

# PALKAŌSNA

## Oraon Sacrificial Ritual

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The Oraons are an agricultural community. Their outlook on life is egalitarian; “Earthly” experience of prosperity is the most valued one. The most prized themes are land, children and cattle. With the help of these they try to participate actively in the order and preservation of the cosmic unity because they understand that in it lies their well-being. The entire life of the Oraons is shot through with their religious outlook to it, and their behavior is coloured by their religious, social sentiments and inclinations.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the Oraon World consists of *Dharmes* who has created the universe. The spirit, man, animal and all other forms of existence and has set an order in them. *Dharmes* is the lord and master.<sup>2</sup>

For the Oraons offering sacrifice seems to be quite natural. “It is natural to the tribals because the desire to come into contact with God is God-given gift to them.”<sup>3</sup> It is a central spiritual activity around which other spiritual exercises are structured. In other words, God himself put a natural desire in the hearts and in idea in the minds of the Oraons to offer sacrifice to Him. S.C. Roy affirms quite clearly, “The Oraon thinks and there appears to be good reasons to think with him, that God has been known to the tribals or revealed himself to them from the very beginning of the creation of man, not as a deity but the Deity. The Oraon regards him as anterior to all, the Author and Preserver, Controller and Punisher of men, gods and spirit of all that exists in the visible and invisible universe.”<sup>4</sup>

The fact that *Dharmes* controls everything, including spirit is symbolized by the arrangement of sacrifice during festivals. From the experience of the Oraons must have learnt that in their struggles against all the odds of life they are very limited, weak, and helpless. Thus very spontaneously they must have turned to some supernatural Power, God for seeking his help and protection.

## Occasions for *Palkaŏsna* Sacrifice

According to the religious myths of the Oraons God himself instructed and taught them how and when to offer sacrifice to God:

When everything was ready, the rainy season came and they (*bhaiya-bahin*) went to *Dharmes* and said to him, Grandfather, what are we going to sow? The *Dharmes* gave them

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<sup>1</sup> Boniface Tirkey, S.J., *Oraon Symbols Theologizing in Oraon Context*. (Delhi: Vidyajyoti, 1980), p. 3

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 20

<sup>3</sup> John Lakra, S.J., *Tribal Spirituality: A Way of Life*, (Gumla: St. Ignatius, 2006), p. 7

<sup>4</sup> S.C.Roy, *Oraon Religion and Customs*, (Delhi, 1985), p.23

some seed in a gourd. They went and sowed them, and as they were sowing, the seeds were growing so that they were able to sow all their fields. But as the crops were growing, the rats, grasshoppers, and lizards began to destroy them. Seeing this they were discouraged and were wondering that to do. Then *Dharmes* came and told them how to do the Pal-kansna with the different lines made of the white flour of the rice, the red mud of their hearths and powdered charcoal. They did so, removed the spell and got good crops.<sup>5</sup>

The sacred tradition (genesis myth) asserts that this ceremony was prescribed by *Dharmes* and adopted by the Oraons when their crops were first injured by beasts and other pests. “The performance of this ritual was the original method of the *Kurukhars* approach to Supernatural powers for security from evil.”<sup>6</sup> It would be useful to talk of them a bit exhaustively as background in which to view and understand the use of symbols in the festivals and the passage of rites. It is also to be noted that *Palkaṣna* is also known as

- Palkaṣna* = destroying evil tooth, breaking the mischief (*Pal*= tooth, *kaṣna* = to break).
- Danda Katta* = twig splitting (*Danda* = Twig, *Katta* = splitting).
- Danda Rengna* = dragging the twig, waving the wand (*Danda* = Twig, *Rengna* = dragging).
- Bhelwa Phari* = Bhelwa twig-splitting (*Bhelwa* = *Semicarpus anacardium*, twig, *Phari* = splitting).
- Bhakh Khandna* = warding evil word. (*Bhakh* = evil words, *Khandna* = warding).<sup>7</sup>

In day-to-day life of Oraons it is said that formerly the belief system of the Oraon people was very simple, i.e., belief in the Supreme Power of good is embodied in *Dharmes* and the power of evil is expressed in the ‘evil eye’ (*najar-gujar*) and ‘evil mouth’ (*bai-bhakh*), later on it is personified by various malignant spirits. In spite of their experience of the goodness of God their experience of sickness and death, and various kinds of misfortunes and miseries of this world was a reality hard to accept and difficult to understand. They attributed it to the envy of certain people who are believed to be born with evil eye and evil mouth with a mysterious and occult power of harming others with their poisonous looks and words.<sup>8</sup>

