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## UNIT 2 TRIBAL FOLKLORE AND CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS

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### Contents

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Tribal Art
- 2.3 Tribal Music
- 2.4 Indian Tribal Performing Arts
- 2.5 Tribal Costumes and Jewellery
- 2.6 The Importance of Tribal Culture
- 2.7 Adivasi Contributions to Indian Civilization
- 2.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.9 Key Words
- 2.10 Further Readings and References

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### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

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- To understand some of the rich tribal folklores and cultural expressions;
- To appreciate some of the cultural heritages of the tribals in India; and
- To acknowledge the tribal contribution to Indian culture.

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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Culture is a living expression of a group of people. The culture provides a group its identity, self-worth and meaning. In any society, culture refers to the lifestyle of that society. Historically, handed down through oral tradition, it demonstrates the “old ways” over novelty and relates to a sense of community. Folklore consists of legends, music, oral history, proverbs, jokes, popular beliefs, fairy tales and customs that are the traditions of a culture, subculture, or group. It is also the set of practices through which those expressive genres are shared. The term ‘folklore’ was first used by the English antiquarian William Thoms 1846. Folklore may be divided into four areas of study: artifact, describable and transmissible entity (oral tradition), culture, and behaviour (dance or rituals). These areas do not stand alone, however, as often a particular item or element may fit into more than one of these areas. Folk culture is quite often imbued with a sense of place. If elements of a folk culture are copied by, or moved to, a foreign locale, they will still carry strong connotations of their original place of creation. folklore can also serve to validate a culture. In this unit, we look into the folklore of the tribals from general perspectives and how it contributes to their culture. We look into their art, music, costumes, etc. Then we see their contribution to the Indian culture. For the first part of this unit, I depend heavily on Indianetzone, “the largest free encyclopedia on India” (Indianet 2010).

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## 2.2 TRIBAL ART

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Folk and tribal art forms a part of Indian art as a whole. It has undergone transformation since a long time. They have evolved along with classical art. Tribal and folk art belong to the section of people who belong to different social groups and it has a native flavour. These are visual arts for example paintings that depict their lifestyle, tradition and culture. They are the ones close to nature and this thing is regional. They have a set of belief system that allows them to interpret things in their own native ways and this influence them in their art even. Puranic gods and legends are often changed into contemporary manner (Smith 2006).

Tribal and folk art is related to fairs, festivals, local deities, fantasy in their representation. Indian art cannot do away with this section that has a regional and a mystic aura in it. Nomadic way of life is also an integral part of the tribal and folk art. Pithora paintings of the tribes of Rathwa, Bhilals and Nayka of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, are another fine example of Indian tribal art. These paintings convey the joy and celebration of the community. Tribal paintings from Orissa, earlier done as house-hold decoration, but now a commercial art-form done on raw silk fabric have themes of everyday life. Madhubani paintings depict bright, lively deities, most popularly Krishna and his beloved Radha, and various stories associated with their legend. They are named after the village of their origin. Others like Phad, Warli, Pithora, Choittora also fall in this category of Indian art (Indianet 2010 & Das 1979).

Indian Tribal Art provides valuable insights into elementary human nature and lifestyle among the Indian tribes. The Indian tribals pay due veneration and reverence to Mother Earth and its crucial elements. Indian tribal art is always described by positive themes and ideas like birth, life, harvest, journey, jubilation or marriage. The Indian tribal art includes paintings which are the integral part of the tribal tradition. It is a tribal art form where life and ingenuity are fused. Tribal paintings and sculptures are of exceedingly high quality and are documents of their cultural heritage. Tribals have made their own place in the contemporary world of art. The art gives the tribals a power and responsibility to control and guide them through it. The symbols portray the imaginations of men and these imaginations are the representative emotions of the people of a particular period and society (Indianet 2010 & Staab 2009).

It has not been more than half a century since the discovery of tribal paintings has revolutionized the discipline of the fine arts. Tribal art is a term covering the art products and performances of tribals. Indian tribals have definite artistic express. Geographical, sociological, historical and traditional factors determine the degree of primitiveness among tribals (Smith 2006).

