
UNIT 32 EASTERN AND WESTERN INDIA

Structure

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32.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Unit we have analyzed tribal religious notions with the help of case studies of some tribes from Southern and Central India. In this Unit we are going to introduce you with religious practices of some tribes from Eastern and Western India. These case studies will help you to understand the tribal worldview which is grounded in the natural events and life experiences. Based on oral traditions tribal religious beliefs and rituals are very much linked with their day to day problems of existence. Supernatural rites are explicitly directed towards happiness in life, abundance of natural resources and crops and protection from illness. In their notion the natural world is having spirits or supernatural powers. Myths, legends and magic have significant role in shaping the religious life of the tribals. Case studies of tribes like the Santals, the Ao Nagas, the Warlis and others will help you in identifying commonalties among various tribes in term of their religious beliefs and practices.

32.2 THE SANTALS

The Santals, the largest of the Indian tribes, are found mostly in the states of Jharkhand, Orissa and West Bengal. They speak an independent language known as Santali which belongs to the Munda group of languages. They have a patrilineal exogamous clan organisation. Like others they have their own legends and myths explaining the mysteries of their creation. According to the Santal tradition Thakur Jiu, the supreme deity, is the creator and sustainer of this universe. There is no regular worship of this god but he is remembered in important religious festival and ceremonies. At times of natural calamities like droughts and famines he is specially worshipped and a white fowl is sacrificed.

At the core of the Santal religion is the belief in Bongas or spirits who have control over the contingencies of nature. Communication with the supernatural spirits is linked through rice-beer offerings and animal sacrifices by a particular group, individual household or the entire village. It is suggested that the Santals'

belief in the power of the Bongas or spirits originated during the course of difficult situations they faced in life journey. They believe in both benevolent as well as malevolent spirits.

Maran Buru is considered as the most powerful Bonga and is associated with both good and mischievous godlings. He has been accepted in institutionalized form as well as in the family as a deity. He has been ascribed the position of the guardian deity. He is propitiated on all festivals and in rites of passage. He is offered rice-beer, white fowl and if a goat is offered it must be white.

Jaher Era is considered as a benevolent spirit who never does any harm. Jaher Era is shadow deity who receives offerings together with Maran Buru. A fowl is offered to her at all the festivals and she is worshipped for general welfare, good crops and for the protection of cattle from epidemic. Moreiko-Turuiko is believed to preside over the welfare of the village and to have control over rain, crops and epidemics. Besides these, the Santals have many more Bongas/spirits like Gossain Era, Porgana Bonga, Manjhi Bonga, etc. They have subclan spirits, household spirits, water spirits, ancestral spirits, mountain and hill spirits, in fact the Santals strongly believe that there are spirits around their neighbourhood who possess a lot of powers. Through worship and sacrifice they try to keep these spirits satisfied. The need to enter into relations with these spirits is so strong that the Santals personify them. Their veneration for their ancestor spirits is so profound that in almost every sacrifice the ancestors are remembered.

The Naike is the elected representative of the community to perform the religious rites. Naike's position is hereditary. He is assisted by the Kudum Naike whose position is not hereditary. They are responsible to ensure that the Bongas are kept satisfied and the community functions are observed smoothly. Besides the Naike, there is another functionary called Ojha. In their notion if there is any natural calamity or mishap in a family this is due to evil spirits. To deal with such situation they believe in various magical practices and the person who performs the magic is known as Ojha or diviner. The Ojha is also a physician having superior knowledge of the magical properties and he also knows how to deal with the courses of misfortune or illness. Only men can become Ojha and his position is not hereditary.

The Santals also have strong belief in the evil powers of a witch. Whenever a sick person does not recover or there is some calamity in the neighbourhood it is believed to be the work of witches. Only women practice witchcraft and witches are said to cause harm through contact. Janguru is the witch diviner.

