
UNIT 1 BELIEF SYSTEMS AND RITUALS AMONG TRIBALS

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit presents the belief systems, religious practices and symbolism of major tribal groups especially from central and eastern Indian states. Although it focuses on certain tribal groups tribal religious philosophy of the tribes emerge from the lesson.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Nearly 700 tribal groups in India are spread out in different parts of the country in the bigger or smaller numbers. Their number is very high in the Tribal Areas of the North East. Similarly, in the Scheduled Areas of the main land in the central belt of the country, tribal population is quite large. Each tribal group is unique in its socio-cultural life. In the present paper it is not possible, therefore, to cover the belief systems and rituals of all the tribals in the country. Here an attempt has been made to discuss the topic with reference to the major tribal groups, such as, the *Mundas*, *Uraons*, *Santals*, *Hos*, *Kharias*, etc. in the central and eastern parts of India. They are mainly in the states of Jharkhand, West Bengal, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. By migration for tea industries they form a large population in the North East, especially in Assam. Similarly, they have a large population in the Andaman and Nicobar islands. Through modern education they are employed both in public as well as private sectors all over the country. They are also in different parts of the country as unskilled labourers in large numbers.

1.2 TRIBAL RELIGION

Generally, tribal religion is tribe-oriented. It is lived by a tribe in the light of shared traditions. In the religious traditions of the *Mundas* and *Uraons* in particular, their religion is illumined by a myth where they found in a crucial encounter with the hostile, greedy and arrogant community of *Asurs* (a community of iron smelters), the key to the mystery of suffering in the world they live in. (Ponette 1984: 70). Other tribal groups mentioned above also share this belief. This key is the

transformation of the Creator of the universe and humankind in a voluntary ordeal by fire in the hands of His Asur enemies. He had taken the form of a young boy full of sores in his body in order to encounter the Asurs. In the bargain, they put him in a new furnace with full-scale burning fire in it. However, when the fire was extinguished he came out of the furnace completely changed into a golden boy free from all his pain and suffering caused by his sores. After this personal transformation, the primordial time was over and the new era began. There and then the Creator made the spirit-world, source of recurring harassment and suffering.

1.3 TOTEMISM

Durkheim was the first one to see that *totems* were symbols, standing for something other than themselves. He argued that what they stood for was the social group itself. He thought that all religions originated in totemism. He was led to the view that all the gods that men worship are but man-made symbols of society itself. Society is the indispensable condition of human life as we know it, and in worshipping God man is really worshipping his own social system.

Durkheim's theory of religion has been subjected to a good deal of well-deserved criticism. It is important to keep in mind that society is not a *thing* but rather a system of relationships. Social relationships, involving beliefs, expectations and values as well as human interactions in space and time, are not *given* empirically, in the same sense that the data of the natural sciences are. It is one thing to say that totemism, or religion, means that a man worships the actual group of people, the social aggregate, of which he is a member. It is quite a different thing to say that what he is revering is a complex system of moral imperatives, of rights and obligations, the observance of which is a condition of ordered social life. It was the latter that Durkheim should be taken as having meant, not the former. Most modern students of religion would hold, as against Durkheim, that religious belief and practice are more than merely a system of social and moral symbolism (Beattie 1977: 221). Such group symbolism can be very important, in secular as well as in religious contexts, and it was to Durkheim's great merit that he pointed this out. Totems are symbols, therefore their significance for the people who have them must be looked for elsewhere than in themselves.

Religion among tribal societies is concerned with supernatural beings who are endowed with some human attributes. This means that living people may enter into some sort of social relationship with them.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Which is the key to the mystery of suffering in the world the tribals live in?

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2) What is the condition of an ordered social life?

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1.2 BELIEFS IN GOD, ANCESTOR SPIRITS AND SPIRITS

The tribal communities mentioned above have developed the idea of a supreme spiritual being known by different names, by different tribal groups, such as, *Dharmes*, *Singbonga*, *Chando Baba*, etc. He is conceived as the creator of the universe and most powerful among the supernatural beings. He is everywhere and everything is under His power and control. There is one common theme running through all their creation accounts, namely, human beings in the first creation of the Creator displeased Him with their evil ways of living which He did not approve. For example, they were proud, arrogant, greedy, disrespectful to Him and to His creation and to one another; and disobedient to Him. They could not co-exist with Him with such ungodly behaviour. Therefore, He destroyed them as the creatures of His first creation by sending rain of fire on them. However, His beloved hid two human beings, one male and the other female, by hiding them from the rain of fire. The Creator felt lonely and unhappy without human beings after destroying them. Happily, His beloved helped Him to find the two human beings whom she had hidden in the hole of a crab in a field. The Creator and His beloved looked after these two human beings with love, care and affection and when they grew up they made them husband and wife to each other and it is from them that the human beings multiplied down the centuries and we are the members of this human family today. This was the second creation of God after He had destroyed His first creation.

Faith of tribals in God is deep rooted. They profess it *communally* and *privately*. The high point in their communal profession is the recurring seasonal sacrifice offered to God in the sacred grove by the *pahan* (village priest) in his own name and that of the village community on most of the feasts that inaugurate a new agricultural operation. Many *individual* expressions of the same belief can only be detected on closer acquaintance with their customs and way of life. For example, during marriage negotiations both parties on their exchange visits are on the look out of auspicious or inauspicious omens which they firmly believe are indicative of God's choice in the matter. When the rites of passage are celebrated, there will always be some one who will address those present mentioning that God is the Master of life, the Provider, the Ruler, the All Knowing, the Bountiful (Ponette, *op. cit.*: 74). Similarly the head of the family will offer at least once a year a sacrifice to the family ancestors in the privacy of the house to obtain their intercession with the Creator on their behalf. Such sacrifices are repeated whenever unexpected or unexplained misfortune hits the family.

Belief in Ancestor Spirits

The belief of tribals in immortality stimulates a frequent awareness of their link with the invisible world through their family, clan and tribal ties. This awareness is the reflection and also

the projection in the world beyond the family. This explains also a good deal of their serenity, particularly in the face of death. Death is not the end of everything, it is the continuation of their temporal life in a new mode of existence in the company of an innumerable number of family, clan and tribal brothers and sisters. There is grief, no doubt, but no despair. In that fond memory the Creator is never dissociated from their dear departed ones. There is no cycle of rebirths to go through to atone the past misdeeds. Survival after death is not an absorption of the tribal's individuality into an anonymous existence. He/she does not disappear in an anonymous mass of spirits. On the contrary, death is a family reunion.

The way to salvation is the tribe. The tribals mentioned above now know their destiny. They know that to reach this destiny they must overcome evil, which is essentially any behaviour that would break up their tribal status. The main religious preoccupation of a tribal is to safeguard the integrity of his tribal identity by the observance of the code established by the Creator. In their organized society they have a priest to preside over the ritual offering and sacrifices.

In the classical worlds of Greece and Rome an attitude of piety and respect was maintained towards the family ancestors: the Chinese had an elaborate ancestral cult (Beattie, *op. cit.*: 225). The above mentioned tribal communities have deep piety and respect for their ancestors. Among these communities, the lineage is thought of as a single unit, including both the living and the dead ancestors. In such cases the ancestors are believed to be concerned above all with the unity and well-being of the lineages descended from them. In this way the belief acts as a social consent in keeping with the behaviour approved by the ancestors and helps to sustain the existing social system. The ancestors are remembered collectively as a community.

Belief in Spirits

Interestingly, in the religious tradition of the above mentioned tribal communities, spirits created were once persons of flesh and blood that were given the form of spirits by the Creator. They were given precise functions in keeping with their previous earthly status. For example, the Asur widows were made the guardians of the village ecology. The widow who was kind in taking care of the Creator in disguise of a young boy full of sore, was made to reside in the sacred grove (*sarna*) to be venerated at the flower feast in every spring season of the year. She is responsible for the good monsoon during the year and also for the good health of cattle and children in the village. Such functions of different spirits can be multiplied.

These spirits are even considered to have retained some human traits in their trans-human condition. They still retain the grosser appetites for food and drink and the personal character traits of their former existence. If they are not looked after properly or are shown disrespect in one way or the other, they show their displeasure by inflicting sickness or some other misfortune upon those failing in their obligation towards the former.

The tribal communities discussed above, believe that there are non-human spirits and these may affect human beings. Therefore, they enter into a sort of human relationship with them through their priest. He speaks to the spirits as if they are persons. In this regard, God the greatest spirit, is thought to be vastly greater and more powerful than human beings, the address to Him takes the form of humble entreaty. A tribal does not attempt to impose terms on Him. He approaches Him submissively. Apart from God, tribals think that spirits are dependent on them, as they are on them. Thus, there are rights and obligations on both sides. In such cases the relationship is

thought of as involving exchange. Just as a person needs the good-will and protection of the spirits, so a spirit is thought to need the attentions of human beings if it is to be remembered, and to be given the opportunity to manifest itself in the human world. Here the underlying principle is *I give to you so that you may give to me* (Beattie, *Ibid.*: 233).

1.3 BELIEF IN BLESSING, CURSING AND OATH-TAKING

There is one further sphere of human behaviour in tribal communities involving reference to spiritual beings or forces, namely, of blessing, cursing and oath-taking. In the first two a human agent gives verbal expression to his wish that something may happen to another person or persons, often through the instrumentality of some non-human power, which may or may not be specified. Thus, the blessing or cursing which is generally believed to be most effective is that of a person to whose wishes the powers invoked are most likely to attend. That is why the blessing or cursing of religious specialists like priests is often thought to be the most potent of all.

In oaths the action of the non-human power referred to is invoked upon the swearer himself. A man who swears an oath deliberately puts himself in a condition of ritual danger unless he does what he has sworn to do. It may be supposed that the power referred to may act directly upon the oath-taker, as a man who swears falsely on the Bible or the Koran may be thought to place himself in danger of divine punishment. The expressive element in these forms of behaviour is evident. Often it is the mere saying of what is wished that is thought to be effective, and here as elsewhere its expression in symbol and rite is believed to enhance its effectiveness.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Do the tribals manifest their deep rooted faith in God? How?

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2) Does the tribal belief in ancestor spirits show that there is no cycle of rebirths? How?

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3) How do the tribals approach God and spirits?

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1.3 RELIGIOUS RITUALS

Sacrifice

The offering of sacrifices is the most practiced activity of the tribals. The sacrifices they offer are intercessory. They have no set prayer formula with the exception of the traditional chanting of the Asur myth by the *pahan*. A short improvised invocation accompanies, of course, the offering of the sacrifice. It is the Creator Himself who enjoined them to provide sustenance to spirits of nature and by extension to all other spirits who people the spirit-world. We can broadly classify their sacrifices into *community* and *individual* sacrifices. Their society is *communitarian* and, therefore, community sacrifices for them is most important. They are offered by the village priest in the sacred grove with the participation of the villagers. They are performed at every agricultural feast during the year. Sacrifices are offered to (a) the Creator, (b) ancestral spirits of the village, and (c) minor spirits. Apart from this, the head of each family offers sacrifices to his family ancestors at least once a year at the new harvest feast and whenever an unexpected misfortune is ascribed to the displeasure of these spirits.

Prayer

Prayer generally is associated with sacrifice. The spirit's attention is drawn to the beast or other object which is being sacrificed to it asking that it should accept its mutual obligation to do what it is asked. Spirits may become harmful if they are not propitiated. The aim of much invocation, prayer and sacrifice is to turn away evil rather than to solicit positive good.

Symbolic Present

Since there is usually an element of exchange in the relationship between human beings and spirits, it often involves the symbolic presenting or making over to them of some material or sometimes non-material thing. Hence, the almost world-wide institution of sacrifice. Sometimes this involves the destruction of what is offered, frequently the killing of some living creature. Sometimes, however, food or drink is left for the spirit, for example at a graveyard. Sometimes living animals or chickens are dedicated to a spirit, and actually not killed. In these rituals there is always the idea of some deprivation on the part of the sacrificer. There is always something made over, transmitted from human being to God or spirit. Among the tribal communities under discussion, any animal or chicken to be offered to God has to be of white colour. The pig is not offered as a sacrifice to Him because it is considered to be an unclean animal. Similarly, non-material things, such as, rice, egg, etc. to be offered to Him have also to be of white colour. White colour is a sign of God's purity and holiness. In the case of sacrifice, an observer of the ritual needs to ask not only what are they doing? but also what do they think they are doing?

The notion that something is given over to God or spirit, is universal. When spirits are regarded as separate and individual powers, dependent on human beings and the latter are dependent on

the former; the rule of *I give to you so that you may give to me* may prevail, and a sacrifice may be thought of as a kind of bargain. However, it is never simply this. Spirits are not people. Sacrifice is a symbolic act whereas the trading in the market is not. If we regard sacrifice as the making of a gift to a spirit, we must ask just what it is that is given and received. Symbolic behaviour is not to be understood simply as a means of achieving something. It is also and essentially a way of saying something. Its manifestations are not always to be taken absolutely literally, as if they were a kind of technology.

