
UNIT 17 RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN INDIA: AS FACT AND VALUE

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17.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit, you will be able to

- understand what religious pluralism means
- explain religious pluralism in India as a fact with special reference to its geographical spread; relationship between religion and sect, caste and religion and language and religious pluralism
- discuss religious pluralism as value with reference to social identity of religious groups, religious pluralism and persistence of shared values among people of various religion and finally, religious beliefs and rituals.

17.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Block, Block 3 **Religion and Related Aspects** you have learnt about such aspects of religion as the religious organisations, religious specialists, religion and its relationship with social stability and change in societies. You also learnt about religious fundamentalism through case studies and the concept of secularism and about the processes of secularisation. All these aspects you learnt at the global level.

In this unit you will learn what one means by religious pluralism in Indian society. How it exists in factual terms and how far each religious faith bears some commonalities with many other religions that exist in our society? You will learn that religious pluralism in India is not only a matter of fact, but it also permeates through beliefs, values and social character of individual religions in India. However, religious pluralism as fact and as value are so closely interlinked that in reality it is difficult to separate the two. It is for the purpose of maintaining the clarity of the unit, as well as, explaining the two dimensions of religious pluralism in India that we first explain to you the factual side of religious pluralism and then the value dimension.

In this unit Section 17.2 explains the meaning of religious pluralism. Section 17.3 provides a detailed description of religious pluralism as fact. Section 17.4 outlines the

various aspects of religious pluralism as value and finally, Section 17.5 gives the summary of the unit.

17.2 RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN INDIA

Indian society is composed of diverse cultures, and peoples, languages and religions. To examine the nature of diversity of the religious faiths in our country we must look at the historical antecedents of various religious groups found in our society.

Diversity of religious faiths has existed over a very long period of time as India has been a country of not only very ancient history but also a place where communities from outside continually kept on coming and settling down. Together with diverse cultural groups in various religions in India pursuing their faiths, these immigrant communities also brought their own religious faiths, customs and cultures. This resulted in bringing together people following different religions and gradually laid the basis of religious pluralism in India. Religious pluralism means diversity among people based on their varied kinds of religious beliefs. Pluralism of religion has thus two connotations:

- i) it refers to the fact that India has been a land of not one but many religions since ancient times; and
- ii) that each religion contains, besides its primary features which define its essence many cultural, social and ritualistic elements which cut across boundaries of different religions faiths. These cultural and social similarities are a product of interaction and accommodation established over a long period of time by regional, linguistic, ritual and social proximity of various religious groups. Religious pluralism in India is, thus not only a fact but it also permeates through beliefs, values and social character of individual religions in India.

You will study religious pluralism in India in the context of:

- a) distribution of religions in India on the basis of numerical, regional and linguistic categories.
- b) differentiation within a particular religion on the basis of sects or denominations;
- c) social differentiation within a religion on the basis of caste or caste-like divisions and
- d) shared cultural values by different religions on the basis of historical links, ecological and economic demands, linguistic and cultural commonalities and processes of migration.

17.3 RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AS FACT

Since ancient times India has been a land of diverse cultural groups professing many faiths. It was also a land where continual migration of people of varying ethnicity and religion from outside took place. It led to occasional conflicts of short durations during the process of accommodation and integration. But finally a veritable adjustment of people professing different religious faiths did take place. This contributed to the existence of religious pluralism as a fact in India.

Over a period of time people of various religious faiths settled down in India. Due to commonalities of shared geography, common of inter-dependent economic relationship and shared neighbourhood in the rural and urban settlements they developed many common or shared elements of culture traits and belief systems

despite professing different religions. People changed their membership from one religion to another due to conversions sometimes forced sometimes voluntary. However, in most cases they did not shed off all cultural and social practices or even beliefs or values they had held earlier. Yet their identify as a separate religious group was recognised. This reinforced religious pluralism in India.

India is the home of a majority of the religions of the world, such as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and so on. The state in India has functioned under the benign guidance and control of religion, and religions or even various religions have received patronage and protection from the state during large parts of Indian history.

Religious pluralism is thus, keynote of Indian culture and religious tolerance is the very foundation of Indian secularism. Religious secularism is based on the belief that all religions are equally good and that they all lead to the same goal of realisation of God. According to S.R. Bhatt (192: 261-271) religious pluralism leading to secularism stands for a complex interpretative process in which there is transcendence of religion and yet there is a unification of multiple religions. It forms a bridge between religions in a multi-religious society which enables each to cross over the barriers of their diversity. This is the main feature of what is called religious pluralism. In this section you will learn about the facts of diversity of religions in India. The census records give us an account of various religions, their numerical, demographic and social features. The most exhaustive and sociologically comprehensive census in India was conducted in 1931 when India was not divided into two countries, India and Pakistan. Kingsley Davis has analysed the demographic and social features of religions in the un-divided India in his book **The Population of India and Pakistan** (1951). Among the religions which are listed in the 1931 census are: Hindu, Muslim, Tribal, Christian, Sikh, Jain, Buddhist, Parsi and Jewish religions. According to 1981 census the major religions as listed above had the following population: 82.64 percent (550 million) Hindus: 11.35 percent (76 million) Muslims: 2.43 percent (16 million) Christians: 1.6 percent (13 million) Sikhs: 0.71 percent (5 million) Buddhists: 0.48 percent (72,000) Parsis or Zoroastrians and 18,000 Jews, Tribal communities listed outside Hinduism or Christianity were listed as "others" and constituted 0.42 percent of the total population.

You would thus observe that factually India comprises the world's most important religions comprising its people. Moreover, it has on its land a diversity of religious communities settled over very periods of time. For instance, Islam came to India as far back as 650 A.D. and spread to the Western parts of India. It began to take hold in India after 1000 A.D. and expanded considerably under the successive Muslim dynasties. Similarly, Christianity came to India many centuries prior to the coming of the British or the Portuguese. An off-shot of the Mesopotamian Christian church existed in India's South-Western part even as early as the 3rd century, and was later on spread by the Portuguese during the 16th century. The Parsis or Zoroastrians migrated to India after Persia was conquered by the followers of Islam. They settled down in Gujarat and came to be known in India as "Parsis".

Box 17.01

Zoroastrianism—Zoroastrianism; the religion of the Parsis, is one of the most ancient religions in the world. It takes its name from Zarasthustra (Zoroaster) who probably lived around the beginning of the first millennium B.C. It has a history of about three thousand years. It is the most important religion of ancient, pre-Islamic Iran. Its origins can be located in the eastern Iranian, tribal, and basically pastoral society. Zoroastrianism is also known as Mazdaism, a word which is derived from the name of this religions' Supreme God, Mazda (or "wise"), or Ahura Mazda. The Parsis in India came to Diu Coast around 766 A.D. But these Zoroastrians abandoned this

place and took refuge in Gujarat. In India the population of the Parsis has varied between 80,000 and 82,000 as evident from the population census between 1881-1981. At present the Parsi community in India is settled mainly in Maharashtra and specially in Bombay, Gujarat and Deccan. (For more details on their social organisation you may read unit 19 of Block 4, course ESO-02 Society in India).

Jews are yet another religious community which has had a very exclusive character. They have been living in India for centuries and have maintained their native traditions. They are a very small group in India. The 1981 census reports the presence of only 18,000 Jews in India.

Box 17.2

Jews in India

“Judaism”, the religion of the Jews has a long history. In India we find two kinds of Jews (i) the Cochin Jews, and (ii) the Bene Israel Jews. Both these kinds are further divided into “Black” Jews and the “White” Jews. Legend, as believed by the Jews in India, has it that their earliest ancestors arrived in India after the destruction of the second Temple of Jerusalem during the time of King Solomon.

The Jews of Cochin trace their origins in India from about 1000 C.E. The Jewish traveller Binyamin of Tudela in his accounts reports the presence of a thousand Black Jews on the Malabar Coast in 1170 who according to him were “good men, observed the Law, possessed the Torah of Moses, the Prophets, and had some knowledge of the Talmud and the halakhah”.

From Moses Pereria de Paivos (Amsterdam 1687) account we come to learn that there was a synagogue (religious place of the Jews) with a total membership of 465 households of White Jews who had come to Cochin from such places as Cranganore, Castile, Algiers, Jerusalem, and so on. The Black Jews appear to have arrived in India earlier than the Whites and since they intermingled with Indian women, they acquired the dark complexion. Both these Jews, Black and White who came later, did not intermix, strict endogamy was followed by both of them. The influence of caste system can be seen in these communities. They prayed in different synagogues. Black Jews did not count in the minyan (quaran of ten adult men) of the White Jews, and vice versa. The segregation between them was such that the Kohima or the priest of the Black Jews did not serve the White Jews. David G. Mandelbaum (1939), an anthropologist, studies the Jews of Cochin in 1937, and he states that the lives of the Black Jews were “even more synagogue centred” than those of the White Jews. In 1948 there were 2,500 Black and 100 White Cochin Jews in India. However, since then all the Black Jews have emigrated to Israel, while most of the White Jews remained, since they could not take their assets out of the country.

The Bene Israel Jews are the largest Jewish group in India. They explain their name to stand for “Children of Israel”, referring to the ten tribes of Israel that seceded from Rehoboam, the son of Solomon. Their legends speak of a shipwreck off the Konkan coast in which only seven Hebrew couples survived. They were cast ashore and settled in the village of Nawgaon, about 26 miles south of present day Bombay. They were isolated from the co-religionists for such a long time that they forgot their Hebrew language and adopted the language (Marathi), customs, dress and even names of their Hindu neighbours.

However, they did not give up observing circumcision, dietary laws, the Sabbath, and some festivals. They also did not forget their holy shema prayers. They earned their livelihood by producing oil. Their neighbours, therefore, called them Shanwar

telis or "Sabbath-keeping Oilmen". Since oil pressing was a lower caste occupation, the higher castes considered contact with the Bene Israels defiling. Bene Israels did not come into contact with other Jewish groups till as late as the 18th century. It was only later that Ezekiel David Rahabi, (1694-1771) working in the Dutch East India Company became interested in the Bene Israels and taught them Hebrew and prayers. By mid-eighteenth century the Bene Israel began migrating to Bombay, attracted by the employment opportunities offered by the big city. Their first synagogue in Bombay was built in 1796. By 1833 about 2,000 of the Bene Israels lived in Bombay which was one-third of their total population.

