



# Folklore and Ethno-Rock Art Studies in the Kaimur Region of India: The Story of the Oraon Tribe

SACHIN KUMAR TIWARY 

PANCHANAN DALAI 

OM PRAKASH 

*\*Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article*

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## ABSTRACT

The present work engages with a comparative study of the Oraon Folklore and their Rock Art for assessing how both these genres seemingly record the geo-cultural history of Oraon origin, their forced migrations and their current state of habitations in another Indian state Jharkhand. It attempts to establish a relation between archaeological data available in the form of rock art supplemented by written accounts and local traditions wherever possible. Based on field works, personal interactions with local inhabitants, especially on important events like, marriage, festivals, rituals etc., and archeological scrutiny of rock art available in the Oraons' previous habitation, i.e., the Kaimur Region in current Indian state of Bihar, the paper attempts to expose the historical value and cultural parallelism of Oraons' folk narratives and rock art. The paper strongly believes that both these genres conspicuously display the cultural history of a marginalized tribe that has undergone several historical and cultural ordeals. Besides this, the paper also offers, for the first time, an English translation of Oraons' oral folklore, adhering to the interdisciplinary approach of this paper. However, most significantly, the paper in its attempt to trace the continuity of rock art in this Kaimur Region also becomes an addition to the domain of ethno-rock art studies.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

**Dr. Sachin Kumar Tiwary**

Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology, Faculty of Arts, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi 221 005, Uttar Pradesh, India

[sachintiwary@bhu.ac.in](mailto:sachintiwary@bhu.ac.in)

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The Oraon tribe, that now lives in the Chhotanagpur region of the Indian state of Jharkhand claims that, once upon a time, they were the aborigines of the Rohtas Plateau of Kaimur Range in the present state of Bihar. Such claim of the Oraons can be verified from their vibrant folklore, which describe how their original place of habitation, i.e. the Kaimur region, was once a paradise for them. However, the Oraons and their paradise comprising of vast and ample forest resources were invaded by another alien tribe, the Kharwar, who hailed from the surrounding areas of the Kaimur region, i.e. the Chhotanagpur region which was once in Bihar but now in Jharkhand state. The story of the Kharwar's invasion of the Oraons is also well recorded in the Oraon-Kudukh.<sup>1</sup> The dominant Oraon folktales, now surviving in the Kaimur region (where they once lived) and the Chhotanagpur region (their present habitation), vibrantly narrate the historical habitation and subsequent forced migration of the Oraon tribe. Interestingly, the stories, events, and the timelines of the Oraons as found in their folklore seem to match with the existing rock art found in the Kaimur region, which spans into the border of existing Jharkhand and Bihar states of Independent India. The various Raags<sup>2</sup> of Oraon folklore and its syncretic reflections on the region's rock art has opened up a new vista to revisit and rethink about the geo-cultural history of the Oraon community as well as other sister tribes such as the Kharwar and the Chero. Researching and analyzing the Folklore and Rock Art of the tribes such as Kharwar, Oraon, etc. of the historical Karushdesh<sup>3</sup> and current Kaimur region in India, the paper also attempts to deconstruct the traditional approach of historiography. It demonstrates how both tangible proofs and oral or intangible facts can be combined, compared and analyzed to hit upon the cultural historicity of a place and its people; in this case, the Oraons.

A galaxy of European and Indian scholars have worked on the cultural aspects of the Oraon tribe. Before proceeding with the main concerns of our paper, it is relevant to mention the names of some of the most important scholarly works on the tribes in India, particularly the Oraons. One of the earliest works is by Ferdinand Hahn C. Bertelsmann (1906) written in German language – *Blicke in die geisteswelt der heidnischen Kols: Sammlung von Sagen, Märchen und Liedern der Oraon in Chota Nagpur* (In English, *Look into the spiritual world of the pagan Kols: collection of sayings, fairy tales and songs of the Oraon in Chota Nagpur*). This work has been recently reprinted by A. Grignard (2017, Reprint) with the title *Oraon Folk-Lore in the Original* by Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi. This work was based on the folkloric data of Oraon (of Chhotanagpur region of Jharkhand). After Hahn C. Bertelsmann, another German scholar Lydin lake Schwadbe (1983) wrote a book on Oraon tribes – *Die Munda and Oraon in Chota Nagpur: Geschichte*, which was published in Berlin by Wirtschaft and Gesellschaft Akademik-Verlag. This book describes different aspects of life style of Oraons.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the famous Indian anthropologist Sarat Chandra Roy published a number of books on Oraons, e.g., *The Oraons of Chota Nagpur: Their History, Economic life and Social Organisation*, Ranchi: Bar Library (1915); in 1984, *The Oraons of Chotnagpur, Man in India* Office, Ranchi Catholic Press, Ranchi and in 1985, *Oraon Religion and Customs*, Gian Publishing House, Delhi. Roy's works are based on the documentation of folk tradition and he tried to highlight the value of this tradition in the world of academia. After Sarat Chandra Roy, there are some other scholars who have worked on some other aspects of Oraons. For example, Abhik Ghosh (2006) wrote a book *The World of the Oraon: Their Symbols in Time and Space*, Manohar, New Delhi. The book deals with the religious aspect and the temporal and spatial aspects of the Oraons locating the same in the world culture within the anthropological studies. Recently, Bhikhu Tirkey has published a book in 2011 *Oraon Sarna: Dharm Aur Sanskriti*, Jharkhand Jharokha, Ranchi in Hindi. He comes from the same community. In his book, he has discussed the religion, economy, customs, rituals, Samskara, Social structure, totem, magic, agriculture, role of animal etc. Being an insider, he has described his observation with thorough explanations of each and every aspects which were largely absent in the existing literature.

1 Kudukh: Kudukh is the native tongue of the Oraon tribe which doesn't have its own script but is written in Devnagri script. Kudukh is also often pronounced as Kurukh and the Oraons believe that the word is derived from the name of their king Karakh. The Oraons' language 'Kudukh' is a member of the northern subgroup of the Dravidian Language family.

2 Raag is a melodic format in Indian Classical songs tradition.

3 Karushdesh: The ancient name of Kaimur region of Bihar. The name Karushdesh is mentioned in the "Balakand" of the *Ramayana*. The name Kaimur is gradually evolved from Kaira, supposedly the name of a devil.

Recent studies of Kaimur-Kudukh myths and legends reveal several facts such as the origin of Oraon, battles between the Oraons and the Kharwars, their military and fortifications features, their forceful migration, traditional sports, etc. The authors attempt to prove that the mythical tales about the importance of elephants, horses, role of females in war, etc. can be testified through the rock shelter of the Kaimur region. The folklore under scrutiny here easily proclaim their significance in decoding the regional history of the Oraons.

