

# **Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia**

**Prof. Sarbani Banerjee**

**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**

**Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee**

**Lecture 52**

**Tribal Traditions and Performances I**

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. Today we are going to start with a new module on the religions of the tribal. As we all know, the tribal population in India is quite significant and there are a number of tribal groups present in India. So tribal religion or rather tribal religions have the roots largely in the oral traditions, and these religions are present in the form of stories that pass down, you know, they could be stories about origin, stories about ancestry, stories about different villages, different clans and sub-clans, and these stories pass down the generations through the word of mouth from the elders to the progeny. So Roshan John Joseph writes (and I quote), “Every tribal religious system consists of three essential elements. Firstly they believe in the existence of a superhuman world which refers to the belief system of tribals. Secondly they form a human relationship to the superhuman world which refers to their value system. Thirdly for establishing a relationship they practice various rites and rituals which refer to their action system,” unquote. So the rituals are shared among each other through oral means, right. Many rituals are exchanged among the different systems of religions and it is very difficult to trace their roots.

And like I was saying, if we go to the different villages, different abutting villages belonging to the same tribe, we would see that these stories, the mini stories, the local stories change. Some villages worship or emphasize, you know, more or place, you know, a higher degree of respect for a certain deity and another village would have its main deity as someone else. So we see that the stories, the mini stories, the localized stories change from village to village. Even the abutting villages have their own local myths, right. So some village, for example, would have at the heart of their, you know, worship or at the heart of their spiritual understanding, spiritual existence, Jaher Era which is one of the, you know, primary deities for the Santal; another village could worship the Moreko Turuiko as higher than Jaher Era.

So for all these villages, some origin stories, some specific myths and, you know, folklores run down the generations. Now tribal religion does not signify any monolithic system of rituals. The Indian population, like I was saying, constitutes of several tribes and their systems do not necessarily overlap with each other completely. So even within the same tribe there are certain nuances, certain, you know, changes in the same myth and the same story-telling. The understanding of tribal religions through a single or monolithic frame is therefore challenging because it has a wide range of belief systems and rituals depending on the tribe itself.

So the tribal communities worshipping could range from super-humans, the super-humans that are called the bongas by the Santals and can also be extended to the inanimate natural objects including the trees, the water bodies, the hills and others. So scholar Tamo Mibang says, I quote, “Most of [such] tribes have their own notion of religion which are shaped not only through the observance of various festivals, institution of ‘priestship’, worship of large number of god and goddess, deities, beliefs in spiritual worlds but also remain embedded deeply with in various myths and other forms of oral tradition” (2), (unquote). The three main components of the Santal worldview are human, nature and god. And the Santal worldview embraces the idea of an integrative and interactive relationship between the community, nature and supernatural forces. So this is to say, I am talking, I am going to talk, you know, more about the Santal, but as an extension of this discussion we could see that some of the traits that I discuss about the Santals could be applied to other tribes as well.

So the Santal's identity, just like in many other tribes, primarily emerges or grows out of the totality of an interdependence among, you know, relationship with other humans, relationship with the nature and finally relationship with the god, such that, you know, there is no such sense of individuality. Meaning of one's existence is wholly manifested only in conjunction with other aspects of the world one lives in. So one is not an entity, one does not derive meaning only as an individual existence. The meaning of oneself is complete or completed only in conjunction with the surroundings, which include other humans, other, you know, the inanimate aspects of nature as well as the spiritual beings, the superhuman bodies and beings. So the tribes are chiefly a congregational rather than an individual entity, and they make religious offerings, sacrifices and libations at the level of a given social unit.

So whenever there is a worship among the tribals, it happens at the level of a unit. It is not an individual worshipper, you know, worshipping the god or a spirit. It is rather a

village, a sub-clan or even a family. So it is a very congregational, a very communal identity. Although a significant population of tribals such as the Santals have now migrated to the urban, you know, the urban areas, the different parts of the country they have moved as nuclear units of households and settled in urban areas.

So although the Santals have migrated to different parts of the country and now they have settled as, you know, nuclear families, nuclear units of households in the urban areas, their ancestors basically originate from villages and villages form the basic communal unit such that we can see that the tribal culture or the tribal groups have never settled alone or in uncultivated lands. So at the heart of the indigenous notion of spirit there is a pantheistic view which suggests that the supernatural and the ephemeral world influence each other and they cannot be really separated. So scholar Dermuid O'Murchu studies the indigenous spirit and to quote O'Murchu, "contained in this world, in the realm of everyday events, yet transcends the material and personal creation", unquote. So the indigenous religions perceive the humans as a strand, just a part and not at the heart of the entire ecological web. So the indigenous or tribal religions see, you know, everyone present in the nature, even the humans as child of nature contributing to the knowledge of what the great spirit is; in the understanding of the great spirit or God, the animate, the inanimate, the humans, the animals, the plants, the flora and the fauna contribute alike.