*Palkaṣna*, the exclusive *Kurukh* (Oraon) ritual is performed at all important occasions. During this ritual *Dharmes* alone is addressed. The purpose of the ritual is twofold. First, it is to obtain blessing: happiness and prosperity of life in terms of sound *health* and increase in progeny, *cattle* and abundant yield from *crops*. On these blessings depends the good of the tribe, perpetuation of the *family* and clan. Secondly, it is to ward off evil and the ill effects of evil doers.<sup>9</sup>

The Oraons offer their great sacrifice of *Palkaṣna* to *Dharmes* alone on the important occasions of seasonal **Feasts and Festivals**: *Phagu*, *khaddi* (*Srhul*), *Dhanbuni*, *Hariari*,

<sup>5</sup> Francis Pereira, *The Faith Traditions of the Kuṛukhar (Oraons)*. ISPCCK, Delhi. p. 89

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 538

<sup>7</sup> *Op.cit.*, B. Tirkey, p. 26

<sup>8</sup> *Op.cit.*, John Lakra, p. 29p10

<sup>9</sup> Agapit Tirkey. “Tribal Signs and Symbols,” *Sevarthum* Vol. 27, 2002. p. 12

*Kadleta, Karam, Tusgo or Nawa-Khani, Sohrai, Khalihani, Maghe* and the **Rites of Passage: Pregnancy and Birth Rtes, Childhood Rites. Puberty Rites and Dhumkuria, Marriage Rites, Ceremonial Friendship Rite, Readmission Rite, Funeral Rites.** Thus the two fold purposes of the ritual are two sides of the same coin.

As the Oraons are an agricultural community; their outlook on life is egalitarian, earthly prosperity is most valued, it is natural desire to them to remain united with *Dharmes* the primordial Being. Today the *Palkaõsna* ritual is more meaningful when it is offered during all important occasions to obtain blessings and ward of the evils. The ‘evil eye’ and the ‘evil mouth’ are the destructive elements experienced by the Oraons in their day-to-day life. The hermeneutics of the ‘evil eye’ and the ‘evil mouth’ are the destructive elements in terms of ‘evil look’ and ‘evil words’. When the family or the community begin to experience blessings: happiness and prosperity of life in terms of sound *health* and increase in progeny, *cattle* and abundant yield from *crops* could be eyed with jealousy, envy, greed and the evil words are said to disintegrate the happiness. This ‘evil look’ and ‘evil words’ may be present in each individual or family or in the community which needs to be warded off. Therefore *Palkaõsna* ritual is an occasion to look into their life, call for reunion with *Dharmes* and mend their family, community life.

## ***Palkaõsna* Ceremony**

The *Palkaõsna* ceremony is performed as an act of worship to God (*Dharmes*). He is worshiped in his own right as the Supreme Being, God and Creator. “The kurkh sacrificer offers sacrifice to *Dharmes* in his own name and in the name of the community acknowledging *Dharmes* as the Creator, Father and sustainer, who is glorious, all-powerful, transcendent and immanent God.”<sup>10</sup>

The ceremony of *Palkaõsna* a is usually presided by a village *panch* representing the village community or by a friend of the family representing the family, whereas the propitiation of the spirit is done by the *naegas* (*Kurukh* priest) representing the village community. “No priest is required for the ritual. Any kurkh male member who know the rubics of the ritual can perform it. He recites the traditional *kurukh* genesis myth recalling the creation of the world from a little bit of clay, a universal rain of fire in which all perished except the *bhaya bahin*.”<sup>11</sup> The sorcerers are explicitly excluded from presiding over *Palkaõsna* ceremony. In fact this sacrifice is offered in order to cancel and ward off the evil and harmful effects of the wicked spirits or wicked people. It is offered in order to get God’s blessing on the people, cattle and crops.<sup>12</sup>



*Naegas (Kurukh priest) offering Palkaõsna Sacrifice*

<sup>10</sup> *Op.cit.*,B. Tirkey, p. 26

<sup>11</sup> *Op.cit.*,B. Tirkey, p. 12

<sup>12</sup> *Op.cit.*,John Lakra, p.12

The altar<sup>13</sup> and things necessary for the sacrifice are prepared. At first a small (20” x 15”) is besmeared with cow dung diluted with water. In Oraon traditions altar is never made on the fashioned stones for any sacrifice as the Lord of Israelites says, “But if you make for me an altar of stone, do not build it of hewn stones, for it, you use a chisel upon it and profane it,” (Ex. 20:25). Then the officiant draws a symbolic diagram over it. At the center he draws a cross, its four ends showing the four directions. This cross is surrounded by a circle<sup>14</sup> using materials of three different colours (these are the basic colours of the rainbow). Let God shoot at the ‘evil eye’ and ‘evil mouth’ by his divine bow, i.e. rainbow.) i.e., black coal dust (*karia*) and reddish burnt clay from the hearth (*guria*), white rice flour (*Charka*), symbolizing the colours of the rainbow. He traces the outer circle with black colour, inner circle with red and innermost circle with white. In the same way around this circle he draws seven semicircles symbolizing the totality of the universe, i.e., *sat pati raji*. In this central circle he puts a handful of pearl rice<sup>15</sup>.

