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Culture, Economy and Identity:

A Study of the Oraon Ethnic Community in the Barind Region of Bangladesh

Md Rafiul Islam

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

College of Arts, Society and Education

James Cook University Australia

September 2014

Declaration on Ethics

The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted within the guidelines for research ethics outlined in the *National Statement on Ethics Conduct in Research Involving Human* (1999) the *Joint NHMRC/AVCC Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice* (1997), the *James Cook University Policy on Experimentation Ethics. Standard Practices and Guidelines* (2001) and the *James Cook University Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice* (2001).

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Abstract

Culture, Economy and Identity: A Study of the Oraon Ethnic Community in the Barind Region of Bangladesh concerns identity politics among Oraons in Bangladesh. The Oraons are an ethnic community who live in the North-West region of Bangladesh. Bangladesh is a multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-lingual country. While Bengalis are the majority, the country has a large number of marginalised ethnic communities with distinct languages, religions, cultures and identities. These peoples are not well addressed in the development process of the country and face many socio-cultural changes in their lives.

This thesis examines the present economic condition of the Oraons and how this affects their socio-cultural life and their identity. Although past literature has portrayed the marginalisation and socio-economic alienation of the ethnic communities in Bangladesh, it has not provided insights into the specific problem of the connection between economic conditions and identity politics. The comparative literature on other societies also falls short in depicting the relationship between economy and identity in relation to ethnic groups that are socio-economically marginalised. Thus, my study focuses on Oraon identity in Bangladesh to see how it is structured by their present economic condition.

Through ethnographic fieldwork in Bangladesh, this research explores the factors that have led to the present economic condition of the Oraons. The literature on the Oraon community shows that they had a prosperous life in their settlement in parts of India before British colonisation in 1765. They were self-sufficient in livelihood as agriculturalists and forest food gatherers. However, their livelihood activities were interrupted by the Hindu, Muslim and British administrators in India. The Oraons were taken away from Chotonagpur in India and were settled in Bangladesh by the British India Government (1765-1947). Over time, socio-political factors, including the partition of Bengal in 1947, the abolition of the *zamindari* (land tenancy) act in 1951, economic differentiation and the rise of Bengali Muslim peasants during 1950s, communal uprising/war between India and Pakistan in 1965 and the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, have caused economic deterioration

among the Oraons. According to oral histories and other empirical data gathered during field research in Barind, the Oraons faced economic crisis and led a hard life.

This research study reveals that the Oraons have lost land to local influential Bengali Muslim peasants and money-lenders. At present, almost all of the Oraons are landless agricultural day labourers and less than self-sufficient in terms of livelihood. Oraon economic practices include inter-household reciprocity of resources or sharing with kin outside the family performing festivals and ceremonies in the community. Thus, although the Oraons are landless agricultural day labourers, Oraon socio-cultural practices contribute to understanding of their domestic moral economy. In addition to their domestic economic practice, the Oraons sell their physical labour to rich Bengali Muslim peasants and are dependent on the wider Bengali society for subsistence, but are exploited. Although the Oraons face economic exploitation, they maintain strategic relations of indebtedness with rich Bengali Muslim peasants for survival. Some Oraons turn to religious conversion and assistance to survive against local Bengali Muslim peasants' domination and socio-economic exploitation.

I explore the processes that have promoted internal Oraon diversity through conversion in Barind. The Oraons are divided into groups embracing Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam because of their economic crises over time. My thesis, thus, identifies the processes of Oraonisation that help define the Oraons as Oraon. Although the Oraons face changes in economic activity and are divided into groups based on world religious views, they nevertheless assert their identity as Oraon, with particular socio-cultural features. In addition, the socio-economic relationships of the Oraons with the local Bengali Muslim peasants have contributed to processes of Oraonisation. Oraon socio-economic exploitation contributes to the constitution of their identity as Oraon, an ethnic minority group in Bangladesh.

My study, thus, focuses on the processes of marginalisation of Oraons in Bangladesh and their resistance to such marginalisation. Although the Government of Bangladesh does not recognise their distinct identity as *adibashis* (indigenous peoples) and has banned celebration of the international day of the world's indigenous peoples, the Oraons are deeply engaged socio-politically concerning their rights and recognition in the country. The Oraons maintain strategic networks with

adibashi groups from both Bangladesh and abroad for their identity as *adibashis* or indigenous peoples to escape from local Bengali domination and state oppression. The Oraons' demands for socio-economic change and equal participation in mainstream Bangladeshi society and culture, described in this study, are partly framed in terms of indigeneity. The Oraons, thus, respond to the discourse of global indigeneity, although they live in remote parts of the Barind region in Bangladesh.

In exploring the changing problems of Oraons, this thesis contributes strategically as well as theoretically to the literature on ethnicity. This research demonstrates a relationship between economy and identity in the case of the Oraons. Significantly, this study explores peoples' choices and interests in shaping their livelihood and survival strategies. I hope that, in exploring the problems of indigeneity in Bangladesh, my study also demonstrates the importance of devising policies for the *adibashis*. I also highlight the need to develop policies for those who live in the plains regions, such as Barind, because most development programmes in Bangladesh focus only on the ethnic groups of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHTs).

Acronyms

AD	Anno Domini
ADO	Adibashi Development Organisation
AOKS	Adibashi Oraon Khatriya Samity
AP	Aloghar Project
ASA	Association for Social Advancement
BA	Bachelor of Arts
BAC	Binodpur Adibashi Club
BBS	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
BBT	Benuban Buddhist Temple
BC	Before the Birth of Jesus Christ
BCM	Boldipukur Catholic Mission
BDT	Bangladesh Taka
BIPF	Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples Forum
BMDA	Barind Multipurpose Development Authority
BNELCDF	Bangladesh Northern Evangelical Lutheran Church Development Foundation
BORDA	Bangladesh Oraon Research and Development Association
BOSA	Bangladesh Oraon Student Association
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
BRTA	Bangladesh Road and Transportation Authority

CCDB	Christian Commission of Development in Bangladesh
CHTs	Chittagong Hill Tracts
DC	District Commissioner
EB	East Bengal
EU	European Union
FGDs	Focus Group Discussions
FYTP	Formation of Youth and Teachers' Program
GOs	Governmental Organisations
HSC	Higher Secondary Certificate
ICDP	Integrated Community Development Project
ILO	International Labour Organisation
JAP	Jatiyo Adibashi Parishad
JPO	Junior Program Officer
JSC	Junior School Certificate
LGED	Local Government Engineering Department
MA	Master of Arts
MAP	Mithapukur Adibashi Parishad
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MLGRDC	Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Co-operatives
NAC	National Adibashi Council
NCIP	National Coalition for Indigenous Peoples

NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
NSW	New South Wales
OSCB	Oraon Survey Committee of Bangladesh
PBV	Paharpur Buddhist Vihar
PIC	Project Implementation Committee
PNG	Papua New Guinea
PSC	Primary School Certificate
RAC	Ramwesarpara Adibashi Club
RDC	Research and Development Collective
RRS	Rangpur Radio Station
SCCCUL	Suihari Christian Co-operative Credit Union Ltd
SECs	Small Ethnic Communities
SEGs	Small Ethnic Groups
SSC	Secondary School Certificate
UISC	Union Information Service Centre
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
US\$	United States Dollar
WB	West Bengal
WHS	World Heritage Site
WV	World Vision

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Introduction

In this study, I examine the present economic condition of the Oraons of Bangladesh, and how this condition affects their socio-cultural life and their identity. The Oraons are an ethnic community¹ who mostly live in the Barind region, in the north-west of the country. Most of the villages of Barind include ethnic minorities or *adibashis* (original inhabitants/indigenous peoples). While the villages are comprised of people of different religious affiliation, including Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Buddhists, almost all of them have a majority Bengali Muslim population. There is no village in the region that is comprised of a majority *adibashi* population. During my field research, I observed that the Bengali Muslims dominate the non-Muslim communities, including the Hindus, Christians, Buddhists and *adibashis* in the socio-economic sphere of the region.

The *adibashis*' deteriorating economic condition impacts many aspects of their socio-cultural life. Many have converted from their original religious traditions to Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam. This understanding about the *adibashis* provoked me to conduct research on the relationship between economy and identity, focusing on the Oraons of Barind. I specifically chose to conduct research among this particular minority group because comparatively little research has been done on their economic situation, especially as it relates to religious and ethnic identity. While much research on minority groups in Bangladesh has focused on the Chittagong Hills region, few researchers have explored the situation of *adibashis* living in the plains regions, such as Barind.

The Population of Bangladesh

Ethno-linguistically, Bangladesh has a diverse population. The Bengalis are in the majority, while the country has a large number of other ethnic communities with distinct languages, religions, cultures and identities. According to Schendel (2009),

¹ For the purpose of this research study, I use such terms as ethnic community, ethnic minority, ethnic group, *upajati* (sub-nation), *adibashi* or indigenous people interchangeably.

although Islamic Bengali identity is strongly rooted in Bangladesh, the country includes non-Islamic Bengalis as well as many people with non-Bengali identities. These include: Santal, Oraon, Koch, Malo and many others in the north-west (Barind region); Garo in central Bangladesh (Dhaka and Mymensingh); Khashi and Hajong in the north-east (Sylhet); and Rakhain (Arakanese) in the southern and south-eastern regions (Chittagong and Patuakhali). These peoples have been living for centuries on land that is now part of Bangladesh. These peoples are considered ethnic minorities in relation to the dominant ethnic identity in Bangladesh, Islamic Bengali (Schendel, 2009: 31-32).

According to the Population Census Report of Bangladesh (BBS, 2011), the total population of Bangladesh is about 160 million, distributed by religion as Muslim (89.52 per cent), Hindu (9.58 per cent), Buddhist (0.46 per cent), Christian (0.27 per cent) and others (0.14 per cent). About 98 per cent of the people of Bangladesh speak Bengali (BBS, 2011). The small ethnic groups (SEGs) living in different parts of the country speak about 68 languages (Rafi, 2006: 36) (Figure 1). The non-Muslim Bengali communities include Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and Animists and form minority groups in the country.

The 1991 Population Census Report of Bangladesh records 27 ethnic communities, numbering about 1.2 million people. This constitutes 1.13 per cent of the country's total population (BBS, 1991). The Population Census of Bangladesh does not allow people to identify their ethnic category themselves. Instead, interpreters/others fill in the census form and identify the religious or ethnic identity according to their own preconceived or stereotyped perceptions. Thus, although the ethnic communities have different religious and ethnic identities, they are often placed in a single category as minorities in the Census Report. The number of ethnic communities in 1991 has remained the same in the 2001 Census and the 2011 Census Reports. The Reports analysing the Census data for 2001 and 2011 have not provided accurate demographics on the ethnic communities, although two decades have passed. Ethnic communities have not been properly presented in the Population Census Reports because of the frequent political changes and attitudes of the Bangladeshi Government (BBS, 2001 and 2011).

For any statistical information about the ethnic communities of Bangladesh, scholars or development practitioners have to depend on the 1991 Population Census Report. The categories, names and numbers of the ethnic communities have been depicted as follows: (1) The ethnic communities in the plains include the Santal (202,744), Oraon (11,296), Buna (13,914), Koch (12,631), Garo (68,210), Hajong (11,477), Harijon (1,132), Khashi (13,412), Mahato (3,534), Manipuri (24,902), Munda (2,112), Paharia (1,853), Rajbongshi (5,444), Rakhain (16,932) and Uria (2,481); (2) the ethnic communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHTs) are the Bawam (6,978), Sak (2,127), Chakma (239,417), Khyang (1,950), Khumi (12,341), Lusai (662), Marma (142,334), Muro (3,227), Murong (22,178), Pangkhuya (3,227), Tanchanghya (19,211) and Tripura (61,129); and (3) the names of other ethnic communities both in the plains and CHTs are not mentioned, but constitute a population of 261,747 (BBS 1991, 2001, 2011 and also see Barakat *et al.*, 2009).

In contrast to the census representation of ethnic communities in Bangladesh, Kamal *et al.* (2007) describe the ethnic communities of Bangladesh as living in three different regions. These are: (1) Barind or the north-west region inhabited by the Santals, Oraons, Bhuimalis, Lahras, Mahalis, Mahatos, Mundas, Mushhors, Noonias, Pahans, Palias, Robidas, Rajbongshis, Ranjoarhs and Rana Karmakars; (2) CHTs or the south-east region inhabited by the Bawms, Chaks, Chakmas, Khyangs, Khumis, Lushais, Marmas, Mros, Pangkhoas, Rakhains, Tanchangas and Tripuras; and (3) Mymensingh-Sylhet or the north-east region inhabited by the Beens, Bhumijs, Bonajs, Barmans, Dalus, Garos, Hajongs, Halams, Kharias, Khasis, Kochs, Kondas, Kurmis, Manipuris, Nayeks, Pangans, Patras and Shabars (Kamal *et al.*, 2007: ix-x).

Drong (2004) argues that there are at least 45 indigenous ethnic communities in Bangladesh, constituting around 2.5 million in total population. They live in both the CHTs and plain land districts (Drong 2004). According to Rafi (2006), Bangladesh has 73 small ethnic groups (SEGs) divided into three broad categories, including 64 discrete, five merged and four ethno-occupational groups (Rafi, 2006: 33). The Research and Development Collective (RDC) – an organisation for the development of indigenous peoples in Bangladesh – claims there are 75 indigenous ethnic communities (RDC, 2010: 10). These accounts do not provide any substantive

statistics regarding the ethnic communities of Bangladesh. For this reason, scholars and development practitioners still have to depend on the Population Census Reports of Bangladesh for any statistical information about the size and population of the ethnic communities.

The Oraons

Before detailing the problem and key questions of the study, I here provide a short cultural profile of the Oraons. The Oraons belong to the Dravidian linguistic group and speak *kurukh* and *sadri* languages. They also speak Bengali (Jalil, 2001:44). The Oraons are believed to have lived in the Indus Valley before 3500 BC, and to have migrated to different parts of the Indian Sub-Continent. The Oraons now live in Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, *PaschimBanga* (West Bengal), Assam, Andaman and Nicobar Island, Tripura and Orissa of India, and also in different parts of Nepal, Bhutan, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka (Taru, 2007: 288-289). Exactly when the Oraons migrated to Bangladesh is controversial. Some scholars state that the Oraons migrated from different parts of India and settled in Barind during the period of the British Colonial Government (1765-1947) (Barakat *et al.*, 2009). The Oraons number approximately 115,000 people (Taru, 2007: 286). In Bangladesh, Oraons are represented as socially and culturally distinct from the wider Bengali society although they are entangled with the people of the wider Bengali society and also with other ethnic minorities.

In the past, agriculture was the main economic activity of the Oraons. They along with other ethnic minorities settled in the region as forest dwellers during the British period. Many of them were also engaged in menial work at the railway stations and as workers on tea estates in the region. They were also engaged in clearing the jungles in the region, and practising agriculture. They cultivated the land as the tenants of local *zamindars* (tax collectors/intermediaries) of the then British India Government (Barakat *et al.*, 2009; Bleie 1987).

Over time, socio-political factors have changed their economic situation. The partition of Bengal in 1947 caused remarkable changes in the economic life of the

Oraons due to communal rivalry among peoples. The abolition of the *zamindari* (land taxation) system in 1951 deprived many Oraons and other ethnic minorities of tenure rights to the land that they had under contracts with the local *zamindars*. However, the loss of these tenancy contracts did not have much effect on their livelihood as they still had access to sharecropping arrangements (Bleie, 1987: 29). Some Oraons also had their own land. They managed their livelihood by depending on agricultural products and remained self-sufficient by cultivating their own land or by engaging as sharecroppers.

Bleie (1987) states that pauperisation and economic differentiation took place in the society toward the end of the 1950s when land owners expanded the labour market in the region, fixing the daily labour to the price of one kilogram of rice (the staple crop). This wage fixation meant that if an agricultural labourer worked in the field of a landed peasant, the labourer's daily wage would be calculated according to the price of one kilogram of rice (Bleie, 1987: 29).

Because the Oraons, along with other ethnic minorities, lost the opportunity to sharecrop, many were compelled to earn their livelihood as agricultural day-labourers. While some Oraons also owned a minimal amount of agricultural land, over time many lost their land to influential Bengali Muslims and local money-lenders. At present, almost all Oraons are landless. Thus, they are unable to grow their own food, but instead have to earn wages selling their physical labour to rich Bengali peasants in order to purchase their food. The Oraons are, thus, dependent on the wider Bengali Muslim society for their subsistence.

Despite their dire situation, the Oraons, along with the other ethnic communities of Bangladesh, have generally not been properly addressed in the development process of the country. Their living conditions are poor compared to their Bengali Muslim counter-parts. In this regard, Abed (2006: ix) argues:

The small ethnic groups, a little more than 70 in numbers, constitute less than two per cent of total population of Bangladesh. In true democracy and inclusive development, this numerical significance should not in any way be marginalising, but celebrated, harnessed and strengthened as a force that adds

to the diversity and richness of the mosaic that is Bangladesh. Unfortunately, our policies and practices have more often than not failed the small ethnic groups in many different ways. Over the years they have been made to experience a strong sense of social, political and economic exclusion, lack of recognition, fear and insecurity, loss of cultural identity, and social oppression.

The Constitution of Bangladesh, which is Muslim in spirit, does not recognise the distinct languages, religions, cultures and identities of the ethnic minorities (Drong 2004). For example, in 2011 Ahmed, the then Law Minister of Bangladesh, stated that the *upajatis* (sub-nations) of Bangladesh are not eligible to be recognised as the *adibashis* (original inhabitants/indigenous peoples) of the country. He also said that the minorities can be treated as the small ethnic groups/communities or *upajatis* of the country and that new articles for preserving their rights in the country would be included in the reviewed Constitution of the country (Ahmed, 2011). His statement shows the marginalisation process and exclusion of the ethnic communities in Bangladesh. In this process, the Oraons are not an exception and many aspects of their socio-cultural life in the country are in a process of flux.

Objectives of the Study

As stated earlier, in this study I examine the present economic condition of the Oraons, and how this condition affects their socio-cultural life and their identity. Specifically, I address the following objectives and research questions. Firstly, what are the features and the attributes of Oraon history and culture through which they define themselves as a distinct group of people or a community in Barind? Secondly, what processes help explain the Oraons' present economic condition in Barind? Thirdly, how have these economic circumstances influenced Oraon socio-cultural life and their identity? Have differentiation and polarisation occurred among the Oraons and, if so, is this structured by their economic condition in Barind? In other words, my task is to identify the factors that define the Oraons as Oraon and the processes of Oraonisation in Barind. I also investigate how the Oraons respond to the discourse of indigeneity, as the Bangladesh Government does not recognise them as

adibashis or indigenous peoples. Finally, my research leads me to consider the processes that could be put in place to ensure the equal participation of Oraons with mainstream Bangladeshi society and culture.

Importance of the Study

Barind is an important region to consider in any attempt to address the most underdeveloped and unprivileged ethnic communities in Bangladesh. The ethnic communities in this region lack satisfactory conditions compared with their ethnic peers in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHTs) and their counterparts in the wider Bengali society. They face many challenges in their lives. In this regard, Ito (2012: 15-16) writes:

In discussing minority issues in Bangladesh, policymakers' attention is invariably drawn to ethnic groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Important as they are, the plight of minorities in the Barind region should warrant equal recognition. Today most of them live as landless labourers living under the poverty line. Their interactions with [the] Muslim majority in terms of labour and financial contracts are characterised by exploitation and they are socially and culturally isolated from the Muslim majority.

Although different non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been working for the development of the ethnic communities in Barind, the quality of life among them is gradually deteriorating. Little research has been carried out into their plight. Even fewer studies have been conducted on their economies and changing socio-cultural processes. While past literature generally portrays the marginalisation and socio-economic alienation of the ethnic communities in Bangladesh, it does not provide insights into the specific problems of economy and identity among these people. Comparative literature on other societies depicts the relationship between economic activity and ethnic identity, focusing on different economic and political conditions of ethnic groups. However, the literature falls short in depicting the relationship between the economy and identity of ethnic groups who are socio-economically

marginalised and alienated in societies of the world generally and specifically in the case of the ethnic communities in Bangladesh.

This study of the Oraon ethnic community in Barind is important because it depicts specific problems of Oraon economy and identity. Significantly, my thesis on the Oraon ethnic community provides new understanding about peoples' choices and interests in shaping their livelihood and survival strategies by collecting empirical data through interviews and observation in Barind. Although the Oraons have been differentiated into groups, they constitute their identity as 'Oraon' through a process of Oraonisation. My thesis, thus, contributes theoretically to the literature on ethnic studies in Bangladesh and elsewhere in the world by explaining the relationship between economy and identity in the case of the Oraons in Barind.

My thesis addresses the process of marginalisation of Oraons in Bangladesh and their resistance to such marginalisation. Oraon demands for socio-economic change and equal participation in mainstream Bangladeshi society and culture, described in this study, are partly framed in terms of a discourse of indigeneity. Oraons are part of a wider 'imagined community' (Anderson 1990) whose members live in different villages of Bangladesh and also in parts of neighbouring countries. The Oraons of Barind maintain contact with Oraons (Oraon settlements) across the boundaries of Bangladesh state, which helps explain the problems of indigeneity in Bangladesh.

In short, my study describes a relationship between economic activity and ethnic identity in the case of the Oraons in Bangladesh. Although the Oraons have faced changes in economic activity and have divided into groups based on world religious views, they form their identity as 'Oraon', presenting unified socio-cultural features. The changing socio-economic conditions/experiences of the Oraons help describe the process of Oraonisation in constituting their identity as 'Oraon'. Also, Oraons' marginalisation and their resistance to local Bengali domination and state oppression, as well as their strategic networks with *adibashi* groups from both Bangladesh and abroad help, represent their identity as *adibashis* or indigenous peoples. Although the Oraons stay in remote territories of Barind region of

Bangladesh, they keep deep socio-political engagement concerning their rights and recognition and thus respond to the discourse of global indigeneity.

I hope that this thesis will enable the research participants (Oraons) to identify their socio-economic problems, help the general community to understand the problems of marginalised ethnic groups such as the Oraons, and provide practical insights into ways of improving their socio-economic condition. My study includes information to guide researchers, social scientists, policy makers and development practitioners in working for the development of the Oraons of Barind. Also, by addressing the Oraon *adibashis* in the Barind region, I hope to highlight the need to develop policies for *adibashis* who live in different regions, as most development programmes focus only on the ethnic groups of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHTs) in Bangladesh.

Chapter Outline

Chapter one of this thesis outlines the importance of the study, assessing relevant comparative secondary sources and materials. This chapter provides a discussion on the theoretical framework of my study. I discuss the key concepts including ethnic community, indigeneity, culture, economy and identity. I also introduce my methodology and describe the different anthropological methods I used to collect necessary data and information to answer the research questions. My data analysis techniques and limitations of my study are also explained in this chapter.

In chapter two, I introduce my fieldwork and the villages of Barind as my study site. I briefly describe the ethnic settlement, ecology and settings of Barind and the villages under study. Specifically, I discuss the cluster settings of villages and the formation of Oraon groupings in village clusters to understand *paddapanch* (the traditional political organisation of Oraons). I provide an ethnographic description of the Oraon households I observed in the villages and their socio-economic conditions. This description of Oraon socio-economic background and settlement in the villages of Barind leads to the subsequent discussion.

I describe, in chapter three, Oraon migration and settlement in Barind based on oral history interviews with research participants. I collate this data with information from the literature on the Oraon community to project their history. I also briefly depict the specific socio-cultural features of the Oraons which define them a distinct group or an ethnic community in Barind. My discussion of this history of the Oraon community sheds light on the nature of their changing economy.

I move on, in chapter four, to describe the different socio-political conditions that Oraons have faced over history. Because of changing socio-political conditions, Oraons have faced economic exploitation and suppression by the government, local landlords and dominant groups. As a survival strategy, Oraons maintain a cliental relationship with rich Bengali Muslim peasants, but are exploited. This description of the Oraons' present economic situation helps understand many of their current livelihood choices.

Chapter five focuses on Oraon differentiation. I discuss Oraon differentiation based on my own ethnographic observation of Oraon socio-cultural practices and interviews with Oraons in the region. The Oraons in my study area are divided into groups, including Christian Oraons, Hindu Oraons/Oraon *Khatriyas*², Buddhist Oraons and Muslim Oraons. In addition, I found some Oraons who have not been converted to any world religion and who practise their age-old beliefs and traditions. They introduce themselves as Sarna Oraons. I argue that Oraon conversion can be explained in utilitarian terms and that Oraons seek economic, legal and educational support through conversion as a survival strategy. This understanding of Oraon differentiation leads to a discussion of identity formation by Oraons.

In chapter six, I describe the Oraonisation process, or how Oraons form their identity as Oraon, irrespective of internal differentiation. I argue that the Oraons represent themselves, and are also represented by others, in primordialist terms. Yet, Oraon identity is also circumstantially created. The Oraons are constituted as an

²*Khatriyas* are the Hindu people who belong to the second category/social status group of Hindu society. The Hindu society is mainly divided into four social groups, including the *brahmins* (priests, teachers and preachers), *khatriyas* (kings, governors, warriors and soldiers), *boishyas* (cattle herders, agriculturists, businessmen, artisans and merchants) and *sudras* (labourers and service providers) based on the practice of purity and pollution of Hindu ritual. Besides, there are also the scheduled caste groups – the untouchables – who belong to the bottom level of Hindu society.

identity category through suppression and socio-economic exploitation by the dominant Bengali Muslim peasants. My discussion of primordial and circumstantial factors in the constitution of identity categories helps elucidate the current process of Oraonisation i.e. identity formation that I observed among the Oraons in Barind. The Oraons maintain their identity as Oraon despite the differentiations among them that have resulted from their changing economic situation in Barind.

Chapter seven provides a discussion on Oraon responses to the discourse of indigeneity. The Oraons face marginalisation in Barind, but they actively resist this. One strategy of resistance that Oraons employ is to affiliate with all *adibashis* (indigenous peoples) in Bangladesh to gain international representation at the United Nations. The Oraons demand equal participation in mainstream Bangladeshi society by engaging with the global discourse of indigeneity.

In chapter eight, I draw out my key arguments and conclude my study. Although the comparative literature reveals that a change in economic activity can transform ethnic identity in some cases, the Oraons, in spite of dramatic changes in their economic circumstances over time, remain proudly Oraon. Moreover, some Oraons resist their status as a marginalised group in Bangladesh by engaging with a politics of indigeneity. Thus, my thesis describes a relationship between economic activity and ethnic identity, and provides a resource for Bangladeshi nationals in the construction of the modern nation-state of Bangladesh, by exploring the past history of Bangladesh through the case of the Oraon community.

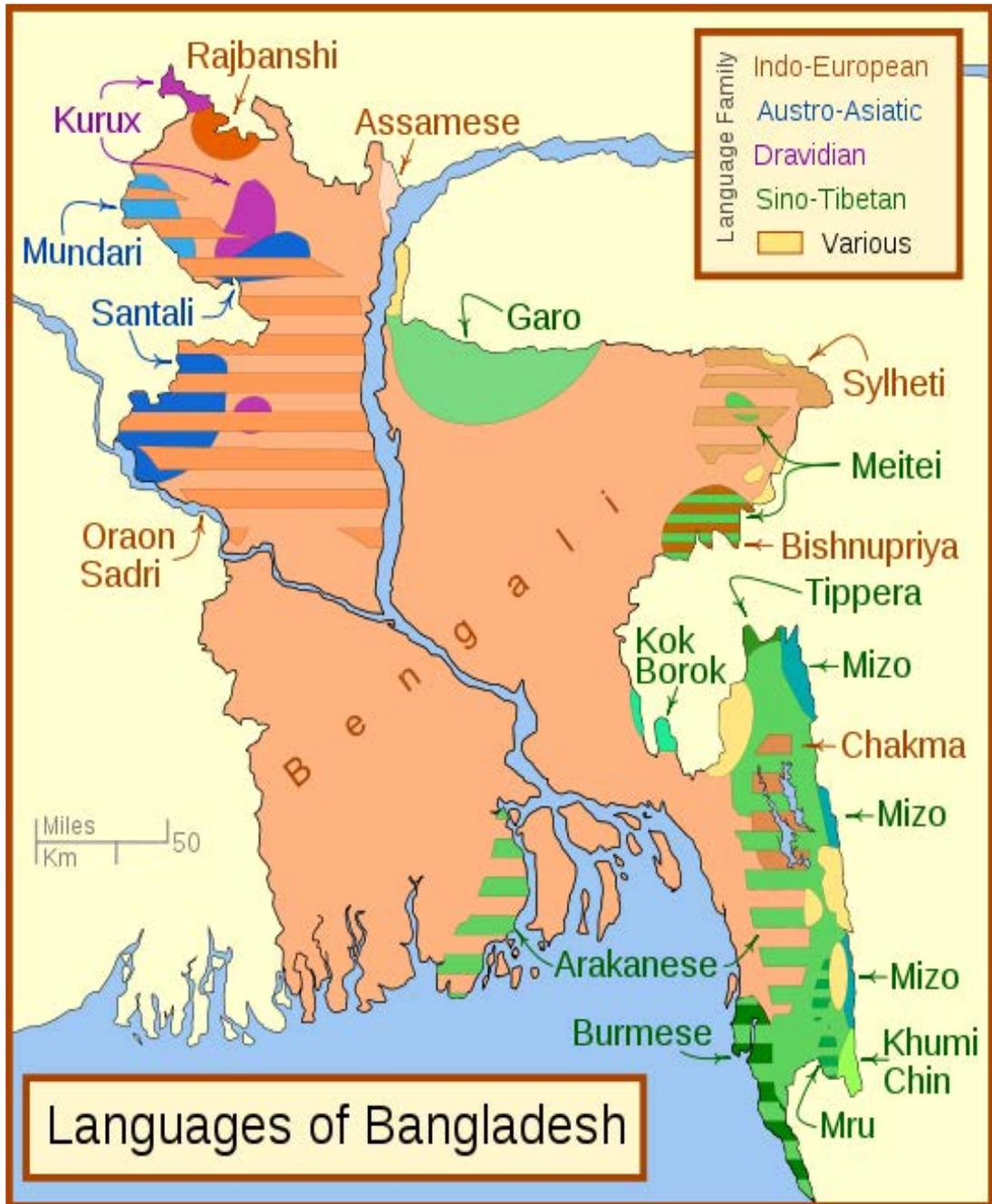


Figure 1: Map of Languages of Bangladesh,

<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Languages_of_Bangladesh_map.svg>.

Chapter 1

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

In this chapter, I first briefly assess the literature on ethnic groups of Bangladesh. Secondly, I consider some key concepts related to understanding the Oraon ethnic community by assessing relevant comparative sources and materials. Thirdly, I review a number of comparative studies on the relationship between economic activity and ethnic identity. I conceptualise the methodology of this study as an entire process of research activity including the literature review, assessment of theoretical sources and the data collection process.

Ethnic Studies of Bangladesh

As Khaleque (1998) notes, the literature on the ethnic communities of Bangladesh dates back many years in the history of the Indian Sub-Continent. During the period between the middle of the 19th century and the first quarter of the 20th century, the British Indian Administrators conducted several studies on ethnic communities in order to understand their socio-cultural life. Among those works, Dalton (1872), Grierson (1903), Hunter (1876), Lewin (1869), O'Malley (1910), Risley (1887) and Playfair (1909) are remarkable. Although these books were written for administrative purposes, they are still important classic ethnographic accounts of ethnic communities in Bangladesh. During the post-British period, the Government of Pakistan produced a book, *Pakistaner Upajati* (in Bengali) (1963) on the basis of the older sources. It contains very little new information about the ethnic communities of Bangladesh. Subsequently, the works of Qureshi (1984) and Gomes (1988) depict aspects of the socio-cultural life of some of these ethnic communities.

Among the most recent sources, the works of Gain (2000), Adnan (2004), Barua (2001), Mohsin (2002), Ali (2008), Bleie (2005), Barakat *et al.* (2009) and Hasan & Ali (2009) generally portray the marginalised and alienated socio-economic condition of the ethnic communities of Bangladesh. Uddin (2009) depicts the value

orientation patterns adaptive to the environment and society and interrelations among the Muslims, Hindus, Santals and Oraons in rural Bangladesh. A few other studies, including Bleie (1987), Chakraborty & Ali (2009) and Islam (2010) concern women's social position in the ethnic communities. As Rozario (2001) describes, economic changes have created class and community hierarchies among the Muslims, Hindus and Christians in Bangladesh. Specifically, economic changes have affected the lives of Christian women who take part in development programmes in Doria village close to Dhaka. Christian women's economic resources from their husbands who work abroad have raised their social mobility, but they are vulnerable because of the absence of male members in their families. Muslim men, because of their association with Muslim-dominated governments and their willingness to behave coercively, exploit Christian women sexually. This reveals a relationship between economic change, purity and communal boundaries in Doria village (Rozario, 2001).

As Islam (2001) mentions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Bangladesh are directly or indirectly involved in evangelisation among the vulnerable groups of people, including the women, children, poor and the ethnic minorities. The ethnic communities are the major targets for Christian evangelisation in Bangladesh. The miserable socio-economic conditions of the ethnic communities have been ascertained as the underlying reason of their conversion into Christianity. In this regard, the Muslim groups of Bangladesh consider the conversion of ethnic communities into Christianity as an assault on Bangladesh society by the NGOs (Islam, 2001). However, the Islamic NGOs in Bangladesh do not work for socio-economic change among the ethnic communities.

As Salehin (2011) describes, the Islamic NGO beneficiaries in rural Bangladesh introduce 'Muslim women' as 'good women' in the public sphere. He argues that Islamic NGOs working among Muslim women help develop a 'different model of gender relations' in contrast to the 'liberal model' (Salehin, 2011). However, Islamic NGO activity in Bangladesh operates so as to reinforce religious identity categories by focusing only on Muslim women. Women of ethnic minority groups such as the Oraons are excluded. As Bangladesh is a multi-cultural country, it is my contention that NGOs should work for economic change among women of all

communities whatever their religious affiliation. I argue this as ‘ethnic women contribute to the economy and family management’ (Singh, 1985) alongside their male counter-parts, but are ‘deprived and excluded in social position’ (Chakraborty & Ali, 2009; Islam, 2010).

This discussion helps identify the gap in ethnic community studies in Bangladesh. Few studies of ethnic communities in Bangladesh provide deep insights into specific problems of the connection between their economic situation and processes of identity construction. Moreover, I have found that little research has been conducted on the Oraon ethnic community of Bangladesh. Hence, the present study makes a modest attempt to address this gap. Specifically, I focus on the changing economic situation and livelihood practices of the Oraons and how this relates to the constitution of Oraon identity in Bangladesh.

Conceptual Framework

At this point of the discussion, I attempt to define the key concepts of the study. I relate the concepts to understanding the Oraon ethnic community, indigeneity and their culture, economy and identity. I conceptualise these terms reviewing relevant comparative sources and materials on ethnic studies.

Identity Categories

The terms ‘tribe’, ‘*upajati*’, ‘ethnic group’, ‘ethnic minority’, ‘ethnic community’, ‘indigenous peoples’, and ‘*adibashi*’, have been used interchangeably in the literature in different ways. According to Chakma (2009) the word ‘tribe’ or ‘*upajati*’ is said to have originated during the development and expansion of British colonialism over the Indo-Pak Sub-Continent. This term was used by colonial administrators in the pursuit of their political interests to marginalise indigenous peoples in the region, and is still used in this way by the Bangladesh Government (Chakma, 2009: 151-152).

Kamal (2007: xi) states that ‘Adivasi means such a group of people who are more or less organized in a region having a cultural unity and whose members feel that they are included in the same cultural unit [...] which makes them different from all others’. In general terms, (according to the definition of International Labour Organisation (ILO)), the socio-economic conditions of *adibashis* is less developed compared to others and their way of life is conducted fully or partly according to their own customs, traditions, laws and regulations. In regard to the statement above, the characteristics of *adibashis* (according to Dalton, 1847) have been ascertained as: (a) the *adibashis* live in such an area which is almost fixed and after procuring food, they return to their fixed area or go to a new place to start a living there; (b) the *adibashis* have their own cultural traditions fixed to their own world; (c) the economic way of life, production or the system of procurement of each *adibashi* remains the same in time, and there is no diversity or economic disparity in their life while their skills remain the same, transmitted from generation to generation; and (d) there prevails a sense of unity or solidarity among the members of *adibashis* (see Kamal, 2007: xi-xii). However, there are a number of problems with this discussion on *adibashi* definition.

Firstly, low socio-economic status is not a defining feature of *adibashi* identity, but the complex nature of relationship between socio-economic status and identity needs further exploration. On the one hand, there are also people in the mainstream society that live in poor economic conditions. On the other hand, if *adibashi* identity is tied to their low socio-economic status in society, what happens if their socio-economic status improves? Do they become integrated into mainstream society or do they maintain their *adibashi* identity? Secondly, as mentioned, the cultural traditions of *adibashi* have been described as if they were static and unchanging. While many cultural practices may continue, culture is a dynamic phenomenon and people’s beliefs and practices change in response to economic conditions, and other social and environmental factors.

In determining the essence of *adibashis*, Khaleque (1998) depicts a distinction between the ethnic groups or tribes and the people of wider society by stating that ‘ethnic communities’ or ‘ethnic groups’ refer to those people whose

linguistic and cultural background is different from that of the mainstream population, and who are socio-economically less developed (Khaleque, 1998: 2). In this discourse concerning *adibashis*, I argue the construct of ethnic group or ethnic community should not be confined to minority and marginalised populations. Rather, members of the majority or mainstream population should also be seen as members of an ethnic category. The meaning of *adibashi* can be made clearer through the idea of ethnic group. Ethnic groups, according to Barth (1969a: 10), refer to ‘a category of ascription and identification by the actors themselves, and thus have the characteristic of organising interaction between people’.

Indigeneity

Another issue relevant to my study is that of indigeneity, particularly the association of *adibashi* with indigeneity. Soucaille (2011) states that indigenous peoples developed contrasts and confrontations with nation-states to attack their neo-colonial policies by developing international networks. They sought to have their voices heard by the international community in order to draw attention to the importance of their local traditions and social customs (Soucaille, 2011: 205). The definition of indigenous peoples relates to territorial location. By presenting themselves as ecological experts on place, they are able to demonstrate their indigeneity (Soucaille, 2011: 210). In this regard, Merlan (2009a) states that indigeneity rests on specific relationships between peoples, places, and cultures that distinguish some people globally as native relative to others (Merlan, 2009a: 306).

Monee (2011a), the Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, has stated that according to the United Nations Convention, the small ethnic groups/communities of Bangladesh are not the *adibashis* or indigenous peoples of the country. She argued that the Bengali ethnic peoples, who have been living for 4,000 years or more in country, are the *adibashis*. According to Monee (2011a) there is no historical evidence that the non-Bengali minority groups claiming to be *adibashis* lived in Bangladeshi territory before the 16th century. She also emphasised that the

Government has the right to make any decision it decides in order to protect the country's territory and sovereignty (Monee, 2011a).

In another discussion, Monee (2011b) stated that all the small ethnic communities of Bangladesh should be addressed equally in terms of their rights in the country and that the ethnic minority groups of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHTs) of Bangladesh should not be singled out for special treatment (Monee, 2011b). According to her argument, recognition of these peoples as *adibashis* or indigenous peoples is an ultimate threat to the country's territory. In relation to the above discussion, my aim is not to enter into debate about whether people who identify as *adibashi* or who have been designated by others as *adibashi* are indigenous or not to Bangladesh (or Barind). Rather, my aim is to explore how Oraons respond to this national debate about their origins and the discourse of indigeneity.

As Marschke *et al.* (2008) state, outside the Americas, indigeneity is often challenged because national governments treat indigenous politics as a highly sensitive issue. Many donor agencies also avoid working on indigenous peoples' issues, motivated by either political or conceptual problems with the notion of indigeneity. However, according to Marschke *et al.* (2008: 483), indigeneity is a meaningful category for development practice. The notion of indigeneity should be understood in terms of both indigeneity-as-marginalisation and indigeneity-as-resistance (Marschke *et al.*, 2008: 485). In relation to this understanding of indigeneity, I conceptualise Oraon indigeneity claims as an expression of their marginalisation, discrimination, deprivation and suppression in Bangladesh. One way that Oraons resist their marginalisation is by claiming rights and recognition as *adibashis* in Bangladesh.

Identity

At this point, the idea of identity needs interpretation for the purpose of the study. Identity refers to the way people define themselves and others in terms of different categories, to differentiate between themselves and 'others' (Turner *et al.*, 1987). When an identity category is determined by ethnic origin, it is termed 'ethnic

identity'. Generally, ethnic identity is marked by the cultural features of a group of people. These features are considered as the outward symbols through which they maintain their proprietary identity. Yet, as Harrison (2006) argues, the process of identity formation and maintenance does not arise from relationships of given, pre-existing differences between groups of people. Harrison argues that among Melanesians, relationships of difference are considered as the basis of social order. In contrast, the absence of difference is considered to be the cause for conflict. Harrison's study helps us to understand that ethnic identity is created through practices of suppression of one group by another, including socio-economic exploitation.

While people employ socio-cultural features as resources in defining their identities, the term identity cannot be defined based only on these features – ethnicity in the primordial view – but must be also defined based on their responses and group integration for some common purpose – the instrumental view (Otto and Driessen, 2000). The meaning of ethnic identity is a matter of controversy and past literature has offered a dichotomy of 'primordial' versus 'circumstantial'/'instrumental' in the interpretation of ethnic feelings (Scott, 1990). The 'circumstantialist'/'constructivist' approach explains that individuals of an ethnic group construct or choose multiple ethnic identities for their survival in a specific historical and/or social context. The primordial ties of an ethnic group are transformed as a valuable source for their collective action, such as economic and political action. However, although members of an ethnic group can change, choose or even negate their identity in a given situation, their basic ethnic identity is often not deniable (see Seol, 2008: 341, 344).

The primordialist approach understands ethnic identity as a deeply rooted and unchangeable phenomenon of people (Van den Berghe, 1978). In contrast, the circumstantialist and instrumentalist positions explain the notion of ethnic sentiment as constructed and reproduced through fundamentally political processes in a particular socio-economic context (Jayawardena, 1980). Another understanding of identity is in terms of the 'politics of identity' (Keith and Pile, 1993) where identities are contested. Identities are not a simple description of people's ethnic group

membership, but are statements regarding their social position and power that they contest with others (see Li *et al.*, 1995:343-344). As Williams (2015: 149-150) writes,

The major theories of ethnic conflict [including primordialism, instrumentalism and constructivism] are each informed by assumptions about the nature of ethnic identity and interethnic relations, they address sensitive and important issues and their utility lies in their ability to address significant aspects of the phenomenon. However, because each of them focuses on a one-dimensional perception of ethnic identity, their explanations of the origin of ethnic identity and its role in ethnic conflict appear over simplistic making the theory incapable of comprehensive and meaningful analyses.

While most researchers on ethnicity have conducted studies conceptually in either the primordialist perspective or the circumstantialist/instrumentalist perspective, these two perspectives are not contradictory. Rather, at an analytical level, the synthesis of these two perspectives must be emphasised in understanding ethnicity. According to Seol (2008: 351-352), the claim of common ethnicity serves as a 'mediating reference point' between the primordial and circumstantial perspectives among Korean Australians:

The common ethnicity of Korean Australians acts as a mediating reference point [...] Korean ethnicity plays an important role as a reference point in the relationship between the ethnic community and the homeland, and between the immigrant society and the mainstream community. Furthermore, their ethnicity becomes a mediating reference point, which enables different individuals, generations and sexes to compare and interpret the old culture and the new culture. It is also their common ethnicity that enables Korean Australians to transform emotional bonds for material purposes [...] Their common ethnicity functions as a reference point, which facilitates [their] integration, and thus provides Korean Australians with a basis for survival by continuously producing and reproducing diverse cultural, social, economic, and political relations. [...] at one level, Korean immigrants and their offspring within the new social setting may experience change, transformation, conflict, ambivalence and contradiction, whereas at another level, they may show continuity, resistance, harmony, and solidarity.

This theoretical discussion of approaches to identity helps to understand Oraon identity formation in Bangladesh. Generally, studies on ethnic communities represent ethnicity as a complex set of relationships through which different groups of people identify themselves. According to Nash (1996), central to ethnicity are kinship or blood, commensality and substance of religious beliefs and practices. But these elements are not easily graspable in terms of the interactions of different ethnic groups. The other index features of ethnicity, according to Nash, are traits such as dress patterns, language, and cultural practices such as circumcision, scarification or tattooing. There are also some other features such as house architecture and interior arrangements, ritual calendars, specific taboos, medical practices and economic practices. These special and traditional practices and beliefs of ethnic groups give them a sense of authority, legitimacy and rightness (Nash, 1996: 24-28). Thus, an ethnic community maintains its difference and identity from other groups of people with reference to particular socio-cultural features.

The socio-cultural features of an ethnic community are seen as essential criteria, which inform the historical origin of identity representation, as well as ‘personal ties, primordial attachments, and responsibilities in corporate bodies [such as political/religious identifications...]’ (Shils, 1957: 130). According to Geertz (1963: 109), primordial ties are constructed, mobilised and transformed as the preferred bases for the development of autonomous political units in new states, such as Indonesia, Malaya, Burma, India, Lebanon, Morocco and Nigeria. People construct their individual or group identities in particular social, cultural and historical situations, but they refer to socio-cultural features, or primordial ties, in order to construct these identities (see Seol, 2008: 337, 341, 344). Thus, people strategically use primordial features as the raw material for the formation and assertion of ethnic identities. In other words they employ a form of strategic essentialism in their economic and political dealings with other groups of people.

With this idea of identity formation, in this study I attempt to understand how a changing economy affects the socio-cultural life and the identity of the Oraons of Barind. I consider how the Oraons in Barind, as an ethnic community, maintain their group identity. In other words, how do the Oraons determine their identity, given

their situation of changing dependency? How important to Oraons is the maintenance of particular socio-cultural features such as their distinctive housing arrangements, dress, language, economic activities, and religious beliefs? What role do such socio-cultural practices play in helping Oraons maintain a distinctive identity that distinguishes them from other social groupings or entities in Barind? Answering these questions helps understand how Oraons frame their own identity in primordialist terms. However, Oraons also frame their identity in circumstantialist terms, through recognising their oppression and through engaging in protest against socio-economic exploitation by the Bengalis.

As stated earlier, almost all of the Oraons in Barind are landless, and they are economically dependent on the Bengali Muslims for their subsistence. My aim in this thesis is to understand how this dependency on the Bengali Muslims impacts Oraon socio-cultural life and their identity. How do the Oraons maintain their relationship with Bengali Muslim peasants? Is their relationship with the Bengali Muslim peasants oppressive? Do the deteriorating economic conditions of the Oraons impact on their socio-cultural practices? Answering these questions helps understand how the Oraons represent their identity in circumstantialist terms.

Rosita Henry (1998), in analysing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal responses to the Kuranda Skyrail dispute in North Queensland, states that ‘loss of control over definition of place means loss of ability to define self’ (Henry, 1998: 157). As the Oraons lost the tenancy/sharecropping rights to land through the abolition of the *zamindari* act in 1951 (see Bleie, 1987: 29) and, subsequently, to influential Bengali Muslims and local money lenders, how do the Oraons keep control over the definition of their land or territory or their place? What is the impact of their increasing/changing dependency on the rich Bengali Muslim peasants in the region?

According to Henry (1998: 159), people engage politically with other groups to contest and negotiate categorical identities. Thus, she argues that identities are produced circumstantially. This directs me to question how Oraon identity is produced. With whom and for what do Oraons contest or negotiate? What is the nature of their socio-political engagement or interrelationships with other groups of people in the region? This study leads to deeper insights into the changing

relationship between economy and identity by assessing the facts and realities of life among Oraons. Answering the above questions helps conceptualise the meaning of identity. Identities are contested, negotiated, and produced based on relations between and among ethnic groups.

Although I consider all the socio-cultural features in identity making, I specifically focus on economy. There are no satisfactory answers to my questions in the current literature about the ethnic communities of Bangladesh. Thus, I attempt in this project to interpret the nexus between economy and identity in the case of Oraons in Barind.

Economy and Identity

Anthropologists have become increasingly interested in the study of economic activity and ethnic identity in many parts of the world (Eriksen, 2005: 355-357). Regarding the classical literature on this topic, Barth (1956) focuses on the mutual dependence of ethnic groups, explaining the interdependent economic activities of Pathans, Kohistanis and Gujars, who occupy different 'ecological niches' in Swat of North Pakistan. Of these three ethnic groups, the dominant group, the Pathans, are cereal farmers who are constrained by geographical boundaries and climatic conditions so that they cannot produce two annual crops. The Kohistanis adapt a dual economic activity engaging in less-intensive agriculture and livestock, while the third group, the Gujars, are livestock herders who also produce some grain (maize, wheat or millet), and exchange goods and services to the dominant groups – Pathans and Kohistanis – in varying degrees. Thus, although mutual economic dependence is found among these three ethnic groups, ecological and political factors have become the basis of their ethnic boundaries (Barth, 1956: 1079-1089).

Barth (1969b) also shows that political competition between Baluchs and Pathans makes it advantageous for Pathans to redefine themselves as Baluchs, suggesting that there is no direct link between economic activity and ethnic membership. But the economic changes/activities among the Pathans facilitate their political competition with the Baluchs so that the Pathans redefine themselves as Baluchs. However, in contrast to Barth (1956, 1969b), Haaland (1969), in his

contribution to Barth (1969c), states that a change in livelihood can entail a change in ethnic identity. Haaland's material from western Sudan depicts the Fur people who, due to varying circumstances, switch from agriculture to livestock herding, effectively becoming Baggara. The Fur people redefine themselves as Baggara and change their ethnic identity by pursuing economic advantages – nomadic subsistence based on animal husbandry – that generates an attitude towards saving and investment. Although the nomadised Fur people (Baggara) also adopt Baggara social prescription/culture, which they practise in changing circumstances through hospitality and marriages with members of Baggara community, it is their rights in and ownership of productive resources (cattle) that helps them to redefine themselves as Baggara. Thus, a change in economic activity is accompanied by a change in ethnic identity.

Ethnic identity varies circumstantially according to economic activity, as described by Barth (1956 and 1969b) and Haaland (1969). Despite this, do the ethnic communities retain the potential to re-unite politically as an ethnic group, in spite of changing their ethnic identity for economic and other purposes? Answering this question helps to understand the Oraons' identity formation in Barind. However, a close link or relationship between a dominant economic and political situation and an elite ethnic identity is observed in other relevant ethnic studies. For example, the Creoles of Sierra Leone in the 1960s, as described by Cohen (cited in Eriksen, 2005: 356) are a small group of economically and politically dominant people who distinguish themselves from two large ethnic groups, Temne and Mende. In spite of their privileged social position, they did not have any legitimate official status as they were not recognised as a dominant ethnic group by the government. So, the Creoles found a way of reproducing their elite status through forming an informal organisation. In general, ethnic elites find ways to retain privileges in a society, tending to reproduce their social position (Eriksen, 2005: 356).

As Eriksen (2005: 356) argues, how Creoles retained their privileges is applicable in the case of the other ethnic groups. For example, in Mauritius, the numerically weak Sino-Mauritians (Mauritians of Chinese descent) are economically powerful, yet have limited social interaction with Mauritians. A similar situation can be found in other colonial plantation societies. The groups, who are politically and

economically dominant, form elite ethnic identities (Eriksen, 2005). The plantation workers on Mauritius are of Indian origin, the workers in the sugar factory are Creoles (African origin), the middle managerial level are of ‘coloured’ mixed African – European or Indian (usually upper caste) origin, and the top managerial level are European (Eriksen, 2005: 356-357). How elite ethnic identities are formed has also been discussed in the case of the Dutch Burghers of Sri Lanka (Henry, 2008). The Dutch Burghers, occupying a bureaucratic social position as well as forming the Dutch Burgher Union of Ceylon, retained privileges and defined themselves as an elite ethnic group during the British colonial administration (Henry, 2008: 214-215).

The link between political and economic functions and the formation of new ethnic identities has also been depicted in case of the Shan and Kachin of North-East Burma (present Myanmar) by Leach (1964) in his classic study *Political Systems of Highland Burma*. The Shan are a feudal hierarchy or autocracy and the Kachin move between two ‘ideal social models’, *gumlao* and *gumsa*. *Gumlao* society is anarchistic and egalitarian or democratic by nature, while *gumsa* society is a compromise between egalitarian and hierarchical ideals. The Kachin become *gumsa* by assuming the names and titles of the Shan and claim aristocracy, while still appealing to the ideals of *gumlao* equality to avoid the feudal prescription of paying dues or taxes to their traditional chief. Some of the *gumsa* communities want to become Shan, while in an opposite direction, the rest of the *gumsa* communities want to become *gumlao* (Leach, 1964: 8-9). Thus, both political choices and economic circumstances are implicated in the formation of new ethnic identities.

In the light of these comparative case studies, what is the situation of the Oraons in Barind? Do the Oraons, having their socio-economically minority group identity, just render their services to, and interact with, the rich Bengali Muslim peasants in the same way as the Pathans, Kohistanis and Gujars of Swat of North Pakistan engage with one another economically while maintaining separate identities? Or do the Oraons change or convert their identities because of varying circumstances, like the Fur people of Western Sudan who switch from agriculture to livestock herding and become Baggara? Also, could Oraons gain a better social position in Barind or special status and recognition in Bangladesh through the

strategic formation of informal organisations, like the Creoles of Sierra Leone, the Sino-Mauritians of Mauritius, or the Dutch Burghers of Sri Lanka? Or, might the Oraons form new ethnic identities based on their economic and socio-political circumstances or engagement with other groups of people in Barind, like the Kachin of North-East Burma who form new identities intermediating between Shan and *gumlao*? In the light of these questions, I endeavour to explore the process of Oraons' identity formation and whether they redefine/change their ethnic identity or form/retain their identity as 'Oraon' a latter discussion in this thesis.

According to Eriksen (2005: 359),

Ethnic identities are created from two directions: from the inside and from the outside. They are the product of self-definitions and of definitions from the outside, and the relationship between these dimensions is dynamic and variable.

If this is so, how do the Oraons define themselves and retain their socio-cultural products, while at the same time, interacting with other powerful social agents like the rich Bengali Muslim peasants in Barind? And how are they defined from the outside by the Bengali Muslims?

At this point, theoretically speaking, it can be argued that although the relationship between economic activity and ethnic identity varies circumstantially, a change in economic activities has the potential to form or constitute ethnic identity, as exemplified in the works of Barth (1956 and 1969b), Haaland (1969), Cohen (1981), Henry (2008), Leach (1964) and Eriksen (1998 and 2005). Adapting this idea for the present study, I attempt to depict the relationship between economy and identity among the Oraons in Barind. Thus, the concepts of culture and economy also need to be defined for the purpose of the study.

Culture and Economy

Culture has been defined by scholars in various ways. The most famous and widely quoted definition of culture is ‘that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society’(Tylor, 1871: 1). As Eriksen (2009) notes, some say that culture permeates all human activities, including economic and political activities, while others say that economics and politics have little to do with culture. Also, cultural values in different societies determine the economic activity of people, and culture also regulates the behaviour of human beings in a society (Eriksen, 2009: 27). Although cultural values inform (but do not necessarily determine) people’s economic practices, for the purpose of this study, I conceptualise culture as the integration of the socio-cultural values and practices of a group of people.

As the economy of a group of people is one of the key components of culture, it requires definition for the purpose of the study. Scholars have different opinions on what constitutes economy. As Wilk and Cliggett (2007) note, from the perspective of economic anthropology, the substantivists³ argue that cultures should be understood in their own terms when interpreting the economic practices of people. On the other hand, the formalists⁴ urge that it is necessary to build general models of all human behaviour in all cultures to determine the characteristics of economics (Wilk and Cliggett, 2007: 5). Generally, substantivists focus on the ways through which people attain material goods and economic activities to make a living according to the cultural values of the particular society in question. But the formalists emphasize people’s choices and decisions in terms of maximising profits for accumulating scarce resources among competing ends.

As Merlan (2009b) states, ‘from its inception in the work of Mauss, Firth, Malinowski and others, much of what counts as ‘economic anthropology’ has emphasised that ‘economy’ cannot be seen as a separate sphere, but must be seen as

³ The substantivists emphasised cultural systems, but not individuals’ choices of material goods and economic activities specific to a particular group of people in a specific environment.

