



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

THE CONCEPT OF CREATOR / ALMIGHTY / PARMESHWAR IN TRIBAL (ADIVASI) SOCIETIES

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Abstract

The concept of a supreme creator or almighty being in tribal societies, particularly among the Adivasis of India, differs significantly from the monotheistic or organized religious structures seen in Brahmanism, Christianity and Islam. Adivasi spiritual traditions are deeply rooted in **animism, nature worship and ancestral reverence**, emphasizing a decentralized belief system that does not conform to the notion of a singular "Parmeshwar" or universal god. Instead, these indigenous communities recognize and venerate **local deities, spirits and sacred natural elements** such as the sun, moon, rivers, forests, and mountains.

Adivasi religious traditions are diverse and vary across different tribal groups. The **Santhal tribe** worships **Thakur Jiu**, while the **Munda tribe** believes in **Sing Bonga** and the **Gond tribe** venerates **Bara Deo**. These deities are often associated with natural forces and ancestral spirits, reflecting a **holistic worldview where the environment is considered sacred**. Rituals, festivals, and ceremonies such as **Sarhul, Karam and Sohrai** play a crucial role in maintaining the spiritual and ecological balance within Adivasi societies. Shamans, known as **Pahans, Dehuris and Ojhas**, act as intermediaries between the human and spiritual realms, conducting rituals to appease spirits and ensure community well-being.

Adivasi spiritual traditions contrast sharply with **organized religions**, as they lack a formal priesthood, religious scriptures, and centralized religious institutions. However, due to **colonial influences, religious conversions, urbanization and government policies**, many Adivasis have been compelled to adopt mainstream religious practices, often at the cost of their indigenous faiths. The **Sarna Dharma Recognition Movement** is an ongoing effort to **obtain legal recognition for tribal religious practices**, ensuring their preservation and protection.

Despite challenges posed by **industrialization, deforestation and migration**, tribal communities continue to resist cultural assimilation and reclaim their spiritual heritage through grassroots movements and legal activism. Efforts to **document and revive indigenous oral traditions, protect sacred groves and promote cultural awareness** have gained momentum in recent years. Recognizing and respecting Adivasi spirituality is crucial not only for **cultural preservation** but also for **ecological sustainability and social justice**. This study explores the unique aspects of Adivasi religious traditions, the impact of external forces and the ongoing struggle for recognition and revival of indigenous belief systems in India.

Keywords: *Adivasi Spirituality, Animism, Nature Worship, Tribal Deities, Sarna Dharma, Indigenous Religions, Ancestral Worship, Sacred Groves, Rituals and Festivals, Religious Conversions, Legal Recognition, Cultural Preservation.*

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1. Introduction

Tribal societies, commonly referred to as **Adivasis** in India, represent some of the oldest and most **indigenous communities** in the world. Their spiritual beliefs and practices differ significantly from mainstream religions such as Brahmanism, Christianity and Islam. Unlike these organized faiths, most Adivasi traditions do not center on a singular, omnipotent "**Parmeshwar**" (Supreme god). Instead, their spiritual worldview is deeply rooted in nature, ancestral reverence and local deities.

Definition of Tribal (Adivasi) Societies

The term *Adivasi* is derived from **Pali-Pakit**, meaning "original inhabitants." It collectively refers to various indigenous communities across India, such as the **Santhal, Munda, Gond, Bhil** and **Oraon tribes**. These groups

have preserved distinct cultural, linguistic and spiritual traditions for centuries, often independent of mainstream religious influences.

Tribal societies are characterized by:

- **A close relationship with nature**, considering forests, rivers, mountains and animals as sacred.
- **Community-based living**, where social structures emphasize collective well-being over individualism.
- **Oral traditions**, where knowledge, history and spirituality are passed down through generations via folklore, songs, and rituals.
- **Self-governance** in many areas, with leadership often rooted in customs rather than external political systems.

Understanding Indigenous Spirituality

Adivasi spirituality is **animistic and nature-centric**, meaning that they see divinity in natural elements rather than in a human-like god figure. Their belief system is built on:

1. **Worship of Nature** – The sun, moon, rivers, trees, and mountains are often seen as divine forces that influence life.
2. **Spirit Veneration** – Many Adivasis believe in spirits (*bhoots, devas, ancestors*) that reside in nature and affect daily life.
3. **Ancestral Reverence** – Ancestors are considered protectors of the community and their guidance is sought through rituals.
4. **Local Deities** – Each tribe has its own pantheon of spirits or gods, often linked to their geographical region.