They were divided into Gora (White) and Kala (Black) subcastes. The Gora were believed to be the pure descendants of the original seven couples, while the Kala were supposed to be the off springs of the union between Bene Israel men and the native women. The Gora were considered to be superior by the Kala and they both remained aloof from each other. They did not intermarry or eat together.

Later another group of Baghdad Jews discriminated against the Gora Bene Israels in the same way as they discriminated against the Kala. This caste-like practice of remaining exclusive from each other underwent a change with India's independence in 1947 when caste system was officially abolished. However, intermarriage between the Gora and Kala and between them and the Baghdad Jews was rare (Patai, Raphael 1987: 164-172).

The Muslims, Christians, Parsis and Jews represent religions which have their main sources of origin outside India. Among these the Muslims and the Christians have had the support of political rulers during the reign of the Muslim kings and the British rule respectively. These two religions swelled their number due to conversion of large number of people in India, particularly the lower caste of Hindus and the tribals. The Parsis and the Jews have remained closed to membership from outside due to their very exclusive nature.

17.3.1 Geographical Spread

Yet another important feature of religious pluralism can be seen in the geographical spread of religions in India. The Hindus, who constitute the majority religion, are spread all over, but have large concentration in the central and southern states of India with high density pocket in a few northern states and far eastern Assam.

The Muslims, the second largest religious group have relatively greater concentration in South-western states such as Kerala, Karnataka, the northern and eastern states in U.P., Bihar, Assam and pockets of Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat. They are also spread throughout the country like the Hindus. We have given you in the illustration the maps of India and Pakistan (1931 census) showing the spread of Hindus and Muslims.

The Christians have density concentration in the southern states of Kerala, parts of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and the north-eastern states of Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya. They are also spread across Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and some parts of other northern states in small pockets. One important feature of geographical settlement of Christians is that they may be found in larger numbers in states with higher tribal population due to the impact of conversion.

Sikhs, yet another important religious group has its territorial localisation in the northern state of Punjab, with pockets of settlement in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. Being a mobile and highly entrepreneurial community, Sikhs can be found spread over most parts of India. (We have given you in the illustration the map of India and Pakistan 1931 census) showing the geographical distribution of the Christians and the Sikhs.

Geographically, Buddhism in India, though once highly influential in the entire north, seems to be now localised to Ladakh, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and in Darjeeling in West Bengal. They are also found in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh where some scheduled caste Hindus have converted to Buddhism. The Jains, are primarily settled in urban areas of the northern states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh. Being an urban and trading religious group they may be found in all parts of the country.

An important feature of the geographical spread of religions in India is that despite evidence of localisation of a particular religion in some parts of the country, each religious group is spread out throughout the country. This has necessitated a large measure of inter-religious interaction, borrowings of ways and styles of life, sharing common languages and cultural practices across religious affiliations. This has led to a diversification of cultural sub-groups belonging to each religion. The Andhra Muslims and Kashmir Muslims in several respects are different cultural communities. There are very few exceptions to this attribute. These pertain to only minority religions such as the Parsis, Jews and few others, which are highly restricted in their distribution.

Activity 1

Select a small area of inhabitants in your city, town or village where you live. Find out from the people in this area such facts as:

- i) which religion they belong to;
- ii) whether they originally belonged to this place or have come from some other place; and
- iii) If they have come from some other place, then how many years back they came.

Write a note of about two pages and compare, if possible, your note with those of other students at your study centre.

17.3.2 Religion and Sect

An important element of pluralism among religions in India is their sub-division into sects. Max Weber has given a technical meaning to a sect and distinguishes it from church, especially in the context of Christianity. He says that membership of Church (the main religion) is compulsory. It is governed by collective norms or rules and is run by religious functionaries. But the membership to a sect is voluntary. It is individualistic and lends freedom to the followers of the sects from the compulsory obedience to the functionaries of the Church.

Weber has used the term sect in a relatively definitive sense which may not apply to all religions. Sects are however, common to all religions, such as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism. Sub-divisions and Sects in a more general sense refer to internal diversities of interpretation of sacred principles, ritual practices and religious practices in a religion. Sects may also evoke historical cleavages within a religion either due to new interpretation of the religious canons or due to factionalisation of the religious leadership. Sects, however, operate within the boundary of the specific religion to which they belong. Yet, the process of differentiation makes it possible that inter-religious proximities of customs, rituals and practices of religion and proximity or religious beliefs across religions is made possible due to this process.

As an example, we may notice that Sufism in Islam, established deeper relationships

with Sikhism, Bhakti movement in Hinduism and with Christian forms of mysticism. Similarly, Lingayat sect in Hinduism established closer relationship with Christian beliefs. Thus, inter-religious borrowings and influences could be observed in most religions across the sects.

There are few religions in India which are not differentiated on the basis of sects. Hinduism always included a diverse range of belief systems from Vedic Hinduism of the past, through **Purans** and **Dharma-Shastras**. Hinduism absorbed numerous religious beliefs and ritual practices. It evolved through this process into many sects and traditions of beliefs and sacred rites. The main sects in Hinduism are, based however, on the **Vaishnavism** (worship of Vishnu) and **Shaivism** (worship of Siva). There are many variations in each of the above two sects. The former promotes strict vegetarianism and puritanism in social and cultural practices. Commitment to Ahimsa or non-violence of this sect is very similar to beliefs of non-violence in Buddhism and Jainism. Shaivism is, however, less puritanical in respect of these values. It permits meat-eating and even drinking; specially among those who are followers of the **tantric** branches of Shaivism.

Many religious movement emerged in India over a period of time based on the beliefs and practices of these sects. The **Bhakti-movement** particularly drew most from Vaishnavism. Similarly, the Lingayat movement in Karnataka drew its inspiration from Shaivism. These sects in Hinduism promoted diversity and innovativeness among the Hindus, and also led to the establishment of many linkages with other religions. Hinduism being a religion without Church, (established unified religious organisation and systems of belief and rituals) its social and cultural character has been more prominent through history in comparison to its ritualistic norms and practices. It has not without reason been described "as a way of life". M.N. Srinivas and A.M. Shah write: "Hinduism lacking a centralised church is so inextricably entangled with Hindu society that it is very difficult to say where one ends and the other begins" (Srinivas and Shah: 1968: 358). Religious pluralism is therefore intrinsic to Hinduism through multiplicity of sects are also through its normative character.

Islam and Christianity too are differentiated into many sects. In Islam the division on the basis of Shia and Sunni denominations is a well recognised one. Religious denomination is a sect which becomes generally accepted by the people and loses much of its vigour. (For further details refer back to unit 12 of Block 3 of this course on Society and Religion). There are several other sects which not only introduce divisions on the basis of differences of interpretation of the sacred traditions but also differences on account of social and cultural interpretations of ritual practices and precepts. Sufism is a very prominent example of this in Islam which allows for a broad banding of more innovative and individualistic viewpoints of Islam which otherwise has a strong communitarian character. Even among Sufis one would find many sub-divisions. Sects and sub-sects are a common feature in most religions because interpretive boundaries of belief and ritual systems in most religions have been always flexible and subject to historical forces.

In Christianity the major sects belong to Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. The latter emerged through reformation movement in Christianity led by Luther and Calvin. Max Weber has written extensively on this problem. These two branches of Christianity are divided in India into several sects. Roman-Catholic religion has the sects of the Romo-Syrians, Jacobites and Reformed, among others. The Protestants are divided into the sects of Anglican Combination, Baptists, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodists, Congregationalist and Salvationist.

Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism which are sometimes described as differentiation from

the Hindu religion itself, are each internally divided into sects. The Buddhists have **Hinayan** and **Mahayan** sect-divisions; the Jains have **Shwetambara**, and **Digambara** sub-divisions (You will learn more about these religions, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism in the next block, **Religious Pluralism-II**). Sikhs too are divided into different sectarian groups based on normative re-interpretation of the principles of Sikhism and its ritual forms.

The differentiation of religions into sects has a deeper impact on the pluralistic nature of religion. It marks a departure from the rigidity and orthodoxy of specific religions and endows them with the capacity to innovate and respond to social and historical changes in society. Sects, therefore, perform along with intensification of religiosity a function of pluralistic interaction with other religions in specific terms, and with society in general. Max Weber rightly highlighted the developmental contributions that sects make towards the resilience of religion in social life. In India the sects in different religions clearly exemplify the contributions they have made first in the sharpening of the definition of the religious boundaries and secondly, in establishing linkages with other religions, their ideas, belief systems and practices.

Check Your Proress 1

i) What do you understand by religious pluralism? Discuss in about 8 lines.

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ii) Distinguish between religion and sect giving an example. Use about 10 lines.

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iii) Fill in the blanks:

a) The Muslims, Christians, Parsis and Jews represent religions which have their main soruce of origin India.

b) An important feature of geographical settlement of Christians in India is

that they may be found in large numbers in states with higher
population due to the impact of

- c) The process of differentiation within the main religion makes it possible for different religions to share their customs, rituals and religious practices, as well as, their beliefs and values in Islam is a good example of such a religious inter-mixture.

17.3.3 Caste and Religion

You cannot fully understand the nature of religion in India without analysing the pervasive role of the caste institution among various religious groups. Caste is based on the Hindu religious view of birth-rebirth and Karma (see Box 17.03 for further details). In Hinduism caste groups are placed into a hierarchical order of pure and impure ritual status within the four Varna wherein the Brahman are at the top, followed by the Kshatriya, the Vaisya and the Sudra and the out-caste. In actual life, caste exists in society as *Jatis*. There are thousands of Jatis among the Hindus each contributing to vertical differentiation and horizontal solidarity among the castes. Therefore, Hindu religion does not constitute a community in a solidary sense. It remained a tolerant adaptive and liberal religion in India. It recognises and is tolerant of differences.

