

Development Intervention and the Social Transformation of Customary Law and Institutions: A Study of the Oraon Community in Sundargarh District, Odisha

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Abstract

This study examines development initiatives implemented in tribal areas with the aim of improving socio-economic conditions, while analysing their impact on social systems and legal traditions. It focuses on the Oraon community of Sundargarh District Odisha and explores how development programmes have influenced their customary laws and traditions. Traditionally, the Oraon people have been practiced and govern by unwritten customary laws and village-level institutions that regulate land use, resolve conflict, dispute resolution, social control, regulation of social life and cultural practices. The implementation of the government schemes such as formal education, livelihood initiatives and state lead initiatives has brought significantly altered these traditional structures. The study analyses how development programmes related to education, employment, land administration and tribal welfare have change the traditional authority patterns, reduced the active role of elders and traditional councils and increased dependence on formal legal and administrative systems. While these initiatives have developed the economic conditions, access to services and legal awareness, they have also contributed to the gradual erosion of customary laws particularly among the younger generation. The traditional practices such as oral transmission of customary law, collective decision making and traditional social activities are gradually challenged by modern initiatives and altering socio-cultural values. The study highlights both positive and negatives outcomes of development interventions. The outcome of this study shows that development schemes overlook the risk of erosion of community cooperation and cultural identity. It stresses the need for sensitive development process that integrates customary institutions to promote sustainable, inclusive and cultural grounded development.

Keywords: - Customary law, Tradition, Institution, Development, Erosion, Sustainable.

Introduction

Development programmes in tribal areas are aimed at inclusive growth and bettering the socio-economic conditions. However, their outcome is often uneven because complex interaction between state-led interventions and indigenous socio-cultural systems, especially traditional institutions and customary laws

that regulate tribal life.

The word “tribe” is derived from the Latin word “Tribus” and transformed from a simple classificatory term into a contested sociological category, influenced by historical and political processes (Bramhane, 2024). Tribal communities are often portrayed as geographically isolated, economically marginalized and culturally distinct, often ignoring their internal diversity and adoptive capacities (Dungdung & Pattanaik, 2020). Despite of several policy towards inclusive development, significant disparities persist in key areas such as health, sanitation and basic infrastructures among tribal populations. These differences are most visible in remote areas, where access to basic services is still limited and unequal. Within this context, the Oraon tribe, constitutionally recognized in India, provides an important case for examining the dynamics of development and marginalization (Purkayastha, 2015).

The present data exposed that Oraon community are approximately 1.8 million and they are linguistically belonged to Dravidian origin and speak Kurukh language. (Kumar, 2019). The Dravidian family of language; Kurukh sub-stratum is important in the language of Konkani or Konkani language. Oraon is the nickname of the Kurukhs given by their headman. Oraon is divided into several totemic clans system such as Lakra, Ekka, Kujur, Panna, Barla, Tigga, Bakhla, Xalxo Toppo, Minz, Tirkey and Bara etc. Oraon have no specific sub-tribes in central province but known as Kuda Kisan are known to be sub-tribes of Oraon but they avoid intermarriage. Traditionally they followed Sarna religion belief system though now many have adopted to Christianity.

Historically, Oraon communities have faced terrible socio-economic challenges during the colonial era, including exploitation and outside interventions. The arrival of Christian missionary in the 19th and 20th centuries also contributed to cultural and religious change in the community. (Oram, 2024). Despite these changes, persistent inequalities remain, especially in access to basic services and other sanitation benefit. Present studies have largely given attention on historical dimensions of tribal communities and cultural, focusing little attention to the intersection between sanitation disparities and the institutional structures of indigenous people in the Oraon case. Therefore, this study long to mentions this gap by comprehending how act of traditional institutions and socio-cultural factors affects the determining practices and development outcomes within the Oraon community.

