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Humans, Nature and Gods: Their Interrelatedness in the Folk Religious World-View

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Abstract: This article shows that folk religion plays a mediating role between society and the individuals, between humans and nature. On the one hand, it takes for granted the existing caste-based social structure and the plausibility of inter-human relationship within caste-system. On the other hand, it also reveals its potential to interrogate and subvert the unjust and discriminatory categories of inter-human relationships within the caste-system. On the one hand, it takes for granted the 'given' relationship between humans and nature in a geographical setting. On the hand, it positively orients humans to care for nature and not to exploit it for their selfish ends. Along this line, the article shows how folk religions create, affirm and confirm the concept of inter-relatedness not only between human beings in society, but also between humans, nature and supernatural powers.

In this article, the author shows how folk religion can play the role of social critique by demonstrating how folk religious rituals like possession, trance and divination can become effective means of questioning and correcting some of the ills in the inter-human relationships in Indian society operative both at the interpersonal and at the societal levels. Thus folk religions have the potentiality to percolate the ideas of inter-relatedness at various levels of relationships: humans' relationship with other humans, human's relationship with the supernatural beings-gods, and humans' relationship with nature. Thus folk religions have given a more comprehensive and holistic picture of reality that intertwines and integrates the different dimensions of reality.

Keywords: Folk religions, subalternity, social identity, possession, sakti, social network.

Introduction

This article makes an attempt to show that the folk religious domain in India is not just the remnant of the past but is a continuous process of creation, acceptance and rejection of the multifaceted reality that undergoes change at the structural level and subsequently at the inter-relational levels. More specifically, it argues that folk religion plays a mediating role between society and the individuals, between humans and nature. On the one hand, it takes for granted the existing caste-based social structure and the plausibility of inter-human relationship within the caste-system. On the other hand, it also reveals its potential to interrogate and subvert the unjust and discriminatory categories of inter-human relationships within the caste-system. On the one hand, it takes for granted the 'given' relationship between humans and nature in a geographical setting. On the hand, it positively orients humans to care for nature and not to exploit it for their selfish ends. Along this line, the article shows how folk religions create, affirm and confirm the concept of inter-relatedness not only between human beings in society, but also between humans, nature and supernatural powers.

To begin its inquiry, the article deliberates on key idea 'caste' which serves as the foundation of inter-human relationships in Indian society. Then it goes on to study the events of folk rituals, pilgrimages and communal meals etc. in order to show how they facilitate and nuance inter-human relationships. Further, the paper moves the discussion of inter-relatedness from among humans to that between humans, nature and supernatural powers and discusses it under such titles as "Inter-connectedness as axial relationships," "Humans' relationship with Nature and Folk Religion," "Interdependent humans and independent gods," and "Sakti: A Power of Unification." Finally it shows how folk religion can play the role of social critique by demonstrating how folk religious rituals like possession, trance and divination can become effective means of questioning and correcting some of the ills in the inter-human relationships in Indian society operative both at the interpersonal and at the societal levels.

Caste, Inter-human Relations and Society

Since caste is the key to the understanding of social life in India, it is undeniably an organising principle of inter-human relations in

this land. No meaningful sociological inquiry into human relationships in India can take place without taking into account the role of 'caste,' because the inter-human relationships in India are very much ordered, controlled, maintained and subordinated by caste-relations. Hierarchy and holism, which are central values of caste-relations according to Dumont, continue to be the key principles which influence the inter-human relationships beyond one's family in the realm of civil society. There is no doubt that, all over the world, family is the most fundamental unit where a person experiences the first tier of inter-human relationships. The human relationships in the family are something 'given,' not chosen by the individuals. In India, the 'givenness' of inter-human relationship extends to the other members of society through the caste-system. Traditionally speaking, caste-system presents one set of people in society (one's caste men/women) as your own and another set of people (the other caste people) as different from you. It prescribes and proscribes different moods and motivations of human interaction with people of different castes. The *varnashrama* dharma clearly spells out the range of possible human relationships for each caste. The caste system, on the one hand, knits together the different segments of society into one whole, by providing a unitary framework in which everyone is related to everyone else in society through a religiously sanctioned social structure. On the other hand, it is divisive. It divides the whole of human society into hierarchical units where one always stands higher or lower than the others in society. Subsequently, it offers a comprehensive and a pre-programmed set of possibilities for human relationships in society. Of course, it provides divisive and discriminatory conceptions of human interactions.