Box 17.03

Karma Theory—The doctrine of karma, and related to this doctrine, the cycle of birth and rebirth or Samsara is one of the essential tenets of Hinduism. It has deep influence on Hindu thought and way of life. It is based on the idea of transmigration of souls. It is believed that every action or deed has a consequence which is not merely of a physical nature, but it also has a mental and moral character. A person's birth in this life is determined by his or her deeds in the past life. The only escape from the cycle of birth and rebirth is through achieving the state of nirvana or true knowledge.

The other major religions in India such as Islam, Christianity and Sikhism are based essentially on communication principle, at least in ideal terms. By communitarian we mean that these religions give importance to the community of its followers. None of these religions recognise inequalities or hierarchy based on caste discrimination. However, in real life none of these religions are free from the existence of caste or caste-like groups which are hierarchically arranged in terms of social status and prestige. These groups are also endogamous and observe social restrictions in marital and social relationships outside their caste-group. The Muslims have caste-like divisions in India in all parts of the country. The main castes among them as listed in the census of 1931 for the northern state of United Provinces are: Shaikh, Pathan, Saiyid, Rajpur (Muslim) and Mughal among the upper category, and Julaha, Manihar, Dhunia, Teli, Faquir, Nai (Hajjam), Darzi, Dhobi, Qassab among the lower caste hierarchy. The upper Muslim castes belonged to ruling or landlord families or they were in the profession of learning. The lower castes had occupations families or they were in the profession of learning. The lower castes had occupations carrying lesser social prestige in the society. Each of these castes was endogamous and also observed social and cultural distance from each other based on hierarchy. Contemporary studies have re-confirmed these observations. There has been some social mobility among the Muslim castes based on changes in occupation, but the caste-like social inequality even today continues to exist.

Christianity in India has not been able to get itself free from the caste system. Even after conversion most caste disabilities of the former (pre-conversion) time continue

to persist. Depending upon the caste from which members converted they continue to have the social status in the Christian community commensurate with their earlier caste status. Similar caste recognitions exist for Muslim converts also. As Christianity has expanded through conversion in India it has incorporated more and more caste-like groups obeying the rules of hierarchy and endogamy within each caste. The exception in this regard are possibly the tribal communities from the north-east which never had the caste institution in their social organisation. Caste prejudices are reported to be all pervasive among most Indian Christian communities. Similar caste distinctions can be found among the Sikhs also. The conversion to Buddhism, a religion which rejects caste system and social discrimination as its basis, has not been able to eradicate the existence of caste disabilities of the members. As in Islam and Christianity, in Sikhism too, the caste system prevails.

We have discussed in some detail the presence of caste in most religions in India, even among those which tend to reject its validity in their religious percepts, to illustrate that such social divisions within each religion reinforces the processes of religious pluralism. Caste being based on the principle of social segmentation, strengthens the forces of differentiation within a religious group. And since most castes are linked with hereditary occupations, they tend to share commonalities of custom, folkways, and beliefs with members of the same occupational caste in other religions. This led to inter-religious interactions, institutional, social and cultural linkages. Many occupational rituals and customs are shared by members of the caste groups commonly found in various religions despite the religious differences. This is particularly so in respect of the caste with agricultural occupation, and artisans. In terms of inter-religious contacts or commonalities of values and beliefs caste differentiation in each religions in India demonstrates pluralism and has in large measure also contributed to tolerance and brotherliness across the religious divide.

17.3.4 Language and Religious Pluralism

India is a land of diverse cultural patterns which have existed within the framework of religious, linguistic, geographical and local traditions. The census of 1931 revealed thirteen languages of outstanding numerical significance each having more than 9 million speakers. About 90% of the population was covered by these major languages. Today the number of numerically significant languages as recognised by the Constitution has increased. Language gives people new identities. There are several hundred languages and thousands of dialects belonging to various linguistic families. India thus presents a formidable mosaic of linguistic distribution each with individual cultural overtones. Religious differentiation exists within the setting of this linguistic divisions. As a result of this most major religions in India; Hinduism, Islam and Christianity have their members coming from different linguistic communities. Just



Children with Santa Claus.

as caste divides and also unites in some respects, the members coming from different religions belonging to the linguistic communities in India perform the same function. This is because people for a linguistic community share many common values, cultural style and way of life. Language not only gives identity to people but also serves as the potent vehicle of cultural expression.

Linguistic variations within the followers of the same religions made it possible for most people in India to take a broader and more liberal view of the relationship between religion and social and cultural life. There was continual sharing of folkways, styles of life, dietary preferences etc. across religions. This reinforced religious tolerance leading to peaceful co-existence.

Check Your Progress 2

i) In what ways are religion and caste interlinked. Explain in about 10 lines.

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ii) What role does language play in religious pluralism? Discuss in about 8 lines.

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iii) Tick the correct answer. True (T) False (F)

- a) Caste is not exactly based on the Hindu religious view of birth-rebirth and Karma.
- b) Hinduism is a pluralistic religion in essence.
- c) Christianity has expanded through conversion in India and has therefore, incorporated more and more caste-life groups, with some exceptions in the tribal communities of the north-east.
- d) Language not only gives identity to people but it also determines their religious faith.

17.4 RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AS VALUE

You have learnt so far some of the factual indicators of religious pluralism in India such as its location in the demographic distribution of major religions in India, its geographical dispersal. You have also learnt about some of the social and ideological factors which brings about differentiation within a religion on the basis of sects, the role of caste in religion and the place that linguistic diversity has in reinforcing religious pluralism.

Now we are going to learn about religious pluralism in our country from the perspective of values. The question is: how far do the different religions in India share elements of commonality in terms of values? What is the place of tolerance of other faiths in the value systems that are enshrined in the canons of the diverse religions? To what extent does religion encompass the entirety of the social and cultural matrix within which members of a particular religion operate in society?

We may be able to respond to these questions taking into view the nature of individual religions. Among the Indian religions Islam, Christianity, Sikhism have a strong communitarian emphasis. Islam and Christianity also has organised church to consolidate and monitor the life styles of their followers. Islamic concept of **Umma** (religious community) and the Christian concept of brotherhood (community of followers) are meant to reinforce religious solidarity among the believers.

17.4.1 Religion and Social Identity

Over a period of time due to changes in social and political contexts in which religion has functioned in society, the sense of identity and exclusiveness has increased in most religions. One consequence of this process of change has been the emphasis on purification through which effort is made to shed customs, rituals and beliefs from religious practices of the group which do not harmonise with the essential attributes of a religion. Emphasis on the exclusive nature and identity of religions has been in evidence in India in several religions. Islam which expanded due to conversion of people of diverse faiths used to be more syncretic i.e. a synthesis of many ideas from different religions and non-exclusive in respect of beliefs and rituals in most parts of the country.

Even today many Muslim communities maintain some values, beliefs and practices which are survivals from their pre-Islamic cultural past. The same is true about the Christians, Sikhs and Buddhists. Even amongst the Jews in India we find influence of another religion. For example, amongst the Bene Israel Jews there has been a strong impact of Hinduism on their own religious values and beliefs, some even contradictory to their beliefs. One of the most distinct features of the religious life of the Bene Israel is their perspective of Hindu religion. It is said that the Jewish community in India re the only Jews in modern times who live in a polytheistic environment where people believe in number of gods and goddesses. Polytheism was the most disliked sentiment of the Jews ever since the Biblical times and they viewed this practice as a vice and sin.

However, amongst the Bene Israel, no such ancient abhorrence for an antiheathen attitude can be seen. The Hindu environment, over the long period of contact resulted in the Bene Israel having a very positive and appreciative attitude towards Hinduism.

One of the reasons for such an attitude was the absence of hostility, persecution and oppression of their religion. They were given a niche in the Hindu society to live in peace, just as other communities lived. They were given freedom to follow their own ways of life. In such an environment, which was historically a unique experience

for the Jews who have been persecuted everywhere else, the Hindu religion on which such a social relationship could survive, appeared to them as having redeeming features not in conflict with their own religious beliefs.

They could ignore the polytheistic character of Hinduism and in fact, till recently, believed that eating of beef was prohibited in the Bible. They also considered remarriage of widows impermissible. Both these views are the result of the impact of Hindu values on their own (Patai, Raphael 1987: 164-172). You have already learnt how caste institution which has its origin in Hinduism subsists in most other religious communities in India.

17.4.2 Religious Pluralism and Shared Values

The persistence of the values of religious pluralism in India can be observed at many levels. First, in the fact that most religions share in common a set of values which can be characterised as universal. Tolerance of all faiths, love for fellow beings, non-violence and righteous conduct are common to all faiths. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity and Sikhism share the values of non-violence and humanism in common. Islam places great emphasis on just and human values. Religions, therefore, share certain universal values in common irrespective of their internal differences. This enriches pluralism.

Secondly, due to historical reasons most religions in India which have expanded through conversion of the local population such as Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, etc. retain in their values and beliefs many elements which come from their past and thus belong to other religions. There are many tribal religions and ritual practices which persist in Hinduism. It is believed that some of its deities, such as Siva, Hanuman (Monkey god) and Krishna are incorporation into Hinduism of deities of tribal origin.

Myths and legends abound about tribal deities being installed as paramount Hindu god-heads. For instance lord **Jagannath** of Puri temple is said to have a tribal origin. Many other attributes of the religion of the tribes, such as the belief in spirits (**animism, totemism** i.e., identifying an animal or part of the animal to which a tribe attributes its origin or which is treated as a saviour in crisis and symbolically represented at rituals) can be traced in many non-tribal religions, such as, in Hinduism, Buddhism and many sects of Christianity. You will learn more about religions of the tribes in the next unit. Jainism too has in its rituals and beliefs elements which can be traced to the other religions. Sikhism has drawn heavily from Hinduism, Islam and Sufism. The exclusive and syncretic or non-exclusive levels of value orientations in religion are a feature to be found in all major religions of India.