In fact, tribal art is an art where life and creativity are inseparable. The tribal arts have a unique sensitivity. Their art is a manifestation of their life and holds their passion and mystery. The tribal art is one of the most fascinating parts of the tribal culture in India. The treasure of tribal arts is immense and has an astounding range, diversity and beauty (Staab 2009). Traditional Indian tribal art tries to wholly recreate the immortal charisma of Indian tribal life. One can easily come across exquisite pieces of Indian tribal art in different parts of India. "The Indian tribal art is rich in expression and is a living form

very much with the times.” It has become an intrinsic part of the country’s cultural identity (Indianet 2010).

Traditional Indian tribal art tries to wholly recreate the immortal charisma and creativity of Indian tribal life. Through solemn efforts, the Indian tribes try to keep alive a culture that is thousands years old, comprising music, traditions, rituals and art. They live in complete harmony with nature by preserving their resources and blending with the environment. Tribal paintings usually belong from the remote tribal regions, in forests or high up in the mountains. Indian tribal paintings bearing illustrious backgrounds include Saura paintings, Gond paintings, Bondi paintings, Pithora paintings, Warli paintings, Thanka, Patta Chitra, Kurumba paintings, Khovar paintings, Pichhvai painting and, miniatures etc. (Indianet 2010).

The Indian tribal art is influenced by the contemporary art and its narrative approach. At the same time the tribal art has also shaped contemporary art. Now we move to the next section where we see the varieties of tribal music. As such the melody of music and rhythm of dance reverberate in the life of every tribal (Archer 1974).

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## **2.3 TRIBAL MUSIC**

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Indian tribal music possesses numerous modulations that have been inimitable in its traditions. Truly, Indian tribal music is considered to be a version of house music. The music is mostly accompanied by drum-beats, with no presence of specific melody. During an ongoing performance, there exists no prolonged synth sound in such music. Due to the Indian variation being of much rugged origin, the instruments utilised are not as refined as the ones used in classical music. Tribal musical instruments are generally manufactured by the musicians themselves, making use of materials like coconut shells, animal skin, etc.

The musical beats are based on sophisticated and synchronised drum patterns, establishing a rhythm. Into a wholesome Indian tribal musical session, there can be a mixture of drum sounds in a particular track. Other instruments utilised include horse hair violin, dudu, bamboo flutes, santoor, sitar etc. (Bhattacharya 1999).

The strict definition of tribal music in India is pretty formless, since tracks are acknowledged as ruggedly tribal because of their booming sound. However, present times witness much of lyrical chanting and traditional sounds, comprising contemporary musical variations. The aboriginal, ethnic tribal music is reproduced live with drums, in accompaniment with other musical instruments (Indianet 2010).

Tribal music in India is not taught the same way as classical music is. There are no finishing schools that instruct tribal music. It has a hereditary process of learning. The music is passed down from generations to generations. However, as times and tastes have changed, variations in the current form are foreseeable. Included in the present-day tribal variation, tribal house music is the end-product of digitalised instrumentation.

Indian tribal music with its closed-group form of ethnicity, is remarkable in the sense that it can never be studied in isolation from the social and ritual

contexts of the people concerned. Tribal music possesses a well-built community basis. The fact can be comprehended in the domains of musical-socialisation, kinds of ownership, levels of participation and nature of specialisation. Learning music in a typical tribal society forms a cardinal part of the entire process of association of its members. It is learnt together with the umpteen customs and practices conforming to the standards reckoned apt by the society. Any given tribal community as a whole initiated its children in learning music, i.e., singing, drumming or dancing, from an early age. Children from the Santhal tribal society are initially supplied with the katic murli (small sized flutes) of five to six inches in length with three to four envoys to blow and the drums of smaller size to beat (Indianet 2010 & Knight 1993).

As with any other tribal society, Indian tribal music scenario also possesses its aboriginal restrictions as well. Music amongst tribals are not conceived as exclusive property of its individual members, but of the community as a whole. For this very reason, tribal music even if framed by individual composers remain anonymous. For instance, none of the Santhal songs can be seen to contain the names of individual Santhal composers. Modernisation has however completely overhauled this tradition. Individualism is keenly looked after (Indianet 2010).

Closely related to the music is the tribal dance. Rhythmic movement and dance steps flows through the very blood of the tribals and is part of the tribal folklore and will be taken up in the next section, as part of the tribal performing arts (Bhavnani 1965).

### **Check Your Progress I**

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

1) What is a folklore?

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2) How are Indian tribal art connected to normal events of life?

