

Sirjana Khīri: A Mythic Interpretation of Kurukh Creation Narratives

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Abstract

The Kurukh language, predominantly spoken by the Oraon tribe, is a Dravidian language that embodies the philosophical, ecological, and spiritual heritage of its speakers. Rooted in oral tradition, Kurukh serves as a living archive of indigenous knowledge, conveyed through storytelling, ritual speech, and ceremonial practices. The Oraon community, primarily located in Jharkhand and its neighbouring states, maintains a rich oral culture interwoven with their agrarian lifestyle and deep ecological awareness. Their identity is inseparably linked to land, forests, and the rhythms of nature, which are vividly reflected in their myths and rituals.

Among the most profound oral narratives are the Kurukh myths of “Sirjana khīri”—the story of creation. These myths go beyond cosmological explanation; they function as ethical and ecological frameworks that transmit core cultural values such as humility, perseverance, mutual respect, and harmonious coexistence with nature. At the heart of these narratives is the deity Dharmes, who breathes life into the soil, giving form to landscapes and all living beings. His role symbolizes the sacred interconnection between the divine, the earth, and human life.

This study undertakes an interpretative analysis of Kurukh myths, exploring their deeper cultural, ecological, and moral dimensions. It aims to uncover how these narratives articulate the Oraon community’s deep relationship with land, spirituality, and ecology, while simultaneously serving as a medium for preserving oral tradition and transmitting indigenous epistemologies. By foregrounding these perspectives, the research demonstrates the continued relevance of Kurukh oral traditions in contemporary debates on environmental stewardship, cultural resilience, and the safeguarding of endangered knowledge systems.

Keyword: Kurukh Mythology, Oraon Tribe, Sirjana khīri, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Creation Narrative.

1. Introduction

Myth can be described as a sacred story that communicates the deepest concerns, beliefs, and values of a community. It is not simply a fictional tale or a product of imagination, but a meaningful narrative that explains how the world came into being, why natural events occur, and how humans should understand their place in the universe. For ancient societies, myths provided explanations for mysteries that could not be understood through observation alone, such as the origin of life, the cycles of nature, or the presence of suffering and death. These stories offered reassurance in times of uncertainty and gave people a sense of purpose and direction.

At the same time, myth served important social functions. It reinforced cultural traditions and customs, legitimized rituals, and established moral codes that guided daily life. Myths also worked as a form of collective memory, ensuring that knowledge, practices, and values were passed down from one generation to another. By retelling myths, communities strengthened their identity, maintained continuity with their ancestors, and preserved a sense of unity.

On a symbolic level, myths helped societies deal with universal human concerns and opposites, such as life and death, chaos and order, or nature and culture. They created a shared framework through which people could interpret reality and find meaning in events beyond their control. Because of this, myths were not only religious stories but also tools for thinking about the world and the human condition.

Even today, myths continue to shape cultures, though often in new forms. They remain powerful narratives that express ideas, values, and emotions central to human life. In this sense, myth is not just a story from the distant past, but a living tradition that continues to influence how people understand themselves and their world.

1.1 The Oraon

The Oraon, also known as Kurukh, represent one of the most prominent Adivasi communities of eastern and central India, whose historical presence, cultural practices, and cosmological worldview continue to shape the anthropological discourse on indigeneity, ecology, and religion. Concentrated largely in the state of Jharkhand and spread across neighbouring regions of Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and West Bengal, the Oraon have long been recognized as a significant Scheduled Tribe population in India. The 2011 Census reports their overall population to be more than 3.6 million, of which approximately 1.7 million reside in Jharkhand alone. This demographic concentration makes them the second largest tribal community in the state after the Santhals, establishing their centrality in the socio-cultural and political life of Jharkhand.

