

**TRIBAL STUDIES IN INDIA: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES AND
APPROACHES**

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Lecture 63

Lecture 63: Tribal Religion and Gender

Thank you. Good morning, and welcome back to the lecture series on tribal studies in India: interdisciplinary perspectives and approaches. Today, we will discuss tribal religion and gender. Specifically, the gender dynamics within different tribal communities. Tribal religions are largely rooted in animistic and totemistic beliefs.



They are rooted in animism and totemism and centered on reverence for spirits, ancestors, as well as elements of nature such as trees, hills, and rivers. Different aspects of nature, both animate and inanimate, are considered objects of worship and reverence. Tribal worship does not necessarily involve idols or temples, nor is it concentrated on particular scriptures. It is not dogmatic in that sense.

Tribal Religion as a Way of Life

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- Tribal worship does not necessarily involve idols, temples, nor is it concentrated on scriptures; rather, rituals are performed at household shrines, sacred groves, and communal altars using offerings and symbolic objects
- Religion in tribal society is integrated into all aspects of life—birth, agriculture, healing, festivals, and death—embodying a holistic view of nature, spirit, and community



Rather, the rituals of tribal religions are performed at household shrines, sacred groves among the Santhals and the Oraons—they call these sacred groves Sarna—and certain communal altars are also used for offerings and symbolic objects. That is to say, the tribals do not, strictly speaking, worship any idols. They do not give a human shape to their divine imagination. However, in many other ways, tribal religion converges with Hindu practices, as both tribals and Hindus follow natural religion.

Their religions are shaped by the courses of nature. Right. However, the tribals do not worship idols, as I said, and they do not identify divinity or sacredness with any religion. Temple or shrine. Rather, they have more unstructured spaces that they consider holy, such as sacred groves where certain trees they consider sacred are grown.

Trees such as the sal tree or the sarjam, which they call the sarjam tree, the mahua tree—all these trees are considered holy. And the deities are or the gods, the spirits, are believed to live close to these trees. Now, at the heart of such a religion is the question of survival. We have to understand why tribals, who are primarily located or rooted in rural culture, worship.

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They are motivated by the question of survival. In village life, existence or survival is a struggle. It's not very easy. It's not as facilitated as in the case of the urban populace. So, medication is not very prevalent, sophisticated, or easily available to the rural population.

So, as a way of warding off negativity, evil spirit, all these different belief systems are practiced, are observed within the microcosm of tribal villages and at the heart of these religions or these religious procedures rather, the question underlying all these paraphernalia of practices is that of survival and a flourishing and harmonious family life and community life. So all they want, all the tribals want is a happy, harmonious life. sense any disease, sense any deformity, and they also want their agricultural produce, their cattle to flourish, to thrive. So that is the motive behind

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which shapes these different rituals of offerings and appeasement and, you know, the different celebrations surrounding the nature and the different seasons. So they appease the different spirits so that their, you know, agricultural produce, their cattle and their families thrive and prosper. So religion in tribal society is integrated into all aspects of life from birth to agriculture to healing to festivals and finally to death, embodying a holistic view of nature, spirit and community. Tribal societies display complex religious systems where spiritual beliefs deeply intersect with gender roles, shaping both religious participation and ritual exclusions for women.

So there are certain prescriptive ways in which women are both included and excluded as far as tribal religions and rituals are concerned. Although tribal women are integral members to the household and community economy, their engagement in formal religious activities is limited by cultural norms and gender hierarchies. So it is important to turn one's attention to the rules as well as the limitations, symbolic positions and paradoxes centering the tribal women in tribal religious domains. Tribal women actively participate in religious rituals that are conducted at the household level, such as daily offerings, fasting on certain specific days, such as the full moon day and you know also fasting for all the major festivals as well as the home-based worship of heritage or ancestral deities.

Gender and Religion in Tribal Societies

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- Although tribal women are integral members to the household and community economy, their engagement in formal religious activities is limited by cultural norms and gender hierarchies
- It is important to turn our attention to roles, limitations, symbolic positions, and paradoxes surrounding women in tribal religious spheres



So all the day-to-day religious rituals are conducted by the women at the household level. Their role is chiefly preparatory and Therefore, women are relegated to, you know, serving from the background. Women are relegated to the background of the entire, you know, scenario of worshipping and performing rituals. So they prepare the setup.

