
UNIT 4 TRIBAL RELIGIONS

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we explain the basic elements of the tribal religions. It has two parts. The first part explains the general characteristics of the tribal religions. It also analyses the need for the belief systems which are important elements of any society. It analyses the characteristics common to most of the tribal religions like God, Ghost and the belief in Spirit and the people's relation to that spirit. The second part explains some of the important elements of the tribal religions in India. It elaborates the world view of the tribal religions and the inter mingling of religion and society in the tribal world.

At the end of the course on tribal religions you are guided to understand:

- the basic characteristics of tribal religions
- the role of religion in the daily life
- some of the important concepts in tribal religions such as God, ghosts and spirit, and human's relationship with them
- the customs and practices of the tribals of India

4.1 INTRODUCTION

If anyone were to ask, what interest the religions of the simpler peoples can have for us, it would be good to remember that some of the most important political, social and moral philosophers from Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau to Herbert Spencer, Durkheim and Bergson have considered the facts of life of those peoples living in small-scale societies with a simple material culture and lacking literature to have great significance for the understanding of social life in general. For our purpose, these peoples are called tribal peoples here. Further, the men who have been most responsible for changing the whole climate of thought in our civilization during the nineteenth century, the great myth-makers: Darwin, Marx-Engels, Freud, Frazer and Comte; all have shown great interest in the life of the tribal people and have used what was known about them in their works.

Secondly, all who have interest in religion must acknowledge that a study of the religious ideas and practices of tribal peoples, which are of great variety, may help us to reach

certain conclusions about the nature of religion in general, and therefore also about the so-called higher religions or historical religions or the religions of revelation. Nothing could have been revealed about anything if men had not already had an idea about that thing. The world around has everywhere revealed to men and women something of the divine and of their own nature and destiny.

4.2 TRIBAL RELIGIONS

Totemism

The term *totem* comes from a North-American Indian language, but it has been widely used to refer to animal or plant species and occasionally other things which are held in special regard by particular groups in a society. A totemic society is divided into a number of named groups, the members of which believe themselves to be descended unilineally from a common ancestor, and stand in a special relationship, usually involving respect and avoidance to some object.

The term totemism covers a multitude of phenomena. However, it refers to situations where each one of the number of distinct social groups into which a society is divided maintains a particular regard for a particular object in the natural or cultural environment. This object is not regarded as valuable in its own right, but because it stands as a symbol for something else. This is why totemism is sometimes considered to be a magico-religious institution. Usually, the totem symbolizes the unity and solidarity of the group which has it. Institutions which have been labeled totemism are so various that no single hypothesis is likely to be adequate to explain all of them. As with all symbols, we have to ask what it is that is symbolized and what the social consequences of symbolizing it are. There is no reason why all cultures should give identical answers to these questions.

Gods, Ghosts, Ancestors and Spirits

Gods, ghosts and spirits are thought of as different from the other impersonal magical forces, however difficult it may be to draw a sharp line between them. The important thing about all of them is that they are conceived to be non-human, even though they may have some human attributes. The fact that they are endowed with some human attributes means that living people may enter into some sort of social relationship with them. Again precise borderlines cannot be drawn. Among many tribal cultures nothing is quite inert. There is a force or power in everything which can be known and ‘personalisation’ is very much a matter of more or less. However, nearly always there is a distinction between those powers with which a relationship of a more or less personal kind can be entered into, and those with which it cannot. It is upon this difference that we base a rough distinction between magic, concerned with impersonal magical forces, and religion, concerned with ghosts, gods and spirits.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) What is totemism?

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Supreme Spiritual Being

In many societies, there has developed the idea of a supreme spiritual being, a high god or the ‘sky spirit’. It is thought of as a kind of universal and all pervasive spirit. Besides this spirit, there are other lesser spirits which have importance in certain places. Where the high god expresses the generalized idea of spirit or ‘power’, the concept sometimes tends to become depersonalized. So in some cultures the high god is thought to be less interested in the affairs of men than are the lesser gods or spirits who may be thought to play a frequent part in everyday life. Often the idea of an otiose high god is expressed in mythical accounts of how after creating the universe he withdrew from it, being dissatisfied with his handiwork. Sometimes, human beings are represented as having broken their original relationship with divinity through pride or disobedience.

