

---

## UNIT 3 TRIBE-CASTE CONTINUUM: SANSKRITIZATION AND GREAT- LITTLE TRADITIONS

---

### Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Tribe-caste continuum
  - 3.2.1 Features of social organisation shared/ exchanged by tribes and castes
  - 3.2.2 What is 'continuum'?
  - 3.2.3 Views on the tribe-caste continuum
- 3.3 Hinduization
  - 3.3.1 Social status and hinduization
    - 3.3.1.1 The Gonds in Bihar and Jharkhand
    - 3.3.1.2 The Tripura tribes
    - 3.3.1.3 The Khasis or Khos of Central Himalayas
- 3.4 Tribalisation
- 3.5 Let us sum up
- 3.6 Activity
- 3.7 References and further reading
- 3.8 Glossary
- 3.9 Check your progress: possible answers

---

### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

---

After having read this Unit you will be able to:

- comprehend the concept of 'Continuum';
- become familiar with various views regarding tribe-caste continuum;
- understand how certain tribal groups became castes over a period of time; and
- grasp the fluid nature of the two categories of tribe and caste.

---

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

---

A combination of anthropological and historical analysis is required to uncover the various processes which have been active in the course of Indian history. With the help of such analysis we can understand one of the fundamental historical transformations that has taken place in India or more so in the entire South Asian subcontinent. The transition from tribe to caste is one such change. As a result of this process we see the formation of various social institutions such as private property, the caste system, the state and the patriarchal family. This transformation took a substantial amount of time period and went through a number of intermediate stages. This process was not just uniform and linear, in the sense of gradual and constant cultural growth and modification. It was a kind of accretion or layers of socio-historical changes interacting and superimposing themselves

on each other. We come across the periods of accretion of small changes (during Vedic periods or within the tribal systems). During subsequent periods major qualitative changes in ways of living and worldviews took place.

Over time a tendency to view society in a way where no substantial boundaries are drawn between one epoch and another has developed. Also some scholars feel the tribe-caste continuum as supposedly the product of Orientalist scholarship of colonising powers.

G.S.Ghurye refused to see any separation between the tribes and castes. He considered the entire category as only 'backward Hindus'. Such attempts are considered by many as part of 'a nation building project' where amalgamation of all people into a Hindu nation is required.

Many scholars stressed social inequality as a common condition of all human societies. In such case the question arises, can a valid distinction between tribal equality and caste inequality be drawn?

---

### **3.2 TRIBE-CASTE CONTINUUM**

---

Beginning from the early epochs to modern civilizations, the making and remaking of social institutions such as caste etc. is a result of a variety of social formations developing through different periods. These social formations, arising out of the internal dynamics of material organization in history have been seen as changes in Social history.

To identify and narrate epochal change in history through meta-narratives or mode of production, where the material conditions of a society and its ways of producing both physical objects and ideas/ worldviews etc. are seen as the defining scale of that particular society, is questioned by many scholars. Yet it is still possible to stress on the importance of an analysis of epochal changes, certainly of specific epochal changes. The transition from the tribe to caste can be viewed as one such change. The formation of institutions like private property, the caste system, the state and the patriarchal family are the result of this process. This process took a long period of time and passed through a lot of intermediate stages. As far as the gradual and constant cultural growth and modification is concerned, they were not uniform. We see periods of accretion of small changes during Vedic period or within tribal systems. There were also stages when major changes took place. There were also periods when qualitative changes in ways of living took place.

There are scholars who deny such breaks in South Asian history. This denial of distinct forms of living and being, of making sense of things, is a form of ethnocentrism. In Indian context, ethnocentrism consists of seeing the history of all communities as being merely the striving to become Hindu, to become a caste. It is suggested that there is no distinction between tribe and caste. Barring only the difference in degree of being caste, all communities are considered castes.

Elements of new society emerge within the old society. This is applicable on the formation of class or caste society. A number of aspects of differentiation, including gender differentiation in access to productive resources and knowledge come into being within tribal society. Whenever the classes of priests and warriors

seize hold of all the hierarchies of society, more or less complete transformation of tribal society into class society is evident.

