



Introduction:

Odisha is a homeland of 62 tribes. The tribals of Odisha constitute a large section of the population of the State of nearly 22 percent of the total population of Odisha. Each has its own peculiar religious customs, social organization and language either inherited or acquired through interaction of many cultural cross-currents, that made inroads into the predominantly forest covered parts of Odisha. Thus religion plays an important part of the tribal life of Odisha. The religion of the tribes of Odisha is an admixture of animism, animalism, nature worship,

borrowed from the Hindu pantheon. In the tribal pantheon there was always one kind of Supreme Being, beneath whom there were a number of gods and goddesses, the demi-gods and animal gods. The religious traditions of tribal elements are to be found in different religious sects, especially of Hinduism. Tribal elements are to be found in the cult of Jagannath, the cult of Stambeswari, or Saktism, nature worship, the worship of Goddess Earth and Sun God are gradually synthesized to the Hindu religions. The process of Aryanisation, Brahmanical from of Hinduism deeply influenced their life and thought which characterized the

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Rinky Behera

supernaturalism, ancestor worship, fetishism, shamanism and anthropomorphism. The religious beliefs and practices aim at ensuring personal security and happiness as well as group solidarity and community well-being. The youth dormitory is the core of tribal culture. It may be considered as the centre of social, economic and religious life of the village.

Deities of Tribal Pantheon:

All the deities of the tribal pantheon are divided into two types: (1) *the native* and (2) *the borrowed*. The first type gods called the racial gods were known to have originated from tribal beliefs. The second type of gods was

growth and development of various religious faiths, viz. Saivism, Vaishnavism and Saktism in Odisha through centuries. Similarly, the influence of Christianity, the welfare activities of the Christian missionaries have affected the life of tribe in various ways which reflected in the celebration of Christian festivals like Easter, Good Friday and Christmas. The tribal pantheon in most cases consists of the Sun God or the Dharma Devata, Mother earth and a lower hierarchy of Gods. Besides, there are village tutelary, nature spirits, presiding deities and ancestor spirits who are propitiated regularly.



Religious Beliefs:

The religious performances of the tribals include life crisis rites, cyclic community rites, ancestor and totemic rites and observances of taboos. Besides, the tribals also resort to various types of occult practices and supernatural force. Their belief in Gods and Goddesses, Ghosts, witchcraft, magic, illness, or misfortune is attributed to displeasure and malicious acts of the supernatural forces, malevolent spirits. The sacrifice of different kinds of livestock accompanied by all the rites and ceremonials of fetishism is considered appropriate appeasement. The offering of food, drinks, blood of animals, birds and even human sacrifice are given. Since such propitiations and observance of rites are explicitly directed towards happiness and security in this world, abundance of crops, livestock, plants and progenies. Fear controlled the action of the tribes of Odisha. They observed that certain activities (illness, sleep, dreams, rain, cloud, thunder etc.) and appearance of moon and sun in a routine manner could not have been possible, unless controlled or monitored by supernatural power. The ritual connected with birth, death, and marriage could only be performed by priests, who are supposed to possess some magical power and in trance could communicate with the Gods and spirits for their intervention and blessing. The Khonds even used to offer human being called 'Meriah' to propitiate the Earth Goddess. Superstition does play an important role in the tribal myth. Their belief in superstitious nature prohibits the undertaking of any enterprise unless the Gods are first appeased and the omens, after being carefully considered, are adjusted to be carefully propitious. Gods and spirits are classified into benevolent and malevolent categories. They were terrified to see the awesome thunder and storms coupled with lightning destroy the trees and

strike man to death, devastating cyclones create horror in their minds. The simple tribal could hardly understand the causes and consequences of such contradictory behaviour of nature. There were three interlinked worlds in which the tribal believes: the world of nature, the world of Gods and spirits, and the world of ancestors. Due to their superstitious beliefs the tribal people very often do not take any medicine to cure the diseases, on the contrary, they mostly believe in offering sacrifice for the cure of a particular disease. They continued to follow the age-old traditional religious practices based on animism and animatisms, belief in supernatural forces, magic, witchcraft, soul, spirits, the observance of totemic rites and taboos, the moral behaviour and essence of ethics and disciplinary approach is woven around certain taboos.

Thus, the life of tribal of Odisha is one which is never ending and is surrounded by music, dance, festivals and myths. The tribal people have their own cultural tradition. There should not be any imposition from the outside forces in the process of orientation and improvement of social conditions. Their local customs and traditions should not suffer so that they could maintain their independence, identity and thereby preserving their indigenous language, animistic religion and tribal customs and traditions. The amazing conglomeration of traditions, beliefs, sorrows and philosophies that together constitute and vitalize the rituals and festivals of the present day. It is the aspects of their culture that give meaning and depth to their lives and solidarity to their social structure. Manipulation of environment is the main concern of the tribals. All the ritualistic acts are directed towards stimulating natural processes whose abode is around the hills forests, rivers and thatched houses. These simple religious beliefs of the tribal, their continuity in the age-old traditions



and customs and their belief in animistic and supernatural power led to many controversial and debatable subjects.

Change and continuity:

Since Hinduism has been the major religion of Odisha and in due course of time the tribal religion has been under the influence of Hinduism whereby Christianity poses a threat to the very cultural/ethnic identity of the tribals of Odisha. As per the census report of 2001, as many as 88.2 percent Scheduled Tribes (STs) are Hindus, whereas the Christian tribal constitutes 7.4 percent. The ST professing other religious and pursuits accounts for 4.2 percent. A negligible 0.2 percent (13,782) of tribal is Muslims. The tribes who follow Sikhism (251), Buddhism (175), Jainism (196) are meagre in number.

The process of Urbanization, Industrialization and with the development of education, science and technology, rationalism, modernization and westernization erode their unquestioning faith in supernatural power. With the change in social life, the moral, ethical and spiritual, religious life of the tribes of Odisha has undergone unique changes whereby affecting the cultural/ethnic identity and disturbing the life style of the tribal society. Nevertheless the influence of propaganda of reconversion of innocent Adivasis within the fold of Brahmanical Hinduism and Christianity involves a silent process of change, through which power is established over the Adivasis in order to exploit them. Hence it witnesses a process of hegemonization; communalism and divisive politics entered into the socio-cultural affairs of the tribals of Odisha that poses a serious threat to the very existence of the tribal society. In spite of the influence and propaganda of the other dominant religions over

the tribal cultural traditions either in the process of symbiosis and acculturation, the tribals have been able to maintain their religious identity. One can still notice the tribal faith in the supernatural elements, witchcraft, taboos, spirits, magic, proves the continuity of tribal traditions and customs even in the present advanced society.

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Rinky Behera, Lecturer in History, KKS Women's College, Balasore.