Spirit Possession

We have *spirit possession* when a person assumes a state of apparent auto-hypnosis or dissociation, and his behaviour, which is not that of his ordinary self, is understood to be due to the control by some spiritual agent normally outside him. Possession by a spirit of some kind is often given as an explanation of illness or abnormality, especially in the case of states of mental derangement or dissociation, when the subject does seem to be ‘out of his mind’. The social history of Western Europe provides numerous examples of possession by evil spirits, especially in connection with witchcraft. Since possession is usually a bad thing the question then arises: what is to be done about it? Different cultures give different answers. Sometimes a spiritual force conceived to be more powerful than the presumed spirit may compel it to leave its victim. Other times techniques of ‘peaceful persuasion’ may be used. A shaman may with soft words, cajole a minor spirit which is troubling a client to leave him and to enter an earthenware pot. The pot is then quickly sealed with clay, and is later destroyed or abandoned in the bush. In other cases, where the subject is not merely possessed but is also a medium, he may, as it were, come to terms with the spirit through the performance of appropriate ritual. Whether the spirit is the ghost of a deceased relative or some other kind of power, it may use its medium, while in a state of induced possession, to say what it requires if it is to leave its victim alone.

Spirit Mediumship

Where the presumed spirit not only possesses someone but also communicated with other people through the possessed person, usually in a voice, accent and perhaps language not used by that person in ordinary life, but culturally accepted as appropriate to the spirit believed to be mediated, then we may speak of *spirit mediumship*. The ways in which spirits are believed to express themselves vary from one culture to another. Although mediums are often in a condition of dissociation, in most cultures the proper way for spirits to manifest themselves through mediums can be learnt,

either through formal instruction by experts, or by experience and example. In all cultures with institutionalized spirit mediumship-cults, certain personality types seem to take more readily than others to cult participation, such as, a propensity to fits or other kinds of mental disturbance.

Shamanism

When the medium is not only a vehicle for spirits, but is believed to have power to control and direct spirits and is able to command them by special ritual techniques, we have *shamanism*. The word comes from the language of one of the North Asian people. It is almost as widespread as spirit mediumship. Often it is believed that shamanistic powers are used by sorcerers, who having once entered into a possession relationship with some harmful spirit – for example the smallpox spirit – can retain it as a kind of familiar spirit and send it to afflict an enemy. Where spirit mediumship is highly institutionalized, novices in the cult usually have to undergo a complex process of initiation. The ritual is controlled by experts, themselves often medium for a number of spirits. These experts know all the techniques appropriate for the ritual and can teach these techniques to others.

Shrines

It is often believed that some kinds of spirits are too powerful, and with them, as with God or the gods in non-mediumistic religions, some sort of more or less enduring relationship may have to be entered into. Prayers and invocations may be addressed to spirits, and sacrifices made to them. As a rule, spirits are conceived as immaterial and, usually, as being diffused through space, or perhaps as not in space at all. However, they are generally associated with specific places in the material world. If these places are made by men, usually at the behest of a god or spirit, they are called shrines. Believers are concerned with the unseen spiritual world and it is helpful to them to have a place where they can pray and sacrifice. It stands as a sign and reminder of the spiritual power which both acknowledge.

Relationship between Humans and Spirits

Having entered into the above mentioned kind of relationship, what does the human party to it do? First, he usually speaks to it, rather as though it were a person. This is the point of having spirits. If the spirit, or God, is thought to be vastly greater and more powerful than men, as is the case in most of the advanced religions, then the address takes the form of humble entreaty. Man does not generally attempt to impose terms on God, still less does he threaten or abuse Him. He approaches Him submissively. However, in many of the simpler or tribal religions the relationship between men and spirits is less one-sided. Very often ghosts and spirits are thought of as being dependent on men, as men are on them. There are rights and obligations on both sides. In such cases the relationship, like so many social relationships, is thought of as involving reciprocity or exchange. Just as a man needs the good-will and protection of the spirits if he is to prosper, so a spirit is thought to need the attention of men 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'; and much of the relationship between men and spirits are of this kind.

Sacrifice

Since there is usually an element of exchange in the relationship between men 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 is prevalent. Sometimes this involves the destruction of what is offered, frequently the immolation of some living creature. Sometimes, however, food or drink is left for the spirit at the shrine. Sometimes living animals are dedicated to a ghost or spirit, and not actually killed. Always there is the idea of some deprivation on the part of the sacrificer, and always something is made over, transmitted from man to god or spirit.

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, there is no sacrifice but a rather different kind of institution, of which the most familiar example is the *scapegoat*. Where evil is conceived as a kind of real existent, it may be ritually transferred to a chosen animal which may be then either driven out of the community or destroyed.

Blessing and Cursing

There is one further sphere of human behaviour which involves reference to spiritual beings or forces, that 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. This may often happen 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 elders' curse is particularly feared because they are the closest of the living to the ancestral ghosts. Where there are religious specialists, such as shamans or priests, their blessing or curse is often thought to be the most potent of all.