This worldview fosters **sustainability and environmental conservation**, as Adivasis consider harming nature equivalent to disrespecting spiritual forces.

The Absence of a Centralized "Parmeshwar"

Unlike monotheistic and organized religions, most Adivasi belief systems do not revolve around a single omnipotent deity like *Parmeshwar* (god). Instead:

- They believe in **multiple spiritual entities**, each governing different aspects of life.
- The concept of **heaven and hell** is largely absent; instead, they believe in balance between nature, humans and spirits.
- **Worship is decentralized** – there are no grand worship structures and religious texts, but rather sacred groves and oral traditions.
- **Rituals are communal**, performed by shamans, pahans (Priest), elders rather than priests with hierarchical authority.

Thus, Adivasi spirituality is distinct in its focus on **nature, spirits and ancestral wisdom**, rather than on a single almighty deity governing the universe. This makes their belief system **fluid, adaptive and deeply connected to their environment and way of life**.

2. Nature-Centric Beliefs in Adivasi Traditions

Adivasi traditions are deeply rooted in nature, reflecting a **spiritual symbiosis between humans and the environment**. Unlike organized religions that often separate the divine from the physical world, Adivasis see

nature itself as divine. Their spiritual practices are shaped by the landscapes they inhabit, from dense forests to rivers and mountains, which they consider sacred.

Worship of Natural Elements (Sun, Moon, Rivers, Forests, Mountains)

Adivasi spirituality is inherently **animistic**, meaning they believe that all elements of nature possess spiritual essence. Various tribes across India venerate natural forces in different ways:

1. **Sun Worship** (*Sing Bonga* among the Munda, *Biri Pahari* among the Ho tribes)
 - The Sun is often regarded as a supreme force of life and energy.
 - Many Adivasis offer prayers at sunrise, seeking blessings for health and prosperity.
2. **Moon Worship**
 - The Moon is associated with time cycles, agriculture and fertility.
 - Many tribes plan their festivals, rituals and farming activities based on lunar cycles.
3. **Rivers and Water Bodies** (*Ganga Maiya* in some tribes, *Lohra Pani* among the Santhal)
 - Rivers are considered life-giving deities. Many Adivasi communities perform purification rituals in rivers.
 - Water sources are often protected by spiritual taboos against pollution and wastage.
4. **Forests and Sacred Trees** (*Sarna* among Oraon and Munda, *Mahuwa* tree worship among the Bhil)
 - Many Adivasis consider forests their spiritual and ancestral home.
 - Trees like *Sal*, *Peepal* and *Mahuwa* are revered, with offerings made under their shade.
5. **Mountains and Hills** (*Niyamgiri* of the Dongria Kondh, *Parasnath Hills* of the Santhals)
 - Certain hills and mountains are considered the abode of deities.
 - Climbing these sacred mountains is often seen as a pilgrimage.

Through these practices, Adivasis maintain a **harmonious coexistence** with nature, believing that harming it would lead to divine retribution.

Relationship between Adivasis and the Environment

The Adivasi way of life is **inseparable from the environment**, as their survival depends on forests, rivers and land. Their **environmental ethics** are guided by:

- **Sustainable Living:** They practice shifting cultivation (*jhum farming*), foraging and hunting in ways that allow nature to regenerate.
- **Community Ownership:** Land, forests and water bodies are treated as communal resources rather than private property.
- **Respect for Animal Life:** Many Adivasis refrain from excessive hunting, considering certain animals sacred and spirit messengers.
- **Eco-Spirituality:** Rituals are designed to honor nature, ensuring that every tree cut or animal hunted is done with gratitude and necessity.

Unlike modern industrial societies that exploit resources for profit, Adivasi traditions emphasize **preservation and reciprocity**—taking only what is needed and giving back to nature through rituals and conservation efforts.

Sacred Groves and Ritual Spaces

A significant aspect of Adivasi spirituality is the concept of **Sacred Groves**—protected areas of forest dedicated to deities and spirits. These groves, often called *Sarna* or *Devrai*, serve as natural temples.

