



The Sacred and the Secular in Tribal Life: Rethinking the Philosophy of Religion through Indigenous Worldviews

A Historical and Philosophical Study of the Santhal, Munda, Bhumij,

Kheria-Sabar, Lodha-Sabar and Birhor Communities of Purulia, Bankura and Jhargram, West Bengal

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ABSTRACT

The academic study of religion has long relied on a working distinction between the sacred and the secular, treating religion as a discrete domain of human life set apart from economic, political, social, and ecological activity. This distinction becomes strained when applied to the lived religious traditions of tribal communities in India. This article offers a historically grounded philosophical examination of how the sacred and the secular relate in tribal life, drawing on the Santhal, Munda, Bhumij, Kheria-Sabar, Lodha-Sabar, and Birhor communities of Purulia, Bankura, and Jhargram districts in West Bengal—regions historically known as the Jungle Mahals and linked to the Chota Nagpur Plateau.

Combining archival and secondary historical analysis with ethnographic observation, the article argues that tribal religion cannot be adequately described as a bounded institutional sphere of belief. It is better understood as an integrated worldview in which nature, kinship, ritual, agriculture, seasonal festival, and the major transitions of birth, marriage, and death are woven together with spiritual significance. The historical record of colonial administration, forest legislation, land alienation, the Criminal Tribes Act, missionary encounters, and post-independence development policies demonstrates that this integrated worldview has been repeatedly tested, adapted, and asserted under conditions of profound structural change. Practices such as sacred-grove worship, veneration of ancestors, belief in nature spirits, oral transmission of knowledge, and cyclical festivals show that tribal spirituality remains at once cosmological, ethical, ecological, and communal.

Accordingly, the article proposes a reorientation of the philosophy of religion along indigenous and historically informed lines: rather than asking whether tribal communities possess “religion” in an institutional sense, philosophical inquiry should ask how they have historically conceived of existence, nature, community, morality, and the relation between visible and invisible dimensions of reality. The study concludes that the tribal worldview poses a genuine philosophical challenge to the rigid sacred–secular dichotomy, and that it has much to offer current debates on ecological ethics, epistemic justice, religious pluralism, and the decolonisation of knowledge.

Keywords: Tribal Philosophy; Tribal Religion; Sacred and Secular; Indigenous Worldview; Jungle Mahals; Santhal; Sacred Grove; Ecological Ethics; Epistemic Justice; Philosophy of Religion; Colonial Forest Policy; Criminal Tribes Act

INTRODUCTION

Philosophy of religion has traditionally taken up questions about the existence and nature of God, the character of religious experience, the relation between faith and reason, the status of religious knowledge, morality, immortality, and the place of religion within society. Much of this inquiry treats religion as a distinguishable region of human life—something identifiable through institutions, doctrines, scriptures, theological systems, and organised worship. This framework fits comfortably with the major textual traditions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and similarly scripture-based systems.



Applying the same framework to tribal religions, however, raises a genuine philosophical difficulty. Many tribal traditions have no single canonical text, no systematic theology, and no centralised religious authority. Religious understanding instead travels through oral narrative, myth, song, ritual, festival, custom, and the memory of elders. But the absence of a written scripture does not amount to an absence of philosophical reflection; philosophical content may simply be carried by ways of living, ritual performance, and relationships with the human and natural world rather than by treatises. Scholars of Indian tribal religion have likewise warned against treating these traditions as a rudimentary or “primitive” stage that more developed religions eventually supersede.

This article grows out of exactly that difficulty. Its guiding question is this: can the sacred–secular distinction adequately account for tribal life? If agriculture, forest, animal, kinship, festival, marriage, death, music, and social duty are all bound up with spiritual meaning, then where, precisely, does the secular begin and the sacred end?

This question takes on particular weight in Purulia, Bankura, and Jhargram—districts that share historical and geographical ties to the Chota Nagpur Plateau and the former Jungle Mahals region, while differing considerably in cultural development, degree of contact with dominant religious traditions, and pace of modernisation. The communities considered here include the Santhal, Munda, Bhumij, Lodha-Sabar, Kheria-Sabar, and Birhor. These groups have experienced distinct yet overlapping historical trajectories under colonial revenue systems, forest laws, the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, missionary activity, and post-independence development regimes.

The central claim advanced in what follows is that tribal religion is not simply one ingredient within tribal culture; religion and culture together constitute a single lived worldview. Birth, marriage, death, hunting, cultivation, dance, and song can all carry spiritual weight, giving rise to a worldview marked by continuity between the visible and the invisible, the individual and the community, and human beings and the natural order. This integrated quality has not remained static. It has been shaped, pressured, and in certain respects reinforced by the historical processes that have defined the region since the late eighteenth century.