⁴ The formalists spoke for the economic rationality of individual’s choices or maximization of profit, found or practised in all societies, as a general model.

a dimension of multi-stranded social relations' (Merlan, 2009b: 269-270). Indeed, economy is not a separate sphere but rather in all societies is embedded in the social relationships that anthropologists study (Mauss 1990; Malinowski 1922; Firth 1929, 1972; Thurnwald 1932, Polanyi 1957a, 1957b; Gluckman 1955, 1965; Wolf 1968, 1982, 1990; Gellner 1989, Nugent 1996).

Since the mid-1960s, the subject-matter of anthropology has been transformed with anthropologists recognising that the forces of colonialism, neo-colonialism, and imperialism are central to social processes. An emphasis on political economy provides a theoretical approach to assess the status of 'people without history' (Wolf, 1982). The long-neglected issues of power and history/local history linking with global context (Roseberry 1988, 1989) and also local history linking with regional settings (Ortner 1984) have contributed to the field (Nugent, 1993: 336-338).

Economy should be studied contextually as well as historically. The economic practices of a group of people need to be interpreted on the basis of their practical everyday lives, as has been exemplified in comparative studies. The concept of 'moral economy' was used by Thompson (1971) in a study entitled 'Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century'. The study concerned bread riots, analysing the way many villagers formed actions and attacked bakeries or grain convoys (Thompson 1971). Similarly, Scott (1976), referring to peasant rebellions, including the Saya San Rebellion in present Myanmar during the 1930s, argues that the peasants who were defeated by the state colonisers were at risk in terms of survival. However, they managed minimum subsistence despite economic exploitation by local elites, landlords, moneylenders or ruling parties, who made a claim on peasant incomes and products (Scott, 1976: 3, 10).

Describing the minimum income of the peasants during the capitalist formation of developing countries, Scott (1976: 9) notes:

While a minimum income has solid physiological dimensions, we must not overlook its social and cultural implications. In order to be a fully functioning member of village society, a household needs a certain level of resources to

discharge its necessary ceremonial and social obligations as well as to feed itself adequately and continue to cultivate. To fall below this level is not only to risk starvation, it is to suffer a profound loss of standing within the community and perhaps to fall into a permanent situation of dependence [...] Traditional forms of patron-client relationships, reciprocity, and redistributive mechanisms may be seen from this perspective.

The distinctive economic behaviour of a subsistence-oriented peasant family is related to the fact that it is a unit of consumption as well as a unit of production. Divergence between the consumption and production of a peasant family arises from a shortage of resources, including land, capital and employment opportunities. This condition or the relative lack of resources compels a peasant family to move into labour-absorbing activities with extremely low returns in order to meet subsistence (Scott, 1976: 13). Smith (2002) also states that when a society is in economic decline, household food production on family plots of land and inter-household networks of reciprocity with cultural significance linking to the market situation create another form of economic practice especially during the transition to capitalism (Smith, 2002: 247). For example, according to Peterson and Taylor (2003: 106),

The persistence and resilience of the Indigenous Australian domestic moral economy, in which sharing with kin is a central feature, is remarkable. Thus, despite Aboriginal people in western New South Wales (NSW) having been in close contact with a capitalist economy for well over 150 years, it is evident that investing resources in social relationships outside the family is still very important.

In relation to this discussion, I consider whether the idea of interweaving cultural and economic practices or sharing/investing economic resources in social relationships outside the family is helpful for understanding the situation of the Oraons of Bangladesh. As the Oraons have lost their land, how do they manage to survive? Do they have a 'moral economy' (Thompson, 1971; Scott, 1976) or 'minimum subsistence ethic' (Scott, 1976) or 'inter-household networks of reciprocity' (Smith,

2002) or a ‘domestic moral economy’ (Peterson and Taylor, 2003)? These are some of the key questions of my study on the economic situation of the Oraons, which I provide in subsequent chapters.

At this point, I also refer to Karen Sykes (2008), who states that ethnographies of moral reasoning can explore human perspectives on contemporary economy. The concept of moral economy concerns the relationship between the way people use/value money and social relationships. As Gregory (1997: 12-13) mentions,

Values are those invisible chains that link relations between things to relations between people. They are invisible in the sense that they are, first and foremost, forms of human consciousness that describe what is and prescribe what should be. As descriptions they clarify the relations between the reproduction of things and people in specific historical, geographical and social settings; as prescriptions they guide the actions taken to transform a found chaos into a desired order, or what amounts to much the same thing, to reform an existing state.

Thus, values are a matter of consciousness of people, surfacing particularly when they are threatened. Values link people to things, to each other and to forms of social relationships that guide their socio-economic life. This helps explain people’s strategic resistance in order to manage everyday life. This strategic management of everyday life has been studied with reference to subaltern groups firstly by Guha (1982), then by Gregory (1997) among others. Sykes urges us to conduct comparative studies of moral reason in specific social relations in which people create value, especially the people who are in minority or subaltern positions or who are socially excluded (Sykes, 2008: 28-29).

Summarising this discussion, I conceptualise the economy of a group of people in terms of their livelihood practices, which are informed by their cultural values, social and ceremonial obligations as well as their interactions or interrelations with other groups of people and the social problems that they have faced historically as well as in the present. Livelihood practices of a group of people also includes their

wage labour for other groups of people, or the trade of their physical labour in exchange for receiving either food or money to buy food. Managing their livelihood also relates to the client relationships they form with patrons from the dominant groups.

This thesis reveals that the Oraons, who have lost land, have become dependent on the local rich Bengali Muslim peasants and manage their livelihood through entering into patron-client relationships. I describe the nature of the cliental relationship that Oraons have developed with the local rich Bengali Muslim peasants arguing that the nature of this relationship is one of dependency. The Oraons become indebted to the rich Bengali Muslim peasants as an economic strategy. I seek to understand the meaning of debt and credit, or indebtedness in relation to the economic situation of Oraons, which I describe in the following chapters.

Credit/Debt and Indebtedness

Credit and debt have been defined by anthropologists in different ways. Credit is considered beneficial and liberating for the creditor (e.g., Nugent 1996; Truit 2007; Zelizer 1994), whereas indebtedness is seen as burdensome for the debtor (e.g., Howe 1998; Lowrey 2006; Taussing 1987). The defining feature of credit/debt is its ability to link the present to the past and the future (Bourdieu 1972; Guyer 2004; Gell 1992; Hart 2001). Credit is a method of lending concrete resources to an institution or an individual in the present and demanding (or expecting) a return in the future (Peebles, 2010: 226-227). As Weber (1922: 81) writes, 'the term 'credit' in the most general sense will be used to designate any exchange of goods presently possessed against the promise of a future transfer of disposal over utilities, no matter what they may be' (Weber, 1922: 81). According to Marx (1894) credit is a 'fictitious capital' because of its relationship to a speculative future in which a person can benefit by taking credit or face potential economic loss (Marx, 1894: 595). In this sense, credit or debt can be seen as a method devised for a debtor to borrow speculative resources for his/her own future and transform them into concrete resources to be used in the

present (Anderlini & Sabourian, 1992: 75-106). However, I also refer to Graeber (2011: 120), who argues that debt:

...is a very specific thing, and it arises from very specific situations. It first requires a relationship between two people who do not consider each other fundamentally different sorts of being, who are at least potential equals, who *are* equals in those ways that are really important, and who are not currently in a state of equality - but for whom there is some way to set matters straight.

Graeber's idea of equality fits with the Oraons' socio-economic situation, when they borrow goods or share physical labour during the community festivals and ceremonies. In this situation they are at least potential equals in repayment of goods and physical labour between and among the community members. This understanding helps define debt relations in the Oraon community. However, Graeber's idea of equality does not fit the debt relations between Oraons and Bengali Muslims, where there is little potentiality for equality.

As Allison (2013: 221) comments on Clara Han's work, *Life in Debt: Times of Care and Violence in Neoliberal Chile* (2012):

Debt is social, in other words: it is at once common to and constitutive of particular relationships that get established – and reestablished – over time. A debt today gets repaid at some point in the future. Until it does, the lingering of the repayment creates a bond of temporary inequality. But, at some point or in some way, matters need to be 'set straight'.

This understanding of debt was the terrain of Clara Han's work, which theoretically focuses on 'family and its weavings of care and debt/credit into the webs of relatedness on which individuals depend for – or fail at – survival' (Allison, 2013: 224).

Although the ideas of credit and debt have different connotations, for the purpose of the study I conceptualise credit as a resource that people collect from a wealthy person or an institution to utilise in the present. The utilization of credit in

the present time can change one's economic condition, with the expectation of repaying the credit in the future. Credit can thus be considered as a means to future development. Debt, on the other hand, refers to an economic condition that arises when people cannot repay the credit in the near future. They are placed in a difficult position if they are unable to repay the credit and improve their economic condition. Their livelihood is threatened and/or they are placed in a position of dependency both in the present and potentially into the future. Debt or credit defines a position of dependency, usually in a context where the wider social relations among people are unequal such that some people are forced into indebtedness to others. I apply this understanding to analyse the credit and debt paradox of Oraons in subsequent chapters.

I consider whether Oraons who have lost land sink into indebtedness only because they cannot repay their loans or whether they also strategically maintain indebtedness with the local rich Bengali Muslim peasants as a successful survival tactic. In answering this question, I take note of Clara Han's work (2012), which explores the lives of poor people in an urban neighbourhood in Santiago of Chile. Han reveals that unstable work patterns, illness, and pervasive economic indebtedness are intimate aspects of everyday life of poor people. As Allison (2013: 224) comments on Han's work,

How particular is the condition of 'life in debt' (and indebted intimacy) to neoliberal Chile - and to those most vulnerable to precarity by being poor? What would life/intimacy without debt look like? And is it even a necessarily good thing?

This direction leads me to state that the ethnographic study of credit and debt describes human sociality. Ethnographers have explored the critical aspects of credit/debt relations in terms of social ties or interlinkages among individual, family, state and international systems. Economists in studying credit/debt relations tend to focus on material effects, although some do discuss debts in more social terms, while anthropologists emphasise the social and moral relations. Thus, anthropologists urge

that moral and material relations should be viewed as co-constitutive (Peebles, 2010: 225, 234-235).

As L'Estoile (2014) argues, analysing a situation in economic terms alone, or even in terms of moral economy, prevents us from grasping the complexity of the world. People's lives are framed by structural precariousness and radical uncertainty about the future. People, thus, maintain personal relationships/friendships to mobilise resources in order to respond to future expectations. These expectations are defined by fields of opportunities and frames of reference and change through time in relation to uncertainty. Thus, ethnographic description of people's economic practices helps understand their coping strategies. This leads scholars to imagine beyond the understanding of either 'economic anthropology' or 'moral economy', as products of certain frameworks, to look more precisely not at economic practices in other settings but at other ways to construct the world and live in it (L'Estoile, 2014: 62-63).

This discussion leads me to ask how the Oraons define relationships among themselves and with local rich Bengali Muslim peasants. To what extent do the Oraons engage in relationships of reciprocity⁵ among themselves? To what extent do they depend on cliental friendship with the local rich Bengali Muslim peasants for their subsistence? To what extent do the Oraons strategically maintain indebtedness with local rich Bengali Muslim peasants in order to perform the community festivals and ceremonies that define them as 'Oraon'?

Oraons as Sub-alterns

At this point, I attempt to conceptualise the meaning of *adibashis* or indigenous peoples or ethnic communities in the case of the Oraons in this study. I refer to the

⁵Reciprocity refers to a form of exchange of equally valued goods and services between two parties. According to Sahlins (1972), there are three kinds of reciprocity, such as (1) generalised reciprocity, which means the exchange of goods and services between and among the family members and close friends that the goods and services are exchanged based on moral obligations; (2) balanced reciprocity, which means the equally valued goods and services is returned within a specific period of time; and (3) negative reciprocity, which means a form of exchange between two parties based on a principle to take advantage of each other or to get something for nothing (Sahlins, 1972: 191-196).

concept of subaltern groups. ‘The term ‘subaltern’ is used to denote the entire people that is subordinate in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office, or any other way’ (Sen, 1987: 203). In opposition to subaltern groups are the dominant or elite groups who are in power. In the Indian case, they are the classes who were allied or collaborated with the British. Subaltern studies seeks to describe the hidden or suppressed accounts of numerous groups, including women, minorities, disadvantaged or dispossessed groups like refugees, exiles, and so on (Said, 1987: v-vi). In its political connotation, ‘subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up’ (Guha, 1981: vii).

In the light of this meaning of ‘subaltern’, I consider whether the Oraons are subordinate in Bangladesh society in relation to the Bengalis. Do they have any affiliation or collaboration with the dominant Bengali groups? Are they a suppressed or disadvantaged or dispossessed group, subject to the ruling or dominant Bengali groups? Answering these questions helps determine whether the Oraons constitute a subaltern group in Bangladesh. Evidence as to the subaltern status of the Oraons of Bangladesh is a discussion I provide in a subsequent chapter.

Oraons as an Imagined Community

Regarding the meaning of ethnic community or *adibashi*, I also refer to the concept of ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1991). I state that the Oraons do not live in a particular place in Bangladesh. They live scattered in different parts of the country, although they are mostly concentrated in Barind. In my research, I have found that Oraons have migrated from different parts of India and also live in neighbouring countries, including Nepal, Bhutan, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. This information about Oraon settlement in other parts of the world is not unknown to the Oraons who live in Bangladesh, according to my Oraon research participants. Thus, the definition of these peoples as only an ethnic minority or ethnic community of Bangladesh is theoretically incorrect. Oraons can best be understood in relation to the concept of an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1991).

Communities should be distinguished by the way in which they are imagined. For example, Javanese villagers who have never seen their co-citizens living in other places, still imagine them as part of their community (Anderson, 1991: 6). In relation to this understanding of imagined community, I argue that the Oraons of Barind perceive themselves as part of a wider community of Oraons, who not only live in other parts of Bangladesh but also in other parts of the world. The Bangladeshi Oraons migrated from Ranchi of Chotonagpur of India about four hundred years ago and have settled mostly in Barind, according to my research participants. This understanding among the Oraons of the history of Oraon settlement in what is today the country of Bangladesh, and their sense of themselves as a dispersed community living in different territories, helps define them as an imagined community.

Although I use the term ‘ethnic community’ in the title of my study, I utilise the terms ‘ethnic community’, ‘ethnic minority’, ‘ethnic group’ and indigenous people or *adibashis* alternatively, in reference to the subjects of this research study. I conceptualise an ‘ethnic community’ as a group of people who interact with other groups of people for their economic pursuits but still attempt to maintain relative homogeneity as a socio-cultural unit. Some ethnic communities are subjects of the ruling or dominant groups and are dispossessed or disadvantaged or suppressed. They are in both conflict and cooperation with other groups of people and seek recognition as distinct groups of people who aim at equal opportunity of participation in mainstream society. I conceptualise ethnic community as both the majority and minority, that is, both the Bengali majority and the Oraon minority are ethnic communities.

Methodology

The theoretical discussion above has informed the data collection process of the present study. I outline below the methods and techniques that I employed in this study and consider the appropriateness of those methods and techniques. This research study is based primarily on ethnographic fieldwork conducted among the

Oraons in Barind, supplemented by an investigation of the literature and historical sources on the Oraons.

As mentioned earlier, the Oraon community of Bangladesh was settled in Barind during the British colonial rule (1765-1947). There have been relatively few studies on this community and I have been able to find only a small amount of material on their history, culture, economy or identity politics in Bangladesh. Thus, an ethnographic as well as a historical anthropological explanation of their society deserves to be developed. As Comaroff and Comaroff (1992: xi) write:

No humanist account of the past or present can (or does) go very far without the kind of understanding that the ethnographic gaze presupposes. To the extent that historiography is concerned with the recovery of meaningful worlds, with the interplay of the collective and the subjective, it cannot but rely on the tools of the ethnographer. It must [...] be more than a little bit anthropological. By the same token, however, no ethnography can ever hope to penetrate beyond the surface planes of everyday life, to plumb its invisible forms, unless it is informed by the historical imagination – the imagination, that is, of both those who make history and those who write it.

These ideas inform the approach I have taken to my research study on the Oraons. I conducted in-depth ethnographic fieldwork among Oraons in order to collect firsthand primary data as well as the Oraon imagination or oral description of their society and history in Bangladesh. I used methods and techniques purposefully to work towards the systematic end of my study. The discussion below includes my rationale for the selection of the study area, a description of my fieldwork, sampling procedure, sources of data and application of data collection tools. I also explain the data analysis techniques and limitations of my study.

Selection of the Study Area

As mentioned earlier, the present study focusses on Barind under the administrative division of Rangpur (Figure 1.1). Specifically, the study has been conducted in the districts of Dinajpur, Gaibandha and Rangpur (Figure 1.2). The villages of Barind are

comprised of Bengali Muslims, Bengali Hindus, Bengali Christians, Bengali Buddhists and other minority groups who speak different languages and dialects. These groups of people live in different clusters within the villages of Barind. Thus, the study area exhibits a variety of social and cultural features.

I considered a few points in the selection of the study area. The objectives of the study, the availability of reliable primary data and secondary sources and information appropriate for answering my research questions were taken into account. I also considered accessibility of the study area and the time and resources to conduct the study. As most ethnic studies in Bangladesh have focused on the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHTs), I chose to do a study on a group that lives outside of this area. The CHTs are familiar to national and international researchers as a fertile land of only 12 ethnic communities, as well as of ethnic/anthropological or ethnographic studies. But the ethnic communities who live in Barind, that is, in the plains of Bangladesh, have not been well studied. For this reason, as a native researcher, I chose to especially concentrate on the Oraons as an ethnic community in Barind.

Fieldwork

I started my fieldwork among the Oraons in Barind in early October 2011. My first fieldwork lasted until the end of September 2012. For the purpose of my fieldwork, I was accommodated at my family house at Gaibandha in Barind. Also, I stayed and spent nights at Oraon dwellings. I started travelling to the villages in which the Oraons live in early October 2011.

Initially, I travelled to a few villages to observe and to determine which Oraons to approach for this study. I travelled to the villages of Binodpur, Udaypur, Nankor Rasulpur, Vagobatipur and Ramwesarpara of Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district. I also travelled to Kadamtoli and Bilpara of Ghoraghat sub-district of Dinajpur district. Then, I travelled to meet the Oraons at Doihara village of Gobindaganj sub-district of Gaibandha district. Finally, I chose my study villages

according to the number and differentiation of Oraons in clusters of the villages⁶ as well as according to the objectives of the study.

I returned to Australia in early October 2012 and analysed the data and information that I collected during my 12 months fieldwork from October 2011 to September 2012 among Oraons. I then returned to Barind/Bangladesh at the end of February 2013 to revisit the Oraons. I stayed in Bangladesh until the March 2014 to recheck my field data and information. During this second field trip, I could not visit my research participants from October 2013 to February 2014 because of the political situation in Bangladesh. However, I contacted the Oraon Students (Bangladesh Oraon Student Association – BOSA) in Dhaka. I spent time with the Oraon students in Dhaka and gathered information about the problems of the Oraon community. Thus, the total duration of my fieldwork was 18 months.

Sampling Procedure

Oraons live in clusters of different villages in Barind. Thus, the households located in the Oraon clusters in the selected villages were approached for interviews. I first approached the leaders of the Oraon community in each village and explained my project at a meeting. Heads of households were individually visited to explain the project and adult members of households were invited to participate. For the purpose of the study, I focused on the following villages with Oraon clusters:

1. Bilpara of Ghoraghat sub-district of Dinajpur district (Figure 1.3) is a single Oraon cluster/village, which is surrounded by the neighbouring Bengali Muslim villages.
2. Doihara village of Gobindaganj sub-district of Gaibandha district (Figure 1.4) has two clusters, of which *Paschim* (West) Doihara is inhabited by both Oraons and Bengali Muslims.
3. Udaypur village of Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district (Figure 1.5) has five clusters, of which, two clusters are inhabited by the Oraons, one by Santals and two by Bengali Muslims.

⁶ I provide a discussion on study site and the villages in chapter 2.

4. Binodpur village of Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district (Figure 1.5) has eight clusters, of which, three clusters are inhabited by the Oraons, one by Bengali Hindus and four by Bengali Muslims.
5. Ramwesarpara village of Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district (Figure 1.5) has seven clusters, of which four are inhabited by the Oraons, one by Hindus and the rest by Bengali Muslims.

Thus, the study includes 11 Oraon clusters in five villages in three districts, which constitute 260 Oraon households. The study population (260) has been calculated as the heads of all Oraon households in the study villages, which consists of 230 males and 30 females. All these Oraon household heads were approached for interviews. In addition, other adult Oraon males and females of different age categories were interviewed during fieldwork.

Ethnographic Methods

As well as individual interviews, my research involved focus group interviews and participant observation of community events, allowing for qualitative description of Oraon socio-cultural life. I applied ethnographic methods to gather firsthand knowledge and material about the Oraons, through the application of different tools and techniques. The data collection techniques included rapport building through initial contact, participant observation, a survey with a structured questionnaire (Appendix 1), ethnographic interviews with an open-ended questionnaire (Appendix 2) and collection of genealogies. I also conducted key informant interviews, case studies (Appendix 3), focus group discussions (FGDs) with a guideline (Appendix 4), and informal discussions. I also applied visual methods, using video and photography. I discuss my methods in more detail below.

Rapport Building

As stated, I conducted my study among the Oraons in Barind as a native researcher. However, as I am from the majority Bengali Muslim community, I initially faced difficulties obtaining the trust of the Oraons. I started my fieldwork by introducing myself as a researcher as well as by explaining the objectives of my project. At first not many of the research participants responded favourably to my study. I spent the initial few months travelling to the Oraons in Barind to develop a relationship with them. Eventually, the Oraons began understand the value of my project and became my friends in practice. This rapport-building process helped me to become familiar with the Oraons in Barind. They eventually cordially accepted me into their community. They helped me patiently and provided data and information on their community and life for the interest of this study. They consider this study as their own study, because to date there have been no other studies on their history and life in Barind.

Survey

I applied survey methods to collect socio-economic information from all the Oraon families under study. I developed and pre-tested a structured questionnaire collating both quantitative and qualitative questions. The survey allowed me to collect Oraon household information systematically. All the questionnaires were filled in by conducting face-to-face interviews with the heads of Oraon families. In conducting these interviews with the research participants, I was also able to observe Oraon socio-economic practices, including housing patterns, dress patterns, food habits and other aspects of their life. This process of data collection by survey helped me to understand Oraon life at the individual household level.

Ethnographic Interviews

Ethnographic interviews using an open-ended questionnaire allowed me to understand Oraon activities at both the individual and community levels. I was able

to document changes in their socio-economic activities and begin to understand their migration patterns, family histories and their responses to their changing socio-economic condition. These ethnographic interviews also allowed me to identify some key informants and participants for case studies and focus group discussions, which finally helped deepen my insights into Oraon society and culture.

Collection of Genealogies

The collection of genealogies while I conducted interviews with the open-ended questionnaire helped me to understand the socio-economic background and migration of Oraons to Barind. Specifically, collection of genealogies of the research participants enables a comparison between their present and past economic situation and cultural practices. In other words, the data collected through the collection of genealogies or interviews also enabled me to document Oraon history and their presence and connections with their relatives, who live both in the villages of Barind and in different places in India, where they had been settled in the past.

Key Research Participant Interviews

I had 10 key research participants of the study. Although I interviewed both adult male and female Oraon research participants at the study site, the key research participants were all male Oraons. The Oraon *pradhans* (headman or chief), including Badal Minji, Ramesh Tiggya, Ram Tiggya, Lalito Kujur and Ramchandra Minji from five villages of Bilpara, Doihara, Udaypur, Binodpur and Ramwesarpara respectively were the key research participants of the study. Interviews with these Oraon *pradhans* enabled me to identify the remaining five key research participants from different places (who were Oraons and were not included among research participants from study villages). I introduce these five key research participants, including Arun Khalko, Lucas Kispotta, Clement Tirkey, Uzzal Ekka and Victor Lakhra below.

Arun Khalko lives in Boldipukur at Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district. Khalko has retired as a Pastor of Boldipukur Catholic Mission (BCM) in Barind. Lucas Kispotta lives in Dinajpur and works as consultant to different non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the region. Kispotta also worked as a member of the Project Implementation Committee (PIC) of the Integrated Community Development Project (ICDP) at Caritas – Dinajpur Region, Bangladesh. Clement Tirkey is the Chairman of Suihari Christian Co-operative Credit Union Ltd (SCCCUL) at Dinajpur. Tirkey also works as a Junior Program Officer (JPO) for the Formation of Youth and Teachers' Program (FYTP) at Caritas – Dinajpur Region. Uzzal Ekka lives in Dinajpur and works as Regional Manager of Aloghar Project (AP) at Caritas – Dinajpur Region. Victor Lakhra works as the Director of Bangladesh Northern Evangelical Lutheran Church Development Foundation (BNELCDF), and lives in Dinajpur.

The key research participants of the study provided historical facts and information about the Oraon community. The key research participants provided me with books, materials and literature on the Oraon community. They provided information about the recent changes, problems, ways of solving problems and the question of Oraon integration and disintegration within the community and equal participation with Bangladeshi society. The key research interviews helped explore/clarify the historical as well as the substantive factors that continue to change their economy and create differentiation, contrasts and confrontations among them.

Case Studies

I developed case studies by conducting in-depth interviews with specific individuals. Through the case studies I was able to explore the practical situation of particular individual Oraons. The case studies helped strengthen the findings, data and information about the reasons for economic change in the individual's life. The case studies also provided insights into Oraon interpersonal relationships, their interactions or interrelationships with other groups of people, the role of

development practitioners in their community and support data on differentiation among the Oraons.

Focus Group Discussions

I conducted 11 focus group discussions (FGDs) among Oraons choosing seven to nine research participants (Figure 1.6) from each of the Oraon clusters in my study area. I developed a guideline for this purpose to discuss Oraon socio-cultural features and the recent changes and problems in their lives. Focus group discussions helped me to understand Oraon community views and practices and provided confirmation of their internal stratification. The data collected via focus group discussions allows comparison with data collected via interviews, case studies and surveys among the Oraons.

Informal Discussion

I interviewed both the adult Oraon men and women informally, during my fieldwork. My informal discussions with them helped me understand their feelings and attitudes regarding many issues in life. Such issues include their interactions and interrelations with the Bengali Muslims, problems and suggestions for solving problems, deprivation by the local government officials, and the expectations and demands of the larger society. They also expressed their frustration and anger regarding their present economic situation because they had lost the principal means of their agricultural practice – their land. The Oraons, especially the elderly, expressed their acute frustration regarding changes to their age-old religious beliefs and practices. The Oraons also expressed concern over the disintegration of their community. All this information collected by informal discussion with the Oraons further enabled me to explore their changing socio-economic situation.

Participation and Observation

I attended the Oraon festivals and life-cycle events, including birth, marriage and funeral ceremonies. Participation in all these Oraon events maximised the reliability of my research study. I observed Oraon practices by participating in their community events. I interacted and stayed with them during their festivals, which helped me gather deep insights into their specific festivals and ceremonies. This method of participant observation also allowed maximum time to understand Oraons' leisure and enjoyment, in the face of the hard lives they lead due to their economic crisis.

Visual Method

In relation to the research aims of this project, videotaping and photographing have helped me in the analysis and presentation of their socio-cultural practices. Through the visual examination of housing patterns, dress, food habits, religious festivals, ceremonies, other rituals of symbolic activities, economic activities and so on of the Oraons, the researcher is able to identify the social and cultural practices that define them as a distinct group of people. The photographs and video recordings proved to be an important data resource after the completion of my fieldwork. Video recordings of interviews enabled me to examine what the participants' gestures and body language revealed about their feelings and understandings on specific issues. Recording and videotaping the Oraon festivals enabled me to discuss them later on with Oraons and to analyse the various activities and stages of the relevant events.

Other Sources of Data

Secondary data were sourced from various books, journals, articles, statistical accounts and materials in the libraries of different institutions, government directorates and different expert bodies in Bangladesh and abroad. For this purpose, the Library at James Cook University, Townsville Campus, Seminar Library at Department of Anthropology and the Central Library at University of Dhaka, Library of the Research and Development Collective (RDC) at Dhaka, Library at Caritas –

Dinajpur, Bangladesh, different government directorates in Bangladesh and expert bodies from both the Bengali Muslim community and the Oraon community have been used. Online journals and books have also been used as an important source of secondary data.

Data Analysis Techniques

In this study, I pay much attention to collating the collected qualitative primary data with the secondary data to analyse the relationship between Oraon economy and identity. The data from the secondary sources were first assessed to determine their importance. As I conducted my fieldwork and collected the ethnographic data in Bengali, I had to translate all the collected data and information into English for the purpose of the thesis. I also had to translate Bengali secondary sources and materials on the Oraon community. In addition, as the Oraons in Bangladesh speak different languages, either *kurukh* or *sadri* or Bengali, I have provided the meaning of words I use in these languages in the thesis (Appendix 5).

Throughout this study I introduce my cases and research participants using pseudonyms. I do not introduce my research participants (except if given consent) in explaining the specific cases of Oraon suppression, exploitation or domination by the Bengali Muslims. I also do not use the Bengali Muslims' proper names. Thus, my thesis involves the analysis of both qualitative and quantitative primary data, as well as relevant comparative secondary sources and materials. However, the study is mainly based on my ethnographic qualitative data.

Limitations of the Study

Any research activity embraces both difficulties and limitations. The present study is no exception. I faced difficulties and limitations at different stages of this study, including in my selection of the study area, contacting the research participants and getting their informed consent, securing resources and collating the qualitative data. As the Oraons are absent from their homes almost all the day for work and

subsistence activity, I had to wait until evening to talk with them. However, even after they returned home, they would remain busy preparing meals and so on. Additionally, I had to continually travel to different villages to meet the Oraons, so my research took more time than I initially expected.

Although I conducted the study as a native researcher, I faced difficulties because of my different socio-economic background to the Oraons in Barind. Some Oraons preferred to avoid me and, because of this, I might have failed to grasp their feelings and attitudes, specifically regarding the Bengali Muslims. Although I tried to present my neutrality, because they identified me as Bengali Muslim, some Oraons avoided speaking to me about their oppression by the Bengali Muslims. Thus, I was not able to obtain as many case studies from the research participants as I might otherwise have done of Oraon oppression by the Bengali Muslims.

Another limitation of this study is the language barrier. I am not accustomed to speaking *kurukh* or *sadri* – the Oraon languages. I therefore had to communicate with them in Bengali. I conducted my fieldwork with this language limitation and thus may have missed some important conversations among the Oraons, when they spoke *kurukh* or *sadri*. But this was mitigated by the fact that I paid close attention to their gestures and body language.

Another limitation of my study is that the views that I have collected from the research participants are mostly from Oraon males (230). Although I have interviewed Oraon females (30), my study is based almost entirely on views expressed by the Oraon males. In addition to this limitation, the cases of the Oraons' socio-economic changes, which I have collected, are based only on the views of the Oraons. I have not attempted to gather Bengali Muslim peasants' views to verify the Oraon problems. These shortcomings of my study need to be addressed in a future study among the Oraons.

Although I adopted strategies to overcome these limitations, it is important in terms of good scholarship to mention them and reflect upon how they may have impacted on the quality of my data and the value of the study as a whole. In this chapter I have discussed some of the literature on ethnic groups in Bangladesh and

theoretical and comparative sources relevant to my thesis. I outlined my theoretical framework and the methodology of the study. In the next chapter, I move on to a detailed description of the study site.



Figure 1.1: Map showing Rangpur division of Bangladesh, http://wikitravel.org/en/File:Bangladesh_regions_ap.png.



Figure 1.2: Map showing the districts of Rangpur division of Bangladesh, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rangpur_Division_districts_map.png.



Figure 1.3: Map showing Ghoraghat sub-district of Dinajpur district, <http://www.welovebd.com/others/dinajpur-district.php>.



Figure 1.4: Map showing Gobindaganj sub-district of Gaibandha district, <http://www.mapsofbangladesh.com/Gaibandha_District.php>.

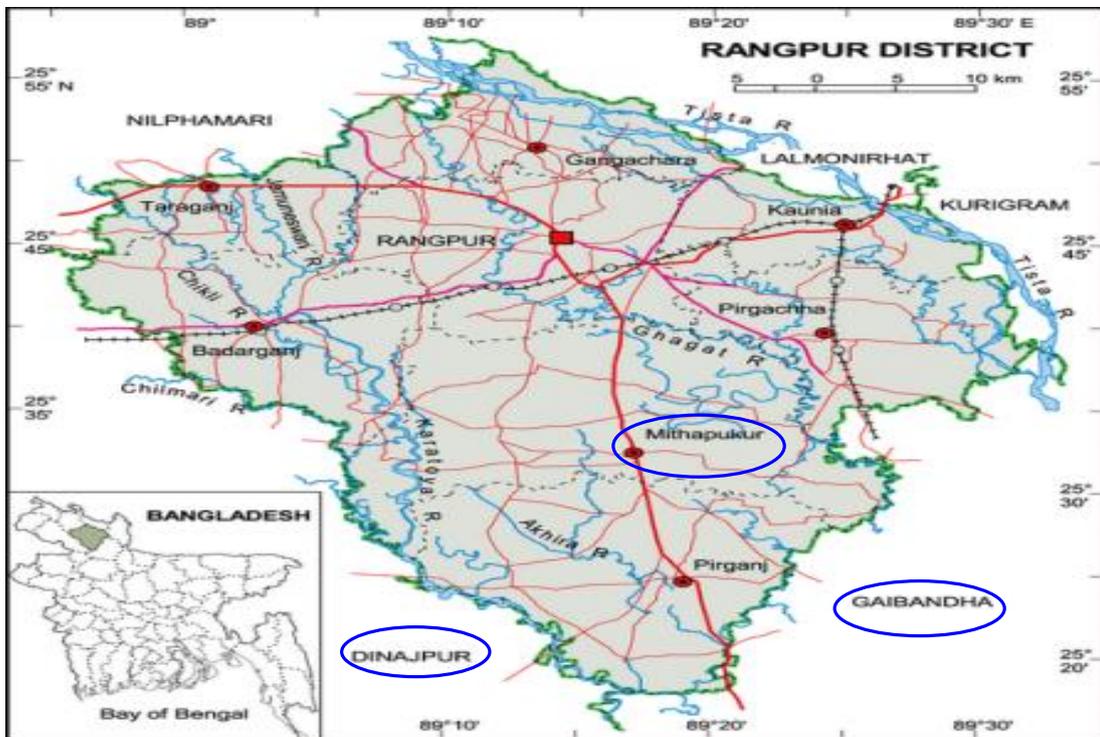


Figure 1.5: Map showing Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur, adjacent to Dinajpur and Gaibandha districts, <http://www.mapsofbangladesh.com/Rangpur_District.php>.



Figure 1.6: Eleven FGDs conducted among Oraons (photos from top left to right bottom) (Photograph by Rafiul Islam, 2012).

Chapter 2

Barind: Study Site, People and the Villages

In this chapter, I present Barind as the study site. Firstly, I provide an overview of ethnic settlement, ecology and geo-physical settings of Barind. Secondly, I depict the ecology and the people of the villages as study sites along with their location. Specifically, I discuss the cluster settings of villages and formation of Oraon groupings in village clusters. Finally, I outline some specific features of Oraon households for a better understanding of the problem of the study.

Barind: Settings, Ecology and People

As stated earlier, the north-west region of Bangladesh is called Barind. As Ali (2008) notes, Barind comprises the greater districts of western Bogra, south-western Rangpur, southern Dinajpur and north-western Rajshahi in Bangladesh. It also embraces the eastern part of Malda – a district of Paschim Banga (West Bengal) in India (Figure 2.1) (Ali, 2008: 47-48). According to Hamid and Hunt (1986), the region overlaps 70 per cent in Bangladesh and 30 per cent in Paschim Banga, India. In Bangladesh, it covers about 8582.427 hectares of land, spreading over the districts of north-west Bangladesh, with undulating landscape and terraced rice fields on extending slopes. Barind is separated into sections by criss-crossing river valleys. These valleys are characterised by comparatively high and low elevation, reddish and yellow-grayish clay soils, locally known as *khiyar*. Barind is made of the deposited upland of the region's earlier Himalayan drainage system (Ali, 2008: 48-49).

Originating in the Himalayas, the river Mahananda flows to the south dividing Barind into two parts – eastern Barind in Bangladesh and western Barind, the eastern part of Malda in Paschim Banga, India. There are many rivers in Barind. The most important river is the Teesta. It drains the catchment area to the north-east of Barind. To the south-west of Barind, the river Atrai and its principal tributary, the Jamuna, are the main channels through which a large volume of ground water is

transported to the south in Jamuna. The Karatoa and the Punarbhaba, tributaries of Atrai, act as drainage canals in the dry season (Ali, 2008: 49).

Another important feature of Barind ecology is its history as dense forest land. In this regard, Bleie (2005) notes that today there is no major continuous forest area in north-west Bangladesh. Most of the region had already been deforested as a result of commercial expansion by the British colonial government during the early twentieth century. The forests, including many species of trees, bushes, creepers, tubers, birds, and carnivores, have already disappeared completely in many sub-districts where the *adibashis* (indigenous peoples), including Santals, Oraons, and Mundas live. A significant shift, from a mixed forest-farm economy to a pure rice-farming production system, with implications for the livelihoods, culture, identity and overall well-being of the *adibashis* of north-west Bangladesh, has taken place over the years. The rapid deforestation changed the humidity of the soil and light conditions in Barind. The jungles, with highly valued organic manure, disappeared over the years. These conditions have negatively affected the micro-ecology and fertility of the *adibashi*-inhabited high land in Barind (Bleie, 2005: 243-249).

Generally speaking, the transformation from a forest-farm economy to a pure rice-farming production system has caused ecological change in Barind. Because of the rice-farming production system, groundwater has been used excessively for irrigation especially during the summer season. Under this system, most of the cultivable land of Barind has been irrigated to produce surplus food crops in the region. As a result, the groundwater level has fallen drastically over the years. This fall in groundwater level has subsequently caused a lower level of surface water in Barind. These water level conditions have caused desertification in some parts of Barind and have had an adverse effect on agriculture, nature and biodiversity.

The growing number of unplanned brick kilns is another reason for ecological change in Barind. The kilns pose a threat to agriculture and biodiversity. The black smoke released by the kilns damages vegetable fields, including tomato, cauliflower, potato and other crop fields. The black smoke carries carbon dust in the air, which prevents the effective pollination of flowers necessary for fruit production. Soil fertility declines because of the carbon dust produced by the kilns. As the fertility of

top soil declines, the farmers increasingly use artificial fertilisers and insecticides, which is also harmful to biodiversity. This carbon dust also has adverse effects on human health. The kilns, thus, negatively impact agricultural productivity and biodiversity in Barind.

Because of the reasons stated above, the climate of Barind has changed over the years (Ali 2008; Hamid & Hunt 1987). The region is, now, characterised by oppressive heat in summer (March-July) with high humidity. The temperature remains over 40 degrees centigrade in summer. During winter (November-March), Barind becomes colder with deep fog and intermittent wind. The temperature usually goes down to 10 degrees centigrade or more (four degrees centigrade was observed in January 2012). During the monsoon season and autumn (July-October), well distributed rainfall occurs. This climatic situation is distinct from other parts of the country and directly impacts people's livelihoods.

Nonetheless, agriculture remains the main economic activity in Barind. Although modern irrigation facilities are available to the farmers, they largely depend on rainfall for their agricultural pursuits. The rivers, ponds or canals do not gather enough water for irrigation during the monsoon season and autumn. Thus, the entire land of Barind is rain-fed. Previously, the land produced only a single crop a year. The Barind Multi-Purpose Development Authority (BMDA) has recently started an irrigation project aiming to utilise the surface water level in all parts of Barind. Although this irrigation project was started about two decades ago, the farmers still largely have to depend on rainfall for their crops because of the previous excessive groundwater use. However, many rice fields or green fields can now be observed around the villages of Barind.

The roads and communication system of Barind are yet to develop. Roads and communication systems have been developed in other parts of the country, especially during the last four decades, but almost all the roads in Barind villages are unpaved. There are many remote territories in Barind that are only accessible by foot. Also, there are places that are only accessible by bullock carts, which are used to carry the agricultural grains and products, including rice, jute, sugarcane and vegetables. Many places in Barind do not have modern facilities, such as safe

drinking water, electricity, hygienic sanitation and instantaneous telecommunication or information systems, including internet or telephone. This description helps to understand that Barind region is relatively neglected by the Government, more so than other areas in Bangladesh.

Ethnic Minorities in Barind

According to Bleie (2005: 6), ‘the Santals, Oraons, Mundas and so on have been the inhabitants of Greater Bengal (Figure 2.1) for, perhaps, at least two thousand years’. Bleie (2005: 7) also states that it is probable that the ancestors of present-day Santals, Kurukhs (Oraons) and Mundas had common myths of descent, lived within certain vast, partly common and partly neighbouring forest-clad territories, had distinctive languages, maintained clan exogamy, shared knowledge of a forested environment and maintained similar but separate religious and political chiefly functions and similar mixed modes of economic adaptation. Bleie’s (2005) account helps us understand the early settlement of ethnic communities in Barind, which have subsequently deteriorated in number and size.

According to Hunter (1876), depopulation of the country, including Barind, occurred as a result of the great famine of 1770 AD (Hunter, 1876: 24-29). Strong (1912) notes that depopulation of the region caused the lands to become more fertile and enabled jungles to grow in many of the interior parts of Barind. This situation is evidenced by an appeal from a local *zamindar* of Dinajpur, Raja Radhanath, to the collector of Dinajpur in 1799 in which he said that the *rayats* (cultivators) migrated from his *parganas* (administrative divisions of land), leaving the land depopulated and vacant (Strong, 1912: 61).

Historically there was a series of migrations to Barind. The immigrants were mainly the caste Hindus and well-off Muslims, who comprised the agrarian feudal social order of Barind, also the *amlas* (functionaries) of the local *zamindars* (tax-collectors) and professional practitioners or traders. This migration during the 18th century was also supplemented by different ethnic communities, including the Santals, Oraons, Mundas, Mahalis, Paharias and so on, who were taken there by the

British India Government (1765-1947). The ethnic communities were settled and engaged in work in the fields of this depopulated Barind during British India (Ali, 2008: 51). Thus, some of the current ethnic communities of Barind have only been there for a few generations. I provide a discussion of this issue in chapter 3.

As observed, the villages of Barind are composed of different groups of people, including the Bengali Muslims, Bengali Hindus, Bengali Christians and Bengali Buddhists and other ethnic minorities/communities. It is difficult to determine the exact number of ethnic communities living in Barind. For example, the Integrated Community Development Project (ICDP) – Caritas Dinajpur (2005) conducted a baseline survey of the socio-economic status of 14 ethnic communities in Barind. Yet, Kamal *et al.* (2007: xiii) states that 15 ethnic communities live in Barind. Other sources depict many more ethnic communities in Barind, including the Santals, Oraons, Paharias, Gainjhus, Mundas, Kochs, Malos, Mahalis, Mahatos, Bhumijis, Tures, Bhuyasors, Choudhurys, Musahars, Kolkamars, Mallicks, Muriaries, Rabidas, Rai, Rajors, Tahars, Lohars and Moralrishis. According to Shafie and Kilby (2003: 6), 18 ethnic groups, speaking more than 10 languages and dialects, co-exist with a majority of Bengalis in Northwest Bangladesh. These ethnic communities have distinctive cultures, identities, languages, beliefs and ideas, but they live in changing circumstances.

Among all these groups of people in Barind, the land-owning peasants have formed an exploiting community by playing a dominant role in the economic, social and administrative spheres. The social interactions, dominated by economic considerations, between the land-owning peasants and the farm landless poor people of all the communities, have transformed the latter into an exploited class. This social distinction in Barind has created two polarised classes, the *jotdars* (the rich/land-owning peasants who retain their allies in business, administration and local politics) and the *ketmojurs* or *kamlas* (the landless agricultural labourers) (Ali, 2008). These social classes have long existed in Barind.

Generally speaking, after the partition of Bengal in 1947, the Muslim majority established a dominant relationship with the non-Muslim minorities. Since then, the Barind social classes, based on economic differentiation, have been shaped

by ethnic-come-religious factors and have been polarised into Muslim and non-Muslim communities. One explanation for this cultural differentiation is because of threat and torture by the Bengali Muslim *jotdars* (land-owning peasants) and *mohajons* (local money lenders). The Bengali Muslim community, thus, plays a dominant role over the non-Muslim community in the socio-economic activities of Barind.

Another factor explaining this differentiation among the people of Barind is the government's policy on non-Muslim minorities. In spite of the presence and number of ethnic communities, they have not been addressed in the Population Census Reports of Bangladesh. The many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in Barind have also not addressed all the ethnic communities for their socio-economic development. Although some NGOs and some voluntary organisations, including the Christian Missionaries and Buddhist Temples, work for the socio-economic development of the ethnic communities, the government has fewer attempts for their development (see Ali, 2008; Barakat *et al.*, 2009; Hasan & Ali, 2009).

The government only provides some subsidies to the ethnic communities, similar to what is provided to the poor and elderly people of the mainstream Bengali community. Because of the frequent changes and attitudes of the government and the changing socio-political situations of the country, the ethnic communities are placed in an alienated social condition. As a result, both the government and development agencies are not well informed about all the ethnic communities. The ethnic communities are not taken into account by the planners and development policy makers of both the national and international communities. The Oraons are no exception to this process of exclusion from the development policies of Bangladesh.

Study Site: The Villages

Generally, the administration system of Bangladesh is decentralised with a distribution of power and responsibilities to the district commissioners. A district or *zila* is comprised of a few sub-districts or *upazilas*. A sub-district is usually a

combination of several unions⁷. A union is comprised of a few villages, while a village is a combination of several clusters of houses or huts. A Barind village is generally comprised of some bounded clusters of houses of different groups of people. A village is bisected with lanes and by-lanes. Small shops, *hats* or *bazars* (village markets) from which the villagers buy their daily commodities, are usually situated by the roadsides of a village. A village is also characterised by some sacred sites, including temples, mosques, churches and schools.

Most of the villages are not well connected with the local administrative offices, although the local government maintains good connections with most villages in Barind. As stated earlier, a village is surrounded by plenty of rice fields (Figure 2.2). The villagers also produce tobacco (Figure 2.3), mustard, maize (Figure 2.4), wheat, sugarcane, jute, banana, potato, cauliflower, carrot, tomato, and other vegetables. Poor villagers also work as daily wage workers in the village farm houses to manage their subsistence. Most of the houses in a village are made of mud, wood, and bamboo with thatched roofs or corrugated iron sheets.

As mentioned earlier, I have chosen five villages in Barind for this intensive study among the Oraons. The villages chosen are not in the valleys of Barind. Rather, they are located on relatively low-lying land i.e. on the extended slopes or the plains of Barind. The villages of Bilpara at Ghoraghat of Dinajpur and Doihara at Gobindaganj of Gaibandha are on the reddish or yellowish soils where farmers face difficulties producing agricultural crops. During my fieldwork, I would have to pass the river Atrai travelling to these two villages. I observed the reddish/yellowish soils on the way to these villages and also found the same inside the villages. The other three villages, including Udaypur, Binodpur and Ramwesarpara, at Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district, are not found on the reddish soils of Barind. The soils of these villages are relatively *doash* (fertile for cultivation). The villages and the Oraons that comprise my study are as follows.

⁷ A union or a union council is the lowest administrative tier of Bangladesh.

Bilpara

Bilpara is situated about 10 kilometres to the east of Ghoraghat *upazila* (sub-district) headquarters in Dinajpur district (Figure 2.5). The village is located only one and a half kilometres to the west of Ghoraghat municipal office, which is also situated to the east of Ghoraghat sub-district headquarters. Although Bilpara is situated in a municipal area, the Oraons do not have access to modern facilities. They lack electricity, paved roads, safe drinking water, and modern communication systems. The village does not have a market place, so the Oraons travel to the municipal market to purchase their daily commodities. Bilpara also does not have any schools for children's education. The Oraon children have to travel to attend the Ghoraghat municipal schools. For college, Oraon boys and girls either travel to the Ghoraghat municipal colleges, or to the institutions situated in adjacent towns far from Bilpara.

Although the soil of this village is poor, different trees, including mangoes, jackfruits, and bamboos, along with small bushes (Figure 2.6), are found. The village is also surrounded by rice fields, sugarcane, and banana fields. The farmers face difficulties in producing or cultivating a good crop because of the low level of surface water, especially during summer season. Because of this, even if they get water from the modern irrigation system, the farmers greatly depend on rainfall for cultivation.

Bilpara is a traditional Oraon village. The Oraons of this village perform *danda-kattna* (Oraon religious symbol) and their traditional religion – *sarna* (Oraon religion⁸) at every event celebrated in the community. This village has 18 Oraon households, which constitutes a Bilpara cluster. The village has no other ethnic population. The Bengali Muslim dominated villages are situated around the village. The Oraons of Bilpara are headed by Badal Minji – the *pradhan* (Oraon chief or headman) at Bilpara. These Oraons, thus, constitute a *padda panch* (Oraon

⁸ As Bleie (2005: 307) depicts, the *adibashi* children of the ancient Sarna Oraon and *adi* (ancient) Santal faiths have yet to be granted the right to education about their own religions. Also, some research participants introduce Oraon/traditional religion as Sarna religion. Thus, I use this term 'Sarna' to describe Oraon religion as Sarna religion and the traditional Oraons as Sarna Oraons, about which I also provide a discussion in chapter 3.

traditional political organisation). All their political, social and economic functions are advised by their *pradhan* – Badal Minji.

The Oraons of Bilpara are animists. They do not have any particular sacred place inside Bilpara, but change their sacred places each year. Also, every household contains a small *thaan* (a sacred place for their evening worship). The Oraons of Bilpara do not have religious priests, like a Christian Father, a Buddhist *vikkhu*, a Hindu *thakur* or a Muslim *imam* or *moulavi*.

Bilpara Oraons have a good relationship with the Hindus and other ethnic communities who live in the neighbouring villages. These Oraons do not worship any Hindu deities or build any images of Hindu gods and goddesses in their village. Yet, they cooperate and contribute money to the festivals and ceremonies of the Hindus. As this village is surrounded by Bengali Muslim-dominated villages, the Oraons are dependent on the influential local Bengali Muslim *jotdars* (land-owning peasants) and *mohajons* (money lenders) for their subsistence and face economic exploitation. During my presence, I documented a number of cases of Oraon land abduction by the local influential Bengali Muslim peasants. I also found that some Oraons of Bilpara assert their equal rights and recognition as *adibashis* (indigenous peoples) of Bangladesh.

Doihara

Doihara is situated in Shakhahar union of Gobindaganj sub-district of Gaibandha district (Figure 2.7). The village is actually situated at a distance of about 20 kilometres to the west of the Gobindaganj sub-district headquarter. On the way to this village, there is a market place, Shohorgachi, situated by the roadside. Doihara is situated about five kilometres to the north-west of Shohorgachi. The Shakhahar union council office is located close to the east of the village.

Doihara has only two clusters – *Purboo* (East) Doihara and *Paschim* (West) Doihara. *Purboo* Doihara is a Bengali Muslim cluster, while I focus on *Paschim* Doihara in which the Oraons live along with other Bengali Muslim peasants.

Although electricity is available in Paschim Doihara, other facilities, including safe drinking water, hygienic and modern communication systems, are not available to the Oraons. As observed, the part of Paschim Doihara in which the Oraons live differs from the Bengali Muslim households in relation to the availability of such facilities. Although shops in small huts are situated in Paschim Doihara, the Oraons travel to Shohorgachi to purchase their daily commodities, because those small shops cannot meet their needs. The Oraons need to travel about 25 kilometres from their home to arrive in Gobindaganj sub-district town for any important shopping or any legal or administrative purposes. Paschim Doihara also does not have any educational institutions. However, there is a primary school at Shihigaon village, which is situated just to the south of Paschim Doihara. The college-attending Oraon boys and girls travel to Gobindaganj sub-district town or other more distant places for their education.

A little valley coloured with reddish soil is marked by the abundant rice fields, as a marker on the way to Paschim Doihara. The soil inside this village cluster is also reddish in colour. This reddish soil becomes very hard in summer and retains elasticity and becomes slippery in the rainy season. The Oraons also suffer from a lack of safe drinking water and irrigation water, as the surface water level falls drastically in summer. The Barind Multi-Purpose Development Authority (BMDA) operates an irrigation project aimed at properly utilising the surface water by retaining water in ponds and canals. However, the farmers still have to depend on rainfall, as the water supplied by the BMDA irrigation project is not enough for irrigation in summer. Paschim Doihara also has several small ponds or tanks as water sources, but these do not contain enough water for cultivation or everyday uses. Thus, the Oraons, who have little farmland, suffer greatly and work hard on their cultivation. Nevertheless, the village is surrounded by plenty of rice fields along with sugarcane and banana fields, which are owned by the richest Bengali Muslim peasants, and where the Oraons along with poor Bengali Muslims who have no farm land work for daily wages.

The Oraons of Paschim Doihara follow both traditional and Christian beliefs. There are twenty Christian and six traditional Oraon households in Paschim Doihara.

These traditional and Christian Oraons form a single *padda panch* (Oraon traditional unit of political organisation) headed by a *pradhan* (Oraon chief or headman) – Ramesh Tiggya, a traditional Oraon. All these Oraons obey this traditional *pradhan* irrespective of their religion. There is no church in Paschim Doihara for the Christian Oraons who attend their Sunday prayer by travelling to the Christian Missions situated in the neighbouring villages. The traditional Oraons also do not have any particular sacred place/institution inside Paschim Doihara. They worship by retaining a small *thaan* (a sacred place) inside their households.

The traditional Oraons of Paschim Doihara practise animism. Although they do not perform *danda-kattna* (Oraon religious symbolic ritual), they believe in the spirit or soul of all living things and objects. Again, although they support and cooperate with the local Hindu festivals and ceremonies, they do not worship or build images of Hindu gods and goddesses in their locality. Despite being mostly Christian, many of the Oraons of Paschim Doihara participate in and contribute to the traditional Oraons' festivals and ceremonies. All Oraons of Paschim Doihara gather in a general meeting inside the cluster for purposes such as marriage, birth, or funeral ceremonies.

As observed, the Oraons of Paschim Doihara live alongside the Bengali Muslim peasants. Other Oraon or ethnic community settlements are not situated close to Paschim Doihara. Nevertheless, they have contacts with other ethnic communities, distant from Paschim Doihara. The location of the village puts the Oraons of Paschim Doihara in close contact with the local influential Bengali Muslim peasants. Their socio-economic condition is changing because of their interactions or interrelations with the local Bengali Muslim peasants. The Oraons of Paschim Doihara provide some important case studies of Bengali domination or exploitation through land abduction, conversion to Islam and threatening relationships with the local Bengali Muslim peasants. In addition, my research reveals how their socio-economic condition is changing due to the wider Bengali society.

Udaypur

Udaypur is situated at the Gopalpur union of the Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district (Figure 2.8). Mithapukur sub-district headquarters is situated nine kilometres to the east of Udaypur village. From Udaypur, on the way to Mithapukur sub-district headquarters, there is a market place named Shatibari *bazar* (a village market). This market place has been well known to the people of adjacent sub-districts and districts in Barind since the time of the British India Government (1765-1947) because of its trade and commerce. Mithapukur sub-district headquarters is situated at a distance of three kilometres to the north of Shatibari *bazar*. The Benuban Buddhist Temple, the first and the largest Buddhist Temple of Barind, is situated close to Mithapukur sub-district headquarters. Many Buddhist Oraons from the neighbouring villages visit and participate in the socio-economic activities of this temple.

Udaypur village is situated about six kilometers to the west of Shatibari *bazar*. From Shatibari, a paved road runs to the west crossing the villages of Udaypur and Binodpur. To the west of Udaypur village, there is a small market place named Dhap *bazar*. Another market place, Mondoler *hat* (village market), is closely situated to the east of Udaypur. Mondoler *hat* is actually situated at Moddhyapara - an Oraon cluster of Binodpur village. All the villagers of both Udaypur and Binodpur gather in Mondoler *hat* during their leisure time both in the day and in the evening. They stay there until mid-night. Small shops, tea stalls and groceries are situated in this *hat*.