Now the question that arises is: What is the relationship between caste and folk religions in this regard? Do they influence one another in a way that conditions the possibility of inter-human relationships in our society? My submission in this article is that folk religions play ambivalent roles in this area. It is true that they support the caste and thus uphold the range of inter-human relationships prescribed and proscribed by the caste system. It is also true that they unfold every now and then their potential to subvert the caste-system and thereby trigger off a certain egalitarian attitude and

humane outlook in inter-human interactions. As we proceed, both these roles will become clear.

Inter-human Relations, Sources of Resilience and Folk Religions

Kinship, caste and neighbourhood—the different forms and structures of inter-human relationships function as effective mechanism of resilience in Indian society. They provide ready-made primordial ties to cope with the crisis and the displacements occurring in the wake of floods, famines and other calamities¹. “When an industrial strike, a communal conflict, danger due to vulnerability during a war or because of terrorism necessitates a safer haven, the kindred of recognition and co-operation provide the first refuge.”² On such crisis situations, the relatives tend to move from cities to villages or from villages to cities, offer their help and return to their places of work when difficulties are overcome. Thus kinship mediates the rural-urban interconnections both for villagers and for city dwellers. Thus the ties of kinship and caste have provided the social base for cooperative action in the face of calamities.

Now folk religious festivals become occasions that not only bring people together as one people of a place but they also strengthen their bonding as one community. Various folk religious rites can be viewed as a process of ritualisation of their solidarity. When a shaman predicts the fortune of the village during divination or when he/she undertakes ritual hunting of village boundaries or when she or he performs rituals on behalf of the village, the sense of kinship and solidarity is evoked, recalled and reinforced, more unconsciously than consciously, through highly orchestrated and emotionally packed ritual performances.

Besides, it must be noted that “these vibrant institutions mediate between the individual and the state in organising the resources of the state to reach the village in times of crisis,”³ and it is often during the time of folk religious festivals that an effective process of communication and negotiation takes place between the village leaders and the state machinery. For instance, in one of the folk religious festivals, I heard the shaman telling the local M.L.A (member of legislative assembly): “You have come to pray and get

the blessing of our god. But have you honoured the god and his people? During the floods, the main road to the village and to my temple are washed away. Why did your officials not care to repair it?" In an another incident, a *tashildhar* was told by the shaman: "You have come here to get darkness dispelled in your life. But you have not dispelled darkness in this village. Why have you not placed the street-light in my village?" Thus the folk religious arena operates as a site of multifunctionality: it is a point of interaction among the kindred of the village community, and a site of negotiation of power between the village community and the state; it revitalises the inter-human relationship among the villagers through its rituals and accentuates the bonding among the village community through a process of ritualisation and by projecting its collective self against the state authorities. However, this collective self is not a finished product. It is continuously in the making through co-operation between individuals and caste groups. In the rural setting, celebration of religious festivals is the most important event when collaboration between people of different backgrounds reaches its high-point

Folk Rituals as a Form of Social Net-work

Folk religious rituals and festivals become conspicuous occasions when the need for co-operation between different families and castes is felt, sought for and realized in concrete forms. They construct and confirm inter-human relationships in the given society through creative indigenous methods that generate collective sentiments among the folk, not only in the rural areas but also in the urban slum settings. Adrian Mayer takes note of the group condolences cutting across religious boundaries in a Malwa village of central India.⁴ In most parts of India, both in the urban and in the rural areas, the moment the news of someone's death is heard people irrespective of caste, creed and ethnicity, gather at the house of the deceased for sharing in the grief and arranging for the funeral rites. Here rituals become not only a site for the display of human solidarity but also a point of convergence of various peoples that transcends their religious and social boundaries. Besides, in various other kinds of rituals like providing safe passage to pilgrim centres or escorting and receiving wedding parties etc... people, regardless of their social affinities, gather together at the village boundaries. Here, once again, the ritual

