

# **Human Rights Situation of the Indigenous Women in Northern Bangladesh: A Study on Oraon Communities**

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## **Abstract**

The indigenous women of Bangladesh are in vulnerable position in getting proper opportunity to enjoy the legal and human rights. The present study intends to deploy both qualitative and quantitative analysis to have a better understanding of the root metaphor of the Oraon women's rights in the context of Bangladesh. The main focuses of the study are to explore the existing human rights status of Oraon women and reveal how they perceive their rights and entitlements. The research conducted in the northern region of Bangladesh. Three main methods such as: participant observation, interviewing and documentary research have been used for this study. In view of the vulnerability of indigenous women the study is rationalized on the following grounds: First, there is a need to understand the intensify of the problems faced by the Oraon women. Second, there is a need to examine the nature, causes and processes of violation of human rights. Third, it is utmost important to know the present human rights situation among the women of Oraon communities and to unfold the existing state policy and ethnic law relating to minority rights in Bangladesh.

## **Introduction**

Bangladesh has the glorious history of cultural heritage where the various communities' people have been living for a long time. Though most of the people of Bangladesh are ethno-linguistically homogenous, a good number of indigenous communities live in different parts of Bangladesh (Karim, 2000). There are around 45 types of indigenous people live in Bangladesh. Their amount is about 2 millions that are 1.08 percent of total population. Among them there are 18 major ethnic communities in northern Bangladesh (Rahaman, 2004:4). Most of the indigenous people of Bangladesh have migrated from the neighbor countries especially India. Each of the aboriginal people has their own culture, ethnicity and individual lifestyle; the Oraon is one of them.

The survival strategies and life pattern are diversified. Among them women's position is more vulnerable. The familial, communities and reproductive roles of women are full of challenges. Although various types of global and national initiatives are in favor of indigenous community, the Oraon women have been depriving from their basic and human rights.

## **Human Rights and Indigenous Women: Global and National Guarantees**

Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed that all men are born free and equal in dignity and rights (Article 1). At the same time, ‘everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status (Article 2). On the other hand, Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women endorses that the signatory countries shall ensure the full development and advancement of women, for the purpose of guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on a basis of equality with men (Article 3). United Nations Millennium Declaration enunciated that the member countries should implement the principles and practices of democracy and respect for human rights, including minority rights (UN, 2000:10).

Moreover, The Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees “the state shall not discriminate against any citizen, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place birth” (The Constitution of Bangladesh, Article 28(1)).

As a member state of United Nations as well as the signatory of various human right initiatives, Bangladesh has the obligation to implement of all the taken steps of UN in its own boundary. But the present feature of human rights practices in Bangladesh shows that the Oraon women have limited access to meet their basic human needs and attain legal and fundamental rights.

### **Study Objectives**

The main objective of the study is to explore the existing human rights situation of Oraon women. Other related objectives of the study are to:

- a) know the socio-economic status of Oraon women in Bangladesh;
- b) reveal the perceived rights and entitlements of them;
- c) explore the problems faced by the indigenous women; and finally
- d) impart to the concern bodies for policy formulation.

### **Study Methodology**

Both primary and secondary data have been used for this study. But the paper mainly based on primary data. Secondary sources of information are collected from published and unpublished research works, books, journals etc. relevant to the main theme of the study. Singa, a village of Durgapur Upazilla, Rajshahi, the northern region of Bangladesh selected as the study area. The women of Oroan communities of the research areas are considered as the study population.

By using purposive sampling method 50 women have been selected. Data was collected from the respondents on January 2008. Three main methods such as:

participant observation, interviewing and documentary research have been used for this study. But interview schedule was the key instrument in collecting data of the present study.

By checking and editing data has been processed. It has coded and classified to make entry into computer for statistical analysis. Both qualitative and quantitative methods and techniques have been used to analyze data.

