

Animism, Ancestors, and Rituals: A Study of Indigenous Religiosity in Indian Tribes

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Abstract

This study examines the complex interplay of animism, ancestor veneration, and ritual practices among indigenous tribes in India. Moving beyond common misconceptions of these traditions as mere superstition, the study highlights how they constitute a sophisticated worldview rooted in deep ecological awareness and communal cohesion. Animism is explored as a living perspective in which spirits are believed to inhabit natural elements, fostering reciprocal relationships between humans and the environment. Ancestor worship is analysed as a dynamic force that maintains lineage continuity, social order, and intergenerational accountability through participatory rituals. The study also addresses the pressures these traditions face from colonial legacies, modern development, and globalization, which threaten to erode sacred spaces and spiritual practices. Nonetheless, the resilience of indigenous religiosity is observed in adaptive syncretism and on-going efforts to sustain cultural identity. Ultimately, the study argues that indigenous religious systems offer vital insights for contemporary discussions on environmental ethics, cultural preservation, and sustainable policy, underscoring the need to honour and integrate tribal voices in broader societal discourse.

Keyword: Ancestor worship, Ritual practices, Superstition, Religious system, Cultural preservation.

1. Introduction

Religion plays a fundamental and vital role in society, facilitating what has been referred to as social integration, social solidarity, and social cohesion. It is a pervasive supernatural aspect of human existence.

Johnstone (1975)¹ characterizes religion as "a system of beliefs and practices through which a community interprets and reacts to what it perceives as supernatural and sacred."

Religion represents humanity's response to the awareness of a supernatural power or entity. It reflects the ways in which individuals adjust their understanding of the supernatural. Historically, religion has been viewed as a byproduct of civilization. The term 'religion' originates from the Latin word 'religio', which may derive from the root 'leg', meaning to gather, count, or observe, or from the root 'lig', meaning to bind. All religions embody a mental disposition towards the supernatural, with the most common expression of this disposition manifesting as beliefs and rituals. Both primitive and contemporary religions share this foundational aspect of beliefs and rituals. Rituals involve the adherence to specific actions performed in a prescribed manner, aimed at establishing a connection between the individual performing the ritual and the supernatural power or powers. Beliefs serve as the foundation for these rituals, ensuring their observance.

Functionalists argue that the role of religion lies in its contribution to fulfilling functional requirements such as social solidarity. Durkheim, a prominent functionalist, defines religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices concerning sacred things, which are set apart and forbidden. (Durkheim, 1912)". Malinowski, another functionalist, views religion as a means of reinforcing social norms and values, thereby promoting social solidarity by addressing 'situations of emotional stress that threaten societal stability (Malinowski, 1954).

Conversely, Marx perceives religion as an illusion that alleviates the suffering caused by exploitation and oppression. In Marx's perspective, 'Religion is the sign of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world and the soul' of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people' (Marx, 1844). From a Marxian standpoint, religion does not merely soften the impact of oppression; it also serves as a tool of that oppression. It functions as a means of social control, upholding the current system of exploitation and strengthening class dynamics.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach, relying completely on secondary data, to examine animism, ancestor worship, and rituals among India's indigenous tribes. Information is gathered from a wide variety of reliable sources, such as peer-reviewed articles, ethnographic books, historical documents, government reports, and trusted online databases. The main method is a careful review of existing literature, which helps provide a thorough understanding of religious practices among tribes. The process includes collecting, organizing, and analysing the available literature to find common themes, cultural details, and historical backgrounds. No fieldwork or interviews were carried out; instead, the study depends on previously published academic and documentary sources to ensure accurate and trustworthy results. This method allows for a broad comparison of indigenous religious traditions and points out areas where more research is needed.

¹ Johnstone, Renold (1975) Religion and Society: The Society of religion. Englewood dros. N.J. Prentice-Hall.

1. EARLY TRIBAL RELIGION

The earliest anthropological theory regarding primitive (tribal) religion, which aims to trace its origins and provide explanations, was proposed by Sir Edward Burnett Tylor. He posited that primitive humans experienced certain phenomena; during their dreams, they engaged in various activities even while asleep; they encountered their deceased ancestors in dreams and had hallucinatory experiences involving them and other entities while awake. They heard echoes of their own voices, observed their reflections in ponds, pools, and rivers, and struggled to separate themselves from their shadows. There must have been some unseen essence within them that eluded visibility, leading to the conclusion of death. Consequently, the belief in such an unseen essence or power, which sustained life when present and caused death upon departure from the body, arose. This essence or power is referred to as the 'soul'. Tylor suggested that primitive humans likely believed in the existence of two souls within an individual: a free soul capable of leaving the body to have experiences, and a body soul, whose departure from the body resulted in death. Primitive humans must have deduced that when the body soul permanently departed, the individual died, and their soul transformed into a ghost or spirit. This belief in the soul is termed as Animism.