activity becomes a nodal point that incorporates different caste groups not only in the geographical space of the village but also in the social space of their habitat through the specialised roles they play. Chauhan draws our attention to the ritual of *dhundh* or search in Rajasthan, which is observed to take note of all births during the year, and a coconut is offered on behalf of the parents to a burning pole. Every house that has lost a member during the year is visited, to share the grief of the non-participating household and to incorporate it within the normal ritual status.⁵ This again demonstrates the power of folk rituals to bring about human solidarity in society. He also takes note of the folk religious practices in Rajasthan preceding Dussehra festival wherein on the concluding day gifts are offered at three ends of the village and a procession of flag masts from all the deities that belong to different casts and clans are carried to a pond towards the south. All the villagers join the procession which culminates in the immersion of the flag masts in the pond, and a soothsayer forecasting the weather and other fortunes for the whole village in the following year. Numerous examples of this kind can be recounted all over India, and they all reveal the fact that ritual complexes set in motion sentiments of common belonging. They play a crucial role in constituting and confirming the bonds of an already existing social network. But what kind of social network do they strengthen? In whose favour do they function? etc., are crucial questions that need to be probed—which we will take up later. In the meantime, let us focus on another event which can bring about a sense of common belonging and facilitate inter-human relationships.

Pilgrimages and the Expansion of Inter-human Relationships

Pilgrimages have long been recognised, by quite a number of writers, as occasions when people of ‘little republics’ and ‘isolated villages’ are not only brought together as one people i.e., as pilgrims, but they also help people to expand their vision of life and to have fresh experiences both sacred and secular. They act as magnets for bringing together people of distant and seemingly unconnected communities into active interaction. A few deities and occasions of worship provide chances for periodic gatherings engaging sets of

people from various localities. Since the regional and folk pilgrim centres ensure greater certainty of travel and return to the village, they get repeated more frequently, reaffirming the orthogenetic nature and coherence of the region and its villages.⁶ They also serve as special marketing centres at that level. For instance, Chauhan notes that people returning from Ramdeoiji purchase musical instruments to be used in devotional performances back home.⁷ Pushkar festival is also known for its trading activities wherein people buy animals, strings and decorations besides wool and skin; the Ganga *snan* at Garh Mukteswar near Agra is associated with trade in donkeys and bullock carts, and Siveleperi near Tirunelveli (Tamilnadu), Bateshwar near Agra is associated with an animal fair. The important thing about such fairs is the greater participation of rural folk and special appeal they hold for women and children, all anticipating these periodic exhibitions with enthusiasm—which also helps them transcend village boundaries, meet, interact, share views and opinions with other women from other villages. Thus their human relationships get expanded—which is not so possible in the closed atmosphere of village communities. These human interactions take place more spontaneously yet intelligently in the market places while people do purchasing or in a situation of entertainment while they comment on dance, drama and ritual performances.

Folk Shrines, Communal Meals and Religious Rituals

In the folk shrines, the religious festivals of three days or eight days culminate in a communal meal, called by various names such as *pataipu*, *kazhiuttal* etc.. The cooked food offered to the deity on behalf of a village or a community is shared by all. While the communal meal reveals the intimate relationship between the deity and the people, it also helps them realise their solidarity with other human beings, transcending their socio, economic and religious affinities. A high caste can eat with the low caste, a rich person might greet a low caste, a Muslim woman will dine with a Hindu woman, who consider one another more as devotees of that deity than as people of a particular background. A sense of religious hospitality is also demonstrated while individual families cook *pongal* or a meal in the vicinities of the shrine to fulfil their religious vows. They whole-heartedly welcome all people around them—irrespective

of caste, creed, age and sex to take part in their sacred meal offered to the deity but shared by human beings. Besides, various folk religious rituals such as Pongal and Makarasankranti offer occasions to people to venerate animals like bulls and cows and offer special meals to them as a sign of gratitude for the cooperation rendered by the animals in the agricultural activities, thereby making the farmers acknowledge the interconnection and interdependence of different beings in the world

