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# UNIT 1 BELIEF SYSTEMS AND RITUALS AMONG TRIBALS

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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

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## 1.2 TRIBAL RELIGION

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Generally, tribal religion is tribe-oriented. It is lived by a tribe in the light of shared traditions. In the religious traditions of the Mundas and Uraons in particular, their religion is illumined by a myth where they found in a crucial encounter with the hostile, greedy and arrogant community of *Asurs* (a community of iron smelters), the key to the mystery of suffering in the world they live in. (Ponette 1984: 70). Other tribal groups mentioned above also share this belief. This key is the transformation of the Creator of the universe and humankind in a voluntary ordeal by fire in the hands of His Asur enemies. He had taken the form of a young boy full of sores in his body in order to encounter the Asurs. In the bargain, they put him in a new furnace with full-scale burning fire in it. However, when the fire was extinguished he came out of the furnace completely changed into a golden boy free from all his pain and suffering caused by his sores. After this personal transformation, the primordial time was over and the new era began. There and then the Creator made the spirit-world, source of recurring harassment and suffering.

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## 1.3 TOTEMISM

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

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

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

### Check Your Progress I

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answers.

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

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

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## 1.4 BELIEFS IN GOD, ANCESTOR SPIRITS AND SPIRITS

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

Faith of tribals in God is deep rooted. They profess it *communally* and *privately*. The high point in their communal profession is the recurring seasonal sacrifice offered to God in the sacred grove by the *pahan* (village priest) in his own name and that of the village community on most of the feasts that inaugurate a new agricultural operation. Many *individual* expressions of the

same belief can only be detected on closer acquaintance with their customs and way of life. For example, during marriage negotiations both parties on their exchange visits are on the look out of auspicious or inauspicious omens which they firmly believe are indicative of God's choice in the matter. When the rites of passage are celebrated, there will always be some one who will address those present mentioning that God is the Master of life, the Provider, the Ruler, the All Knowing, the Bountiful (Ponette, *op. cit.*: 74). Similarly the head of the family will offer at least once a year a sacrifice to the family ancestors in the privacy of the house to obtain their intercession with the Creator on their behalf. Such sacrifices are repeated whenever unexpected or unexplained misfortune hits the family.

### **Belief in Ancestor Spirits**

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

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

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

### **Belief in Spirits**

Interestingly, in the religious tradition of the above mentioned tribal communities, spirits created were once persons of flesh and blood that were given the form of spirits by the Creator. They were given precise functions in keeping with their previous earthly status. For example, the Asur widows were made the guardians of the village ecology. The widow who was kind in taking care of the Creator in

disguise of a young boy full of sore, was made to reside in the sacred grove (*sarna*) to be venerated at the flower feast in every spring season of the year. She is responsible for the good monsoon during the year and also for the good health of cattle and children in the village. Such functions of different spirits can be multiplied.

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

The tribal communities discussed above, believe that there are non-human spirits and these may affect human beings. Therefore, they enter into a sort of human relationship with them through their priest. He speaks to the spirits as if they are persons. In this regard, God the greatest spirit, is thought to be vastly greater and more powerful than human beings, the address to Him takes the form of humble entreaty. A tribal does not attempt to impose terms on Him. He approaches Him submissively. Apart from God, tribals think that spirits are dependent on them, as they are on them. Thus, there are rights and obligations on both sides. In such cases the relationship is thought of as involving exchange. Just as a person needs the good-will and protection of the spirits, so a spirit is thought to need the attentions of human beings if it is to be remembered, and to be given the opportunity to manifest itself in the human world. Here the underlying principle is *I give to you so that you may give to me* (Beattie, *Ibid.*: 233).

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## 1.5 BELIEF IN BLESSING, CURSING AND OATH-TAKING

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

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

### Check Your Progress II

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answers.

- 1) Do the tribals manifest their deep rooted faith in God? How?  
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- 2) Does the tribal belief in ancestor spirits show that there is no cycle of rebirths? How?  
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- 3) How do the tribals approach God and spirits?  
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## 1.6 RELIGIOUS RITUALS

### Sacrifice

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

### Prayer

Prayer generally is associated with sacrifice. The spirit's attention is drawn to the beast or other object which is being sacrificed to it asking that it



should accept its mutual obligation to do what it is asked. Spirits may become harmful if they are not propitiated. The aim of much invocation, prayer and sacrifice is to turn away evil rather than to solicit positive good.

### Symbolic Present

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

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

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

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

## Scapegoat

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

## Sacrificial Meal

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

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

### Check Your Progress III

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answers.

- 1) Sacrifice is a symbolic gift giving. Explain.

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

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## 1.7 RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM

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

### Signs

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

### Symbols

The grounds on which a symbol's appropriateness to what is symbolized is based may vary. They may lie in some real or fancied resemblance between the symbol and what is symbolized. They may derive from some historical occurring at the same time in the individual's or the culture's past. However, whatever the ground of the association between symbol and referent, it will generally be found that it entails some kind of appropriateness. An important difference between symbols and signals is that symbols commonly stand for or imply some abstract notion: they do not refer just to some event, or to a concrete existing reality. What we find to be symbolized in various ways in different cultures are more or less abstract notions like power, group solidarity, familial or political authority. Sociologically, this is the most important thing about symbols. They provide people with a means of representing abstract ideas, often ideas of great practical importance to themselves indirectly. It would be difficult or even impossible for them to represent these ideas to themselves directly. A 'totem' for example provides a convenient and understandable symbol for essential group values.

### Symbolic Behaviour

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

How are we to identify the symbolic element in behaviour? It requires a clear distinction between what have been called the *instrumental* and the *expressive* aspects of human behaviour. Instrumental activity is directed to bringing about some desired state of affairs. It is oriented towards an end. Expressive

activity is a way of saying or expressing something, usually some idea or state of mind. The instrumental aspect of any activity is understood by seeing what it is aimed at whereas its expressive aspect by understanding what is being said. So, symbolism is a kind of language and it is appropriate to ask of any symbol what it means.

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

### Check Your Progress III

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answers.

1) What is the distinction between signs and symbols?

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

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## 1.8 LET US SUM UP

Religious behaviour is a ritual behaviour involving a belief in non-human spirits. Like all ritual, religious behaviour is essentially expressive, though it is generally thought of as instrumental as well. Instrumentally regarded, religious beliefs and practices form part of systems of action. They have consequences, even if they are not always those envisaged by the people who have them. On the level of knowing, they provide satisfactory answers to otherwise insoluble questions. They fill gaps in human knowledge and experience and so diminish areas of doubt and uncertainty. Thus religious belief and practice may give confidence in the face of dangers which would otherwise be overpowering. They provide institutionalized means of coping with

such dangers, and even if these means are generally scientifically ineffective, they are morally and emotionally satisfying. Ritual may serve to co-ordinate and regulate co-operative human behaviour in a variety of social situations. Religious beliefs may serve as means of social control, through the fear of incurring supernatural punishment if approved norms are broken.

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

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

#### Check Your Progress IV

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answers.

- 1) How do religious beliefs and practices provide satisfactory answers to otherwise insoluble questions?

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

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## 1.9 KEY WORDS

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

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

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## 1.10 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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