Geographical spread of Oraon community

The Oraon community owned a long-standing historical convention concerning its migration and origin, protected through both scholarly interpretation and oral narratives. These sources consistently identify Rohtasgarh, located in the former Shahabad district of Bihar, as the earliest remembered settlement of the Oraons. In Oraon tradition, Rohtasgarh occupies a central place in collective memory as their original homeland.

There are two major narratives explain the establishment of the Oraon in Rohtasgarh. The first, proposed by colonial ethnographer Cornel Dalton, suggests that the Oraons must have migrated from the Deccan region, after a prolonged stay in the Pandya Kingdom. And from there they believed to have moved along the Narmada River, and subsequently eastward, crossing the Sone River, before setting in Shahabad round 800 B.C.

Another account presented by Shri Mahli Libin Tirkey describes the origin of the Oraons to the Harappan region along the banks of the Sutlej in around 3500 B.C. According to these narratives, the community was displaced due to Aryan invasion around 1750 B.C, leading to their eastward migration across the Yamuna plains and eventual settlement in Rohtasgarh between 800 and 900 B. C. Tirkey further notes

that subsequent conflict with the Chero tribe around 100 B.C, contribute to continued migrations (Xalxo, 2018).

Despite these movements, the Oraons identify that Chhotanagpur plateau as their central homeland. From this plateau they later dispersed to several parts of India, especially settled down in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal, Assam, Bihar and to their neighbouring countries such as Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh (Purkayastha, 2015).

Oraon Customary Law and Traditional Institution

Customary law, in its broadest sense, refers to the norms, practices and usage of a given community that acquire the force of law through long-standing acceptance, consistency and collective adherence. It embodies the customs, values and social ethos that regulate relationships among members of a community and is enforced through social sanctions (Nwocha, 2016). The Oraon tribe, one of the major tribal communities of central and eastern India, possesses a distinct system of customary law and traditional institutions that regulate its social life.

It is believed that customary laws are regarded as divinely sanctioned and constitute the basis of community identity and cultural continuity. They govern important aspects of things in life, including family relations, marriage, divorce, inheritance, child custody and rights over land, forests and water resources. Oraon customary law is transmitted orally across generations to generations and is deeply embedded in cultural beliefs and practices and based on collective consensus rather than individual interest. Customary law is an important instrument for the regulation of social order, the resettlement of disputes and preservation of social cohesion.

Its punitive measures are largely restorative, aiming at reconciliation rather than retribution. However, tribal customary rights received formal legal recognitions under the Indian Evidence Act 1872 (Kujur A. , Interface of Customary Laws with Modern Inputs: Impact on Marriage Rituals Among The Tribes of Jharkhand, 2024), their legitimacy continues to derive primarily from communities' acceptance rather than state authority. Even today, many Oraon communities prefer customary mechanism for dispute resolution due to their accessibility and cultural relevance (Xaxa, Politics of Language, Religion and Identity: Tribes in India, 2005).

The traditional institutions also play a vital role in administering customary law. The most significant institution among the Oraon community is the Parha System. Pahan (village priest) Panibharwa (Pahan's water bearer), Pujar (Pahan assistant), Bhandare and Chowkidar are among the positions in the village-level political organization known as Parha. Each of them plays a crucial role in religious ceremonies, rituals and resolving conflict within the community. This Parha consists of several villages that function as a socio-political and judicial unit. This ensures that unity among the village members and regulate social conduct. The Parha council settles inter-village disputes, enforces customary norms and organizes collective rituals.

At the village level the Mahto (village headman) and Pahan (religious priest) are key functionaries. They maintain the order of the village and manage all the village activities. On the other hand, Mahto manages village administration, calls meetings and helps in dispute resolution. The Pahan is responsible for religious ceremonies, rituals, agriculture and protection of sacred land. They are supported by the elders who form an informal village council. These institutions ensure participatory governance and social discipline (Karunamay, Sethy, & Sharma, 2024).

