

# Tribes are Hindus (??): A Study in the Context of Odisha Tribes.

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## Abstract

*Tribes are Hindus (??). The question mark in the bracket indicates social, religious, anthropological, historical and philosophical question, and gives rise to a great debate among the intellectuals. An attempt has been made in this paper to resolve the issue with a better conceptual clarification of the Odisha socio-cultural and religious systems of the tribes as well as Hindus inhabiting therein. In doing so, attempt has been made to analyse the concepts related to both 'Tribalism' and 'Hinduism'. By collecting data through primary and secondary sources, I find some unique as well as common features in both. This article is the consequence of my field study and observation of a long process of acculturation and assimilation between them. Lastly, I have concluded that Tribalism and Hinduism survive parallelly with reciprocatively.*

**Key words:** Tribalism, Hinduism, Hindu civilization, varna-jati social system, acculturation and assimilation

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## I. Introduction

The gist of whole article rests on the following three assumptions:

1. Tribes are Hindus.
2. Tribes are not Hindus.
3. Tribes are tribes.

The main issues arises when different tribal people claim their religion as 'Sarna'<sup>1,2</sup> which is a common religious platform of the Odisha tribes. Many tribal social organisations have their solidarity movement for their identity<sup>3</sup> and the tribal people are living with their own culture independent of acculturation and assimilation to different cultures that are dominant in Odisha.<sup>4</sup> Odisha is a home land of as many as 62 different tribal communities with 22.85 per cent of the total population of the state and 9.17 percent of the total tribal population of the country, that is, more than 12 crores.<sup>5</sup> The fact is that they have been recognized as Scheduled Tribes<sup>6</sup> but unfortunately their religion has not been recognized in spite of the fact that they worship and practice their rituals with a distinctive way which is different than other religions and it is their fundamental right of the Constitution. The tribal population of the state is as much significant as their culture from demographical point of view. Their culture always remained under threat<sup>7</sup> due to dominion of mainstream cultures in to their habitats. The opinion of tribal social organisations is that there is no political willingness in post-independent period in India for the recognition of their religion as a distinct and different from other religions. As a result, the different surveys and census conducted in different times on the basis of religions did not include tribal religion as a separate category like other six established religions (Hindu, Islam, Christian, Buddhist, Jaina and Sikh). Hindu organisations, that are politically strong, claim that tribes are Hindus<sup>8</sup>. In their opinion, 88.2% of tribes are treated to be included in Hindu religion; and 7.4% in Christianity. This is a fact according to 2001 census report. The report seems to be erroneous on the ground that their social, anthropological, and religious issues are not properly dealt with, for which controversy arises. This controversy has not yet been resolved.

Most of the tribes, not only in Odisha but also on the country, follow some or other form of Hinduism.<sup>9</sup> It is because they have contacts with Hindu neighbours. Missionaries tried to label tribal religions nearer to Christianity during British rule. A massive conversion of tribal people in Odisha to Christianity were observed during the period, not only in Odisha but also in all parts of India especially in north east states of India, Christianity among the tribal groups and also in other religious groups were spread over massively as history says. Hence, some radical Hindu organizations have belief in the first assumption that 'tribes are Hindus' and, therefore, their conversion to any other religion is unethical and treated as a crime. The tribes are Hindus, they should remain as Hindus. The gruesome murder of Graham Stewart Staines along with his two kids named Phillip and Timothy in Manoharpur, Odisha<sup>10</sup> is the consequence of this assumption.

The second assumption that 'tribes are not Hindus' gives rise to another problem. Former Judge of Odisha High Court, Honourable Justice M. Popanna,<sup>11</sup> once addressed to a seminar where he expressed his view that tribes are not Hindus. His address was not only subject to criticism, but also created provocation in Odisha Assembly that time and the statement was considered as communal and created a religious disorder inside and near the state. Therefore, some organizations have a belief that tribes, not being Hindus, can be converted to any religion.<sup>12</sup> The killing of Arul Doss, a priest of a Catholic Church in the bordering area of Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar district of Odisha,<sup>13</sup> has, more or less, a remote possibility of relation with the controversy. Thus, the issue has not only puzzled the common people, it puzzled the intellectuals as well. Sometimes, it shackled the Legislative Assembly of Odisha.

### **Analysis**

It is, of course, difficult to resolve such a controversy with an easy effort of analysing the facts around the sensitive issue. A continuous positive fraternal attitude towards the issue is needed with a better conceptual clarification on the culture, society and religion of the tribes inhabiting in the state of Odisha. An attempt has been made in this regard.