Inter-connectedness as Axial Relationships

The folk world-view locates the domain of relationships between humans, gods and nature on two axes, the horizontal and the vertical. Human beings relate to other human beings, to nature and to gods at both the levels. A member of a caste relates to the other members of his or her caste on a horizontal axis. But when a man or woman relates to the other caste men/women he/she operates on vertical relationships, because a person is always inferior or superior to 'others' in the caste hierarchy. Similarly, when people relate to nature by farming or fishing etc.. they operate on the horizontal plane. They consider it equal to them; they treat it as if it is theirs. However, there are occasions when they consider nature and its entities superior to them. They believe that nature is more powerful than them. Various folk religious rituals performed at various occasions indicate that people revere and venerate nature, and take cognisance of the fact that nature can affect the lives of people. Such ritual expresses people's belief that they are part of nature and that this belongingness to nature is primordial to their existence. Similarly, people's relationship to gods/goddesses can be placed both on the horizontal and vertical planes. On the one hand, their gods and goddesses are equal to them, as they were once humans who are now deified. Various rituals such as blood sacrifice and cooked food in fact treat the gods and goddesses as humans. But, on the other hand, these gods and goddesses are superior to them. They can control the lives of humans as they are more powerful than humans. Various folk religious rituals such as ritual hunting, possession dance and divination highlight the vertical dimension of people's relationship with gods/goddesses. Thus the folk religious world-view offers a perspective on reality in which everything is connected with and

related to everything else both vertically and horizontally. While this perspective arrays the different aspects of reality on a twin axis, it has multiple functions: it brings the different dimensions of reality together; it helps people to maintain a healthy balance between the two axes by providing different sentiments of relationality—the horizontal axis evokes the feeling of sameness with other aspects of reality, while the vertical axis triggers off sentiments of difference; it generates attitudes of friendliness, care and proximity on the one hand, and a sense of respect, awe and distance on the other. Having said this, let us focus on how concretely these characteristics are realised in human beings' relationship with nature through the mediation of folk religions.

Humans' Relationship with Nature and Folk Religion

Most folk religious rituals, especially the agrarian folk rituals fashion human relations with nature, and transmit habits of practice and attitudes of mind to succeeding generations, thereby guaranteeing the perpetuation of an ecologically-oriented religious world-view. "Religious world-views propel communities into the world with fundamental predispositions toward it because such religious world-views are primordial, all-encompassing, and unique."⁸ Religious worldviews help humans fully absorb the natural world within them, thereby providing human beings "both a view of the whole and at the same time a penetrating image of their own ironic position as the beings in the cosmos who possess the capacity for symbolic thought: the part that contains the whole—or at least the picture of the whole—within itself."⁹ Further, only religious perspectives enable human beings to evaluate the world of nature in terms distinct from all else. "[T]he natural world is evaluated in terms consonant with human beings' own distinctive (religious and imaginative) nature in the world, thus grounding a self-conscious relationship and a role with limits and responsibilities."¹⁰ Religions do play a vital role in sustaining ecology. They provide essential wellsprings of human motivation and concern that shape the world as we know it. We will understand nature better when we understand the religions that form the rich soil of memory and practice, beliefs and attitudes which fashion people's relationships with the cosmos.

One of the functions of folk religious rituals in the agrarian setting is to tackle the threats and deal with the hazards that endanger the agricultural land, and to take care of the environment. The realm of folk rituals, which often emerge out of agricultural concerns, are in fact a reflection of people's keen interest in the maintenance of land and its resources. It is an ingenious invention of mechanisms and strategies by which the environment is cared for and its resources effectively managed. E.N Anderson, who has documented indigenous practices with impressive details notes that "All traditional (indigenous) societies that have succeeded in managing resources, well over time, have done it in part through religious or ritual representation of resource management"¹¹ He observes how, in various case studies, ecological wisdom is embedded in myths, symbols, rituals and cosmologies of these people.

Folk rituals also instil a sense of fear among the folk, which leads them eventually to venerate and thus protect nature. Folk religions make sure that familiarity with nature obtained through the agro-based economic activities does not breed contempt for the environment. By instilling among the members of the ritual community a strong sense of veneration toward nature, folk religions make humans not destroy the environment according to their whims and fancies. Thus they ensure the non-exploitation and protection of nature.

Besides, folk religion, by its belief in the existence of different kinds of spirits, exhibits its understanding of interconnectedness in the universe. But it is commonly understood that this folk logic is often irrational and superstitious, since folk rituals seem to lead to manipulation of nature. Nevertheless, through its repertoire of rituals, folk religion embeds the '*deep time*' metaphors¹² of the interconnectedness of the universe in the collective unconscious of the cultural members. It teaches them that one aspect of reality can harm or help, make or break another dimension of reality. The project of 'modernity' has forgotten this dimension of 'inter-connectedness,' as Heidegger has pointed out. Folk religions are right in telling us *that* different dimensions of reality can affect each other, but they are perhaps inadequate in their explanation. They are not scientifically well founded (hence appear to be at fault) in their

understanding of *how* they can affect each other and *how* they can be related to through the process of ritualisation. However, some scholars have highlighted the inadequacy of science itself to understand the totality of the universe and its nitty-gritty which local forms of knowledge believe in.