Sacrifice, then, is a symbolic gift-giving. Now in giving a gift a person gives, in a sense, part of himself/herself. In sacrifice this identification is often made explicit. This is why the sacrifice of living things among tribal communities is so often specified. For an ox or a goat or a chicken shares the quality of life with the human being who sacrifices it, and so may appropriately stand for him. Also, and more practically, when a man sacrifices a valuable beast like an ox he is giving up a most prized possession. However, the giving of a gift is always a symbolic act, a rite, and in the last resort it is the rite, and not the object sacrificed, that matters most. A person who makes a sacrifice is symbolically giving a part of himself.

The identification of the sacrificer with the object sacrificed is always marked with an act of consecration, either by a laying on of hands or if it is a chicken then by making it pick and eat the consecrated rice grains at the spot of sacrifice. By consecration, the object sacrificed ceases to be just an ox or a goat or a chicken or a handful of rice. It becomes something more, namely, a man-made symbol. Sacrifice is often a moral cleansing, a washing away of evil, a means of disposing of ritual impurity.

Scapegoat

When the expiatory element is dominant, and the emphasis is rather on getting rid of evil and impurity than on making a gift to a specific spiritual power, the tribals have not sacrifice, but a rather different kind of institution, of which the most familiar example is the scapegoat. In this case evil may be ritually transferred to a chosen animal or a chicken and then driven out of the community believing that it has taken with it all the evil of the village, thus purifying it.

Sacrificial Meal

Sacrificial meal with spirits by the community members gathered together is essential among the tribals under discussion. The meaning of meal together is one of mutual respect and good will. Thus, sharing food or drink with a spirit, like sharing it with anybody else, implies friendly relationship and especially reconciliation. When two tribals have quarreled, once the dispute is settled they eat a meal in common, and after that the matter is supposed to be completely finished. However, not all sacrifices are communions, though some of them are.

With the discussion above, what becomes plain is that the concept of sacrifice is by no means a simple one. All the same, what is common to all sacrificial rites, whether the emphasis is on (a) gift exchange and propitiation, (b) communion with the spirit world, (c) purification or some other aspect of the relationship between man and spirit; it is their symbolic character. Like all ritual, sacrifice is a way of saying something as well as a way of doing something. We can only understand it if we ask not only what the tribals who practise it are trying *to do*, but also what they are trying *to say*, and in what language they are trying to say it.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Sacrifice is a symbolic gift giving. Explain.

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2) What is the idea behind the ritual of scapegoat?

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1.5 RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM

Tribals in general think about the world in which they live in terms which are often symbolic rather than scientific. Coherent thinking can be symbolic as well as scientific, and if we are sensible we do not subject the language of poetry to the same kind of examination that we apply to a scientific hypothesis. Here it is important to determine with reasonable clarity what we are to mean by the term 'symbol'.

Signs

It is not useful to regard everything that stands for something else as a symbol. It is therefore useful to distinguish between two different kinds of signs, of things that have meanings and which stand for something other than themselves. First, there are signals, which give information about some state of affairs. What they do is to convey a specific message. Signs can be merely conventional but this is not the case with symbols. For there is usually some reason why a particular symbol should be appropriate in a particular case. There is an underlying reason which may be discovered, even though it may be by no means obvious, and may even be quite unknown to the persons who use it.

Symbols

The grounds on which a symbol's appropriateness to what is symbolized is based may vary. They may lie in some real or fancied resemblance between the symbol and what is symbolized. They may derive from some historical occurring at the same time in the individual's or the culture's past. However, whatever the ground of the association between symbol and referent, it

will generally be found that it entails some kind of appropriateness. An important difference between symbols and signals is that symbols commonly stand for or imply some abstract notion: they do not refer just to some event, or to a concrete existing reality. What we find to be symbolized in various ways in different cultures are more or less abstract notions like power, group solidarity, familial or political authority. Sociologically, this is the most important thing about symbols. They provide people with a means of representing abstract ideas, often ideas of great practical importance to themselves indirectly. It would be difficult or even impossible for them to represent these ideas to themselves directly. A 'totem' for example provides a convenient and understandable symbol for essential group values.

Symbolic Behaviour

Symbolism is essentially expressive, it is a way of saying something important, something which it is impossible or not practical to say directly. What is said symbolically must be thought to be worth saying. What is symbolized is always an object of value. This means that people's attitudes to their symbols are rarely neutral. They are always more or less affectively charged. People tend to have sometimes extremely strong feelings about their symbols.

How are we to identify the symbolic element in behaviour? It requires a clear distinction between what have been called the *instrumental* and the *expressive* aspects of human behaviour. Instrumental activity is directed to bringing about some desired state of affairs. It is oriented towards an end. Expressive activity is a way of saying or expressing something, usually some idea or state of mind. The instrumental aspect of any activity is understood by seeing what it is aimed at whereas its expressive aspect by understanding what is being said. So, symbolism is a kind of language and it is appropriate to ask of any symbol what it means.

A difficulty is that much human behaviour exhibits both instrumental and expressive aspects at the same time. However, instrumental behaviour must be understood in terms of the consequences it aims at and achieves while expressive behaviour in terms of the meanings, the ideas, it expresses. Symbolism therefore must be studied on at least two levels. First, it has to be studied on the level of meaning. A community's values may often be understood by analyzing their symbols. However, symbolic behaviour must also be studied on the functional, *action* level of analysis, for as well as having meanings it may also have social consequences. Symbolic behaviour often does have socially significant consequences.

Check Your Progress IV

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) What is the distinction between signs and symbols?

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2. How are we to identify the symbolic element in our behaviour?

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1.6 LET US SUM UP

Religious behaviour is a ritual behaviour involving a belief in non-human spirits. Like all ritual, religious behaviour is essentially expressive, though it is generally thought of as instrumental as well. Instrumentally regarded, religious beliefs and practices form part of systems of action. They have consequences, even if they are not always those envisaged by the people who have them. On the level of knowing, they provide satisfactory answers to otherwise insoluble questions. They fill gaps in human knowledge and experience and so diminish areas of doubt and uncertainty. Thus religious belief and practice may give confidence in the face of dangers which would otherwise be overpowering. They provide institutionalized means of coping with such dangers, and even if these means are generally scientifically ineffective, they are morally and emotionally satisfying. Ritual may serve to co-ordinate and regulate co-operative human behaviour in a variety of social situations. Religious beliefs may serve as means of social control, through the fear of incurring supernatural punishment if approved norms are broken.

On the level of idea and meaning, all kinds of ritual forces and powers are highly important for the people who respect them. However, none of them is given as an empirical datum, though their presumed effects are. Everywhere people are dependent, whether they like it or not, on extra-human forces lying outside their physical control. Ritual both enhances the importance of the things and events with which it is associated, and provides a means of dealing with them. What is affirmed in various forms of symbolic behaviour is always something of value for the people who have the ritual, and generally it is something more or less abstract, not concrete.

Much ritual and religious behaviour translates uncontrollable natural forces into symbolic entities which, through the performance of ritual, can be manipulated and dealt with. Ritual is a language for saying things which are felt to be true and important but which are not subject to statement in scientific terms. In the areas beyond science, there is no way of expressing man's awareness of the universe and its ultimate meaning except symbolically. To say that religious symbols are man-made is not to decry the validity of religion, for ritual is a manifestation of something and not just of itself.

Check Your Progress V

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) How do religious beliefs and practices provide satisfactory answers to otherwise

insoluble questions?

2) Why is ritual a language for saying things which are felt to be true and important?

1.7 KEY WORDS

Totemism: The term *totem* comes from a North-American Indian language, but it has been widely used to refer to animal, bird, fish, plant, mineral species which are respected by the tribal groups in central and eastern India having them as symbols of their group identity.

Sacrificial meal: Sharing of meal during religious activities by the community members gathered together is essential among the tribals

1.8 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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UNIT 2 ESCHATOLOGICAL VIEWS OF THE TRIBALS

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

Tribals or Adivasis are put under the category of Scheduled Tribe according to the Constitution of India. They have their own distinct culture and worldview. Their eschatological beliefs are also different from those of other religious communities. By the end of this Lesson you should have:

- a basic understanding of what eschatology means;
- a knowledge of the way in which tribals view their end times;
- an understanding of the Adivasi concept of communion with their ancestors.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (1987) defines *Eschatology* as the science of the four last things: death, judgement, heaven, and hell. The New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language (1996) defines it as the branch of theology that treats death, resurrection, immortality, the end of the world, final judgement, and the future state. Applying these dictionary meanings to tribal eschatological views, it would mean, how the tribals view death and life after death.

2.2 THE WORLD BEYOND

The tribals believe in the life after death as in many other cultures and religions. They believe that after death the soul leaves the body and goes away to an unknown world which is known by various names.

The Oraons say that after death the soul goes *merxa* which corresponds to heaven. In their world view *merxa* is something like the happy ploughing ground where everybody has plenty of land and bullocks to plough it with, and plenty of rice beer to drink after their daily work. Hence, they have little anxiety about their life beyond. There is, however, one condition for a blissful life in the life after death, i.e. living in conformity with all customs of the tribe, which are monitored by the Panchayat.

The Oraons are not familiar with the concept of hell. There is no place of punishment for them. They believe that everybody will be happier in the other world than in this world. Everything in the next world, in the Oraon worldview, is like a replica of this world. Everybody is believed to be treated the same way as in this world. It is believed that everybody will be remitted to his/her ancestor in the life after death. The abode of ancestors which is known as *pachbalar*, is some kind of netherworld, something like the sheol of the Hebrews. It is not really a heavenly abode. People meeting violent deaths, such as by drowning (*dubal*), killing (*pasal*), hanging (*tangal*), killed by a tiger (*baghaut*), and a lady dying in pregnancy or childbirth, do not go to *merxa*.

The Mundas' belief in the world beyond is conceptualized in the concept of '*Parom Disum*'. It is a world coming out of primordial times, the world as made by Haram, the Supreme Being. If man had not fallen, he would have experienced this environment. However, due to the fall of man he lost his awareness and hence the world beyond is now beyond perception. It is not only the world of the spirits but also the spiritual world. It is the mysterious world in which there is consciousness, knowledge and power at a level not known to us. It is a world which causes much of what happens in the present world. It is a world to be feared, not only because of its impact on the present, but also because it is veiled from the present by a screen of fire. It can be entered only through death. When for the individual the chronological time comes to an end, he passes over into it. The world beyond is the world beyond the present, the world of man's future life, the world in which he has his destiny for ever. In this respect it is the opposite of chaos, it is a world of order in which the ancestral and other Bongas are subject to Singbonga. It is a world we cannot understand. As man's invisible existence is more important than his visible one, so on the cosmic scene the Parom disum is more important than the present world.

Kharias' belief in the world beyond is known as '*Bhatyug*' or Eternity about which they are not very clear. However, this state of existence seems to be a desire-free and action free state. Whether this state of life is a blissful one or whether this state is attractive good moral life to possess it, is not very clear either. They also believe in the communion with ancestors on the occasion of Kaman and *harboha*, which are considered to be spiritual marriage according to them. They believe that at death soul leaves the body which they call *jiom cholki*.

The Adivasis in general have a belief in the survival of the soul after death and in a sort of paradise where the pachbalar (ancestor spirits) live happily after an ordinary death and proper obsequies. The living descendants of the family have a filial duty of offering the dead regular sacrifices, offerings and libations. Hence the family landed property is jealousy guarded in the clan. Sin is supposed to be visited by punishment already in this life. The Adivasis perform double obsequies for their dead. Persons dying before the sprouting of rice plants are burnt. Those dying later are temporarily buried.

The dead body is washed and anointed and then carried away on a bier covered with a piece of new cloth. On the way to the funeral grains of 'dhan' (paddy) and small pieces of cotton are dropped at short intervals and the bier is occasionally placed on the ground. At these halts, four heaps of dhan and wads of cotton are placed where the feet of the bier had rested on the ground. After arrival at the burning ghat the body is placed on the pyre after being carried round it three times. The head is made to rest in a northerly direction. A coin is placed in the mouth of the dead man and the pyre is lit by the eldest son or nephew. When the fire has already died out, the women present gather a few bones in an earthen urn, which is then carried home and suspended from a tree close to the house of the deceased person.

On their way back from the ghat, the mourners call the shade of the dead person back. The Oraons sacrifice a chicken to the shade in order to put it at rest. For about ten days after the death, the dead man is offered a datun (tooth brush) and water to cleanse his mouth; and rice and dal is served to him to appease his hunger. On the tenth day on the kaman feast day a pig is sacrificed to the ancestors and the mourning is brought to an end.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) What is your understanding of the tribal views of eschatological belief?

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2) What do you understand by the tribal obsequies of the dead?

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2.3. HAPPINESS AND FULFILMENT

Happiness is the key to salvation or total emancipation in the Adivasi worldview. One cannot claim to be emancipated without attaining happiness. Happiness is the criterion of a successful life either here on earth or in the life beyond. For Adivasis this happiness is collective. It is the collectivity that gives the individual a sense of achievement, a sense of satisfaction, a sense of

direction and a sense of accomplishment. This happiness, for the Oraon, is articulated in terms of three C's, namely "cattle, crops and children" as indicators of happiness and prosperity for their family. They even envisage their life after death as having plenty of fields to plough, with lots of cattle, children and bumper crop. Thus the criteria of happiness are underlined very clearly in the Oraon worldview.

