
UNIT 18 TRIBAL RELIGION: TWO CASE STUDIES

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18.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this Unit, you will be able to

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

18.1 INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

18.2 TRIBAL RELIGION IN A STATE OF SIMPLICITY

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

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

18.2.1 Ritual Way of Life

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

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

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

"We want the man who is of such and such

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

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

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

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

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



A Tribal ceremony

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then addressing the spirits, he says,

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

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

Activity 1

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

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

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

18.2.2 Ritual Elements

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

a) Purpose

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

b) Performer

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

c) Preparation

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

d) Performance and process

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

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

Check Your Progress 1

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

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

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18.2.3 Spirits and Souls

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

a) General spirits

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

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

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

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

b) Clan spirits

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

c) **Family spirit**

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

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

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

e) **Individual tutelary or Sakti bhuts**

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

f) **Minor spirits or Ningchha bhuts**

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

g) **Manita bhut of women**

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

h) **Souls or umbul**

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

18.2.4 Religion without Explanation

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

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

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

Box 18.1

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

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

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

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

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Describe any one of the general spirits using about six lines.
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ii) Of the spirits recognised by the Birhors what are the deities that belong to the Hindu pantheon? List them in about two lines.

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

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

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18.3 TRIBAL RELIGION SEEKING THEOLOGICAL COMPLEXITY

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

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

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

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

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

18.3.1 Encounter with Christianity

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

a) Reorganisation of traditional Khasis

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

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

b) Creation of literature

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

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

c) **Preservation of cultural heritage**

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

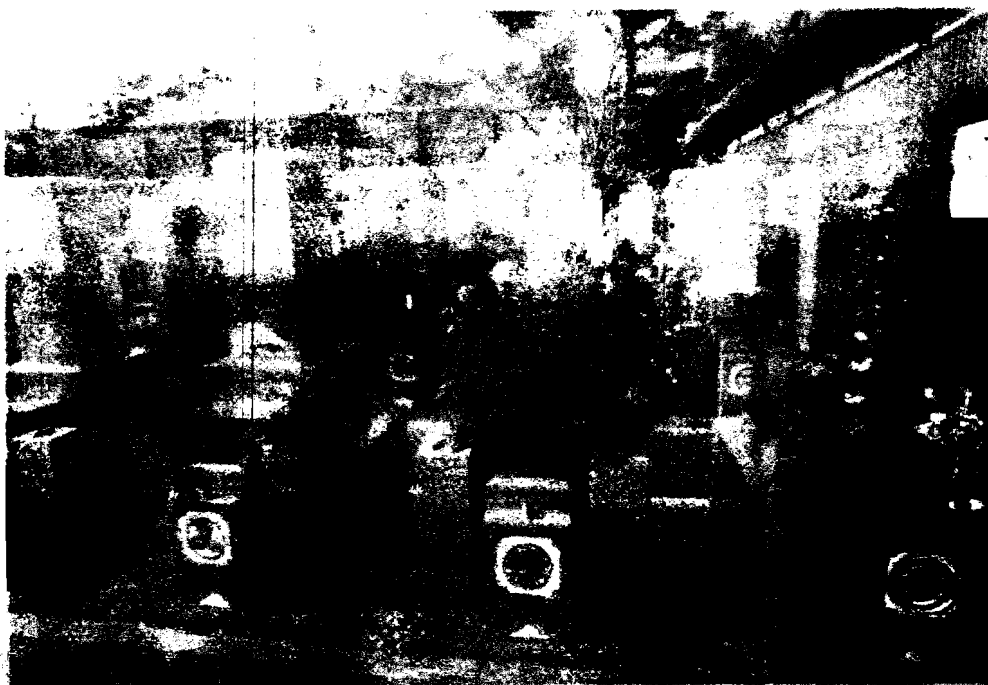
Activity 2

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

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

18.3.2 Old Belief and New Interpretation

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



A funeral memorial.

Box 18.2

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

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

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

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

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

Check Your Progress 3

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

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

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iii) Fill in the blanks:

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

18.3.3 Writing a Tribal Theology

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

a) **Man**

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

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

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

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

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

b) God

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

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

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

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

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

c) Religion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

18.3.4 The Changing Worldview

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

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

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

18.4 CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISON

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

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

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

Check Your Progress 4

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

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

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

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18.5 LET US SUM UP

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

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

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

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

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

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

18.6 KEY WORDS

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

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

18.7 FURTHER READING

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18.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

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

Check Your Progress 2

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

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

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

Check Your Progress 3

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

Check Your Progress 4

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

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