Characteristics of Sacred Groves

- **Strict Protection:** Cutting trees or hunting in these areas is forbidden.
- **Ritualistic Importance:** Special ceremonies, such as animal sacrifices and community feasts, are held in these groves.
- **Healing and Meditation Centers:** Many Adivasis believe these spaces have divine energy, making them ideal for spiritual healing and guidance.

Examples of Sacred Groves in Adivasi Culture

- **Sarna Sthal (Oraon, Munda, Ho Tribes)** – A cluster of sacred *Sal* trees where prayers are offered.
- **Devrai (Maharashtra's Bhil and Warli Tribes)** – Small patches of forests preserved for deities and ancestral spirits.
- **Niyamgiri Hills (Dongria Kondh, Odisha)** – The entire mountain range is considered sacred and protected against mining activities.

These **sacred spaces act as ecological reserves**, preventing deforestation and ensuring biodiversity conservation.

Adivasi traditions demonstrate a **deep respect for nature**, viewing it as a **living, breathing spiritual entity** rather than just a resource. By worshipping natural elements, maintaining sacred groves and practicing sustainable living, they uphold a unique environmental consciousness.

Unlike organized religions that separate God from nature, Adivasi spirituality **integrates the divine with the earth, water, sky and forests**. This nature-centric worldview offers valuable lessons for modern environmental conservation efforts.

3. Animism and Spirit Worship in Adivasi Traditions

A fundamental aspect of Adivasi spirituality is **animism**, the belief that all elements of nature—trees, rivers, mountains, animals, and even the wind—are inhabited by living spirits. These spirits are neither purely benevolent nor malevolent but must be respected, appeased, and maintained in harmony with human life. Alongside nature spirits, **ancestral worship** plays a crucial role in maintaining the spiritual balance of Adivasi communities.

Concept of Living Spirits in Nature

Adivasis believe that the natural world is not an inanimate entity but is **alive with spirits** that influence daily life. These spirits can bring prosperity, protection and misfortune depending on how humans interact with them.

1. Spirits of the Land and Forests

- Many tribes believe that forests are home to guardian spirits.
- Certain trees, such as the *Sal* or *Peepal*, are considered sacred dwellings of spirits.
- Cutting down sacred trees without permission from the spirits is believed to bring disaster.

2. Water Spirits

- Rivers, lakes, and wells are often thought to house spirits or deities (*Jal Devta* or *Nag Devta*).
- Fishermen and farmers perform offerings before using water bodies to ensure blessings and protection.

3. Mountain and Rock Spirits

- Hills and caves are believed to be the resting places of powerful spirits.
- Many Adivasi groups, such as the Dongria Kondh, consider certain mountains (*Niyamgiri*) to be the physical embodiment of their gods.

4. Animal Spirits and Totemism

- Some tribes believe they are descended from particular animals (*totem worship*), such as the **Santhal** worshipping the crocodile (*Chhita*).
- Killing one's totem animal is strictly forbidden, as it is considered an ancestor or protector.

This deep connection with nature spirits ensures that Adivasis practice **sustainable coexistence**, avoiding exploitation of the land and maintaining ecological balance.

Ancestral Worship and Its Importance

Adivasis believe that the spirits of their ancestors continue to watch over them, guiding and protecting the living. Ancestors are considered part of the extended family, and **forgetting them is seen as disrespectful and dangerous**.

1. Role of Ancestors in Daily Life

- Ancestors act as intermediaries between the human world and the spirit world.
- Their blessings ensure health, good harvests and community harmony.
- If neglected, ancestral spirits can become restless and cause misfortune.

2. Shrines and Memorials

- Many tribes maintain small ancestral shrines in their homes or villages.
- Offerings of food, liquor (*handia*), and flowers are made regularly.

3. Death Rites and Spirit Release

- Rituals are performed to ensure the peaceful passage of a soul into the spirit world.
- The soul is believed to take some time before joining the ancestors, requiring guidance from the living through prayers.

By honoring their ancestors, Adivasis maintain a **spiritual continuity** between the past, present, and future, reinforcing their sense of community and identity.