What it is going to be like in the life after death is reflected in what it is now on this earth. The Munda, the Kharia, the Santhal, and the Ho, have similar criteria for their fulfillment. They are basically agriculturists and hence a longing for the land and a rich harvest is justified. The Kharia have a special respect and reverence for cattle and the latter are a part of their household as they are crucial to their survival. Children continue the generation of the parents. Every tribe looks up to them for its perpetuation. Therefore children who are well versed into the norms and values of the tribe, those who can uphold the dignity and pride of the tribe, are always held in high esteem. The philosophy behind their love for the land manifests a network of relationships, both in this world and in the next. The Adivasi characteristics of simplicity, truthfulness, contentment, hard work, hospitality, generosity, independence, a care-free attitude, egalitarianism and love for peace, etc., are indicative of their harmonious life. Thus Soares-Prabhu is convinced that in the midst of individualism, greed, aggressive competition and growing alienation from nature, the tribal values of solidarity with nature and egalitarianism, should show others the way.

Land is central to the tribes' existence. Without land they simply do not exist. In absence of land there is no space for their social, cultural, economic and ecological life. Sanjay Bosu Mullick opines that "identity of the indigenous peoples rests on two vital elements, space and speech". Spatial habitat or the geographical territory of their ancestors is their birthright. That part of "Mother earth" has been passed on to them by their fore-parents. Therefore, the rationale for their struggle for a separate land can be justified in terms of three J's, namely, JAMIN (the land), JAL (the water), and JANGLE (the forest), which belong to them from time immemorial.

The divine origin of the land and its stewardship by the tribes is an open secret. Singbonga, Dharmes, Chando Baba, Ponmesor, Thakur Jiv, the gods of their respective tribes have given the land to the tribe to be taken care of. Nirmal Minz rightly points out that the personhood of Adivasi is rooted in their concept of land. From earth comes all sustenance to human beings and non-humans. No land, no personhood of the Adivasis! Therefore ownership of the land alienates it from the user. For the Tribe land and forest, water and air and all nature's bounty are gifts of God. No king, no landlord, no Government has ever created the land. Land was there from time immemorial and the Adivasis have been using this gift as stewards and not as owners. On account of the Adivasi-land symbiosis, land forms a major part of their being in terms of culture, religion, socio-cultural organization, philosophy, history, economy, and geography. An Adivasi honours, respects, reveres and protects the land. The Adivasi intimacy with land results in a vast repository of knowledge of the flora and fauna, which have sustained them for centuries. The land forms the core of the education of the Adivasi to teach them how to exist in harmony with nature, so much so that "a tree in the hamlet ceases to be merely a tree, but an important member of the village community, so also animals and birds". It is said, "No other community can understand the link between the Adivasi and the land than the one that knows and shares this sacred link of the "Holy Land". For the Adivasi, their land is the "Mecca" of Islam, Jerusalem of

the Christian and the Jew, the Bodh Gaya of the Buddhist. The sacredness permeates even the offspring of the land – the animals, birds, trees, rivers, and the people”.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) How do Adivasis understand happiness and fulfilment in their life?

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2) What is the place of land in the life of an Adivasi?

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2.4. HUMAN SOUL

Tribals in general are staunch believers in the existence of *soul* which is distinct from the *body*. It continues to exist even after a person dies. Primarily, it signifies any *shade* or *shadow*. It is a quite fitting word to distinguish the invisible, intangible soul from the visible and tangible solid body. Even as the shadow resembles the bodily form so must the soul, as a life giving power and director of the body in acquiring various human faculties and virtues.

The Munda tribe is one of the major tribes in India and much study has been done on this tribe. The traditional thinking of the Munda tribals about human soul is quite illuminating. It explains the eschatological views of the tribals with much clarity. Their neighbouring tribes in central and eastern part of India have similar views on the human soul. According to the Mundas every human person has two souls: (a) the *ji* and (b) the *roa*.

The *Ji*

The *ji* is the principle of life, found not only in men but also in animals and plants. In plants, however, it has only the vegetative power. In animals it has moreover the faculty of sense perception and the appetitive and movement faculties. In human being, in addition to all these, it has *reason* and *will*. The *ji* as endowed with reason and will is called *mon* (mind). Strictly speaking, animals have no *mon*. When a plant or animal dies, its *ji* wastes away into air and ceases to exist. The *ji* of human being is *immortal* and when the person dies it goes to *bitarpur* (the inner dwelling), also called *parom disum* (the country beyond), to receive there reward or punishment but what kind of reward or punishment that is not known.

The *ji* is considered the cause of all the processes of bodily life. It is, therefore, said to be present everywhere in the whole body and to act and watch over it even when it is asleep or in a state of unconsciousness. This is why our heart keeps beating and we continue breathing. It grows in strength together with the body of little children and decreases in old age.

The Roa

If *ji* is the first soul then *roa* is the second soul in every human being. While the former is the principle of *life*, the latter is the principle of *quality* or power (*gun*, *raisi*) in a person. Every human *roa* is endowed by *Singbonga* (Supreme Being) with a single *gun* or *raisi* which has the following effects on the *roa*:

First, it causes the *roa* to present the shape of a certain animal when seen by another *roa* in dreams. The *ji* cannot leave the body without causing death whereas the *roa* is not bound to remain continually in the body during one's life. However, its continued absence would in the long run prove equally fatal. While a person sleeps, it goes for an outing almost every night. What we call *dreams* is just what the *roa* sees and hears in its outings.

Often, if not always, it sees things not as they are actually in progress but as they are going to happen shortly. When free from the body, it is gifted with an insight into the near future. It may moreover either see the actors of events in their unveiled reality just as they are or may see them under symbolic appearances. Actually, the latter is the usual way in which an individual is almost always seen by the wandering *roa* under the shape of such animal as he/she resembles by character or at least a man/woman stands for an animal and vice versa. A dream may also be a warning of impending harm inflicted by a *bonga* (spirit) for the *roa* when free from the body is able to get a glimpse of the spirit world.

Second, the effect of the *gun* of the *roa* is that it influences a person's temperament and fate and causes in his/her life a similarity with the special habit, aptitude or efficacy which characterizes the animal the shape of which his/her *roa* presents. For example, (1) a person having a catlike *roa* is a grumbler and one who has a doglike *roa* is quarrelsome; marry the two such people and they will live together like cat and dog; (2) the one who has an elephant like *roa* is a ruinous eater serenely free of interruption or disturbance, on the other hand he/she knows no fear; (3) the one who has a viper like *roa* is quiet in his/her ways but successful, (4) contrariwise, the one with a cobralike *roa* is bound to poverty; (5) the one with a vulture like *roa* though a good hand at the plough, and always thorough master of his team, is nevertheless so poor that he has to find his sustenance as a hireling; (6) the one with a crowlike *roa* vainly shouts and thrashes his team, he cannot make his oxen go fast, they do not obey him; (7) the one with a river-snakelike *roa* is bound to become rich, is moreover a good swimmer and can cross a river in easy mind, the flood will never carry the person off; (8) the one with a rat-snake like *roa* is a coward, quick to fly; (9) the one with a tigerlike *roa* inspires reverential fear, such a person commands respect and has influence and authority, especially in *panchayats*; (10) the one with a jackal like *roa* is cunning and with great ease invents excuses and creates stories; (11) a person with a bear like *roa* has the knack of finding honey; (12) a person with an otterlike *roa* makes a good fisher; (13) a person with a mongoose like *roa* gives knowledge of medicinal roots and happiness of curing many patients; and (14) a person with an ogre like *roa* eats like an ogre and consequently is vowed to dire poverty and want.

Third, in addition to the above special characteristics, the *gun* imparts to the human *roa* a quality of either slowness or quickness or disinclination to action or making energetic efforts with corresponding effects. Thus, every human being has either a *hambal roa* (heavy soul) or a *rambal roa* (light soul), according to whether, and in proportion to, the animal, the shape of which the person's *roa* presents is either slow-moving or quick-moving.

The good or bad influence believed to be produced by a person with a *heavy soul* is as follows: not only is such a person slow in whatever he/she does himself/herself, but he/she has a slowing influence on people and things around him/her. Such a person should never be the one to start a work. If for instance, he/she plants the first paddy seedlings in a field, the planting in that field will take no end of time. On the other hand, it should always be a person with a heavy soul to open a bale of paddy and take from it the first paddy grains, the provision in the bale will last so much the longer. Such a person has a damping effect even on the *spirits* which will not easily harm him/her. The mere presence of such a person makes even divination slow and difficult.

Fourth, both the elephantlike and the ogerlike *roas* have an effect of their own, namely, of making food or what is to produce food run short. For example, if a person with such a *roa* happens to plant the first seedlings in a field, the owner will soon find out that he has not enough seedlings for the whole field. Again, if the above person takes the first paddy grains from a bale, the paddy will soon be finished.

The *roa* like the *ji* is immortal but after death it does not go with the *ji* to the next world. It remains on earth and becomes a *spirit*. It is the disembodied *roa* which is called *umbul* (shade). Except *Singbonga* who is really God, and the only God, all other *bongas* (spirits) are nothing but disembodied *roas*, or shades of men and women. The guardian spirits of families are the shades of the ancestors of these families.

The disembodied *roa* is believed not be as immaterial as the *ji*, since it is supposed to be still in need of food and drink. That is why at the burial of the dead, some rice and coins are put with the corpse to enable the *roa* still present in the neighbourhood, to pull along until it is re-introduced into the *ading* (inner room) of the family to dwell there and find its sustenance in the few grains of rice and drops of drink offered to the shades of the ancestors at each meal of the family. If the *roa* is not brought back into the inner room of the house, it must look after itself and try to get its food somehow.

2.5 ANCESTRAL SPIRITS

Once introduced into the inner room of the house, the *roa* becomes one of the ancestral spirits of that family. These spirits are venerated by the family members and in return they are believed to intercede with the *Singbonga* for the good of the family and to protect them during their journeys or in difficult circumstances. Everyday before the food is distributed to the family members, the distributor drops a little of it on the floor for the household spirits. Similarly, before taking rice beer a few drops are first dropped on the floor for these spirits. If these services are neglected, somebody in the family will be the victim of a severe stomach-ache or some other sickness or mishap. When a new animal is brought home, one must put oil on its head or horns when taking it into the cattle-shed in order that the household spirits may recognize it and do not harm it. On

all the main feast days of the village community, the household spirits are not forgotten. A reddish fowl is sacrificed to them. The household spirits are supposed to dwell in the inner store room of the house where no stranger may enter. Hence, the daily ordinary veneration to the household spirits is done by the women of the family

Communion with Ancestor Spirits

While the light shade remains among the living members of the deceased person's family, the *ji* of the departed person is believed to join the community of the dead ancestors on the *gami* day. With the *gami* (Communitarian religious ceremony assisting the deceased person to join the community of his/her ancestors), the dead person is believed to have found a resting place with his/her ancestors for ever. Among the Uraons (Kurukh speaking tribals) in the region mentioned above, the bones of all the members who have died in the course of the year are ceremonially drowned or deposited in the clan *kundi* (place for depositing the bones of deceased persons) on the annual *konha benjja* (great wedding) day in the month of December or January after the harvest season gets over. Through this ceremony it is believed that the dead person is fully incorporated into the community of the ancestors as one of their members living in the world beyond for ever in peace and joy. However, they still form part of the clan of their living descendants whom they now protect as clan guardians, with whom they converse in dreams, and over whom the dead ancestors keep a watch in times of sickness and ward off evil spirits. Thus, the tribals believe that they are always living in company with their ancestors. They are convinced that the ancestors still love them, take the same interest in their affairs as before, help and protect them in their earthly life.

In their turn, the living members of the clan discharge their filial duty towards the ancestors by invoking their aid in times of distress. They are especially remembered on the occasions of great annual feasts, such as, *phaggu* (The tribal new year day on the full moon day of the lunar month of February-March), *khaddi* (Spring or flower festival), *karam* (Festival of standing crops and unmarried maidens who are the prospective mothers for perpetuating and continuing the tribe) and *tusgo* (Feast of eating of the new harvest). At every meal, a devout tribal makes it a point to place some food outside his/her plate and to drop a few drops of his/her drink before eating or drinking, in honour of the ancestors. This is a way of expressing one's gratitude to them for providing the family with fields from which the family members make a living and continue their lineage.

