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## **Distinct Religious Identity of Tribal Religion with Reference to Kuñrukhar (Oraons/Uraons)**

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There are about 5000 indigenous/tribal groups with a total population of 370 million living in more than 70 countries on five continents. Of these about 190 million tribals are in Asia. According to the 2011 Census, India is home to 104.3 million people of 705 tribes and comprises about 8.6 percentage of India's population.<sup>1</sup> The Faith Tradition of the Kuñrukhar bears witness to their separate religious identity. Unlike Hindus, Christians, Jews, and Muslims, the Kuñrukhar do not have any *sacred writings* or "sacred scriptures" of their own in written form. They also do not have a religious hierarchy. But they do practise a traditional religion from time immemorial that has a separate religious identity of its own. They have their own myths, legends, wisdom stories, wisdom sayings, rituals, and other religious practices, which could be considered as their Faith Tradition or "sacred scriptures" in oral form. Nityanad Patnayak in his work *Folklore of Tribal Communities*, says that "Kirodandi" is the religion of the "Kudukh" (Kuñrukhar) community.<sup>2</sup> Though the information is wrong, it also shows how some of the Kuñrukhar (Oraons/Uraons) of Sundargarh district of Odisha from whom this information was gathered were not able to name their religion. They knew that they are neither Hindus nor Christians and the ceremony (elsewhere known by different names, viz., *Pal-kañsna*, *Āanda-katta*, *Bhelwa-phari*, *Bhākh-khandna*, *Pal-asthna*, etc.)<sup>3</sup> they perform with *kirōor bhelwa* (wild cashew) twig/stick is one of the central rituals to their religion and "*sarna*" is only a place of their worship and not the name of their religion. The religion of Hindus is not called *Temple* (*Mandir*) religion, that of Muslims *Mosque* (*Masjid*) religion, that of Christians *Church* (*Girja*) religion, and that of Sikhs *Gurudwara* religion. Hence, those Kuñrukhar who raise objections when others label their religion as *Sarna* religion have good reasons to do so. However, for lack of a better term to distinguish their religion from Hinduism and other religions many Kuñrukhar and others call it

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<sup>1</sup>The Indigenous World 2023; india, accessed on iwgia.org

<sup>2</sup>Patnayak N., *Folklore of Tribal Communities*, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, 2002, p. 154.

<sup>3</sup>Francis Pereira, *The Faith Tradition of the Kuñrukhar (Uraons)*, ISPCK, Delhi, 2007, pp. 537-541.

“Sarna” religion. Some Kuñrukhar like Devcharan Bhagat<sup>4</sup> prefer to call their religion *Addi Dharam*. Hindus (who call their religion *Sanatana Dharma*) too claim that their religion is from the beginning (*Addi Dharam*). On the other hand, Tana Bhagats who rejected some of their traditional Kuñrukhar beliefs influenced by Hinduism claimed their reformed religion as *Kuñrukhar Dharam*. Some of them also call it *Bangayo Dharam*. To have its own distinct separate religious identity, I think it is appropriate to call the traditional religion of the Kuñrukhar by the name *Kuñrukhar Dharam*.