Rituals to Appease Nature and Ancestors

To maintain harmony with the spirit world, Adivasis perform various rituals to **appease both nature spirits and ancestral beings**.

1. Sacrificial Offerings

- Animal sacrifices (such as chickens or goats) are common in many tribal rituals.
- These sacrifices are believed to **feed** the spirits and ensure their goodwill.
- The blood of the sacrifice is often sprinkled on sacred stones or trees.

2. Seasonal Festivals and Community Gatherings

- **Sarhul (Oraon, Munda, Ho tribes)** – A spring festival where people offer Sal flowers to nature spirits.
- **Karam Puja (Santhal, Munda tribes)** – Dedicated to the Karam tree spirit, praying for agricultural prosperity.
- **Sohrai (Santhal, Munda, Ho tribes)** – A post-harvest festival where cattle are worshipped, acknowledging their role in survival.

3. Shamanic Practices and Spirit Mediums

- Shamans (*Ojha* or *Dehuri*) act as intermediaries between humans and spirits.
- They conduct healing rituals, exorcisms, and divinations to communicate with the spirit world.
- Trance states and drumming are commonly used to invoke spiritual guidance.

4. Fire and Water Rituals

- Fire is used to purify spaces and ward off evil spirits.
- Water is sprinkled on the ground before ceremonies to **invite benevolent spirits** and cleanse negative energy.

The **animistic and ancestor-centric** belief system of Adivasis shapes their way of life, ensuring **respect for nature, sustainability, and social cohesion**. Rather than worshiping a distant, singular god (*Parmeshwar*), they engage in **daily interactions with spirits and ancestors**, fostering a profound connection with their environment.

These practices not only reinforce Adivasi identity but also serve as **an ecological model**, reminding modern societies of the importance of living in harmony with nature.

4. Supreme Beings and Local Deities in Different Tribal Groups

Although Adivasi belief systems do not follow a centralized concept of *Parmeshwar* like organized religions, many tribal groups worship **supreme beings, local deities and nature spirits** who govern various aspects of life. These deities are often linked to natural elements and are deeply rooted in **oral traditions, rituals and community life**.

Different tribes have their own supreme beings and spiritual guardians, who play a vital role in their **cosmology, rituals and social customs**. Below are some significant deities worshiped by various Adivasi communities.

Thakur Jiu – Supreme Deity of the Santhal Tribe

- **Thakur Jiu** (also called *Thakur Baba*) is the **creator god** of the Santhal tribe.
- He is believed to have created the first human beings and given them the knowledge of survival.
- Though *Thakur Jiu* is considered a supreme deity, he is **not actively worshiped in daily life**. Instead, the Santhals focus on nature spirits and ancestral deities for direct guidance.
- Santhals also worship **Marang Buru** (Great Mountain Spirit), **Jaher Era** (Goddess of Sacred Groves) and **Gosain Era** (Rain god) in their spiritual practices.

Religious Practices:

- Worship of *Thakur Jiu* is usually done during **birth, marriage and death rituals** rather than daily prayers.
- *Jaher Than* (sacred groves) is the central place of worship, where offerings are made to spirits.

Sing Bonga – Sun God of the Munda Tribe

- *Sing Bonga* (also called *Dharmesh* or *Singbonga Baba*) is the **supreme deity of the Munda tribe**.
- He is associated with **the Sun and cosmic order**, providing light, life and prosperity.
- Unlike *Thakur Jiu*, *Sing Bonga* is more actively revered and prayers are offered to seek his blessings.
- He is believed to punish wrongdoers and bless those who live righteously.

Religious Practices:

- **Fire sacrifices** and **Sun worship rituals** are common in Munda religious ceremonies.
- **Sarhul festival** is celebrated in honor of nature spirits and *Sing Bonga*, marking the arrival of spring.

Bara Deo – The Supreme Spirit of the Gond Tribe

- The Gond tribe worships *Bara Deo*, the **Great God and protector of the forest**.
- He is believed to reside in **sacred groves and hills**, ensuring the well-being of the Gond people.
- Unlike Brahmin gods, *Bara Deo* is **not represented in idols** but is believed to be present in nature.
- The Gonds also worship other spirits such as **Bhum Dev (Earth God), Jal Dev (Water God), and Patal Dev (Underworld Spirit)**.

