
UNIT 27 RELIGION IN TRIBAL SOCIETIES

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27.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to

- discuss that tribal societies are characterised by simple forms of religion
- show that understanding of religious notions is vital to the understanding of tribal lifestyle
- describe that tribal worldview recognises no differentiation or opposition of the sacred and the secular
- discuss the impact of other religious faiths on tribal religions
- describe the occurrence of socio-religious movements among the tribal groups.

27.1 INTRODUCTION

In units 25 and 26 we discussed broad patterns of social structure in the tribal societies of India. In this unit we will try to understand how **faith** in supernatural is structured in tribal society.

If we go by the 1961 census of India, it would appear that about 89 per cent of the tribals claimed to profess Hinduism and 5 per cent had converted to Christianity. About 4 per cent were enumerated as following tribal religions, which number 52 (Mitra 1966). Vidyarthi and Rai (1976: 238) hold that the tribals in India are mainly Hindu. They quote many scholars who also hold a similar view. Here we have not gone into the details of these opinions. Let us for a minute assume that most of the tribals in India follow some or the other form of Hinduism. It is obvious that this is due to the contacts the tribals had with their Hindu neighbours. So also is the case with regard to Christianity, which was introduced among the tribal groups during the British rule. Therefore we will discuss in the last part of this unit both Hinduism and Christianity as aspects of the impact of other faiths on tribal religions. The first part of the unit will deal with the nature of tribal **religion**, the main theme of this unit.

We will here discuss main features of the **ritual** complex of tribal people. Next we will show how tribal **worldview** recognises no differentiation of the **sacred** and the secular. We also show that tribal simple beliefs are in agreement with the highly sophisticated worldview of the **theologically** self-conscious society. Then we take up the issues of the impact of other religious belief systems on tribal religions. In the end we discuss the occurrence of socio-religious movements in the tribal societies of India. In many parts of the world, such movements have been reported to occur among the aboriginal populations, and the tribal groups in India share with them belief in millenarianism.

27.2 CHIEF CHARACTERISTIC OF TRIBAL SOCIETIES: SIMPLE FORM OF RELIGION

Every religious system consists of a set of three essential elements: (a) belief in the existence of a superhuman world; (b) human's relationship to it; and (c) practice of ritual as an instrument of establishing relationship.

Here (a) refers to the belief system, (b) to the value system, and (c) to the action system. The form and meaning of these elements, i.e., religious belief, religious value and religious action, may differ from one order to another.

Religion of a **tribe** is simple insofar as it is expressed in everyday language and experienced in everyday life. It is descriptive, demonstrative and readily discernible. Among the tribes religious **myth**, belief, religious value and religious action are not treated as something apart from other kinds of belief and behaviour, as followed in social, economic and political contexts. Yet, the meaning of beliefs and behaviour of the tribals appears mysterious to the outsiders. This is precisely because theirs is a religion without explanation. However, tribal religion is no less complete than the highly developed form of complex religion to the extent that its implicit philosophy recognises the same universal truth.

Let us now explain to you all these features of tribal religion, its implicit philosophy and the worldview. This we will do by discussing tribal lifestyle, tribal ritual complex and tribal worldview.

27.3 TRIBAL LIFESTYLE

Religion pervades all aspects of tribal life that is why for understanding the tribal lifestyle we need to first understand the tribe's religious notions. To explain this, we will take an example of the pastoral Toda of the Nilgiri in South India (see Walker 1986).

By their own account, the Toda and their long horned buffaloes were created on the high massif of the Nilgiri Hills by the great goddess Teikirzi. Their settlement is marked by the unique barrel-vaulted houses and dairy buildings. The dairy buildings are temples. The following illustration (figure 27.1) shows the entrance of a dairy building and in the foreground is a Toda male pacifying a buffalo with butter.