They prepare the stage rather than leading a religious performance. So their role becomes, in a way, secondary in that sense. So these rituals reflect both devotional practices as well as women's indirect control over spiritual well-being, particularly in matters of family health and prosperity. So women among the tribals just Like in the case of women in other, you know, societies—other non-tribal societies—are associated with caregiving, with spiritual well-being, and with protection of family health and prosperity.

Women should pray in the capacity of mothers, wives, and daughters. for the well-being, the general well-being of the family. In most tribal communities, despite women's critical domestic and religious roles, they are rarely allowed priesthood or officiating positions in public religious ceremonies. So the training and expertise required for the post of a priest is often exclusionary, gender-biased, and in many cases, we see it is also hereditary in nature.

Women's Participation in Household Rituals

- Tribal women actively participate in religious rituals conducted at the household level, such as daily offerings, fasting on Purnima (full moon) and other festivals, as well as home-based worship of heritage/ancestral deities. Their role is preparatory and relegated to services in the background, than leading a religious performance.
- These rituals reflect both devotional practices and women's indirect control over spiritual well-being, particularly in matters of family health and prosperity.
- In most tribal communities, despite their critical domestic and religious roles, women are rarely allowed priesthood or officiating position in public religious ceremonies. The training and expertise that is required for the post of a priest is often exclusionary, gender-biased and at times, hereditary.



It is passed down from generation to generation in a particular family, which is known as the family of the priest. And women do not usually get the opportunity to become or hold the post of the priest. Women do participate in rituals. However, they are largely excluded from priesthood and decision-making. So religious authority remains one of the significant areas of unchallenged male supremacy in tribal societies.

So religious authority is a domain that is monopolized by men in a way. Men enjoy complete monopoly, and women... are shrouded as secondary members as far as religious worship and the conducting of festivals are concerned. So in this, tribal religions are very similar to other major religions. such that the woman's bodily service lacks any kind of charge, self-control, self-determination, or self-intervention, and she is frequently reduced to the imagery of a womb that symbolizes ripe produce.

Gendered Taboos and Restriction of Women in Worship

- Women do participate in rituals, but are largely excluded from priesthood and decision-making (Behera, 2017). Religious authority remains one of the significant areas of unchallenged male supremacy in tribal societies.
- In this, tribal religions are similar to the major religions, such that the woman's bodily service lacks charge, self-control and self-intervention, and she is frequently reduced to the imagery of a womb symbolizing ripe produce.
- Specific religious taboos restrict tribal women from entering religious places, particularly if they are unmarried or menstruating.
- Bhils, Gonds (and Santals) practice religious prohibitions for women, such as by not worshipping or preparing food etc. (during menstruation) (Behera, 2017).



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So, like I said, she is not entirely ignored or excluded because she is the you know, imagination and imagery of the womb, which symbolizes the fresh produce, the agricultural produce. And that is an indispensable part of a society's growth, a society's, you know, continuation of lineage. So a society would not exist without this imagery of the womb. So the woman cannot be entirely shrouded or

Removed. However, she cannot lead; she cannot be at the forefront of the religious performance. Specific religious taboos restrict tribal women from entering religious places, particularly if they are unmarried or menstruating. So For instance, the Bhils, Gondas, as well as the Santals, practice religious prohibitions for women, such as not allowing them to worship or prepare food during menstruation.

These prohibitions are rooted in notions of ritual purity, and they reinforce male control over sacred spaces where deities are believed to inhabit. Thus, men alone enjoy spiritual authority. In contemporary times, some restrictions have relaxed slightly. However, the key areas of worship remain out of bounds for women at certain points in time or certain phases in their lives. Women conduct protective rites in tribal societies and play a key role in safeguarding their husbands and children, especially when they are traveling or involved in other activities.

This shows women's gender responsibilities within domestic spiritual boundaries. This is once again very similar to non-tribal societies, where the ideal woman is associated with the role of a good wife and a good mother. So, these forms of worship conducted by women or performed by women at the domestic level affirm their roles as nurturers and protectors. Even as their access to formal ritual power is highly constrained. One example that comes to mind: when men go to the forests for hunts, their female kin live, you know, in austerity.