Science, with its quantum mechanics methods.. can never address the universe as a whole; and it certainly can never adequately describe the holism of indigenous knowledge and belief. In fact, science is far behind in the environmental movement. It still sees nature as objects (“components” of biodiversity is the term used in the Convention on Biological Diversity or CBD) for human use and exploitation.¹³

Yet another area where folk religion contributes to the totality and interrelatedness of reality is its concept of interdependent relationship between humans and the gods.

Interdependent Humans and Independent Gods?

In the folk religious world-view, gods of varying degrees of power can enrich or control the different aspects of human life. As gods are understood as embodied powers, i.e., substance as well as power, humans’ interaction with them at the horizontal axis involves transaction of substances. Many transactions in the Hindu folk world involve substance – receiving substance, giving substance, “exchanging” substance. Because giving is valued over receiving, men must not only give to the gods (in services and food), but also receive from them. This explains the logic of ‘*prasadam*’, the leftover of offerings made to the gods and returned to the worshipper after the gods have taken their share.¹⁴ While the consumption of these leftovers reiterates the worshiper’s inferior status—which makes him/her realise the vertical nature of one’s relationship with the gods/goddesses, it also provides a means to appropriate the power of gods that can have effects on different aspects of human life, including the sphere of human relationships centred around the deity. Further, while such practices reinforce the idea of an intimate relationship between the deity and the worshippers, they also affirm and strengthen the web of interconnectedness between gods, nature and humans.

Conceptions of power operate not only in god-(wo)man and (wo)man-(wo)man relationships, but also in god-god relationships. Wadley maintains that, according to Indian conceptions, all beings are filled with some sort of power or the other but in varying degrees. Gods also differ in their possession of power. Some gods embody more powers than others. Thus, there is a hierarchy of deities in terms of power. A deity of small or limited powers is, in many senses, as much under the control of higher, more powerful beings as (wo)men believe they themselves are. If a given deity can cause conditions of distress and another can remove them, then the latter can undo the actions of the former and can therefore be regarded as more powerful. This once again highlights the idea of interconnectedness and the dependent situations of gods themselves in the folk religious sphere

Conceptions of power operate also between (wo)man and (wo)man relations in the Indian society. Men/women are also powerful beings in one way or another. They too are born with their share of powers of the universe. They too can alter their substance and thereby their powers through various means. Within the caste hierarchy, as intermediaries between (wo)men and god, Brahmins are more powerful than others, while the Dalits are the least powerful. In general, Brahmins obtain more power than others *by* their birth according to *karma* (action in their previous lives). But they must continue to maintain and increase these powers by correct actions in this life. This will prescribe one set of relationships with high castes, prescribe or proscribe another set of relationships with low castes.

In contrast, the low caste folk shamans obtain their powers through their actions in this life, by manifesting the deity to others through 'possession'. Through his mediating role of intervention through divination, which helps the devotees, both the high caste and low caste, to overcome crises in life, he/she becomes more powerful than others. Enabled by his ritual power, he establishes a new range of human relationships which other low castes do not get or obtain. Thus power, either 'given' by birth or 'acquired' through religious engagements, does play a role in constricting and constructing a range of human relationships in Indian society.

Besides, the power possessed by the folk shamans is also capable of bringing about harmony at various levels.