Religious Practices:

- *Bara Deo* is worshipped through **animal sacrifices**, community feasts and **drumming ceremonies**.
- The **Persa Pen cult** is a special religious sect within the Gonds that worships ancestral spirits and nature deities.

Other Tribal Deities and Their Role

Many other Adivasi communities across India have their own **unique deities and spiritual figures**. Some important ones include:

1. **Budha Deo (Oraon Tribe)**
 - Considered the **chief god** of the Oraon tribe, residing in the **sacred Sal trees**.
 - Often associated with wisdom and justice.
 - Worshipped through **ritual dances, song offerings and nature-based ceremonies**.
2. **Gaon Devta (Village Deity) – Common in Multiple Tribes**
 - Every Adivasi village has its **protector spirit**, often called *Gaon Devta*.
 - Ensures the safety and prosperity of the community.
 - Worshipped in **village shrines and during harvest festivals**.
3. **Kali Mai (Bhil and Warli Tribes)**
 - A fierce goddess associated with **war, protection and fertility**.
 - Believed to protect warriors and ensure successful harvests.
 - Worshipped through **blood sacrifices and fire rituals**.
4. **Naga Devta (Snake Deity – Multiple Tribes)**
 - Revered among tribes such as the **Baiga, Bhil and Santhal**.
 - Snakes are considered **sacred beings**, believed to possess **supernatural wisdom**.
 - Worshipped for protection against **disease, droughts and bad omens**.
5. **Niyam Raja (Dongria Kondh Tribe, Odisha)**
 - A **mountain god** worshipped by the **Dongria Kondh** tribe.
 - The **Niyamgiri Hills** are considered his sacred abode, and no mining or deforestation is allowed in this area.
 - Dongria Kondhs hold **annual feasts and community prayers** to honor Niyam Raja.

The diversity of **supreme beings and local deities** in different Adivasi communities reflects their **deep connection to nature and the environment**. These gods and spirits are not distant figures but **living forces present in trees, rivers, mountains and animals**, directly influencing daily life.

Unlike organized religions, Adivasi spirituality does not demand strict worship routines or religious institutions. Instead, **it thrives through oral traditions, communal rituals and sustainable coexistence with nature**.

5. Rituals, Festivals and Ceremonies in Tribal Societies

Adivasi (tribal) communities celebrate various rituals, festivals, and ceremonies that reflect their **deep connection with nature, ancestors, and spirits**. These celebrations mark **seasonal changes, agricultural cycles, and spiritual beliefs**, reinforcing social unity and cultural heritage. Unlike organized religions, Adivasi

traditions are **oral-based** and **community-centered**, focusing on **songs, dances, and ritual offerings** rather than rigid religious structures.

Important Tribal Festivals

1. Sarhul (Spring Festival – Munda, Oraon and Ho Tribes)

- Celebrated in **March-April** at the beginning of the **new agricultural cycle**.
- Dedicated to **Mother Earth and Sal Tree spirits** (*Jaher Era*).
- Sal flowers are offered to **village deities and ancestors** to seek blessings.
- **Rituals:**
 - Community **dancing and singing** around sacred trees.
 - **Drum beating** (Nagara, Mandar) to invoke spirits.
 - **Animal sacrifices** (chickens/goats) to appease deities.
 - Distribution of **handia** (rice beer) among villagers.

2. Karam (Harvest Festival – Santhal, Munda, Oraon, Ho Tribes)

- Celebrated in **August-September** to **thank Karam Devta**, the god of youth, fertility and agriculture.
- Symbolizes **community harmony and gratitude to nature**.
- **Rituals:**
 - Women plant **Karam tree branches** and worship them.
 - Fasting and singing **traditional Karam songs**.
 - Village elders tell **folktales about Karam Devta**.
 - **Night-long dance celebrations**.

3. Sohrai (Cattle and Harvest Festival – Santhal, Munda, Ho, Gond Tribes)

- Celebrated in **October-November** after the rice harvest.
- Dedicated to **cattle and livestock**, which are crucial for survival.
- **Rituals:**
 - Cattle are **washed, decorated with natural colors, and worshipped**.
 - Farmers perform **rituals to honor Mother Earth and ancestors**.
 - **Sohrai paintings** (tribal wall art) are made on houses.
 - Villagers **feast, dance, and drink rice beer** in celebration.