The Kurukh identity is deeply tied to its language, which belongs to the northern branch of the Dravidian family. Despite centuries of cultural transformation, Kurukh has endured through a rich oral tradition that preserves myths, folktales, ritual hymns, and songs associated with agriculture and worship. In recent times, the creation of indigenous scripts has further reinforced cultural pride and linguistic continuity. Among these, the Kurukh script Tolong Siki, developed by Dr. Narayan Oraon in 1999, has gained broader acceptance in regions such as Jharkhand and West Bengal, as it was designed specifically to capture the phonetic structure of the language. Although structurally distinct and unrelated in form, both existing scripts embody the community's determination to preserve linguistic independence and protect their cultural heritage against the threat of erosion. Their significance extends beyond the realm of writing systems; they stand as powerful cultural symbols of autonomy, identity, and the collective will to sustain continuity across generations.

At the heart of the Oraon worldview lies an ecological and spiritual cosmology in which land is not conceived as property, but as the living foundation of existence. This perspective offers a stark contrast to modern developmental paradigms that reduce land to an economic resource for extraction and expansion. For the Oraon, land is the dwelling of divinity, the repository of ancestral memory, and the central medium through which relationships between humans, nature, and the spirit world are maintained. The soil itself is understood as animate, imbued with memory and capable of carrying the imprints of generations. It is where ancestors are buried, where crops are sown and harvested, and where rituals of birth, marriage, and death are enacted. Every grove of Sal trees, every stream, and every mound of earth is perceived as sacred—an essential thread in the tapestry of Oraon cosmology.

Kurukh myths of creation offer profound insights into this eco-centric understanding. Oral traditions narrate that Dharmes, the supreme creator, did not bestow the earth to humans as a commodity, but entrusted it as a shared creation. Boundaries were to be respected, trees to be worshiped rather than destroyed, and rivers to be revered instead of diverted. The myth of Khekhel Gahi Sirjana recounts that land emerged only after a series of divine struggles and the ultimate sacrifice of an earthworm, whose humble act of selflessness created the soil from which life could flourish. This myth situates land not as a product of conquest or dominion, but as a sacred trust born of sacrifice and humility. The philosophical implications are significant: it establishes a moral framework of stewardship, where human beings are not masters of the earth but participants in a cosmic covenant of care, respect, and reciprocity.

2. Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach to explore cultural meanings, symbolic dimensions, and collective knowledge embedded in community traditions. Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources to ensure a comprehensive understanding of beliefs, practices, and oral narratives.

The primary methods include unstructured interviews, observation, and focus group discussions (FGDs). Interviews with elders, ritual specialists, and community members provided rich insights into ritual practices, cosmological beliefs, and intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Observation of ceremonies and everyday interactions with sacred spaces revealed embodied practices and symbolic expressions. FGDs further captured dialogic perspectives, allowing for an understanding of shared meanings as well as points of contestation.

Sampling was purposive, focusing on individuals with cultural authority or experiential knowledge, and supplemented with snowball sampling to identify additional participants. This ensured diversity of perspectives while maintaining flexibility until data saturation was reached.

For analysis, both content and narrative analysis were applied. Content analysis helped identify recurrent themes and symbols, while narrative analysis emphasized the structure and meaning of oral traditions. Together, these methods revealed patterns in cultural expression, collective memory, and the ways traditions are preserved and reinterpreted across generations.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To interpret the Kurukh narrative of Sirjana khīri (story of creation) through the symbolic interpretation.
2. To examine how the Oraon creation myth symbolizes the community's relationship with land and ecology through the roles assigned to natural elements and animals.
3. To examine challenges to preserving and transmitting Oraon myths.