Sakti: A Power of Unification

From the perspective of folk-world view, the 'sakti' possessed by the oracles is pre-eminently a moral and creative, not an immoral and destructive, power. Its moral creation takes the form of unification, especially, the unification of human beings. Through divination the folk shamans try to cure the folk of the alienating physical ailments and bring about union and harmony within oneself. He or she is not only a healer of physical diseases but also a healer of interfamily squabbles, reuniting husband and wife, or in-laws or brothers or relatives.¹⁵ Through the mechanism of *Sattiyam* (promise), the *sakti* of god/goddess is seen as a power of 'settlement' and 'union' that puts to rest all apprehensions and suspicions, and restores the relationships between people. When the folk have recourse to the deity in the event of 'marriage' or 'child-birth' etc.. the folk gods are perceived to help find the right marriage partners, and bring about life-long union between a man and a woman, or are seen as a powerful divine power that ensures the arrival of a new member into a family at the time of delivery, which gives rise to a new set of human relationships between the child and the parents, between the child and other siblings of the family, and between the child and the other members of the clan. Thus the conceptions of supernatural power in folk religions can be described as instrumentalisation of such power that operates on a set of relationships to bring about hopeful intra-human harmony and inter-human ties. Nevertheless, these powers, in the form of spirits, are also capable of challenging and straightening out the inhuman relationships in our society.

Possession and Ritual Healing: A Coping Mechanism in inhuman treatments

Sudhir Kakar, who made a psychological inquiry into India and its healing traditions, has come out with interesting findings in this matter. His study on the phenomena of the treatment of the sprits in the Hindu temples draws our attention to the involvement and integration of the patient's relatives in the healing process. Many

rituals that need to be carried out in the temple require the active participation of the family members. Thus the healing process “requires a polyphonic social drama that attempts a ritual restoration of the dialogue not only with the patient but with the family.”¹⁶ By participating in rituals together with the patients, the family members too seem to accept their share of the blame for the patient’s problems. Thus, some of the folk temple healing practices implicitly acknowledge the fact that spirit possession is the result of ‘lack of care’ and ‘rupture in family relationships’ and the solution to it needs to be sought in repairing the damage done in family relationships.

Besides, a belief in ‘evil spirits’ as the cause for diseases prevails more among people who find themselves in socially vulnerable positions. ‘Spirits’ attack those who are in a liminal situation, a situation that has deep-seated uncertainties in relationships. A grieved wife, a humiliated daughter-in-law or a notorious man etc.. are the ones who often get possessed. I.M. Lewis notes that spirit-attacks are found more among politically ‘impotent’ people. Dube observes that “The signs of physical discord are the signifiers of an aberrant world.”¹⁷ When a battered wife or a despised daughter-in-law gets possessed, she makes use of the opportunity to question the injustice done to her, to suggest measures of amendment that will repair the damage done to her and to ensure that such cruelty will not continue. Through the technique of possession, she can make a powerful statement about the inhuman relationships she finds herself in. In such situations of social liminality and political vulnerability, external agents, such as the ‘evil spirits’ are treated as responsible so that internal causes—insurmountable most of the times—can be coped with. “The desired transformations in the world focus upon healing as a mode of coping with and transforming an oppressive social order.”¹⁸ Folk religions are not only capable of dealing with inhuman relationships at the interpersonal level. They also can challenge the unequal and unjust relationships that exist between different social groups, which gives rise to social conflicts.

Social conflicts, Social identities and Subaltern Religions

Conflicts accompany social existence, and each society carries differences of viewpoints—and of interests—which in turn could

pull the social fabric apart. It is during the time of social conflicts that the interhuman relationships between different groups are at their lowest point, which are otherwise taken for granted in normal circumstances. During this period of social crisis, it is very conspicuous that interhuman relationship of the in-group gets strengthened while that of the in-group in question and the other opponent out-group(s) almost ceases to exist. Suspicion, hatred, aggressive feelings, hostile communications accrue between different warring communities. It is also during this time that the different stake-holders withdraw their share or hold back their contribution to society, which seriously affects the inter-dependent character of society. For instance, doctors by refusing to treat the patients, scavengers by refusing to clean etc., can show that they are capable of maligning the interconnectedness of society. Each group's share of the interdependency of society becomes a potential weapon to communicate to the larger society how serious an issue is for oneself and how important is a segment's contribution to the maintenance of the whole. However, it is to be noted that society has put in place certain mechanisms like shared ideologies and common worldviews, and institutions like caste and religion to deal with conflicts. The former in the agrarian setting provides the social integration needed for maintaining the agricultural cycle as well as full round of ritual and social activities.¹⁹ The latter, religion in general, provides symbolic orders promulgating ideologies and practices of an integrative sort—often embedded in society's everyday practices. It supplies concepts and ideas which specify how one should act. It not only specifies the norms and courses of action, but also specifies implicitly or explicitly, the limits within which a particular norm applies.²⁰ Besides, folk religion, through its ritual network, does reinforce the idea of co-existence and co-operation of different hierarchical social segments. Thus it does provide a system of ordering or devices of regulation that help pre-empt the possibility of a good deal of conflict.