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## **2.4 INDIAN TRIBAL PERFORMING ARTS**

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Indian tribal performing arts is amazingly divergent in its content, with ethnicity speaking from each angle. Tribal performing arts in India is not an area that needs further novelty and expression to elucidate its profound charm. Tribal existence in the country is known to have been since thousands of years, even before the advent of Aryans. Hence, it becomes pretty obvious that their

indigenous culture has been rooted with passionate culture and tradition. Performing arts may not be the term which such men and women might use, but that was what they had imbibed themselves with as an essential past-time.

Historically, it can be explained that tribal life in India was much unhurried and relaxed moments making up each day. Something new and novel comprising dancing, dramatics, singing, imbibing of musical instruments, art of chiselling out refreshing artefacts, was perhaps the order of the day. Tribal women in India were foremost and leading in such business in performing arts, including sometimes painting or sketching. The tribal society in India is a very close-knit one, with unity surviving in diversity (Indianet 2010).

Through common motives and aims of establishing an orchestrated society, performing arts in Indian tribal groups were done in a common platform in a clearing. This tradition is however still followed amongst some tribes, lurking within the depth of woods.

Commercialisation and modernisation has paved way for tribesmen to move out into the wide world for gaining popularity. The immensely formulated manner in which such tribal performing arts work is done is one that fetches inspiration for cosmopolitan cities also. Be it while singing, while dancing, while enacting a theatrical performance or beating of united drums, tribals in India try to make a point every time.

The exceedingly enriched and indigenous performing arts culture amongst Indian tribals is manifest by their yet successfully surviving tradition, battling against all odd of modernism. The positive point that can be mentioned here is that whatever has happened or occurred in tribal lives, Indian tribal performing arts has moved ahead in unison to capture million of hearts today (Indianet 2010).

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## **2.5 TRIBAL COSTUMES AND JEWELLERY**

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Indian tribals have an innate sense of beauty that is simple and close to nature. Among them fashion has existed since the primordial existence of tribals who had first laid their footsteps in the subcontinent. With time, several instances and excavations by historians and archaeologists have exhibited the unusual yet exceptional qualities in making beautiful things during times when man had just started to grasp the meaning of ‘progression of humanity’. Today, however tribal fashion in India has taken on a fresh meaning, looking towards the Western culture, with much broader and pan-Indian aspects to be proud about. People of the Indian metropolitans, with imposing shops established in every corner of streets, house tribal jewellery or tribal attires, making the rather archaic communities going great guns. Whatever is the stance of cities today, the fact remains as it is, that Indian tribal fashion has descended from the tribal ancestors, who still maintain a progeny. The hinterlands in which they perhaps reside, stay witness to umpteen innovative tribal fashion, successfully blending the ancient and the modern (Indianet 2010).

Indian tribal fashion can be zeroed down on the two primary aspects of costumes and jewellery. Indian history bears evidence that the primeval tribal jewellerys were sometimes chiselled out from animal bones, carved into extraordinary angles. These jewellerys possessed a sharp and jagged edge, which were almost always worn everyday, with specialties reserved for occasions. With time and advancement of civilisation, Indian tribal fashion took



on a fresh turn, with the surging advent of gold jewellery. Depending on one's capacity to afford the expensive metal, throughout the ages gold has been utilised in every kind of jewellery, from necklace, armlet, headgear, wristlet, ornament for the waist, or even anklets. Gold ornaments were also and still is at times utilised in appeasing the Almighty in ceremonial occasions. Emerging in almost every hue and brightness, gold jewellery in Indian tribal fashion can be witnessed from the east to west and north to south (Indianet 2010).

Flowering one's body, empowered with rich patterns of fragrant flowers amongst many tribes of North-East India are in vogue, however with certain restrictions. Indian tribal fashion also finds proud passage in the diversified class of costumes and attires from the states and union territories that the country is dotted with. For example, men in Arunachal Pradesh, believe in keeping it simple, hence they wear *lungis* woven in red and black yarn, a jacket and a turban. Women from Arunachal deck themselves in a piece of cloth that wraps the body from the shoulders to the knees. This is then done again with a full-sleeved coat and a striking sash, called *muhkak*, tied around the waist. A Khasi man from Meghalaya is known by his dhoti (an unstitched garment for the lower part of the body), jacket and a turban. Khasi women from Meghalaya deck them with a two-piece cloth pinned on each shoulder and a shawl, called *jainsem* and *tapmoh* locally. A Garo tribes woman dons a blouse and tie and a long unstitched cloth called *dakmanda*, round the waist. The cloth is hand-woven, with a 6-10 inch borderline, bearing floral motifs. A Jaintia tribes woman from Meghalaya deck up in a similar manner as Garo women, with the blouse, a striped sarong (A garment consisting of a long piece of cloth worn wrapped around the body and tucked at the waist or under the armpits), called *thoh khyrwang* (Indianet 2010).