Activity 2

Do you know of any inter-religions marriage taking place in real life, film or fiction? What was the socio-cultural impact of such a marriage?

Write down your views and observations in a note of about two pages. Compare, if possible, your note with those of other students at your study centre.

Thirdly, religion in its day-to-day expression maintains closer relationships with existential (life-related) problems of human beings. Births, deaths, diseases, survival and physical sustenance are existential issues which no religion can treat as marginal. In a way, religion is a form of response to existential dilemmas of human kind. For this reason each religion contains in its repertoire, along with the abstract principles of dogmas, a set of norms which are designed to deal with material life. Space, time, nature etc. are defined by each religion from the perspective of the sacred.

This element in religion perforce introduces ethical principles and values in each religion which deal with existential issues such as work, occupation, space, time nature etc., since the material conditions under which religion responds to these elements of human existence have a common character. For this reason despite exclusiveness of each religion from the other ones, each religion shares normative features with other religions in common. For instance, different occupational groups despite differences of religion, cherish beliefs and values having sacred or religious character (taboos, calendric preferences, belief in sacred space or occupational rituals) in common on account of their work-situation. Peasant groups exemplify this in large measure.

17.4.3 Religious Beliefs and Rituals

Finally, religious comprised both systems of belief and rituals. The systems of belief and rituals which characterises all religions comprises of myths and ceremonies, rites and customs. Ritual has been described in anthropology as any formal actions following a set pattern which express through symbol a public or shared meaning. They are typically the practical aspects of a religious system and they express sacred values. All religions have sacred festivals, celebrations and get-togethers related to various myths, legends or normative perscriptions of the religion. Many of these festivals are occasion for members of all religious groups to participate.



Deepawali lamp lights.

Among the Hindus, the **Ram Lila** is an occasion when people of different religions participate in the celebration. Similarly, **Mohurram** among the Muslims offers an occasion for members of other religious groups to participate. This enhances the strength and quality of religious pluralism at the level of values and beliefs. It encourages inter-religious participation and mutuality among the people. Rituals are therefore, a very concrete manifestation of the pluralistic values in religion.

The next unit on religions of the tribes will explain to you yet another aspect of religious pluralism in India.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) Name the religions which are strongly communitarian in about two lines.

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- ii) Describe one of the consequences of increase in the sense of identity and exclusiveness which has occurred in most religions. Use about eight lines.

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iii) Mention at least two of the universal values shared by most of the religions in a plural society like India. Use about two lines.

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iv) What has been the relationship between religions of the tribes and non-tribal religions? Explain in about eight lines.

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v) Discuss one of the reasons due to which, inspite of the exclusive nature of each religion in a plural society, they share common normative features. Use about eight lines.

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17.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you have learnt about the meaning and nature of religious pluralism. You have studied how religious pluralism is a fact in Indian life. The demography of religious group and its territorial localisation supports this viewpoint. There are additional elements in most religions. For example, the existence of sects, castes or caste-like divisions which reinforce pluralism in religion, both as fact and as value. Finally, you have studied how values of pluralism have not only existed in all religions in India but have persisted through a long period of time.

17.6 KEY WORDS

- Canons** : Laws or rules related with the body of the religious organisation.
- Communitarian** : Inclined towards giving more significance to living in a community, sharing collective religious practices, performing rituals and so on.
- Denomination** : When a sect gets generally accepted by the people and relaxes its religious vigour, it is called a denomination.
- Functionaries** : Those who hold an office. In our case, those people who hold religious office, such as, a priest or clergyman.
- Normative** : That which is related to the moral structure of the society; the rules and regulations of social behaviour guided by the norms and values in a society.
- Pluralism** : It refers to the philosophy which recognises more than one principle of being. In our context, pluralism in the sense of religion means a society in which people of different religious faiths live, preserving their own distinct customs.
- Repertoire** : A collection of, or a storehouse of items. In our case, values, beliefs and rituals present in a religion.
- Sect** : It is a religious group which stands for those who dissent from an established church and are united as a communion of religious brotherhood with a well-defined creed. Membership to this group is voluntary rather than compulsory.
- Syncretic** : That which is a synthesis of or has a blending of ideas, values, customs and religious practices from different religions and in this sense non-exclusive.

17.7 FURTHER READING

Davis, Kingsley, 1951. *Population of India and Pakistan*. Princeton University Press: New Jersey.

Madan T.N. (ed), 1991. *Religion in India*. Oxford University Press: Delhi.

Barth A., 1990. *Religion of India*. Low Price Publication: Delhi.

Srinivas, M.N. & Shah A.M., 1968. "Hinduism" in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, VI. 5, pp. The Macmillan Company & The Free Press: New York.

17.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Religious pluralism means a society in which people of various religions come

together during a long period of time, bringing their own customs, faiths and cultures. Due to the close interaction amongst them some common values emerge. They begin to share many of their customs, values and beliefs due to this long period of association.

- ii) Religion is the main body from which the different branches emerge as protest groups known as sects. Sects and sub-sects are formed due to the internal differentiation that occurs in the main body of a religion. For example, in Christianity the membership to the church (the main religion) is compulsory. It is governed by collective norms and run by the religious functionaries. But a sect is voluntary, individualistic and it gives freedom to the followers of the sect from the compulsory obedience to the functionaries of the church.
- iii) a) Outside,
b) Tribal, conversions,
c) Sufism.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Caste system is based on the Hindu religious view of birth-rebirth and Karma theory. In Hinduism castes are placed in a hierarchical order based on the concept of pure and impure. According to this hierarchy the Brahmin are at the top, next are the Kshatriya, then Vaisya and finally the Sudra. This hierarchy also indicated occupational hierarchy as well, in Hinduism. Due to the long association of other religions, such as Islam and Christianity with Hinduism, many of the customs of the Hindus came to be adopted by them. Especially, the converts to these religions from the Hindu fold carried over their caste distinctions and customs to their new religions.
- ii) Most of the major religions like Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and, even Sikhism, to a certain extent have their members distributed throughout India in different linguistic communities. Language is something which binds a people together through common customs, living conditions and so on. It is a vehicle of cultural expression which leads to integration of people of different religions. In this sense it plays an important role in maintaining the pluralistic character of Indian society and religion.
- iii) a) F
b) T
c) T
d) F

Check Your Progress 3

- i) Strongly communitarian religions are, Islam, Sikhism and Christianity.
- ii) One of the consequences of an increase in the sense of identity and exclusiveness in most religions is that these religions have begun to place more emphasis on purification of their customs, rituals and beliefs. They have tried to give up those customs, ritual practices and beliefs which did not go with the essential qualities of their own religion.
- iii) Belief in humanism and non-violence are two universal values shared by most

religions in a plural society.

- iv) Due to the close interaction between people of tribal origins and non-tribal religions living in an area, many of the customs, values and religious practices get imbibed by people of the tribal from non-tribal religions and vice-versa. For example, Hinduism has adopted many of their deities from religions of the tribes. Some of these deities are like Siva, Hanuman and Krishna.
- v) In many of the regions in India, people of different religions share similar normative features since they belong to the same occupational group. The existential conditions of living together in the same economic and political environment necessitates a somewhat similar normative structure for these occupational groups which crosses the boundaries of religious exclusiveness.



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UNIT 18 TRIBAL RELIGION: TWO CASE STUDIES

Structure

- 18.0 Objectives
- 18.1 Introduction
- 18.2 Tribal Religion in a State of Simplicity
 - 18.2.1 Ritual Way of Life
 - 18.2.2 Ritual Elements
 - 18.2.3 Spirits and Souls
 - 18.2.4 Religion without Explanation
- 18.3 Tribal Religion Seeking Theological Complexity
 - 18.3.1 Encounter with Christianity
 - 18.3.2 Old Belief and New Interpretation
 - 18.3.3 Writing a Tribal Theology
 - 18.3.4 The Changing Worldview
- 18.4 Cross-Cultural Comparison
- 18.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 18.6 Key Words
- 18.7 Further Reading
- 18.8 Answers to Check Your Progress

18.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this Unit, you will be able to

- identify the basic constituents of tribal ritual complex
- understand the tribal concept of human being as a ritual being
- describe theological orientation of a tribal religion without explanation
- discuss the tribal method of meeting the challenges of Christianity
- evaluate the process of transformation from oral to textual modes of cultural transmission
- show the consequences of conflicting cosmologies on the life of the converts
- explain the features of continuity in the changing tribal religion.

18.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit (number 17) you studied the various aspects of religious pluralism in India. You learnt about the geographical distribution of religious communities throughout India, their demographic aspects and then you learnt about the social and cultural-historical foundations of the value systems of different religions. Tribes in India constitute about 7% of the total population of India (1981 Censs). In this unit we are going to explain the nature and development of tribal religions in India with the help of two case studies; Birhors of Bihar and Khasis of Meghalaya. In this unit, we will examine two cases of tribal religion to highlight further its specific features.

As you know, tribal religion is based on oral traditions. The tribes express their beliefs in everyday language. Their rituals are aimed at solving day to day problems of life. Objects of worship are things of Nature such as trees, rivers, mountain, sun, moon and earth. Offerings are usually in the form of food and drink, domesticated birds and animals. Rituals are mostly performed collectively and transmitted orally. By the term ritual; which has been interchangeably used with the terms rite ceremony

or custom; one implies any non-instinctive behaviour which is repetitive, symbolic and meaningful. It stands for any formal actions following a set pattern which express through symbol a public or shared meaning. These symbols express sacred values which are demarcated from profane or mundane day to day activities of everyday life. The sacred is that which is superior to the ordinary, utilitarian life activities which falls in the purview of the profane. Tribal World view is grounded in the natural events and life-experiences. Their cosmology is socially effective i.e. existential, but uninterpretative. It lacks interpretability, precisely because the tribes themselves have no metaphysical anxiety i.e. the anxiety to know about the reason for their existence or how and why the cosmology exists, and so on. But, coming in contact with the complex forms of religion, they are now adopting explanatory apparatus.

