
UNIT 2 TRIBAL FOLKLORE AND CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

Culture is an integrated dynamic whole which consists of common world view or view of life, common values, goals, meaning, thinking, environment and patterns of behaviour. These are acquired, embodied and transmitted through language, status and role systems, modes of behaviour, music, dance, painting, artifacts and techniques. They are transmitted through a long tradition and are capable of influencing society. Culture is also what a social group considers as the best and sum-total of its thinking, living and expressing. It is a living and dynamic reality supported and nourished by folklore. In this unit you are expected to understand:

- Tribal Folklore
- Folklore in Tribal Life
- Cultural Expression
- Village Organisation
- Socio-Religious Customs: Rites of Passage
- Annual Feasts and Festivals

2.1 INTRODUCTION

According to Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary this word is made up of *folk* meaning the great proportion of the members of a people that determines the group character and that tends to preserve its characteristic form of civilization and its customs, arts and crafts, legends, traditions and superstitions from generation to generation. *Lore* means something that is learned. That is, (a) knowledge gained through study and experience, (b) traditional knowledge or belief. *Folklore* thus means traditional customs, tales, or sayings preserved orally

among a people. In a broad sense, it is a medium through which the soul of a people expresses itself colourfully. Culture has been variously defined. Thus, one can say that it is ‘a learned behaviour and the products of that behaviour as opposed to instinctive or biologically determined behaviour’. In its *external* manifestation, it bears on tangible realities, activities and ways of conduct of social life, behaviour of people, relation to their natural environment and other persons and groups; tools and techniques, customs, forms of instruction, etc. In other words, it means social practice. In its *inner* formation, it is symbolic indicating all that transmit meaning. It is the ‘way in which a group of people live, think, feel, organize themselves, celebrate and share life. In every culture, there are underlying systems of values, meanings and view of the world, which are expressed visibly in language, gestures, symbols, rituals and styles.

2.2 TRIBAL FOLKLORE

Origin Myths

A common feature of many cultures of the world is to have ancient story traditions explaining human frailty and cosmic order. There are many tribal narratives in this line highlighting human fall with a subsequent action of God. One of such narratives among the major tribal groups in the Central-Eastern region of India is as follows:

Destruction

God found the earth infested with undesirable elements. So, one day He decided to destroy mankind. He rained down fire day and night. He told the monkey to beat his drum as a sign that half the earth was thus cleansed. The monkey stationed himself on a high ebony tree. He was taken up in enjoying the ripe fruits of the tree. He forgot all about his duty until the fire scorched his hind quarters! The bark of the tree turned black. In this rain of fire a pair of a *male* and a *female* humans, a boy and a girl, hid themselves in a crab-hole of a paddy field.

Preservation

When the whole earth had thus been burnt, God did not get offerings from human beings for His own food. And He was sad. His divine beloved, seeing this, knew it was time to spring her surprise, which her own foresight had prepared. She told Him to go to the paddy field hunting. He went, taking His hawk on a golden staff accompanied by His dogs. They scented the two human beings saved by His divine beloved. The boy and the girl ran and hid themselves in a crab hole and said: “See *grandfather*, they will bite us.” And God answered: “No *grandchildren*, they will not harm you. Delightedly, He then brought them home and looked after them affectionately. He taught them to plough and cultivate. He gave them seeds for cultivation. Whenever crops failed, they approached Him for a remedy.

Tribals have a very familiar attitude to God. The image they have of Him is that of a grandfather. Their relationship with the grandfather is very cordial, familiar and spontaneous with complete faith and trust in him. This is how they understand and see God who is provident in looking after them.

Procreation

The boy and the girl, till this time, used to sleep side by side but they discreetly used to place a log/husking pole between themselves. On God’s advice they drank rice beer one night and when they were drunk God solemnly invited the boy, “If you cross the log/husking pole mankind will multiply!” The boy did so and mankind multiplied and filled the whole earth! Thus, God imparted to the first human couple the secret of procreation.

Comment

It is common in ancient cultures to attribute human shape and characteristics to God. This anthropomorphism, as a way to speak understandably about divine mysterious realities reveals the basic personality of each people and their culture as they identify themselves in close fellowship with the godhead itself. Through this delightfully familiar symbolism, the tribal myth seeks to bring light to bear on their origins. This story communicates a profoundly optimistic view and a sense of general well-being. For tribals, life is the way it has been ordained by God.

2.3 FOLKLORE IN TRIBAL LIFE

Tribals live in a symbiotic union with nature. Hence the rural population enjoys a deep familiarity and bond with both animate and inanimate creatures. Tribal folk-tales reflect this close communion in which pride of place is always given to human beings, because they have intelligence and wisdom. This can be illustrated with one hilarious tale of a tailless jackal as follows:

