



## TREE WORSHIP AND RELIGIOUS BEHAVIOUR IN TRIBAL SOCIETIES: A SOCIOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

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### RESEARCH ARTICLE



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#### Abstract

Tree veneration carries deep importance within the spiritual, religious and cultural frameworks of tribal communities, where nature is honored not just as a source of materials, but as a vital force woven into the essence of social and spiritual existence. This paper delves into the sociological aspects of tree veneration as a crucial dimension of religious practices among tribal groups, highlighting its influence in cultivating group identity, fostering social unity, and promoting ecological awareness with folk religion activities. Various tribal factions throughout India and elsewhere have customarily assigned sacred significance to particular trees, including the banyan, sal, neem, and peepal, frequently linking them to ancestral spirits, deities, or natural phenomena. These folk traditions are not standalone practices. They are intricately integrated into the community's kinship networks, seasonal rhythms, and ethical principles. Tree worship folk functions as a cultural tool that aids in the preservation and transmission of collective memories and oral histories. It also directs social behavior, often shaping how communities engage with their environment sustainably. Viewed through a Durkheimian perspective, tree worship represents an expression of collective consciousness, where the sacred symbolizes group unity. From a sociological functionalist standpoint, these rituals contribute to preserving social order and ecological equilibrium. This analysis draws on field studies and secondary sources to illuminate the similarities and differences in tree worship practices across malda tribal cultures. It further addresses the challenges posed by modernization, deforestation, and cultural assimilation that jeopardize the survival of these indigenous belief systems. In conclusion, the examination emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and safeguarding tribal religious customs not merely as cultural relics.

**Keywords:** *Folk Religion, Taboos, Sacred, Oral Traditions*

#### Introduction

Worship of trees is perhaps one of the oldest and yet most enduring forms of spirituality that humans have encountered. In primitive cultures where religion intertwined with nature, there is a prevalent belief that trees serve as powerful symbols embodying cosmic order, dead ancestors, or divine forces. These cultures regarded trees as spiritually living beings possessing mystical essence and life-giving powers besides being tangible objects. Across primitive cultures on all continents, the acts of worshipping trees, from sacred groves to ritualistic offerings and taboos, are central to the practice of religion. This research attempts to understand the sociological aspects of tree worship in tribal cultures from a socio-religious perspective, focusing on its meanings, purposes, and effects. Malda Zilla, which is located to the north of West Bengal, is famous for its tribal population, historical places, and rich culture. Numerous tribal groups like Santals, Oraons, and Mundas have shown deep-rooted spiritual connections with nature. The phenomenon of tree worship is one of the most striking features of their culture. This is not an exhaustive study but rather a picture of tree worship observed during field visits to different blocks of Malda, including Bamangola and areas with a strong tribal population.

#### Research Objectives

- Investigate the spiritual and metaphysical doctrines that support tree worship in indigenous religions. This involves investigating the alleged relationships that exist between trees and ancestors, spirits, deities, and the natural environment.
- Examine how traditional environmental knowledge and ecological balance are preserved in tribal communities through the practice of tree worship. This goal is to comprehend how religious respect for trees influences conservation efforts and the dissemination of ecological knowledge.

- Consider how, in primitive civilizations, tree worship interacts with other facets of religious practice. Analyzing the ways in which taboos, festivals, rituals, and the worship of other natural components interact with beliefs and behaviors relating to trees is part of this.
- To create a sociological framework to comprehend how religious conduct, tree worship, and sociocultural life are intertwined in primitive civilizations. In order to get a comprehensive understanding of the relevance of tree worship within the larger framework of tribal religions, it is necessary to synthesize the data.
- By offering theoretical and empirical insights into tree worship, you may add to the body of sociological research already available on tribal religions and the interactions between humans and the environment. The goal of this mission is to increase academic understanding in this particular field of study.

### **Area of Survey**

Tribal groups make up the majority of the indigenous population in the Malda area; the Habbipur Block residents were the particular focus of the survey. Cultivators, mostly indigenous families, make up a major section of these communities. They oversee or work land that belongs to them, the government, or other groups. Others are hired as agricultural laborers, working on other people's property in exchange for cash, in-kind compensation, or a portion of the crop. The populace also works for daily wages, which provide an essential source of income.