The purpose of the discussion that follows is accordingly both historical and philosophical: to reconstruct how colonial and postcolonial transformations affected the material and institutional conditions of tribal religious life, and then to ask what the resulting practices imply about reality, human existence, morality, knowledge, and the relationship between people and nature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

From “Primitive Religion” to Indigenous Worldview

Early anthropology often sorted tribal religious life into categories such as animism, animatism, magic, and ancestor-veneration. Edward Tylor’s foundational account of animism, for instance, treated belief in spiritual beings as the earliest and most elementary form of religious consciousness, from which more developed religious systems were assumed to have evolved. While such typologies aided comparative study, they also tended to place indigenous religious systems on an evolutionary ladder with institutional religions positioned at the top.

More recent scholarship has questioned this assumption. Studies of Indian tribal religion emphasise its diversity, its local rootedness, and its close connection to the surrounding ecology; belief is carried orally rather than scripturally, and myth, ritual, song, and symbol perform serious intellectual and social work. This shift matters for the present argument. If tribal religion is approached only under the heading of “animism,” attention tends to fix on the supposed objects of belief—spirits, trees, hills, ancestors—rather than on the worldview that gives those objects their meaning in the first place, or on the historical conditions under which that worldview has persisted and adapted.



Historical Scholarship on the Jungle Mahals and Tribal Resistance

A substantial body of historical work has documented the political and economic transformations of the Jungle Mahals and adjoining regions. The area, loosely corresponding to present-day Purulia, parts of Bankura, Jhargram, and West Midnapore, came under East India Company control after the acquisition of the Diwani in 1765 and the cession of certain territories from Mir Qasim in 1760. The Permanent Settlement of 1793 extended into the region with uneven and often disruptive effects. Local zamindars, revenue demands, and the extension of settled agriculture pressed upon forest-dependent and shifting-cultivation communities.

Resistance was recurrent. The Chuar disturbances of the late eighteenth century, the Bhumij rebellion (Ganga Narayan Hungama) of 1832–33, and the great Santhal Hul of 1855–56 all arose, in significant measure, from grievances over land alienation, moneylending, forest access, and the intrusion of outsiders into tribal domains. The creation of the Santhal Parganas after the Hul represented a partial colonial recognition of the need for protective administration. Later forest legislation—particularly the Indian Forest Act of 1878 and subsequent measures—further restricted customary rights of access and use, accelerating processes of sedentarisation and economic vulnerability among groups such as the Lodha, Kheria-Sabar, and Birhor.

The Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 cast a long shadow over several of the communities under study. Lodha, Kheria-Sabar, and related groups were notified under the Act, generating enduring stigma that persisted after denotification in 1952. Post-independence development programmes aimed at “uplift” and resettlement of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) such as the Lodha and Birhor introduced new forms of state intervention into livelihood, settlement, and, indirectly, cultural and religious practice.

Tribal Spirituality and the Sacred–Secular Question

A relevant strand of scholarship holds that tribal worldviews do not, in general, maintain a sharp line between sacred and secular life. K. P. Aleaz describes the tribal worldview as an integrated relationship among creation, spirituality, and community in which no clean division between sacred and secular can be drawn. Educational writing on tribal religion in India similarly identifies harmony with creation as foundational to Adivasi spirituality, observing that religion and non-religion are not clearly separated within this outlook. These accounts bear directly on the present study, since they suggest that the sacred–secular dichotomy may be a culturally specific tool rather than a universal feature of religious life.

Tribal Religion, Nature, and Ecological Thought

A second body of scholarship concerns the relationship between tribal spirituality and ecology. Contemporary writing increasingly describes indigenous religious worldviews as ecological or eco-spiritual, emphasising the bond between land, nature, and spiritual life. This article builds on that discussion but does not stop at an exclusively ecological reading. Nature is not simply “protected” because tribal communities recognise its usefulness. Nature carries ontological and religious weight in its own right: the forest is not merely a resource but can be a sacred domain; the hill is not merely a geographical feature but may possess a spiritual identity of its own. The relationship between people and nature is therefore ecological, ethical, and religious all at once—a point developed further by environmental thinkers such as Vandana Shiva and Ramachandra Guha, who have argued that indigenous relationships to land offer resources for rethinking dominant, extraction-oriented models of development.

Epistemic Justice and Indigenous Knowledge

The second theoretical framework informing this article is epistemic justice. Miranda Fricker’s account of epistemic injustice—the ways certain persons or communities are wronged specifically in their capacity as knowers—offers a useful lens for understanding how tribal perspectives have often been silenced or misrepresented within dominant narratives. Recent scholarship extends this discussion to indigenous epistemology more specifically. V. Hari Narayanan argues that standard accounts of epistemic injustice may not fully capture indigenous ways of knowing, since indigenous conceptions of the self, of knowledge, and of knowing can differ in fundamental respects from the assumptions built into much modern epistemology.