A certain old man used to cross a river every day in order to go and plough his fields. His wife would dutifully carry him his rice for the noonday meal. One day a jackal met the wife and asked her: “Where are you going, old lady?” “Child I am taking rice to the old man.” The jackal craftily said to her: “Mother, you are aged and the river already has much water in it. I am going to help you across.” As the old lady was about to enter the water, the jackal suggested, “Mother, I shall take the rice upon my head. You just hold on to my tail.” During the crossing of the river, the jackal ate half of the rice. And every day without failing he tricked the old lady, so that when the food was brought to her husband it was clear that half had already been scooped away. So one day the old man asked: “Wife, why do you bring me regularly rice, part of which has been taken away?” The old lady answered, “Husband, every day on my way here, I meet a certain jackal. It is he who plays the cheat and eats off half of your full portion of rice.” The next day, unknown to anyone, the wife was in the field and the husband at home. In the morning when the sun was high up, the old man combed his long hair, put on a lady’s long garment, sharpened a razor, and set off with a pot of rice on his head, just as his wife usually did. Near the river he came upon the jackal: “Where do you go, old lady?” the jackal asked in mock politeness. “Child, I am taking rice to the old man,” said the husband in disguise. Pat came the invitation from the jackal, “There is much water in the river. How will you cross it? I shall carry your rice and you take hold of my tail!” So they set off. But as soon as the jackal started to eat the rice the old man took out his razor and cut his tail clean off! In great surprise the jackal turned round, saw what had happened, and only then he recognized the old man. Angry and ashamed that he had lost his tail, the jackal threatened, “Wait a bit, old man! I will cover the handle of your

plough with filth!” The clever old man ordered some sharp pointed nails to be made by the village smith and then he fixed them into his plough-handle. When the unsuspecting jackal came and sat on the handle, he got his own seat damaged!

With his pride hurt again, the jackal warned: “Wait a bit, old man! You have cheated me, but I shall have your fowls for my meal!” True to his threat, soon after the jackal came with a whole pack of jackals to rob the old man of his fowls. But the farmer was ready for the attack. He had already removed the chickens from their house and he himself was there armed with a scythe. When the jackals entered the chicken house, the old man gave a touch of his weapon and they shouted: “Oh brothers, a huge cock is there! And it pecks very hard!” The tailless jackal was not afraid of any cock, so he too entered and the old man inflicted a good gash into him. The jackal ran off shouting: “You fellows! What you call a cock, is really the old man!” Again he made a threat: “Wait a bit, old man,” he said. “I shall have all of your pumpkins!” So the wise old man plucked all the pumpkins off his roof. He then covered his body with ashes, and hid himself there amid the leaves. Once more the jackal took some associates with him for a night robbery. As soon as the jackals got up upon the roof, the old man gave them each a good hard and rough push. The jackals cried: “Oh brothers, the old man’s pumpkins are butting frightfully!” Then came the tailless jackal’s turn to go to the roof for the pumpkins. Just as he came onto the roof, the old man gave him such a sharp blow that he jumped off and ran away shouting: “You fellows, what you call the old man’s pumpkins, is really the old man himself!” So, this is the way it went: Neither could the old man kill the tailless jackal, nor could the tailless jackal rob the old man of anything.

In the end, the man and his wife held a council: “How shall we lure all those jackals together and make an end of them, once and for all?” they asked. They devised a plan and this is what it was. One day the old lady seated herself at the door of her house and cried out in lament: “My husband is dead! What shall I do?” The jackals said to her: “Old lady, you must prepare a funeral repast. And you will invite us, won’t you?” The clever woman said: “Why shouldn’t I invite you, children?” What did she do then? She collected a good quantity of dry cow dung and pebbles. After hiding away her husband, she invited all the jackals for the feast. When they had all gathered, she made the cow dung into a heap over the pebbles, and then set fire to it. Each time she would take a stone out, she would drop it into water and it hissed violently. Deceived the jackals greedily shouted: “Give it to me, granny! Give it to me granny!” The old lady replied: “Wait, Children! If you allow the cooking its time, there will be nice cakes for all! I will give you each your share!” Finally she said: “Come on children! The cooking is over!” As the impatient jackals approached, she said: “Children if you remain as you are, you will rob one another, or you will have a fight. So come, I shall tie you all down with ropes to keep peace.” And so she tied them all with ropes, and the tailless jackal she bound with a chain. Now that they were captive all, and seated in a row, she shouted. “Come quick, old man, ho! ho!” The jackals asked: “What do you say, old lady?” She replied, “Children, I was only calling out my husband’s ancestors.” With that, out of his concealment came the old man with a large wooden hammer in hand and he began to beat all those jackals one after the other up and down the row. When he came to the tailless jackal, he gave him such a thrashing that his chain snapped. At this sight, the other jackals too, vehemently pulling their ropes, broke them, and they all

ran for their lives, each in a different direction and from that day they never were seen nor heard of again.

Summer evening hours are generally spent by children gathered around some old man listening to him telling them such tales in the village for hours enchanted till sleep got the better of them. Folklore is a means not only to entertain children but also to teach them values, attitudes towards life and relationships.

Riddles

They have been yet another means of entertainment and pastime that have a real community-building role among the tribals. At leisure time at night, when they come together after the day's work, both young and old revel in telling practical jokes and riddles. They enter into a lively competition to outdo one another with these mind-teasers. Such competitive superiority hurts no one – it is good fun for everyone to enjoy. Riddles also present a good glimpse into the symbolic nature of the tribal mind and a graphic feature of their language. Here are some examples:

- 1) As a youngster there were four feet, turned adult there were only two, and when old there were three. What is it? (A human being!)
- 2) A prince royal cannot bear up with the most insignificant cause of pain. What is it? (The eye!)
- 3) A youngster goes about sporting a crooked stick. Who is he? (A dog!)
- 4) Fire has broken out in one village, the smoke rises in another, while the alarm is given in a third. What do you say of this? (It is the *hookah*, a smoking device with three different parts!)
- 5) Flesh inside, bowels outside. What is it? (The paddy bale!)
- 6) A flower droops all day, but at night it blooms. What is it? (A mat!)
- 7) As one takes this baby in arms, it creates a din, but when one lays it down, it keeps quiet. What is it? (The drum!)
- 8) A girl, after raking up her sweepings, takes her station at the back of the house. Who is she? (A comb!)
- 9) This tiny fellow knocks down big, strappy, powerful men. Who is he? (Rice beer!)
- 10) A water spring coming out of dry wood. What is it? (An oil press!)
- 11) A broad, flat fish flounders about in a few drops of water. What is it? (The tongue!)
- 12) Held with the hand, it does not hold in the hand. What is it? (An umbrella!)