The Kuñrukhar do not believe in a number of gods and goddesses. They believe in a Supreme God who has created everything that exists. The Supreme Being is called *Dharme* or *Dharmes*. They also believe in good (benevolent) and evil (malevolent) spirits. According to E. T. Dalton, the Kuñrukhar acknowledge a Supreme God, adored as *Dharmi* or *Dharmes*, the Holy One, who is manifest in the sun, God who is perfectly pure, beneficent being, who created us and would in his goodness and mercy preserve us<sup>5</sup>. According to Sarat Chandra Roy, the conception of the Kuñrukhar of a supreme God is of a supreme deity ruling over the universe and the other gods and spirits may probably have been suggested (in ancient times) by the spectacle of the sun reigning supreme in the sky, and dispersing darkness and its terrors and bringing light and its blessings to the earth. *Dharme* is not a sun-god or sun-spirit, neither is the sun his abode. The Kuñrukhar believe that all that exists including the sun and moon were created by *Dharmes*. It is true that in olden times *Dharme* or *Dharmes* was called *Biri Bēlas* (“Sun-King”, and not “Sun-Lord” or “Sun-god”) and sometimes even today the sun is referred to as the visible symbol of *Dharmes* and not the actual representation of *Dharmes*. Originally, the supreme being might have also been conceived as a Supreme Spirit dwelling in and shining through the luminary and reigning supreme over the earth, dispersing darkness, and its terrors, purging sin and subduing all evil and bringing all blessings to the earth and its inhabitants<sup>6</sup>. Those who speak of *Dharmes* as the “sun god” have been influenced by the concept of “sun god” of other cultures and religions. The sun which is dazzling in beauty and splendour, is only a symbol of *Dharmes*. There are good reasons to believe that God has been known to the tribe or revealed himself to them from the beginning of the creation of human beings, not as a deity but as the Deity. *Dharme* or *Dharmes* is not a personification of an element of nature but a Supreme Being, anterior to all, the

<sup>4</sup> Author and publisher of *Addi Dharam Palkaṁsna Pūjā Nēg gahī Dharam Pothī*, *Addi Dharam ara Rājī Gav’anā*, *Addi Dharam Addiarge Akhnā Joge Dharam Katthā*, *Addi Dharam gahi Nemhā Bhajan* and *Kuñrukhar gahī Parab*. He is from Kasmar village of Surguja district in Chhattisgarh state.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Tuite Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, Calcutta 1872, reprinted as *Tribal History of East India*, Cosmo Publications, Delhi, 1973, p. 257.

<sup>6</sup> Francis Pereira, *The Faith Tradition of the Kuñrukhar (Uraons)*, *op.cit.*, p. 247.

Author and Preserver, Controller and Punisher (*sic*) of human beings, gods and spirits – of all that exists in the visible and invisible universe.<sup>7</sup>

Ferdinand Hahn in his second edition of *Kuñrukh Grammar* translates the words *Dharmes* as God and *Dharme* as goddess whereas in the first edition of the same work he translated *Dharme* as feminine Godhead and says that non-Christians (Non-Christian Kuñrukhar) look upon God as being feminine only<sup>8</sup>. *Dharme* is spoken of both as male and female by the Kuñrukhar practising traditional *Kuñrukh Dharam*. In their prayers, *Dharme*(*Dharmes*) is always addressed as a male and never as a female. As explained by Sarat Chandra Roy in his book *Oraon Religion and Customs*, in the prayer, “*Ana Dharme, akkun ninim rahdai*” *Dharmes* is addressed as a male person. Again, “*Nin Dharme Baba hek dai. Akkam balkam, adin samrhakë, Embai khann malä iri. Ninim Baba hek dai, samrhakë*”,<sup>9</sup> *Dharme* or *Dharmes* is addressed as a male person. It is the use of Kuñrukhar language that makes the difference clear. A female person would be addressed as “*hekdi*” (or “*hikdi*”) instead of “*hek dai*” and as “*rahdi*” instead of “*rah dai*.” *Dharmes* is addressed or referred to as “*Baba*” (father) or King “*bëlas*” (king) and not as “*Ayo*” (mother) or “*biri*” (queen). But there are times when *Dharme* is also spoken of as a female person especially when they want to attribute feminine or motherly qualities to *Dharme*. When the Kuñrukhar returns to the house of the deceased person after the cremation, they observe the ashes spread on the floor of the house and if they see the signs of the thread they believe that “*İsin kä idin Dharme hoccä*”.<sup>10</sup> Here *Dharme* is spoken of as female as the verb used is *hoccä* (or *occä*) and not *hoccas* (or *occas*) and the name used to address the Supreme Being is *Dharme* and not *Dharmes*.<sup>11</sup>

According to Ferdinand Hahn, *Dharmi* or *Dharme* is philosophically distinct from the Sanskrit-Hindi *Dharmi*, ‘virtuous,’ or ‘godly’ and has to be translated as creator. William Crooke is of the opinion that there seems to be no sound evidence in support of this view and assumes the term *Dharme* to be borrowed from Hindus of the plains.<sup>12</sup> According to Sarat Chandra Roy, the name *Dharme* or *Dharmes* is derived from Sanskrit and is a later loan-word to indicate creator.<sup>13</sup> It seems to

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<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 527.

