

Work and Prayer

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In the comfortable, spacious afternoon in the courtyard of Badol Minji's house in Borobila village of Dinajpur's Ghoraghat they've hastily arranged a table and chairs. Silver-haired Minji is a respected ex-local-member and renowned ex-president of the local indigenous association. Borobila is an Oraon village of one hundred families. Easily he takes his place near the table head. His daughter floats about showcasing the latest henna design to adorn her youthful hands.

Minji's presence carries natural dignity but it doesn't radiate far. Nearby his wife Dulali Khalko is too animated to sit. She's engaged in narrating the story of two brothers, her storytelling seeming to feed upon itself like a merrily boiling kettle. Her facial expressions tread the boards, spanning the spectrum of seriousness as she tries to recall each detail to ensure its safe delivery to its exact belonging-place in the sacred story. It's mesmerising.

Beware: afternoons like the one at Badol Minji's house carry risk. Bright and welcoming, they're all too easy to get lost in.

According to the 1991 national census there were 11,296 Oraons scattered across Bangladesh's northern districts. In Ghoraghat today there are up to 500.

Daram-Karam they call the story about the one brother who prayed while the other spent his days working. Life was good: the working brother's toil produced more than enough food. With the other brother's prayer the food was wholesome.

But there came one day, Khalko narrates – the kettle sings – when the working brother noticed his brother performing *puja* around a branch of sacred kadam tree that he'd pushed into the ground. It must've been like any other day except that on that day it seemed the easier option. The working brother suddenly angered.

"I'm working the whole day in the field!" he complained, Khalko says, "You're only doing puja!" With rage he took the kadam branch and threw it into the nearby river.

While there is suggestion the Oraon are the Kurukh people whose origins lie along the Konkan



Badol Minji with his daughter.



Dulali Khalko narrates the sacred Oraon story of two brothers with great fervour.

Coast of Maharashtra and Goa – famed wanderers whose geographic distribution was enhanced with the railway expansion during the British era, such origins are far from certain. In Borobila they say the Oraon language has two main forms: Kurukh which is rarely spoken in Bangladesh, and Saddari, which is common.

From the day he discarded the kadam branch the working brother faced difficulties, says Khalko. In his food he found insects and worms. He soon understood his error and left to search for the branch in the river, hoping to set things right.

Badol Minji's house of mud brick is unusually

two-storey and rather grand for the village. It'd be easy to see in it the traditional dormitory-style housing of the Oraons, which used to allow boys and girls daily contact, ideal for finding a life a partner. But the houses of the past were low in height. Later they became taller. The mud of Minji's house may be traditional. The tin is new.

By custom guests at Oraon houses were served rice and date-palm-juice wine of the *pachai* or rarer *mahua* variety, in small bowl-like cups made from leaves. In Borobila the brew comes in glasses. There wasn't any available at Badol Minji's but the neighbours were obliging. It's unquestionably delicious.

Gradually the house takes on a less traditional aspect. It starts to look like the modest manor of a

that the Oraon religion long ago mixed with Hinduism. But *Dal puja* or *Karam* festival – at the time of Saraswati puja and very similar to the Hindu *Bhadu* festival – is the calendar's highlight, when a kadam branch is planted in the ground, when they sing and dance to drums and sacrifice chickens.

We learn too that about half the Bangladeshi Oraon already converted to Christianity. We hear concerns in Borobila about the promise of a Christian INGO to establish a school there – the lure of education is tempting; but in Borobila as yet there are no Christians.

Badol Minji is expressing regrets that the Oraon often face discrimination in dealing with broader Bangladeshi society. "If society met with us," he says,



The traditional Oraon religion long ago mixed with Hinduism and many of the mainstream pujas are also observed in Borobila.

small-scale forgotten vineyard in a remote French village. A crackly Edith Piaf record and a few bread sticks: that afternoon at Badol Minji's surely would've engulfed us.

Dulali Khalko never noticed the change. Her facial expressions continued to stir into the afternoon even greater brightness. The kettle-boil narration has lost no steam.

The working brother walked far in search of the branch. Becoming thirsty he stopped on the riverbank to take a drink; but in his cupped hands he saw inside not water but insects.

He found a kul tree. He knew the fruit would be a little sour, but at least they had liquid to refresh him. "Maybe the water inside will help," he thought, Khalko narrates. But inside the fruit he found only insects.

"And after many struggles," says Khalko – finally the straw in the clay stove seems to be running low – "he found the branch. He started to perform puja and water became water, food became wholesome."

Her face relaxes. The afternoon grows more potent.

In the courtyard of Badol Minji's house we learn



Borobila village in Dinajpur's Ghoraghat is home to about 100 Oraon families.

"what's the problem? We are often neglected but as far as I know Oraons are no less brilliant than others."

And then he flips the coin. "Our problem is our people are shy. They do not like to meet with Muslims but it would promote harmony."

Meanwhile the French afternoon, incongruous with the talk of problems, seems as if it might stretch on to Spain, and who could wish that it wouldn't?

They're talking about Christianity again: they could still wear bangles and the chandan after marriage wouldn't be a problem, the Father says.

"One thing," says Badol Minji, "We are still united. A thief in the village is really rare. It's peaceful here."

It's true that it's not easy to consider life's challenges on an afternoon at Badol Minji's house. There's only us. There's only now. No disquieting memories to faze us. No regrets: just a very Bangladeshi afternoon that might just reach to Spain if we let it.

With research from "Life and Land of Adibashis" by Abul Barkat, Mozammel Hoque, Sadeka Halim and Asmar Osman, Pathak Shamabesh, 2009.