However, tribal religion encompasses much more than animism. For example, there exists a belief in a 'High-God'. The High-God is perceived as a personal deity, distinct from and superior to all other deities and spirits, the master and often creator of the universe and humanity, the originator and protector of the moral code, and the sovereign over life and death, characterized by benevolence and immutability. In many tribal religions of India, the High-God is currently viewed as an otiose deity, meaning he is invoked but seldom worshipped. He has become a remote deity who allows the world and humanity to be governed by lesser deities, spirits, and demons. Numerous primitive tribes have specific rites of veneration for their ancestors, particularly during times of death or certain festivals. All primitive tribes firmly believe in the continuation of the human soul after death. They may even hold the view that there are multiple souls: the shadow, the life-spirit, and the ego. Each soul is thought to have its own destiny following death. The belief in the transmigration and reincarnation of the soul is quite prevalent. Numerous tribes contend that the quality of one's future life is influenced by their actions, whether good or bad. The tribal communities have cultivated a predominantly magical worldview.

They assert that the entire universe and each individual existence are primarily governed and influenced by superhuman forces, both personal and impersonal. However, they also believe that these superhuman entities can be effectively swayed and controlled through the use of magic and exorcism². Specifically, the healing of ailments is entrusted to magicians who, through their divination or during trance states, identify the nature of the illness, its natural and supernatural origins, as well as the methods and rituals necessary for healing. The tribes are cognizant of the fact that certain illnesses have natural origins and can be treated with natural remedies, of which they possess considerable knowledge. Nonetheless, they suspect that many instances of illness or accidents are instigated by supernatural forces. The tribes also acknowledge the presence of numerous malevolent spirits that have never been human. Additionally,

² Exorcism is the religious or spiritual practice of evicting demons, djinns, or malevolent spirits from a person, place, or object believed to be possessed. It involves rituals, prayers, or commands used by an authorized person-like a priest -to force the entity to leave. It is also metaphorically used to describe freeing oneself from something negative, like a haunting memory or traumatic experience.

there are spirits that inhabit in trees, rocks, rivers, springs, hills, and mountains. These entities may inflict harm upon humans if they feel slighted or if their due offerings are not made. When an individual becomes ill or experiences misfortune, the tribes seek the counsel of diviners, exorcists, and magicians to ascertain which deity or spirit has been offended and how to appease it. Black magic is often blamed for a significant amount of illness or misfortune among the tribes; however, it can be countered by the practice of white magic.

2. TRIBES OF INDIA AND RELIGION

➤ Tribes of Western India

The Bhil represent one of the most significant tribes in Western India, residing in regions of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra. A considerable number of Bhil individuals have adopted Hindu practices. There exists a legend regarding their descent from a Tiger ancestor. The Jhabua Bhil³ and other groups worship Bhagavan or Bholo Iswor⁴, regarded as a personal supreme deity. Additionally, they venerate minor deities, which are honored at shrines located on hills or beneath trees. The worship of Bhagavan occurs at the central sanctuary of the settlement. There is a cult focused on the deceased, with its principal ritual known as Nukto⁵, performed in front of the house of the deceased. Nukto serves to purify the spirit of the departed and to unite it with Bhagavan(God). Gothriz Purvez⁶ is recognized as the collective ancestor. The notion of a spirit rider holds significance in both Nukto and Gothriz, as Purvez accompanies the spirit during part of its journey to the afterlife.