As regard to the tribal religion and its relation to Hinduism, sociologists, generally have two opinions: First, tribes are aborigines<sup>14</sup> and have their primitive belief on every facet of life what we call their religion. The culture, society, economy and the way they live, taken together, is called 'tribalism'<sup>15</sup>. And it is believed that they are ancestors, and so-called sophisticated religions have been evolved out of them. Throughout the evolution process, those who have been exposed to outer sophisticated world, adopted the modern way of living, belief, and practices, which changed the way they lived. They became non-tribe (may be Hindu or Islam or Christian or Jews). This theoretical speculation emphasises 'tribalism' as the origin of other religions. Secondly, many social anthropologists and historians have tried to draw many parallels between Hinduism and Tribal Religions, though there are many similarities. In their opinion, these two religions parallelly continued from pre-historic periods. These two opinions can be interpreted to reveal the similar facts that the tribes have had their separate cultural identities as well as religions, with which they have been living for thousand and thousand years. In spite of certain similarities in the functional level of both tribalism and Hinduism, they have their distinctive features. We can estimate between the opinions that one is 'inclusive' and other one is 'exclusive' by nature. The former opinion seems to be more theoretical than the latter, which is sufficed by the attestation of many historians and the most popular social anthropologists of the time, who suggest that tribal religions have some distinctive and distinguishing features than its counterpart Hinduism.

In this context, the discussion needs clarity on the concept of 'Hinduism'. The concept has not yet been defined unambiguously. Some consider 'Hinduism' as 'Hindu civilisation', and some other as 'Hindu religion'. It is a general belief that Hindu Civilization<sup>16</sup> started between 2500 B.C. and 1700 B.C. in the Indus Valley. The ambiguity lies in the phrase 'Hindu religion'- whether it is a pantheon of religions with a common platform or a definite religion with a set of principles in codified form.<sup>17</sup>

A. Eschmann<sup>18</sup>, an eminent social anthropologist, says, "Hinduism has an extraordinary capacity to incorporate and amalgamate other religions and alien cults. ....and that whoever is born in India is essentially a Hindu". It is implied from the assertion of Eschmann that he uses Hinduism more in the sense of a pantheon, which has a nature of 'inclusivism' than a textual religion. Anthropologist L. K. Mohapatra says,<sup>19</sup> "Hindu civilisation of India was the end product of a long-standing process of indigenous developments". He further says, "We may just refer to the most colourful combination of diverse peoples and cultures brought into the vertex of the *Mahabharata* war..., Aryan, Dravidian and numerous tribal resources in men, materials, technology and knowledge, was symbolic of the process of building up of the Indian civilisation".

'Hinduism' in the sense of civilisation, incorporates not only *Vaishnav*, *Shaiva*, *Shakta* and *Sikh* but also *Buddhism*, *Jainism*, and even *folk religions*. Hindu religion as a textual religion means Brahmanical caste religion, which has the nature of 'exclusivism' as text shows. It is in *sastriya* or in codified form. People did politics and tried to divide India in different sections in pre-independence period out of the derived functional values of both of Hindus and tribal religions. Even in present times, politicians and religious fundamentalists get a plea out of these functional similarities of these two religions and take opportunities and advantages.

Prof. N. K. Behura<sup>20</sup>, in his scholarly quest for the meaning of the word 'tribe', discusses and takes the name of famous Historian Nihar Ranjan Ray who said the word 'tribe' was first used by Britishers in Indian context and it labelled the Sanskrit word '*Jana*' which referred to these primitive communities during ancient times. The term '*Jana*' referred to 'tribes' and the places in which they used to live is known as *janapada*. The term 'Hindu' referred to caste Hindu society based on caste-system. Tribes were different from *Jati* or from castes only in the sense that the former continued to remain outside the Brahmanical *Varna-Jati* social system. There are linguistic and archaeological evidences to suggest that there was a continuous pressure of Hindus over these ethnic people on their habitation for centuries.

Till the early part of 20<sup>th</sup> century, some of the tribes were completely isolated and autonomous where as some others have assimilated Hindu culture in varying degrees which is the result of acculturation, and for which it blurs the distinction between the two. But it was the general tendency among most of the tribes towards articulation with the caste societies. They treated the caste Hindus as their reference groups for emulation.