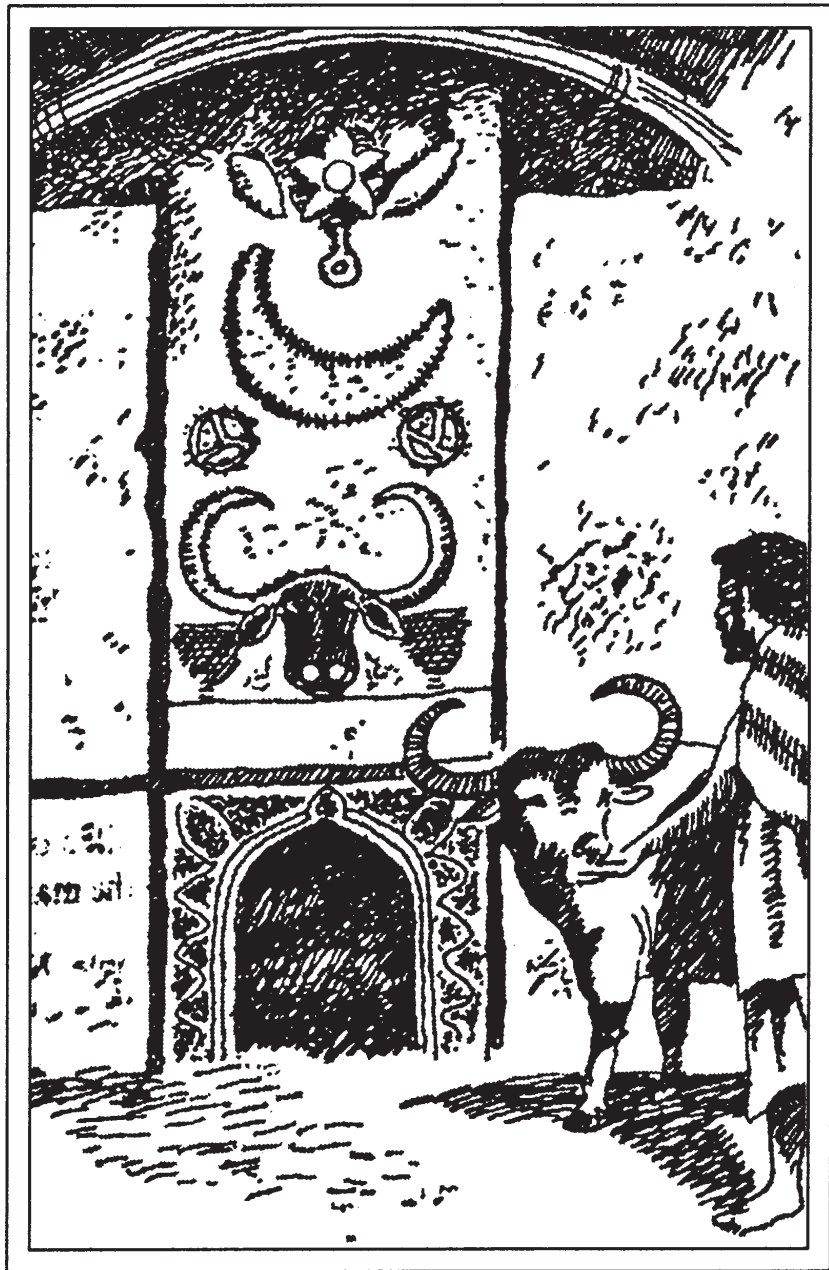


Fig. 27.1: Entrance of a Dairy Building and a toda male pacifying a buffalo

The Toda are socially organised into two endogamous sections, named *Tarthoral* and *Teivaliol*. The division is based on ritual specialisation. The *Tarthar* people

alone can own the most sacred dairy temples with their associated herds; the *Teivaliol* men, called 'the servants of the gods' fulfil the highest priestly tasks associated with them. Their economic and social lives are centred on the buffaloes. The greater part of their religious observance is also focused on this animal. The buffaloes are ritually guarded. Every task of the dairyman, every object and place associated with the herds has received the impress of ritual. The Toda observe a number of special ceremonies related to the dairies, the buffaloes and the pastures. There are rites by which they honour the dairy, purify it when it has been defiled, and make offerings to it. There are rites associated with rebuilding and rethatching. Next are the rites for naming a buffalo, milking a temple buffalo for the first time, giving salt to the herds and moving them to the new pastures. There is also the rite of lighting the gods' fire to ensure the fertility of the pastures.

Life's major events are highly ritualised among the Toda. The first pregnancy of a Toda woman is seen as ritually contaminating and hence in approximately fifth month she spends a complete lunar month in a temporary 'pollution hut' outside her hamlet. In her seventh month of pregnancy, the husband ritually gives her a bow-and-arrow to establish the social paternity of the unborn child. If a child were born to a woman who had not been given a bow, it would be a bastard with no **patrician** affiliation. In former days when **polyandry** was the norm, the several husbands of a woman took turns to assume the paternity of her children.

Childbirth is a polluting event. It is not only the mother and her child who are ritually defiled, but also all other people and things which come in close contact with them. Purificatory rite is performed on or just before the day of the new moon after birth. The 'face-uncovering' ceremony is performed some time between one and three months after the birth of a child. It is only then the Toda child is recognised as a social being.

The name-giving ceremony follows it. Marriage is initiated in childhood and completed at maturity. Meanwhile the ear-piercing ceremony is performed for all boys. For a girl there are two distinct rites supposed to precede her entry into womanhood. The two rites essentially are symbolic and an actual defloration is performed before a girl's first menstruation. When the partners in a marriage alliance reach maturity, arrangements are made for their cohabitation and for the subsequent payment of dowry. On this occasion the girl's father performs 'the girl-sending' ceremony. The passage of a Toda man or woman into middle or old age is not marked by ritual. As death approaches, the elders can look forward to an afterlife not radically different from their present one. As the goddess Teikirzi rules over the living Toda and their buffaloes, so does her brother, On, who reigns over the dead. Death generates the greatest profusion of ritual. The corpse of the deceased is cremated at the end of the first funeral ceremony during which buffaloes are sacrificed so that they may accompany the **spirit** to the afterworld. A second ceremony is held, usually months after the first, in which a relic of the deceased (a lock of hair and a skull fragment) is cremated.

What comes through this description of the Toda passage through life cycle, as also the organisation of their territory, society and economy, is the great importance of religion. You have seen how the complex web of ritual is woven around the comparatively simple tasks of the husbandryman. One might, therefore, conclude that tribal life and society cannot be fully understood without understanding their religion. However, as Winter (1978) has pointed out, in some societies religion plays a much more important role in group structure than it does in others. This

has been illustrated with reference to African tribes. The social structure of the Iroquois cannot be described without taking religion into account; that of the Amaba can be described in such a manner.

Activity 1

Identify some areas of your lifestyle, which require an understanding of your religious notions. Write a note of 200 words on this aspect of your lifestyle. Compare, if possible, your note with those of other students in your Study Centre.

27.4 TRIBAL RITUAL COMPLEX

For a religious human, the superhuman world is the real world, which is ritually replicated in space and time. The believer communicates with this world through a symbolic code which Saraswati (1982) calls the **ritual language**, consisting of (a) esoteric word, *mantra*, (b) gesture, *mudra*, (c) sound, *dhvani*, (d) everyday language of interaction, *vyavahariki*.

The tribal ritual complex may be described along this line. Here we will first speak of ritual space and then of ritual time. Next, we will discuss ritual language in terms of *mantra*, *mudra*, *dhvani*, and *vyavahariki*.

27.4.1 Ritual Space

In the tribal perception the space is filled with spiritual beings. There are two classes of space: cosmic space and physical, or object space. The Santal believe that the creator *Thakur Jiu* dwells up in the sky; the *Sin Bonga* or the Sun God also occupies the cosmic space. There is also the *Hanapuri*, or the land of the dead. The spirits occupy concrete objects in and around their settlement. Such spaces are named after the spirits associated with them. For instance, the spirit of the region, the spirit of the village boundary, the house spirit, the spring spirit, the mountain spirit, the forest spirit, the spirit of the rice field, the spirit of the threshing floor, cremation ground, etc.