On this rice-heap an egg<sup>16</sup> is placed. Both these things symbolize human life. The egg is thus an exalted symbol of life. It is the most fitting sacrificial object to be offered to *Dharmes* whose face nobody has seen. He is the ultimate source of every life. Offering of an egg to Him is thus symbolic of the offering of one’s own life in its purity and self surrender.

Over the egg the split end of a *bhelwa* (*Semecarpus anacardium*) twig is placed from the eastern side. The *bhelwa* twig is believed to scare away the effect of the ‘evil eye’.

The one who performs the ritual sits down before the diagram facing the east<sup>17</sup>. He takes a winnowing basket with some pearl rice and five pieces of split *bhelwa* twigs. Throughout the incantation of the prayer and the creation myth he keeps on rubbing the pearl rice. From time to time he sprinkles some achat rice on the egg. In the name of the house, on whose behalf he is officiating, the celebrant worships and adores God and invokes God’s blessing on the family, using the following or similar formula:

Maiyā *Dharmes*, kiyyā Panchār.”...”Nīn Dharme Babā hekdae. Akkam balkam, adin samrh:āke. Emhai khan malā īrī. Nīnghai khan īrī. Nīnim babā hekdae, samrh:āke.” ‘(God, *Dharmes* above, the Panches here below.”... ‘You *Dharmes* are our Father. Take care of

<sup>13</sup> As in the Old Testament the Lord orders the Israelites “You need make for me only an *altar* of earth and sacrifice on I your burnt offerings and your offerings of well-being your sheep and your oxen in every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you, (Ex. 20:24).

<sup>14</sup> Circle means that God is the Master o the whole universe. (John Lakra, S.J., *Tribal Spirituality: A Way of Life*, Gumla. St. Ignatius, 2006. p. 12).

<sup>15</sup> Rice is the staple food of the Oraons. Hence it is the symbol of life. it is considered as the blessing of the Supreme Being who give them prosperity and wellbeing. When it is use in offering sacrifice it stands as a substitute for life. (Agapit Tirkey, *Sevartham*, 27 (2002). p. 13)

<sup>16</sup> Egg- the egg is a pure source of life. It is full in itself, self contained, *nirmukhi* (without any face). (Agapit Tirkey, *Sevartham*, 27 (2002). p.13).

<sup>17</sup> Facing east symbolizes the rising sun which is a symbol of *Biidi Baba, Dharmes*.

whatever (whichever spirits) we have overlooked. Our eyes do not see. Your eyes see. You alone are Father, do Thou take care (restrain them).<sup>18</sup>

At the end of each section of the story he repeats the same prayer of adoration and petition to God, and sprinkles some *achat* rice on the egg. At the end of the recital he takes the egg in his left hand and with his right hand he sprinkles some pearl rice on it repeating the same prayer, ending with these words: “Now I am sacrificing this egg to Thee. Now I have offered it. Now I am breaking it.” At these words he breaks the egg with his knife and pours the yolk into the leaf-cup containing rice-flour. It is placed over the hearth to be baked. He pours some water in the egg-shell. He carries these leaf-cups and the egg-shell containing water to the roadside and deposits them there. On his return he washes his hands. The baked yolk of the egg is brought before him. He scratches off a bit of the yolk with his fingernails and offers it to *Dharmes*, saying: “Here, O Dharme! I am offering Thee the heart of the victim. “The rest of the egg is distributed among the participants. Then a libation of pure water is offered to *Dharmes* and a libation of rice-beer is poured to the ancestors.”<sup>19</sup>

In the ritual of the *Palkaõsna* the Oraons recall and actualize the primordial events, as described in the myth, which lie at the basis of the paradox of good and evil in life.<sup>20</sup> They, thus, learn the significance of earthly existence, of the tribe, of the ancestors, of life beyond, and of the spirits (ancestor spirits and nature spirits), and the need of sacrifice and rituals. They try to cope with the problem of evil in which all the above-mentioned elements play their part.

