

# KURUKH VOICES

## The Oraons of Bangladesh



Oraon women dancing during their main festival, Karam Puja, in Godagari, Rajshahi.

**Most Oraon children are deprived of modern education, entering the workforce at a young age to help support their families.**

BABUL CHANDRA SUTRADHAR

Under the vast skies of northern Bangladesh, in the corners of Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Rangpur, and the hillier terrains of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, lives a vibrant community whose roots run deep into the soil and soul of the region—the Oraons.

The journey of the Oraons to Bengal began centuries ago, driven by the age-old human desire for better life and livelihood, security, and survival. Like many indigenous groups who sought refuge in the fertile plains of Bengal, such as Santals, Mahatos, Mundas, Rakhaives, Khasias, Tripura, the Oraons too found a home here, drawn by the natural generosity of the land

and its people.

### A people called "Human"

Lexically, the name *Oraon*, or *Oraon* or *Urang*, translates simply to "human." Their language, *Kurukh*, means "speaker," and is what anthropologists identify as part of the Dravidian language family. Believed to have originated in the ancient Kankan region, modern day Maharashtra and Karnataka, the Oraons migrated to the Barind region of Bangladesh during the Mughal period and began settling permanently.

Today, around 1,20,000 Oraons live in Bangladesh. Their population also stretches across the Indian states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and

West Bengal, and even as far as China and Myanmar.

### Spiritual by nature

The Oraons are deeply spiritual, practising a nature-based faith that falls under the broader umbrella of *Sanatan Dharma*. They believe in reincarnation and perform sacred rituals for the welfare of departed souls. In more recent times, some members of the community have embraced Christianity, yet many continue to celebrate both Christian and traditional festivals in tandem.

The most revered celebration is Karam Puja, a festival of purity, protection, and prosperity symbolised by the Karam tree. Held during the full moon of Bhadra, the festival lasts three days and features vibrant processions, dance, and music. From the *Tasi* and *Ektara* to the *Mukhbandhi* and *Kartal*, the rhythmic beat of traditional instruments animates every celebration—be it a birth, wedding, or harvest ritual.

Like the Hindu caste system, the

Oraons are divided into clans—Lakda, Tirk, Ekka, Kujur, and others, each treated as an extended family unit. Marriages within the same clan are strictly prohibited.

Oraon society is patriarchal, much like mainstream Bengali society. However, women contribute significantly to both household and economic life, weaving clothes, making utensils, even crafting their own jewelry. Despite their hard work, gender inequality remains a concern, with men holding more prominent roles both socially and within the family.

Health practices also remain largely traditional. Modern medical treatment is often a last resort, with most relying on folk medicine passed down through generations.

Kurukh, their mother tongue, is still spoken but has no written script. Thus, the stories, songs, riddles, and proverbs are passed down orally.

### Progress denied

During Bangladesh's Liberation War in 1971, Oraons stood shoulder-to-

shoulder with Bengalis, fighting for freedom, justice, and equality. However, even five decades later, that dream of equality remains unfulfilled.

Despite their rich cultural heritage, the community faces pressing challenges. Most Oraon children are deprived of modern education, entering the workforce at a young age to help support their families.

A recent study conducted in Godagari upazila of Rajshahi district presents a stark reality. Among the Adivasi community, 70% work as day labourers, while only 2.6% have studied beyond the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) level. Additionally, 67.3% own no agricultural land, and 30.5% are without housing. In cases of land loss, 70.4% occur through the use of forged documents, while 29.6% result from forced grabbing.

### Building a future

The road to change is neither short nor simple. But people like Sudhir Chandra Oraon, advisor to the Oraon social organisation *Dighi Raja Parishad*, are doing their part. As president of Gunigram High School's management committee, Sudhir is vocal about what's needed.

"Without effective access to government services, the impoverished Oraon community finds it difficult to progress. While the authorities must remain vigilant, we Oraons too must become aware of our rights—an awareness that can only be achieved through education," he said.

As Bangladesh moves forward with its commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it must ensure that indigenous communities like the Oraons are not left behind. Because the story of progress will remain incomplete as long as the voices that speak in *Kurukh* go unheard.

**Babul Chandra Sutradhar is a human rights activist and a researcher.**



Oraon men and women taking a break under a tree after working together in a paddy field in Godagari, Rajshahi.