<sup>9</sup>*ibid.*, p. 318.

<sup>10</sup>Ferdinand Hahn, *Kuñrukh Folklore in the Original*, The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta, 1905, p. 69.

<sup>11</sup>Francis Pereira, *The Faith Tradition of the Kuñrukhar (Uraons)*, *op.cit.*, p. 527

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 219

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 235.

us quite reasonable to assume that the word *Dharme* originally was not a Kuñrukh word but a borrowed word (“loan-word”) from the Aryan Hindus and the Aryan language to mean creator. Most probably, the most ancient word (in its pristine form) used by the Kuñrukh to refer to the Supreme God (creator) was “*Ajjo*” (grandfather).<sup>14</sup> In the older versions of the genesis-myth God is called “*Ajjo*” (grandfather) by human beings, and in turn, the Supreme Being calls them grandchildren.<sup>15</sup> The influence of Hinduism with its concept of gods and goddesses has affected the Kuñrukhar in their conceptualisation of *Dharme*. It seems to us that gradually, over the centuries, because of living in close contact with the Hindus, the Kuñrukhar developed the concept of Supreme God with “loan words” such as *Dharme*, *Bhagwan*, *Mahadev* (*Mahādo*, *Madho*, *Mahyadev*), *Parvati* and *Sita*. Nowadays the most common word used for the Supreme Being is *Dharme* (*Dharmes*).

The general belief of the Kuñrukhar is that the Supreme God *Dharme* (*Dharmes*) does not have a wife. The genesis myth speaks of the *Old Mother* or *Parvati* or *Sita* or *Bhabī* who protected the human progenitors *bhaiya-bahin*. It looks as if the *Old Mother* (*Parvati* or *Sita* or *Bhabī*) is a consort of *Dharmes*. But none of the old versions of the genesis myth specifies that *Old Mother* (*Parvati* or *Sita* or *Bhabī*) is a wife of *Dharme*. The internal evidence of one of the versions of the genesis myth shows that *Parvati* or *Sita* is identical to *Dharme* himself. In the myth, *Dharme* tells Halman (Haluman), “Nephew, stay by me. When I rain down fire, beat the drum”.<sup>16</sup> Later on, *Parvati* says to Halman (monkey), “O Nephew, I told you to sound the drum, yet you did not do so”.<sup>17</sup> It was *Dharmes* (*Dharme*) who told Halman (Haluman) to beat the drum but later on in the same myth *Parvati* says that it was she who had told this to Halman or Haluman (monkey). Hence, here *Parvati* identifies herself with *Dharme*. There is no contradiction in the narration if we consider *Parvati* or *Sita* as the personification of the feminine qualities of *Dharme*. *Parvati* or *Sita* also seems to be the personification of God’s wisdom.<sup>18</sup> The Kuñrukh concept of God is very anthropomorphic and hence concepts of *Old Mother*, *Parvati*, *Sita*, *Bhabī* and *Mahādo* (*Mahadev*) complement the concept of *Dharme* (*Dharmes*).

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<sup>14</sup> According to John Hoffmann, the oldest term used by the Mundas for God is *Haram*, the old one.

<sup>15</sup> Francis Pereira, *The Faith Tradition of the Kuñrukhar (Uraons)*, op.cit., pp. 88, 208-209 and 437.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 208-209.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

<sup>18</sup> John Lakra, “The Genesis of Man: The Uraon Myth,” *Sevartham*, Vol. 9 (1984), p. 39 and Francis Pereira, *The Faith Tradition of the Kuñrukhar (Uraons)*, pp. 433-435. In the Genesis myth, Old Mother or Sita is the one who asks Dharme to create a golden *Kilkila* and according to her wish, he creates the golden *Kilkila* and gives it life and later on he asks her to give wisdom to him in creating the human beings.