4. Mage Parab (Santhal Winter Festival – Celebrating Ancestors)

- Occurs in **January-February** to honor **ancestral spirits**.
- Involves **sacrifices, drumming and traditional dance**.
- Highlights **storytelling and myth recitations** by elders.

5. Bhagoria (Bhil Tribe – Festival of Love and Marriage)

- Celebrated in **Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra**.
- Also known as the **Adivasi Valentine's Festival**.
- Young men and women **choose their life partners** during community fairs.
- **Traditional Bhil folk music and dance** are performed.

Role of Shamans and Tribal Priests

Shamans (Ojha/Dehuri/Pahan) – Spirit Mediators

- Adivasi shamans, also known as **Ojha, Dehuri, Pahan**, are the **spiritual leaders** of the community.
- They act as **healers, protectors, and intermediaries** between humans and spirits.
- Shamans **communicate with spirits through trances, drumming and herbal medicines**.
- **Duties include:**
 - Performing **sacrificial rituals** to appease nature spirits.
 - Conducting **healing ceremonies** for the sick.
 - Leading **ancestor worship** rituals.
 - Exorcising **evil spirits or bad omens** from villages.

Tribal Priests (Pujaris/Pahans)

- Responsible for **seasonal rituals and village protection ceremonies**.
- Conduct **agricultural prayers** before planting and harvesting.
- Lead **annual festivals like Sarhul and Karam Puja**.
- Some tribal priests also practice **divination and fortune-telling**.

Traditional Songs, Dances and Oral Traditions

1. Tribal Music and Instruments

- Music is an **essential part of tribal rituals and celebrations**.
- **Traditional Adivasi instruments** include:
 - **Mandar, Nagara, Dhol** (Drums) – Used in festivals and rituals.
 - **Tiriyo, Bana** (Flutes) – Played during **love songs and storytelling sessions**.
 - **Tungri, Sarangi** (String Instruments) – Used in **folk performances**.

2. Tribal Dance Forms

Tribe	Dance Form	Significance
Santhal	Santhali Dance	Performed in Karam and Sohrai festivals. Features graceful, circular movements .
Munda & Ho	Jhumar	A slow, rhythmic dance performed by both men and women.
Oraon	Karma Naach	Danced in honor of Karam Devta , the deity of fertility.
Gond	Perani Dance	Warrior dance symbolizing strength and bravery.
Bhil	Ghoomar	A vibrant love and marriage dance.
Baiga	Gotul Dance	Celebrates youth and tribal unity in the Gotul system.

3. Oral Traditions and Folklore

- Adivasis have **strong oral traditions**, passing history, myths and moral lessons through **storytelling**.
- Elders narrate **creation myths, warrior legends and heroic folktales**.
- Some famous tribal folktales include:
 - **Santhal Creation Myth:** How **Thakur Jiu** created the first humans.
 - **Gond Legend of Lingo:** The **origin story** of the Gond tribe.
 - **Munda Tale of Sing Bonga:** How the **Sun God** shaped the world.

Rituals, festivals, and ceremonies in Adivasi societies are deeply intertwined with **nature, ancestors and community life**. Through **music, dance, storytelling and shamanic traditions**, Adivasis **preserve their cultural heritage** and maintain a **harmonious relationship with their surroundings**.

These traditions **not only reflect indigenous spirituality** but also serve as **an ecological and social guide for sustainable living**.

6. Comparison with Organized Religions

Adivasi spirituality differs significantly from **organized religions** like **Brahminism, Christianity and Islam**, which follow **written scriptures, institutionalized worship and hierarchical priesthoods**. Tribal religions, in contrast, are **nature-centric, oral-based and community-driven**. Over time, religious conversions and cultural interactions have led to **syncretism**, blending tribal traditions with mainstream religions.

