Theory, Culture and the History of Tribals
# THEORY, CULTURE AND THE HISTORY OF TRIBALS

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Block 5 Unit 1 will delve into the history of tribals that would also provide the background to their writings. Unit 1 would elaborate that the history of the tribals goes back to the pre-historical period though the documentation was neglected for centuries.

Unit 2 familiarizes us with the tribal world view with its concept and characteristics. It will give you a closer look at the attitude of tribal people towards life and the beliefs they hold.

Unit 3 discusses the concept of the tribal discourse as well as its significance. The unit also looks at the forms of tribal discourse and its features.

Unit 4 focuses on the aspects of nature and celebration in tribal life. The tribals take inspiration from nature and also the rituals performed on various occasions and are happy to celebrate life.

Unit 5 explains the important point made by G.N. Devy and Thingnam Kishan Singh in their essays. These writings are significant to understand the way of life of the tribals and their world view.

Unit 6 discusses the essays of Verrier Elwin and John Mac Dougall that explain the cultural past of the tribals and the tribal social system. These essays are significant in understanding their writings in this units that follow.
1.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this unit is to provide a historical background to the tribal writing. This will help students in understanding tribal literature better. We know that context and text are intimately related — the text is a product of the context in which it has been produced. The tribal writing should be viewed in context since it is a product of its time. It is also a historical product. It is necessary therefore to look at the time, the past and present that give rise to such writing. Tribal writing is not only a product of history, but it also recapitulates and reconstructs history, too. It is quite necessary thus to look into the past before we look at the writings about the tribal people. This unit will provide a background to the tribal writings available to us in the contemporary period.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

History has traditionally been understood as the story of kings and queens, their conquests and defeats. Common people had no significant place in such historical narratives. For instance, the tribal people have hardly been mentioned in mainstream historical narratives. Regarding them, we only find stray references here and there. Does that mean they had no contribution? Does that mean they didn’t exist around that time? We should tell ourselves that they existed and also contributed significantly to society but their achievements and contributions have not been valued. They were not written at all, because the dominant class made their history the accepted one. And the tribals? They were not equipped to write. Then, how did they retain their history? The answer is: through oral narratives. They expressed their experience in songs, stories, epics, ballads and lyrics. If we study them, we will find their history. Sadly, nothing much of these narratives has been collected and documented. Whatever sources are available, are to be studied so that we are able to foreground tribal history.
In recent years, the concept of history has undergone change. In the new situation, history also includes the life of the common people including women, dalits and tribals. Though there are very scanty historical accounts about tribal people, we will try to delve into their history by looking at different sources.

### 1.2 KEY QUESTIONS

i) What do you know about tribal history?

ii) Why is there scanty information about tribal past?

iii) Why is it necessary to reconstruct tribal history?

iv) What is the relationship between tribal history and literature?

### 1.3 HOW TO STUDY THIS STUDY MATERIAL?

Do you agree that the sources of tribal history are different from that of mainstream history?

As mentioned in the introduction, we need to depend on a number of unusual sources to learn about tribal history. For instance, we need to look at their oral traditions, namely their myths, legends, songs and folk tales. We also need to look at mainstream history which gives some information about tribal people. Before going through this unit, it will be useful to look at some narratives of the tribal people and historical accounts that do mention the tribal people. Then we may go through this unit in detail. The suggested readings will be of great help in this regard. The glossary will also help you understand certain concepts used in the unit.

### 1.4 UNDERSTANDING TRIBAL HISTORY

Tribal people form a major segment of the world population. They are found all over the world and called by different names such as primitive, tribal, indigenous aboriginal, natives and so on. India has a large number of tribal people. According to R.C. Verma, “They constitute about 8.08 percent of the total population. They would be about 6.78 crores out of the total population of 83.86 crores according to 1991 census” (1). The major tribes in India are the Gonds, the Bhils, the Santhals, the Oraons and the Minas. They live in different regions and speak their own languages. The state of Jharkhand, Chhatisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Bihar, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal and North Eastern regions have greater concentration of the tribal population. The Andaman and Nicobar islands are also inhabited by several tribes such as the Great Andamanese, Sentelese, Onges, Jawas Sompens, and so on.

The tribes are “the autochthonous people of India who are believed to be earliest settlers in Indian Peninsula” (Verma 1).

### 1.5 TRIBAL HISTORY: THE TRIBALS IN ANCIENT TIMES

Tribals are known by different names. One of the names for the tribal people is “adivasis.” It means the first settlers. It is said that their history goes back to the prehistoric period. Yet, due to lack of a written tradition, it is difficult for the historians to chronicle their past. As Nadeem Hasnain says, “it has now become an established
As mentioned, tribal history is dependent on the mainstream history. There are references to tribal people in different texts at different times. For instance, tribals have been mentioned in the ancient texts such as *The Ramayana* and *Mahabharata and Puranas* by different names. In those texts they have been described as dasyus, kiratas, ahiras, sabaras, nishadas and so on. In the *Ramayana* it has been mentioned about a Sabari woman offering fruits to Rama. In *Mahabharata* we come across mention of Ekalavya, who was a Bhil boy and who learned archery from Dronacharya and offered his thumb as “dakshina.” The other literary works such as *the Puranas* give description of the tribal people.

During the feudal period (400-1000) tribal areas were invaded by the non-tribals. The Mundas and the Nagas claimed to have fought on the side of the Kurus against the Pandavas. We also learn that Arjuna married Chitrangada, a Naga princess.

### 1.6 TRIBAL HISTORY: THE TRIBALS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

In the middle age, we find glimpses of the tribal people being attacked by the Turko-Afghan and Mughal rulers. With the advent of the Muslim invaders in the 11th and 12 centuries, some Rajputs who did not submit to the invaders and replaced tribal chiefs as kings away from their own place. In some areas, the tribal chiefs were forced to accede to the Moghul kingdoms. We find such instances in Chhotanagpur and North Eastern regions. “Apart from the Moghuls, the other groups who disturbed the tribal regions were the Persians, the Greeks, the Sakas, the Huns and other hordes of Nomadic invaders who came periodically from the Northwest” (Mahanand 26). Thus we may note that tribal history is full of instances of invasions. The tribals have been chased from one place to another by the dominant class in different phases of history.

### 1.7 TRIBAL HISTORY: THE TRIBALS IN THE COLONIAL PERIOD

We come across the colonial narratives in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They include autobiographies, travelogues, administrative documents, novels and short stories. Among the administrators who have written on the tribals are J.P. Mills, G.H. Hutton and E.T. Dalton. The other writers include John Masters, Verrier Elwin, Christopher Von Furer Haimendorf, Rudyard Kipling all these have written extensively about the tribal people in their report, diaries, short stories, poems and novels.

It is useful here to describe how the word “tribal” has been used for people living in the forest by the colonial administration. It was during the colonial period that the tribals were studied by scholars for the purpose of knowing and managing in the colonial context. A number of administrators and anthropologists who were engaged in studying the tribes provided classified information about the tribals and their population. In the Census Report of 1891, V. A. Bains, the Commissioner of Census, classified the castes according to their traditional occupation. Under the category of Agricultural and Pastoral castes; he formed a subheading called “Forest Tribes.” In the Census Report of 1901, they were classified as “Animists” and in 1911 as
“tribal animists” or people following tribal religion (Verma 5). In the Census Report of 1921 they were specified as “Hill and Forest Tribe” and in the 1931 census they were described as Primitive Tribe. The Government of India Act specified them as Backward Tribes. However, the Census Report of 1941 classified them as “Tribes” only. Thus the term “tribe” was used persistently by the British to the people in the forest. In an essay titled, “The Idea of Tribe in Indian Scene” Jagannath Pathy explores the origin and policies of using the term. He states that before India was colonized, there was no equivalent indigenous word for the English term “tribe”. Later some tribes were categorized Scheduled Tribes by the Indian Constitution.

1.8 TRIBAL HISTORY: THE CONTEMPORARY TIMES

Among the Indian historians we have scholars such as R.C. Verma, Ramachandra Guha, Meena Ramakrishna, K.S. Singh, L.P. Vidyarthi, Dilip Desouza, G. N. Devy among others who have written extensively on tribal people and their predicament. Their works will be of valuable information.

Apart from these accounts the tribals have a rich resource of the oral tradition. They include songs, folktales, myths, legends, ballad, and epics. They also bear their historical accounts. There have been attempts to compile and document these different narratives by many writers such as G. N. Devy, Randhir Khare, Sitakanta Mahapatra, Ramanika Gupta and others.

1.9 THE INTERFACE BETWEEN TRIBAL HISTORY AND TRIBAL LITERATURE

The historical events of which we made mention in the previous pages have tremendous impact on writers. Many creative writers have used historical events and infused them in their writings. It is interesting to see how Mahasweta Devi has fused tribal history into fiction. We can take three of her novels namely (In the Name of Birthday), Aranyer Adhikar (Rights over the Forests) and Choti Munda ebang Tar Tir (Choti Munda and His Arrow) to illustrate this point. The first novel is available in Bangla and Hindi but is yet to be translated into English. The second novel, Aranyer Adhikar has been translated into many Indian languages but is yet to be translated into English. Her novel Sal Girar Dake or In the Name of Birthday was published in Bangla in 1984 and it is based on a Tribal (Santhal) Revolt that took place in the 18th century in Chotanagpur region. She depicts how the Santhals resisted the invasion of the East India Company. The novel Aranyer Adhikar (1977) is based on Birsa Munda’s Movement for tribal emancipation. Mahasweta Devi has used K.S. Singh’s historical account Dust, Storm and Hanging Mist which was given a different title as Birsa Munda and His Movement 1874-1901 as the source for her novel. She uses an old Munda as the narrator, and tells the history of the tribal people to younger generation. In this novel we find a glimpse of Birsa’s revolt against the British. Mahasweta Devi’s Choti Munda ebang Tar Tir (1980) or Choti Munda and His Arrow is also based on another Tribal Movement known as Tilka Majhi Movement. It deals with a tribal hero called Chotti Munda who leads the revolution against the money lenders and contractors who exploit the tribals even after Independence despite laws meant to safeguard the tribal people. The three tribal movements have been documented by historians like K. S. Singh and A.R. N. Srivatsava as historical accounts. Mahasweta Devi sees these sources and artistically
Tribal World View

infuses them into her fiction. Apart from these, she also brings in mythical characters such as Raktabija and the tribal warriors of Kurukshetra to weave them in her fiction. Her recently published novel After Kurukshetra lays bare the predicament of the tribal warriors.

In the recent years, tribals have started writing about their own conditions and issues. We have writers like Laxman Gaikwad who are engaged in reconstructing the tribal past through their autobiographical narratives. Gaikwad in his autobiographical novel Uchalya (The Branded) brings to the fore the issue of Denotified tribes. He also gives a vivid picture of the life of the people who were branded by the British during the colonial regime. Thus, we can understand how historical accounts on tribal history may help us grasp the contemporary writings of the tribal people.

Even today poets like Bhujang Mesram invoke Birsa Munda in their poems:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Birsa, you have to come,} \\
\text{You have to come from somewhere} \\
\text{A sickle for grass, an axe for wood} \\
\text{No east west south north matter} \\
\text{Come from somewhere my Birsa} \\
\text{As the breeze in the fields...} \\
\text{People await, await your coming (Mahanand 28).}
\end{align*}\]

1.10 LET US SUM UP

- This unit begins by making a place for tribal history in the midst of dominant history. We have had for a long time.
- It argues that the concept of history has undergone change. Now history is not confined to the story of kings, queens, and the feudal lords, but is also a story of the marginals such as dalits, tribals and women.
- It also explains that history does not mean past records of archival details, but also fiction, folklore and forms of oral narratives.
- It talks about the importance of documenting tribal past as it has been neglected for centuries.
- It also explains how historical narratives are important in understanding contemporary writings of the margins as many writers use them in their creative endeavour.

1.11 GLOSSARY

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<tr>
<th>Dominant Class</th>
<th>The upper sections (class) of society</th>
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<td>Indigenous people</td>
<td>people having particular ties to a particular area and cultural and historical distinctness. In the Indian context, the tribal people are also called indigenous.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nomadic</td>
<td>people who don’t reside in a particular place but wander from one place to another for livelihood. Some tribal communities in India are included in this category.</td>
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Colonial narratives: Narratives written by colonial administrators, scholars and writers.

Animists: people who believe in the existence of spiritual beings that inhabit in natural objects like animals, trees, and so on.

1.12 QUESTIONS

1) What is the dominant concept of history?
2) How do you define tribal people?
3) Why is tribal history relevant today?
4) What kind of impact does history have on literature?
5) How do writers use history in their writings?

