

CENTRALITY OF “LIFE” IN THE ORAON INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY OF CHOTANAGPUR

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Abstract: The complementary of human life with other life forms in nature presupposes as interconnectedness between human beings and nature. The Oraon worldview sees everything in nature connected by a complex web of interrelationships. Understanding the role of nature in human life is an essential for understanding Oraon moral precepts. According to Oraon belief, human beings are created by Dharmes and are similar to him. They are given dominion creation are enjoined to respect and care for the order. This paper articulates a significance of Oraon creation myths and their participations in the creative Act of Dharmes (their God) and stewards of creation. This paper discusses on Oraon tribal community which is an indigenous community of Chotanagpur under these criteria a distinctive social, cultural and religious tradition, the practices of which have undergone a widespread change because of the outside influences. Their ancestors were forest dwellers. Because of their affinity for nature, they have developed a worldview which aims at preserving and maintaining between their life and nature. This paper also demonstrates the goal of their life that is to attain happiness and well-being, which is seen in the abundance of health and prosperity of progeny and crop. The religious myths, religious belief and culture are discussed in this paper.

IndexTerms - Life, Myths, Beliefs, Nature.

The way of life and worldviews of any Institution, religion, culture or civilization evolve and gain shape from the myths of how human beings and the entire creation came into being. Anupa kujur in her book *The Oraon Habitat* illustrates that in order to understand the Oraons concept of life, we have to understand first of all their myths of creation and then their socio culture and religious beliefs and practices based on these myths. Like any other great civilization, e.g., Sumerians, Babylonians, Hebrews, and Hindus and like any other indigenous group, Oraons have their own creation story that expresses their inner spiritual aspirations and religious convictions. In their creation story, Dharmes is presented in typical anthropomorphic form, which creates human beings in his own image (243). The study of Oraon creation stories, human beings, all other beings and everything on the face of the earth help us to understand the Oraon concept of life. It shows how the Oraon worldview, their day today life, and their moral conduct have been formed by creation myths and how these myths continue to exert influence on Oraon culture even today. Many authors put the Oraon creation stories in two major parts, namely, the genesis of human beings and the origin of the spirits.

However, to bring out its ecological significance, these stories have been divided in three parts the creation of earth and human beings, the fall of human beings and punishment and the restoration. At the first glance, this seems to be parallel with the Biblical creation narrative and any reader may readily point to the influence of Christian missionaries. In fact, Christopher Lakra elaborates in his book *The New Home of Tribals* illustrates that missionaries have influenced the meme of the myths in their efforts to unify diverse versions, but the essence has remained unaltered. The myths are simple, captivating to the audience and full of rich imagery. Unlike other cultural traditions, Oraons have no written traditions and everything has been handed down from generation to generation orally, hence, the narrator often uses a lot of freedom to improvise and to make the story alive (178). The essence of the story remains unchanged but the freedom of the narrator in improvising the story brings in changes in the story line. Because of this there is no single definitive version of creation myths. The stories are told in various modes with slight changes here and there but the basis content and message remain the same. In the beginning the whole world was covered with water. Dharmes created a Kilkila bird and ordered it to take and ordered it to take seed from Landu Gandu who was living in Patalpur under the water. With that seed, he created Sat-pati-raji, the earth. He moulded human beings from the clay and left them in open for drying. But Dharmes horse Hansraj tramped them down because it feared that human beings would fill the earth and ride it constantly. So Dharmes created dogs to chase away the horse, put blood into the clay forms and they came to life as human beings. Soon the earth was filled with human beings. Dharmes also made all other creatures molding them from clay. He provided for every creature giving food to each according to his/her need, for example, to the grass eaters, he provided grass. When the human beings filled the earth, Dharmes divided them into twelve professional groups. However, one was somehow left out and was assigned later to work at the furnace for subsistence and was called agria lohar (iron smith). His descendents were supposed to be the twelve Asur brothers and thirteen Lodha brothers, who smelted iron day and night, so much so that the whole earth and heaven were escorted and filled with smoke. There was no vegetation and no grass could be found for Dharmes horse. Dharmes sent his messengers, the king crow, the heron and the hedge sparrow one by one to tell Asur and Lodhas to stop smelting during the night, but were so proud and arrogant that they maltreated all the messengers and refused to listen to the advice of Dharmes. Finally, Dharmes himself appeared in disguise as a leprous boy to teach them a lesson. He approached them for food and shelter, but the Asurs and Lodhas rejected him. Their wives refused even to give him water to drink. Later an old widow brought him to her house, washed him and anointed him with oil. They began to live as mother and son. The leprous boy did wonders for the widow and the other people. One day because of some unknown reason, the iron smelting work of Asurs and Lodhas was spoilt and they could no longer smelt iron. Since the leprous boy performed great wonders time and again for the people, they seized him and asked him to do something for them. The boy performed some sorcery and prescribed a human sacrifice as remedy. They could not find anyone for the sacrifice, and so the boy offered himself to be sacrificed. As he entered the furnace, he told them to work on their bellows for seven pitcher and sprinkle on the furnace with mango leaves. They did