The way in which old society dissolves, affects the nature of the new society that is formed. It is evident in the formation of caste society in South Asia. In Europe, dissolution of tribes perhaps led to class society. In South Asia, the whole tribes were integrated into certain positions of the new social division of labour. This way, instead of the break-up of tribes, we see the transformation of tribes into castes. This is a particular type of class formation in relation to caste in India and South Asia.

### 3.2.1 Features of social organization shared/exchanged by tribes and castes

When the whole sections of tribes transformed into castes, some of the features of tribes also got carried over into castes. Noted historian D.D.Kosambi opines that the *Gotras* of the caste system are carried over from tribal clan organizations. Another historian Prof. Romilla Thapar feels that the clan identity does not altogether disappear because some aspects remained essential to the basic unit of caste institutions, i.e. the *Jati*.

Some internal institutions which are taken over from tribes to castes acquire new functions and drop some older functions. D.D. Kosambi points out that the property functions in the tribal system were dropped in caste and the *Gotra* retained marriage functions only. Thus, beside the carryover, transformation of functions also takes place.

Even the setting of a caste in relation to other castes is different from the setting of a tribe in relation to others. This way the social role of institutions that are carried over, got changed significantly. According to Uma Chakaravarty, endogamy gets a different function in caste formation. Whereas in a tribe it is matter of maintaining the tribal identity, the notion of identity becomes a matter of purity in caste. Identity is not necessarily hierarchical. Purity on the other hand is hierarchical because it necessarily relates to the impurity of others. Here others are hierarchically less pure or more pure. In the notion of tribal identity, sexual relation with others is forbidden (though men could be readmitted on feasting the clan, where women are not allowed for the same). The notion of caste purity allows entry of women from purer castes but they could not be given to lesser pure castes.

There are scholars who feel that the aspect of mutuality in terms of interaction and exchange or acceptance of caste borrowing from tribe is deliberately ignored. Some others feel that acculturation was not only violent but also led to subjugation of those tribes which are absorbed into the bottom of the caste order. For example, the *Bhils* who played an important role in the formation of Mewar state were detested by the same state.

Thus acculturation was not neutral despite borrowing from each other. It could be considered as coming-to-terms with a tribal power that could not be overcome. But it did not mean that the tribal were treated as socially equal in the new order.

The transformation of tribe into caste, rather than the break-up of tribes into classes, has been the way in which South Asian society developed. The distribution

of tribal and caste communities in India is largely but not entirely exclusive. More often than not, changes among the tribal communities are 'tribes in transition', is equated to a movement towards caste.

### 3.2.2 What is 'continuum'?

Indian tribes have often been characterized as societies which in many respects follow primitive lifestyles. Arguments are forwarded that the tribal people have no religious ideology and are in the process of being Hinduized or Sanskritized. This way they are supposedly moving towards the other pole of the continuum, the diametrically opposite category known as 'the Caste.' The tribal pole represents equality where as in the caste pole, inequality is the main characteristic.

The concept of 'continuum' was initially coined by R.Redfield in his work *The Folk Culture of Yucatan*. Hitherto, he projected a serialized transformation from one cultural form and social system to the other end of another cultural form and social system. Here he adopted the 'Folk-urban' continuum model. This conceptualization provided the tenacity for tying evolutionary trends. Influenced by this schematic model, other scholars borrowed this conceptual framework and rechristened it as 'Tribe-Caste Continuum'. F.G.Bailey, while studying 'Kondh' and 'Oriya' political system, used this concept. He suggested, "We view caste and tribe as the opposite ends of a single line. At different points along the line the particular societies may be located according to their proximity to either the organic caste model or segmentary tribal model." Bailey labeled 'Oriya' caste society as organic and tribal 'Kondh' society as segmentary and argued that their kinship values and religious beliefs are not far detached from one another.