1.13 SUGGESTED READINGS


UNIT 2 TRIBAL WORLD VIEW

Structure
2.0 Objectives
2.1 Introduction
2.2 Key Questions
2.3 How to Study this Study Material?
2.4 Tribal World View: Concept and Characteristics
2.5 The Place of Myths, Rituals, Signs, Songs and Sayings
   2.5.1 Features of Tribal World View
2.6 What does the Tribal Life Offer to the Non-tribal World?
2.7 Let Us Sum Up
2.8 Glossary
2.9 Questions
2.10 Suggested Readings

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will have a closer look at tribal world view. We will discuss different features of the tribal world view and stress how people of these significant communities are distinct, self-sufficient and independent. The discussion will also provide an idea of their relationship with others, the environment in which they live and the beliefs they hold. As a whole this unit will acquaint the reader with the feeling and attitude of tribal people towards their life.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

What do we mean by world view?
‘World view,’ according to the Oxford Dictionary means a person’s thinking and understanding of life. It refers to two things: (a) thought and attitude of a person at the individual level; and (b) the collective level—What a person thinks about oneself and what he/she thinks about others. We shall focus our discussion on these points to understand tribal world view. Thinking about one self is a big question. It has a larger philosophical meaning. However, in our context, it can mean how a tribal person defines himself/herself. A tribal person looks at himself/herself as a member of a larger community. He/She is generally, content and happy in life. Their world is limited and the needs are also limited. They are not greedy and do not exploit others for their personal gain. They are independent and love freedom. This is evident from the Gond’s (one of the tribes) idea of heaven and hell. The Gond’s idea of heaven is “miles of forest without any forest guards, and their idea of hell is miles and miles of forest without any mohua trees” (Elwin, Baiga 58). The above statement proves that the tribal person loves freedom and does not like restrictions from others. Apart from their love for freedom, they are also honest, and straightforward.

How does an individual relate to others including their community, environment and the spiritual world? The tribal people have a strong sense of community life. They are intimately related to one another and believe in sharing. Verrier Elwin
gives an instance of this aspect in one of his novels *Phulmat of the Hills*. He says that one day the villagers go to get wild mangoes from the jungle, and at the end of the day, “half the village was sucking mangoes” (Elwin, *Phulmat* 91-102). Apart from their community life they are connected to nature. They have filial relationship with trees, animals and other living beings. They are also connected to spirits of their ancestors with whom they interact and seek support and guidance from them in important matters of their life.

### 2.2 Key Questions

a) What does one mean by the tribal world view?

b) How is tribal world view distinct? How the myths, rituals, signs, symbols and sayings contribute to the tribal world view?

c) What is the relevance of tribal world view to the present-day world?

d) Is the tribal world view static?

### 2.3 How to Study This Material?

a) Before going further in this unit, it will be beneficial for you to observe some paintings, and have a look at the arts and crafts of the tribal people in addition to reading any book on tribal people and the tribal discourse and thought. If you can read their songs and stories, please do. If you watch a film on tribal life such as *Aakrosh* or *Mrigaya*, it will be easier for you to understand this unit and the points made here.

b) Consult an encyclopedia or search the Net to find the meaning of World View.

c) Try to identify the features of the tribal world view in the introduction. Then read the other parts and consult the books suggested below.

### 2.4 Concepts and Characteristics

We have discussed in the introduction, world view means thinking, and attitude of a person to oneself and towards others. When we say attitude towards oneself, we mean the way in which one places oneself as an individual. A tribal person thinks he is part of a community that is larger and these social and political institutions are immensely powerful. He/She thinks also that they are not all powerful but there is a supreme power which supervises the well-being of all. This can be *Thakur Deo*, *Dhartimata* or *Mahapuru*. Along with this Supreme Being, there are spirits of the ancestors around him/her who guide, counsel and protect members of the tribe. A tribal person, for this reason, is not anxious, depressed, exploitative and mean but is content, secure, and self-sufficient.

Another aspect of world view is relationship of a person with others, their environment and the supernatural. As we have already observed, tribal people live a community-based life. Hence, they are intimately related to other people in society. They may include their family members (parents and siblings), neighbours, villagers, elders, and so on. Parents are taken care of in their old age. If some one neglects his/her parents, the elders of the village and social organizations counsel the person. They never think that it is the private matter of the family. We find not only sharing but cooperation among tribal communities. In case of need and adversity, they come forward to help one another and are bound by community rules. Verrier Elwin states “community rules are more important than rules of the government” (133). There is
a saying among the tribal people that “the village court is superior to the high court.” The villagers respect the village elder and the head of the community. Severe punishment is pronounced for breaking community rules. The village council also plays an important role in their social and political life.

Apart from their relationship with other individuals of family and community, tribal people are also related to spirits of their ancestors. They believe in the existence of these spirits and seek their counsel at the time of need. They also make effort to keep the spirits satisfied. That way, the tribals feel protected and secured. Apart from these spiritual beings, the tribals believe in their presiding deities and other supernatural powers and mythological figures. Verrier Elwin rightly says that tribals are “possessed by their mythology” (56). It is to be added that the totems, signs and symbols also are respected as they learn about them from their myths and they are related to their clan, past or belief system. They make icons to satisfy the ancestors. Elwin describes that “before the ikons were made the ancestors used to give people a great deal of trouble” (183).

Festivals, arts and crafts, songs and dance play an important role in their life. The Karma dance of the Gond is a precious occasion when they invoke the goddess to protect their crops from insects. The practice also connects them to nature as they sing and dance around the karam tree celebrating the occasion. Songs are there to redeem their culture from mediocrity. Elwin describes the artistic nature of tribal people in several places by narrating their art and craft, motifs in paintings, and so on. This is how he talks about their poetic bent of mind, “And I soon found… among these gentle and romantic tribal people, poetry jumps out at you. It is there every where, in their eyes, on their lips, even in some of their actions” (Elwin, The Tribal World 53). He further mentions, “I found the people talking poetry . An old woman speaks of fire as a flower blossoming on a dry tree of an umbrella as a peacock with one leg. Children playing round their fire at night ask each other riddles which are sometimes real poems” (53).

The tribal people are also related to their environment including trees, birds and animals. They have a filial relationship with them. Many trees, birds and animals figure in their myths. Hence they respect them and do not destroy them. That’s how their belief system helps to preserve trees and forests. They not only regard the forest as their Mother or Dharti Mata but also love the forest with passionate devotion. It is to them the forest of joy, the forest of sweet desire. It is the scene of the early romances of their childhood, the arena in which they engage upon their most heroic struggles with nature” (Elwin, The Tribal World 115). They are not afraid of animals, even tigers. Verrier Elwin describes how he saw a tiger when he was travelling with a Baiga. “He was scared as it was an open car. But the Baiga who sat near him was cool and started his magic spell. Later he told about a man who could play with these tigers” (59). They generally draw a lot of lessons for their life from sayings, proverbs and songs.

Tribal people are not only cooperative but affectionate, helpful and hospitable. Elwin shares his experience as to how they helped him to reach a hospital when he was ill. He says, “Once in Patangarh I developed a very large septic boil which I attempted to cure by some antibiotic tablets or Milk of Magnesia which they resembled in size, so they did not do very much good and I got steadily worse, until I was in acute pain and fever. It was the height of the rains, no motor transport was possible and I had to be carried thirty two miles to a place where I could get a car to take me another ninety miles to the nearest hospital. I shall never forget the cheer and
tenderness of the men who carried me in a sort of litter through pouring rain and partly by night. We had to cross flooded rivers into which my bearers plunged up to the neck, raising my litter above their heads to keep me dry. When I ultimately reached the hospital I was told that if I had delayed even a few hours I should have developed generalized blood poisoning, but an immediate operation put me right. Yet it was my tribal friends who saved me” (Elwin, *The Tribal* 125). You might have seen in films or read in books about the helpful nature of tribal people. Elwin also recalls and says, “Around this house and other houses in which we lived there was a strong atmosphere of affection”(124). The tribal people’s sense of cooperation and commitment to community has been described by Elwin in following terms, “But inspite of the realm of fantasy in which they lived, these women are practical and devoted servants of their tribe. They were always ready to hasten to minister to the sick and console the sorrowful (Elwin, *The Tribal World* 192).

If we look at their individual characteristics they are gentle, have no jealousy, no individual attachment to property and personal possessions and have special civic and social instincts. They are gentle and kind in their attitude.

### 2.5 **THE PLACE OF MYTHS, RITUALS, SIGNS AND SAYINGS**

Myth, rituals, signs, songs and sayings—all of these play an important role in the life of the tribals. Myth, as Elwin mentions, plays a bigger role than social institutions and reminds them of their role and place on the earth. Elwin points out, “Myth does far more than explain the Baiga’s institutions; it is their motive power and their authorization. When a Baiga is summoned to control a man-eating tiger, he faces this dangerous task with more courage because he knows that the duty has been his from the beginning. When he comes to perform magic to Dhartimata and Thakur Deo on behalf of Gond or fellow Baiga cultivators, he recites the myth of the creation of the world and reminds his hearers of the unique quality that his tribe had in it. When he is overwhelmed by his own poverty, he comforts himself and his family by reminding them that to be poor and to live close to the earth was the voluntary choice of his great ancestor, their glory and not their shame” (216-217). This is something all of us must emulate in the present times since the present generations are engulfed by greed and exploitation.

Tribal life is completely bound by religion the members of the tribe believe in. Elwin describes Saora life as follows, “Saora life was completely dominated by their religion. Beyond and around this life and this visible world is an unseen realm of vital reality, peopled by a host of spirits whose activities impinge on normal existence at every turn. The ghosts live in an underworld, which is something like the world of our own, but everything is on a Lilliputian scale. The houses are very small; the clouds lie low upon the land; it is always twilight under the infernal moon. The ghosts live a sad half life, ill fed and poorly clad, until they themselves die again and, if they are created in proper form, vanish from the misery of existence for ever” (Elwin, *The Tribal World* 191-192).

The tribals believe in myths which tell the story of their past origins and ancestors. Almost each clan is informed about their past through myths. Myths also tell them about many other things—giving them directions in life. They tell about their story of origin and totems. The tribals respect their totems. Totem is a being, object or symbol representing an animal or plant that serves as an emblem of a tribe or a clan,
According to a Muria myth the Murias consider the *dandai* fish as their totem (Elwin, *Selected*, 115). Out of respect they don’t kill the fish but have a lot of veneration for it. Each clan has its totems. It could be an animal, bird or an object. Another clan may consider cobra as their totem.

Rituals show their discipline and devotion towards traditions. Rituals not only offer them psychological satisfaction but also enhance a sense of renewal in life. The signs portrayed in their wall paintings show their creativity and specific style of art. The songs and sayings not only add meaning to their life but educate them about different aspects of existence.

Happiness is another quality of the tribal people. They are happy in their life. The Gond folksong, for instance, idealizes the concept of happiness in the following terms:

> “In all the world a village is the place for happiness  
> In every house are ploughs and bullocks  
> And every one goes farming” (Elwin, *The Tribal World*, 139).

The tribal people celebrate life and beauty in living. Nari Rustamji felt about the tribal people in the following manner: “Much of the beauty of living still survives in these remote and distant hills, where dance and song are a vital part of everyday living, where people speak and think freely without fear or restrain” (qtd. in Elwin, *The Tribal*, 296).

### 2.5.1 Features of Tribal World View

We can list the features of tribal world view in the following manner:

- a) Tribals are self contented, peaceful, righteous and free from inhibitions, not individualistic, or ridden with jealousy.
- b) They have a strong sense of community life which makes them closely related to other members of the community.
- c) They are also closely related to Nature. They consider Nature as their Mother. They have filial relationship with trees, animals, rivers and mountains—elements of Nature.
- d) They believe in the spirit of their ancestors and take counsel and guidance from them. They also believe in the supernatural elements like their presiding deities.
- e) Their myths, songs, signs and symbols reflect their origin, creativity as well as belief system.
- f) Their world view is not a static subject but fluid. It changes over a period of time. It also varies from tribe to tribe.

### 2.6 WHAT DOES THE TRIBAL LIFE OFFER TO THE NON-TRIBAL WORLD?

This is a very interesting question. We know that the contemporary world dominated by non-tribal population lacks many of the good things the tribal people possess. Firstly, the contemporary world has become individualistic, exploitative and greedy.
We are insensitive to others, exploit others and nature and have become self-centred. Tribal world views such as cooperation, contentment and the collective spirit trait should be emulated by the contemporary world.

We are becoming more and more individualistic forgetting cooperation and good aspects of community life. The tribal view of life which is based on community and cooperative life offers us lessons to lead a life of cooperation.

We are distancing ourselves from Nature. Not only that, we are using it very roughly. As a result, there are natural calamities like Tsunami, floods and other disastrous events. Deforestation causes drought and many land areas become deserts. Melting of the snow occurs. Sea water level may go up. All these are negative effects of exploiting nature. Respect for nature and the spirit to protect it is something we learn from the tribal world view.

Finally, the tribal belief in the supernatural makes them less anxious, stressed and depressed.

Finally, It must be stated that the tribal world view is not a static concept. It is subject to change from time to time and place to place. It is also not a homogenous concept meaning all tribals having the same world view. You might have observed that we have gleaned evidences from different tribal groups such as Gond, Baiga, Saora and so on.

2.7 LET US SUM UP

- World view in general is defined as a person’s thinking and understanding of life keeping in view how people are related to others including individuals and environment
- Tribal people consider themselves as part of this larger world, particularly of Nature. They are happy and self-contented. They are non-exploitative, non-individualistic and have a strong sense of community and cooperation. They are affectionate and hospitable.
- They are tradition bound; believe in their totems, ancestors and spirits.
- Their world view is a message to others particularly when modern societies are moving away from community based life and from nature.
- The tribal world view is not static, instead it is dynamic marked by innocent curiosity.

