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# FROM TRIBAL COMMENSALITY TO EUCCHARISTIC COMMUNITY: REFLECTIONS ON THE TRIBAL MEAL AND THE EUCHARIST

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## 1. Introduction

Some tribal communities, especially in the tribal belt of South Bihar, are marked by a strong sense of commensality. A study of the tribal attitude to meals gives an overall picture of their perception of themselves, of their perception of how others perceive them, and of others' perception of their tribe. That meals are central to tribal life is revealed in all important community ventures and enterprises, agriculture, hunting expeditions, rites of passage, feasts and sacrifices. When we talk of the significance of the tribal meal, we refer to tribal communitarian meals, and not to daily individual or familial meals per se, although tribals consider each meal symbolic of their union with God, ancestors and the other members of the tribe. A theological reflection on tribal meals offers an insight into these three relationships.

Before understanding the intricacies of the tribal meal, two assumptions need to be clarified. First, the projection of the tribe as an isolated and closed group, living in hills and forest tracts, primitive and self-reliant, with a sustainable management of the natural resources, has been contested by some scholars (Brosius, 280). The critics of this concept of the tribes as 'ahistorical people', 'living in equilibrium and harmony', living in a 'symbiotic relationship with nature', call these idealized pictures valorization and essentialization. Tribal communitarian meals are socio-religious events, and theology cannot overlook their sociological dimensions.

The community meal of the tribes must be examined in the context of their existence in history, as it goes through a process of constant change. The struggle for survival and the process of adaptation in the face of modernization must be considered in any discourse on tribal meal. Second, the tribal meal is often assumed to be exclusive and 'communal'. My argument is that though there be a functional, structural or material role of the tribal meal, a phenomenology of this community activity reveals its significance to tribal life. And although this finds concrete particular expression in the given cultural and social framework within the tribe, it has significance for the entire universe as one family. The tribal meal sheds vital insights for a reconstruction of the distorted and disfigured face of humanity.

My reflections make sense in the context of the agricultural tribes and cannot be generalized for tribes all over India. This study is also in relation to tribes in transition and not to tribes in their 'pristine', 'primordial', 'ahistorical', 'pre-scientific' state, as is often so wrongly implied in the work of some thinkers. I attempt here to capture the elements of the universal significance of the tribal meal on the basis of two case studies and of empirical observations in the context of some Indian tribes. Meals may not necessarily include sacrifice as a component, but sacrifice does have meal as an inseparable element.

In the Eucharist the symbols 'bread' and 'wine' are taken from an agricultural economy. They are used for the sustenance of human beings. They are given by God who is Lord of the universe. The Divine is symbolized in every aspect of creation. Thus the cosmos is revealed as an interrelated, harmonious whole. The tribal understanding of the Eucharist and the Christian reflection on the tribal meal are attempts to synthesize two traditions so as to make the tribal Eucharist more enriching and meaningful. I shall not superimpose Christian categories on the tribal but allow the latter to speak for itself.

## 2. Meal as Spiritual Solidarity - a Communion

The tribal meal is something sacred. It is a sacrament. It is communion with the Supreme Being, with the ancestors and with

others of the tribe. Tribal religious truths are viewed within a hierarchically ordered unity: (i) *Dharmes* (God, Creator), (ii) *pachbatar* (ancestors), (iii) *nad* (good and bad spirits, nature spirits) and (iv) human beings and creation (Tirkey 1989). The religious life and experience of the tribes are expressed in their feasts, rites of passage, sacrifices and ancestral worship. The meal is central to all these collective expressions. There are sacrifices for every important occasion. There are seasonal sacrifices, family sacrifices and rites of ancestral veneration. There is an attempt to find the will of the Divine in everything. The mystical experience of union with the Divine is expressed very specially in the symbol of the community meal and sacrifice.