### 3.2.3 Views on the tribe-caste continuum

Thus we see that the tribe-caste continuum studies in India bear the roots of imperialism from the school of American Cultural Anthropology. Terms like Great and Little tradition, Universalization and Parochialization are modeled for India. These terms were used to study the problems of unity and diversity. The Brahminical model of Sanskritization was followed by this approach. By synthesizing British and American structural functionalism and neo-evolutionism to the study of Indian civilization, many scholars further the development of the continuum concept.

Scholars of tribe-caste continuum have often used social manifestations of religion, broadly referred to as ritual and belief while describing the transition from one polar category to another. People identified tribal religions as founded on psychological fears rather than on philosophical explanations of unknown. It is also argued that movement from simple to complex forms of religion is without any obstacles or social contradictions. Under this thought the exponents of tribe caste continuum argue, "The transition was spread over a long span of time. About 70% of the tribal people have been characterized as Hinduized without being Hindus and as indistinguishable from the inferior ranks of caste order. The range of variations in this category of tribals is immense and the polar categories of tribe and caste do not any longer prove useful."

It is felt that through culture contact and diffusion of cultural traits, the guiding principles of socio-religious change are determined. As Sachidananda argues, "In India, however, most of the groups, which are now regarded as tribal have

been in contact with Hindu society for many centuries past. Directly or indirectly, they have imbibed influences from Hinduism." Apparent empirical similarities are analyzed as continuities. The transition shows change from segmentary to hierarchical societies.

Some scholars also feel that the movement from the tribal pole to the caste pole involves progress in ethnic heterogeneity, roles specialization, social stratification, emergence of the elite and increased interaction with network of civilization centers. These features or specific characteristics are said to be completely missing in tribal societies.

Working on the data from *Botia* in Utter Pradesh, Srivastva finds the concept of '**cultural approximation**' quite helpful in dealing with the problem of tribe-caste mobility. Cultural approximation can be described both as a process and as an end product at a given time. This is a form of adaptation in which an interactive and mutually beneficial cultural co-existence is rendered possible.

### Check Your Progress 1

**Note:** 1) Your answers should be about thirty words each.

2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of this Unit.

1) What do you understand by the term 'Continuum'?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

2) What is 'Cultural Approximation'?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

## 3.3 HINDUIZATION

M.N.Srinivas and Redfield may be considered as the pioneers for making others believe in tribe-caste continuum in the context of India. They contend that acculturation defines the tribe-caste mobility in India. It seems that the primary concern of these scholars is the social mobility of the group and not of the individual. In the process of restructuring normative content of social organization,

individuals accept dominant trends of the group to which they belong. This trend can be exemplified by relevant references as follows:

Michael York writes, “the *Gond*, *Kolam* and *Naikpod* are basically equivalent though separate. The equivalence is affected by the fact that the Naikpod can now be marginally included in the Telugu caste ideology and can claim greater ritual purity by not eating beef and pork.”

Sachidananda says, “The tribe caste situation in Bihar is interesting. Out of a total population of 42,40,770 enumerated as belonging to the fold of scheduled tribes, as many as 30,30,195 reported their religion to be Hinduism’. D.N. Majumdar writes, “The transformation of a tribal group into a group in the greater Hindu society with a distinct position in the caste hierarchy, may come about without any occupational specialization within the group or by the group as a whole. It will also be shown that admission into the caste hierarchy has been achieved entirely through the process of Sanskritization.”

Another feature of this argument is that the tribes are interacting with a caste category and not with individuals in a society. As the importance is attached to rank, hierarchy, ritual, pollution and purity, they dominate all other considerations of modalities of interaction. People are adapted to the dominant trends visible in the society in which they participate. This phenomenon is described as neo-caste system in which a traditional model which was based on a series of dyadic relationships and was without any overall organizations and covering ideology, now becomes more systematic and caste-like. Thus commentators on social exchange on the tribe caste continuum find the presence of the process of Hinduization and Sanskritization.

The absorption of tribal communities into caste society takes place generally at lower level. There are many examples of tribal communities who become caste. This is done by accepting the ritual and social superiority of Brahmin and other twice-born castes. They accept a lowly occupation and the imposition of taboos in respect of food material comforts and social customs. They consequently accept the notion of rituals of purity and pollution.