2.8 GLOSSARY

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<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>World View</td>
<td>A person’s way of thinking about and understanding life which depends on his/her beliefs and attitudes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akrosh</td>
<td>A Hindi Film by Govind Nihalani depicting exploitation of tribal people. Important actors in the films were Om Puri, Smita Patil, and Naseeruddin Shah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrigaya</td>
<td>A film by Mrinal Sen depicting tribal life during British rule.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Thakur Deo and Dharti: supreme deities of the Baiga.

Mata Totem: An object, or symbol representing an animal or plant that serves as an emblem of a group of people such as clan or family reminding them of their ancestry.

2.9 QUESTIONS

a) What do you understand by World View? What are the basic features of the tribal world view?
b) How does a tribal individual understand himself/herself?
c) How does a tribal person relate to others?
d) What is the attitude of a tribal towards Nature?
e) What do you understand by totem? Explain it with a few examples.
f) What is the role of myth in tribal belief system?
g) Tribal world view is not static and homogenous. Explain.

2.10 SUGGESTED READINGS


Singh, Kumar Suresh. Ed. The Tribal Situation in India. Shimla: IIAS, 1972
UNIT 3   TRIBAL DISCOURSE

Structure
3.0  Objectives
3.1  Introduction
3.2  Key Issues to be Discussed in this Unit
3.3  How to Study this Study Material?
3.4  Tribal Discourse- the Concept
3.5  Forms of Tribal Discourse
3.6  Features of Tribal Discourse
3.7  Significance of Tribal Discourse
3.8  Let us Sum Up
3.9  Glossary
3.10 Questions
3.11 Suggested Readings

3.0  OBJECTIVES
The objectives of this Unit are to understand the concept of discourse in general and tribal discourse in particular terms. One of the objectives is to sensitize students about different forms of tribal discourse. The unit also talks about the relevance of the tribal discourse.

3.1  INTRODUCTION
The tribal discourse deals with information, communication and intellectual resources of the tribal people. It is a vast area of knowledge concerning society, culture, thought, polity, economy, language, literature and history of the tribal people. We have a wealth of information, about the mentioned areas that should be disseminated and shared.

3.2  KEY ISSUES TO BE DISCUSSED IN THIS UNIT
We shall address here the following areas:

a)  The term discourse
b)  The identity of the tribal people and the specific way in which tribal discourse is to be interpreted.
c)  The analysis of the tribal discourse.

3.3  HOW TO STUDY THIS MATERIAL?
a)  We suggest that you go through the materials you already have, particularly in Units 1 and 2 of Block 5. These will give you the basic idea about tribal history, life and culture.

b)  Ask yourself-(i) what do you know about the India tribes? (ii) Make a list of points you may learn from this Unit. These will later form a background to
Tribal Discourse

your approach needed for examining and exploring the issues that the tribal face in their day –to-day living.

c) Read through this unit and see if your ideas about the Indian tribes are correct. The information available from other sources may be clubbed with what you get from this unit.

d) After going through the Unit, look at the points you had made before reading and compare whether your guesses were right.

e) Make a comparison between Dalit discourse and tribal discourse.

f) Read more about discourse from Wikipedia, encyclopedia and other sources.

3.4 TRIBAL DISCOURSE- THE CONCEPT

The word discourse comes from the Latin word “discursus” meaning running to and fro. It also means the written and spoken communication. It means intellectual inquiry. In Humanities and Social Sciences, the term is used to describe a formal way of thinking that can be expressed through language. Discourse is linked with different aspects of human life. From that point of view, we can relate discourse to different aspects of tribal life. For instance, if we look at the economic aspect of tribal life, we may relate our thoughts, discussions and communications with the productivity of the tribals. We also need to see the thoughts; discussions and communications the tribal people have about their economic aspect. This will be regarded as economic discourse of the tribal people.

In the same way, we try to think of philosophical discourse of the tribal people, and take into consideration their world view and attitude towards life.

3.5 FORMS OF TRIBAL DISCOURSE

Tribal discourse with regard to History

Historical knowledge makes us aware of our past, our origin and development as a collective entity. We learn about our heritage, society, economic and political situations through history. If we look at the tribal history, we may find it to be a history of erasure and displacement. The mainstream historical account says very little about these people. Tribal people themselves have no written history. But we see that they possess enormous resources about their past in oral forms. Thus we may study oral literature and through it come to know that they had a rich and eventful past. We know that they are the original inhabitants of India and for this reason they are called adivasis. As a result of invasion and war waged against them by organized powerful groups, they were dispersed to remote parts and became forest dwellers, staying away from the so-called civilization. We also come to know that they were once rulers of some kingdoms. For instance, the Kingdom Gondwana in middle India was ruled by the Gond kings. There were many tribal chiefs and kings in different parts of India in the ancient period. The tribal people were driven away by outsiders to the remote areas. They resisted such invasions through resistant movements but were eventually suppressed. Even history of these movements was suppressed because of which the sense of the past got obliterated from their memory. Since they were not literate, they did not write their history. The mainstream history written about them was presented in a distorted way. Take for example, their fight against the British for preserving their land and forests. The British described them
as criminals. But in reality, it was the British government which looted their resources! This is how history is used to misrepresent people. Such an understanding will help us to look at history in a different manner. If we look at the historical situation from a tribal point of view, we will see a shift in our attitude. Tribal discourse of history thus helps us to look at history from the tribal point of view. Out of this will finally emerge the tribal discourse. In the same way we need to look at political discourse.

**Political Discourse**

We see that tribal history is embedded in the oral traditions of the tribal people. The political system of tribal people is based on their traditional ethos. It is worth going to a tribal village to observe how their political system works, and the hierarchy that exits there. First of all we need to understand their traditional political institutions. If we observe their traditional political structure, we would find that they have a leader of their community who is called raja. For instance the Oraon tribe of a particular region has their community leader who is called Oraon Raja. Then at the local (village) level, they have a Chief. This is the traditional structure. The Raja and the Chief traditionally decide matters related to their tribe at the community and the village levels respectively. They are traditional heads. But these communities are not free from modern political system. They have their local Sarpanchs, M.L.As, M.Ps and elected leaders. So the tribal people are governed by two systems. It would be interesting to see how these two are related and how they function. It has been of interest to scholars as to how the tribal communities relate themselves to the Indian State and how has the State been treating these communities. We might have heard a lot about the debate of Isolation and Assimilation, Prime Minister Nehru’s *Panchsheel* and so on. All these matters constitute the political discourse with regard to the tribal people. We might observe from this discussion that political and social domains are intimately related. Hence let us go to the social domain.

**Social Discourse**

In order to understand social discourse of the tribal people, we need to understand the different aspects of their social institutions like family, clan, community among others. We also need to know about how these are related to one another. We should also have some idea about their social customs like marriage and the concept of gender relations among these people. For example many tribal communities do not have dowry system. In fact the groom has to pay the bride -price. If he is not able to pay it, he has to work in his in-law’s place. In some tribal communities, the woman enjoys more freedom. In Bonda community, for instance, the bride is about ten year older to the groom. The tribal discourse constitutes all these aspects of their life. Social and cultural discourses are interrelated. Let us discuss the cultural discourse.

**Cultural discourse**

Culture is a complex term. A single definition of the term cannot include its varied aspects. In a simple way, we can understand it as a way of life. Culture means the way people earn their livelihood, the way they dress, conduct themselves, and so on. It may also include their attitude towards themselves and others. Culture also includes rituals, festivals, songs, dance, and forms of entertainment, art, crafts, festivals, languages, literature and traditions. The tribal communities have a rich reservoir of cultural resources. One needs to understand these forms. Each of these forms of culture and cultural practices are to be studied. There are discussions and communications on these. This constitutes the cultural discourse of the tribal people.
Gender discourse

In the discussion on social discourse, we talked about marriage as a social institution. Gender discourse includes subjects on how men and women are related in a tribal community. What is the place of woman in the community and family? What are the performative roles women play in family and community? A lot of social scientists and writers have studied these aspects of tribal life and written on them. These writings and narratives from the community would constitute the gender discourse of the tribal people.

These are a few aspects of tribal life and there are writings and discussions available on these. These aspects together would be termed as Tribal discourse. It may be produced by the tribals or by others on the tribes. For understanding tribal narratives these will provide us a background. One may ask, Isn’t tribal writing or literature part of tribal discourse?

One may say yes. It may constitute a part of tribal discourse, but since it is linked with the above mentioned aspects, we need to use them as background to understand tribal literature or writing.

Creative Writing

In the field of creative writing, tribal people have been used as subjects by a number of writers. We can start from the oral narratives or from our epics the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Creative writers like Verrier Elwin, John Masters, Rudyard Kipling who had produced colonial narratives have left behind a wealth of resources on the tribal people. We have Indian English writers like Arun Joshi, Kamala Markandaya, Gita Mehta who have differently dealt with this theme. In Indian languages writers like Gopinath Mohanty, Shivarama Karanth, and Mahasweta Devi have written about the tribal people. There are many tribal writers like Ram Dayal Munda, Grace Kujur, Mahadev Toppo, Rose Kerketta, in Jharkhand who have been writing about their own life. The writers from Kerala - C.K. Janu and Narayanan have contributed to tribal discourse through their narratives. In the North East, we have writers like Rongbong Terang, Estherine Iralu, Temsula Ao, Dorje and others who have produced a world of literature on the life of their own people.

These works would be regarded as tribal discourse in creative writing.

Literary Criticism

Many scholars and critics have also responded to works written by tribal writers. Tribal literature has become an important area for research and scholarship in the recent years. It is important to gather a data base on these works. Prolific writers on tribal issues include Ganesh Devy; Mahasweta Devy; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak who has written extensively on literature on the tribal people. Anand Mahanand’s *Tribal Literature in India* (2005) and *Representations of Tribal India in Fiction* (2010) also deal with criticism on the writings of these creative writers.

Films and Visual Discourse

It is not that only oral and written narratives constitute discourse. Discourse may also include films and visual narratives. There are many films produced on tribal people in Indian languages. It will be interesting to talk about films on tribal people in our own languages. The popular films on the tribals include Mrinal Sen’s *Mrigaya*, Govind Nilhani’s *Aakrosh*, Satyajit Ray’s *Agantuk* and *Aranyer Din Ratri*. There
are also visual media such as paintings, advertisements and so on that speak about the life of the tribal people.

### 3.6 FEATURES OF TRIBAL DISCOURSE

**a) An Emerging Discourse:** Unlike other discourses, tribal discourse is relatively new and still in the process of forming itself. The tribal point of view has for long been silenced. The dominant discourse has often presented its own version of tribal life which has caused much harm to the way the tribals are perceived today. However, with change of time and with the education and consciousness of tribal people a new trend has emerged. With the tribals raising their voice against prejudice in literary writing, sociological and political writings, in protest songs on environment, against exploitation, against deforestation, and so on it has caught the attention of the country’s centre. Though it has been there in the forms of protest movements, with collective consciousness and networking through electronic media, it has become quite visible today.

**b) Tribal discourse is forward looking:** Tribal discourse picks up the concerns of the tribal people pertinent to the present time. Tribal discourse, no doubt revisits the past, but it also looks towards the future. Tribal people have their own history, their heroes, legends, traditions, and myths. All these get emphasized tribal discourse. At the same time, they are also concerned about their future and future generations. So they write about their future. Tribal discourse has remained relatively an unexplored area of research and study hence it has much scope in future.

**c) It is about inclusive growth:** Tribal discourse is concerned with development of the tribal people who constitute one of the marginalized and neglected sections of society. If adequate attention is paid to their problems concerning education, social upliftment, and economic development, this will contribute to inclusive growth of our nation as well as the world. Tribal discourse on these aspects can further the cause of inclusive growth. Tribal discourse can positively impact the government’s policy on tribal education.

**d) It leads to sustainable development:** The western model of development stands in contrast to the traditional ways of living. It has to a large extent destroyed ecology and natural environment and snatched away people’s traditional means of livelihood. Though it gives immediate prosperity, it is for a short span of time. For instance, rapid industrialization in certain areas has given employment, but it has caused damage to the local environment. It has caused air, water and earth pollution. The water level has gone down and there is no adequate water supply. Due to deforestation and ecological destruction, people have lost their traditional livelihood. This is an example of rapid development against sustainable development. Tribal discourse emphasizes sustainable development, a development that would be self-sufficient for the local community and would be able to regenerate resources. This is evident from the writings of tribal authors and authors who empathize with tribal issues.

**e) It is indigenous and rooted in our life and surrounding:** Tribal discourse comes from local experience. It is not based on any extraneous theory but emanates from the experience and expertise of the tribal people. Be it...
sociological discourse, economic analysis or creative writing, they emanate from the experience of the tribal people.

g) **Tribal discourse is primarily collective:** A major portion of tribal discourse is in oral narratives. Most of these are in folk forms. These forms of knowledge are based on collective memory and contribution. However, the written discourse is based on individual authorship/ownership. Even autobiographical writings of the tribal writers talk about their communities.