### 2.1. Communion with the Supreme Being

The meal is sacred because it is taken in the presence of *Dharmes*, the ancestors and the other deities. The visible participation of the tribes and the invisible participation of the supernatural make the meal rich in meaning and symbolism. There is an interlinking of the human and the divine, the natural and supernatural, the cosmic and supracosmic. Everything and everybody is related to everything else and every being. Any disorder in a part affects the whole. Any distortion of the 'gift' of *Dharmes* in the 'tribe' affects the cosmos. Thus cosmic order is interdependent on the internal disposition of even, the tiniest animate being.

God as the giver and sustainer of life figures very strongly in the sharing of the community meal. In the meal, with or without sacrifice, the best products, the best 'works of human hands', are given to God and the spirits. *Danda-katta* is a ritual worship of *Dharmes*. This sacrifice is in the name of God, the provident Creator who is both transcendent and immanent. *Danda-katta* is performed to obtain God's blessings upon every social venture, to plead for God's protection, and as thanksgiving. While breaking the egg, the president of the ceremony prays:

*Maiya Dharmes, Kiyya Panchar*

*Nin Dharme Baba hekdae*

*Emhai khann mal iri, Ninghai khann iri*

*Ninin baba hekdae, samrh:ake*

*Akkam balkam, adin samrh:ake.*

This could be translated as:

God, *Dharmes* above, the *Panches* are here below.

You *Dharmes* are our Father.

Take care of whichever spirits we have overlooked!

Our eyes do not see, Your eyes see.

You alone are Father, do Thou take care (restrain them)!

*Dharmes* is benevolent and provident. Everything good is attributed to *Dharmes* and the ancestors. The 'evil eye' and the 'evil mouth' are considered to be the sources of all evil. The *danda-katta* ceremony which is believed to be divinely instituted is liberative for the tribes (Tirkey 1983 & 1989).

Communion, protection, propitiation and thanksgiving are the themes of many feasts and festivals that have meal and/or sacrifices as part of the celebration. In the *Phagua* feast, *danda-katta* is offered to God before the hunting expedition for God's protection and for abundant game. The feast marks the New Year day of the *adivasis*. Before *Sariul*, no ploughing is allowed. No eating of fresh vegetables and fruits is allowed. After the usual purificatory rite, a chicken is put under the thatch and set on fire by the tribal priest (*pahan*). In one stroke he severs a branch of a mythical tree (*semar*) to symbolize the severing of all the sicknesses and sufferings of the last year. Children play with 'torches' and pelt fruit trees with them to symbolize the 'abundant fruit' of the New Year. When the fire dies down, ashes are applied to the foreheads. This signifies a cleansing or purification. Fire represents the destruction of evil. All the evil and bad experiences of the past year are forgotten. In the New Year new life is celebrated. The old self is discarded.

A sense of gratitude, thanksgiving and communion with the Divine is clear in the tribal rites of passage. For instance, the tribals thank God for the gift of the new child. There is a special ceremony of purification of the mother eight days after the child's birth. The initiation rite or the name-giving ceremony (*chhatti*), about the tenth day after the birth, is basically an expression of union with the Divine. Likewise, during the feast of *Hariari*, the priest does the *puja* so that "no sickness or trouble enters the vil-

lage or visits its homes or affects its inhabitants and their children, cattle and 'luck' (Tirkey 1990: 65-6). The victim is addressed as the 'owner of the village' and is requested to change the course of any disease or calamity that seeks entrance into the village, and to bring peace, happiness, rain and a bumper crop. The sacrificial victim is identified with the Deity to which it is sacrificed. Only menfolk attend this ceremony and partake of the sacrificial meat. Only young unmarried girls may eat meat back at home. Parts of the liver are offered to the deities and the rest is eaten by the *pahan* and other elders. The contents of the mythical chants are creation, cultivation, procreation, children, cattle, destruction of the earth and attack of evil forces on crops.