Proverbs

They are perhaps the best example of refined tribal sentiments. Tribals are basically people of deep emotions, they relish delicate feelings. Proverbs are the means through which they reflect their sophisticated manners and social attitudes. They are also excellent examples of tribal wisdom which is based on their concrete experience rather than on cerebral activity. Some illustrations follow:

The Story of the Tribals

- 1) With men who are perpetually hanging about their wives' petticoats have no social interaction.

Comment: For a male tribal, it is a gentle reminder that though tribal women are strong characters, husbands are not to be over-dependent on them.

- 2) A pig does not forget the taste of beer leftovers.

Comment: This is a symbolic language and refers both to the tendency to vice and to people who have an incorrigible taste for vice – particularly fornication and adultery.

- 3) When they find the bird-dirt people say, 'The birds have lodged here for the night!'

Comment: The image of bird-dirt merely insinuates an illicit relationship.

- 4) Danger from a tiger in the home, danger from a tiger in the jungle, whither can I run?

Comment: There are certain inescapable problems and a person simply has to face up to them. Nothing is gained by trying to escape an inescapable responsibility!

- 5) Shall I tie the yoke to the plough with the bullock's tail?

Comment: A tribal who is poor and without any means expresses his helplessness and brings home to listeners his wretched condition through this graphic agricultural proverb.

- 6) If you take only one cupful, they say, the cow charges at you; take a cupful more!

Comment: It is commonly used in drinking parties, and means that etiquette and good manners require that you accept a second helping. It is symbolic of tribal hospitality and sensitivity.

- 7) You will see your parents' wedding!

Comment: It is used to admonish young, mischievous boys and girls, to caution and admonish them against misadventure and danger. It would mean, "Don't court trouble, don't endanger your life, don't take undue risks!"

- 8) Verily, how moonlike shines your face!

Meaning: Indeed, you are too good to be true.

- 9) Everything else may be washed away, but the clan won't.

Meaning: It is not easy to forget one's kin.

- 10) If not while only a sapling, never when it is a tree.

Meaning: Evils must be remedied before it is too late.

Cosmology

Tribals often express their perception of truth and their experience of life not in conceptual language but in their own characteristically graphic, down-to-earth manner. It is the form of myths and fables which satisfy their questionings. Thus, for example, to explain lunar phases they tell the following tale:

One day the moon invited the sun to dinner and gave him a good meal of sweet potatoes cooked in butter. These were so delicious, that the sun asked what the food was and how it had been prepared, for he wanted to have the same menu again. The moon shamefacedly confessed that the food she had served were her own children. “Well,” said the sun, “my children must be as good as yours!” So saying, he killed them all. Only as he began to eat them did he realize that he had been tricked. So he went in a rage to punish the moon. Seeing him coming, the moon hid behind a mango/baniam tree. The sun saw this ruse and with his sharp sword he slashed the moon. At the same time, he cursed her saying: “Now you shall keep that cut all your life! You will try to get cured every month. But as soon as you think you are all right, the cut will reappear and go on increasing.” And so it is. From that time onwards we have the different phases of the moon. The shadow of the mango/baniam tree remains printed upon the moon’s face. From that time, also, the moon carefully remains hidden from the sun. She appears only when she knows that he has gone to sleep.

Astronomical Legends

Tribals weave beautiful legends about stars, planets and galaxies. They are also accustomed to create stories about everything and anything that make up the situation and condition of their everyday domestic life and work. These are good expressions of their rich, aesthetic grasp of reality. They show how the tribal mind revels in contemplation of the beauty and mystery of creation. They take much pride in knowing and relating these traditions. So goes the story of the heavenly constellations Orion and Pleiades:

God made the plough for the boy and girl, first ancestors of human beings. With it they were to till the earth and bring it under cultivation. It took Him seven days and seven nights to make this implement. Now, while He was making the plough, a certain tiger came to frighten and attack Him. To protect Himself He threw a handful of wooden chips upon the tiger, and sent His wild dog after it. So, the wild dog went after the tiger and ever since the wild dog has become a bitter enemy of tigers.

God again set about making the plough. He saw a dove sitting on her eggs. He aimed his hammer at the dove and threw it but it fell short. He next threw his file at it, again He missed, and the dove flew away from its nest. This dove became a star and the double eggs, double stars, and the hammer became the Pleiades, while the file became Orion.

Folk Song and Dance

The underlying current of tribal living is a sense of celebration. It is an exultation of life that finds spontaneous expression in song and dance. The jovial and celebrative character of tribal personality is best portrayed in their strong musical tradition. Song and dance are effective ways in which tribals express themselves creatively, sharing their experience of life, their emotions, their history and, above all, their irrepressible hope and joy-in-living.

Folk Song

The theme of tribal songs may be about any life-event: birth, marriage, death, ploughing, sowing, reaping, etc. These are daily life-experiences: pain and suffering, joy and sorrow, success and failure, frustration and aspiration. Tribal

The Story of the Tribals

song is a deeply poetic expression. It may just be sung, or it may be accompanied by dramatization, movement and dance. It is never a solo performance. Song accompanied by dance is always *in* the community, *with* the community and *for* the community.

