

Displacement, Resettlement and Rehabilitation: A Study on Oraon tribe in Barak Valley of Assam

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Abstract: Study of small community in regional setting attains prominence in the present contemporary society. Oraon--a tribal community recognised by the Government of India--inhabits mainly in Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal, but pronounce differently in different states namely Orang, Oram, Uram and Urang etc. In the Barak valley of Assam it is popularly known as Urang. The community--owing to its initial days of economic deprivation and socio-historical problems--created from within and imposed from outside--migrated to the different regions of the state during the British Period. A large number of Oraons came and settled down in the Barak valley during that period. But unlike other states and regions, where they are known as tribes, in the Barak valley they are enlisted as Other Backward Class (OBC). What made them OBCs here? Whether they are assimilated/absorbed vis-à-vis de-tribalised/de-constructed them willingly or they are coercively subjugated by the dominant-hegemonic power structure of the valley/region they presently live in? The study proposes to investigate these two important issues/problems of the Oraons in the Barak valley.

Keywords: Oraon, migration, Barak valley, displacement, assimilation, detribalization.

I. INTRODUCTION

Oraon--a tribal community recognised by the Government of India--inhabits mainly in Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal. The community--owing to its initial days of economic deprivation and socio-historical problems--created from within and imposed from outside--migrated to the different regions of the state during the British Period. A large number of Oraon tribe came and settled down in the Barak valley during that period. After arrival in Barak Valley they lost their traditional culture, custom and become de-tribalised. This Study, focus upon circumstance compelling them to migrate from their ancestral homeland to various parts of Northeast and how migration, displacement and occupational change failed to rehabilitate them. Main concern in this study is to what made Oraon to become Other Backward Class (OBC) in Barak Valley in Assam.

II. DISPLACEMENT, NEW OCCUPATION AND SOCIO-CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

Transformation of tribe and culture is a continuous process. Tribal's of India have come in contact with various external or internal forces and are in constant change. As they are no longer in isolation, but exposed to various forces, so change in their culture is inevitable. But their contact with outside world has allowed a number of evils to infiltrate in them along with a number of benefits. Many people started exploiting poor, illiterate, tribal to keep them below poverty. They are deprived of their right over land and forest and often being fleeced by money lender, big land owner, trader and businessman and others in tribal areas. The process continues till the poor have nothing but to sell except their body and labour. In Eastern and Northeast India a large number of tribes are engaged as labourers in tea estates. Such tribal labourer force came from Chotanagpur, changed their life-style. Change is more in their material life which partly affected their religious and psychological life. Change in economy--shift in agriculture to agro-based industrial work- developed some propensity to factory work among tribal youth.

Socio-economic and cultural life of tribal groups of India varies from tribe to tribe and region to region. They belong to various ethnic stocks, have distinct pattern of economy, technology and religious belief and speak a large number of languages and dialects. Though there is 'diversity in life of these communities, there exists a good deal of similarity in their socio-cultural and psychological level. Till today tribes are more or less try to retain their separate identity, custom and regulation. As a result they can be regarded as comparatively isolated and backward.

Tribal societies in India have borrowed cultural traits from their dominant Hindu neighbours and replaced their own identical cultural traits by these. The tribal people in Indian subcontinent are living for centuries in close contact with the numerous dominant Hindu caste people on whom they depend economically. They felt a strong desire to unite themselves with the cultural matrix of the dominant Hindus only to upgrade their position in the ladder of the Hindu social hierarchy. During the long centuries of Hindu rule and Hindu neighbours, tribes assimilated with Hindu culture. Almost all so-called aboriginal tribes have Hinduised section, small or large they have been in fairly intimate contact with Hindus for a long time, and that they have common interest with Hindus in matter of religion and gainful occupation. Tribes have shown a tendency to look upon themselves as Hindis or as people closely connected with Hindus. For section of tribes who remained in isolated mountain, only very small sections in recesses of hills and depth of forest have not been touched by Hinduism and they retained tribal creed and organization than many castes of Hindu society, yet they are in reality Backward Hindus. It implies interaction between tribe and Hindu neighbours brought assimilation among tribes.

In Barak valley Oraon participate and perform ritual of Hindus. Overall transformation of their culture and life is due to migration and assimilation with local people Barak Valley region. With change of their social structure Oraon have lost their name of tribe. In the region they are called by *Urang* instead of *Oraon*. Absence of social connection with their place of origin led to relaxation of many of social custom and rite of different communities. Oraon have adopted local culture, custom and also local way of life.