## 2.2. Communion with Ancestors

Customs and rituals in different cultures reinforce the belief in the life after death. Common to ancient civilizations of Babylon and Assyria and present-day tribes in Africa and the Far East is the use of symbols, sacrifices and rituals marked by great diversity (Crooke, 65-8). The Chotanagpur tribes, too, have rites and sacrifices to show their solidarity with the dead. They keep a toothbrush-twig, water, eatables and other things of daily use in the grave for the dead person. Some tribes have a custom of a funeral fest to mark the solidarity of the clan wherein kith and kin enjoy a solemn meal in the presence of the dead.

The tribes rely on the intercession of ancestors/saints for help. The ancestors are mediators. Ancestral spirits are the *pachbalars*. As a memorial for the ancestors, during the initiation or name-giving ceremony, tribals drop three grains in a leaf-cup filled with rice-beer or water. The grain that touches the child's grain will symbolize that ancestor who becomes its special guardian. The child will be named after that ancestor. In the obsequies of the dead this communion with the dead can also be seen. If a person has died an ordinary death, s/he will join the company of the ancestors, the *pachbalars*.

The Mundas shelter the 'shade' of the dead in the *ading*, a sacred corner in the house. The Oraons sacrifice a chicken to put the 'shade' at rest. On the tenth day after the death, a pig is sacri-

ficed. This is the *Kaman* feast, a feast for the ancestors. With this feast the mourning is brought to an end. In the beginning of January, all the bones of the dead of the whole year are carried in procession, with songs and dances, to their respective clan ossuaries. The day this feast *Konha benja* (Great Marriage) is celebrated, the ancestors are asked to receive the dead persons in their company for protection and care.

### 2.3. Communion among Members of a Tribe

#### 2.3.1. The Tribe as Chosen People

The tribe is given by God. All the social institutions of the tribe need to be maintained and safeguarded from the sinister designs of evil spirits. A good tribal is truly in communion at three different levels: in solidarity with others in the tribe, and through this s/he is in harmony with the Supreme Being and experiences harmony within her/himself. The absence of this communitarian dimension may lead one to individualism. This happens increasingly today due to the diversification of occupation and the transformation from relative homogeneity to heterogeneity.

#### 2.3.2. Community is Built through Meals

Building up the tribe is a sacred act. The meal brings people together. The people's unity and mutual forgiveness, an understanding of and openness to the other, are always holy realities. Keeping the law of the tribe is ultimately keeping the divine law itself. The meal ensures that the cosmotheandric vision of the tribe is concretely realized in inter-personal relationships. The tribals' endeavour is to transcend narrow domestic walls and make room for others, to accommodate others. But the perception of threat to their identity makes them close up. They perceive the external invasion of their culture and ethos as breaking the cosmic order. The battle to safeguard the threefold union with God, nature and others seems to them to put this order in jeopardy, as they face alien values of individualism and consumerism. The meal challenges the participants to be honest to the tribe. They can be so only when they are honest to *Dharmes*. Honesty to *Dharmes* implies adherence to the law of the tribe.

Hence, ethics plays a significant role in shaping the tribal personality and identity.

#### 2.3.3. A Collective Expression of Faith-Experience

Within the tribe, there is a certain notion of purity. In the faith-life of the tribes, manifested in its myths, the tribe sees itself as a pure reality outside which there is impurity (Van Exem 1987: 45-64). Hence, the child before its *chhatti* (initiation rite), the mother at childbirth, and dead persons before the ritual for the dead, all need to be formally, ritually, incorporated into the tribe. The tribe is thus experienced as a chosen people. Fullness of life is received in, through and with the tribe. Any violation of the law of the tribe and its taboos results in excommunication. Interestingly, even in ostracism, the orientation is final reconciliation. Or rather, there is, in excommunication, an invitation for re-membering into the community. Thus, there is either a collective identity with the tribe or no identity at all. The tribal finds identity in the collectivity and not in personal achievement, understanding her/himself in relation to the cosmos. The faith-experience calls for an active attitude of harmony with all cosmic reality (Van Exem 1988). Whenever the ritual of *danda-katta* is performed, even on behalf of individuals, it is ultimately the good of the tribe that is desired (Koonathan, 105). Apart from the tribe, the individual has no meaning. The sharing of the sacrificial meal, *tahri*, is oriented towards strengthening the communion that exists between themselves and God, concretely realised in their communion of tribe, nature, humankind and the cosmos.

