



## An Analytical study of Religion in Tribal Societies

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### Abstract:

*Most of the tribals in India follow some or other form of Hinduism. It is mainly due to the contacts the tribals had with their Hindu neighbors. Christianity was introduced among the tribal groups during the British rule. Almost all the tribal religions across India believe in the existence of spiritual powers. What is the religious change among tribal communities? In majority areas of tribal population in India, activities of religious conversion are taken up by Christian missionaries. Vidyarthi and Ray have noted that the influence of Christianity on the tribals began in the Khasi of Meghalaya in 1813; in Urano of Chooa Nagpur in 1850 and in the Bhils of Madhya Pradesh in 1880.*

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### 1. Introduction

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.

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.

### 2. Objectives

1. 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
2. Describe that tribal worldview recognises no differentiation or opposition of the sacred and the secular
3. Discuss the impact of other religious faiths on tribal religions
4. Describe the occurrence of socio-religious movements among the tribal groups.

### 3. 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 tribe's 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.

#### 4. 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 1) shows the entrance of a dairy building and in the foreground is a Toda male pacifying a buffalo with butter.



**Fig. 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 newmoon 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 after life 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 the irreligion. However, as Winter (1978) has pointed out, in some society's 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.

### **5. Impact of other religious belief systems**

As mentioned in the introduction of this article, 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.

### ***5.1 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.

### ***5.2 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. 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.

## 6. 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 (Burrige 1969). The word millenarian means, literally, a thousand 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. 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 and 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.

### **6.1 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 Bachi-dan 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 the sects are extremist and orthodox like Sibu Bhagat. The rest are mixtures of tribal and Hindu religious beliefs and practices.

### **6.2 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 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. 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.

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