The ritual space is different from the ordinary space inasmuch as it is sacred-effective. But any ordinary space can become a ritual space, depending on its association with the spirit. Generally, it is allowed to retain its natural form. For instance, the *Jaher*, or the sacred grove of the Santal consists of a clump of *sal* tree with one *mahua* standing near. Three trees in a line are dedicated to *Mama Buru*, the spirit who dwelt with the first Santal, *Jaher Era*, the spirit of the sacred grove, and to *More ko Turuc ko*, the spirit called Five-Six. Another *sal* tree is dedicated to *Pargana Bonga*, the spirit of the region, while *Mahua* tree is reserved for *Gosae Era*, the spirit of the sacred house. At the base of each of these trees, a stone is embedded and all five are known as *Bonga* trees. A simple construction may also mark the sacred space. The Santal *Manjhithan* consists of smoothly cemented plinth of mud with two stories to represent the founder of the village, *Manjhi* and his wife, a centre pillar of *sal* wood, a second and smaller pillar supporting a pot of water and finally a roof of thatch or tiles.

Tribes, by and large, entertain no notion of hierarchy of the sacred spaces. But, as Walker (1986) has reported, the Toda dairy temples are graded into a complex

hierarchy according to relative sanctity. The higher they are, the more elaborate is the ritual associated with the daily tasks of the dairyman, and the higher must be the purity in which the dairy, its appurtenances, and the dairyman himself are maintained.

27.4.2 Ritual Time

The tribes order their ritual time on the Nature's signal, i.e., on the blossoming plants and trees, on the position of stars and moon, the biological time, and, if the circumstances so demand, by direct **divination**. The principal festival of the Oraon is called *Sarhul*, the Feast of the *Sal* Blossoms, also known as the Marriage of the Earth. Another festival known as *Kadlota*, is celebrated when rice grains have formed in the rice plants. The Toda perform their rituals according to the position of stars and new moon. The star called ket (Tamil *kettai*, Sanskrit *jyestha*), the 18th *naksatra* or lunar mansion, is considered to have a malignant influence. Most rituals are performed on or about the new moon. The moon-time is followed rather strictly. As you have seen, the Toda regard childbirth pollution particularly dangerous to the ritual condition of the sacred dairies of the hamlet. Thus they insist that a new mother and her child should be taken, as soon as the woman could move, out of her hamlet to the pollution hut. The length of the time mother and child were compelled to remain in this hut depended upon whether or not the child was her first. In the case of the second or subsequent child, the period of seclusion would last until the new moon following the birth, possibly just a few days. But for the first born it had to be a complete lunar month following the new moon after the delivery. Thus, if a woman had given birth to her first child just after a new moon, she would have to endure almost two months of seclusion. On the third day of the new moon the newly delivered mother receives butter and buttermilk from the dairy, which event marks the end of the restriction on her drinking milk and consuming milk products from the dairy. The 'social paternity rite' or 'bow-and-arrow ceremony' is performed on the day of the new moon. The first funeral rite is also held on the day of the new moon. Most tribes consider biological time as an occasion to perform ritual, such as the first menstruation, childbirth, and death.

27.4.3 Ritual Language

Forms of ritual may vary from one tribe to another, but the basic ritual code of *mantra*, *mudra*, *dhvani*, and *vyavahariki* is applicable to all cultures.

- a) **Mantra**. In the complex form of religion, such as in the *Vedic* and *Tantric* traditions, the conception of mantra is fully developed. The *Vedic* mantra is considered as the **primordial** word of which neither human nor **God** is the author. It is not even the message of the God; it is the God itself. Briefly, a *mantra* is that letter or combination of letters, which evokes the deity. The *mantra* used by the tribes in the performance of a ritual are simple words of everyday language. For instance, the Kharia tribal priest recites the following mantra to the village spirits:

O ye Khunt and Baghia spirits!

Today I am offering sacrifices

Today in your name I am offering to you

Mahua, Ber, fig-all these fruits,

I am worshipping you.

Do ye protect (our) bullocks, buffaloes,
goats, men, etc., in jungle and brushwood,
from tigers and bears.

This *mantra* may appear as **prayer**. For, the Kharia priest offers a sacrifice to the spirit, which in return is asked to reciprocate. But, on closer inspection you will find that in this there is both a command for boons and the hope of reciprocity. Some scholars (for instance, Woodroffe 1955) are of the opinion that *mantra* is not the same thing as prayer. A *mantra* intoned in the proper way becomes effective by the very structure of its soundbody; a prayer, on the other hand, is a mere individual thinking expressed without determined sounds.

- b) **Mudra.** There are various kinds of hand gestures and bodily positions representing specific feelings and esoteric actions. In tribal dance the movement of steps, interlocking of hands and other hand gestures have both aesthetic and ritualistic significance. The most common forms of the tribal dance *mudra* are interlocked arms at the waist level in front and back; swinging of one leg while holding all the weight on the other foot; open movements of arms above shoulder level; outstretched hands held diagonally—one above the level of the head and the other at the level of the knee; taking such tiny steps that the lifting of the feet from the ground is hardly perceptible, the arms held down to the sides and the eyes downcast; fast movement of foot back and forth; swinging; rolling; rotating; hanging head down; and so on and so forth. There are also gestures of ceremonial greetings, such as *Johar* of the Santal.
- c) **Dhvani.** Sound is the third component of ritual language. The sound of musical instrument guides the dance *mudra*. Certain forms of sound have special significance. The Santal produce peculiar sound at the annual hunt. They shout “Der der, Deper deper” during the *Bitalaha* dance. The Toda shout “0 haw how” during the thatching of their sacred dairy temples. The tribes of North-East India also produce a wide variety of sounds, sometime giving expressions to their virility. The sound of flute, the sound of the drum, whistle, and cries are associated with a number of ritual performances. Certain forms of sound are considered inauspicious. According to the Birhor, if a jackal of the Fekar kind (which emits a peculiarly hoarse sound) is heard calling near the settlement, it is apprehended that some one in the community will fall sick or die. The croaking of a raven near the Birhor’s hut is believed to indicate that the news of the death of some near relative is about to come. Ceremonial weeping at the time of death may also be included in the category of ritualistic sound.
- d) **Vyavahariki.** In course of the performance of a ritual what follows in the form of prescriptions or instructions, thoughts, methods and behaviour is the *vyavahariki* code. The following description (Walker 1986) of making offerings to a Toda dairy will be a good illustration: All Toda dairies must be kept in a state of high ritual purity. Dairies are participants in the divinity of the gods of the sacred places believed to be able to grant boons and punish wrong doers. The manner in which the Toda go about requesting a boon from a dairy is strictly prescribed. It involves presenting to the dairy certain