This matters for the study of tribal religion. If philosophical knowledge is assumed to require written propositions, systematic argument, and formal doctrine, oral tradition will be excluded from philosophy by definition rather than by considered judgment. A philosophical treatment of tribal religion therefore requires broadening what counts as philosophical knowledge in the first place—a point consistent with wider decolonial arguments about research and knowledge production made by scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the historical transformation of tribal religious and cultural practices in the Jungle Mahals region under colonial and postcolonial regimes.
2. To analyse the philosophical relationship between the sacred and the secular in tribal life, with attention to community-specific differences among the Santhal, Munda, Bhumij, Kheria-Sabar, Lodha-Sabar, and Birhor.
3. To reconstruct tribal religion as a lived worldview rather than an institutional system of belief, while tracing how historical pressures have shaped that worldview.
4. To examine the relationship between tribal spirituality, nature, and ecological consciousness in light of colonial forest policy and subsequent environmental change.
5. To explore the philosophical significance of ritual, oral tradition, festival, and sacred landscape through historically informed comparison across Purulia, Bankura, and Jhargram.
6. To question how far conventional, largely Western categories of sacred and secular apply to tribal religious experience.
7. To examine tribal oral knowledge through the lens of epistemic justice.
8. To show how tribal spirituality can contribute to contemporary philosophy of religion and environmental ethics.

METHODOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive design that combines three strands of work: ethnographic fieldwork, analysis of census data and secondary historical literature, and philosophical analysis. The design follows from the research question. Whether the sacred–secular distinction can account for tribal life is a conceptual question, yet it can only be answered by looking at how these communities actually live and at the historical conditions under which that life has been shaped. Fieldwork supplies lived practice, historical and census material supplies context, and the philosophy of religion supplies the framework for asking what the two together imply.

Study Area and Field Sites

Primary fieldwork was carried out in twelve villages across four blocks of Purulia district: Hura, Puncha, Manbazar, and Bandwan. Purulia was part of the historical Jungle Mahals and lies on the eastern margin of the Chota Nagpur Plateau, which makes it a suitable site for studying how tribal religious life has persisted under colonial and postcolonial change. Fieldwork ran from February 2024 to January 2025 and was organised as five separate visits. Spreading the visits over twelve months made it possible to observe festivals across the agricultural and ritual year and to follow up in later visits the conversations begun in earlier ones. The six communities named in this article (Santhal, Munda, Bhumij, Kheria-Sabar, Lodha-Sabar, and Birhor) form its analytical focus. The comparative treatment of Bankura and Jhargram in Section 13 is based on census data,



district-level reports, and published historical and ethnographic studies, not on direct fieldwork in those districts.

Data Sources

Ethnographic data. Participant observation was conducted during six festivals: Baha, Sarhul, Akhyan Jatra, Karam, Sohrai, and Bandna. A total of twenty Jaher Than (sacred groves) were visited across the field villages, where the setting of each grove and the rituals performed there were observed. Alongside observation, informal and open-ended conversations were held with village elders, ritual specialists such as the Naike, and other community members. Most of this material was recorded on audio, and written notes were kept in a field notebook during and after festivals, grove visits, and conversations. Field photography supplied a visual record of ritual spaces, offerings, and festival practice.

Census and secondary data. Government census data (Census of India) were used to establish the demographic and tribal-population context of the districts and communities studied. These were read together with district-level reports and published historical studies of the Jungle Mahals, colonial forest policy, the Criminal Tribes Act, and tribal resistance movements, which provide the historical background set out in Sections 5 and 6.

Selection of Sites and Informants

Villages and informants were selected purposively, not at random, because the aim was depth of understanding and not statistical representation. Elders and ritual specialists were approached with particular attention, since they are the main carriers of oral religious knowledge, while other community members were included so that practice could be observed beyond the circle of specialists. The festivals and groves observed give material on the seasonal and ritual forms through which religious life is carried on in the region. The study therefore makes no claim of statistical representativeness, and its findings are offered as interpretation.

Data Analysis

The audio recordings were reviewed alongside the written notes, and the material was organised around recurring themes: nature and sacred landscape, ritual and festival, kinship and community, oral transmission of knowledge, ethical obligation, and the effects of historical change. Field material was then set against census data and the historical record, so that observed practice could be read in its historical context and the different kinds of evidence could check one another. In a final step, themes were compared across communities, festivals, and groves to separate shared features from specific ones, and were interpreted through the philosophy of religion. The four philosophical propositions in Section 18 were developed from this process.

Philosophical Approach

This article interprets the material gathered through the philosophy of religion while remaining attentive to historical process. It makes no claim that all tribal communities share one uniform religious outlook; on the contrary, the comparative material drawn on here shows marked differences across communities and regions, differences that are themselves products of distinct historical experiences.

The philosophical method adopted is therefore interpretive, comparative, critical, and historically situated. The aim is not to measure tribal religion against an external theological yardstick but to reconstruct its internal conceptual structure on its own terms, while recognising that those terms have been forged and reworked under specific historical conditions of colonial intrusion, land alienation, legal stigmatisation, missionary contact, and developmental intervention.

Ethical Considerations and Positionality

Participation in conversations was voluntary. Elders, ritual specialists, and community members were told the purpose of the research, and verbal consent was sought before audio recording and photography. Individual informants are not named in this article, and sensitive ritual knowledge is treated with restraint. The



researcher's own position and disciplinary training shape what is noticed and how it is interpreted. For this reason the study begins from the communities' own terms (such as Jaher Than, Bonga, and Naike) before applying philosophical vocabulary, and it treats its conclusions as interpretive claims and not as neutral facts.