#### 2.3.4. Tribal Identity is asserted in the Community Meal

Central to the sacrifice is the identity of the tribe as a community of *Dharmes*, faithful to Him, adhering to the law of the tribe. Any violation to the law may bring dishonour to the tribe, and hence, a reparation may require the blood of the defaulter. The implications about human sacrifice are out of question now. Communion with the tribe is by 'breaking the body' of the victim and by 'pouring out' the beer. The meal is a symbol of unity. It brings tribals together and enables them realize the values of sharing and caring. The

good of the tribe is everybody's responsibility. Partaking of the sacrificial meal, *tahri*, is the symbol of communion between the community of the living and of the dead. This meal is a symbol of communion and participation with *Dharmes* and ancestors.

### 2.3.5. Meal as Nourishment for the Community

Cultural anthropologists and historians of religion have great difficulty in analyzing food customs on a worldwide basis. This is mainly due to the diversity of religious and social environments that have moulded the dietary laws, food taboos and rituals associated with them. Social identity is a powerful factor in preserving a given society's dietary laws. Meals are said to be social mechanisms to foster group unity and protect its identity. Food taboos are often linked to ecology. Thus taboos are yet another cultural mechanism in the areas where food is scarce and wildlife dangerous (Lathan, 387).

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines 'health' as not only 'a state of mind and body' but also in terms of the 'spiritual' and 'social' well-being of an individual. In the context of the Chotanagpur tribes the meal nourishes the community and its members not only physically and mentally, but also 'spiritually' and 'socially'. The meal nourishes and sustains the community as a people of *Dharmes*, *Singbonga*, *Chando Baba* and *Thakur Jiu*. In this sense, it creates 'vertical communion' with the Divine. Furthermore, the social dimension of the tribal meal is very significant. The meal gives the members of the tribe a sense of inter-relatedness, interdependence and complementarity. The meal that follows *madait* or *sangat* (village cooperation) expresses compassion and concern for those who cannot afford to employ labourers. Here, the village decides to help the poor family in harvesting or ploughing. The owner of the house need not pay anything to the villagers; a leaf-cup of rice beer suffices and everybody is happy. Rice beer becomes a sign of unity and fellowship. The common weal on all fronts — economic, social, religious and political — is the prime concern of the tribe. However, the tribe is only a symbol of the entire human race, the universal human community. Through the tribe one participates in

the universal 'table-fellowship' of the human family and fosters a 'horizontal communion' of all people.

The tribal understanding of community meal has important implications for the Eucharist. The entire community participates in and celebrates the Eucharist, thereby strengthening the community's bonds with God, with its ancestors who are remembered during the eucharistic prayer, and among the members of the community.

### 3. Meal as Reconciliation, Restoration and Re-communion

The above section has depicted how the tribal meal is a collective expression of solidarity: with the Supreme Being, with ancestors and with others. It is also a medium and means by which reconciliation, restoration and re-communion are fostered. If anybody is not allowed to partake of this meal, s/he must have been ostracized. There is no interaction of tribals with an ostracized person. Outside the tribe no one can be saved. The implications are serious. One who lives outside the tribe will not be given a traditional funeral. The tribe will not have any funeral fest in her/his name, and s/he will not be in communion with the ancestors; s/he will be a *bhut* (malevolent spirit). Ostracization has befallen her/him for not keeping the law of the tribe.