## ***Palkaõsna* Sacrifices and the Eucharist**

If we closely observe the procedure and the meaningfulness of the Eucharistic sacrifice which the priest offers in the Christian tradition as the remembrance (*anamnesis*) of the sacrifice of the Lord, and the *Palkaõsna* ritual in the Oraon tradition, we find a lot of similarity in them.<sup>21</sup>

Eucharist is the sacrifice of Christ, the lamb. It is, however, the sacrifice once and for all. In this sacrifice he is himself the offerer and the victim, sacrificing for the entire human race to unite them to the Father. It is the sacrifice for the same human race which is **in trouble, sick, under the evil power, separated** and so needing to be **re-united**, to be **re-admitted** into the family of God. These are the same motives behind the *Palkaõsna* sacrifice. In the remembrance (*anamnesis*) of the same Eucharistic sacrifice of Jesus, the Christians partake

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<sup>18</sup> *Op.cit.*, B. Tirkey, p. 28

<sup>19</sup> *Op.cit.*, John Lakra, p.16

<sup>20</sup> Writes Fr. A. Van Exem, S.J., “As the root-cause of our being exists, but remain unseen, so the primordial world is there even now, but it is imperceptible. It is in man and around him; it forms part of, or is, the world beyond perception. The closure of the primordial time does not mean that it ceased to exist, but rather that it reached a certain completion: the chronological and historical time can start. Thus in the belief of the Mundas, the Asur women of the primordial time now exist in the world beyond perception as Bongs of nature.” *Haram and Singbonga: The Concept of the Supreme Being According to Munda Mythology*, p.33. Bongas=spirits.

<sup>21</sup> It is not an attempt to compare the two traditional sacrifice, but to explicate their significance, meaning and value so as to bring them into common platform, while retaining the tradition from which they originated.

and offer sacrifice in all occasions – in the feast days, in joyous occasions and in troublesome ones, in times of need so as to ask favours, and in times grace-filled occasions so as to express gratitude to God. Thus we find that the sentiments behind these two sacrifices which are performed differently are similar. Procedure of the symbolic rites of the Eucharist is similar to that it's the *Palkaõsna* sacrifice. There is a preparatory rite in the beginning of the Eucharist, followed by the liturgy of the word (which incorporates the narration of the past), petitions and prayers, sacrifice proper, community eating and drinking of the victim's body and blood (that is Christ), and dispersing with grateful hearts. It is, therefore, very easy for Oraon Christians to understand the Eucharist and the *Palkaõsna* sacrifice.

Eucharist is the sacrament of our salvation accomplished by Christ on the cross. It is also a sacrifice of praise in thanksgiving for the work of creation. In the Eucharistic sacrifice the whole of creation is presented to the Father through the death and the Resurrection of Christ. Eucharist is a sacrifice of thanksgiving to the Father, a blessing by which the church expresses her gratitude to God for all his benefits, for all that he has accomplished through creation, redemption and sanctification. The Eucharist is the memorial of Christ's Passover, the making present and the sacramental offering of his unique sacrifice, in the liturgy of the Church which is his Body. The Eucharist is also the sacrifice of the church, the community of believers. The church, which is the Body of Christ, participates in the offering of her Head. In the Eucharist the sacrifice of Christ becomes also the sacrifice of the members of his body. The lives of the faithful, their praise, suffering, prayers and work, are united with those of Christ and with his total offering, and so acquire a new value. Christ's sacrifice present on the altar makes it possible for all generations of Christians to be united with his offering.

The sacrificial meal in Oraon tradition is a symbol of the communion and participation with *Dharmes* through the ancestors, is celebrated not only during the suffering of most prized land, children and cattle; but also in very happiness of their existence. The approach to happiness and problems of suffering and death is an ordinary mode of being in the world. Abundant harvest, numerous cattle-head, and healthy progeny are most highly valued possessions. Happiness is understood in terms of health and cattle adequate reserves of the necessity of life are ensured, with progeny perpetuation of the family, the clan and the tribe and the performance of ritual offerings to *Dharmes* and to the spirits is assured, because on them depends man's happiness. Hence the Oran Prayer, "O Dharme bless our cultivation with abundance and give increase in our cattle and our progeny"<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> *Op.cit.*, B. Tirkey, p. 29

## Conclusion

In Oraon institution, happiness ultimately comes from fulfillment of duty, i.e., offering sacrifices to *Dharmes* and the spirits, honouring the ancestors, which requires that there be people to fulfill this duty. Concern with life and happiness is meaningful and is manifested in markedly collective and corporate exercise of duties, and ritual actions. The good of the tribe is a religious duty enjoined on every Oraon, and is a collective obligation which is significantly borne out by the observation of the passage rites, and by the communitarian character of the *Palkaõsna* sacrifice. In the partaking of the sacrificial meal the union of the community of the living and of the ancestors is not only pre eminently signified but also is achieved and actualized. It also signifies union with *Dharmes* because (it is understood that) the ancestors are taken up into the world of *Dharmes* and make a community with him. Thus the sacrificial meal is a symbol of the communion and participation with *Dharmes* through the ancestors and the final destiny is to merge in the company of the historical ancestors, spirits and the primordial Being *Dharmes*.

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