Feast of eating the new harvest is the great feast in honour of the ancestors. It is a day of rejoicing. Sweetmeats are prepared and it is certainly the best day of the year for the tribals. It is touching to see them remember their departed parents and grand parents with gratitude for feeding them in the past when they were helpless. No one would partake of the new rice before a little of it was offered to the ancestors. A handful of it is made into *alkhra* (flat rice) and spread on the ground in honour of the ancestors. Similarly, before anyone could drink *jhara* (rice beer), a little of it is dropped on the ground in honour of the ancestors. Sacrifice of a whitish grey fowl is made to them by the head of a household. He crushes the head of the fowl with his fist saying: 'O our departed mothers and fathers, you have always been so good and kind to us. Here we are rejoicing. We cannot forget you. Come and rejoice with us'.

During the name giving ceremony, a child is named after an ancestor who is requested to protect the child in a very special way. They invoke the ancestor by putting the child under his or her

protection saying: ‘See, now this child has taken your name. Kindly protect this child under your care’.

At the marriage of their sons and daughters, the fathers-in-law raise two brass jugs of water and together invoke the ancestors of both their families to take the married pair under their protection. They join arms on two occasions and drink the two jugs of rice beer in honour of their ancestors. On those occasions, they spill a little of the drink on the ground and say to them: ‘Render your shade and protection to us. We have settled this marriage satisfactorily among ourselves. Now protect us and partake of the feast and drink the rice beer we offer you’.

In times of sickness or difficulties, they have recourse to their ancestors and say: ‘You have left us your children. You see in what difficulties we are. Help us and do not forget us for we do not forget you and always give you sacrifice’.

It is believed by the traditional tribals that the heavy shade of a dead person hovers about after his/her burial homeless between the house and the burial ground. Food in leaf cups is provided for it. In the tradition of the Uraon tribals, after a lapse of ten days after the burial, the relatives of the dead gather together at his/her house on the *gami* day. Each one of them brings with him/her some rice in a leaf plate. A small space is cleaned and besmeared with diluted cowdung. An elder of the clan digs a hole in the centre of this cleared space with the help of a ploughshare. He draws the diagram of *palkansna* (A ritual performed in order to get (a) God’s blessing upon oneself and one’s crop, cattle and children, (b) God’s protection against evil) around the hole. Rice and an egg are put on the diagram. He performs the *palkansna* ceremony invoking God and reciting the genesis story. He ends the invocation with words such as: “*Now he/she is gone, look after him/her,*” and breaks the egg which is then cooked and given to children. The egg shell is put in the hole.

A pigling is next sacrificed to *Nasre*, the clan elder of the dead ancestors, and while the blood of the victim is poured into the hole, the person performing the ritual addresses *Nasre* as follows: ‘Accept him/her among you. He/she is one of your children. Receive him/her as such and have pity on us also that remain behind’.

The rice in the leaf plate is heaped together and sent to be cooked but the leaf plates are put into the hole which is now closed up. Henceforth the departed soul takes its place among the ancestor spirits of the clan. The assembled relatives now sit to a meal together.

When boys burn their forearm on three or five spots as a mark of manhood and girls tattoo their foreheads and temples, they are told to look toward the place of depositing the bones of their clan members, and not to mind the pain. It is quite painful but helps them to be courageous. On this occasion, the elders warn them: ‘Look towards the burial place. Your ancestors are there. If you are not courageous, they will not receive you’.

Before occupying a newly built house, a householder first offers a sacrifice to his ancestors and recommends his family to their protection.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) What have you learnt about the two aspects of the human soul?

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2) What is the significance of communion with ancestral spirits for Adivasis?

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2.6 A COMMUNION

Union of Shades, Bones: A Divine Communion

For the Munda even after death the 'roa' or 'umbul' (the disembodied soul) continues living. On the basis of this belief only the spirit of the deceased is brought back through a ceremony called 'umbul ader' (sheltering the spirit) which is conducted seven days after the burial. The 'umbul ader' ceremony marks the homecoming of the deceased person. This sets all the fears to rest as the spirit of the dead is said to settle down happily with Singbonga and the ancestors. The philosophy behind the 'umbul ader' ceremony and its feeding at the grave every evening is that in death the spirit of the dead becomes an outcaste and the family has to feed it separately until the spirit is sanctified.

This shows a spiritual solidarity among the dead and the alive. The *umbul ader* ritual is not just an empty rite. It is indeed a symbolic action of the Munda religious worldview. The immortal *roa* which is known as 'umbul' till it is taken into the *ading*, becomes *ora bonga* (the house spirit) by the *umbul ader* (ading) ceremony. It joins the ancestors in the *ading* and stays with them for ever. It is united with Singbonga through the union with the ancestors. It prays to Singbonga for the welfare of the family. In response the head of the family offers it rice and

curry in the *ading*, and expresses the relationship with the deceased who has now become the *ora-bonga*.

The ritual of 'Jang-Topa' or the 'Second Burial' also symbolizes their continuous solidarity with the departed ones. The sacrificial victim symbolizes a living worship to Singbonga and a living memory of the deceased. The function of the ritual is to unite the Mundas and strengthen their bond. This is also a reminiscent of the eternal happiness and a state of bliss after death. It is also an occasion for purification. It reminds one about a great future, a hope for eternal life, happiness and eternal fulfillment. Thus life here on earth is full of hope and promises because their communion with Singbonga and the deceased ancestors is a matter of joy and happiness. Thus the Munda fulfillment is attained through this very communion.

According to Dehon two main rituals of the deceased, namely: (i) *Ekh mankhna* (Chhain Bhitrana) or calling back the light shade of the departed into the house, and (ii) the *koman* or the re-uniting of the heavy shade with the shades of their ancestors, are reminiscent of the tribe's communion with the ancestors and the Supreme Being. The ceremony of *Harbona* or *Koha Benja* is a sequel to this. The Uraons are not satisfied with the reunion of the shades. They want also the reunion of the bones. Relatives over whom they put some rice, native gin and money collect bones. Then they take this urn to the river, which holds the bones of their ancestors. The *Bhuinyars* (first settlers and proprietors of their fields) have a particular spot called *kundi* in the river where they deposit the bones of all the members of the family. The *Koha benja* is celebrated in the month of January. After the banquet in honour of the dead, a procession is taken out to accompany the bones to their last resting-place. *Nasre*, namely the ancestors gone to *Merkha*, personifies the *panch* of the heavy shades. *Pachbal* personifies the light shades that remain with their relatives.

There is no hell for them, no place of punishment. They say, they go to *merkha*, which corresponds to heaven. The Red Indians speak of the happy hunting grounds and the Uraons imagine something like the happy ploughing grounds where everybody will have plenty of rice-beer to drink after their labour. Hence, they have no anxiety at all about their future life, provided that they conform to all the customs imposed on them by the *panchayat* of the other world, which they personify under the name *Nasre*. All their anxiety is about this world, and all their religious practices tend only to worldly things, namely to get good crops and be free from sickness. All evils are attributed to the 'evil eye' and 'evil mouth'. In such cases they have recourse to Dharmes in the 'Palkhansna', i.e., the breaking of teeth.

Separation and Communion – From Death to Life

Death is always mourned whether it is of an old person or an infant, whether it is a natural death or unnatural. The difference, however, in the case of the unnatural death is that there is fear in the minds of people. The one dying of 'dubal' (drowning), 'pasal' (murder), and 'tangel' suicide is said to turn into 'muan bonga' or harmful spirits. Such people have no hope of fulfillment. Thus there is hope only for those dying a natural death. In the category of 'unredeemable' spirits come also the infants who have not been formerly incorporated into the tribe through the initiation ceremony called 'chchatti'. Those dying in a state of 'chchilan' (ostracism) are also

meted out the same treatment. In Christian terminology their 'salvation' is not possible. Decision of the 'Panchayat' is final in matters relating to tribal identity. A person endangering tribal solidarity and peacefulness by way of violating taboos is bound to be excommunicated. It is like public conviction. Parapullil mentions three kinds of punishment among the Oraon, Santal and Munda tribes: (i) Ritual separation (e.g. birth, death in a family); (ii) Ostracising from the community for such crimes as inter-tribal marriage, theft; (iii) Total exclusion (Bitlaha) from the community (e.g. for marriage with a non-tribal, also called 'adultery'). In the wake of any or all of the above, reconciliation is a communal event, and in the event and experience of reconciliation there is fulfillment.

The event of excommunication is symbolically neutralized among some tribes by killing a fowl or a goat and the excommunicated drinking the victim's blood. This is the re-incorporation into the community. This is also an emancipatory sacrifice. Panchayat represents the community. The 'Sirpanch' (village elder) receives water/beer from the culprit's hands symbolising readmission and acceptance. Since the separation is communitarian, reconciliation, too, has to be a communal event. The Mundas have a belief that a bad person cannot obtain happiness after death. The bad are deprived of the community of the ancestors. The separation from the tribe is the greatest punishment for the tribes all over, either it be the Munda, the Oraon, the Kharia, the Ho, the Santhal, the Andaman Islanders. It is the experience of 'hell' for them, for without the tribe they fail to attain the destiny set for them.

2.7 LET US SUM UP

This unit attempts to explain what the eschatological worldview of the Adivasis is. It has presented some beliefs of the Adivasis in the end times. It has also presented the way in which two aspects of the human soul, namely the *ji* and the *roa* operate. The importance of ancestral spirits is described with whom a communion is required for salvation in the life after death. If there is no communion in this world with the community, there cannot be a communion with the community of the ancestors after death. Happiness and fulfilment are understood in terms of their union with the community, both on this earth and with ancestors after their death. The land is central to their identity, without which there is no happiness and fulfilment. The life beyond is an extension of the present life in union with the community.

2.8. KEY WORDS

- Eschatology** : Views about end times and the life after death.
- Obsequies** : A funeral rite or ceremony
- Ex-communication** : A religious censure to deprive, suspend or limit membership of someone in a religious community.

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UNIT 3 TRIBAL RELIGION/S VIS-À-VIS IMPACT OF OTHER RELIGIONS

Contents

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- 3.11 Further Readings and References

3.0 OBJECTIVES

The unit aims at giving the account of tribal religions and their encounter with foreign religions. The relationship is very well known from the different tribal movements that have characterized themselves as defenders of tribal religions or as speaking for the adaptability and accommodation.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Religious leaders, who have been acknowledged as genuine *prophets* in the Judaeo-Christian traditions, have always claimed to speak in the name of God. They were His spokesmen, and their vocation has an origin from a call of God Himself rather than from their fancy or choice. Through several difficult, critical periods of Jewish history, the prophets claimed to be the authentic interpreters of the voice of God, the revealers of His plan, and the guardians and guarantors of the divine promise to God's chosen People. In the present study too the religious leaders initiating them have claimed to be inspired either by God or some other supernatural power. The messages they communicated to their followers, they maintained, were from God or spirits, and that they were merely their mouthpieces. Hence, we may be permitted to call these leaders 'prophets'.

Similarly, in its original restricted sense, the term *messianic* refers in the Judaeo-Christian traditions to the expectation or belief in a Messiah, a redeemer, or a Saviour for the whole world born of the Jewish people. In a broader sense the term may be stretched to include the expectation of salvation in other religions as well. It may in fact be used broadly to denote a mass liberation of a people from oppression. At any rate, at least in the context of Western cultures, messianism refers to the expectation of a saviour or redeemer, who in the form of either a historical person or a historically identifiable group of people, is a bearer of salvation and possesses the means of effecting it. In the movements under study too, the religious leaders promised to their oppressed people a deliverer in the person of either God Himself or some other superior power or the religious leader himself. And their followers expressed their vehement desire to see such a saviour and took concrete steps to facilitate his coming. Hence the term 'messianic' is used to express this feature of the cults.

The term *millennium* is used in Christian theological vocabulary in connection with eschatology or the body of doctrines concerning the final state of the world. Those who expected a millennium, believed that one day, in the near future, the Messiah of the world would establish an enduring (a thousand years') reign over the elect, a humanity at once perfectly happy and good. The participants of the movements described here also expected their world to be utterly transformed, their long drawn out misery and oppressions to cease, and an era of peace and plenty to follow in the immediate future. Hence, these movements are described as *millenarian*.

Contact of tribal societies with non-tribal societies in India has often disturbed the traditional set up of the former. Their institutions were often gravely affected if not rendered quite useless, and the whole fabric of their traditional life was in danger of dissolution if no new steps were taken to make these people find their bearings and strike out for a new mode of existence. Precisely in such situations, there have often emerged religious leaders or *prophets*, who claimed to be divinely inspired and proclaimed to their people a message from above, and made them adopt new norms of living in preparation for a blissful existence in this world in the near future. Unbelievers were threatened with exclusion from sharing this happy future or even with dire destruction.

Recourse to millenarian hopes is commonplace in human history. In times of severe distress, when men have felt themselves dissatisfied with the existing world and looked forward to a better one, prophets have often arisen and assured them that better days were imminent. Millenarian movements have not been confined to tribal societies alone. It has been observed that in other societies too traditional beliefs about a future golden age or messianic kingdom takes the form of mass disorientation and anxiety. The ideologies of such popular movements turn out to be of a peculiar kind in which there is absence of order.

Messianic movements appeal to the inspiration of supernatural beings to justify their cults and thus they have strong religious aspects. Yet, political, economic and racial factors may often be involved in the process. There may be in these movements a struggle for reallocation of power based on wealth and organisation. Messianic movements would seem not so much to sanction political and social aspirations as to give them an expression in symbolic forms.