gifts: a buffalo or a dairyman's black loincloth, silver coins, or a silver ring. If the presentation is to be a buffalo, the ceremony lasts two months; if it involves no more than a silver, the whole affair can be completed in a couple of days. But in any case, it involves all the male adults of the patrician and the ritual interaction of the two clan divisions known as *kwir* horns. On the day before the new moon following the announcement of the act of offering a buffalo, all female members of the chief settlement must leave the hamlet, as must all males of the buffalo-giver's *kwir*. On the Sunday following the new moon, the buffalo will be presented to the dairy. The man who wishes to propitiate the dairy must provide a female calf, between one and two years old, unblemished, with clear eyes and no parts of its ears or tails cut. On the morning of the ceremony, members of the gift-giving *kwir* must bathe from head to foot and abstain from food. When they are ready, they assemble at the outskirts of the chief hamlet from where they approach the settlement in a group with the calf; each man bares his right arm (a ritual sign of respect) and carries a green stick. When the members of the resident *kwir* see these people approaching, they shout, "Give the buffalo! Come here".

The gift-giving *kwir* enters the hamlet and the two divisions face each other. The dairyman addresses a ritual three times with the question "Shall I give the buffalo!", to which the reply each time is "Give the buffalo!" Then all the men drive the calf past the buffalo-giving stone, by which act it becomes the property of the resident *kwir*. The whole assembly now bows toward the dairy entrance as they recite a short prayer, which differs from clan to clan. After the prayer, all approach the dairy and bow, one by one, at the threshold, after which every one partakes of a feast prepared by the receiving *kwir*. The food on this occasion is a Toda delicacy, large balls of puffed millet and jaggery, served with generous helpings of honey and ghee. After eating, the gift-giving *kwir* must again leave the chief settlement and stay away for another lunar month. Members of the gift-receiving *kwir* may come and go as they please, except the resident dairyman. Two or three days after the new moon, everybody (including the womenfolk) may return and the whole community is invited to participate in a celebratory feast. Dancing is an integral part of the festivities. Life in the chief hamlet now returns to normal, having been disrupted for two months.

The underlying structure of the tribal ritual complex, as you must have realised, is not a mere reflection of and association with the superhuman world, but a strong reinforcement of the human world itself. Both social and aesthetic aspects of life are enriched. The social implications of primitive religion have been highlighted by Durkheim and Weber and many other sociologists of religion. The integrative function of religion in tribal society is demonstrated in their common goal (superhuman world) and common means (ritual). Unlike the salvation-seeking complex religions, tribal religion is concerned with the maintenance of social and cosmic harmony and with attaining this worldly goods—rain, harvest, children, health, victory, and so on.

Check Your Progress 1

- i) "Tribal life and society cannot be properly understood without understanding tribal religion". Illustrate. Use eight lines for your answer.

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ii) What is ritual language? Use five lines for your answer.

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iii) How do the tribes determine their ritual time? Use three lines for your answer.

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27.5 TRIBAL WORLDVIEW

Evolutionary anthropologists of the last century held that the primitive man’s mental equipment is very different from that of the civilised man. Since then several statements have been made supporting the view that the civilised mind is logical, rational, supremely abstract and scientific, while the savage mind is prelogical, irrational, supremely concrete and superstitious. We may (must) not take this difference seriously.

The primitive lack of differentiation in their worldview does not necessarily prove that they are intellectually incapable to reasoning and interpretation. As we shall see in a while (subsection 27.5.1) the principle of undifferentiated reality has found a place of pride in the highly intellectualised Vedantic philosophical system.

Secondly, as Geertz (1978) has said, nor is it necessary to be theologically self-conscious to be religiously sophisticated.

Thirdly, the development of religious systems cannot be established by finding correlations between social and psychological needs and the degree of religious articulation.

Lastly, the so-called primitive societies make no difference between the technical order and the spiritual order, and hence in their case the consideration of social and psychological factors influencing the religious life is totally irrelevant.

27.5.1 Simple Belief of the Tribals and the Upanishadic Complex Thought

Saraswati's (1986) exploration and analysis of the tribal myths of North-East India has led him to say that in the archaic vision, human, cosmos and the supernatural are not separate realities but are related and closely communicable to the extent that the Land of the Dead is the archetype of the Land of the Living. In support of his argument he quotes the Apa Tani's **eschatological** beliefs, as recorded by Furer-Haimendorf (1953): "The Apa Tani believe that the souls, *Yalo*, of all those who die a natural death go to *Neli*, the place of the dead, which looks like an Apa Tani village with long rows of houses. As an Apa Tani lived on this earth so will he live in *Neli*; a rich man will find the cattle he has sacrificed during his lifetime. Every woman returns to her first husband, but those who died unmarried may there marry and beget children. Life in *Neli* is similar to life on earth: people cultivate and work, and ultimately they die once more and go to another Land of the Dead". In the *Katha* Upanishad, Yama, the god of death, had told Nachiketa:

"Whatever is here, that is there,
What is there, that again is here,
He who sees any difference here,
Goes from death to death".

Comparing the Upanishadic complex thought with the tribal Apa Tani's simple belief, we find that both comprehend the essential oneness to the same degree of sophistication. The Apa Tani's description of the land of the dead is an apt illustration of the Upanishadic *Rishi*'s conceptualisation of the fundamental unity of all experience and the intrinsic harmony of all existence.

27.5.2 Some Ethnographic Examples

Furer-Haimendorf (1962) describing the event of an earthquake in a Konyak Naga village addresses himself to the problem of tribal mind: "What is the Konyak's idea of the natural phenomena that sometimes threaten his life and his property?" The answer given by Furer-Haimendorf is that the Konyak Naga man is not a primitive, living in mortal fear of the unknown. In fact, his worldview is rather clear and simple. A Konyak Naga's ideas on-nature are derived from logical deduction.