Mondoler *hat* is a meeting place for the villagers of both Udaypur and Binodpur irrespective of ethnic group affiliation. They exchange ideas and information there. In addition, the televisions playing at the tea stalls of Mondoler *hat* are sources of relaying information and ideas through the media news. There is also the opportunity to watch pop songs and movies in Bengali, Hindi, Nepali, and sometimes *kurukh* or *sadri* (Oraon language). Thus, while they do not have instantaneous telecommunicating news and information about the world in their own homes, they have access to news and are able to enjoy watching movies or songs in the tea stalls. After having tea, they also enjoy a betel leaf with a piece of betel nut plus tobacco. This Mondoler *hat* acts as a good source of ethnographic information about the Oraons and all male dwellers of both Udaypur and Binodpur.

Although a paved road crosses through the middle of Udaypur village, there is no other such road in the village. The villagers walk through the agricultural fields to travel from one part of the village to another to meet their neighbours and relatives. Some parts of the village have electricity, whereas others do not. Many villagers also do not have access to safe drinking water, hygiene and modern communication technology.

Udaypur village has a Christian Missionary School, a Baptist Church and an Adventist Church. The children, especially the Oraon children of both Udaypur and Binodpur, take elementary education from this Christian Missionary School at Udaypur. A government primary school is also situated at Udaypur. The college boys and girls of all ethnic groups of Udaypur and Binodpur travel to Shatibari or Mithapukur for their education. Also, some Oraon boys and girls attend the Christian Missionary-funded colleges, which are situated in the neighbouring towns or in the capital – Dhaka. The churches are attended by the Christian Oraons of both villages. Udaypur and Binodpur Oraons also have a local *adibashi* (indigenous peoples) club or *samity* (association) to take care of their benefits. A local branch office of Caritas is also situated at Udaypur village close to Binodpur village or Mondoler *hat*. This branch of Caritas – Dinajpur, Bangladesh - extends socio-economic programmes among the Oraons and other ethnic groups in the locality.

As stated earlier, the land of Udaypur village is relatively *doash* (fertile for cultivation) and farmers can easily produce their yearly agricultural crops. They produce rice, potatoes, sugarcane, tobacco, wheat and vegetables. Modern irrigation facilities and other high yielding inputs including pesticides for cultivation are available to them. The village is surrounded by abundant green/rice fields like other villages in Barind.

Udaypur village has five clusters, two of which, namely Dhappara and Ambapara, are inhabited by the Oraons, one by the Santals and two by Bengali Muslims. Dhappara has eleven Christian, three Buddhist, and one traditional Oraon households. Ambapara has three Christian, three Buddhist and eighteen traditional Oraon households. Thus, these two Oraon clusters, Dhappara and Ambapara of Udaypur, constitute a combined total of thirty-nine households with Christian,

Buddhist, and traditional religious affiliation. All these Oraons make up a single *padda panch* (Oran traditional unit of political organisation), headed by a *pradhan* (Oraon chief or headman) – RamTiggya, a traditional Oraon. Although these Oraons are differentiated in their religious beliefs, they gather in their traditional political organisation – *padda panch*. This political organisation is still a symbol of their integrity, although some Oraons have been converted to Christianity or Buddhism in Udaypur. Despite gathering in the same *padda panch*, they follow different practices in relation to births, marriages and funeral ceremonies according to their different religious beliefs.

The Oraons of Udaypur, irrespective of their religious beliefs, cooperate and contribute to the Hindu festivals and ceremonies. However, the traditional Oraons do not perform or build any images of Hindu gods and goddesses in their houses. They perform their worship by retaining a small *thaan* (a sacred place) inside their households. The traditional Oraons of Udaypur do not usually perform *danda-kattna* (Oraon religious symbolic ritual), yet they still practise their traditions and age-old animist beliefs.

Udaypur Oraons enjoy good relationships with the Santals, Hindus and other ethnic groups of the locality. They attend the festivals and ceremonies of Santals and Hindus. Even though some Oraons of Udaypur assert that they have a good relationship with the local Bengali Muslims, relations are not actually so favourable. Some Oraons said that they had good experiences in the past, but that the local Bengali Muslims grabbed their land illegally. Even today, the local Bengali Muslims always look for a means to cheat and exploit them.

Binodpur

Binodpur is situated at the Durgapur union of Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district (Figure 2.8). Like Udaypur, Binodpur village is also situated about five and a half kilometres to the west of Shatibari *bazar* (village/market place). As stated earlier, a paved road runs through these two villages – Udaypur and Binodpur. I could easily reach these villages to meet Oraons, but could not arrive at all Oraon households in

village clusters unless on foot. I travelled to Mondoler *hat* by riding on a local vehicle, which runs from Shatibari *bazar*. As observed, the physical settings of these two villages correspond to each other.

Binodpur village has eight clusters; three clusters, namely Purboopara, Moddhyapara and Dhipapara, are inhabited by the Oraons, one is inhabited by the Hindus and four by the Bengali Muslims. Binodpur Oraon clusters are situated to the east of Udaypur Oraon clusters. From Mondoler *hat*, an unpaved road connects Moddhyapara with Dhipapara of Binodpur. Also, a small river, like a canal, separates Purboopara from both Moddhyapara and Dhipapara of Binodpur. Purboopara Oraon cluster is, however, connected with the paved road by another unpaved road. This Oraon cluster also has a Christian Missionary funded school for children's education. Of the three Oraon clusters of Binodpur, only Moddhyapara has access to electricity. Other than that, Binodpur's description corresponds to the above description of Udaypur in relation to its facilities, soil conditions, and the relationships of the Oraons with the Hindus, Santals and other ethnic communities, including local Bengali Muslim peasants.

Among the Binodpur Oraon clusters, Purboopara has thirty-seven Christian Oraon households. Moddhyapara has five Christian and nineteen traditional Oraon households. Dhipapara has sixteen Christian and five traditional Oraon households. All of these eighty-two households depict a combination of both Christianity and traditionalism among Binodpur Oraons. These Oraons, irrespective of their religious differentiation, form the same political organisation – *padma panch*, headed by a *pradhan* (Oraon chief or headman) – LalitoKujur, a Christian Oraon. This *padma panch* is supposed to resolve social problems and administer justice within the community. The Christian Oraons also participate and contribute to the traditional Oraon festivals and ceremonies. Distrust, disrespect and misunderstanding can be found in the leadership of *padma panch* of Binodpur, which fails to execute Oraon socio-economic practices. This malfunctioning of Binodpur Oraon *padma panch* is due to both internal conflict among the Oraons regarding their leadership and the influence of the local Bengalis in weakening their integrity.

The Oraons of Binodpur also cooperate and contribute to the Hindu festivals and ceremonies. Specifically, I refer to the traditional Oraons, who neither worship nor build any images of Hindu gods and goddesses in their houses. Although they do not perform *danda-kattna* (Oraon religious symbolic ritual) in their socio-religious events today, they still remember and follow their age-old religious practice of animism. Thus, they differ from other Oraons who have been converted to Christianity, Buddhism, or Hinduism.

Ramwesarpara

Ramwesarpara is located about four kilometers south-east of Shatibari *bazar*, at the Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district. This village is situated at Bara Hazratpur union of Mithapukur sub-district (Figure 2.8). On the way to Ramwesarpara from Shatibari *bazar*, there is a marketplace named Paglar *bazar*. Ramwesarpara village is about one kilometer to the east of Paglar *bazar*. From Shatibari, a paved road runs eastward crossing Paglar *bazar*. I would get off from the local vehicle at Paglar *bazar*, then either walk or hire a rickshaw or van to enter into Ramwesarpara.

The road from Paglar *bazar* to Ramwesarpara is unpaved and the villagers face difficulties walking especially during the rainy season. Residents also lack facilities, such as electricity, safe drinking water, hygiene facilities, and information technology. There is only a small shop, selling cookies, biscuits and some daily necessities. The shop is run by an Oraon *khatriya* (members of the second Varna, according to the Hindu caste system) family and situated in the middle of Ramwesarpara. As this shop does not contain all the commodities needed for the dwellers, they travel to Paglar *bazar* or Shatibari to purchase their daily necessities.

A government primary school and a community clinic are also situated at Ramwesarpara. The younger children attend this primary school for elementary education, while the college-attending boys and girls travel to Shatibari or Mithapukur. A Baptist Church was built by the Christian Missionary at Moddhyapara in this village. This Church renders services such as education to the Oraons, who introduce themselves as Oraon *khatriyas*. These Oraons also established

an *adibashi* club in the village aiming to retain their rights and to solve their problems locally.

In its formation, the village exhibits seven clusters, of which four, namely Moddhyapara, Tetalipara, Amapara and Paschimpara, are inhabited by the Oraons, one by the Hindus and the rest by the Bengali Muslims. Moddhyapara has thirty-five Oraon *khatriya* households, while Amapara contains twenty-nine Oraon *khatriya*, Paschimpara fourteen Oraon *khatriya* and Tetalipara has sixteen Oraon *khatriya* and a single Buddhist Oraon household. A single Christian Mahali family also lives in Moddhyapara of the village. The Oraon *khatriyas*, thus, constitute ninety-four households, while there is a single Buddhist Oraon household in Ramwesarpara.

These Oraon *khatriyas* also form their traditional political organisation – *paddapanch*, headed by a *pradhan* (Oraon chief or headman) – RamchandraMinji. This *padda panch*, acting as the symbol of Oraon integrity, is supposed to exercise all their socioeconomic activities. Their socio-religious practices, especially the Hindu practices, are performed by hiring a *thakur* or *gurudev* (Hindu religious priest). These Oraon *khatriyas* also built a small temple at Amapara of Ramwesarpara village specifically for Hindu worship. They also have images of Hindu gods and goddesses in their houses to worship. The Oraons of this village perform *poushsankranti* at the end of a Bengali month – *poush* is their re-affirmation process to be Oraon *khatriyas* as Hindu Oraons. Nevertheless, these Oraon *khatriyas* or Hindu Oraons also perform the Oraon traditional (animist) festivals in the community.

These Oraons also interact with the Bengali Muslim peasants, but face domination or exploitation. They are subject to land abduction, social exclusion, and even sometimes physical assault by the local Bengali Muslim peasants. The Oraons, previously, had almost the entire land of this village. Presently, almost all of them have lost agricultural land because of local Bengali Muslim peasant domination and exploitation. Because of Bengali domination, the Oraons maintain a good relationship with the Hindus and other ethnic minorities, who live in Ramwesarpara and in the neighbouring villages.

Oraon Household Information

As I observed, the Oraons in the Barind villages are divided into groups based on their different religious views. The Oraons of Bilpara perform *danda-kattna* (Oraon religious symbolic ritual) in all events of the community. They practise their traditions and age-old beliefs – animism or Sarna religion (as I noted earlier). These Oraons do not practise rituals for any Hindu deities, although they maintain good relationship with the Hindus as ethnic minorities. Thus, I define the Oraons of Bilpara as ‘Sarna Oraon’ instead of traditional or *sonaton*⁹ because the term ‘*sonaton*’ reflects the usual meaning of practising Hindu religion or culture in the region/Barind.

The Oraons of Doihara, Udaypur and Binodpur, who cooperate with the Hindus, but do not build any images of Hindu gods or goddesses, are overwhelmingly considered as traditional or *sonaton* (Hindu) in the locality. As the local people do not know about the religious beliefs of the Oraon people, they overwhelmingly consider them as the ‘Hindus’. However, the Oraon people do not identify as ‘Hindus’ as they have a distinct religious beliefs that differ from that of the Hindu community. I observed that these Oraons believe in *danda-kattna* or Sarna religion, although they do not perform a *danda-kattna* in any socio-economic events of the community. Therefore, I define them as ‘Sarna Oraon’ instead of *sonaton* (Hindu) Oraons. On the other hand, the Oraons of Ramwesarpara, who do not perform *danda-kattna* or Sarna, but who build images and believe in Hindu deities, I define in the same way as they introduce themselves, as ‘Oraon *khatriyas*’ or ‘Hindu Oraon’ for the purpose of the study.

The Oraons who have converted to Christianity, Buddhism or Islam, I define as ‘Christian Oraon’, ‘Buddhist Oraon’, or ‘Muslim Oraon’¹⁰ respectively. Thus, the Oraon groups are Sarna, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu (Oraon *khatriyas*) and Muslim. This Oraon religious differentiation is analysed as a result of socio-economic

⁹ The word ‘*sonaton*’ usually refers to the practices according to Hindu religion and culture. The Hindus are called the *sonaton* people in the Barind region.

¹⁰ However, I did not find any Muslim Oraons in my study villages; rather the cases of Oraons’ conversion to Islam were recorded based on interviews in the study site.

changes in Oraon life in subsequent chapters. At this point, I provide a discussion of some specific features of the observed Oraon households.

Table 2.1: Observed Oraon households in Barind

Village	Oraon Cluster	Oraon household ¹¹				
		Sarna Oraon	Christian Oraon	Buddhist Oraon	Oraon <i>Khatriya</i>	Total
Bilpara	Bilpara	18	-	-	-	18
Doihara	Paschim Doihara	6	20	-	-	26
Udaypur	Dhappara	1	11	3	-	15
	Ambapara	18	3	3	-	24
Binodpur	Purboopara	-	37	-	-	37
	Moddhyapara	19	5	-	-	24
	Dhipapara	5	16	-	-	21
Ramwesarpara	Moddhyapara	-	-	-	35	35
	Amapara	-	-	-	29	29
	Tetalipara	-	-	1	16	17
	Paschimpara	-	-	-	14	14
Total (per cent)		67 (25.77)	92 (35.39)	7 (2.69)	94 (36.15)	260 (100)

Source: Fieldwork in Barind, 2011

Out of the observed 260 Oraon households, 94 (36.15 per cent) are Oraon *khatriya*, followed by 92 (35.39 per cent) Christian Oraon, 67 (25.77 per cent) Sarna Oraon, and the remaining 7 (2.69 per cent) are Buddhist Oraon. I interviewed the household heads including adult Oraons of different age structure, including 21 - 30 (17.31 per cent), 31 - 40 (21.92 per cent), 41 - 50 (25 per cent), 51 - 60 (20.39 per cent), 61 - 70

¹¹ Although I present the Oraon households based on their religious differentiation, my aim in this study is to project the Oraons' identity formation irrespective of such differentiation.

(11.92 per cent) and 71 and above (3.46 per cent). These research participants are comprised of 230 (88.46 per cent) males and 30 (11.54 per cent) females. My survey reveals that in terms of marital status, 231 (88.85 per cent) are married, 3 (1.15 per cent) are unmarried, 24 (9.23 per cent) widowed and 2 (0.77) are divorced. The unmarried are all Oraon males, while the widowed and the divorced are all females.

I define those Oraons who can read and write, sign their names, or have completed study up to Master's level as literate. The data reveal that most household heads, 151 (58.08 per cent), are illiterate followed by 24 (9.23 per cent) below primary school certificate (PSC) (five years education experience of class one to five), 35 (13.46 per cent) PSC, 8 (3.08 per cent) below junior school certificate (JSC) (three years education experience of class six to eight), 9 (3.46 per cent) JSC, 15 (5.77 per cent) below secondary school certificate (SSC) (two years education experience of class nine to ten), 9 (3.46 per cent) SSC, 1 (0.39 per cent) below higher secondary certificate (HSC) (two years education of class eleven to twelve), 5 (1.92 per cent) HSC and 3 (1.15 per cent) have experienced tertiary education.

Of the tertiary education participants, two participants have completed a Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree, while a third has completed a Master of Arts (MA) in Education. The higher rate of literacy among the Christian Oraons is because of the Christian Missionaries' education at support. More than half of the Oraon population is illiterate. Although the children are attending schools, many of them drop out early because of economic hardship, family members' unfavourable attitude towards children's schooling, children's lack of interest in schooling and learning in other languages, involvement in earning to support the family, absence of educational institutions in the locality and children's illness.

At this point, the concepts of household and family require interpretation for the purpose of the study. In the case of the Oraons, a family consists of members of one or more generations of kin related through both blood and marriage. An Oraon daughter is expected to leave her father's household after her marriage and join the family and household of her husband, but she is still considered a member of her father's lineage. I conceptualise an Oraon family as usually consisting of the married

men of a patriline and their wives and children, whether they live together as a single household or comprise several different households.

The head of a family, a father or the eldest son, makes decisions in regard to most of the socio-economic functions of the family. I have observed that Oraon families are dependent upon the family of procreation for economic, emotional and social needs and that they seek support from their parental families/ family members for in times of socio-economic crisis. The members of Oraon families are considered as the members of larger totemic clans or lineages in the community, which I discuss in the next chapter. This meaning of a family generally differs from the western perception of nuclear families, which are self-supporting and may only have loose ties with other relatives.

In Oraon society, families usually constitute households, although not all the members of a family necessarily live together under the same roof or share the same hearth. Thus, based on my observation and data, I do not distinguish between family and household. I conceptualise a household as a social form that includes both consanguineal and affinal kin and others. Although members of different Oraon families constitute a household, they participate in the same socio-economic activities for subsistence. Although a household head makes decisions and usually works to support all members of the household, other members also contribute economically to the household functions, as well as to their families. A household head is generally capable of performing all kinds of work and communicating with outsiders in times of crisis and tends to possess more of the knowledge required to manage a crisis (Chakraborty & Ali, 2009: 54). These functions also apply to female-headed households in the study area.

As observed, the Oraon families are changing because of their economic crisis or landlessness. Based on my collected data, I have categorised the Oraon families into three types: nuclear, joint and extended. The data on the Oraons reveals that 180 (69.23 per cent) are nuclear, 68 (26.15 per cent) are joint and 12 (4.62 per cent) are extended families. An Oraon nuclear family includes a husband and wife with or without children, which constitutes a nuclear household. The single member Oraon families/households have also been included in this category for the purpose

of the study. As I have observed, if an Oraon son sets up a nuclear household, he still stays/lives in his father's homestead or in the same household compound, but manages his subsistence separately. Oraon joint families usually consist of parents, married sons and their wives and unmarried sons or daughters with grandchildren. I conceptualise this formation of Oraon joint family as an Oraon joint household because they cook food in the same hearth, and eat and stay together in the same household compound.

An Oraon extended family is defined as a family of husband and wife with their unmarried children and/or with any other close relatives, including either uncles or aunts or grandparents from either affinal side. This idea of Oraon extended family differs from the meaning of joint (extended) family. As I have observed, an Oraon family generally consists of members who belong to the same lineage, specifically to the father's lineage, joined by wives who come from other lineages. Thus, marriage is patrilocal. Because of this and also based on my data, I consider an Oraon family including any affinal or fictive kin as the extended family, which constitutes an extended household. In some cases, all members of an Oraon household participate either in labour activities associated with household farming or in the sale of their physical labour to local rich Bengali Muslim peasants' farmers and contribute economically to family subsistence, but the household head is the principal person responsible for the subsistence of all members.

As I have observed, all Oraon households, except a few land-owning Oraons, lead life in hardship. The 260 Oraon households in my study include a total of 1072 Oraons, comprising 548 (51.12 per cent) males and 524 (48.88 per cent) females in the study villages. Thus, the average family/household size of Oraons is calculated as $1072/260$ i.e. 4.12 persons. These data correspond with those of the Integrated Community Development Project (ICDP) of the Caritas – Dinajpur region, Bangladesh (2005), which depicts the *adibashi* populations as reasonably balanced between males (50.56 per cent) and females (49.44 per cent). The average family sizes for the *adibashi* communities (3.87) and for the Oraons (3.94) are lower than that of the national figure (4.8) (ICDP, 2005: 6). The earning and non-earning status of the observed 1072 Oraons are 561 (52.33 per cent) and 511 (47.69 per cent)

respectively. The non-earning Oraons are usually dependents composed of school-attending children and elderly members of the community. However, the earning status of an Oraon family reflects a hard life, considering the average family size of 4.12 members.

As I observed, the sanitary conditions of the Oraons are unhygienic. One hundred and forty (53.85 per cent) Oraon households have *kaccha* latrines. The Oraons dig a small hole near their houses and fence it with various materials including wood, bamboo, jute stick or corrugated iron sheets. Thirty-three (12.69 per cent) Oraon households have semi-*pucca* latrines i.e. a latrine built from bricks with a corrugated iron roof. Eighty-seven (33.46 per cent) Oraon households have no latrines. The members of these households defecate in the open fields or in the bushes near their dwellings. However, development organisations such as the Christian Missionaries, local level NGOs or the Government have built some sanitary latrines and tube-wells for safe-drinking water in Oraon localities. Yet, even where available, sanitary latrines are not necessarily used by all, as some Oraons are habituated to defecating in the open field/bushes.

This introduction to my fieldwork and the villages as a study site provides material that contributes towards the development of the discussion in subsequent chapters. The specific socio-cultural and environmental information regarding the Oraon village clusters and my discussion of the nature of Oraon households is crucial for understanding the relationship between Oraon economy and identity formation. To further this aim, in the next chapter I provide a discussion on the history of Oraons, based on historical texts and also on their own oral histories, which I documented during my research.

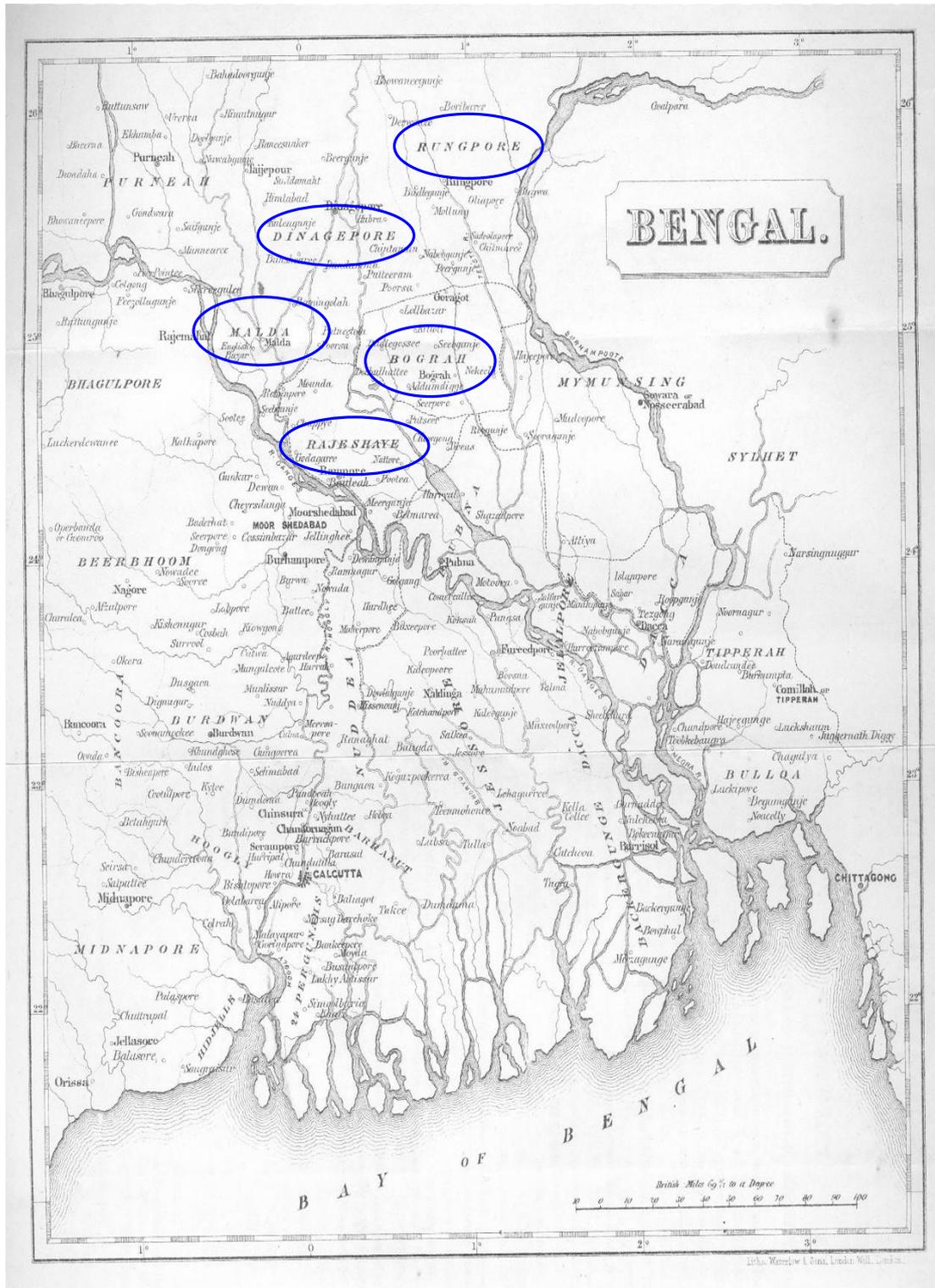


Figure 2.1: Map of Greater Bengal showing the greater districts of Bogra, Dinajpur, Rajshahi, Rangpur and Malda, <<https://jrahman.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/bengal-map1853.jpg>>.



Figure 2.2: Rice fields at the study site (Photograph by Rafiul Islam, 2012)



Figure 2.3: Tobacco cultivation at the study site (Photograph by Rafiul Islam, 2012)



Figure 2.4: Mustard and maize cultivation at the study site (photos on top and bottom) (Photograph by Rafiul Islam, 2012)

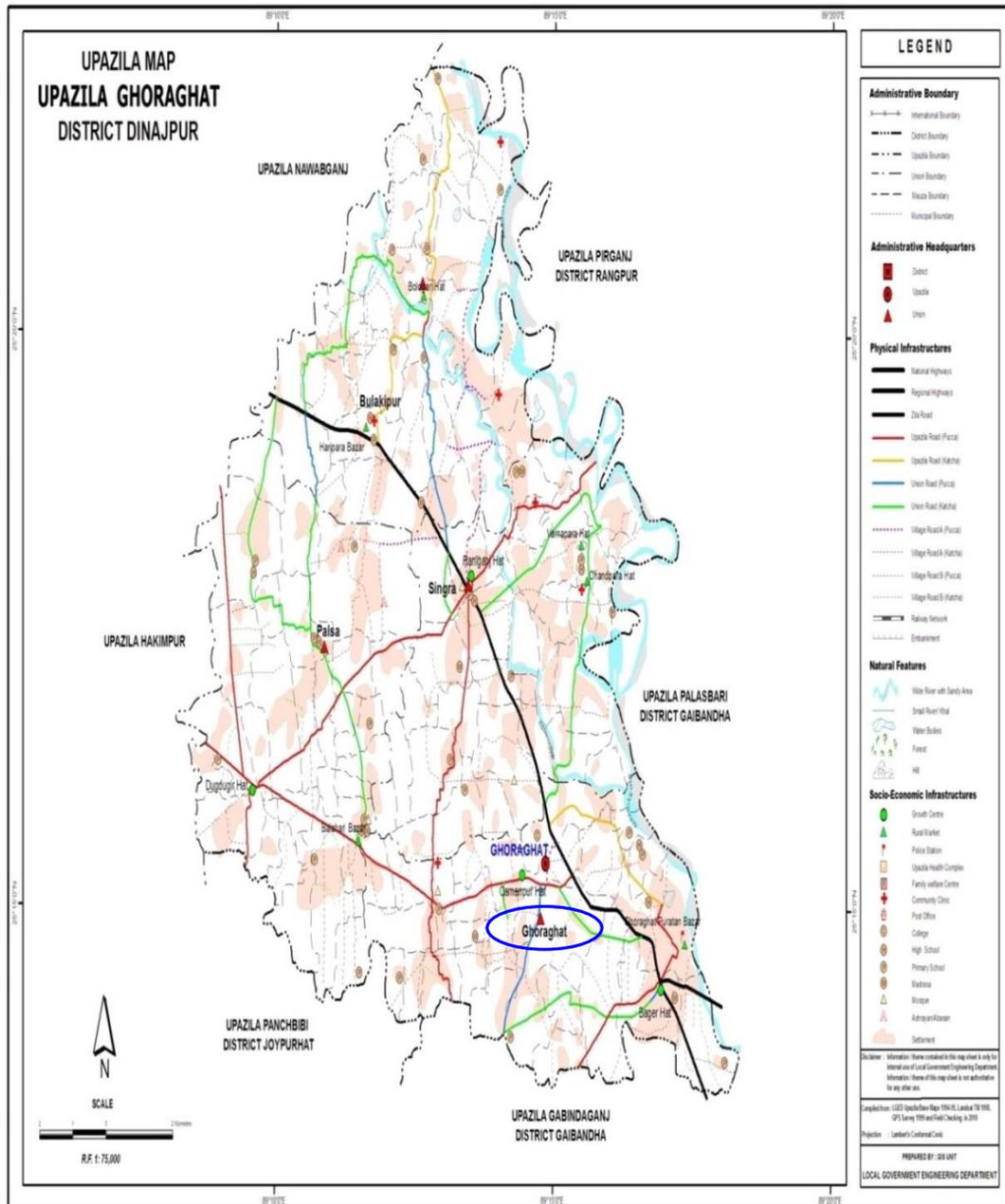


Figure 2.5: Map showing location of Bilpara village at Ghoraghat sub-district of Dinajpur district,

<<http://www.lged.gov.bd/UploadedDocument/Map/RANGPUR/dinajpur/ghoraghat/ghoraghat.jpg>>.



Figure 2.6: Jackfruits and bamboo along with small bushes at Bilpara of Ghoraghat in Dinajpur (photos on top and bottom) (Photograph by Rafiul Islam, 2012)

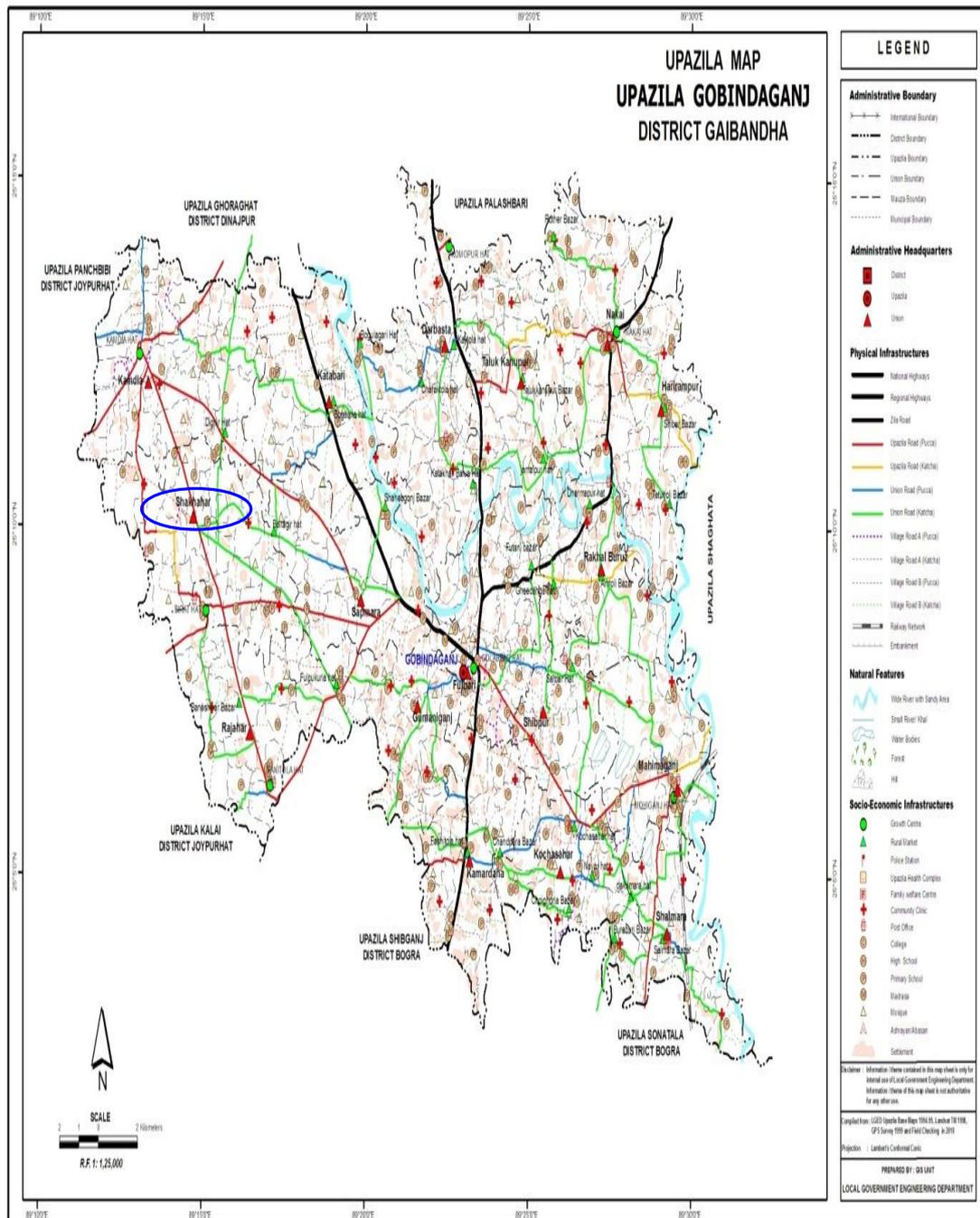


Figure 2.7: Map showing location of Doihara village at Shakhahar union of Gobindaganj sub-district in Gaibandha,

<<http://www.lged.gov.bd/UploadedDocument/Map/RANGPUR/gaibandha/gobindaganj/gobindaganj.jpg>>.

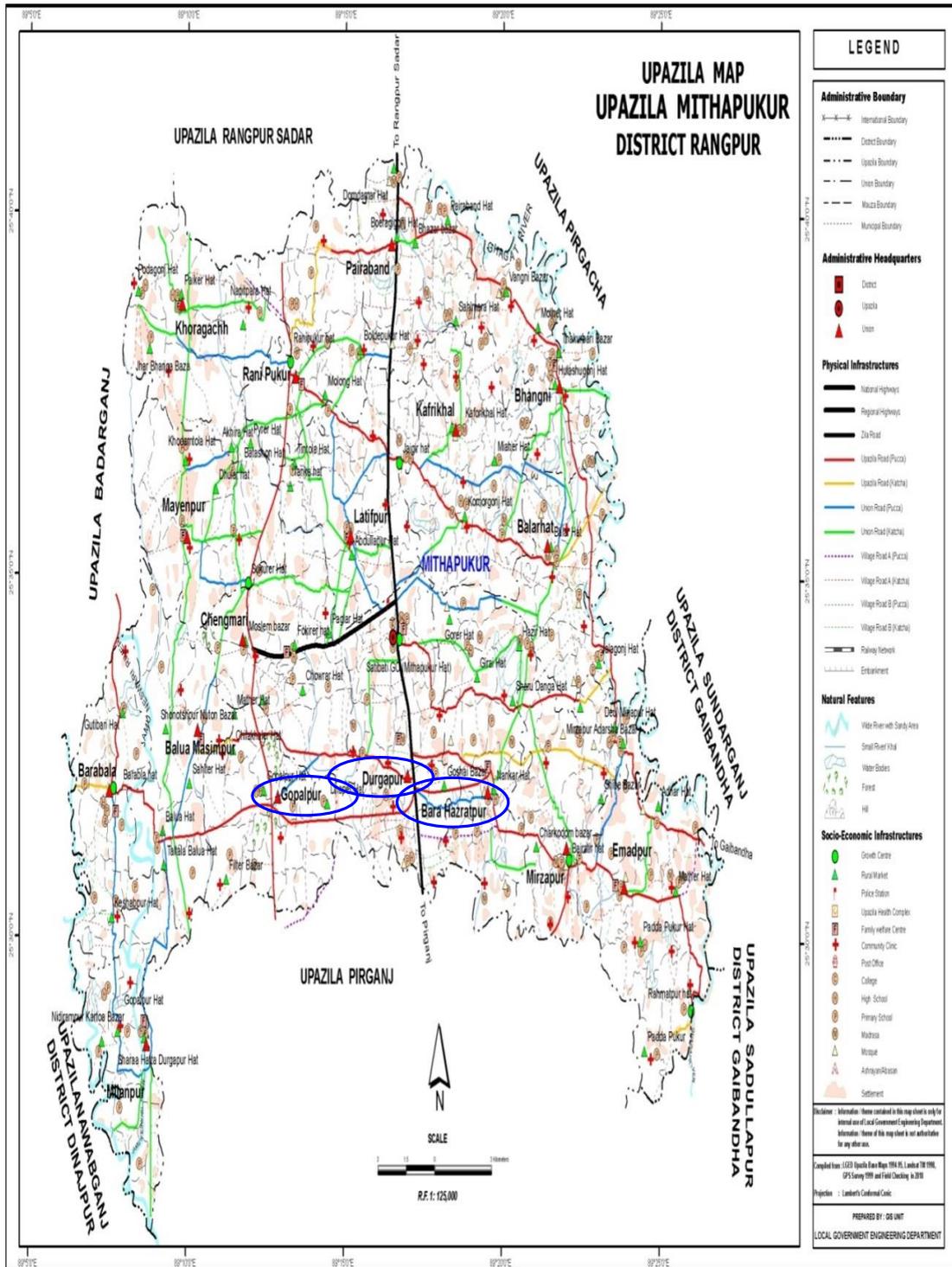


Figure 2.8: Map showing the location of Udaypur, Binodpur and Ramwesarpara villages respectively in Gopalpur, Durgapur and Bara Hazratpur unions of Mithapukur sub-district in Rangpur,

<<http://www.lged.gov.bd/UploadedDocument/Map/RANGPUR/rangpur/mithapukur/mithapukur.jpg>>.

Chapter 3

Oraon Community: History

In this chapter, I provide a discussion of the history of Oraons and their migration to and settlement in Barind. Importantly, I consider the history of Oraons prior to their arrival in Barind because this history has an impact on their present socio-cultural life. Firstly, I discuss the name ‘Oraon’. Secondly, I provide an account of their language, *kurukh* or *sadri/khatoya*. Thirdly, I discuss their origins and histories of migration as conveyed to me by Oraons who participated in my study. Finally, I explore certain socio-cultural features which help us to understand the Oraon community in general.

According to my Oraon informants, the Oraons of Bangladesh/Barind migrated from Ranchi¹² of *Jharkhand* (forest tract), *Nagpur* – the local name for Chotanagpur¹³. When I asked the Oraons of Barind about their origin, each of the research participants spoke of Ranchi, *Jharkhand* or Chotanagpur or *Nagpur*. A few also depicted their origin as either from South India or Indus Valley civilisation or from North India. This response, from my research participants, actually provides an understanding of their history of migration. However, I have also examined secondary sources and literature on their history. I have collated the information gathered from the Oraons of Barind, together with accounts from published sources, to depict their origin and history in the following way.

¹² Ranchi is a provincial town and the administrative centre of Chotanagpur division of the State of Bihar. For more than 2000 years, Ranchi has been the peaceful abode of the Oraons, Mundas and Kharias (Tirkey, 1989: 3).

¹³ Chotanagpur, previously, included seven tributary states of India, including Bonai, Chang-Bhakhar, Gangpur, Jashpur, Korea, Odeypur and Surguja (Banerjee, 1989: 27). Presently, Chotanagpur is one of the four administrative divisions of the State of Bihar, which includes the districts of Ranchi, Lohardaga, Gumla, Hazaribagh, Singhbhum, Palamau, Giridih and Dhanbad. Socio-culturally, *Nagpur* also includes some parts of West Bengal, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh and Santhal Parganas of Bihar (see Koonathan, 1999: 101-102).

The Name ‘Oraon’

The Oraons are known by different names. According to Hahn (1986), the term ‘Oraon’ is seldom used by the people themselves. Terms including *Kurukh* and Oraon have also been used to introduce these people (Koonathan, 1999: 104). Roy (2004) notes that the name *Uraon* was given to them by the Hindus. The Hindus initially called them *Raonaput* or *Orawan*. Eventually, the name *Orawan* became Oraon. The Oraons also call themselves *Kurux/Kurukh* or *Kuruxar/Kurukhar*. According to Roy (2004), the term *Kurukh* derives from Karakh – the name of a mythical king – Karakh of the country/place – Korkai¹⁴. Accordingly, *Kurukh* means a group of people from the community of king Karakh. Likely, *Kurukhar* refers to the inhabitants of Korkai – *Karukh-Des* – the country of king Karakh (Roy, 2004: 10-17).

Nowadays, the Oraons are also introduced by different terms in different parts of India. For example, Tirkey (1989) notes that the Oraons are called *Uraons* or *Dhangar* (labourer or servant) in Bihar and Uttar and Madhya Pradesh in India. They are known as *Kisan* (cultivator), *Kora* (digger) or *Dhangar-Kora* (labourer-digger) in the Sambalpur district of Orissa. According to Tirkey, the original name of the *Uraons* might have been *Male* (‘Man’). These Oraons, who are known as *Maler*, live in the Rajmahal Hills of India (Tirkey, 1989: 4). The Oraons of Bangladesh, specifically those in Barind, call themselves *Urao* or *Orao*, although I choose the term ‘Oraon’ to introduce these people.

The Language ‘Kurukh’ or ‘Sadri/Khatoya’

The Oraons speak *kurukh* or *sadri* as their mother language. According to Roy (2004), *kurukh* belongs to the Dravidian linguistic group. The Dravidian linguistic group includes the languages and dialects of Tamil, Malayalam, Kanarese, Telegu, Koragu, Tulu, Toda, and Kota. These languages and dialects are also known as

¹⁴ Korkai was, previously, known as the capital town of the ancient Pandya kingdom in the Deccan. Also, Korkai is, now, a village on the Tambraparni River in Tinnevely situated in Tamil Nadu – presently, a southern state of India (Roy, 2004: 11).

Tamulian languages, spoken by the peoples of South India (Roy, 2004: 18). Tirkey (1989) also argues that the Oraons, both ethnologically and linguistically, have a close affinity to many South Indian communities, including Kanara, Tamil, Telegu and Malayalam. However, according to him, *kurukh* has no written literature. No written record of this language has been discovered. The Oraons believe that they once had their own script, but it was lost during one of the many crises in the course of their history (Tirkey, 1989: 5).

Sadri is a mixture of some Indian languages, including Hindi, Urdu, Bengali and Arabic. The Oraons inherited this language by intermixing with different peoples in the course of their history (Jalil, 2001). One of my research participants, Badal Minji, an Oraon *pradhan* (chief or headman) and a leader of the ethnic communities in Barind, who is aged 61 and lives in Bilpara at Ghoraghat sub-district of Dinajpur district, informed me that while the Oraons have no written alphabets for their languages, the Christian Missionaries endeavour to write in Oraon languages by using the English and Bengali alphabets. According to another key informant, Clement Tirkey, aged about 47 years, who has completed a Bachelor Degree, and works at Caritas – Dinajpur, ‘about 60 per cent to 70 per cent Oraons speak *sadri* only. This percentage of Oraons cannot speak *kurukh*. The remaining percentage of Oraons can speak both *sadri* and *kurukh*. Specifically, the younger Oraons cannot speak *kurukh*’.

Scholars, including Jalil (2001) and Taru (2007), also depict the Oraon language in Barind/Bangladesh as being *kurukh* or *sadri*. I found the Oraons of Ramwesarpara speak *kurukh* along with *sadri*. I also heard the Oraons of Udaypur and Binodpur speaking *kurukh* as well as *sadri*. These Oraons referred to *sadrias khatoya*, a local name for their language. I also observed Oraons in Bilpara and Doihara speaking both *sadri* and *kurukh*. However, younger Oraons in all my study villages are not accustomed to speaking *kurukh*. The Oraon children speak *sadri* and can also speak Bengali. As *sadri* is used as a trade language in interethnic interaction and is spoken by others besides Oraons, this language acts as a lingua franca. Some Oraons also speak English.

Oraon Origin and Migration

According to Roy (2004), the origin and traditions of the Oraons point to South India. A linguistic connection has been identified between *kurukh* and Tamulian languages. Roy (2004) suggests that Oraons once occupied a territory located from the north bank of the Krishna River to the Vindhya Mountains of South India. They were also once settled in the fertile valleys of the Narmada River in North India. Because of either overpopulation, external pressure, or other reasons, the Oraons moved from South India to North India (Roy, 2004: 18-24). This description of Oraon migration and origin is also supported by Koonathan (1999), who writes that the Oraons are both linguistically and ethnically Dravidians because of the affinity of their language, *kurukh*, with that of the South Indian people. The Oraons believe that their ancestors lived in South India in prosperity. They eventually moved from South India to settle in North India and finally settled in Chotanagpur (Koonathan, 1999: 106-107).

Scholars have different opinions regarding the migration and origin or settlement of the Oraons. For example, according to Dalton (1872) the traditions and folktales of the Oraons indicate their earlier settlement in the western coast of India adjacent to either Gujarat or Konkan. Other accounts depict Oraons' earlier settlement land as the low lying strip of the western portion of the Bombay Presidency – the present Maharashtra State, which is situated between the Western Ghats and the Indian Ocean. From Maharashtra, in western India, the Oraons moved towards the east and settled in north India, in the fertile valleys of the Narmada River.

Because of overpopulation or perhaps some external reasons, including food crises and natural calamities, the Oraons settled in the Rhotas plateau of the Kaikur hills in Shahabad district in North-East India. The Oraons were also forced out¹⁵ from

¹⁵ The Oraons of Shahabad district believe that the Hindus dislodged them from Rohtasgarh (Roy, 2004: 26). Also, about 1500 B.C., the Aryans – the Hindus, from Hungary and Mesopotamian, entered India through its north-western corner, defeated the Oraons at Rohtasgarh (Khalko 2009: 13-14).

their settlement in Rohtasgarh¹⁶ in Shahabad. Being divided into two groups, they followed two paths. One group of them, under the leadership of their chief, settled in the Rajmahal hills following a journey along the Ganges. The other group, under the leadership of the younger brother of their chief, took possession of the north-east portion of Chotanagpur plateau after following the route alongside the valley of Son, Palamau, and the bank of the Koel River. Upon their arrival in Chotanagpur, the Oraons found that the area was occupied by the Mundas along with other ethnic groups, including Birhors, Korwas, etc. (Das & Raha, 1963: 15-16). This description of Oraon migration is also supported by other scholars, including Tirkey (1989: 8), Koonathan (1999: 107-109) and Roy (2004: 26).

Oraon History in Chotanagpur

Being driven out from Rohtasgarh fort in Shahabad, a group of Oraons arrived in Chotanagpur, where they found the already established Munda in occupation of the territory. Koonathan (1999) writes that the Oraons sought help from the Mundas to live in Chotanagpur. *Nagpur* at the time had plenty of fields and jungles. The Oraons cleared the jungles, prepared rice fields, and settled. They lived there for hundreds of years by practising their own lifestyle and culture. Also, they absorbed many customs, manners and beliefs from the Mundas (Koonathan, 1999: 108-109).

According to Tirkey (1989), Oraons, along with other ethnic communities, have lived in Chotanagpur for more than 2000 years. Because of their capacity for hard work in plantations, the Oraons were moved by the British colonial administrator to parts of north and northeast India, to the Andaman Islands, and to what became the neighbouring countries of Bangladesh and Nepal. They were also

¹⁶ Rohtasgarh was the Oraon fort which the enemy found impossible to breach due to its stone rampart of about 1.6 kilometres in height. The history of dislodgement of the Oraons from the Rohtasgarh depicts the enemy as having forced a Hindu milk woman, who supplied milk to the Oraon king, to convey the secret information of the Oraons to them. With the help of information from that milk woman, the enemies launched an attack during the *sarhul* festival (spring/new leaves festival), when the Oraon men were drunk. Although the Oraon women defended themselves against their enemies three times, they were defeated the fourth time. The Oraons however, escaped following a secret path out of their Rohtasgarh fort (see Koonathan, 1999: 107-108; Khalko, 2009: 14-15).

taken to places even further away, including Mauritius and the West Indies (Tirkey, 1989: 6, 10).

At this point of my discussion, before addressing Oraon migration from Chotanagpur to Bangladesh, I will attempt to depict their history in Chotanagpur, where they suffered suppression or exploitation during the rule of different foreigners, including the Hindus, Muslims and the British. This discussion of Oraon history in Chotanagpur helps one to understand their changing socio-economic life.

After settling in Chotanagpur, the Oraons with all *nagbasis* (the inhabitants of Chotanagpur) were ruled by a Hindu autocratic *Raja* – Phani Mukut Rai¹⁷. He introduced the hereditary kingdom in Chotanagpur in 64 A.D. The Oraons, initially, increased in numbers and gradually extended their settlements. They also became organised in village social life. They developed a village federation called *parha*. The head of one of their villages was chosen as the head of the *parha*. This village federation head settled disputes between villages and administered justice and other matters of interest in a democratic way. The Oraons remained autonomous, and the king had no proprietary rights over the Oraon villages.

The Oraons did not have to pay any fixed tribute during the jurisdiction of Phani Mukut Rai. He did not interfere with the Oraon *parha*. The king only received periodical voluntary gifts and services from his subjects. They also supported him in war. However, over time, the Hindu successors of King Phani Mukut Rai converted the voluntary gifts into a fixed tribute, which created trouble in the Oraons' life in Chotanagpur. This history of Hindu consolidation lasted until the 16th century A.D., influencing both Oraon life and their *parha* (Oraon village federation) (Tirkey, 1989: 10-12).

The trouble experienced by the Oraons during the Hindu consolidation continued during the Muslim consolidation. In 1585, the Moghul Emperor of Delhi,

¹⁷ Phani Mukut Rai from the Hindu community was the first king of the *Nagbasis*. The *Nagbasis*, including the Oraons, Mundas and others chose him as their king because of their sense of community as everything-for-all. Another reason for choosing a king was their idea of leadership as a corporate task. Also, they believed authority rested upon the decision of the elders, not the king nor even their *parha* chief. The king was a figure head, whose specific purpose was to lead them in war against aggressors. They believed authority remained with their *Parha* (Tirkey, 1989: 11-12).

Akbar (1556-1605), sent one of his *nawabs* (generals), Shahbaj Khan, to invade Chotanagpur and to vanquish the kingdom of Chotanagpur. He changed the position of the king of the *nagbasis* (inhabitants of Chotanagpur) to that of a *malguzar* (tributary king). The gifts and presentations, which the Oraons previously presented to the king, were enacted as regular payments. These regular payments were supposed to raise the tributes to be paid in Delhi. But the Oraons refused to pay these regular payments as taxes on their land. The tributary king thus failed to pay regular taxes to Delhi.

Later on, in 1616 A.D., the successor of the Delhi Emperor, Jahangir (1605-1627), sent his *nawab* (general), Ibrahim Khan, to raise taxes and regular payment. Ibrahim Khan captured the tributary king of Chotanagpur because of his failure to regularly pay taxes to Delhi. The *nagbasis* acquired a new tributary king who was autocratic in collecting payments and taxes from his subjects and caused more trouble for the Oraons. This Oraon history under Muslim consolidation lasted until the British came to power in India in 1765 (see Tirkey 1989: 12-13; Koonathan, 1999: 110).

After the Muslim consolidation in India, Oraons faced the impact of the British consolidation. Chotanagpur came under British rule from 1765 until 1947. The Mughal administration system did not change immediately as direct British rule did not start at the beginning of British consolidation in Nagpur because of its remoteness. The British, however, introduced a system of law and order into the country that facilitated the exploitation of the Oraons, along with the other *nagbasis* (inhabitants of Chotanagpur), by Hindu and Muslim middlemen. These British Hindu and Muslim middlemen also expropriated land from the people. Apart from causing resentment during the British consolidation, the Hindu and Muslim middlemen extended economic exploitation among the Oraons and the former sometimes occupied the land of the Oraons as a result of failure of taxes and regular payment to Delhi. Because of this exploitation, the Oraons along with other *nagbasis* became frustrated and angry. As a result, they revolted against British oppression in 1789, 1797, 1807, 1820, 1831, and 1832. All these uprisings were then suppressed by the British army.

The British, in 1908, subsequently introduced the Chotonagpur land tenancy act. This land tenancy act helped the Oraons, along with other *nagbasis*, to secure their rights over land, although their lands had already been alienated by the Hindu and Muslim middlemen. Later, in April 1912, the British India Government showed sympathy to the Oraons and other ethnic groups. The government increased facilities for them and sought peace and progress for these ethnic groups. Nonetheless, the Oraons, along with the *nagbasis*, found the British administration to be a painful period of history. Their life-struggle during this period was characterised by eviction, displacement, subjugation, and exploitation by these *dikus* (the powerful foreigners), the British colonisers (Tirkey, 1989: 14-16).

Oral History of Oraons in Barind

The following discussion focuses on the oral history of the Oraons in Barind, as depicted by research participants. The information and data collected through the questionnaire and interviews indicate that Oraons migrated to the Barind region from parts of India especially from Ranchi, *Jharkhand*, Chotanagpur or *Nagpur* during the period of the British India Government (1765-1947). This statement of Oraon migration and settlement in Barind is supported by the data collected through the genealogies of Oraons.

The Oraons settled in Barind as the tenants/sharecroppers of the then local *zamindars* (intermediaries) of the British India Government. They covered the large jungle areas in the region, under the control of local *zamindars*, and practiced settled agriculture. They lived off their agricultural products and efficient hunting in the dense forest of Barind during the period of the British India Government. At this time, they were self-sufficient. Yet, today, almost all Oraons are landless and few are self-sufficient.

Except for very few research participants, the descendants of these migrated Oraons of Barind are not able to say much about their past history. All they are able to say is that their forefathers previously lived in and migrated from Chotanagpur. They depict Chotanagpur as a peaceful plateau for them for hundreds of years in

history. They say their ancestors lived there and enjoyed abundant land, forests and jungles. They did not have to starve. The descendants of the Oraons who migrated to Barind remember *Nagpur* as their past place of settlement. They now lead a hard life in Barind. Regarding their history and migration from Chotanagpur, one of my key research participants, Arun Khalko, a Christian Oraon, aged about 70, who lives in the Boldipukur Christian Mission compound at Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district, depicts Oraon history in the following way:

Probably, the Oraon ancestors lived in Indus Valley Civilisation. They were leading life with self-sufficiency there. Eventually, for a better livelihood, they migrated and settled in Patna of Bihar. On their way to Patna, they got into a battle with the Aryans or *Hendu* [the Hindus], who entered into India through the north-western territory of the country. They came from the Mesopotamia [Mesopotamian] and Hungary. The Oraons defeated the Aryans three times.

Subsequently, the Aryans found that they were defeated by the Oraon females who fought with them in the guise of males. The Oraon males were tipsy and drunk from drinking *haria* [rice-beer] during their *sarhul* [spring/new leaves celebration festival] ceremony, when the Aryans attacked them. After the battle, when the Oraon females were bathing in a nearby river, the Aryans again attacked them. At this time, the Oraons were defeated by the Aryans. Being defeated and driven out by the Aryans, they fled to Ranchi of Chotonagpur.

Chotonagpur was basically a territory of the Mundas. The Mundas were then celebrating *karam* [an enemy protection festival]. The Oraons sought help from the Mundas and took part in *karam*. Since then, the Oraons perform *karam* as their own festival. One other thing is that the Mundas did not know how to cultivate land efficiently. The Oraons taught them to cultivate land. By interacting with the Mundas and getting support from them, the Oraons settled in Chotonagpur.

This settlement of Oraons in Chotanagpur was of a total territory of 3614 sq. miles. Observing the nature, forests, land, rivers and canals in Chotanagpur, the Oraons divided themselves into 68 clans in the name of different animals and objects. They also organised their villages into *parha* [village federations]. They lived peacefully in Chotanagpur. Also, eventually, the Hindu Kings of Chotanagpur claimed taxes for their land. The Muslim rulers also exploited them by claiming fixed tributes. The Hindu *zamindars* [the intermediaries/tax collectors for the British] also exploited them and sometimes tortured them physically, if they failed to pay regular taxes. The Oraons were then called *bedouin* [nomads] by the British India government.

The government also found out that the Oraons are efficient agriculturalists. Subsequently, the British India Government took the Oraons of Chotonagpur, by keeping closed all the doors and windows of a train, and dropped them at the Hilli Railway Station at Dinajpur district in Barind. The Oraons were then engaged on tea plantations and also in some menial jobs at the railway stations. But the agriculturalist Oraons did not like their jobs on the tea plantations and at the railway stations. The government then engaged them in clearing the deep jungles and bushes of Barind and allowed them to practise cultivation as the tenants or as the sharecroppers of the then local Hindu *zamindars* for the government of British India. The Oraons lead a sufficient life as the tenants of British Hindu *zamindars* as well as by gathering food from *jongol* [forests]. However, during the Partition of Bengal in 1947, the Oraons decreased in number in Barind. Many Oraons also fled to India during the Pakistani regime (1947-1971) (Arun Khalko, personal communication, April 2012).