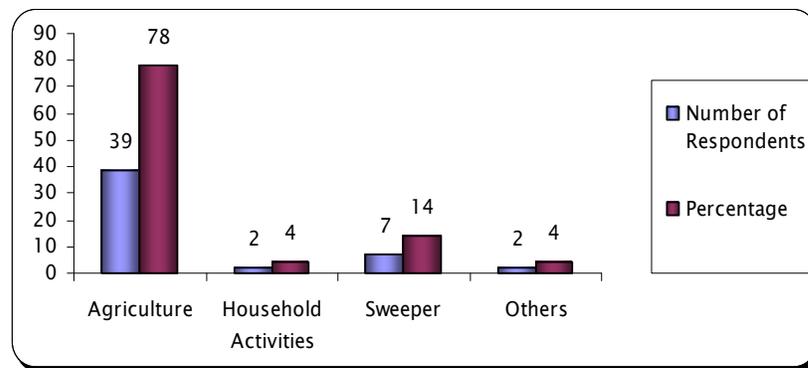
## Findings

### Socio-economic Status of Oraon Women

#### *Occupation*

The women of Oraon community are involved in different types of occupations. Among them 78.00 percent are involved in agricultural activities, only 4.00 percent involved in household activities. On the other hand, 14.00 percent are sweeper who works in various local offices as well as market places and 4.00 percent are involved in others occupations like small business, hawker and so on. Generally the male members of the society are engaged in agricultural activities in rural Bangladesh, but the present study shows the Oraon women are also engaged in agricultural activities with their male partners.

Figure1: Occupation of the Respondents



#### *Income-Expenditure*

There are immense nexus between occupations and income-expenditure. Most of the respondents (30.00 percent) earn monthly 500-1000 taka, 28.00 percent 1000-1500 Taka, 24.00 percent 1500-2000 taka and only 4.00 percent respondents earn above 2500 taka. Their monthly average income is 1420 taka. On the other hand, 34.00 percent respondents' monthly expenditure is 1500-2000 taka, 30.00 percent above 2500 taka, 26.00 percent 2000-2500 taka and only 6.00 percent respondents' expense is 1000-1500 taka. The average monthly expenditure of the respondents is 2110 taka. The data shows that the average monthly expenditure is higher than average income. That means there are disparity between income and expenditure. As a result, women of the Oraon communities cannot exit from the vicious circle of poverty. This

situation interrupts their normal life and creates obstacle in fulfilling the basic human needs.

Table: 1 Monthly Income-expenditure Features of the Respondents

Monthly Income (Taka)	Number of Respondents	Percentage	Monthly Expenditure (Taka)	Number of respondents	Percentage
500-1000	15	30.00	500-1000	02	4.00
1000-1500	14	28.00	1000-1500	03	6.00
1500-2000	12	24.00	1500-2000	17	34.00
2000-2500	07	14.00	2000-2500	13	26.00
2500+	02	4.00	2500+	15	30.00
Total	50	100.00	Total	50	100.00

### ***Food***

Due to the discrepancy between income and expenditure the Oraon women are fully unable to bear themselves in present inconsistent market system. They cannot fulfill their basic human needs. This unexpected situation puts pressure on their food habit. Normally, Bangladeshi people are habituate to take meal 3 times in a day. But 60.00 percent respondents take 2 times, 30.00 percent take 1 time and only 10.00 percent take 3 times in a day. They cannot maintain food standard or nutrition in their food items.

Moreover, their food habit is different from mass people of Bangladesh. Most of the respondents (70.00 percent) eat rice like other people of the country. Simultaneously, 20.00 percent are accustomed to eat various local foods like a sort of arum or arum leaves, wild fruits-potatoes and birds, wild rabbits and so on.

On account of the unaffordable situation in collecting foods the Oraon women intake insufficient food than necessity. This vulnerable situation directly effect on their usual life.