Mawrie's (1981) self-interpretation of Khasi religion points to the same intuitive rationality. According to Mawrie, a Khasi family facing affliction or distress or financial problems believes that all such events have a cause. The cause may be an offense, displeasing the spirits. The family generally finds out the cause by resorting to divine consultation. After discovering the cause they perform sacrifice to atone the shortcomings so that the affliction may disappear.

Tribal traditions make no real distinction between man, animal and god (spirit). A woman give birth to twins, of whom one is human and the other tiger; animals talk, and also behave, like man; of two brothers, one is the father of mankind, and the other the father of the spirit (see Elwin 1968). This notion makes the interpersonal communication between man, animal and god theoretically conceivable and ritually possible.

Ritual actualises the man-god interaction in concrete observable contexts. Here is an example from an account of the Kharia by Roy and Roy (1937). He writes that the spirit doctor (Deonara) is called to diagnose when anyone suffers from a serious illness. In the manner of a medical practitioner, he feels the pulse of the patient and examines his body. Then he finds out if some spirit (Dubo) is the cause of the malady. Identification of the offended spirit (Dubo) is carried out by the spirit doctor when he gets into a state of spirit possession. He may also find this out by reading the nature of the way a wick flickers. If the flame is whitish and weak, a minor spirit is declared to be the cause of the malady, if the flame is red, an ancestral spirit or family deity is indicated. If the flame is strong and flickers only a little, a particularly malevolent spirit is indicated. After confirming the identity of the spirit, the spirit doctor prescribes appropriate sacrifices, which are offered by the head of the family.

Activity 2

Ask someone either in your family or neighbourhood to tell you the story of Nachiketa or try to read it from literary sources and write it in your words.

OR

Write a note on how you would explain when your family falls into affliction or distress or financial deterioration.

Compare your story/note with those written by other students of your Study Centre.

27.5.3 Anthropological Studies of Primitive (Tribal) Religion

The early **evolutionary** study of religious phenomena in Tylorian, Morganian and Frazerian style was replaced by the structure-functionalist approach initiated by Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown. In more recent years, social anthropologists, such as, Evans-Pritchard, Lienhardt and Worsley, have developed the study of primitive religions further. During the last few years there has been greater sophistication in understanding the structure and meaning of the primitive belief systems, largely in terms of their symbolic significance, owing much to Claude Levi-Strauss and Clifford Geertz. But most anthropological analyses of primitive religion, in some form or the other are still geared to the evolutionary problems and preoccupations. Religions of the so-called primitive and the so-called civilised are marked off on the recognition of the notion of historical progress from simple to complex and the nature of primitive and of modern society. If progress means differentiation, then primitive means undifferentiated and modern means differentiated. It has been observed that the contemporary primitives live technically, socially, economically, and politically in the most simple and undifferentiated conditions, and so also in their personal worldview. But this does not prove that a society tend to be so differentiated in its worldview. You have seen how the simple Apa Tani residing in the undifferentiated social conditions and the Upanishadic *Rishi* of a highly differentiated society share the same thought of the essential oneness.

i) Is it necessary to be theologically self-conscious to be religiously sophisticated?

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ii) What is the tribal perception of man, animal and god?

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iii) How do the evolutionary anthropologists differentiate between the so-called primitive and the so-called civilised thought worlds?

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27.6 IMPACT OF OTHER RELIGIOUS BELIEF SYSTEMS

As mentioned in the introduction of this unit, many tribal religions have blended with other faiths of non-tribal groups. Of these Hinduism and Christianity are the major religious systems which have affected the tribal communities. Let us first consider the impact of Hinduism on tribal religious beliefs and practices.

27.6.1 Hinduism and Tribal Religions

Ethnographic studies of different tribal groups show that the contact of the tribals with their neighbours varied from part-isolation to complete assimilation. The Tharu (Srivastava 1958) and the Khasa (Majumdar 1962), the two central Himalayan tribes in North India are a good example of completely assimilated or Hinduised tribes. By adopting Hindu caste names, wearing the sacred thread, establishing social links with the local Rajput and Brahmin groups, these tribals have incorporated their identity with high caste Hindus. Similarly, the Kshatriya model (Srinivas 1966) of Hinduism has been adopted in middle India by the Chero, Kharwar, Pahariya of Bihar and the Bhumij of Madhya Pradesh. The Bhumij Kshatriya Association, founded in 1935, showed wider implications of Hinduisation of the tribals. The concept of tribal Rajput continuum (Sinha 1961) was evolved in the course of historical studies of the Bhumij Raj of Birbhum.

In Eastern India the Bauri of West Bengal (see Shasmal 1967) accepted to observe the prescribed number of days of pollution for mourning, wear the sacred thread,

go to pilgrimage and follow Vaishnavism. They now claim to belong to the Brahmin caste.

Adhering to beliefs in the Hindu concepts of Karma, pollution, merit (*punya*) and observing Hindu life cycle rituals, the Mahali of West Bengal (Sengupta 1966) have adopted and assimilated the elements of local belief and practices of the Hindus. Similarly, in many of the Oraon villages of Chotanagpur, Hindu gods and goddesses are worshipped; Hindu priests are employed to carry out ritual performances during life-cycle ceremonies (Sahay 1962 and Sachchidanand 1964).

In Western India also, we find that many of the Hindu deities are worshipped by the tribals. For example, Mahadev is the main deity of the Bhil tribe. Shah (1964) has shown that in Gujarat the Dubla, Naika, Gamit and Dhanaka are quite Hinduised and employ a Brahmin to perform the rituals.

Looking at the situation in South India, we find that beliefs and practices of the neighbouring Hindu castes have been adopted by the Chenchu, Kadar and Muthuvan. Hindu gods and goddesses like Aiyappan, Maruti and Kali are worshipped by the Kadar. Presiding deities of Madurai temple, Palaniandi and Kadavallu are treated as their chief deities by the Muthuvan.