Differences from Brahmanism, Christianity and Islam

Aspect	Adivasi Spirituality	Brahmanism	Christianity	Islam
Concept of God	Multiple local deities, spirits, nature worship. No single supreme deity.	Polytheistic (multiple gods like Vishnu, Shiva, etc.), but also recognizes Brahman as a supreme reality.	Monotheistic (One God, Jesus as the Son of God).	Monotheistic (Allah, with Muhammad as the final prophet).
Sacred Texts	No written scriptures; oral traditions and myths.	Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana, etc.	Bible (Old and New Testaments).	Quran.
Religious Leaders	Shamans (Ojha, Pahan, Dehuri) mediate between spirits and people.	Brahmins and priests perform rituals and temple worship.	Priests, pastors, and bishops lead the church.	Imams lead prayers in mosques.
Places of Worship	Sacred groves, forests, rivers, mountains, and village shrines.	Temples, pilgrimage sites, and riverbanks.	Churches and chapels.	Mosques and holy sites like Mecca.
Afterlife & Rebirth	Ancestor worship; spirits remain in nature.	Karma and rebirth until moksha (liberation).	Heaven and Hell; eternal life with God.	Heaven and Hell based on deeds and faith.
Festivals & Rituals	Linked to agricultural cycles and nature (Sarhul, Karam, Sohrai).	Religious festivals (Diwali, Holi, Navratri).	Christian holidays (Christmas, Easter).	Islamic festivals (Eid, Ramadan, Muharram).

Impact of Religious Conversions on Tribal Beliefs

1. Brahmanization of Tribal Beliefs

- Many **Adivasi deities** are **assimilated into Brahmin pantheons**.
- Brahmin reform movements, such as **Arya Samaj** and **RSS-backed Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram**, promote Brahmin identity among Adivasis.
- Some tribes are classified as "**Vanvasis**" (**forest dwellers**) rather than **Adivasis** to link them to Brahmin traditions.

- Tribal gods like **Sing Bonga, Thakur Jiu and Naga Devta** are sometimes equated with **Surya (sun god) and Siva**.

Effects:

- ✓ Some Adivasis adopt Brahmin festivals like **Durga Puja and Navratri**.
- ✓ Worship practices shift towards **idol worship and temple visits**.
- ✓ Loss of **traditional shamanic practices and animistic rituals**.

2. Christian Influence and Missionary Conversions

- British and European **missionaries introduced Christianity** in tribal regions from the 18th century.
- Many tribes, especially **Santhals, Oraons and Nagas**, converted to Christianity.
- Christian missionaries provided **education, healthcare and social services**, influencing Adivasi cultural identity.
- Church organizations replaced **traditional religious structures** with **Christian beliefs and worship practices**.

Effects:

- ✓ Introduction of **Western education and literacy**.
- ✓ Decline in **ritual sacrifices and animistic practices**.
- ✓ Adivasi Christians blend **tribal customs with Biblical teachings** (e.g., Christmas celebrated with **tribal dance and drumming**).

3. Islam and Tribal Communities

- Some tribal groups, such as **Meos (Rajasthan) and Pathans (Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand)**, have converted to Islam over centuries.
- **Sufi saints and Islamic traders** played a role in gradual conversions.
- Some tribal Muslims **retain Adivasi customs** alongside Islamic practices.

Effects:

- ✓ Shift towards **monotheism (belief in Allah)**.
- ✓ Adoption of **Islamic rituals like Namaz, Eid celebrations**.
- ✓ Retention of some **tribal marriage and community customs**.

Syncretism: The Blending of Tribal and Mainstream Religions

Over centuries, Adivasi religious beliefs have merged with elements of **Brahmanism, Christianity and Islam**, resulting in **syncretism**—a fusion of indigenous and mainstream religious traditions.

Examples of Religious Syncretism

1. Santhal Christians

- Many Santhals follow **Christianity but retain tribal rituals**.
- Churches allow **tribal music and dance** during worship.
- Christmas celebrations include **Santhali traditional feasts and rice beer sharing**.

2. Hindu-Tribal Fusion (Sarna Dharma Movement)

- Many **Oraons, Mundas, and Ho tribes** follow **Sarna Dharma**, a fusion of tribal spirituality and Brahmanism.
- Worship of **Sarna Mata (Mother Earth)** continues alongside Brahmin gods.
- **Sarna temples and shrines** coexist with Brahmin pilgrimage sites.