### ***Sanitation***

The Oraon women lead poor qualities of life that visible in their socio-economic status. They have insufficient facilities regarding the sanitation system in their community. About 86.00 percent respondents have the semi-sanitary latrine in their household. But the sanitation system is not self-managed. It is the donation of NGO's, voluntary organizations or Christian Missionaries. It is mentionable that the Oraon people of Singa areas were the follower of Hindu religion. Due to the massive poverty they converted into Christianity in order to achieve material gain. As a result the Christian Missionaries have direct influence on their socio-cultural activities and ecological life. These organizations provide the facilities among the Oraon communities by free of cost. On the contrary, 14.00 percent have no sanitary latrine. In this regard, they use open fields or surroundings' bushes. Thus, they suffer from various diseases.

### ***Recreation***

Recreation plays an important role in proper development of human beings. It is considered as the fuel of working force. It refreshes human body and mind. But the Oraon women have inadequate recreational facilities both in their houses and communities. The present study shows that 92.00 percent respondents have no medium of recreation like radio, television and so on. Only 4.00 percent have radio and television that is used as the media of recreation. Besides, no recreational facilities, except religious festivals, are available in the community level. So, Oraon women, especially children are deprived from proper recreational facilities that disrupt their normal development.

### **Human Rights and Oraon Women**

#### ***Educational Status***

Education is the main engine for social development. It is an important social capital for human society. The overall education rate of the Oraon women is not satisfactory. Among the respondents 64.00 percent are illiterate, 16.00 percent have the secondary level education, 14.00 percent are literate, who know how to sign their name and only 6.00 percent passed the primary level education.

Table: 2 Educational Status of the Respondents

Educational Qualification	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Primary	03	6.00
Secondary	08	16.00
Literate	07	14.00
Illiterate	32	64.00
Total	50	100.00

On the other hand, the education rate of the respondents' family members is also vulnerable. Among them 62.00 percent are illiterate and 56.00 percent literate. At the same time, 32.00 percent have primary education and only 16.00 percent have experiences to go to secondary school.

#### ***Health Condition***

Though the Oraon women are very industrious, most of them are ill and broken health. Almost hundred percent respondents have been suffering from any type of diseases. Among them 42.00 percent are suffering from unknown disease. That means they do not know about their physical problems. Besides, 22.00 percent are suffering from cold; fever and cough, 16.00 percent eye problem and 20.00 percent are suffering from periodic paralysis (table-3).

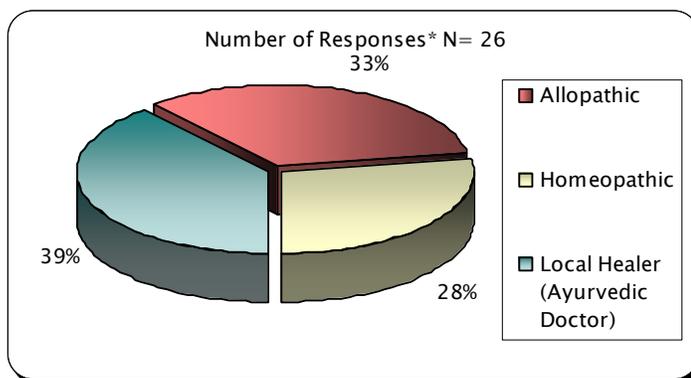
Table: 3 Types of Diseases of the Respondents

Types of Diseases	Number of Responses* N =50	Percentage
Eye Problem	08	16.00
Fever, Cold and Cough	11	22.00
Chest Problem	07	14.00
Body Pain and Rheumatic Fever	06	12.00
Periodic Paralysis	10	20.00
Unknown Disease	21	42.00
Total	63	-

\* Multiple responses were available

The respondents who are suffering from different types of diseases, 46.00 percent of them (23 respondents) have taken the physicians' advices and 54.00 percent (27 respondents) did not take any advices from the doctor. The respondents, who have received the treatment from doctor, its' nature is different. Most of them (60.87 percent) have taken treatment from local healer like Ayurvedic doctor, 52.17 percent from local Allopathic and 43.48 percent have received treatment from Homeopathic doctor (table 5). That means most of the respondents are deprived from the modern treatment facilities.