Here we would like to also mention that contacts between the tribals and their Hindu neighbours have not only resulted in the impact of Hinduism on tribal beliefs and practices, “We find also the impact of tribal religions on the practices of certain Hindu groups living in tribal villages. For example, the process of tribalisation in the Bastar region of Madhya Pradesh reflected in acceptance by high caste Hindus of tribal morals, rituals and belief (see Kalia 1959: 32). Majumdar mentions the concept of transculturation among the Ho of Singhbhum, signifying reciprocal impact of tribal culture on local Hindu castes. Hutton (1931) observed that Hinduism and tribal religions share a common base, while Bose (1971: 6) is of the opinion that the tribal population of India has contributed to the making of Hinduism.

It is not out of place here to mention that the tribal groups have also been affected by their neighbours. Such as the Buddhists and the Muslims. In upper Lahaul and the Ladakh region, the Bhot tribals are mainly Buddhists. Similarly, the Gujar of the North-Western Himalayan region and the Bhil of Rajasthan have close contacts with Muslim groups and are affected by their beliefs and practices.

In this section, we have simply mentioned about the neighbouring groups’ impact on the tribal groups. We have not discussed the process of these changes. This point will be examined in the next unit on *Tribes and Modernisation in India*. Let us now look at Christianity, which has affected many of the tribal groups in India.

27.6.2 Christianity and Tribal Religions

Beginning with the conversion of the Khasi of Assam in 1813, of the Oraon of Chotanagpur in 1850 and of the Bhil of Madhya Pradesh in 1880 (Sahay 1963, 1967) by Christian missionaries, Christianity has brought about many changes in the cultural life of the tribals in India. The missionaries attempted to convert numerically major tribes. As a result, minor tribes remained untouched by the new religion while mass conversion of major tribes gave the impression of the hold of Christianity on tribal India.

Of the total population of Christians in India at least one sixth belong to tribal groups. Most of the tribal Christians are found in the North-East Himalayan zone. Elwin (1961) estimated that ranging from half to almost the entire population of the Mizo, Garo and Naga tribes professed Christianity.

In middle India, two-thirds of the Khasi, one-fourth of the Munda and one fourth of the Oraon follow Christianity. In the tribal areas of Madhya Pradesh and Orissa, we find small pockets of Christian tribals. The tribes like the Chero, Kharwar, Pahariya, Birhor, Baiga, Balhudi, Bedia, Karmali, do not have a single Christian convert.

In South India, Hill Pulaya, Malayarayan and Palliar tribals of Kerala have been **proselytised** and nearly two-third of their population has accepted Christianity.

Conversion to Christianity gave the tribals a model of westernisation. We will discuss this point in unit 28. Here it will suffice to say that the Church organisation, western education, values and morals reached the tribals through Christianity. Their introduction implied a demand to give up tribal belief and practices. In some cases, traditional festivals were reinterpreted in terms Christianised myths. For example, origin of the festival Sarhul of the Munda was, after conversion, associated by them to the fight between Alexander and King Porus in 400 B.C. Sahay (1963) has concluded that the Oraon of Chainpur in Ranchi district (formerly part of Bihar state and now the capital of the newly formed state of Jharkhand that was carved out of Bihar on 15th November 2000) of Jharkhand gave up their faith in traditional Sarna religion and adopted Christian faith. This resulted in considerable changes in celebration of festivals, village organisation, economic life and other aspects of their culture. Thus, some scholars have viewed Christianity as a source of disintegration of tribal religion.

We can also mention the element of fusion with Christianity introduced among the tribal groups. Under the rubric of one denomination of Christianity some of the previously separated tribal groups came together and even accepted marital relations across tribal boundaries. Under the Church organisational network, many tribal groups scattered over a wider area came together and built contacts not only with the provincial and national but also international Church bodies. Sahay (1963) has studied the process of Christianisation of the Oraon tribals and identified a set of five processes, signifying different forms of interaction between the tribal Christian norms and values. Under the patronage of British rule, conversion to Christianity had found a favourable environment while in independent India, many revivalist movements among the tribal groups have led the tribals to go back to their traditional religious beliefs and practices. In the next section, we will discuss some of these movements and evaluate their significance for tribal India.

Activity 3

Give an example of the impact of one religious system on another religious system. Elaborate, in 200 words, on the nature of this impact. Compare if possible, your note with notes of other students at your Study Centre

27.7 SOCIO-RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

All over the world, socio-religious movements have evolved in almost all religions. These range from **cargo cults** (Lawrence 1964) to millenarian movements (Burridge

1969). The word millenarian means, literally, a thousands years and refers to the belief that the world order is soon going to end, giving way to a new and perfect society. Ethnographic material is well researched and documented to explain the emergence of such movements. Here we will examine the emergence of some of the socio-religious movements among the tribal groups as products of change within the group, of contact with the out-group, and of reinterpretation of the sacred realm. As the sacred realm bears direct relationship with society, reinterpretation of the 'sacred' forms an important feature of such movements. By focusing on these movements among the tribal groups, we do not mean to say that such movements do not occur among other groups.

In fact, many such movements have been recorded among the untouchable and middle castes in India. Examples of such movements among the tribals are the Munda Rebellion, Jatra Bhagat Movement and Kharwar Movement. All these examples show that the tribals (among whom the movements emerged) were never totally isolated from the main currents of Indian society. Secondly, the exploitative forces (against whom the movements were addressed) were not only colonisers, but also the non-tribal upper castes. Thirdly, the influencing contact with the out-group did not come only from Christian missionaries but also from Hindus and Muslims.

We may have to ask ourselves the question as to why it is that no socio-religious movement had emerged in the North-Eastern Frontier Agency while many did among the tribals of Chotanagpur. If we go by the theory of deprivation as one of the causes of emergence of such movements, it may appear that perhaps the tribals of Chotanagpur were deprived to the worst extent and hence among them a multiplicity of such movements arose.

We may also look at the question of duration of contacts between different cultures. We may ask, at what stage of contact, does a socio-religious movement arise? Due to varying intensity of crises, various durations may be necessary in particular groups for the movements to crystallise. Also, a movement may emerge, become active and then lie dormant (see Lawrence 1964). Again, a socio-religious movement may come at the initial stage of contact or it may come after the completion of acculturation.