### 3.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF TRIBAL DISCOURSE

One may ask what is the significance of tribal discourse? We may answer the question in the following manner. The primary significance is that it had been marginalized for centuries in spite of its eventful past and richness and it has to be highlighted only in the recent times. We know that the tribal people of India have rich historical and cultural traditions. Their history is as old as human civilization. Their culture is varied and rich. Their social customs, outlook, philosophy, knowledge systems are valuable. However, these forms of knowledge and cultural practices are considered inferior. They are marginalized by the dominant systems. For instance, the tribal people fought many battles against the British. There are several tribal movements present in the collective memory of the community. But our mainstream history hardly records their contribution. By suppressing these forms and practices the dominant culture makes the tribal people dispossessed and inferior. If the achievements of the tribal community are highlighted the tribal people will feel empowered and rich. They will get back their social rights. The second point is that these discourses and values are not affected by modernized and westernized processes and have been preserved and retained by the people. Hence they are precious and may help in the welfare of the present humankind. For instance, tribal medicine may help to cure many diseases that are not curable by allopathic medicine. There are many social and cultural practices the mainstream society can learn from the tribal community. For instance, community based life, respect for our environment, dowry-free marriage and so on. Tribal discourse can offer so much to the so called mainstream world.

Even though we forget about superiority and inferiority of culture and cultural practices, exploration in the field of tribal discourse will pave way for dialogue among different cultures. This dialogue will also facilitate inter-disciplinary studies.

Tribal discourse is also significant as they are unique and valuable resources. Just like tribal medicine, tribal oral narratives, for instance are rare and aesthetically pleasant and educative. They have influenced many great writers such as Mahasweta Devi and Girish Karnard. They are also a valuable source of knowledge. Even the creative writing produced by the contemporary writers are unique forms of expression.

Let us consider the following questions to understand the above mentioned points in detail.

### 3.8 LET US SUM UP

i) Discourse concerns with communication, system of knowledge and ideology.

ii) Tribal discourse deals with different domains of tribal life which include language, literature, culture, society and history
iii) It is an emerging field, with collective consciousness

iv) Tribal discourse has greatly contributed to research and knowledge generation vis-à-vis the tribal community that had been neglected for a long time. It has helped in reconstructing tribal past and has further helped us understand different aspects of tribal life, culture and heritage.

### 3.9 GLOSSARY

**Discourse**: The word discourse comes from the Latin word “discursus” meaning running to and fro. It also means written and spoken communication. It can mean intellectual inquiry. In Humanities and Social Sciences the term is used to describe a formal way of thinking that can be expressed through language.

**Tribe**: Roughly it means an ethnic group organized largely on kinship. In Indian context, tribe is referred to the tribal people who are also known as *divasis*.

**Sustainable development**: A mode of development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

**Indigenous people**: This term broadly refers to people of ethnic minority with a distinct culture with common ancestry with non-dominant form of society.

### 3.10 QUESTIONS

i) What do you understand by the term “discourse”? What is tribal discourse?

ii) Why is tribal discourse important in our time?

### 3.11 SUGGESTED READINGS


*Tribal Literature in India*. Hyderabad; CIEFL, 2005.


UNIT 4  NATURE AND CELEBRATION IN TRIBAL LIFE

Structure
4.0 Objectives
4.1 Nature as a Rescuer
4.2 The Poet-subject and the Surrounding World
4.3 Absence of Power Structure in Tribal Community
4.4 Spontaneity and Variety in Tribal Life
4.5 Openness and Distinctness in the Tribal Community
4.6 Unity of Nature and Humans
4.7 Harmony and Peace as the Core of Tribal Life
4.8 Let Us Sum Up
4.9 Questions
4.10 Suggested Readings

4.0 OBJECTIVES

We consider in this unit aspects of nature and celebration that are reflected in the life and behaviour of the tribal community. It is observed that the tribal has a close organic association with nature. S/he is born in nature, looks at it on a daily basis as no other in the rest of the country, and relates to it as if one is a part of it. On the other side, nature has its different phases. It shows itself in rain, sunshine, clouds, streams and rivers, animals and birds, various sounds and colours. The tribal changes his/her mood in accordance with all these, believing that all these are its guides protectors, and well-wishers. Nature has also its joyous aspects, such as breeze, storm, flowers, singing of birds, roar of lions, etc. The tribal takes inspiration from these as well as from the rituals performed on various occasions in life because of which he becomes happy and therefore celebrates. These are taken up in some detail in this unit.

4.1 NATURE AS A RESCUER

In the beginning, let us have a look at the lines from a poem by Temsula Ao “Soul Bird.” The poem is from the point of view of a girl child whose vision is constructed by the environment surrounding her. At one stage, she loses her mother and she misses her. There is no way she can come to terms with her pain. The issue is who or what will rescue her in this sad situation. The lines go as follows:

She slowly turns heavenwards
As her red-rimmed eyes
Settle on the circling silhouette,
And then with a sudden
Unseemly whoop
She draws me closer
Whispering in my ear,
First, we might take a note of the distance between the girl and her companion with “red-rimmed” eyes. The companion is senior in age, has known the ways of the world and the bigger surroundings of nature where exist centres of peace and stability. The dramatized situation has participants such as the young girl, her senior companion, the figure of the bird in the sky and, finally the poet-presenter of the scene. For reason of this multiplicity of angles, there is a complex of discourses in the poem. Quite subtly, the lines are woven together to chart the link between the community existence and nature. The poet Ao’s insistence is on the equation of the child with the bird. This is to be highlighted.

The message of this poem is simple, and therefore extremely problematic. It is simple since the bird as symbol of the mother flies away to leave the daughter in hands of the older woman who will protect her and take her home to settle down there. But the problematic part is that in the modern world of technology and tortuous economic and social interests that work to the disadvantage of the tribal community, going home is not easy. The “home” has its own aspects of deprivation and helplessness. Does the tribal have a home in the existing circumstance? Also, even if nature saved the child, that would be a temporary rescue act. This problematic, difficult to comprehend, renders the poem significant.

From here, we move to the poet Temsula Ao, a middle class intellectual and a sympathetic perceiver of the phenomenon. The sympathy has led her to state that the tribal may stay protected only in the imagination but in the concrete reality of the socio-economic kind, s/he has no escape from doom. Therefore, the more problematic the poem, the more realistic and threateningly conscious it becomes.

Coming back to the basic point with which we started, the lines quoted have an answer, and a positive one at that; it has an immediate apprehension of not suggesting long-term stability, but as perspective it is a statement of far-reaching consequences. At the higher level of making and having a home and keeping it alive for a long duration, the poem provides an answer in which the existence of nature is profoundly established. In the context, coexistence of humans with ecological factors, to use terms of the modern world, is not just required but is desirable and worth working for. This is the place we might give to nature in our scheme of things.

### 4.2 THE POET-SUBJECT AND THE SURROUNDING WORLD

What is suggested about the surrounding world in the preceding paragraph requires a more elaborate description of the present issue. In a sense that is stark in the quoted lines, it is the death of the young girl’s mother. Following it, the child is taken by someone, a family member, away from home to a place from where the sky is clearly visible. Whereas the child innocently watches the surroundings and then is asked to look at a bird flying high in the sky, and imagine that the mother’s soul became a bird and is soon seen keening away. The wailing mother has no option but to leave the child behind. That is why she is heard crying. The reason for this is that she is attached to the daughter. There is a beautiful fusion here of the
human and the nature-related. The senior person, presumably the grandmother, tells about, and explains in some detail, the belief system of the tribe that humans and birds are so closely related with each other that they might transfer themselves to the form of each other under a bigger principle of commonness. The question that can be raised in this context is whether humans are merely individuals or else a part of nature that assumes different shapes in the process of dynamic movement and change.

In response to the question raised above, we may state that humans have this approach under which they live with one another in a relationship. The relationship may be of members within a family and those others who live nearby in the same place. Cities, towns and villages have homes and these define the way humans would spend their time establishing contact, creating a sense of peace and harmony. In general terms, all these constitute society. At the same time, humans also arrange food, clothing and other necessities of life taking help from fields, rivers, trees, mountains and valleys, as well as forests. In the case of a tribal community, most needs of life are fulfilled with help coming from the forest; that is the larger surrounding in which all constituents exist and depend upon one another for sustenance. This enables tribal communities to feel at home and organise their living in simple and easy terms. The lesson to be learnt from this is that humans have a social character that can be explained as mutuality. Extend this idea to say that one is complete within oneself. In this, where is that individuality people in urban centres talk about? Theoretically speaking, individuality indicates one person living alone and keeping one’s attention focused on the choice made that putting in practice that choice to one’s best capacity. But the idea is theoretical, shedding light only on the restrictive nature of present-day context. In another context, for example, the task assigned by a collective structure might leave full scope to the person involved for experiment and innovation. The life of the tribal individual shows such a thing quite explicitly as well as convincingly. This happens for two reasons—the first is associated with the urge to live in a specific place along with its geographical contours and remain there as if one belonged to it. On the other hand, the second is linked not with power structure of any kind as such, but with a point of inspiration coming from a specific direction. In the case of a tribal community, it comes from nature.

### 4.3 ABSENCE OF POWER STRUCTURE IN TRIBAL COMMUNITY

Let us consider the first reason, which is that the tribal community does not have a power structure that it evolved to manage its affairs. Indeed, it works without a power structure. Consultations may happen. People may sit together and ponder over an imminent danger. Also, the work, the labour is not divided, and no conscious plan exists for execution to further long term goals. Nor is knowledge an end-result of a venture in which the community participated as such. The group of people living together at a place form themselves into a community not to a well laid out plan that set for itself high ideals to achieve. They form themselves into a community in the functional sense—it may have been the will of a few and others followed it. Conversely a natural circumstance, such as flood or famine, threw them together, and this resulted in their association with one another for a longer duration than visualized. The implication here is that most of what followed was a matter of chance happenings beyond the community’s control. If we expanded the scope of such a development to cover centuries and millennia, we may reach the conclusion that early societies worked on the principle of all resources of the planet being of
use for all the people. The question is whether such a visualization is a matter of utopianism, something belonging to fantasy and thus without any tangible basis. If we surmised happenings in the past as thrown up by necessity that people faced in times of ease or distress, we shall see the said visualization not as a utopia. On the other hand, if we brought in the framework of production for increased comfort and convenience, of seeking pleasure in more acquisition of resources that led to higher or lower ranks of living, we might rate the tribal community lower down in scale.

So far as the second reason goes, we may state that nature with its cycles, variety, and aesthetic-inspiring quality sends out messages to the tribe as a matter of course.

### 4.4 SPONTANEITY AND VARIETY IN TRIBAL LIFE

Spontaneity and variety are the crux of a tribe. This goes opposite to the established view. A preconceived notion about a tribal community is that it is ancient, static and undynamic. Nothing is farther from the truth. A process of curious looking around and learning from what is around continues uninterrupted. This causes the occurrence that judgment seldom forms a part of the life of a tribe. As we come across in day to day living, people see and soon begin to assess, as if the whole thing exists for them to grasp and use. It is assumed that the observed part of the surroundings is a chapter of the book of life. When one has ‘read’ it, one is supposed to carry on from there. From where? Obviously, from the happening one witnessed and went through. Stretch it further to see that the happening has already opened the door of further movement in a specific direction that lay potentially in the happening. In this manner, the happening is the point of departure, a beginning that will direct and govern the future effort. We move in the already existing direction born in the middle of the previous episode. Becoming its prisoners, as it were, we lose freedom and carry out that came up as a chance occurrence. The binding of the action we did would drive us under its principle. It will not give us enough space to choose a path that suits our desires and aspirations. We should indeed put it beside the method of learning the tribal individual or the general tribal life, which are inseparable.

As suggested, the tribal community does not seek guidance from what happened in the past, but from what happens on the day that followed the previous night. To see the pattern that may finally emerge from actions done over a long time, one may realize that the order of preference and choice was dictated by the dynamically changing socio-natural scenario. The tribal community only keeps pace with the changes in the environment. Also, in view of a governing logic prevented from emerging, the tribal community absorbs the truth of the socio-cultural scenario in a radically new way.

### 4.5 OPENNESS AND DISTINCTNESS IN THE TRIBAL COMMUNITY

The question is whether this method of learning is non-intrusive; it maintains consonance with the organically evolving nature-human link. That is where the answer is found to the innocence and sympathy with the outside world the tribal life enjoys. Let us call it spontaneity. Where is variety and the ongoing process of seeing more and more in such a case? An answer to this query is not to be found in theory. Instead, one appreciatively and sympathetically recognises features that are added
to the tribal existence over decades, centuries and millennia, enriching it and lending it depth. Sanjoy Hazarika has observed:

The Northeast has been described as Asia in miniature, a place where the brown and yellow races meet and mingle. The oral history of the tribes of Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur and other areas tell of ancestors from the shadowy past, from mountains steeped in mist and romance, from lands far away, of snake gods and princesses, epic battles and great warriors.


In this quotation, the phenomenon of variety has been effectively outlined. The Northeast here is an identity collectively evolved for telling the world that there is an alternative character of living is present in it. Significantly, the area under mention is given the extremely suggestive and appealing name “Asia in miniature.” The first impression of the name it is a beautiful entity, making the onlooker curious about what the place contains and in what measure. Since, beauty has been brought in, there must be an artistic aspect to it. That indeed is the case. In art, proportion is important. It creates symmetry. One part integrates with another as if the two complement each other and show their interdependence. Look at the community visualized in the word and find that each component of it, human and natural, lives for itself and the others with equal respect and dignity. The beauty also comprises the various cultures that coexist to inspire one another and finally form a collective unit suggested by the beautiful word.