4. The Mythological Narrative of Creation in Kurukh (Oraon)

Bajram mundh, nu hurmi tra am dim am nindkī rehchā. Eksan hun khaj kā khe–khel mal aethra lāgiā. Khane dharmesh khe–khel kamnā gahi tihā n ghokhā helras kā ekā bhese am kitae khaj ondoraa khe–khel kamnā manō. Ābirim kakḍo dharmesh hedaē barchā darā bāchā – “e–n kādan dharme, khaj ondoraa.” Darā kakḍo am kiā kālar tanghya bakā tee khajan khevanchar barā helār. Barum–barum adi gahi bakā tā hurmi khaj no–ḍrā kērā darā dharmesh hedū nādim barchā. Khane dharmesh menjas “āokhō khaj?” kakḍo bāchā – “anā dharme am nu o–gunīt barum–barum hurmi khaj gā no–ḍara kērā.” Dharmesh bāchas – “e–rā ge

akay ujgo ithirdee peh nīn gā ṭeṛho raḍī. Kalay eksay ningahe bihit inātī anem e–koy.” Aulatīm kakdo ṭeṛho eekī āra aḍde īrī.

Akkū dharmesh akay ghokh nu puṛārās kēras. Dharmesh gahi dukhen e–rr “ekka tanghyo chaṭin ḍippā nunum barchā darā bāchā e–n kālon dharmesh yāngān taiya.” Khune dharmesh bāchas – “kalay! Eeka am kiā kera darā khajan tanghyo me–d nu bhər me–d luṛhā darā barā heltā. Barum–barum adi gahi me–d tī hūm humi khaj am n to–ḍṛā kērā arā āḍ dharmesh gusm nādīm aṇḍrisyā. Khune dharmesh āniyas – “ābirī gā chatin ḍippā nanar bāchkī kā e–n ondron dharme, eṅgan taiya!” Khutī ekak lanjā darā kukkan nuṛḍā piccā. Akkū hūn ālarin īrī drā kukkan nuṛḍai kā ī.

Akkū gā dharmesh aur akay ghokh nu puṛārdās kādas – ām ghokhdas kā n duṛā ī nalkhan nanā āngo! Ābirim lenda barār bāchā – “ī nalkhān e–n nanon!” Lenda gahi kathān menar dharmesh bāchas – “kakdo gahi bakā rechā arā eka gahi me–d akay cakād rehchā, annu hūn abdā khaj pollā ondoraa. Nīn eksat onḍoroāoy.” Khane lenda bāchā – “chīhunt...” “nandan dharme, polloān hōle chamā nanake!” Akkū lenda am kiyyā kērā darā der khajan mōmkha antale am tī bahārī urkhar ekka gahi me–d nu turiya. Ā khaj dim ekak me–d n khe–khel bancha kērā. Avomgem ālār banar ekak khe–khel nukur ee akku Dharmesh akay khusmaras dara aa khaj ti and murat kamar khaya gey uiyas . khane ga Dharmesh gahi ankharaj–pankharaj ghoṛo uḍiyamnum barchā darā lathchā chicchā. Dharmesh aurā murat kamchas dara khāyā ge oiyas. Khane gā ghoṛo arahem barcha darā lathcha ciccā. Akkū dharmesh khisaras darā ghoṛo gahi ḍenan khāḍiyas chicchās. Akkū mūnd khewan murat kamar allan khāpā ge oiyas.

Avomgem innā hū kuruḍkur khāpā ge allan poshnar. Avari alla ghodon bhuknum kheda helārā khane pollā lathā. Pēh dharmesh aur lathā ṭekanā gahi ilachka tī begar khāyā chiyam abāḍā murat nu jiyā sajas chicchās. Avomgam ālār kheynar, jiyā sajas khane āorat mukā arā āorat me–t āl banchar kerr darā īr tim ālār baḍruwā helār. Khokhā nu dharmesh ulla–mākhā bīḍī, chandō, bīnkō arā khe–khel tā hurmi āloan kamchas. Kerme–kerme ālār goṭe khe–khel nu nindyar kerar. Khāra sukhe tī unjja binjā hellār dara alar tangā–tangā jiya gey unjum helār.

4.1 Translation

In the beginning, Dharmes created heaven and the earth. But when he shaped the earth, it was covered entirely with water—no soil, no dry ground, only endless waves. At first, Dharmes filled this watery expanse with creatures, yet he longed to create life upon solid land. The challenge was: how could soil be brought up from beneath the deep waters?