➤ Tribes of North-East India

The hill tribes of the North East India, from ancient times until their conversion to Christianity, held a specific understanding of religion. They believed in a spirit or powerful entity associated with natural elements such as stones, rivers, trees, and mountain peaks. They recognized the existence of numerous spirits, both benevolent and malevolent, that influenced human life. To appease these spirits, sacrifices were necessary. Each village had priests knowledgeable in the rituals of sacrifice. Additionally, the hill people worshipped a Supreme God, who held the highest status. Beneath this Supreme Being, there existed a considerable number of spirits and demons worthy of veneration. These spirits, regarded as demigods, were believed to inhabit or haunt specific locations, such as villages, rivers, stones, forests, and mountain summits. In essence, the tribal communities can be accurately described as animists. They also honored their ancestors, offering sacrifices to satisfy the souls of the deceased. Throughout the majestic heights of Assam and NEFA (North-East Frontier Agency), most Eastern Indian tribal groups possess their own tribal deities and express profound respect for other belief systems. Almost all tribal individuals acknowledge the presence of spirits that animate nature and influence human behavior. They assign various names to these spirits and worship them in unique ways. The role of priests is crucial

³ झाबुआ भील

⁴ भगवान भोलो ईश्वर

⁵ नुकतो

⁶ गोत्रज परवेज /पूर्वज Totems/Ancestors

within tribal society, as no ceremonies are conducted without their involvement. Annual sacrifices are a common practice among the hill communities. According to their beliefs, deities must be honored with their preferred animals.

The Khasi tribe of Meghalaya believes in the Supreme Being, but their religious rites and ceremonies are directed more to the appeasement of the numerous spirits by which they are surrounded, and also to keep their ancestral spirits pleased by prayers and offerings. The spirits of the hills and rivers also receive their due share in the form of animal or bird sacrifices. The Khasis' are supposed to be great believers in augury⁷ and divination by means of broken eggs or an examination of the entrails of birds and animals offered in sacrifice. With the spread of Christianity and of modern education, these customs have tended to disappear. It is interesting to note that the Khasi had priests (Lyngdoh)⁸ only for the performance of worship for communal welfare. The other rites were mostly conducted by elders who had the necessary knowledge. Such rites were connected with birth, marriage and death, and used to be strictly performed in earlier times. In every case, when a Khasi is faced by a crisis of one kind or another, he did not dare to depend on his own judgment, but sought the guidance of superior, unseen powers who spoke to him through the dumb language of omens and signs⁹. One thing, however, should be very clearly borne in mind, and this is true not only of the Khasis but of the others as well and that the tribal people of India live in constant dread of evil spirits which inhabit the world around them. This view does not seem to be wholly true. If one observes carefully the life of these people, one realizes that there is enough joy left in their lives which the fear of spirits has never been able to quench. They resort to augury and magical practices only when they are hard pressed in life. Even then, they sometimes conform to established custom, not because they believe in it, but because this is what is done by everyone else under similar circumstances.

The Naga tribes live in the mountains of North-East India. They believe in an earthquake god. The earth was formed from the waters by a deity who also shaped it through seismic activity. The offspring of this deity now oversee humanity and administer punishment to those who commit transgressions. Additionally, there exist nameless and formless deities residing in the mountains, forests, rivers, and lakes, who require appeasement due to their antagonistic nature towards humans. Omens and dreams are widely accepted as significant. The practice of witchcraft is prevalent, and certain individuals are believed to possess the ability to transform into tigers. Head-hunting was a crucial ritual, as the fertility of crops was thought to rely on the sprinkling of a stranger's blood over the fields. Many Naga tribes hold a belief in reincarnation and the deceased are interred facing the direction from which their ancestors originated. The concept of Genna¹⁰ (taboo) encompasses entire social groups, villages, clans, households, age cohorts, and gender groups through a series of rituals that may be routinely observed or arise in response to emergencies, such as an earthquake.

⁷ Augury in the Khasi tribe is an integral part of their traditional religion and culture, used as a method of divination to ascertain the will of the gods and spirits, particularly in times of trouble. It is a form of spirit worship and propitiation, where practitioners (often a priest or *Lyngdoh*) seek guidance from supernatural forces to understand the cause of misfortunes, illnesses, or to make important decisions.

⁸ In the traditional Khasi tribe of Meghalaya, India, a Lyngdoh is a hereditary, sacrificial, or officiating priest. They are a central figure in the traditional Khasi animistic religion and social structure, responsible for mediating between the human community and the spirit world.

⁹ Omens and signs in the Khasi tribe are central to their traditional religion, folklore, and daily life, heavily rooted in animism and a deep connection with nature. These omens are used to interpret the will of the gods and ancestors, determine the right course of action, and predict future events.