What do “the brown and yellow races [that] meet and mingle” tell? To my mind, they tell the story of coexistence that naturally evolved. People of one area and culture saw something appealing in another area and the two enjoyed the mixing. Initially, they had different languages to use for communication, but as they moved near each other, they happily borrowed words, phrases, short crisp expression, jokes, comments and finally views. All formed a spectacle of happiness. Did a different colour matter? Did a different set of rituals draw line of demarcation and division? The answer to both the questions was a firm no, since the “meet and mingle” act had raised the living by a few notches and added value to the union unthinkable earlier.

Again, in the quotation “ancestors from the shadowy past” along “from mountains steeped in mist and romance, from lands far away” combine time and place containing community life spread over millennia in a manner at once aesthetic and philosophical. The description appears to suggest there was complete unity between ancestors and mountains as well as mist and romance. Note that it is not specificity that is evoked, but a vision that takes us to post-development phase of history. In this sense, socialism as envisioned by history outside of and freed from “prehistory” could be sensed in the quotation and its clear reference to those inhabitants in “the shadowy past” who bore witness to an era of positive and dynamic mutuality. To this, another statement by Sanjoy Hazarika becomes an apt corollary:

The people of the Northeast are the guardians of its most precious asset: its uniqueness. Which other area has such beauty among its people and its environment? Which sees such a range of religions, creeds, communities, lifestyles and traditions? Which other area can match it in the sheer raw power of nature: whether it is the Brahmaputra that resembles a great sea during its rain-swollen, flood-hungry days; or the force of its gales and the grace of its waterfalls, the lushness of its forests and
Mark the word “uniqueness” here that denotes a value worth preserving by posterity. Literally, the word speaks of something not seen anywhere in the world. This is an exaggeration we should appreciate for its emphasis on the vital life the Northeast represents. Metaphorically, it might go in an entirely new direction to send the message that we watch in the region a future that we may have to consciously and assiduously work for. Indeed, that is possible if we saw in clear terms the “preciousness” of the “asset”. It cannot be captured through prose. That is why Hazarika has taken recourse to the broad manner of poetry and created the sense of wonder and loftiness by talking of Brahmaputra “resembling a great sea” and “the lushness of its forests and bamboo thickets.” However, the picture would not be complete if he did not make a telling reference to “the solitude of its spirit, found in the mist of the mountains.” This underlines the unity between what humans have (in the form of urge and will) and what they observe in nature. On the other hand, if humans reduce their capabilities to the level of possessing more things than required, they lose out on the invaluable wealth of nature, something that puts them in touch with the magic of the mind. The tribal community in their songs, in their simple-looking rituals re-enact the drama that they see with the help of imagination in their own memory. Do they have history, do they have a progressive knowledge with which to harness the power of nature? In response to this, we might say that the terms of their knowledge and what to remember from the past are not those of going forward. On the contrary, their terms are inspired by make-believe, re-working and re-living acts of happiness and fulfilment. All these fall in the category of celebration. For them, the mantra of life is to share with one another those moments that will put them in touch with the rhythm that the movement of waters, animals, birds and the slow-growing plants and trees follow and work with. In the latter, there is life. This life is recognised and worshipped. It also makes them believe that such a life generates a sense of belonging. The tribal community lives in and for the forests and streams that they strive to preserve and nurture. Charles Chasie mentions a practice where forces of nature, chance, gods and the deep faith residing in the tribal person come together to construct the act of sustenance. In this case, even as ordinary a practice as blessing a young person who may be going on a journey to conduct business away from one’s place will reveal the creative mindset of the tribe. Important in it would be the faith reflected in the blessing where help from gods or the tribe’s ancestors is invoked. At one level, it is a flight of one’s imagination, at another it might as well be a pointer to something unknown but so near that the reference may directly assure safety and security.

4.6 UNITY OF NATURE AND HUMANS

The tribal mind draws strength from sensuous capturing of the surrounding reality, as if it first appealed to that part of the observer that receive sensation as well as the associated pleasure. In case of representation of a state of mind, the poem or narration assumes the shape of a living object, an animal, a plant, or a stream that sings. This is because in the context, fulfillment of desire is the issue, even as it is steeped in pain, misery or suffering. Most of the time, however, the expression is of celebration as if a ritual in which two or more members are participating is being observed with engagement. The following lines from a Garo song titled “House Warming” bear testimony to this:
Spirits, away with you,
I am celebrating.
As the father of Mune made the place his home,
As the Sane cultivated the land,
I have a shield,
I have a shade,
I will also cultivate the land,
I will also dwell in the village.
...
By smearing the blood,
And by sticking the feathers.
I will also dwell in the village;
I will also cultivate the land. (Devy 152)

The title “House Warming” points at the name of the ritual that makes the place appropriate for staying in. Since humans did not occupy it, or another set of people lived in it, a ritual is required to make the place new and fresh, so to say. The assumption in the song is that the goal can be achieved only when the spirits present at the place are asked to leave. That done, the celebration formally would begin. Mark that the personal stay is made part of the fundamental truth of work that joins all with one another. The same is denoted through “I am celebrating” that demands interaction between two people or among more than two since a larger mission of cultivation is the issue. The ownership of the house by two fathers (of the two women, Mune and Sane respectively) is involved and cultivation of land as well as dwelling at the place is to happen. Physical effort will result. The last four lines talk of smearing of blood, and sticking of feathers that are to precede cultivation. The celebration in this sense is work-related and social.

In the following lines from a Garhwali song, we come across a change in mood that has moved away from the serious work-related endeavour to the relatively subjective participation:

We offer flowers to you,
O doorstep of the house, be kind—
Fill the granary with corn.

It is the festival of flowers—
We offer flowers to you,
O threshold of the house!

May God bless you with an auspicious new year,
May your granary fill till it overflows,
May your crops thrive and wealth grow,
Let these seasons and months come again,
Let the flowers bloom again and again. (Devy 135)

Important words in these lines are “festival of flowers,” “auspicious,” “granary,” “season,” and “months.” All these refer to either nature or time which in the context
is united through the human being at work. Also, note that rather than the forest or the wild, it is nature harnessed through labour that is made the subject of celebration. Not to be missed, however, is the fact that cultivation of crops and granary to be filled “till it overflows” are a matter of joy ensuing from labour. This is radically different from what is termed marketable, the mention of “wealth grow” in the lines notwithstanding. The point to be made is that work leading to the filling of granary is to reassure oneself that the moment to celebrate has finally arrived. In relation to other stages of change in the tribal existence in history, we are told in the lines that quiet change has occurred in the ways life is lived and that forms of living may be further altered if conditions for that came into existence.

4.7 HARMONY AND PEACE AS THE CORE OF TRIBAL LIFE

Finally, the harmony that potentially exists between nature and humans may be of interest to us. It is not difficult to visualize humankind’s distant past when greed and possessiveness were not defined as the central truth of life. Thought and action, hunger and food, desire and its fulfilment were within the reach of people inhabiting different parts of the world. Such a way of existence could easily go on peacefully, recognizing resolution hidden within its problem and thus giving chance to society to attain with effort and simple planning a sense of satisfaction within limited means. The tribal community shows us this simple dream of happiness and fruitful companionship that may be quietly thought of and appreciated for its desirability. We learn productive lessons from the tribal communities even as they perform their tasks with innocence and curiosity. Such a dream is enshrined in the poetry and fiction that constitutes oral history belonging to these communities in our midst. In the modern age, literatures are becoming increasingly word-centric that are meant for writing using a script and for printing so that they can be made available to a larger audience than before. There may be obstacles in the way of presenting literary pieces such as poems, dramas and short stories that were originally spoken and performed in the manner of a stage production. It is pointed out, meanwhile, that printing might miss out on the quality and vitality of the oral representation. Be that as it may, it is certain that the tribal imagination has a method to adopt for giving palpable and somewhat fixed language to their folk forms of expression. An interesting example of how the dream of mutuality and harmony could be composed, the following description could offer a glimpse for our help. This has formed part of a short fiction piece “The Hunter’s Story” written by Monalisa Changkija:

Just before dawn, [hunter] Chuba dozed off for about an hour. When he woke up he thought that he had a terrible nightmare. And seeing all the dwellers of the forest still surrounding him, his heart was filled with fear again. Finally, the king of the forest, the Grand Lion spoke. Chuba was now shivering despite the sun’s rays embracing the earth with warm arms. The Grand Lion said, “I think you, man, did not have a pleasant night. Well, we the dwellers of the forest haven’t had a pleasant night’s rest for the past ten years, except last night. I don’t need to tell how we have felt and what we have suffered for the past ten years because of you, man, and now you too have gone through our experience last night. It would have been very easy to take revenge for the death of all our loved ones in the most violent way—which is through your gun. But we do not believe in violence and revenge. We too can hurt and kill but we know that we were not created to cause pain and death. We know that we have been created to maintain the balance of nature and
contribute to the well-being of this planet. We cause pain and kill only when we are attacked, in self-defence. (Misra. Tilottama Ed, *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Fiction*. New Delhi: OUP, 2011. P.253)

This passage shows in clear terms the map of happiness that humans are capable of creating if they have a positive attitude towards themselves and nature in consonance with each other. In this passage, the Grand Lion symbolises the grandeur and breadth of vision of the tribal imagination that works on the principle of attaining uninterrupted peace for all, described by him as “a pleasant night’s rest.” This has basis in the concept of equality and respect for all people on the planet earth that has plenty of resources for the survival and upkeep of humanity. Incontrovertibly, humans have it in them to dream big about lasting happiness that can lead all to a celebratory mode.

### 4.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have discussed the scope of dynamic living within the imaginative capability of people compelled to live on the margins. These constitute the many tribal communities living in India. Surrounded by the wide variety of organized living that is progressive and enlightened, we have generally missed out on the ways of thought and feeling of the tribals. The proximity of these peaceful communities living on the edge of forests, rivers, mountains and valleys, with nature holding an example of harmony for the strife-torn societies of our time. The answer to our state of deprivation, inequality and large scale violence lies in recognising the role and function of spontaneity and harmony that we can learn from the tribal communities in our midst. Such a message is conveyed by the rich and inspiring literary heritage that the communities possess and seek guidance from.

### 4.9 QUESTIONS

1) How does the tribal individual relate to nature? Explain.

2) What do celebration and joy mean in the context of the tribal community? Elaborate.

**Notes:**

1) The blessing to the traveller on mission is as follows: “May the spirits look after you and protect you; May good fortune attend to you; May you always be in good health so that you do not lose perspective and can always remain directed towards your goal; And you’re your achievements surpass that of your rivals. May the smoke of your fire be seen as long as anyone else is making fire; May you be fleet-footed so that you may not stumble and fall either by stone or stump; And having achieved what you set out to do, may you return as quickly as the hand of Providence guides you.” (Misra. *Poetry and Essays* 263) In this, combination of various myths, cultural figures and nature’s images works towards a project that members of the tribe undertake in the social context. See the mention of spirits, the protection theme, goal, the way of walking to a place, and Providence in the same breath.

2) G.N. Devy has observed, “Songs have a special importance in tribal imaginative transactions, as they relate to every aspect of life. These songs normally take the form of a requiem or a conversation, and thus might contain a lover’s address to his beloved, a daughter’s to her parents or a man’s to his ancestors.
… Their complexity lies in their allusive quality and their wonderfully earthy metaphors.” The lines from the two songs quoted in the text are important from the point of view of what Devy has called their “earthiness.”

### 4.10 SUGGESTED READINGS


UNIT 5 TRIBAL THOUGHT: SOME VOICES-I

Structure

5.0 Objectives
5.1 G.N. Devy’s General View About the Tribals
5.2 Concept of the Organically Linked Community
5.3 The Secular is Counter-posed With Sacred
5.4 Two Traditions: The Oral and The Visual
5.5 Thingnam Kishan Singh’s View of Manipur Region in History
5.6 Vibrancy in Manipur in Its Early Existence
5.7 Fall and Subjugation of Manipur Through Violence in Early Eighteenth Century
5.8 Irony Working Behind a Different Kind of Modernity
5.9 The Problematic Present
5.10 Let Us Sum Up
5.11 Questions
5.12 References

5.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit aims to familiarise the young scholar with new thoughts about the tribal population in India. These thoughts are given the word voices since they signify a sympathetic understanding of the way of life of the tribals with special focus on their attitude, their aesthetic vision enshrined in their folk tales and their overall history. Particularly, this unit will dwell upon the rationale of living of this community equipped to interpret the forest, the land, community life, and cultural identity. Two scholars of repute picked up for covering the community/communities of India’s tribal population and for presenting a sympathetic appreciation of this social segment are G.N. Devy and Thingnam Kishan Singh. Devy’s essay constitutes the Introduction in his book Painted Words: An Anthology of Tribal Literature, and Kishan Singh’s essay is titled “Encounters and Literary Engagements: A Critique of History and Literature in Manipur.” An attempt is made in this unit to emphasise a few important points made by the two scholars in their respective essays.

5.1 G.N. DEVY’S GENERAL VIEW ABOUT THE TRIBALS

G.N. Devy distinguishes the tribal section as different from all other categories of social life. For him, none among scholars and observers has done justice to this section, seeing it the way it is. Its material existence and the objective ways it adopts are to be noted. In fact, the tribal defies all divisions and characterizations that people have forged to describe it. Are people constituting this section are original inhabitants of the place they live in at present, something that the word “adivasi” denotes—belonging to a stretch of forest land since time immemorial? Were they stuck to the place as if made and shaped by it, giving them specific contours of
culture? Was their domain exclusive and unconnected with all others we know? Giving answer to these questions in the affirmative would be abstract and ill informed. They are a given, a concrete existence of humanity, like most others bearing the name of a region, a time, a way of living, a belied system, or exemplifying a rigid community formation. Thus, one might adopt the method of enquiry at once sympathetic and appreciative. That would imply a deeply learning engagement, free from preconceived notions and prejudice.