This unit will apprise you of both the situation, that is: (i) tribal religion in a state of simplicity, and (ii) tribal religion seeking theological complexity. Section 18.2 describes tribal religions in their original state. For this let us take an example of the Birhors of Bihar. In order to explain the tribal religion seeking theological complexity we have given you the example of the Khasis of Meghalaya in the section 18.3. Section 18.4 gives the Cross-cultural comparison of these two tribes and finally, section 18.5 provides the summary of the unit.

18.2 TRIBAL RELIGION IN A STATE OF SIMPLICITY

The Birhors (Roy 1925, 198) are a nomadic hunting and gathering tribe. They are numerically a small population located chiefly in the Chotanagpur plateau (south Bihar) and sporadically found in Orissa, West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh. They move about in small groups snaring monkeys, tracking hare, deer or other games, and collecting rope-fibres, honey and bees wax. During the rainy season they camp in tiny leaf huts called **Kumba**, and make wooden vessels and plait ropes, weaving them into hunting nets. Their habitat, called **tanda**, is located in open spaces on the wooded hill tops and slopes, or the edges of the jungles. By the sides of most Birhor settlements is a 'sacred grove' called the **Jayar** or **Jilu-Jayar**, marked by one or more trees and a few blocks of stones. This is the seat of the **Sendra-bongas**, the spirits presiding over the hunt.

Birhor literally means the "Jungle (**bir**) fold (**hor**)". There are two main divisions: (i) **Uthalus** or **Bhulies**, the wanderers, and (ii) **Jaghis** or **Thantias**, the settlers. The **Uthalus** move about from jungle to jungle in small groups with their families and scanty belongings. Their deities represented by lumps of clay, pieces of stones and wooden pegs are carried in baskets by one or two young bachelors who walk at the head of the party. The **jaghis** settle down for a comparatively long period on the outskirts of the jungle, but rarely stop at one place for any considerable length of time.

18.2.1 Ritual Way of Life

Every Birhor **tanda** has a headman called the **Naya**, who is primarily the priest of the group, supernaturally selected. On the death of a **Naya**, his successor is chosen of the spirits in the following manner: A **Mati**, spirit-doctor, who is called on this occasion, swings his head from side to side and reaches a state of ecstasy. He asks the spirits.

"Whom will you have for your **Naya**?"

In answer the spirits, through the mouth of the **Mati**, declares,

"We want the man who is of such and such

appearance, and has so many children, we shall obey him”.

The new **Naya** selected in this way, first takes a bath in some spring or stream and then takes to the **jilu-Jayar** where the hunting nets have been placed in a heap. There he offers rice to the spirits. Following the brief ritual, the men of the **tanda** go out for a hunt to test the correctness of the selection. If the hunt proves successful the people rejoice; if fails, the **Naya** is called upon for an explanation. The **Mati** again gets possessed and finds out what spirit has caused failure. On his declaring the name of the spirit and the sacrifices it requires, the **Naya** proceeds to propitiate the unfriendly spirit. He thus, puts himself right with man and spirit.

The duty of the **Naya** is to offer the sacrifice. He appoints a man as the **Kotwar** or **Diguar** to the hunt, to attend at the sacrifices and to make all necessary arrangements for them. The position of the **Mati** is different from both the **Naya** and the **Kotwar**. He is neither elected nor appointed. He is the person believed to have the power of second sight. Usually, a person who feels a call to the vocation of a **Mati** goes to another **Mati** for training. He observes certain strict rules as to diet and worship. After having completed the training he is recognised as a **Mati**. The function of the **Mati** is to find out the unfriendly spirits causing sickness and other misfortunes of the community, and the required sacrifices to propitiate them. When there is a new birth in the **tanda**, certain hills which may not stand pollution have to be avoided by the hunting party of the **tanda** until the purificatory ceremony has been performed on the seventh day of the birth. It is the business of the **Mati** to discover and declare the hills which could resent such contact.

As a nomadic hunter and food gatherer, the Birhor social organisation and religious beliefs are essentially concerned with success or luck in securing food. Any case of ill-luck that befalls the community either in respect of food, health or other concerns of life is attributed to the infringement of some taboo by some member of the community and the consequent wrath of some spirit. To illustrate the point, let us look into the rituals and beliefs associated with the monkey-hunt, called **qari-sendra**, which is the Birhor's characteristic mode of food quest.

On the morning of the appointed day of monkey-hunt, the **Naya** bathes in a stream or spring, fills a pot with water and brings it home. He changes his loin-cloth, and in the company of one or two elders proceeds with a handful of rice and the water-pot to the **Jily-Jayar** which his wife has already cleaned with mud or cowdung. The **Kotwar** has placed there all the nets of the intending hunters. Before this heap of nets, the **Naya** stands on his left leg with his right heel resting on his left knee (**Fig. 1**), and with his face to the east and with arms extended forward, pours a little of water three times on the ground, invokes all the spirits by name for success in hunting:



A Tribal ceremony

“Here I am making a libation in your names.
May blood of game flow like this”.

He then sits down before the nets and puts three vermilion marks on the ground. On these he sprinkles a little **arua** rice, and address the spirits:

“Today I am offering this rice to you all.
May we have speedy success.
May game be caught in our nets
as soon as we enter the jungle”.

All the assembled persons, then return home, leaving the nets there. After breakfast each intending hunter tyakes up from the **Jule-jayar** his own hunting net, clubs and bamboo poles for fixing nets, and subsequently proceeds to the selected jungle.

Precautions are taken, while leaving the **tanda**, that none of the party may chance to see any empty vessel being carried along, or a person easing himself. Such sights are regarded as bad auguris. When the party arrive at the selected jungle, all sit down together on the ground for a short while. The **Kotwar** touches each net with an ebony twig and hands it over to the **Naya** to perform a ritual called **bana-sana** which is believed to have neutralised the harmful effects of the evil eye that may have been directed against the party. With a low murmuring voice, he says

“Today I am making **bana-sana** in the names of those (women) who cast their eyes at us while sending us away.
May we have success in the hunt as soon as we go (enter the jungle).
May oil of the bhelwa, or making-nut, drop into the eyes and anus of those who cast evil eyes on us”.

The parties are, then, told to set off in different directions for monkey-capturing. After bagging the game, the party leaves the forest. When they arrive at some stream, they light a fire and scorch the monkeys in it. The roasted meat is distributed among the members of the party. But before that, the **Naya** offers it to all the spirits jointly and promises them similar offerings in future if they always bring them such game. When the hunting party return home, the wife of each hunter first washes the feet of her husband, and then all the women proceed to the house of the **Naya** and there each women washes his feet and anoints them with oil. If the party returns home unsuccessful, the **Naya** asks the **Kotwar** to bring him the hunting nets of each family in the **tanda**. He takes out a bit of thread from each of the nets and buries the bundle of thread in the ground. Sitting down by its side, he goes on muttering incantations, and exclaims,

“Here is the bundle which these spirits have secreted.
That is why no game could be had.
Now that I have taken out this impediment
to chase, it will henceforth be all right”.

Then addressing the spirits, he says,

“I shall sacrifice fowls to you.
Don't offer obstructions any more.
From today may game be caught
in plenty in our nets.

Saying this, he sacrifices a fowl by cutting its neck with a knife.

Activity 1

You just read the section on “Ritual Way of Life” of the Birhor tribals. Are there equivalent rituals which you perform in your family and community. Describe in detail at least one such ritual in about two pages. Compare, if possible, your answer with those of other students of your study centre.

You have seen how the Birhor a whole life—biological, economic, social and political—is pervaded by his religion. Birhor religion consists of beliefs in the sacred presence of the spirits with whom tribesmen interact in everyday language and through numerous rites, sacrifices, charms and spells in everyday life.

The rituals performed during the monkey-hunt, such as that of pouring of water three times by the Birhor priest before the nets of the intending hunters invoking all the spirits by name for success in hunting, refers to what the anthropologists call sympathetic magic. In other words, like produces like. In a broad sense, this is the initial thinking of human beings regarding the regularity of cause and effect. If the spirit is the cause, the desired effect, such as success in hunting, will follow in the continuation of the act.

18.2.2 Ritual Elements

The structure of Birhor rituals is formed by various components or elements which are inextricably related with one another. Briefly, these are as follows:

a) Purpose

Protection from evil; luck in health; progeny and food; ensure success in the hunt; for the good of the family; to avert any mischief of the spirit; causing death and sickness to an enemy; protection of the **tanda**; training of a spirit-doctor; stopping storms and lightning; rain-making; recovering a lost dog; driving away bugs and mosquitoes; attracting a beloved person; to control plant-life; purification from birth and death pollution; for the good of the departed soul; and performances connected with the lifecycle and with calendrical festivals.

b) Performer

The **Naya** priest, the **Kotwar** or **Diguar** ritual assistant; the **Mati** diviner; the headman of the clan; and woman.

c) Preparation

Bathing; smearing oil on head or limbs; fasting; not eating salt; cleaning the ritual space with mud, cowdung and water; and purification by fire, by sharing, etc.

d) Performance and process

- 1) Ritual time: Jan–Feb, July, Sept.–Oct.–Nov.; Friday, Monday; junctures of time such as morning, noon, evening.
- 2) Ritual space: upland, hill, forest, field; family hut, spirit-hut; square; east-facing.
- 3) Ritual objects: rock or stone, bamboo or wooden peg, lump of clay; leaf-cup, flowers, twigs of trees, spirit-box containing a little vermilion in a small container and some **aura** rice kept in a bamboo-tube; spirit-net; husking pestle; arrow heads, iron tridants or chains, totemic objects such as rice-husk, pellet-bow, **bonga sauri** (a kind of wild grass), etc.