¹⁰ In Naga culture, Genna is a broad term referring to a system of social and religious prohibitions, taboos, and sacred holidays. It is a fundamental aspect of traditional Naga life (particularly among tribes like the Ao, Angami, and Zeliangrong) that regulates daily life, agricultural cycles, and social events.

➤ **Tribes of Central India**

The contemporary Mundas of Jharkhand hold the belief that the Supernatural realm is teeming with numerous spirits of diverse characteristics and capabilities. Some of these spirits are regarded as benevolent, akin to deities, and are worshipped, appeased, or propitiated for the benefit of the community. Furthermore, the Mundas are convinced that this realm is rife with intrusive witches and other malevolent entities that perpetually seek to inflict harm upon humanity. Within this community, the influence of Daine¹¹, or witch, is notably prevalent. Discussions regarding witches are seldom conducted openly, and most individuals prefer not to disclose information about them to outsiders. Similar to other groups in the region, they maintain the belief that a woman can embody the role of a witch and that she is capable of targeting both males and females indiscriminately. The Munda make a distinction between Daines, or witches, sorcerers and magicians. The witches are invariably malevolent, intent on causing harm to others. It is believed that a witch will only attack individuals whom she harbors animosity towards. This belief is of considerable importance and significance, as the conviction in witchcraft is profoundly entrenched within their culture.

In contrast, the Gonds have undergone numerous external influences across various aspects of their social and cultural existence, making it remarkable that their religious beliefs and practices have not remained unchanged. The foundation of their social structure is built upon a complex mythology that elucidates and legitimizes the interactions and functions of the different segments of Gond society. Each clan possesses a deity, and these clan deities are perceived as protectors of their respective members throughout their extensive history, reinforcing the Gond ability to prevail in conflicts with various other ethnic groups, thereby validating their trust in the power and benevolence of these deities. Consequently, the Gonds have had little motivation to seek the protection of foreign gods or to fragment their loyalties among different cults.

According to the Santhal tribes, primarily located in Jharkhand, Bihar, and Orissa, the Supreme deity who governs the entire universe is known as Thakurji. However, the primary focus of their belief system is a court of spirits (Bonga)¹², which manage various aspects of existence and must be appeased through prayers and offerings to prevent malevolent influences. These spirits function at multiple levels, including village, household, ancestor, and sub clan, alongside evil spirits that can induce illness and may inhabit village peripheries, mountains, water bodies, and forests. A distinctive aspect of Santhal villages is the sacred grove situated at the settlement's boundary, where numerous spirits reside and where a series of annual festivals are celebrated.

The most significant spirit among them is Maran Buru (Great Mountain), who is called upon during offerings and who imparted knowledge of procreation and rice beer brewing to the first Santhals. Maran Buru's partner is the kind Jaher Era (Lady of the Grove). An annual cycle of rituals associated with agriculture, as well as life-cycle ceremonies for birth, marriage, and death, includes appeals to the spirits and offerings that typically involve the sacrifice of animals, predominantly birds. The religious leaders

¹¹ witches

¹² In the Santhal tribe, "Bonga" (often referred to in the query as 'binga') refers to spirits, deities, or supernatural forces that play a central role in their religious beliefs and daily life. The Santhal religion is characterized by the veneration of these spirits, which are believed to inhabit nature, including hills, forests, and villages.

within this community are male specialists in healing practices who engage in divination and witchcraft. Comparable beliefs are prevalent among other tribes in Northeast and Central India, such as the Kharia, Munda, and Oraon.

In the Chota-Nagpur region, the Mundas and Ho tribes hold a belief in a supernatural force that is perceived as a quality or characteristic of various objects. This religious framework of beliefs prevalent among these tribes is referred to as Bonga. The Bonga are understood in a vague manner as impersonal powers that lack a definitive appearance or existence. These impersonal Bonga utilize dreams as a medium for prophecy, with daydreams serving as warnings regarding adverse events. Bonga represents the embodiment of an indistinct supernatural force, which is the source of all energy. Variations among individuals, including differences in power and prestige, are believed to correlate with the extent of Bonga power that an individual possesses. Any new occurrence necessitates a fresh adjustment, and any disruption to the harmony between personality and environment is considered a Bonga.