Impact of Development on Customary Institution

From early times, tribal communities have maintained a deep relationship with forest. Their lifestyle, customary law, economic practices, religious beliefs and social life are intricately connected to forest ecosystems. However, modernization and development projects have severely affected to these practices with tribal community. Infrastructure development, mining and logging have led to the displacement of large tribal populations. Such projects often overlook socio-cultural costs, leading to loss of traditional knowledge, identity and socio-economic stability. The displacement also results in increase cultural disintegration, poverty, loss of traditional practices, health issues (Sethi & Mallik , 2025).

The modernizations and development programmes such as dam construction, mining, industrialization and large-scale infrastructures projects in Odisha, have significantly disrupted the socio-cultural fabric of tribal communities. A prominent example is the establishment of the Rourkela Steel Plant in Sundargarh district. In 1956, the Government of India selected Rourkela as a suitable location to meet the growing national demand for steel. At that time regions were inhabited by the both tribal and no-tribal people including number of Oraons families. The process of displacement started in 1950s and according to the 1961 Census monograph on industrialization in Rourkela, at least 519 Oraon households including Christians and non-Christians were displaced due to the installation of the RSP. Other affected tribe included the Munda, Kharia, Lodra, Mahali and Kisan along with number of caste groups. The overall 15,200 individual and 2,465 households from 33 village were displaced, leading to severe socio-economic and cultural consequences (Ghosh, 2021).

Traditionally, tribal institutions like community leaders and village councils maintained social life, resolve disputes and regulated order through customary law based on long-standing traditions and collective norms. The advancement of the modern government system just as Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) the traditional council are gradually declined. Elected bodies now manage administrative and legal matters, reducing dependency on customary institutions. This has led to a weakening of traditional leadership roles such as Mahto and Pahan. On the other hand, the missionary who promoted the education system and provided health care facilities as well as remove the blind faith of the tribal people. These also one or the other way affect the customary institutions and norms (Ghosh, 2021).

Policy and legal interventions, especially in region like forest management and land have also impacted customary practices. Although protective measures like the Fifth Schedule and Forest Rights Act exists, their implementation often conflicts with traditional systems, contributing to the loss of customary practices (Xaxa, 2005). Development programme has also contributed to socio-cultural transformation. Increasing in access to education, migration and exposer to market forces have influenced the younger generation causing to disrupted the customary practices and norms (Ekka, 2016). As a result, traditions are gradually declining their traditional relevance in some regions. Although the development initiatives have brought positive change in modernization, education and market integrations, affecting younger generation to detached from traditional norms and laws. However, the impact is not totally negative. It has also help in improved access to health care, education and livelihoods. In some of the region customary institutions have accepted by cooperating with formal systems. Despite these changes, the weakening of traditional institutions raises concerns about the loss of cultural identity and social cohesion.

Changes in Local Governance and Community Response

The progression of formal governance structures has brought about considerable changes in the local administration of the Oraon region. In the past, governance was community-based and consensus-driven,

with elders playing a central role in decision-making. The advancement of formal organization has created to a bifurcated structure with statutory regulations and customary law in coexistence. This shift has led to alter in power of authority in the community. The members who are elected as representatives now hold formal authority, while traditional leaders have less influence in governance. Although the customary organization remain relevant in maintaining cultural and social matters and bear witness to their continued importance for community life. (Kujur A. S., 2021).

The Oraon community have adopted flexible to these shifts by applying both systems dynamically. For instance, they often preferred customary institutions for resolving minor disputes, while relying on formal systems for legal and administrative issues. These dual strategies reflect a highly practical transition in local governance.

However, the formal governance faces criticism over its effectiveness. The lack of cultural sensitivity, bureaucratic processes, and limited participation can reduce trust in formal institutions. This will compare, the customary systems are much valuable that closely rooted in local governance and making them more acceptable to many community members (Karunamay , Sethy, & Sharma, 2024). In some of the places, a hybrid governance model is introducing, where local traditional leaders and formal authorities collaborate together. This integration can grow underlining the resilience of the Oraon people in assuming to change. Overall, the development initiatives and emergence of missionary have vitally changed the local governance, bringing both challenges and opportunities for Oraon people. However, the formal governance systems give administrative support and access to resources, they also disrupted traditional organization. A balanced approach that integrates customary and formal systems is important for sustainable and culturally sensitive development (Yadav & Arti , 2026).