This is a complex institutional process involved in the transition from a largely uncertified primeval society to a stratified peasant society. Barring the centrality of caste which is common to India society, the process can be seen in region and tribe-specific manner.

The potential site of the emergence of non-kin labour and hierarchical stratification was the Brahmana households which necessitated attachment of permanent workforce and its ordering. Culturally contingent effect of the Brahminical perception and appreciation of the social relations was the formation of caste.

The tribe caste model is mainly of two types:

- 1) The Hindu method of absorption assuming that caste system protects tribal people; and
- 2) The Sanskritization model emulating Brahminical or upper caste reference.

Scholars suggest that instead of adopting a particular caste, the tribal people attempt to get assimilated into the Hindu fold in general.

Due to the internal dynamics which tribal societies very much possess, the people and formations are changing. Scholars attribute it to the influence of caste as explanation. Superiority and domination of dominant system get thus automatically asserted.

### 3.3.1 Social status and Hinduization

G.S. Ghurye rejects the view that social degradation follows Hinduization. Status in Hindu society tends to depend upon the caliber and temper of the society (tribal) concerned. He does not feel that the Hinduized tribes will fall into the quagmire of social degradation of untouchability. The position claimed or achieved by a tribal group in the caste hierarchy is determined by the ownership of land, possession of wealth and past or present rank in tribal structure. In a situation where these status resources were lacking, a tribe gravitated towards that caste group in the hierarchy that was compatible with its economic and occupational level.

Within the caste system, a process of upward mobility had been known to have existed. Whenever emergency occurred, there were recruitments to the army and thereby to the castes of the Kshatriya *Varna*. Sometimes castes which were lower in the order, uprooted kings and were then crowned kings as Kshyatriyas. In all such situations, the concurrence of the Brahmins has always been considered essential. Only the Brahmin could dig out a lost genealogy for a wealthy and powerful patron. He could proclaim him and his lineage as belonging to that genealogy. He could invest in him with symbols of the high caste status. The Brahmin again laid down the life styles for people of different social orders. He imposed them through the machinery of the state and society, and approved changes when they had to be. One of these processes where lower castes tried to improve their social status by adopting the life style of the Brahmins, has been labeled as Sanskritization. We can try to view the process in specific settings.

#### 3.3.1.1 The *Gonds* in Bihar and Jharkhand:

There are many tribes in Bihar and Jharkhand such as the *Bhumij*, *Kherwar*, *Chero*, *Gond* etc. They belong to that category whose members have adopted the Hindu faith. They retain their clan and totems and some elements of their tribal belief. To a great extent, the *Gonds* are absorbed to Hinduism.

The transformation of a tribe into a caste is subsumed in the wider phenomenon of the absorption of that community into Hinduism. The different communities of *Gond* in Bihar and Jharkhand can be seen at different stages of assimilation. Their movement on the tribe-caste continuum scale may be viewed as the common process of transition taking place in India.

The fact that the *Gonds* are not bound to a particular area or territory that gives them the character of caste. The extent of their cultural approximation differs from each other. The *Gond* of Ranchi and Palamau are placed nearest to the tribal end of the tribe-caste continuum scale. They stand between two competing traditions in the region they inhabit. They are influenced by, on the one hand, the Hindu caste and on the other hand, by *Munda*, *Oraon* and other tribal groups. They are clearly inclined towards the 'little tradition' of Hinduism. A large number of Hindu deities are worshipped. They participate in almost all Hindu festivals. Hindu rituals at birth, marriage and death are imitated. This indicates their glide towards Hinduism. One finds the influence of Hinduism stronger in Singhbhum.

They immigrated to that area from Orissa and they were under the strong influence of Hinduism there. Their worship pattern reveals that they are deeply impressed by Hindu religious patterns. Unlike in Ranchi and Palamau, the *Gond* of Singhbhum enjoy the status of a lower Hindu caste at whose hands water may be accepted even though this is not explicit.