So the thankfulness, the gratitude of the humans towards the birds and the trees result in the indigenous worldview emerging as a biocentric harmonious loop. You know, it is more like a circle rather than a homocentric or an androcentric power-driven ladder or hierarchy where human is at the top of all the other beings. So physical differences among various aspects of the nature are balanced by the spiritual sameness. So the outwardly differences, humans are different from trees and from animals, but you know this outwardly difference is balanced by spiritual sameness and the existential necessity to share and become a part of the other. That is what entails, that is what our existence entails, to share and you know such that we are extension of one another.

We are all part of a common loop of existence, of being and that is where the pantheistic view of tribal religions is coming from. So we see the anthropomorphic traits of these spirits of the Santals. Like I said, I am going to talk about the tribal religions, but at the you know centre of my discussion today I will mainly have the Santal tribe in my mind. So rather than focusing on the hierarchical relationship where there is just one high or supreme god, the tribals generally practice camaraderie or you know bond with anthropomorphic spirits that intercept their everyday mundane activities. So for instance,

although the Santal considers Ponomoser or Dharam as the supreme spirit and the sun as a symbol of Ponomoser, Santals also believe in appeasing the you know the localized the smaller spirits, the village spirits.

And these spirits are called bongas. I have already said that they also propitiate the ancestral and domestic spirits who keep a watch over the villagers and they are responsible, these ancestor spirits and the domestic spirits are responsible for the betterment of the village, for the up keeping of communal health and overall happiness. So the Santal myth talks about you know a clash that happens between the high god Ponomosar or you know Dharam and the bongas or the lesser spirits. So Dharam also is known as Thakurjiu or Thakur So that is the idea of the supreme god, a more comparatively more distant god; and the bongas.

So there are myths about a clash between the supreme god and the lesser gods until the smaller spirits, the local spirits are defeated and sent to settle on earth, and these local spirits or bongas became the messengers of Thakurjiu. So we see these anthropomorphic you know traits of the spirits depicted through the storytelling and the myths of the tribals. God is therefore not an absolute and distant object of worship for the tribals, but is believed to accompany him or her in everyday activities. So god accompanies a Santal or an Oraon to their hunt, to their agricultural fields. The Santal in fact as a human, as an ephemeral mortal human uses his or her agency to nominate only certain species and render them the status of deities, right.

So only among the inanimate objects the humans choose which species can be endowed with the quality of you know, quality of the spirit, right, which species can be nominated as the spirit. So Santali folklores subscribe to the idea of the heaven and the earth as two platforms, which exchange and interact with one another. So heaven is not really far away. The humans and the gods are on exchangeable platform. The Santal myths have it that the Thakurjiu and Thakurani, the great spirit and his consort had once decided to come and stay on earth and they engaged Jaher buri or Jaher Era, Lita bonga and Dharam to arrange for sustainable resources on earth.

The crisis of water on earth was discussed among the gods and Thakurjiu would deploy his entire consignment of spirits to resolve this crisis and fill the earth with water. That is you know coming from one of the creation stories, how the earth was created, how

different species started coming and living on earth. So the Santal's sacred book Jamsin binti uses short oral stories to describe the heaven and the earth, the creation of life by Thakurjiu, the lores of haadia or rice beer, the stories on cotton harvesting and creation of clothes among others. So we see through these you know mythical stories, we see how human civilization also metamorphoses, how humans evolve. So they are discovering you know sources of water, they are discovering you know how to light fire, they are learning how to weave clothes.

So it is also regarding you know the evolution of humans that these myths are talking about. These stories reflect how the three limbs of the tribal religions, in this case we are talking mainly about the Santal people from the eastern part of India, the three limbs being the philosophical, the ritualistic and the organizational or social aspects. So these three aspects are deeply interwoven and interspersed with one another, the philosophical, the ritualistic and the organizational. So we see the origin story saying that Thakurjiu consulted the lower spirits in creating the different creatures on earth, which suggests that the Santal's god and spirits function through a sense of accountability towards humans. The human world and the you know, the supernatural world or the godly world cannot be really dissociated from one another.

Santali gods and poems suggest that in fact it is a blemish on the god's reputation if the god or the Thakur cannot reciprocate to human prayers and take care of the mundane needs, the everyday needs. So humans make demands and god as a way of protecting his own godliness has to fulfil these needs, take care of these demands. God has to constantly engage with the state of mundaneness with the ordinary life. God is not over and beyond the mundane state of existence, right. So that is why we are getting the concept of anthropomorphic spirit from.

Now the Santal believes that the primordial knowledge came to man from birds and animals. So this is where we are getting the human-animal relationship. I was already talking about how the Santal considers you know himself or herself as only a strand in the whole, and a part of the biocentric loop. The world is not imagined in the Santal cosmos or the tribal cosmos at large. So in the tribal cosmos, you know, the worldly existence is perceived in terms of a bio centric loop and not a homocentric hierarchical ladder.

