

# The Culture of the Urang Community of Bangladesh

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**Abstract:** This comprehensive study focuses on the life and culture of the Urang community of Bangladesh, who are living mainly in greater Sylhet for ages. Data have been collected through field visits and semi-structured interviews with 64 members of the community. The result shows that, even though the Urangs have traditionally been working and living in different tea gardens in Sylhet, a lot of them are now engaged in various professions including jobs even in some government offices. Culturally the community has its distinctive features while it has affinity with Hinduism. Rice is their staple food and they dress up in accordance with mainstream Bangladeshi culture. Their food habit is different from other Bengali people living in this area. They wear different dresses in different occasion. Because of living in the remote area, they are habituated to adjust with raining and other natural disaster. They generally speak in Sadri and Kurukh language.

## **Introduction**

Bangladesh is known for its cultural diversity where people of different cultures based on their regional, religious and ethnic identities have been living side by side in harmony for centuries. Apart from the mainstream population of the country, Bangladesh boasts in the fact that it is home for more than two dozen of ethnic communities settled in many a district of the country, especially in the hilly regions. The Chakmas, the Marmas, the Tripuras, the Tanchangyas and the Mrosare are few of the biggest ethnic communities living in Bangladesh for centuries. One of the many such ethnic communities living in Bangladesh is the Urang community. It is worth mentioning here that the variation in the English spelling of the name of the community in question may be confusing as the word Urang is sometimes and in some documents spelt as Oraon, Uraon, Oran, and even Oram. This community is also known as the Khurukh tribe according to the name of their hero-king Karakh. One, however, should remember that all these variations in the name and spelling of the Urang community refer to the same and one ethnic group that we have preferred to mention as the Urang community in this study. The study is undertaken for the following objective to reveal the salient cultural features of Urang community.

## **Literature Review**

One of the earliest literatures dealing with religious beliefs of the Oraon or Kunrukhar was reviewed by Ferdinand Hahn, a German Lutheran missionary working in Lohardaga, the heartland of Oraon in Chotanagpur, India, for 25 years and he wrote Kurukh Grammar published in 1900. The book included religious beliefs and practices. Subsequently a book entitled Kunruk Folk-lore in the Original, was first published by Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta in 1905 containing

folklores and myths. A critical text with translations and notes was later written by Ferdinand Hahn another European missionary in 1931 entitled as Hahn's Oraon Folk-lore in the Original: A Critical Text with Translations and Notes and was very important for scholarly study and analysis of the religion of the Oraons (Hahn, 1931). The first essay on the religious beliefs and practices of the Oraons depicted Dharmesha the supreme spirit of the Oraons whose abode is thought to be in the sun with whom the supreme Godhead is almost identical. This supreme spirit is not the center of worship because it is so good whose adoration is generally not needed. The posthumous publication of this paper by a Jesuit missionary from Belgium is another important writing dealing with the religious beliefs and practices of the people known as Oraons/Urangs. Next to the contribution of F. Hahn, it was certainly the study made by this Jesuit which threw more and detailed light on the belief system and practices of the Oraon community. As the present study was conducted in and around different tea gardens of Sylhet district, (mainly because the Urangs have been working and living for many generations in different tea estates of Sylhet) it is worthwhile to review literature pertaining to tea garden laborers. It is assumed that the people working in different tea gardens all over in Bangladesh lead a miserable life but the real situation is yet to be investigated.

Very few micro-level studies on tea plantation workers have been done so far. The findings of some studies show the sub-human life of tea workers both in terms of working environment, living conditions and health and sanitation as most of tea workers live below the poverty line (Barkat, et al., 2010) and their poor income (Ahmed et al., 2014; Majumder and Roy, 2012) often lead them to live without basic human rights. Labourers are to accommodate themselves in a small dilapidated house, sometimes with their pet animals (Das and Islam; 2006; Majumder and Roy, 2012). Workers living in tea gardens are not facilitated with sanitary toilet rather majority of them are inured to use open place for excretion of faeces (Khan, 1991), even they are very unaware of or often ignore their rights regarding sanitation (Das and Islam; 2006). Even faeces are generally disposed to nearby water bodies or thrown in the jungle (Chowdhury et al., 2011). Open defecation causes various excreta related diseases as washing hand after defecation is not practiced (Ahmed, et al., 2006). High rate of illiteracy, ignorance, social exclusion, economic hardship, etc. bound them to maintain traditional life without minimum opportunities.