## CONTEXTUALIZING FOLKLORE, ROCK ART AND INDIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

‘Historiography’ as an art of writing, and ‘history’ as a site of hermeneutics reading and interpretations have always been an ambiguous intellectual and academic praxis. Both reading and writing of history have been the prerogative of the mainstream society, as both the actions demand for written words (signs) and knowledge of words (signified). History, therefore often tend to obliterate the ‘unwritten’, such as, folk tales, legends and myths. Representations in history therefore need a panoptic gaze and criticism. Re-questioning and reinterpretation of history are some of the current historical practices in contemporary academics. For Hayden White, history is a meta-history, constituted of tropes such as mode, employment, ideology, etc. For E. H. Carr, History is a site of chance fishing where facts are but mere accidents (Carr 1961: 15). Similarly, the postmodernist decry any coherence or finality of historical truth and representations. Thus, we can perceive a possibility of debate on history’s existing content and methods, not to mention about its ideology and objectives. In the absence of such deconstructing probe, readers of history may be left not only to a false historical consciousness.

Surprisingly, we have confounded history to literate past and people only. Therefore, we have failed to correlate history’s relationship with invisible sources such as folktales, folklore, Rock Art, etc. We consider reading of folk literature and rock art merely as artistic or exotic expressions. Historians and archaeologists must actually diagnose and establish links between rock art, folktales, or folk arts. Such linkages would definitely contribute towards the empirical nature of reading and writing history.

In the domain of Indian historiography, one can notice several problems concerning reading, writing, and practicing history. Modern Indian historiography is ideologically painted, intellectually insufficient and representatively unrepresentative. The subaltern groups’ criticism of Indian historiography is a pertinent example here.

“The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism—colonialist and bourgeois nationalist elitism”, observes Ranajit Guha (Chatterjee 2010: 187). To consider that Indian historiography, at least the modern historiography, is a palimpsest of the European historiography would not be entirely wrong. Historians like Romila Thapar critiques how oriental historians rest upon their intellectual allegiance and discursive training in Western practice and pedagogy of history. According to her historical consciousness in India has obliterated the ontological presence of regional history in India. To quote her, regional history “is an area which has been ignored in the past because of the assumption that historical consciousness was absent in Indian societies” (Thapar 2000: 1). Moving beyond the subaltern concerns of historiography, one can also notice how Indian historiography has been myopic to include things such as folklore, oral narratives, ethno-rock art, etc. as a great repository of historical evidences. Thapar in fact “suggests ways of looking at regional history from a comparative perspective as well as its integration into the history of larger areas” (Ibid.).

To be precise, the historians in India must also probe into the epistemological relevance of the folktales, ethno-rock art of the so-called marginals in Indian society; particularly that of the tribal, nomadic clans, etc. Much research is required to focus on these marginalized and estranged, the undiscovered historical sites, locals, places, etc. This is required for authenticating and augmenting Indian historiography; and if we do so, our historiography would be a fitting counter narrative not only to the elite historians in India but also to the European historians, who have either failed or misrepresented us.

What behooves more is the urgency of restoring the lost identity of these tribal people who are given Scheduled Tribe status in the Indian constitution. The recovery of their cultural pasts, language and identity would definitely empower them to assert their political and cultural

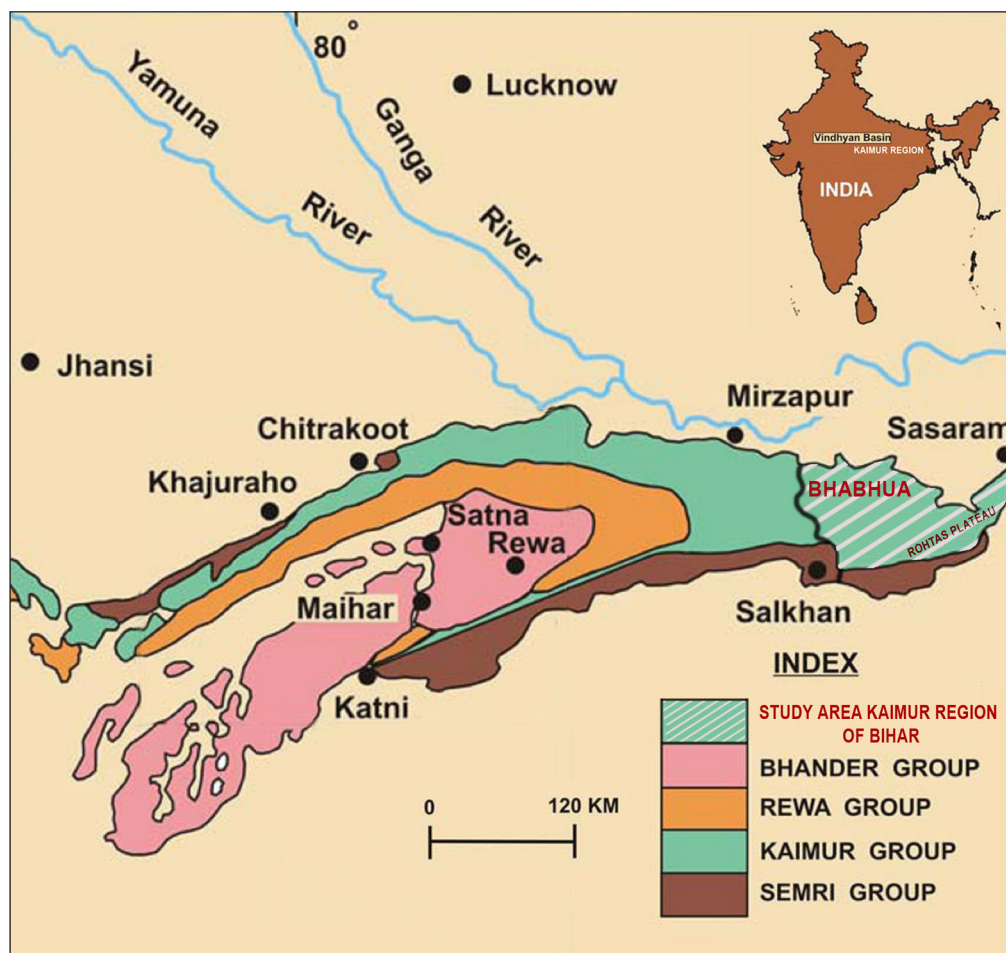
position in India. Needless to mention, the upsurge of government policies, institutions and civil sensitization about the ontological significance of these tribes in Indian society has also forced academicians and activists to revisit the unexplored and often neglected pasts of the Indian tribes.

Considering the above assumptions, the present article intends to contextualize the interrelationship between the Kaimur Rock Art and the folktales of the Oraon tribe, who once lived in the Kaimur region and are now inhabiting the Chhotanagpur region. Orans are also found to be living in other parts of India; but the current article deals with the Oraons in the Kaimur region. The article would serve the following purposes:

1. To understand the historicity and the ethnic relation between Kaimur rock art and the socio-cultural life of the indigenous ethnic tribes and other inhabitants.
2. To contribute to the existing historical readings of such unexplored ethnic and historic rock art and folktales.
3. To comparatively read and link depictions in rock art and representations in tribal folk narratives.
4. Finally, to illustrate how Ethno-Rock Art (Tiary 2013) is a discursive site that tries to study ethnic groups and, during various occasions, to interpret and understand rock art itself.

