

The Oraon tribe of Jharkhand: their art and culture

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Abstract: *The Oraon tribe, a native Adivasi community in central and eastern India, has a unique cultural identity rooted in their close ties to the natural world, group lifestyle, and oral traditions. The tribe's social structure is based on kinship ties, clan affiliations, and village communities, with patriarchal governance and village councils reflecting their emphasis on community ethos. The Oraon people follow animistic beliefs and worship a pantheon of deities, spirits, and natural forces, with rituals and ceremonies aimed at blessings for a bountiful harvest and protection from evil spirits. Rituals and festivals, such as the "Sarhul" and "Karma" festivals, foster community cohesion and spiritual rejuvenation. Oraon culture is expressed through music and dance, which serve as conduits for spirituality, social cohesiveness, and storytelling. The Oraon dances represent the community's resilience, joy, and cultural identity.*

Key Words: *Oraon, Oraon Culture, Adivasi, social, dance, Community.*

1. INTRODUCTION :

The ancient Austroasiatic-speaking indigenous groups that spent centuries living in the hills and forests of central and eastern India are the ancestors of the Oraon tribe. The Oraon people, one of the native Adivasi communities in the area, have created a unique cultural identity that is defined by their close ties to the natural world, group lifestyle, and extensive oral traditions that have been passed down through the years. Given that "Ora" means "man" and "On" means "our," it is thought that the name "Oraon" originated from these two words, representing their shared identity and sense of community.

The social structure of the Oraon tribe, which is based on kinship ties, clan affiliations, and village communities, is fundamental to their cultural identity. With descent and ancestry traced through the male line and clan elders holding a major role in community governance and decision-making, Oraon society is customarily patriarchal. Village councils, also referred to as "panchayats" or "gram sabhas," act as forums for social norm enforcement, dispute resolution, and the preservation of customary laws. They are a reflection of the Oraon culture's emphasis on community ethos and shared responsibility.

The Oraon people follow animistic beliefs and worship a pantheon of deities, spirits, and natural forces. Religion plays a significant role in their lives. Their religious rituals and ceremonies are performed to invoke blessings for a bountiful harvest, protection from evil spirits, and communal well-being. These practices are closely linked to their agrarian lifestyle. An essential part of Oraon spirituality is the worship of "Dharmes," or ancestral spirits, "Dharani Penu," or earth goddess, and "Jaher Era," or forest deity, which reflects their respect for the natural world and the paranormal. In Oraon culture, rituals and festivals are essential events that foster community cohesion, cultural expression, and spiritual rejuvenation. Celebrated in spring, the "Sarhul" festival ushers in the agricultural cycle with rituals honoring the earth goddess and asking for her blessings for a bountiful harvest. Similar to this, the Oraon people's strong ties to the land and their agricultural way of life are symbolized by the "Karma" festival, which is held in the fall and is devoted to worshipping the "Karma Devta" (deity of fertility) via songs, dances, and offerings.

The Oraon people's artistic sensibilities, inventiveness, and generation-to-generation transmission of traditional knowledge are all reflected in their exquisite craftsmanship and art. The Oraon people are well known for the colorful folk art, intricate basketry, and exquisite handwoven textiles that adorn their everyday objects, homes, and clothes.



Customary Oraon designs, influenced by the natural world, fauna, and indigenous mythology, are heavily emphasized in their artistic creations, representing their worldview and cultural heritage.

Oraon culture is expressed primarily through music and dance, which act as conduits for spirituality, social cohesiveness, and storytelling. The melodic tunes, rhythmic beats, and poetic lyrics of Oraon folk songs, also referred to as "Jhumar" and "Karma," tell stories of love, nature, and tribal life. Folk dances from Oraon, like the "Karam dance," "Jhumar dance," and "Kurukh dance," are also performed at festivals, weddings, and other social events. These dances represent the community's resilience, joy, and cultural identity.

2. Historical Context and Inception :

Kurukh, another name for the Oraon tribe, has a rich historical background that is intricately linked to the prehistoric indigenous communities of central and eastern India. The Oraon people come from the Austroasiatic-speaking tribes that spent centuries living in the region's hills and forests. Their history is characterized by resiliency, cultural diversity, and environmental adaptability.

The Chotanagpur Plateau, which includes portions of modern-day Jharkhand, Bihar, Odisha, and West Bengal, is thought to have been home to the Oraon tribe for a very long time. Their ancestors were hunter-gatherers who relied on the abundant biodiversity of the area for their food during their prehistoric era.