They live a very austere life sans any form of entertainment or merriment and even give their sacred iron bangles with their husband for protection. Ancestral rites such as funerals or Shraddhas are performed exclusively by male members as lineage and clan names are strictly patrilineal, leaving women outside of the ancestral ritual domain. So, funeral can be carried out ideally by the son for her father or even for both the parents. The daughter does not have as much rights.

Gender and Tribal Ancestral Worship

- Ancestral rites such as 'sradhas' (funerals) are performed exclusively by male members, as lineage and clan names are patrilineal, leaving women outside the ancestral ritual domain.
- Women may honour ancestors in private ways, but ceremonial offerings and ritual speech are reserved for men, sustaining male ritual dominance. This gendered control over ancestral rites symbolically validates male continuity and authority across generations.
- Males dominate core religious functions, including sacrifice, funeral pyre lighting, and priesthood, limiting women to secondary or supportive roles. Women are even excluded from funeral rights and attending cremations, reflecting a belief in their ritual incapacity and spiritual susceptibility.



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Women may honor the ancestors in private ways. So women have the right to honor or remember, commemorate the deceased ancestors in their own private ways. But ceremonial offerings and ritual speech in the formal sense is only reserved for men, which sustains the male ritual dominance. So, in the ritual domain, the males dominate.

This gendered control over ancestral rights symbolically validates male continuity and authority across generations. Males dominate the core religious functions, which include animal sacrifice, funeral pyre lighting, and conducting roles of priesthood or fulfilling the tasks of priesthood, which limits women to secondary or supportive roles. Women are relegated to secondary or supportive roles. Women are even excluded from funeral rites and attending cremations, which reflect a belief in their ritual incapacity and spiritual susceptibility. Even the cremation setup differs.

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In many tribal societies, women's pyres are elevated higher than men's to compensate for their socially lower spiritual status, as it is believed that a woman's spiritual status is lower than a man's. Her pyre needs to be elevated more than the man's so she can reach the same afterlife. This gender differentiation reveals deeply ingrained ritual hierarchies based on gender, symbolizing women's secondary place in both life and death rites. Both men and women participate in festivals. However, men play instruments and lead ceremonies, whereas women are often restricted to dancing or merely spectating.

Even where women are present and actively participating, their religious roles are tightly scripted and symbolically subordinate to male officiants. Duties such as the priesthood are entirely male, as I have already mentioned, and there are no female equivalents to priesthood in most tribal cultures. Women have no right to positions and are generally deprived of inheritance rights. Additionally, they have traditionally been barred from participating in tribal assemblies. However, all these things are being updated, revised, and revisited.

Contd...

- Even cremation setup differs in many tribal societies, where women's pyres are elevated higher than men's to 'compensate' for their socially lower spiritual status. This differentiation reveals deeply ingrained ritual hierarchies based on gender, symbolising women's secondary place in both life and death rites.
- Both men and women participate in festivals, but men play instruments and lead ceremonies, while women are often restricted to dancing or spectating.
- Even where women are present, their religious roles are tightly scripted and symbolically subordinate to male officiants.



Thus, the picture is not as orthodox in contemporary tribal and rural societies. However, taboos and stigmas persist regarding gendered distinctions or biases. Women cannot enjoy as much political agency as men. This ritual monopoly ensures that public religious authority remains exclusively male, even as women may perform parallel domestic rituals. This ritual monopoly ensures that public religious authority remains exclusively male, even as women may perform parallel domestic rituals.

So when compared to social evils such as marriage dowry and infanticide, which are more prevalent in non-tribal societies, one sees that tribal society is apparently more gender-balanced or gender-neutral. So the malpractices such as marriage dowry are not present among the tribals, nor do they encourage female infanticide. The tribal woman is usually free from taboos that are associated with bodily honor because they are, most of the time, assisting their male counterparts, their male kin, in the fields, in cultivation, in agricultural fields. So the concept of, you know, parda, Antarpur or Andarmahal, all of these being associated with elite Hindu or Muslim women, these ideas or concepts are not available among tribal women.