Excommunication is not a punishment. It is a social control mechanism of the tribe: (i) it maintains the discipline of the tribe for the sake of the community, since the greater good is the criterion for the extreme step of ostracizing a person, (ii) despite excommunication, restoration is always open — the person can be reincorporated into the tribe if s/he satisfies the demands of the tribe. Here again, collective interest is the uppermost concern. Two case studies aptly illustrate how an ostracized family is re-membered with the tribe and how reconciliation takes place:

**Case 1:** In one of the villages in the suburbs of Ranchi, a Kullu family was excommunicated because two of its children married outside the tribe. The parents wanted to be part of the tribe and they had to go through an official ritual of re-incorporation into the Kharia community. On a fixed day the elders of the tribe

assembled and the defaulters were brought into their presence. A goat was supplied by the couple. The headman made a prayer to *Ponnesor*, the God of the Kharia Tribe. The goat was slaughtered and the blood collected in a bowl. The headman took nine pebbles in his hand, each of them symbolizing nine clans in the Kharia tribe, namely, Tele, Soreng, Kerketta, Baa, Kiro, To:ppo, Dungdung, Bilung and Kullu. He made a circle symbolizing the Kharia tribe and kept the first eight pebbles inside. The defaulters' pebble, symbolizing the Kullu clan, was kept outside, implying ex-communication. "We do not know who this is," said he, pointing towards the Kullu pebble, "but if you are ready to atone for your anti-tribe attitude and promise to comply with the law of the tribe in future, we are willing to reinstate you." The Kullus shook their heads in affirmation. The blood of the goat was served to the couple marking the re-incorporation of the family into the tribe.

Case 2: Suiafoli, in the Gumla district of the Chotanagpur plateau, is an exclusively Oraon tribal village of about forty families. The village was relatively self-sufficient with bumper crops year after year. Each household had three C's, namely children, cattle and crops, the indicators of happiness and prosperity for any tribal family. It was a village overflowing with milk and honey. There was peace and harmony until the only child of a family died of some mysterious sickness. When contacted, the *ojha* (witch doctor) of a neighbouring village diagnosed the death of the child as a consequence of *baan marek* (shooting poisonous arrow) and witchcraft. An elderly, respectable woman was identified as the villain responsible for the tragedy. This judgement shocked many and the village was split into two groups: one demanding the *chhiltan* (ostracism) of the so-called witch, and the other sceptic about the diagnosis of the witch-hunter and suspicious about his malafide intentions. A situation of tension, suspicion, mistrust and hatred continued for five long years till better sense prevailed among the *Panches* (elders of the village). They decided to settle the dispute once and for all. A handful of rice was collected from each household. Monetary contributions as per people's capacity were also made. The *Panchayat* fixed a day for a community meal. When the entire village had gathered, the *patan* prayed:

## Part Two : Bread

O *Dharmie Baba* (God the Father),  
 You are above and the *Panches* below,  
 You know everything and we know nothing,  
 You see everything and we see nothing,  
 Let our village get your blessings,  
 Let there be blessings on our children,  
 Let there be plenty of grain in our barns,  
 Let there be an increase of cattle in our stable,  
 O *Dharmie Baba* you are above and the *Panches* below,  
 We are offering you a goat.  
 Let there be peace, harmony and understanding in our  
 village!

A goat was killed and the blood sprinkled on the three heaps of rice: one for *Dharmes*, the second for the ancestors and the third for other spirits. Even as the dressing of the goat and the cooking of the rice were in progress, *jhara* (rice beer) was served. Every-one was served a sumptuous meal. The content of the conversation of the elders was that with this meal all their fears, suspicion, hatred, mistrust and insecurities had vanished. A new life had dawned — a life of forgiveness, understanding, reconciliation, and re-com-munion. The community meal, besides nourishing and uniting the community in diverse ways, also reconciles, re-members and re-instates the harmony of tribal villages like Suiafoli. This tribal village is a miniature of the global village at a macro-cosmic level.

The trends of the contemporary times are: lack of respect for all forms of life, either plant, animal or human; ecological insen-sitivity; corruption, greed and divisive tendencies rather than union and integration; an attitude of domination and ethnocentrism rather than cultural relativism; a myopic vision of oneself and one's own community rather than the broad vision of humanity. The tribal community meal has a powerful message of reconciliation for the entire world.