Gradually, they moved into permanent agricultural settlements, raising crops like rice, maize, and lentils while engaging in shifting cultivation (also referred to as "dahiya" or "kutcha") to make ends meet.

Given that "Ora" means "man" and "On" means "our," it is thought that the name "Oraon" originated from these two words, representing their shared identity and sense of community. The mythological character "Sardar Oraon," who is regarded as the tribe's ancestor, is the source of the Oraon people's ancestry, according to oral traditions and folklore. The Oraon community is believed to have been led by Sardar Oraon during their migration from northern India to Chotanagpur, where they settled and built their villages and social institutions.

The Oraon tribe has influenced the cultural practices, social customs, and linguistic traditions of numerous neighboring communities throughout history through interactions with other indigenous groups, Hindu settlers, and Muslim rulers. The Oraon language, which belongs to the Munda branch of the Austroasiatic language family, incorporates phonetic elements and loanwords from nearby languages like Bengali, Hindi, and Odia, reflecting the linguistic diversity of the area.

Since British colonial administrators imposed policies of land alienation, forest exploitation, and Christian missionary activities that disrupted traditional Oraon livelihoods and cultural practices, the colonial period brought about significant changes to the socio-economic and political landscape of the region. The Oraon people persevered in preserving their oral traditions, traditional knowledge, and way of life in the community in spite of these obstacles, demonstrating their cultural resilience.

The Oraon tribe emerged as a socially and politically conscious community during the post-independence era, fighting for their rights to resources, land, and cultural autonomy. The creation of tribal welfare groups like the Oraon Welfare Society and the All-India Oraon Society gave Oraon leaders a forum to express their demands for development projects, representation, and tribal rights.

The Oraon tribe continues to play a crucial role in the sociocultural fabric of Jharkhand and the surrounding states, adding to the socioeconomic growth, artistic legacy, and cultural diversity of the area. The Oraon people continue to preserve their customs, rituals, and cultural practices in spite of persistent difficulties associated with land alienation, displacement, and environmental degradation. This ensures that their rich cultural heritage will be preserved for future generations. The Oraon tribe continues to celebrate its identity, tenacity, and contributions to the cultural mosaic of India's indigenous peoples as stewards of a distinctive cultural legacy.

3. Cultural Expressions and Artistic Traditions :

The Oraon tribe's rich legacy includes artistic traditions and cultural expressions that are essential to their creativity,

aesthetic sensibilities, and strong ties to their cultural origins. The Oraon people celebrate their identity, spirituality, and social ties through a variety of artistic expressions, ranging from traditional music and art forms to rituals and festivals.

Conventional Art Forms

The Oraon tribe is well known for its superb artistic talent and craftsmanship, which are displayed in the many traditional art forms that the people engage in. Painting, weaving, basketry, and ceramics are a few of the well-known artistic traditions that the Oraon people have carried down through the ages, representing their creative inventiveness and sense of cultural identity.

In Oraon culture, basketry is very important; finely woven baskets are used for decoration as well as practical functions. The women of Oraon are adept at crafting diverse shaped and sized baskets out of locally obtainable materials like grass, bamboo, and cane. The Oraon people have a close relationship with nature and lead a sustainable lifestyle, which is reflected in the use of these baskets for household purposes, grain storage, and transporting agricultural produce.

The Oraon tribe also practices pottery, with techniques for creating pottery being passed down from generation to generation. Pots, pitchers, and cooking utensils are just a few of the earthenware items made by Oraon potters using clay that is obtained locally. The elaborate patterns and motifs that adorn these ceramic objects represent the cultural symbols, values, and aesthetic tastes of the Oraon people.

Oraon culture is fundamentally reliant on weaving, with women typically handling the handlooms used to spin yarn and weave cloth. The vivid hues, geometric designs, and customary themes found in Oraon textiles are attributed to their inspiration from the natural world, fauna, and indigenous mythology. The process of weaving requires dexterous handiwork and meticulousness, producing exquisitely designed textiles for apparel, blankets, and home furnishings.

The Oraon people have a highly valued artistic custom of painting, as evidenced by the wall paintings that adorn their homes, communal areas, and places of worship. Using natural pigments made from plants, minerals, and earth, these paintings—known as "sohrai" or "karma" paintings—reflect the Oraon people's respect for the natural world and their environmentally conscious way of life. The paintings serve as visual representations of Oraon culture and identity, showcasing everyday scenes, tribal myths, and religious beliefs.