Within the Saoras tribe of Orissa, each village consistently hosts a number of shamans and shamanins, whose primary responsibility is to safeguard the living from the assaults of deceased spirits and malevolent deities. The path to becoming a shaman or shamanin is not one of personal choice. Typically, these individuals are chosen by certain spirits, and should they decline or show reluctance, they face severe repercussions, manifesting as illness or accidents. A shaman or shamanin is required to lead a life of purity and must remain wholly devoted to any summons or service from their master or suffering community members, even if this dedication is perceived as a form of 'supernatural' compulsion.

➤ Tribes of Southern India

The Todas represent a small pastoral community residing on the Nilgiri Hills in South India. They hold a belief in either 1600 or 1800 superior godlike entities, with the two most significant being 'ON'¹³ and 'TEIKIRZI'¹⁴. 'ON' is recognized as the male god of Amnodr, the domain of the deceased, credited with the creation of the Todas and their buffaloes, and he himself was a dairyman. In contrast, Teikirzi is a female deity of greater importance to the community, having once governed them during her existence in the Nilgiris, where she instituted the social and ceremonial laws of the Todas. The majority of other deities are hill gods, each linked to a specific hill. Additionally, there are two river gods associated with the two principal rivers. The religious practices of the Todas are fundamentally centered on buffaloes and their milk, with dairies serving as their temples. Numerous tribes across India exhibit significant syncretism with Hinduism, exemplified by the Kadugollas of Karnataka, who revere deities such as Junjappa, Yattappa, Patappa, and Cittappa, yet are predominantly devoted to Siva, who presides over their festivals and religious practices. Local deities continue to hold significance, as seen with the Bedanayakas of Karnataka, who venerate Papanayaka, a deity believed to have lived 300-400 years ago as a holy figure among them, performing miracles.

¹³ ऑन

¹⁴ टिकिरजी

3. HINDUISM AMONG THE TRIBALS

Hinduism has traditionally not been a religion that seeks to convert others. The native population of India is believed to have played a significant role in the historical development of what is recognized as Hinduism. Although the tribes maintained the core aspects of their beliefs and practices, these were subject to varying degrees of modification. Furthermore, they engaged with some of the deities and participated in the social festivals and rituals of their Brahmanical neighbors, without any active attempts at conversion from the latter. Such participation did not transform them into Hindus. It could be argued that the tribes are effectively integrated within the Hindu community, as Brahmin priests conduct Brahmanical rituals for them during the three pivotal life events: birth, marriage, and death. Even if these events are still marked by tribal customs, the communities remain loyal to their original faith, despite their involvement in certain ceremonies associated with the Hindu community.

4. PRE-CHRISTIANITY TRIBALS

The predominant traditional religion among tribal communities is commonly referred to as animism. This traditional belief system tends to be perceived more negatively than positively. Adherents do not have a designated place for worship and do not engage in idol worship. Rituals and sacrifices can occur in various locations, including within the home, along roads, beneath trees, on rocks, by rivers, in paddy fields, and other sites believed to be inhabited or visited by spirits.

All hill tribes in Manipur hold a belief in a Supreme Being or God. They universally acknowledge him as the creator and sustainer of the universe, worshipping him with the hope that their souls will attain a place in heaven. Furthermore, they believe that individuals who lead virtuous lives in this world will be rewarded with a favorable existence in the afterlife. The Supreme Being is also viewed as a judging God. It is customary among the tribes that when a significant dispute arises requiring resolution in the village court, the elders, led by the Chief, require both parties to swear in the name of the Supreme Being, with the implication that judgment against the wrongdoer may result in severe consequences. Key practices associated with swearing in critical cases include biting the 'Raihai Stone,' a small black round stone regarded as the dwelling of a war deity, which is placed on a pile of stones or a platform at the village chief's residence. This stone is considered untouchable; any contact with it is believed to lead to serious illness, madness, or even death. Another practice involves sharing and consuming 'chicken's intestine' between the disputing parties. Additionally, they share a piece of 'liver' in the same manner. Another ritual includes biting the 'fresh soil' from the contested land, and finally, they drink a toxic juice derived from the 'ai' plant, known as 'Aituidawn.' All these actions are performed while invoking the name of the Supreme Being. Following the ritual, should death occur within the designated timeframe in one of the two families, it is interpreted as an indication of the wrongdoer's identity and, consequently, as a manifestation of divine judgment upon that family. Thus, God is perceived as a deity of judgment. Sacrifices are made to appease God, seeking both individual and communal prosperity, as well as protection from natural disasters. There is also a belief in the presence of both benevolent and malevolent spirits. These spirits are thought to inhabit stones, trees, rivers, streams, forests, and mountains. Therefore, there exists ample opportunity for the manifestation of spirits, as observed in the traditional religions of the hill tribes.