(a) Family: Changes are also observed in daily family life of Oraon. Women's work confine within household chore, collection of fire-wood and gathering of edible herb, nut and tuber from neighbouring forest. But in present setting many of them work as wage earners, mostly in nearby tea gardens. The elementary family oldest man, who must be earning member, is the head. Widow becomes head only when children are minor. A good number of families are found where a son is head because father is retired, and younger son is earner.

(b) Marriage: Marriage is monogamous. Marriage between near relative is not sanctioned. Bride-price and re-marriage are widely practiced among Oraon. Widow of deceased brother becomes wife of younger brother. Divorce is frequent and elopement of bride is also seen among Oraon. But now a days it is observed inter-caste marriage is found to some certain extent among Oraon. Due to contact with Hindu neighbours in Barak Valley Oraon involve with inter-caste marriage. But such trend is not frequent among Oraon in Barak Valley. Traditionally, Oraon get wed-lock with sun rise which is called *Sindra daan*. But in present day, change occurred in their marriage. To some extent it is observed that they also follow custom of Bengali, Bhajpuri etc. after completion of *Sindra daan*.

(c) Change in Language: When tribe is integrated into structure of Hindu society it adopts language of regional community. It is possible for a tribe to become a caste only after it has been assimilated into regional linguistic community such as Bengali or Oriya or Assamese people. Tribes have been differentiated not only from caste but also from dominant community of region. Dominant community is invariably a linguistic community. Tribes are differentiated from non-tribes on several criteria, most important being language and social organization of caste. Tribes are treated as tribes precisely because they are outside dominant regional community and thus outside complex of civilization. One is not sure whether even after experiencing change at level of culture, including religion and language, a tribe can be said to have become a caste. Much depends on nature of linkage with social structure of regional, linguistic and caste society. Kurukh is the traditional dialect of Oraon belongs to Dravidian family. But in present contest, most of Oraon forgot it. Only a very few elderly persons know Kurukh language. Majority of Oraon in Barak Valley are bilingual. So it can be said that Kurukh language is gradually vanishing from Oraon social structure in Barak Valley.

Table 1: Oraon using non-Oraon language

Language	No of Respondent		Total	Percentage
	Male	Female		
Bagani (Bhojpuri mixed Bengali)	103	123	226	75.34
Sadri	32	20	52	17.33
Bengali	11	4	15	5.00
Hindi	4	3	7	2.33
Grand Total			300	100.00

Source: Fieldwork Data

Data indicate most Oraon (75.34%) use Bagani language. Bagani language is generally used in tea garden as well as neighboring areas. It is a mixed language of Bhojpuri, Oriya and Bengali. And a little less than one-fifth (17.33%) use Sadri language. Beside these 5% use Bengali and only a small segment that is 2.33% speak Hindi language for communication. Barak valley is 505organized505d505505 by heterogeneity of castes, languages and culture. Bengali speaking people are numerically large in number in Barak valley. Hence, Oraon are generally using Bengali language for inter group communication. But to some extent they use other languages also.

(d) Dress and Ornament: There has been noticeable change in dress and ornaments used by Oraon. Old dress is now not in practice. While it is still common to see that dhoti in its miniature form, western style shirt with collar are mostly replaced by native upper garments. New and current style is mostly initiated by few young boy and girl who study in school or are in contact with nearby urban center. Change of dress often means of new psychology, a scorn of tradition of one's tribe, a sense of being ashamed of it. This leads to a breakdown of tribal discipline: a youth in smart western cloths and sola topi, and girls in blouse and even trouser with lipstick on their lip and phoney trinkets in their hair will not obey his tribal chief who looks so 'jungly' in his traditional attire. Traditional ornament worn by Oraon woman is *Baju, Nakfuli, Husle, Hathpatta, Dhul, Churi, Hikhol*. But at present Oraon women do not use these traditional ornaments. Only a few Oraon women use their traditional ornament at social occasion. Oraon women now generally use modern ornament instead of their traditional ornament. They feel inconvenience to wear old kind of ornament. Thus it is observed traditional attire of Oraon is becoming unpopular day by day and getting replaced by modern kind of ornament.