Literature Review

Development initiatives have had a significant impact on the Oraon customary law and traditional institutions by disrupting the existing socio-cultural and livelihood structures. Tribal practices such as forest-based livelihood and food systems have long ensured community well-being, ecological balance and cultural identity. however, these systems have been weakened by factors such as restrictive forest policies, displacement and modernization that have led to loss of land reduced social cohesion and erosion of customary institutions. These changes have increased vulnerability, particularly among marginalized groups and created challenges in maintaining traditional governance and cultural continuity. This highlights for rights-based participatory and culturally sensitive development approaches that empower communities, promotes sustainable livelihood and strengthen traditional institutions while preserving indigenous knowledge and identity.

Kujur, N., & Ekka, A. (2024) Food Practice and Sustainability: A Study of Oraon And Kisan Tribes in Sundergarh The journal discusses the traditional food practices of the Oraon and Kisan tribes in Sundergarh and describes their role in sustaining social life, culture, environment and health. The study examines that tribal food patterns are closely linked to sustainable living, ecological balance and cultural identity. These indigenous community traditionally depend on agriculture, seasonal foods, forest produced wild edibles using locally found crops and traditional cooking style along with community food sharing practices. Such systems ensure both nutritional balance and environmental sustainability.

However, factors such as modernization, deforestation and changing life styles have vitally impacted these practices. At present scenario and the younger generation is increasingly changing towards processed and market-based foods, leading to changes in dietary patterns and reflecting resilience and cultural continuity.

This journal highlights at the conclusion is that protecting of indigenous food systems is essential for ecological sustainability, community health and cultural preservation and documenting the traditional practices as well.

Purkayastha, N. (2015) Displacement, Resettlement and Rehabilitation: A Study on Oraon tribe in Barak Valley of Assam. The journal discusses about displacement, resettlement and rehabilitation among the Oraon community in the Barak Valley region of Assam. The study exposed the consequences of displacement, mainly the loss of ancestral land and its effect on tribal identity and social institutions. The author mention that displacement has led to the loss of traditional livelihoods based on land and forest resources while resettlement has introduced new socio-economic and socio-cultural challenges.

The study also examines that the rehabilitation policies, noting that they often provide less support and failed to address the cultural and community needs of the Oraon people. However, many families faced challenges to maintained social cohesion and traditional practices. The findings show that displacement has long-term economic, cultural and call for more inclusive and culturally sensitive. The rehabilitation polices to ensure sustainable resettlement and preservation of tribal identity.

Sethi, B.K., & Mallik, S.K. (2025) CHANGING FOREST POLICIES AND THEIR SOCIO-CULTURAL IMPACT ON TRIBAL COMMUNITIES OF ODISHA. The study highlights the socio-cultural effect of transforming forest policies on tribal community in Odisha. The study shows the strong dependence of tribal people on forest resources for their livelihood, social practices and cultural identity. This stress that both post-colonial and colonial forest policies have prohibited tribal to access forest resources, disrupting traditional livelihood systems, customary conservation practices and ritual life. The author highlights that commercial forestry and conservation laws have further marginalised tribal people, leading to slowly decline in social institutions, customary laws and indigenous knowledge systems. At end the study sum up explaining that changing forest policies have significantly convert the socio-cultural life of tribal population and stresses the need for participatory approaches that recognizes customary rights and traditional knowledge for sustainable forest management and cultural preservation.

Singh, P., Dhuria, S.S., Soan N., Chauhan, K., Kamesh, & Pandey, S. (2024) FOREST BASED LIVELEIHOOD: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN INDIA: A REVIEW. The journal explains the significant of forest-based livelihood in India, stressing forest as a crucial source of income, food, security and employment of rural and tribal communities. The study evaluates these livelihoods within the framework of sustainable development and analyse the role of policy and institutional structures in shaping forest dependence. It explores the key opportunities such as community forestry initiatives, traditional occupations and non-timber forest produced.

