

An Overview of Language, Culture and Identity of the Oraon Tribe in Odisha

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Abstract

The Oraon community people who speak Kurux, a north Dravidian language, have a long history of culture and community life. Major concentration of these people is in the districts of Bihar, West Bengal, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh which formed Chotanagpur earlier and Central Provinces the homeland of Oraon from where they have migrated to other parts of the country for their livelihood, and to the neighboring countries like Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh.

The census of India 2001 figures the population of Kurux speaking population as 1,750,000. Oraon is one of the major tribes in Odisha among other 62 tribes. The Oraons have always lived together with other tribal groups viz. Kisan, Munda, Kharia etc. in the village. Sadri is used as a link language within these tribal communities in the village. The Oraon community people are losing their language in favour of Sadri, Hindi, Odia and other languages. Sadri is an Indo-Aryan language which is a dominant role player in replacing Kurux in most of the Oraon villages. They used to play musical instruments like '*mandar*' and '*nagda*' (both are two different kinds of drum), and sing folk songs and traditional dance in '*akhra*' a dance floor in a village on the occasion of different seasonal festivals. Every festival had different folk songs and different styles of dance. They are vanishing slowly. The worship of gods and goddesses at '*sarna*' a place of worship under a shade of sacred grove, are found rarely.

This paper is an attempt to trace linguistic situation of the Oraon tribe in Odisha who are moving away from their aboriginal language and culture. It also focuses on the steps that need to be taken for revitalizing the language and grow awareness about the language, culture and identity of the people. The data analysed for this study includes the census data, literatures related to this tribes and personal interactions and interviews with the informants in the villages of Sundargarh district.

Keywords: Kurux, Oraon, Kisan, Munda, Chotanagpur, Sadri, akhra, nagda, mandar, sarna

Introduction

The Oraon community people lived in Rohtasgarh in the district of Shahabad in Bihar in the past. Rohtasgarh is a memorable place for the Oraon people. This place is historically related to these people. There are two predictions made how these people have landed to Rohatasgarh. The first one is by Cornel Dalton who makes guess that the Oraon must have come from Deccan region. They might have been there in the Pandya kingdom for long time. Then, they might have moved to the bank of Narmada River and from there towards eastern side. They reached to Bihar, a place called Shahabad crossing the river Sone. They might have come and settled down in Shahabad in and around 800 B.C. (Turkey 1989: 7-8).

The second guess work is put forward by Shri Mahli Libin Turkey, who goes on describing that the Oraons were the inhabitants of Sindhu Ghati. They were at the bank of Sutlej at Harappa in 3500 B.C. But, due to the invasion of the powerful Aryans, they left that place around 1750 B.C. Then they reached in Shahabad place called Rohtas crossing the plains in the bank of Yamuna in between 800 and 900 B.C. (ibid. p. 8).

Turkey (ibid. p.8) describes that the Oraons were invaded by Chero tribe in and around 100 B.C. There are many traditional stories which unveil about the brave Oraon lady *Singi Dai* who dressed her up like man along with her friends to fight back the enemies. This incident took place on the day of *Sahrul* festival, when the Oraon men were drunk and were not in a position to fight. The enemies were driven out thrice

consecutively. The enemies did not know the fact that they were chased out by the women soldiers led by *Singi Dai*. They inquired about this and came to know this fact from the milk woman. The milk woman gave them a hint that if the soldiers wash their face by using two hands while crossing the river then they are women. And, the same thing was observed by the enemies who fought back and captured Rohtasgarh. The Oraons left the place and they came to Chotanagpur and settled down. There were already many other tribal groups, among them the Munda community is one. The Munda believe that they have saved the life of Oraon tribe. Munda tribe people take pride that they have saved the Oraon tribe¹. There is a traditional story which articulates that the Oraons were invaded by the other tribe men. When the Oraons were chased down, Mundas cleverly saved one Oraon man by shaving his head. Munda usually kept clean shaven those days. The Oraon man later married to Munda lady and the Oraon offspring was raised. Till today these tribes are found together in almost all the villages keeping the good affinity in them.

Geographical Spread and Their Population

These people are mainly found in 20 states of India² viz. Jharkhand, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal are having larger numbers of these people. Also many people are found in the north-western in the tea garden.

According to the census 2001, the population of the Oraon people in India is estimated as 1,750,000³. The Joshua project⁴ report shows the population of Oraon is 4,664,000 in India. This data varies from the census data of India.