(e) Song and Dance: Oraons have their different numbers of songs and dances such as *Karam dance, Fagua dance, Jhumar dance* etc. Oraons have to be appreciated for song and dance they perform at different occasions. In addition to that dance and song are part of their life and source of enjoyment and relaxation. Apart from that different musical instrument are played in accompaniment of singing and dancing on the occasion of birth, marriage, name giving, attaining of puberty, sowing of seed, harvesting, wearing new flower and eating new fruit and crop, hunting. But in present scenario it is observed that their traditional dance and song are not being performed by them. In some occasion they listen Hindi, Bengali, and Bhojpuri songs instead of their traditional song.

(f) Food Habit: Oraon food habit also under gone change. They now habituate to take wheat in form of roti. Traditionally Oraon eat boil rice and millet. They no longer boil all edibles together in a hotch-potch. Use of oil and spices is very common and they have learned art of frying item. Besides, sweet and other dainty eatable are also brought. Items like tea and beetle-nut etc are taken. In an average Oraon consumption habit is exclusively new in present society. Though during their festival and other related occasions they prefer *haria* (rice beer) is still prevalent among them.

Religious Belief and practice:

Oraon are traditionally agriculturist tribe of Chotanagpur. Thus their major festivals are connected with agricultural cycle. At each stage of agricultural operation they propitiate their god and deity to seek their favour as their economy is mainly based on agriculture. Their supreme deity is known as Dharmesh. He is the creator and sun is the visible symbol of Dharmesh. He is 'beneficent one' and although highly revered, a number of malignant spirits are adorned and propitiated. Dharmesh is invoked by name of *Danda Rengha* (bhelwapari). Supreme god is invoked at time of greatest difficulties. They also have ancestor- spirits known a *Pach Balar*. They are invoked and make offering during festivals. They have also a belief in Ottanga (ritual human sacrifice). The women must abstain from using a plough, otherwise whole village becomes polluted. Old women drive out such 'disease' (*Rogi-khedna*). There is also a confederacy of a number of neighbouring villages with a central 505rganized505d505 known as *Parha Panch*. Each para consist of a number of villages and each comes from a *Raja* (King), *Dewan* (Prime minister), *Panrey* (clerk), *Kotwar* (Bailiff) and *Kartaha* (officiates on a socio-religious gathering). Oraons also believe in a number of gods, goddesses, deities and spirits. At

home, many of these super-natural spirits are propitiated ceremonially and at regular intervals. Thus, ritual connected with hunting expedition e.g. *Fagua-sendra*, *Bisu-sendra*, *Jeth-sikar*, *Jani-sikar*, agricultural operation e.g. *Hanan*, *kadlota* and *kharra-puja* and periodical *jatras* are no longer observed. But major festivals e.g. *Sohrai*, *Karam* and *phagu* are observed at regular interval. Traditionally Oraon propitiate a number of spirits e.g. *chala-PachchoDarha*, *Chordewa* and *Sarni-Burhia*.

Now, most Oraon do not seem to be familiar with these spirits. Many traditional ceremonies and rituals are replaced by offering at village shrine. A few traditional pujas e.g. *Khut Puja*, *Chatal Puja*, *Valua Puja*, *Naga Puja*, *Karam Puja*, *Hariari Puja*, *Pachatia Puja* –*pahari puja* are still observed by them to some extent. Now- a –days it is also seen that Oraons are accepting religious festivals of other caste in Barak valley. Almost all Oraon in Barak Valley perform Hindu rituals. They celebrate Hindu religious festivals like *Durga puja*, *Kali puja* etc. It is observed that they take more interest with these pujas than their traditional festivals.

Economic transformation:

Economic transformation occurred due to migration and change of occupation from peasant economy to wage labourer. Such a process of uprooting of peasant for plantation work is a world-wide phenomenon. Traditional occupation of Oraon was agriculture and hunting. Due to pressure on land, frequent famine and oppression of money lender and land-lord, they started migrating in batches to tea plantations in Assam. Loss of land, increase in population, need for cash, and atrocity money-lender and zamindar drove out a large number of Oraon to tea gardens.

Nature of suffering of plantation worker is different from other industrial worker. Working and living condition of Oraons are seen to be unsatisfactory. Lack of proper housing results in illness and immoral act as Oraon with traditional occupation migrated to tea plantation. Migration has considerably reduced occupational hierarchy of Oraon as they have involved themselves in industrial way of life. Nature of their work in plantation is related to agricultural work except factory work. Although wage of plantation worker are not better than neighboring peasant, Oraon get absorbed in new working environment find economic stability and permanent source of earning for livelihood.

