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

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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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3.2 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.

3.3 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 revitalisation 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 independence 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.

3.4 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.

3.5 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 *Birsait 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.

3.6 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 docotrs 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.

3.7 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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5) What was the doctrine of Tana Bhagat Movement?

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3.8 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 Uraons, 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 Oraons 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 Oraons 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?

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3.9 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.

3.10 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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