It is important to remember that tribal songs are sung according to different seasons during the year and those who sing are carried away by the rhythm of the season they are in. They witness the signs of nature and events facing them, surrounding them and affecting them. It is that experience of feeling and emotion that they give expression through songs. For example, they sing when they see clouds gathering on the distant horizon. They know that the pre-monsoon winds are building up and so one of the soothing songs they sing is as follows:

Pour down, you dark clouds!

Shower you rains, why tarry!!

Comment: This song, thus, gives voice to their eager and joyous anticipation of the rains which bring relief and prosperity. So, as the clouds and breezes are as if ready for celebration, people's deep emotions burst forth in thankful anticipation. Experience has taught them how to read the signs of late summer days just before the incoming monsoon. With its rains there is a promise for plenty of (a) water in fields, ponds and rivers, (b) crops in the land, and (c) greenery and fruits in the forest!

Same observation as above follows in some important life-events like marriage. From their marriage tunes one gets a glimpse into the wealth of tribal poetic simplicity. One such example is as follows:

Come out and look, O mother dear!

Are they not the kin, here?

From the East do they come and enter

Are they not the kin, here?

Comment: This song is sung during the very first phase of marriage negotiations, when the mediators from the prospective bridegroom's family arrive at the house of the prospective bride. By proxy it expresses the excitement and joy felt by the latter.

Folk Dance

Folk song is accompanied with community dance. Rural tribals spend their evenings during both lean agricultural seasons and festivals in singing and dancing. "The tribe that dances does not die," states Verrier Elwin, India's famous anthropologist. In fact, song and dance are important ways in which tribals express, relive and relieve their emotions. Over the centuries they have built up a tradition, a whole cycle of song and dance corresponding to their agricultural and social customs. They have different kinds and styles of seasonal songs and dances. It is characteristic of tribal song and dance that they are performed in a variety of ways. Some songs are only sung while others are sung and danced. Some others are sung and danced accompanied by instruments. Tribal dance is rendered by groups of performers locked arm-to-arm, arm-to-shoulder or arm-to-waist, moving in beautiful, undulating waves.

Check Your Progress I

- Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.
- 1) How do the tribals express their experience of truth, intelligence and wisdom?

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2.4 CULTURAL EXPRESSION

Folk culture in a tribal society is seen in the following four different forms:

Oral tradition: These include mostly verbal arts or expressive literature consisting of spoken, sung and voiced forms of traditional utterances like songs, tales, poetry. Ballads, anecdotes, rhymes, proverbs and elaborate epics.

Material Culture: These are visible aspects of folk behaviour, such as, skills, recipes and formulae as displayed in rural arts and crafts, traditional motifs, architectural design, clothes, fashions, farming, fishing and various other types of tools and machinery.

Social Folk Customs: these are areas of traditional life that emphasize the group rather than the individual skills and performances. They include large family and community observances and relate to rites of passages, such as, birth, initiation, marriage and death or annual celebrations, festivals, fairs, ritual and ceremonial gatherings, market occasions and rural meets.

Performing Arts: These consist of traditional music, masquerades, dance and drama.

Among these, the *oral tradition* and the *performing arts* appear to be the main media of communication, Storytellers, singers, minstrels and other kinds of folk entertainers have acted for centuries as sources for the transmission and dissemination of news and information through face-to-face live communication. Families, social groups and community gatherings served as the main platforms of communication and sources for feedback for the folk performers. The values, attitudes, beliefs and culture of the people are propagated, reinforced and perpetuated through these folk forms. The issues in a society are depicted in the form of satire by the folk artists for curing societal evils.

Material Culture

Every tribal group develops techniques of work that respond to the demands of the environment, to the capacity, creativity and level of living standard of the group. Hunters, fishers, farmers of different tribal cultures have markedly different techniques of hunting, fishing and tilling the soil. So, also it is from the way of

playing, singing, painting, cooking and the like that it can be decided whether one tribal group is different from the other or not.

Technology and economy fall under material culture. They play an important role in shaping the mode of life of any tribal group. When the group is small, its technology is simple, resources are scarce and the problem of survival is most important. In order to survive in his material surroundings, a tribal develops techniques, invents some instruments and uses them for earning his food, making his clothes and constructing his shelter.

There is no tribal society without methods of *production*, *distribution* and *consumption* and some forms of exchange and some expression of value in terms of monetary or other symbols. The economy of the majority of tribals is agriculture-based economy. Land is their biggest asset and agriculture is their main occupation though forest produce is equally important in their economy. For agricultural activities they depend very much on the help of their animals, especially for manuring and ploughing their fields and threshing their crops. They have two kinds of agricultural land, (a) upland, and (b) lowland. In the former they grow crops which require less water whereas in the latter they grow paddy and wheat crops which require more water.

The economy of tribals is mainly consumption based economy. They do not bother about saving or investing for the future. If their produce is plentiful for consumption for the year, they are quite satisfied. Other necessary things for everyday life are obtained through exchange. Nowadays, money is being used more than the barter system even in remote villages.

Other occupations like weaving, basket-making, pottery, blacksmithing, tanning, etc. are best left to their low class Hindu neighbours among the tribals of Central-Eastern region of India. However, in the case of necessity they take up some of these works, too, as a part time job. They are very reluctant to take up trade as their occupation. Even those who take up this job are rarely found successful in it. They would prefer to sit in the office holding some job but would have no patience to sit in the shop! Being educated they are now going for jobs in public as well as private sectors. With mining and industries coming in their areas, even the uneducated ones among them are going to work in them as unskilled labourers.