However, the study mentions that some of the major difficulties, such as restrictive to forest polices, market exploitation, environmental degradation, and loss of access to natural resources. The author state that modernization and conservation schemes have often abandon tribal livelihood systems, increasing economic vulnerability. The author summarised that forest-based livelihoods continue as crucial and emphasize the need for inclusive policies, strengthened community rights and sustainable practices for long-term development.

Objectives

1. To know the core features of Oraon traditional institutions and customary law.
2. To study the effect of development initiative on customary institutions.
3. To understand the changes in local governance and community response.

Research method and Data Collection

The present research study is conducted among the Oraon community in Karanj Khol village under Lepheripara block of Sundargarh district, Odisha. This study is on an empirical investigation, integrating both quantitative and qualitative research methods to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the subject. Data for the study has been collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data is gathered through field observation, group discussion, focused group discussion (FGD) and provide in-depth insights into the community's practices and experiences. Secondary data is collected from book, research article and journals to understand existing literature and previous studies related to the topic. The total sample size is 68 respondents are selected using a combination of stratified and purposive sampling techniques to ensure representation of different groups within the community.

Result and Discussion

The data collected during the pilot study were coded, tabulated, and analysed using the Microsoft Excel. Descriptive analysis, including frequencies and percentages, was used to highlights the demographic characteristics and participation in Oraon customary institutions. The detailed findings are presented in the tables below. The results provide a preliminary understanding of the level of participation in customary institutions and indicate the continuing relevance of traditional governance alongside gradual changes in customary practices.

Table: - 1 Distribution of age group in Karanj Khol Village, (N=68)

Age groups	Sex		Total	Percentage %
	Male	Female		
15-25 years	12	8	20	29.41
26-50 years	12	16	28	41.18
51-75 years	6	8	14	20.59
Above 75 years	3	3	6	8.82
Total	33	35	68	100.00

(Source: Pilot studies)

The table no. 1 shows the age distribution of 68 individuals in Karanj Khol village. The largest group is aged 26-50 (41.18%), followed by 15-25 (29.41%), 51-75 (20.59%), and above 75 (8.82%). The sample includes 33 males and 35 females, data from pilot studies. This shows gender balance, making the sample suitable for analyzing community roles and participation.

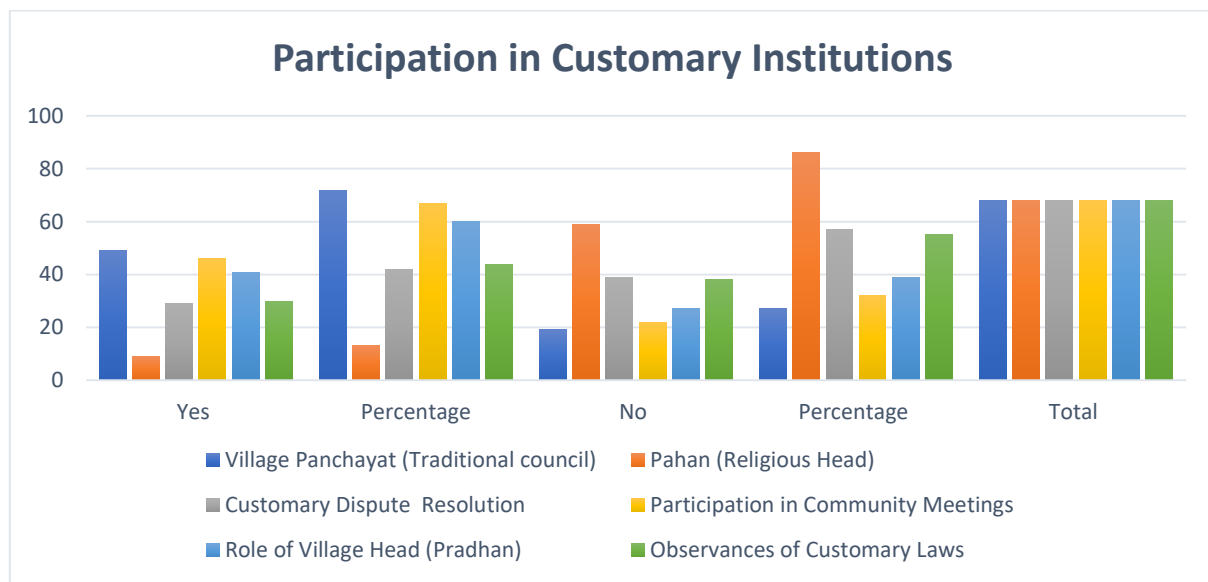
Table: - 2 Participation in Customary Institutions