First, Dharmes sent the crab (Kakro). The crab eagerly dug up soil and carried it in its claws, but as it surfaced, the water swept everything away. When Dharmes asked, “Where is the soil?” the crab replied helplessly, “Dharme Bangayo, it slipped away in the water.” Angered, Dharmes cursed the crab: “Your heart is crooked like your claws. From today, you will walk sideways and your eyes will look askew.”

Next came the tortoise (Ekka), who offered to try. With Dharmes’ blessing, it dove deep and scooped a load of soil onto its shell. Yet again, the water washed it away before it could surface. Ashamed, the tortoise admitted its failure and withdrew into its shell. From that day, the tortoise hides its head whenever it feels fear.

At last, the earthworm (Lenda) came forward, timid but determined. It said to Dharmes: “I will bring the soil. If I fail, forgive me.” Dharmes was doubtful: “The crab had claws, the tortoise had a shell—what do you have?” But the earthworm insisted.

The earthworm swallowed as much soil as it could from the depths, surfaced, and then vomited the soil onto the back of the tortoise. The tortoise bore this sacred soil upon its shell, and Dharmes blessed it. From

the soil, mountains, plains, and forests arose. Even today, the people say that when the tortoise moves its head beneath the earth, the ground shakes and trembles—thus come earthquakes.

Dharmes then filled this new earth with trees, grass, birds, and animals, until it was teeming with life. Finally, From the same soil, He shaped the first man and woman, leaving them out to harden in the air.

But nearby, two horses Ankhraj and Pankhraj they stamped their hooves and trampled the figures into dust. Dharmes did not give up. He formed the pair again, this time placing a dog beside them as guardian. When the horses charged once more, the dog barked fiercely, driving them away. From that day forward, the dog was entrusted with guarding humankind.

Fearing another attack, Dharmes did not wait for the clay to dry. He breathed life into the soft figures, and the first humans stood up, tender and fragile. From that single pair, people multiplied and spread across the land, filling the world Dharmes had created with his wisdom.

5. Interpretation of the Kurukh Creation Myth

The Kurukh creation story, when examined through ethnographic and symbolic interpretation, reveals itself as more than a myth—it is a worldview embedded in symbols, practices, and ecological wisdom. The narrative of soil being brought up from beneath the primordial waters through persistence and sacrifice signifies the sacredness of earth itself. Among the Oraon people, soil is not merely a resource; it is life-giving, memory-bearing, and deeply tied to identity. This symbolic foundation underpins farming practices, ritual life, and daily engagements with the land.

An important part of the story is the sequence of attempts to bring forth soil. The crab and the tortoise both fail in their tasks, while the small and humble earthworm succeeds. The crab, despite its claws, loses the soil and is cursed by Dharmes, forever walking sideways with crooked eyes as a reminder of its “crooked heart.” The tortoise, despite its strength and shell, fails as well and hides its head in shame, a trait that persists in its behaviour today. In contrast, the earthworm—weak, soft-bodied, and seemingly insignificant—succeeds by relying on patience, humility, and steady effort rather than force. This highlights a profound cultural lesson: greatness lies not only in power but in persistence and determination. The myth teaches that even those who appear weak or small can contribute meaningfully, and that every being has a role in sustaining the world.

The role of the earthworm also connects directly to ecological wisdom. In farming, earthworms are essential; they increase air in the soil, improve water flow, and enrich fertility. The myth thus encodes real agricultural knowledge, showing that respect for the smallest creatures is fundamental to the survival of the community. It reflects a worldview where ecological interdependence is recognized, remembered, and transmitted through narrative.