Limitations

The findings are qualitative and bound to the context studied. Fieldwork covered twelve villages in four blocks of Purulia and does not describe every village, or every member of the communities concerned. Informants were not recorded by gender, so the study makes no claims about gender differences in religious practice or knowledge. Oral accounts reflect the views of particular informants, and census and colonial records reflect the perspective of the administrators who produced them. The comparison with Bankura and Jhargram rests on secondary sources and should be treated as indicative. Further fieldwork in those districts, and systematic attention to gender, would strengthen and refine the arguments presented here.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE JUNGLE MAHALS AND THE MAKING OF TRIBAL MARGINALITY

Any philosophical account of sacred–secular relations in the region must begin with the historical conditions that shaped tribal life from the late eighteenth century onward. The Jungle Mahals—comprising territories that now fall largely within Purulia, parts of Bankura, Jhargram, and West Midnapore—were brought under Company control in stages after 1760–1765. The Permanent Settlement of 1793, applied unevenly, encouraged the expansion of settled agriculture and the intrusion of non-tribal intermediaries into formerly forested and shifting-cultivation zones.

Resistance was neither sporadic nor purely economic. The Chuar disturbances of the 1790s, the Bhumij-led Ganga Narayan Hungama of 1832–33 in the Manbhum–Jungle Mahals area, and the Santhal Hul of 1855–56 all combined grievances over land, forest access, moneylending, and administrative intrusion with assertions of collective identity and autonomy. The Hul, led by Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu among others, resulted in the creation of the Santhal Parganas as a special administrative unit—an acknowledgement, however limited, that ordinary regulation had failed.

Forest policy constituted a second major axis of transformation. Colonial legislation progressively reserved forests, restricted customary rights of grazing, fuel collection, and shifting cultivation, and treated tribal dependence on the forest as an obstacle to “scientific” management and revenue extraction. For communities whose religious life was centred on sacred groves (Jaher Than among the Santhal), hills, and particular trees, the legal enclosure of forests was simultaneously an economic, ecological, and spiritual disruption.

A third historical pressure came through the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. Lodha, Kheria-Sabar, and related groups in the region were notified under the Act, generating a legal and social stigma that outlasted formal denotification in 1952. The Birhor, a small, traditionally nomadic or semi-nomadic community specialising in rope-making and forest produce, experienced parallel processes of administrative classification, resettlement pressure, and developmental intervention. These legal and administrative histories differentiated the experience of the larger agrarian communities (Santhal, Munda, Bhumij) from that of the smaller, more forest-dependent and stigmatised groups (Lodha-Sabar, Kheria-Sabar, Birhor).

Missionary activity, particularly from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, introduced further layers of religious encounter. Christian missions entered areas where state services were weak, providing education and healthcare while also presenting alternative religious frameworks. In the post-independence period, competing processes of Sanskritisation, Hindu organisational outreach, and, more recently, assertions of distinct tribal religious identity under the names Sari Dharam (especially among Santhals in West Bengal) and Sarna Dharam have continued to reshape the religious landscape. The historical record therefore shows not a static “tribal religion” but a series of adaptations, resistances, and reassertions under changing political and economic conditions.



DIFFERENTIATING THE COMMUNITIES: HISTORICAL AND RELIGIOUS SPECIFICITIES

A central limitation of much writing on “tribal religion” is the tendency to generalise across communities that possess distinct historical trajectories, social structures, and religious practices. The six communities examined here illustrate both commonalities and important differences.

The Santhal

The Santhal form the largest Scheduled Tribe population in the region and are predominantly agrarian. Their religious life centres on the sacred grove (Jaher Than), the supreme deity Marang Buru, the female spirit Jaher Era, and a range of Bonga spirits associated with particular places and functions. Seasonal festivals such as Baha (flower festival), Sohrai (harvest and cattle festival), and Karam articulate the agricultural calendar with communal and spiritual observance. In West Bengal, a significant number of Santhals identify their religion as Sari Dharam, a self-conscious assertion of distinct tribal religious identity that has gained political visibility in recent decades. Historically, the Santhal experience of migration into the Damin-i-Koh, the Hul of 1855–56, and subsequent protective legislation has shaped a relatively strong sense of collective identity and institutional memory.

The Munda and Bhumij

The Munda and Bhumij are closely related Austroasiatic-speaking communities with deep historical roots in the Chota Nagpur and Jungle Mahals regions. The Bhumij were central to the 1832–33 rebellion and have long histories of interaction with local zamindari structures. Both groups practise forms of nature- and ancestor-centred religion, with sacred groves and clan-based ritual responsibilities. Their experience of land alienation, incorporation into hierarchical agrarian systems, and varying degrees of Hindu cultural influence has produced a more mixed religious landscape than that of the more insulated Santhal villages of earlier periods. Clan structure, traditional dance, and grove worship persist alongside processes of religious and cultural change.