When one culture meets the other, one social order is affected by the other. In section 27.6 of this unit we talked about the impact of other religious groups on tribal religions. Here, while reemphasising the same, it can be said that most of the time meeting of cultures has been prompted by colonisation. The colonisers (be they foreigners or other cultural groups within the country) integrate their colonies into wider markets by introducing different forms of economy, by exporting the local products and raw materials. As a result rapid changes take place and the existing social order breaks down. In the case of tribal India, large scale changes were introduced by the missionaries. These changes, in turn, produced disturbance in the way society was previously organised among the tribals. The disturbances caused many a dilemma for the people, leading to both psychological social deprivations. These are the situations, which triggered the path to socio-religious movements.

With this background of their emergence, let us now take two examples of socio-religious movements, namely, the Tana Bhagat Movement among the Oraon of Bihar (Jharkhand) and the Birsa Munda movement of the Munda in and around

the districts of Ranchi and Singhbhum in Chotanagpur Division of present day Jharkhand. Both these movements are essentially religious in nature. Here, Jatra Bhagat and Birsa Munda, the tribal leaders of the respective movements were essentially fighting the foreign exploiters, like the landlords and contractors. The tribals, feeling deprived and isolated, found through these movements a sense of unity and a common identity. Yet, the two movements also differed from each other. Let us consider each of them separately.

27.7.1 Tana Bhagat Movement

In Tana Bhagat Movement, as in other Bhagat movements, an attempt is made to emulate the way of life of the Hindu higher castes. Tana Bhagat movement is one kind of the Bhagat movement that emerged among the Oraon of Chotanagpur, Jharkhand. There were other Bhagat movements like Nemha Bhagat and Bachidan Bhagat. The term Bhagat has been employed in many parts of Bihar and Jharkhand to refer to sorcerers and magicians. Among the Oraon it is however applied to a distinct section of the tribe which subscribes to the cult of Bhakti. The entire Bhagat movement, attempting as it did to raise the status of its members in the eyes of the surrounding Hindu society, is characterised by large scale incorporation of Hindu belief-practices into its ideology.

The leader of Tana Bhagat movement was called Jatra Oraon who lived in village Beparinwatoli in Bishanpur Thana of Gumla sub-division of Ranchi district. In 1914, this person announced in the month of April that Dharmesh, the high god of the Oraon, had revealed to him that the people would have to give up the worship of **ghosts** and spirits and the practice of exorcism. He told his people that they would have to refrain from animal sacrifice, meat eating, liquor drinking etc. Even cultivation by plough with the use of animal power was rejected. It was believed that god had given to Jatra certain songs or spells by which fever, sties, and other ailments could be cured.

The leaders of this movement believed that the tribal spirits and deities whom they had been worshipping were of no use to them since it did not help them alleviate the socio-economic ills of their community. They also tried to prove that in fact it was these deities who were responsible for their present state of misery and degradation. By asserting that these tribal deities were of Munda origin, the founders of Tana Bhagat movement embarked on a programme of proselytisation and agitation for the exorcism of the foreign spirits and deities. The cult emphasised a return to the original Oraon religion.

Its earliest manifestation was in the expulsion of evil spirits imported from the Munda and in the active rebellion against unfair landlords who exploited them. Even when their leader Jatra Bhagat was imprisoned, some of the cult members refused to pay rents to their landlords and ceased to cultivate their lands. Such and other rebellious activities like ghost-hunting drive and holding meetings by the followers of the Tana Bhagat movement were regarded with suspicion and branded as 'disloyal and illegal' gatherings.

This movement broke up into several smaller cults after sometime. Some of these cults are extremist and orthodox like Sibuhagat. The rest are mixtures of tribal and Hindu religious beliefs and practices.

27.7.2 Birsa Munda Movement

During the second half of the nineteenth century the whole of Chotanagpur underwent a tremendous change. The old Munda system of *khuntkatti* tenure gave way to a new and alien system of exploitation by the landlords known as *Jagirdar* and *Thikadar*. Under their greed and cruelty the tribal population was squeezed out of their land and other possessions. Suffering economically and politically, the Munda were assigned low social status. Later the Christian missionaries tried to give the Munda back their rights on their land. But this too had a price, which was conversion to Christianity. A large number of the Munda did convert to Christianity. But in due course they realised that this was not the solution. The missionaries had failed to redeem them from abject poverty and oppression.

At this time when the Munda community was seething with discontent, in 1895, Birsa Munda of Chalked started a movement. In him the Munda found the embodiment of their aspirations. He gave them leadership, a religion and a code of life. He held before them the prospect of Munda Raj in place of a foreign rule.

Under the influence of a learned Satnami Pandit, Birsa Munda became a vegetarian and the religion that he preached had elements of both Hinduism and Christianity. His religion promised to end the misery of his community and so it was a means to an end.

His religion had the element of charisma. Birsa came to be regarded as an embodiment of god '*Birsa Bhagwan*'; his people believed that Birsa could bring the dead back to life. Whenever there was epidemic he visited his people and cured them. He had the magic touch and proclaimed himself to be the prophet of Sing-Bonga, the one and only God. So far Birsa was seen as a provider of new and better life for his people,

But later his movement assumed quasi-political and militaristic shape. As he organised a force to fight oppressive landlords, Christian missionaries and British officials, he was imprisoned. Since his people believed in Birsa's magical power, they did not ask for his release, rather they wanted to go to jail with him. They believed that within three days he will himself come out of jail. He was released only after two years.

Out of jail, Birsa asked his people to ready their arms to fight injustice. He trained his army and became the politician leading his people to their goal of self-rule. He was however arrested again and died in jail. Yet the seeds of unrest were sown among his people and they continued to fight against injustice. The erstwhile, 'Jharkhanda Movement', which ultimately culminated in the formation of the Jharkhand State(see unit 28) has its roots in this movement (Singh 1983).