Additionally, there is a belief in the presence of household deities that contribute to the well-being of families, along with individual deities associated with paddy fields that protect and bless the crops. Consequently, sacrifices are frequently offered to these gods, particularly during the sowing of seeds, harvesting, and festive occasions. Illness is often attributed to malevolent spirits, prompting the involvement of a physician, fortune-teller, or sorcerer to appease these entities.

Among the Kuki Chin, a sacrificial practice known as 'Gampi' is performed in the forest to appease the spirit and liberate the soul of a specific ill individual. Thus, the traditional tribal religion is fundamentally rooted in 'fearfulness.' Ancestor worship was observed among certain tribes in Manipur, while others merely honor their ancestors. Strict adherence to taboos, gennas, and ceremonies is also prevalent. Omens, divinations, and dreams are interpreted during significant events. In traditional tribal religion, practices such as sorcery, wizardry, and necromancy were commonplace, and even today, similar practices persist among non-Christians.

In Tribal religions, the notion of Sin is rather ambiguous. Generally, tribal life is notably devoid of deceit and theft, with adultery being a serious offense that incurs a substantial fine as per tribal customs and laws. Nonetheless, the severity of punishment differs among tribes. While adultery is viewed as a grave transgression among tribal communities, the practice of 'promiscuous intercourse' among unmarried youth is not only tolerated but also promoted by elders in certain tribes. The concept of sin lacks clarity; it is perceived as a violation of tribal customs or taboos, and actions deemed morally wrong may be considered acceptable if they do not contravene tribal laws. All tribal members hold a belief in an afterlife, asserting that the soul of the deceased transitions to the 'Land of the Dead'.

The Kuki-Chins refer to this realm as 'Misi khua'. It is believed that the afterlife mirrors the existence in this world, allowing the soul of the deceased to reunite with their family in the land of the dead. In fact, the Tangkhuals engage in the practice of presenting gifts upon the death of a relative; these offerings are intended for the deceased, with the hope that they will pass them on to family members who have already entered the 'Land of the Dead'. Friends and relatives also contribute various gifts to assist the deceased in their journey to the next world. They hold the belief that the soul of a virtuous individual ascends to heaven to dwell with the Supreme God.

A common characteristic of tribal beliefs in India is the conviction that all beings possess a living spirit. This principle, however, does not extend to animals, plants, rivers, and mountains. The deceased, who seem to have departed, remain present among us; it is through remembrance and offerings that we must renew our connection with them during significant occasions. The dead are believed to be reborn as offspring in the current generation, thereby extending the scope of human companionship to include all that surrounds us.

What is noteworthy in tribal religion, or 'animistic' belief, is that tribes such as the Mundas, the Oraons, or the Santhals perceive the entire world, populated by spirits, as sacred. In the forests where some of the more secluded communities reside, certain trees remain untouched or uncut, as they symbolize the primal grove. These trees represent the entirety of the forests that humans, driven by necessity, have had to clear. The mountains are considered holy, and there are rocks of remarkable shapes or colors that are regarded as evidence of their sanctity. If spirits inhabit all places and harmony exists with them, individuals experience freedom from illness and longevity. However, if someone becomes ill, it is commonly believed that a relationship has been disrupted; in such cases, individuals skilled in specific

magical rituals determine the necessary actions for the afflicted. Once these actions are performed, it is believed that health is restored.

Among the 'animistic' tribes of India, every location is sacred as it serves as a dwelling for spirits. Some critics have claimed that these so-called animists live in constant fear of ghosts and spirits. However, there appears to be no substantial justification for this assertion. All individuals harbor hopes and fears, and to isolate certain aspects of tribal religion and assert that they stem solely from fear would be a significant injustice to these communities.