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Since *Dharme* is both male and female, the male form of *Dharme* is seen in *Dharme* (*Dharmes*) and the female form is seen in the *Old Mother* or *Parvati* or *Sita* or *Bhabī*. It may not be unreasonable to assume that about 3000 B. C. the ancestors of the Kuñrukḥ called the Supreme God “*Grandfather*” and “*Old Mother*” and later on these male-female aspects were incorporated into one term “*Dharme*” and gradually other terms like “*Parvati*,” “*Sita*” and “*Bhabī*” were used to refer to the female form and personification of wisdom of the Supreme Being. Gradually, down the centuries, because of the Hindu influence, *Parvati* or *Sita* of some myths is seen as “consort” or “wife” of *Dharme*, separate from *Dharme*, and *Dharme* too is called by the name *Bhagwan*, *Mahyadevas* or *Mahadevas* (*Madho*).<sup>19</sup> But *Parvati* or *Sita*, the female form of God was never worshipped or was invoked in prayers by the Kuñrukḥar.

According to Devcharan Bhagat, *Dharmes* is the Supreme God without form. He has manifested himself as “male-female” in the forms of *Mahyadevas* and *Parvati*. Both of them together are creator, preserver, and destroyer.<sup>20</sup> The genesis myth speaks of *Dharmes* in a very anthropomorphic way. He wears a *dhoti*, and goes hunting with his dogs and ‘hunting bird.’ He is hungry, weeps bitterly, searches human beings and takes care of them with fatherly affection.<sup>21</sup> This anthropomorphic concept of the Supreme Being is a distinguishing feature of Kuñrukḥ’s idea of God. In other myths, we see the soteriological (saving) intention of the creator-God when he comes down to the earth in the form of a leprous boy and kills the *Rāksas* (personification of oppressors or evil) or teaches a lesson to the Asurs who were proud and greedy or when he kills the evil vulture, *Sonu*.<sup>22</sup>

Are the Kuñrukḥar (Oraons/Uraons) Hindus or do they have a distinct, separate religious identity of their own? The religion of the Kuñrukḥar (Oraons/Uraons) is an indigenous religion and the Kuñrukḥar having lived amidst the Hindus for thousands of years in India, also share some religious beliefs with Hindus. Hinduism has been the dominant faith in India and has influenced all other faiths in the country.

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<sup>19</sup>In Kuñrukḥ language one refers to *Mahadev* as *Mahadevas*. Ferdinand Hahn and William Crooke also mention that *Dharme* was looked upon as the husband of *Dharti Mātā* or Mother Earth.

<sup>20</sup>Dev Charan Bhagat, *Kuñrukḥar gahi Parab*, Gumla, 1990, p. 22. This also reminds us how the regeneration myth of Kuñrukḥar speaks of God destroying humankind by raining down fire (“*cich-cep*”) but saves two children, a boy and a girl (“*bhayya-bahin*”).

<sup>21</sup>P. Dehon, “Religion and Customs of Uraons,” *Memoirs of the Asiatic Society*, Vol. 1, No. 9, (1906), p.127.

<sup>22</sup>Devcharan Bhagat, *Addi Dharam gahi Nemha Bhajan*, Gumla, 1990, pp. 34-36