Tribals involved in messianic movements, no doubt, feel oppressed, frustrated and overwhelmed. This oppression may, however, cover not only the political and economic grounds, it may also be felt in the psychic and moral spheres. Again, oppression in itself is a negative aspect of the

situation and it may be useful to note that messianic cults also manifest a positive will of the dissatisfied tribals to reassert their integrity as men and to participate in a wider world created by their contact with non-tribals. Messianic movements are 'Religions of the Oppressed', but with hope. Communities caught up in messianic movements may often be obliged to reformulate their native assumptions in the face of new constantly changing material and moral environment.

A hero, a prophet or a messiah, it is true, will be accepted as such only in a community which is ready for such a personality. But, there may be more than mere religious fervour involved in the development of the messianic situation. There could be political or economic tensions caused by a privileged few enjoying undue advantages. There could be no way of communication between the rulers and the ruled which the prophet alone may be thought capable of breaking down or, he may serve as a nucleus on which the oppressed people may choose to build their ideals and hopes. He may be the very image of what they may be striving to become.

This study looks at similar movements among the major tribes of Central and Eastern India in the 19th and 20th centuries during the British rule till Independence in 1947. The regions inhabited by these tribes form an area which has a common culture based on agriculture. This area is in Jharkhand today but its culture spills over into the adjoining districts under the states of Chhattisgarh, Orissa and West Bengal and beyond.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Who are called *prophets*? What are their claims?

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2) Which are the characteristics of messianic and millenarian movements? Explain.

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3.3 BHAGAT MOVEMENTS AMONG THE URAONS

In the latter half of the eighteenth century, there appeared in the Uraon country of Chota Nagpur sporadic examples of holy men known as *Bhagats* (from *bhakti*, meaning devotion). These men were disposed towards devotion and contemplation of God. Some of them advanced in their contemplation to such a degree that they would spend whole nights in meditation. In such a state, or in an alleged vision of the Deity, or in dreams, a *Bhagat* fancied he saw a stone emerging out of the ground in his courtyard or somewhere in its neighbourhood. This was presumed to be a manifestation of the deity *Mahadeo*. The stone would then be promptly sheltered under a shed where the devotee would worship his deity. These men were known as *Bhuiphat Bhagats* (from *bhumi*, meaning ground and *phatna*, to split), because they had adopted an image of a deity that had emerged from the ground.

The *Bhagat* cult lays stress on a personal reverent adoration and loving service of a beneficent God by an individual devotee. While still acknowledging the existence of the old officially recognised deities among the Uraons, this cult regards these deities, with the exception of ancestor spirits, as evil beings to be deliberately avoided. Unlike the *Mati* (witch doctor and exorcist), a *Bhagat* never allies himself with harmful spirits for furthering his selfish ends. In Roy's opinion the fact, "that Hindu influence had been at work in developing and to some extent perhaps giving shape to the *Bhagat* cult cannot be denied, but such influence would appear to have been less direct than Riseley supposes. Ancient tribal tradition and certain tribal customs would appear to indicate that the germ of *Shakti* cult had been long present in the tribal soul." (Roy, S.C., *Uraon Religion and Customs*, Ranchi, 1928, p. 323.)

The *Bhakti* cult spread, as it were, by cultural osmosis, especially in the western and southern part of the Ranchi District and its adherents numbered a few thousand in 1928. It was not a proselytising movement and its tenets of ritual purity were exacting. It was generally the immediate family circle of the *Bhagat* blessed with a revelation from God that assumed and carried on the tradition of the *Shakti* cult.

In some cases the descendants of well to do *Bhagats* have nominally accepted as their *Gurus* (spiritual guides) *Gosains* or itinerant mendicant Hindu *Vaisnava* Brahmins coming from north Bihar. These *Gurus* used to confide to their disciples secretly the name of the tutelary deity which was to be remembered and invoked daily. As an expiation for their past sins and ceremonial impurities the disciples were required to make their *guru* the gift of a *Bachhi* (heifer), whence they came to be known as *Bachhi-dan Bhagats*. These *Bhagats* also adopted a vegetarian diet. The mercenary spirit of the itinerant *Gosains* quickly brought an end to their influence on the Uraon *Bhakti* movement. The *Bhakti* cult preached by Kabir also once found its way from Bilaspur and Raipur in central India through Gangpur in Orissa State into the south of the Ranchi District, in the second quarter of the nineteenth century.

Uprightness and regard for truth are natural to simple unsophisticated Uraons. Almsgiving to the needy and hospitality to guests were regarded as natural virtues to them. While they use meat in their diet, they are kind to their domestic animals. Their own *Bhagats* had introduced the idea of total abstaining from all animal food and intoxicating drink. So the teaching of Kabir would have seemed very appropriate to those Uraons who aspired to break away from the cult of minor spirits to a higher spiritual ideal. One tenet of Kabir's teaching, however, went counter to the tradition of the Uraons, namely, they could not for long adore their deity without an outward symbol and without an elaborate cult.

The Uraon converts to the sect of Kabir were allowed to retain such tribal customs of marriage, birth and death that did not conflict with the teachings of Kabir. They were allowed to marry their daughters according to the rules of clan exogamy and even with non-*Kabirpanthi* Uraons. Girls thus married out of the sect were not allowed to cook or serve meal for their parents' people or to sit down to a meal with them. Animal sacrifices were prohibited, as also the cremation of the dead and offerings to their spirits. At birth, marriage or death in these families a service known as the *Chowka*, (Roy, 1928, 331-335) was gone through by a *Mahant* (a *guru* of the sect). At this service the kernel of a coconut was ceremonially broken and distributed to the congregation, together with *betel* leaves, as a substitute for sacrificial flesh and meal.

With the exception of this *Chowka* service and the communal meal that followed, there was little else in this new cult to fire the enthusiasm of the Uraons looking for an institutional religion permeated with a personal devotion to a deity. The *gurus* of the new sect did not always inspire the personal devotion of their disciples. So already by the year 1928, when Roy was writing his *Uraon Religion and Customs*, the movement had long ceased to make further progress among the Uraons.

In all these religious reform movements, one notices a strengthening of *monotheistic* belief and an insistence on the personal practice of religion as against the customary clan or tribal approach to spirits. Abandonment of dance and drink and meat, on the other hand, seems to have taken its origin from Hindu inspiration. The marriage and kinship system of the Uraon tribe, however, remained intact and marriage outside one's own clan as well as marriage within one's own tribe persisted, preserving the tribal identity in spite of sectarian differences.

To conclude, religious movements, such as, Hindu proselytising bodies like the *Arya Samaj* had made very few converts among the Uraons. This was due to the fact that these bodies offered little relief to the economic ills of the Uraons, who were also suspicious that, if converted to Hinduism, they would be relegated to a low place in it below the *Twice Born*. The Uraons, as it was shown above, were indirectly influenced by the *Bhakti* sects of the Hindus because these had no caste implication for the converts. A few Hindu deities like *Mahadeo* and *Dharti Mai* have also been adopted by some Uraons because these squared with their traditional notions of *Dharmes*, the Supreme Being, and *Chala Pachcho*, the old lady of the *Sarna* (sacred grove) whom they used to worship and venerate.

3.4 THE KHERWAR MOVEMENT (OR KHARWAR MOVEMENT)

The period following the Santal Insurrection (*Hul*) of 1855 was not entirely peaceful. The oppression by the *Mahajans* still continued in Santal Pargana. A spirit of resentment swept throughout the district brining the Santals once again to the point of mass upsurge. They felt that no good could be achieved unless a revitlaisation of their society was brought out. This realisation was the beginning of a new consciousness which manifested itself in another social movement called the Kharwar movement. It was motivated by the desire to return to the Golden age of tribal indpendence and glory that is celebrated in the Santal myths.

A millenarian cult, called the Kherwar movement, was observed among the Santals at this period. The aim of the movement was an attempt to return to their golden age when the Santals

worshipped *Chando* (God) only and were undisputed lords of their land. An early account describes the movement as follows:

“It appears to have been first noticed in 1871, when a Santal named Bhagrith (Hinduised as Bhagirath) set himself as a religious teacher, exhorting the Santals to give up eating pigs and fowls, as well as the drinking of liquor, and to abandon the worship of *Marang Buru* (mountain god) for that of the one true God. The burden of his preaching, however, was that the land belonged to the Santals, and no rent should be paid for it. He used to have a tray loaded with grain carried round his meetings and would ask who made the grain. The reply would be *Chando* or God. He would next ask, “who cultivated the grain?” The answer would be “we cultivated the grain.” Bhagirath would then say: “If we cultivated the grain and God made it, why should we pay rent?” His adherents were known as *Kherwars* or *Saphahors* (Clean men), and were to rise at a given signal and drive all the non-*Kherwars*, i.e. foreigners of all kinds, out of the land....There were many *Saphahors* in the district, who would not eat pigs and fowls or drink intoxicating liquor, but worship *Mahadeo* (Shiva) and never kill animals except in sacrifice. In this and other aspects there was a decided tendency to adopt Hinduistic practices, but many of the *babajis* (ascetics) have been pervert Christians and their teaching shows traces of Christian influences. The movement is especially apt to revive in times of scarcity when the people attribute their misfortunes to their having fallen from a state of pristine purity when they worshipped God.” (1911 *Census of India* Report, Vol. V, Part I, p. 216.)

The aim of the movement itself was very straightforward; the recovery of the ancestral lands from foreign landlords and the ensuring of tribal independence. The means to achieve these ends appear rather mysterious. They included the abandoning of the *bongas* (spirits), the worship of the one true God, and the adoption of Hindu rules of purity (vegetarian diet and total prohibition) in imitation of their Hindu antagonists the landlords.

Bhagirath had numerous imitators, who were also called *Babajis*, or in some cases *guru*, and worked much as he did. Several of them declared to the people that they had been commissioned by God to spread their doctrine. Most of them had come into contact with Protestant Christianity. They declared that it was God and not they who cured the people. Only those who believed were healed, and doubters were not to expect assistance in any way. The people must live clean lives and abstain from obscene language and impure thoughts. Some of the *Babajis* started regular meetings for the people on Sundays, and prohibited hard labour on that day (presumably in imitation of Christians).

The *Kherwar* movement seems to have been originally of a religious character. The Santal tradition asserts that their ancestors had no *bongas*, but worshipped God alone. They were conscious of having become degraded due to their abandonment of their original and purer belief. Their leaders ask despairingly why God has punished them and permitted them to lead a vagrant life, moving like a silk worm from place to place, without any abiding home. In ordinary years a Santal will not give much thought to these questions; but the dormant memory of God is awakened in times of a crisis on a national scale, when the movement revives. When calamities cannot be explained by the traditional beliefs in the malign influences of the *bongas* (spirits) or witches, their thinking would be that they would improve their lot by altering or reforming their religious practices and beliefs.

It is also noticeable that on its religious side the Kherwar movement has shown a tendency to Hinduism in matters of outward ritual purity (e.g. vegetarianism, ritual baths, etc.) but a leaning towards *monotheistic* beliefs and not to Hindu polytheism. The leaders of the movement seem to model themselves on the Hindu *guru* or *fakir*. The very name of *Saphahors* (clean men) assumed by the Kherwars is a pointer to their insistence on ritual purity, to attain which they abandoned meat and liquor.

Much of the vitality of the Kherwar movement, no doubt, derives from the contact of the Santals with Christianity. Several of the *Babajis* have been apostate Christians, and the first, Bhagirath, either had been a Christian or at any rate had attended a Christian school. The assumption of a prophetic role by these leaders and their appeal to divine inspiration for their message were probably of Christian inspiration. Their preachings were often on Christian themes, such as the Ten Commandments.

3.5 CHRISTIAN MOVEMENTS

German Evangelical Lutheran Mission

Pastor Gossner of Berlin sent out 4 missionaries to Calcutta without assigning them any definite region for their work. While they were waiting at the house of Dr. Haberland, another German missionary, he pointed out to them some tribal people of Chota Nagpur (now in Jharkhand) who were working in the streets of Calcutta as casual labourers. They looked strong and athletic and capable of hard work, docile and good humoured. Favourably impressed by these men, the German missionaries made up their minds to establish a mission in Chota Nagpur. They arrived in Ranchi, the principal town of this division on 4th November, 1845. They came in contact with tribals first in and around Ranchi and began to teach them Christian doctrine. Their monotheistic teaching with humanistic approach appealed to the tribals who had been also practising a monotheistic religion. Their traditional religion got enriched by Christianity. Naturally, they became members of Christian community in big numbers.