Social Folk Customs

They consist of all the structural components of a society through which the main concerns and activities are organized, and social needs, such as, those for order, belief and reproduction are met. They constrain or determine the behaviour of specific social groups. In this context, let it be clear that today both traditional as well as modern tribal societies are undergoing far reaching transformation under the impact of rapid social changes taking place. However, their *social institutions* are still based on relatively more stable value systems as given below.

Kinship

It establishes relationships between individuals and groups on the model of biological relationships between parents and children, between siblings, and between marital partners. It thus means blood relationship. Among the tribals it includes *family* and *clan*, its extension. Relationships established by marriage forming alliances between groups of persons related by blood or consanguineous

ties, are usually referred to as affinal relations. There is a special *term* for every distinct relationship, both in direct and indirect lines of descent. There is also the custom of using one and the same term called *classificatory term* in addressing the whole class of relatives. This is to show greater respect for the elders and greater affection for the younger ones. Strictly speaking, only those people have the right to call someone by name who may have been assisted by the former at the latter's birth or name giving ceremony.

Joking Relationship

A certain category of people among tribals have a fun loving relationship, for example, between (i) grandparents and grandchildren, (ii) brothers-in-law and their wives' younger brothers and sisters, (iii) sisters-in-law and their husbands' younger brothers and sisters, (iv) wife's brothers-sisters and husband's brothers-sisters. These people may enjoy greater familiarity with one another and have a lot of fun among themselves without offence. These relationships may be real or classificatory.

Reserve-Respect Relationship

In this form of relationship, there is a certain distance due to a reserve-respect attitude towards one another. Members of different families and clans enter into such relationship through affinity. The relationship may be real or classificatory, for example, between (i) one's elder brother and one's wife, (ii) one's husband and one's elder sister. Out of deep respect for each other, there is a reciprocal *avoidance* and name *taboo* between these persons. For the same reason, there is also name taboo between a husband and his wife.

Clan

Kinship structure includes the *family* and its extension into the broader group relationships, that is, the *clan*. Each tribe is divided into a number of clans named after totems, such as, *animals, birds, fish, plants, minerals*, etc. 'Totemism' is reverence for different natural species identified as 'totems' with solidarity of particular human groups, especially groups of common ancestry. They are names standing for persons to whom one's ultimate ancestors can be traced back. They are respected. There are various legends about them of receiving some help from them in ancient times. Each clan descends from common ancestors. It is this belief which is the foundation of *marriage outside one's own clan*. It is for the same reason that sexual union between persons of the same clan is regarded as union between close family members. According to tribal creation stories, it is God Himself who divided human beings into various clans to enter into *inter-clan* marriage relationships.

Welcoming Guests

If the guest is a regular visitor, a jar of water is given to him/her to wash his/her face and feet before getting seated. Once seated comfortably, the guest and the host pick up conversation in which they exchange news about the wellbeing of each other's family members followed by rice beer and meal together.

Washing of Feet

If the guest is very dear or respectable and is visiting the family after a long time, he/she is made to sit down and then his/her feet are washed. This is a mark of

great love, respect, affection, gratitude and appreciation. It is the female members who wash the feet of guests. As a token of appreciation, the guest may give some money to the person washing his/her feet but it is not obligatory.

Check Your Progress II

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

1) How does the folk culture in a tribal society get expressed?

2) In what way does the kinship system in a tribal society help to establish relationships between individuals and groups?

3) How does the clan system bring about social order in a tribal society?

2.5 VILLAGE ORGANISATION

For the service of a village community, there are some officials among the tribals in the Central-Eastern region of India. They are either elected for the office or inherit it. These officials are:

- a)

Village Headman: He is responsible for the general good of the village. When there are violations of social and moral laws and other regulations requiring settlement, it is he who calls a village meeting and informs the parties concerned with the case. He announces the judgment arrived at by the elders after their deliberation.

- b) **Village Priest:** He is the religious head of a village. He offers public sacrifices on behalf of his village community to God on some important agricultural feasts for getting good crops and rich harvest during the year. Similarly, he offers periodical sacrifices to village spirits in order to appease them so that the village community may live in peace and harmony with them.
- c) **Village Watchman:** He assists the above officials in their duties as a middleman between them and the community members.
- d) **Village Brotherhood:** In keeping with the village kinship, everyone in the village is related to one another as brother, sister, uncle, aunt, nephew, niece, etc.
- e) **Village Cooperation:** It consists of various kinds of help given to one another in the form of labour. Some of them are as follows:
 - i) **Sangat:** It is an organisation in which a person in need of labourers for some urgent work, gets them from the villagers. During the year, he pays back the village *sangat* with his own labour without any interest.
 - ii) **Pancha:** When someone wants a number of persons to help him out to complete his work within a short time, he contacts the chief of the young men in the village and asks their help. The chief directs the young men under him to do the work promptly. It is a kind of social work through which these young men render free service to the poor and needy of the village, for example, they go to repair the roof of a poor widow or such other helpless persons in the village.
 - iii) **Madait or Pachait:** It is getting help for a particular work in exchange of a meal and drink for the whole family.
 - iv) **Pasri:** It is ploughing the field of a neighbour in exchange as and when need arises.
 - v) **Sajha:** It is share-cropping in which a person cultivates the field of another person and at harvest the produce is shared fifty-fifty between the land owner and the cultivator.
 - vi) **Dhangar:** It is employing a helper who stays with the employer like a family member, sharing in everything of the family and working for it for the whole year. At the end of the year, his parents get a fixed amount of paddy as agreed upon. The contract may be renewed every year.
- f) **Youth Dormitory:** It is a large hall built by the young men of a village to serve at night as their dormitory. It is not only a place to rest after the day's work but also an institution to initiate the youth into various cultural aspects of their society. Here, they learn not only the songs, dances and musical instruments but also some village crafts as well. The supervision and discipline of the dormitory is in the hand of the eldest member among them. He instructs the boys in their social and religious duties. During dances and other celebrations, it is his duty to see that they are dressed properly. He even has the right to punish anyone who does not obey him. Unmarried girls sleep in the house of a widow separate from the boys' dormitory.