Check Your Progress II

- Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

- 1) Sacrifice is a symbolic Act. How?
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- 2) What is the importance of religious behaviors and the rituals in the modern day society?
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4.3 TRIBAL RELIGIONS IN INDIA

Worldview

‘Worldview’ is the structure of things as human beings perceive them. It refers to the way the world looks to that people ‘looking out’. It denotes the way a given people in a particular society, see themselves in relation to all else. Concepts of culture and worldview are related but carry subtle differences. On the one hand, if we try to describe the important qualities of people we can say something about those aspects, which include the mode of life, principal customs, practices, beliefs and institutions of that group. Such description amounts to the ‘culture’ of a people. On the other hand, the ‘worldview’ of a people ‘is the way a people characteristically look outward upon the universe’. It suggests how everything looks to a people. It includes, (a) the conceptions of what ought to be as well as of what is, (b) patterns of thought, (c) most comprehensive attitudes towards life, (d) dimensions of time, ideas of past and future.

Within the framework of worldview, there are two types of ‘views’ to be distinguished: (i) ‘inside’ view, and (ii) ‘outside’ view. If we are to understand the worldview of a people, we need to begin with the ‘inside’ view. We need to see the meaning and feel the feeling connected with the object or act in the mind of the native. Only after this we can shift to an ‘outside’ view point. The ‘outside’ view consists in detached and abstract understanding of a view point. Thus, delineating the worldview of a given culture entails objectifying and describing the interpretation of the ‘world’ of that particular culture – as people in that culture see it. Initially this term came into English as a rendering of the German *Weltanschauung* which is an overall perspective on life encompassing the way a person perceives the world, evaluates and responds to it.

The notion of worldview encompasses human experiences, such as, time, society, causality, nature, world, sacred and the self. It denotes “a distinct set of attitudes, beliefs and values that are held to characterize particular individuals or social group. The term often implies a relationship between the social location or situation of such individuals and group and their consequent outlook or view of reality” (O’Sullivan et al. 1996: 333). It deals with the aggregate of ideas which an individual within a group or that group have, of the universe in and around them. It attempts to define those ideas from the point of view of the individuals holding them, from inside the culture rather than outside.

In the Indian context, tribal peoples are called *Adivasis*, meaning original inhabitants. Adivasi worldview involves, first of all an understanding and describing the Adivasi world as the Adivasi traditions look upon it, and then, conceptualizing and abstracting it. Indeed, the inside view of the Adivasi world involves, (a) collective interpretation that is reflected in Adivasi language, cosmology, rituals, customs, beliefs, myths, songs and stories; (b) the way the Adivasi traditions interpret time-space dimensions, (c) the way the Adivasis see their own identity and that of others, and (d) the way they interpret ethical dimensions.

In the Adivasi worldview space is central. Everything has to be understood in the perspective of creation. Harmony with space or creation is the starting point of their spirituality and their search for liberation. An awareness of being one with the whole of creation is, therefore, the spiritual foundation of the Adivasi peoples. In this unity of creation and spirituality, there is no clear cut distinction between sacred and secular, religion and non-religion. One sees the Supreme Being in space/creation and not outside

of it. Since each Adivasi group is unique and different from one another, it is not possible to discuss their various worldviews here. However, the Mundas, Uraons (Kurukh speaking), Kharias, Santals and Hos, are the major Adivasi groups in the Chhotanagpur plateau of India running through the state of Jharkhand, some districts of Chhattisgarh, Orissa and West Bengal. It is hoped that they represent other similar Adivasi worldviews of the country as well in a satisfactory manner. They are reflected in their various creation accounts as given below.

Supreme Being

Each Adivasi group has a very clear idea of the Supreme Being as its creator and of the universe and its creatures. He is known by different names by different tribes as given below:

Tribe	Personal Name	Relational Name	Symbolic Name (In likeness)
Munda	Haram (Old One)	Grand Father Father	Sing Bonga (Sun-Spirit) Maran Buru (Great Mountain)
Ho	Gusia (Master)	Do	Do
Santal	Thakur Jiu (Spirit)	Do	Chando Baba (Sun-Father) Maran Buru (Great Mountain)
Kharia	Ponomesor (Unchanging One)	Do	Bero Lerang (Sun-Moon)
Kurukh	Dharmes (Beneficent One)	Do	Biri Belas (Sun- King)

None of the tribes mentioned above has made any *image* of their Creator in the past and present though they share in common His imagery as a benign *old man* with white long hair and flowing beard on the dazzling white clouds. They have not made any *temple* for Him because they experience His presence everywhere.