Indian tribal fashion is also reflected exceedingly well in the costumes of tribes in Mizoram. Men folk from Mizoram deck them with a piece of cloth, early 7 feet in length, wrapped round the body. In winter, men adorn them with a long white coat, fastened at the throat and going down up to thighs. The coats are ornately patterned near the sleeves with bands of red and white. The tribes men also wear a particular kind of headgear, wrapping a cloth around the head, paying attention that the ends fall over the ears. Women from Mizoram don a single cloth wrapped around the waist and descending to the knees. A short white jacket with hand-woven patterns on top completes the look of the attire. Tribal fashion in Manipur consists of women donning a blouse and a three-piece hand woven *phanek* (the traditional women's wear of Manipuri women), closely resembling a wrap-around skirt. Men generally wear a single piece of cloth, resembling a lungi. Turbans are a must attire for Manipuri men.

Indian tribal fashion finds a pride position in Nagaland, with sixteen tribes donning different costumes. Within the men, attires primarily comprise a short wrap-around skirt and a feathered headgear. Women from Nagaland possess various fashions of donning a skirt, named mekhla, varying according to tribes. Whatever, is the form amongst the tribes, wearing of mekhla follows the basic of less is more. Tribal fashion in Tripura consists of men wearing a narrow piece of cloth as a garment for the lower section of the body, without a shirt. The headdress is a turban, with the Tripura women donning two separate pieces of cloth, draped round the body both for lower and upper section of the body. The most astonishing feature of the attire is the upper part of the garment, embroidered with ornate designs (Indianet 2010).

Indian tribal fashion amongst the Bhil community in Rajasthan consists of the men getting comfortable in a loincloth, embroidered waistcoats, turbans and traditional Rajasthani shoes. The Bhil tribeswomen don a single cloth, tucked round the waist, while the rest is used to cover the head. Diversified jewellery, ranging from beaded chokers, colourful bangles, nose-rings and an ornament hanging from the hair to the forehead, is a requisite for Bhil women. The Warli tribe from Western Ghats, rather popular as *ghatis*, don minimal clothing, with men wearing short dhotis and embroidered waistcoats. Warli women wear saris, short in length, with a half-sleeved embellished choli that is tied in a knot in the front. The Toda tribe from Nilgiri Hills have men wearing long, loose-flowing garment, covering the whole body. The colours are normally red, white and blue borders. Toda women also wear the same woven garment, except in the fashion of a sari. The jewellery is limited to silver, beads and shells.

Indian tribal fashion exists to quite a massive height in West Bengal, Bihar and parts of Orissa, with the presence of the Santhal tribe. Santhal attire basically redefines minimalism, with men donning lungi and women donning short sari without a blouse, however worn to fit their body neatly, without even going loose at any trying circumstances (Indianet 2010).

### **Check Your Progress II**

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

1) How did commercialisation affect tribal art positively?

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2) Give the role of Jewellery in tribal culture?

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## **2.6 THE IMPORTANCE OF TRIBAL CULTURE**

These folklore and other expressions indicate the dynamic and creative nature of the tribal culture. Culture refers to the pattern of human activity and the symbols, which give significance to this activity. Culture is represented through the art, literature, costumes, customs and traditions of a community. Different cultures exist in different parts of the world. The natural environment greatly affects the lifestyle of the people of that region, thus shaping their culture. The diversity in the cultures around the world is also a result of the mind-sets of people inhabiting different regions of the world.

The cultural values of a community give it an identity of its own. A community gains a character and a personality of its own, because of the culture of its people. Culture is shared by the members of a community. It is learned and passed from the older generations to the newer ones. For an effective transfer of culture from one generation to another, it has to be translated into symbols. Language, art, religion and folklore serve as the symbolic means of transfer of cultural values between generations (Edward 2007).