The *Gonds* are recognized as one of the many castes of craftsmen in Shahabad. Except their dance, which is also in disrepute, nothing is tribal about them. The *Gonds* in Saran and Champaran have been recognised as one of the backward castes. They are not even very conscious to the fact that they are tribals till recently. They are placed at a definite position in caste hierarchy and do not have any tribal traits. These groups can be put at the nearest to the caste end of the tribe-caste continuum scale. They represent the high mark of the process of Hinduization which has been in operation among various tribal communities in India.

The *Gonds* have belief in a multiplicity of gods and goddesses. They believe that spirits of various kinds can co-exist with the worship of the important gods of the Hindu pantheon. They observe a large number of festivals like Holi, Diwali, Dashara, Shiva Ratri etc. together with the Hindus. The tendency of imitating the Hindu norms is prevalent in the rites connected with birth, marriage and death etc. Eating of beef is not found in any group. Killing of cows is strictly prohibited. Domestication of pigs and fowls is prevalent like in some lower Hindu castes.

Imitating the process of Sanskritization, some *Gonds* groups are claiming Kshatriya status in the caste hierarchy. They employ Brahmins in most of their rituals. They keep a number of fasts and observe festivals. They have started wearing the sacred thread. The names they give to their children are almost indistinguishable from that of the higher Hindu castes. They also fully subscribe to the Hindu idea of ritual purity and pollution. Occasions such as women during menstruation and in child birth and the family on the death of a member are considered polluted. Each time purification ceremony is held to restore the family to its normal ritual status. By putting on sacred thread and also by expressing their superiority over the *Harijan* or untouchable caste, they demonstrate their consciousness to secure high caste status. They also maintain due social distance with the untouchable castes so that they may not be polluted.

Some affluent families have given up free mixing between the sexes. The acts of moral and sexual lapses are severely condemned than in the past. Sexual union which enjoys highest social approbation is that which imitates Hindu ritual of marriage with a Brahman as the officiating priest.

In the endeavour of making them compatible with Hinduism as far as possible, the *Gonds* of Bihar and Jharkhand trace their connection with the ruling Gond families of Madhya Pradesh. They feel what are they attempting to do now is only to regain their lost prestige and power. With some groups claiming Kshatriya status, others are satisfied to get lower caste status in the Hindu hierarchy.

The case of *Gonds* in Bihar and Jharkhand illustrates the process of acculturation leading to assimilation in Hinduism. Their status accorded them in Hindu society is not necessarily the lowest. Recognition of their claim to clean Hindu caste is accorded. Their life in Saran and Champaran is marked by heterogeneity and



multiethnic residence. And they participate with other communities in an economy involving specialization.

They interact with other ethnic groups with greater intensity and with the 'great tradition.' Some areas also show the emergence of elite and also notions of social stratification.

According to the above stated discussion the *Gonds* of Bihar and Jharkhand can be put at the caste pole of the tribe-caste continuum. In place of living as an isolated tribal group, they have become part-society as a caste.

### 3.3.1.2 The Tripura tribes

Long ago, some Bodo speaking tribes belonging to the indo Mongoloid stock, such as the *Tripura*, *Riang*, *Jamatiya*, *Noatia* and *Kuki* got themselves settled in Tripura. Tripura chief Chhengthung Fa after subjugating other tribes, established his authority to rule over them. He assumed the title of *Maha Manikya* and left a line of rulers belonging to *Manikya* dynasty to rule over Tripura. This marked the beginning of the state formation process in Tripura. In the absence of any written language in Tripura, the Raja started using Bengali language. Sanskrit written in Bengali script was used for inscribing legends on the coins. These developments suggest the presence of Hindu influence from the early phase of state formation in Tripura. It meant the establishment of Bengali and Sanskrit as the languages of the Tripura people in their predominantly tribal society.

In all probabilities, Brahmans declared the Raja as a descendant of the famous *Lunar* dynasty of Kshatriyas. The kings of Tripura were recognized as Hindu kings connected with the 'great tradition' of Indian civilization. In Tripura and outside they built a number of famous temples of Hindu gods and goddesses. According to royal proclamations, the Tripuras were to be called as Tripura Kshatriyas. Besides worshiping their own traditional deities, they also began worshiping Hindu gods and goddesses and celebrating Hindu festivals.