In Chotanagpur the tribal community meal symbolizes recon-ciliation and reparation. The traditional *Panchayat* of tribal vil-lages assembles to find solutions to problems like the settling of disputes, or to find responses to group endeavours like hunting, agricultural and welfare activities. A *Panchayat* where a dispute

has been settled is usually followed by a festive meal, symbolizing the reconciliation between disputing parties and with the community. In the *Panchayat* everybody is equal. The final decision does not depend on one individual. In fact, the president of the *Panchayat* only expresses the feelings of the group. Thus tribal society offers a dialogical alternative to the myopic, ethnocentric and domineering monologic approach.

The reconciliation and re-communion fostered through the performance of blood rituals, as in the cases cited above, aptly indicate the dynamic symbolism of blood as life. By the sipping and sprinkling of blood, the erring members of the tribe are cleansed and re-constituted as members of the community. This is their 'new life' after undergoing reconciliation and restoration. Much the same happens in the reconciliation rites and the 'drinking of the cup' of the Eucharist whereby the bloody and total sacrifice of Jesus reconciles, rejuvenates and redeems sinful humanity.

#### 4. Tribal Meal as Sacrifice

A sacrifice is defined as a 'rite in the course of which something is forfeited or destroyed, its object being to establish relations between a source of spiritual strength and one in need of such strength, for the benefit of the latter. The relationship may be one of communion, i.e., one by which strength is conceived to be imparted to people (communal type); or conversely, it may be one whereby a human weakness is held to be withdrawn and neutralized (piacular type). An instance of the first type occurs whenever the victim is consumed in a sacred meal, of the second whenever it is treated as unclean and cast away to beasts of prey" (James, 1).

A tribal sacrifice is a highly symbolic ritual marked by fixed recurrent and formulaic expressive procedures aimed at bringing about some desirable end. It is set apart from ordinary, mundane activity. The sacrifice conveys an offering to a spiritual power, either a supreme God, or divinities among a pantheon of gods, ancestors, or other spiritual manifestations of incorporeal natural forces. The sacrificial victim, usually an animal, is offered on behalf of an individual or community. The participants partake of the flesh

of the offering. The life of the victim is offered as a surrogate for the conveners of the sacrifice. The ritual act of sacrifice transforms the victim into a sacred object as its life is given over to the spirit world. Thus, coming from an ordinary plane the victim becomes a mediator between the natural and the supernatural, between the human and the divine, and between the known and the unknown world of spiritual power. The sacrifice is a link, a bridge between the seen and the unseen forces.

Partaking of the sacrificial meal is communion in, through and with the victim, be it a fowl, a pig, a goat or a calf. This communion is with the one to whom the offering is made. There is in sacrifice the breaking of the body and the pouring out of the blood to make the tribe ever faithful to *Singbonga*, and ultimately to maintain the cosmic order by rectifying all disorder. The 'blood' sacrifice is a reminder of *Dharmes's* 'Promised Land' as narrated in the Genesis myth of the Oraons, Kharias and Mundas. Ever since the beginning of the cosmos, the tribe should in all earnestness cooperate with the divine for the peaceful co-existence of other lives — plants, animals and human — on the one hand, and the spirits on the other. And so neither greed nor disobedience can be tolerated which we know resulted in the destruction of the world and in the burning of the *Asurs* according to a Munda myth, as punishment for smelting iron night and day and thus polluting the entire universe out of sheer greed. The main ideas among tribes regarding primitive sacrifice are connected with (i) communion, (ii) praise and thanksgiving, (iii) propitiation, (iv) supplication, (v) expiation, and (vi) gift. A survey of the tribes in general, and the Chotanagpur and the North-East tribes in particular, shows that these ideas are applicable according to their respective contexts. There is no watertight compartment between them. More than one or all the ideas or motives may be combined in a single sacrifice.