Generally, the Oraons of Barind depict their migration as having been from Chotanagpur in India. The oral description regarding Oraon migration and settlement partially differs from that of the secondary written sources on Oraon history and migration. However, the Oraons claim that their ancestral homeland is Chotanagpur. They still remember their lineages, land, and property in *Nagpur*. They also still contact relatives who live in *Nagpur*. This description of the Oraons' past settlement in *Nagpur* and their migration to Barind is supported by other oral accounts that I collected in the course of my fieldwork. The accounts reveal that conflict over land tenure was at least one of the reasons that Oraons migrated from Ranchi to what has become Bangladesh. For example, according to Badal Minji¹⁸, a 61-year-old literate Oraon who lives in Bilpara village at Ghoraghat of Dinajpur district:

Badal Minji's ancestors lived in Ranchi, India. Mangra Oraon was his grandfather. Mangra Oraon's father had three brothers who had many successors in Ranchi, while Mangra Oraon was the only successor of his father. Mangra Oraon's father died in Ranchi leaving 350 decimals (1.4175 hectares, calculating 100 decimals = 0.405 hectares) of cultivable land for him. On the other hand, Mangra Oraon's paternal cousins inherited minimum land because of the many successors in their family. Being jealous of

¹⁸ Badal Minji obtained his secondary school certificate in 1972. He was an elected member of the local Union Council, the lowest administrative tier of Bangladesh. Currently he heads the Bilpara Oraon cluster/*padda panch* (Oraon traditional political organisation).

Mangra's larger land inheritance, his cousins attempted to kill him by mixing poisons with food to occupy his 350 decimals of land.

Mangra Oraon's mother became aware of this bad intention on the part of Magra's paternal cousins and migrated with her son (Mangra) from India to Bangladesh (then East Bengal of India). Settling in the Barind region of Bangladesh, they started to lead a hard life. In telling this story of his ancestors, Badal Minji expressed a desire to go to Ranchi to visit his paternal kin. Yet, he is unable to visit Ranchi because of physical sickness in his old age.

Some Oraons chose to migrate to Barind to secure livelihood. Others were forcibly taken to Barind by the British India Government, which sought to engage them in economic activities and harness their labour. Further discussion on the history of Oraons in Barind, specifically after the partition of Bengal in 1947, is included in the following chapters.

Oraon Community/Socio-cultural Features

At this point, I move on to describe some of the socio-cultural features that help us understand the Oraon community generally. These socio-cultural features under discussion include political organisation, religion and beliefs, clan, family, marriage, economy, and the occupations of Oraons. I also discuss Oraon inheritance of land and property, dress, food, and shelter. This descriptive account is collated from both secondary sources and data gathered from the Oraons in Barind.

Political Organisation

An Oraon village council is known as *padda panch* (the lowest administrative tier of Oraon traditional political organisation). Each Oraon village has a council, which is called *padda panch*, meaning five members. *Padda panch* is also sometimes referred to as *village-panch* or *panchayat*. *Padda panch* is actually a misnomer, as it does not only consist of five persons or representatives, but is open to all adult male members

of an Oraon village. *Padda panch* is the most highly respected institution. It is placed next to *dharmes* (Oraon Sun-God), as the highest authority on earth among Oraons.

The function of *padda panch* is to maintain peace and order and to enforce the community's moral/social code of behaviour. Generally, disputes regarding division of family property, offences against customary laws, especially marriage laws and taboos, assaults and cases of witchcraft are placed before the village *padda panch* for its judgement. As punishment, normally a guilty person pays some fine, but in serious cases, like breach of marriage laws and taboos, one can be excommunicated from the community. Oraon *padda panch* does not only exist to implement customary laws, but also acts as a platform for social activities. For example, when a village faces a problem or a challenge like opening a school, building a wall, or when an official comes to village in connection with a programme of the government, etc., the Oraon *padda panch* is called upon to oversee these social functions on behalf of the village community (Dhan 1967; Tirkey 1980; Tirkey 1999; Roy 2004).

The Oraons also have a village confederation, which is a council of several village councils or *padda panches*. This village federation is known as *parha panch* or *parha*. An Oraon *parha* (village federation) is a confederacy of a number of neighbouring villages (Roy, 2004: 245). The Oraon village federation is also known as *parha panchayat* or *parha* confederation. The number of *padda panches* in each *parha panch*, may consist of seven, nine, twenty or even thirty. Each *parha panch* has its particular territory, which includes the agricultural land, village sites, forest tracts, grazing lands, water supplies, fishing pools and so on (Tirkey, 1999: 128).

Regarding the formation of a *parha panch*, Roy (2004) argues that each *parha panch* maintains a hierarchical order among the *padda panches* for administrative purposes. One of the *padda panches* is called *raja* (king) *padda panch* because the headman of that *padda panch* presides over all the meetings of the *parha panch*. A second *padda panch* is the *dewan* (prime minister), a third the *panre* (the assistant), and a fourth *kotwar* (messenger). The remaining *padda panches* under a *parha* are *praja* (subject) *padda panches* (Roy, 2004: 245).

An Oraon *parha* or *parhapanchayat* maintains social regulation and control, and peace and harmony among all Oraon villages or *padda panches* by dealing with inter-village disputes. The *parha panchayat* acts as the court of appeal for matters that a *padda panch* cannot decide or when a decision is not accepted. The *parha panch* offers the Oraons an institution that enables greater cooperation when pursuing common programmes, including working, dancing, hunting, and so on. A *parha panch* generally meets once a year. All heads of *padda panches* attend the *parha panch* meeting in which all Oraons are allowed to speak out about general public affairs. The Oraons work together in *parha panch* to protect villages from natural and supernatural dangers (Prasad 1961, Dhan 1967, De Sa 1975). The Oraon *parha panch* is thus an institution that enjoys a great deal of respect and exercises authority in all public affairs of Oraons (Turkey, 1999: 128-129).

At this point, I provide a discussion on Oraon political organisation in Barind/Bangladesh. According to Kispotta (2007), the lowest tier of Oraon political organisation is the *padda panch* and the highest is the *bey-lar* council. The ascending tiers of Oraon political organisation are *padda panch*, *parha panch*, *dudhvaiya* or *dighri parha*, *vaiyari parha*, *rahji parha* and *bey-lar* council. These tiers of Oraon political organisation are understood to correspond to the administrative tiers of the Peoples' Republic of Bangladesh. The administrative tiers of Bangladesh include the *para* or a village (a combination of a few *paras*), union council (a combination of several villages), *upazila* (sub-district – a combination of few unions), *zila* (district – a combination of few sub-districts) and *desh* (country – a combination of all administrative districts).

All the tiers of Oraon political organisation have both executive and general committees, or councils. The number of general council members at each level of Oraon political organisation is unlimited, while the number of members on an executive committee at each level is prescribed. Oraon *padda panch*, *parha panch* and *dudhvaiya* or *dighri parha* have their respective executive committees, each of which consists of nine members/officials. The *vaiyari parha* has an executive committee of eleven officials, while the *rahji parha* has thirteen officials and the *bey-lar* council has seven officials. Of the seven officials of a *bey-lar* council, four are

members of the Oraon community, one is a member of any other ethnic community, one is a representative of either a local or international development organisation, and one is from the district or sub-district level of government administration (Kispotta, 2007: 15-25). For the purpose of this study, I do not discuss in detail the formation of the executive committees of all the Oraon political stages, but focus here on the formation of the executive committee of a *bey-lar* council of Oraons.

I observed the Oraon *padda panch* in operation in all my study villages, but as a weakening institution. *Padda panch* is headed by a *pradhan* (Oraon chief or headman), while all Oraon older males of the specific villages are members of *paddapanch*. An Oraon *pradhan* is nominated/ selected by older members of respective villages. The Oraons choose a *pradhan* irrespective of their religious affiliations. Although an Oraon *pradhan* usually appoints an *agua* (messenger), the function of an *agua* was absent in the studied villages. Ideally, the Oraon heads manage all socio-cultural activities of the community by discussing with the remaining members in common meetings. However, the Oraon *padda panch* in my study villages are weak and unsuccessful in this regard.

The Oraon institution of *padda panch* does not play as important a role in solving the problems of the community as it did in the past. Because of the present economic situation of the Oraons, the *padda panch* has been weakened. Bengali domination, which has caused the present deteriorating economic situation among the Oraons, plays an indirect role in weakening the Oraon *padda panch*. Due to their weakening political organisation, the Oraons are dependent on the larger Bengali society. My observations in the study area reveal that the functions of *padda panch* in maintaining Oraon integrity and solidarity, and in executing and implementing their traditional regulations or solving social problems, are changing (Figure 3.1). In this regard, I refer to the following example from my field notes:

At Moddhyapara of Binodpur village of Mithapukur sub-district in Rangpur district, in the evening of April 04, 2012, Mukul Kujur, aged 26 years old, son of Montu Kujur, attacked one his neighbours, Aduri Ekka, aged 25 years old, daughter of Karma Ekka. Mukul Kujur found Aduri Ekka on the road side in front of their locality. He attempted to talk to Aduri and proposed that

she spend time with him, but Aduri refused to talk to him and attempted to slap him. Mukul attempted to take Aduri away, whereupon she resisted. Aduri was beaten by Mukul on the spot.

As a background to this harassment, formerly Mukul and Aduri were in a relationship which broke up. Later on, Aduri got married and went to live in her husband's house at Birgonj of Dinajpur district. She came to see her parents on the day of the incident at Binodpur of Mithapukur. The community people came to know about the incident between Mukul and Aduri and tried to have a meeting but failed. At that meeting, the Oraon community leaders along with the local Union Council member and the villagers were present.

I observed that the Oraon leaders were not informed that they needed to resolve the problem. The parents of Aduri Ekka informed the local Union Council member instead of informing the leaders of the *padda panch* of the Oraon community. The fact is that Aduri's parents were more interested in solving the problem through the local Union Council leaders instead of their traditional *padda panch* because of their dependency on the Bengali Muslim community. These days the Oraons tend not to depend on the *padda panch* for solving their problems.

Later on, although the local Union Council member along with the Oraon leaders held a meeting in the community to solve the problem, they could not come to any solution. The leaders asked Mukul Kujur to attend the meeting, but he did not attend. The meeting was called a second time in the community, but again Mukul did not attend. Mukul avoided the leaders, while the victim, Aduri, along with her parents, as present in the meeting. However, Aduri went to the local judicial court at the local Union Council to file a case of sexual harassment and kidnapping against Mukul Kujur. This case depicts the political functions and enactments as well as the changing functions of Oraon *padda panch*, which in the past was the principal institution to execute socio-economic activities in the community. Today, this organisation of the Oraons has been weakening as a symbol of Oraon integrity and social solidarity.

This case study evidences that the Oraon *padda panch* has been weakened in solving disputes in the community. The Oraons do not trust their leaders to settle disputes because of religious differentiation among them. The Bengali Muslim leaders also interrupt the Oraons in settling Oraon disputes through *padda panch*. As the Bengali Muslim leaders as well as the Union Council leaders have privileges and play a dominant role in the socio-economic sphere, they motivate the Oraons to settle disputes through Union Council. Although the Oraons call *padda panch* meetings to solve social disputes among them, the Bengali Muslim leaders as well as the Union Council leaders attend the Oraon *padda panch* meetings.

As observed, the aggravated party considers the Union Council is more likely to offer swift action and that the Union Council leaders can help them to get quick results. The aggravated party also thinks that the Union Council leaders will compel the offending party to pay compensation to them. But the Union Council leaders shamelessly ask the offending party to pay them an amount to settle the dispute in their favour. Although corrupt Union Council leaders might favour an aggravated party, they claim their shameful shares of the compensation that is paid to the aggravated party. Thus, the Bengali Muslim leaders as well as the Union Council leaders frown on Oraon *padda panch*, which cannot play active role as it did in the past in settling disputes and governing the community. Although the Oraons organise *padda panch* meetings to settle disputes, they fail to solve issues because of disintegration among them due to religious differentiation, as well as Bengali Muslims' interruption for their own interests.

Religion and Belief

The Oraons believe in one supreme god known as *dharmes* or *biri belas* (Oraon sun-god or sun-god). They believe the appropriate colour for *dharmes* is white – the colour of the sun. Their sacrificial offerings to *dharmes* consist of a white fowl or a white goat and usually an egg. Oraons also offer clear water and white coloured *dharia* (rice-beer) to their god at every sacrificial ceremony. The Oraons believe that *dharmes* is the one supreme being, who transcends all supernatural powers or spirits since the creation of human beings. They perform *danda-kattna*¹⁹ as their greatest sacrifice for *dharmes*. Thus, the Oraons have a monotheistic understanding of god (Tirkey 1980; Tirkey 1999; Roy 1972, 2004; Pereira 2007).

¹⁹ The *dandakatta* ceremony is also known as *palkansna* (destroying evil tooth, breaking the mischief), *bhelwa-phari* (*bhelwa* twig-splitting), *bhakh-khandna* (warding evil word), or *danda-rengna* (dragging the twig). The *pahan* (village priest) himself chooses a piece of ground, clears it and draws a diagram of three concentric circles crowned on the border by seven or nine identical semicircles. At the centre of the diagram, a small heap of *arwa* (silver) rice is placed. On the heap, an egg held by a split *bhelwa* (*semicarpis anacardium*) twig is kept resting. The materials, including charcoal dust, hearth-clay crust and rice flour are used to draw the diagram. Black, red and white are the three principal colours of the Rainbow. The diagram represents the universe. The colours remind of the rainbow. The weapon (bow) is used to strike the enemy. After reciting the prayer, the *pahan* breaks the egg and drops the yolk over the heap of *arwa* rice. Then, the blood of the victim is dropped on the rice heap (see Tirkey, 1980: 26).

Below, I focus on a debate among scholars specifically concentrating on the name of the Oraon religion, which further helps clarify their religious beliefs. Pereira (2007) writes that the Oraons, which he refers to as the *Kunrunkhar*, unlike Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, Christians, Jews, and Muslims, do not have any sacred scriptures of their own. They also do not have any religious hierarchy. However, they have distinct myths, legends, wisdom stories and sayings, and rituals which are considered as their faith tradition or sacred scriptures (Pereira, 2007: 552). Patnayak (2002), referring to the Oraons as the *Kudukhs* in Sundargarh district of Orissa in India, says that *kirodandi* is the religion of the community (Patnayak, 2002).

Pereira (2007) states that the Oraons are neither Hindus nor Christians. They perform their religious ceremonies according to different names, including *pal-kansna*, *danda-kattna*, *bhelwa-phari*, *bhakh-khandna*, *bhag-bura*, *pal-asthna*, etc. The centrality of the performance of their religious ceremonies refers to the use of the *kirodara/kirodandi* (principal or main stick framing a *danda-kattna* – a symbol of Oraon religion/religious belief) or *bhelwa* (*semicarpis anacardium*) stick. Referring to the works of Bhagat (1990a, 1990b, 1988a, 1988b and 1987), Pereira (2007) also mentions that the Oraon religion is *anaddi dharam* (ancient religion). Other ethnic communities and other religions (e.g., Hindus, who call their religion *sonaton dharm* – traditional religion) also claim their religions, from the beginning of their history, as an *addi dharam* (ancient religion). On the other hand, Tana Bhagat Oraons²⁰, who have rejected/reformed many of their traditional beliefs, claim that the original religious form of the Oraons is *kunruk dharam* (Oraon religion). Considering all these arguments, Pereira (2007: 552) depicts the separate religious identity for the Oraons as *addi* (ancient) *kunruk* (Oraon) *dharam* (religion).

Also, as Pereira (2007) states, the Oraons do not worship in a temple or mosque or church. Rather, they practise rituals in a *sarna* (sacred grove). The Oraons offer animals and fowl as sacrificial offerings (blood sacrifices) in open places or under a tree in the sacred grove (*sarna*). Thus, he states that the religion of Oraons is

²⁰After their settlement in Chotanagpur of India, the Oraons eventually received religious lessons from a religious priest, named Bhagat, who was actually from the Hindu community. These Oraons accepted change in their religious beliefs, which labelled them as Bhagat Oraons or Tana Bhagats (Khalko, 2009).

not ‘Sarna religion’, as other scholars depict. He argues that as *sarna* is merely the place of Oraon worship, the religion itself should not be called *Sarna*. After all, he writes, the religion of the Hindus is not called temple (*mandir*) religion, the religion of Muslims is not called mosque (*masjid*) religion, and Christianity is not called church (*girja*) religion (Pereira, 2007: 552-553).

However, other scholars call the religion of the Oraons ‘Sarna religion’. For example, as noted in chapter 2, Belie (2005) introduces the Oraons as Sarna Oraon. She argues that the children of the Sarna Oraon and *addi* (ancient) Santal faiths should be granted the right to education about their religions (Bleie, 2005: 307). Koonathan (1999) also argues that the religion of the Oraons can be best termed Sarna religion, which has a definite connection to the sacred grove (*sarna*) in which some of their religious rituals take place and which is believed to be the abode of Oraon religious spirits. He further states that both animism and animatism are deeply rooted in the Oraons’ Sarna religion (Koonathan, 1999: 136-138). This discussion on Oraon religion concerns their belief in one supreme god – *dharmes*. However, although the Oraons believe in one supreme god, they embrace different religious views and change their religious practices over time that scholars have attempted to define the name of the Oraons’ traditional religion as Sarna religion.

I observed that the Oraons of Bilpara at Ghoraghat sub-district of Dinajpur district perform their sacrificial offerings under a mango tree in an open field (Figure 3.2). I asked my research participants why they performed their sacrificial offering in this place and they replied:

We perform this sacrificial offering in such a place so that people (outsiders) do not know beforehand which place is going to be selected for this special sacrificial performance. Because, as we believe, if we tell or announce the place of our sacrificial performance beforehand to people, they may commit some evil acts regarding our sacrificial performance. We always keep secret and purify the sacred place under the tree in the open field on the day we are going to perform this special event, so that other community people will not know which place is going to be selected for our sacrificial performance. Before selecting the place, we discuss the matter with our community *pradhan* – Badal Minji. We do not disclose the place selected for our sacrificial performance, and every year we change the place of our sacrificial

performance. We select a place and the very morning on the day of our sacrificial performance, we clean, purify and decorate the place for this purpose.

This description of Oraon sacrificial performance at Bilpara sheds light on Oraon religious beliefs. The Oraons believe that in order to maintain secrecy in preparing a sacred grove in the community they must change the sacred grove every year. Maintaining secrecy for their sacred grove is not a problem for them. Neither the wider Muslim population nor the Christian missionaries is harmful for them in this regard. But the Oraons' sacrificial performance is associated with a belief that they should not disclose the name of the place selected for the performance, as outsiders (other community members) may cause harm to their ritual practice. I argue that it is proper to term the Oraon religion as Sarna religion, as they perform their sacrificial praying in the sacred/secret/purified place under a tree in the open field of the community, which they do not disclose before their performance. One of my key research participants, Arun Khalko, a Christian Oraon, aged about 70 years old, who lives in Boldipukur Christian mission at Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district, depicted the name of the Oraon religion as Sarna religion in an interview with me in August, 2012.

According to Pereira (2007: 553), 'the village priest is usually elected for a term and thus the priesthood is temporary and not necessarily hereditary'. In this regard, I observed that generally the Oraons of Barind select their priest at a village meeting or at their *padda panch* meeting. They do not elect, but rather select the oldest Oraon from the community as their priest. Other than that, the Oraons do not have any particular religious priest, like a Muslim *imam*/a *moulavi*, a Christian monoster, a Hindu *thakur* or *gurudev*, or a Buddhist *vikkhu*. The Oraons just choose or select the oldest member of their community, who heads their community as well as leads their religious practices.

Whatever the name of their religion or their religious priest, my aim here is to consider their actual religious beliefs and practices and how these are changing. As revealed, the Oraons are traditionally animists. They practise different festivals

corresponding to the changes in nature during the year. Those Oraons who perform *danda-kattna* I categorise as Sarna Oraons. As discussed in chapter 2, remaining members of the Oraon community can be subdivided into Oraon *khatriyas* (Hindu Oraons), Christian Oraons, Buddhist Oraons, and Muslim Oraons. I focus on these religious differentiations among Oraons in chapter 5.

The changing religious differentiation among the Oraons is not only expressed at the community level, but also at the family level. For example, the family of Thakur Lindari, at Ambapara of Udaypur village in the Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district, is divided in their religious beliefs and practices. Thakur Lindari, his mother and his wife are followers of Buddhism, while his two sons are followers of Christianity. The reason for this differentiation is that his two sons are getting support from the Christian missionaries. They stay at the hostels of a Christian missionary educational institution far away from their village home. Thakur Lindari's sons attend Church regularly and are accustomed to practising Christianity. They also attend Church at Udaypur, when they visit their parents, family and friends in their village home.

Totem Clans

According to scholars (see Dhan 1967; Prasad 1961; Bhowmik 1986; Lakra 1996; Sarkar 1965; Tirkey 1980; 1989; 1999; Koonathan 1999), the Oraon community is divided into numerous clans named after different birds, animals, plants, materials, or objects. The prominent anthropologist, S. C. Roy (2004: 195), in his work, *The Oraons of Chotanagpur*, depicts 68 totemic clans among the Oraons. Of these totemic clans, 43 are animal, 19 are plant, 2 are mineral, 2 are places and 2 are split totems (parts of any material or body of any animal).

Generally, as a social prescription, a totem is sacred among Oraons. The Oraons do not eat, harm or destroy any of their totems. The totems are not worshipped by Oraons, but they believe the totems look upon or help them as friends or allies. There is no hierarchy among the clans; all clans are equal in dignity and respected in the community. As Oraons are patrilineal, a clan name is transmitted

from a father to his children. All Oraons of a common ancestor belong to a clan, and the members of a particular clan are considered to be family. Because of this belief, the Oraons love and respect even a stranger, if he or she belongs to the same clan as them. Oraon clans are strictly exogamous, but the Oraon community is endogamous.

At this point, I provide a discussion on Oraon clans in Barind/Bangladesh as observed in my study villages. An Oraon clan in the Barind villages is known as a *gotra* (lineage). According to one of my key informants, Uzzal Ekka, a 36-year-old regional manager at Caritas – Dinajpur, Bangladesh, there are 18 clans among the Oraons of Bangladesh. Taru (2007: 290-291) similarly notes that the Oraons of Bangladesh are divided into 18 clans which take their names from different animals, birds, fish, trees and material objects, such as *lakra* (tiger), *tiggya* (a species of monkey), *tirkey* (baby mouse), *bindo* (wild rat), *barho* or *barhoya* (wild dog), *khan khan* (crow), *korteka* (a species of sparrow), *toppyo* (a species of bird with long tail), *ekka* (turtle), *khalko* (a species of fish), *linda* (a species of earth worm), *minji* (a species of fish), *bakla* (a species of grass), *barha* (a species of tree), *khesh* (paddy), *ganna* (iron), *beck* (salt) and *kispotta* (guts of pig).

In my study, I found the following 18 Oraon clans, which differ from the Oraon clans depicted by Taru (2007). The clans are *Bara* (*Ficus indica*), *Bakla* (a species of grass), *Bandra/Bandh* (an embanked reservoir of water), *Beck* (salt), *Dhan/Dhanoar* (paddy or paddy husker), *Ekka* (tortoise), *Kerkata* (hedge-sparrow), *Khakha* (raven), *Khalko* (a species of fish), *Kispotta* (pig's entrails), *Kujur* (a kind of fruits), *Lakhra* (tiger), *Linda/Lindari* (a subdivision of the eel), *Minji* (a species of fish), *Panna* (iron), *Tappo* (a species of long tailed bird), *Tiggya* (a species of monkey) and *Tirkey* (young mice). Comparing the names and meanings of the Oraon clans in my study with those listed by Taru (2007), it appears that the Oraon clans in Bangladesh are more than 18 in number.

Family

Generally speaking, a family is the basis of social life among Oraons. The Oraons are patriarchal in the family and economic affairs of the community. The father or senior

male member usually heads an Oraon family. As stated in chapter 2, during my fieldwork I observed that Oraon joint families in Barind were changing because of their economic crisis or landlessness. The head of an Oraon family cannot usually manage subsistence for all his/her family members. Thus, the Oraons prefer a nuclear family arrangement. Single member families, including the widowed and the divorced person, are also prevalent among Oraons. Once an earning member of an Oraon joint family gets married, he leaves the joint arrangement and sets up his own family and household. An earning Oraon member of a joint family, thus, establishes a nuclear family and manages subsistence with the minimal wage that he may earn in a day.

Marriage

Oraon men and women only get married once they reach adulthood. For them, marriage signifies fullness of life. Infant marriage is entirely prohibited among Oraons. The Oraons generally practise monogamy. Also, for Oraons, a marital life means satisfying the will of *dharmes* (Oraon sun-god). The Oraons get married with a belief that procreation will extend their community and satisfy the divine spirit of their god. They believe that if a couple gets married, they satisfy their god and god has himself arranged their marriage (Dalton 1872; Tirkey 1980, 1989, 1999; Roy 1972, 2004).

As I observed, Oraon marriages are negotiated by parents or guardians who choose a bride for their adult son. Also, a boy may himself select a girl after which his parents arrange the marriage ceremony. In some cases, Oraon boys and girls select their partners themselves. The potential partner's identity is then shared with friends and relatives who convey the information to their parents. Then, the father employs an *agua* (go-between/Oraon marriage match-maker) for his son's or daughter's marriage. The *agua* makes inquiries into the bride's age, maturity, work efficiency, her parents' economic situation, her brothers and sisters, and the name of her family or clan. If the bridegroom's parents consider her an eligible bride for their son, then they make a marriage proposal through the *agua* to the bride's parents.

The Oraon father, who usually heads an Oraon family, arranges the marriage ceremony of his son or daughter. The marriage expenses are arranged by the family, while the community members and relatives of an Oraon bride and bridegroom share and contribute to the marriage expenses by bringing food, meat, *haria* (rice-beer) or some subscription in cash money. However, some Oraons arrange loans to cover their sons' or daughters' marriage expenses because of their economic situation. I provide particular cases of this below.

Despite holding different beliefs, all Oraons, except for Christians, follow the marriage practices of their fore-fathers. They use *karsavanda* (an Oraon organising symbol) in their marriage process. They do not invite any religious leaders to perform the marriage. They invite the community members and, in the presence of the bride and groom, gather together in a place in front of *karsavanda* inside a house. They perform the marriage rituals required for them to think of themselves as husband and wife in the name of *dharmes* (Oraon god).

My research participants state that dowry is not practised among them. Instead, Oraons practise bride-wealth. The amount of bride-wealth among Oraons is BDT 25.25 i.e. US\$ 0.32²¹. This bride-wealth amount is symbolically paid to the father of a bride by the father of a bride-groom. However, although dowry is not prevalent among them, some Oraons arrange some gifts for their daughters, when they get married.

At this point, I depict a few cases where Oraons have married outside the community. I found a case of a marriage between an Oraon son and a Santal daughter and a case of a marriage between a Christian Oraon son and a Bengali Christian daughter. There were two cases of marriage between Oraon sons and Pahan daughters. These cases of community exogamy have happened among Oraons either because of an absence of an eligible bride or bridegroom, or in accordance with the bride or bridegroom's choices. Some Oraon girls married Bengali Muslim boys, but these Oraon girls leave their community for good. These cases of Oraon girls' marriage are neither accepted by the Oraon community, nor by the Oraon family; although, they are accepted by the Bengali Muslim community/family, as long as the

²¹ One US\$ is equivalent to BDT 80 on January 2012.

Oraon daughter accepts Islam. These cases are rare exceptions to Oraon clan exogamy and community endogamy.

Inheritance of Land and Property

Generally speaking, Oraon customary law excludes women from inheriting land and property from their fathers. When a father or a head of an Oraon family dies, the land is divided among all his surviving sons. This prescription of inheritance of land and property is related to the fact that, after marriage, daughters live with their husbands' family or clan. As stated earlier, the Oraons believe land is the ancestral property of their patri-clan.

As I have found in the course of my fieldwork, the Oraons of Barind follow this customary law of inheritance of land and property irrespective of their religious affiliations. If a man has no sons, his paternal nephews will get his land and property after he passes away. The Oraons who have become Oraon *khatriyas* claim to follow the Hindu tradition in their land and property inheritance, which also excludes women from inheriting land and property.

Nevertheless, because of the impact of the larger Bengali Muslim community, Oraons sometimes register a portion of land and property to their daughters, if they have no sons. As one of my research participants, Momindro Beck of Ramwesarpara at Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district, aged 50 years old, commented: 'I do not have any sons. If I desire my daughters to get my property then I have to register my land and property for my daughters before I pass away. If I do not do so, my nephews will get all my property after I pass away and my daughters will not get any portion of my property.'

Economy and Occupation

Traditionally, agriculture was the main economic activity of the Oraons. The Oraons met all their daily necessities, including food, clothing, shelter and other

requirements from agriculture. Oraons supplement their agricultural activities with occupations such as fishing, crafts, and raising cattle. Some occupations, including weaving, basket-making, tanning and blacksmithing are traditionally considered by Oraons to be below their dignity. Oraons are also not traditionally traders or business operators. However, they do sell and borrow things (see Lakra 1996; Lutz & Munda 1980; Tirkey 1989; 1999; Roy 2004).

Land is the principal source of livelihood for Oraons. The Oraons believe land was given by *dharmes* to their ancestors. Because of this belief, they do not want to leave their ancestral lands (Tirkey, 1999: 121). My research reveals that the Oraons have left their ancestral lands and have moved on, migrated to, and settled in different places over the course of time. I found that, although some Oraons have big farm land holdings, almost all Oraons in Barind do not own land and are engaged as landless agricultural day-labourers. Some Oraons engage in van/rickshaw pulling, petty trading, barbering, fishing, and driving motor vehicles or in construction works in the region during the non-agricultural season. Some others also travel to distant places to find jobs in the cities, including Dhaka, Rangpur, Bogra, and Barisal.

I observed that the Oraons face many economic problems. They cannot manage expenses for food, shelter, treatment and education. Although Oraon children attend local primary/elementary school, very few go on to attend colleges in either neighbouring towns or cities, or other cities situated in places distant from their villages. Most Oraons in Barind are illiterate. The Christian Oraons are more educated than other Oraons. Some educated/literate Oraons have found employment in governmental and non-governmental organisations. They include an assistant land revenue officer, a missionary school teacher, a church pastor, an accountant at an Adventist development and relief agency in Mymensingh, a hospital electrician and an *adibashi* programmer at Rangpur Radio Station (RRS).

Dress, Food and Dwelling

Oraon people have some distinct cultural practices regarding dress, food, and shelter. Traditionally, the Oraon men wear a *nengti* (a loin cloth) and the Oraon women wear

fota (two pieces of short cloth). In the past, Oraon men used to wear a loin cloth. Oraon women used to cover their lower portion with a piece of cloth and another portion of cloth was used to cover their bosoms, and the rest used to cover their shoulders and hang down their backs. Nowadays, almost of the Oraon men wear shirts, trousers, *lungis* (a longer loin cloth) and vests. The Oraon women used to wear saris without petticoats or blouses. Nowadays, they wear saris with petticoats and blouses and also fix flowers on their heads. The Oraon girls now wear *salwar* (a loose fitting trouser) and *kamiz* (a long dress covering the upper part of the body).

Bhat (cooked rice) is the staple food of Oraons. They eat different kinds of fish and meat, vegetables, lentils and so on. They are also fond of milk and milk-related foods, like *chhana* (milk), *doi* (curd), *makhan* (butter), etc. *Kichuri* (cooked and mixed-rice with lentils and vegetables) and *panta bhat* (cooked rice dipped into cold water) are also popular dishes among the Oraons. The well-off Oraons ideally consume three meals a day, at morning, noon and evening. However, my questionnaire data reveal that most Oraons cannot afford three meals a day. They are barely able to consume two meals, morning and evening.

Haria (rice-beer) is a popular drink in the Oraon community and is consumed by all Oraons except some Christian Oraons. *Haria* is made of rice mixed with the powder of roots and some indigenous ingredients, such as a parasite which lives on other trees (Figure 3.3). The Oraons preserve and produce the parasite known as the *haria* tree in their household compound in the community, but do not usually share with local Bengali Muslims. One important feature of this traditional drink is that it is the Oraon women who know and collect the ingredients to produce *haria*. The Oraon men are not associated with *haria* production. However, drinking *haria* (Figure 3.4) is a source of recreation among both Oraon men and women during the community festivals and ceremonies.

My data indicate that although many Oraons manage to fund their own food and drink expenses, some Oraons have had to borrow for their subsistence. Nonetheless, drinking *haria* is customary for them, which along with other socio-economic features of the Oraons helps mark their identity. Because of this, and that the economic difficulties, they face in providing for their own subsistence, the

Oraons are compelled to borrow money for *haria* to drink at their festivals. They are willing to pay for *haria* in spite of their poverty because becoming tipsy by drinking *haria* is an important way to represent their identity. Drinking *haria* is also a means of forgetting their pains in the light of their understanding that they once had a prosperous life. Both the Oraon men and women drink *haria* to forget both their present-day problems and their past. Nevertheless, some Oraons live by producing and selling *haria* as a means of alternative livelihood, especially when they face economic crisis.

Another important socio-cultural feature of the Oraons is their dwellings (Figure 3.5). The walls of their houses are made of thick mud. The roofs are either made of corrugated iron sheets or straw thatch and windows and doors are made of bamboo or wood. The inner side of an Oraon dwelling consists of several houses including kitchen, cattle sheds and store rooms. Some Oraons do not have all these structures in their dwelling compound. The outer side of the Oraon dwelling compound looks like a single house. The houses of an Oraon dwelling compound are attached to the walls, which contain a narrow gate to enter the compound. The Oraons keep this gate closed at night to protect the entrance against any enemies, guard against theft, and prevent misconduct in their dwellings. While there are some differences, in general, the dwellings of the Oraons are similarly patterned in all the villages in my study.

This discussion on Oraon history and socio-cultural features contextualises the issues I examine in the following chapters.



Figure 3.1: A meeting of Binodpur *padda panch* that failed to resolve the problem/harassment between Mukul Kujur and Aduri Ekka (Photograph by Rafiul Islam, 2012)



Figure 3.2: Oraon sacrificial offerings in the sacred grove (Sarna) at Bilpara of Ghoraghat of Dinajpur district (Photograph by Rafiul Islam, 2012)



Figure 3.3: *Haria* parasite/tree living on other trees (Photograph by Rafiul Islam, 2012)



Figure 3.4: Drinking *haria* (rice-beer) at home (Photograph by Rafiul Islam, 2012)



Figure 3.5: Oraon dwellings/shelters (Photograph by Rafiul Islam, 2012)

Chapter 4

Oraon Economy: Changing Relations

In this chapter, I firstly examine changing historical conditions in relation to Oraon economic life. Secondly, I describe their present economic situation and how they maintain their subsistence or livelihood. Finally, I consider the alternative livelihood strategies of the Oraons and how they manage their lives in a changing economy. People of every society generally meet their basic needs or subsistence by following their own methods. The conditions of meeting subsistence and basic needs are shaped by their environments, social institutions, and interactions with other groups of people. With this in mind, the main concern of this chapter is to explore how the Oraons survive under the harsh economic conditions that I describe below.

The Changing Relations of Oraon Economy

The Oraons have faced many interruptions, conflicts and confrontations in the course of their history. According to the literature, they had a relatively prosperous life in earlier habitats during the course of their migrations, including in South India, North India and their settlement in Chotanagpur (see Roy 2004; Tirkey 1980, 1989, 1999, Koonathan 1999; Das & Raha 1963). They lived from nature and the products they produced from the land. The objects and materials they gathered from the forests and rivers significantly supported their livelihood. In all their settlements, they were self-sufficient. However, their lifestyle was impacted by over-population, natural calamities, and the intervention of the *dikus* (powerful foreigners), including Hindus, Muslims and the British. These powerful foreigners created problems for them in terms of their livelihood and socio-cultural life (see Tirkey 1989; Koonathan 1999), which I discuss below.

As mentioned earlier, the disruption of Oraon ways of life mainly started in Chotanagpur. Oraon land was illegally occupied by intermediaries for the British, i.e. the British, Hindu, and Muslim *zamindars* (intermediaries), specifically during

British rule (1765-1947). The Oraons were exploited by these British intermediaries, who collected taxes or revenues, compelling them to pay tribute to the, then, government of India (the British East India Company). From Chotanagpur, the Oraons were taken by the British India Government, as part of their administrative policies, to be resettled in the then East Bengal (Barind/Bangladesh) and other parts of the country. This Oraon resettlement in Barind is understood as forced migration because of the British India Government's capitalist expansion, which has contributed to the changing economic situation of Oraons.

The Oraons were self-sufficient, in relation to their livelihood and economy, after settlement in the former East Bengal (Barind/Bangladesh) region of British India (1765-1947). As Bleie (2005) describes, when the ethnic communities including the Oraons, Santals, Mundas, and others settled in north-western Bangladesh (Barind), the region was full of forests and jungles. This forested region contained sufficient resources to provide for the livelihoods and economies of these ethnic communities, who practised hunting and gathering as a supplement to agriculture as their main subsistence. However, the age-old experience of settling in jungle environments and the skills of ethnic communities conflicted with the jungle clearing and agricultural practices of the Bengalis in Barind.

The British India colonisers, observing these skills of the ethnic communities, used them ruthlessly in large-scale commercial expansion, which affected the livelihoods of these communities. The ethnic communities were appointed to cut timber for railway construction and to convert forests into agricultural land. As a result, the forests and jungles disappeared and there was a shift from a mixed forest-farm economy to a rice-farming production system, which Oraons had to practise along with Bengalis. These changes have affected the ecological balance in Barind and the livelihoods and economies of the ethnic communities (Bleie, 2005: 249).

In describing the changing livelihoods and economies of these ethnic communities, I refer to Rasul's (1997) account of Santal experiences under the British India Government. Rasul (1997) describes how the Santals lived in the dense forest of the country. The British colonisers along with their local intermediaries, the *zamindars*, motivated the Santals to clear jungle forests to practise agriculture. The

British declared that if the Santals cleared the dense forest and practised agriculture, the government would offer them the ownership of those lands free of taxes and for revenues. But the British failed to adhere to their promise and the Santals did not get land ownership rights. The local *zamindars* remained the owners of the land. The Santals, however, remained the tenants of local *zamindars* (Rasul, 1997, cited in Arefeen, 2005: 28). A similar situation was experienced by the Oraons and other ethnic communities during the British India Government. The Oraons also cleared the forests and cultivated the land, but they were not offered ownership of those lands. Nevertheless, they were relatively self-sufficient as tenants or sharecroppers having a direct relationship to local *zamindars*.

Also, Oraon people were not accustomed to a production-oriented economy. They had no experience with the coin/cash economy culture. They were partially dependent on food gathering in forests and jungles and mainly practised a subsistence based economy, which was not profit-oriented. Maintaining the basic needs of life was the prime objective of their economy, which Sahlins (1972: 1), refers to as the ‘original affluent society’.

Eventually, the Oraons became dependent on agricultural production for their livelihoods, as the clearing of jungles and forests resulted in the loss of their hunting and gathering economy. This shift was problematic, as they became dependent on local money-lenders in order to manage their economic crises. However, they did not understand the extreme impacts of the interest associated with loans from money-lenders. This transformation in Oraon economy and livelihood continued throughout the entire period of the British India Government, until 1947, which resulted in a worsening economic situation for the Oraons.

The already worsening economic situation of the Oraons was, subsequently, sharpened by the partition of Bengal in 1947. Many Oraons left land, cattle, houses and property and fled to other parts of the country – India as a country was divided based on the religious disparities of the people. The Oraons, along with other minority communities, felt threatened by the local Bengali Muslims. This changing social condition created a communal uprising in Barind (see Ali, 2008; Barakat *et al.*, 2009). A communal uprising also occurred between the Muslims and Hindus, along

with other minority groups, including the Oraons, before the partition of Bengal in 1947. This uprising also contributed to their changing economic situation.

The most vulnerable political stage in British India occurred from 1946 until August 1947, and resulted in Hindu-Muslim rivalry (Khan, 2014). The Muslims claimed supremacy as early invaders and rulers of India, while the Hindus, as the earlier invaders of India who were defeated by the Muslims, claimed rights over their proprietary lands. These claims of supremacy resulted in a conflict that was vented in parts of India, including Bengal. This Hindu-Muslim conflict was evident in the 'blood bath' in Calcutta in August 1946, known as the 'Great Calcutta Killings'. The communal rivalry between the Hindus and Muslims flared up due to the second partition of Bengal in 1947, which induced a partition-migration of millions of Hindus and Muslims from both ends of Bengal – East Bengal (EB) and West Bengal (WB). Because of this massive migration, a 'Nehru-Liaquat Agreement' was held to solve the problems of partition-migration between India and Pakistan. The Hindus were returned to their parental homes on assurance of communal safety, but suffered from anxiety due to memories of horrifying communal violence in the past (Khan, 2014: 326-328).

The Oraons migrated to India during 1946-1947, along with the Hindus and other minority groups. This concurrent migration was influenced by the fact that many Oraons, along with other ethnic communities, found homogeneity as minorities with the Hindus in their socio-cultural practices. The Oraons who migrated to India eventually returned to Barind to live in their parental homes. However, what happened to the Oraons who returned to their parental homes in Barind? What happened to the Oraons who did not migrate to India but stayed in Barind? Were they able to change their socio-economic condition? Or did the Oraons again migrate to India because of the socio-economic exploitation or subsequent communal violence, while the region was a part of the then East Pakistan (subsequently Bangladesh) (1947-1971).

As the socio-political situation stabilised, the Oraons came back to their houses and land in Barind. Upon their return, the Oraons found that much of their land and property had been occupied by the local influential Bengali Muslim

peasants. Incidents of land and household property grabbing, by the Bengali Muslims, were commonplace. A number of my Oraon research participants described their land and property loss during the partition of Bengal in 1947. The following cases of Oraon land loss provide an understanding of the situation.

Case study 4.1: Oraon land loss in Binodpur during the partition of Bengal in 1947

Subash Minji, aged 65 years old, son of Pancha Minji, grandson of Vott Minji, lives in Moddhyapara of Binodpur village at Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district. Subash Minji is a traditional/Sarna Oraon in belief. He notes that his grandfather (Vott Minji) had 450 decimals farm land. In 1947, a local influential Bengali Muslim peasant – Rafiq Mondol (pseudonym) occupied Vott Minji's 450 decimals farm land negotiating with the local Hindu *zamindar*, who attempted to flee to India. This Hindu *zamindar* was seeking help from Rafiq Mondol to move to India. In return, Rafiq Mondol bagged illegal registration/occupation of the land of Vott Minji (Subash Minji's grandfather) and that of other Oraons from this *zamindar*, although Vott Minji's family along with other Oraons of Binodpur did not go to India. They stayed in their locality in Barind during the partition of Bengal in 1947.

Subsequently, in 2010 (and not before because of their unawareness and prevalent economic crisis), Subash Minji and his brothers claimed right over the farm land, but faced threats from Rafiq Mondol. Moreover, they could not reoccupy their land because of a cost of BDT 150,000 for land revenue taxes calculated since 1940s plus other expenses at the local land registration office. Subash Minji and his brothers and nephews could not manage the land registration expenses. They earned subsistence either by agricultural day-labouring, sharecropping, *haria* (rice-beer) sale, hunting or catching fish in nearby ponds and canals or by running small businesses at Mondoler *hat* (village market) in Binodpur. Subash Minji also notes that the Bengali Muslims were not the majority in Binodpur in the past. All the land surrounding their households belonged to the Oraons. But today, almost all of them have become landless day-labourers and have only minimal homestead land. However, a few Oraons have bigger farm landholdings in the locality.

Case study 4.2: Oraon land loss in Ramwesarpara during the partition of Bengal in 1947

Sokhindra Beck, aged 30 years old, lives in Moddhyapara of Ramwesarpara village at Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district. He is literate and an Oraon *khatriya* by Hindu religion. He has 10 decimals homestead land. He earns subsistence for his family of two through

agricultural day-labour. He states that his grandfather had about 300 decimals agricultural land. During the partition of Bengal in 1947, his grandfather along with all family members went to Paschim Banga in India, leaving all their land and property. When the conflict between the Hindus and Muslims ceased, they came back but found the Bengali Muslims had illegally occupied all of their land and property except for their homestead land and houses.

What they did: they accepted this land grabbing by the Bengali Muslims. They did not get back any portion of their land because of the Bengali Muslims' favourable/majority position in the locality. They avoided submitting to the local court a land grabbing case. They remained silent because they are minorities. They had no choice but to accept this suppression by local influential Bengali Muslims.

Sokhindra states: 'We the *adibashi* Oraon *khatriyas* do not like any conflict. We like peace. We asked the Bengali Muslims to help us but they did not help us. They asked us to show our land documents. We did not have any documents, and the Bengalis are still occupying our land. Previously, the entire territory – all the land surrounding our homestead – was ours, but today we do not have land to cultivate.'

As Bleie (1987) depicts, after the partition of Bengal in 1947, the abolition of the *zamindari* (land taxation) system in 1951 deprived many Oraons, and other ethnic minorities, from tenancy rights to the land that they had on tenancy contracts with local *zamindars*. Yet, as sharecropping was available to them, loss of tenancy rights to land did not have much effect on their livelihood (Bleie, 1987: 29). Nevertheless, and despite facing the loss of tenancy rights, some Oraons managed to keep their own lands. They managed their livelihoods by solely depending on agricultural products, and were self-sufficient by engaging as sharecroppers and/or cultivating their own lands. The following case depicts the process of land retention/loss in Barind during the abolition of the *zamindari* system in 1951.

Case study 4.3: Oraon land ownership in Barind during the abolition of the *zamindari* system in 1951

Badal Minji, aged 61 years old, lives in Bilpara of Ghoraghat sub-district of Dinajpur district. He is literate and a traditional/Sarna Oraon in belief. He is the *pradhan* (Oraon chief or headman) of Bilpara *padda panch* (a unit of Oraon traditional political organisation). Badal Minji is a former *adibashi* leader, who was also elected as member of local union council at

Ghoraghat. He depicts how after the abolition of the *zamindari* system in 1951, the educated as well as the local influential Bengali Muslim and Hindu peasants were able to register their lands in their own names. Likely, some Oraons, who were a little bit cleverer and better educated and interacted with the Hindu *zamindars*, registered lands in their names in return for services and the minimal amount of money owed to them.

These Oraons along with other ethnic communities, including the Santals, Mundas, Mahatos and others, also helped the then Hindu *zamindars* to flee to India. These *zamindars* also rendered their lands and property to some Oraons in return for services free of cost at the moment of their travel to India. Other than that, the Oraons along with other ethnic communities remained settled in their dwellings and habitat, which contained some lands, including the homestead and agricultural farm lands. This is because although the Oraons and other ethnic communities were basically the tenants or sharecroppers of the Hindu or Muslim *zamindars* in Barind, they owned not the minimal portion of land of the locality, but the vast majority of the land in Barind. The Hindu *zamindars* fled to India, while the Muslim ones/aristocrats remained staying in Barind with the landed property.

Although Oraons were able to register lands during the abolition of the *zamindari* system in 1951, they still faced land loss. The Oraons, along with other *adibashis* lost land because of the influence of literate Bengali Muslims, who had close contact with the then Hindu or Muslim *zamindars*. These influential/literate Bengali Muslims registered Oraon land in their names. This occurrence was both described in interviews with Oraon research participants and observed in the villages of Barind. The following case studies provide examples of Oraon land loss following the abolition of the *zamindari* system in 1951.

Case study 4.4: Oraon land loss in Udaypur following the abolition of the *zamindari* system in 1951

Mongoli Lakhra, aged 70 years old, an Oraon widow, lives in Dhappara of Mithapukur in Rangpur District. She lives alone and manages her subsistence by engaging in agricultural day labouring along with help from her relatives. She notes that her father-in-law had many lands in the past. They were well-off and managed their subsistence by the crops that they produced on their land. After the abolition of the *zamindari* system in 1951, the local influential Bengali Muslim peasants grabbed her father-in-law's 500 decimals of cultivable land, when she was a newly married bride at her in-law's house. This land grabbing incident is known to everyone in the locality,

but no one has helped them to reoccupy her father-in-law's land. She adds that there have been many incidents of land grabbing in the locality and that the Bengali Muslim peasants are still cultivating the Oraon land. The Oraons themselves cannot take any steps to reoccupy their grabbed land because of their economic crisis, illiteracy and lack of contact with the local administration.

Case study 4.5: Oraon land loss in Bilpara following the abolition of the *zamindari* system in 1951

According to Badal Minji, aged 61 years old, who heads the Oraon cluster at Bilpara of Ghoraghat in Dinajpur, Dhumro Oraon's sons, Charo and Mangro Oraon, lived in Bilpara. Charo Oraon passed away while his descendants and his younger brother – Mangro Oraon and his sons and daughters are still living in Bilpara. They had 2,000 decimals cultivable land in the locality. But after the abolition of the *zamindari* system in 1951 in the then East Pakistan – the present Bangladesh, local influential Bengali Muslim peasants, Mondol Saheb and Rafiq Rahman, illegally registered the entire land of Charo and Mangro Oraon in their names in the land tenancy record of 1962.

Charo and Mangro Oraon were unaware their land had been registered by certain local Muslim peasants because they were illiterate. They did not have contact with the local administration. After their land was registered and occupied by these Muslim peasants, Charo and Mangro Oraon could no longer cultivate their land. Because their land was occupied by these two local Bengali Muslim peasants, the descendants of Charo and Mangro Oraon now lead a hard life working on the land and in the houses of Bengali Muslim peasants.

Many other Oraons of Bilpara have similarly seen the illegal occupation of their land by local influential Bengali Muslim peasants. These incidents of occupation of Oraon land by the Bengali Muslim peasants have been a key factor in the Oraons' economic deterioration. Additionally, the Oraons and other ethnic communities faced economic differentiation because of the local landlords' profit maximisation, which sharpened their economic deterioration. As Bleie (1987:29) depicts:

Toward the end of the fifties the pauperisation and differentiation processes were characterised by a rather dramatic increase in the prices of sample crops relative to the wage level. The increase in the supply of labour power gave land owners a new room of manoeuvre to depress the wage level and to set

new conditions for the hiring of labour. One basic shift was the casualisation/individualisation of the wage market, individuals were now paid on [a] day basis.

The land owners paid the labourers by calculating the price of one kilogram of rice (staple crop) relative to daily wages. Thus, the Oraons, and other ethnic minorities, lost the opportunity for sharecropping. The Oraons, along with other ethnic communities and the relatively landless Bengali Muslims, had control over production activities through sharecropping. But the changing economic situation impacted their control over production activities and compelled them to earn their livelihood as agricultural day-labourers, even those who still owned a minimal amount of agricultural land.

At this point, I refer to the comments of Barakat *et al.* (2009) to broaden the understanding of Oraon economic deterioration or land loss. During the Pakistan period (1947-1971), specifically during the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965, threats and rumours that the Hindus would not be allowed to stay in the country flourished in East Pakistan. Fear drove many Oraons and other ethnic communities to leave their houses, land, and property and flee to India. In this situation, the local Bengali Muslims, taking advantage of this fear-factor, forcibly grabbed the lands of these people. Many of them sold land and other household property at lower prices. If an Oraon wanted to sell some land to the Bengali Muslims, the voiceless Oraon minority did not get the due price. Also, the written document of sale often varied from the oral agreement of an illiterate Oraon, which caused further land dispossession among these people (Barakat *et al.*, 2009: 177).

Falguni (2009) further elaborates on the reasons for and processes of land dispossession/economic deterioration among the ethnic communities in Bangladesh. The land deprivation of the ethnic communities in Barind began with the appropriation of the forest commons of the ethnic communities by the colonial Forest Department in the 1870s. The process of land grabbing actually commenced after the partition of Bengal in 1947 and the abolition of the *zamindari* system in 1951. This process of dispossession was sharpened after the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965 because of the Hindu-Muslim communal conflict in the country. This trend of land

appropriation continued in independent Bangladesh with the highest level of land grabbing during the period 1971-1980 (Falguni, 2009: 42-43).

In this regard, this study also documents that increased Oraon land loss that happened during the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971. Research participants stated that, although many Oraons and ethnic community members participated and contributed to the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, they lost their land and property during the liberation war. The influential local Bengali Muslims forcibly occupied their land and property because of their absence from the locality during the liberation war period of March-December, 1971. In this regard, one of my research participants provided the following example.

Case study 4.6: Oraon land loss in Binodpur during the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971

Keshori Minji, aged 46 years old, lives in Moddhyapara of Binodpur village in Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district. He is illiterate, and a traditional/Sarna Oraon in belief. He lives on his 10 decimals homestead land. Although he has no farm land, he sharecrops about 150 decimals agricultural land of a rich Bengali Muslim peasant. Keshori Minji manages subsistence for his family of five by both sharecropping and agricultural day-labouring. He notes that his father had 250 decimals agricultural land. During the independence war of Bangladesh in 1971, a local influential Bengali Muslim forcibly occupied all their land. When they tried to claim their land, this man threatened them with death. They could do nothing to reoccupy their land.

The following discussion also helps explain why Oraons have experienced land loss and economic deterioration. According to one of key informant, Clement Turkey, aged 47 years old, a literate/Christian Oraon, who works for Caritas, many Oraons, including Bukha Pandit and Funi Babu at Boldipukur village of Mithapukur sub-district in Rangpur district and Budhu Minji of Panchaghar district in Barind, had big farm landholdings. Yet, today no Oraons have such big landholdings. My research participants also argued that their deteriorating economic situation sharpened in recent years. The deteriorating economic situation of Oraons is also partly due to their internal conflict, lack of awareness, illiteracy, and land sale for medical treatment, marriage, funeral, drinking *haria* (rice-beer) and family management.

At this point, I state that the causes of Oraons' economic deterioration resemble that of many Bengali Muslims. Generally speaking, the Bengali Muslims, who were also insecure through lack of education, absence from home during the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971, lost land and property. Land loss, as well as economic deterioration, happened to both the ethnic minorities and many Bengali Muslims due to the intervention of local Bengali Muslim landlords. The economic situation of many Bengali Muslims has also deteriorated due to the burden of their family management, medical treatment, arranging marriage ceremonies, etc. Although Oraons' land loss and economic deterioration can be interpreted as a form of ethnic discrimination, such discrimination intersects with class differences that transcend ethnicity. I provide an explanation later of the Oraons' economic deterioration.

The Bengalis' entrance into the Oraon community for *haria* and illegal soil taking from their farm land are other causes of their present economic situation. Below are some cases of Oraon land loss, as depicted by research participants.

Case study 4.7: Internal conflict among Oraons over land occupation

Jogen Beck, aged 45 years old, lives in Moddhyapara of Ramwesarpara village in Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district. He is illiterate and an Oraon *khatriya*. He has 10 decimals homestead land. He earns subsistence for his family of five by agricultural day-labouring. About 10 years back in 2002, Jogen Beck was in a conflict with one of his paternal cousins, Chandra Beck, for control of their grandfather's 14 decimals farm land, which was actually left for some religious activities in the community. Also, Jogen and Chandra wanted to sell this land, but could sell it because they did not have any land documents. Meanwhile, a Bengali Muslim peasant understood the conflict between Jogen and Chandra. He supported Chandra with money in exchange for occupation of the land. The Bengali Muslim peasant occupied the land with the help of Chandra as he agreed to buy the land at a lower price than its market value against the wishes of Jogen. This intervention by the Bengali Muslim peasant created a conflict between these two Oraon brothers.

Case study 4.8: Oraon sells land for sister's marriage

Surin Ekka, aged 52 years, lives in Moddhyapara of Ramwesarpara village in Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district. He is illiterate and an

Oraon *khatriya*. He has five decimals homestead land and has no farm land. He earns subsistence for his family of six by agricultural day labouring. Surin narrated that about 20 years ago in 1992, they faced trouble because of crop failure, but his father had to arrange the marriage ceremony of Surin's sister. At that time, they were in so much economic strife that they had no choices of taking loans at that moment, which compelled them to sell their entire 30 decimals farm land. Since then, Surin along with his father has led a hard life. Surin's father passed away about 10 years ago. Surin has his own family now. He faces difficulties supporting his family of six. He cannot manage all his household expenses. He can neither manage three meals a day for all his family members nor afford clothing for his children.