The young men mentioned above have many other social duties, for example, the younger boys have to clean the hall, spread mats and light lamps. During rainy or winter season they have to light the fire. When any guest comes to their village, they have to look after him. At wedding, they have to do the cooking. If a villager needs any urgent help, he requests the leader of these boys for assistance and the latter sends the boys under him to do the work. The girls’ dormitory has similar functions.

These dormitories, thus, provide privacy for the parents at home. They unite the youth together, provide an opportunity for close companionship and educate them in community living. In spite of all this, with the advance of education and process of urbanization; many of these dormitories have disappeared.

2.6 SOCIO-RELIGIOUS CUSTOMS: RITES OF PASSAGE

Human communities the world over have certain definite ways of ordering and regulating the life of individuals and the group. The *Rites of Passage* are the ways by which such goals are achieved by societies. These rites are socio-religious customs observed in the life of the members in relation to the community. They mark vital phases in life, namely, *birth*, *marriage* and *death*. The main point of ceremonies observed on these events of life among the major tribes of Central-Eastern India, is incorporation of a member into the community of both the living and the dead. Here they are as follows:

Birth

A new baby is, as it were, a stranger to the community and does not yet belong to it, till after the *name-giving*. In this ritual, a name for the infant is sought by rice-and-water divination. An elder takes his seat with a shallow vessel (generally a leaf cup) containing water. Another leaf cup contains a handful of paddy grains close by. He takes a grain keeping in mind the name of the child, removes its husk with his fingernails and gently drops it to float on the still surface of water in the leaf cup. It is in the name of *God*. Similarly, he drops a second grain in the name of *elders*. Likewise, he drops a third grain in the name of the child and finally he drops the fourth grain naming at the same time one ancestor dead or alive. If the last two grains meet while floating, the child is named after this ancestor. From then on this ancestor becomes the *patron* or *guardian* of the child. The operation is repeated, each time naming different ancestor, till the third and fourth grains meet each other. After this, the child belongs to the father’s *clan*, *tribe* and *ancestors*. This ceremony manifests that the child is from God and the elders are the witnesses to this mystery of life. It also reveals that the ultimate goal of this earthly life of a tribal is to attain the ancestral community at long last in which the tribe lives for ever.

Marriage

Tribals hold marriage holy for according to their various creation myths, God the Creator Himself has instituted it. They practise *adult*, *virilocal* (man’s place), *monogamous* (one husband-one wife), *lifelong* marriages. However, the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia tribals practise *uxorilocal* (woman’s place) marriage. Among them a tribal marries *within* his/her own *tribe* and *outside* his/her own *clan*. Members of a clan consider themselves as belonging to one and the same family.

Hence, they do not get married with one another. *Widow remarriage* is allowed. Marriage between the descendants of a brother and his sister may take place only after *third generation*. Tribals do not have dowry system though they pay a token of *bride price* in cash or kind to the bride's parents. Divorce is very rare.

They go through an elaborate process of negotiation for marriage arrangement. The families of the *bride* and *bridegroom* exchange a number of visits before the marriage proper takes place. Omens, signs from nature, are carefully observed to seek *divine* approval for the proposed match. At *betrothal* rite, an opportunity is given at the courtyard of the house of the bride's parents when the bride and bridegroom may express their agreement or disagreement publicly whether in the future they would like to get married or not. In the central marriage, the bride and bridegroom apply vermilion on each other's forehead. Vermilion is the symbol of blood which is itself the symbol of life. Therefore, by exchanging it, they symbolically manifest that they have decided to share their life and love together for ever. Tribal marriage uniting the bride and bridegroom also unites their families in venerating their ancestor spirits.

Death

According to an ancient custom among the tribals in the Central-Eastern region of the country, if a person dies before the crop seeds sprout in the fields, he/she is burnt and a few of his/her charred bones are collected in an earthen jar which is temporarily buried in the kitchen garden attached to the house of the deceased person or sometimes inside an extra hut near by. If anyone passes away when the crops are standing in the fields, he/she is buried in the burial ground. After some months a few of his/her bones are taken out and are temporarily buried in an earthen jar under a stone near the house of the deceased person. The bones preserved in these ways, are taken out at the end of the year and are deposited in the place for the bones of the dead.

a) Bringing in the 'shade'

The tribals in general believe in the survival of *soul* after death. The tribals mentioned above, believe that the soul survives in the form of two shades, (a) *light shade*, and (b) *heavy shade*. After the burial ceremony, the light shade of the deceased person is brought back home through a special ritual and is requested to reside in one corner of the house peacefully among its old acquaintances. In this way, his/her presence continues to remain among the living members in the family.

