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EFFECTS OF TEA INDUSTRY ON TRIBAL LIFE: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Oraon--a tribal community recognised by the Government of India. Oraon in large number live in Chhotanagpur plateau in India since centuries. They used to maintain eco-friendly life depending entirely on forest and hill. Their life started to become miserable when they came in contact with outsider as well migrated to different regions owing to overt and covert reasons. Particularly in British colonial period their life became so miserable that many of them found no place in their ancestral homeland to maintain a normal life. They probably found an alternative to income when tea planters of Assam gave a lot of promise for better future in tea plantation work. Accordingly, believing on planters and their brokers they migrated to Assam without knowing that in immediate future they would lose their all bonds of homeland, kith and kin and even their own tribal identity.

KEYWORDS: Oraon, Migration, Displacement, Assimilation, Regional Setting, Detribalization.

INTRODUCTION

Oraon is one of the largest tribal communities in India. They are Dravidian tribe. Oraons are believed to have settled in the Chotanagpur plateau centuries ago. They are also known as *Kurukh tribe* (Vidyarthi and Rai: 1976). Work and employment possibly introduced them to leave their ancestral property as they migrated to different regions and especially in Assam during British period. Still now most of them are engaged as wage labourers in different tea gardens in Cachar district. Due to socio-economic exploitation by both tea planters and non-Oraons, their life becomes more miserable than their original habitats. Till today they were deprived in different circumstances and faced numerous problems (poverty, homeless, illiteracy and became

excluded and marginalized) instead of their hope of economic prosperity for which they leave their home land.

Universe of the Study

Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj are three districts located under Barak valley region of Assam. The region is situated in southern part of Assam. Headquarter of three districts of the region is main urban centers. Silchar, headquarter of Cachar district, is the largest town of the valley followed by Karimganj and Hailakandi. Official language of Cachar district is Bengali. Majority of people speak sylheti, a dialect of Bengali language. Apart from Bengali, Cachar is home land of Kachari, Hmar, Manipuri (Both Bishnupriya and Meitei), Rongmei Naga, and tea community. Ruttonpore tea estate is

situated under Tapang Development Block in Cachar District of Assam. Total population of Ruttonpore tea estate is 3760 (Source- Tea Association of India, Barak Valley Barnch). This tea estate is surrounded by multiple communities of people. Different castes and tribes are living in this tea estate. Total population of Oraon tribe is 612 followed by 68 household (Source: Assam Pradesh Oraon (Urang) Sangha, Barak Valley Barnch. Year: 2017).

METHODS AND DATA

The study is mainly based on qualitative in nature. Both primary and secondary data have been used for the study. The secondary data related to various journals, books etc related to the topic has been consulted with a view to develop present study in right perspective. Necessary primary data have been collected from the field. Tolls for data collection are observation, interview guide and case study. Data

has been collected from Oraon tribe in Ruttonpore tea estate of Cachar district, Assam. Total sample size was 50 households. The data obtained from both secondary and primary sources have been processed and analyzed using simple but meaningful statistical techniques for objective and logical interpretation. Conclusions on the study area are drawn on the basis of the results derived from the data analysis and personal experience gathered through the observations during field study.

POVERTY AND INDEBTEDNESS

Traditionally, Oraons are agriculturist (Sachchidananda:1963). After their migration to Assam they are engaged in different occupations (Kar: 1999). In Ruttonpore Tea Estate their main occupation is tea garden. Occupation is shown in table no.1.

**Table no. 1
Occupation of Oraon**

Occupation	No of Respondents	Percentage
Tea Garden worker	44	88%
Farmer	3	6%
Petty Business	2	4%
Govt. Employee	1	2%
Total	50	100%

Source: Field Study

Data indicate that majority of respondents 88% are tea garden worker while 6% of the respondents are farmer. Beside these 4% is engage in Petty Business and a little segment that is 2% of the respondents are Govt. Employee. 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. Oraons family income in Ruttonpore

Tea Estate is mainly based on tea garden wages. Respondent’s view that their daily wage is so less than one person’s wage is not sufficient to maintain a family. That is why more than one member is engaged in tea garden work to meet their daily expenses. Monthly family income of respondents is shown in table no.2.

**Table -2
Monthly Family Income**

Monthly income (in rupee)	No of Respondent	Percentage
<Rs. 3,000	13	26%
Rs. 3000 -5,000	27	54%
Rs.5000 -7,000	7	14%
Rs.7000 -9000	2	4%
Rs. 9,000 >	1	2%
Total	50	100%

Source:Field Study

From the above table it is clear more than half (54%) have low family income, range from Rs 3000 to Rs 5000 and 26% monthly income is very low, below Rs 3000. Besides these, 7% of family income is medium Rs 5000-7000. While 4% average monthly income and only 2% of respondent's family income is relatively high with above Rs 9,000 per month. Thus, we can say that Oraon in Ruttonpore tea estate live in poor condition. Economic life of majority of them is in bad shape.