Figure: 2 Treatment Methods of the Respondents



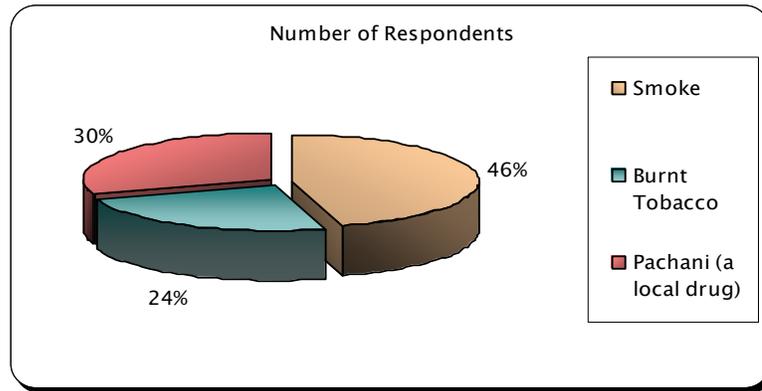
\* Multiple responses were available

### ***Addiction***

The Oraon women are addicted in various types of local drugs. Among the respondents 66.00 percent have the addiction and 34.00 percent have no addiction in any type of drugs. Those who are addicted, usually habituate to smoke (45.45 percent), use burnt tobacco as a dentifrice and scented tobacco with betel leaves (24.24 percent) and 30.30 percent drink *pachani* (a local drug, made by date and palm juice as well as rotten rice) that is unhygienic (table 6). Though 34.00 percent respondent did not disclose about their addiction, by interviewing with other

community people and observation of the researcher it has been possible to know that about hundred percent of Oraon women are addicted.

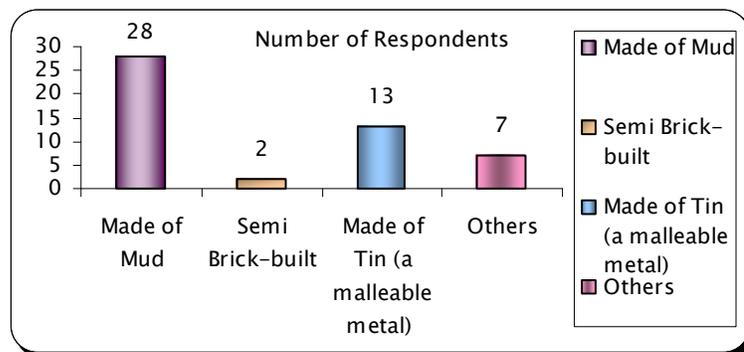
Figure: 3 Nature of Drugs



### *Housing*

Most of the Oraon women live in fragile houses. Among the respondents 56.00 percent live in the houses that are made by mud and bamboo. Nonetheless, 26.00 percent live in the houses of tin, 7.00 percent live in the other houses that are made by straw, bamboo, sack and only 4.00 percent houses are semi brick-built. The housing pattern of them indicates their vulnerable position in the society.

Figure: 4 Pattern of Housing of the Respondents



### ***Property***

About hundred percent of the respondents have given their opinion that they have no own land or property. Just they give their labor in others' land as day laborer. They understand the domestic animal like poultry and goats as their property. In this regard, the Oraon women are very insecure in their social and family life.

### ***Family and Community Role***

Generally the three types of roles of women have been observed in any society such as: familial, community and reproductive. But the Oraon women are highly engaged in different types of family and community roles, albeit reproductive role is the main. They have less opportunity to participate in family and community decision-making process. Alternatively, they are victimized by the male dominated societies in many ways.

### ***Violence***

Violence against Women is a common feature of Bangladesh. The indigenous women are victimized of violence's both in their personal and community life. The Oraon women are to abuse also by the male partners in their family and community. Among the respondents 54.00 percent have admitted the violence against them and 46.00 percent did not confess it. On the other hand, they disclosed about their physical and mental torture both in home and outside the home. Sexual harassment and abuses are included in the physical torture.