#### 4.1. Communion in Tribal Sacrifice

Communion is central to any tribal sacrifice. Partaking of the sacred meal of a fowl, goat or calf necessarily means that the tribe enters into a spiritual union with the supernatural. The tendency of humans towards self-transcendence, or to make themselves part of the

divine, finds fulfillment in the sacrificial ritual. The human is both material and spiritual, body and soul. Its capacity to transcend finds fulfillment in mystical union during the sacrifice.

Some tribes hold a feast in the presence of the dead. This reveals their union with the dead. They are very present, but invisibly. The dead are united with the ancestors. Sometimes even the blood of the sacrifice is drunk to seek deeper union with the Divine. Studies show that savages sometimes seek to enter into communion with the dead by eating part of the body of the deceased. In Chotanagpur, however, no such practices have been observed in recent times. Drinking of the victim's blood has been known as means to enter into communion with the Divine and the ancestors. In Pandkitoli village in Gumla, for instance, a girl named Heera had to drink the blood of a sacrificial goat to be reinstated into her tribe. Her only fault was that the very next day of her marriage she left her husband and came back to her father's home. She alleged that she was forcibly married to the boy. In her father's home she was not allowed to enter the kitchen and the cowshed until the purification rite was conducted in the presence of the village elders. This ritual re-established her communion with the Divine, the ancestors and the tribe.

The sacrificial meal at *Sarhul* brings the tribe in vertical and horizontal communion with God, spirits, and with one another. All spirits are propitiated at the *sarna* grove (sacred grove). The symbolic marriage of the *pahan* with his wife indicates the mystical marriage between the earth and the sky. Water poured on the *pahan* symbolizes the expectation of abundant rain. The rice-beer libation is given to the spirits. The *danri* (village spring) is cleansed on the eve of *Sarhul* with fresh foliage in order to prevent any bird or beast from defiling the spring. It is followed by the offering of pure water to the spirits the next day. Young chickens are collected for sacrifice. They symbolize the young children of the village. *Arwa* (unbleached) rice is offered for each spirit. Chickens of different colours are given to different spirits. Only the priest eats the heads. Hearts and livers are offered to the spirits. The rest of

the meat is boiled with rice and distributed to all men present. This is a communion meal. God's prominence is distinguished by the pure white colour of all the offerings given to Him. The prayer of the *pahan* is, "O God, the Father! Whether knowingly or by mistake we have offended the spirits: restrain them. Overlook our protection over crops; cattle and children in the coming year."

In the *Karam* feast, too, the communitarian dimension surfaces powerfully. Even before *Karam*, the feast of *Hariari*, which is the festival of the green rice plants, is celebrated before transplantation. Separate victims are offered to *bhuts* on a *tanr* (upland) and the *pahan* prays for the well-being of people and cattle, and asks for rain. *Kadleta*, yet another minor feast, is celebrated on the eve of *Karam*. Sacrifice and libations to ancestors and other spirits for the health of crops, cattle and children are made. *Danda-katta* is performed to ward off the evil eye of people from the standing crop. The popular *Karam* feast is celebrated to ensure protection of the crop. This feast is primarily for unmarried girls who have been recently engaged. Prayers are offered that they might have healthy children in future.

*Sohrai* is the feast of cattle. Cattle are a gift of God. Sacrifices are offered to the spirits and to God. This is to thank God and to invoke his continued protection over the cattle. In the *Khalihani* feast, too, sacrifices are offered to God and to the ancestors on the threshing floor to ensure a bounteous yield of grain from the paddy stalks. Hearts are filled with gratitude for the great gift of grain. The feast of *Maghe* brings the agricultural year to a close. This is an occasion for releasing old domestic servants from their annual contract and for making a new contract for the coming year.