- 4) Offerings: **arua rice**, rice with blood, salt, turmeric, chillies, vermilion; water, honey, rice-beer, liquor, blood of sacrificial fowl, goat, pig or bullock, deer-hair or skin roasted flesh of monkey) etc.
- 5) Sacrifice: **Kutam** process in which the pigs are sacrificed by striking them at the neck with the but-end of an axe, and **jabai** process (with two and half strokes of a weapon) in the manner of the Muhammadans; the head of the fowl cut off with the knife, the fowl sacrificed by twisting the head, that is, sacrifice by **ningchha** method.
- 6) Colour: White fowl, speckled (spotted red and white) fowl, white goat, red goat, black goat.
- 7) Ritual drawing: a figure drawn on the ground with rice-flour for **takchanrhi** marriage ceremony (Fig. 2), a mystic diagram (Fig. 3) drawn on the ground with black coal dust, red earth and white rice-flour for **bana-sana** ceremony in which the black stand for the Baghour spirit, red for Naga-Era Bindi-Era, and the white for Banu-bonga.
- 8) Methods of spirit finding: The **khari-hora** process in which the **Mati** sits down holding with one hand an axe placed upright on the ground with its butt-end downward, and begins by sprinkling around him rice-grains placed before him on a leaf and goes on muttering invocations to different spirits, interrogating them in a sing-song tone; the **dub-hora** process of spirit-finding consists in the **Mati** taking some rice on a winnowing basket and briskly rubbing them with his hands on the basket while muttering his invocations until he is possessed by the **bhut** responsible for the trouble.
- 9) Sound: For rain-making ceremony people go up the nearest hill and push-down stones of all sizes which produce a rumbling noise which at the same time is intensified by beating a drum so as to produce a low, heavy, continued sound in imitation of the sound of falling rain on the roofs of their huts. Invoke clan-god or Yam spirit in imitation of the crowing of a cock by uttering the queer cry of **Kok-ro-cho**; relatives of the deceased rending the air with loud cries of lamentation.

Check Your Progress 1

i) Who are the Birhors? Use about 8 lines for your answer.

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ii) What are the ritual elements? Describe any one of them in about 8 lines.

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18.2.3 Spirits and Souls

To the Birhor everything above, below, or around, him is animated either by spirit or supernatural elements. Every living being is animated by a soul or souls. The spirits reside in a large number of things. Most of them are dormant, but still the number of active spirits and energies is considerable. The most important of these are spirits of their original native hills, forests and streams. Besides, there are the ever-increasing spirits of dead human beings, all seeking food and nourishment. The Birhors recognise a distinction between spirits who may have to be propitiated with prayers and sacrifices and impersonal powers of energies which may be controlled, averted or repelled by spells, threats and other such methods. All these may be grouped as follows:

a) General spirits

- 1) **Singbonga** or the supreme spirit, symbolised by the Sun, generally an unconcerned spectator or witness who does not ordinarily cause any harm to man and may occasionally protect him from evil.
- 2) **Burhi mai** or the mother spirit, **Kali mai**, **Devi mai**, and other represented by a piece of wood daubed red with vermilion, brings luck in health, progeny and food.

Chandi and other spirits of the chase. A piece of rock or stone under some tree is fixed upon as the seat of the hunting spirit **Chandi** and his associates. **Bandarbir** and **Hulmanbir** bring success in catching monkeys.

Some of these spirits, for example **Chandi**, **Kalimai**, **Devi**, **Hulman**, **Mahadeo**, etc. belong to the Hindu pantheon.

- 4) **Mahali chaati**, a female spirit, the presiding deity of smaller game like the wild cat and lizard, grants success in hunting those animals which are caught in the rainy months.

b) Clan spirits

- 1) **Ora-banga** or **buru-bonga**, the spirits of the different hills reputed to have formed the original homes of the different Birhor clans, the masters (dispensers) of sickness, credited with certain powers over Nature such as that of causing and stopping rain and storm.
- 2) **Larankia bhut**, the fighting spirit with whose help in ancient times, the forefathers of the clan are reputed to have fought against other clans, invoked on fighting expeditions.
- 3) **Manita** or acquired spirits such as **Mai** or **Mehamaya**, **Mahadeo** and several others provided with seats either in a small leaf-hut called **bonga-ora** or the family as distinguished from the common (**jama**) **thaan** of the **tanda**. A **vow** or **manita** is made when the epidemic spreads and the promised sacrifices are offered by the **Naya** when it abates.

c) **Family spirit**

- 1) **Haprom** or ancestor-spirits, the spirits of such deceased persons of a Birhor family as have been conducted to the **ading** or inner-tabernacle of the hut by the **Umbul-ader** ceremony. Although they generally exercise a guardian care over their descendents, ancestor-spirits are not consulted in times of distress nor credited with the power of giving oracles to them.
- 2) Family **manita bhuts** or the acquired spirits of a family, comprise such spirits as owing to repeated mishaps having been caused by them to the family.

d) **Group-spirits or Sangi bhut**

Jaher Buri, Mai, Kali Mai, Devi, Darha Mahadeo and several other dieties are included among the **Sangi bhuts**. These are spirits sacrificed to by an entire **tanda** or food group once a year in the month of January-February as also when an epidemic visits the **tanda** or its surrounding country.

e) **Individual tutelary or Sakti bhuts**

It is only the **mati** who takes to himself some particular deity such as Mahadeo, Mai, Devi and Durga as the **Sakti bhut**. The Sangi bhuts are characterised as **Arhaia bhuts**. They will kill people or do them other harm.

f) **Minor spirits or Ningchha bhuts**

In this class are human spirits who are excluded from the category of **Haproms** such as the **bhuts** or spirits of men whose wives died during their menstrual periods. **Kichin** or spirits of women dying during menses, **Baram-bhut** or spirits of bachelors who kept maidens in concubinage, **Mua** or spirits of persons dying of snake-bite, **Churin** or spirits of women dying during pregnancy, and elemental spirits like the **Satbahini**, the seven sisters and **Bindi-Era**. These are wandering spirits, having no fixed habitation.

g) **Manita bhut of women**

Ordinarily, men alone are entitled to offer sacrifices to the spirits and have personal relations, so to say, with them. In some cases women may also offer sacrifices to certain spirits. This happens especially when she eats the meat of the head of an animal, or fowl, sacrificed to a spirit. As the spirit is thereby drawn on her and begins to cause trouble to herself and her family, she adopts the spirit as a **manita** to be periodically propitiated with appropriate sacrifices.

h) **Souls or umbul**

When death occurs the **umbul** or shade of the deceased joins the spirit-world. A man has two souls—a male one and a female one. These remain united in death as in life, and when they finally lose their present body by death, are reincarnated together in a new body. When a person dreams, the male soul goes out of the body and visits different persons and places, while the female soul remains in-charge of the body, just as his wife is left in-charge of the hut when a Birhor goes out to hunt. So long as the male soul does not come back, the body is said to be sleeping; but when it is unusually long in returning the female soul too goes out in search of her mate leaving the body dead. Some **Matis** are credited with the power of calling back the truant souls and thus restoring life through the aid of their family spirits. When a Birhor dies in the jungle during a storm, the chances are that his death may be only temporary, hence some Bihors postpone for three or four days after death the cremation or burial of a man dying through exposure in a storm.

18.2.4 Religion without Explanation

The Birhor religion, as we have seen, has its basis in a haunting sense of the presence of spirit-powers all around the world. The most important problem of life is to deal with these powers to ensure individual and collective well-being. The solution that Birhor society has found is to seek conciliation and communion with the more definite and potent personal spirits and to deal with the more indefinite and impersonal forces by way of control, expulsion or avoidance through appropriate rites, ceremonies, spells and taboos. But the tribal faith does not account for the ultimate cause of the natural phenomena and happenings in life.

The Birhor supreme-spirit, Singh-Bonga, is creator of the world, but he does not take any active part in the direction of the universe and in the affairs of human beings. The other spirits, friendly and unfriendly, are the potential source of good luck and bad luck. But no spirit is conceptualised as God in the Christian sense of creator and ruler of the universe and the one who pronounces reward and punishment on human beings.

The Birhor spirits are conditioned by the same appetite and desires as those of the human. They are anxious for animal food and a regular supply of it. Yet the spirit powers are treated as a class apart. This of course indicates the tribal sense of sacredness, but gives no phenomenological explanation of the sacred or profane. In other words, there is no theology or body of religious philosophy behind the tribal religions.

Box 18.1

Phenomenology The term “phenomenology” is derived from the Greek word “phainein” which means “to show”. It is from this word that phainemenon that is “that which appears”, has been derived. It is in this sense that phenomenology can be literally understood as the study of phenomena or appearances. It could therefore, include a large arena of traditional philosophy and science. The famous twentieth century German philosopher, Edmund Husserl was closely associated with this school of thought.

You will learn more about phenomenology and its relationship with sociology in your post-graduate courses.

The Birhor belief in the multiplicity of supernatural powers remains unexplained. In the more complex forms of religion, the power behind the universe is conceptualised as one, though with many manifestations.

Among the Bihors, as we have already seen, a man in a state of self-induced trance can enter into direct communion with the spirit-world. The *Mati* comes to know the wishes and demands of a particular spirit and brings about a mutual understanding between man and the spirit. The Naya performs rituals to put his tribesmen on a working relationship with the spirits. The common human being enters into the spirit world when he or she is asleep. And all Bihors become one with the spirit by eating the sacrificial meal. Yet, they do not become the author of the Advaitin theory of non-duality i.e., the belief that there is one God as believed by the Hindu philosopher Shankara.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Describe any one of the general spirits using about six lines.

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ii) Of the spirits recognised by the Birhors what are the deities that belong to the Hindu pantheon? List them in about two lines.

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iii) What is the nature of the spirit world worshipped and propitiated by the Birhors? Discuss using about six lines.

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iv) Birhor religion is a religion without metaphysics. Discuss in about ten lines.

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18.3 TRIBAL RELIGION SEEKING THEOLOGICAL COMPLEXITY

In the previous section you learnt about the simple tribal religion of the Birhors which lacked metaphysical explanation. But due to the contact of complex religions such as Christianity and Hinduism some of these tribal religions have acquired an explanatory apparatus. One such religion is the religion of the Khasis of Meghalaya.