The Lodha-Sabar and Kheria-Sabar

The Lodha and Kheria-Sabar (often linked in local usage) were historically forest-dependent communities whose livelihoods were severely disrupted by colonial forest laws and who suffered the stigma of notification under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. After denotification in 1952, state development programmes sought to resettle them into sedentary agricultural life. Their religious practices retain strong connections to forest spirits, ancestors, and healing traditions, but the historical experience of criminalisation, social boycott, and forced sedentarisation has produced a distinct vulnerability and a different relationship to land and memory compared with the larger agrarian tribes. Continuity of sacred practice has often had to be maintained under conditions of extreme economic precarity and social marginalisation.

The Birhor

The Birhor, recognised as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group, are a small community traditionally associated with hunting, gathering, and rope-making from forest materials. In West Bengal they are concentrated mainly in a few blocks of Purulia (Baghmundi, Jhalda-I, Balarampur), having migrated from regions of present-day Jharkhand more than a century and a half ago. Their social organisation centres on the tanda (camp or settlement unit) and traditional specialists. Religious life is closely tied to the forest and to a cosmology that reflects a historically mobile, forest-based existence. Developmental interventions aimed at settlement and livelihood change have altered, but not erased, these orientations. The Birhor case illustrates how the integrated sacred–secular worldview can persist even under extreme demographic and economic pressure.



TRIBAL RELIGION AS A LIVED WORLDVIEW

A central difficulty in defining tribal religion arises from assuming that religion requires scripture, doctrine, and institutional authority. Many tribal traditions simply do not fit this mould: religious knowledge lives instead in oral narrative, ritual performance, song, myth, and communal practice. The lack of a written scripture should not, therefore, be read as a lack of religious knowledge. Within a predominantly oral culture, knowledge is preserved through memory and repeated performance, so that ritual itself becomes a vehicle of transmission.

Tribal faith, on this reading, tends to be cosmocentric, holistic, and experiential: forests, rivers, animals, celestial bodies, and ancestors are understood as bearers of spiritual significance. This suggests an important philosophical claim: tribal religion is not primarily a system of propositions about the sacred; it is a way of inhabiting a world already understood as sacredly interconnected. Taking this claim seriously requires philosophy of religion to move beyond a narrow preoccupation with belief and doctrine toward questions of lived experience, relationship, and practice—questions that become sharper when set against the historical record of dispossession and resistance.

THE SACRED AND THE SECULAR: A PROBLEM OF CONCEPTUAL BOUNDARIES

The sacred–secular distinction serves many purposes well, but its claim to universal application is philosophically doubtful. Within a modern institutional framework, one might distinguish between religious worship and economic activity, sacred ritual and ordinary labour, religious festival and agricultural work, religious belief and political organisation, spiritual practice and environmental management.

Such distinctions are difficult to sustain within tribal life. An agricultural festival, for instance, may simultaneously be an act of worship, a community gathering, an expression of ecological awareness, and an economic occasion. Likewise, protecting a sacred grove can be at once a religious observance, an act of environmental conservation, and a form of cultural preservation. The historical record of colonial forest reservation shows how the legal separation of “forest” from “village” and of “revenue land” from “sacred space” imposed categories that did not map onto indigenous understandings.

This integrated quality is one of the central philosophical features of tribal culture: ritual, ecology, kinship, and ethics are not separate compartments but dimensions of a single lived reality. The philosophical upshot is significant—the sacred is not necessarily a separate enclosure within tribal life; rather, it may supply the very meaning through which ordinary life is understood. Historical pressures have repeatedly tested this integration without extinguishing it.

NATURE AS SACRED REALITY

One of the clearest instances of sacred–secular integration is the tribal relationship with the natural world. Among the communities considered here, forests, hills, rivers, trees, and animals routinely occupy a central place in religious consciousness. The sacred grove—the Jaher Than of Santhal tradition in particular—functions both as a religious space and as a focal point of communal identity.

The Santhal religious universe includes figures such as Jaher Era, Marang Buru, and various Bonga spirits. Seasonal festivals such as Baha, Sohrai, and Karam similarly bind agricultural rhythm, natural process, communal life, and spiritual practice into a single fabric. For the Birhor and Lodha-Sabar, whose historical livelihoods were more directly forest-based, the spiritual significance of particular trees, animals, and forest domains remains pronounced even after resettlement.

This worldview resists a purely instrumental picture of nature. Modern economic thinking tends to treat forests chiefly as timber, land, mineral wealth, or economic resource. Tribal spirituality adds a further category—sacred value—one that cannot be collapsed into ecological, economic, cultural, or social value alone. A forest,



on this account, carries at least five distinct kinds of worth: ecological value, economic value, cultural value, social value, and spiritual value.

The implications for environmental ethics are direct. If nature is understood as a community of spiritually significant beings rather than an object available for human use, then its exploitation becomes not merely an ecological failure but an ethical and spiritual violation as well—a conclusion that resonates with broader critiques of extractive development offered by ecological thinkers writing on Indian environmental politics. The colonial history of forest reservation and the subsequent struggle over forest rights supply the concrete historical ground for this philosophical claim.

RITUAL, FESTIVAL, AND THE UNITY OF LIFE

The relationship between sacred and secular is especially visible in tribal festival life.