The tortoise, which bears the sacred soil on its back, becomes the cosmic foundation of the earth, and its movements explain the trembling of earthquakes. This connects natural phenomena to the mythic order, embedding environmental events into cultural memory. Similarly, the dog, placed by Dharmes to protect humans from destructive horses, symbolizes loyalty, vigilance, and guardianship. The dog is rewarded with a permanent bond with humankind, while the horse symbols of uncontrolled power and destruction. Dharmes, the creator, also emerges as a deeply significant figure. He is not distant or abstract but intimate and involved—shaping the world with his hands, conversing with animals, punishing arrogance, rewarding humility, and breathing life into fragile clay figures. Through him, creation is not depicted as a one-time act but as an ongoing process. Human beings, tender and soft from their origin, are born fragile and dependent. Yet their survival is assured not only by divine care but also by the cooperation of animals,

the fertility of soil, and the resilience of the land. Humans are not mere users of nature but active partners in sustaining life.

Above all, the Kurukh creation story teaches that everything is interconnected. The land, animals, humans, and divine powers are woven into a single web of relationships. Nothing exists in isolation; every being contributes to creation through effort, sacrifice, or protection. This vision reflects a central truth of Oraon culture: life is collective, and survival depends on respect, reciprocity, and responsibility within the interconnected web of existence.

6. Findings

Cultural and Social Changes

The role of myth within the Oraon community has not remained static but has shifted in response to broader cultural and social transformations. Once central to ritual practices and communal gatherings, myths no longer occupy the same collective spaces of performance and storytelling that they did in the past. Traditional sites of ritual expression, which served as focal points for mythological narration, have gradually declined in importance, while newer channels such as print, school-based education, and mass media have introduced different narratives and modes of interpretation. Despite these changes, the Oraon community continues to draw upon its mythological corpus by reshaping and retelling stories in ways that correspond to present social realities. Through this process of adaptation, myths remain meaningful even as their forms and functions evolve.

Challenges to Myth Preservation

At the same time, several forces challenge the preservation of Oraon myths. The expansion of dominant religious traditions, especially Christianity and Hinduism, has created alternative frameworks of belief and ritual, leading to the gradual weakening of indigenous oral traditions. Formal education, often rooted in Western pedagogical models, tends to privilege written texts over oral knowledge, which undermines the authority of myth as a source of learning and cultural transmission. Added to this is the influence of mainstream media and consumer culture, which often capture the imagination of younger generations more than ancestral tales. As a result, intergenerational transmission of myths is increasingly fragile, with fewer young people demonstrating sustained interest in traditional storytelling practices.

7. Conclusion

The Kurukh creation narrative of Khekhel Gahi Sirjana is not merely a myth from the past it is a living story, one that continues to breathe through the Oraon people, their rituals, their fields, their forests, and their fight for dignity and land. It reminds us that land is not just where we live it is how we live. It is the starting point of identity, culture, and community. For the Oraon, to care for the land is not an option it is a sacred responsibility entrusted by Dharmes himself.

Through the actions of a humble earthworm, the myth teaches us that creation is rooted in cooperation, humility, and care not in power or dominance. Dharmes, the divine creator, doesn't simply create life and walk away. He remains present teaching, guiding, and sometimes correcting. This myth gives the Oraon people not only an origin story, but a full ethical and ecological framework for living in harmony with nature.

In today's world, where environmental degradation is accelerating and indigenous voices are often silenced, the wisdom embedded in Kurukh cosmology becomes more urgent than ever. These myths offer an alternative vision where land is sacred, where nature is alive, and where humans are co-creators, not

conquerors. They remind us that stories are not just entertainment they are survival. They hold the values, histories, and spiritual truths of a people who have lived with the land for generations.

As we reflect on Khekhel Gahi Sirjana, we are reminded that every patch of earth carries a story. That story may begin with myth, but it ends in practice: in how we treat the land, how we relate to animals, and how we choose to live with one another. For the Oraon community, the soil is more than matter it is memory, morality, and meaning. And in honouring that soil, they keep alive not only a tradition, but a vision of a better, more balanced world.

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