They did not have such an economic stability in native village under precarious exploitation by rich peasant, landlord and moneylender belonging to non-tribal community. Other occupational facilities related to health, education, recreation, housing etc, motivated Oraon to develop positive attitude towards their new occupation. However, low level of education is related to their low occupation. Plantation workers do not have aspiration for better employment and job mobility is totally restricted to them. They generally do not think of taking up non-plantation job except a few. Upward mobility is also absent even within plantation environment.

Economic life of Oraon is very poor. Most of them depend upon tea estate for their livelihood. Some of them do earn independently by doing cultivation. According to them wage of tea estate is not adequate to meet their daily expense. That is why youth Oraon are gradually showing interest to go outside tea garden to earn more money. And aged Oraon think in present situation it is not possible for them to go anywhere for earning except tea estate. But due to poverty and illiteracy, whatever they desire to do or perform that remains confined within the locality.

Table 2: Occupation of Oraon in Barak Valley

Occupation	No of Respondents		Total	Percentage
	Male	Female		
Tea Garden worker	76	94	170	56.66
Retired Person	16	16	32	10.67
Farmer	15	7	22	7.33
House Wife	-	20	20	6.67
Student	13	4	17	5.67
Petty Business	15	-	15	5.00
Unemployed	5	7	12	4.00
Govt. Employee	7	-	7	2.33
Wage earners	3	2	5	1.67
Grand Total			300	100.00

Source: Fieldwork data

Data indicate more than fifty percent of respondents (56.66%) are tea garden worker while 10.67% of the respondents are retired person. Beside these 7.33% are farmer, 6.67% are house wife, 5.67% are student, 5% are petty businessman, 4% are unemployed, 2.33% are Govt. employee and a little segment that is 1.67% of the respondents are daily wages worker.

Transformation to Caste:

Tribes in India constitute around eight per cent of total population. Oraon is one of the largest tribal communities in India. They are considered to have second largest population in Bihar and Jharkhand. Oraons are believed to have settled in Chotanagpur plateau centuries ago. There are more than 400 groups in Indian society which are officially designed as scheduled tribes. These groups have all been undergoing changes. British administrator cum scholars gave rise to concept that tribes lived in isolation from rest of population and had no interaction or interconnection with mainstream. Tribe is a dimension of little tradition that cannot be adequately understood unless it is seen in relation to great tradition. The entire course of Indian history shows tribal elements being fused into general society. Transformation of tribes into caste is conceived to occur through method, which have been diversely conceptualized. The adoption of technology of Hindu society by tribes, major method of absorption took place under prevalent system for organisation of production. Tribes follow non-competitive system of production because they find protection within it. Sanskritisation is another method through which tribes are absorbed into Hindu society. Other method of tribal assimilation is state formation. The process of acculturation, Hinduisation and social stratification within village could not be properly understood unless data are examined in border context of formation of principality. The formation of state provided decisive socio-political framework for transformation of tribal system into regional caste system. When a tribe undergoes change through loss of isolation and through close integration with wider society tribal becomes a caste. Oraon today practice various religions and speak more than one language, they earn their livelihood from a verity of occupations. They have not become a caste with any definite standing in caste hierarchy. After arrival in Barak valley Oraon have not only lost their traditional culture but also lost their Scheduled Tribe Status. They are popularly known in the region as *Tea Tribe*. All tea tribes in the region are categorised as **Other Backward Class (OBC)** instead of Scheduled Tribe. Though India became independent these people lost their Scheduled Tribes Status in Assam and thus they are deprived of educational, economic and political privilege granted by constitution of India. Their migration, displacement and change of occupation are responsible for their change of identity. Oraon working in tea gardens of Barak valley are not treated equally with tribes of Assam. Migration lost their ecological attribute which is regarded as one of criteria to recognize a tribe. Their displacement and change of occupation help them to lose all attributes of tribal life. In the valley they are forced to assimilate with other non-Oraon community and to some extent they adopt way of life of local society.