Culture is a bond that ties the people of a region or community together. It is that one common bond, which brings the people of a community together. The customs and traditions that the people of a community follow, the festivals they celebrate, the kind of clothing they wear, the food they eat, and most importantly, the cultural values they adhere to, bind them together.

Culture is seen as a system of social control, wherein people shape their standards and behavior. The cultural values form the founding principles of one's life. They influence one's principles and philosophies of life. They influence one's way of living and thus impact social life. The importance of culture lies in the fact that it is a link between people and their value systems (Oak 2010). In fact tribal culture has something very profound to share with others: simplicity, closeness to nature, democratic values, community spirit, etc.

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## 2.7 ADIVASI CONTRIBUTIONS TO INDIAN CIVILIZATION

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Adivasi traditions and practices pervade all aspects of Indian culture and civilization, yet this awareness is often lacking in popular consciousness, and the extent and import of Adivasi contributions to Indian philosophy, language and custom have often gone unrecognized, or been underrated by historians and social scientists (Payat 2002).

Although popular myths about Buddhism have obscured the original source and inspiration for its humanist doctrine, it is to India's ancient tribal (or Adivasi) societies that Gautam Buddha looked for a model for the kind of society he wished to advocate. Repulsed by how greed for private property was instrumental in causing poverty, social exploitation and unending warfare - he saw hope for human society in the tribal republics that had not yet come under the sway of authoritarian rule and caste discrimination. The early Buddhist *Sanghas* were modelled on the tribal pattern of social interaction that stressed gender equality, and respect for all members. Members of the *Sanghas* sought to emulate their egalitarian outlook and democratic functioning

At that time, the tribal republics retained many aspects of social equality that can still be found in some Adivasi societies that have somehow escaped the ill-effects of commercial plunder and exploitation. Adivasi society was built on a foundation of equality with respect for all life forms including plants and trees. There was a deep recognition of mutual dependence in nature and human society. People were given respect and status according to their contribution to social needs but only while they were performing that particular function. A priest could be treated with great respect during a religious ceremony or a doctor revered during a medical consultation, but once such duties had been performed, the priest or doctor became equal to everyone else. The possession of highly valued skills or knowledge did not lead to a permanent



rise in status. This meant that no individual or small group could possess exclusive authority any kind, or enjoy hereditary rights (Payat 2002).

Such a value-system was sustainable as long as the Adivasi community was non-acquisitive and all the products of society were shared. Although division of labor did take place, the work of society was performed on a cooperative and co-equal basis - without prejudice or disrespect for any form of work (Kumar 2003).

In fact, it is said that the simplicity, the love of nature, the absence of coveting the goods and wealth of others, and the social harmony of tribal society attracted Gautam Buddha, and had a profound impact on the ethical core of his teachings.

Nevertheless, tribal societies were under constant pressure as the money economy grew and made traditional forms of barter less difficult to sustain. In matters of trade, the *Adivasis* followed a highly evolved system of honour. All agreements that they entered into were honoured, often the entire tribe chipping in to honour an agreement made by an individual member of the tribe. Individual dishonesty or deceit were punished severely by the tribe. An individual who acted in a manner that violated the honour of the tribe faced potential banishment and family members lost the right to participate in community events during the period of *punishment*. But often, tribal integrity was undermined because the non-tribals who traded with the Adivasis reneged on their promises and took advantage of the sincerity and honesty of most members of the tribe (Payat 2002).

Tribal societies came under stress due to several factors. The extension of commerce, military incursions on tribal land, and the resettling of Brahmins amidst tribal populations had an impact, as did ideological coercion or persuasion to attract key members of the tribe into “mainstream” Hindu society. This led to many tribal communities becoming integrated into Hindu society as *jatis* (or castes) while others who resisted were pushed into the hilly or forested areas, or remote tracks that had not yet been settled. In the worst case, defeated *Adivasi* tribes were pushed to the margins of settled society and became discriminated as outcastes and “untouchables”.

But spontaneous differentiation within tribal societies also took place over time, which propelled these now unequal tribal communities into integrating into Hindu society without external violence or coercion. In Central India, ruling dynasties emerged from within the ranks of tribal society.