Numerous tribe members work in a variety of professions outside of agriculture. These include small store proprietors, teachers, government workers, toto drivers, and hand-pulled cart drivers. Even with these occupations, a number of families continue to have ties to agriculture by raising fish and poultry.

Additionally, several homes run small-scale domestic cottage businesses. Usually, one or more family members operate these cottage companies out of their homes or in the local hamlet. The flexible and multiskilled nature of the tribal labor in this area is reflected in these businesses, which are essential to sustaining livelihoods. often to augment household income.

### **Methodological Approaches**

Primary data is the study's main source. Books, reputable journals, working papers, newspapers, and the Internet are just a few of the places where secondary data may be found. Speaking with tribal members directly—especially religious leaders, elders, or practitioners—provides primary sources. Following traditions, sporting events, and everyday schedules in their native environment. I have done the same by using the non-participant observation method. Folk studies on a tribe or location, historical documents, and sociological essays are examples of secondary sources. Stories, songs, and symbols depicting tribal life can be found in archival sources.

Stories passed down orally that express the group's intellectual and spiritual core are called myths and traditions. The Culture of Material Things: sacred items, "TOTEM," and ritual tools that represent spiritual ideas.

After that, I preferred the 'snowball sampling' approach for gathering unofficial data. Worshippers were interviewed in-depth to get primary data. Both closed-ended and open-ended jobs were on the schedule. Alternatively, I used 'qualitative data' to find out how folk sports are doing in the local tribal culture.

### **Research findings with Sociological Overview**

#### **1. Comprehending Tribal Cultures and Their Interaction with Nature**

Close-knit communities, basic technology, and ingrained customs that have been passed down through the years are characteristics of tribal society. Above all, their worldview is holistic, assuming a symbiotic interaction between humans and nature. These communities' lifestyles are closely linked to their natural surroundings, and they frequently reside in hills, forests, or isolated areas.

According to tribal phenomenon, nature is sacred and neither inert nor distinct from the divine. According to animism, mountains, rivers, animals, and trees in particular are thought to be living things with spirits or souls. Religious activity that revolves around respect, conciliation, and communion with nature is a result of this animistic worldview. Trees are special among the natural components because of their longevity, productivity, and symbolic depiction of life cycles.

#### **2. Indigenous Culture Uses Trees as Sacred Icons**

According to tribal belief systems, some trees are connected to mythological events, gods, or spirits. For instance, certain trees, like the sal, peepal, or banyan, are regarded as the homes of spirits or deities by numerous Indian tribal tribes, including the Santals, Oraons, and Bhils. Trees like the baobab are considered to be the dwelling places of strong spirits or living ancestors by African tribes like the Yoruba and Dogon.

The capacity of tree worship to unite community belief systems around common symbols makes it significant from a sociological standpoint. Sacred trees are frequently used as meeting places for ceremonies, conversations, and group decision-making. The tree thus becomes a societal institution as well as a religious symbol, representing moral authority, collective memory, and communal identity.

#### **3. Mystic The idea: The Intersection of Ecology and Religion**

Tribal societies' establishment of holy groves—forest areas set aside for religious purposes—is among the most striking instances of tree worship. These groves, which may be found throughout South America, Southeast Asia, Africa, and India, are thought to be untouchable and are frequently devoted to regional deities or ancestor spirits.

Sacred groves serve as an example of how religious belief and ecological preservation may coexist from a sociological standpoint. The groves' customs and taboos, such as the bans on hunting, tree-cutting, and unpermitted entry, serve as unspoken rules that preserve biodiversity and guarantee sustainability. Sacred groves have been recognized by ecologists and anthropologists as early examples of environmental care, where ecological purposes are served by religious conduct.

Crucial groves also serve as sites for social reproduction, passing down moral principles, religious knowledge, and cultural identity from one generation to the next. Events like harvest celebrations, marriages, and puberty rites that take place in groves serve to further emphasize how important trees are in forming the tribe's social and spiritual life.