exactly as he had told them to do. When the fire had died out, they opened the furnace. To their surprise, the boy came out alive and gloriously laden with gold. Asurs and Lodhas were as greedy as arrogant, and so they too entered the furnace hoping to collect gold asking their women folk to work on bellows vigorously. The boy told their womenfolk to bring water in the black earthen jars and sprinkle it with bitter sindur twigs, and then open the furnaces. Unfortunately, they could find only the bones and ashes of their dead husbands inside the furnace. Leaving them wailing and crying, Dharmes, who was so far in the form of a leprous boy, started to fly away from them riding his flying horse Hanraj.

They clung to his feet and begged that shows us the way to live. Then he turned them all into spirits, and told them that men will offer you sacrifices. They fell in different directions and wherever they fell, they turned into spirits of those objects and places. "The drawn Creation myths show the creation of the earth, human beings and other life forms, their subsequent destruction and restoration, the institution of marriage and agriculture, the discovery and use of iron and the origin of the spirits. They also underline the duties and responsibilities of human beings towards one another, towards living beings, the earth and even towards the spirits. After the creation, Dharmes decides to destroy his creation because human negligence has polluted the earth (Ekka, 2003). Even in the last part of the myth, Dharmes comes down to destroy the iron smelting community because they have polluted the earth and sky by reckless burning of fuel. His triumphant emergence from furnace signifies a challenge to their greed and arrogance considered as two great vices by Oraons; and thus spells out the profound meaning of sacrificing oneself for others. They also manifest the core of Oraon religious beliefs and practices, socio cultural traditions and moral behavior. They form the very lifeblood of Oraon life. Their entire life experiences and their expressions are informed in socio-cultural or religious manner. These myths are the point of reference to the Oraon community for their everyday life. The moral norms what has to be done and what has not been done depends on the commandments of Dharmes that are found and interpreted in the myths. In other words, their socio-cultural and religious traditions have originated and developed in and through their creation myths. In the Oraon creation myths, the human beings are invited by Dharmes to be participants in his creative act through procreation and agriculture. Procreation is the clear sign of Dharmes creative act through human beings, whereas the products of Land manifest that he continues to impart life in various forms. From the Oraon creation myth, it is clear that Dharmes himself teaches human beings to propagate human race by establishing the institution of marriage. In a way, he first creates them his own image and now he asks them to continue his creative act through a social system instituted by him.

The gift of life becomes a gift forever and with Dharmes blessing it is bound to bear fruit. From here follow various social norms which invite Oraons to abide by the law of Dharmes in continuing the creative act. That is why every time a prayer is offered to Dharmes, the Oraons pray for increase in their progeny. Procreation is so important in the life of Oraon that even before their marriage, the young maidens keep a fast during the feast of Karma, and pray for the blessing of healthy children for the continuation of the tribe. All the major objects used during feast manifest the desire of Oraons to abide by the command on Dharmes to procreate and generate life. At the end the feast, the maidens distribute tender barley shoots to all, especially to the young boys. This is an example of their deep-rooted desire to attain greatest happiness in life, which is manifested in abundance of progeny, cattle and crop. From this point of view, the Oraon marriage is naturally ordained to procreation. Oraon believe that in the beginning man was taught by Dharmes himself to multiply so that the creation of life never ends." Children are raised for the tribe so that the family, clan and tribe are continued and there are enough members to offer sacrifices to Dharmes, the ancestors and the spirits. Hence it is the primary duty of every adult Oraon to enter into marriage and indulge in procreation. Children are always welcomed in the family and the village community; they are never looked upon as an economic liability. Rather they are treated with great affection by all.