In any case, the end result was that throughout India, tribal deities and customs, creation myths and a variety of religious rites and ceremonies came to be absorbed into the broad stream of “Hindu” society. In the *Adivasi* traditions, ancestor worship, worship of fertility gods and goddesses (as well as male and female fertility symbols), totemic worship - all played a role. And they all found their way into the practice of what is now considered Hinduism. The widespread Indian practice of keeping ‘*vratas*’, i.e. fasting for wish-fulfillment or moral cleansing also has *Adivasi* origins (Payat 2002).

Renowned Bengali writer Mahashweta Devi has shown that both Shiva and Kali have tribal origins as do Krishna and Ganesh. In the 8th century, the tribal forest goddess or harvest goddess was absorbed and adapted as Siva’s

wife. Ganesh owes its origins to a powerful tribe of elephant trainers whose incorporation into Hindu society was achieved through the deification of their elephant totem. In his study of Brahmin lineages in Maharashtra, *Kosambi* points to how many Brahmin *gotras* (such as *Kashyapa*) arose from tribal totems such as *Kachhapa* (tortoise). In Rajasthan, Rajput rulers recognised the *Adivasi Bhil* chiefs as allies and *Bhils* acquired a central role in some Rajput coronation ceremonies.

India's regional languages such as Oriya, Marathi or Bengali developed as a result of the fusion of tribal languages with Sanskrit or Pali and virtually all the Indian languages have incorporated words from the vocabulary of *Adivasi* languages.

*Adivasis* who developed an intimate knowledge of various plants and their medicinal uses played an invaluable role in the development of Ayurvedic medicines. In a recent study, the All India Coordinated Research Project credits *Adivasi* communities with the knowledge of 9000 plant species - 7500 used for human healing and veterinary health care. Dental care products like *datun*, roots and condiments like *turmeric* used in cooking and ointments are also *Adivasi* discoveries, as are many fruit trees and vines (Payat 2002). Ayurvedic cures for *arthritis* and night blindness owe their origin to *Adivasi* knowledge.

*Adivasis* also played an important role in the development of agricultural practices - such as rotational cropping, fertility maintenance through alternating the cultivation of grains with leaving land fallow or using it for pasture. *Adivasis* of Orissa were instrumental in developing a variety of strains of rice.

*Adivasi* musical instruments such as the *bansuri* (flute) and *dhol* (drum), folk-tales, dances and seasonal celebrations also found their way into Indian traditions as did their art and metallurgical skills.

In India's central belt, *Adivasi* communities rose to considerable prominence and developed their own ruling clans. The earliest Gond kingdom appears to date from the 10th C and the Gond Rajas were able to maintain a relatively independent existence until the 18th C., although they were compelled to offer nominal allegiance to the Mughal empire. The Garha-Mandla kingdom in the north extended control over most of the upper Narmada valley and the adjacent forest areas. The Deogarh-Nagpur kingdom dominated much of the upper Wainganga valley, while Chanda-Sirpur in the south consisted of territory around Wardha and the confluences of the Wainganga with the Penganga.

Jabalpur was one of the major centers of the Garha-Mandla kingdom and like other major dynastic capitals had a large fort and palace. Temples and palaces with extremely fine carvings and erotic sculptures came up throughout the Gond kingdoms. The Gond ruling clans enjoyed close ties with the Chandella ruling clans and both dynasties attempted to maintain their independence from Mughal rule through tactical alliances. Rani Durgavati of Jabalpur (of Chandella-Gond heritage) acquired a reputation of legendary proportions when she died in battle defending against Mughal incursions. In fact, the city of Nagpur was founded by a Gond Raja in the early 18th century (Payat 2002).

### Check Your Progress III

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

1) How important is culture in tribal societies?

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2) Was Buddha attracted by the tribals?

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## 2.8 LET US SUM UP

After having look into the various aspects of folklore among the tribals, we have also studied their significant contribution to the Indian culture. In spite of their simplicity and serenity, there is a profound and lived wisdom in their culture, which are expressed through their folklores and other expressions.

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## 2.9 KEY WORDS

**Folklore** : The traditional beliefs, practices, customs, stories, jokes, songs (etc.) of a community, handed down orally or behaviorally from individual to individual.

**Performing arts** : The performing arts are those forms of art which differ from the plastic arts insofar as the former uses the artist's own body, face, and presence as a medium, and the latter uses materials such as clay, metal or paint which can be molded or transformed to create some physical art object.

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