Creation

Before the Supreme Being made the present world, in all the accounts there is a mention of the *sea* with its *creatures* covering everywhere. In His works of creation the Supreme Being takes the help of His own creatures, especially the sea creatures, such as, *crab, prawn, fish, turtle, tortoise*, etc. separately in bringing a tiny bit of clay to Him from the bottom of the sea in order to make the present earth. However, all of them failed in their mission because the sea water washed away the clay which they had tried to carry to the Supreme Being for making this world. However, the *earthworm* finally succeeds in fetching this bit of earth to the Supreme Being in the Munda and Kurukh accounts. He takes this bit of earth and makes the present earth.

Destruction

Offended by the evil deeds of the human beings as mentioned above, the Creator sent *rain of fire* on them for 7 days and 7 nights. All the human beings perished except the *bhaiya-bahin* (brother-sister). In the Kurukh account, the beloved of the Supreme Being had hidden the pair of male and female children in the hole of a *crab* covered with the *gangla* thicket (Job’s tear) of the low-land. In the Kharia account, the king *Sembhu* and queen *Dakai* pulled the *brother* and *sister* inside the marsh and hid

them. With destruction of the human beings, food supply to the Creator by way of offering sacrifice to Him by them ceased. He was thus very hungry and not happy without human beings. His beloved told Him that His happiness could return only with the finding of human beings alive. Consequently, He found the *bhaiya-bahin* after many disappointments and distress. After seeking and finding them, He brought them to His abode with great joy. He kept them with Him, fed them and looked after them lovingly with His fatherly care. He called them His *grand children* and they in return called Him *grand father*. Thus, the Creator renewed His relationship with the surviving human beings as their *grand father* who is very fond of His *grand children*, ever loving and forgiving. In this personal relationship with Him there is no oppressive fear. It is quite liberating.

New Creation

When the *bhaiya-bahin* grew up, He gave them *field* to cultivate, *oxen* to plough and *seeds* to sow and reap. When their *crops* were growing, some insects and pests attacked them and thus they were getting destroyed. The *bhaiya-bahin* then went up to the Supreme Being to tell Him their problem. After listening to them, He taught them the ritual of *danda-katta* (Kur?ukh). The *bhaiya-bahin* used to sleep separately by putting a log of the *simbali* (silk cotton) tree. One night they drank *hanria* (rice beer) and went to sleep. The Supreme Being and His beloved removed the log between them and they slept together as husband and wife. On reporting their experience to the Supreme Being, He said that it was all right. Thus, He instituted *marriage* and introduced human beings to the secret of procreation so that they might multiply in this world. He divided them into various *gotars* (clans) in order to enter into marriage relationships outside one’s own clan. The Adivasi clans consist of *animals, birds, fish, plants, minerals*, etc. They are called *totems*. This is the *new creation* of the Supreme Being and all men and women today are the *stewards* of this creation by not destroying and polluting it. His creative activity in this world thus continues to this day through the cooperation of human beings with Him.

Approach to God

Among the Adivasis, there are many forms of approaching God mainly by way of offering sacrifice to Him and praying to Him in an informal but personal way. However, there is one particular ritual among the Kur?ukh Adivasis which is worth discussing here because it is full of rich symbols. It expresses protection of *Dharmes* (Supreme Being) against evil. As life is experienced in a paradoxical existence of good and evil, life and death, the twofold end of the ritual is first, to obtain blessing, viz. happiness and prosperity of life in terms of sound health and increase in *progeny, cattle* and abundant yield from *crops* and secondly, to ward off evil.

Check Your Progress III

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) Trace the important aspects of the world views of the tribals (Adivasis) in India?

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2) Trace the important elements in the creation of human beings that are common in different accounts of Creation.

Cult of Deities and Spirits

The cult of deities and spirits was instituted later when the Adivasis came in contact with non-Adivasis. The Adivasis believe that God in His design has appointed various village spirits, nature spirits, etc. over them. Besides these, they have also their own personal or family spirits and they feel obliged to keep them well pleased by offering them animal sacrifices at different occasions. If they neglect this duty they think that the spirits become troublesome and send upon them various kinds of suffering and misfortune manifested in sickness, epidemics, drought, famine, etc. This thought causes a lot of *fear* in the minds and hearts of the Adivasis and they try to *appease* the spirits concerned at any length with sacrifices of chickens, goats, oxen, buffaloes, etc. at the risk of their great financial loss. In spite of all their efforts, if the situation does not improve, they come to God at long last as their *ultimate* resort against evil and suffering because they believe that the spirits are also under God’s power and control over them.