Gender and Tribal Ancestral Worship

- When compared to social evils such as marriage dowry and infanticide present in non-tribal societies, the tribal society appears more gender-balanced. The tribal woman is usually free from taboos that are associated with bodily honour. For instance, the Santali religion does not prescribe a woman to cover a certain part of her body, such as the head (Kisku, *The Indigenous Santal Woman* 32-33, 36).
- The tribal woman's traditionally emancipated status is understood from her right to choose her husband, and propose a divorce in case of an unsatisfactory marriage, and still not be socially ostracized as a divorcee or a widow.



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They work hard, you know, shoulder to shoulder with their men in the fields, and they also work as laborers with their men. So the Santali religion does not prescribe a woman to cover certain parts of her body, such as the head, with, you know, part of their clothing. So this concept of gunghat or the concept of parda is not available among tribal people or not prescribed by their religions. The tribal woman's traditionally emancipated status is understood from her right to choose her husband and propose a divorce in case of an unsatisfactory marriage—a neutralized marriage—and still not be socially

ostracized as a divorcee or a widow. So there are no stigmas associated with the status of a divorced woman or a widow in a

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These ways, when seen from these angles, show that tribal religions offer a more gender-neutral, you know, way of living or way of life. However, with the formation of caste society and the initiation of settled agriculture, the woman's choice... with respect to her marriage partner, as well as her ease of obtaining divorce from an unhappy marriage, and even her free participation in community dancing, all of these are looked down upon as backward. So, the process of mainstreaming, in the case of the tribal woman, has been detrimental overall. It has reduced her degree of freedom in many ways.

Gender and Tribal Ancestral Worship

- However, with the formation of caste society and the initiation of settled agriculture, the woman's choice with regard to her marriage partner, her ease of obtaining a divorce and even free participation in community dancing are looked down upon as backward (DN, "Women and Forests" 197).
- Moreover, unlike in the hunter-gatherer tribal societies or the shifting cultivation economies that traditionally warrant a greater agency to women in terms of decision-making and economic control, patrilineal agriculturalist tribes such as the Santals and the Oraons have traditionally deprived their women of property rights (Mehrotra, "Situating Tribal Women" 111).



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It has reduced her degree of freedom in many ways: her bodily freedom, her freedom of choice that she used to enjoy. And even, you know, living a life without any stigmatized status or stigmatized designation are some of the things that she used to enjoy in a traditional tribal setup, and that is going away as non-tribal values seep into the tribal

society—where a woman dancing freely in public, a woman, not covering certain parts of her body, and a woman asking for freedom from an unhappy marriage and living as a divorcee, all these things now carry that burden of stigma, which previously were not associated.

Moreover, unlike in the hunter-gatherer tribal societies or the shifting cultivation economies that traditionally warrant greater agency for women in terms of decision-making and economic control, the patrilineal agriculturalist tribes, such as the Santals and the Oraons from eastern India, have traditionally deprived their women of property rights. So the equality that we are talking about—the gender equality that we are talking about vis-à-vis decision-making, economic control, and overall equal participation in different activities—is more available, relatively more available here, in the hunter-gatherer tribal societies. With settled agriculturalist societies, such as that of the Santals and the Oraons, the gendered hierarchy comes back; it reemerges, in a way emulating and echoing the non-tribal gender dynamics. So women are deprived of property rights and excluded from a number of activities.

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So, according to Lewis Stuart O'Malley, I quote, 'The religion of the Santals is essentially a man's religion.' 'Women are not allowed to be present at sacrifices, except when they are offered in the house to the ancestors and family gods—and then only if there are no men to help the sacrifice,' unquote. Regarding the status of the Santal woman in rituals, A.B. Chaudhary states the following: 'Should they be allowed to worship the spirits, they would win favor quickly, and their nature being destructive, they would invariably indulge in destructive activities to the detriment of social interest.'

The women may take part in the ritualistic dances at the Jeherthan and Manjithan after the rituals are over, but they cannot actively associate themselves with the worship, unquote. So this is how the popular, you know, psyche of the tribals works. That if women are allowed too close to the place of worship or too close to directly communicate with the spirits, they would win the favor quickly and basically the social power will be in the hands of the women, which is not possible. Deemed as something undesirable. Hence, they are kept away from the place of worship and they are seen as detrimental to social interest.