PHOTOS: RIB

# HEAT, HUNGER, AND HOMELESSNESS

## How Dhaka's stray animals are suffering in the climate crisis



PHOTOS: PRABIR DAS

AFRINA MOMOTAJ

As the climate crisis worsens, its effects in Bangladesh are becoming increasingly visible and destructive. However, amid the growing discussions about rising temperatures, flooding, and urban resilience, one vulnerable group remains largely overlooked: the stray animals of Dhaka.

Roaming the city's alleys, streets, and marketplaces, thousands of stray dogs, cats, and other animals are increasingly exposed to the harsh effects of climate change. Unbearable heat, water shortages, and food scarcity have turned survival into a daily struggle for these silent victims of an urban environment that is becoming ever more hostile.

### Urban Heat and Animal Suffering

Over the past few years, Dhaka has experienced increasingly severe heatwaves, with temperatures soaring above 40°C, far beyond historical norms. This temperature rise, compounded by the city's urban heat island effect, poses a serious threat to animals living on the streets without access to shade, clean water, or proper nourishment.

"Earlier, we used to share leftover rice with street dogs at the end of the day," says Monir Hossain, a tea stall owner in Farmgate. "Now, I barely have enough to eat myself during heatwaves. There's hardly anything left for them."

Public parks, small ponds, and green spaces that once offered shade and comfort to animals are rapidly being replaced by concrete developments, particularly in low-income and informal settlements.

### Rising Tensions Between People and Animals

The climate crisis has not only worsened the plight of animals but has also intensified human-animal conflict. As more climate migrants pour into Dhaka's slums and streets, competition for space and resources grows, often leading to animosity towards stray animals. Fear of disease, particularly rabies, continues to fuel cruelty and neglect.

"When we try to place water bowls in our neighbourhood for stray dogs, some

residents throw them away," says Tamanna Rahman, a university student and animal welfare volunteer. "They think the animals bring disease, but these creatures are simply trying to survive in unbearable conditions."

Heat-stressed and malnourished animals may become more aggressive or disoriented, further straining public tolerance and compassion.

### Community Action and Climate-Resilient Solutions

Despite the challenges, there are hopeful signs of grassroots efforts that recognise the interconnectedness of animal welfare and urban climate adaptation. In several neighbourhoods—including Dhanmondi, Mohammadpur, and Gulshan—youth-led groups and NGOs have set up hydration stations and feeding corners for stray animals. Local tea stall owners and shopkeepers are also being engaged to maintain water bowls during the hotter months.

"These initiatives show that even small actions can make a big difference," says Rifat Mahmud, an organiser with Dhaka Paws, a local animal advocacy group. "Caring for animals doesn't just help them—it also strengthens our community's empathy and resilience."

**Urban expansion and climate change have combined to shrink the availability of resources that once helped sustain stray animals. Water sources, such as roadside puddles and drainage canals, often dry up during extreme heat.**

Climate-resilient urban planning must begin to incorporate animal-friendly policies. This includes the provision of shaded spaces, the inclusion of veterinary services in emergency planning, and the implementation of humane birth control and vaccination programmes to ensure public safety without resorting to culling or poisoning.

### The Need for Inclusive Climate Policy

While Bangladesh has made significant strides in climate adaptation and disaster preparedness, animals remain largely absent from national and municipal planning. The neglect of non-human species in climate policies risks undermining holistic resilience and public health.

"Stray animals are part of our urban ecosystem and deserve protection, especially in times of crisis," says Sharmin Khan, a legal advisor focusing on animal rights in South Asia. "They don't contribute to carbon emissions or pollution, yet they suffer the consequences. Leaving them behind is not just unethical—it's shortsighted."

### Shared Responsibility in a Warming World

In the heart of Dhaka, as temperatures continue to rise and green spaces disappear, the survival of stray animals grows increasingly precarious. Their suffering is a stark reminder that climate change is not just a human issue—it affects every living being that calls this planet home.

We must ask ourselves: can our fight against climate change be truly just and sustainable if we continue to ignore those who cannot speak for themselves?

A climate-resilient Dhaka must not only be smarter, cleaner, and greener—it must also be kinder.

**Afrina Momotaj is an animal rescuer.**

