
UNIT 4 FUTURE OF TRIBAL RELIGIONS

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

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

4.1 INTRODUCTION

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

4.2 VARIETY AND DIVERSITY OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

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

The Nagas

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

The Bhils

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

The Todas

The Todas are a tiny pastoral community living on the 7000 Nilgiri Hills in South India. Religious belief in this Indian tribe is in the 1600 or 1800 superior godlike beings, the two most important being On and Teikirzi. On

is the male god of Amnodr, the kingdom of the dead and he had procreated the Todas and their buffaloes. He was himself a dairyman. Teikirzi is a female deity and more imperative to the people. She once ruled when she lived in the Nilgiris and is known to have established Toda social and ceremonial laws. Most other deities are hill-gods, each linked to a particular hill. There are also two river-gods belonging to the two main rivers. Toda religion is based primarily upon the buffaloes and their milk. The temples are the dairies.

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

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Who are the Bhils?

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2) Are there syncretic elements in tribal religions?

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4.3 SANTAL RELIGIOUS LIFE

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

The Gods and Goddesses

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

feature of the Santal village is a sanctified grove on the perimeter of the settlement, where numerous spirits live and a series of annual festivals go on.

The most important spirit residing amongst Santals is Maran Buru (Great Mountain), who is conjured up whenever offerings are made. Religious beliefs in this Indian tribe instructs that the Maran Buru first dictates the Santals in sex and brewing of rice beer. Maran Buru's consort is the benevolent Jaher Era (Lady of the Grove). An annual round of rituals linked with the agricultural cycle, along with life-cycle rituals for birth, marriage and burial at death, calls for petitions to the spirits and offerings that include sacrificing of animals, usually birds. Religious life in this Indian tribe is dictated by the religious leaders, who are male specialists in medical cures. They like to practice soothsaying and witchcraft. Similar beliefs are common among other tribes of north-east and central India like the Kharia, Munda, and Oraon. Smaller and more isolated tribes often manifest less articulated classification systems of spiritual hierarchy, delineated as animism or a widespread worship of spiritual energies associated with locations, activities and social groups.

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

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

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Who is the most important spirit among Santals?

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2) How do the Santals express their joy?

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Our human life has basically four important stages, birth, initiation, marriage and death. The Santals have very special rites/ceremonies on these occasions. All these different stages of transition are significant moments in their life and they make these occasions important through various symbolic activities. Santals consider these rites of passage as religiously significant. These rites and ceremonies are mainly concerned with securing active help of benevolent spirits and passive forbearance of the malignant ones. This is to ensure the safety and well-being of the individual. They are also collective occasions to emphasise the mutual harmony and solidarity between the individual and society. I explain briefly these aspects because to know a people we need to know their life-cycle too. It is good to know who they are, what they are, and how they form and organise their life.

Birth and Purification (*Janam Chatiar*)

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

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

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

Once the people have returned to the house after their bath, the child’s mother is made to sit on the veranda of the house with the child in her lap.

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

Initiation (*Caco-Chatiar*)

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

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

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

Marriage (*Bapla*)

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

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

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

Other Types of Marriage

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

the initiative because he does not know if the parents agree to the marriage. So in a public place he forcibly applies vermilion (*sindur*) on her forehead claiming her as his wife. In *Nir Bolok* (intruding) *Bapla* it is the girl who takes the initiative. She intrudes into the house of the boy because he has had sexual relations with her and refuses to marry her. So she forces him into marriage (Troisi 1978).

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

Death (*Gujuk*) & Funeral Rites

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

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

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

Though with the *tel nahan* ceremony the departed spirit is said to have been released from the underworld, he has not reached his final abode. The last part of the funeral ceremony, *bhandan* is what joins the spirit of the dead with the realm of the ancestors. Several relatives and villagers are invited for this celebration. They bring along goats and chicken and rice beer to be offered to the spirit. After the sacrifices are offered the people's mourning comes to an end. The meal is cooked with the meat offered to the spirits. All eat and drink and celebrate the occasion because they know that the dead has joined the world of the ancestors.

Santals believe that death is essentially an interruption of the normal process of living. They in fact speak of *hormo* and *jion* (body and life or soul). The body remains here on this world (*noa puri*) and soul (*jion*) goes to the other world or sky or heaven country. Life in the other world depends on the type of life one has led here in this world. If one has led a good life on this earth one is rewarded with a happy life in the other world; if one has led a bad life on this earth one will receive punishment and will remain in hell which is known as *ich kund* (excrement heap) (Culshaw 1949).

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

Santal Festivals

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

4.4 THE FUTURE OF TRIBAL RELIGIONS

As we reflect on the future of tribal religions, we need to note the creative, flexible and oral aspect of tribal religions. We also need to be aware that tribal religion is central to one's identity. Another aspect of tribal religions is the "power of now" or the celebration of the present. Oral tradition is one of the trademarks of all tribal religions. The religious stories repeated told make it easy to understand the spiritual and moral lessons that are intended by them. Rather than try to explain what God is in literal terms, stories are woven with the use of nature and animals to show what God is like. Oral tradition also preserves creatively the intent of the lessons. The written word is often taken literally and the essence of its meaning is lost in the lines. In

primal cultures, the tribal life and religion is central to the individual's identity. However, the tribe in this sense extends beyond the individual human beings. It is everything in the ecosystem of the group. It is all of nature, animals, and objects, animate and inanimate, in addition to the people. As such, great emphasis is placed on the existence of Spirit in everything. Everything has its place and value in the tribe. Everyone is taught to honor everything within the tribe, as well as the tribal entity.

The "eternal now" is significant for them. It seems the Aborigines believe that they can become their archetypal heroes, or gods, in every moment. They can, of course, embody this god for continuous moment and, as a result, merge with it. Tribal religion – without fixed structures, written scriptures, clear doctrine and hierarchical authority - is in a fluid state. But the three aspects mentioned above will revitalise their religiosity and collective consciousness. The primal religion is experiencing another boom in the contemporary society. Here we may see some similarities between the concepts of primal religion and "New Age" religions. Many seekers, in an effort to get to the Truth, adopted the ideas and traditions in primal religions. There is a tendency today to go back to the sources and draw religious inspiration from the tribal and primal spiritualities, which are so close to nature.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) How do the tribals understand marriage?

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

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4.5 LET US SUM UP

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

4.6 KEY WORDS

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

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

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