### **Methodology**

The present study is qualitative in nature that was conducted from November to December, 2018 from inside and outside the tea garden areas near Sylhet city. Data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews with 65 respondents who were selected randomly. The collected data were analyzed as per appropriate statistical techniques. The authors visited the area, collected data and mingled with the common people of the community to know their culture, social status, livelihood and the languages they use. Since most of them work in tea gardens, this study focused predominantly on the tea garden workers. Field visits were carried out to different tea gardens in Sylhet to talk to various respondents. Out of the total sixty-four respondents interviewed, sixty five percent were male and thirty five percent were female. In the past they worked in tea gardens as wage laborer and lived inside or outside the tea garden. They had no land of their own but nowadays very few of them have settled outside tea gardens they work in. With the passage of time the situation has changed to some extent for the better. However, still most of them are peasants who depend on the authority of tea gardens, landlords and nature.

### **Ethnic Community of Bangladesh**

Anthropologists opine that originally Urangs are Austric as a race and in terms of language they are Dravidians and that is why researchers often describe the Urangs as the descendants of Dravid-speaking Kurukha race. Though their ancestral home is in India, now they are found in neighbouring countries such as Myanmar, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. It is not clear when the

Urangsimmigrated to Bangladesh but it is assumed that they entered into Bangladesh during the Mughal rule. Traditionally, the Urangs used to be dependent on the forest and farms for their rituals and livelihood, but in recent times, many of them have established themselves as agriculturists.

The Urangs in Bangladesh are scattered across the country and now they are found in districts such as Kurigram, Nilphamari, Gaibandha, Lalmonirhat, Rangpur, Dinajpur, Rajshahi, Naogaon, Natore, Chapai Nawabganj, Gazipur. However, the largest number the Urangs are settled in greater Sylhet, particularly in Habiganj and Maulavaibazar. As per the Census Report of 1991, the number of Urangs in Bangladesh was 11,296. However, according to a recent estimate, the number of Urang people living in Bangladesh has risen to 102,000 (see [en.banglapedia.org](http://en.banglapedia.org)). According to one source that compiles data form various reliable national and international sources, the total population of the Urang community in Bangladesh is 114000 whereas the number of Urang people living in Sylhet alone is 66000 which is the largest number compared to the population density of Urangs in any other part of the country (see [https://joshuaproject.net/people\\_groups/14210/BG](https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/14210/BG)).

As for the languages used by the people who belong to different ethnic communities living in Bangladesh, it should be noted that almost all the ethnic communities of the country are bilingual: they use their tribal mother tongue to communicate with the people who belong to the same tribe while they learn and use Bangla, most often the local Bangla dialect, as the lingua franca for intertribal communication and for communicating with mainstream Bangladeshi people. That said, it is not always possible to have a lingua franca for intertribal communication, especially when it comes to communicating with less progressed ethnic groups. In such a situation, usually an interpreter's help is sought. Furthermore, as a result of Christian missionary activities, a lot of people of many ethnic communities have converted to Christianity and as a result of this many of the ethnic people turn multilingual as they speak English too along with their ethnic mother tongue and Bangla. It should also be remembered that while only a few ethnic languages have still retained their original writing systems, for example, Chakma and Marma, many of the ethnic languages either have already lost their original written scripts, resulting in these languages' being spoken-only languages, or adopted scripts of other languages to write their own languages. However, the few ethnic communities that have preserved their original writing systems till date, it has been observed that the young generations of those communities are quite unfamiliar with the written scripts. This is due to the fact that the schools that the young generations of these ethnic communities went to, have been teaching students to read, write and speak only Bangla and English until recently. However, over the last few years, initiatives have been taken to preserve the written forms some of the dominant tribal languages through printing books in these languages that are being taught to school children. Though studies have been conducted on various aspects of the life of the Urangs, for example, their beliefs, religion, folklore, and socio-economic status, these studies either relate to the Urangs in general, i.e. the Urangs living in Indian subcontinent, or conducted earlier.