## AN ACCOUNT OF THE SITES

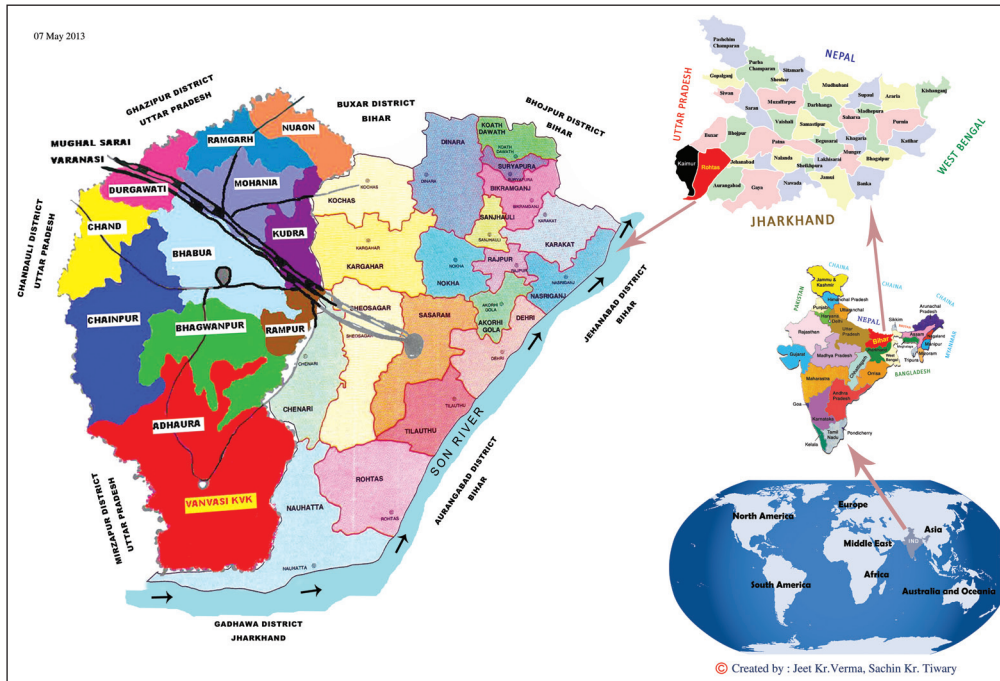
The Kaimur Range (*Figure 1*) constitutes the Eastern part of the Vindhya Range (Soni 1987: 87–138) extending from Sasaram in Bihar in the East to Chittaurgarh in Rajasthan in the West and passing through Madhya Pradesh about 483 kilometers (300 mi) long (Pandey 1963: 49) (Oldham 1856: 224–256), from around Katangi in Balaghat district of Madhya Pradesh to around Sasaram in Rohtas district of Bihar, India. The range is a few hundred meters above the surrounding plains and has a maximum width of around 80 km. Kaimur Range comprises of Rewa, Satna and Balaghat districts of Madhya Pradesh, Sonbhadra, Chandauli and Mirzapur districts of Uttar Pradesh, and Kaimur and Rohtas districts of Bihar states of India (Ghosh 1989: 279).



**Figure 1** General View of the Kaimur Range.



The tribes such as Kharwar and Oraons are located all around the Kaimur Range and near the Hazaribagh Range of Jharkhand too. The rock art sites are reported in Adhaura, Chand, Chainpur, Bhagwanpur, Rampur blocks of Kaimur and Sasaram, Nauhatta, Tilauthu, Rohtas blocks of Rohtas districts (*Figure 2*). These sites are divided by two major rivers of the peninsular India, the Son on the south, and Tamsa or Tons on the north. Many other rivers Like Ken, Karmanasa, Kudra, Durgavati, Dhoba, Kuhira are also the main sources of water for tribes of the Kaimur region spanning between the Ganges and the Son.



**Figure 2** Location Map of both the Districts.

## AN ACCOUNT OF THE ORAON FOLK NARRATIVES AND ROCK ART

The present section of our article attempts to explain a few Oraon folk songs that are still existent amongst the Oraon tribe and narrate the story of their ancestral place and their consequent migration to their current domicile in Chhotanagpur in Jharkhand. The narrator of the Odes is an anonymous Oraon ancestor who seems to remind the younger Oraons about their origin and fateful migration to their new place of habitation. The folk songs (identified as Odes in the paper) in fourteen segments are translated and analyzed here for our research purpose. The Hindi version of the Ode numbers iv and vii are accessed from Dr. S.S. Tiwari's book (Tiwari 2014: 27–40).

The selection of songs does not attempt any thematic consistency, as far as locales, timelines, and perspectives are concerned. For example, the narrator also takes the position of women to render the female experiences and feminine perspective of the Oraon exodus from their original habitation. The form of these odes seems to be largely dramatic monologue, and the tone is predominantly elegiac and sometimes heroic, especially when the anonymous singer sings the glory of the fort of Oraons and their and battle. We also perceive a sense of pride and loss interplaying at the same time, quite fitting to the historical rise and fall of the Oraon tribe in India. Similarly, we also attempt to analyze (vis a vis the folk songs) the existing pictographs in the Kaimur region, which depict some episodes of Oraons' ordeal as also recorded in the folk songs under scrutiny here. There is no one to one similarity of depiction in all folk songs and pictographs analyzed here; nevertheless, a few Ode nos. iii, v, vi, viii, and xii can be compared with the pictographs to justify the cultural parallelism of the Oraon history as embedded in both the folk literatures and rock art of the Kaimur region.

## ANALYSIS OF ORAON FOLKLORE TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH

Following are the fourteen stanzas translated first time into English by the authors. These stanzas in their fragmented themes, however, contribute to a holistic understanding of the Oraons's rise and fall at their ancestral place, i.e., the Kaimur region. Below each stanza is

given an explanation, followed by pictographic evidence collected from the Rock Art around the region. The pictograph stands almost parallel to the stanza as far as what these two genres, folklore and rock art, intend to convey.

### **(ODE-I) ORIGIN OF THE ORAON TRIBE**

**Where are your origins, O man; where were you first born?**

**Our roots were in the Rohtaspur Patna, but Nagapure is *your* birthplace now;**

**Hey, where were you created, and where did you lay your eggs?**

**I was born in Ruidaspur Patna, but in Nagapure I was brought up in eggs.**

[Explanation: The story of the Oraon genesis is narrated in an elegiac and nostalgic mood in the above stanza. Here, the narrator, through his monologue, draws the attentions of the listeners to the details of their origin– their ancestry, and place of origin. And, then, he himself testifies that their actual ancestry was a place called Rohtaspur<sup>4</sup> in the Rohtas district and Patna in the Kaimur district of Bihar; but unfortunately, they had been forced to flee to Chhotanagpur region in current Jharkhand where their new generations now live. The narrator clarifies for himself that he was born in Ruidaspur but was brought up in Nagapure.<sup>5</sup> The phrase ‘lay your eggs’ emphasizes on the very origin of the Oraons.]