Case study 4.9: Oraon land loss for drinking *haria* (rice-beer) and family management

Mongol Kujur, aged 44 years old, lives in Moddhyapara of Binodpur village at Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district. He has attempted elementary education and has passed class II. He lives on his 10 decimals homestead land, and has 17.5 decimals cultivable land. He also sharecrops 50 decimals farm land of a rich Bengali Muslim landowner. He earns subsistence for his family of three by self-farming, sharecropping and also by engaging in agricultural day-labouring in the fields of Bengali Muslim peasants. Mongol Kujur said that his father used to have 100 decimals farm land, but his father, along with his paternal uncles, drank a lot of *haria* not only at festivals but every day. They drank *haria* to forget their pains in life. By drinking *haria*, his father became sick and lost his physical strength to work, which placed him in economic crisis. Mongol Kujur's father had no alternative but to sell his minimal agricultural land.

According to Mongol Kujur, his father did not intend to sell his land to fund his drinking. What happened was that he went to a local rich Bengali Muslim peasant to borrow some money or some food grains to survive. He borrowed money or food grains from the local rich Bengali Muslim peasant, but didn't calculate the cost of those food grains along with the amount of money he borrowed. When the rich Bengali Muslim peasant asked Mongol Kujur's father to pay back the money, he could not repay the money so the rich Bengali peasant asked Mongol's father to give his land in exchange for the repayment of his loan and to work on that land during the agricultural season to pay back his remaining loan. Because Mongol's father could not repay his loans, he lost ownership over his 100 decimals farm land in the 1980s. Mongol Kujur depicts this Oraon incident as part of the general land grabbing process by the Bengali Muslim peasants in the locality. He adds that almost all of the Oraon people in the community were illiterate, easy-going and simple and that they trusted their Bengali-Muslim counterparts, but that the Bengali Muslims cheated these simple Oraon people.

Case study 4.10: Oraons' land sale for drinking *haria* and for treatment and a funeral

Momindro Beck, aged 50 years old, lives in Moddhyapara of Ramwesarpara village in Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district. He has passed class IX in his education. He is an Oraon *khatriya*. He has 10.5 decimals homestead land and has no farm land. He earns subsistence for his family of three by agricultural day-labouring. He depicts that his father had 75 decimals of agricultural land. His father was habituated to excessive drinking of *haria*. From drinking *haria*, his father became sick and passed away at an early age. Because of his father's sickness, about 15 years back in 1997, when his father was sick, he had to sell 75 decimals agricultural land for his father's treatment and for his funeral after he passed away. Thus, Momindro Beck blames *haria* drinking for his economic situation. He adds that if an Oraon becomes sick and needs treatment, he has no choice but to sell his property, whether moveable or immovable.

As observed, although the Oraons seek assistance from the local governments, they are refused as minorities. But the poor Bengali Muslims receive assistance from both the local governments and the local rich Bengali Muslim peasants. The local rich Bengali Muslim peasants feeling religious homogeneity with the poor Bengali Muslims help them economically. The Oraons, because of their socio-religious differences with the local rich Bengali Muslim peasants, hardly receive any economic help or assistance from the latter. Thus, the Oraons do not make any attempt to act collectively with the poor Bengali Muslims to seek assistance from either the local governments or the local rich Bengali Muslim peasants. The Oraons blame themselves for being too trusting or being weak-willed rather than looking at the wider social structures that foster their dispossession.

Case study 4.11: Oraon land loss because of Bengalis' entrance into the community for drinking *haria*

Victor Lakhra, aged 55 years old, is a Christian Oraon. He lives in Dinajpur. He directs Bangladesh Northern Evangelical Lutheran Church Development Foundation (BNELCDF). According to Lakhra, about 50 years back the Oraons drank *haria* at their festivals. They also drank *haria* during the cultivation season. During the cultivation season, they all work in a *gata/hawli* (working together by turns). At night, after the day long work in the field, the specific Oraon household arranges food and drink for all who worked in the field that day. The Oraons enjoyed *haria* in the past either at

their festivals or during their harvests. They did not consume *haria* at all times of the year. However, when the Oraons began to interact with the local Bengalis, the Bengalis also started drinking *haria*. The Bengalis asked the Oraons to prepare *haria* for them. *Haria* has become a popular alcoholic drink among the local Bengalis. Because of this entrance of the local Bengalis' into the Oraon community, the Bengalis got information on the Oraons and attempted to exploit the Oraons by grabbing their land and other household assets.

This case study, however, helps to understand the everyday relations between the Oraons and the Bengali Muslims. Although drinking *haria* is prohibited for the Bengali Muslims, many of them drink in secret under the cover of interacting with the Oraons. Also, I provide the cases of everyday relations and interactions between the Oraons and the Bengali Muslim peasants in chapter 6.

Case study 4.12: Illegal soil taking from the Oraons' farm land

Victor Lakhra also depicts illegal soil taking from the Oraons' farm land as an important reason for their economic deterioration. At his village home in Mithapukur of Rangpur, one day an Oraon, because of his economic crisis and family management, wanted to sell one foot of soil from his land to a local brick-field owner. But the owner of the brick-field illegally took away more than three feet of soil instead of one foot of soil from the Oraon's farm land. Because of this illegally excessive soil taking from the Oraon's farm land, he could not cultivate in the following agricultural season. As he could not cultivate his farm land properly, he again attempted to sell soil from his land for his subsistence. This time, the brick-field owner took so much soil from the Oraon's land that the farm land now looks like a pond. This is how some Oraons have lost their farm land so that they cannot cultivate anything on it to harvest.

At this point, I analyse the changing relations of the Oraon economy. The Oraons have faced many changing social conditions since their settlement in Chotonagpur and a long process of economic loss, from the time of the intervention of a Hindu King in 64 A.D. in Chotonagpur (see Tirkey 1989). They had to share their agricultural production to present tribute to the Hindu King and also faced autocracies, including Hindu, Muslim, and British consolidations, until 1947. All of

these consolidations thrust Oraons into specific social relationships. They remained/worked as the tenants of local Hindu or Muslim *zamindars* or local intermediaries including landlords or money-lenders. Thus, Oraons were subject to economic exploitation and even physical intimidation and torture, which has continued in Barind.

As described earlier, many events have contributed to the Oraon's deteriorating socio-political condition, including the partition of Bengal in 1947, the abolition of the *zamindari* system in 1951, economic differentiation in the late 1950s, communal uprising and the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965, and the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971. These events dramatically impacted Oraon economic life, as they were confronted with new and shifting social relationships. As a result of the Hindu-Muslim communal uprising the Oraons had to adjust to the social relationships of a new country – East Pakistan (Barind/Bangladesh) – a province of Pakistan. Although Oraons worked as the tenants of local *zamindars*, they lost this relationship through the abolition of *zamindari* system in 1951.

Some Oraons, who were better educated and had direct relationships to the local Hindu *zamindars*, became land owners negotiating with the latter at the moment of their departure from Barind to settle in India. Also, many Oraons, who failed to bag land ownership, became the sharecroppers of local Bengali Muslim landlords, and thus faced a new social relationship in place of their previous identity as tenants of local *zamindars*. Other Oraons also became agricultural day-labourers, as the local Bengali Muslim landlords attempted to maximise their profit. Oraons thus became a part of the local market economy and were proletarianised, while the Bengali Muslim landlords played a dominant role in the socio-economic sphere. Thus, Oraon people faced economic exploitation by dominant Bengali Muslim landlords in Barind.

Nevertheless, there are a few big farm land-owning households in the Oraon community, while most Oraons are farm land less. I argue that the Oraon community is stratified at least based on farm land-holding size. Although the big farm land-owning Oraons attempt to help their families, relatives, neighbours and close friends, they cannot help all the poor members in the community. As stated in chapter 2,

among all the communities in Barind, the land-owning peasants have formed an exploiting community by playing a dominant role in the socio-economic sphere. The social interactions, dominated by economic considerations, between the land-owning peasants and the poor people of all the communities have transformed the latter into an exploited class. In this regard, most Oraons are considered *ketmojurs* or *kamlas* (the landless agricultural labourers) or rural proletariats, while the land-owning peasants are considered *jotdars* (the rich peasants). This understanding of social classes helps to explain the economic situation of the Oraons intersects with class differences that transcend ethnicity to some extent.

The Oraons also faced a new social condition in Bangladesh as a result of its liberation war in 1971. After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, there was an upsurge of Bengali nationalism in Bangladesh that led to discriminatory practices against minorities, which is still prevalent in the governments' policy to favour the Bengali Muslim majorities. Although the government has development policies for the ethnic minorities, these are not culture-oriented and the minorities are not well addressed in the development process of the country. The Oraons are considered minorities or subalterns, who are 'subject to the activity of ruling groups' (Guha, 1981: vii) in Bangladesh. As subalterns, they face economic exploitation and suppression and are frustrated by local Bengali Muslim domination or intervention. They have lost land and property due to debt, resulting from circumstances such as their need to manage family affairs, secure treatment for ill health, and perform life-cycle rituals and other cultural festivals. Additionally, some have lost land due to taking loans to fund *haria* drinking habits that enabled them to forget the pains in life. Comprehension of these social conditions or relationships helps us understand the changing relations of Oraon economy in Barind/Bangladesh.

Oraon economy is embedded in particular social relationships. Referring to the works of Mauss (1900), Malinowski (1922), Firth (1929, 1972), Thurnwald (1932), Polanyi (1957a, 1957b), Gluckman (1955, 1965), Wolf (1968, 1982, 1990), Gellner (1989) and Nugent (1996), I state that Oraon social relationships help define their economy. The Oraons have been connected through social relationships with different actors over time, including the colonialist, local intermediaries, landlords,

money lenders or rich Bengali Muslim peasants. In other words, the social relationships of the Oraons, which help to define their changing economic condition, are connected with the ‘long-neglected issues of [their] local history’ (Roseberry, 1988; 1989) in Bangladesh society. The ‘regional settings and local history [condition]’ (Ortner 1984) of the Oraons, which affect ‘[their] social position’ (Wolf, 1982) in Bangladesh, also help understand their changing economic condition. Also, the ‘economic exploitation’ (Scott, 1976: 3) that the Oraons have faced over time helps to explain their present economic situation. I discuss their present economic situation in the following section.

The Present Economic Situation of Oraons

At present, almost all of the Oraons are agriculturally landless. The Oraons have become dependent on the wider Bengali Muslim society for their subsistence. The following discussion shows the present economic situation of the Oraons as well as their levels of subsistence and demonstrates how they manage basic needs and survival. The following paragraphs and tables describe their land²², occupation and income²³, expenses, savings and debts.

²²I calculate the land of the research participants as they provide information regarding their land holding at the moment I conduct household survey. I use a structured questionnaire in conducting household survey among the Oraons that I gather the land holding information from each of the research participants. I calculate the land of the research participants that I present in table 4.1. Also, I note that although landlessness is extensive across all ethnic and religious communities in Bangladesh, this study on the Oraon ethnic community comprises the data with other studies as mentioned in the text.

²³ I interviewed each of the research participants regarding their daily income at the moment of household survey using a structured questionnaire. I calculate their daily wages along with the local value of their agricultural products, if they produce any crop or rear cattle in their households. I also calculate the income of the research participants, if they manage subsistence by selling products, including *haria*, fuel (made of jute stick mixed with cowdung), a tree, etc., which they produce in their households. Calculating all these sources of income, I present the monthly income of the research participants or Oraon households in table 4.2. This calculated income of the research participants does not, however, include the income of other members of their households.

Table 4.1: Land of the research participants/household heads

Decimals/ land	Farm		Homestead		Mortgaged		Sharecropped	
	No.	Calculated land	No.	Calculated land	No.	Calculated land	No.	Calculated land
1 – 10	8	44	51	280.5	2	11	1	5.5
11 – 20	10	155	39	604.5	6	93	5	77.5
21 – 30	13	331.5	20	510	5	127.5	12	306
31 – 40	8	284	6	213	-	-	3	106.5
41 – 50	4	182	10	455	-	-	8	364
61 – 70	1	65.5	-	-	-	-	2	131
71 – 80	4	302	1	75.5	1	75.5	1	75.5
81 – 90	1	85.5	-	-	-	-	-	-
91 – 100	10	955	1	95.5	1	95.5	-	-
101 – 200	7	1053.5	-	-	-	-	1	150.5
201 – 300	11	2755.5	-	-	-	-	-	-
301 – 400	3	1051.5	1	-	-	-	-	-
401 – 500	2	901	-	-	-	-	-	-
501 – 600	1	550.5	-	-	-	-	-	-
701 – 800	2	1501	-	-	-	-	-	-
1000	1	1000	-	-	-	-	-	-
1150	2	2300	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	88	13517.5	203	2234	15	402.5	33	1216.5

Source: Fieldwork in Barind, 2011

As observed, from the total 260 research participants, 203 (78.08 per cent) live on their personal homestead land and the remaining 57 (21.92 per cent) do not have homestead land. The Oraons who do not have personal homestead land live either on their relatives' land or on community members' land. Also, 88 (33.85 per cent) of Oraons have farmland and practice self-farming over the year, while the remaining 172 (66.15 per cent) do not have any personal farm land. Of all the Oraons, 15 (5.77 per cent), who are landless Oraons, have taken mortgaged land for practising self-farming. Thirty three (12.69 per cent) of Oraons sharecrop the land either of their

community members or of neighbouring Bengali Muslim peasants. Table 4.1 shows that 88 Oraon households have a total cultivable land of 13,517.5 decimals. If I divide this amount of land for all Oraons (the total population is 1,072) in my study, I find the per-capita cultivable land of Oraons is 12.61 decimals. The data also describe that 203 Oraon households have a total homestead land of 2,234 decimals, i.e. the per-capita homestead land of Oraons is 8.59 decimals.

I also compare my data of cultivable and homestead land of Oraons to other sources. According to Barakat *et al.* (2009), about 53 per cent of Oraon households have landed property, which means they have both cultivable and homestead land (Barakat *et al.*, 2009: 175). The Integrated Community Development Project (ICDP) – Caritas Dinajpur, Bangladesh (2005) depicts the percentages of Oraon households having cultivable and homestead lands as 66.39 and 99.04 respectively (ICDP – Caritas Dinajpur, 2005: 24). I have found that 33.85 per cent of Oraon households have 153.61 decimals farm land. The remaining 66.15 per cent do not own any farm land. The data also reveal that 78.08 per cent of Oraon households have homestead land, while the rest (21.92 per cent) have none.

As Gain (1998) depicts, the per-capita amount of cultivable land available to the people of Bangladesh is about 20 decimals (Gain, 1998: vii). This study has found that the per-capita cultivable land of Oraons is 12.61 decimals. In another study, I also found that the per-capita cultivable land of Oraons is only 2.58 decimals in a cluster of 25 Oraon households in Chalkgopal village of Joypurhat district in Barind (Islam, 2012: 59). This data indicates that landlessness is prevalent among Oraons, but varies from cluster to cluster, in village to village, in Barind. However, Oraons' per-capita cultivable land (12.61 decimals) is an average per-capita cultivable landholding, calculating on the basis of 260 Oraon households in 11 clusters of five study villages in Barind. Also, most Oraons, who engage in agricultural day labouring in the fields of local rich Bengali Muslim peasants, have no farming land.

Landlessness and minimal access to cultivable land means that almost all Oraons manage their subsistence as agricultural day labourers. Wages earned by selling their labour to rich Bengali peasants are used to purchase food and food

grains for meals. Furthermore, the acute landlessness of Oraons has compelled them to engage in different occupations in order to manage their subsistence. They are engaged in various occupations, including van/rickshaw pulling, small shop keeping, construction works, garment works, rearing livestock (pigs and cattle), services at local shops and NGOs, tailoring, selling *haria*, barbering, fishing, hunting, and gathering food and fuel. Oraon land loss and engagement in different labour activities can be understood through the work of Scott (1976). Scott (1976: 13) describes how a relative lack of resources compels a peasant family to move into labour-absorbing activities with extremely low returns in order to meet subsistence; Oraons are no exception.

At this point in the discussion, I move on to describe the Oraon income situation and how they earn and manage their daily subsistence. I have observed that the daily wages of Oraons engaged in agricultural day labouring vary from village to village in Barind. The duration of daily work and the number of days Oraons get work also vary from village to village. Most Oraon agricultural day labourers cannot work all year round. The Oraons can work for only one and a half months during the six months of an agricultural season i.e. their daily income is only for the three months during the two agricultural seasons a year. For the remaining nine months of the year the Oraons' joblessness helps explain their economic situation. During the nine months without agricultural labour, some Oraons stay at home. Others travel to distant places for work or engage in other occupations. Thus, the Oraons experience short periods of 'labour intensity [and longer] stocks of unutilized time' (Chayanov 1986: 75-76) (Figure 4.1). The following case study of Buddha Lakhra corresponds to the livelihood strategies of almost all of the Oraons who are engaged in agricultural day-labouring for their daily subsistence and sheds light on how Oraons lead their lives during the remaining nine months of the year.

Case study 4.13: Oraons' income/jobless situation

Buddha Lakhra, aged 40 years old, lives in Dhipapara of Binodpur village in Mithapukur of Rangpur District. He is illiterate, and a Christian Oraon by religion. He has 10 decimals homestead land. He engages in agricultural day-labouring to earn subsistence for his family of three. But he

can hardly work three months during the two agricultural seasons a year. The remaining nine months a year he remains jobless. During the agricultural season, he can earn barely BDT 6,000 a month, i.e. BDT 18,000 a year. But he faces crisis to manage his family subsistence. Thus, he survives by searching i.e. gleaning for food grains including potatoes, eggplants and paddy that are left after cultivation in the fields of the local Bengali Muslim peasants. He also does fishing in the nearby ponds, canals and rivers. He also hunts tortoises, rabbits and rats in the neighbouring jungles. Besides this, he sometimes goes to the neighbouring villages, towns or city centres to find a job. By all these means, Buddha Lakhra tries to manage his subsistence; but he faces hardship.

As mentioned earlier, some Oraons also sell *haria* (rice-beer) to supplement their subsistence. The Bengali youths, vehicle pullers, or workers usually visit the Oraon households to consume *haria* recreationally. Some Bengalis also purchase *haria* to carry to their households for preservation and consumption at their leisure. The following case study illustrates how *haria* sale serves as a source of income for the Oraons' subsistence.

Case study 4.14: *Haria* as a source of income of Oraons

At the residence of Subash Minji (aged 65 years old) at Moddhyapara of Binodpur village in Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district, where I resided during my fieldwork, I observed that Subash Minji sells *haria* as his source of income. His customers include Bengali Muslim youths, local track drivers and also Oraons. Subash Minji is a traditional Oraon. He has no farm land. He earns subsistence for his family of two by sharecropping 100 decimals of farm land and by *haria* sale. He has also two cows for his subsistence from which he sells milk to buy groceries at the local village market. He has a son, who works in a garment industry in Dhaka, but the son does not help his father so Subash Minji leads a hard life. Because of his hard life, Subash Minji produces *haria* at his place and sells it to the local customers even though *haria* making and selling is illegal and the local administration sometimes raids the community for selling *haria*.

Subash Minji approximately sells a small pot of *haria* of one litre for BDT 100 (US\$ 1.20). As Subash Minji has no other alternative to make money other than his sharecropping and two cows, he has to produce *haria* to sell it for his subsistence. Previously the police raided his residence and he beat the policemen. Because of this, he was sentenced to jail and his brother had to sell their land to bail him out of jail. He said, 'I drink *haria*. We drink *haria*. The Bengali youths including many people also drink *haria*. Why

should I stop producing *haria*? I produce *haria* as a drink for me and also for my subsistence.’

The daily income of Oraons includes the income of research participants who do not depend on agricultural day-labouring, as well as the big farm land-owning research participants’ incomes. Thus, I consider the local value of one kilogram rice, or the other crops Oraon produce by either self-farming or sharecropping, in calculating their incomes. As Oraons have other income sources, including *haria* sale or cattle rearing, I have converted their income into local values. In addition, I also consider the income of household members who contribute to the economic management of an Oraon household head, as s/he takes decisions in all socio-economic activities. The Oraon income situation that I provide in this discussion is not only comprised of their daily labouring wages, but also of the income that they earn from engaging in self-farming, sharecropping, cattle rearing, or other occupations. Table 4.2 describes the average monthly income of Oraons.

The data reveal that Oraons earn on average²⁴ BDT²⁵ 4577.43 a month i.e. US\$ 57.22 a month or US\$ 1.91 a day (calculating US\$ 1 equivalent to BDT 80 in January 2012). As described earlier, the daily Oraon income of US\$ 1.91 is an average income, calculated on the basis of the whole annual income that they earn by engaging in different occupations. However, in a different study, I found that the daily income of a Santal or an Oraon family is approximately US\$ 1.5 (Islam, 2012: 67). Also, as Barakat *et al.* (2009: 170) note, a male Oraon farm labourer, who usually manages the subsistence for his family, earns BDT 105 a day (US\$ 1.32). The Integrated Community Development Project (ICDP) – Caritas Dinajpur, Bangladesh (2005) calculates that the daily income of an Oraon family is BDT 76 i.e. US\$ 1.27 (US\$1 = BDT 60 in June 2004) (ICDP – Caritas Dinajpur, 2005: 32). Comparing these studies, I argue that although the average daily income of the Oraons has increased during last few years, it is still minimal (US\$1.91) and they face great hardship in life.

²⁴This average income hides variation about the mean. For example, the lowest earning households earn less than BDT 4577.43 a month. I have calculated this average monthly income to draw an inference regarding the average income scenario for all Oraons in my study.

²⁵BDT refers to Bangladesh Taka/Bangladesh currency

Table 4.2: The average monthly income of an Oraon household

Monthly income in BDT	Number of Households	Calculated total income/BDT
1001 – 2000	21	31510.5
2001 – 3000	39	97519.5
3001 – 4000	69	241534.5
4001 – 5000	83	373541.5
5001 – 6000	12	66006
6001 – 7000	7	45503.5
7001 – 8000	4	30002
8001 – 9000	6	51003
9001 – 10000	4	38002
10001 – 11000	4	42002
11001 – 12000	3	34501.5
12001 – 13000	3	37501.5
13001 – 14000	2	27001
14001 – 15000	1	14500.5
15001+	4	60004
Total	260	1190133
The average monthly income of a household		4577.43

Source: Fieldwork in Barind, 2011

The data indicate that Oraons earn a minimal daily income, which means they face difficulties in managing their subsistence and subsequently lead a hard life. Also, as I stated earlier, the data depict that the earning and non-earning statuses of the observed 1072 Oraons are 561 (52.33 per cent) and 511 (47.69 per cent), respectively. The non-earning Oraons are usually dependents, composed of school-attending children and elderly members of the community. The Oraons try to survive on the income of the half of members of the community who are earning as the other half are non-earning/dependent. Because of this, they face difficulties paying for food (Figure 4.2), meeting expenses for treatment, education (Figure 4.3), clothing,

festivals and other daily necessities. Generally, the economic situation of the Oraons appears to be worsening, compared to their economic situation during the British colonial rule (1765-1947) and earlier. When I interviewed research participants about their present-day problems, they replied that they faced an economic crisis in life. Generally, in their group discussions, I found that the research participants depicted their present economic situation in the following way:

Today, we lead a hard life, but life was not so hard in the past. We had our golden past. We cannot now manage three meals a day. Our economic situation is so harsh that sometimes we have to starve. Except for a few of us, we do not have our farm land that we could cultivate. We live by day-labouring. We do not also get work all year round. About 75 per cent of us earn subsistence or live by hand to mouth. If we become sick and need to arrange our sons' or daughters' marriages or any other festival in the community, even like a funeral, we have nothing in hand and have to sell out our land, trees and household assets or cattle. Other than that our only recourse is to borrow with high interest either from NGOs or from local money-lenders.

The above discussion, on the subsistence situation of Oraons, helps explain their economic practices in the community. I have observed that the Oraons have developed means of arranging festivals, marriage ceremonies, or even funerals, despite their economic hardship. The landless Oraons, who lead a hard life, collect subscriptions from other households in the community to arrange such events. For example, if an Oraon comes to his/her relatives' place to attend a festival or life-cycle event, s/he brings some coins, grains, fuel (made of jute sticks mixed with cowdung) or a pot of *haria* (rice-beer) to contribute to the event. All Oraons contribute either economically or physically to such community events.

I argue that although the Oraons are landless, they practise a form of economic reciprocity or 'inter-household networks of reciprocity' (Smith, 2002: 247). Oraon economic/balanced reciprocity among the community members can be compared with the 'Indigenous Australian domestic moral economy, [which involves] ...investing resources in social relationships outside the family [or] ...sharing with kin' (Peterson & Taylor, 2003: 106). Oraon inter-

household/community networks of reciprocity constitute a form of domestic moral economic practice. Another form of Oraon economic practice involves borrowing to relieve their economic hardship. I discuss the monthly expenses, savings, and debts of Oraons below.

Table 4.3: The average monthly expenses of an Oraon household

Monthly expenses in BDT	Number of Households	Calculated total expenses
1001 – 2000	20	30010
2001 – 3000	40	100020
3001 – 4000	74	259037
4001 – 5000	86	387043
5001 – 6000	15	82507
6001 – 7000	8	52004
7001 – 8000	2	15001
8001 – 9000	3	25501.5
9001 – 10000	4	38002
10001 – 11000	1	10500.5
11001 – 12000	1	11500.5
12001 – 13000	1	12500.5
13001+	5	65005
Total	260	1088632
The average monthly expenses of a household		4187.05

Source: Fieldwork in Barind, 2011

A discussion on the monthly expenses, savings and loans/debts of Oraons further helps explain their present economic situation. The data presented in table 4.3 indicates that the monthly expenses of an Oraon family are BDT 4187.05 i.e. US\$ 52.34 (calculating US\$ 1 equivalent to BDT 80 in January 2012) or US\$ 1.74 a day. Their daily expenses (US\$ 1.74) are less than their daily income (US\$ 1.91), but the

Oraons are hardly able to save, unless they have extensive farm land holdings. The Oraons who have large farm land are almost self-sufficient. Nevertheless, according to Barakat *et al.* (2009), most Oraon households have some savings, either in cash or in deposit with NGOs²⁶ (Barakat *et al.*, 2009: 170). In particular, Oraons who are in debt with NGOs tend to deposit their weekly savings. But, in most cases, Oraon savings are used up because of their prevalent economic crisis. Despite their weekly deposits in NGOs, these Oraons remain in debt.

Information gathered from research participants indicates that 128 (49.23 per cent) of Oraons have taken loans. The sources of their loans are their community members, relatives (despite economic/balanced reciprocity among the community members, the Oraons borrow from their relatives), local money lenders, and NGOs. The local NGOs, including the Grameen Bank, Ashrai, Caritas, the local *Adibashi* (ethnic community) Club, Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), Uddipon, Dipshika, World Vision (WV) and Heed Bangladesh, are the most significant sources of loans for the Oraons. Oraons borrow money for various purposes, including food, medical treatment, housing, clothing, drink/*haria* (rice-beer), festivals or life-cycle events/funeral arrangements, children's education, daughter's marriages/dowries and son's marriages. They also borrow in order to run small businesses, repay loans or land mortgages, and to cover the costs associated with irrigation, taking land leases/mortgages, and buying land, cattle, or vans/rickshaws.

It is important to analyse how Oraons utilise credit. As stated in chapter 1, I endeavour to explore what happens to Oraons if they receive credit and what happens to them if they cannot repay their credit. If they become debtors, does this indebtedness have any impact on their livelihood? Also, do they maintain indebtedness strategically for livelihood management? Answering these questions elucidates the process of indebtedness of Oraons as an alternative livelihood strategy.

²⁶ A number of NGOs, including Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), Grameen Bank, Association for Social Advancement (ASA), Proshika, Dipshika, Ashrai, Caritas-Bangladesh, Uddipon and others work for the development of ethnic communities in the region. They have created some self-help groups, in which the Oraons or ethnic communities keep their savings, if they have any. However, this description does not fit for the source (Barakat *et al.*, 2009) I have referred to because the authors generally refer to the NGOs as there are many NGOs, which work among ethnic communities in the region.

Strategic Indebtedness

As stated earlier, because of the loss of their land, Oraons have move on to wage labour activities. Because of the priority of their subsistence and social and ceremonial obligations within the community, the Oraons who borrow cannot repay loans. They continue to borrow again and again and fall into a cycle of indebtedness. Given their prevalent economic-crisis, they cannot manage three meals a day along with other expenses, such as medical treatment, festival or funeral arrangements, marriages and children's education or clothing. Consequently, Oraons adopt alternative strategies for their livelihood management. The Oraons do not have any other alternative, but to borrow or sell their physical labour in advance. The cases below help in understanding their choices and alternative livelihood strategies:

Case study 4.15: Oraons' advanced sale of physical labour for subsistence

Kamol Tiggya, aged 50 years old, lives in *Paschim* Doihara in Gobindogonj sub-district of Gaibandha district. He lives on his 15 decimals homestead land. He is illiterate and manages subsistence as an agricultural day labourer from which he earns BDT 250 a day during the agricultural season. He gets work for three months out of the two agricultural seasons per year. He remains jobless during the other nine months of the year and hardly manages to make a living. This jobless condition compels him to sell his physical labour in advance at a lower wage at BDT 150 a day instead of BDT 250 a day. In 2011, he took BDT 5,000 in advance from a local rich Bengali Muslim peasant on the condition that he would repay the loan by working in the latter's field during the agricultural season. Because of this advanced sale of his physical labour and current subsistence during the agricultural season, Kamol Tiggya can neither repay the loan nor can earn more money that he still owes to the landlord after doing work. Moreover, because of his dire economic situation, he has been placed in a permanent process of advanced sale of physical labour to earn his subsistence. This case study of advanced sale of physical labour of Kamol Tiggya illustrates the livelihoodstrategies that some landless Oraons are forced to adopt.

Case study 4.16: Oraon's advanced sale of physical labour for daughter's marriage and for subsistence

Soma Ekka, aged 55 years old, lives in Bilpara village in Ghoraghat sub-district of Dinajpur district. He is illiterate and lives on his relative's land. He engages in agricultural day-labouring to earn subsistence for his

family of seven. About six years ago in 2006, he borrowed BDT 15,000 from a local influential Bengali Muslim peasant in exchange for advanced sale of physical labour in the latter's field. Soma Ekka borrowed this money to arrange his daughter's marriage ceremony. Because of the repayment of his loan, Soma Ekka and his wife and another daughter have been working on the Bengali Muslim's land during the two cultivation seasons a year for the last six years. They are only able to work for one and a half months out of the six months of an agricultural season, i.e. a calculation of two agricultural seasons per year. They remain jobless during the other nine months of the year. At the same time, they are also compelled to repay their loan. Because of this jobless condition and repayment of their loan, they endure a harsh economic situation by having to sell their physical labour in advance at a lower wage at BDT 150 a day instead of the usual wage of an agricultural day-labour at BDT 250 a day. In this calculation, Soma Ekka and his wife and daughter have so far paid BDT 9,000 out of the BDT 15,000 they owed.

In addition, Soma Ekka purchases food and other daily necessary goods from the grocery of a local money lender in the market place. During the last agricultural season, Soma Ekka purchased groceries of BDT 3,000. Of this, he could only pay half and arranged to pay the half during the next agricultural season. During the off-agricultural season, he does not have any work or money in hand, but his family of seven has to survive by purchasing groceries in advance from the local money lender in the market, again putting him in a situation where he has to repay the cost of groceries in the following agricultural season. Soma Ekka adds that if he becomes sick, he will not have any alternative but to borrow money and buy food from the grocery in advance. This way, he barely manages a living and cannot find any way to change his economic situation. Although Soma Ekka has a large family and some of his family members work as labourers, he cannot manage debt better because of current subsistence and repayment of previous loan.

Case study 4.17: Oraon borrows from an NGO and money-lender for medical treatment and subsistence

Mongol Kujur, aged 60 years old, lives in Purboopara of Binodpur village in Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district. He is illiterate and a Christian Oraon. He lives on his six decimals homestead land. He has also 30 decimals farm land. He manages the subsistence for his family of five by self-farming and also by engaging himself in agricultural day-labouring. He has no savings in hand and faces difficulties in earning subsistence for himself and his family. He suddenly became sick and could not manage money for his treatment. He sought help from his neighbours, including the Oraons and the local rich Bengali Muslim peasants. He got some help, but could not manage to cover the expense of his treatment.

In this situation, Mongol Kujur borrowed BDT 8,000 from the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC). Although he recovered

and started working for his subsistence and for his loan repayment, he could hardly find work. Because of his failure to earn subsistence and to repay the loan, he again borrowed money (BDT 20,000) from a local money lender in exchange for his physical labour in advance at a cheaper rate of BDT 150 a day instead of BDT 250 a day. This situation compels him along with his wife and two adult sons to work in the field and household of the local money lender. They cannot repay the loan because of their daily subsistence needs and also because of the nine months jobless situation each year. They have fallen into a permanent situation of debt to the money lender. The Oraons are compelled to maintain as a patron-client relationship with money-lenders for their survival.

Case study 4.18: Oraon borrows loan from an NGO for subsistence

Dimboo Kujur, aged 80 years old, lives in Purboopara of Binodpur village in Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district. He is illiterate and a Christian Oraon. He has only five decimals homestead land and does not have any farm land. He earns subsistence for his family, comprised of himself and his wife, by agricultural day-labouring. Also, he is elderly and cannot work hard for his subsistence. Although he has work age sons, they have established nuclear households and can hardly manage their own subsistence, so cannot help him (Dimboo Kujur). The Bengali peasants also do not like to hire him for agricultural day-labouring because of his old age. He finds work but cannot work like other Oraons in the locality. This situation compels him to borrow money. But because of his old age and also because of his lack of farm land, the Bengali peasants do not lend him money, as they feel insecure about getting back their money.

In this circumstance, Dimboo Kujur seeks a loan by attending a meeting of Ashrai – a local micro-credit organisation. Ashrai, taking into account his five decimals homestead land, allows Dimboo a loan of BDT 10,000 for his subsistence and household management. By getting this loan from Ashrai, Dimboo buys two small goats and a small cow to rear and to sell in future to make money. Still, he faces difficulties to repay the weekly instalment of his loan. The choice of Ashrai to give Dimboo a small loan is: if Dimboo fails to repay his loan, the Ashrai officials will take Dimboo's homestead land as a repayment of his loan. What will happen to Dimboo as a result of taking this loan from Ashrai? He will potentially lose his homestead land, if he fails to repay the loan. He will probably lose his land because of his age.

These case studies illustrate how Oraons borrow to manage subsistence. Because of their dire economic situation, Oraons borrow from either NGOs or rich Bengali Muslim peasants and local money lenders to manage subsistence and survive. They

borrow in exchange for the advance sale of their physical labour at a lower price. However, they cannot repay loans because of their current demands and the need to repay previous loans. As observed, this situation of indebtedness even puts them at risk of starvation. The Oraons are forced to develop a 'cliental relationship' (Scott, 1976: 9) with local money lenders or rich Bengali Muslim peasants as a strategy for their survival.

The strategic relations that Oraons maintain with Bengali Muslims in order to avoid the risk of starvation put them in a position of 'strategic indebtedness'. Oraons' strategic indebtedness can be interpreted as 'their actions in an apprehensible moral universe of consequentiality' (Acciaioli, 2004: 179) through which they manage subsistence. The Oraons engage in strategic indebtedness with the local rich Bengali Muslim peasants to satisfy their everyday moral subsistence/demands and their socio-cultural practices.

At this point, I argue that the Oraons are compelled to maintain strategic indebtedness with the dominant Bengali Muslims for their moral subsistence and the continuity of their socio-cultural practices. This informs their economic practices. This understanding of the relationship between cultural and economic practices of the Oraons is interpreted as Max Weber and Emile Durkheim propose, that people's 'values and social norms shape their economic actions' (see Blim, 2005: 306-307).

Also, Oraons' economic practices structure their socio-cultural practices, which can be interpreted as Marx states that 'human activity to reproduce its existence shapes human outlooks and ultimately what people believe' (see Blim, 2005: 306). Marx's statement helps understand the Oraons' economic situation that shapes their daily subsistence and socio-cultural life. The Oraons have stopped practising many aspects of their community festivals and ceremonies because of a deteriorating economic situation. Oraons' economic situation, thus, shapes their cultural values and norms, while their economic practices are the results of long-term relationships with the different actors, including the governments, local landlords, money-lenders and the dominant Bengali Muslim peasants. The Oraons seek to establish a form of relationship – 'strategic indebtedness' – with the dominant Bengali Muslim peasants for their daily subsistence and socio-cultural practice.

Thus, Oraons' socio-cultural practices and ceremonial obligations do not necessarily inform their economic practices; rather it is their economic practices that guide their cultural values and norms.

Oraons, thus, maintain strategic indebtedness with the dominant Bengali Muslim peasants for their survival. As observed, although they may wish to be free of debt, the Oraons cannot repay loans and remain debtors. Although the Oraons receive loans from either NGOs, money-lenders, relatives or friends; in most cases, they cannot change their economic situation utilising the loan because of their prevalent economic crisis and everyday subsistence and because they have to pay previous loans. The Oraons spend the loan/fund on their concurrent livelihood management and they cannot transform it into concrete resources to be used in the present or the future. Thus, for the Oraons, credit can best be termed as 'fictitious capital' (Marx, 1894: 595). Debt places the Oraons in a destructive position/a position of dependency both in the present and the future.

While debt places the Oraons in a destructive position and they face risk of starvation, strategic indebtedness can ensure their subsistence and socio-cultural practices. As discussed earlier, Oraons strategically maintain relationships with the dominant Bengali Muslim peasants for their survival. As the dominant Bengali Muslim peasants invest to maximise profits, they hire physical labour at a cheaper wage from the poor Oraons and engage them to work in the fields and households. This helps the Oraons to establish a cliental relationship with the dominant Bengali Muslim peasants. The cliental relationship of the Oraons with the dominant Bengali Muslim peasants is, in fact, a functional framework that allows the Oraons to establish 'personal relationships [...and] frames of reference' (L'Estoile, 2014: 62) with the latter to mobilise resources in order to respond to their economic precariousness. Thus, Oraons' strategic indebtedness as a survival strategy potentially offers them a long-term capacity to ensure subsistence, while the dominant Bengali Muslim peasants maximise profits utilising the Oraons' physical labour at a cheaper rate.

However, because of their indebtedness, Oraons face continuing exploitation by dominant Bengali Muslim peasants. I ask why Oraon people strategically indebt

themselves to Bengali Muslims peasants and money lenders when this strategy only leads to their further domination and exploitation. Do Oraon people have, or seek, any other choice? As Scott (1976) describes, the categories of the choices and adaptations, or survival strategies, of peasants are: (1) reliance on local forms of self-help; (2) reliance on the nonpeasant sector of the economy; (3) reliance on state-supported forms of patronage and assistance; and (4) reliance on religious or oppositionist structures of protection and assistance (Scott, 1976: 204).

As observed, the Oraons rely on local forms of self-help for survival because of their landlessness. The Oraons state that they lack state-supported forms of patronage and assistance because of the negligence of the Bangladeshi Governments. The governments do not have any direct programmes to assist and patronise the Oraons along with other ethnic communities for income-generating activities. The governments also do not enforce any law regarding the wage payments for the Oraons. Besides, the local Bengali Muslims are not sympathetic to Oraon problems, while the Oraons are simply blind to them and borrow from them. Oraons' borrowing from local Bengali Muslims can be interpreted as local help.

Although Oraons have turned from farming and agricultural labour to other economic activities, they are still exploited. These non-peasant economic activities are run by dominant Bengali Muslims who do not offer Oraons a healthy work environment that is conducive to their survival. The Bengali Muslims pay them less than the daily wage, but work them hard in the fields. They also engage the Oraons in household works in addition to their daily wage labour. The local rich Bengali Muslim peasants also demand the support of the Oraons, in local politics, to be elected as formal leaders of local Union Council. Thus, Oraon people have turned to religious conversion and opportunist structures of protection and assistance as survival strategies in the changing socio-economic context of Barind, a phenomenon that is discussed in the following chapter.



Figure 4.1: Oraons' jobless situation/drinking *haria* (rice-beer) at home (Photograph by Rafiul Islam, 2012)



Figure 4.2: Oraon subsistence during an evening with no electricity (top photo)/photo taken with a camera flash (bottom photo) (Photograph by Rafiul Islam, 2012)



Figure 4.3: Oraon children study at home in the evening with no electricity (top photo)/photo taken with a camera flash (bottom photo) (Photograph by Rafiul Islam, 2012)

Chapter 5

Oraon Differentiation: Christianisation, Hinduisation, Buddhisation and Islamisation

In this chapter, I discuss Oraon differentiation along the lines of religious conversion and identification as Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims. This discussion on Oraons' religious identifications aims to explore the reasons, whether it is their economic crisis that led them to convert, and/or whether there are other causal factors that have led to their conversion. As I have observed, some Oraons also practise what they refer to as their age-old beliefs, and they introduce themselves as Sarna Oraons. Despite this internal Oraon diversity, all Oraons identify themselves as 'Oraon'. I discuss this in the next chapter as a process of Oraonisation.

Oraon Religious Identifications

I argue that the Oraons have converted to Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam partly because of their economic crisis. Also, most Oraons consider the economic crisis is the main cause of their religious conversion. The Oraon Survey Committee of Bangladesh (OSCB, 1997) estimates that in Bangladesh as a whole, the Catholic Christian Oraon households are 1452, while the Protestant household amount to 317. The Hindu Oraon households number 2312, while the traditional or Sarna number 14,199. There are also 15 Muslim Oraon households (OSCB, 1997: 14). This religious differentiation among Oraons varies from my own data concerning Oraon differentiation, as my study does not cover all Oraon households in Bangladesh.

The present study was conducted in 11 clusters, in five villages of Barind, which contain 260 Oraon households. Of these, the majority, 94 (36.15 per cent), are Oraon *khatriyas* (members of the second Varna, according to the Hindu caste system), followed by 92 (35.39 per cent) Christian Oraons, 67 (25.77 per cent) traditional/Sarna Oraons and 7 (2.69 per cent) Buddhist Oraons. I did not find any Muslim Oraon households in my study area, but a process of Islamisation has been

identified based on the comments of research participants, as the following case study demonstrates:

Case study 5.1: Oraons' changing traditions and internal differentiation

Lalito Kujur, aged 55 years old, lives in Dhipapara of Binodpur village in Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district. He is a Christian Oraon and heads Binodpur *padda panch* (a unit of Oraon traditional political organisation). He has 350 decimals farm land and 26 decimals homestead land. He has also cattle, ponds and forests. With his land and property, he continues his family of six. He has passed the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examination. He states that Oraon traditions and cultures have been changed because of economic crisis.

Many Oraons also starve because of lack of work. The Oraons have no alternative but to seek support from different organisations, including government organisations (GOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), Christian missionaries and Buddhist monasteries. The Oraons visit these organisations to find help and facilities, including education, medical care, housing, economic and legal support. Lalito Kujur also states that 'we – the Oraon leaders cannot help our people because many Oraons are not well-enough to run families. Because of our economic problems, we have been converted to Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. Also, very few Oraons belong to our original belief and tradition. Still, we – the Oraons – organise in our *padda panch*, although our social structure is now weakened.'

Before providing an account of Oraon religious identifications, I briefly contextualise my analysis by considering ethnic communities in other parts of the world. According to Malefijt, Norbeck, Wallace, Lessa and Vogt (cited in Arefeen 2005: 30), ethnic community movements have occurred in many different regions of the world. Some movements are defined as nativistic, some are defined as revitalisation movements, and others as messianic movements. Yet others, particularly in Oceania, have been referred to as cargo cults. These movements originated alongside the emergence of European power. Although some of these movements emerged in the name of world religions, the ethnic communities were revolting against the cultural domination of European power. Economic crisis was another cause for these movements against European domination.

Rambo (1993), examining conversions in contemporary North America, argues that colonial powers disrupted and in some cases destroyed the existing socio-cultural realities of indigenous peoples. Another study, exploring the 'generational' aspects of conversions to Christianity in Igbo community of Nigeria, argues that, for the first generation, conversion was a decisive encounter with power; it subsequently developed into an anti-colonial and revivalist orientation, which gave birth to a firm Igbo identity instead of Christian Igbo (Okorochoa, 1987). According to Bara (1997), colonial ethnology in India describes how the ethnic communities regularly interact with external socio-economic forces. The Christian missionaries and their education inculcated a new sense of quality of life among the ethnic communities of Chotonagpur during the mid-19th century. The ethnic communities of Chotonagpur along with the northeast region of India joined the 'mass movement' of conversion to Christianity because they were attracted to egalitarianism and wanted to escape from the caste hierarchy of Hinduism (Bara, 1997: 785-786). Mathew (1982: 128) also notes that during the missionary movements of the British period in India, the term 'mass movement' was used to denote the religious changes in large groups of people, an entire village or a caste, whose members embraced Christianity.

However, religious conversion does not come only with the advent of colonialism. As Pati (2001) argues, conversion is a complex and multi-faceted process, which involves personal, cultural, social, economic and religious dimensions. People's class and social position in relation to dominant religions matter for their conversions into other religions (Pati, 2001: 4205-4206). Lincoln (1963) points out how the Black Muslims have embraced Islam to reject Christianity – the religion of the majority of white Americans. Describing the Black Muslim movement in America, Lincoln (1963: 29) notes that:

Because Christianity is 'the white man's religion', the repudiation of Christianity is an overt act of aggression against the white man. To be identified with a movement that openly rejects the fundamental values of the powerful majority is to increase vastly one's self esteem and one's stature among one's peers.

Mathew (1982) notes the conversion of an entire Harijan village to Islam in Tamil Nadu of India. The Harijans, who were victims of a dominant Hindu community's exploitation, found Islam advantageous in that it enabled them to enhance their social position. The Muslims in Tamil Nadu were in a better social position in government offices, businesses, and agriculture. Also, the 'sense of solidarity and equality among Muslims' (Mines 1978: 165) was a strong attraction to the despised Harijans in the face of extreme socio-economic suppression perpetrated on them by the upper caste Hindus in Tamil Nadu. The Harijans, thus, converted to Islam to join a religion which promised to treat them as equals (Mathew, 1982: 1028-1033).

Religious conversion often results from socio-economic exploitation by dominant religious groups. As observed, the Oraons of Bangladesh are both economically and culturally different from the dominant Bengali Muslims. Their economic crisis and their suppression by dominant Bengali Muslims are the root causes of Oraon religious conversion. The Oraons choose '...a new creed for a place of dignity and a competing great tradition giving their social/personal position against the dominant religious groups or social values' (Scott, 1976: 238). Many Oraons have embraced Christianity, Hinduism, or Buddhism, while some Oraons have been converted to Islam through economic exploitation. I discuss all of these changing processes of Oraon religious conversions below.

Christianisation

I first provide a discussion on Christianisation among Oraons. Describing the process of Christianisation among the Oraons, Tirkey (1999) states that the ethnic communities of south India came in contact with Christianity in the first century AD, while in north India, they embraced Christianity in the 19th century. The first Christian missionaries were Lutherans who came to Ranchi in 1845. Later, on June 9, 1850, Oraons became Christians, which was not a mass conversion among them. However, the Oraons embraced Christianity in Chotonagpur because of their economic loss, oppression, ill-treatment by their landlords, and threats to their

traditional religious beliefs (Tirkey, 1999: 135-139). Tirkey (1989) also describes social change among the Oraons of Chotonagpur. He comments that 'embracing Christianity not only meant salvation for their souls but also socio-economic stability, education and religious freedom especially from fear of evil spirits' (Tirkey, 1989: 29). I observe that there has been a process of Christianisation among the Oraons of Barind since the British India Government (1765-1947).

Based on my data and cases that I have collected through fieldwork in Barind, it is clear that the Christian Oraons (Figure 5.1) in the study area are better educated and have better economic activities than other Oraon groups. As part of their Christianisation, the Oraons have embraced many changes (Figure 5.2). These changes are documented in the case studies below.

Case study 5.2: Changing Oraon tradition/conversion into Christianity

Buddha Panna, aged 60 years old, lives in Purboopara of Binodpur village in Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district. He is illiterate and a Christian Oraon. He has been converted to Christianity because of economic, educational, clothing, shelter and medicinal support that his family and children receive from the Christian missionaries. He lives in his own homestead land of 25 decimals and has also 50 decimals farm land. He also engages in agricultural day-labouring to provide subsistence for his family of three. Buddha Panna notes that the Oraons have their own language, rituals, religion and festivals.

Also, he notes that the Oraons do not all follow their own culture. Today, many young Oraons cannot speak/do not practise *kurukh* or *sadri/khatoya*. The festivals are also changing in the community. Some Oraons also change religion because of an absence of a written codification of their traditions. Although some Oraons change religion because of an absence of their religious codification, other Oraons state that the main cause of their religious conversion is economic crisis. They change religion due to receiving educational, health and medicinal, shelter and clothing support from Church-based missionary activity in the region.

Case study 5.3: Christian missionary support among Oraons

Louda Bakla, aged 75 years old, lives in Dhipapara of Binodpur village in Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district. He is illiterate and a Christian Oraon. He lives on his own homestead land 12.5 decimals and has 40 decimals farm land. He earns subsistence for his family of five by self-

farming and also by agricultural day-labouring. He said that the Christian missionaries work for socio-economic development of the *adibashis* (ethnic communities).

The missionaries have been working among the *adibashis*, including the Oraons, Santals, Mundas and others for many years. The Oraons also receive facilities from the Christian missionaries. The facilities are medical treatment, shelter, education and income-generating support. The missionaries also send/sent some Oraon students for higher study abroad, including to Australia, England and Philippines. They also build Churches in clusters in villages of Christian Oraons for religious practices. These facilities offered by the missionaries attract the Oraons to be converted to Christianity.

Case study 5.4: Oraons' conversion into Christianity

Gobindo Ekka, aged 60 years old, lives in Moddhyapara of Ramwesarpara village in Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district. He has obtained elementary education to class V. He is an Oraon *khatriya*. He lives on his 1.5 decimals homestead land and has no farm land. However, he has taken a mortgage of 12.5 decimals farm land. He earns subsistence for his family of five by self-farming and agricultural day-labouring. He notes that in the past, the Oraons were self-sufficient by sharecropping as the tenants of local *zamindars*. But at present, almost all of the Oraons face economic hardship in life. Gobindo Ekka comments that many Oraons are willing to be converted to Christianity as the Christian missionaries help them economically. Adding to this statement, Gobindo Ekka states that although they are still performing *sonaton dharma* (Hindu religion), they observe many Oraons' conversion to Christianity.

Case study 5.5: Oraons embrace Christianity, but some remain *khatriya*

Etoya Tappo, aged 25 years old, lives in Tetalipara of Ramwesarpara village in Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district. He is literate and an Oraon *khatriya*. He has 12.5 decimals homestead land and 62 decimals farm land. He is engaged in self-farming for subsistence of his family of three. He depicts: 'We see our younger generation is much inclined to embrace Christianity to get economic and education support from the missionaries. Again, many of us also embrace Christianity, as we have no written document of religion. We also embrace Christianity because of the tendency of both the local Bengali Muslims and local administration to avoid our problems. They do not look into our problems, while the missionaries address our problems.' He adds that: 'I also wanted to be a Christian but my in-law's mother – an Oraon *khatriya*, forbids me to be a Christian so I still stay as an Oraon *khatriya*.'

Case study 5.6: Impact of Christianity on the Oraon community

Rabi Ekka, aged 35 years old, lives in Moddhyapara of Ramwesarpara village in Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district. He has completed education to class VIII. He is an Oraon *khatriya*. He lives on homestead land of 17 decimals and has 100 decimals farm land. He engages in self-farming and agricultural day-labouring to manage subsistence for his family of three. He depicts, today, the poor Oraons cannot afford all expenses for food, clothing, medical treatment, children's education and arranging festivals.

Many Oraons live from hand to mouth. Sometimes they have to starve, if they do not find any job, especially during the non-agricultural season. He calls for economic support: If any organisation helps them, they will find ways to survive. Stating this urgency, he comments: 'Many Oraons receive facilities from the missionaries. Why shouldn't they accept this missionary support, if they help the Oraons?' He adds that many Oraon children are supported by the missionaries for food and education, as they cannot afford even three meals a day. Because of their poor economic situation, many Oraons accept the missionary support and have embraced Christianity.

These case studies indicate that many Oraons have embraced Christianity because of their poor economic situation. They are compelled to seek support from both the governmental organisations (GOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) because they live in economic hardship. They embrace Christianity, as they receive more support from the missionary organisations than they do from any other organisation. According to my interviewees, the Christian missionaries support the Oraons by providing facilities, *including* food, shelter, medicine, education and legal support. Many Oraons are now Christians, as a result of Christian missionary support.

My fieldwork data indicates that increasing differentiation is occurring among the Oraons in terms of religious beliefs. For example, the Oraons of Ramwesarpara village in Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district introduce themselves as Oraon *khatriyas*. These Oraons follow specifically Hindu traditions. They differ from the Christian, Buddhist, and traditional/Sarna Oraons. Thus, at this point of my discussion, I will attempt to provide an account of the Hinduisation process among the Oraons.

Hinduisation

I have observed that a group of Oraons in my study area introduce themselves as ‘Oraon *khatriyas* or Hindus’. My research among the Oraons in Barind on the process by which some became ‘Hindus or Oraon *khatriyas*’ reveals that Hinduisation has deep roots in their society. The Oraons were organised through a process patronised by a local Hindu *zamindar* in Rangpur. The Hindu *zamindar* along with his Hindu intermediaries helped the Oraons to re-affirm Hinduism and their identity as ‘Oraon *khatriyas*’, in response to socio-economic exploitation towards the end of British rule. Oraons today retain and practise Hinduism, known as *poushankranti*, as a response to Bengali Muslim domination, which I describe below.

During my visit to the Oraons, I attended one of their biggest festivals, *poushankranti* on 15 January 2012. The Oraons enact this festival on the last day of the Bengali month *poush* (the ninth month of the Bengali Calendar²⁷). According to Singh *et al.* (2011), *poushankranti* is principally a re-affirmation process for Oraon *khatriyas*. This re-affirmation process has been practised for the past 82 years, that is, since the Bengali year 1337 or 1930 AD in the then East Bengal (Singh *et al.*, 2011: 6).

The Oraon *khatriyas* have a social grouping in Rangpur. The Oraon clusters in the thirteen villages of the Mithapukur and Pirgonj sub-districts in Rangpur district established a *samaj* (social grouping), an association with the name of Adibashi Oraon Khatriya Samity (AOKS). This social grouping of Oraons has thirteen *pradhan* (Oraon chief or headman), one from each village, and is headed by a *gurudev* (Hindu religious priest). All adult Oraon males and females of these villages are members of this *samaj*. These Oraons perform *poushankranti* through the presence and direct instructions of the *gurudev*. They perform this event in every *poush* month in a selected village.

²⁷The Bengali Calendar was inaugurated by Emperor Akbar – the Muslim Emperor of Undivided India during the 16th Century. Along with the help and guidance of his Royal Juries, Emperor Akbar introduced the Bengali Calendar of 12 months observing the 12 different changes of weather and nature of Bengal/India.

As mentioned, *poushankranti* was first held at the end of the *poush* month of 1337 Bengali year (1930 AD). The patronage of the then Hindu *zamindar*, Gopal Lal Roy Bahadur at Tajhat of Rangpur, and the inspiration of their first *gurudev*, Rabindranath Moitra, marked the inauguration of *poushankranti* among the Oraons in Barind. Rabindranath Moitra was born in Rangpur in 1301 Bengali year (1894 AD) and was a supporter of modern education. Rabindranath Moitra met Somra Vagot Singh, *aadibashi* Oraon leader, at Boldipukur of Rangpur in 1337. These Oraon leaders thought that the Oraons were originally Hindus, and then were later converted to different beliefs. According to this belief, Rabindranath Moitra and Somra Vagot Singh discussed the problems of Oraons. They attempted to find a way of revitalising the converted Oraons to preserve their existence.