The Khasis are a matrilineal tribe inhabiting the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya. In the past, as shifting **jhum** agriculturists they had to move from one place to another in about twenty to thirty-year cycle. Swine husbandry as part of the shifting agricultural system, was another source of their livelihood. At one time, each village has had a small patch of forest preserved in a virgin state. The Khasi deities representing

various elements of nature reside in these sacred groves. Cutting live wood from these forests was considered a taboo. It was believed that the spirit would wring the neck of the offender. One, however, is allowed to remove the dead wood.

Each grove had a presiding spirit, **U. Basa** or **U. Ryngkew**, for instance, reign the Mawphlang sacred grove locally called **Law Lyngdoh**. Such groves also exist in Upper Shillong, the capital town of Meghalaya, and Mawsmi in Cherapunji, a place which was known for the world's highest rainfall. The Khasi religion and culture used to revolve round the **jhum** operations. Ritual dance and music, pig sacrifice and other religious rites and ceremonies follow their **jhum** calendar.

This traditional setting has changed considerably in course of time. With the increase in population and relative decrease in the carrying capacity of land, the Khasis have changed their **jhum** way of life. On the introduction of the new method of cultivation the community rights in land has changed. The post-independence development schemes have drifted them to new occupations. And yet, the forest farming continues to some extent. Paddy, potato, betel nut, betel-leaf and banana remain their main products of cultivation. In the traditional Khasi society, the secular and religious leadership combined in the person, namely Syiem who in association with **Myntries**, **Lyngskhors**, **Basans** and **Lyngdohs** held the Khasi durbar at the regional level. The larger body called **Durbar Bima**, or state assembly, reigned supreme in all judicial matters and was known as **Ka Durbar Blei**, the Assembly of God. This system was adversely affected by the establishment of the British Raj. And now, most of the functions of the traditional political organisation are performed by the District Council and the State Government.

18.3.1 Encounter with Christianity

Following the British Raj, Christian Missionaries made in roads to the Khasi Hills. In 1813, Krishna Chandra Pal, an evangelist, succeeded in converting two Khasis to the Christian fold (Sahay 1986). And today nearly half of the Khasi population has embraced Christianity. At the beginning, conversion was vehemently opposed by several English educated Khasis; prominent among them were Jeebon Roy, Sibacharon Roy, Harmurai Diengdoh and Rash Mohan Roy. The challenges of Christianity were met in the following manner:

a) Reorganisation of traditional Khasis

A formal organisation of the indigenous religion, called Seng Khasi, was formed in 1899 with a view to safeguarding the Khasi tradition. The four cardinal principles underlying the objectives of the organisation are:

- 1) Adherence to the tenets of kinship as specified by the ancestors.
- 2) Righteousness through service; love and truth and a desire to improve both mind and body.
- 3) Respect for one's own fellowmen and cultivation of humility.
- 4) To work for one's country with faith in God.

b) Creation of literature

Publication of literature on Khasi religious rites and customs became the most important activity. In the preface of his booklet **Ka Niam jong ki Khasi**, Jeebon Roy wrote in 1897, "The people will completely forget (their religion), with the coming of the Christian Mission, the Roman Catholic Mission, the Unitarian Mission, the Brahma Mission; the poor religion of the Khasis without any written record will pass into oblivion and we will one day forget it completely".

Since then leading intellectuals of the Seng Khasi organisation are involved in the creation of Khasi religious literature.

c) **Preservation of cultural heritage**

The Seng Khasi plays an important role in revitalising the traditional symbols and aesthetic manifestations through ritual idiom. It organises calendrical festivals like **Shad Suk Mynsiem** and the **Nongkrem** dance which involve mass participation and effective realisation of the Khasi's cultural heritage.

Activity 2

You have just read the section on "Encounter with Christianity". Keeping this in mind try and find out if there has been the impact of any other religion on the religious values, beliefs and customs of your own. For this you may take help from other members of your family, friends and colleagues.

Write a short note of about two pages. Compare your note, if possible, with those of other students at your study centre.

18.3.2 Old Belief and New Interpretation

Against the virulent attack of the Christian Missionaries and in response to anthropologists misinterpretation of Khasi religion and society, the promoters of the Seng Khasi gave new interpretation to their old beliefs and customs. Rymbai (1980), the most venerable inspirer of the Seng Khasi movement today, has made the following assertions:



A funeral memorial.

Box 18.2

The Khasi-Pnars believe that God is omnipotent and omnipresent. Accordingly, they hold it a sacrilege to symbolise God or to picture Him in any shape or form. The early Western Christian Missionaries who contemptuously characterised the Khasi-Pnars as worshippers of idols, of stocks and stones, spoke of what they did not know, and of what they superciliously disdained to learn (May God forgive them). They were also equally and mightily wrong when they lightly labelled them as animists because they do not worship spirits said to be inhabiting mountains, rivers or trees. Neither do the Khasi-Pnars practise ancestor-worship, another misconception of the Western Missionaries about their reverence for their ancestors who, they believe, watch them from high place.

The Khasi-Pnars have no temples, churches or synagogues. God, the creator of all, fills heaven and earth. Every bit of ground is therefore sacred, and no particular part or portion can be held as holier than the other. They also have no saints or martyrs or any system or established priesthood, for their creed is that each man must save himself by his own actions: living justly, observing and obeying the word of God transmitted to him through the advice of his parents. The Khasi-Pnars are monotheistic, but they invoke God by various names according to the need of the moment, as God has all the attributes of goodness and all the power to do good.

The Khasi-Pnars have no fixed days of congregational worship like the Sunday of the Christians, the Friday of the Mohammedans, or the Sabbath of the Jews. If to be religious means to be seen in religious gatherings in churches or temples on fixed days of the week, or preaching publicly about God, or praying in public to Him, or sitting in sack clothes and ashes, or going on pilgrimage, a Khasi-Pnar may be considered as the least religious of human beings, or as one having no religion at all, because you do not find them doing so. But they are, in fact, intensely religious people as they must *Kamai ia ka hok*, which they can fulfil only by means of honest work, truthfulness in thoughts and word, and justness in all their transactions. Thus religion permeates the life of a Khasi-Pnar in all its aspects because he or she must work to live and honest work is worship.

In the Seng Khasi's self-defence we thus find:

- i) denial of the most common characterisation of tribal religion as animistic;
- ii) denial of the tribal practice of ancestor-worship; denial of the polytheistic (i.e. worship of many gods) character of tribal religion;
- iii) assertion of the tribal religion that there can be no space bereft of God and no Sphere of human life on which religion does not have a crucial bearing; and
- iv) ascertain of the tribal religion that work is worship is the fundamental truth of life.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) How does a tribe meet the challenges of a proselytising religion? Take the example of the Khasis of Meghalaya. Use about eight lines.

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ii) In self-interpretation what makes a tribal truly religious. Use about ten lines.

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iii) Fill in the blanks:

- a) The Khasi religion and culture used to revolve round the operations. This was a method ofthey followed earlier.
- b) In the traditional Khasi society, the secular and religious leadership combined in one person, namely who in association with **Myntries, Lyngskhors, Basans and Lyndohs** held the Khasi durbar at the level.
- c) A formal organisation of the indigenous religion, called was formed in 1899 with a view to safe-guarding the Khasi tradition.

18.3.3 Writing a Tribal Theology

As indicated, the Khasis felt the need to write tribal theology mainly to meet the Christian challenges to their indigenous faith and form of culture. Most of the scholars who have written the Khasi theology were past-Christians. In the situation, it is not unexpected that whatever has been written by them will have a strong bearing on the Christian theology. Let us take a few examples of the basic concepts that constitute a theology of any tradition. In doing so, we can do no better than referring to Mawrie (1981) whose expositions of the tenets of the Khasi culture and religion are considered authentic. he interprets Khasi concept of man, God and religion as follows:

a) **Man**

The Khasi concept of human being is similar to that of the Jews. A Khasi believes that God made her/him, which means that He made her or him a full-fledged human being to inhabit this world.

The Khasi thinks that a human being is a special creature of God. He or she is incomparably higher than any other creature.

A Human beings' capacity to grow morally and spiritually is quite special to him or her—and this is God's particular gift to human beings: the element of the divine in them.

Another divine gift to human being, a Khasi believes, is the unique gift of **Ka Rngiew**: **Ka Rngiew** is a human beings' capacity to bring rational considerations to bear upon his or her understanding of his or her own situation.

The Khasi believes that this world is full of the powers of darkness and evil and that the sole function of these powers is to dislodge a human being from his/her place given to him or her by God. Human beings cannot fight these powers on their own. Their strength lies in the presence of God in them and therefore, God, must always remain in the resolve of their hearts.

b) God

The Khasis, like the Jews, never seek to formulate arguments to prove that God exists. They take it for granted that God exists and that there is only one God who is omnipresent, omnipotent and eternal.

God may reveal himself to human beings in any or all the following ways:

- a) through His power,
- b) through His righteousness, and
- c) through His spoken word.

To a Khasi the name God is above the rules of gender. He is the alpha and omega. Therefore, whatever we call U Blei (masculine) or Ka Blei (feminine) it makes the same sense. To a Khasi, God is the supreme planner and creator.

A Khasi addressed God with diverse names but all these names are only to express the qualities and attributes relating to different functions of God in His particular relation to human beings.

c) Religion

For a Khasi **Ka Niam** (religion) necessarily complements **Ka Rukom** (rite); hence the phrase **Ka Niam Ka Rukom**. **Ka Rukom** indicates the ceremonial aspects of religious observances, which must be according to the norms laid down in **Ka Niam**.

The Khasi religion illustrates the relationship between human beings and God through parables and mysterious words. According to the Khasi, religion is the relationship between them and God, and this relationship is governed by two factors, namely, **Ka Nia** and **Ka Jutang** (reason and covenant). The principle reason for human beings is that he/she is a creature of God. The covenant on the other hand is that as long as he/she is alive in this world, he/she should abide by and execute the command (hukkom) of God by earning righteousness—and on God's part the covenant is that God shall take care of her/him.

The Khasi's religion is an integral part of their clan and group life. The clan keeps religion in the care of the God-head, the Ancestress, the Ancestor and the Ancestral Uncle. These four comprise the family cause.