The Oraon desire to continue the creative act of Dharmes can be easily seen in the number of children present in any family, in the family symbols used extensively during the marriage ceremony, e.g. Rice, nuts, dates, mango leaves, bamboo and mahua branches and the general absence of the smearing turmeric and sprinkling of water during the marriage ceremony are fertility rituals. Pouring water over the bride and groom is a symbolic affirmation of physical union of the marriage act and fulfillment of conjugal rights and duties. Their intense fertility consciousness has led them to consider barrenness as inauspicious. Consequently, a woman cannot assist at the central ceremony of marriage. Commenting to this, P. Dehon has rightly said, "The Oraons are a very prolific race and whenever they are allowed to live without being too much opposed, they increase prodigiously" (109). Indeed, healthy and numerous progeny is counted as a blessing for both the family and the tribe and thus, as the continuity of the creative act of god. It was Dharmes who gave to each and every being of the earth and provided them with food for sustenance according to each one's need. Dharmes instructed the human beings to clear the forest for cultivation, provided them with seed and taught them the techniques of agriculture. The giving of seed to human beings has a great symbolic meaning. They are being told to use the seed not only for their own survival and sustenance but to continue the creative act of Dharmes even in nature. Therefore products of land and increase in cattle are all signs of Dharmes creative act that is being continued by the human beings. This sense of being the participants in Dharmes continuing that is around them, so to say, their ecological surroundings. Everything in the creation has been given to them by Dharmes to make use of them and at the same time, to let them grow and multiply in their own way. Therefore, undue and excessive exploitation or overuse of natural resources including birds, animals, trees, plants, land and water is prohibited by the Oraon community. The understanding of Oraons is that just as they have been created by Dharmes, so too, all. Other forms of life in the nature have received life from Dharmes himself. Everything has been given to them 'for their well-being. Along with being aware of their central place in the universe, Oraons are also aware that the orders in the universe and the rhythm of life have been determined for them and their well-being. Their goal of life hence: on earth is the preservation of the order so that human beings attain wholeness and happiness in God, which is visible in the abundance of cattle, crops and healthy progeny. The ultimate goal of Oraons earthly existence is the incorporation into the community of the tribe thus becomes highest obligation of each Oraon. This obligation stems guaranteed only in the careful maintenance of the natural order. According to Oraon myths, human beings are taught to clear forest by Dharmes himself and at the same time they. They are given the seed to cultivate. Clearing parts of the forest was necessary so that new forms of life can sprout and flourish. Creation is destroyed because the human beings do not take care of it and contaminate the earth with undesirable elements. Later, the iron smelters are destroyed because they do not respect the order of creation and persist in working on their bellows night and day. Therefore, the myths give clear indication to Oraons that they should be the caretaker of the creation and not its master. Right from the beginning, nature has always provided Oraons with their fundamental needs such as food, clothes and shelter. It has played a vital role in the emergence of socio-cultural and religious traditions and moral norms, which guide their day-to-day life.

Days and months were named according to the agricultural seasons and changes in nature. The animal, water, forest and land are the four major sources of their livelihood and uniting factors for all the indigenous communities of Chotanagpur. Over the years, Oroans have learnt from their experience that the good, prosperous and healthy continuity of the tribe depends on a prudent and cordial relationship with nature marked by respect and care.

In the Oraon creation myths, the concept of life occupies the central place. It is not merely human life but the life in general in the whole creation. He takes the help of a bird and earthworm in creating the earth and human beings. But ultimately, it is he who is the source of all life. After the creation, he provided each and every creature with essential food and shelter to sustain all forms of life. He does not keep them dependent on him, but teaches them to care their own livelihood. Human beings are taught the technique of agriculture. When he ascends into heaven on his horseback, he gives provisions to the widowed womenfolk of the iron smelting community to live on the sacrifices offered to them by human beings. All these manifest that Dharmes is the source and finality of all forms of life; and hence when the human negligence makes all forms of life unbearable, including that Dharmes and his horse, he decides to destroy his creation. Again out of his kindness, he allows the life to flourish under his own personal care. The human beings are invited by Dharmes to be participants in his creative act through procreation and agriculture. On the other hand, at the center of Oraon religious beliefs is one supreme God, Dharmes, The Lord and Master of the universe, who is placed in a class apart. The ancestral spirits are given due veneration and various other benevolent and malevolent spirits are appeased according to the need. In all these religious practices, life in general occupies a central place. In religious worship, the well-being of human beings as well as that of the livestock and crops is always sought. Oraon religious beliefs and practices point towards their close communion with the whole of nature. The religion for Oroans is not merely a set of rituals and observances that seek to fulfill their religious aspirations, but a way of life comes to them naturally. It embraces every dimension of their everyday life. Their worship and sacrifices express a twofold desire first, the desire for an abundance of cattle, crops and progeny; and second, the desire to avoid sickness, evil mouth and natural calamities.