Role specialization, social stratification and emergence of elite can be viewed in Tripura society. Census Report for 1931 describes that among the tribes, the Tripura being the ruling tribe, enjoyed the highest social status. There was intra-tribe differentiation which was quite prominent. The *Thakurs* enjoyed the most privileged position next to the members of the royal family in the society. The rest of the Tripura tribe was subdivided into twelve sections called *Hadas* on the basis of the services rendered by them to the king. This reflects the stratification in the Tripura society.

Tribes like the *Jamatiyas*, *Riang* and *Noatias* were not of equal social status. The *Jamatiyas* who served as soldiers generally, were better off than the others. Later on they adopted the system of settled wet-rice cultivation and turned out to be successful farmers. The *Noatias* were not treated as Tripur Kshatriya initially. Their advanced section was included in the Tripur Kshatriya by an order of the king. This order also stipulated that as and when the backward Noatias achieved progress, they would be admitted into the Kshatriya fold.

The evidence of the process of Sanskritization, practicing of rituals and life styles associated with the upper castes in order to move up the social hierarchy, are also present. All the members of Tripura Kshatriya Samaj were enjoined by the

king to put on the sacred threads and to be restrained from drinking habits. On the occasion of any birth or death in the family, twelve days of *Asoucha* (penance) was required to be observed. Some Brahmins performed the duties of priests. Non-Tribal Hindus, particular Brahmins did not accept water touched by Tripura Kshatriyas. This shows that the tribals of Tripura were admitted into the Hindu orbit as the low caste Hindus.

Under the influence of some of the kings, Hinduization of the Tripura and other tribal groups also took place through their conversion to Vaishnavism. After suppressing the revolts of the *Jamatiyas* (1863) and the *Noatias* (1942-43), the kings of the respective periods forced them to embrace Vaishnavism.

The Census Report (1951) indicates that all the tribal groups switched over to some established religions. The majority of the tribals embraced Hinduism and they were classified as Tripur Kshatriyas. The Tripur Kshatriya caste was not internally a homogenous one. Here we see the stratification under the aegis of privileged, less privileged and even depressed groups. They were further divided into two Hindu sects, namely, Vaishnava and Sakta.

This account shows the movement of the Tripura Tribes from the tribal pole towards the caste pole along the tribe-caste continuum axis. The king patronized and insisted the integration of the Tripuras into the Hindu fold. They were prompted presumably by their vision of getting merged in the 'great Indian tradition' along with their subjects.

### 3.3.1.3 The *Khasis* or *Khos* of Central Himalayas

As per the 1872 Census, the *Khos* constituted more than half of the entire population of the Kumaon region. Similar was the case of Garhwal. As the time passes, the situation has changed entirely in both Garhwal and Kumaon. Here the word 'Khos' has become a derogatory term and everyone has started claiming an immigrant status. The trend of social transition in Central Himalayas has been that of de-Khasization and Sanskritization. It started with *Khos*' supernaturalism came under attack of Shastric Hinduism of *Shaiva*, *Shakta* and *Vaishnva* order. As an impact, new ideas of Brahminical Hinduism were incorporated into *Khasi* supernaturalism. There was no much socio-political change. Whatever change had occurred, was restricted to the seats of shrines which were turned into the greater tradition. Through connubial ties, the temple functionaries intermingled with the main stream *Khos*. This association sees the creation of *Chaturdham*, *Punch Kedar*, *Punch Badri* and *Punch Prayag* in this region and exposes it to pilgrimage by the elements which represent the greater Hindu tradition. As a result of this, territory-based clan identities were encouraged to adapt and convert themselves into traditional caste or *Jati* fold. This process has got assimilated into other adjoining areas gradually. With the influence of immigrants, not only does the Sanskritization takes place but also introduce the labels of Brahmin (*Baman*) and *Jimidar* (Rajput) in the society. The social stratification was between *Bith* and *Dom*. The *Biths* included the immigrants as well as the *Khos*. The immigrants who were called *Asal* (real), enjoyed all administrative and civil authority. The *Khos* who were either *Khas Baman* or *Khas Jimidar* were inferior in status to the *Asal Baman* and were forced to wear brass bracelet (*Pitali*).