- L. O'Malley- "The religion of the Santals is essentially a man's religion. Women are not allowed to be present at sacrifices except when they are offered in the house to the ancestors and family gods, and then only if there are no men to help the sacrifice" (Bengal district gazetteers n.pag.).
- Regarding the status of the Santal woman in rituals, A.B. Chaudhury states:
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(*Witch killings* 151)



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According to Maria Susai Dhavamoni, the view that man is the founder of religion whereas woman is the master of magic sets forth an essentialist and gendered attitude. Among the tribals, the exclusion of the woman from the religious mainstream is directly related to the formation of or the belief surrounding witchcraft, a parallel field of knowledge, which is thought to be produced and disseminated. Entirely by women. So, as Shashank Sinha notes, the practice of witchcraft by Santal women is secret worship resorted to by women because they are not permitted to take part So, P.O.

Gendered Taboos and Restriction of Women in Worship

- Dhavamony – The view that man is the founder of religion and woman is the master of magic sets forth an essentialist and gendered attitude (“Magic and Religion” 35).
- Among tribals, the exclusion of the woman from the religious mainstream is directly related to the formation of ‘witch-craft,’ a parallel field of knowledge, thought to be produced and disseminated solely by women: “...practice of witchcraft by Santal women is,...secret worship, resorted to by women because they are not permitted to take part with the men directly and personally in ordinary public worship” (Sinha, “Adivasis” 119).



Boding in this regard states that the women are not permitted to approach any deity themselves. It has to be done through the men. Now, the women want just as much as the men to have an equal opportunity for good or for evil, for direct appeal to the supernatural. It cannot be done in public with the consent of the men. Hence, it must be done in secret if it is to be done at all.

This is a way, you know, peer voting theorizes or explains things. The purported or supposed alleged practice of witchcraft among the different tribal communities. In the case of the Adivasi communities, the weakening of traditional collective ethos, the emergence of feudal land relations, exploitation by middlemen and moneylenders, as well as the development of mercantile capitalism, all these factors are major determinants. These have contributed to the breakdown of social safety mechanisms around tribal widows and single women. The failures of land reform policies, indebtedness and poverty, sustained and continued poverty among the tribals, land alienation, and cultural changes perpetuated by technological development have all together caused

Gendered Taboos and Restriction of Women in Worship

- The failures of land reform policies, indebtedness and poverty, land alienation and cultural changes as perpetuated by technological development have all together caused a decline in the domestic economy of the tribals. These factors have not only aggravated gender tensions, but also raised a fear and suspicion of the female sexuality, and effected a steady rise in the cases of witch-accusation.
- Vinita Damodaran’s study reveals that witch-hunting is the result of “pressures of rapid ecological changes combined with the erosion of common property rights and deforestation” (“Gender, Forests and Famine” 147).



you know, an overall decline in the domestic economy of the tribals. All these factors have not only aggravated gender tensions but also raised a general fear and suspicion of tribal female sexuality and led to a steady rise in cases of witch hunts and witch accusations. In this regard, Vinita Damodaran's study reveals that witch hunting is the result of, I quote Damodaran here, 'pressures of rapid ecological changes combined with the erosion of common property rights and deforestation,' unquote. The collapse of ecological and moral economy in the colonial era and sheer pressure on tribal natural resources have resulted in social and physical standoffs being interpreted as evil eye and witchcraft. So, at the heart of all these superstitions is a continued state of economic standoff, you know, moral degradation, a collapse of, you know, ecological and moral economy, and an overall breakdown of social values.

Gendered Taboos and Restriction of Women in Worship

- The collapse of ecological and moral economy in the colonial era and sheer pressure on the tribal natural resources resulted in the social and physical standoffs be interpreted as 'evil eye' and 'witchcraft.'
- Asitbaran Chaudhury - behind the facade of superstitions such as 'daini' and 'apodebota' that supposedly caused many Santals to leave their village, the real forces driving them out were the zamindars and talukdars (Chaudhury, *Santal samaj* 309).



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So, that actually accounts for and amounts to these, you know, ideas centering on evil eye, negative, you know, spirits, witchcraft, and so forth. Asit Baran Chaudhary states that behind the facade of superstitions such as dine or witchcraft, as well as apodevata, evil spirit, which supposedly cause many tribals to leave their villages, the real forces driving them out are the zamindars and the talukdars. And in more modern conditions, it is the technological developments, the different projects, being enforced on their lands that cause them to leave their villages, that cause forced displacement without any fair compensation.