According to Sarat Chandra Roy, the attitude of Oraon society towards the supernatural is one of reverential fear in the presence of certain mysterious supernatural powers and beings, dependence on and conciliation and proposition of and prayerful submission to them. Dharmes is the creator, sustainer and controller of the creation, whom Oroans approach when they are in great difficulty (p, 23-35). Apart from Dharmes, there are various benevolent and malevolent spirits who play a significant role in their lives. Their acts of worship are predominantly community oriented and seek to establish a harmonious relationship between the various constituent elements of the Oraon world: Dharmes, ancestors, spirits, nature and man. Oroans have a monotheistic; understanding of God. They believe in one supreme Dharmes, who is a benevolent and beneficent God. Sarat Chandra Roy in his work *Oraon Religion and Customs* states that the Oroans regard Dharmes as anterior to all, the Author and Preserver, Controller and Punisher of men, gods and spirits of all that exists in the visible and invisible universe. It is he who creates the world, human beings and everything else. He is the author of life who puts life and blood into the creatures that he shapes (29). He is not a God who creates and then forgets his creation; with great care he provides for them everything that is necessary. Because of these characteristics, Dharmes is perceived to be a very kind, caring and affectionate God and is fittingly personified with a loving grandfather figure. From the creation myths, three striking features of Dharmes can be underlined. First and foremost is the special love for human beings. Even though he creates all life forms and all are recipient of his providence, only human beings enjoy his providence in a very special way.

The special care of Dharmes for human beings is seen in the episode of his going to search for Bhaiya Bahin, the progenitors of Oroans. After finding them, he brings them home, tucked up in the fold of his garments. He shows them great familiarity in the way he deals with them. He teaches them the technique of agriculture, the secret of procreation, the art of making rice beer and the ritual remedy against the evil eye and the evil mouth. His own good relationship with animals and birds enjoys human beings to also have a good relation with nature and everything in it. Second is the fact that Dharmes is described in a very anthropomorphic language. He is presented as one who can grow very hungry and needs human offerings of rice and eggs and other provisions for his substance. In the process of creation sometimes he does not know how to proceed and seeks the advice of Sita. He enjoys going for hunting with his dogs. In spite of all this, Dharmes shows his power and mercy to the old widow. He reveals himself to the Asurs and Lodhas in his glory, all covered with gold. This indicates that even though he is described with quite human traits, he is very different; he is transcendent. He is someone who is always near, someone who is very familiar with them as if he is one of them, but at the same time, he is totally the other. Third, Dharmes is depicted as the one who is intolerant of evil. When human beings pollute the earth, he punishes them by sending a great configuration. The similar attitude is seen towards the Asurs and Lodha brothers who refuse to limit the polluting smoke from their furnace. After repeated warnings, he allows them to go to their own destruction. Yet even though he is intolerant of evil, Dharmes respects human freedom. He does not force submission and obedience, but warns erring human beings repeatedly so that they may voluntarily give up evil. When they refuse, however, he does choose to punish them. Thus, God is presented as the one who takes care of all, respects human freedom and gives time for the mending one's ways. Michael Kujur (1993) describes that Oraons religious belief system is quite systematic and hierarchically ordered. Dharmes, the Creator and Preserver occupy the highest place in that hierarchy. In the second place are the Pacchbalar and finally other types of benevolent and also malevolent nads (spirits). Dharmes, often symbolized by the sun, is regarded as superior to all spirits and is capable of controlling them. In the times of calamities when the other spirits fail to protect them, Oraons turn to Dharmes as the final resort and offer sacrifices of white fowl or a goat as his colour is believed to be white. The Pacchbalar are highly venerated and remembered on all occasions. They are held as the role models of good life, who are to be imitated. Because of this, the newborn babies are named after their dead ancestors. They are kind and helpful to the living tribal members. Other spirits are propitiated according to the occasion and the need of an individual or the community. Subsequently the importance of life in Oraon Religious Beliefs and Practices, we come to know that Oraons believe in one supreme God (Dharmes) who is the master of the universe as well as they also believe in the ancestral spirits. In all these religious practices, life occupies a central place. Thus the religion for Oroans is not merely a set of rituals but the way of life comes to them naturally. It embraces every dimensions of their everyday life. Thus, the importance of human life and its interconnectedness with nature and other life form that occupies a central place in Oraon social systems and cultural practices.

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