The *Khos* and *Doms* were supplanted in status by the cultural practices and rituals ascribed in the migrant culture of the Hindu *Shastric* model. Yet the village level

social order is persisted and maintained by the *Khos* culture and associated supernatural institutions. All these cultural streams co-exist as they made assimilation of cultural changes inspired from Sanskritization, a harmonious exercise.

**Check Your Progress 2**

- Note:** 1) Your answers should be around thirty words each.  
2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of this Unit.  
3) How does a tribe become a caste?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

- 4) What are the three tribal groups that have been studied in detail in the preceding section?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

**3.4 TRIBALISATION**

A question arises at this point: would the exposure of tribes to the Hindu influence i.e. material and non-martial, necessarily lead to their integration in the Hindu social organization? One would imagine that it occurred on the condition on the nature of countervailing processes, i.e. the tribal society's effort to maintain its identity. Some of the scholars feel that the movement from tribe to caste is not unidirectional. Wherever the opposite force is non-existent or weak, the integration becomes easier. Almost all the writings on the topic assume the closeness of links between the tribals and the neighbouring 'Hindu' world and the remoteness of the period of origins of most of such links. It can be seen natural that the two communities borrow from each other.

Evidences of the phenomenon now called as 'tribalization,' are also available. The traditional aspect of tribalization is defined by K.S. Singh as 'acceptance of

tribal mores, rituals and beliefs by incoming communities.' Nihar Ranjan Ray suggests a broad-based assimilation process affecting vital aspects of religious beliefs and rituals and social practices of the immigrating communities of the Aryans. It is assumed that the various totemistic and animistic beliefs of the Aryans are the results of their emulation of the culture of the autochthons, i.e. the *Adivasis*. Ray finds out a lot of rituals and practices, such as the worship of 'village gods' (*Gram Devata*) where the Brahmin priest has no role, whereas worshipping of 'village gods' in open spaces is strictly forbidden in Brahminical injunctions.

K.S. Singh suggests that acceptance of tribal mores is easier for the middle and lower segments of the caste hierarchical order. They move in search of land or to offer their services to their tribal masters. This process does not affect the Brahmin and other high-caste people.

Other aspects of the tribalization process are: 1. Respect for the tribal priest and medicine-man and for tribal deities which are retained even though the tribal groups are driven out of the village; and 2. the participation of tribes in the formation of state and their continued support for it.

It can be asserted that tribalization was a much weaker cultural force than Hinduization. It is perhaps not fit to call it a countervailing process in relation to Hinduization. Hierarchical Hindu caste society distances itself from the tribal community in a conscious manner out of the complex mindset, that they are culturally superior. Tribal groups are accorded lower status in ritual rankings whenever and wherever they at all are admitted into the caste system.

The process of absorption of tribal communities into the Hindu social structure has been unobtrusive and without any pressure from any side. As the final mark of the completion of the process of Sanskritization, the tribe is recognized as a Hindu caste. V. Elwin describes this process of Hinduization of the tribal group in course of which they have adopted the full Hindu faith while retaining tribal names, clan, totem rules and several other elements of tribal religion.

### Check Your Progress 3

**Note:** 1) Your answers should be about thirty words each.

2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of this Unit.

5) What do you mean by tribalization?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

6) What are the main characteristics of tribalisation?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

### 3.5 LET US SUM UP

One of the important social transformations to have taken place in Indian history is the transition of tribes into castes and in a more restricted sense the identification of certain castes with tribes. While some scholars have not distinguished between tribes and castes, others have sought to discuss the distinct features of each with relation to social organization and other aspects. The concept of continuum has been applied to tribes and castes for a better understanding of the relation between the two categories. Seeing both categories as two ends of the same line or pole seeks to show social changes in a serialized manner. However, this has been found inadequate by some scholars in understanding the complex and fluid nature of interaction between the two categories.