Indeed, this is not asking for too much in the contemporary circumstance. Today in many a case, we do look at a phenomenon with sincere curiosity and wonder, and strive to enrich our mind with yet to be attained wisdom. Also, with such an attitude we acquire a critical awareness of our own thoughts and ideas that may be invisibly bound with complacency and smugness. When did we, for instance, look at as a tribal as if he viewed his world and ours sensibly and seriously? To us he appears so simple and unevolved! We soon tell ours, if we are sympathetically inclined in the general sense, that he should be helped to raise his level of education, awareness and skills. This way he will catch up with us and become our equal finally. We assume erroneously that his growth as a human being is stunted and if not given a push in what we consider the new direction, it will dry up and fall on the wayside. We do not realise that in history, tribal have gone through troubled times at all places where they lived, and survived many ups and downs. Today, too, they pose issues before the mighty capitalist interests and even if pressed hard, may have a resistance strategy built in the marrow of their own logic of existence. Capitalism is ruthless and deadly. Its violence, we all know, works at a multiplicity of levels. It can combine ideology, politics, money power and naked repression to see that tribals are driven away from their forest and absorbed into the market scenario as work force. Yet, the tribal ethos stands apart and may be an answer to to the ills and evils of modern-day capitalism. This is precisely what Devy has in mind as he argues for a positive and an altogether different view of the tribal worldview. His view could go a long way in mobilizing opinion in support of the tribal community. For making his point about the ethos of the tribal section, Devy uses reversal as a strategy in which influential groups among us are looked at from the eye of a different section of people. This is a crucial point he has made since it turns tables on the world driven by profit making and turning human venture into a commodity for purchase and sale in market conditions. It is one thing to dub the tribal not knowing and left behind in the process of what is called change and another to look critically into the existing world and spotting only vacuity there.

5.2 CONCEPT OF THE ORGANICALLY LINKED COMMUNITY

For Devy, tribal communities scattered over different regions in the world enjoy similarity and unity. They relate more with nature surrounding them, for instance, that each other within the community. At the same time, members of the community do not live separated from one another, but are linked through sharing a common perspective, something considered odd in the supposedly developed societies. A thread, living and organic, links one with the other. Separate one person from the rest and all are affected in the cohesive world they inhabit. Their work that can be termed labour as well is geared towards fulfilling the immediate needs; once those are met, the communities begin looking for new ways to realize themselves in a participatory framework. Here, that which is termed rational or reason-oriented has
a limited significance. Instead, intuition as a perception rooted in instinct is the
driving force, the guiding principle in living. Members of the tribal community
connect with a tree, a bird, a water-body, a star as a companion that will suffer with
them, enjoy along with them. For the tribal community, these companions are nature
that also flows in their bodies and has a residence in their minds. Also, a power that
is considered God is inseparable from nature or the community bound by
geographical lines such as rivers or rivulets, mountain ranges and the forest. Thus,
all existing phenomenon with various parts in it is present for worship, for talking
to, for sharing one’s feelings and emotions with. Keeping this in view, the tribal is
seldom lonely, or helpless. The sense of togetherness that enthuses one and all and
binds each within an emotional territory constitutes truth. It creates a mind, a centre
of feeling and thinking that can be named imagination. The question can be raised—
what is tribal imagination? The answer as such would be—it is a faculty with which
the tribal community perceives and is active in, it is a human method to extend
boundaries for the benefit of the community to reach one another and communicate
with. The word denoting interaction is common to both community and conversing.
Is the tribal community concerned about what is termed truth? While attempting an
answer, keep in mind the apparent assumption that truth can be reached through
perception, analysis and examination; it stands at the end of a whole process of
human-made logic and methodology. Yet, the tribal looks at the phenomenon in
front with instinct telling him what is acceptable and what is not. In this sense, truth
is subjective, even as the subjective is thought to be right by the whole community
to which the tribal individual belongs. Incontrovertibly, the truth as it is seen is
instinct-based, a paradigm not fitting in with what we call the rationally available
phenomenon.

5.3 THE SECULAR IS COUNTER-POSED WITH SACRED

Devy uses the word ‘sacred’ to make the distinction—the secular is counter-posed
with sacred. We may give it the status of imagination at work in a community that
lives with nature as its part that as an entity where humans draw a line between the
two and assume the role of active agents working upon the world of nature, modifying
and improving it so they can put it to human use. The noted Bengali writer
Mahashweta Devi presents the distinct organicist vision that forms itself in the
tribal imagination. This is captured by her in the short story “Makar Savar.” The
following account of a character living in a community is an example of this vision:

At that time Mangal had arranged a marriage between Makar and Revati.
Kisto Babu had laughed and said, “Revati? Pahari Savar’s daughter? I
know her. She will be a good match for our Makar.”

Yes, the first marriage was performed with all the rituals. On the auspicious
day, Makar was first married to a mango tree and Revati to a morwa tree.
“Let your married life last as long as the trees do. As the tree yields fruits
and flowers, you too beget children, as children bring joy and a sense of
fulfilment to life.” After the tree ceremony came the proper marriage, the
rice and mutton, plenty of liquor, and songs and dances. Revati was as
lovely as a flowering morwa tree.

Makar was happy, truly happy. Both of them left for the forest in the morning. They
dug pits and planted saplings. The saplings are tall now. But Revati was not a mother
even after five years. She proclaimed:

Note the link between nature and the tribal individual in the lines above. The equation between the two is logical if we recognize the specificity. The marriage is not here a matter of long negotiations necessary to know the sustainability of the relationship. Thus, Managal arranges the marriage and with it the matter ends. The rituals, too, are of serious consideration. The tribal believes them to be true and essential. Also, no need is felt to look critically at the equation between humans and trees. If a man can marry a woman, so can a man or a woman marry a tree each. To a supposedly secular and argumentative individual, the case of the marriage happening here is in the form of replication—both Makar and Revati first marry the respective tree and then each other and they or the community to which they belong takes the whole procedure in earnest.

5.4 TWO TRADITIONS: THE ORAL AND THE VISUAL

G.N. Devy has talked of two traditions simultaneously, the oral and the visual. Whereas the oral tradition works on the basis of memory, the visual goes by the images. In the latter, imagery is the central aspect as in a painting. It is asserted that the tribal imagination works in a stronger sense when it deals with memory. Thus, spoken words occupy the foreground. Music, rhythm, tone and the accompanying telling of the tale by a performer before a live audience play a decisive role in the tribal imagination. It is notable that in the oral tradition, time is used and worked upon to relate with the world, since the home of time is the memory. In the absence of written documentation, memory through repetition of what happened yesterday and the day before yesterday is repeated to preserve the long tradition bound to time. When it comes to the visual, says Devy, the tribal mind becomes less dynamic and mobile, at least apparently. The geographical space, from one region to another, or from one country to another poses many problems, which are sorted out by playing out with colours in their creative use. The tribal imagination sticks to colours, gets committed to visual patterns and becomes a strong adherent to what appeals to the eye. Thus it is, believes Devy, that words meant to be spoken and used in a performative act become objects of creativity and therefore carriers of feeling and emotion. They evoke in the bargain the effect of a sensuous movement. Losing the dimension of meaning or message, they assume the character of a fixed representation in the manner of a painting. We may wonder how Devy would justify the expression “Painted Words” that happens to be the title also of his anthology of tribal literature. Perhaps, he brings the visual and oral, the space-related and memory-oriented expression closer to each other. This enables him to suggest that boundaries between dialect and language as well as memory and imagery get blurred in the act of expression at the hands of the tribal artist. Yet, these categories project the tribal art and literature in a manner distinct from what is observed in the supposedly secular art of the western world that has swept the modern writing in major Indian languages. Meanwhile, the artist and writer active in a tribal community hides behind a tradition and puts in the forefront a collective experience than an individual slant of seeing. In it, the element of a dream-like sequence, a hallucinatory representation takes shape, not the precise and palpable expression available in the secular art form. In
tribal art, things move back and forth, constantly repeat and work only through
mild invisible ways. They also swear by pleasure, relaxation and indulgence than
meeting an artistic challenge as if from contemporary structures of art and culture.

5.5 THINGNAM KISHAN SINGH’S VIEW OF
MANIPUR REGION IN HISTORY

The second essay that we take up is by Thingnam Kishan Singh. It has been written
specifically to describe the socio-cultural features of Manipur region in its history
and the present. Singh’s case is of a different kind. He is an insider unlike G.N.
Devy. He has taken upon himself the task of arguing for the place he belongs to.
The task entails an argument that is intellectual in nature examining life’s real
features. Singh considers himself to be a theorist of the tribal’s existence. He is his
community’s intellectual, his role being that of an elaborator in the Gramscian
sense. His voice is of commitment. We see in his essay, published in the Oxford
Anthology of North-East India: Poetry and Essays, a passionate urge to state the
rationale of a region’s existence. For Singh, the region is rich with folklore, that
expresses spirit of the people of Manipur.

The essay begins with asserting the idea that “History bears testimony to the travails
of civilization running through a course of two thousand years as the people
inhabiting what is presently called Manipur experienced numerous upheavals
subsequent to clashes with different cultures and powers.” It is a simple but extremely
assertive statement telling in clear terms the character of people inhabiting Manipur.
In his opinion, the region had many groups with their separate identities. The groups
clashed with one another sometimes, and many a time they lived in relative harmony.
You may notice the sense of pride when the reference is made to “the people”
experiencing “numerous upheavals” after clashes had occurred between groups in
the community consisting of “different cultures and powers.” Mark here that the
people of the region were dynamic, full of energy and capable of taking their own
decisions as also fighting if that became necessary. In the comment is inherent the
truth that groups within the community made mistakes and took wrong decisions
presumably since at the particular moment when it all took place in their lives, they
felt like taking a stand that led to faulty actions. Singh’s purpose is to let the reader
know about the sense of living with freedom and self-reassurance—they were makers
of their own destiny. Let us keep in mind the fact that decisions taken persistently
by a community only express their bent of mind. That only denotes the character
and nature of the people involved. It is history that we are discussing, not a discourse
from outside of the framework of action. This, says Singh, continued till the region
came later to be called Manipur.

5.6 VIBRANCY IN MANIPUR IN ITS EARLY
EXISTENCE

The question can be raised what the region was called before it became Manipur.
Singh’s answer is: it was known then as “Kathe to the Burmese, Meklee to the
Assamese, Mooglie to the Cacharies, Cassey to Shans.” The variety of names tells
a different story that is heard in the twentieth century. It is aware of not only that
which appears to be the today’s real but also that which was executed in a violent
form at some point in the past. Humankind’s history has numerous episodes to
relate to and make sense of. This is common to all histories of the regions,
communities, cultures and literatures. For example, Manipur had its freedom to cherish, its problems to solve, and harmony and equanimity to work out. That was not easy. The place had contending interests to come to terms with. Those would be the different visions and ideals each section in the community and those ones surrounding it would emerge at one time or the other. Reflecting on the folk tales of each section that swore by its own identity and role. As a region and linguistic unit, Manipur would have a vibrant way of living that involved arranging bread and butter, peaceful surroundings, legal framework, mutuality in day-to-day dealings and celebratory activity linked with culture. In the middle of this, Manipur survived and evolved over centuries. A part of Singh’s essay is devoted to this. It contains an interesting account of what went on and helped people to live by, in short or long term. Read the following to see what indeed was the nature of living in Manipur over centuries:

Prior to its encounter with Hinduism, Manipuri literature till the seventeenth century has been said to constitute its early period. Ritual songs and hymns composed before the advent of the Manipuri script form part of the corpus of the literature of the early period. These songs and hymns are not treated as folk songs or part of folklore as they were not widespread amongst the people. Neither were they handed orally through successive generations. They were confined to a certain erudite section of performers whose performances were again limited to [specific occasions].