In Odisha, absorption of tribal societies in *varna-jati* social system is more likely for three reasons for which the blur is more intense to distinguish two religions:

i) the regional culture of Odisha has a distinctive character and it revolves around its central axis of Sri Jagannath cult, which is the confluence of the elements of tribal, Jaina, Buddhist and Brahmanical religions.<sup>21</sup> The accommodation of tribal deities in Hinduism is not limited with Lord Jagannath of Puri, but factual evidences prove that Lingaraja of Bhubaneswar, Shiva of Kapilas also have some Savara origin. Many more deities from tribal origin are also being worshipped by Hindus in Odisha. Anthropologist S. C. Behera<sup>22</sup> pointed out the reason behind it. He said that religious dominance and pressure on tribal religions brought a remarkable inter religious transformation in Odisha. The great political powers of Odisha from tribal origin like *Pulindas*, *Savaras*, and the *Sailajas* etc. were influenced by Hinduism, as a result of which they adopted anthropomorphic concept of Brahmanical Gods leaving behind the primitive tree worship and stone worship and ultimately laid down the foundation of *Saivism*, *Vaishnavism*, and *Shaktism* of early mediaeval Odisha.

ii) The feudal and zamindars of Odisha were always having an attitude to sanction the caste status to socially lower communities living outside the *varna-jati* social system as Prof. N. K. Behura<sup>23</sup> said. For example, the *Bathudi* tribes in Mayurbhanj district were conferred the social status as enjoyed by caste Hindu society.

iii) The tribal population in Odisha is so vast that it caused the religious absorption bilaterally and opened the road to acculturation. Because some caste Hindus have also been absorbed in tribal communities in the passage of time and social pressure.

Social anthropologists maintain that the tribal elements in caste Hindu societies as well as Hindu deities in tribal ritual practices is a common factor in different practices in both. In fact, one is several degrees away from the other. Therefore, besides these acculturations of tribal practices in Hinduism and the vice versa, certain differences on functional level of both the religions are worth discussing. There are certainly significant differences in social activities like the system of marriage, payment of bride price, acquisition of bride etc. The attainment of sexual maturity of a girl in the tribal world is a remarkable incident. The practice of unilateral and bilateral cross cousin marriages under preferential marriage rules is also a distinguishing feature of tribal society.

Tribal people express their cultural identity and distinctiveness in their social organisation, language, rituals and festivals. Amongst all, the youth dormitory is the core of tribal cultures and it reinforces the age-old traditions. Annual hunting is also another cultural activity, which distinguishes tribes for their identity.

There are also some functional differences in the practices of religion of both Hinduism and folk religions. In Hinduism, the deities appear through the medium of an iconographic image. The *avahan* and *visarjan* of Hindu deities are ascertained by the attending priests through the rituals of *Sodasa Upacara*. In contrast to this, "in tribal India anthropomorphic images of Gods are rare", as stated by Verrier Elwin.<sup>24</sup> "Tribal shrines may be completely empty or else contain uniconical symbols, wooden posts, earthen posts or elementary symbols like stones and trees", says Eschmann.<sup>25</sup>

From the analysis of the above facts, it may be said that tribal cultures in Odisha is the web and woof of Hindu Civilisation and Hindu religion of the state. Besides, social anthropologists and historians of Odisha draw attention that tribal religions and Hindu codified *sastriya* religion go parallel with their distinctiveness in spite of the integration of both the religions. It shows 'exclusiveness' nature of Hindu religion. According to famous Indologist N. K. Bose<sup>26</sup>, Indian civilisation not only takes care of traditional Indian societies and practices of their religions but also that of the modern Indian society which is the product of Indian constitution, the spirit of which is equality, fraternity, secularism, democracy and socialism. It provides directives for planned social change. As an instrument of planned social change Indian constitution has provided certain opportunities for the rise of social movement, and 'tribalism' has become one of such movement, which the modern India is witnessing. Considering the cultural and religious sentiment of tribal communities in India some constitutional sanctions have been provided to these indigenous people in the social and habitation fields. Besides many constitutional provisions, marriage and right to have property and habitations are important to them for the protection of their culture and religions. Some social organisations constituted by elites from different ethnic groups have rightly understood their social, cultural and religious identities and organised their solidarity movements. They are at the verge of realising the political, social, religious and economic exploitations with which they have been victimised all the times by the outsiders whom they call 'Diku'.

Time has come for them to prove their identity and will no more be weaker sections of Indian societies. But whatever it may be, it is agreed with Eschmann<sup>27</sup> that, who is born in India (Hindustan) is a Hindu or a citizen of modern India and whatever may be his inner socio-cultural or religious identity, he will continue to articulate himself with other constituent of Indian society.

## II. Conclusion

In spite of the above analysis, the tribes think themselves to have separate identity. They have their own way of life, customs, thoughts, and religious practices. Their religion is different from any other religion. Tribes, now a days, demand that the Centre should recognize their religion as *Sarna*, otherwise they should be treated as 'tribes' only so as to say that 'Tribes are tribes', which is our third assumption. Though the proposition looks analytic, it is no doubt a meaningful sentence. Like others, the tribes have separate category, an autonomous social entity. This truth cannot be denied.

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