Roman Catholic Mission

Rev. C. Lievens, Jesuit missionary, arrived in Ranchi in 1885. He applied his great natural talent to the study of the laws and customs of the country. He studied the laws governing the land tenure, the extent of the rights of the *zamindars* (landlords) and also the limits of these rights. He consulted magistrates and lawyers and he had soon mastered the whole extent of the duties and rights of the poor tribal *raiya*s (cultivators) in relation to their oppressors. Now he was able to give them effective advice and help when they came to him with their tales of oppression. He made them understand their legal rights and at the same time pointed out to them the way to obtain redress. Justice prevailed and the court decisions were in favour of the *raiya*s, and many a tyrant saw an end to his tyranny. Naturally the news spread rapidly among the tribals and they hailed Lievens as their protector. From all sides people flocked to him. While helping them, at the same time he explained what the Catholic religion would do for them. The people listened to him readily and believed in his teaching which was liberating from the oppression of (a) *zamindars*, and (b) evil spirits. This was an integral liberation from both socio-economic and spiritual bondage which their traditional religion was not able to liberate them from.

Consequently, they embraced Christianity in increasing numbers and stood by this new found faith with utmost loyalty both in good and bad times. It was their free decision.

3.6 BIRSA MOVEMENT

In 1895, under oppression of the Mundas by foreign landlords, Birsa Munda rose as a prophet, a great religious leader in the Munda country. He was between 20 and 25 years of age when he started his movement. He had received a little education and a smattering of English in the German Evangelical Lutheran mission-school at Chaibasa. He had been a Lutheran, but later preached his own religion. One day while out walking with a companion a thunderstorm broke overhead. A brilliant flash of lightning seemed to light up his features. His companion reported this to his villagers, maintaining that the Deity itself had appeared to Birsa in a marvelous interview. Very soon Birsa was credited with astonishing healing powers and drew great crowds of listeners and sick persons in search of cures. After months of reflection, the prophet preached his new religion: "And, at length, the prophet opened his lips. Out came the message he had received from *Sing Bonga*, God Himself for the salvation of his tribe. Hundreds of Mundas listened with eager and reverent attention to every word that fell from his hallowed lips. The Mundas were henceforth to worship one only God. They were to give up their customary sacrifices to a multitude of *Bongas* or deities, abstain from eating any animal food, lead good lives, observe cleanliness in their personal habits, and wear the *janeu* or sacred thread in the manner of the twice-born Hindu castes. Such were the doctrines of his new religion, apparently a mixture of Christianity and Hinduism." (Roy, S.C., *Mundas and their Country*, Calcutta, 1912, p. 328.)

The Birsa movement was a manifestation of the socio-economic and religious unrest among the Mundas. They saw in him a prophet and saviour who would redeem them from the oppression of the *dikus* – the hated foreigners whether British or Indian and would establish for them a Munda *raj*. His religion was a combination of the Munda belief, Hinduism and Christianity. The movement was agrarian in its root, violent in its means and political in its end. Birsa in his speeches emphasised the agrarian factors and sought a political solution of the problems facing his people, that is, the establishment of the *Birsaite Raj* under the new king (himself)' (Singh 1966: 191). The movement had such a tremendous impact that the foundation of the British rule in Chota Nagpur was once shaken for sometime.

3.7 TANA BHAGAT MOVEMENT

In the month of April 1914, when a certain Jatra Kachhua, an Uraon tribal of Chingri village in Bishunpur circle, Gumla police station of the Ranchi district, proclaimed that *Dharmes* (God) had appeared to him in a vision and gave a message to him for the Uraons. He was 25 years old and got an enthusiastic following. He proclaimed that it was God's order that henceforth the Uraons should adore God alone through prayer and *bhakti* (devotion) and that they should completely abandon the worship of *bhuts* (minor spirits) and do away with animal sacrifice. It was also God's command that they should lead an ascetic life and give up meat, alcoholic drinks, traditional singing and dancing and coloured dresses and showy ornaments. Jatra taught his followers what he claimed were divinely inspired prayers and incantations for exorcising spirits, curing diseases and neutralising the evil spells of witches. He warned them that those who did not follow him would all perish soon. The foreigners would soon be expelled from the country

and the Uraon-*raj* was about to begin and he would be its first king. Because of his refusal to allow his followers to work for the *zamindars* or the Government, Jatra and his leading disciples were arrested and sent to the subdivisional court, tried and sentenced to imprisonment.

Other prophets took over the leadership of the movement. The *Bhagats* abandoned the cult of *nad* or *bhut* (minor spirits) as they were brought in among the Uraons from the Mundas. (There may be some truth in this allegation, since after their entry into Chota Nagpur, the Uraons have adopted the Munda priesthood in the villages where they reside with the Mundas, for the sacrificing of victims to the village spirits. The exclusive Uraon *Palkansna* ceremony to God needs no priest and is in the *Kurukh* language, whilst all the invocations to the minor spirits and the magic formulae of spirit doctors are in *Sadri*, a local Hindi offshoot.) They took to the worship of one God, and started leading a very austere life. Formerly they had been accustomed to offer countless sacrifices of animals and fowls to the *bhuts* suspected of causing sickness, drought, famine, death and other calamities. Now these *bhuts* were not only left unappeased, but they were to be chased right out of the Uraon country by an extensive rite of exorcism. (Roy, S.C., *Oraon Religion and Customs*, Ranchi, 1928, pp. 347-53. Cfr. Also Tea Districts Labour Association, *Hand-Book of Castes and Tribes*, Calcutta, 1924, pp. 28-29.) The refrain '*tana baba tana*' (pull father pull, i.e. out with it father!) recurring endlessly in the exorcism hymns gave outsiders the idea to dub these exorcists "*Tana Bhagats*". The expulsion of these deeply entrenched *bhuts* was understood to be no easy task and in order to assure its success, the *Tana Bhagats* had to lead an ascetic life free from alcoholic drinks and meat eating. They had, besides, to learn long hymns and *mantras* by heart and to sing these in chorus often throughout the nights. In these nightly noisy sessions, the singers called on God and on all the mighty *babas* (powers, such as, the sun, moon, stars, etc.), to come to their aid in expelling the evil spirits, freeing the sick from their ailments. Even in the far-off tea plantations of the *Terai* at the foot of the Himalayas, the Uraon labourers took enthusiastically to the new movement and an insurrection of the Uraons there was feared.

The *Tana* rules of conduct clearly indicate an approach to a Hindu ideal of ritual purity and asceticism. The appeasing of minor spirits and the practice of witchcraft is taboo. Untruthfulness, thefts, quarrels and resort to violence are vehemently condemned. Ceremonial cleanliness is strictly enjoined.

3.8 THE HARIBABA MOVEMENT IN SINGHBHUM (1930-31)

Led by Duka Ho, called *Haribaba*, this movement swept through northern parts of Singhbhum and the whole of the Ranchi district. It directed its attack against the *bongas* (spirits). Everything suspected of *bongas* was discarded. Duka's followers cut down the trees of the *sarnas* (sacred groves), abodes of the spirits. The *Haribabaites* worshipped *Hanuman* and wore the sacred thread. They insisted on cleanliness. They did not eat meat and stopped drinking liquor. They believed that a saviour would come and save them from oppression. The movement was influenced by the Birsa movement. *Haribaba* was alleged to be seeking to unite the tribals with the aim of restoring to them their pristine rule over lands and forests. The movement subsided with the arrest of *Haribaba*.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Did the Bhagat movement bring about any radical change in the religion of Uraons? Give reasons to your answer.

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2) Which were the religious characters of Kherwar movement among the Santals?

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3) How did Christianity play the role of liberating tribals in the prevailing socio-economic and religious situations?

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4) What was the message of Birsa Munda for his people?

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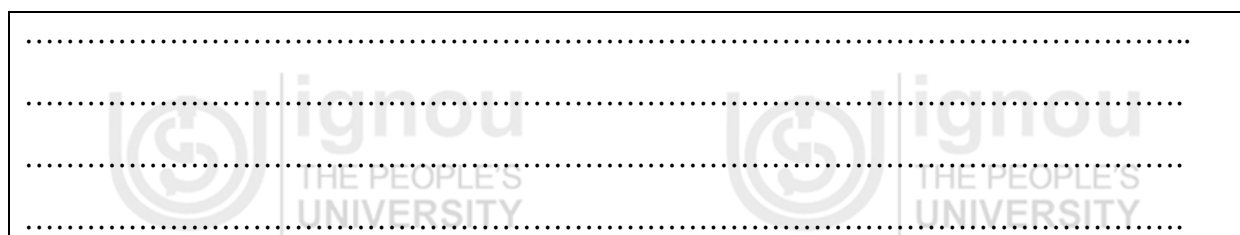
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5) What was the doctrine of Tana Bhagat Movement?

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3.9 LET US SUM UP

One of the distinguishing features of these millenarian cults is that they occurred in a confrontation of the Hindu landlords and money lenders against tribal groups. In their external behaviour the sectarians of the new cults adopted the observances of the Hindu rules of ritual purity by giving up animal sacrifices, meat and liquor and tribal dances and adornments, and took to the wearing of the sacred thread, and taking of ritual baths. They did all these things in order to raise their social status before the Hindus coming in contact with them but they did not bring about any structural change in their social and religious institutions.

A student of social change is primarily concerned with *institutional changes*. He attempts to follow the changes that may have occurred in some such institution as the political, economic, kinship, or religious organisation of a society in its social, cultural and ecological setting. When doing this, he does not assume that by tracing out the origin of some custom in time he will have explained it. Nor does he imply that a simple knowledge of the diffusion of a cultural trait in space will have helped him to understand its nature adequately. When two different societies come into effective contact the resultant changes that occur are rarely simple or one sided. Innovations borrowed from neighbouring societies may modify pre-existing institutions and radically affect the complex network of relationships.

Another kind of social change is more dramatic, for it alters the very character of the social system itself. Some of its constituent institutions are so altered that they no longer fit in with the other existing institutions as they previously used to do. This structural change is *radical change*. The conflicts it gives rise to are not resolved in terms of the existing values of the society. Tradition provides no cure for these unprecedented conflicts. Hence, they are confusing and a source of great stress. If the social system is to survive, radical modifications must be made in it before long. And in the process, the society will become something other than what it used to be.

Millenarian movements have occurred generally in situations of severe social conflicts and stresses often caused by radical institutional changes in societies. But institutions are ultimately social abstractions. How is one to observe radical social conflicts and stresses? When a particular institutional complex changes in one or two of these aspects but not in all, various stresses follow.

Any social movement which is based on the expectation and anticipation of a coming Messiah (anointed one), who will release people from their current misery is called a messianic movement. Messianic movements, especially in Third World societies, are typically associated therefore with deprivation. Messianic beliefs offer hope for a better world. In this sense, the above mentioned reform movements among the tribals were messianic movements no doubt.

Their leaders were prophets who prophesied the coming of imminent, total, ultimate, this-worldly, collective salvation.

As regards the beliefs themselves adopted by the converts, we note in all these religious movements an insistence on monotheism. Taking the example of the Uraon tribals, their belief in a Supreme Being, Creator of all things, was not new to them. In fact they never forgot to invoke God on the big ceremonial occasions. They always offered Him a white (pure) victim, and when all else failed, they finally turned to Him saying, “*akkuga ninim ra'day*,” meaning “It is up to you now.” What was new was the renunciation of the minor spirits and the propitiatory sacrifices to them in case of sickness and trouble. The converts had to turn to God in all their troubles. The exorcism of the minor spirits and the abandonment of their worship also formed an important feature of the Tana Bhagat movement.

The adoption of new religions entailed some structural changes in the society of converts. Christianity, for example, made the old centres of Uraon worship quite redundant. The *sarna* or the sacred grove, where the minor spirits were once solemnly propitiated, the *darha* and *desauli* fields, i.e. fields associated with these spirits, where regular sacrifices were offered, and the clan ossuary where the bones of the dead were interred at the second burial, all lost their relevance. In their stead, a room in the convert's house, the village chapel, and the church at the mission station now became the centres of prayer and worship.

The personnel, too, of the traditional cults were now rendered unnecessary. The *Pahan* (village priest) was no more called on to perform the communal sacrifices and his assistant, the *Pujar*, had nothing more left to do. The service lands attached to these offices no more served their old purpose. The Christian Catechist now assumed the status of the village religious headman. He led the prayers, presided over the meetings of Christian elders and his decisions were liable to be vetoed by his parish priest. The traditional privilege of the founding clan to supply exclusively candidates for the village priesthood was broken, for any suitable candidate was able to become a Christian clergyman or a religious nun.

The traditional rituals of animal sacrifices to minor spirits, ancestor spirits and *Dharmes*, the Supreme Being, were now reduced to recital of prayers, the singing of hymns, and participation in sacraments and religious processions. Witch-hunting and punishing of suspects was now discouraged. With the possible exception of the retention of a modified version of the harvest festival and the feast of the cattle, all the traditional agricultural feasts were abandoned.

S.C. Roy, a great authority on the Mundas and Oraons, says the following on the *Tana Bhagats*:

“A section of the Oraons of Chota-Nagpur have within recent years developed a new religion which is a curious result of Hindu and Christian ideas on primitive Animism The main-spring of the new movement appears to have been a desire in the agitators of the movement to raise the now degraded social position of their community to the higher level occupied by the Hindu and Christian converts among their tribe-fellows and to remedy, if possible, their long standing agrarian grievances and the present wretchedness of their economic condition. And thus the social and economic aspects of the movement are bound up with its religious aspect.” (Roy, S.C., “A new Religious Movement Among the Oraons,” *Man in India*, Ranchi, Dec. 1921, Vol. I, No. 4, pp. 266-267.)