32.3 THE BIRHORS

The Birhors who are nomadic hunters, food gatherers and rope makers are mostly found in the Chotanagpur plateau (Jharkhand). Their habitat is called Tanda. Their religious beliefs are essentially concerned with success or such in receiving food. Any ill-luck concerning their life is considered as the wrath of some spirit. Beliefs in the presence of the spirits and through rites, sacrifices, charms and spells propitiating the spirits constitute the cardinal feature of the Birhor religion. The Birhors do not have clear idea about the hierarchy among different Gods, Goddesses and spirits. Kando Bonga is considered to be creator

God. This God is essentially benevolent. In case of Ora Bonga one finds a set of different Gods. At least two main types of sets can be identified, i.e. the Buru Bonga and the Narjar Bonga. They are their lineage God. The Birhors have number of stories and songs related to lineage God which are occasionally narrated and sung. It is believed that Ora Bonga gives them prosperity, happiness and other general development .

Haprom Bonga is ancestral God. In the Birhor terminology Haprom means respect for elderly male ancestors of a lineage. These ancestors are not individually worshipped but they are worshipped periodically collectively. They believe that Haproms look after the general welfare and prosperity of their descendants. There are number of Gods, Goddesses and the spirits under the category of Tanda Bonga. No specific ritual is performed for these Tanda Bongas but their names are mentioned at the time of performance of other rituals or sacrifices. In the Birhor pantheon there are also spirits of malevolent nature. If they are not properly worshipped periodically they may cause harm to the community.

The main sacred head among the Birhor is called the Naya. The Naya is not only religious head of a particular Tanda but he is incharge of all other activities of the Birhor at Tanda. Office of the Naya may not be always hereditary but selected from persons of a Tanda. His main function is to offer the sacrifice. Besides the Naya, the Mati, spirit doctor, also holds an important position in the Birhors religious life. He is the person who possesses skills of making miracles and has the power of second sight.

The function of the Mati is to find out the unfriendly spirits causing sickness and other misfortunes of the community and to prescribe solutions to these problems. Generally the religious life of the Birhor is household affairs. Most of the sacrifices are carried by head of a particular family under the guidance of the Naya of the Tanda. Chicken, pig, goats are offered as sacrifices to different deities or spirits. Few drops of blood of each sacrificed animal is poured in the name of different deities or spirits, followed by wine or rice beer. In every Tanda there is a sacred place which is called Marai and this is considered as the abode of different Gods and Goddesses. In most of the cases the worship is performed in the Marat.

Thus the religious life of the Birhors reflects their belief in the multiplicity of supernatural powers and religion provides them psychological security from unforeseen dangers. As we have seen, the Mati knows the wishes and demands of a particular spirit and mediates between man and spirit. The Naya performs rituals to put his tribesmen on a working relationship with the spirits.

32.4 THE DUDH KHARIAS

The Kharias are mostly found in the states of Jharkhand, Orissa and West Bengal. They are divided into three subgroups, Hill Kharia, Dhelki Kharia and Dudh Kharia. Based on the study of religious life of the Dudh Kharias by Dr. A.P. Singh, we will introduce you to the religious beliefs and practices of this tribe. The Dudh Kharias are concentrated in the Ranchi District and the language spoken by them is known as Kharia. Belief in supreme deity and spirits is common among the Dudh Kharias. The supreme deity is Ponomoser or

Bhagwan who is revered by every member of the community. He is considered to be the saviour of the people from all sort of crisis and the Kharias remember him whenever they are in trouble. Next to Ponomosor is Burha-Burhi. The Kharias believe that after death the soul becomes spirit and protects the family from danger. Male ancestral spirit is called Burha and the female spirit is known as Burhi. In their notion, these ancestral spirits look after the family in any crisis. On special occasions prayers are made and sacrifices are offered to them. First fruit, first crop of the season are offered to them. Pat spirits are village spirits who are supposed to take care of the well being of the entire village. Another spirit known by name as Raksha –Dubo is believed to protect the village from evil spirits. Dharti Mai is regarded as mother Earth Goddess and she is worshipped for good agricultural productions. Besides these there are also a large number of other spirits which are worshipped for protection from different calamities.