5. CONTRIBUTION OF CHRISTIANITY TO TRIBAL TRANSFORMATION

Christianity provided an ideology that helped the tribal people maintain their identity in the face of serious erosion of their traditional religious, social and political institutions. In fact, there is hardly any custom that needs a metamorphosis. What is needed is to modify and make it suitable for the present time. For example, the dead could be buried in a common place and not within the house compound, or, stop or reduce rice beer brewing so as to save for the future, say for example, for the education of the children, or again folksongs that sound archaic could be turned to the modern music. However, change from the old to new generation must be gradual so that both the old and the new feels at home with the changes. Some churches have definitely contributed much towards the preservation of culture. Dances, folk-songs dresses and the like have been integrated for the sacramental worship and in church functions and at public functions as well. Today Christian institutions are doing their maximum for the preservation of the cultural identity of the people except in some places where there may be some who are still not aware of the importance of it and may impede its preservation. Pre-Christian social life consisted of hunting of Wild animals, and elaborates celebrations after that. Eating and drinking continued for days. If there was a good harvest emptying the granary with all feasts of merry making were made, often sorts of festivities. At present, the people get together in the churches to thank for the best harvest. They also offer best products to the Church seeking God's blessing.

In the past, the tribal people were considered primitive, ferocious and dangerous. By listening to the preaching's of the missionaries, the tribal developed a new outlook. For the tribal to become a Christian was to become a man more refined and polished. The Christians missionaries taught the tribal how to read and write. The missionaries taught them to abstain from intoxicating drink. Abstaining from drinking especially led to decrease of social get together which led to spending of more time with families. They started wearing proper dress and understand the value of cleanliness. They realized the value of education. Personal cleanliness, cleanliness in the house and better ways of life were taught by the missionaries and the Evangelists which the tribal started to follow. If a person falls sick in the pre-Christian time the tribal believed that the sick person can be cured by sacrifices of birds and animals, this was a costly affair especially for the poor. When the tribal became Christians, all kinds of sacrifices became unnecessary. The new faith brought peace among the tribal. The tribal found in Christianity, a religion that met their needs which sets them free from the bondage of evil spirits. The work undertaken by the missionaries have led to a number of schools, colleges and other learning institutions being established which have led to a lot of the tribal becoming mobile in their sphere of occupations: They are no longer just farmers, cultivators, but many of them have go on to become doctors, engineers,

administrators, etc. The services which the churches rendered to the tribal people were indeed of a high order. Apart from spreading the message of the Gospels, great service was rendered by the missionaries in the economic distress to which people had been subjected for long time. The missionaries made enquiries about the oppression of land-lords and money lenders and when the cases came up to court, helped the converts by their counsel and in every possible way. This included exercising their personal influence on officers of the Government. Help of this kind was sorely needed, and a large number of tribal folk were attracted towards the Church, which not only defended their rights but also treated them with a dignity which had never been accorded to them by other mainstream people.

Conclusion

Religion serves the central and crucial function in society, supporting Social cohesion. Religion is an all pervading supernatural phenomenon in what has been variously called social integration, social solidarity and man's life. This study explores how Indian tribal religions are much more than just superstitions. These beliefs show a deep connection between people, nature, and the universe. For these tribes, animism is the idea that spirits live in rivers, forests, trees, and animals. It is not a simple or old fashioned belief for them. Instead, it is a way of understanding the world where humans and nature are closely linked and respect each other. For example, the Santhal people protect special forest areas called sacred groves, which shows their respect for nature, something modern societies are also trying to learn, especially as we face environmental problems. Honoring ancestors is also very important in these tribal religions. Ancestors are seen as protectors who connect the living with the spiritual world. Through several rituals and festivals, people remember their ancestors not just by thinking of them, but by making offerings, singing, and dancing. These activities help keep family lines strong and the community united. The rituals also help solve problems, pass down stories, and protect tribal identity from being lost as the world changes. However, these traditions are under threat. Colonialism, new development, and globalization have damaged sacred places and put tribes at risk. Some rituals are now performed mainly for tourists, which can weaken their true meaning. Still, these communities show resilience. Some, like the Gond, blend their old beliefs with Hindu practices, showing that their traditions can adapt and survive.

In the end, Indian tribal religions challenge the idea that humans are separate from or more important than nature. At a time when the world faces environmental and spiritual crises, these beliefs teach us that everything is connected and should be respected. Ancestor rituals remind us that we have responsibilities to future generations. Policies like the Forest Rights Act need to be enforced and researchers should study these communities with understanding rather than treating them as curiosities.

Protecting these traditions takes more than just writing about them. Tribal people need to have a say in decisions about their culture and land. Respecting animism, ancestor worship, and rituals can help India and the world find a more balanced, connected way of living. According to the Santhal tribe "The forest speaks if we listen," reminding us to pay attention to these traditional ways for a healthier future.

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