'Hinduization' and 'Tribalization' can be seen as two processes that are complementary to each other. Hinduization or the absorption of tribes into the dominant neighbouring caste systems is a complex process. This has been studied with the examples of three tribes, namely the Gonds of Bihar and Jharkhand, the tribes of Tripura and the Khasis of the Central Himalayas. Tribalisation on the other hand refers to the identification of certain castes of the lower order with tribes and tribal characteristics and rituals. This can happen when the castes may serve the tribes in some way, or be in close contact with them over a long period of time.

Thus we can see that the 'Tribe-Caste Continuum' though a concept developed for a clearer understanding of the categories of tribe and caste may at times not be adequate for representing the complex social transformations that both categories have undergone. At the same time it is a concept that needs to be understood especially when dealing with the fluidity of social categories in the Indian context.

### 3.6 ACTIVITY

Try to explain the process of 'Sanskritization' as you have understood it to a friend or a group of friends. Record their views and your views on paper. Try to visit the nearest library and look up further information on how tribal societies have integrated themselves into a national identity. Try to interact with tribal people or societies to find out how they perceive themselves in relation to those not within their social set up.

---

### 3.7 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS

---

- Beteille, Andre: "The Concept of Tribe with special reference to India", *Society and Politics in India: Essays in a Comparative Perspective*, Delhi, 1992
- Bailey, F.G: *Tribe, Caste and Nation: a study of Political Activity and Political Change in highland Orissa*, 1960
- Bose, N.K: The Hindu Mode of Tribal Absorption, *Science and Culture*, vol. vii, 1941
- Louis, Dumont: *Homo Hierarchicus- the Caste System and its Implications*, Chicago, 1980
- Nathan, Dev: (ed.) *From Tribe to Caste*, Shimla, 1997
- Majumdar, D.N.: *Matrix of Indian Culture*, Lucknow, 1947
- Sherring, M.A: *Hindu Tribes and Castes*, vol.I,II, Delhi (rpt) 1974
- Singh, K.S: (ed.) *Ethnicity Caste and People*, Delhi, 1990
- Sinha, Surajit: Tribe-Caste and Tribe-Peasant Continuum in Central India, *Man in India*, Vol.45, Jan-March, 1965

---

### 3.8 GLOSSARY

---

- Anthropological** : related to the study of man with relation to evolution and the study of the societies and customs of mankind.
- Orientalism** : the study of Eastern cultures and societies which is thought to have its beginnings in the colonial period.
- Ethnocentrism** : a process by which a society evaluates others or those on its margins by its own values and views.
- Ethnic Heterogeneity** : ethnically varied composition of a society.
- Social Stratification** : understanding the composition of a society as being made up of various layers being placed on top of each other with many complex relations between them.
- Acculturation** : refers to the process by which groups with distinct cultures interact with each other in a consistent manner and borrow some features from each other.

---

### 3.9 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

---

- 1) The term 'Continuum', initially coined by R Redfield, refers to a model projecting a serialized transformation from one cultural form and social system to another form and system that can potentially be seen as an 'opposite' to the former.
- 2) 'Cultural Approximation' is best understood as a process involving the mutually beneficial co-existence of two or more social groups within a cultural framework and the result of such a process.

- 3) Tribes can become castes through a complex process of social change called 'Sanskritization' which implies the absorption of a tribal community into caste structures by a dominant society. The tribal societies too may accept the ritual and social superiority of Brahmin and other twice-born castes. They may also accept inferior social status, lowly occupations and the imposition of certain taboos.
- 4) The Gonds of Bihar and Jharkhand, the Bodo-speaking tribes of Tripura, namely, the Tripuras, Riangs, Jamatiya, Noatia and Kukis and the Khasis or Khos of the Central Himalayas are the three tribal groups studied in the preceding section.
- 5) Tribalization briefly, refers to the acceptance of tribal beliefs, mores, rituals and ways of life by the incoming communities leading to a process of assimilation. This can also be understood as a counterpoint to the process of 'Hinduization'.
- 6) Respect for the tribal priest, an egalitarian social structure, belief in tribal deities and rituals and the participation of tribal people in the formation of state are the chief characteristics of 'tribalization'.