To officiate in religious rites the Kharias have sacred specialist known as Kalo. He is religious head of a village and enjoys the highest religious position. The position of Kalo is hereditary and mostly the eldest son of a Kalo after his father's death becomes Kalo. But although it is hereditary a Kalo is selected by all the village elders and a Kalo must be a man of high moral. It is believed that Kalo is the only person who satisfies the benevolent as well as malevolent spirits to bring good health and happiness of the community. The Kharias also have medicine man known as Deonra. Deonras can be both male and female and have magical power to cure people from diseases. They need proper training before they can exhibit their magical capabilities.

32.5 THE AO NAGAS

The Ao Nagas are one of the major tribes of Nagaland. With definite dialectical differences the three main subgroups of the Aos are Chougli, Mongsen and Changki. The religious beliefs and concepts of the Aos are largely dictated by their need for getting food in abundance and protection from calamities. Religious beliefs and practices bind the community together to their ancestors and the spirits.

The Ao Nagas believe in one supreme God, Lichaba. Lichaba is regarded as the creator of the earth including human being and plants. A yearly ceremony called Lichabamung is observed in his honour in all villages. This prevents landslides because he holds the earth between his two hands. A pig is sacrificed outside the boundary of the village and eaten by the village councillors. People all retire to their houses early and late in the evening they throw an old pot for the Lichaba to accept because this is the only thing left in the house.

Longtitsungba is considered as the God of the sky who controls rain, storm, and other natural forces. In order to secure Longtitsungba's goodwill over the year sacrifices and ceremonies are attributed to him by individuals as well as communities.

Tiar is believed to be the God of life and death. To gain his favour cocks, pigs are offered at times of illness and mishap in the family. Meyutsung is regarded as the God of righteousness. Besides these, there are also a large pantheon of minor deities to whom also offerings are given.

In the Ao villages there are several stones which are said to be the abodes of deities. Stones or boulders which are of uncommon shape are considered sacred and no one spits into the ground when passing the stone. The Aos make offerings of fowl, pig and of rice beer to these stones.

There are number of religious ceremonies among the Aos. Moatsu is the main festive day for the Aos. This ceremony is observed for six days and on the fourth day a sacrifice is made by the priests for well being of the community. As we said for good crops and harvest Tsungrem is observed through worship and sacrifice to Lichaba.

Witchcraft is an important feature of Ao religious practices. Illness is most commonly believed to be caused by evil spirits. A medicine man is called in without delay. Performing various rites the medicine man ensures that evil spirit has left the affected man.

Among the Aos there is no priestly class/clan. For simple ceremonies of the home and field a man acts as his own priest. For ceremonies where the entire clan is involved the oldest man of that clan who is most experienced performs the religious rites as the high priest. Each clan in a village may have from one to four or more priests. All the clan priests together form the priests council. Public opinion dictates the selection of priests. Medicine men are different from the priests and they are called to cure specific illness. The sign that a person is endowed with the powers of a medicine-man is a tendency for him or her to talk incoherently.

32.6 THE DUBLAS

The Dubla tribe has been living in the plains of South Gujarat. Like other tribes the Dublas believe that there are different types of spiritual powers and diseases are caused by spirits/witches. There are good number of Gods and Goddesses worshipped by the Dublas. Bharam Dev is the major deity of the Dublas and is universally respected. Generally during epidemic he is invoked and once established his worship needs to be continued every year in order to avoid his displeasure. Bharam Dev is considered to be a great god and nothing less than the sacrifice of a goat is regarded sufficient to pacify the wrath of Bharam Dev.

Baliyakaka is the God connected with diseases of an epidemic nature. Baliyakaka is not offered an animal sacrifice. Devout persons may offer cock or goat but the animal is kept alive and taken away without being killed.