**(Households beside the teagarden)**

Traditionally Urangs in greater Sylhet area have been working as tea laborer for generations and they are known as tea-tribe. A number of respondents had more than one reason to work in tea plantations. The majority of respondents decided to work in teagardens due to ancestral connections, whereas others claimed that they had no alternative.

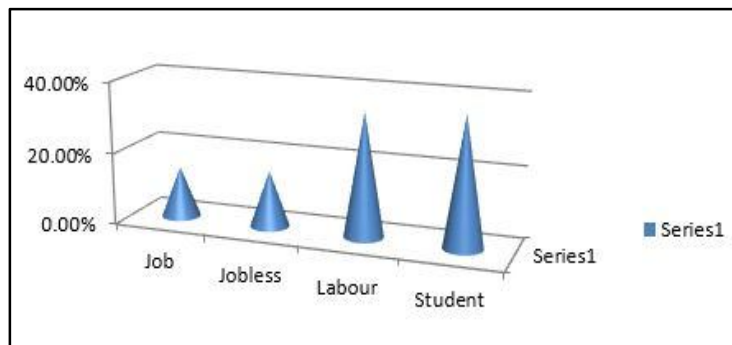


**(The Urangs are working in the teagarden.)**

Both male and female were found to work in teagardens and they were very ill paid. However, their economic condition has improved to some extent due to their work value. Their wage for working in the tea garden is calculated weekly based on their daily performance. They are paid mainly on weekly basis. A plucking worker is required to pluck 23 kg (sometimes varies between 18 and 24 kg) of leaves a day. If they fail to achieve the target, pay might be cut proportionately.

According to an existing contract a tea plantation worker receives BDT 69 per day as cash remuneration (Faisal and Ismail, 2016).

As the following chart shows, out of the 64 respondents 14.06% were in various jobs, 15.62% were jobless, 34.37% were laborers and 35.93 % were students.



It is clear from the chart that the rate of literacy among the Urangs is good and on the increase. Whereas previously most of them worked in teagardens only, nowadays, a good number of them are engaged in different types of professions. For example, some of them were found to work as electrician, some as mason, even some were found to work in government offices.

Majority of people of the laboring class still work in tea gardens because there is more or less one member who works in tea gardens. Most of the tea laborers are not permanent and the authority provides cost free accommodation only for permanent workers. The tea garden authorities allocate roughly 2200 square feet of land to construct a house. The size of the house is also fixed at 10.5 feet by 21 feet (Faisal and Md. Ismail, 2016). The permanent workers are benefitted but those who are

not permanent are in miserable condition. On the survey it was found that most of the people of the Urang community live outside the tea garden. The people who are in permanent jobs, live with different facilities in tea gardens. However, at present many members of Urang families are engaged in different professions outside tea gardens. For example, some of them work as general day laborers, some are involved in different other jobs, including office jobs. The members of the Urang families, who are involved in different professions outside tea gardens, usually live outside tea gardens. As they have no land of their own, they have to make their houses in the pieces of land allocated by the authorities of tea gardens. If they inform the tea garden authorities in advance, usually the authorities allocate tin and other materials to build a house. It seems that tea garden authorities are helpful to the members of Urang families even if they don't work in tea gardens. Once there was a landlord called Jambu in Baluchar area who gave shelter to a lot of people of Urang community. With the demise of Jambu, gradually, the people of the community have spread out to different parts of Sylhet area. However, some people who are engaged in different professions are still living at Baluchar making houses on their own lands.

### **Standard of living**

Generally, the roof the Urang houses were found to be made of corrugated iron and the wall and floor of earth. On the survey no concrete buildings were found. Another type of house was also noticed where the roof was either thatched on bamboo bracing or covered with corrugated iron on wooden frame and bamboo bracing. There were indoor and outdoor kitchens for each family.



They drink pure underground water drawn through tube wells. Sanitation system has found not to be good. Almost every house has a bathroom floored with concrete slabs and enclosed with corrugated iron or bamboo fence. From the conversation with Urangs it has been understood that since their income is very low, they cannot eat enough nutritious food. As a result, they suffer from malnutrition. However, they have been observed to be very conscious about cultivating different kinds of vegetable in their homestead gardens. They compost cow dung to use as manure. The raise pigeons, chickens and goats to supplement their income through selling them.