b) Reunion of the 'heavy shade' with Ancestors

This ceremony is held generally after 10 days of the burial of a deceased person. Meanwhile it is believed that the heavy shade is not at rest. It hovers about homeless between the old house and the burial place. Food and drink in leaf cups are provided for it at the burial place during this period. On the day of reuniting the 'heavy shade' with ancestors, relatives of the deceased person gather together at the courtyard of his/her old house. In their presence, one elder prays to God in these words: "O God, this person had been living among us. Now he/she has gone away from us. See that everything be right for him/her." After this he prays to ancestors saying: "We request you to accept this person among you. He/she is one of your children. Receive him/her as such and have pity on us also who remain behind." It is believed that henceforth the departed soul takes its

place among the ancestors and a community meal is served in his/her name. With this ceremony the mourning period for him/her gets over and normal daily life is resumed by his/her family members.

c) *Bone Drowning*

It is the crowning ceremony of the tribal death ritual. In the month of December or January when the crops have been brought in, the bones of all those who had passed away during the year, are taken from their temporary resting places. They are taken round the village halting for the last time before their old homes once and then are carried in procession with song, dance, drumming and weeping and are deposited at the place of dead persons' bone keeping. Interestingly, the *Kuròukh* (Uraon) tribe calls this ceremony 'great marriage'. After this ceremony, it is believed that the soul of the dead person takes its place among the ancestors for ever.

2.7 ANNUAL FEASTS AND FESTIVALS

Since it is not possible to cover this topic for all the tribals in the country, the following discussion centres around the tribals of the Central-Eastern region of the country. It is hoped that it helps to understand the cultural expression of other tribal groups too in different parts of the country.

Phagua

It is celebrated on the full moon day in the lunar month of *Phagun* (February-March). It is the *new year* day for the tribals. For the celebration, a branch of the cotton tree often together with a branch of the castor plant is planted on the *phagua* field outside the village. Several bundles of thatching grass are made to lean all around the branch. After the usual consecration over a chicken, it is let loose alive by the *village priest* under the standing dry grass bundles which he next sets on fire. While the fire is ablaze, the assistant of the village priest cuts the top of the branch with a single blow of a battle axe saying: "Let all the sickness and suffering of the past year pass away like this severed branch!"

The myth behind this ceremony is that there was a wicked *vulture* in ancient times on a very tall cotton tree. It used to lift away human beings young and old to its nest to feed its young ones. Terrorised by it, the people prayed to God to save them from this vulture. God had pity on them and took the form of a dwarf hero and went down to kill the vulture. He shot the vulture with His bow and arrows made of iron. It fell to the ground in several pieces and died. He also shot down the cotton tree which had given shelter to the evil vulture. Thus, the branch of the cotton tree in the ceremony is the symbol of evil. As nature renews and bedecks itself with new, tender and beautiful leaves and flowers, the *phagua* feast ushers in the new year for the tribals and says good-bye to the past year.

Sarhul

It is celebrated in the lunar month of *Chait* (March-April) when the *saal* trees are full of flowers. Around noon on the feast day, the village priest and his assistant take a ceremonial bath at the village spring or pond or in a river close by. In some villages, the *village priest* and his *wife* are next made to sit side by side in their courtyard and the headman of the village anoints their foreheads with vermilion to signify and effect the mystical marriage and union of the earth and the sky to ensure plentiful rain and a bumper crop during the year.

A solemn procession of men now starts for the sacred grove. The village priest's assistant now clears a strip of ground with a spade and smears it with cow dung. The village priest sits cross legged in front of the clearing. His assistant takes chickens of appropriate colours, washes their legs, anoints their heads with vermilion and hands them over to the village priest. The latter beheads the victims, drops some blood on the rice heaps placed for various spirits. He prays to the spirit at the sacred grove to ensure good monsoon and rich crop during the year. He also prays to other spirits not to interfere with the mystical union between the earth and the sky so that the earth may produce plenty of good things for mankind. The sacrificed chickens are later cooked with rice and eaten as sacrificial meal in common.

God's power over the spirits is clearly maintained at the sacred grove. He is offered a white (pure) victim at a separate spot away from the place of the spirits. In the *Kuròukh* tradition, the village priest faces the east because the sun, which is the symbol of God, rises from there and prays as follows:

Here below are the *panches* (elders),

Dharmes (God) is above.

O Father, you are above, we are below.

You have eyes, we do not see.

You know all, we are totally ignorant.

Whether knowingly or by mistake we have offended the spirits, restrain them.

Overlook our mistakes.

Hariari

When seedlings get ready for transplantation, it is celebrated on a day fixed for it. The village priest prays to God to give His blessing upon green plants in the field and protect them against all dangers and help them to yield rich harvest. After this he goes to his field and plants five sheaves of seedlings. Following it other members of the village may begin to transplant in their fields too.

Karam

Its celebration begins on 11th day of the lunar month of *Bhado* (August-September) and continues till the harvest season. Although the feast is meant to ensure protection of standing crops, it is primarily the feast of unmarried girls who have been recently engaged. They pray for the blessing of healthy children in their future life in order to perpetuate the family, clan and tribe.

On the *karam* feast day, the unmarried girls who want to take part in the ceremonies keep fast. Towards the evening, young men and women of the village go in procession to a *karam* tree singing, dancing and drumming. One of the young men, cuts three branches from it. These branches are caught in mid air by the girls who carry them in dance procession to the village priest's courtyard. He and his *wife* together plant the branches in the middle of the dance ground. The girls after their light refreshment gather there and sit in a wide circle around the *karam* branches to listen to the story narrating God's blessings upon human beings. After this, young men and women of the village proceed to dance the whole night around the *karam* branches symbolizing God the Creator.