An Overview of Linguistic Situation in Odisha

Odisha is one of the Indian states, situated in the eastern part of India. This state is very rich linguistically. There are different ethnic group of people who speak different languages from different language family. The census 2011 estimates the total population of Odisha as 41,947,358. There are 62 different tribes in Odisha which are officially recognized. The population of the scheduled tribe (ST) is 8,145,081. The population STs gives 22.1 per cent of the total population of the State and 9.7 per cent of the total tribal population in the country. They practice different socio-cultural activities and have their indigenous language. There are many tribal languages in this part. Indo-Aryan language beside Odia being the official language, there are many variants of Odia found, Sambalpuri, Baleswari, Gajami, Desiya and so on. Sadri is one of the lingua franca used within the tribal communities of Oraon, Kisan (Dravidian family) and Munda, Kharia (Munda family) to communicate each other. There is continuous growth in the number of Oraon population. The table below provides the figures of Oraon population from 1971 to 2011, which shows the growth rate of this tribe, as compiled in the census of India.

Table-1

1971		1981		1991		2001		2011	
Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
81399	83220	107889	107447	127820	130009	153934	154997	177457	180655
Total -164619		Total- 215336		Total-257829		Total- 308931		Total- 358112	

Source: Compiled from Census of India (1971, 1981, 1991, 2001 and 2011)

Shift in Language and Cultural Activities

Fordham (1998) points out the importance of language which contains all the aboriginal knowledge

¹ This fact was described by Marcel Jojo, a Munda language speaker from Sundargarh district in Odisha.

² https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/14210/IN

³ <https://www.ethnologue.com/language/kru>

⁴ Joshua Project. A ministry of Frontier Venture. https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/14210/IN

system of the people. The same group of people in one place is a positive sign for the language and culture to prosper. They maintain their language and culture in all set up. The archaic form of language is maintained due to lesser influence from the outsiders. The cultural activities are at the best. The language and culture get influenced and shifted only when there is another dominant group in and around. The community having lesser number get dominated. The influence of dominant culture and language falls on the way of life style to language usage in everyday setting.

Language Shift of Oraon

The Oraons are proud to have their own language and culture. They speak Kurux language a north Dravidian language. But as the time has passed on these people are shifting to other tongues. Despite of having good number of people, this language is regarded as an endangered language. The UNESCO’s Language Vitality and Endangerment framework defines degree of language endangerment as a vulnerable when ‘most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g., home).’ In Bangladesh out of 90000 thousand Oraon tribe people only 25000 Oraon people are speaking Kurux. They are speaking Sadri rather than Kurux.

The Oraons and their language Kurux is facing very tough time to survive in many regions including in Odisha. It can be hypothesised that the Oraons are shifting to other language due to the demand that the modernisation has made and to cope up with the changing scenario and culture. The job opportunities and medium of school education are done in the state languages and in English. The state language in Jharkhand is Hindi and link language Sadri between the different communities. In Odisha, Odia a state language and Sadri is within the tribal groups. In general, all the Oraons are using Sadri, Odia or Hindi in their respective places as it demands. Slowly and gradually those languages are replacing Kurukh and becoming the mother tongue for the coming generation.

The population of the Oraon tribe has been increasing but there is decrease in the mother tongue speakers. The Oraon people have slowly started flocking towards the urban areas for the quality education, health care and life style. The table below carries the rural and urban population figure of the Oraon tribe in Odisha.

Oraon Tribe in Odisha (Rural and Urban Population)

Table- 2

1971		1981		1991		2001		2011	
Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
149770	14849	186409	28927	217673	40156	261571	47360	295924	62188

Sources: Compiled from Census of India (1971, 1981, 1991, 2001, 2011)

According to the census 2001, the total number of Oraon people in Odisha is 308931, taking the figure of both living rural area 261571 and urban area 47360. It shows 16 per cent of people in Odisha have moved towards urban areas. The census of 2011 numbers Oraon population in Odisha as 358112, living in rural areas 295924 and in urban 62188. It is nearly 18 per cent of people have moved to urban areas. The figure of 16 per cent and 18 per cent of people who have moved from the villages for the city life in 2001 and 2011 seem to be small chunk but has put lot of impact on the usage of language. Due to this, rituals, customs and traditions are not being followed. The important festivals like, Karma, Sahrul are not observed. The coming generation are completely away from the age old customs, tradition and the language in very specifically. In course of time people have shifted to other language.

The language shift in the tribal community is growing in a faster rate. People are leaving their own language and making other languages as their own. It looks very tough time for the tribal to maintain their language. It is noted clearly by Mishra (1991: 211) that “Kurux has undergone contraction in number of speakers. According to the 1961 census, mother tongue returns to Kurux is gradually decreasing. Out of 16,

00,445 Oraons only 10, 35,619 speak Kurux natively.” Nearly 65 per cent of the Oraons spoke in 1961. And, Khubchandni (1992:38) estimates that “hardly 49 per cent of tribal retained their mother tongues in 1971. This was further decreased to 42 per cent in 1981”. Tirkey (1998) says, it means 58 per cent of the tribal have already abandoned their mother- tongue in the year 1981 and adopted languages of the dominating society.