Among the problems raised by the typical messianic cult rituals, it is the question of the apparent incongruity of adoption of mystical means in these movements for attaining straightforward political and social goals after the failure to attain them by rational means. How are we to explain the reversal of the Mundas and Uraons to strict *monotheism*, their abandonment of the worship of village spirits and the adoption of Hindu rules of ritual purity in their attempt to expel foreign landlords and to regain their lost ancestral lands, village autonomy and traditional ways of life?

These ritual steps will perhaps appear less incongruous if we regard them as symbols or as understandable signs for some notion, more or less abstract, to which cultural values, either positive or negative get attached. The central problem of these rituals is that of expressing what cannot be readily thought of. The basic question in these rituals is not whether they are true (i.e. whether they are in fact capable of expelling foreigners and restoring ancestral lands) but whether they say in apt symbolic language what the Mundas and Uraons sought and held important to say. To the followers of messianic movements of course, these cultic rituals are more than mere symbolic expressions of their desire, they are to them also effective means of attaining these desires. J. Beattie suggests that “fundamentally, ritual’s efficacy is thought to lie in its very suggestiveness.” (“Ritual and Social Change,” *Man*, Vol. 1, No. 1, March 1966, p. 69.)

The certitude of the believers in the effectiveness of rituals would seem to stem from the fact that they are attributed to divine inspiration. Prophets are looked upon as divine ambassadors and their charismatic powers are taken as their credentials for the genuineness of their claims. The messianic cults attempted, it would seem among other things, to solve a moral problem. Something other than a mere economic or political recovery was involved.

For *Tana Bhagats* the exorcism of spirits and the abandonment of tribal habits was a symbolic break with the past. The *Bhagats*’ adoption of strict *monotheism* and congregational prayer gatherings on a fixed day were clear imitations of their relatively better organised Christian neighbours. The adoption of the Hindu rules of ritual purity (vegetarianism, ritual baths, wearing the sacred thread, the adoption of non violence, etc.) was a sign of their imitation of their better off Hindu landlords. A sociological explanation of a millenarian cult therefore views them as a pattern of social change in which societies under radical institutional change reassert, in the face of bureaucratic and cash centred systems, a new integrity in a totally new environment. This study thus leads to the conclusion that the cult itself reveals the moral efforts of a dissatisfied people to rise up as new men in a new social and moral environment.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) What was the observation of S.C. Roy on Tana Bhagats?

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2) Did Hindu religion have any radical impact on tribal religions? How?

3.10 KEY WORDS

Birsa movement: it was a manifestation of the socio-economic and religious unrest among the Mundas.

Haribaba: this movement swept through northern parts of Singhbhum and the whole of the Ranchi district. It directed its attack against the *bongas* (spirits). Everything suspected of *bongas* was discarded. They cut down the trees of the *sarnas* (sacred groves), abodes of the spirits.

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UNIT 4 FUTURE OF TRIBAL RELIGION/S

Contents

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Variety and Diversity of Religious Practices
- 4.3 Santal Religious Life
- 4.4 The Future of Tribal Religions
- 4.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.6 Key Words
- 4.7 Further Readings and References

4.0 OBJECTIVES

- To study the religious situation of the tribals.
- To learn some of the religious practices of tribals, especially that of Santals.
- To draw insights on the future of tribal religions.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, esp. a personal God or gods. Clifford Geertz's definition of religion as a "cultural system" was dominant for most of the 20th century and continues to be widely accepted today. Religious life among tribes in India is an astounding variety of unknown customs and venerations. Amongst the 68 teeming million citizens of India who belong to tribal groups, Indian tribal religious concepts, terminologies and practices are as wide-ranging as the hundreds of tribes. However, members of these groups possess one thing in common: they believe in the constant insistency to remain united under religious faiths and customs. Most of the insistency, however, comes from the process of consolidation within a national political and economic system that brings tribes into increasing reach with other groups and uncountable prestigious belief systems. On the whole, those tribes that remain geographically separated in desert, hill, and forest regions or on islands are able to retain their traditional cultures and religions for a longer period of time. The tribes that make a changeover, moving ahead from hunting and gathering and towards a sedentary agriculture are generally low-status labourers. These men always encounter their ancient religious forms in disintegration and their place being filled by practices of Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, or Buddhism. Whatever be the cases or worries, religious life amongst Indian tribes is an exemplary situation, wherein everybody follows by the essential norms.

4.2 VARIETY AND DIVERSITY OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

Indian religions tribal concepts are intricately interlaced with ideas regarding nature and dealings with local ecological systems. Normally in the tribal religions, religious specialists are drawn from the village or family and serve a vast range of spiritual functions focussing on appeasing potentially dangerous spirits and coordinating rituals. We will see a few examples of variety and diversity in the religious beliefs and customs of tribals.

The Nagas

The Naga tribes live in the mountains of north-east India. They believe in a specific earthquake god who created the earth out of the waters by earthquakes. The sons of this God now watch over mankind and punish those who perform wrong deeds. Religious life in this Indian tribe is quite quaint and secretive, compared to the others. Other deities without name or form reside in the mountains, forests, rivers and lakes, who need mollifying, for their hostile attitude to men. Omens and dreams are also generally believed in. Witchcraft is wide practised and some men are also believed to have the capability to turn into tigers. Some tribal groups sacrifice dogs or pigs when making a wood carving; otherwise the carver will soon fall ill or die. This most likely belongs to the older tradition of only allowing a man to carve a human figure in a *morung* (bachelors' dormitory) when he had taken a head. Head-hunting was a significant practice, since fertile crops depended on a sprinkling of blood from a stranger over the fields. Reincarnation is believed by many Naga tribes and the dead are buried in the direction from which their ancestors have arrived. The doctrine of genna (tabu) involves the entire social groups: villages, clans, households, age groups, sex groups, in a series of rituals that are regularly practised; this genna ritual is also the result of an emergency such as an earthquake.

The Bhils

The Bhils are one of the largest tribes of western India, living in parts of Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra. Many Bhils are Hinduised. Religious life amongst this Indian tribe is known to be much varied and curious. There exists a myth of descent from a tiger ancestor. The Jhabua Bhil and others believe in Bhagavan or Bholo Iswor, who is a personal supreme God. They also believe in minor deities who have shrines on hills or underneath the trees. Worship of Bhagavan is generally performed at the settlement's central sanctuary. There lies a human-oriented cult of the dead amongst the Bhils, whose main ritual is named Nukto and is practised in front of a dead person's house. Nukto purifies the spirit of the dead and merges it with Bhagavan. Gothriz Purvez is the collective ancestor. The perception of a spirit-rider is crucial in Nukto and Gothriz Purvez accompanies the spirit on part of its journey to the after-world.

The Todas

The Todas are a tiny pastoral community living on the 7000 Nilgiri Hills in South India. Religious belief in this Indian tribe is in the 1600 or 1800 superior godlike beings, the two most important being On and Teikirzi. On is the male god of Amnodr, the kingdom of the dead and he had procreated the Todas and their buffaloes. He was himself a dairyman. Teikirzi is a female deity and more imperative to the people. She once ruled when she lived in the Nilgiris and is known to have established Toda social and ceremonial laws. Most other deities are hill-gods, each linked to a particular hill. There are also two river-gods belonging to the two main rivers. Toda religion is based primarily upon the buffaloes and their milk. The temples are the dairies.

Many tribes in India demonstrate considerable syncretism with Hinduism, like the Kadugollas of Karnataka, who worship gods such as Junjappa, Yattappa, Patappa, and Cittappa. In reality they are more devoted to Shiva, who dominates their festivals and religious observances. Local deities are still of significance, though, the Bedanayakas of Karnataka worship Papanayaka. This deity is supposed to have lived 300-400 years ago as a holy man among them and who performed miracles.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Who are the Bhils?

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2) Are there syncretic elements in tribal religions?

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4.3 SANTAL RELIGIOUS LIFE

After briefly going over the religious setup of some tribe, we want to focus more on the Santals, one of the most studied tribal religious groups. They are found Orissa, Jharkhand and West Bengal and are one of the largest tribes in India, with a population estimated at 4.2 million.

The Gods and Goddesses

According to the Santals, the supreme deity is Thakurji, who ultimately commands over the complete universe. However, the primary reverence of belief falls on a court of spirits (bonga), who address different aspects of the world. These spirits must be appeased with prayers and oblations in order to ward-off evil influences. These spirits operate at the village, household, ancestor and sub-clan levels, along with evil spirits that induce disease. Going by religious beliefs in Indian tribal life, such evil spirits have possibilities to inhabit village boundaries, mountains, waters and the forest. A distinctive feature of the Santal village is a sanctified grove on the perimeter of the settlement, where numerous spirits live and a series of annual festivals go on.

The most important spirit residing amongst Santals is Maran Buru (Great Mountain), who is conjured up whenever offerings are made. Religious beliefs in this Indian tribe instructs that the Maran Buru first dictates the Santals in sex and brewing of rice beer. Maran Buru's consort is the benevolent Jaher Era (Lady of the Grove). An annual round of rituals linked

with the agricultural cycle, along with life-cycle rituals for birth, marriage and burial at death, calls for petitions to the spirits and offerings that include sacrificing of animals, usually birds. Religious life in this Indian tribe is dictated by the religious leaders, who are male specialists in medical cures. They like to practice soothsaying and witchcraft. Similar beliefs are common among other tribes of north-east and central India like the Kharia, Munda, and Oraon. Smaller and more isolated tribes often manifest less articulated classification systems of spiritual hierarchy, delineated as animism or a widespread worship of spiritual energies associated with locations, activities and social groups.

Santals do not consider themselves to be Hindus. They have a religion of their own which is completely different from Hinduism. It is called *Sarna Dhorom*. A yearly round of rituals connected with the agricultural cycle, along with life-cycle rituals for birth, marriage and burial, involve petitions to the spirits and offerings that include food articles and sacrifice of animals and birds. Religious leaders are male specialists in medical cures who practice also divination and witchcraft. In every village there is a *jaherthan* or sacred grove. Usually the *jaherthan* is found at the boundary of every village, with a number of Sal trees (*Shorea robusta*), and the sacrifices are offered in this particular place by the *naeke* (priest). It is believed that many spirits dwell in the sacred grove and many festivals are held during the year. For all the festivals there is a *puja* (sacrifice) held here.

Santals are a joyous community; *raska* meaning joy, pleasure, happiness as a motto in life. They are happy and contented even in the worst situation of utter poverty. Thus there are numerous seasonal rites and festivals by the Santals to keep them happy. Their behaviour during these festivals is characterised by a carefree, uninhibited attitude and a joyous frame of mind.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Who is the most important spirit among Santals?

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2) How do the Santals express their joy?

.....

The Santal Life-Cycle

Our human life has basically four important stages, birth, initiation, marriage and death. The Santals have very special rites/ceremonies on these occasions. All these different stages of transition are significant moments in their life and they make these occasions important through various symbolic activities. Santals consider these rites of passage as religiously significant. These rites and ceremonies are mainly concerned with securing active help of

benevolent spirits and passive forbearance of the malignant ones. This is to ensure the safety and well-being of the individual. They are also collective occasions to emphasise the mutual harmony and solidarity between the individual and society. I explain briefly these aspects because to know a people we need to know their life-cycle too. It is good to know who they are, what they are, and how they form and organise their life.

Birth and Purification (*Janam Chatiar*)

“One of the greatest things a Santal married couple dreads is to have no offspring. They will secure adult respect only when they beget a child. So important is a child, especially a son, that a husband can lawfully divorce a wife if she is found to be barren and a wife can divorce her husband if he is found to be sterile. In some cases, the husband is persuaded to take a second wife. This however, is done only with the consent of the first wife” (Troisi 1978).

The birth of a child is announced by saying, “The new relation has arrived.” Children are spoken of as the gift of the Supreme Being and so they are a blessing to the family. It is true that every family likes to have a male child at first because they want to keep the family clan and inherit the father’s lands. It is also important that he needs to assist at his father’s funeral ceremonies and perpetuate the worship of his own ancestors. Girls are welcome but not in the same priority. The first girl is not considered as a curse as seen by many Hindus. A villager on hearing the birth asks, “What is it? Does it carry on the shoulder (a boy) or does it carry on the head (a girl). Or he may say, “Is it a hunter or is it a water carrier?” (Culshaw 1949).

Once the child is born the message is announced to the people in the house. Later the whole village is notified about the birth. All the villagers are expected to know this because of the impurity involved as well as the happy message of the new member. The next important ceremony is the ritual purification (*janam chatiar*). The ceremonial uncleanness resulting from birth is shared by the whole village. There are three reasons for this ceremony. First there is the purification of the house and village from the defilement caused by child birth. The second is giving the child a name and admitting the child into the father’s clan and giving the child protection of the father’s spirits. The third is incorporating the child into the tribe. For this ceremony the relatives are invited. The removal of defilement consists in shaving and bathing. A barber shaves all the men of the village, starting from the *naeke* (priest). A few locks of hair are also cut from the child’s head. Once this is complete all the men folk go to the river and bathe themselves. After they return the women folk bathe.