### **(ODE-II) ABOUT ROHTAS: THE PLACE OF ORAON’S ORIGIN**

**Look at the fort of Ruidaspur, how great, glittering and splendid it looks!**

**How it blazes in the sunlight and looks gorgeous!**

**Here sets the elephant out from the Ruidas fort,**

**and the lord JhingaMahato<sup>6</sup> is mounted on it;**

**My lord! Your servants’ fan him there;**

**How magnificent you look being fanned;**

**JhingaMahato thou are great!**

[Explanation: The narrator provides a physical and scenic magnificence of the Fort of their clan king Jhinga Mahato, and nostalgically recollects the picture of their great King mounting on an elephant and his servants fanning him gleefully. The splendor of his ancestral fort at Ruidaspur captured in the adjectives “great, glittering and splendid” and the majestic march of Jhinga Mahato on elephant back accentuate the social and historical opulence and importance of the Oraon community. The direct tone and photographic description refer to the vibrant cultural memory and sensitivity embodied in this stanza.]

### **(ODE-III) KARMA: THE MAIN FESTIVAL OF THE ORAONS**

**There is the celebration of the Karma festival (*Figure 3*) in Rohtasgarh;**

**Youths are adorned with jingling bells on their feet;**

**Surely, they are rejoicing the Karma fest,**

**And there are jingle bells on the youths’ feet.**

[Explanation: The narrator describes the festive mood of the Oraons’ main festival Karma (*Figure 3*). He refers to this festival as their ancestral festival as celebrated in their ancestral place of origin: Rohtasgarh. He explains the costumes of the boys having jingle bells on their feet and dancing to the festive tune of the Karma festival. The repetition of the phrase ‘jingle bells’ refers to the lost glory and happiness that their ancestors enjoyed. As a binary, the stanza depicts the displaced and despicable plights of the Oraons in Chhotanagpur, Jharkhand].

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4 Ruidaspur: The ancient name of today’s Rohtas district in Bihar.

5 Nagapure: The present Chhotanagpur in Jharkhand.

6 Supposedly a mythical Figure. There is no historical account of him.



**Figure 3** Scene of the Karma Festival.

## COMPARATIVE ANALOGY WITH THE PICTOGRAPHS-FIGURE 3 AND FIGURE 4

Karma is the most important festival of Oraon tribe. It is celebrated in the month of Bhadrapada (August-September) on the eleventh day of the Lunar calendar. This is a harvest festival in which the worshipers pay their respect to their presiding deity the 'Karma Devata'. Karma Devata is supposed to bring health and wealth to the tribes. The Karam tree (*Neolamarckia Cadamba*) symbolizes the deity and is considered holy. The branches of Karam tree are collected by the unmarried girls of the community. These branches are washed with milk and placed in the center. All the men and women of the community gather around the branches of Karma tree and listen to the tale narrated by the local priest. The ritualistic dance around a Karma branches go on the whole night in which both men and women participate.

When we look at the pictographs found in the Kaimur region as well as central India regions, we find the visual depiction of this festival. In the pictographs above, we notice the tribal members encircling a fruit laden Karma tree (See zoomed pic, **Figure 3a**). The Karam tree seems to be identical to what is widely known as Kadamb tree. In the images, people are seen dancing with joy, and some of them are also carrying *amridanga* (drum) like musical instruments. These images of the celebration of the Karma festival directly correspond to the current form (**Figure 3c**) of the festival celebrated by local tribal people with much enthusiasm. **Figure 3d** depicts the real image of a Kadam tree located inside the ruined Rohtasgarh fort. The pictograph depicting the celebration of Karma festivals (**Figure 3a**) can be termed as representative because of its depiction of the Karma celebration with all details. This art must have been produced by some members of the community and, as such, lack the expertise of a professional artist.

The four images above also depict varying rituals of the Karma festival. In **Figure 4a** and **c**, we notice that the participants are dancing without holding their hands; whereas in **Figure 4b** and **d** we notice the dancers holding their hands. **Figure 4a, b** and **c** pictographs are from the rock shelter, and **Figure 4d** represents the existing ritualistic practice. Although, these practices are still prevalent among these community, with the change of time, they are also confronted with modern influences and interventions. One of the modern influences can be noticed in **Figures 4d** and **3c** where the participants are not adorned with natural costumes like Karma branches etc. Instead, they use artificial flowers, machine sewn costumes, etc. Today, there would also be more variation in the use of musical instruments. It is also not entirely uncommon to notice how music is played on recorder instead of being sung by the dancing members of the community. However, it is important to note the uniformity in their dresses, the rhythm in their dance and the discipline of their communal living that are so well discernable in these





**Figure 4** Group of Dancers on the Occasion of the Karma Festival.

images, as well as in their folklore that speak about youth rejoicing the dance and the jingling bells attached to their feet that are creating soulful musical note in the course of their dancing. These images are to be seen in almost every shelter in the region of Rohtasgarh spread over a radius of 50 sq. km.

#### **(ODE-IV) THE HUNTING GAMES OF THE YOUNG ORAONGIRLS**

There are the mudgars<sup>7</sup> made of Sal<sup>8</sup> for the girls of Rohtas,  
 And the girls are moving into the forest  
 To play hunting with the mudgarsin their hands.  
 Oh mother, these young girls of Rohtas are bustling with their age,  
 And calling us repeatedly to join in their game of hunt!  
 Oh little girls, will you play the game of hunt,  
 Will you put turban on your head?  
 Oh, it's certain that you will put on turban on your heads.  
 You have hunted a deer,  
 But now you have to carry it home on your shoulders.  
 When you lifted the deer on your shoulder,  
 Your waist started shaking!

[Explanation: The narrator describes a hunting game played by the Oraon boys and girls. The boys seem to be reluctant to include the girls in their hunting gang and therefore are seen complaining to their mothers regarding the nubile girls' playful intention to be included in the boys' hunting group. The boys are asking to the girls if they can put on turbans on their heads like the boys do; and if at all the girls can also carry the weight of full bodied deer on their back if they succeed in hunting it; they also jest fully interjects that if at all the girls carry the hunted deer, their waists will shake with its weight. We sense an interplay of gender role here. Hunting is being described as a male profession, though a great interest for it is also noticed amongst the Oraon girls. The narrator also describes the physical beauty and youthfulness of the boys and girls here.

<sup>7</sup> Mudgars: A kind of mace/club made of Sal tree; Sal tree was abundantly available in Oraon habitation, besides Bamboo.

<sup>8</sup> Sal tree is botanically called '*Shorea robusta*': It is a tropical long tree, costly for its leaves and straight and strong wood.