#### **4. Religious Practices and Offerings in the Presence of Trees**

Rituals associated with the worship of trees vary; some are seasonal, some are particular to life-cycle events, and some are performed to seek blessings or appease spirits. Typical methods include:

- Tying cloths or threads as vows to tree stumps.
  - At the foot of the tree, light incense or lights.
  - Presenting the alleged tree-dwelling spirit with food, flowers, or animal sacrifices.
- Honoring the tree by circumambulating (going around it), frequently in odd numbers. Individual piety and group cohesion are strengthened by these ritualistic actions. They also have a psychological purpose, giving people a way to deal with uncertainty, disease, or natural disasters by attributing hope and cause to divine intervention.
- In many cultures, women are particularly linked to the worship of trees, which represent the energies of reproduction and life. For instance, in some regions of Central India, women who are infertile may offer prayers to particular trees that are thought to bestow fertility. As a result, trees act as a bridge between supernatural abilities and human wants.

#### **5. Stories & Oral Traditions**

Telling the Sacred Trees are often central to creation stories, heroic tales, or moral fables in tribal mythology and oral traditions. Trees are frequently personified in these tales, given human characteristics or divine beginnings. Some tribes, for example, think that a certain tree protected a deity in times of peril or that their ancestors were born beneath a certain tree.

From a sociological perspective, these stories encode social norms and validate trees' hallowed position. As repositories of moral teaching and communal memory, myths guarantee that reverence for the natural world is ingrained from an early age.

Furthermore, especially in nonliterate civilizations, these oral traditions are essential to social cohesiveness. The tribe's identity, beliefs, and relationship to the outside world are defined by the shared stories that unite the community.

#### **6. Using Tree Worship to Establish Social Control and Norms**

In primitive societies, religious conduct frequently functions as a social control mechanism. Respect for trees is not just spiritual; it is also accepted as the standard. A sacred tree or grove's sanctity can be violated by cutting it down or desecrating its surrounds, which is considered a major act that may result in community punishments or even divine vengeance.

These standards support moral principles, maintain societal cohesion, and control the use of resources. For instance, in certain tribal communities, disagreements are resolved beneath revered trees that are seen as truth-bearers and witnesses to oaths. A moral system where societal and divine supervision are complementary is established by this sacralization of justice.

#### **7. Contemporary Issues and the Destruction of Conventional Wisdom**

Tribal communities' tree-worshipping customs encounter several difficulties in the contemporary day, notwithstanding their tenacity. Traditional belief systems have been upset by urbanization, Sanskritization, land acquisition, deforestation, Hindunization, and missionary endeavors. Trees have been felled for building, sacred forests have been overrun, and religious practices have been written off as "superstition" or beliefs.

New value systems that place an emphasis on individualism and material advancement over social spirituality and ecological balance have also been brought about by modernization and globalization. Formal education, popular religion, or migration may persuade younger generations to abandon traditional customs and folkways.

But there are also examples of adaptation and resuscitation. Tribal customs have been recognized for their ecological wisdom by environmental movements, non-governmental organizations, and even government programs. Tree worship is being reframed as "eco-spirituality" in some places, where sacred groves have been granted legal protection, bridging the gap between ancient veneration and modern environmentalism.

#### **8. Sociological approaches**

Sociologists have approached the study of religious activity, including tree worship, from a variety of theoretical angles. Émile Durkheim, for example, claimed in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* that religion is a reflection of the collective consciousness and totem. Thus, sacred trees might be interpreted as representations of shared values and social cohesiveness. Bronislaw Malinowski highlighted how religion serves psychological purposes by providing solace and stability in unpredictable situations. In tribal life, tree worship fulfills this purpose exactly, complete with taboos and rituals. Religion, in the opinion of Clifford Geertz, is a cultural system that offers models for and representations of reality. The tree turns into a symbol of cosmic order and a moral code for tribal indigenous people. These frameworks assist us in realizing that tree worship is a multifaceted phenomenon rather than just a holdover from earlier times.

## Conclusion

In summary, tree worship is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that combines social structure, ecology, spirituality, and cultural identity in primitive societies. It represents a profound grasp of the relationships between humans and nature and plays crucial roles in upholding social order, protecting the environment, and fostering shared values. It is by no means unreasonable or outdated. Tribal cultures' religious practices can teach us a lot in this era of environmental disasters and cultural uniformity. Their respect for trees serves as a reminder of a world in which spiritual ecology influences both beliefs and behavior, and the sacred is woven throughout the ordinary. A sociological analysis of this practice emphasizes the significance of rituals, the lasting power of representations, and the close relationship between belief systems and the social structure they uphold.

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