Once the people have returned to the house after their bath, the child’s mother is made to sit on the veranda of the house with the child in her lap. The midwife sprinkles cow-dung water on the mother and child. Then the child is given a name and thus the child receives a definite status in the family and village. In order to be united with the ancestors the boy child receives the name of his grandfather and the girl child the name of the grandmother. The ceremony is complete when all are given rice boiled with neem tree (*Azadirachta indica*, a medicinal tree) leaves (*neem dak mandi*). Part of the boiled rice is offered to the spirits for the protection of the child (Culshaw 1949).

Initiation (*Caco-Chatiar*)

The second important period in the life of the Santal is initiation or *caco-chatiar*. This ceremony may be observed any time before marriage and no Santal boy or girl may be permitted to be married before the initiation is performed. Once this is done they become full-fledged members of the tribe with all the responsibilities and privileges. The members enter into a new relationship with the *bongas* (spirits) who can now be approached with sacrificial offerings and also share in the sacrificial meal (Troisi 1978).

On the fixed day the villagers are summoned to the house where the ceremony is to take place. At times there may be more than one member to undergo initiation. The midwife who presided at the birth may be present. She or some other elderly woman bathes the children by pouring water over them. After that the midwife or a girl from the village anoints all the people present with oil and turmeric, starting with the *naeke* (priest). Rice beer brewed for the occasion is served to all present and after that they sing and dance. At this juncture an old man comes to narrate the story of creation, and the wanderings of the Santals as narrated in the myth. It is important that they know their tribal tradition. It also helps to transmit the tribal lore, ensuring certain continuity in the tradition (Mukherjee 1980).

The practices of tattooing (*Khoda*) the girls and cicatrization (*Sika*) of boys are also associated with initiation. Many Santals say that these marks are very important for them to reveal their identity. The boys are branded on the hand/arm (in odd numbers) and girls are tattooed on the arms, shoulders and breasts. These marks are a guarantee for life in the next world to prove that they are Santals.

Marriage (Bapla)

"The Santals cannot simply understand the proposition as to how a man can go on in a state of single blessedness. So both sexes despise the unhappy wretch and do not hesitate to call the solitary one, 'a thief, a witch, or a no man'." (Mukherjee 1980) Even today bachelors and old maids are few among the Santal tribe. Marriage (bapla) is the most important stage in the Santal life cycle because they want to protect the solidarity of the tribe. Tribal endogamy and clan exogamy are practised very strictly by the Santals. These people enjoy abundant freedom in social contacts and they find their own partners although it is not always the case; marriages may be arranged by the parents. It is common among the Santals to marry quite young, many of the girls get married just after reaching puberty; many boys get married before they are twenty. They do not practise polygamy unless the wife is barren.

Bride Purchase (Kirin Bahu Bapla)

Though there are various forms of marriage (traditionally seven) the usual form is called *kirin bahu bapla* (bride purchase). It means the wife is bought by the bridegroom by paying a price to the bride's father. This is usually arranged by the elders. The relatives (would-be) meet each other and a day is arranged to visit the boy in his house. On this occasion the bride price (*gonon*) is fixed as well as other matters related to the marriage. This ceremony is called *nepel* (meeting each other). It is the same as betrothal. Later the bride is visited at her place. On both the occasions sacrifices are offered to the village spirits and to the ancestral spirits for the protection of the couple (Troisi 1978).

The preparations for the marriage are very important and many people of both the villages (bride's and bridegroom's) take part. The houses and the streets (*kulhi*) are decorated. The bridegroom bathes and then oil and turmeric are applied on his body. After this the procession starts with drums and cymbals beat to the accompaniment of merry music. When the groom's party enters the bride's village they are received with traditional ceremonies. The best-man carries the groom on his shoulder and the bride is carried in a palanquin. Both are sprinkled with water. The bride's face is uncovered and the groom applies *sindur* (vermilion) on her forehead. (This is equal to putting the rings on each other's fingers). This is accompanied by loud shouting, drumming and cheering. Then the couple enter the house. The priest offers sacrifice to the village spirits at the *jaherthan* (sacred grove) for the welfare of the couple. After these rituals are over they begin the meal (Orans 1965).

Other Types of Marriage

The other forms of marriage are for convenience and at times due to the prevailing situation. *kirin jawae bapla*: when a husband is acquired/bought for a girl who is made pregnant by a man who, either does not want to marry her, or cannot marry her because he belongs to her clan. In such a case the cost of acquiring/buying (*kirin*) a husband (*jawae*) is borne by the offender. *Tunki Dipil Bapla*: This is observed by people who are poor who cannot bear the expenses of a regular marriage. No bride price is paid. The bride gathers all her belongings in a small bamboo basket (*tunki*) and she is brought to the groom's house with the basket on her head (*dipil*). *Sanga Bapla*: This is contracted by a widow or a divorced woman, a widower or a divorced man. In this case the bride price is half of the normal rate. The reason for this is because it is believed that after death the woman will re-join her first husband. *Ghardi Jawae Bapla*: This is resorted to by the parents who have only daughters and no sons. So a man is brought in to help in the work of the household. All marriage expenses are borne by the girl's party. The groom pays no bride price either. Normally only boys from poor families agree to this kind of marriage. He is obliged to stay in the bride's house for five years. After this period he may go back to his house. In the case of *Ghar Jawae Bapla* he stays permanently in his in-law's house. However he continues to retain his rights on his father's land and property. He cannot make sacrifices to his father-in-law's *bongas* but he keeps his father's *bongas*. Two other types of marriages (*Itut Bapla*, *Nir Bolok Bapla*) are rare because there is force involved. In the case of *Itut* (to mark with paint) *Bapla* the boy takes the initiative because he does not know if the parents agree to the marriage. So in a public place he forcibly applies vermilion (*sindur*) on her forehead claiming her as his wife. In *Nir Bolok* (intruding) *Bapla* it is the girl who takes the initiative. She intrudes into the house of the boy because he has had sexual relations with her and refuses to marry her. So she forces him into marriage (Troisi 1978).

Marriage is understood as a relationship not merely between two persons but between two families and villages. The following words indicate the union of two villages, "From now on our villages have become as one. Formerly you were strangers and you used to pass by our village. Now if any of your people is passing this way he must stop and ask for a drink" (Orans 1965).

Death (*Gujuk*) & Funeral Rites

The Santals do not recognise the possibility of natural death. They attribute death to the malignancy of certain *bongas* (spirits). Though one has to fight against these bongas all through life, finally the *bongas* put an end to human life. When a death takes place in the tribe, the village headman and the villagers flock together in mourning. They anoint the body with oil and turmeric. The corpse is then taken out of the house in a cot and is kept on the courtyard. Without much delay, when most of the villagers are present, they carry the dead body to the outskirts of the village and bury it. Usually women do not go to the burial place (Mukherjee 1980).

A grave is dug at the outskirts of the village facing north south. The body is buried there with the head facing south. It is buried with the cot and above it dry branches or bamboo sticks are placed so that mud does not fall directly on the corpse. They then cover the grave with earth and place some stones above it. After this the chief mourner, usually the eldest son, has his head shaved completely. Then all go for their purificatory bath because the Santals believe that after the death of a person the whole village is polluted. The next important ceremony after the funeral is known as '*tel nahan*' (oil washing). It is also known as *umul ader* (bringing in the shadow). Until this ceremony is performed the dead person will remain in the clutches of the hostile agency.

The *tel nahan* ceremony takes place five days after the death of the person. The ceremony is important because of the double effect; one is for the redemption of the dead person and the other for the purification of the village. The village men gather at the dead man's house. After all have been shaved, some male relatives of the deceased accompanied by other villagers go to the grave. Here, the chief mourner collects a handful of earth which he burns and puts into a new earthenware pot. On returning to the end of the village *kulhi*, where they are met by womenfolk, the pot is smashed to pieces and the burnt earth is sprinkled with water and turmeric. Then everyone goes for his purificatory bath. The chief mourner carrying the burnt earth keeps it on a leaf plate. After taking bath and rubbing themselves with oil given by the deceased's family, the chief mourner, surrounded by his male relatives and villagers, makes offerings of oil cakes and *sal* twigs to *Maran Buru* (Supreme God), *Pilchu Haram* and *Pilchu Budhi*, and to the departed soul. He implores *Maran Buru* to lodge the deceased's soul in the shadow of the house till he reaches his final rest (Troisi 1978).

Though with the *tel nahan* ceremony the departed spirit is said to have been released from the underworld, he has not reached his final abode. The last part of the funeral ceremony, *bhandan* is what joins the spirit of the dead with the realm of the ancestors. Several relatives and villagers are invited for this celebration. They bring along goats and chicken and rice beer to be offered to the spirit. After the sacrifices are offered the people's mourning comes to an end. The meal is cooked with the meat offered to the spirits. All eat and drink and celebrate the occasion because they know that the dead has joined the world of the ancestors. Santals believe that death is essentially an interruption of the normal process of living. They in fact speak of *hormo* and *jion* (body and life or soul). The body remains here on this world (*noa puri*) and soul (*jion*) goes to the other world or sky or heaven country. Life in the other world depends on the type of life one has led here in this world. If one has led a good life on this earth one is rewarded with a happy life in the other world; if one has led a bad life on this

earth one will receive punishment and will remain in hell which is known as *ich kund* (excrement heap) (Culshaw 1949).

In all societies, major events in the life cycle (as mentioned above) are subject to ritualised forms of recognition. Across the world, such events are celebrated in diverse and sometimes elaborate ways, with different cultures singling out different stages of life for attention. Because rites of passage appear around the world and concern deeply human transitions, it is easy to lapse into universal claims: When there is a death, you should grieve; everyone rejoices at a birth; weddings are dramatisations of love. The point in examining other people's rites and ceremonies is not to steal or even borrow them but to evoke more appreciation and understanding towards them. Each tribe or race has its own unique customs and practices. These are elements that make a tribe rich and worthy of attention.

Santal Festivals

Religious and secular festivals and feasts have many uses and values beyond the public enjoyment of a celebration. In Santal society, festivals provide an opportunity for the elders to pass on folk knowledge and the meaning of tribal lore to younger generations. Their festivals and feasts focusing on the customs of their traditional or ethnic group enrich understanding of their heritage and religion. Communal feasts are also occasions for eating, drinking, and merrymaking for the Santals. It fosters common living and religiosity.

4.4 THE FUTURE OF TRIBAL RELIGIONS

As we reflect on the future of tribal religions, we need to note the creative, flexible and oral aspect of tribal religions. We also need to be aware that tribal religion is central to one's identity. Another aspect of tribal religions is the "power of now" or the celebration of the present. Oral tradition is one of the trademarks of all tribal religions. The religious stories repeated told make it easy to understand the spiritual and moral lessons that are intended by them. Rather than try to explain what God is in literal terms, stories are woven with the use of nature and animals to show what God is like. Oral tradition also preserves creatively the intent of the lessons. The written word is often taken literally and the essence of its meaning is lost in the lines. In primal cultures, the tribal life and religion is central to the individual's identity. However, the tribe in this sense extends beyond the individual human beings. It is everything in the ecosystem of the group. It is all of nature, animals, and objects, animate and inanimate, in addition to the people. As such, great emphasis is placed on the existence of Spirit in everything. Everything has its place and value in the tribe. Everyone is taught to honor everything within the tribe, as well as the tribal entity.

The "eternal now" is significant for them. It seems the Aborigines believe that they can become their archetypal heroes, or gods, in every moment. They can, of course, embody this god for continuous moment and, as a result, merge with it. Tribal religion – without fixed structures, written scriptures, clear doctrine and hierarchical authority - is in a fluid state. But the three aspects mentioned above will revitalise their religiosity and collective consciousness. The primal religion is experiencing another boom in the contemporary society. Here we may see some similarities between the concepts of primal religion and

“New Age” religions. Many seekers, in an effort to get to the Truth, adopted the ideas and traditions in primal religions. There is a tendency today to go back to the sources and draw religious inspiration from the tribal and primal spiritualities, which are so close to nature.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) How do the tribals understand marriage?

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2) What is the significance of oral tradition in tribal religions?

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4.5 LET US SUM UP

For tribals religion is very vibrant giving them personal and collective identities. This unit described the varieties of religious life of the tribals and then focussed on the Santal religious life. It also spoke about the future of tribal religions.

4.6 KEY WORDS

Tabu: Tabu or taboo is a prejudice that prohibits the use or mention of something because of its sacred nature.

Jaherthan. It is sacred grove, very significant for Santal Religious practices. Usually the *jaherthan* is found at the boundary of every village, with a number of Sal trees (*Shorea robusta*), and the sacrifices are offered in this particular place by the *naeke* (priest).

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