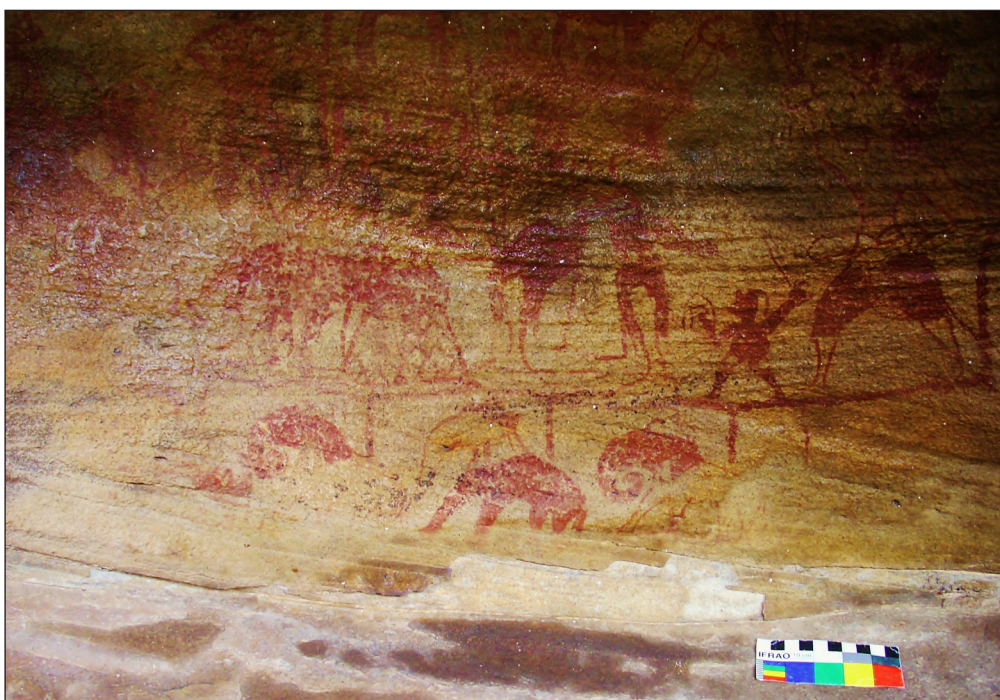
## (ODE-V) THE GREAT BAMBOO BATTLE AGAINST THE INVADING KHARWAR TRIBE

There has been a battle, the battle with the Kharwar,  
The Bamboo battle in the wood of Brindavan!  
Our king won the battle, with the bamboos of Brindavan,  
And he built a bamboo palace and lived happily.

[Explanation: The narrator mentions about a war raised by another tribal community called Kharwar of their vicinity, i.e. Rohtas and Kaimur. He shares through his songs how the Kharwars invaded into their jungle in Brindavan for confiscating their bamboos; but their Oraon king Doriya<sup>9</sup> won the battle and built a fort made of Bamboos and lived happily thereafter. Bamboo enjoyed/s a significant economic and cultural object in Oraon community. The rock art has captured this very vividly.]

## COMPARATIVE ANALOGY WITH THE PICTOGRAPHS-FIGURE 5 AND FIGURE 7

When we look into the existent rock art in the shelters and caves surrounding Kaimur range, we notice the images alluding to the battles between the two communities (**Figure 5**). These pictorial representations are also echoed in the folklore of the Oraons. From the above explanations of the lore, we realize that their lore are poignant depictions of feuds and battles between the Oraons and the Kharwars. There were three battles between them that took place to take over the Rohtasgarh fort, which was in possession of the Oraons rulers. The region of Rohtasgarh in Kaimur Range, where the Oraons ruled, has plenty of Bamboo trees (**Figure 6**) which were quite valuable as they were essential for community living that include- building houses, wattle and daub, making bows and arrows, spear heads, agricultural activities, domestic uses etc. The Bamboo Battle alludes to this aspect of the Oraons life. The song above narrates the first battle, i.e., the Bamboo Battle, between the two communities. The narrator describes the preparation for the battle. The Oraon warriors are being informed about the attack from the Kharwars. They are being asked to hurry up to lead the charge against the enemies that have invaded the Oraons from all corners. The warriors prepare their horses and elephants. The horses are neighing and elephants are trumpeting. Finally, the enemies are defeated by the Oraon king Doriya who built a palace and lived happily.



**Figure 5** Warriors with their weapons.

9 Mythical Figure, who is believed to be the son of Air.





**Figure 6** General View of the current Bamboo Groove, View from Bandha-II.

This narrative of the first victory of Oraon over the Kharwar in the Bamboo battle at the Rohtasgarh region is also visually represented in the rock art (**Figure 7**) found in the eleven shelters of the region. The pictograph below in **Figure 7** visually narrate the event. For example, we notice a soldier mounted on an elephant and carrying a long barbed spearhead. We also notice symbolic representation of bamboo trees which were the main motive for the enemies to attack the Rohtasgarh fort. The presence of the tree at the battleground suggests what is at stake in this battle, besides the honour of the Oraon king. To some people, the image of the trees may appear to be that of Palm group of trees, but it must be remembered that the lore neither talk of Palm tree, nor palm trees are found in this region. Thus, the purpose of drawing this image must be the depiction of bamboo grove which was the Oraons' pride possession.



**Figure 7** The Scene of War and symbolic representation of Bamboo.

Oh brothers, the enemy army has attacked our Rohtasgarh,  
And we are surrounded from all around!  
Surly the enemies have attacked us!  
Brothers, let us go and chase them away!  
Oh girls! the enemies have invaded Rohtas from all far corners,  
They have surrounded us.  
Surely, the enemies have squared us down from all corners,  
They have surrounded us.  
Brothers, get the elephant ready for the battle,  
Let the horses out from the stable; brothers!  
Time is passing very fast,  
Let loose the horses of the fort from their stable now!  
In Ruidaspur fort, our horses neigh; the enemies are close;  
And their horses are neighing too.  
The horses of Ruidaspur are getting saddled,  
They are whining too.

[Explanation: The narrator is describing about an impending battle (*Figure 8*) with the Kharwar when the Kharwars tried to invade and capture the Rohtas fort of the Oraons. The narrator lyrically orchestrates how all the Oraons, including men, women, boys and girls, desperately tried to fight with the invading enemies. The narrator seems to be alerting the Oraon boys and girls about how the Kharwars have surrounded their fort and village from all directions. He appeals to them to come out and ready their elephants and horses for the battle (*Figure 9*) (who are neighing and getting saddled) ready to confront and chase away their enemies.]



**Figure 8** Horse riders with weapons.





**Figure 9** Elephants riders with weapons.

## COMPARATIVE ANALOGY WITH THE PICTOGRAPHS- *FIGURE 8* AND *FIGURE 9*

In the pictograph below, we see the images of horses and elephants with the warriors mounted on them, along with their weapons such as long barbed spearhead, bows and arrows, shields and swords. The images also indicate the military acumen of the warriors as we notice the horse are placed in the front and just behind them are seen the soldiers mounted over the elephants. In the folklore, the narrator also informs that not only the soldiers but also the horses and elephants are eager to defend their territory. In this pictograph, we see corresponding images of elephants and galloping horses with the soldiers mounted on them. In some of the images, we also see heavily decorated elephants signifying the status King they belong to. These images suggest that the battle between Oraons and the Kharwars were not only fought between the soldiers of the two sides but also by the royals themselves. As described in the lore, the images of horse (*Figure 8*) and elephants (*Figure 9*) suggest that they are eager to defeat the enemies and extend support to their masters. Realizing this, the Kharwar warriors regrouped themselves and launched attack on the Oraons, who fought and lost to their adversaries. This defeat forced them to vacate their Rohtasgarh fort and migrate to the hilly area of Chhotangapur now in Jharkhand. The Oraons have kept alive their sense of loss of Rohtasgarh fort by immortalizing the tale in their folklore. At least, this can be analyzed from both the lore and pictographs.