We also have this figure of the medicine man or oja or the witch doctor. So the ojas are another such group representing clout and influence at the rural level. The Adivasi society's dependence on herbs and animal body parts for treating the ailments for until, you know, until a recent past, the Adivasis had been entirely dependent on, you know,

herbs and animal body parts for treating different diseases. They were not exposed to, they were not familiar with modern medication.

Gendered Taboos and Restriction of Women in Worship

- The *Ojhas* (medicine men or witch doctors) are another such group representing clout at the rural level. The adivasi society's dependence on herbs and animal body parts for treating ailments until a long time, coupled with the *Ojha's* inability to cure complex diseases incited the latter to spread false superstitions about ghosts and witches.
- Perpetuation of such collective fear at the heart of the indigenous society ensured that the *Ojha* was able to hide his ineptitude and survive the competition posed by modern medicine through creating alternate crises as well as 'remedy' (Kisku, "Daini" 289).



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And coupled with this, you know, dependence, the *Ojha's* inability to cure complex diseases incited the tribals to spread false superstitions about ghosts and witches. So we see that these societies were very limited in terms of, you know, modern knowledge, modern medical, you know, benefits or modern sophisticated curative mechanisms. They were not exposed to the latest technologies. So what happens is they either try the local herbs and quack, you know, curative procedures or they resort to the *oja* and when the *oja* is unable to cure there is an arbitrary blame placed on some witch and these superstitions about ghosts and witches spread in the villages in that way.

So at the heart of these superstitions is a kind of helplessness alienation, lack of exposure, lack of facility, poverty, deprivation, continued state of hunger and struggle that make the tribal people more and more superstitious. Perpetuation of such collective fear about ghosts and witches at the heart of the indigenous society ensure that the witch doctor or *Ojha* is able to hide his ineptitude, his lack of expertise. and still survive the competition posed by the modern medicine through creating alternate crisis as well as remedy. So, arbitrary people are suspected as witches or as possessed and then at times like we see in news, violence is also perpetrated on such people without any valid reason or proof.

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So that is how the medicine man or the local, you know, this *Ojha* or witch doctor, is also sustaining his position, his profession, and he's earning out of people's collective superstition. Thus, tribal women, as we can see, are paradoxically viewed as both spiritually vulnerable and spiritually dangerous. They are, on the one hand, feared as witches, and on the other, they are excluded as impure beings from the core rituals and worships. Accusations of witchcraft often emerge from this dual imagery, where the woman, on the one hand, is impure, and on the other hand, she is fearsome. So, the woman's religious power is simultaneously denied and feared.

Symbolic Contradictions in Female Religious Identity

- Thus, tribal women are paradoxically seen as both spiritually vulnerable and spiritually dangerous; they are feared as witches, yet excluded as impure beings (Behera, 2017).
- Accusations of witchcraft (*Khadra*) often emerge from this dual imagery, where women's religious power is simultaneously denied and feared.
- Women are stripped of attending funeral processions or ceremonies. They can't light the pyre for funerals. They are discouraged from moving off into the jungle



So women are deprived of attending funeral processions, as I already said, and from many such sacred activities; they cannot light the pyre for funerals. They are discouraged from navigating and walking around the forests. They cannot touch the trees when they are menstruating. So limitations are very many, and this social exclusion, it is believed, is leading to the formation of a parallel female-centric knowledge, which is alleged as witchcraft among the tribals.

Symbolic Contradictions in Female Religious Identity

- Thus, tribal women are paradoxically seen as both spiritually vulnerable and spiritually dangerous; they are feared as witches, yet excluded as impure beings (Behera, 2017).
- Accusations of witchcraft (Khadra) often emerge from this dual imagery, where women's religious power is simultaneously denied and feared.
- Women are stripped of attending funeral processions or ceremonies. They can't light the pyre for funerals. They are discouraged from moving off into the jungle



So religious festivals become key sites for expressing and reinforcing gendered boundaries within the religious domain. Both men and women are trained in magical exorcist practices, such as spirit removal or healing rituals. And yet, if we look at the popular imagination, then we would note that recognition—public recognition—is predominantly associated with the male specialists. As Shashank Sinha has observed in one of his essays, the witch or the ailment in a society, the problem in the society, is

is essentially the female, whereas the witch doctor is essentially the male. So, the male provides the cure, the woman causes the problem in the society. That is how we see that the society, the ecosystem is so gender biased, it is so much lopsided and so much favorable to society. Women may gain respect through practices of, you know, healing practices as an exorcist or a witch doctor or medicine person. However, often they remain confined to local family level roles.