### **Discussion**

The ethnic population, especially the Oraon women are subject to indiscriminate manners, distress, abhorrence, ill feeling and exploitation by the majority community. They are generally regarded as sub nations within the geographical boundary of states (Rahman, 1996:301). The findings of the present study support the notion that women of the Oraon community are very neglected by the government and also the mass people of Bangladesh. The results revealed that the oraon women are abandoned and holds the lower quality of life regarding the various socioeconomic issues like profession, income, expenditure, food habit, sanitation, recreation, medicare systems and so on.

On the other hand, in connection with the human rights issues they are also isolated. The study outcomes showed that education, property rights, shelter and fulfillment of basic human necessities of Oraon women are not up to the standard. Because, the global initiatives like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, CEDAW, UN Millennium Declaration as well as the national commitment like the Constitution of Bangladesh are highly obliged to protect the rights of the ethnic community. But the real features relating to the tribal rights are fully different these types of institutional assurances.

In addition, Universal Declaration of Human Rights stated that 'everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international cooperation and in accordance with the

organization and resources of each state, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality' (Article 22). The present study demonstrated that despite the security measures are available of the government of Bangladesh like Oldage Allowance, Destitute Women Allowance, Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF), Vulnerable Group Development (VGD), Test Relief (TR), Gratuities Relief (GR), Food For Work (FFW) and so on, the Oraon women of study areas do not only get this types of opportunities as the security measures but also know nothing about these government programs.

The indigenous women are not aware at all about their health. The major parts of them do not seek the doctors' advice. Moreover, they take some local drugs that negatively impacts on their body and reproductive health. On the contrary, CEDAW pronounced to protect the women from all forms of torture, discrimination and cruelty. The present study exposed that the Oraon women are not free from violence. They are persecuted of different violence's in their community. As a signatory of various international agreements relating to human rights, the government of Bangladesh has less attention to protect the indigenous women from torture and cruelty.

The findings of the present study have significant implications for the rights of the Oraon women as well as the broader perspective of human rights of indigenous people. Simultaneously, the study would be able to contribute to the knowledge and consciousness among various concerned groups of people and different agencies so that they can concentrate on the importance of initiating policy, programs and actions that can protect the indigenous women from these vulnerable situation.

### **Policy Prescriptions**

In Bangladesh context, indigenous women are considered as the disadvantaged group of people. As the citizen of Bangladesh they are entitled to enjoy all of the legal rights. State should take initiatives to fulfill their basic human needs as well as the fundamental rights according to the constitution of Bangladesh. For the betterment of indigenous women and linked them to the main stream of national development priority must be given on the following issues.

- i) It is needed to introduce non-formal education program among the indigenous communities. At the same time, favorable opportunities should be created so that they can pursue the education by their mother language.
- ii) Government, simultaneously law enforcing agents should be more concern in meeting their rights and privileges.
- iii) It is necessary to take steps for the employment of indigenous women in their local community.
- iv) The government should be carried appropriate plan and specific program regarding health facilities especially for the reproductive health of indigenous women.
- v) It is needed to create an ample opportunity for the women of the Oraon community so that they can smoothly participated in the community decision-making process.
- vi) The Government of Bangladesh, NGO's, civil society, media and other concern groups should come forward together to uplift the human rights status of indigenous people.

## **Conclusion**

The women of Oraon community in Bangladesh lead their life very vulnerably as well as deprive from the basic needs and fundamental rights. Due to the poverty, unemployment, social insecurity, lower socio-economic status, illiteracy the Oraon women have been failing to perform properly both in their self and national development. The Oraon community is a small and underprivileged section of people that are leading their life without proper education, Medicare and job facilities. They have been growing up within a lot of socio-cultural problems. They are the disadvantaged group who has limited access to enjoy the state law, fundamental and human rights that interrupted their civic rights. In these circumstances, comprehensive policy and program should be taken immediately on constitutional and the humanitarian ground for the betterment of this community as well as the greater interest of the nation.

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