Dance and Music Oraon culture is primarily expressed through music and dance, which act as conduits for spiritual communion, social cohesiveness, and storytelling. The melodic tunes, rhythmic beats, and poetic lyrics of Oraon folk music, also referred to as "jhumar" and "karma," reflect the community's shared experiences, joys, and sorrows.

Traditional musical instruments like the "mado" (a drum) and "dhodro banam" (a string instrument) are frequently used to accompany the songs, which enhances the emotional depth and rhythmic complexity of the music.

Oraon folk dances, which highlight the community's artistic talent and cultural diversity, are an essential component of social ceremonies, religious rituals, and joyous celebrations. The "Karma dance," which is presented at the Karma festival, is a colorful and vivacious dance style that incorporates deft footwork, elegant motions, and coordinated gestures. The dancers portray tales from tribal mythology and folklore while wearing traditional clothing and decorations as a way of showing their respect for the natural world, their ancestors, and gods.

Festivals and Rituals

Another important festival in Oraon culture is the "Karma" festival, which is celebrated in the fall and is devoted to worshipping the "Karma Devta" (the fertility goddess) via songs, dances, and offerings. The villagers gather to sing folk songs, dance around bonfires, and carry out rituals to please the deity and guarantee a bountiful harvest, all in the spirit of the festival, which is observed with great zeal and enthusiasm. The Oraon people's deep connection to the land and their shared goals for prosperity, fertility, and well-being are embodied in the Karma festival.

The Oraon tribe celebrates a number of other rituals and ceremonies throughout the year in addition to these major festivals. These include marriages, births, and funerals, all of which are marked by customs, prayers, and community get-togethers.



By preserving cultural values, fostering social ties, and passing down ancestor knowledge from one generation to the next, these rituals help to keep Oraon culture alive and well in the face of modernity.

4. Community Organization and Social Structure :

The Oraon tribe's social structure and community organization are firmly established in their shared cultural traditions, familial relationships, and way of life. The Oraon people are an indigenous community that is native to the Chotanagpur Plateau and the surrounding areas of central and eastern India. They have created a unique social hierarchy, governance structure, and communal ethos that guide their relationships, interactions with one another, and group decision-making.

The institution of kinship, which serves as the foundation for social structure and community identity, is central to Oraon society. Oraon kinship is patrilineal, meaning that males inherit and descend from each other. The "kutumb" or "biradari," or extended families, are very important in Oraon people's lives because they offer them social support, financial stability, and generation-spanning emotional ties. The family is the fundamental socialization, educational, and cultural transmission unit that instills in its members the values of mutual respect, cooperation, and respect.

Within the family and community, men have traditionally held the primary authority and decision-making power in the Oraon tribe's patriarchal social structure. Various facets of Oraon life, such as inheritance, marriage, and land ownership, are governed by patriarchal norms that mirror conventional gender roles and expectations. Despite this patriarchal structure, Oraon women are highly influential and responsible in the family and community, frequently taking on important roles in household management, agriculture, and cultural preservation.

The fundamental unit of Oraon social organization is the village community, which gives its members a sense of security, identity, and belonging. Every Oraon village, called a "tola" or "hadi," is run by a village council, which is made up of respected locals and elderly members of the community. The village council, also known as the "panchayat" or "gram sabha," is the main decision-making body in charge of handling community affairs, enforcing social norms, and resolving conflicts.

The village council is essential to the preservation of customary laws, social order, and traditional values and practices. Community disputes and conflicts are resolved through consensus-based decision-making processes that are informed by the values of fairness, justice, and the well-being of the community.

The village council is responsible for supervising a range of social ceremonies, rituals, and festivals, guaranteeing their appropriate execution and conformity to cultural standards.

The social structure and community organization of Oraon are deeply rooted in religious and spiritual beliefs, which serve as a foundation for moral guidance, ethical behavior, and group unity.

Animistic beliefs and the veneration of a pantheon of gods, spirits, and natural forces that exist in both the material and spiritual worlds define Oraon religion. Fundamental elements of Oraon spirituality include ancestor worship, reverence for nature, and ceremonies honoring the land's spirits. These practices promote a sense of interconnectedness with both the natural world and the invisible forces that guide human existence.

The Oraon tribe prioritizes group harmony, cooperation, and reciprocity over individual interests, placing a high value on these qualities. The core values of Oraon society are sharing, cooperation, and mutual aid. These values guide social interactions and relationships and help to build a sense of unity, belonging, and support among its members.

