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Basu, Salil, 1990. 'Ethnic Identity and Ethnopolitics: Regional Movement in India', in B. Chaudhuri (ed.) *Ethnopolitics and Identity Crisis*. New Delhi: Inter India Publication.
- Chaudhuri, B. 1990. 'Identity Crisis of the Tribals - A Case Study', in B. Chaudhuri (ed.) *Ethnopolitics and Identity Crisis*. New Delhi: Inter India Publication.
- Enloe, Cynthia, 1996. 'Religion and Ethnicity', in J. Hutchinson & A.D. Smith (eds.) *Ethnicity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Geertz, Clifford, 1996. 'Primordial Ties', in J. Hutchinson & A.D. Smith (eds.) *Ethnicity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Horowitz, Donald, 1985. *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. California: University of California Press.
- Hutchinson, J. & A.D. Smith, 1996. 'Ethnicity', in J. Hutchinson & A.D. Smith (eds.) *Ethnicity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kujur, Anupa A., 1989. *The Oraon Habitat: A Study in Cultural Geography*. Ranchi: Daughter of the Cross.
- Sills, Edward, 1957. 'Primordial, Personal, Sacred and Civil Ties', *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 7.
- Risley, H.H., 1981. *Tribes and Caste of Bengal*. Calcutta: Ethnology Glossary.
- Roy, S.C, 2004. *The Oraons of Chota Nagpur, 1915 (Reprinted)*. Ranchi: Crown Publication.
- Roy, S.C., 1999. *Oraon Religion and Custom, 1915 (Reprinted)*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House.