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- Women may gain respect through such practices, but often remain confined to local, family-level roles. This dual participation hints at an under-acknowledged spiritual expertise among women that lacks formal institutional authority in tribal societies.



Such curative roles of bi women are very localized and very much concentrated to the family sphere. In the public discourse, their knowledge is never utilized, hardly utilized.

Most of the time, the curative procedures are prescribed by a medicine man and not a medicine woman. So this dual participation hints at an under-acknowledged, under-recognized spiritual expertise among women which lacks formal institutional authority in tribal societies.

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Even if a woman has that kind of a knowledge, of cure, she is not given the due recognition and so the proper institutional authority is only associated with men in tribal societies. Studies have found that interactions with other religions have not significantly affected the question of gender equality in tribal religious spheres because other major religions are equally patriarchal in nature. They are also imbued with patriarchal norms. For example, tribal practices that follow similar gender norms also continue to restrict their women's access to temple rituals and sacrificial rites under certain circumstances.

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19

Even Christian and Buddhist institutions have largely restricted female access to certain rituals, and they retain male leadership structures in tribal religious settings too. So, whether it is Christianity, Hinduism, or Buddhism, the male leadership structure is the

prevalent one. All these different religious traditions are deeply influenced by patriarchy. So, according to Shashank Sinha, I quote, 'Though some tribes continue to practice their specific rituals, traditions, religion, and taboos, most of them have become sufficiently Hinduized or Christianized over a period of time,' unquote. However, it is noted that conversion to Christianity or other religions by tribals has often led to the adoption of new cultures and rituals of these religions.

For instance, tribes that have converted to Christianity have also discontinued the practice of taking bride price. So, this is a malpractice associated with the tribals. Once a tribal converts to Christianity, he stops the practice of taking bride price. Further, the tribal women who convert to Christianity can worship God alongside their husbands. This was previously restricted in their original tribal community.

So, apparently, women gain some kind of equal footing with men once they convert to Christianity. Having said that, however, we see the other side of the picture too, where scholars and critics such as Sanchita Kisku attribute the institutionalized orthodoxy of the converted Santals to their Christian values. So, according to Sanchita Kisku, conversion to Christianity makes a Santal even more orthodox. It embraces the institutionalized orthodoxy of Christianity and Christian values.

Conclusion

- On the other hand, Sanchita Kisku's attributes the institutionalized orthodoxy of the converted Santals to Christian values. Even as the ordained Santal Christian woman's theological view is acceptable, she is denied its official investiture (Kisku, *The Indigenous Santal Woman* 5).
- Tribal religions simultaneously empower and marginalise women: they are central to domestic spirituality but peripheral in public religious life.
- Male supremacy in rituals serves to reinforce gender hierarchies under the guise of spiritual purity and ancestral continuity.
- Despite marginalisation, women act as carriers of oral traditions, festival songs, and symbolic knowledge, sustaining tribal religious culture.



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Even as the ordained Santal Christian woman's theological view is acceptable, she is still denied its official investiture. So tribal religions simultaneously empower and marginalize women. They are central to domestic spirituality, but peripheral to public religious life. And even conversion does not really help in the true sense of the term. So official investiture is denied even if a Santal woman embraces Christianity.

Male supremacy in rituals serves to reinforce the gender hierarchies under the guise of spiritual purity and ancestral continuity. Despite marginalization, women act as carriers of oral traditions, festive songs and symbolic knowledge, sustaining religious culture of the tribes. So women become active bearer of the tribal culture. They, although they are not, you know, religious,

spearheading the rituals and festivals and the different sacred procedures, they are actually the receptacle and the bearer, the sustainer of symbolic knowledge and religious culture of the tribes. So, with this, we come to the end of our discussion here today. Let us meet with a new topic in our next lecture. Thank you.