Name of the Institution	Yes	Percentage%	No	Percentage %	Total
Village Panchayat (Traditional council)	49	72%	19	27%	68
Pahan (Religious Head)	9	13%	59	86%	68
Customary Dispute Resolution	29	42%	39	57%	68
Participation in Community Meetings	46	67%	22	32%	68

Role of Village Head (Pradhan)	41	60%	27	39%	68
Observances of Customary Laws	30	44%	38	55%	68

(Source: Pilot studies)

The table no-2, shows the participation level of 68 respondents in different customary institutions of the Oraon community. It indicates that the highest involvement is in the Village Panchayat (72%) and community meetings (67%), reflecting strong engagement in traditional governance. The role of the Village Head (60%) is also moderately recognized. However, participation is lower in customary dispute resolution (42%) and observance of customary laws (44%), suggesting a gradual decline in traditional legal practices. The lowest participation is seen in the Pahan (13%), indicating reduced importance of traditional religious leadership. Overall, the data highlights that governance-related institutions remain active, while religious and customary practices are weakening due to changing socio-cultural influences.



(Source: Pilot studies)

The above clustered column chart shows the level of participation in various Oraon customary institutions based on “Yes,” “No,” percentage, and total responses. It represents that the Village Panchayat (Traditional Council) has the highest participation, indicating its strong role in community governance. In contrast, the Pahan (Religious Head) has very low participation, suggesting limited involvement of people in religious leadership activities. Customary dispute resolution shows moderate participation, reflecting that traditional conflict-handling practices are still relevant but gradually declining. The Participation in community meetings and the role of the village head (Pradhan) also show relatively high engagement, indicating their importance in decision-making. Customary laws are still fairly observed that customary laws are moderate, indicating gradual change. Overall, the shows reflect that governance-related institutions remain stronger than religious and legal customary practices.

Conclusion

The effect of development programmes on Oraon customary law and traditional institutions is best understood as process of gradual change rather than disappearances. Although, development initiatives

have improved the access to education, healthcare, and governance, contributing to the socio-economic advancement of the community. At the time simultaneously they have reduced the authority and functional scope of customary institutions, especially in regions like land, resources management and dispute resolutions.

However, customary practices continue to demonstrate resilience and adoptability. Instead of being replaced, they have managed to changing conditions and now coexist with formal institutions, resulting in a hybrid system of governance. This coexistence reflects the community's pragmatic approach in a balancing tradition with modernity. In a deep context, these changes undergo a shift in power, legitimacy and knowledge systems, where formal governance often dominate, yet customary practices remain culturally vital.

For the effective safeguarding of Oraon customary law needs stronger legal recognition, active participation and involvement of traditional leaders in decision-making and government funding to support community institutions. This also involves documenting customary practices, ensuring cultural sensitivity development policies and engaging the younger generation. A balanced integration of traditional and modern governance systems is essential to preserve cultural identity and social cohesion. To conclude, development's effect is dialectical, both transformative and disruptive. Sustainable and inclusive development does not mean replacing traditional systems, but rather integrating them meaningfully into formal systems, allowing the preservation of cultural identity in pursuit of socio-economic progress.

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