The Oraon tribe has been facing the danger of losing their language. As it is shown in the Joshua project the total population of the Oraon is 4,664,000 but among the total population only 1,573,000⁵ are the primarily Kurux speakers. The 33.7 per cent of Oraons are speaking their language. In Odisha according to the census 1971 the population of Oraon was 164619 and among them only 59179 speak Kurux.⁶ It is nearly 35 per cent of the total population spoke their language.

The table below gives us clear picture of different states in India having number of Kurux speaker in the year 1961.

Mother Tongue Returns (Census 1961)

Table-3

State	Total Kurux speaker		Mother tongue	Returns
Bihar	734625	Kurux	531780	72.4%
Odisha	129066	Kurux	48882	37.8%
Madhya Pradesh	283068	Kurukh	252282	89.1%
West Bengal	453686	Kurukh	202675	44.7%

Sources: Data Compiled from Mishra 1991: 211⁷

The above table shows that Bihar having the highest number of Kurux speakers and the other states comparatively lower. In Bihar 72 per cent of people used Kurux as their mother tongue. At the same time only 37 per cent of the Oraon population in Odisha retained their language as their mother tongue which is very low. The current situation of the Oraon speakers is hard to imagine in Odisha.

The table below shows the percentage of the people who have shifted to other language and accepted as the mother tongue.

Percentage of Kurux shifted to other languages

Table- 4

State	Shifted to other languages
Bihar	27.6%
Madhya Pradesh	10.8%
West Bengal	66.1%
Orissa	55.3%

Sources: Data Compiled from Mishra 1991: 212-213⁸

The Oraon people of West Bengal and Orissa have shifted to other languages like, Hindi, Sadri, Odia, and Bengali in highest number in 1961. And this process has continued generation after generation.

⁵ https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/14210/IN

⁶ Dr. Pasayat 2008, has shown in the table 1 Tribal Languages of Orissa on the Basis of their Independent Linguistic Status and Speaker Strength as per 1971 Census

⁷ Data Compiled from (Census 1961; source: Ekka 1980 in Mishra 1991: 211)

⁸ Data compiled from (Source: Ekka, 1980 in Mishra 1991: 212-213)

Attitude towards Language

Language and culture is the identity of the tribal people. The tribals after moving out of their world have generated distaste for their language. Istiaq (1994) has an opinion that there is an attitude among the tribal groups that their language is unable to meet the demands of present situation in job market globally. Due to which people are moving away from their aboriginal language. Therefore, the Oraons have cultivated the mind set of teaching Hindi, Odia, and English at home so that it becomes easy for their children to cope up in the job field. As it is rightly said by Tirkey (1998: 14), “English and Hindi have become the 'job languages' for the educated tribal going out in search of some kind of jobs.

The tribal languages also can become powerful if they will be taught and made mandatory course in the educational institutions. In the higher level these languages are taught in Jharkhand. The initial schooling is needed to be taught in the tribal languages so that literacy among the tribal will grow and the language can be preserved. Therefore, Istiaq (1994) says, “all language passes from one generation to another and therefore, its growth and development are inevitable. Another positive aspect of imparting education through tribal language is the achievement of a higher level of literacy among the tribal population. The higher rate of drop – outs among them have a direct relation with the medium of instruction which are inevitably non-tribal languages.” (Tirkey 1998: 14).

Mohan (2004) has elaborated that, in the state of Jharkhand where there are many instances of educated Oraons who live in the urban areas who have failed to cultivate the habit of talking in their own language. Out of 46 Oraon people, 41 were from the urban area and 5 are from the rural area. This work was carried out in Jharkhand. The children have no chance to hear their parents speaking in Kurux but in other languages like Sadri or Hindi popularly used in Jharkhand. Hence, the children are picking up either Sadri or Hindi as their mother tongue.

The skills of Speaking (S), Writing (W), Understanding (U), and Reading (R) were tested. The result shows that among 46 Oraons 23 of them speak in Kurux and understand 35 of them. But, it is interesting to see 46 out of 46 in both Sadri and Hindi in speaking and understanding level.

The similar instance is marked in many villages in Odisha in the district of Sundargarh. The villages viz. Kondh Toli nearly 40 houses and among them 20 are of Oraon families, Laldipa- 15 Oraon families, Khariadipa, more than 50 families. The Kurux language is not transferred to the present generation. There are only three old women and two men who know the language in Kondh Toli village. But they do not converse to each other in Kurux. The Sadri has emerged as the dominant language within this group.