The first *poushankranti* was held on the bank of the Ghaghot River in the Thakurbari village of Rangpur. As mentioned, the event was held under the patronage of Gopal Lal Roy Bahadur at Tajhat of Rangpur, the first *gurudev* along with Somra Vagot Singh, an Oraon leader in 1337. This event was also attended by other landed aristocrats of Tajhat Estate of Rangpur, who were all Hindus, including Surendra Chandra Roy Chowdhury, Mahima Ranjon Banerjee, Pramod Ranjon Banerjee, Atul Chandra Guha Mitra, Nagendranath Lahiri and Satish Chandra Chattopadhyaya. The then Hindu priests, advocates, journalists, civil contractors, and more than a thousand villagers also observed the event. At this event, about 300 converted Christian Oraons were re-affirmed as Oraon *khatriyas* under the leadership of Rabindranath Moitra. Since then (1930 AD), a large number of Oraons have been re-affirmed as Oraon *khatriyas* under the leadership of different *gurudev*s, including Rothindranath Moitra, Prakas Chandra Chowdhury and Pradip Kumar Chowdhury (Singh *et al.*, 2011: 4-5). Presently, this re-affirmation process of Oraons is held every year at the end of *poush* month under the leadership of a *gurudev* – Putul Kumar Majumdar.

The functionaries of the British India Government were under threat by the end of the British regime (1765-1947). An anti-British India Government movement was active in the region, and the local Hindu *zamindars*, aristocrats and educated personalities were also working against the government. The local leaders, including

the *zamindars*, organised their subjects, including the ethnic communities, who had converted to Christianity, while the Hindu aristocrats or educated personalities played the role of re-affirming the commoners, including the Oraons as Oraon *khatriyas*. However, economic exploitation by mainstream British India during the colonial era was the other cause of this Oraon re-affirmation as Oraon *khatriyas*, who were organised under the banner of Adibashi Oraon Khatriya Samity in Rangpur region. The Oraons retained this social grouping, which is still active in Barind. They celebrate *poushankranti* every year in order to re-affirm both Oraon males and females as Oraon *khatriyas*. Adibashi Oraon Khatriya Samity works as a common ground for Oraon *khatriyas* where they discuss and attempt to solve the problems associated with Bengali domination in the region.

In 2012, the Oraon *khatriyas* performed *poushankranti* at Shokhipur – a village adjacent to one of my study villages – Ramwesarpara. Ramwesarpara is one of those thirteen villages of the Oraon *khatriyas*' *samaj* grouping. The other twelve villages are Shokhipur, Boro Hajratpur, Choto Hajratpur, Moddhyapara, Vagobatipur, Paharpur, Shogna, Modipur, Tarafkamon, Adampur, Kathali and Boldipukur of Mithapukur and Pirgonj sub-districts in Rangpur district (Singh *et al.*, 2011). The Oraons living in clusters of these villages collect subscriptions of 100 BDT and one kilogram rice from each of their households. Poorer Oraon households contribute less, according to their ability to participate in *poushankranti*. In 2012, the total cash collection for performing the event was about 35,000 BDT. With this money, the Oraon *khatriyas* prepared food including *khichuri* (a food made of rice, lentils and vegetables, but no chili as a ritual prescription) and *ghonto* (a food made of vegetables only, no chili) for their feast. Also, before starting to cook, they performed specific rituals in the name of the creator for a successful completion of their day-long event –*poushankranti* – by offering a feast at the end (Figure 5.3).

During *poushankranti*, the *gurudev* firstly worships *Shiba Ram* (a Hindu god – controller/destroyer of the world), as according to the Oraon *khatriyas*, they are the descendants of *Shiba Ram*. Then, he starts re-affirming the Oraon females first. Only married adult Oraon females are re-affirmed by *gurudev*. Young unmarried Oraon females cannot be re-affirmed as Oraon *khatriyas*. The re-affirmation of Oraon

females is conducted in accordance with the will of the Oraon males, as they are the heads of their families and maintain all decision making powers within the community. Adult Oraon males, aged over fifteen years, are re-affirmed every year during *poushankranti*. As part of the process of their re-affirmation, the adult Oraon males, firstly, cut their hair completely and wear *poita* (a long piece of white coloured cotton thread) threaded their necks and the bottom part of their abdomen. Then, they are offered sacred banana, which is placed in their hands, but which they cannot eat. They sit in rows on the earth under a shade. The shade is made of cloths surrounded by human pillars (Figure 5.4).

The *gurudev* and one of his assistants along with the re-affirming Oraons, are placed under the shade. *Gurudev* and his assistant perform some rituals under the shade which are not seen by the audience. After performing the rituals, the Oraons come out from the shade and throw away the sacred food banana, which they have taken into their mouth this time, but have not eaten during the ritual performance. Then, the re-affirmed Oraons take a bath and paint some tattoos on their foreheads. The re-affirmed adult Oraon males and married Oraon females do not take food until the whole process of re-affirmation is completed by the *gurudev*.

In the next step of *poushankranti*, the *gurudev* discusses the Oraons' religious beliefs and their presence in Bangladesh. The *gurudev* with the help of his written materials depicts the traditions and history of the Oraons as Oraon *khatriyas*. Discussions of their history and advice to remain as Oraon *khatriyas* are also delivered by the specific *pradhan* (Oraon chief or headman) of each village of their *samaj* (society) groupings (Figure 5.5). After this discussion, the Oraon *khatriyas* also perform a cultural program (Figure 5.6), when the feast starts. Finally, at the end of the event, they play a *kirton* (song) in the name of the merciful creator and seek forgiveness from all participants for any mistakes they may have made in arranging the event – *poushankranti*.

At this point of my discussion, after describing the Oraon *poushankranti*, I offer some insights into the significance of this event. The collection of money and arrangement of the *poushankranti* and its relationship with the establishment of the Adibashi Oraon Khatriya Samity require explanation. According to the research

participants I interviewed, the collected money and grains for arranging *poushankranti* are not immediately spent. The Oraon *khatriyas* deposit the collected money in the Adibashi Oraon Khatriya Samity fund at Vagobatipur. In this regard, Ram Chandra Singh Minji, about 80 years old, of Ramwesarpara states:

We deposit our savings in our welfare fund account in a bank. So far, the savings is about 300,000 BDT. We also raise funds by collecting subscriptions from each of our households in the name of the Adibashi Oraon Khatriya Samity welfare fund. This fund raising helps extend our activities including our representation, negotiation or discussion about our problems with local government administration. We also plan to buy a small piece of land at Vagobatipur village to establish a temple through which we will continue our re-affirmation process in future. We also utilise this fund to help the poor households for arranging marriage ceremonies, performing funerals, children's education, treatment or planning to establish temples in different Oraon clusters in villages. These functions of Adibashi Oraon Khatriya Samity help represent our solidarity and integrity as Oraon *khatriyas* in the region.

With this discussion in mind, I refer to a comment made by an Oraon leader, Khalko (2009). He argues that the Oraons lived in Bangladesh before the Aryans or the Hindus invaded India/Bengal. The latter defeated the former in the battle of *kurukhattro*²⁸. The Aryans or the Hindus occupied their position in Bengal after the Oraons – non-Aryans (Khalko, 2009: 13-14). This historic description is also supported by a young Oraon – Ratan Minji of Paharpur village of Pirgonj sub-district of Rangpur district – a graduate student at Rajshahi University. Although Ratan Minji attends the *poushankranti*, he rejects the Oraon *khatriya* designation. He introduces himself as a traditional/Sarna Oraon. He states:

We drink *haria* (rice-beer) in our marriage ceremony. Even to this day, if we are not able to offer *haria* to *agua*, the middle man of a marriage ceremony, the marriage event will not get perfection in practice. *Gurudev* at

²⁸ As mentioned earlier in chapter 3, the Oraons of Shahabad district, believe that the Hindus dislodged them from Rohtasgarh fort (Roy, 2004: 26). Also, about 1500 BC, the Aryans – the Hindus, from Hungary and Mesopotamian, entered into India through its north-western corner. These Aryans defeated the Oraons at Rohtasgarh fort, known as the battle of *kurukhattro* (Khalko 2009: 13-14).

pousshankranti advises us for not to drink *haria*. Still, we drink and offer *haria* to our guests at different events and ceremonies in our community.

Thus, the statement of Ratan Minji and the description stated by Khalko (2009) contrasts with *pousshankranti* – the re-affirmation process of Oraons as Oraon *khatriyas*. *Pousshankranti* is, thus, a process of re-affirmation among the Oraons. As far as my research indicates, the re-affirmation process of Oraon *khatriyas* through *pousshankranti* is not yet widely known among the people of Bangladesh. My investigations into the event help understand the process of Hinduisation among the Oraons in Bangladesh. While Adibashi Oraon Khatriya Samity acts as a common ground for the Oraon *khatriyas*, other Oraons, including the Buddhist Oraons have different platform to act against the economic exploitation of local Bengali Muslims.

Buddhisiation

Some Oraons, being motivated by socio-economic support from the Buddhist monasteries, specifically introduce themselves as Buddhist Oraons. Thus, I also provide an account of Buddhisiation among the Oraons. In order to determine the number and presence of Buddhist Oraons, I visited the Benuban Buddhist Temple (BBT) at Mithapukur of Rangpur with which the Buddhist Oraons in my study area are affiliated. Interviewing the officials of Benuban Buddhist Temple at Mithapukur, I estimate that about 135 Oraon households²⁹ are affiliated with this temple, having been converted to Buddhism.

The conversion process of Oraons to Buddhism started in 1994 in Barind. This process is a comparatively new one in comparison to the process of Hinduisation, which started in 1930 in Barind (Singh *et al.*, 2011) and Christianisation, which actually started in 1845 in Ranchi of Chotonagpur of undivided India (Khalko, 1985; Tirkey, 1999).

²⁹ These Oraon households are close to the Mithapukur sub-district headquarters at Rangpur, and have not been interviewed within the study samples. Rather, among the Oraons who have attended *pahela boishak*, some Oraon leaders have been interviewed from the purpose of the study.

I visited the Benuban Buddhist Temple on *pahela* (the first day) of *boishak* (the first Bengali month) 1419 – the Bengali New Year festival on 14 April 2012. This event is the biggest festival of the Buddhist Oraons in the region. At this event, firstly, I talked to the Caretaker of Benuban Buddhist Temple – Ganendra Mohan Karmakar, who himself was converted from the Hindu community. According to Ganendra:

The Benuban Buddhist Temple is a Bangladeshi owned institution. Also, this temple is visited and financially helped by the representatives of different Buddhist countries, including Myanmar, Thailand, China, Japan and Sri Lanka. The temple comes at different socio-economic activities, including coaching for education of school/college attending Oraons, social forestry, medical help and the *mahila* (female) *samity* (association) in the community. In other words, the objective of this temple is to keep the *adibashis* (indigenous peoples) free from starving, diseases and economic crisis through education, training, social forestry, land mortgage recovery program, awareness building and by performing daily prayer. These socio-economic activities are conducted for the Oraon *adibashis* to enhance their situation as these peoples are not well addressed in the development process of the country.

During the event – *pahela boishak* of 1419 Bengali Year and 2556 Buddhaera, 14 April 2012, I observed the practices of Oraons at the temple. The Oraons first performed their worship at the temple. Afterwards, a feast was cooked by the temple members and offered to the Oraons (Figure 5.7), to which the Oraons also contributed according to their will and ability. During the feast, I observed that the Oraons who face economic crisis and are not able to afford three meals a day are attracted by the feast offered by the temple. In other words, the temple offers a festive environment to the Oraons. However, after offering a feast to the Oraons, the temple arranges a discussion for the Oraon audience followed by a cultural programme (Figure 5.8). According to a discussant at the event, Gautami Sri Moni, a female *bhikkhu* (Buddhist religious priest) and a delegate from Chittagong – an industrial city situated in the south of Bangladesh:

Archaeological evidence, including Mahasthan³⁰, Paharpur³¹ and Mainamati³² along with other ancient Buddhist sites in the country help prove the Buddhist background of people in Bangladesh. You – the Oraons were the followers of Gautama Buddha since before 2500 years ago. Meanwhile, you were motivated by other practices and were not worshipping Buddha. You have again been motivated as Buddhists and will be practising Buddhism for your peace and prosperity in life.

However, I talked to the president of the Benuban Buddhist Temple, an Oraon, Gandhu Tappo, aged about 60 years old, who donated the land to establish the temple. He stated:

Being motivated by Joti Bikas Barua – a Buddhist personality who had been working as an engineer for the Bangladesh Road and Transportation Authority (BRTA) at Rangpur, I donated the land first to establish this temple. Joti Bikas Barua visited Mithapukur in 1994 and observed the practices of Oraons. Observing the practices of Oraons, Joti Bikas Barua interpreted that the Oraons also practise Buddhism and there is nothing different between the religious practices of us and that of the Buddhists. Joti Bikas Barua then invited the Oraons to attend the International Buddhist Temple at Dhaka. According to his invitation, two Oraons, Hari Minji and Dino Minji, visited the International Buddhist Temple at Dhaka. Later on, this temple – the Benuban Buddhist Temple at Mithapukur – was first established in Northern Bangladesh. As a continuation of our activities for improving the fate of these deprived Oraons along with other *adibashis* [ethnic communities], 18 Buddhist Temples have been established in Barind.

³⁰ This ancient city of Pundranagar is now buried deep in Mahasthan, spreading along the western bank of Karatoya at five miles north of the present Bogra administrative district in Bangladesh. The city came into existence in the 3rd century BC and it continued to flourish up to the 16th century AD. It was the provincial administrative headquarters of successively, the Mauryans, the Gupats, the Palas and other lesser known under Hindu dynasties (Barua, 2011: 63).

³¹ The biggest single Buddhist Vihar/Temple south of the Himalayas is Paharpur Vihar, previously known as Sompura Vihara in Naogan district near the border of Joypurhat district in Barind. This great monastery was built by the great Pala emperor Dharmapala (770-810). The huge quadrangular monastery covers an area of 27 acres (922ft. north-south and 919 ft. east-west) with 177 monastic cells enclosing the courtyard, numerous votive stupas, minor chapels, ancillary buildings and a majestic spectacular central shrine at the centre. In 1985, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) declared Paharpur Buddhist Vihar (PBV) a World Heritage Site (WHS) (Barua, 2011: 64-65).

³² Half to one and half a miles wide and eleven miles long, an isolated low hill range known as the Mainamati-Lalmal range runs through the middle of the Comilla district from north to south. Average height of the hills is only 50ft., some peaks rise upto 150ft. or more. The northern part of the range is known as Mainamati and the southern part is known as Lalmal or 'Red Hill' because of the red colour of the soil. This glorious ancient city also met the same fate of all other ancient Buddhist sites of the Indian sub-continent. With time, the abundant site was fully covered with bush and jungles (Barua, 2011: 65).

I also attempted to explore the religious practices that the Oraons performed before converting to Buddhism. I asked Gandhu Tappo: ‘How did you perform your religious practices previously?’ He replied:

We performed our religious practices by gathering all Oraons in the courtyard of one of our households in the community. We worshipped in front of a tree situated in our courtyard by raising a white flag from morning to noon in order to earn the kindness of our creator. We performed our religious practice in this way from our grandparents’ generation by raising white flag, which was different from the Buddhists’ flag. Now, we have established this temple to extend/execute our Buddhist practices, as well as socio-economic activities, including a coaching centre for education/good results of school/college-attending Oraons, social forestry and medicinal support in the community, sewing and a *mahila* [female] *samity* [association] (Figure 5.9) for the female Oraons. We have also a plan to establish a school to extend education among the Oraons.

In addition, I interviewed specific Oraons to explore age-old religious beliefs and practices before conversion. I interviewed Dino Minji, aged about 50 years old, the accountant of the temple: ‘What and how did your ancestors perform your religious practice?’ He replied: ‘We performed our religious practice in the courtyard of our household by raising *tanaparni* - two white flags - a smaller one and a comparatively bigger one than the smaller one, in front of our sacred small tree - *tulshi*. Previously, in our religious practice, we did not worship Gautama Buddha, we only worshiped and shouted for the kindness of our creator’. Dino Minji's statement regarding their previous religious practice was approved by another research participant, Shuka Minji, aged about 90 years old, on the day/event of *pahela boishak* 1419 at the Benuban Buddhist Temple at Mithapukur of Rangpur.

The statements of Gautami Sri Moni, Gandhu Tappo, Dino Minji and Shuka Minji regarding age-old Oraon religious beliefs and practices of Buddhism point to a contrast/contradiction between the religious practices of Buddhist Oraons and their religious practices prior to conversion. The statement by Dino Minji, supported by Shuka Minji, describes the ancient Oraon practice of *tanaparni* or *parni*. This practice of *parni* is still performed by some Oraons at Mithapukur of Rangpur, as

stated by Dino Minji. Additionally, the practice of *parni* is also depicted as an Oraon age-old religious practice by Khalko (1985: 47). At this point, I provide the comments of one of my key informants regarding the Oraons' age-old religious belief and practice. In an interview on 12 April 2012, Arun Khalko, a Christian Oraon, aged about 70 years old, who lives in Boldipukur Christian Mission compound at Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district, commented:

About 550 BC, the Oraons settled in Ranchi of Chotonagpur by clearing the large hilly and jungle bushes. The Oraons observed the territory as a fertile land for their livelihood. They observed nature, trees, flowers, fruits, rivers, canals, the directions of wind and rain, and thought that all these things and events are of course directed by some supernatural power or by someone who is supposed to be powerful in this world and who has a life. By thinking and observing nature in this way, the Oraons started to worship *dharmes* [the Oraon god] by slaughtering white goats and chickens. They also formulated a symbol of worshipping *dharmes*, which is known as *danda-kattna*. The seven circles of *danda-kattna* refer to the seven directions of wind according to the observation of Oraons. The middle circle is for placing an egg as a symbol of a soul to worship *dharmes*. The rooted-crossing stick is for the symbol of cultivating the soil as per the blessing of *dharmes*. This age-old religious symbol for Oraons prevailed for centuries. Also, during the early days of Oraons in Chotonagpur they had no religious leader like Mohamed [Mohammad (sm.)] among the Muslims or Jesus Christ among the Christians.

Oraons receive economic benefits from the Buddhist Temple. The Buddhist Temple leaders attend to Oraons by directly going to their clusters or villages. They bring rice, medicine, educational materials for Oraon children, and clothing for the Oraons. They give these materials to the Oraons and ask them to gather in the villages to discuss Gautama Buddha. The Buddhist leaders participate in these discussions in order to encourage Oraons to convert to Buddhism. I argue that the Oraons embrace Buddhism because of their economic situation. Also, I observed a contrast between Buddhist Oraons and Oraon *khatriyas* in one of my study villages, which is provided in the following case study.

Case study 5.7: Buddhist Oraons differ from/invoke Oraon *khatriyas*

Fulbala Tappo, aged 37 years old, lives in Tetalipara of Ramwesarpara village in Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district. She is illiterate and a widow. She lives in her father's land along with her mother and her younger sister's family. She heads their family of seven. All their family incomes are shared by her, her sister and her sister's husband. They manage the subsistence of their joint/extended household by agricultural day-labouring and by share-cropping 38 decimals farm land. She depicts that: 'If invited, the Buddhist Oraons attend the festivals of Oraon *khatriyas*, but they [Oraon *khatriyas*] do not attend the Buddhist Oraons' festivals.' The Buddhist Oraons invite the Oraon *khatriyas* to attend their annual festival – *pahela boishak* – the biggest festival of Buddhist Oraons, which is held once a year at the Benuban Buddhist Temple in Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district. During this festival, which the Oraon *khatriyas* refuse to attend, the Oraons redefine themselves as Buddhist Oraons. The Buddhist Oraons, today, redefine themselves as the followers of Gautama Buddha about 2000 years ago.

Oraon conversion to Buddhism is similar to their conversion to Christianity or Hinduism. As I observed, Oraons appear to embrace Christianity or Hinduism or Buddhism predominantly because of their prevalent economic crisis. The Oraons, thus, introduce themselves either as Christians or Hindus/Oraon *khatriyas* or as Buddhists, although all are 'Oraon', as they state. Also, some Oraons have been converted to Islam. The reasons for their conversion to Islam are provided below.

Islamisation

As previously discussed, the local Bengali Muslims exploit the Oraons in every socio-economic sphere of Barind. The Oraons' economic exploitation by the local Bengali Muslim peasants' fraudulent actions, including illegal land appropriation, low wages and sexual harassment, permeates every aspect of Oraons' lives. This situation helps define the relationships between the Oraons and the Bengali Muslim peasants. The Oraons do not share intimate feelings with local Bengali Muslims. Instead, they feel more comfortable interacting with other ethnic communities with whom they identify in common as minorities. Despite this, some Oraons seek economic help from the local rich Bengali Muslim peasants through conversion. But

the Muslim Oraons are sometimes cheated and do not get any economic help, as I observed during my field work in Barind in 2012. The following case study documents Oraon land loss and Islamisation:

Case study 5.8: Oraon's land loss and Islamisation

A Muslim Oraon named Gabriel Minji lives in *Paschim* (west) Doihara of Gobindaganj at Gaibandha. He had three acres of cultivable land. He is illiterate and used to drink a lot of *haria* (rice beer) before his conversion to Islam. Gabriel's drinking habit led him to attempt to sell parts of his land, his cattle and household goods, including furniture, utensils, and so on. About 25 years ago in 1987, he attempted to sell three *bighas* of his land to a local Bengali Muslim peasant. The Bengali Muslim took advantage of Gabriel's illiteracy to register three acres of Gabriel's land instead of three *bighas*. Gabriel and his family did not know about this illegal registration of their land. In the cultivation season, they attempted to plough the rest of their land, but the Bengali Muslim told them not to till the land, claiming the land had been sold to him by Gabriel. Gabriel with the support of other Oraons argued that he did not sell all of his land, yet he was unable to re-occupy the land due to the Bengali Muslim's iron hand.

Later, Gabriel attempted to sell his remaining homestead and 20 decimals land in order to cover his *haria* drinking expenses. This time, his family and members of the community forbade Gabriel to sell his land and compelled him to register the homestead in the name of his sons and daughters. Thus, Gabriel turned to the local Bengali Muslim peasants to get the money to satisfy his drinking habit. The local Bengali Muslim peasants asked Gabriel to leave his community and to convert to Islam as a condition of their economic help to get back his land from his sons and daughters so that he could eventually sell it to them. In accordance with this conditional agreement, Gabriel has become a Muslim and has taken the name Md. Mokhlesur Rahman. However, Md. Mokhlesur Rahman was given neither economic help nor any support by the Bengali Muslim peasants to get back his land from his Oraon sons and daughters. Md. Mokhlesur Rahman, 57 years old, now begs from door to door in the Muslim community.

When I talked to Gabriel's son, Ilio Minji, he could not express his pain in the presence of his community members. Ilio's pain is because of his father's conversion to Islam as he (Gabriel) has been cheated by a local Bengali Muslim peasant. Although his father converted to Islam for economic help, he begs from door to door for subsistence. But begging is a shameful act for Oraons. They do not beg for alms, but work hard to manage subsistence. Ilio feels pain that his father (as a Muslim) now begs for alms. He kept silent with a helpless expression on his face.

Ilio Minji now works as an agricultural day-labourer. Although drinking lots of *haria* has led to economic loss in the case of Gabriel, drinking at the Oraon festivals is a valued customary practice. The illegal occupation of Gabriel's land by a Bengali Muslim and his influence on Gabriel to convert to Islam denotes the Oraon exploitation and conversion of Oraons into Islam.

In addition to economic exploitation, the Oraon daughters face sexual exploitation or forced marriage by the local Bengali Muslim youths. The research participants in the group discussion at Tetlipara of Ramwesarpara village, in Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district, depict sexual exploitation or forced marriage as another cause of their conversion to Islam. They mention incidents in the neighbouring Oraon villages, including Choto Hajratpur of Mithapukur, where two Bengali Muslim youths captured two Oraon daughters. The Bengali youths sexually exploited these two Oraon daughters. Consequently, a local meeting was held in the village to resolve the problem. The villagers, especially the Bengali Muslim majority, argued for the conversion of these two Oraon daughters to Islam and advised the Muslim youths to marry them. The Oraons themselves kept silent, as they were in the minority and could not speak out against this conversion decision of the local influential Bengali Muslim majority. This incident of conversion to Islam, because of the sexual exploitation of Oraon daughters by the local Bengali youths, was as an exception conveyed to me by the Oraon research participants in my study villages.

Islamisation among the Oraons also results from the Bengali Muslim domination in Bangladeshi society. Other causes of Islamisation among Oraons include the lack of state policy in favour of them and a lack of proper development initiatives by both national and international organisations. A lack of proper interaction between the state and Oraons and other international development bodies is also referred to as a reason for Oraon conversion to Islam. These reasons promote the conversion process of Oraons into Islam, as acknowledged by the research participants in my study villages. Also, there are NGOs and voluntary organisations, which work for the non-Bengali minorities in Barind. But the services of those NGOs and voluntary organisations hardly follow the multi-cultural approach in

solving the socio-economic problems of ethnic minorities. Thus, the problems of ethnic minorities are not well addressed in the development process.

Oraon Identity Formation

This discussion of religious identifications among Oraons helps one to understand how their ethnic group identity changes when people embrace different world religions and cultures. While the explanation for their religious conversion lies in a complex set of social, political and cultural factors, the Oraons partly embrace new identity as a consequence of their socio-economic condition. This identity formation of the Oraons can be interpreted from circumstantialist/constructivist viewpoint. Oraons' religious identifications are 'socially constructed and [are] fluid entity' (Williams, 2015: 149) basing on their changing social, economic and political conditions. Although Oraons change 'their own individual or group [identity]' (Seol, 2008: 341) embracing different world religions and cultures, Oraons' common socio-cultural practices are their primordial ties, which inform their basic ethnic identity.

At this point, I reiterate that the Oraons have different religious identifications, as they have embraced Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam. The key question is whether these Oraon religious differentiations impact on identity formation among Oraons. How do Oraons continue to identify themselves as 'Oraon' in spite of such religious differentiation? According to Gottschalk (2001), the British India social classifications assumed that religious identities had existed since the rise of Muslim power in the 12th century in India, which represented the foundation of the society and the basis of the individual. Also, the British administrators defined Hinduism and Islam as mutually exclusive categories of social belonging, which bifurcated nearly every societal and cultural dimension of India (Gottschalk, 2001: 105, 182-183).

This understanding of social categories in British India helps explain the Oraon religious identifications. Although the Oraons have been differentiated into religious groups, in part because of economic crisis or Bengali Muslim domination, the Oraon religious identifications are not mutually exclusive categories. Nor do

Oraon religious categories provide the foundation of their society; rather, all Oraons, irrespective of their religious identifications, organise and identify themselves as 'Oraon' as a foundation of their society. Understanding Oraon identity formation requires a discussion of Oraon socio-cultural practices and of their socio-economic context, which I provide in the following chapter.



Figure 5.1: Christian Oraons of Binodpur and Udaypur village at a Church in Rangpur (Photograph by Rafiul Islam, 2012)



Figure 5.2: A Christian Oraon at his father's graveyard in Dhipapara of Binodpur village in Rangpur (Photograph by Rafiul Islam, 2012)



Figure 5.3: Oraon *khatriyas*' ritual performance (top photo) before cooking (middle photo) in the name of the creator for a successful completion of a feast (bottom photo) during *poushankranti* in Mithapukur of Rangpur (Photograph by Rafiul Islam, 2012)



Figure 5.4: Adult Oraon males participating in a re-affirmation process as Oraon *khatriyas* during *poushankranti* at Rangpur (Photograph by Rafiul Islam, 2012)



Figure 5.5: The *gurudev* along with his fellow Oraon mates discussing their background and history as Oraon *khatriyas* (Photograph by Rafiul Islam, 2012)



Figure 5.6: Cultural performance of Oraon *khatriyas* at the end of *pousshankranti* (Photograph by Rafiul Islam, 2012)



Figure 5.7: Oraon worship (top photo) and feast (bottom photo) at Benuban Buddhist Temple at Mithapukur of Rangpur during *pahela boishak* (Photograph by Rafiul Islam, 2012)



Figure 5.8: Discussion of Buddhism (top photo) and participants of cultural programme (bottom photo) at Benuban Temple during *pahela boishak* (Photograph by Rafiul Islam, 2012)



Figure 5.9: Oraon *mahila samity* participants at Benuban Buddhist Temple during *pahela boishak* (Photograph by Rafiul Islam, 2012)

Chapter 6

Oraons as Oraon: Oraonisation

This chapter provides an account of Oraons as Oraon. I describe a process of Oraonisation in Barind/Bangladesh. As previously mentioned, today most of the Oraons of Bangladesh have been converted to different world religions, including Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. The Oraons who still practise their age-old beliefs and traditions introduce themselves as Sarna Oraons. However, all Oraons, whatever their religion, follow some common socio-cultural practices, which help define their identity as Oraon. Also, the interactions of the Oraons with the people of the wider Bengali society, as well as their socio-economic situation help constitute their identity as Oraon.

Scholars have debated the idea of identity or ethnic identity from both primordial and circumstantial viewpoints (Scott, 1990; Otto & Driessen, 2000). From a primordial viewpoint, the socio-cultural features of a group of people are their identity markers. People interact with other groups and maintain differences based on their inherited socio-cultural features, which means that identity is thought of as inherited and proprietary. But peoples' 'ideals and beliefs [...] influence [their] conduct alongside of personal ties, primordial attachments, and responsibilities in corporate bodies...' (Shils, 1957: 130). Primordial ties are constructed, mobilised and transformed in particular social, cultural and historical situations. According to Geertz (1963: 109), primordial ties are the preferred bases for the demarcation of autonomous political units in new states, such as Indonesia, Malaya, Burma, India, Lebanon, Morocco and Nigeria. Primordial ties are the basis of peoples' economic and political development and help them to retain their basic ethnic identity in a given situation (see Seol, 2008: 337, 344).

However, from a circumstantialist viewpoint, scholars (e.g. Harrison, 2006; Henry, 1998; 2008; Jayawardena, 1980; Keith & Pile, 1993; and Li *et al.*, 1995) argue that identity is not inherited, but reproduced and contested in relation to socio-economic conditions. This understanding of identity also helps guide my discussion

on Oraon identity formation. In this regard, I describe the socio-cultural practices through which Oraons represent their identity. As the Oraons have stopped practising many aspects of their socio-cultural life, partly as a result of their economic situation and their religious conversion, I discuss only those common socio-cultural practices that they continue to practise today. The Oraons' common socio-cultural practices inform their primordial attachments and their identity in a changing socio-economic context. Thus, I also provide a short description of the socio-economic context of Oraon identity formation addressing the specific issues that Oraons face/experience in their relationships with the local Bengali Muslim peasants.

Common Socio-cultural Practices

A discussion on Oraon socio-cultural practices provides an understanding of Oraon identity representation from a primordial viewpoint. The Oraon socio-cultural practices are *gotra* (clan), and their form of salutation – *gorlagi*, *karsavanda*, flag and language. Oraon political structures, the use of *haria*, and marriage process and festivals are also important practices that project their identity. Oraon songs and history, and women's social position and contribution to their society are also specific to their identity projection. I discuss each of these facets of Oraon socio-cultural identity below.

***Gotra*: Totemic Clan Identity**

Membership of a *Gotra* (clan/lineage) is an important identity marker for the Oraons. As stated in previous chapters, the Oraons are divided into numerous clans named after birds, fish, animals, plants or minerals. The clans are also designated as the titles of the Oraons. The present study concerns 18 Oraon clans in Bangladesh. The Oraon clans are *bara* (*ficus indica*), *bakla* (a species of grass), *bandra/bandh* (an embanked reservoir of water), *beck* (salt), *dhan/dhanoar* (paddy or paddy husker), *ekka* (tortoise), *kerkata* (hedge-sparrow), *khakha* (raven), *khalko* (a species of fish), *kispotta* (pig's entrails), *kujur* (a kind of fruits), *lakhra* (tiger), *linda/lindari* (a subdivision the eel), *minji* (a species of fish), *panna* (iron), *tappo* (a species of long

tailed bird), *tiggya* (a species of monkey) and *tirkey* (young mice). These clan identities remain strong in identifications among Oraon clan members.

The Oraon clan system helps them portray their identity. As discussed in chapter three, a totem/clan object is sacred among Oraons, and they do not destroy any totem objects. As the Oraon community is patrilineal, a clan name is transmitted from a father to his son/daughter. Oraon clans are also relevant to marriage processes, as the clans are strictly exogamous. If an Oraon comes across other Oraons of the same totem clan, s/he respects them and counts them as family members, because s/he believes they are descendants of the same ancestor. Because of this social prescription, a defining feature of being Oraon is the ability to assert membership of Oraon clans. Oraon clan totemism can be interpreted as an ‘historically specific form [to] ...define themselves as independent or interdependent units’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 51).

My study reveals that the Oraons, who have embraced Christianity, Hinduism or Buddhism, have not changed their Oraon titles. The Oraons retain totemic clan titles, which help introduce them as Oraon, irrespective of their religious identifications. Totemic clan identity is important in the Oraon context, both in terms of everyday practices of relatedness and in terms of identity politics today. Both everyday and ceremonial practices that I have observed evidence the continuing significance of totemic clan identity among the Oraons. Below I discuss some Oraon socio-cultural practices that constitute ‘the media of [their] *totemic consciousness*’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 51) and help them represent their identity.

Gorlagi

Gorlagi is the Oraon salutation. When an Oraon meets another Oraon, he salutes and utters the word *gorlagi* as a greeting. At the same it is also customary to shake hands and to touch a portion of their clothing according to their kinship relationships, at the moment of their meeting. This practice of Oraon salutation is the same for both men and women, and differs from that of the Bengali Muslims. The Bengali Muslims (both men and women) usually utter the word – *assalamualaikum* (May the

Almighty keep peace in you) and/or shake hands one another at the moment of their meeting. However, the Oraon salutation is observed among all Oraons, irrespective of religious differentiation.

Karsavanda

All Oraons retain the use of the Oraon symbol – *karsavanda* (Figure 6.1). The paddy stem, blazing fire, and three pounding iron sticks in *karsavanda* are the symbols of the Oraons' spirit. These special objects in *karsavanda* refer to the Oraon belief in *dharmes* (the Oraon god), *pachoyaaa-lar* (the past ancestor) and *padda panch* (Oraon traditional political organisation) respectively. In essence, *karsavanda* depicts the organising foundation of the Oraons. The Oraons retain this symbol of *karsavanda* to identify themselves as Oraons. They use this symbol in their socio-cultural practices, including marriages, festivals and in receiving guests or any *dikus* (foreigners). The practices of Oraon *karsavanda* help them portray their identity.

Flag

Today, the Oraons of Bangladesh have a flag (Figure 6.2) that represents their identity group. This flag is a means of presenting their identity in Bangladesh (Kispotta, 2007: 10-11). The Oraon flag is equally divided into three portions with green colour in the upper, white in the middle, and yellow in the lower portion. The symbol of a half rising sun is placed in the middle of the green portion of the flag. The green coloured portion of the flag represents the Oraon work spirit and the half rising sun represents their expectation or dreams. The *dandakattna* or *veloyafarry* (the symbol of Oraon sacrifice/worship for their god – *dharmes*) is placed in the middle of the white portion of the flag. The white coloured portion of the flag represents their simplicity and peace and the *dandakattna* or *veloyafarry* symbol is for their thankfulness to *dharmes*. The yellow coloured portion is a symbol of the Oraons' protest/resistance against their enemies.

The history of the Oraon flag was recounted by research participants as follows. The Oraons in the past, especially after the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, faced conflict (among themselves) in their annual gathering over the representation of their clans. Because of this conflict, the Oraons called meetings and discussed the equal representation of all clans at their annual gathering. They decided to introduce a flag (Kispotta, 2007: 10) to symbolise their unity. Subsequently, on 3 October 2007, the Oraons inaugurated the flag with the consent of 68 Oraon leaders from all over the country. This Oraon flag is flown on both the Oraon annual day (3 October) and at Oraon youth gathering days (28-30 December) each year. Although the Oraon flag is not accepted in the Bangladesh constitution, Oraons fly both the national and their own flags at annual or youth gathering days or any gathering in the community in the presence of Government executives. Also, the Oraons retain the flag as a symbol of their resistance against their enemies.

Kurukh and/or Sadri

As mentioned earlier, the Oraons speak *kurukh* and/or *sadri* as their mother language. *Kurukh* has no written literature. *Sadri* is a mixed language of some Indian languages, including Hindi, Urdu, Bengali and Arabic. The Oraon elders can speak both *kurukh* and *sadri*. The Oraon elders recite their folktales and legends in *kurukh*. However, the younger Oraons cannot speak *kurukh*. All Oraons can communicate in Bengali. However, whether they can speak them or not, the languages – *kurukh* and *sadri* – remain Oraon identity markers. I argue that although the Oraon young people cannot speak *kurukh* themselves, their awareness that this is the historical language of their ancestors, means that it is significant to them in terms of their identity as Oraons. While the elderly speak *kurukh*, the decline in *kurukh* language among younger Oraons does not mean a wider decline in Oraon identity as the Oraons retain other identity markers.

Padda panch

As discussed earlier, *padda panch* is the village level political organisation of Oraons. A *pradhan* (Oraon chief or headman) heads this *padda panch*. Traditionally, the *padda panch* oversees all socio-economic functions of the community. The *padda panch* still exists among the Oraons, although it has been weakening in relation to its execution of Oraon socio-economic functions. The *padda panch* has not been divided according to religious identifications of Oraons. The Oraons choose an oldest male member as *pradhan*. All Oraons, irrespective of religious differentiation in specific villages, are members of *padda panch*. The *padda panch* is a marker of Oraon identity.

Haria

Haria (rice-beer) is a customary drink among the Oraons. Drinking *haria* is not only a source of Oraon recreation, it is also necessary to the successful conduct of certain rituals. For example, if the Oraons do not drink *haria*, they cannot perform the marriage ceremony. In a marriage ceremony, they must entertain the *agua* (match-maker of the marriage) and all guests by offering *haria*. Irrespective of religious identifications, Oraons believe that both men and women must drink *haria* during their marriage ceremonies and community festivals. Some Oraon men drink *haria* almost everyday. Some Oraon households also live by producing and selling *haria* for their subsistence, although drinking *haria* is prohibited by the local government administration. Thus, I understand that becoming tipsy by drinking *haria* for both Oraon men and women is important to their identity.

Festivals

My research has revealed that the Oraons celebrate a series of festivals at various times during the year. In the past, the Oraons performed more festivals, but nowadays they cannot celebrate all their festivals due to economic hardship. Some

Oraons have expressed anxiety about the fact that many of their festivals are becoming extinct. In this regard, I provide the following case study:

Case study 6.1: Oraons cannot perform traditional practices due to economic crisis

Montu Minji, aged 49 years old, lives in Ambapara of Udaypur village in Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district. He is illiterate and a traditional/Sarna Oraon by religion. He lives on his 17 decimals homestead land and has 100 decimals farm land. He manages the subsistence for his family of seven by both self-farming and agricultural day-labouring. He states that ‘like other communities, we have our own tradition, social and religious festivals and rituals. We have been living in this region for the last many years. Nowadays, we – the *adibashis* cannot perform all our festivals because of our economic crisis. Our festivals are gradually having abolished from life. We are anxious for our festivals and rituals.’

Despite economic constraints, Oraons still perform specific festivals round the year, which I describe below. The Oraon festivals are seasonal and closely linked to their agricultural practices. According to Koonathan (1999: 156-160), the Oraon festivals are *fagua* (festival of new year celebration), *sarhul* (festival of nature worship), *dhanbuni* (festival of sowing paddy seeds), *kadleta* (festival of transplantation seedlings), *hariari* (festival of re-ploughing the field for a harvest), *karam* (festival of enemy protection), *nayakhani* (festival of eating the first fruit of a harvest), *khalihani* (festival of expressing gratefulness to *dharmes*), *sohorae* (cattle festival) and *maghe* (festival of expressing gratitude to the domestic servants). But all these festivals are not practised by all Oraons in my study villages. I observed that the festivals *fagua*, *sarhul*, *karam* and *sohorae* are practised by all Oraons irrespective of religious identifications among them. Oraon festival practices represent their identity. I provide a brief description of these Oraon festivals below.

Fagua

The Oraons celebrate *fagua* festival towards the end of February or at the beginning of March. *Fagua* is the main hunting festival among Oraons, although hunting is not

practiced these days because of the massive clearance of bush land and *jongols* (dense forests) for irrigation in Barind. Although the *jongols* have disappeared over time, the Oraons still symbolically arrange for hunting. Before going hunting, the Oraons perform *danda-kattna* (Oraon religious sacrifice for *dharmes*) and also prepare a hut, which is mainly made of straw, to be set on fire. After coming back from hunting, they set the hut on fire to symbolise the end of the dying year and to welcome the New Year. The Oraons neither gather any jungle produce, nor do they kill any game for food or plough/manure the fields, before performing *fagua*. They start gathering food and engage in food production only after performing the *fagua* festival. Thus, *fagua* is called the New Year celebrating festival or food-gathering festival of the Oraons.

Sarhul

Sarhul is the spring festival. The Oraons celebrate this festival at the end of March or beginning of April. They celebrate this festival when the *sal* tree (*shorea robusta*) begins to blossom. The Oraons believe that when the *sal* flowers are in bloom, the sky descends to the earth. They celebrate the mock marriage between *pradhan* (an Oraon chief) and his wife in the village, which symbolically affirms the union between the earth and the sky. They also believe that nature begins her blessings on earth. Oraons do not work on that day, as they think the sky comes down to the earth. They stay at home and worship the *dharmes* (Oraon god). The Oraons do not gather, eat or use new fruits, flowers, or edible leaves until the *sarhul* festival has been celebrated in their clusters/villages.

Karam

The Oraons celebrate the *karam* festival on *ekadoshi* (the eleventh day) of the Bengali month of *bhadro* (August-September). The Oraons traditionally celebrate the *karam* festival after the transplantation of their paddy fields. They perform it for relaxation and to embrace the rigorous work coming in the following harvest. As

observed, the main ritual of *karam* is installing three branches of the *karam* tree (*naucleaparvifolia*) in the middle of the village *akhra* (dancing ground). After installing the *karam* branches, the Oraons sit around the branches to listen to the *karam* legend, read by an Oraon elder.

During the *karam* festival, the Oraons drink *haria* to become tipsy and dance around the *akhra*. Boys, girls, middle aged men and woman, youngers and elders dance around the *karam* branches the whole night. When they get tired they lie down for a while on the ground. They continue dancing until 10 am the following morning. After that, the *pradhan* (Oraon chief or headman) pulls up the *karam* branches and respectfully hands them over to the maidens (young virginal girls), who throw them into the nearby canal. Later on, in the evening or the next morning, the Oraons put the *karam* branches in the middle of the paddy fields to ensure a good harvest. The principal purpose of the *karam* festival is to protect the girls, who will give birth to the future generation of the Oraons. The girls, along with the older women, the boys, and the Oraon elders, dance together to protect the girls and to ensure the regeneration of their community.

Sohorae

Sohorae is the cattle festival of the Oraons, which is celebrated during the new moon day in the Bengali month of *karthik* (November). According to my interviewees, the Oraons celebrate the *sohorae* festival after completing their harvest in November. It is winter then and the weather becomes friendlier; it is neither too hot, nor too cold. The villages in the region become full of winter vegetables and harvested paddy and the days are fine, without any rain. In such weather, the Oraons celebrate *sohorae* as their biggest festival. The Oraons think that the cattle are the most useful animals in their community, as the cattle are a great help for their agricultural operations.

During the *sohorae* festival, the Oraons keep their houses neat and clean. On the evening of the festival, newly made earthen lamps are lit in the Oraon houses, cattle sheds, and kitchen gardens. During the following morning, the cattle are bathed. The horns, forehead and the hoofs of the cattle are anointed with vermilion

diluted in oil. Their hoofs are also sprinkled with rice beer. The Oraons sacrifice a fowl and also hold a feast in honour of their cattle. They do not eat food until their cattle are fed. The Oraons enjoy themselves a lot drinking *haria* throughout the whole night of the festival.

Songs and History

The Oraons have distinctive songs that they sing at festivals and during ceremonies. These songs concern their history and migration. As mentioned earlier, although the Oraon women defeated the Hindus three times in the guise of Oraon men in the battle of Rohtasgarh, they were defeated by the Hindus, as the latter knew that the Oraon females fought against them, while the Oraon men were drunk from drinking *haria*. The Hindus (Aryans) defeated the Oraons and occupied Rohtasgarh. The Oraons fled and settled in Chotonagpur. In remembrance of this incident at Rohtasgarh and settlement in Chotonagpur, the Oraons recite songs in both *kurukh* and *sadri*. They also sing songs in memory of the Oraon women's participation in the Rohtasgarh battle against the Hindus.

Although the Oraon *khatriyas* remember the Rohtasgarh battle against the Hindus, they have a different history of their identity as *khatriyas*. The Oraon *khatriyas* believe that the Oraons were defeated by the Hindu King Porsuram in Bengal and were driven out from their settlement. They were resettled in Bengal and appointed as the warriors in favour of King Porsuram. Thus, the Oraon *khatriyas* believe that they belong to the warrior caste category (second stratum) of Hindu society. Also, they explain that the Bengali word '*orao*' means 'they are also', that is the Oraons are also *khatriyas*. This history of Oraon *khatriyas* was provided by one of my key informants – Ram Chandra Singh Minji (80) – *pradhan* of Ramwesarpara *padda panch*, who states that the Oraons are divided in their history and settlement in Bangladesh.

My research participants provided the songs in memory of their Rohtasgarh battle against the Hindus and translated them into Bengali, which I translate into English

below. These Oraon songs are associated with their history and migration, and are important to their representations of their identity.

1. Oraon song in *sadri* concerning their history and settlement:

kaha sirijala-re-myana [oh my child, where have you been born]

kaha nubujala re [where have you been placed]

Rohitas pate naame sirijala re myana [you have been born in Rohtas Patna]

Nagpure khottha disai aara paray [you have gave birth to an egg settling in Nagpur]

Nagpure janama tohara-re [you have been born in Nagpur]

ghanta ghumari jhumul bajala [you ringing the bell, you ringing the bell]

sato gutni jagala [you wakeup the wives of seven brothers]

sato gutni dekhala re [you called the wives of seven brothers]

kon ghate nutarala byarangire vaiya mora [oh boatman, on which bank of the river, have you placed my brother?]

dulu dulu dera karay [you have built small huts]

dulu dulu basa karay re [you have built small houses]

ruk ghate nutarala byarangire vaiya mora [oh boatman, on some bank of the river, have you placed my brother?]

dulu dulu dera karay [you have built small huts]

dulu dulu basa karay re [you have built small houses]

loro ghate nutarala byarangire vaiya mora [oh boatman, on other bank of the river, have you placed my brother?]

dulu dulu dera karay [you have built small huts]

dulu dulu basa karay re [you have built small houses]

manoyake mati maru sati katu byarangire vaiya mora [oh boatman, do not kill my brother – human being]

manoya bina rah-ji nahi sotay [the world will not survive without human beings]

manoya bina desha nahi shovai re [the country will look bare without human beings]

2. Oraon song (mixed) in both *kurukh* and *sadri* concerning women's hunting every 12 years remembering their contribution to the battle against Hindus at Rohtasgarh:

choaay koi lanree pello [wake up the lazy girl]

bali koranuh ballu rai [the sands in the corner of the door]

baro bachchare jani sikar [women's hunting after 12 years]

janika mure raja pagri bandhay [the king has placed hats on the women's heads]

chal nayo jani sikar [let's go, my daughter, to the women's hunting]

janika mure pagri bandhay [the women have kept hats on their heads]

baro bachchare jani sikar [women's hunting after 12 years]

janika mure raja pagri bandhay [the king has placed hats on the women's heads]

hur hur hur [let's go, let's go, let's go]

The Oraon songs concerning their history and settlement provide an understanding of the Oraons as an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991). The Oraon songs concern the crisis they faced in relation to past settlement and their movement to different places in search of a better livelihood. On their search, the Oraons first faced interruption by the *dikus* (foreigners), such as the Hindus at Rohtasgarh, and then settled in Chotonagpur. As discussed earlier, the Oraons then migrated from Chotonagpur and settled in Barind during the British India Government (1765-1947). The Oraons who live in different villages of Barind/Bangladesh still remember their history and settlement in Chotonagpur through their songs and, thus, remember their fellow community members in Chotonagpur, India. Although the Oraons migrated to Barind, they remember Chotonagpur as their 'homeland'. This practice of Oraon songs and remembrance of their place and community mates in Chotonagpur demonstrates how identity is performed and memories are practised in the sense that Henry (2012) has discussed in the case of the Djabugay people of Kuranda in North Queensland. Oraons create an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991) through their songs and the history celebrated in these songs.

Oraon Women's Social Position and Contribution

Oraon women's social position and contribution to their society and economy are also factors in Oraon totemic clan identity representation. As I have observed, Oraon women work hard in the family and economic sphere of the community. They work

in the fields and earn wages as daily labourers. They also perform household work and their responsibilities include cooking meals, rearing cattle, and taking care of children and older members. It is the Oraon women who know how to produce *haria* (rice-beer) and where to collect local ingredients – something which is unknown to both the Oraon men and the wider community. This association of Oraon women with *haria* production and their socio-economic contribution to the family help project Oraon identity, as these practices of Oraon women are specific to Oraon society.

In addition, the Oraon women's participation and fight against the Aryans (Hindus) also marks their identity. As discussed earlier, the Oraon women contributed to the historic battle against the Hindus at Rohtasgarh upon their migration to Chotonagpur. The Hindus were defeated three times by the Oraon women, who fought in the guise of Oraon men. In the study area I observed that the Oraon women symbolise their contribution to the battle against the Hindus by painting a tattoo of an *ulki* (three thrones with a button) on their forehead. This symbolic representation of Oraon women is an important projection of Oraon identity.

Despite all their contributions and socio-economic management in the community, Oraon customary law excludes women from land ownership. Although the Oraon women help and cooperate in preparations for the religious events, they cannot participate in the religious functions of the community. As observed, the Oraon women consider their social position as given by *dharmes* (Oraon god). They accept their social position as they believe that land is protected by the men, as decreed by *dharmes*. Traditionally, it is only the men who own and take care of land. Because of this belief, an Oraon daughter, who lives in her husband's clan after her marriage, does not own any portion of her father's land. But this belief among the Oraon women has begun to change as they observe the social position of local Bengali Muslim women, who do own a portion of their fathers' land. Although some Oraon fathers, who do not have sons, have registered land in the name of their daughters, the Oraon women are generally 'deprived' and 'excluded in social position' (Chakraborty & Ali, 2009; Islam, 2010) in the community.

Oraons continue to use certain common socio-cultural features, irrespective of their different religious identifications. These Oraon socio-cultural practices operate as markers of their identity, to both themselves and others. Below, I provide some case studies, which demonstrate the retention of socio-cultural features that represent their identity.

Case study 6.2: Oraons' changing socio-cultural practices

Subol Minji, aged 28 years old, lives in Purboopara of Binodpur village in Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district. He has attempted elementary education and has passed class III. He is a Christian Oraon. He lives on his relatives' land and has no agricultural land of his own. He has taken a mortgage of 25 decimals farm land. He earns subsistence for his family of four by farming this land and by agricultural day-labouring. He argues that 'although we have been changed in our religion, we still introduce ourselves the Oraons'. He adds that 'we haven't yet changed all our traditional practices, including *haria* drinking, language and lineage titles, and so on. We haven't also been changed in our traditional behaviour including, if we meet an Oraon, we show our traditional salutation, *gorlagi*'.

Case study 6.3: Oraons are Oraon despite conversions

Lucas Kispotta, aged about 60 years old, who lives in Dinajpur, is a Christian Oraon. He has obtained his Master Degree in Social Work from Rajshahi University in Barind. He, depicting their identity markers, states that 'today, we – the Oraons – are divided into Christian Oraons, Hindu Oraon *khatriyas* and Buddhist Oraons. Some Oraons among us do not change religion, while some others convert to Islam. The Oraons of my village who convert to Islam keep close contact with me and also sometimes attend the Oraon festivals'.

Kispotta claims that 'although we have been converted to Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism or Islamism, we are still Oraon.' He also states that the socio-cultural cultural features of the Oraons, including their languages, lineage titles, *karsavanda*, festivals, drinking *haria*, songs and dances, are their important identity markers. He adds that 'we, the Catholic Christian Oraons, perform the *karam* songs [without changing the meaning of the songs] in the Churches. So, we have some common socio-cultural features, which help define our identity, despite many changes in our life'.

It is clear that despite their religious identifications and current economic crisis, the Oraons have maintained some common socio-cultural practices, albeit in a changing mode. These changing socio-cultural practices are outward symbols through which the Oraons maintain their proprietary identity. Oraon socio-cultural practices also give them ‘a sense of authority, legitimacy and rightness’ (Nash, 1996: 27). These practices are their cultural resources, through which they retain and maintain relationship with other groups – ethnicity.

The socio-cultural practices described above are seen by Oraons themselves, as well as by others, including members of the Bengali Muslim majority, as essential criteria of defining the Oraons as an ethnic minority. However, the Oraons have stopped practising many aspects of their socio-cultural life, which they remember but do not practise, partly due to their economic situation and religious conversion. Such practices inform the historical origin of their identity representation rather than being a living part of their everyday lives.

The Oraons also retain and practise many aspects of their socio-cultural life albeit in a changing mood. These practices inform their ‘personal ties, primordial attachments, and responsibilities in corporate bodies [religious identifications...]’ (Shils, 1957: 130). Their reference to primordial ties along with their past history and origin provide a case of strategic essentialism on the part of the Oraons to ensure they retain a stronger collective identity in their dealings with the Bengali Muslim majority.

As stated earlier, the Oraons remain distinct from the dominant Bengali Muslim community in terms of many of their socio-cultural features. However, the communities do have some common socio-cultural features, such as patterns of dress or economic activity. In addition, Oraons are economically dependent on Bengali Muslim peasants for their subsistence. They are socially and economically deeply entangled with the Bengali Muslim majority. This raises the question of how the Oraon dependency on Bengali Muslim peasant impacts their socio-cultural life and identity. These questions, concerning the socio-economic context of Oraon identity, are discussed in the following section.

The Socio-economic Context of Oraon Identity Formation

At this point, I provide a discussion of Oraon identity formation, based on the socio-economic issues that Oraons face during their interactions with local Bengalis. I examine Oraon relationships with the local Bengali Muslim peasants, and how these relationships provide insights into their identity formation from a circumstantialist viewpoint (Harrison, 2006; Henry, 1998; 2008; Jayawardena, 1980; Keith & Pile, 1993; Li *et al.*, 1995).

As I have discussed in earlier chapters, the research participants state that the Bengali Muslims do cooperate the Oraons in specific ways. Although the Bengali Muslims cooperate with the Oraons, they place social and economic pressures on them. If an Oraon seeks economic help from a rich Bengali Muslim peasant, the latter claims interest or some bond for the expected support. If the Oraons fail to repay the loan, the Bengali Muslims forcibly occupy the land and property of the Oraons.

According to a number of the Oraons I interviewed, the Bengali Muslims also sometimes abuse them physically or destroy their sacred places or houses. The Oraons cannot rear their cattle and other domestic animals in the neighbouring fields of Bengali Muslim peasants. The rich Bengali Muslim peasants sometimes rebuke the Oraons, if the latter enter the fields of the former to gather fuel or food or to rear cattle.

As observed, the Oraons cannot avoid contact with the Bengali Muslims in their everyday life. Although the Bengali Muslim peasants either rebuke or torture the Oraons physically, the latter are helpless as minorities. Also, the local Bengali Muslims have a social construction that the minorities/the Oraons are not purified in the sense of Islam. Thus, the Oraons are looked down on by the Bengali Muslims. Because of this sense of religious difference, the Bengali Muslims avoid the Oraons' problems. Although the Bengali Muslims have contact with the Oraons to utilise their physical labour for economic pursuits, they exploit the Oraons in wages and illegal land appropriation. While poor Bengali Muslims share common economic problems with poor Oraons, they are not looked down on by the rich Bengali

Muslims, but are dealt with sympathetically because of their religious homogeneity. The poor Bengali Muslims also do not face the negligence of local administration and local Bengali Muslim leaders in either settling disputes or land sales. In spite of their shared economic hardships, poor Bengali Muslims tend not to be overly sympathetic towards the poor Oraons.