CULTURAL, CUSTOM AND LOCAL WAY OF LIFE

Traditionally Oraons followed *Sarna Dharma*. But due to influence of Hinduism some they started Sarna Dharma in Hindu way. Varieties of Sarna Dharma existed due to Hindu influence. These are *Bishnu Bhagat, Bacchinda Bhagat, Karmu Bhagat and Tana Bhagat*. Sarna followers perform religious rituals under shade of a sacred grave. They worship Sun as *Biri* and Moon as *Chanda*. Chanda and Biri are words which are used in Sarna Puja. They call earth as mother (Roy:1928). Festivals have been part of life for Oraons since ancient time. *Sarhul* and *Karma* are two main important festivals of Oraons. But now- a –days it is also seen that Oraons are accepting religious festivals of other caste in this region (Ghosh:2003). Here Oraons celebrate different local festivals like Durga puja, Kali puja, Laxmi puja etc with non-Oraon neighbours. Here Oraon participate and perform ritual of Hindus. 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. But upper caste people of Barak valley strongly deny keeping any social relation with these people. Due to poverty and illiteracy they are often neglected by other advanced people in the

region. Socio-cultural life of Oraon is based on local socio-cultural environment. Oraon is generally performing all socio-cultural activities followed by local people. In spite of that upper castes are not interested to keep relation. They are told to be *men eater* and *inferior caste*. Hence it can be said that non-Oraon people in this valley always try to keep themselves far away from any social contact.

MARRIAGE AND KINSHIP

Traditionally Oraon prefer to marry an Oraon only. Inter-tribe marriage was strictly restricted in Oraon Society (Dalton:1872). Marriage is arranged by guardian in family, but opinion of bride and groom is respected. Child marriage is not recognized. Divorced as well as widow women and men can marry again but married men and women are not allowed a second marriage. Sexual intercourse before marriage is tacitly recognised and is so practiced that no Oraon girl remains virgin at time of marriage (Risely: 1915). Oraon in general or Oraon in Ruttonpore tea estate never like to inter-caste marriage. But due to influence of regional setting inter-caste marriage is found among some Oraons due to assimilation with other castes in the region. To some extent it is found that marriage is anticipated among Mala, Santal, Rabidas, Munda and Tanti in Oraon society.

LANGUAGE USED AMONG ORAON

Mother tongue is the most important identification of human beings. *Kurukh* is the traditional dialect of the Oraons (Russell: 1916). But in the present context, most of the people have forgotten their mother tongue. Hardly any Oraon speak Kurukh language. But a few aged Oraon speak Kurukh language occasionally. It is observed that no Oraon speaks Kurukh language regularly. Thus Kurukh language is gradually vanishing from their society. In Ruttonpore Tea Estate Oraons are using non-Oraon languages. Language spoken by Oraons is shown in table: 2.

**Table- 2
Oraon using non-Oraon language**

Language	No of Respondent	Percentage
Bagani	39	78%
Sadri	2	4%
Bengali	6	12%
Hindi	3	6%
Grand Total	50	100.00

Source: Field Study

Data indicate that majority Oraon (78%) 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 4% use Sadri language. Beside these 12% use Bengali and only a small segment that is 6% speak Hindi language for communication.

TRIBAL IDENTITY

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 (Chaudhury:2008). 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 (Chaudhuri: 1992). 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 (Sinha :1958). When a tribe undergoes change through loss of isolation and through close integration with wider society tribal becomes a caste (Xaxa: 1999). 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 Assam are categorized as *Other Backward Class (OBC)* instead of Scheduled Tribe (Kandulna :1999). 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 (Pullopillil:1999). Oraon working in tea gardens of Assam 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 Ruttonpore Tea Estate they are forced to assimilate with other non-Oraon community and to some extent they adopt way of life of local society.

CONCLUSION

Oraon are getting accustomed with dominant culture of Ruttonpore tea estate. Their occupation, language, religion, food habit and institution of family marriage are no longer remaining same as their homeland. Rather a new culture has become dominant in region which governs entire way of life of Oraon. In Ruttonpore tea estate Oraon continuously interact with non-Oraon people. It's rather irony to note hardly any Oraons original identity is seen in this region. It is found that their migration, displacement and change of occupation are responsible for their change of identity. Oraon working in tea gardens are not treated equally with tribes of Assam. Migration lost their ecological attribute which is regarded as one of criteria to recognise a tribe. Their displacement and change of occupation help them to lose all attributes of tribal life. They are socially excluded as wider Bengali society is not easily accepting them as caste people. Due to poverty and illiteracy they are often excluded by other castes in the region and confine them in tea garden.

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