### (ODE-VII) *ORAON GIRLS AND THE FUTURE OF THEIR TRIBE*

**Oh, you girls! Catch hold of swords!**

**You will only light the lamp of hope in Rohtasgarh!**

**Oh young girls!**

**You will only hold the swords, when needed.**

**When our tribes will be forced to flee from Rohtasgarh,**

**When Rohtasgarh will be under attacks,**

**Then you will only show the courage!**

**As long as your names survive in the world,**

**The Oraons will live forever in glory.**



[Explanation: The song is an appeal to the young girls of Oraons and it incites them to catch hold of swords to fight and restore the hope and glories of their ancestors. It appeals the young girl to fight whenever their people will be attacked and forced to flee from Rohtasgarh. It motivates the young girls saying as long as the young fighters are alive to fight, the Oraons will forever live in glory. The song here shows the Oraons' desperation to save from the Kharwars; at the same time, it also depicts the inclusive attitude of Oraon patriarchy towards their women folk. In fact, tribes in India are usually considered as very liberal and respectful towards their women folks.]

### **(ODE-VIII) DESCRIPTION OF THE WAR**

**The enemy king is not seen, he lies hidden;  
He has come with his army as large as the Ganges.  
Now, the king has sent some soldiers disguised as the Ahirs;<sup>10</sup>  
This is the second time he has played such a disguised trick,  
But, now, he himself appears!  
They tried hard but could not enter into our fort;  
Being pelted with stones, they ran back defeated.  
His large Ganges like army invaded the fort for the third time,  
But this time too they ran back defeated;  
This time, the blood of mother Chala<sup>11</sup> turned fiery,  
Like pigs, we hunted them to flee.**

[Explanation: The narrator is talking about the three successive guerilla wars the Oraons successfully fought with the Kharwars and won. He says the enemy king has come with an army as large as the length of the Ganges and is hiding somewhere. The enemy Kharwar king instead of attacking directly on the fort has disguised his soldiers as local milkmen Ahirs, and sent them to the Oraon fort to invade and spy for information. For the second time too, the enemy king has sent his disguised army. But, now in their third battle, the enemy king has appeared himself! They tried but could not enter into the fort, as they were pelted with stones and ran back defeated. His Ganges like large army now attacked the fort for the third time, but this time too they ran away. This time, mother Chala's blood turned fiery and with her blessings we, the Oraons chased the Kharwars like pigs. Each time, the Kharwars tried, the Oraons drove them out successfully.]

### **(ODE-IX) THE WOMEN WARRIORS OF ORAONS IN DISGUISE OF MEN**

**Crossing the river Sone, the Kharwar army thrashed the Ahirs  
And asked them- "why did you betray us?"  
So many of us are killed.  
You spied to us that Oraons were drunk,  
They were all drunk.  
We had bribed you with seals to let spy for us.  
And the Ahirs replied- "Don't kill us."  
"Look if you have eyes, they are women,  
See the women bathing themselves."  
"Defeated by women you now thrash us;  
Shame on you, go and drown yourself in Sone."**

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<sup>10</sup> Ahirs: Milkmen who had easy access to the fort to deliver milk every day.

<sup>11</sup> Chala: A kind of deity among the tribes of Jharkhand existent even today; she is considered as the village deity who is the guardian of the village. She is worshiped on the occasion 'Sarhul' festival (tribal new Year).

[Explanation: The narrator is describing about how the Kharwar king's spying method failed and led to the death of many Kharwar soldiers in the battle that was raised to abduct the Oraon queen. The narrator explains when they crossed the river Son after being driven away by the Oraons women army, the Kharwar army beat the Ahirs for betraying the king's army, i.e., not providing the correct information about the Oraons army. The king had bribed the Ahirs with seals to inform them about the Oraon's presence. Consequently, being informed by the Ahirs that the Oraon males were now drunk and sleepy, the Kharwar army attacked the Oraon fort. But they were heavily retorted by the Oraon armies who were actually Oraon women in male soldiers' disguise. So being defeated and feeling cheated the Kharwar king asked the Ahirs why they betrayed him. The Ahirs replied that the Oraon men were actually drunk and sleepy; and the king could now notice in his eyes how only the Oraon women were seen bathing. So, the Ahirs requested the king not to kill them; and in fact, the Ahirs mockingly told the Kharwars to go and drown themselves in the Son river as they were vanquished by the Oraon women. The narrator sings the military power of the Oraon women here, also how their ancestors could militarily outwit their rival tribe.]

## **(ODE-X) ABDUCTION OF THE ORAON QUEEN, SINGI DAI<sup>12</sup>**

**The dogs bark inside the seven doors and seven courtyards.**

**Rise and light the lamps, who know what has been stolen!**

**The wealth is intact, but your sister is abducted!**

**Tie your turban on your heads, and fasten your waist.**

**Set out to look for your sister.**

**This side is the Ganges and that side is the Yamuna;<sup>13</sup>**

**In the middle of these, they found your sister.**

**They fought the war first time, second time,**

**And finally, in the third war,**

**The Oraon army won back their sister.**

[Explanation: The narrator speaks about the invasion of the Kharwars to abduct the Oraon queen Singi Dai. The song depicts the abduction of their sister (their queen) and her consequent rescue by the Oraons on their third attempt. The narrator seems to recollect this unfortunate incident for his new generations to acquaint them about the historical trials their ancestors had undergone. The present tense in which the incident is being narrated enlivens the incident more and emphasizes on its vibrant impact on cultural memory. The first three lines talk about how the queen was well guarded from a distance covering with three doors and three courtyards. Then, describing about the ominous signs of dogs barking, the narrator alerts the Oraons to keep vigil and light lamps. He mournfully shares that their wealth is intact, but their greatest possession, i.e. their queen has been abducted. In the next two lines, the narrator shares how there was a war call for the Oraons to tie turban on their heads and master strength in order to be ready to fight and win back their sister. Then he narrates how they fought three successive battles with the Kharwars and finally rescued their queen in a place flanked by the Ganges and Yamuna.]

However, in the war, the Oraons were defeated by the Kharwars but they are very proud of the heroic valour of their ladies who fought on behalf of their unprepared men. As a marker of cultural memory and homage, every Oraon woman, even now, now wears three distinct tattoo marks between her eyebrows (*Figure 10*). These three dots are symbolic representation of the three battles they fought with the Kharwar tribe. Their bravery has been part of the folklore in which they have been addressed as *Dais*, which means *Senanayika* (Female Warrior) or commander in chief. They earned this epithet for the three battles that they waged against the Kharwars. The three dots on their forehead are symbolic marks of these three battles in

12 Singi Dai: It is believed that she was the princess of Rohtasgarh and her friends Champa and Kaili were the bravest women of the Oraon tribe. Dai means woman warrior.

13 Yamuna: This is a river running through central India and one of the trio-rives called Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati. Its plateau is very fertile and densely populated like that of the Ganges.



**Figure 10** Three dots of tattoo on the forehead of the Oraon women.

(Source- [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kutia\\_kondh\\_woman.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kutia_kondh_woman.JPG)).

which they defeated their male adversaries with great valour and courage. The time-tested bravery of the Oraon women have assured their community to appeal to these women as and when their community will be under attack and invasion: “as long as your names survive in the world, the Oraons will live forever in glory.” says the narrator in the Ode no vii.