And humans are connected with animals, right. They have a kinship, familial you know tie with other animals. That is how Santal envision, the Santal envisions or understands the natural world and human's existence in it. So a biocentric view of the world shapes the values and the basic habits of the Santal. A common thread connecting humanity with animality is realized from the different origin stories that are available.

One of the common stories being that the first man and woman Pilchu haram and Pilchu buri were brought to being, they were created. So the first man and the first woman Pilchuharam and Pilchuburi were created by a pair of heavenly birds, the has and the hasil, and these has and the hasil were created out of God's hair. And the fact that the human harmonizes between you know opposing elements is understood from the fact that their ancestors, these birds has and hasil were mediators of opposing elements, the heaven and the earth. So has and hasil is believed to have you know flown, they flew below the sun and above the earth, making a contact with both the worlds. So human has both the potentials, the godly potentials and the animal-like traits in them.

This is something we have also discussed while talking about Islam and Sufism. So many of the religions see humans as a liaison between two different worlds, two different planes and having the traits of the angelic, the traits of the you know the demonic or the devil and then the traits of the animals in them. So humans are like a connection or a bridge and has.. and the human has very many possibilities within his or her body. So the idea of a close-knit bond between the human and the animal worlds is also reinforced through Santali folktales that refer to you know human mothers giving birth to animals and also animals conceiving human child. So this kind of you know human-animal relationship is very common, where animals are in fact seen as ancestors and coming to that, the concept of totemism.

So the Santali myth claims that the mortal world came into being through the earthworm consuming the earth and excreting it on the back of a tortoise for seven days and nights, and then finally the earth comes above the all-pervasive water. First there was only water and then you know the earthworm and the tortoise together bring the earth above the water. This is how the creation myth or the myth of about the origin or creation goes. So this is very different from the Biblical myth about provenance, about origin of creation where you know human is at the centre of all creations and God you know ordains or God kind of permits humans to have or enjoy a utilitarian relationship with the rest of the nature.

Human is above all other creatures. So here it is not like that; all the creatures have their own value in the nature, in the natural you know, in the ecological cycle and the ecological chain of beings. So totemism also points to the Santal's sense of connection with the animal world, right. What is a totem? We have to understand among Santals the concept of individual body substance cannot be uncoupled from one's membership to a clan and association with a totem. So there is no such thing as you know an individual body substance. That is the body substance shared by a clan and each clan is you know marked by its association with a certain totem.

So every Santal clan is believed to have descended from either a totemic animal, sometimes it could be a totemic bird or even a plant. So usually it is a totemic animal or bird, and this creature is supposed to be related to the birth and deeds of the ancestors of that particular clan, right. So it is almost like the totem occupies the position of a demi-god for that particular clan to which it belongs. So this totemism entails that as a way of showing respect, the totemic animal should be considered as a clan member. So that you know defines this human-animal relationship, human as not only you know... the human existence derives its essence from a transhuman bonding or a transhuman linkage with the other natural beings.

So totemic animal being considered as a clan member and it is never hunted or consumed by that particular clan, right. It needs to be shown respect. It is like a demi-god like you already said. In fact, killing or eating a totem is considered as a taboo, it is equivalent to a patricide or a fratricide, it is like killing a member of one's own clan and just like killing one's own father or one's own brother, one's own kin. And even Santhals would believe that seeing a dead totem entails observing death rituals.

So when one witnesses a totem that has died, one has to observe death rituals. Now Santhal society you know has certain, so we see that Santhal society prescribes certain relationship among different clans. Just as intra-clan marriage suggests pollution, pollution caused by incest, marriage between or marriage within a clan is completely prohibited, marriage between clans that share antagonistic totemic relations is also forbidden. So for instance, the kingfisher clan or Kisku and the weed clan, Marandi, right, Kisku and Marandi would never marry among themselves, right. So because the kingfisher eats the weed, so it is a consumer-consumed relationship.

It will never fructify into something positive. It will become, it is believed that any marital or conjugal relationship between the Marandi and the Kisku would result in something negative, right. So within the clan one cannot get married for fear of incest. Marriage between certain clans that share antagonistic totemic symbols, the symbols of you know hunter-hunted or consumer-consumed also cannot get married according to the Santal totemic system, belief system. So by virtue of celebrating distinctiveness and specificity in terms of stories, totemic worship, clothing habits, food and deities, the clans consciously avoid any kind of endogamous alliance.

I mean, endogamous alliance would destroy their uniqueness in you know, the clans surviving with their own unique stories. It is also a way of keeping certain traditions alive. When the totemic individuality or totemic specificities are threatened, the Santal's identity is also believed to be thereby threatened. So with this, I am going to stop my lecture here today and let us continue with the discussion in our next lecture. Thank you. Thank you.