Oraons try to stay away from the Bengali Muslims. According to the Oraons whom I interviewed, if they interact intensively with the Bengali Muslims, they are afraid of what might happen in their lives. They remember that the Bengali Muslims illegally occupied their land and even abused them in the past. Lalito Kujur, aged 55 years old, who lives in Dhipapara of Binodpur village in Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district, states:

Nowadays, the incidents, including *adibashi* land abduction and physical abuse of them, are happening in the region. If an Oraon mortgages land to any local Bengali Muslims, later on, the latter says the former has taken money for selling the land, not for the mortgage. For example, Shurendra Kujur, an Oraon, mortgaged his land to a local Bengali Muslim. But the latter has built houses on that land of Shurendra. The Bengali Muslim says that Shurendra sold his land not merely mortgaged it. Afterwards, Shurendra Kujur was beaten by the Bengali Muslim, and we couldn't take any steps against the latter because we are minorities, while the Bengali Muslim maintains good connections with the local leaders in the majority.

This illegal land occupation is happening repeatedly in the locality. This is because, while the Oraons prefer not to interact with the local Bengali Muslims, they have no other alternative in order to survive. Contrary to their attitudes to interaction with the local Bengali Muslims, the Oraons are much more inclined to interact with the local Hindus and other *adibashi* minority groups, including the Santals and Mundas. They prefer to interact with these groups, instead of the Bengali Muslims, because of their common identification as ethnic minority groups. In this regard, the comments of one of the research participants are as follows:

We do not have a good relationship with the local Bengali Muslims because we are *adibashis*. We are the minorities of the locality. The Bengali Muslims are the majorities. We have a different culture, tradition, religion and language, which differentiate us from them. If we interact or allow them any options to interact with us, they will harm us. We are now aware of that, although we talk or interact with them in the locality, we do not believe in them. We do not share our inner happenings of life with them. Instead, we interact and feel like sharing our happenings with the local Hindus and other ethnic minority groups.

My interviews indicate that the interactions of the Oraons with the local Bengali Muslim peasants are quite contradictory in principle. The Oraons faced many threats from the local Bengali Muslim peasants, as demonstrated in the example below.

Case study 6.4: Oraon bullock loss for local Bengali Muslim's threats

Abedon Minji, aged 32 years old, lives in Paschim Doihara of Gobindaganj sub-district of Gaibandha district. He states, 'about 15 years back in 1997, I was in economic crisis so I wanted to sell one of my bullocks. Hearing my decision to sell my bullock, the local Bengali Muslim (1) asked me to give him the bullock, saying that he would pay me the cost of my bullock later on. I refused his proposal and asked him to pay me the cost of my bullock cash in hand, as I am in crisis. However, another local Bengali Muslim (2) wanted to buy my bullock in cash. I agreed with the latter Bengali Muslim (2) to hand over my bullock to him.

But in the meantime, the former Bengali Muslim (1) the following day just took my bullock away from my house. He slaughtered my bullock and enjoyed the meat of it with the neighbouring Bengali Muslim peasants (3). Later on, we asked for a meeting in our locality to solve this bullock abduction. The former Bengali Muslim (1) was asked to hand over the total cost – BDT 10,000 – of my bullock to another Bengali Muslim peasant (4). But later on, the former Bengali Muslim (1) threatened me and he didn't give any money to another Bengali Muslim peasant (4) to pay me for my lost bullock'.

The Oraons of Paschim Doihara at Gaibandha district also depict their food grain loss as a consequence of the influential Bengali Muslim peasants' threats. They claim that about 20 years ago, in the 1990s, if any *adibashi* wanted to sell any food grains in the market, the local influential Bengali Muslim peasants would threaten the

adibashis and take the food grains from the *adibashis* on the way to the market. The Bengali Muslims paid lower prices to the *adibashis* than the actual value of those food grains. If they did not get the food grain, the local Bengali Muslim would demand money instead of the grain. Robbery or illegal land occupation occurred repeatedly in the 1990s as depicted by the research participants. Below are some cases from my field notes:

Case study 6.5: Oraon land purchase repetition for local Bengali Muslims' claims

Mongol Tiggya, aged 57 years old, lives in Paschim Doihara of Gaibandha district. He said, 'in 1990, he bought 62 decimals farm land from Ashraf Fakir, a local Bengali Muslim peasant. For this land purchase, I paid BDT 70,000 to Ashraf Fakir. I occupied this land and cultivated it. But after seven years in 1997, Manna Fakir – a son of Ashraf Fakir – claimed that he and his brothers own 53 decimals out of that 62 decimals farm land of his father, Ashraf Fakir'.

What happened in this land purchase from Ashraf Fakir to Mongol Tiggya? Because of his illiteracy, Mongol Tiggya at the time of his land purchase did not understand the land documents of Ashraf Fakir. Manna Fakir and his brothers along with Mongol Tiggya went to the local land registry office and found that Mongol Tiggya does not have the proper document for the land that he purchased from Ashraf Fakir. What happened subsequently? Mongol Tiggya, as he had occupied the land for seven years since 1990, had to buy the 53 decimals farm land again at half price from Manna Fakir and his brothers.

Case study 6.6: Illegal occupation of Oraon land by the local Bengali Muslim

Ramesh Tiggya, aged 60 years old, who lives in Paschim Doihara of Gaibandha district, is a small farmer. He lives by self-farming and by share-cropping a Bengali Muslim peasant's land. About 20 years ago in 1992, he bought 15 decimals of cultivable land from a Bengali Muslim peasant – Jabber Mia – through the exchange of cattle and crops costing about BDT 10,500, while the land today is worth approximately BDT 150,000. Ramesh attempted to cultivate the land in the following season, but the relatives of Jabber Mia ousted Ramesh, and asked him not to plough the land because they were the owners of this piece of land. In fact, when Jabber Mia sold the land to Ramesh he hid from Ramesh who the legal owners of the land were, and Ramesh did not understand the land documents because of his illiteracy.

Subsequently, Ramesh requested a village meeting along with the Bengali Muslim peasants in the locality. The meeting was an informal gathering of the Oraon leaders and the local Bengali Muslim leaders in the village. But the Bengali Muslim majority decided in favour of the relatives of Jabber Mia. Later on, Ramesh went to the local judicial court to submit a case of illegal land occupation by Jabber Mia and his relatives. The local judicial court accepted his case against Jabber Mia's family but Ramesh could not continue the court case because of his economic situation, illiteracy and the distance from his locality to the court. Although local Oraons wish to assist Ramesh, they cannot help him because of their prevalent economic crisis. However, in this case of illegal land occupation by Jabber Mia and his family, Ramesh Tiggya has been rendered silent. Ramesh has got back neither the land nor the cattle and crops that he sold to buy the land and has had to accept this economic loss.

Case study 6.7: Oraon faces robbery by local Bengali Muslim

Chandra Minji, aged 60 years old, lives in Purboopara of Binodpur village of Mithapukur sub-district in Rangpur District. He has passed elementary education (class I-V). He is a Christian Oraon by religion. He has 100 decimals of agricultural land. He lives in his five decimals homestead land. He earns subsistence for his family of five by self-farming and agricultural day-labouring. About 10 years ago in 2002, he attempted to purchase a piece of 10 decimals farm land from a neighbouring Bengali Muslim peasant – Ruhul Mian. For this land purchasing purpose, Chandra Minji gave BDT 25,000 to Ruhul Mian, but Chandra did not get a land registry document for this land purchase. Chandra is an easy-going Oraon, so he agreed with Ruhul Mian that they would sign this land purchasing contract later on.

Later on, when Chandra attempted to cultivate the land, Ruhul asked him not to plough the land because he wanted to give back the money to Chandra. Accordingly, Ruhul returned BDT 10,000 to Chandra and he promised to return the remaining BDT 15,000 later on. When Chandra asked Ruhul for the remaining money, Ruhul did not agree to return the money because Chandra could not provide any documentation. Chandra Minji, being an *adibashi* minority Oraon, could not protest this land/money robbery by Ruhul Mia. Chandra Minji just stays helpless because of Ruhul Mia's influences as a local leader in the village. If Chandra wants money from Ruhul, the latter just threatens the former. Now, Chandra Minji faces economic crisis to run his family, but Ruhul does not help Chandra.

The local Bengali Muslims used to take cows, goats, and food grain from the houses of the Oraons. They did this when Oraons were absent, attending marriage

ceremonies at far distant places, or when they were drunk from drinking *haria* (rice-beer) during the festivals. Sometimes, the Oraons were not able to overcome the economic loss caused by the Bengali Muslims taking away the Oraon bullocks, which they needed to plough their farmland. I found numerous cases in which Oraons described how they were either cheated or physically assaulted by local Bengali Muslims.

Case study 6.8: Oraon cheated by a local Bengali Muslim

Binod Tappo, aged 48 years old, lives in Moddhyapara of Binodpur village at Mithapukur of Rangpur District. He is literate and has passed class VIII. He is a traditional/Sarna Oraon. He lives on his 30 decimals homestead land. He has 250 decimals farm land for the subsistence of his family of four. He did not have any problems running his family household. About five years back in 2007, he attempted to send his eldest son – Rohit Tappo - to work abroad.

Rohit, aged 25 years old, had obtained his Secondary School Certificate (SSC), class I-X, but failed to obtain his Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC), class I-XII. He could not find a job and did not attempt to work with his father on their farm land. He wanted to work abroad, so he contacted Tajul Islam, a local migration agent, to seek help to go abroad. Accordingly, Rohit asked his father to contribute BDT 250,000 to send him abroad. His father, Binod Tappo, also talked to Tajul Islam and managed to get the money together by selling grain, cattle and also by taking loans with higher interest from a local money-lender.

Binod Tappo handed the money to Tajul Islam for sending his son abroad. Binod waited for the time of his son's departure from home. But Tajul did not contact him. Later on, Binod understood that Tajul had cheated him. Tajul did not return the money to Binod. Binod cannot claim any more of the money from Tajul because he is an Oraon minority, while Tajul has connections with the local influential Bengalis. This cheating incident placed Binod in such a situation of economic loss that he has become frustrated. Binod is still paying the interest on his loan from the local money-lender.

Case study 6.9: A local Bengali Muslim assaults the Oraons

Somra Beck, aged 50 years old, lives in Amapara of Ramwesarpara village at Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district. He is illiterate, and a Hindu Oraon *khatriya*. He has five decimals homestead land, but has no farm land. He lives by agricultural day-labouring for subsistence of his family of

three. About five years back in 2007, Somra Beck took BDT 15,000 from Unus Bepari in exchange for mortgaging his 10 decimals land to the latter.

For this land mortgage purpose, Unus took a finger print of Somra on paper. Somra did not know what was written on the paper. After three years in 2010, Somra took a loan from an organisation and wanted to pay back his land mortgage money. But Unus Bepari said, 'You have taken money for the sale of your land'. Later on, Somra protested and attempted to occupy his land, but was beaten by Unus Bepari. As Somra is a minority Oraon, he could not do anything against Unus Bepari because he had placed his finger print on the land mortgage agreement, which was actually a land sale document.

As revealed by my interviews, Oraons have faced tremendous exploitation from the local Bengali Muslims. Sometimes, the local Bengali Muslims attempted to destroy or even set fire to the Oraon houses in order to occupy their settlement land. The following case depicts this situation.

Case study 6.10: Conflict between the Bengali Muslims and the Oraon minorities

Victor Lakhra, aged 55 years old, a Christian Oraon, lives in Dinajpur. Victor Lakhra, who is the Director of Bangladesh Northern Evangelical Lutheran Church Development Foundation (BNELCDF), notes that in his locality, during the early 1980s, one night, the local Bengali Muslim peasants set the houses of their neighbouring Oraons on fire. The fact was that the local Bengali Muslim peasants and the Oraons were living on government land in the locality. The local Bengalis (who were not motivated by any wealthier Bengali Muslim peasant) had a plan to occupy all the government land in the locality on their own, but the Oraons were also living there. The parties had some conflict in the locality, but the local Bengali Muslims could not throw out the Oraons from the land. Because of this, the local Bengali Muslims attempted to set fire to the houses of the Oraons.

What happened on that day? The Oraons are landless agricultural day-labourers. They went away from their houses to work for the day. After work, they bought food and necessary materials and came back home late in the evening. They cooked meals and laid down their tired bodies in bed or on the floor of their houses. On such a night, when the day-long-working Oraons were tired and in deep sleep, the local Bengali Muslims created fire by pouring kerosene oil onto the houses of the Oraons. But they did not know that their houses were on fire, as they were sleeping inside. Victor Lakhra, along with some other Oraons, realised that the Oraons' houses were on fire. They attempted to stop the fire by pouring water and local materials. Later

on, he had to travel to the local district commissioner at Rangpur and to the ministry of Bangladesh government in Dhaka to claim this Bengali Muslim torture in his locality and to seek necessary cooperation from the government. In this case, the government has responded to the Oraons' claim that they still live in that place.

Because of the local Bengali Muslim peasants, the Oraons lost land, livestock or food grains. Oraon interactions or relationships with local Bengali Muslim peasants, thus, result in economic loss for Oraons, which in part, explains their identity as a minority group.

As observed, sometimes, local Bengali Muslim youths also disturb the Oraons in their dwellings. The local Bengali youths would come to the Oraons' houses to drink *haria* (rice-beer). Sometimes, the local Bengalis disturb or tease the Oraon daughters or women when they come to drink and take food at the Oraon dwellings. Furthermore, the local Bengali youths also take goods and other things from the Oraon dwellings. In response, I found that the Oraons protest and sometimes even beat the Bengalis.

Case study 6.11: Local Bengali youths disturb Oraons in dwellings, but are beaten

Momot Kha Kha, aged 53 years old, lives in Dhappara of Udaypur village of Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district. According to Momot Kha Kha, 'the local Bengali Muslims usually come and ask us to prepare *haria* for drinking. Sometimes, they also attempt to abuse our female members. They also threaten to beat us, if we do not work according to their will. In such a case, some local Bengali Muslim youths came to my house and asked my wife to prepare *haria* and cook food for them. All this was made for them, as we treat them as our neighbours. But subsequently, they attempted to talk to my wife, after becoming tipsy from drinking *haria*. I noticed it and I beat the three guys; me alone. Later on, nothing happened because the guys came to my house with a bad intention to abuse us'. The Bengali youths kept silent perhaps because they did not want to admit to their own parents that they had been drinking *haria* and abusing Oraon hospitality.

Case study 6.12: Local Bengali youths disturb Oraons in dwellings, but are penalised

Mongol Tiggya, aged 57 years old, lives in Paschim Doihara of Gobindaganj sub-district of Gaibandha district. According to him, the local

Bengali Muslim youths steal fruits, grains, money, ornaments or cows, goats, ducks, hens or eggs from the Oraon dwellings. The Bengalis come to Oraons' dwellings by day and observe those things and goods. At night, when the Oraons become tipsy by drinking *haria* and sleep deeply, some of the local Bengali youths come to their dwellings and steal those goods and things. This also happens when Oraons travel to distant places to visit to their relatives or attend festivals or ceremonies.

Mongol Tiggya depicts how one night in 1992 five local Bengali youths came to his house to pick mangoes. Mongol Tiggya was not sleeping, but was inside his dwelling. Mongol Tiggya, along with other Oraon males, caught the Bengali youths and beat them. The following day, a meeting was called that the local union council member asked the youths to pay BDT 1500 (300 each) to Mongol Tiggya as compensation.

In this case, the local union council leader, who is a Bengali Muslim, supported Mongol Tiggya's actions against the youths. This was not only due to the fact that the youths were caught red handed in the act of stealing his mangoes, but also because the union council leader relies on Oraon support in order to be elected. Also, the compensation was slight for the Bengali youths, who were, in fact, saved by the local union council leader instead of being sentenced to jail or brought to the police. Thus, in settling disputes in the locality, the local Bengali Muslim leader was in fact, actually in favour of the Bengali Muslims, because the loss of mangoes for Mongol Tiggya was higher than the compensation that was paid to him by the youths.

From a circumstantialist viewpoint, Oraon socio-economic exploitation by local Bengalis contributes to Oraon identity formation. The Oraon interactions or relationships with local Bengali Muslim peasants results in their socio-economic alienation. In fact, the Oraon 'socio-economic condition' forms their 'ethnic group sentiment' (Jayawardena, 1980: 446-447), which sometimes leads them to protest against the local Bengalis. Oraons' ethnic group sentiment is sharpened by their socio-economic alienation, which helps define their minority identity. The cases of local Bengali youths being beaten by Oraons can, thus, be explained as the result of Oraon ethnic group sentiment arising out of their socio-economic alienation. The Oraons, contest with local Bengalis, that is, their protest is produced (Henry 1998; 2008) because of local Bengali Muslim peasants' domination or economic exploitation.

At this point of this discussion, I contextualise my analysis of Oraon identity formation as a process of Oraonisation. As discussed, despite their present economic situation as well as their religious differentiation, the Oraons still engage in some common socio-cultural practices. Although they have changed some of their socio-cultural practices, the Oraons are still identifiable by their language, clan structure, traditions, and particular cultural practices. However, these cultural practices do not, by themselves, explain their identity as Oraon. The Oraons' socio-cultural practices as primordial ties along with their history and origin provide the essential criteria for them to represent their minority identity in dealings with the Bengali Muslim majority.

The Oraon interactions, relationships, and confrontations with the local Bengali Muslims also play a crucial role in constituting their identity. As revealed, the Oraons are victims of local Bengali Muslims' threats, cheating, robbery, and abduction. This socio-economic exploitation helps to create them as an identity category in the country. As I have argued, Oraon identity is not just based on the particular socio-cultural practices that distinguish them from the Bengali majority. Their socio-economic condition and their relationship with the local Bengali Muslim majority are also crucial in the process of identity formation. This relationship has led to a process of Oraonisation, which can best be understood based on a 'mediating reference point' (Seol, 2008: 351) between the primordial and circumstantial viewpoint. Oraons' ethnic group sentiment/ minority identity is socially constructed as a result of their socio-economic alienation; while Oraons' primordial ties based on socio-cultural practices, along with past history and origin, provide the source material for their strategic essentialism for collective interests/actions, such as their economic and political action in dealing with Bengali Muslim majority.

This discussion on Oraonisation, however, requires interpretation of Oraon marginalisation and resistance or responses to the discourse of indigeneity in Bangladesh. The rights and recognition due to the Oraons as *adibashis* in the country are neglected by the Bangladeshi Government. Because of this deprivation and exploitation, the Oraons organise themselves at local, regional, or national levels and also have representation at the international level for the protection of their due rights

and for recognition of their deprivation. How Oraon deprivation or exclusion differentiates them from the people of the wider Bengali society and how Oraons represent themselves as *adibashis* (indigenous peoples) is discussed in the following chapter.



Figure 6.1: Oraon *karsavanda* (organising symbol) (courtesy: Kispotta, 2007: 10)



Figure 6.2: Oraon flag (courtesy: Kispotta, 2007: 11)

Chapter 7

Indigeneity: Oraon Marginalisation and Resistance

In this chapter, I provide a discussion on Oraons as *adibashis* (indigenous peoples) and their responses to the discourse of indigeneity in Bangladesh. As explored previously, the Oraons are an excluded and deprived people in respect to their socio-economic condition. They are also differentiated even within their own community because of their present-day religious affiliations. The Oraons also face discrimination in Bangladeshi society, because of the state policy concerning their distinct identity. Thus, they seek help and support from the wider Bengali society and also from the Bangladeshi state in their drive towards socio-economic-political change. Here, I firstly aim to discuss indigeneity as a process of marginalisation. Secondly, I aim to explore the forms or levels of Oraon resistance against such marginalisation. I analyse Oraon demands for socio-economic change and equal participation in mainstream Bangladeshi society.

Before providing a discussion on Oraon responses to the discourse of indigeneity in Bangladesh, I will contextualise Oraon understandings of indigeneity. As mentioned in chapter 1, the association of *adibashi* with indigeneity (Marschke *et al.*, 2008; Soucaille, 2011; Merlan, 2009a; Monee, 2011a, 2011b) is relevant to this study. Generally, the *adibashis* (indigenous peoples) of Bangladesh have tense relationships with Bangladesh Governments, as these authorities do not recognise their distinctive cultural identities. They are considered small ethnic communities and discriminated against or marginalised by the Bangladeshi state and the dominant Bengali groups. The small ethnic communities contest the Bangladesh Governments for their recognition as *adibashis* and for equal participation in mainstream Bangladeshi society. As observed, the *adibashis* seek help from the international community and develop alliances with other *adibashi* groups who live in Bangladesh, or in other countries, in order to protest against or escape from Bangladeshi state oppression or local Bengali domination. In relation to this observation, as Henry (2011: 248) mentions, ‘by claiming indigeneity [indigenous peoples] seek to escape oppression by linking “their causes with the causes of others,

on different continents, in similar positions” (Barnard, 2006: 13) through the kinds of creative networks and public performances’.

The Oraons are no exception to this understanding of indigeneity. Thus, the marginalisation of Oraons and their recognition as *adibashis* requires discussion, in terms of how Oraons respond to the discourse of indigeneity in Bangladesh. As the Oraons are suppressed or dominated by the local Bengalis, Oraon marginalisation conforms to an understanding of ‘indigeneity-as-marginalisation’ (Marschke *et al.*, 2008). Also, the ways in which the Oraons protest against their marginalisation and demand socio-economic change and equal participation in mainstream society provides an understanding of ‘indigeneity-as-resistance’ (Marschke *et al.*, 2008).

Oraon Marginalisation

According to research participants, apart from their landlessness and economic crisis, the Oraons face social discrimination by the local Bengali Muslims. Other forms of Oraon marginalisation include deprivation and dominance by the local leaders and administration, avoidance by and negligence of local government officials, inadequacy of government support, and a lack of state patronage. The government does not recognise the Oraons as *adibashis* as they are not the original inhabitants of the country, and stops the celebration of the international day of indigenous peoples in Bangladesh. These factors reflect Oraon marginalisation, which I discuss in the following paragraphs.

The local Bengalis, as the majority, are not much concerned about solving the socio-economic problems of the Oraons. The religious disparity between the Oraons and the local Bengali Muslims sharpens the socio-economic deterioration of the former. The Bengali Muslims exploit the Oraons on various issues in the villages. The social discrimination facilitates the disintegration of the relationship between the Oraons and the local Bengali Muslims, for which I provide a case study below.

Case study 7.1: The Oraons are neglected by the local Bengali Muslims

Shukra Lakhra, aged 55 years old, lives in Moddhyapara of Ramwesarpara village at Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district. He is illiterate and a Hindu Oraon *khatriya*. He lives on his relative's land. He has no farm land, but has taken a mortgage of 20 decimals land for cultivation. He earns subsistence for his family of seven by both self-farming and agricultural day-labouring. According to him, as the Oraons are economically poor, the Bengali Muslim peasants usually look down on them. The Bengali Muslims do not consider them in any of their ceremonies. The Oraons are treated by the Bengali Muslims as the lower stratum people in the village society. As almost all of the Oraons are landless and also as they do not have safe latrines or are not habituated to use a sanitary latrine, they usually defecate in the Bengali Muslims' open field or in the bushes. The Oraons also attempt to graze cattle in the open field of the Bengali Muslims. But if they attempt to defecate or to graze their cattle in the Bengali Muslims' open field, they are rebuked or even sometimes beaten by the latter.

Again, the Bengali Muslims usually do not enter the village market or a local tea stall, if they see some Oraons or *adibashis* are present. They feel like they are being ritually polluted, if they enter into the same tea stall when the minorities – Hindus, Oraons or *adibashis* – are present. Usually, the owner of the market or tea stall does not make any differentiation regarding his or her service to the customers and serves them irrespective of religious differentiation. He allows these Oraon people to have seats in the tea stall because of his business. Still, the Bengali Muslims do not enter into the same tea stall in the village market where the Oraons are seated or taking tea. Different tea stalls for the Bengali Muslims and for the *adibashis* or minorities are situated in the village market. As observed, this social disparity is created especially by the local Bengali Muslim leaders.

The Oraons are also discriminated against in terms of daily wages and children's schooling. As observed, the Oraons are not given fair wages when they work in the agricultural fields or in other sectors, including shops, market places, or in the brick fields of the local Bengali Muslims; they are paid less than their Bengali counterparts. The rich Bengali Muslim peasants understand that the Oraons or *adibashis* are efficient agricultural day-labourers, but do not pay them fairly, considering the price of food and food grains in the region. The Bengali Muslim peasants also delay paying wages to the Oraons, which sometimes places the latter in instant economic crisis. These discriminatory practices sharpen the economic crisis of the Oraons.

I also observed that the Oraon children are not cordially accepted in the local primary school. They are looked down upon by the Bengali Muslim teachers at school, and the Bengali children do not interact well with the *adibashi* children. This negative interaction between the Bengali and Oraon children at school is sometimes created by the school teachers and also by the Bengali Muslim guardians of their children. These relationships between the Oraons and Bengali Muslims contribute to the marginalisation experienced by the Oraons.

The Oraons, as ethnic minorities, are neglected by the Bengali Muslim leaders and local administrative bodies. If any problem arises between the Oraons and the Bengali Muslims, the local Union Council leaders take positions or opinions in favour of the latter. Because of this attitude among the members of the wider Bengali Muslim community, the Oraons are compelled to go to the local judicial courts, but fail to receive any justice even from these courts. For example, if an Oraon goes to the local judicial courts, the Bengali Muslim leaders with the help of the corrupted officials at the courts manage the court cases concerning their occupation over Oraon land. As observed, the Oraons keep silent because their illiteracy, economic insolvency, and the prohibitive cost of filing a case make it difficult for them to take a case to the local judicial court. Thus, the Oraons are deprived of any justice from the local judicial courts in terms of land occupation in the region. This situation compels the Oraons to embrace the Bengali dominance.

The Oraons describe the local government officials' avoidance, negligence and unawareness. As observed, the local Union Council officials avoid the Oraons, along with other minority groups, in distributing government support and facilities. Also, the Oraons along with other *adibashis* are not cordially accepted by the local government officials. I provide the reflections of a local government official about Oraons in the following case study:

Case study 7.2: Reflections of a local government official about the Oraons

On April 5, 2012, I went to the Union Information Service Centre (UISC) of a local Union Council at Rangpur region to collect statistical data on one of my study village's population. I met the local government official,

a local Bengali Muslim. Finding me a Muslim with an Oraon, the Union Council secretary, who is a Bengali Muslim, became dissatisfied and stated: 'The Oraons drink *haria* (rice-beer) and you are living with these *haria* drinking people'. He reacted as if these peoples are untouchables to the Bengali Muslims. I replied: 'I am a Muslim and, at the same time, I am an inhabitant of Bangladesh and they are also the inhabitants of this country'. I also stated to the secretary at the local Union Council office: 'If I stay with the Oraons, does it make any difference to you?' However, later on, the Oraon, with whom I travelled to the Union Council office, told me that 'the local government officials do not treat us in a good way at all. They always try to avoid us. They deprive us of the government facilities, including food, clothing and money'. This incident provides evidence the avoidance and negligence of the Bengali Muslims towards the *adibashis*, including the Oraons.

The research participants claim that government help and assistance is hardly available to them, considering their socio-economic problems. But the special affairs division at the Prime Minister's office has specific programmes for the ethnic communities. According to Hasan & Ali (2009: 60), only 4.9 per cent of the ethnic communities are aware of the programmes of special affairs division and 1.9 per cent of them receive supports for education, health, safe drinking water, poultry, etc.

The Oraons claim that they rarely get support and relief, such as rice, wheat, oil, clothing, corrugated iron sheets for building houses, medicine, and elderly allowances from the government. They also claim that mismanagement is prevalent among the government programmes, including in the elderly and widow allowance programmes that are available generally in the country. The government provides subsidies for festivals, but not at all times. Sometimes, this support is distributed on the basis of the beneficiary's political affiliation with the local Union Council leaders. The Oraons also state that they are excluded from receiving government support because of the corruption of local government officials. Some Oraons comment that the government officials manipulate the system and are corrupt in distributing the relief materials or elderly allowance. An elderly research participant, aged about 70 years, of Ramwesarpara village at Rangpur claims that he himself paid a BDT 500 bribe to get the elderly allowance from the local Union Council.

The research participants also state that there is unequal distribution of government support among the *adibashis* in Bangladesh. I interviewed another key research participant, Victor Lakhra. He stated that the government support and facilities for the *adibashis* are not equally distributed among them. In getting government support and facilities, the *adibashis* of Barind are disadvantaged in comparison to the *adibashis* who live in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHTs). In this regard, one of my research participants, Bimol Tappo (34), who lives in Bilpara village of Ghoraghat sub-district of Dinajpur district, also claims:

The *adibashi* support and facilities, which are offered by the Government, are largely grabbed by the *adibashis* of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHTs). We rarely receive this government support and facilities in Barind. As the *adibashi* leaders from the CHTs are more advanced and better educated than those of Barind, we hardly know about the government support and facilities for us. Besides, the *adibashi* leaders, who are from CHTs, are in the leading position considering the problems of all *adibashis* in the country. We rarely find an *adibashi* leader from Barind, who properly represents us in the country. Nonetheless, the *adibashi* leaders even from Barind, are corrupt, and they work for their own benefit only, not for us.

As mentioned earlier, the *adibashis* of the CHTs are well known to both the local and international development practitioners, while the *adibashis* in the plain districts are less known and less addressed in the development policies considering their socio-economic problems. Also, the *adibashi* leaders from the CHTs are generally better educated and connected with both the Governments and development organisations than those from the plain districts. The *adibashi* leaders from the CHTs are well aware of the resources that both the Governments and development organisations allocate to them. Thus, the *adibashis* from Barind and other regions receive less support and resources than their ethnic-peers, who live in the CHTs. Although the *adibashi* leaders from Barind do receive some resources, these are less than what is needed for their community members. Also, the *adibashi* leaders tend to distribute the support and resources among their poor kin and families first, rather than to the wider community.

The research participants also describe their dissatisfaction with the fact that their contribution to Bangladesh is not recognised by the government. One of my key informants, Clement Tirkey, who is 47 years old and works at Caritas – Dinajpur and has completed a Bachelor Degree, describes that, although the Government of Bangladesh has inaugurated some programmes for the *adibashis* through the Special Affairs Division of the Prime Minister’s Office, the programmes are insufficient for their socio-economic development. The programmes include education stipend (BDT 10,000) for a college/university-attending *adibashi* student, *adibashi* loans for income-generating activities, including cattle rearing or running small businesses, and establishing *adibashi* cultural centres across the country. In this regard, Clement Tirkey (47) states that although the government has offered some specific programmes for their socio-economic development, these are not sufficient for their socio-economic change. He claims:

We are still far away from the modern facilities offered by the Government. We feel that the Government is not very cordial about our problems. Also, I claim our contribution to the independence of the country in 1971. We also fought for the Independence of Bangladesh in the 1971 liberation war, but we didn’t get the due recognition for our contribution to the country in the past. I can at least refer you to go to see our contribution to the liberation war in 1971, depicted in *Orjon* [achievement], The Independence Statue of Bangladesh at Rangpur Modern Bus Terminal (Figure 7.1).

This Independence Statue of Bangladesh – *Orjon* – was built in 1997. We state we fought for the independence of this piece of land. But, have we got the due recognition? We haven’t yet got it. The Government doesn’t recognise us as the *adibashis*. The Government has just built this independence statue to recognise our participation in the 1971 liberation war. Yet, this recognition is superficial, as we do not receive any proper support and cooperation from the Government to practise our traditions and cultures as a separate entity. So, how could we have our equal participation with the mainstream Bangladeshi society and culture?

As stated above, the government of Bangladesh does not recognise the Oraon/ethnic communities as *adibashis* and bans the celebration of the international day of indigenous peoples. The Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives (MLGRDC) has declared itself against recognition of the *adibashis* and

against celebration of the international indigenous peoples' day in the country. This declaration was published in the daily newspapers, such as *The Daily Kalerkantho*, on the 13th April 2012. The declaration has been disseminated through the local administration in the country. The government has stated that it will not help, or assist, the people of the small ethnic communities to organise or celebrate the international day of indigenous peoples in the country. This is because the government declares that there are no *adibashis* or indigenous peoples in Bangladesh. In this regard, I provide the following case studies describing the reflections of Oraons as *adibashis*.

Case study 7.3: Oraons confronted with the comments of the Bangladeshi state

Dulali Minji, 48 years old, lives in Tetali para of Ramwesarpara village in Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district. She is a widow and landless. She lives in her husband's homestead, with her son and a daughter, and has no agricultural farm land. She herself is an agricultural day-labourer. Her son and daughter also engage in agricultural day-labouring to manage their subsistence. She comments on the government statements regarding the identity of *adibashis* in Bangladesh: 'The indigenous peoples or the people of the ethnic communities are not the original inhabitants of Bangladesh. The Bengalis are the *adibashis* of Bangladesh'. Dulali Minji treats this statement of Bangladeshi Government as shameful for the people of the ethnic communities including the Oraons. She also states that she does not receive any support or cooperation from the Bengali Muslim peasants or from the government.

Case study 7.4: Oraons claim for their recognition as *adibashis*

Badal Minji (*choto*/younger Badal Minji), aged 55 years old, of Bilpara village in Ghoraghat sub-district of Dinajpur district, depicts the woes of Oraons in life. He claims that as Oraon *adibashis*, they do not get any support or facilities in the country. The Bangladesh Government does not care for their identity as *adibashis* or indigenous peoples. At this stage of his life, he desires to see their recognition as *adibashis* and to introduce them in this world as the Oraons.

Although the Government of Bangladesh has banned the celebration of the international day of indigenous peoples and has enacted a resolution not to cooperate

with the *adibashis* in celebrating this day at any level, the *adibashis* still celebrate the day with the help of some voluntary organisations. Officially, the Oraons, along with other ethnic communities of Bangladesh, are not considered as *adibashis* of the country. The government of Bangladesh considers these people as ‘small ethnic communities’ (SECs). The government of Bangladesh does not recognise the distinct cultures, languages, religions and identities of *adibashis*, including the Oraons. According to Monee (2011a), if the Bangladesh government recognises the ethnic minorities as *adibashis*, they will create potential threats to the specific territories (CHTs) and sovereignty of the country (Monee, 2011a). This potential threat will also spread over the country by the *adibashis* who live in different regions. Thus, the government does not recognise the ethnic minorities as *adibashis*, but takes initiatives for the improvement of their quality of life. However, the Oraons along with the other ethnic communities of Bangladesh resist the steps taken by the Bangladeshi government. The following section provides a discussion of Oraon resistance.

Oraon Resistance

The Oraons organise themselves for their protection and due rights, as *adibashis*, at different levels in Bangladesh. The Oraons, along with other *adibashi* groups, organise themselves at the local level and also have some regional level forums for their representation. Additionally, these people also have national representation through organisations such as the Indigenous Peoples’ Forum in Dhaka. This forum also maintains the international representation of the *adibashis*, including the Oraons, by celebrating the International Day of Indigenous Peoples, although it has been banned by the Bangladeshi government. Below, I attempt to provide a brief description of the organisational structures of the Oraons/*adibashis* at local, regional and national/international levels.

I first describe Oraon organisation at the village/local level through which they resist local Bengali domination. As discussed earlier, the Oraons’ traditional political organisation (*padda panch*) still exists in their community, although it is

weakened in its functions. The Oraons in the villages organise themselves or call a general meeting of *padda panch* to discuss their problems with local Bengalis. In addition, the Oraons have established local *adibashi* clubs, in respective villages, to discuss their problems and to represent themselves locally.

For example, the Oraons of Ramwesarpara at Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district, in addition to their *padda panch*, have established the Ramwesarpara Adibashi Club (RAC). The *adibashi* club at Ramwesarpara village is situated close to the Ramwesarpara Government Primary School. The Ramwesarpara Adibashi Club was established to resist local Bengali domination in the region. If an Oraon is deprived of his or her rights, including his/her daily wages or land registration, or is physically abused by the local Bengali Muslims, the Oraons call a general meeting at the local *adibashi* club to discuss the problems and take steps to solve them. As a result, the local *adibashi* club at Ramwesarpara village has become a common ground to discuss the problems of the Oraons and to protect their rights and represent them in the locality.

The Ramwesarpara Adibashi Club also acts as a common ground to protect the *adibashis'* rights and to pursue support from local government bodies. This *adibashi* club organises the local *adibashis* to resist corruption and deprivation by the local government officials. As the Oraons, along with the other ethnic communities, including the Mundas in the village, face deprivation or corruption in relation to the receipt of government support and facilities, they claim justice and equal distribution of those supports and facilities. The funds to establish the Ramwesarpara Adibashi Club came from Christian missionaries. The Adibashi Club distributes both the government and missionary support, including the clothing, medicinal facilities, food and shelter to them.

I also observed the Binodpur Adibashi Club (BAC) in action at Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district. The Oraons of Binodpur and Udaypur villages, in addition to their *padda panches*, have established a local *adibashi* club at Mondoler *hat* (village market) in Binodpur village with the name of Binodpur Adibashi Club. This Binodpur Adibashi Club was also funded by the Christian missionaries. Like the Ramwesarpara Adibashi Club, the Binodpur Adibashi Club was established to

protect the local *adibashis*' (all *adibashis* of Binodpur and Udaypur) rights and to ensure their representation in the locality.

I have observed that the Oraons also have regional level organising structures. As discussed in chapter five, the Oraon clusters in thirteen villages of Mithapukur and Pirgonj sub-districts in Rangpur region established an association with the name Adibashi Oraon Khatriya Samity (AOKS). This Oraon *samity* (association) has an organising structure consisting of thirteen *pradhan* (Oraon chief or headman), one from each village. Also, all adult Oraon males and females of these villages are members of this *samity*. According to interview data, the members of this *samity* collected subscriptions to raise funds to perform specific functions.

This *samity* specifically aims at renovating Oraons as Hindu Oraon *khatriyas* each year. The Oraon *khatriyas* conduct activities, such as negotiation or discussion about their problems, with local government administration. The *samity* also helps poor households and plans to establish temples in different Oraon clusters in villages. These functions of the Adibashi Oraon Khatriya Samity help the Oraon *khatriyas* maintain solidarity and integrity against the local Bengalis' dominance in the region.

I found that the *adibashis* also have an association at the Mithapukur sub-district level in Rangpur district. Mithapukur sub-district consists of seventeen Union Councils, which contain a good number of Oraons along with other ethnic minority groups. The Oraons and other minority *adibashi* groups of all villages of these seventeen Union Councils of Mithapukur constitute their regional *adibashi* association. This regional *adibashi* association is named Mithapukur Adibashi Parishad (MAP) and works as a common platform for all *adibashis* in this sub-district. This Mithapukur Adibashi Parishad consists of eleven *adibashi* leaders, who have been chosen to execute specific functions in villages of Mithapukur sub-district.

Specifically, these *adibashi* leaders of Mithapukur Adibashi Parishad distribute government support among the *adibashis* and protest against the local Bengalis' dominance in villages. As part of the government's activity in 2011, three latrines and two tube-wells for each *adibashi* cluster in the villages were distributed or setup through Mithapukur Adibashi Parishad. However, research participants

stated that these latrines and tube-wells are limited for them in each *adibashi* cluster of villages in Mithapukur sub-district. Regarding school allowances for the *adibashi* students, the *adibashi* leaders state that the amount provided to help the poor *adibashi* children for schooling is very limited. Mithapukur Adibashi Parishad negotiates with the local government administration concerning *adibashi* deprivation or economic exploitation by the local Bengali Muslim peasants.

Oraons, along with other *adibashi* groups, have specific associations in regard to their resistance against marginalisation at the national level. Organisations, including the Jatiyo Adibashi Parishad (JAP)/National Adibashi Council (NAC), Coordination of NGOs for Adibashis (CNA), National Coalition for Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) and Christian Commission of Development in Bangladesh (CCDB) and Caritas – Dinajpur Region, organise the *adibashis* and work for their socio-economic change in the country. These groups organise the *adibashis* at different levels, fostering their rights and due recognition in Bangladesh. These organisations help establish *adibashi* committees along with strengthening their traditional political organisations. For example, I provide the placard, which was disseminated by the National Adibashi Council in Rangpur region, describing the *adibashi* gathering for a separate land commission in plains districts (Figure 7.2).

According to research participants, the *adibashi* leaders of the Indigenous Peoples' Forum in Dhaka attempt to ensure, at the least, participation from all ethnic communities to celebrate the international day of indigenous peoples in the country. The Indigenous Peoples' Forum in Dhaka also ensures their representation in the United Nations (UN) on the international day of indigenous peoples – the 9th August. The representation of the Oraons, at an international organisation, is not direct, but they do claim solidarity with indigenous peoples of all other ethnic communities from different parts of the country. This way, the Oraons along with other ethnic communities of Bangladesh, have their representation and maintain a 'global alliance' (Henry, 2011: 247) with all indigenous groups of peoples at the international level.

On the 9th August 2013, the Research and Development Cooperative (RDC) and the National Coalition for Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) organised a discussion on

the international day of indigenous peoples at the Auditorium of the National Library of Bangladesh in Dhaka. This discussion raised the *adibashi* issues in Bangladesh and was followed by a cultural programme performed by the *adibashi* participants. I observed that the distinguished discussants, including ministers (who apologised for banning the celebration of international day of indigenous peoples), members of parliament, civil society members and *adibashi* leaders, urged *adibashi* rights and recognition in Bangladesh. The *adibashis'* rights and recognition are yet to be formally acknowledged by the government of Bangladesh. Here, I do not enter into a debate on the Bangladeshi constitution regarding the rights and recognition of indigenous peoples. Rather, my aim is to explore the demands for recognition of *adibashi status*, specifically among the Oraons, and their fight for socio-economic change and equal participation in mainstream Bangladeshi society and culture.

At this point, I state that the Oraons have different levels of organisations through which they resist against the local exploitation and national indifferences. The Oraons establish local clubs, which are funded either by Christian missionaries or by themselves to ensure their rights in the locality. But the functions of *adibashi* clubs are limited to organising the members in solving social problems and to distribute the government and Christian missionary funded support and facilities among them. The functions of Oraons' regional level organisations are also limited to gather the government and charitable organisation funded facilities and to distribute those facilities among the ethnic minorities in specific villages. Both the local *adibashi* clubs and the regional level organisations of the Oraons, thus, need to ensure their effectiveness to resist against local exploitation and negligence of the local Bengali Muslim peasants and the local administration. Although the national and international level organisations of the ethnic communities, including the Oraons, attempt to ensure, at the least, their participation in the national gathering and their representation internationally, their rights and recognition as *adibashis* are yet to ensure in Bangladesh. Thus, the Oraons need to develop stronger ties among themselves and with other *adibashi* communities from both the country and abroad for their equal participation in the mainstream society and recognition as *adibashis*.

Oraon Demand for Socio-economic Change

As observed, the Oraons seek cooperation from local Bengalis and regular aid from both the governmental organisations (GOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for their socio-economic advancement. Various NGOs, including the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), Grameen Bank, Caritas – Dinajpur Region, World Vision (WV), Christian Commission of Development in Bangladesh (CCDB) and Christian missionary, an organisation, have launched programmes for the socio-economic development of the Oraons along with other ethnic communities. These NGOs provide various forms of support, including education, medicine, housing, credit, agricultural pesticides and high-yielding varieties of rice to the Oraons. *Dipshika* (a local NGO) offers fertilizers, high yielding varieties of seeds, cattle, and tube-wells to the Oraons. *Pallishri* (a local NGO) also offers cows to the Oraons in exchange for a return of the original value, plus half of the profits procured from rearing a cow. The NGOs also provide relief materials, including rice, wheat flour, lentils, warm clothing, mosquito nets and clothes, for both Oraon women and men. While the governments provide specific services for the ethnic minorities, including the Oraons, some NGOs also play an advocacy role in solving their socio-economic problems rather than only providing them services.

Despite these support efforts and subsidies, the research participants state that there has been no change in their socio-economic condition. The result of the development projects run by the NGOs is not satisfactory to the Oraons. In some cases, the socio-economic condition of the Oraons has deteriorated because of the credit programmes of the NGOs, as these credit programmes cannot ensure a regular income for them. Because of their prevalent economic crisis, most Oraons can neither pay the regular interest of the loan nor utilise the fund for income-generating activities. Although some Oraons run small businesses by taking loans from the NGOs, most Oraons just utilise the fund for their daily subsistence. Although the NGOs and Christian missionaries have extended development programmes for their socio-economic improvement, the Oraons do not receive much benefit because these programmes are not culturally appropriate. In this regard, I asked one of my key

research participants, Lucas Kispotta, aged about 60, who lives in Dinajpur: ‘How would you see the ways of Oraons’ socio-economic change and equal participation in the mainstream Bangladeshi society?’ He replied:

We see that the Bangladesh Government is giving us some facilities, including funds for our children’s education, a proportionate percentage of jobs and admissions in the tertiary educational institutions in the country and so on. But, we see that all those jobs, funds and admissions are mostly received by the *adibashis*, who live in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHTs). What are we getting – the *adibashis*, who live in Barind? We see an absolute differentiation as well as discrimination in getting government support. This differentiation in getting government support places us in a more under-privileged position in comparison to our-mates, who live in the CHTs. We also see that many national and international development projects have been launched for the socio-economic development of the *adibashis* of the CHTs. But we do not see any endeavour by both the national and international communities for the socio-economic development of the *adibashis* in Barind.

Considering the sympathy and responsibilities of the Bangladeshi Governments for us, we see that there is an academy – Bangla Academy –, housed on the campus of the University of Dhaka. But we don’t have any academy for the practice or development of our own language in Bangladesh, *kurukh*. We are much willing to practice our own language, *kurukh*, in Bangladesh. We are not getting support or patronage to establish an academy for practicing our mother tongue, *kurukh*. If we look at the Oraons, who live in Ranchi of India, we see there is a University by the name of *Kurukh* University and also an institution by the name of Oraon Research Institution.

The Oraons of Ranchi of Chotonagpur of India have been able to develop their culture, language and traditions with the help and patronage of the Indian Government. We expect to see similar patronage by the Bangladeshi Government to enable us to practise our own culture, language and traditions in Bangladesh. We want to develop an institute to practise our own culture and languages. For that, we are eager to accept any support or patronage by any person or by any organisation. The goal of establishing our institute is to practise Oraon culture alongside the Bangladeshi culture to foster understanding of our community and of our equal participation.

Lucas Kispotta also stated that the development projects for the *adibashis*, as well as for the Oraons, have not been under-taken based on their social structures. Any development project for them should be inaugurated based on their demand and cultures. Before inaugurating a project for their socio-economic development,

practitioners, as well as development organisations or the Government, should assess the feasibility as well as the effectiveness of that project among the Oraons. The development practitioners should have also some training in social sciences including the disciplines of sociology, social work, economics and anthropology, which will enable the practitioners to understand the problems of the Oraons or of the *adibashis*. Almost all of the development projects run by the NGOs in Barind are usually executed by personnel who do not have any training in social sciences or in development studies. Nonetheless, the NGOs have launched the same project for the socio-economic development of both the mainstream poor people and the *adibashis*. Different development projects could be launched for either. Also, for an effective contribution to the development of the *adibashis* or the Oraons, projects should be sector-oriented i.e. a specific project should be taken to resolve a specific problem of the *adibashis*.

The research participants also state that neither the government nor the NGOs have initiated development programmes emphasising their life and culture. To date, none of the governments of Bangladesh have introduced any particular programmes specific to the culture and society of the Oraons or any other ethnic communities. They state that although the government of Bangladesh along with donor agencies have launched programmes for their socio-economic development, none of these are in tune with their traditional social structure. Development programmes such as health and sanitation, micro-credit and livelihood management through income-generating activities have been launched for both the poor Bengali Muslims and the ethnic minorities. According to my interviews with the research participants, these development programmes are not concerned with the Oraons' traditional political structure (*padda panch*), which can identify the Oraons' problems and demands in the community. But the development practitioners do not consider the Oraons' traditional political structure in implementing those programmes.

As the government of Bangladesh does not recognise their distinct culture, religion, language and identity, the Oraons are not enamoured with the development process. The better educated Oraons demand sector-oriented development projects for socio-economic change in their community. They seek political consensus of the

governments, as well as the attention of concerned parties, both local and international, for resolving their socio-economic problems. The better educated Oraons also emphasise the importance of awareness-building programmes to increase Oraons' zeal, along with cooperation and support from the local Bengali Muslims or from the mainstream population, to ensure their socio-economic development. I analyse the Oraons' demands from both the government of Bangladesh and international community for their socio-economic change and equal participation in mainstream Bangladeshi society and culture below.

As the Oraons have suffered gradual land dispossession over the course of history and lead a hard life, they claim return of their dispossessed land. According to research participants, the government of Bangladesh has rarely taken steps to recover the land of Oraons or to compensate them for land that has been illegally appropriated. Although some local level non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and Christian missionaries have rendered legal support to the Oraons, along with other ethnic communities, to reclaim their land from the local Bengalis, much Oraon dispossession of land has yet to be resolved. Many cases of illegal occupation by the local Bengali Muslims have not yet been solved in favour of the Oraons interviewed in the study villages.

The Oraons seek the support and attention of civil society and the wider Bengali community in order to take steps to help them reclaim and reoccupy their land. Some Oraons also state that the *khas* land (government acquired/owned land) in the region can be distributed among the landless Oraons for cultivation and resettlement, as many of them have been displaced from their own lands in the localities. Collaboration between the *adibashis* and the local administration of the Bangladesh government has been sought to protect the land of the *adibashis*, including the Oraons, as demonstrated in the following case study.

Case study 7.5: The Oraons demand for an easy access to land sale/purchasing system

Badal Minji, aged 61 years old, who lives in Bilpara village of Ghoraghat sub-district in Dinajpur district, states that the Oraons cannot easily sell or purchase a piece of land like the Bengalis. The Bengalis easily

sell or purchase land by going to the local land registry office. But if Oraons desire to sell or purchase a piece of land, firstly they need permission from the local Adibashi Development Organisation (ADO). Secondly, this land sale or purchasing permission needs to be approved by the District Commissioner (DC). After performing these two approval steps, an Oraon is entitled to buy or sell a piece of land either among his community members or to others as he wishes.

This land sale or purchasing process of the Oraons differs from that of the Bengalis. Some Oraons demand equal right/easy access to the land sale/purchasing system available to all citizens of Bangladesh. However, the reason of land sale or purchasing permission in case of the Oraons is for protection of their land by the Bangladesh Government. Badal Minji in another interview claims that the Bengalis still attempt to grab their land illegally when the Oraons along with other *adibashis* enact a land sale or purchasing permission from the local Adibashi Development Organisation (ADO) and that the Government of Bangladesh also enacts a land-selling or purchasing permission for them to protect their land.

Some Oraons have sought loans for farming along with land re-occupation in their localities. As stated earlier, the Oraons take loans for different income-generating activities, including cattle rearing, or buying a van or rickshaw for regular income. Loans are also used for fishing, buying fishing equipment and digging ponds, and for running small businesses. The Oraons also seek sufficient work and training for regular income along with loans, as they cannot work in the agricultural sector throughout the year. As mentioned earlier, most Oraons remain jobless, especially as agricultural day labourers, during nine months of the year; they demand the opportunity of regular work. They also demand a labour market to ensure their labour price in the region, as they get lower wages than their Bengali Muslim counter-parts. They also state that small-scale or large-scale industries should be set-up in their localities so that they can get jobs and can earn regularly.

Oraon employment is hindered by their lack of education or illiteracy. The research participants state that they are in need of education, so that they can get jobs and can earn regularly, and so that the local Bengali Muslims cannot continue to cheat them. They also argue for female education. Change in the socio-economic status of their community cannot be achieved without educating their females. The higher level of illiteracy among the Oraons reflects their underdevelopment in the

region. The data from my study reveal that most of the Oraons (58.08 per cent) are illiterate. This illiteracy rate is calculated on the basis of a combination of both Oraon men and women of different age categories, although the Oraon women are less literate than the Oraon men, as observed. The functional literacy rate of the total Bangladeshi population of age 11-45 years is 53.7 per cent (BBS, 2011), which means, the illiteracy rate among the Bangladeshi population (42.3 per cent) is lower than that of the Oraons (58.08 per cent). Thus, 58.08 per cent of Oraon population, comprised of both men and women of different age categories, can neither read nor write nor even sign their names. These Oraons have never attended school, although education is one of the basic human rights.

The Oraons do not receive a modern education because of their economic situation, and changing social conditions. Today, most Oraon children attend school, but they are deprived and they do not get the proper school stipend. Oraon leaders collect the school stipend from the *upazila* (sub-district) education office, but they claim that they receive the minimal amount of school stipend for the *adibashi* children. The school stipend amount is not sufficient for the school-attending Oraon children. Despite the fact that the government of Bangladesh has introduced various education programmes for its people generally, the Oraons and other ethnic communities are far behind in those education programmes. However, the main hindrance to the educational development of the Oraons is their acute poverty. The Oraon girls drop out of school to marry early and instead of attending school the boys engage in economic activities to help contribute to their families.

As mentioned earlier, several NGOs and voluntary organisations, including the Christian missionaries, have launched programmes to address the educational underdevelopment of the Oraons. These developmental organisations have extended education programmes as part of their development initiatives among the *adibashis*, including the Oraons. Still, another problem remains, related to language and communication among the Oraons. Bengali is not the mother tongue of the Oraons, and they cannot understand all the accents of the Bengali speakers who teach in the schools. Hence, as the better educated research participants urge, development agents and government officials should be trained and be aware of how to communicate with the people from ethnic communities in a multicultural setting.

As the Oraon *kurukh* and *sadri* languages have no written form, the research participants urge the transcription of their literature using the Roman alphabet. This transcription of Oraon literature using the Roman alphabet could encourage Oraons to attend school and attain educational development. Also, the development of Oraon literature in *kurukh* and *sadri* using Roman alphabet (as they urge) along with Bengali or English can enhance their education. Although the development organisation Caritas – Bangladesh has taken steps to transcribe the Oraon *kurukh* and *sadri* languages into the Roman alphabet, steps have yet to be implemented by the Bangladeshi governments for the translation of Oraon literature either into Bengali or into English.

In this regard, the research participants state that although the Bangladesh Government has emphasized bilingual education and the value of learning in one's mother tongue in its 2010 education policy, no book in *adibashi* languages has yet been exhibited in schools by the Government. Also, Caritas – Bangladesh has produced books in *adibashi* languages and has exhibited them in elementary classes among the *adibashi* schools through the educational development project funded by the European Union (EU). Caritas – Bangladesh also plans to introduce books in *adibashi* languages in grades one and two within the next one or two years among the *adibashi* children in different regions of Bangladesh. The educational development programmes in *adibashi* languages through Caritas – Bangladesh, thus, promote bilingualism among the *adibashis* of Bangladesh.

At this point, I refer to the education programmes of indigenous peoples with respect to the value of bilingual education and learning in one's mother tongue. As Prattis and Chartrand (1983) argue, has bilingualism encouraged the Inuit speaking people, a minority group in the Northwest Territories of Canada, to maintain their cultural distinctiveness and communicate with the dominant culture through the effective use of their second language (English) (Prattis & Chartrand, 1983). A bilingual education programme has also been launched among the Aboriginal communities of the Northern Territory of Australia, aiming to first build-up Aboriginal children's self-concept and then to develop sufficient fluency in English, before it is used as a means of instruction for understanding of both Aboriginal and

wider cultures (McGrath, 1977). Bilingual education programmes among the Aboriginal people in Australia have led to improved academic achievements, higher second-language proficiency and positive self-concepts, as well as the Aboriginalisation of the schools and strengthening of the minority languages (Gale, 1990). I also refer to the bilingual education programmes among the indigenous peoples of Papua New Guinea. As Malone & Paraide (2011: 705) explain:

Papua New Guinea (PNG), an independent state in the southwest Pacific, is the most linguistically diverse country in the world. Its roughly six million people speak over 800 distinct languages. In spite of this diversity, in 1995 the Papua New Guinean government established a mother tongue-based bilingual education programme in which community languages are taught as a subject and used for instruction in the first three years of formal education. English is introduced as a subject in the third year of school and becomes one of the languages of instruction, with the community language, in early primary. In grades seven and eight, teachers use only English for instruction, although community languages can still be used informally. By the early 2000s, over 400 languages were being used in PNG's formal education system.

Papua New Guinea, a country of great linguistic diversity, recognises 'Education for All', including children from non-dominant language communities. Aiming at gradually 'bridging' to the national language of education, English, PNG follows the principles of 'Education for All' set forth by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the subsequent Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). PNG revised the primary education system and curriculum to allow for mother tongue instruction in the early years of children's learning. This curriculum revision allows children to build a good educational foundation in their first language, thus enabling them to learn additional languages more easily. Learning in one's mother tongue for the first few years of schooling is better than being taught exclusively in the second language (Malone & Paraide, 2011: 715, 717).