Another important goddess is the Akashi Mata. Like the sky covering the earth the Akashi Mata is having control over general wellbeing of the community. At times of crisis vows are taken in the name of this goddess that once the crisis is over the goddess will be given a special worship and offering. No animal is offered to this goddess but flowers and coconut are offered. Petfodi Mata is worshipped by the Dublas at times of difficult child birth. Praying for safe child birth a vow is taken in the name of this goddess and after the safe delivery of the child a silver image of the child is offered to her. Marakimata is regarded as the deity of epidemic like cholera. Whenever there is any apprehension of epidemic Dublas take a vow to offer a cock or a goat to the goddess so that they are protected from the epidemic. Once the epidemic is over the Dublas of

a village collectively go to the temple of Marakimata and sacrifice a he-goat before her. The Dublas also have great faith in goddess Devali Modi. In any adverse situation or in domestic festival like marriage offerings are made to this goddess seeking her blessing. Like other tribes the Dublas also believe in witchcraft and magic. Superstitious belief in an evil eye can be observed among the Dubla men and women. It is believed that the spirit of a person who dies in an accident and has many unfulfilled desires becomes a ghost. To cure them from diseases and to protect them from evil spirits the Dublas have their Bhagats. In every village there are one or more persons of both sexes who act as Bhagats. The Bhagats are most respected persons in the village and it is believed that they have learnt the art from their ancestors.

32.7 THE WARLIS

The Warlis are found in Maharashtra. They live in small communities under their own headman and they are divided into a number of clans. They do not have a clear notion of a supreme being and all diseases and misfortunes are attributed to the influence of evil spirits. Their main deity is Vaghya whose image is generally placed under a large banyan tree. They believe that tiger is Vaghya's dog and that he comes about once a month to Vaghya's image to pay respect. Once in every year the Warlis celebrate grand ceremony in honour of Vaghya and offer sacrifices. Their household god is Hirva. He is represented either as hunter with a gun, a warrior on horse-back, or a five-headed monster riding a tiger. They also worship many other gods and goddesses. Generally images of gods and goddesses are kept in the houses of well-to-do members of the Warlis and others come in such houses at the time of worship.

After new crop rice and mango are worshipped before the community members eat them.

The Warlis believe in the spirits who they think can cause diseases and harm people. If any body falls sick they assume that it is the work of spirits. The medicine man is called to perform certain rites by which he divines the cause of the sickness. Goat, fowl or coconut are offered to please the spirits. Bhagat holds a special status among the Warlis. He practices witchcraft. Bhagats are paid in cash or in kind, e.g., grains, liquor, etc. for removing the evil effect of witches.

32.8 OBSERVATIONS

In Unit 31 as well as in this Unit we have explained to you religious beliefs and practices of some tribes from different parts of India. Purpose behind these selective case studies is to help you understand the tribal mind and their world view. You must have noticed how myths and legends have strong influences in the religious life of the tribals. Whether it is the universe or the clan the tribals in general have different mythological traditions explaining their creation. Although there are also various myths and legends in Hinduism but Hinduism is primarily based on the Vedas and the Puranas, whereas tribal religion is based on oral traditions and unlike Hinduism there is no varna hierarchy among the tribes. On the basis of our case studies we shall try to explain here some important points related to tribal religious tradition in India.

We may begin by saying that there is a general belief among the tribes regarding the existence of supernatural powers. It is very common among the tribes to explain any disease or natural calamity as the work of supernatural powers. At the core of their religious belief is the practicing of various rites and rituals. We have seen that many tribes have a very well developed concept of a supreme deity. Besides the supreme deity there are tutelary deities of different tribal villages. Tutelary deities are village gods and goddesses and on occasions of family ceremonies or any mishap in the family, offerings are made seeking blessings from these deities. Along with deities, spirits, both benevolent and malevolent, occupy a predominant position in tribal religious life. It is very common in their belief that for good harvest and health of men and animals it is essential to worship and offer sacrifices to spirits. Any situation which has adverse effect in their life is believed to be the work of the spirits. These spirits are invisible and they can be anywhere either in the forests or in the big boulders. For example the Ao Nagas worship the boulders. Besides worship and offerings in order to pacify the spirits the magician also plays important role to protect people from the spirits. Ancestor worship is also done because of the belief that their spirits protect the family from any eventuality. Among the Nagas Mithun ceremony is very important because Mithun is sacrificed in the name of the dead ancestor for their prosperity. The Bhils have always special regard for their ancestors and ancestor worship is closely connected with Bhil festivals.