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According to William Crooke, the process of absorption of tribal faiths into Hinduism and influence of Hinduism on tribal faiths was gradual.<sup>23</sup> Many of the *Baigas*, *Deoñras*, *Sokhas*, *Ojhas*, *Matis*, *Pahans* and others with their Hindu and Munda backgrounds also have influenced the original belief system of the Kuñrukhar. Sarat Chandra Roy opines that the Hindu influence slowly penetrated the religious belief system of the tribals living in Chotanagpur from the sixteenth or the seventeenth century, and more so when *Raja* gradually became Hinduised and from the latter half of the seventeenth century began to introduce officers and Brahman priests from outside and made assignments to them in his kingdom.<sup>24</sup> However, the traditional religion of Kuñrukhar (*Kuñrukḥ Dharam*) is different from Hinduism. The Kuñrukhar do not believe in the authority of *Vedas* or consider *Upanisads*, *Puranas*, *Bhagavad Gita*, *Ramayana*, and other *sacred writings* of Hindus as their *sacred writings*. *Brahma* is not known to them as the creator of the world nor *Vishnu* as the preserver. They also do not worship *Rama* and *Krishna*, two important *avatars* of *Vishnu*. They do not believe in thirty-three crores of gods and goddesses. They do not worship at temples (*mandir*) but offer prayers and sacrificial offerings (blood sacrifices) of animals and fowls to the Supreme God and spirits in open places or under a tree in the sacred grove of Sal trees (*Sarna*). The ceremonial use of rice beer (*jhara* or *haria*) for religious rituals is a characteristic feature of their religion. The Kuñrukhar have their priesthood independent of Brahmanic control. The priest is a tribal person from their own tribe (Kuñrukhar) and is usually elected for a term, thus the priesthood is temporary and not hereditary. The head of the family offers sacrifices and prayers to *Dharmes* and ancestor spirits. Unlike Hindus, the Kuñrukhar do not have a caste system codified by Manu and are not a part of the *Varna* system. The Kuñrukhar also do not believe in *karma*, the concept of Hinduism whereby a soul (*atma*) of a deceased person after a cycle of births and rebirths (according to one's *karma*) finally finds liberation (*moksha*) or becomes one with the *Brahman* (Supreme God).

Kuñrukhar call the soul “shade” (*chhain* in Sadri or *ekh* in Kuñrukḥ). The Kuñrukhar believe that one who dies a natural death would find eternal happiness in the company of his or her ancestors (*pachbalar*) and the spirit of one who dies an unnatural death will always wander in the world without rest.<sup>25</sup> They do not believe in reincarnation or rebirth. They do not believe in union with God or a

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<sup>23</sup> W. Crooke, *The North Western Provinces of India: Their History, Ethnology and Administration* Methuen & Co., London 1897, pp. 59-61.

<sup>24</sup> Rai Bahadur Sarat Chandra Roy, “The effects on the Aborigenes of Chotanagpur of Their Contact with Western Civilization” in *Journal of Bihar and Orissa Research Society*, Vol. 17, 1931, p. 359.

<sup>25</sup> Sarat Chandra Roy, *Oraon Religion and Customs*, Man in India Office, Ranchi, 1928, reprint Gyan Publishing House, Delhi, 1985.



blissful dwelling in the company of gods(*svarg*) or a special place of punishment or torment (*narak*) after death. Dead relatives or ancestors (*Pacbälar*) of the Kuñrukhar are not only honoured but also revered and prayed to. They are remembered with gratefulness by the living for the life and the land that they have received from them. Ancestors are invoked with faith: “Watch over us, cast a glance of kindness and of love upon our souls and bodies, upon our children and our homes; keep them and us immune from every harm and misfortune, overfill our cattle with every kind of blessings, well keep everything under control in the land of the living and in that of the dead, and set everything right”.<sup>26</sup> The rice beer and food are offered to the dead as they too are thought to be in need of sustenance. They live in the nether world but also visit their living relatives and care for them. The Kuñrukhar do not dread the ghosts of their dead relatives as their *shades* (souls) are brought inside the house where they have a special place of honour (*ulä*) in the interior of the house (usually in the kitchen).<sup>27</sup> They are especially honoured on special feast days and times of family celebrations. Sometimes even on ordinary days a little food or a few drops of rice beer is dropped on the ground before one eats and drinks. In Hindu marriage bridegroom and his family give dowry to the bride and her family whereas among the Kuñrukhar it is the bridegroom and his family who give the bride price to the bride and her family and there is no dowry system. Almost all of their feasts are connected with agriculture. Nowadays, though many of the Kuñrukhar who follow their traditional religion (Kuñrukhar *Dharam*) are Hinduised, many of them still retain a distinct, separate religious identity of their own.

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<sup>26</sup>Francis Pereira, *The Faith Tradition of the Kuñrukhar (Uraons)*, *op.cit.*, p. 413.

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