#### **(ODE-XI) AND THE SHOCKING NEWS OF RUIDAS FORT CAPTURE**

(Note: Unfortunately, when the Oraons were fighting to free and recapture their sister who was abducted by the Kharwars, some fleets of the Kharwar army had already invaded and captured the Ruidas fort. After winning back their sister from the Kharwars’ hand, the Oraons were elated and trying to return jubilantly to their fort. It is in this moment of happiness and glory, an Oraon brother informs their army that their fort has been already invaded and captured by the Kharwars of Japla.<sup>14</sup>)

**Let’s go brother to defend the fort of Ruidas;**

**The out castes like hoards of the broomsticks are attacking us.**

**Oh sister, let’s march towards the Ruidas fort.**

**Where is Rohtasgarh now!**

**The army of enemies has invaded us from all around.**

**Our bereaved hearts are full fears that,**

**Now, the army of our enemies have invaded us!**

[Explanation: This is the final attack of the Oraon fort by the Kharwar. The narrator is appealing to fellow Oraon brothers and sisters to be ready and fight with the enemies who to them were merely hordes of broomsticks. He also appeals to the women folk to get ready and march towards the Ruidas fort to defend their fort from the enemies who have surrounded it from all sides. The narrator projects his apprehension about their own claim to their Rohtas fort as the enemy army has already entered into it, and therefore, helplessly describes how their fort has now been invaded and captured by the Kharwars.]

14 Japla: Japla is now known as Hussainabad which is a town and a sub division in Palamu district in the Indian state of Jharkhand. Even the place Dumba mentioned latter belongs to this region. Both these places as mentioned in the folklore suggest the authenticity of the Oraon tribe.



Oh King!

Thou are mounted on your giant horse,

Where do you go?

Oh, my friend!

Where do you go?

Your horse is giant indeed!

Brother!

Your land now slips away from you!

[Explanation: This is the description of the Oraons' exodus from their fort and place of ancestral origin. The narrator describes about how their beloved king is now mounted on his giant horse but only to flee. The narrator asks in a perplexed tone to the king and the fellow Oraons about where they are fleeing to. While describing the fleeing scene, the narrator finally admits how their land has been now slipped into their enemies' hands. The repeated question 'where do you go?' addressed both to the king and fellow Oraons reflect their uncertain destination and future. This loss of their house and the toils of the forced migration seem to have etched in folk songs and rock paintings.]

## COMPARATIVE ANALOGY WITH THE PICTOGRAPHS- FIGURE 11 AND FIGURE 12

The memory of their origin and subsequent forced migration reminds them of the great past and also gives them a distinct sense of identity. This may be reason why they must have thought to devote their time and energy in depicting the scenes from the series of battle that they had with their adversaries. In some of the images found in the Kaimur region, we see the depiction of their migration (*Figure 11*). People are moving in one direction with their belonging put on the head. These pictures present a very moving visual of the migrating Oraons comprising of men and women, old and young, along with their children and domestic herds. The young women are carrying the loads and those that are old or pregnant are following them without any load on their head or shoulders.



**Figure 11** Movement of the Humans along with their Domestic.



Possibly as a continuation and homage to these fighting animals, every house of Oraons has outer wall painted with horses and elephants (**Figure 12**). Modern Oraons are not aware of the origin of this practice; yet, when you look at their folklore and the rock art, you would notice that they are full of admirations for these animals as they served as the closest and loyal companions of their masters in the battlefield. These animals have been depicted in both rock art and lore as faithful companion in their fight for survival. Accordingly, they have been accorded a respectful space in their cultural iconography. This is probably the reason, why these animal forms are invariably present in the paintings on the outer wall. Moreover, we see similar practice in the form of terracotta figurines of these animal forms present in their culture. It is a practice among these communities to offer these figurines to the local goddess whom they call *Vanadevi* on all the important festive occasions such as Karma, Sarahula, Deepavali,<sup>15</sup> etc. These are made by unmarried male and female of the community. The purpose behind offering these figurines (**Figure 13**) to the deities are various depending on the local believes and customs. For example, they offer them to the goddess when someone is cured of sickness, has been blessed with childbirth, their cattle have recovered from disease, or when they have good rain and harvest.



**Figure 12** Wall paintings with flora and fauna.



**Figure 13** Ghorawa-Ghoriya Terracotta offering.

<sup>15</sup> Deepavali: This is predominantly a Hindu festival, but due to gradual changes and hegemony of the Hindu culture, the Oraons have also started celebrating Deepavali.

Oh, the lord of land and law,  
 You kept running away during the hot summer,  
 You travelled day and night.  
 You were running in the moonlit tonight too.  
 Oh, dear King,  
 You kept moving day and night.  
 You ran in light as well;  
 You ran when you were hungry and thirsty.  
 When you were hungry and thirsty,  
 You ate the Dumber<sup>16</sup> flowers;  
 Yes! You picked up and ate the gular fruits.  
 Oh Lord, you hurriedly picked up Dumber, and ate those.  
 When you were so hungry,  
 You even did not peel the Dumbers,  
 You instantly swallowed them,  
 You ate the over ripen and half rotten Dumbers.  
 Oh king, there were worms in those Dumbers!  
 Oh King, how could you hurriedly pick them up and swallow those!  
 Did you not open the Dumbers up, did you not pill them off,  
 And yet you hurriedly you swallowed them inside!  
 The women could not warn you  
 That there were worms in the Dumbers.  
 When you had already had those,  
 Then the Dumbers were found infested with worms.

[Explanation: The stanza depicts a fellow traveler's account of the difficult journey of the king and his convoy; possibly this account is now addressed to the King himself after his arrival in a new place. The narrator captures the voice of this fellow migrant who was amongst the migrant convoy of the king. One of the fellow travelers narrates how their king, who was once the lord of the land ad law, now is travelling day and night with hunger and thirst. He reminds the King how he ate the worm full fig-flowers and figs due to his uncontrollable hunger during the travel. The king was so hungry that he even ate rotten or over ripen dumber full of worms. He asks the king now how desperate he was to do this. The king didn't even peel off the figs and swallowed those; even before the women accompanists find worms in those. The stanza portrays the poignant part of the Oraons' eviction and travel. The repeated appeal to the King only suggests how they have suddenly been reduced from a regal status to hungry vagrants.]

The king and his convoy halted the whole night there.  
 And before the break of dawn,  
 They started their march for Dumba.<sup>17</sup>

16 Dumber/Domba: In English, it is called fig, often eaten as fruit and vegetable in India. Its Botanical name is *Ficus racemose*.

17 Domba/Dumba: Name of a place in between present Ranchi and Gumala districts in Jharkhand. The name is possibly derived from the fruit Domba which was plenty available here.