… The manuscript PanthoibiKhongkul gives an account of the religious and social festival known as the Lai Haraoba where the Khaba community paid homage to the deity NongpokNingthou and his consort Panthoibi. …

…

Another important aspect of the literature of the early period was the treatment of heroism. Rivalry and clashes between the clans resulted in the development of martial skills. Bravery and courage remained central to the numerous conflicts that created a martial culture. (Misra, Tilottoma. The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry and Essays. New Delhi: 2011. P.144-145)

In this quotation, we come across the point that the way of life of a community causes evolution of norms and ideas. Those in turn excite the imagination of many of its members who take pride in their acts of valour. Working hard to realise their aims, the participants in the heroic endeavour innovate and experiment for bettering their skills and methods. In due course, yet greater success in the efforts of the community is ensured. Singh terms the long-standing effort “martial culture” from which the community draws inspiration for a long time. Also, the effort is witness to accounts of specific individuals who behaved in a certain manner and planned their activity by talking, discussing and analysing, as well as executing the plan. In such a case, it is only natural that narratives are formed consisting of descriptions of what specific individuals got involved in while active in the said venture. There is a reference in the passage quoted above to the “religious and social festival” of the Khaba community. In the obvious sense, the festival is rightly assumed as celebratory. Through it, the community realizes its hidden desires to make possible what they imagined as good and desirable.
5.7 FALL AND SUBJUGATION OF MANIPUR THROUGH VIOLENCE IN EARLY EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Thingnam Kishan Singh has explained in this essay titled “Encounters and Literary Engagements: A Critique of History and Literature in Manipur” a whole process of subjugation and destruction of a heroic community of fighters. The violent episode is described as follows:

The close of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth century mark a turning point in the history of Manipur. … Deeply influenced by the teachings of the Bengali Vaishnavite Shantidas Goswami, a preacher on a proselytizing mission along with the prevailing socio-political circumstances, Garibnawaz lived to the true ideals of a tyrannical despot when he issued a diktat pronouncing Hinduism as the new religion of Manipur. Opposition and resistance to this autocratic move to obliterate the traditional faith and culture were brutally repressed. The king and Bengali mentor left no stone unturned to erase traces of the indigenous faith. Places of worship were destroyed, worship of traditional and local ancestral deities, traditional rituals and rites, Lai Haraoba festivals, eating of meat, drinking of liquor and burial of the dead were immediately banned. Burial was replaced by cremation. Edicts were proclaimed to bring about these changes with severe consequences for disobedience. Along with the imposition of Hinduism, the manuscripts and texts in the indigenous script were confiscated and burnt in full public view in officially sanctioned events known as the Puya Meithaba. Use of the indigenous script was banned with dire consequences for those attempting to resist. It was to be replaced by the Bengali script. Shantidas Goswami composed an entirely different chronicle known as Gijay Panchali, which was a deliberate attempt to efface the history and culture of the people. It projected the land as the Manipur in the Hindu epic Mahabharata and traced the lineage and genealogy of the first King of Manipur to Chandrabhanu whose daughter Chitrangada was married to Arjuna, the great Pandava archer. Babruvahana was the son born of this wedlock. … Imported art forms like the Natya Sankirtan actively encouraged by the royal power gained popularity. Corruption in language became the order of the day as the elite and aristocratic class got increasing exposure to Indo-Aryan languages like Sanskrit and Bengali. Manipuri vocabulary witnessed introduction of many new words from these languages. (Misra, Tilottama. The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry and Essays. New Delhi: 2011.P.148-9)

Mark here words such as “autocratic move to obliterate the traditional faith and culture.” Whereas the history of the Manipuri community prior to the seventeenth century was of group clashes within the indigenous social unit, the developments in the seventeenth century denote autocracy. The word denotes a wilful act devoid of internality of the group in question, and points towards the tendency to use cold and calculated policies meant to impose through means fair or foul to kill the urge to survive, assert and preserve. In the process of “obliteration,” the script is changed, the folklore is declared null and void and taken away from circulation so that it is replaced by a counter folklore. The act of policy is marked by a cruelty that works on a different plane. The parameters of this policy are not physical, but mental and spread in its scope to the plane of culture. One culture is removed through force and another culture replaces it after the agents of the former culture have been rendered inoperative.
Kishan Singh’s account of the process of obliteration of Manipuri culture and folklore bears a close resemblance to colonising a whole people through force, physical and mental. The latter violence is yet more cynical; it is executed through recourse to systematic suppression. Culture and thought are sought to be changed radically under it and the target is the mind, creativity and fantasy. The whole community is denied the right to observe its past in the way it existed and was believed be so over time. What was carried on for centuries in the name of rituals, observance of norms and their projection through folklore is snatched from the community, and a new form of thought and interpretation is brought in for assessing one's work at the level of mind and imagination.

5.8 IRONY WORKING BEHIND A DIFFERENT KIND OF MODERNITY

With heroism denied to the community for close to two centuries, Manipur faced another phase of onslaught in the closing years of the nineteenth century. This came in the form of a rationale that enjoyed sanction of science and improved ways of production and organization. This region of the Northeast was without any cohesive frame and fights would occur between one sub-group of society and another. The result was a weakening of the thread that bound the people together. Any alien power that approached the people in the region for mutual exchange would see in this an opportunity to pursue its own narrow economic interests. Thus, it became possible for a more effective method of exploitation to come in and take control of the resources of the region. Following such a situation, says Kishan Singh, the closing years of the nineteenth century marked “another significant turning point in the history of Manipur, as the Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891 altered the political contours of the land. It is crucial to note that Manipur’s political interaction with the British had started quite some time back as a result of constant conflicts with the Burmese along with fratricidal tussles for the throne. … Rapid changes could be seen in every aspect of life as forces of modernity in the wake of British rule ruptured the traditional fabric.” (Misra 150)

5.9 THE PROBLEMATIC PRESENT

At this point in the essay, Kishan Singh enters the present phase of life in the community in Manipur. For him, the place had gone through many an upheaval, from an indigenous past of dynamism to confronting a violent denial of freedom and, therefore, following a patterned design of subjugation, and from then on to bearing the yoke of enslavement imposed by the British. The changes occurring at regular intervals had made it easy for the new masters to keep the region in check. This resulted in the 1940s and 50s constituting an era of what Kishan Singh has called homogenisation. In his words, “The ancient Asiatic kingdom newly transformed into a democratic political structure in the postcolonial period was ‘merged’ with the newly independent State of India on 15 October 1949 in pursuance of a treaty of accession. It is this crucial encounter with India that people largely perceive has produced highly conflicting tendencies in terms of explicit moves to impose a homogenizing framework which operates at every level of existence—social, political, cultural, legal, economic, etc.” (Misra 154)
5.10 LET US SUM UP

We have read in this unit an interpretation of the life of the tribal community from two viewpoints, those of G.N. Devy and Thingnam Kishan Singh. Whereas Devy comments on the nature of the tribals as harmonious with nature, Kishan Singh takes us deep into the past of Manipur region. Devy’s appreciative view of the tribal community blends well with that of Kishan Singh who has called people of Manipur heroic with respect to their heritage. Each of the two scholars has a distinct view of the people under study. The two voices of the tribal thought enable us to see the tribal community as dignified, honest, and living in harmony with nature. Yet, they face problems of dealing with social prejudice and homogenisation by a power centre away from them. It is also observed that thinkers and writers among the regions in the Northeast are conscious about their own vitality and the urge to live with dignity.

Notes:

1G.N. Devy has observed:

“Most tribal communities in India are culturally similar to tribal communities elsewhere in the world. They live in groups that are cohesive and organically unified. They show very little interest in accumulating wealth or in using labour as a device to gather interest and capital. They accept a worldview in which nature, man and God are intimately linked, and they believe in the human ability to spell and interpret truth. They live more by intuition that by reason, they consider the space around them more sacred than secular, and their sense of time is personal rather than objective. The world of the tribal imagination, therefore, is substantially different from that of the non-tribal Indian society.” (Int., Painted Words x)

2This is what Devy has said in the context:

“One of the main characteristics of the tribal arts is their distinct manner of constructing space and imagery, which might be described as ‘hallucinatory.’ In both oral and visual forms of representation, tribal artists seem to interpret verbal or pictorial space as demarcated by an extremely flexible ‘frame.’ The boundaries between art and non-art become almost invisible. A tribal epic can begin its narration from a trivial everyday event; tribal paintings merge with living space as if the two were one and the same. And within the narrative itself, or within the painted imagery, there is no deliberate attempt to follow a sequence. The episodes retold and the images created take on the apparently chaotic shapes of dreams. In a tribal Ramayana, an episode from the Mahabharata makes a sudden and surprising appearance; tribal paintings contain a curious mixture of traditional and modern imagery. In a way, the syntax of language and the grammar of a painting are the same, as if literature were painted words and paintings were a song of images.” (Int. Painted Words xiii)

5.11 QUESTIONS

1) What does G.N. Devy mean when he says that for the tribal, sacred is preferred to the secular? Explain.

2) How does Thingnam Kishan Singh interpret homogenisation that the Manipur region faces at present? Elaborate.
5.12 REFERENCES


UNIT 6  TRIBAL THOUGHT: SOME VOICES-II

Structure
6.0 Objectives
6.1 Introduction
6.2 Key Questions
6.3 How to study this Study Material?
6.4 Verrier Elwin: An Introduction
   6.4.1 The Muria and their Ghotul
   6.4.2 John MacDougall: An Introduction
6.5 “Tribal Resistances”
6.6 Let Us Sum Up
6.7 Glossary
6.8 Questions
6.9 Suggested Readings

6.0 OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the unit is to discuss Verrier Elwin’s “The Muria and their Ghotul” and John MacDougall’s “Tribal Resistance” to understand their perspectives on tribal way of life as well as their cultural past. These two essays constitute important material on tribal life and discuss the uniqueness of the tribal social system as well as history. The unit will help students understand this uniqueness through these essays. This background knowledge of the tribal communities discussed in these essays will help them understand other writings as well.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Due to some gap in communication between the tribal people and the non-tribal communities, there have been hurdles in understanding the tribal people, their history and culture. Due to this gap, their culture and history have been either ignored or overlooked. There are also misrepresentations. However, due to efforts made by some scholars like Verrier Elwin and MacDougall, a good number of aspects of their life have reached the so-called mainstream society and they are valuable pieces of information. See, for instance the following:

“The clan system of the Muria is now greatly confused. In the old days it seems probable that the inhabited territory of north Bastar was divided up among the different clans of Maria and Muria, and each had its own particular bhum or clan area. In each bhum there was a spiritual capital called the pen-rawar or pen-kara. Here lived the clan-god or Anga with the clan-priest to tend him and mediate between him and his kinsmen. Here they came for the chief festivals of the Anga; here they brought their dead and erected their menhirs; here they gathered for the special panchayat that discussed offences against the clan laws.” (108-9)
It shows the way tribals organized their living through specific patterns. The work done by Elvin and MacDougall is a product of serious engagement with comments that the tribal community had in the course of existence. For this reason, the scholars such as these are also a unique source of knowledge about the tribal people. The above mentioned essays will give information about tribal customs and history. These will also provide background knowledge to read other texts.

Elwin’s essay deals with the Muria’s social system called Ghotul. Ghotul is understood as a dormitory system, but it is more than that. If we read through it, we will discover that the tribal youth learn to have healthy relationship with the opposite sex and social traits here. In the same essay, he also talks about many other aspects of social life such as social organization, clan, totem, family, ghotul discipline, and so on. The following quotation sheds light on the customs the tribals have developed in conditions surrounding them.

A boy obviously cannot marry relatives of the inner circle or any of his classificatory ‘aunts’ or ‘nieces’. He is strictly forbidden to marry his wife’s elder sister, his mother-in-law, his younger brother’s wife or widow and any other woman in a parallel relation to them. There is no objection to his marrying his grandmother or granddaughter even when they are in the direct line of relationship. A few cases are known of men marrying their ‘aunts’ or their ‘nieces’.”(p.121)

MacDougall’s essay in the same manner describes two social movements—the Sardar Movement and the Kherwar Movement that took place in Ranchi district and Santal Parganas respectively during the colonial period. It describes the causes of these movements and attributes them to the process of partial peasantization as one of the major causes. A quotation from MacDougall will make clear the role played by the movements in which tribals took part:

“The Sardars (participants in the movement) thought that as the original settlers of Ranchi District, the adivasis had an inalienable right to free (or virtually free) use of all of the land in the district. The Sardars felt that the dikus had no right to make heavy impositions on them. Thus the Mudas and Oraons wanted to regain low-rent or rent-free lands that they had lost. They sometimes demanded in addition the right to govern their villages by themselves.” Tribal Resistances (9-10)

6.2 KEY QUESTIONS

i) What are your impressions of tribal culture? Do you know how young boys and girls spend their time? Have you heard of the Muria tribe and their Ghotul system or tribal dormitory of any other tribe? Offer a brief comment.

ii) What do you know about tribal history? Have you heard about any of their social or historical movements? What are the causes of the movement?

6.3 HOW TO STUDY THIS STUDY MATERIAL?

This study material will be easier to understand if we attempt a preliminary survey about the following. We can search the matter on the Internet or look up a book such as K.S. Singh’s India’s Communities. We can do the same with respect to the following words:
i) The Muria
ii) The Santhals
iii) The Oraons
iv) The Mundas

These are different tribes of India. As said before, Elwin’s essay is about the Muria and their dormitory system and the MacDougall’s essay is about the Santhal, Oraons and the Mundas and their social movements. It is also about how these communities became peasants during the colonial period.

After the survey, you may read the essays. Make a beginning with any one. Make notes of the striking features you discover about the Muria’s custom and about the movements of the Mundas, Oraons and the Santhals. One could then go to the essay by MacDougall. It is about peasantization. Ask yourself what peasantization means. Also: when can we call a person peasant? Just observe how the writer narrates the process of peasantization of three tribal communities.

6.4 VERRIER ELWIN: INTRODUCTION

A prior knowledge about the essayist will help us understand ideas contained in the essay better. The essay “The Muria and their Ghotul” has been written by the famous anthropologist and writer Verrier Elwin. Let us know a few details about him.

Verrier Elwin (1902-1964) is a well-known anthropologist who worked among the tribals of India. His name is synonymous with the subject—tribes. He is an indispensable source for the scholars on tribal matters. Born in England in a religious family, he studied at Oxford University to become a priest.

He came to India in 1927 and set up an ashram in Poona in 1928 with an aim to integrate Christianity and Hinduism. Later, he decided to work among the tribal people.