Baha

Baha, marking the flowering of the sal tree and the arrival of spring, shows how nature, the agricultural calendar, community, and religion intersect. The flowering of the natural world becomes, at once, an ecological event, a social occasion, and a religious experience. Among Santhal communities, the festival is closely tied to the sacred grove and the propitiation of Jaher Era.

Sohrai

Sohrai expresses the relationship among people, cattle, agriculture, and harvest. Animals here are not treated purely as economic instruments; their bond with human life receives explicit ritual recognition. The festival's persistence across districts, despite varying degrees of external religious influence, indicates the resilience of this integrated valuation.

Karam

Karam is tied to fertility, prosperity, and social solidarity. Its significance reaches beyond formal worship into community cohesion and shared ethical life. The festival's performance often involves collective labour and reciprocal obligation, illustrating how ritual enacts rather than merely symbolises social bonds.

Sarhul

Sarhul, likewise linked to the flowering of the sal tree and the renewal of the agricultural cycle, again shows how a seasonal turn takes on religious meaning. In areas with stronger Sarna or Sari identification, the festival functions as a public assertion of distinct religious identity as well as a seasonal observance.

These festivals function as vehicles through which tribal cosmology is enacted rather than merely spoken. Festival, in this light, is not an interruption of ordinary life but a moment in which the underlying unity of that life becomes especially visible. Historical pressures—land loss, forest restriction, missionary activity, and developmental resettlement—have altered the material conditions of festival performance without abolishing the underlying logic of integration.

ORAL TRADITION AS RELIGIOUS AND PHILOSOPHICAL KNOWLEDGE

A further defining feature of tribal spirituality is the centrality of oral tradition. Where text-based philosophical traditions preserve knowledge chiefly through written treatises, tribal communities carry religious knowledge instead through myths, folk songs, stories, ritual performance, proverbs, dance, festival, genealogical memory, customary practice, and instruction from elders.

Tribal religious knowledge is thus transmitted orally, through myth, folk song, and the guidance of elders and specialists such as the Naike. The philosophical stakes of this observation should not be understated. If



philosophy is defined only as written, abstract argumentation, oral traditions will look non-philosophical almost by stipulation. But if philosophy is instead understood as critical, reflective engagement with fundamental questions of existence, morality, and human life, oral tradition becomes a legitimate object of philosophical inquiry in its own right.

This is not to claim that every myth amounts to a philosophical argument. It is, rather, to recognise that philosophical content can be embodied in narrative, ritual, and collective practice, and not only in propositional text. The historical suppression or marginalisation of oral knowledge under colonial and modernist standards of evidence constitutes a form of epistemic injustice that continues to shape academic reception of tribal thought.

COMMUNITY, ETHICS, AND THE SACRED

The tribal conception of the sacred also carries an important ethical dimension. The individual, on this outlook, is not conceived as an isolated, self-standing agent. Individual identity is instead bound up with kinship, clan, village, ancestry, and the natural world. Tribal social life rests on a broadly communitarian ethic that gives priority to the group and encodes particular understandings of origin, selfhood, and the relation between visible and invisible worlds.

This produces a distinctive relationship between religion and morality. Where some modern philosophical traditions treat ethics as a rational system of principle separable from religion, tribal life tends to embed ethical obligation directly within religious custom. Respect for elders, obligations to community, ritual responsibility, relationships with ancestors, and restrictions surrounding sacred space can function simultaneously as religious duty, moral obligation, social norm, and mechanism of cultural continuity.

The sacred, on this account, does not merely regulate acts of worship; it supplies the moral architecture of communal life as a whole. Historical experiences of collective resistance—whether the Bhumij rebellion, the Santhal Hul, or quieter forms of cultural persistence under the Criminal Tribes Act—have reinforced the sense that moral and religious obligation are inseparable from the defence of land, memory, and community.

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE: PURULIA, BANKURA, AND JHARGRAM

Comparing Purulia, Bankura, and Jhargram is important precisely because it prevents “tribal religion” from being treated as a single, uniform category. Common elements across the three districts include nature-centred spirituality, spirit worship, sacred groves, seasonal festival, oral tradition, and the continuing role of ritual specialists. Alongside these commonalities, however, there are substantial differences in the extent of external religious influence, degree of cultural preservation, and strength of distinct religious identity—differences that are themselves historically produced.

Purulia

Purulia (historically part of Manbhum district) presents a comparatively mixed religious environment in which traditional tribal practice coexists with influence from dominant Hindu traditions. The district’s history of zamindari expansion, the Bhumij rebellion of 1832–33, and later administrative reorganisation produced early and sustained contact between tribal communities and non-tribal agrarian and commercial structures. Some communities here are associated with the term Sari Dharam, alongside continuing reverence for figures such as Marang Buru and particular sacred landscapes. The presence of Birhor settlements in Baghmundi, Jhalda-I, and Balarampur adds a further layer of diversity, illustrating the coexistence of agrarian and historically forest-mobile groups within the same district.