Homestead vegetable production has been noticed in the study area. The Urang families also grow vegetables in the homestead gardens and sell them in the local markets.

## **Culture**

Minz (2017), an indigenous thinker and follower of the traditional Urang religion views Munda and Urang religions as close to Hinduism with worship of several gods and goddesses similar to Hinduism. While avoiding any discussion on absence of caste system in Oraon/Munda society, unlike caste-ridden Hindu society, he objects Christian missionaries/theologians' depiction of Primal religion as monotheistic.

During the survey in Sylhet area, it seemed that the people of Urang community strongly believe in Gods and Goddesses. They celebrate thirteen religious festivals in a year. Since their religious beliefs are closely tied to Hinduism, they worship Durga, Shib, Swarasati and other gods and goddesses. They think Durga as the goddess of power, Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and Swarasati, the goddess of learning.

Karam Puja is the most important festival of the community and the system of this worshipping is intriguing. About five to seven men and women extract sands from a pot (sara) and keep in bamboo pipe with pulse seed. They consider it as God and worship it in the morning and in the evening. Karam is the worship of Karam-Devta (Karam-Lord/God), the god of power, youth, and youthfulness. The Karam festival is an agricultural festival celebrated by diverse groups of people. The festival is held on the 11<sup>th</sup> day of a full moon (Purnima) of the Hindu month of Bhado (Bhadra), which falls between August and September. Groups of young villagers go to the jungle and collect wood, fruits, and flowers. These are required during the puja (worship) of the Karam God. During this period, people sing and dance together in groups. The entire valley dances to the drumbeat "day of the phases". In the ritual, people go to the jungle accompanied by groups of drummers and cut one or more branches of the Karam tree. The branches are usually carried by unmarried, young girls who sing in praise of the deity. Then the branches are brought to the village and planted in the center of the ground which is plastered with cow-dung and decorated with flowers. A tribal priest (Jhankar or Dehuri) offers germinated grains and liquor in propitiation to the deity who grants wealth and children. A fowl is also killed and the blood is offered to the branch. The tribal priest then recites a legend to the villagers about the efficacy of Karam puja. The legend varies from tribe to tribe. After that it is sunk in the pond or in the river.

Another Catholic theologian Koonathan strongly presents the religion of the Oraons as monotheistic, against anthropologists' view of animism. However, in the survey area no monotheists were found. It was found that they not only believe in one god, they believe in several gods and goddesses. Marriage is a social institution within the community environment which is generally regarded as the only institution that justifies the alliance between men and women, sexual relationships, and with the aim of obtaining offspring. The marriage system of the Urangs is identical to that of Hinduism. After marriage the bride goes to the bridegroom's house. On the marriage day delicious dishes are offered to the marriage guests. Generally, they avoid Bengali traditional food polaw and meat on wedding day. The traditional dress of the Urangs used to be very short: men used to wear one piece of cloth called 'nengti' while women used to wear an extra short piece of garment called 'fata' to cover the top of their bodies. But during our study we found, the people of the community wearing lungi, dhuti, sari, shirts and pants. In respect to food, the Urangs are omnivores like mainstream Bangladeshi people. However, rice is their staple food. Like many other ethnic communities living in Bangladesh, the Urangs too drink alcoholic beverages.

## **Conclusion**

The study can be concluded here by saying that the people of the Urang community who have been living in Sylhet for many years are hardworking. Though the previous generations of the community

used to work and live in tea gardens, with the passage of time a lot of Urang people are now engaged in various jobs outside ranging from wage earning as day labourer to office work. Culturally they have their distinctive dimensions while they also have affinity with Hinduism. Their staple food is rice and they wear mainly typical Bangladeshi clothes. With regard to language, they use their tribal mother tongue Kurukh and some of them speak Sadri for intercommunal communication while they use Bangla when it comes to communicating with mainstream Bangladeshi people. As almost none of them know how to write their mother tongue, Kurukh, mainly due to the fact that they hardly have any books written in this language. This language can be considered as an endangered one. Initiatives should be taken to revive this language by printing books and periodicals in it and by teaching it to the people of the community. The result of the study has implications for cultural and linguistic studies of ethnic communities living in Bangladesh.

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