Religion and Cultural Activities

These people were thought to be the worshiper of the nature but they believe that the rivers, sacred groves (*sarna*), hills, trees are only the dwelling place for the deities. The Oraons believed in supreme god *Dharme* or *Dharmesh*, who is creator of the universe. The sun is considered as the symbol of God's glorious power and brightness. The Oraons venerated sun, and acknowledge a supreme god, *Dharme* or *Dharmesh*, who dwells in the sun. They also believed in ancestral spirits, called as *pachbalar*, whom they offered prayers. They believe in the evil spirits and offered sacrifices for them. They worship at the place called as *sarna* a sacred place under the shade of grove. This practice of worshiping at *sarana* is now very rare to see. Most of the Oraon population has accepted Christianity. The Oraon people who are still unmoved from their original religion are called *saḍsar uraḍ* who practise worship at *sarana*. But, they have started including the Hindu way of worship.

The festivals are related to the life of the tribal. They celebrate different festivals in different occasions. In the words of Tirkey (1998) “Their walking is dancing, and their talking is singing”. The Oraons celebrate major festivals like; *Sahrul*, *Phagu*, *Karam* and many others in the community. The festival of *Sahrul* is also known as the spring festival. This festival is celebrated when the *sal* trees are in full blossom. The sun and earth get symbolic marriage bond on this day. Before this festival no Oraons supposed to till their fields or do any preparatory works on the ground. After the festival is over, people go for ploughing and sowing the seeds. But, now the custom of *Sahrul* festival is very rare to see. There are different styles of dances on different occasions, but it is hard to see now.

Karma festival is categorised as an agriculture festival. It is celebrated in the month of Bhado (August-September). It has symbolic meaning of productivity. The agriculture might produce good crops. The centre of worship on this day is *Karam* tree, scientifically called *Nauclea Parvifolia*. This festival also reminds the great escape of the Oraons from the hand of *Chero* tribe. The Oraons hide themselves under the *Karam* tree which had thick branches touching to the ground. Therefore, Oraons love and venerate the *Karam* tree. There was a practice of telling the origin story of the Oraon from where they descend, beginning from the journey to Rohtasgarh and after that the incident of invasion of *Chero* tribe, they fled to Chotanagpur. These narrations of the origin story were done in the *akhra* a dance floor and a place where they usually gathered for any meeting. These festivals are slowly getting lost day by day from the Oraon community.

The situation in tea garden as mentioned by Purkayastha (2012: 99) “now many of them are not performing pujas in their family because they think non-Oraon may laugh at their pujas”. Hence, they are not practising worship now days. Christianity has played a vital role in moulding the life of scheduled tribes in Chotanagpur region. Christianity came within Oraon community in 1845 through Lutheran missionary. Then the Roman Catholicism came through Jesuit priest Augustus Stockman in 1869, who settled at Chaibasa⁹. The people here were looted of their land and made to work for without wage by the *dikku* outsiders. The Oraon community has experienced its growth and prosperity after the advent of Christianity. They came to the education field and fetched some kind of quality life. Now, they have spread across the country searching for quality job and quality life. The advent of new religion in the community has influenced the way of life. The Oraons had practices of offering animals to satisfy the evil spirits. The new religion gives a way for these people to get rid of such practices and people accepted the religion happily. They also got the benefits in education, health and in many other fields.

The other tribals in this region Sadans which is an Aryan group, viz. Teli, Jhora, Ghasi, Lohar, etc and Mundas have influenced a lot to the way of life of Oraons. The demand of modern age for quality life, quality job, the Oraons are trying to cope up with the demands. By this they are falling apart from their cultural practices of dance, folklores, songs and other customs. The language is also not talked at home. This is the wakeup call for the Oraons and all other tribes to protect and avoid this kind of situation which may take away the indigenous identity.

Conclusion

The Oraons knew how to cure the diseases by making medicine from the medicinal trees and their leaves, roots, fruits, grass and so on. Nearly 34 diseases were cured by these people. But this practice of curing sickness is also getting lost and becoming much more dependent on the hospitals. The loss of these practices is a great loss. The names of medicinal trees and the trees cannot be recognised by the present generation people. And as a result, trees will be cut down because they are of no use.

Due to the advancement of the modern era these people are losing their taste in cultural activities and other religious rituals and so on. They have begun to accept Hindi, Odia, Sadri and other languages as their mother tongue. Language and culture give the recognition of one's identity. There are other tribes who live side by side with Oraon call Oraon as *dhanka uraõ* because they do not know the language. It is a derogatory word to call the Oraon people. It is hard to imagine such a language and culture is getting decayed day by day. Introduction of Kurux language as the medium of teaching in primary school level is necessary. Also, literary works need to be produced along with the awareness program to protect the language at first hand. All these will boost the language in this scenario.

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⁹ It is described in Tirkey, B. 1989. *Prasannamukh Uraon*. Patna: Navjyoti Niketan. p.31-35.

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