**In Dumba, the king and his men settled there later on.**

**The Wailing Women at Dumba!**

**Oh sister! Oh sister! Oh, dear sister!**

**We are now orphaned!**

**You are no more fortunate to buy any new Tukunu and new Nachua.<sup>18</sup>**

**We can't any more take pride in these ornaments**

**And keep roaming around.**

**We kept on moving from place to place,**

**But all the doors were shut for us,**

**And none even talked to us.**

**Oh, now you think**

**How despicable have been our lives-**

**Yours, ours, and, yes, all of ours!**

[Explanation: Unlike the previous stanzas, this stanza is replete with predominate female voice. Here the fellow women migrants capture the ordeal of their king's night halt, his journey towards a place called Dumba where he settled, and the wailing women who felt like orphans in Dumba. The emphasis is on the Oraon women folk who travelled along with the King but now find orphaned in a new place called Dumba. The loss of their home has saddened them so much that they have no pleasure in buying and putting on ornaments like tukunu and nachua. The women confess how they kept on moving here and there for help but all the helping doors were shut for them, no one even talked to them. The narrator then reminds the listeners to think about how the story of Oraons life have been despicable. The stanza therefore serves as a historical education for the younger Oraons.]

#### **(ODE-XIV) THE ORAONS WHO STAYED BACK AT ROHTASGARH**

(Note: There were quite a few numbers of Oraons who stayed back in Rohtasgarh, but they too had to flee and settle outside Rohtasgarh. It seems that these people, who stayed back, painted the stories of their war on nearby rocks almost in a narrative form)

**We were like the giant birds,**

**But we had to flee from Rohtasgarh like predated birds**

**Due to the frequent attacks of the Kharwars.**

**Once these happy birds who lived in the green jungle**

**Suddenly flew and settled outside Rohtasgarh.**

**Sisters! Most of the Oraons**

**Who were like the species of giant birds**

**Moved away from Rohtasgarh and Patna.**

**This is the matter of remorse!**

[Explanation: This is the account of another Oraon ancestor who shares how the remaining Oraons had to flee from Rohtasgarh. The Oraons were the predatory birds/hunters but after their defeat and due to the Kharwars' frequent assault on them, they were driven as predated birds/hunted birds. It narrates that once they were the happy birds living in a lush jungle but suddenly they had to desert and settle outside Rohtasgarh. It further narrates that most of the Oraons were might species of birds but they moved away from Rohtasgarh for their lives. This is the matter of remorse for the Oraons.]

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18 Tukunu and new Nachua: Jewelry of tribal women. Often these jewelries were the markers of the beauty and affluence of tribal women.



Folklore and Rock art are the sites where people store their cultural memory in the absence of written texts. It served the same purpose for primitive societies as do the written texts for modern society. For a long time, when the script was not available, people handed down their tales from generation to generation in the form of folklore, folk arts and rock engravings. They are the historical and cultural repository of the trials and tribulations, war and peace, victory and defeat, happiness and sorrow related to a community. That is why, folklore and rock art are so important for the community living as they work as adhesive and provide them a distinct identity.

Folklore and Rock art of the Oraons reveal a great deal of their social, political, economic and cultural practices and their relationship with Nature. They tell us about the position of women, their intercommunal rivalry, their dependence on Bamboo grooves and domestic animals such as horses and elephants, rituals and religious activities. The relationship of tribal societies with their surroundings is always very special. This dimension is also well reflected in the folklore of these two communities.

Unfortunately, due to their ignorance, the tribal folks of the Vindhyan Range do not associate themselves with rock art found in these areas; when asked about it, they explain it as the work of evil spirits or epic heroes. A similar opinion has been expressed about the rock art in Odisha, India, where 'the local people do not attach any special significance to these rock art sites. To them, the works of art in the shelters are the works of the heavenly bodies or that of the ghosts. They often consider it a taboo to touch such works of art (Pradhan, 2001: 62). 'However, as it is usually believed, since prehistoric times, people used these genres to transmit their experiences, beliefs and important events in the form of stories or legends from generation to generation. The present condition of the tribes of Kaimur and the people of the adjoining plain region, their customs, dress, habitations, rituals, mode of worship, behavior and methods of herding and cultivation remind us of the characteristic features of the early humans, and there is enough archaeological evidence to support this.

The paintings hint at the connection with the folk rituals that still occur in these same places. The authors are of the opinion that these relics contain drawings of the landscape of the region as well as the deities worshipped by the mythical ancestors of the same people who still practice these rituals. Nevertheless, to ensure a better understanding of the rock art, the legends associated with them amongst the local inhabitants of the region need to be taken into consideration. The rock art found in the region, appear similar throughout the area.

Thus, the above descriptions of Kaimur rock art based on the oral testimony of local inhabitants, especially as narrated by the older generation, can be regarded as nearer to historical accounts. In the folklore of Oraons analyzed above, we notice the cultural memory of war and migration. The folklore here serve as cultural repository of the Oraons. They also serve us in providing an overview of the history of a region which doesn't find place in the main stream history books.

However, it is difficult to validate their truth-value as these stories are passed down from generation to generation with significant modifications over time. Whatever may be the actual history, the authors of this essay feel that it is their duty to share their observations and the findings with the scholars in the relevant field and suggest their conclusions to solicit further discussions among the scholars of rock art, folklore and history. The authors also agree that "Rewriting of history is a continuous process into which a historian brings to bear new methodological or ideological insights or employs a new analytical frame drawn upon hitherto unknown facts" (Panikkar 2013: 17).

The above study of Kudukh folklore provides proofs for several facts such as – the origin of the Oraons as per their folklore from Ruidaspur (Rohtas, Bihar) and their gradual expansion from the present Kaimur district to a place mentioned as Patna (not to be confused with the capital of Bihar state) which is located near the Kaimur Range. The said place Patna is either located (Tiwari 2014: 27–40) near Nindaur archaeological site (Kaimur hill is only 350 mts from this village) of Chand block or Patna village (Kaimur hill is only 3.5 kms from this village) of Rampur block, Kaimur district, Bihar. The Rohtasgarh is 72 kms (Aerial distance) from the Nindaur village whereas the Patna village of Rampur is only 43 kms (Aerial distance). Their folklore describe the forced migration of the Oraons to Chhotanagpur, which is about 270 kms (Aerial distance) from



Rohtasgarh fort. The tale of separation from the place of their origin is so moving that the local village men burst into tears while recounting the scene in the lore. The lore presents a sad tale of humiliating defeat by the Kharwars who used unfair means to snatch their fort from them. Before describing the war, the narrator also talks about the splendor of Ruidaspur their native land, and the natural beauty of the region which was their source of energy. The marvelous architecture of the fort and houses are also described in the folklore. So, in this lore, one can identify the land morphology and geographical features of the region and the the knowledge of and affection for their architecture among them. The land morphology, and the river Son is also stated in the lore, which is also an important source for geo-ecological concern in the region. Even today, one can see the natural beauty of the region, attractive sites and the existing Rohtas fort. The river Son is presently flowing in those hilly ranges as the source of their livelihood and spiritual energy.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

## AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

**Sachin Kumar Tiwary**  [orcid.org/0000-0003-3838-9659](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3838-9659)

Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology, Faculty of Arts, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi 221 005, Uttar Pradesh, India

**Panchanan Dalai**  [orcid.org/0000-0002-6497-6091](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6497-6091)

Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi 221 005, Uttar Pradesh, India

**Om Prakash**  [orcid.org/0000-0001-9723-0926](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9723-0926)

Department of German Studies, Faculty of Arts, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi 221 005, Uttar Pradesh, India

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