Our description of both the Tana Bhagat movement and Birsa Munda movement underlines the importance of a 'prophet-like' figure, who is the guiding spirit of the movement. He draws his legitimacy from the divine revelation. His prophecy appeals to the crisis situation. He becomes the epicentre of the collective expectations of his people. He suggests rejection of certain activities, rituals and customs. He incorporates new elements and adapts certain components of out-group culture to suit the needs of collective expectations. He reinterprets the myth, reformulates the ritual and prepares his people for collective action. In section 27.2 of this unit, we say that cult myths are dynamic aspects of tribal religion as they express the

hopes of the people. We can conclude here that by discussing some of the socio-religious movements among the tribals we have gained an added understanding of tribal religions.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) Are socio-religious movements a product of change within the group or of contact with the out-group? Use one line for your answer.
.....
- ii) Who does the term Bhagat refer to? Use one line for your answer.
.....
- iv) Did Birsa Munda ever organise an army to fight injustice? Use one line for your answer.
.....

27.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have made the following observations:

- a) Religion of a tribe is simple. Religious beliefs and behaviour are not treated as something apart from other kinds of beliefs and behaviour. Religion pervades all aspects of their life. Tribal life and society cannot be fully understood without understanding their religion.
- b) Tribal ritual complex is not a mere reflection and association with the superhuman world but a strong reinforcement of the human world itself. The integrative function of religion in tribal society is demonstrated in their common goal (superhuman world) and common means (ritual).
- c) Most anthropological analyses of primitive religion are still geared to the evolutionary problems and preoccupations. It has been observed that the contemporary primitives live technically, socially, economically, and politically in the most undifferentiated conditions, and so also in their personal worldview. This does not prove that a society characterised by a high degree of social differentiation will tend to be differentiated in its worldview. The simple tribal eschatological belief is in agreement with the highly sophisticated worldview of the theologically self-conscious society.
- d) Due to culture contact, tribal religions were affected by the religious beliefs and practices of other groups. We have also mentioned that some of the non-tribal groups were affected by tribal customs and practices.
- e) Lastly, we discussed the emergence of socio-religious movements among the tribals. These movements were primarily religious in content and reflected the articulation of collective hopes of the tribals.

27.9 KEYWORDS

Cargo cults	of Melanesia are considered a form of millenarian movement, which refers to a belief in a miraculous arrival of bountiful goods.
Divination	means discovering the spiritual means.
Eschatology	means doctrine of death and afterlife.
Evolution	is a scientific paradigm taken to mean the change of one form into another, following the biological laws of variation, selection, survival, adaptation and progress.
Faith	is a constitutive human dimension by which human beings understand their ontological relation to God or whatever name one may give to the foundation of being.
Ghost	is an apparition of dead person etc.
God	is the transcendent being worshipped as divine power of creation, preservation and destruction.
Myth	is that unquestioned which is taken for granted and purifies thought so that the unthought may emerge and the intermediary may disappear.
Patrician	is the largest group of agnates between whom marriage is forbidden and sexual intercourse regarded as incestuous.
Polyandry	means polygamy in which one woman has more than one husband.
Prayer	is the act in which and by which man enters into contact with the core of the real.
Primitive	in a pejorative sense characterises an evolutionary stage of prelogical human mind oriented to undifferentiated conditions.
Primordial	is the first age of world.
Proselytism	is practice of conversion to another faith.
Religion	is a system of faith, which relates man to the ultimate conditions of his existence.
Ritual	is a transcendental phenomena from which has arisen all creative impulses and vitality and which leads ultimately to that distant and secret destination which mankind has been exploring from the beginning of his existence.
Ritual Language	is a symbolic ritual code consisting of esoteric word (<i>mantra</i>), gesture (<i>mudra</i>), sound (<i>dhvani</i>), and everyday language of interaction (<i>vyavahariki</i>).
Sacred	is a category sui generis, i.e., it differs in nature and quality from all that is human, secular or profane.

Spirit	is disembodied person or incorporeal being.
Theology	is the philosophical treatise of a religious order.
Tribe	is a social group usually with a definite area, dialect, cultural, homogeneity and unifying social organisation, ideally characterised by lack of interaction and absence of any hierarchical system, and isolated from other ethnic groups in ecology, demography, economy, politics and other social relations.
Witchcraft	is the use of black-magical practices dealing with devil or evil spirits.
Worldview	is the view of the world based on a particular ideology that defines the world.

27.10 FURTHER READING

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27.11 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Here we take an example of the Toda tribal. The Toda are pastoral people. They and their buffaloes are believed to be a divine creation. Their dairies are the temples. Ceremonies are associated with the dairies, the buffaloes and the pastures. Life's major events are highly ritualised. Even the social

paternity of a child is determined not biologically but ritually. The Toda economy and society revolve round the complex web of ritual. No aspect of Toda life can be described without taking ritual into account.

- ii) Ritual language is a symbolic code, which points beyond what cannot be expressed in human language. In its essential form it is a fourfold code, consisting of (a) esoteric word, (b) gesture, (c) sound, (d) everyday language of interaction in the form of prescriptions or instructions, thoughts, methods and behaviour.
- iii) Tribes order their ritual time on the Nature's signal, i.e., the blossoming plants and trees, on the position of stars and moon; the biological time, and by direct divination.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) No. Comparing the theologically self-conscious Upanishadic views with those of the theologically unaware Apa Tani tribals on the fundamental unity of all experience and intrinsic harmony of all existence, we find that both comprehend the essential oneness to the same degree of sophistication.
- ii) Tribals make no real distinction between man, animal, and god (spirit). A woman gives birth to twins, of whom one is human and the other tiger; animals talk and also behave, like man; of two brothers one is the father of mankind, and the other the father of spirit. This notion makes the interpersonal communication between man, animal and god theoretically conceivable and ritually possible.
- iii) The evolutionary anthropologists consider that the primitive man's mental equipment is very different from that of the civilised man. The civilised mind is logical, rational, supremely abstract and scientific, while the primitive mind is prelogical, irrational, supremely concrete and superstitious. The primitive people lack differentiation in their thoughtworld; the civilised means differentiated.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) Socio-religious movements may emerge as a result of changes within a group but mostly they are a product of contact with the out-group.
- ii) In Bihar the term Bhagat refers to magicians and sorcerers.
- iii) In 1897, after a spell of two years in jail, Birsa Munda asked his people to take their bows and arrows to fight injustice.