He went to the central province and set up a Church in Karanjia, a Gond village in the Maikal hills. Elwin and his friend Shamrao Hivale called it an ashram and started their work among the adivasis by giving them health care, education and hygiene.

In 1936, they moved to another village. As he travelled and worked among the adivasis, he came to know more about their life, culture and society. He was struck by some of their values and cultural practices. Elwin realized that he should learn from the adivasis instead of teaching them. He was fascinated by the freedom enjoyed by adivasi women. They could choose their partners and marry without dowry, and divorce if they wished to do so. He was also quite impressed by the village dormitory system which he called ghotul and their joyful attitude towards sex and absence of sexual repression.

Elwin liked the community life of the tribals and their sharing of natural resources. He writes in his book Leaves from the Jungle, “One day one family of a village went to pluck mangoes and at the end of the day half the village was sucking mangoes”. Elwin was also appreciative of the adivasis respect for nature and environment. He saw that they lived in harmony with nature and considered it as part of their sustenance. As he aptly writes, “Their concept of heaven is miles and
miles of forest without any forest guard and their concept of hell is miles and miles of forest without any *mahua* tree.”

Elwin’s keenness to learn about the adivasis helped him in acquiring enormous knowledge about their life, society and culture. His writings bear testimony to his knowledge. His writing includes anthropological accounts such as

1) *The Baiga* (Murray, 1939)
2) *The Agaria* (OUP, 1942)
3) *Maria Murder and Suicide* (OUP, 1942)
4) *The Muria and their Ghotul* (OUP, 1947)
5) *Bondo Highlander* (OUP, 1947)
6) *Leaves from the Jungle: Life in a Gond Village* (1936)

### 6.4.1 The Muria and Their Ghotul

You might have observed that Verrier Elwin has written a book titled *The Muria and their Ghotul* where he has given an account of the Muria tribe and their social system called Ghotul elaborately. This essay is a gist of his ideas on these aspects. Now, let us know more about the Muria tribe. They are defined in the Wikipedia as the following:

The Muria are an *adivasi* tribe (scheduled tribe) of the Bastar district of Chhattisgarh, India. They are part of the Gondi people. Traditionally they are economically homogenous and they strive to work as a collective. They have mixed-sex dormitories where adolescents are sent to practice premarital sex, sometimes with a single partner and sometimes serially. They have an omnivorous diet, with liquor playing a key role in their society.(en.m.wikipedia.org)

You might observe that the Wikipedia definition of the Ghotul highlights the Muria’s free mixing up and alliance with partners. Let us read the essay and know more about the people and their ghotul system. Let us sum up the essay. First, Elwin talks about the clan system. He says that no marriage is possible within the clan as the members of the same clan consider themselves as members of the family. For this reason, such a marriage is not permissible.

Later, Elwin talks about the Ghotul system of the Murias. He narrates how young boys and girls start arriving at the Ghotul beating drums from 7.30 p.m to 9.00 p.m. He describes the role of the Kotwar and the Sirdar in this context. From his description of activities we understand ghotul as a place where young boys and girls learn social traits. Read the following:
In the Chota Dongar Pargana, the girls go to massage the chelik in the very place where they are going to sleep. Elsewhere they sit in a circle or grouped round the fire, sometimes scattered about the room. If the boy is asleep the motiari rouses him and makes him sit up; she sits or kneels behind him, very close, with her knees round his body. With her comb she begins to shake out and arrange the boy’s hair. (Elwin 128)

It is a place for singing, dancing, playing and entertaining one another. The girls comb hair of one another and give a massage to boys. Lovers meet and if they want to enjoy physical intimacy, they go to smaller room in the ghotul complex. In this regard, Elvin tells us about conventions the Muria, for instance, observe:

“The Muria have their own system of joking relationships. As a result of the common cross-cousin marriages, a chelik has special licence to joke and flirt with his mother’s brother’s daughter or his father’s sister’s daughter (both mandari in Gondi). A motiari can be equally free with her father’s sister’s son or her mother’s brother’s son (both manriyo in Gondi). This freedom, however, only lasts so long as they are not engaged to be married. Should such an arrangement be made the joking relationship changes into one of avoidance, for a girl must never have anything to do with her betrothed.”(p.122)

Elwin also describes the ghotul discipline. The life of chelik and motihari is strictly regulated. Even the members have to strictly follow the rules. Quarrels in the dormitory are strongly condemned. Cleanliness is maintained regularly. Read the following to know how discipline is practiced:

Chelik and motiari are insistent that everyone must take an equal share (though not always the same share) in the common labour and common recreations. Failure to attend the ghotul regularly is punished; an absence of two or three days, unless there is a very good excuse, means a fine. It is especially bad for the motiari to absent themselves. This is regarded as a really serious offence, an infringement of the chelik’s rights, a breach of ghotul fellowship; it raises the suspicion that the girl is having an affair with a married man or a member of another caste. On the other hand, if a girl enters the ghotul during her menstrual period she must provide liquor and perhaps a more substantial sacrifice to appease Lingo Pen whom she has offended. (pg. 135)

There are forms of penalty for the offenders. Like the Muria, the oraons also have their dormitory system known as Dhumkuria. It is studied by the sociologist S.C. Roy in his book *The Oraons of Chhotanagpur*. In the same manner J.P. Mills talks about the dormitory system of the Nagas known as Morung in his book *The Rengma Nagas*.

The tribals have their own norms of living with one another. Read, for instance the following:

As elsewhere in India, a woman and her husband’s younger brothers or a man and his wife’s younger sisters are specially privileged. So are grandmother and grandson or grandfather and granddaughter. A boy may say to his grandmother, ‘Once you are dead I will eat beef in your honour; I will go dancing in front of you with a drum; why don’t you die quickly so that I can get a good feast?’ And she replies, ‘If I die you will have to
spend a lot of money, you will have to get rice, you will have to bring several tins of liquor, so what good will it be?’ A grandfather always flirts and jokes with his granddaughter. Sometimes he says to her husband, ‘How dare you sleep with my wife? You will have to give me the bride-price for her’, and so on. (p. 122)

I hope you have got some idea about life of the tribals reading Elwin’s writing about this unique system. Now let us move to the next writing which has been written by John MacDougall. Before that let us know about the writer.

### 6.4.2 John MacDougall: An Introduction

Unlike Elwin who had an illustrious career and an eventful life, John MacDougall has had a quiet career. But he has been a serious scholar who studied tribal resistances that took place in India particularly in Chotanagpur region. He teaches Sociology at the University of Lowell, Massachusetts. He is director of the Peace and Conflict Programme at the university.

### 6.5 TRIBAL RESISTANCES

The essay “Tribal Resistances” offers a view of the two social movements namely the Sardar Movement and the Khewar Movement. The Sardar Movement was organized by the members of the Munda and Oraon tribes in Ranchi district who sought to restore their land from the outsiders. The Kherwar Movement on the other hand involved members of the Santal tribe living in Santal Parganas district. The Santals also pressed for lower land rents but their mode of resistance was based on religion. The writer talks about the causes of the movement. One of them is peasantization of the tribes. According to him, peasantization of three tribal communities namely the Mundas, Oraons and the Santals and their resistance to the exploitation of the outside forces or dikus led the tribals to spearhead the above-mentioned uprisings.

Peasantization of the adivasis means how the adivasi society became peasant society in the historical process.

A peasant society broadly has these three features.

1. **Settled cultivators with household mode of production.**
2. **Other groups extract economic surplus from the peasants.**
3. **The state has coercive power and some legitimate authority over peasants and the state is accorded with some prestige by peasants.**

According to MacDougall, before the British rule, these adivasi societies were not peasants. They had no fixed place where they could cultivate, the surplus of their production was not extracted by other groups, and the state did not control them forcibly. In fact they were under a king and had a different kind of relationship with him.

Under the British rule, the relationship between the state and the adivasi society changed. The adivasi societies became settled cultivators. Many non-tribal communities settled in this region. They had come from other regions and they were non-tribal groups. They extracted and appropriated adivasis economic surplus in different ways. The dikus made several attempts to Hinduize the adivasis. But they were not successful in interfering with the adivasi social structure. Another
agency that was active was the church. The missionaries tried to christianize the
tribals. The adivasis resisted such intervention. Most of the time, the state constituting
the British administration had direct and coercive power over them through police.

The elaborate way in which issues were handled is shown by MacDougall in the
following description:

“It is true that before British rule, the Maharaja of Chotanagpur and his
dependents extracted some economic surplus from the Mundas and Oraons,
and was given some prestige by them. However, available evidence
suggests that a negligible amount of surplus was actually extracted. Nor
did the Mundas and Oraons participate in any meaningful way in the Hindu
civilization to which the Maharaja’s family was oriented. This stands in
marked contrast to the orientation of low-caste rural Hindus reported by
such observers as Marriott (1955: 173-218; Fallers, 1961: 108-10)). Thus
in crucial respects the Mundas and Oraons were not peasants before 1770.
The same is true, a fortiori, of the Santals, who did not have an equivalent
of the Mahajara of Chotanagpur.” (MacDougall, John. Tribal Resistances.
Delhi: Critical Quest, 2008.P.16)

Two Adivasi Movements took place as Resistant Movements. As a result, two
tribal movements namely Sardar Movement for reclaiming land during 1867-80
happened in Chhotanagpur where Mundas were the main participants and Kherwar
Movement with a religious dimension to it in 1874 in Santal Parganas where Santals
were the main participants.

In this regard, the following is illustrative: Chelik and Motiari are insistent that
everyone must take an equal share (though not always the same share) in the common
labour and common recreations. Failure to attend the ghotul regularly is punished;
an absence of two or three days, unless there is a very good excuse, means a fine. It
is especially bad for the motiari to absent themselves. This is regarded as a really
serious offence, an infringement of the cheilk’s rights, a breach of ghotul fellowship;
it raises the suspicion that the girl is having an affair with a married man or a
member of another caste. On the other hand, if a girl enters the ghotul during her
menstrual period she must provide liquor and perhaps a more substantial sacrifice
to appease Lingo Pen whom she has offended.

6.6 LET US SUM UP

i) a) The essay “The Muria and their Ghotul” by Verrier Elwin is about the
Muria tribe of Middle India and their dormitory system called Ghotul.

b) The extract begins with a description of the organization of the tribe, the
clan system and the family.

c) Elwin also talks about how young boys and girls spend their time in the
evening in the Ghotul.

d) There is also detailed description of the Ghotul rules. After reading the
extract, we understand that Ghotul is not a place for pre-marital mixing
up as informed by popular literature, but is a well organized social
institution which trains young boys and girls in a number of norms and
traits.
B) a) The essay, “Tribal Resistances” is about two social movements namely the Sardar Movement and the Kherwar Movement organized by the members of the Munda and Oraon tribes in Ranchi district and members of the Santal tribe living in Santal Parganas respectively. The processes of complete peasantization of the three adivasi societies of Chhotanagpur region under the British rule and tribal resistant movements seems to make background to this phenomenon.

b) The writer says that the tribal society was not peasantised before the British rule i.e. 1858. He enlists three features of peasantization and proves that these societies did not undergo such processes during British rule. Yet, they were partially peasantized during the British rule.

i) With peasantisation, the dikus, British administrators including police, court officials, and missionaries formed the oppressive outer crust which extorted economic surplus of the tribals.

ii) The British administrators, dikus missionaries played their parts in the tribal regions. The dikus tried to Hinduize the adivasis, the missionaries christianize them and the administrators exploited them. MacDougall explains it thus: “British rule, paradoxically, helped the dikus to establish control over adivasi society, in several important ways. The British brought peace to the whole of India, and so enabled the dikus to settle in districts far from their homes and peopled by hostile and alien adivasis. the British administrative and judicial system was based on British and Moghul ideas and practices, and used languages and procedures that adivasis could not understand, but dikus could understand and manipulate.

iii) There was a strong nexus among all those involved with affairs of the adivasis. The tribals felt that they were being exploited. There was discontent among them. As a result, two tribal movements namely Sardar Movement for reclaiming land during 1867-80 took place in Chhotanagpur where Mundas were the main participants and Kherwar Movement with a religious dimension took place in 1874 in Santal Parganas where Santals were the main participants.

6.7 GLOSSARY

Muria : An indigenous tribe that lives in Middle India. They are believed to be a part of Gond tribe.

Ghotul : a dormitory system of the Muria where they mix up on terms of equality and learn social traits.

Clan : a group of tribe that claims common origin. The clan members seem to have blood relation. For this reason, they do not marry within the tribe.

Peasantization : a process which makes an individual or community settled cultivator(s) with household mode of production. They are organized under a state which has legitimate authority over them. The economic surplus of the community is extracted by another community.

Santals : A tribal community that mostly inhabits Jharkhand, Odisha and Bihar and Bengal.
Oraon: A tribal community that inhabits Jharkhand, Bihar, Odisha and Bengal.

Sirdar: Head boy of a ghotul.

Kotwar: Warden of a ghotul.

Chelik: Young man.

Motihari: Young woman.

6.8 QUESTIONS
1) Who is Verrier Elwin? Why is he famous?
2) What do you know about the Murias?
3) What is Clan system?
4) What do you know about John MacDougall?
5) Describe the two Resistance Movements — The Sardar Movement and the Kherwar Movement. Describe their Origin and causes.

6.9 SUGGESTED READINGS


Verma, R.C. Tribals through the Ages. Delhi: Ministry of Information and broadcasting,

Wikipedia.