Another important aspect in tribal religion is the presence of sacred specialist or priest. Priests are known by different names among different tribes and sometimes they also have assistants. Usually, the position of the priest is not hereditary and priests are chosen by the decision of the villagers or by the decision of gods. For example, among the Ao Nagas it is the senior man of the village whereas in the case of the Santals it is chosen by the gods. Priest's position is different from that of the magician or the medicine man. Medicineman's services are required when someone falls ill or at the time of any calamity in the village or the family. All these give the idea that religion in tribal society is primarily seen as means to overcome crisis in their daily life. If one closely examines religious practices and beliefs of tribes in India one can easily find that their belief system and ritual practices are very simple and these are primarily governed by their immediate natural habitat. It would not be out of place here to mention that over the years in the process of interaction with other dominant religious traditions changes have come in the forms and practices of tribal religious traditions. Particularly Hinduism had strong bearing on tribal religion. But at the same time it would not be correct to suggest that 'the form of religion practiced by the tribals throughout India is more or less Hindu'. Contacts between the tribals and their Hindu neighbours have not only influenced tribal beliefs, tribal religions have also influenced many local Hindu religious practices. Actually many religious traditions followed by lower caste Hindus had lot of commonalties with tribal religious practices.

32.9 SUMMARY

We have explained in this Unit religious beliefs of the Santals, the Birhors, the Aos, the Warlis, etc. Analysing their religious practices we have seen that they believe in the existence of a supreme deity who is the creator of this earth and also a world where soul goes after death. Names and forms may be different,

most of the tribes worship and offer sacrifices to a number of gods, goddesses and spirits with the hope of good harvest and health, protection from calamities. Priests and medicine men act as the medium between the deities, spirits and the common people. Their belief in supernatural power and respect for the priests and medicine men help them in facing any adverse situation in life. Absence of religious complexity, varna hierarchy and specialized knowledge of religious texts make the tribal religions different from established Hinduism. Tribal religion is descriptive, demonstrative and readily discernible.

32.10 EXERCISES

- 1) Write in brief religious practices of any one tribe mentioned in this Unit.
- 2) After going through this Unit explain in brief significant characteristics of tribal religions.

SUGGESTED READINGS FOR THIS BLOCK

L.P. Vidyarthi and B.K. Rai, *Tribal Culture of India*

Chitrasen Pasayat, *Tribe, Caste and Folk Culture*

K.S. Singh, *Scheduled Tribes, Vols. 1 and 2*

S. Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200-1991*

W.H.R. Rivers, *The Todas, 2 Vols.*

S. Ratnagar, *Understanding Harappa, Civilization in the Greater Indus Valley.*

S.K. Singh, 'The Gond Movements' in K.S. Singh (ed.) *Tribal Movements in India.*

J. Troisi, *Religion, Religious Beliefs and Practices among the Santals.*

C. Sahu, *Birhor Tribe*

P. Imchen, *Ancient Ao Naga Religion and Culture*

P.G. Shah, *The Dublas of Gujarat*

A.P. Sinha, *Religious Life in Tribal India*

R.E. Enthoven, *The Tribes and Castes of Bombay, Vols. 1 and 3*

B.N. Saraswati, *Tribal Thought and Culture, Essays in honour of Shri Surajit Ch. Sinha.*

Marshall.D. Sahlins, *Tribesmen, Foundations of Modern Anthropology Series.*