However, the folk religious realm is also capable of doing just the opposite. It has potentiality to destabilise the existing social orders and question their inherent inequality. They provide beliefs and practices which are instruments in the articulation of the rebel consciousness. The works of Guha, Saurbh Dube, Dirks and others,

who have studied different forms of folk religions through a series of historical events of resistance indicate that folk religion is a powerful arena, wherein subaltern consciousness is constituted and through which the agency of marginal peoples can be expressed. Theoreticians call this brand of folk religions 'subaltern religions'. They have highlighted the potential of folk religion to interrogate the existing unjust and unequal inter-human relationships in the caste hierarchy of Indian society, and to establish a more equalitarian and just socio-religious system like the Satnami movement in Chattisgarh and Ayya Vazhli Movement in Tamilnadu.

In these religions, the marginal people often make use of ecstatic religious practices such as shamanism and divination for social protest and aggressive self-assertion in peripheral situations. I. M. Lewis, who has studied the phenomenon of ecstatic religiosity, notes that "possession most generally expresses aggressive self-assertion. In peripheral cults then, this aggressive self-assertion embodies the shrill voice of protest directed against other more fortunate members of society."²¹ The 'Performance' theorists, who have studied the folk religious phenomenon, also hold that through various religious performances, life is interpreted, identity is created, and the folk "create polyphonic, aesthetically stylised, idealised projections of themselves to reconfirm and celebrate their multifaceted identities."²² What is manifest in this hidden script are the attempts and aspirations of marginal peoples for an egalitarian society wherein a genuine inter-human relationship is possible, which is otherwise absent in the present social structure.

Conclusion

To conclude, this article shows that folk religions have the potentiality to percolate the ideas of inter-relatedness at various levels of relationships: humans' relationship with other humans, human's relationship with the supernatural beings-gods, and humans' relationship with nature. Thus folk religions have given a more comprehensive and holistic picture of reality that intertwines and integrates the different dimensions of reality – the human, the cosmic and the divine into a single whole, thereby generating a balanced attitude of mind, respectful disposition of heart and caring habits of

human actions towards the whole of reality and its different dimensions. In this endeavour, folk religions were probably too careful to disrespect nature and its entities – which has left them with superstitious practices and irrational beliefs.

Notes

1. Chauhan, “Village Community” in Veena Das (ed.) *The Oxford India Companion to Sociology and Social Anthropology*, Vol. I., New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003. p. 427.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p. 428.
4. Adrian Mayer, *Caste and Kinship in Central India—A Village and Its Region*. Delhi: Universal Book Stall, 1960 (1986).
5. Chauhan, Village Community, p. 415.
6. Ibid., p. 422.
7. Ibid.
8. Sullivan “Preface” in John A. Grim ed., *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Centre for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School. 2001: xi-xii
9. Ibid., p. xii.
10. Ibid.
11. Anderson, *Ecologies of the Heart: Emotion, Belief, and the Environment*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 166.
12. Dusan Boric (2002) uses the term ‘deep time’ to describe the cultural attitudes and practices that relate to the past through retrospection and deepening temporal surface. It refers to the memory of the past envisaged as a non-linear temporal network where objects, ideas and material fragments of memory are disseminated in multidimensional time and space.
13. Posey, “Intellectual Property Rights and the Sacred Balance: Some Spiritual Consequences from the Commercialization of Traditional Resources” in Grim, ed., *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School. 2001.p 5.
14. Wadley, *Sakti: Power in the Conceptual Structure of Karimpur Religion*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1985, 152-153.

15. Cf. Isabelle Nabokov, *Religion Against Self: An Ethnography of Tamil Rituals*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2000.
16. Sudhir Kakar, *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982, p. 86.
17. Saurabh Dube, "Myths, Symbols and Community: Satnampanth of Chattisgarh," *Subaltern Studies* VII, p. 141.
18. Ibid.
19. Satish Saberwal and N. Jayaram, "Social Conflict," in Veena Das, *The Oxford India*, p. 551.
20. Ibid., p. 538.
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