First Plough

In the Munda creation account, the ‘Old One’ started to make a plough for the man he had made. Taking a large tree he carved out of it the plough with its shaft, grip and handle; all in one piece. He took a long time to finish this work. His wife sent a *tiger* who rustled the leaves around him to distract Him. Taking a chip, the ‘Old One’, threw it at the tiger. At once the chip became a *wild dog* which chased the tiger away. That is why even to this day the tigers are afraid of wild dogs. The Santals share the similar worldview.

Creation of Heavenly Bodies

In the Munda and Kurukh accounts it is told that before the moon was made, the Sun was alone in the sky and it did not set. One day the Creator went to see the man making fields and asked him some questions: “When did you make this field?” “Now” was the answer. “When did you make that field?” “Now.” “When did you make the yonder fields?” “Just now.” “When did you eat from these fresh leaves?” “Now.” “When did you eat from those dry leaves?” “Now.” “When do you rest and when do you work?” “I rest *now* and work *now*.” The Creator said: “You will not live on with such work and eating without regular times.” So, He made the Sun to set and rise - thus *day* and *night* were made to work and to rest. He also made the moon to shine during the night.

4.4 LET US SUM UP

A knowledge of the social structure is required for the understanding of some features of religious thought. This amounts to saying that we have to account for religious facts in terms of the totality of the culture and society in which they are found. They must be seen as a relation of parts to one another within a coherent system, each part making sense only in relation to the others, and the system itself making sense only in relation to other institutional systems, as part of a wider set of relations. Religion plays an important part in the social life of the tribals. It helps them to preserve social cohesion, gives them confidence and so on. Do such explanations take us very far, and if they are true, which has to be proved, how does one set about determining in what way and in what degree does religion have these effects? What is most important is how religious beliefs and practices affect in any society the minds, the feelings, the lives, and the interrelations of its members

4.5 KEY WORDS

- Tribe** : A tribe is a social group of humans connected by a shared system of values and organized for mutual care, defense, and survival beyond that which could be attained by a lone individual or family.
- Hypnosis** : Hypnosis is a mental state or set of attitudes usually induced by a procedure known as a hypnotic induction, which is commonly composed of a series of preliminary instructions and suggestions.

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4.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

- 1) Totemism has been widely used to refer to animal or plant species and occasionally other things which are held in special regard by particular groups in a society. A totemic society is divided into a number of named groups, the members of which believe themselves to be descended unilineally from a common ancestor, and stand in a special relationship, usually involving respect and avoidance to some object.

Check Your Progress II

- 1) In almost world-wide, the institution of sacrifice is prevalent. There is usually an element of exchange in the relationship between men and spirits. It often involves the symbolic presenting or making over to them of some material or sometimes non-material thing. That is why sacrifice is offered. Sometimes this involves the destruction of what is offered, frequently the immolation of some living creature. Sometimes, however, food or drink is left for the spirit at the shrine. Sometimes living animals are dedicated to a ghost or spirit, and not actually killed. Always

there is the idea of some deprivation on the part of the sacrificer, and always something is made over, transmitted from man to god or spirit. The meaning of sacrifice varies widely from culture to culture. In all these cultures sacrifice is a symbolic act. Sacrifice, is symbolic gift-giving.

- 2) The religious behaviour is essentially expressive, though it is generally thought of as instrumental as well. Instrumentally regarded, religious and magical 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 cognitive level, 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 overwhelming.

Check Your Progress III

- 1) In the Indian context, tribal peoples are called *Adivasis*, meaning original inhabitants. Adivasi worldview involves, first of all, an understanding and describing the Adivasi world as the Adivasi traditions look upon it, and then, conceptualizing and abstracting it. Indeed, the inside view of the Adivasi world involves, (a) collective interpretation that is reflected in Adivasi language, cosmology, rituals, customs, beliefs, myths, songs and stories; (b) the way the Adivasi traditions interpret time-space dimensions, (c) the way the Adivasis see their own identity and that of others, and (d) the way they interpret ethical dimensions.
- 2) In the different accounts of creation of human beings the Supreme Being first makes human figures out of clay and bakes them in the sun before putting life into them. However, except in Ho account in all other accounts there comes a *horse* from somewhere and kicks and destroys the human figures till the Supreme Being makes a dog(s)/tiger to chase away the destructive horse. Following it, in the Munda account, a large Indian *stork* laid two *eggs* on the land. A *boy* and a *girl* were born from these eggs. Similarly, in the Santal account, a *boy* and a *girl* were born from the *eggs* of *hans* and *hansil* (male-female swans).