Mythology, which includes a wide range of myths, legends, and creation stories that explain the beginnings of the universe, the natural world, and human existence, is one of the most important themes in Oraon oral literature. A wide cast of gods, spirits, and otherworldly creatures, each representing a unique facet of Oraon cosmology, spirituality, and moral principles, populate these myths. In Oraon mythology, tales of gods and goddesses like "Dharmes," "Dharani Penu," and "Jaher Era" are interwoven, demonstrating their respect for the natural world, their ancestors, and supernatural powers.

Another well-known form of Oraon oral literature is folktales, which are a rich tapestry of stories meant to inspire, instruct, and amuse listeners. These folktales offer insights into Oraon cultural values, social norms, and human behavior. They frequently include moral lessons, cautionary tales, and humorous anecdotes taken from everyday life.



Folktales are passed down orally from one generation to the next, with each storyteller enhancing and interpreting the tale in a way that makes it relevant and resonates with modern audiences.

Folk songs from the Oraon people, referred to as "jhumar" and "karma," are an essential component of their oral culture. They are used as a means of expressing feelings, acknowledging life's highs and lows, and marking important occasions. These traditional tunes are distinguished by their lyrical lyrics, catchy melodies, and rhythmic beats—many of which tell stories about love, the natural world, and tribal life. The Oraon people build a sense of communal harmony and collective identity through performing folk songs at social gatherings, religious ceremonies, and festive celebrations.

Another significant component of Oraon oral literature are proverbs and sayings, which are brief statements of social values, cultural norms, and wisdom. Proverbs are a concise and memorable way to communicate moral lessons, social graces, and useful advice. They also serve as a reflection of the community's collective wisdom. Oraon proverbs frequently use examples from everyday life, animals, and the natural world to convey timeless lessons about human nature and behavior.

Oraon oral literature includes a wide range of traditional forms of expression, such as riddles, chants, lullabies, and ritual incantations, in addition to folk songs, proverbs, and storytelling. All of these elements add to the rich tapestry of Oraon cultural heritage. The community's collective memory, a feeling of identity and belonging, and the passing down of cultural knowledge from one generation to the next are all greatly aided by these oral traditions. The Oraon people preserve and honor their cultural legacy as stewards of a rich oral tradition, guaranteeing that their songs, stories, and wisdom live on for many generations to come.

5. The effects of globalization and modernization :

The Oraon tribe has experienced significant changes in their traditional way of life, cultural customs, and socioeconomic dynamics as a result of modernization and globalization. The Oraon people are an indigenous community with deep roots in the forests and hills of central and eastern India. As a result of modernization and globalization, they have faced a variety of opportunities and challenges that have an impact on their identity, way of life, and cultural heritage in both positive and negative ways.

The change in the Oraon tribe's traditional means of subsistence and economic endeavors has been one of the biggest effects of modernization and globalization. Many Oraon communities, whose livelihoods have traditionally depended on subsistence farming, forestry, and traditional handicrafts, have seen substantial changes in their economic practices as a result of factors like urbanization, industrialization, and market integration. The Oraon people's traditional agrarian economy has changed as a result of wage labor, cash cropping, and migration to urban areas. This has changed land use patterns, resource management, and socioeconomic relations within the community.

The Oraon tribe now has more opportunity to interact with the world economy, use contemporary technology, and take part in market-based businesses thanks to globalization. A larger audience, both domestically and abroad, can now view Oraon artisans' and entrepreneurs' traditional handicrafts, textiles, and cultural products thanks to increased connectivity, better infrastructure, and technological advancements in communication.

Concerns about cultural homogenization and the loss of traditional knowledge also stem from the expansion of modernization and globalization, as Oraon youth are exposed to more and more outside influences, including consumer culture, mainstream media, and Western schooling systems. The community's cultural identity is becoming less resilient and vibrant as younger generations lose interest in oral traditions, folk practices, and indigenous languages, endangering the transmission of Oraon cultural heritage and intergenerational continuity.

Furthermore, increased exposure to infectious diseases, illnesses linked to a particular lifestyle, and social inequalities are just a few of the new social and health issues that globalization has brought to Oraon communities.

Changes in dietary practices, consumption patterns, and lifestyle decisions brought about by the integration of Oraon communities into the global market economy have resulted in health problems like obesity, malnutrition, and non-communicable diseases. Similar to this, social issues like drug and alcohol addiction, domestic abuse, and alcoholism have resulted from Oraon society's fast social change, economic marginalization, and cultural upheaval.



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