Bankura

Bankura occupies something of a middle position. Tribal religious practice continues, but the influence of dominant Hindu tradition is comparatively strong. The district’s longer history of settled agriculture and proximity to more densely populated plains facilitated earlier and deeper processes of cultural interaction. Clan



structure, traditional dance, and grove worship persist alongside ongoing processes of religious and cultural change. The relative strength of Hindu institutional presence has produced more frequent instances of syncretism and, in some localities, a partial absorption of tribal deities into broader Hindu pantheons.

Jhargram

Jhargram shows comparatively strong retention of nature-centred traditional practice, with a stronger association with Sarna Dharam and relatively greater preservation of traditional ritual. The district's more forested character, later intensity of administrative penetration in certain pockets, and the historical presence of Lodha and related communities have contributed to a landscape in which distinct tribal religious identity remains more visibly assertive. Festivals and sacred-grove practices often function not only as seasonal observances but as markers of collective identity in a region that has also experienced significant political mobilisation around Adivasi issues.

The comparative picture shows that the sacred–secular relationship is not fixed. It shifts with geography, migration, education, modernisation, religious contact, and political circumstance. These shifts are historically legible: districts with longer and denser exposure to zamindari, missionary, and Hindu organisational influence exhibit greater hybridity, while areas of later or less intensive penetration retain stronger markers of distinct practice.

RELIGION, CULTURE, AND IDENTITY

The close bond between religion and culture raises a pressing philosophical question: what happens to cultural identity when religious identity changes? This question is especially sharp in relation to religious conversion. If religion were simply one independent component of culture, conversion would, in principle, involve only a change of belief. But where religion is interwoven with language, festival, kinship, moral value, ecological practice, and collective memory, conversion is likely to have far deeper cultural consequences.

The material examined here therefore resists the simple conclusion that conversion automatically erases tribal identity. It instead points to tension, reinterpretation, and transformation between religious and cultural identity. Historical evidence from missionary encounters in the Jungle Mahals and from more recent processes of both Christian conversion and Hindu organisational outreach shows patterns of selective adaptation rather than wholesale replacement. Identity, on this view, is dynamic—cultural tradition can survive, adapt, and hybridise even as religious affiliation shifts. The recent political assertion of Sari Dharam and Sarna Dharam as distinct religious categories further illustrates how communities actively negotiate the terms of recognition within modern census and legal frameworks.

RETHINKING THE PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

The discussion so far suggests that philosophy of religion itself stands to benefit from conceptual expansion informed by historical specificity. A conventional philosophy of religion typically asks: Does God exist? What is the nature of divine reality? Is religious knowledge rational? What is the relationship between faith and reason? Is religious experience genuine? These remain important questions. But an indigenous and historically situated philosophy of religion invites further ones:

- What is the relationship between human beings and land, and how has that relationship been historically contested?
- Can nature itself hold sacred status, and what happens when legal regimes treat it primarily as revenue or resource?
- How is religious knowledge transmitted in the absence of scripture, and how have colonial and modernist standards of knowledge marginalised oral forms?



- What is the relationship between ancestors and the living, and how do collective memories of resistance shape that relationship?
- Can ritual itself constitute a form of knowledge?
- How are moral obligations tied to community and ecology under conditions of historical dispossession?
- Can a worldview be religious without being institutional?
- What follows when sacred and secular are not separate categories at all?

These questions widen the field of philosophy of religion. The aim is not to carve out an isolated “tribal philosophy” set apart from the rest of the discipline, but to show that the philosophical study of religion remains incomplete so long as it recognises only text-centred, institutional traditions and ignores the historical conditions under which indigenous worldviews have been formed and defended.

EPISTEMIC JUSTICE AND THE RECOGNITION OF TRIBAL PHILOSOPHY

At bottom, this is a question of epistemic justice. When tribal cosmologies are dismissed as superstition, primitive animism, or mere folklore, their knowledge claims are set aside before they have been philosophically examined at all—a form of epistemic marginalisation in Fricker’s sense. Tribal oral knowledge has historically been discounted by standards of knowledge that are text-centred and modernist in orientation.

None of this implies that every tribal belief must be accepted without question; philosophy must keep its critical edge. The point is rather that criticism should follow understanding, not substitute for it. A serious philosophical engagement with tribal religion therefore needs to reconstruct the internal logic of the worldview before evaluating it by external standards—a methodological caution reinforced by contemporary work on indigenous epistemology, which argues that indigenous understandings of self, knowledge, and lived experience may differ in basic ways from the assumptions of much modern epistemology. Historical analysis of how colonial ethnography and administrative categories constructed “the tribe” and “tribal religion” further underscores the need for epistemic humility.

TRIBAL SPIRITUALITY AND CONTEMPORARY ECOLOGICAL PHILOSOPHY

The philosophical significance of tribal spirituality reaches beyond the study of tribal communities themselves. The contemporary world faces ecological crisis, climate change, resource depletion, and a widening estrangement between human beings and the natural world. Much of modern development has treated nature chiefly as an economic resource. The tribal worldview offers a different conceptual starting point, one that might be summarised as follows: human beings are not masters of nature but participants within a larger sacred order of life.