#### 4.2. Sacrifice as Propitiation, Supplication and Expiation

Conciliation to avert, neutralize or expel evil is yet another common reason for sacrificial offerings. Tribes are susceptible to apprehensions of danger from supernatural powers, which give rise to the idea of appeasement or placation of the spirits. What is common to the tribes in India is a belief in the spirit world. There



is a hierarchy of spirits and each class is treated separately as befits it. Benevolent spirits are good by nature. Malevolent spirits are evil and have to be kept under control. The Supreme Spirit is all goodness. He can never be bad or wrong. White coloured victims are offered to the Supreme Being. Brown colour is reserved for the ancestral spirits, whereas the black colour is reserved for bad spirits. Spirits live on the offerings of human beings as we learn from the myth of "the origin of evil spirits" (Turkey 1993). The Chotanagpur tribes also have atonement as one of the motives for sacrifice.

Sacrifices of supplication are commonly found in tribal cultures. The object of petition can range from purely material goods to the highest spiritual blessings, namely, forgiveness of sins and divine grace. Besides establishing the link with the sacred through the sacrifices, tribals invoke the divine to ensure the maintenance of the cosmic order, and the strengthening of the power on which all powers depend.

Expiatory sacrifices involving purification, in a strict sense, presuppose an awareness of a moral fault that can be punished by a higher being, who should therefore be appeased or placated by suitable acts. In a broader sense, expiation means the removal or prevention of every kind of evil and misfortune. Thus the tribes pray for the removal of the cause of suffering and evil, and also the removal of the anger of the deities so that once again they live in peace. The higher beings are regarded benevolent and therefore incapable of any harm. Whatever disharmony is experienced is therefore attributed to human fault in terms of greed, pride and disobedience. Expiatory sacrifices are believed to restore the normal relationship not only with the Supreme Being but also with others; and most importantly with oneself.

#### 4.3. *Sacrifice as Praise and Thanksgiving*

Free offering in grateful recognition of the beneficence of the deity are called honorific offerings. Through their offerings the tribals express their thankfulness to benevolent deities for favours received. The ideas of self-sacrifice, sorrow, penitence, union with God through prayer and abstinence do not seem to be common with the

tribes. However, most tribes in India have ritual fasting and sexual abstinence before offering sacrifices at certain festivals.

It can be debated whether sacrifices among tribes are offered purely for praise and thanksgiving. Though sacrifices may be offered to acknowledge the goodness of the Supreme Being, a hidden agenda may still be to get some favour from Him, as we find in the *danda-katta* ceremony of the Oraons of Chotanagpur. Sacrifices of thanksgiving are offered so that the Supreme Being may not be angry and so that His blessings on the sacrificer and his people may continue.

The feast of *Nayakhani* is basically a thanksgiving celebration. Tribals do not have a term to express thanks, but their attitudes exhibit gratitude for the blessings received from God. Offering the first fruits or first sheaves of rice to God symbolizes the offering of their own selves. Christian tribals offer a portion of rice to God for the upkeep of the Church. Simultaneously, it is an occasion to express gratitude to the dead ancestors for the gift of life, land and livestock. Meals are first offered to the ancestors, and before drinking, a libation of rice beer is poured for them, invoking their blessings and seeking their protection. This tradition is reminiscent of the Christian 'communion with saints'.

Like the Eucharist, the tribal communal sacrifice is a thanksgiving sacrifice because the offering is made to the Lord "God of all creation through whose goodness" the tribes have come into being. The gifts either of a victim or of rice beer "which the earth has given and the human hands have made," are ultimately given by God Himself.

#### 4.4. *Sacrifice as Gift*

The significance of sacrifice as a gift to gods is emphasized by social scientists like Edward B. Tylor, Marcel Mauss and Durkheim (see Glazier). The tribes of Chotanagpur offer sacrificial gifts to a spiritual power with the expectation of some kind of return, thus providing a means for influencing the invisible, the unknown, and the unreachable. The sacrifice, however, differs from ordinary gift-giving. There is, in the sacrificial ritual, a transformation of the