Due to change in old value of Oraon they face new problem and challenge to lose of tribal status. Oraon are not satisfied with the identity as they many time resisted and protested against such an imposed identity. They like to retain their own tribal identity. Oraon with their organisation still put their demand to government to get back their Tribal status which they lost after arrival in Barak valley. Because they think that reason of losing their tribal identity is poverty and illiteracy. It is another source of strength of Oraon to solve their problematic issues. Issue or problem like status of Schedule Tribe, how to retain their culture in the valley are often discussed at different levels. To some extent it is found some Oraon think their organisation Assam Pradesh Kurukh Sangha can better understand and address their problem. The term adivasi in rest of India refers to tribe in general, except Assam, where the term excludes a specific community of tribe or sub-tribe such as Santal, Munda, Oraon etc. who migrated from central India to work in tea gardens of Assam. There are many other tribes in Assam and northeast like Bodo, Khasi, Naga etc. having scheduled tribe status. Social background of local tribes and migrated tribes is almost same or similar but migrated tribes are not recognised as tribes in this region. Thus issue of disenfranchisement Adivasis, both in and out of tea garden, face numerous problems. Some more prominent adivasi organisations like All Adivasi Students Association of Assam (AASAA) as well as groups are active among tea garden workers like Assam Tea Tribes Students Association (ATTSA) demand for Schedule Tribes status of adivasi migrated to Assam. Student organisations are of view that government will not easily concede to their demand for Scheduled Tribe status and they have to fight for it till their demand is met.

Adivasis have history of enormous exploitation. Government of India (GOI) made special safeguard to protect them from exploitation as well as ensure social justice since inception of planning in 1951. Policy of 'protective discrimination' in order to safeguard interest of oppressed communities include reservation of post in public service, guarantee political representation as well as seat in educational institution. It emerged as a result of immense socio-economic inequality in

India since 1800. After Independence need for all-round development of India was felt to pay additional attention to depressed communities. Government of India sought to achieve, through legislation, ameliorative programme and treatment to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Primary objective being creation of a civil society extending effective citizenship right to vast section of population who are historically deprived and marginalised. An important question is: if adivasis deemed as deserving Schedule Tribes status in everywhere in India, why then has it been denied particularly to Tea Tribes after Independence in Assam? Among prevailing broad argument surrounding these issues include:

1. Adivasis came from outside the region i.e. migrated to here as labourers to work in tea gardens, hence cannot technically be considered as indigenous tribes of Assam.
2. They have not faced historic discrimination and exploitation that other tribes in the region faced.
3. Granting Schedule Tribe status to Adivasis will dilute franchise that other communities have gained through years of struggle to gain their own special status as well as political power in territorial council.
4. There is some question with regards to economic contribution of Adivasi community to state of Assam.
5. Adivasis have not assimilated properly enough into Assamese society and often practice their own culture, languages and tradition within secluded enclaves outside purview of the larger Assamese society.

The most common argument against granting Schedule Tribes status to adivasis in Assam is to point at their migratory history i.e. coming into state as indentured labour to work in tea gardens. Argument is that they are technically not indigenous tribe. This argument is hugely problematic to make because it could then very easily be extended to numerous, indeed all, other communities in India who do receive special benefit. Oraon of Barak valley has a long history of exploitation. Migration of Oraon into Assam was a forced and extremely harsh kind of purposive uprooting without considering their future. The effect of migration of Oraon left no choice or freedom as they live on mercy of their recruiter and employer. Oraons settled in tea belt of Assam are not floating population but rather a settled population with no connection to their original home. Oraon adopted local ways and habit and thus consider Assam to be their home. Granting of special status by India government is primarily a means of undoing past historical exploitation that tribal and other communities faced, rather than a moniker of identity. Thus it is wise for issue to revolve around history of injustice not indigenoussness.

III. METHODS AND DATA

The study follows both explorative and descriptive 'Research Design'. The data was collected from primary and secondary sources. The secondary data was collected from the census and other sources like books, periodicals and journals. Primary data was collected through participant observation. The study depends upon ethnographic account. The total sample size was 300. The criteria of sampling are 'Random', taking 100 people, fifty males and fifty females, from each district. The unit of sample is tea gardens and villages of the Valley where Oraon are living. As Oraon are spread out in entire Barak Valley region of Assam so data was collected from exclusively Oraon inhabited tea gardens/villages of different localities of three districts of Barak Valley.

IV. CONCLUSION

Oraon in Barak valley are undergoing change in their comprehensive life. Due to various overt and covert factors-imposed from outside and partly created from inside-Oraon in particular and tea tribes in general are attaining consciousness to certain extent. Some of them are also educated, if not sizeable number, to review existing situation-political, economic, and socio-cultural. Most Oraon youth probably understand change and continuity in present society and their right to live and sustenance. They form different organisation and association to raise their voice against exploitation, marginalisation and displacement. They also demand, protest and ready to fight to include them in tribal category and merely putting them in other backward class (OBC) frame. Hence Oraon of yester day are not found same as they are coming up with yardstick of demand for proper rehabilitation and over all development of the community at large.

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