When any family falls into affliction, or distress, or financial deterioration, or is inflicted with sickness, or events causing grief, or agony to the family, the family believes that there is a curse behind such happenings. A Khasi does not believe that things take place without a cause.

They ask for the clue or sign from grains of rice, or cowrie or other materials and should those not yield any result, they use the egg-breaking or cock-sacrificing ritual. When they have discovered the cause, they then, perform sacrifices for

atonement of the shortcomings so that they may be set free from the gripping affliction.

In general, the Khasi religious rituals take place within a family household, or in a clan or group with its own ancestress, ancestor and ancestral uncle.

18.3.4 The Changing Worldview

The changing worldview of the Khasis, as reflected in their theology, is to be seen in the perspective of changing environment. As Saraswati (191) points out, "Unlike the 'modern' societies, a basic characteristic of all traditional societies is that there is no gap in their knowledge and existence. The moment a tribal society loses this unique feature, its purity and distinction are lost for ever. But this does not mean that the tribal world is static and closed. There has always been active incorporation of the new elements and reformation of the old, the evidence of which can be found in the elaboration of myths and general beliefs. However, affirmation of new ideas is possible only within the basic ontological categories. Difficulties arise when cosmologies are in conflict. The following autobiographical statements by Pugh (1976), a Christian Khasi by birth, trained in agricultural science in the U.S.A. and a public man of high repute, are relevant:

As a religious man, I believe in God and being a man, my God also in anthropomorphic (the conception of God as having the form, personality or attributes of man or woman) while in my heart of hearts, I do not believe that it can be so. Jesus himself has said: 'God is a spirit' or 'God is spirit'. But being also a Khasi tribal who lives in a Khasi land, in spite of my science and Christian theology, I continue to pray to God who seems to me circumscribed in the environment in which I live.

When I die, my desire is that I may be cremated as I do not wish that my body should lie in close company with the Saints, neither do I wish that my mortal remains should unnecessarily encumber the ground which is so hard pressed because of the increasing population".

18.4 CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISON

The two cases that we have discussed separately may now be compared for the sake of our understanding. These two, otherwise incomparable cultures, are compared in order to grasp the wider phenomena underlying a tribal religion. Let us present our finds in a tabular form.

Birhor	Khasi
1. Hunter, gatherer	1. Shifting agriculturist
2. Partilineal	2. Matrilineal
3. Relatively untouched by modern education and occupation	3. Exposed to modern education and occupation
4. Secular and sacred combined in one person	4. Secular and sacred combined with one person
5. Priest chosen of spirits	5. Divinity ascribed to the assembly of people
6. Multiplicity of spirits, having different functions and powers	6. God with diverse names, indicating different functions.

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| 7. World filled with spirits | 7. God omnipresent |
| 8. The supreme spirit created the universe | 8. God the creator |
| 9. Distinction between benevolent and malevolent spirits recognised. | 9. Distinction between God and Devil maintained |
| 10. Spirits distinguished by gender. | 10. Traditional sexual distinction of God, derecognised. |
| 11. Sacred groves. | 11. Sacred groves. |
| 12. Ritual space not restricted to man-made structures. | 12. Ritual space not restricted to man-made structures. |
| 13. Cause of natural phenomena and happenings in life recognised. | 13. Cause of natural phenomena and happenings in life recognised. |
| 14. Divination: rice and cock-sacrifice | 14. Divination: rice and cock-sacrifice. |
| 15. Taboos | 15. Taboos |
| 16. Spirit-powers controlled, averted or repelled by man | 16. Man subject to God's reward and punishment |
| 17. Clan and ancestral spirits worshipped. | 17. Clan and ancestral spirits worshipped. |
| 18. A man as two souls | 18. A man has only one soul. |
| 19. Cremation | 19. Cremation |
| 20. Primacy of ritual without explanation. | 20. Primacy of theological explanation. |

Check Your Progress 4

i) Explain in your own words the Khasi concept of man using about ten lines.

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ii) What are the three ways in which God may reveal Himself to man, according to the Khasis? Use about five lines.

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- iii) Describe at least two features in which the Khasis differ from the Birhors using about eight lines.

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18.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have made the following conclusive observations:

Tribal religions may differ among themselves slightly, or significantly according to their own cultural history or on the basis of the extent to which other religions have made an impact on them.

These may be classified into two broad categories: one with the old beliefs and rituals and another with the old beliefs and rituals undergoing theological orientation. The difference lies not in praxis but in the acceptance of a theory developed outwardly.

Tribal religion of the first order pervades all aspects of life, that is, it performs integrative functions; which the second category is more restricted in its effect.

In the first case, there is no gap between belief and behaviour; in the latter the gap exists and widens with the increase in theological orientation.

The tribal revitalisation of indigenous ritual idiom and the search for a new theology may appear incompatible in their goals; in reality they together aim at securing maximum efflorescence of tribal identity.

18.6 KEY WORDS

- Animism** : The belief in attribution of soul to inanimate objects and natural phenomena.
- Atonement** : Correcting moral wrongs.
- Augury** : Omen, sign portending good or evil.
- Charms** : Words or objects or characters supposedly having occult power.
- Communion** : Participation in Lord's Super, fellowship.
- Congregation** : Assembly of people for religious worship.

Conversion	: Change of religion.
Covenant	: A mutual agreement.
Diviner	: One who is expert in divining the future.
Ecstasy	: Overwhelming feeling of spiritual joy, rapture.
Incantation	: Magic spell.
Indigenous	: Belonging naturally to soil or country.
Invoke	: Call on in prayer, summon spirit by charm.
Libation	: Drink-offering to god or spirit.
Matrilineal	: System in which descent is traced through the mother.
Metaphysics	: Theoretical philosophy of being, knowing.
Monotheism	: Doctrine that there is only one God.
Omnipotent	: All powerful.
Omnipresent	: Present everywhere.
Ontology	: The metaphysics concerned with nature and essence of being.
Patrilineal	: A system in which descent is traced through the father.
Phenomenology	: The philosophy which recognises observed or apparent objects or fact or occurrence and its cause.
Polytheism	: Belief in or worship of more than one God.
Propitiation	: Act of appeasement.
Reincarnation	: Rebirth of soul in new body.
Sacrilege	: Violation of what is sacred.
Shifting cultivation	: A method of slash-and-burn forest farming on a plot of land shifted in cyclical order.
Synagogue	: Building for regular assembly of Jews for religious instruction and worship.
Taboo	: Act, or system, of setting apart a person or sacred thing.
Totem	: Natural object (especially animal) adopted as emblem, of a tribe.
Trance	: A spiritually elevated state of mind.

18.7 FURTHER READING

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18.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Birhors are a nomadic hunting and good gathering tribes, numerically small and located mostly in the Chotanagpur plateau (South Bihar). They are also found in Orissa, West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh. The term Birhor literally means jungle folk (Bir)—jungle and (hor) folk. There are two main divisions: (i) uthalus or Bhulies. They are the wanderers, and (ii) Jaghis or Thantias. They are the settlers.
- ii) Ritual elements or components form an integral part of the Birhor ritual structure. They are all interrelated. For example, the purpose of performing a ritual is related with the performer, the preparation of the ritual and the process of the ritual performance, and so on. Purpose of ritual can be protection from evil, luck in health, success in hunting and so on.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) One of the general spirits propitiated by the Birhors is Singhonga or the supreme spirit. This spirit is symbolised by the sun and is considered to be generally an unconcerned spectator or witness who does not ordinarily cause any harm to human beings and may occasionally protect them from evil.
- ii) Some of the deities recognised by the Birhors which belong to the Hindu pantheon are Devi, Kali Mai, Chandi, Hulman, Satbahini.
- iii) Some spirits are benevolent, some malevolent. The spirits who do not cause harm to human beings and may protect him or her are propitiated with prayers and

sacrifices. Those who have certain powers over Nature and cause harm to human beings are controlled, averted or repelled by spells, threats and such other methods.

- iv) Birhor religion is said to be religion without explanation because although the Birhors believe in a number of spirits or supernatural powers but these powers remain unexplained. They believe in a supreme-spirit, Singbonga, who is the creator of the world. But this creator does not take an active part in the functioning of the universe or the dealings of human beings. This spirit or any other spirit, good or bad in terms of the luck it brings cannot be equated with the concept of God in the Christian sense of the creator and ruler of the universe. Birhor religion lacks the theological explanation of the existence of the cosmos or the explanation, in terms of the theory of knowledge, of the sacred or profane.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) A tribe meets the challenges of a proselytising religion by (a) reorganising traditional Khasis into a new order called Seng Khasi; (b) creation of literature on Khasi religious rites and customs; (c) revitalising the traditional symbols and aesthetic manifestations through ritual idiom; (d) giving new interpretations to their old beliefs.
- ii) What makes a tribal truly religious is not the congregational worship in Churches or temples, not even pilgrimage, but, as the Khasis say, **Kamai ia ka hok**. This means a tribal becomes an intensely religious person by means of honest work, truthfulness in thoughts and words, and justness in all his transactions. Religion permeates the life of a tribe in all its aspects because he works to live and honest work is worship.
- iii) a) jhum, cultivation
b) syiem, regional
c) Seng Khasi

Check Your Progress 4

- i) According to the Khasi belief, God created human beings to inhabit this world. They believe that human beings are special beings belonging to God and as such much above the other creatures of this earth. Human beings have the capacity to grow as moral and spiritual beings. This capacity of human beings is a gift of God to human kind which brings in the element of the divine in them. Besides this gift, they believe that God has given them the unique gift of **Ka Ru grew** which means that they can understand their own situation rationally.
- ii) The three ways in which God may reveal Himself to human beings are:
- 1) through His power,
 - 2) through His righteousness, and
 - 3) through His spoken word.
- iii) a) The Birhors believe in the multiplicity of spirits, having different functions and powers while the Khasis believe in God having different names each indicating different functions.
- b) The Birhors believe that the world is filled with spirits while the Khasis believe that God is both the creator and that He is omnipresent.

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