This discussion helps us understand the demand for a bilingual education programme among the Oraons and other *adibashis* of Bangladesh. Educational programmes should be formulated to support the Oraon minority children in building

a bridge between their mother tongue (*kurukh*) and their second languages, such as Bengali or English. This kind of ‘bridging’ educational programme can help Oraons along with other *adibashis* to contribute actively to both their communities and the wider society. However, the implementation and formulation of ‘bridging’ educational development programmes for *adibashis* in Bangladesh depends on the will and consensus of the country’s governments and political leaders to attain the potentials of the country. Thus, by considering language and culture as a resource, rather than as a problem, a well-planned and theoretically sound mother tongue-based educational programme could be launched for Oraon educational development and their contribution to national development in Bangladesh.

At this point, I state that the Oraons also claim modern facilities. As almost all of the Oraon communities are situated in remoteregions of Barind, the Oraons demand paved roads and infrastructure, telecommunications and regular water and electricity supply. Although they possess tube-wells as sources of safe drinking water, they use pond water for bathing and household purposes. The tube-wells, installed by the NGOs in the community, fail to supply safe drinking water because of the recession of the ground water table. Access to ground water in Barind, is especially problematic during the dry summer season. Thus, Oraons urge for modern facilities at the best possible level. Although modern facilities are needed for all inhabitants in the locality, the majority Bengali Muslims are privileged and are granted such facilities more readily than the Oraon minorities.

As observed, the health and sanitary condition of the Oraons are unhygienic in practice. Almost all of the latrines in the community are neither hygienic nor do they have any privacy. The development organisations including the Christian Missionaries and local level NGOs have built some sanitary latrines in the localities of the Oraons. Yet, even where available, sanitary latrines are not necessarily used by all, as some Oraons are habituated to defecating either in the nearby bushes or in the crop fields. Considering this unawareness of Oraons about health and sanitation, programmes such as awareness building and motivation along with providing adequate sanitary latrines and tube-wells need to be launched for them.

Also, as almost all of the Oraons live below the standard poverty line with their daily income (US\$1.91) being less than US\$2, they cannot afford their daily meals and lack proper nutrition in their diet. In addition, most of the Oraons drink excessive *haria*, which makes them unhealthy. While drinking *haria* is customary for them, it makes them tipsy and sick, which impacts their ability to work and affects their daily income. The Oraons follow their indigenous technology to produce *haria*.

As I observe, *haria* is an Oraon product, but they do not have a means of producing *haria* in a purified way. In this regard, I think, *haria* can be produced as rice-beer with the help or assistance of the wider community. Producing alcoholic products locally is prohibited in Bangladesh, although such beverages as Coca-Cola, Pepsi or Sprite are popularly consumed in the country. Because of this hindrance, the Oraons do not receive any assistance to produce their *haria* as a brand like some local products in the world, including Japanese Sake or Queensland Beer. The Governments can assist the Oraons to produce *haria* as a local/traditional product. Although the Oraons produce and drink *haria* and sell it to the members of the wider Bengali community for subsistence, sometimes the local administration arrests them and fines them for producing *haria* illegally, although, as mentioned earlier, some Oraons live by *haria* sale. Therefore, steps should be taken either for *haria* to be purified, or to educate Oraons about the effects of consuming *haria* on their health and energy. I do not think that this Oraon product *haria* should be banned, as drinking *haria* is customary for Oraons. However, the Oraons and others have not attempted to change the legal situation. Although any move towards changing the law comes up against the Bengali Muslims ban on alcohol, Oraons' claim to produce *haria* can be made on their ethnic/traditional grounds. Also, I think steps should be taken to make Oraons aware of the effects of excessive drinking of *haria* on their health.

As observed, the Oraons cannot perform all their social and religious festivals because of their prevalent economic crisis. In addition to the demise of their cultural practices and festivals, the traditional political structure of the Oraons (*padda panch*) has also been weakened in terms of its internal organisation and functions in the community. As stated, the Oraons are administered by the *padda panch*, which

executes all of their activities. Oraons tend to idealise their past and they say they enjoyed their community life and experienced peace and harmony in the past through the *padda panch*. However, there is evidence of a long history of displacement and changing socio-economic condition as discussed in chapter 3.

I argue that the ‘revival of traditional political organisation’ (Bleie, 2005; Ali, 2008; Islam, 2012) could be an effective step towards addressing the socio-economic problems of *adibashis*. As observed, the Oraons work for strengthening their *padda panch* to address their socio-economic problems (see Kispotta, 2007). But this traditional political organisation of the Oraons has been emphasised neither by the government nor by the NGOs to ensure their socio-economic change. Adas (1995) mentions that the colonial powers in different areas commonly stressed the ‘*preservation* of indigenous cultural traditions’ to maintain colonial order and internal peace. During the early 19th century in India, the British India Government urged that, wherever possible, they ought to rule India through ‘traditional’ elite groups and indigenous institutions. The British officials preserved the ‘indigenous cultural traditions’ such as the local landlord hierarchy to administer India (Adas, 1995: 292-293). In this regard, the Oraon traditional political organisation (*padda panch*) could be strengthened, if not to administer these people, at least for maintaining social order among the Oraons.

If the traditional political structure of the Oraons is not strengthened, it will ultimately disappear from their life and result in a loss of identity. In recent times, as their traditional political structure has been weakened, they feel undermined and they can neither act as individuals, nor as a part of the political system of the wider Bengali society. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen the traditional political structure of the Oraons and to support them through networking with the institutional framework of the local political bodies. Although there are social hierarchies and power exercises among the members of the traditional Oraon political structure, it is important to strengthen the political structure or leadership functions among the Oraons (see Kispotta, 2007).

Also, an Oraon *pradhan*, who exercises power in executing socio-economic functions of the community, is less respected by some of the younger members of

padda panch in specific villages. The *pradhans* and Oraon elderly state that the functions of Oraons' customary organisation are waning because of the intervention of Bengali Muslim leaders, and development programmes launched by NGOs and other voluntary organisations in the locality. The Oraons are much more dependent on Bengali Muslim community and development organisations than on their traditional political organisation in executing socio-economic problems. However, enabling the Oraons to conduct their affairs according to their traditions can generate faith and confidence among them, which can contribute to their development. In this regard, the research participants state that they need to strengthen their traditional political structure and to develop their leadership to ensure their access to the services.

I also analyse why the local political leadership of Bangladesh has failed to solve the problems of these affected Oraons along with other ethnic minorities. The fact is that if the local political leaders take initiatives to enable the Oraons to reoccupy their land, they will lose the political support of the local Bengali community, because the influential Bengali and local money lenders are the land grabbers. If the local political leaders take a step in favour of the Oraons, it ultimately goes against the interests of local Bengali majority, who will, therefore, not vote for the local political leaders in the national election.

If a poor Bengali Muslim's land is grabbed, the local political leaders generally help them get their land back because of their religious homogeneity. However, this does not necessarily lead to the poor Bengali Muslim supporting the local political leaders in the local/ national election. During my fieldwork in 2012, I observed that the Oraons voted for a liberal candidate who was elected as Chairman of the Durgapur Union Council in Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district. The Oraons along with the other ethnic minorities avoid supporting conservative candidates. But the local Bengali Muslims are divided in their support that some of them choose conservative candidates, while most of them vote for liberal candidates in the national election.

However, the research participants state that the local political leaders interact with the Oraons and intervene in Oraon affairs, but do not take steps in favour of

them. So far, because of this situation, no consensus regarding the welfare of the Oraons has been developed among the local political leaders, or national political parties, or among the governments of Bangladesh. Therefore, the sympathetic attention of local, national and international bodies and other concerned parties, along with the governments, is necessary to resolve the problems of the Oraons/*adibashis*.

At this point in my discussion, I attempt to analyse the strategic location of the Oraons along with other *adibashi* groups in Barind. As mentioned, the Oraons along with other *adibashi* groups face local Bengali dominance and socio-economic exploitation and state marginalisation. As an *adibashi* response to this situation, some Oraons in Barind express their strong dissatisfaction with the Bangladeshi Government and State. Some Oraons claim that if this situation/process of marginalisation of *adibashis* continues in the country, the *adibashis* of Barind will take steps against the local Bengalis and local administration. In this regard, I refer to the comments of Bleie (2005: 309-310) on the *adibashi* situation in northern Bangladesh/Barind, who writes that:

The strategic location of the Adivasi-inhabited northern corner of Bangladesh, bordering on a number of insurgency hotspots, makes it not unlikely that disenfranchised landless and unemployed youths might respond to calls for militant action. North-western Bangladesh is at risk of becoming gradually more integrated into the expanding axes extending from Andhra Pradesh through the central tribal-inhabited Indian states into Nepal and eastwards, including India's north-east and Bangladesh's northern border areas. This axis might come to pose in future decades a formidable challenge to state-level government and national governments. If governments and the international community are to reduce the risks of such a destabilised future happening, they have to start doing what they are mandated to do – expanding their human rights obligations, improving governance, security and justice and extending welfare services into these disastrously neglected rural and urban hill and plains areas.

Bleie's (2005) statement corresponds to the comments of my research participants. As one of my research participants argued, the Oraons live in Bangladesh as a marginalised and a disadvantaged group of people. This disadvantage and marginalisation is also similar to that which is experienced by the other *adibashi*

groups of Barind. The problems of Oraons along with other *adibashis* are not considered by the governments of Bangladesh. The *adibashis* live in acute poverty. No policy has been launched to eradicate poverty and other problems of these people. No legal or institutional patronage has been offered for these downtrodden people. The research participant also stated:

We the Oraons along with other *adibashis* live in Bangladesh peacefully. We have also our distinct identity like the Bengalis. But the government does not recognise our distinct identity and this makes us worried... if you look into the settlement of *adibashis* in Bangladesh, you will see all the *adibashi* settlement is mostly alongside the border lines of the country. What does it mean? It means these people have migrated from different parts of the neighbouring country and that they still have close contact with their community mates who live in other countries.

This research participant also warned that if the Oraons along with other *adibashis* do not receive work and food and if they have to starve, one day they will take steps against the local administration and local Bengali leaders, who have exploited them.

Because of this Bengali Muslim domination and exploitation, the Bangladesh governments and international community should come forward to take steps to resolve the problems of Oraons along with other *adibashis* of Barind. Although the governments of Bangladesh have taken steps to resolve the problems of *adibashis* of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHTs), they do not look into the problems of *adibashis* in Barind. Policies and programmes should not concentrate solely on the *adibashis* of CHTs. Policies should also be taken into consideration for the *adibashis* of Barind, including the Oraons, to ensure their equal participation in mainstream Bangladesh society and culture.



Figure 7.1: *Orjon* (achievement) – The Independence Statue of Bangladesh, built in 1997 at Rangpur Modern Bus Terminal, depicts the active participation of *adibashis* with bows and arrows against the then Pakistan Army in the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh (Photograph by Rafiul Islam, 2012)



Figure 7.2: A placard for an ethnic community gathering on 27 January 2012 at Rangpur for their rights and recognition in the country. (The heading on the placard says 'Separate land commission in plain districts, protect the land of the *adibashis*')

Chapter 8

Conclusion

This study of a small ethnic community in northwest Bangladesh has examined the relationship between economy and identity among the Oraons. My examination of the changing economic condition of the Oraon ethnic community and how this condition affects their socio-cultural life and their identity contributes to ‘the study of economic activity and ethnic identity’ (Eriksen, 2005: 355). I observed that the economic condition of the Oraons in Barind has changed over time. Yet, while they have discontinued many aspects of their earlier cultural life, they continue to practise some socio-cultural features that present them as a distinct group of people. Additionally, the changing economic condition of the Oraons, as well as their socio-economic interactions with the dominant Bengali Muslim peasants in Barind, helps constitute their identity as ‘Oraon’. My study is not an ethnographic account of the Oraons as a given indigenous ‘Other’ or a description of Oraon culture as a fixed thing. Rather, I have examined Oraon identity formation in relation to their socio-economic experiences and the discourse of indigeneity in Bangladesh.

As mentioned in the introduction, in the course of my field research I found that most of the villages of Barind include ethnic minorities who define themselves as *adibashis* (indigenous peoples). The villages of the Barind region are comprised of people of different religious affiliation, including Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Buddhists. The Bengali Muslims dominate the non-Muslim communities, including the Hindus, Christians, Buddhists and those of other religious persuasion, in the socio-economic sphere of the region. The *adibashis* have a deteriorating economic condition, as a result of which many have been converted from their original faith to Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam. My study has explored whether it is their economic crisis that led them to convert, and/or whether there are other causal factors that have led to their conversion.

In chapter 3, I looked into the Oraon attributes through which they define themselves as a distinct group of people in Barind. As noted, the Oraons belong to

the Dravidian linguistic group (Roy, 2004: 18; Tirkey, 1989: 5) and speak *kurukh* and *sadri* languages. They also speak Bengali to communicate with the Bengalis (Jalil, 2001: 44). The Oraons are believed to have lived in the Indus Valley before 3500 B.C. and to have migrated from there to different parts of the Indian Sub-Continent (Roy, 2004; Tirkey, 1980; 1989; Tirkey, 1999; Koonathan, 1999; Das & Raha, 1963). Some Oraons migrated and settled in the Barind region of Bangladesh during the British India Government (1765-1947) (see Taru, 2007 and Barakat *et al.*, 2009).

Oraons execute their community affairs through *padma panch* (a unit of Oraon traditional political organisation), although this institution is weakening. In spite of conversion, most Oraons retain animist beliefs and rituals and believe in one supreme god – *dharmes*. They have different *gotras* (clans), and their society is patriarchal in structure. These particular practices are often cited by Oraons themselves and by others, especially members of the Bengali Muslim majority, as signifying Oraon ethnicity and their difference from the wider Bengali society in Barind.

As explored in this thesis, the Oraons live in different villages of Barind (or Bangladesh) organising and interacting with their fellow Oraons, at the local, regional and national level. Oraon research participants I interviewed also remember and/or maintain relationships with Oraons outside Bangladesh - in India and other countries. Thus, I argue that the Oraons also constitute an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 1991: 6). The Oraons are a ‘subaltern’ (Guha, 1981: vii; Sen, 1987: 203; Said, 1987: v-vi) group of people, who are poorly addressed in the development process of the country. The Constitution of Bangladesh does not recognise their distinct language, religion, culture and identity. Thus, although the Oraons remain distinct in Barind, they have not been recognised as *adibashi* or indigenous people by the Governments of Bangladesh.

As discussed in chapter 4, in the past, agriculture was the main economic activity of the Oraons. The literature on the Oraon ethnic community shows that the Oraons had a prosperous life in earlier habitats, including in South India, North India and Chotanagpur, India (Roy, 2004; Tirkey, 1980; 1989; Tirkey, 1999; Koonathan,

1999; Das & Raha, 1963). The materials they gathered from the forests and rivers in their settlements supported their livelihood and they were self-sufficient. However, the intervention of *dikus* (foreigners), including the Hindus, Muslims and British, interrupted this self-sufficient lifestyle. Their land was illegally occupied by the British Hindu and Muslim *zamindars* during the British India Government (1765-1947).

The Oraons were removed from Chotonagpur by the British India Government as part of their administrative policies to settle in Barind. According to Bleie (2005), when the Oraons settled in Barind, the region was full of forests and jungles, which was fairly sufficient for their livelihood. But the British India Government appointed them to work clearing the jungle for agriculture. Thus, a farming economy, predominantly based on a rice-farming production system, was created in Barind (Bleie, 2005: 49). The Oraons became dependent on agricultural production, after they lost their food gathering economy due to the clearing of the jungles and forests. They subsisted through cultivating land as tenant farmers.

The economic situation of the Oraons became worse after the partition of Bengal in 1947. As revealed by this study, many Oraons in Barind left land, cattle, houses and property during 1947 and fled to India. Subsequently, the abolition of the *zamindari* (land taxation) system in 1951 deprived many Oraons of legal ownership rights to the land which they had on tenancy contracts with the local *zamindars*. Despite this, some Oraons managed to keep hold of farm land. They survived on their own agricultural products and by engaging as sharecroppers in Barind. However, as Bleie (1987) shows, toward the end of the 1950s the land owners expanded the labour market in the region (Bleie, 1987: 29) and the Oraons lost the opportunity to sharecrop. This situation compelled those who had no land, or a minimal amount of farm land, to earn their living as agricultural day-labourers.

According to Barakat *et al.* (2009), during the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965, Oraons left their houses, land and property and fled to India. Most of their land was then grabbed by Bengali Muslims. This process of land grabbing intensified after the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965 because of the Hindu-Muslim communal conflict in the country (Barakat *et al.*, 2009: 177; see also Falguni, 2009: 42-43). As my study has

revealed, Oraons also lost land and property during the 1971 liberation war of Bangladesh. The influential local Bengali Muslims forcibly occupied their land and property because of their absence in the locality during the liberation war. This trend of land grabbing has continued in independent Bangladesh.

My study helps elucidate the factors that have led to the economic deterioration of the Oraons as a minority group in Bangladesh. The main factor in their deteriorating economic situation over time has been the loss of land to the influential Bengali Muslims and local money-lenders. As I have argued (in chapter 4) these historical conditions have contributed to the Oraon economic situation today. The social relationships of Oraons are connected to different actors, including the British colonial agents, local intermediaries, landlords, money lenders or rich Bengali Muslim peasants. In addition, the local history and regional settings of Oraons are factors in their social position in Bangladesh.

At present, most Oraons do not have any agricultural farmland and are therefore less than self-sufficient in terms of livelihood. As land is the principal means of their agricultural mode of production, land ownership among the Oraons affects their present economic situation. My data reveal that the per capita-cultivable land of the Oraons is 12.61 decimals. Because of their landlessness, as well as having the minimal per-capita cultivable land, almost all Oraons manage subsistence as agricultural day labourers. They earn wages selling their physical labour to rich Bengali Muslim peasants and purchase food and food grains for their meals. The Oraons are, thus, dependent on the wider Bengali Muslim society for subsistence. In addition to engaging as agricultural day labourers, Oraons work as van/rickshaw drivers, engage in small shop-keeping, construction works, garment workers, rearing livestock (pigs and cattle), services at local shops and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), tailoring, selling *haria*, barbering, fishing, hunting, and gathering food and fuel. The Oraons engage in these labour-absorbing activities to meet subsistence because of lack of land.

As the Oraons face land loss, working the land or agricultural sector can hardly provide them with regular work. Thus, the younger Oraons are not attracted to work in the agricultural sector and wish to have better opportunities than their

parents. According to my interviews with them, college and university-attending Oraons wish to work in both government and non-governmental organisations. According to my research participants, some Oraons also travel abroad for employment purposes, including to Australia and Papua New Guinea, and live in there. The Christian missionaries also send some Oraon students for higher study abroad, including to Australia, England and Philippines.

As my data revealed, the Oraons' average daily income per annum is US\$ 1.91. Despite landlessness, the factors that contribute to the minimal daily income of Oraons are the earning and non-earning statuses of the observed Oraons (52.33 per cent and 47.69 per cent respectively). Also, most agricultural day-labourers earn daily income for only three months of the year. During the remaining nine months, the Oraons are jobless. Thus, they fluctuate between short periods of 'labour intensity [and longer] stocks of unutilized time' (Chayanov, 1986: 75-76), which puts them in a dire economic situation over the whole year. They face difficulties in managing subsistence, expenses for medical treatment, education, clothing, festivals and other daily necessities.

My study reveals that the Oraons continue to arrange festivals, marriage ceremonies and funerals, although they face economic hardship. The landless Oraons, who manage minimum subsistence and lead a hard life, collect subscriptions from households in the community to arrange such events. For example, if an Oraon comes to his/her relatives' place to attend a festival or life-cycle events, s/he brings some coins, grains, fuel (made of jute sticks mixed with cowdung) or a pot of *haria* (rice-beer) to contribute to the event. All Oraons contribute either economically or physically to such community events.

Oraon socio-cultural practices, thus, contribute to an understanding of their domestic moral economy. I argue that although the Oraons are landless, they practise a form of economic reciprocity or 'inter-household networks of reciprocity' (Smith, 2002: 247) in performing festivals and ceremonies in the community. Oraon economic practices are similar to the 'Indigenous Australian domestic moral economy' which involves 'investing resources in social relationships outside the family' or 'sharing with kin' (Peterson & Taylor, 2003: 106). Oraon inter-

household/community networks of reciprocity constitute a form of ‘domestic moral economic practice’. Another Oraon economic practice involves borrowing to relieve their economic hardship.

As calculated, the monthly expenses of an Oraon family are US\$ 52.34 (US\$ 1.74 a day). Considering their daily income and expenses, the Oraons are hardly able to save. Most Oraons are in debt. My research shows that 49.23 per cent of them have borrowed money from other Oraon community members, relatives, local money lenders and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The Oraons borrow money for various purposes, including food, medical treatment, housing, clothing, drink/*haria* (rice-beer), education expenses, dowry payments, and festivals or life-cycle events such as funerals and weddings. They borrow also for running small businesses, repaying loans or land mortgages, irrigation, leasing and buying land or cattle or vehicles or rickshaws. Thus, taking loans is a common practice among the Oraons.

Although borrowing is a common phenomenon among the Oraons, it is difficult for them to repay their debts. Because of their daily subsistence and other necessities, they cannot repay their debts and they feel compelled to borrow again. Given their prevalent economic crisis, the Oraons do not have any other choice but to borrow money or sell their physical labour in advance at a lower price. This repeated borrowing process places many Oraons in a permanent situation of ‘indebtedness’, which is ‘burdensome’ (Howe, 1998; Lowrey, 2006; and Taussing, 1987). Thus, some Oraons are caught in a continuing cycle of indebtedness and are forced to develop a ‘cliental relationship’ (Scott, 1976: 9) with local money lenders or rich Bengali Muslim peasants as a survival strategy.

I argue that the Oraons maintain a strategic relationship of indebtedness for their survival. I have introduced the concept of ‘strategic indebtedness’ in this thesis to refer to the tactics and strategies that Oraons employ in their relationships with others, such as Bengali Muslim peasants and money lenders, not only for subsistence purposes but also for maintaining distinctive kinship and life-cycle practices that define them as Oraon. Such strategic indebtedness can be interpreted as a form of resistance against potential economic erasure of socio-cultural practices. Yet, at the same time it draws Oraons even further into relationships of dependency. Strategic

indebtedness establishes a framework through which the Oraons maintain ‘personal relationships [...and] frames of reference’ (L’Estoile, 2014: 62) with the dominant Bengali Muslim peasant to mobilise resources in order to respond to their economic precariousness. Oraons’ strategic indebtedness, thus, potentially offers them a long-term capacity to ensure their livelihood.

As revealed, Oraons contribute either economically or physically to festivals and ceremonies or life-cycle events of neighbours, friends or relatives. Oraon economic practice in such events is reciprocal in that it turns on return or repayment of debts among themselves. Oraons maintain their indebtedness to repay resources that they receive in life-cycle events. The exchange or reciprocity of equal resources among Oraons is a continuous relationship in their everyday economic practice, which can be interpreted as keeping ‘track [strategically] of who owes what to whom’ (Graeber, 2011: 36). Resource exchange and reciprocity helps explain their sociality, which creates a sense of security in the face of economic precariousness.

I argue that debt works to maintain Oraons’ distinctive kinship relations or socio-cultural practices. The landless Oraons, who face economic precariousness and uncertainty, strategically maintain their indebtedness to local rich Bengali Muslim peasants or money lenders. This Oraon economic practice helps them to manage subsistence as well as perform community festivals and ceremonies and life-cycle events. Oraons’ ‘strategic indebtedness’ helps them to resist the potential erasure of socio-cultural practices that define them as Oraon and to retain their ‘ways to construct the world [they] live in’ (L’Estoile, 2014: 63). I hope that the concept of ‘strategic indebtedness’ contributes to understanding ‘credit/debt relations’ (Peebles, 2010: 235) among the Oraons themselves as well as their relations with local rich Bengali Muslim peasants or money lenders.

As revealed, although Oraons maintain strategic indebtedness for survival, they face economic exploitation by the local rich Bengali Muslim peasants and money lenders. Oraon people seek alternative strategies to escape from this economic exploitation. ‘Reliance on religious conversion and opportunist structures of protection and assistance as survival strategies and choices’ (Scott, 1976: 204) helps them to adapt to their economic crisis. Because of this economic crisis, the

Oraons seek help from development agencies, including Christian missionaries, Buddhist monasteries or NGOs, which work for their socio-economic advancement in the region. As the Oraons face economic exploitation by Bengali Muslim peasants and seek methods of escape, they embrace religious conversion to either Christianity or Buddhism. Some Oraons have converted to Hinduism as they have a different conception about their history as Oraon *khatriyas*, and also because of socio-economic exploitation by the Bengali Muslims. A minority of Oraons also seek economic help through conversion to Islam, but my research reveals that they have been cheated or exploited.

Oraons' conversion to world religions is a result partly of their economic crisis and a complex set of social, political and cultural factors that the Oraons have faced related to the history of their displacement at different times. As explored, Oraon minorities' social position against the dominant Bengali Muslim majority, as well as socio-economic suppression are the root causes of their religious conversion. Also, socio-economic forces, including the Christian missionaries, Buddhist monasteries or NGOs and Hindu priests or educated personalities entangle the Oraons with religious identifications. However, the Oraons partly embrace new identity as a consequence of their changing socio-economic condition. Religious conversion among Oraon groups contributes to the creation of differences among them. I have found that the Oraons have been increasingly differentiated based on their conversion to Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam (Chapter 5). My study has revealed that the Oraons in Barind are Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim as well as Sarna/traditional (Oraons who have not been converted).

Nevertheless, Oraon religious identifications are not 'mutually exclusive categories of social belonging' (Gottschalk, 2001: 105). Although they have been differentiated based on world religious views, they still introduce themselves to others as 'Oraon'. I have discussed this as a process of Oraonisation (chapter 6). Oraon identification as 'Oraon' is also based on their relationships with local Bengalis and local administrative governments. Also, Oraons' identity formation is understood as a process of Oraonisation based on a 'mediating reference point' (Seol, 2008: 351) between the primordial and circumstantial viewpoint. Oraons' identity is

socially constructed as a result of their socio-economic alienation. Oraons' primordial ties based on changing socio-cultural practices, along with their past history and origin, mobilise the strategic essentialism for their collective interests/actions, such as economic and political action in dealing with the Bengali Muslim majority and the local administration.

Whether they have converted or not, the Oraons interact with each other through common socio-cultural practices. All Oraons utter *gorlagi* when they meet each other. They retain and practise the symbol of *karsavanda*, specifically in their marriage process and when receiving foreigners. The Oraons also have a flag, which is specific and known to them as a symbol of their community integration. Obviously, their language – *kurukh* or *sadri* – is a distinctive feature of Oraon identity representation.

Although the Oraons are divided into different religions, Oraon clanship overrides religious differentiation. They practise their traditional political structure – *padda panch* – whether they are Christians, Hindus, Buddhists or Sarnas. The Oraons do not consider as relevant to political leadership the religious belief of their leader – *pradhan* (Oraon chief or headman) of a *padda panch*. Although they are divided in terms of religious affiliation, they practise the common *padda panch*. Oraon festivals, including *fagua* (festival of New Year celebration), *sarhul* (festival of nature worship), *karam* (festival of enemy protection), and *sohorae* (cattle festival) are commonly practised.

Oraons also customarily drink *haria* during their community festivals and marriage ceremonies. Although Oraon customary law excludes women from owning land, the association of Oraon women with *haria* production and their socio-economic contribution to the family and community are important to Oraon identity projection. Oraon songs informing their history and settlement also provide an understanding of their identity presentation. These Oraon socio-cultural practices help portray their identity representation as 'Oraon'.

From a primordialist viewpoint, ethnic identity is a deeply rooted and unchangeable phenomenon. But Oraon identity is not unchangeable. While some of

their socio-cultural practices have ancient roots, both the historical circumstances of the Oraons and their interactions with the people of wider Bengali society or with the Bangladeshi state have contributed to the transformation and constitution of their identity.

As I have observed, the Oraons are dependent on the local Bengali Muslim peasants for their subsistence, but the local Bengali Muslim peasants place social and economic pressures on the Oraons. Although the Oraons may appear to be in a good relationship with the Bengalis, their interactions with the Bengalis are not satisfactory. The Oraons try to avoid the local Bengalis as they are afraid of what the latter might do, including land appropriation, torture, rebuking, cheating or threatening them, as my case studies describe. Due to the nature of their interaction with local Bengalis, the Oraons are much more inclined to interact with the local Hindus and other *adibashi* minority groups, including the Santals or Mundas. They prefer to interact with these groups instead of the local Bengalis because of their shared feeling as minorities.

As this research has revealed, Oraon interactions with local Bengali Muslim peasants result in their suppression. The socio-economic exploitation of Oraons by local Bengalis contributes to the mistrust and negativity of the Oraon community towards the Bengalis. The cases of Oraon protest or confrontation against the local Bengali youths are an expression of their ethnic group sentiment as well as their strong dissatisfaction against the latter. Oraon protest or ethnic group sentiment is, thus, produced in part because of local Bengali Muslims' domination or socio-economic exploitation.

Socio-economic exploitation helps to create Oraons as an identity category in the country. Oraon interactions and confrontations with local Bengali Muslims, thus, play a crucial role in constituting their identity. As I have argued, Oraon identity is not just based on the particular socio-cultural practices that distinguish them from the Bengali majority. Crucial in the process of identity formation are also their socio-economic condition and their relationships with the local Bengali Muslim majority, which have led to a process of Oraonisation. I argue that although the Oraons have been differentiated into groups because of a changing economic situation, their

identity as ‘Oraon’ is constituted through a process of Oraonisation, which describes a relationship between economic activity and ethnic identity.

In chapter 7, I argued that Oraon socio-economic marginalisation and forms of resistance also help portray their identity category as *adibashis* or indigenous peoples in Bangladesh. Oraon resistance, as well as their demands against their marginalisation, is a response to the discourse of indigeneity in the country. As my study reveals, apart from their landlessness and economic crisis, the Oraons face social discrimination and lack of cordiality based on a purity-pollution distinction drawn by the local Bengali Muslims. Deprivation and dominance by the local leaders and administration, avoidance and negligence of local government officials, inadequacy of government support and lack of state patronage create Oraon marginalisation. The Bangladeshi Government does not recognise them as *adibashis* and stops the celebration of the international day of indigenous peoples in the country. The Oraons are dissatisfied by the Government’s attitude and state that they also fought for independence of the country in 1971. This fact is represented in an independence statue – Orjon at Rangpur Modern Bus Terminal in 1997 – but the Government still does not recognise the due rights that should accrue. These issues of Oraon deprivation or oppression can be understood as ‘indigeneity-as-marginalisation’ (Marschke *et al.* 2008: 485).

I have found that the Oraons organise themselves at the local, regional, national and international levels for rights and for recognition of their marginalisation. The Oraons organise at different levels against Bengali Muslim peasants’ domination or state suppression. At the local level there are the *adibashi* clubs, including Ramwesarpara Adibashi Club (RAC) and Binodpur Adibashi Club (BAC) at Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district in Barind. The Oraons, despite their traditional political organisation – *padma panch* – establish these local *adibashi* clubs to discuss community problems and protect themselves in the locality. The local *adibashi* clubs of Oraons solve their problems with the Bengali Muslims and help them pursue support from local administrative governments.

I have also observed the functions of Adibashi Oraon Khatriya Samity (AOKS) and Mithapukur Adibashi Parishad (MAP) in the Rangpur region. These

adibashi organisations work for the rights of Oraons along with other *adibashi* groups against local Bengalis' domination in Barind. My study also reveals that the Oraons along with other *adibashi* groups have developed associations in regard to their resistance against marginalisation at the national level. The organisations, including Jatiyo Adibashi Parishad (JAP)/National Adibashi Council (NAC), Coordination of NGOs for Adibashis (CNA), National Coalition for Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) and Christian Commission of Development in Bangladesh (CCDB) and Caritas – Dinajpur Region/Bangladesh work for the *adibashis*, including the Oraons, to change their socio-economic condition in the country. These organisations organise the *adibashis* at the national level at different times to pursue their rights and due recognition in Bangladesh.

The Oraons along with other *adibashis* also gather to celebrate the international day of the world's indigenous peoples under the common platform of Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples Forum (BIPF) in Dhaka. The BIPF ensures at least some participation from all *adibashi* groups in the United Nations (UN) on the international day of the world's indigenous peoples – 9 August each year. This way, the Oraons along with all *adibashis* or indigenous peoples have representation at the international level. Although the representation of the Oraons is not direct to the international level, they confess and integrate with the solidarity of indigenous peoples, both from Bangladesh and abroad. The Oraon *adibashis*, thus, organise and connect themselves with other indigenous groups in the world to resist their marginalisation or to escape from state oppression in Bangladesh, which is an expression of 'indigeneity-as-resistance' (Marschke *et al.*, 2008: 485).

Along with their resistance against marginalisation in Bangladesh, the Oraon *adibashis* seek equal participation in mainstream Bangladeshi society. They seek cooperation from local Bengalis and consistent aid from both the governmental organisations (GOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for their socio-economic advancement. They urge that the development programmes should be oriented according to their culture and traditions, which should not be equated with the problems of the majority Bengali mainstream population. The Oraons demand that policies should be formulated based on their own specific issues or problems,

including resettlement and compensation for land loss, labour market for daily wages and regular work, credit for farming and income-generating activities such as cattle rearing. Bilingual education and development/transcription of their languages (*kurukh* and *sadri*) should also be considered, they urge. They also seek support for their cultural practices and to strengthen their traditional political organisation (*padda panch*). Modern facilities, including water and electricity supply, health and sanitary support, telecommunications and paved roads, are also demanded by the Oraons as their localities are in the remote regions of Barind.

Most importantly, the Oraons argue that urgent steps must be taken by both the Bangladeshi governments and international communities to eradicate poverty among them. They state their strong dissatisfaction with the local Bengali leaders and local administrative governments, who have exploited them. The Oraons are an oppressed minority group in Bangladesh. The Government of Bangladesh does not recognise them as *adibashis* or indigenous peoples and has banned uses of the word *adibashi* along with the celebration of the international day of indigenous peoples in the country. My study reveals that because of this dissatisfaction, the Oraons develop their connections or relationships with other *adibashi* groups both from Bangladesh and abroad. They unite and build their strategic networks with other *adibashi* groups to resist domination by the majority Bengali Muslims or to escape from the Bangladeshi Government's oppression.

Oraon relationships or strategic networks and international connections with other *adibashi* groups contribute to their identity formation as *adibashis* or indigenous peoples. The Oraons of Bangladesh are thus in the process of becoming members of the global indigeneity movement. As Henry (2011: 256) mentions, 'like culture, indigeneity is a dynamic process, not a 'thing' in itself. It is an expression of a process of identification and differentiation that defines human sociality as not just a way of being in the world, but a way of *becoming*'.

Although the Oraons have faced changes in economic activity and have diversified into groups based on world religious views, they still claim their identity as 'Oraon', presenting specific socio-cultural features. Rather than ethnic erasure, the changing socio-economic conditions and economic exploitation of the Oraons have

resulted in a process of Oraonisation. Oraon marginalisation and their resistance to local Bengali domination and state oppression as well as their strategic networks with *adibashi* groups from both Bangladesh and abroad foster their identity claims as *adibashis* or indigenous peoples. Although the Oraons stay in remote territories of Barind region of Bangladesh, they keep deep socio-political engagement concerning their rights and recognition and thus respond to the discourse of global indigeneity.

My study, exploring the problems of indigeneity in Bangladesh, provides a resource for the Bangladeshi nationals who wish to build a modern nation-state. My study urges that attention be given to policies for the *adibashis*, including the Oraons in the Barind region. Although policymakers tend to focus on ethnic groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (Ito, 2012: 15), the governments of Bangladesh along with concerned international parties should take steps to resolve the problems of the Oraons along with other *adibashi* groups in Barind. The *adibashis* of the Barind region are not well known to the international community. Policies should be devised to solve their problems, aiming to ensure their equal participation in mainstream Bangladeshi society. The Bangladeshi Governments and the international community need to extend humanitarian services, including security, justice and good governance to eliminate exploitation, reduce poverty and enhance the wellbeing of the Oraons and other ethnic minority groups in the plains regions, such as Barind.

In this study, I discuss the Oraons' changing socio-economic condition based mostly on the views of the Oraon men, but the views of both the Oraon women and the Bengali Muslim peasants are important to verify the Oraons' socio-economic problems. These views will need to be addressed in a future study among the Oraons. However, I adopt strategies to overcome the lack of both the Oraon women's and the Bengali Muslim peasants' views by reviewing the literature on ethnic groups in Bangladesh, as well as collating the theoretical and comparative sources relevant to my thesis.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Structured Questionnaire of Household Survey

Questionnaire of the study, 'Culture, Economy and Identity: A Study of the Oraon Ethnic Community in the Barind Region of Bangladesh'

1. Description of the research participant?

a) Name & Address:

b) Age:

c) Sex:

d) Marital status:

e) Religion:

f) Education:

2. How long you have been living in this locality?

a) Two generations b) Three generations c) Four generations d) Others

3. Where did your ancestors live?

a) Paschim Banga b) Bihar c) Barind d) Others

4. What was your ancestors' family and property?

a) Self-sufficient b) Landlord c) Landless d) Others

5. Who manages/decides your family and economic activities at present?

a) You yourself b) Your wife c) Your elder son d) Others

6. How many members does your family have?

No.	Name	Relationship	Age	Sex	Education	Occupation	Earning status

7. What is the type of your family?

- a) Nuclear b) Joint c) Extended d) Others

8. How do you arrange your son's or daughter's marriage ceremony?

- a) Parents' choice b) Son/daughter' choice
c) Community's choice d) Others

9. How do you manage the expenses of a marriage ceremony?

- a) Self expense b) Loan c) Land mortgage d) Others

10. What do you/family members take in a meal?

- a) At morning: b) At noon: c) At afternoon: d) At evening:

11. Do you have any favourite drink in the community?

- a) *Haria* b) *Pachani* c) Others

12. How do you manage your food and drink?

- a) Self expense b) Loan c) Land mortgage d) Others

13. What is the sanitary condition of your family?

- a) *Pucca* latrine b) *Kaccha* latrine c) Others

14. What is the dress pattern of your family members?

- a) Man : b) Woman: c) Children:

15. What are your native languages?

- a) Kurukh b) Sadri c) Bengali d) Others

16. How many festivals/*parab* do you perform a year?

- a) 13 b) 14 c) 15 d) Others

17. What are the names/these *parabs*? Festivals:

18. How do you arrange these *parabs* in the community?

- a) Self expense b) Loan c) Government support
d) Land mortgage e) Community' association support f) Others

19. Do you attend any Hindu festival?

- a) *Durga puja* b) *Kali puja* c) *Laxmi puja* d) Others

20. Why do you attend the Hindu festival? Can you please explain any reason?

- a) Homogeneous feeling as minority b) Own feeling c) Others

21. What are the life-cycle events you perform in life?

- a) Birth b) Marriage c) Death d) Others

22. How do you arrange these life-cycle events in the community?

- a) Self expense b) Loan c) Land mortgage d) Others

23. What is your occupation?

- a) Self-farming b) Agricultural day labourers c) Others

24. How many kilograms of crops/grains you produce?

- a) Grains a single season: b) Grains a year:

25. Do you participate in any other economic activities that help manage your family maintenance?

- a) Livestock rearing b) Small business c) Rickshaw pulling d) Others

26. How many days do you work a week as a labourer?

- a) Three b) Five c) Seven d) Others

27. How much do you earn a day or a month as a labourer?

- a) Income a day: b) Income a month:

28. How much do you spend for your family management a month? What are the purposes?

a) Food: b) Clothing: c) Treatment: d) Education: f) Others

Total:

29. Do you have any monthly saving? If yes, what are the purposes of your saving?

a) Food: b) Treatment: c) Children's schooling: d) Others

Total:

30. Do you have any loan for your family management? What are the purposes of your loan?

a) Food: b) Treatment: c) Children's schooling: d) Clothing:

e) Housing: f) Festivals: g) Repayment of loan g) Others

Total:

31. What are the sources of your loan?

a) Community members b) Relatives c) Local money lenders

d) Bengali Muslim peasants e) Government organisations

f) NGOs g) Others

32. What is your ownership of this house/land, you are living in?

a) Personal b) Leased c) Government/*khas* d) Others

33. What is the type of your house?

a) Brick-built/*pucca* b) Tin-shed/*semi-pucca* c) *Kaccha*/others

34. How many decimals/acres of land do you have?

a) Farm/agriculture: b) Household: c) Barren: d) Others

35. Who will own your land in your absence?

- a) Wife b) Son c) Daughter d) Others

36. What is your agricultural productivity this year? Is your productivity enough for your family subsistence?

- a) Sufficient b) Less-sufficient c) Not enough d) Others

37. Do you have any specific problem this day in life?

- a) Economic b) Social c) Medicinal d) Others

38. What are the reasons of your economic problems in life?

- a) Lack of land b) Lack of work c) Lack of education d) Others

39. What are the social problems that happen in the community?

- a) Avoidance of rules b) Theft c) Quarrel d) Others

40. How do you solve these problems?

- a) By the community b) By the legal law of wider society c) Others

41. How is the community's customary organisation? How many officials does this organisation have?

- a) Five officials b) Six officials c) Seven officials d) Others

42. Do you see any change in the community's customary organisation?

- a) Integrity b) Execution c) Enactment d) Others

43. Do you get any support or help to solve your problems by any other organisations?

- a) Union council b) NGOs c) Christian missionaries d) Others

44. What is the support that you get from other organisations?

- a) Food b) Clothing c) Housing d) Health

e) Education f) Legal/judicial g) Others

45. Do you get any support or help from the rich Bengali Muslim peasants?

a) Food or paddy b) Lending money c) Advance for your physical labour
d) Shelter e) Others

46. Do you or your community members face any problem with the Bengali Muslims in the recent past or this day?

a) Illegal occupation of land b) Physical torture c) Sexual exploitation
d) Destroying the community properties e.g. houses, sacred places etc.

47. What measures do you have attempted to solve these problems with the Bengali Muslims/your neighbours?

a) Discussing the community people b) Meeting the local union council
c) Visiting the local judicial courts d) Attending Pan-Tribal organisation
e) Seeking help from NGOs f) Others

48. Do you have any suggestions to solve your problems e.g. economic, social or problems with your neighbours?

a) Work b) Education c) Legal support d) Awareness
e) Self-determination f) Training and loan g) Others

49. Do you any other comments about your present economic condition?

Comments:

50. Do you have any other comments about your identity as an Oraon/nation?

Comments:

Participant's suggestion (do you have any other suggestion/comment?):

Appendix 2: Open-ended Questionnaire of In-depth Ethnographic Interviews

Open-ended/semi-structured questionnaire of the study,
'Culture, Economy and Identity: A Study of the Oraon Ethnic Community in the
Barind Region of Bangladesh'

Name/Address:

Date:

1. Who manages your family and economic activities?
2. How long you have been living in this locality?
3. Where did your ancestors live? What was your ancestors' family and property?
4. What religion/religious belief do you belong to?
5. What are your religious activities, festivals, ceremonies, life-cycle events and other community activities?
6. Can you speak *kurukh* or *sadri*?
7. How is your ownership of this house/land, you are living in?
8. How many decimals/acres of land do you have?
9. How did you and your parents lose your land and property?
10. How is your agricultural productivity this year? Is your productivity sufficient for your family subsistence?
11. Do you participate in any other economic activities such as livestock rearing, running small business or others that help manage your family maintenance?

12. Do you face any difficulties in your family management?
13. What are the reasons of your economic problem in life?
14. Still, how do you manage your participation in the community's festivals, ceremonies and in other life-cycle events?
15. Do you see any changes in all these events, festivals and ceremonies this day in life?
16. If you see any social problem in the community, how do you resolve the problem?
17. What roles does your customary organisation play in solving the problem?
18. Do you see any changes function the community's customary organisation?
19. Do you get any support from union council or other organisations to solve your problems?
20. Do you discuss your problem with your neighbours such as the Bengali Muslims, Hindus or other communities?
21. Do you and your community face any problem with the Bengali Muslims in the recent past or this day?
22. Do you get any help from the local judicial system to solve any problems with the Bengali Muslims?
23. Does your community have any affiliation with other homogenous communities in the region or in the country?

24. What things can help manage your problem? How do you think of changing your present socio-economic condition?

25. Why *haria*? How do you produce *haria*? Do you have any *samity* that you take part in? Why do you take part in your local club/*samity* activities?

Genealogy of the household/family

Appendix 3: Observed Cases of the Study

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Appendix 4: Guideline of Focus Group Discussions

I have discussed/addressed the following issues with research participants in focus group discussions:

1. Migration, settlement and language
2. Religious festivals, ceremonies and life-cycle events
3. Family patterns, marriage, kinship and clan
4. Customary organisation
5. Education, occupation and division of labour
6. Income, expenditure, savings and debt
7. Housing, health, medicinal practices and sanitation
8. Agriculture, land and causes of land loss
9. One acute problem traced by the participants in life
10. Changes in festivals, ceremonies and life-cycle events
11. Changes in customary organisation and marriage processes
12. Interactions and relationships with the Bengali Muslims
13. Interrelations with the Hindus and other minority communities
14. NGOs' activities and Christian missionaries in the region
15. Government support and local structures to solve the problem
16. Homogenous community organisation and people in the region
17. Self-determination, comments and suggestions for solving problems

Appendix 5: Glossary of Local Terms and Dialects

<i>adi</i>	ancient
<i>addi</i>	ancient
<i>adibashis</i>	ethnic communities/indigenous peoples
<i>addi dharam</i>	ancient religion, refers to the Oraon religion
<i>addi kunrukhh dharam</i>	ancient Oraon religion
<i>agua</i>	go-between/match maker in Oraon marriage system
<i>arwa</i>	silver
<i>assalamualaikum</i>	may the almighty keep peace in you
<i>bakla</i>	Oraon clan, meaning a species of grass
<i>bandra/Bandh</i>	Oraon clan, meaning an embanked reservoir of water
<i>bara</i>	Oraon clan, meaning <i>Ficus indica</i>
<i>barha</i>	Oraon clan, meaning a species of tree
<i>barho or barhoya</i>	Oraon clan, meaning wild dog
<i>bazar</i>	market
<i>beck</i>	Oraon clan, meaning salt
<i>bedouins</i>	Oraon name, given by the British India Government
<i>bey-lar council</i>	the highest tier of Oraon political organisation
<i>bhag-bura</i>	Oraons' worship in the name of the God, <i>Dharmes</i>
<i>bhakhkhandna</i>	Oraon religious ceremony, meaning warding evil word
<i>bhat</i>	cooked rice

<i>bhelwa</i>	<i>Semicarpis anacardium</i>
<i>bhelwa-phari</i>	Oraon religious ceremony, meaning <i>Bhelwa</i> twig-splitting
<i>bhikkhu</i>	Buddhist religious priest
<i>bigha</i>	a unit of land calculation (33 decimals or 50 decimals), varies within Barind village to village
<i>bindo</i>	Oraon clan, meaning wild rat
<i>biri belas</i>	Oraons' sun-king or sun-god, refers to <i>dharmes</i>
<i>boishak</i>	the first Bengali month
<i>boishyas</i>	third category of Hindu society (cattle herders, agriculturists, businessmen, artisans and merchants)
<i>brahmins</i>	upper category of Hindu society (priests, teachers and preachers)
<i>buddha</i>	Buddhist religious priest
<i>chhana</i>	sweet food, made of milk
<i>danda-kattna</i>	Oraon religious symbol
<i>danda-rengna</i>	Oraon religious ceremony, meaning dragging the twig
<i>decimal</i>	a unit of land, calculating 100 decimals = 0.405 hectares
<i>desh</i>	country
<i>dewan</i>	prime minister
<i>dhan/dhanoar</i>	Oraon clan, meaning paddy or paddy husker
<i>dhangar</i>	Oraon name, meaning labourer or servant
<i>dhangar-kora</i>	Oraon name, meaning labourer-digger

<i>dharmes</i>	Oraon God
<i>dikus</i>	foreigners (Hindus, Muslims or British for Oraons)
<i>doash</i>	fertile land for cultivation
<i>doi</i>	curd
<i>dudhvaiya/dighri parha</i>	a tier of Oraon political organisation corresponds to the meaning of a sub-district
<i>durga puja</i>	a Hindu festival
<i>ekka</i>	Oraon clan, meaning tortoise
<i>fagua</i>	Oraon new-year celebration festival
<i>fota</i>	two pieces of short cloth for a woman/dresses
<i>gata/hawli</i>	working together by turns
<i>ghonto</i>	a food made of vegetables only
<i>girja</i>	church
<i>gotra</i>	clan
<i>gurudev</i>	Hindu religious priest for Oraon <i>khatriyas</i>
<i>gurudwara</i>	Sikhs' religious institution
<i>haria</i>	rice-beer
<i>hat</i>	village market
<i>Imam</i>	Muslim religious leader/priest
<i>jharkhand</i>	forest tract, local name of Chotanagpur of India
<i>jongol</i>	forest and bushes
<i>jotdar</i>	rich peasant

<i>kaccha</i>	usually a latrine or an wall of a house, made of mud or clay
<i>kali puja</i>	a Hindu festival
<i>kamiz</i>	a bit longer dress wearing in the upper part of body of a girl
<i>kamla</i>	agricultural day labourer
<i>karam</i>	Oraon enemy protection festival
<i>karsavanda</i>	Oraon organising symbol
<i>karukh-des</i>	country of king Karakh
<i>kerkata</i>	Oraon clan, meaning hedge-sparrow
<i>ketmojur</i>	agricultural day labourer
<i>khakha</i>	Oraon clan, meaning raven
<i>khalko</i>	Oraon clan, meaning a species of fish
<i>khan khan</i>	Oraon clan, meaning crow
<i>khatoya</i>	Oraon language, also known as Sadri
<i>khatriyas</i>	second category of Hindu society (kings, governors, warriors and soldiers)
<i>khesh</i>	Oraon clan, meaning paddy
<i>khichuri</i>	cooked rice but mixed with lentils and vegetables
<i>khiyar</i>	Barind
<i>kirodandi</i>	Oraon religion
<i>kirodara</i>	stick, <i>semicarpis anacardium</i>
<i>kirton</i>	song
<i>kisan</i>	Oraon name, meaning cultivator

<i>kispotta</i>	Oraon clan, meaning pig's entrails
<i>kora</i>	Oraon name, meaning digger
<i>korteka</i>	Oraon clan, a species of sparrow
<i>kotwar</i>	messenger
<i>kudukhs</i>	Oraons
<i>kujur</i>	Oraon clan, meaning a kind of fruits
<i>kurukh</i>	Oraons or their language (Persian version)
<i>kunruk dharam</i>	Oraon religion
<i>kurukhar</i>	Oraons, the inhabitants of Korkai
<i>kurukhattro</i>	the battle between Oraons (non-Aryans) and Hindus (Aryans)
<i>kunrunkhar</i>	Oraons
<i>kurux</i>	Oraon
<i>kuruxar</i>	Oraons, the inhabitants of Korkai
<i>lakhra</i>	Oraon clan, meaning tiger
<i>laxmi puja</i>	a Hindu festival
<i>linda</i>	Oraon clan, meaning a species of earth worm
<i>lindari</i>	Oraon clan, meaning a subdivision the eel
<i>lungi</i>	a little bit longer loin cloth of man/dress
<i>mahila</i>	female
<i>makhan</i>	butter
<i>male or maler</i>	Oraon name, meaning man
<i>malguzar</i>	tributary king

<i>mandir</i>	temple
<i>masjid</i>	mosque
<i>mattabor</i>	<i>pradhan</i> or headman or chief or leader
<i>minji</i>	Oraon clan, meaning a species of fish
<i>moulavi</i>	Muslim religious leader/priest
<i>mohajons</i>	money lenders
<i>nagbasis</i>	inhabitants of Chotanagpur
<i>nagpur</i>	Chotanagpur
<i>nawab</i>	a general of Muslim emperor in India
<i>nengti</i>	a loin cloth of man/dress
<i>nomads</i>	Oraon name, given by the British India Government
<i>orao</i>	Oraon
<i>orawan</i>	Oraon name
<i>pachani</i>	rice-beer (<i>haria</i> is also known as <i>pachani</i> among Oraons in some villages of Barind)
<i>padda panch</i>	the lowest administrative tier of Oraon political organisation
<i>panchayat</i>	the lowest administrative tier of Oraon political organisation
<i>pahan</i>	Oraon village priest
<i>pahela</i>	the first day
<i>palkansna</i>	Oraon religious ceremony of destroying evil tooth/mischief
<i>pal-asthna</i>	Oraon religious ceremony of destroying evil tooth/mischief
<i>panna</i>	Oraon clan, meaning iron

<i>panre</i>	assistant
<i>panta bhat</i>	cooked rice dipped into cold water
<i>pargana</i>	administrative jurisdiction of land
<i>parha</i>	Oraon village confederation, a combination of several villages
<i>parha panch</i>	Oraon village confederation, a combination of several villages
<i>parha panchayat</i>	Oraon village confederation, a combination of several villages
<i>paschim</i>	west
<i>paschim banga</i>	West Bengal of India
<i>pitha</i>	a food made of rice flour, sugar/molasses, coconut mast etc.
<i>poita</i>	a long piece of white colour cotton thread threaded through necks and the bottom part of belly of males usually practice by the Hindu males
<i>pradhan</i>	Oraon headman or chief or religious priest
<i>praja</i>	the subjects or the commoners
<i>pucca</i>	brick-built
<i>purboo</i>	east
<i>poush</i>	the ninth month of the Bengali Calendar
<i>pousshankranti</i>	reformation process of Oraons as Oraon <i>khatriyas</i>
<i>pushna puja</i>	festival during the ninth month of the Bengali Calendar
<i>rahji parha</i>	Oraon political organisation corresponds to a country
<i>raja</i>	king
<i>rayat</i>	cultivator

<i>raonaput</i>	Oraon name
<i>rohtasgarh</i>	Oraon fort
<i>sadri</i>	Oraon language – admixture of Hindi, Urdu, Arabic and Bengali
<i>Salwar</i>	a loose fitting trouser, wear on the lower part of the body of a girl
<i>samaj</i>	social grouping
<i>samity</i>	association
<i>sarhul</i>	Oraon new leaves celebration festival
<i>sarna</i>	sacred grove
<i>sarna religion</i>	Oraon religion
<i>shiba</i>	a Hindu god worshipped for human generation
<i>sidur</i>	vermilion
<i>sohorae</i>	Oraon cattle festival
<i>sonaton</i>	Hindu religion
<i>sonaton dharmā</i>	ancient religion, usually refers to Hindu religion
<i>sudras</i>	fourth category of Hindu society (labourers and service providers)
<i>tanaparni</i>	two white colour flags – a smaller one and a comparatively bigger one than the smaller one stand for Oraons’ religious practice in the past, also known as <i>parni dandi</i>
<i>tanavagat</i>	a creed among Oraons, which advises them to worship the

	sun or moon instead of worshipping Hindu gods and goddesses
<i>tappo</i>	Oraon clan, meaning a species of long tailed bird
<i>thaan</i>	sacred place for religious worship
<i>thakur</i>	Hindu religious priest or leader
<i>thakur bari</i>	a local <i>zamindar</i> house
<i>tiggya</i>	Oraon clan, meaning a species of monkey
<i>tirkey</i>	Oraon clan, meaning young mice
<i>tulshi</i>	a sacred tree, smaller in size
<i>ulki</i>	three thrones with a button painted on forehead
<i>upajatis</i>	sub-nations/ethnic community/indigenous peoples
<i>upazila</i>	sub-district, a combination of several union councils
<i>urao</i>	Oraon
<i>uraon</i>	Oraon
<i>vagat</i>	Oraon religious sect, which creates social hierarchies based on ritual purity and pollution as that of the Hindus
<i>vaiyari parha</i>	a tier of Oraon political organisation corresponds to the meaning of a District
<i>vikkhu</i>	Buddhist religious leader
<i>zamindar</i>	intermediary or tax collector of British India Government
<i>zamindary</i>	land taxation system
<i>zila</i>	district