This is not to suggest that tribal communities possess some flawless or romanticised ecological culture, nor should indigenous communities be treated as static, museum-like objects. Tribal culture, like any other, must be free to change without losing its underlying cultural core. The philosophical value of this material lies, then, not in romanticising tribal life but in learning from specific principles embedded within it: relationality, reciprocity, communal responsibility, respect for living beings, the sacredness of land, intergenerational responsibility, and restraint in the use of natural resources. Such principles can make a genuine contribution to contemporary environmental ethics, in ways that complement existing critiques of consumption-driven development. The historical experience of forest dispossession in the Jungle Mahals supplies a concrete case study of what is lost when those principles are overridden by extractive regimes.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SACRED–SECULAR UNITY

The discussion can be drawn together in four philosophical propositions, each grounded in the historical and ethnographic material presented above.



First: Ontological Proposition

Tribal spirituality generally presupposes an interconnected reality in which humans, ancestors, spirits, animals, and natural entities all participate in a single, broader order of existence. This ontology has been historically defended against legal and economic regimes that treated land and forest as separable commodities.

Second: Ethical Proposition

Because the human person is understood relationally, ethical life is not confined to individual choice; it extends to obligations toward community, ancestors, and nature. Historical experiences of collective resistance have reinforced this relational ethic.

Third: Epistemological Proposition

Knowledge, on this view, is not necessarily severed from lived experience. Ritual, oral tradition, memory, observation, and participation can all function as legitimate ways of knowing. The historical marginalisation of these forms under colonial and modernist standards constitutes a form of epistemic injustice.

Fourth: Philosophical Proposition

The sacred and the secular are not necessarily universal categories at all; their distinction may instead reflect a particular historical and cultural form of religious consciousness. The tribal communities of the Jungle Mahals demonstrate that an integrated alternative has persisted, adapted, and been politically reasserted under conditions of profound historical change.

Together, these propositions make the case for tribal religion's place within philosophical discourse proper, rather than its confinement to anthropology or folklore studies alone.

CONCLUSION

The distinction between the sacred and the secular has done important work in the modern academic study of religion. Yet the present discussion suggests that this distinction cannot be applied without qualification across all contexts. In the tribal communities of Purulia, Bankura, and Jhargram, religion frequently operates not as a separate institutional sphere but as an integrated dimension of culture, ecology, social organisation, ethics, and everyday existence.

This integration is not a timeless essence. It has been shaped by the specific historical experiences of the Jungle Mahals: colonial revenue and forest regimes, the Bhumij and Santhal rebellions, the Criminal Tribes Act and its aftermath, missionary encounters, post-independence development programmes, and the recent political assertion of Sari and Sarna religious identities. Across these transformations, the underlying logic of interconnection—between humans, ancestors, spirits, and the natural world—has proven remarkably resilient, even as its institutional expressions and political articulations have changed.

Tribal spirituality is therefore best understood as a lived philosophy. The sacred grove, the forest, the cultivated field, the seasonal festival, the ancestor, the village community, and the ritual specialist are not isolated religious objects standing apart from ordinary life; they are threads within a single interconnected worldview. The philosophical significance of this worldview lies precisely in its refusal of divisions that modern categories often take for granted. Nature and culture, religion and society, spirituality and ecology, individual and community, sacred and ordinary life remain bound together rather than separated.

At the same time, this study does not claim that all tribal communities share one uniform religious system. The comparative evidence from Purulia, Bankura, and Jhargram, and from the distinct trajectories of the Santhal, Munda, Bhumij, Lodha-Sabar, Kheria-Sabar, and Birhor, points to substantial differences in ritual practice, religious identity, and the extent of external influence. These differences are historically produced and must be analysed as such.



The significance of tribal philosophy accordingly lies not in presenting it as a static alternative to modernity but in recognising it as a living, dynamic intellectual tradition. Tribal communities continue to negotiate modern education, migration, religious conversion, economic change, and political transformation. The central philosophical question is therefore not whether tribal culture should remain unchanged, but whether cultural transformation can proceed without severing the community's fundamental relationship to its land, memory, spirituality, and collective identity.

This study suggests, finally, that the philosophy of religion stands to gain from taking indigenous worldviews seriously as philosophical sources in their own right, and from situating those worldviews within the concrete historical processes that have shaped them. Doing so calls for epistemic humility and a willingness to recognise forms of philosophical knowledge not necessarily expressed in formal treatises. Tribal oral tradition, ritual, festival, and ecological practice may contain sophisticated reflection on existence, morality, community, and nature—reflection that deserves to be read as philosophy rather than set aside as mere custom.

In an age marked by ecological crisis, consumerism, and social fragmentation, the tribal understanding of the interconnectedness of human beings, community, and nature offers a genuine philosophical resource. It does not hand modern problems a ready-made solution, but it does challenge the assumption that human beings stand outside or above the natural order. The tribal worldview thus invites contemporary philosophy to reconsider one of its most basic distinctions: perhaps the sacred does not occupy a separate world from ordinary life at all—perhaps the sacred is simply a way of understanding life itself.

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