Nawakhani

It is celebrated in the lunar month of *Kuwanr* (September-October) when the first paddy crop is ready for harvest. The *head* of each household sacrifices a chicken to the ancestor spirits in gratitude for giving the gift of life, land and livestock to their descendants. The choicest portion of the festal meal is first offered to them and ritual rice beer is poured for them and prayers are made for their blessing and protection upon the family members.

Soharai

This feast is kept on the eve of the new moon day in the lunar month of *Kartik* (October-November). It is celebrated to honour the cattle helpful in agriculture. Occasionally, a fowl is sacrificed by the *head* of the family to the spirit of cowshed. Cattle are indispensable for the tribals in agriculture. They are the tribe’s most prized gift and possession given by God who had given oxen to the first human beings to plough their fields and grow crops for their livelihood. Thus, cattle are the gift of God and therefore man needs to take care of them.

Khalihani

It is celebrated in the lunar month of *Aghan* (November-December). On behalf of the village community, the village priest on this occasion prays to God in the morning of the feast day at his threshing floor for getting plenty of grain in their threshing activity.

Maghe

It is celebrated in the month of *Magh* (January-February) to honour a house servant. The housewife washes his feet, applies oil on his hair and combs it. She then offers him rice beer. After tasting it if he says, ‘it tastes good, it is delightful!’ then it is a sign that he wishes to continue to give his service to the family for yet another year. If he wishes to discontinue his service, he would remain silent. The willing servant is kept while the unwilling one is released after paying him duly as per agreement.

Thus, the annual feasts among the tribals centre around the good of the family, clan and tribe which is their highest good. Concretely, they are connected with the health and prosperity of their *children, cattle* and *crop* ensuring continuation and happiness of the tribe. The feasts thus manifest the common worldviews of the tribals. They also show how the tribals live their *core values* during the annual cycle of their agricultural life. Thus, they support and strengthen the socio-cultural identity of the tribals in the multi-cultural Indian society.

Check Your Progress III

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

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

1) Give your general evaluation of how the celebrations of annual feasts and festivals of tribals become instrumental in expressing their culture.

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2.8 LET US SUM UP

Folk means the great proportion of the members of a people that determines the group character and that tends to preserve its characteristic form of civilization and its customs, arts and crafts, legends, traditions and superstitions from generation to generation. *Lore* means something that is learned. That is, (a) knowledge gained through study and experience, (b) traditional knowledge or belief. *Folklore* thus means traditional customs, tales, or sayings preserved orally among a people. In a broad sense, it is a medium through which the soul of a people expresses itself colourfully.

2.9 KEY WORDS

- Folklore** : It means traditional customs, tales, or sayings preserved orally among a people. In a broad sense, it is a medium through which the soul of a people expresses itself colourfully.
- Culture** : It is a learned behaviour and the products of that behaviour as opposed to instinctive or biologically determined behaviour.
- Riddles** : They present a good glimpse into the symbolic nature of the tribal mind and a graphic feature of their language.
- Proverbs** : They are the means through which the tribals reflect their sophisticated manners and social attitudes. They are also excellent examples of tribal wisdom which is based on their concrete experience rather than on cerebral activity.

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2.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer to Check Your Progress I

- 1) Tribals often express their perception of truth and experience of life not in conceptual language but in their own characteristically graphic, down-to-earth manner. It is the form of myths and fables which satisfy their questionings. They weave beautiful legends about stars, planets and galaxies. They are also accustomed to create stories about everything and anything that make up the situation and condition of their everyday domestic life and work. These are good expressions of their rich, aesthetic grasp of reality. They show how the tribal mind revels in contemplation of the beauty and mystery of creation.

Answers to Check Your Progress II

- 1) Storytellers, singers, minstrels and other kinds of folk entertainers have acted for centuries as sources for the transmission and dissemination of news and information through face-to-face live communication. Families, social groups and community gatherings served as the main platforms of communication and sources for feedback for the folk performers. The values, attitudes, beliefs and culture of the people are propagated, reinforced and perpetuated through these folk forms. The issues in a society are depicted in the form of satire by the folk artists for curing societal evils.

- 2) It establishes relationships between individuals and groups on the model of biological relationships between parents and children, between siblings, and between marital partners. It includes *family* and *clan*, its extension. Relationships established by marriage forming alliances between groups of persons related by blood or consanguineous ties, are usually referred to as affinal relations. There is a special *term* for every distinct relationship, both in direct and indirect lines of descent. There is also the custom of using one and the same term called *classificatory term* in addressing the whole class of relatives. This is to show greater respect for the elders and greater affection for the younger ones.
- 3) Each tribe is divided into a number of clans named after totems, such as, *animals, birds, fish, plants, minerals*, etc. with solidarity of particular human groups of common ancestry. They are names standing for persons to whom one's ultimate ancestors can be traced back. It is this which is the foundation of *marriage outside one's own clan*. It is for the same reason that sexual union between persons of the same clan is regarded as union between close family members.

Answer to Check Your Progress III

- 1) The annual feasts among the tribals centre around the good of the family, clan and tribe which is their highest good. Concretely, they are connected with the health and prosperity of their *children, cattle* and *crop* ensuring continuation and happiness of the tribe. The feasts thus manifest the common worldviews of the tribals. They also show how the tribals live their *core values* during the annual cycle of their agricultural life. Thus, they support and strengthen the socio-cultural identity of the tribals in the multi-cultural Indian society.