3. Muslim Adivasis

- Some Muslim Adivasis in Bengal and Jharkhand continue **ancestor worship**, a non-Islamic practice.
- Tribal Islamic festivals include **folk music and drumming**, which are not typically part of orthodox Islam.

Adivasi spirituality is distinct from organized religions due to its **oral traditions, animistic beliefs and deep connection with nature**. However, **Brahmanization, Christian missionary work and Islamic influence** have transformed many aspects of tribal religious life. While some tribes have fully embraced **mainstream religions**, others continue to practice **syncretic traditions**, blending **tribal customs with Brahmin, Christian and Islamic beliefs**.

Despite religious conversions, **Adivasi identity remains deeply rooted in nature worship, ancestral reverence, Buddhist practices and communal celebrations**.

7. Modern Challenges and Preservation of Tribal Beliefs

Adivasi spiritual traditions are facing significant challenges due to **urbanization, industrialization, government policies and religious conversions**. However, efforts are being made to **preserve indigenous spirituality and tribal identity** through activism, legal recognition and cultural revival movements.

Impact of Urbanization and Industrialization

1. Loss of Sacred Lands and Displacement

- Many Adivasi communities live in **forest regions, mountains and river valleys**, which are central to their religious practices.
- **Mining, dams and deforestation** have led to **mass displacement**.
- **Sacred groves** (*Jaher Than, Sarna Sthal*) are being destroyed for infrastructure projects.
- **Examples:**
 - **Narmada Dam Project** displaced **Bhil and Gond tribes**, affecting their religious sites.
 - **Coal mining in Jharkhand** has led to the destruction of **Santhal, Oraon, Kharia and Munda sacred spaces**.

Effects:

- ✓ Adivasis lose access to **ancestral lands and traditional shrines**.
- ✓ Migration to cities weakens **community-based spiritual practices**.
- ✓ Traditional festivals like **Sarhul and Sohrai** are declining in urban areas.

2. Influence of Modern Lifestyles

- **Younger generations** are moving to **cities for education and jobs**, leading to **reduced participation in traditional rituals**.
- Westernization and digital media introduce **new cultural influences**, sometimes replacing **tribal folklore with mainstream entertainment**.
- Alcoholism and consumerism are replacing **traditional community feasting rituals**.

Effects:

- ✓ Decline in **oral storytelling and shamanic traditions**.
- ✓ Tribal festivals and rituals are becoming **commercialized and adapted to urban settings**.
- ✓ Many **young Adivasis prefer modern religious institutions** over ancestral faiths.

Government Policies and Tribal Identity**1. Lack of Recognition for Tribal Religions**

- Indian government policies classify Adivasis under **Brahmin, Christian, Muslim categories**, often ignoring **indigenous tribal faiths**.
- Movements like **Sarna Dharma Recognition Movement** demand **separate religious identity** for Adivasis.

Effects:

- ✓ Many Adivasis are **forced to register as non-advasis** in official documents.
- ✓ Tribal spiritual practices are often **misrepresented and ignored** in national policies.
- ✓ Efforts to **declare Sarna Dharma as an official religion** are ongoing.

2. Reservation Policies and Religious Conversions

- Some **Adivasis lose ST (Scheduled Tribe) benefits** due to conversion.
- Brahmin nationalist groups try to **reconvert Adivasis under "Ghar Wapsi" campaigns**, claiming they are originally Hindus. (Originally they are **Buddhists**)
- **Conflict arises between tribal cultural identity and political-religious affiliations.**

Effects:

- ✓ Pressure on **tribals** to prove their **Adivasi identity**.
- ✓ Divisions within **tribal communities** based on religion.

Efforts to Preserve Indigenous Spirituality**1. Legal and Political Movements**

- **Sarna Dharma Recognition Movement** – Adivasis in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Odisha demand **official recognition** for their indigenous faith.
- Tribal leaders and activists push for **constitutional protection of tribal religious practices**.

✓ **Jharkhand Assembly passed a resolution (2020)** for **Sarna Dharma** recognition, awaiting national approval.

2. Cultural Revival and Awareness Campaigns

- **Adivasi Youth Organizations** promote tribal languages, folklore and rituals.
- **Santhali language was added to the 8th Schedule of the Indian Constitution**, preserving oral traditions.
- Digital platforms are used to **document tribal songs, dances and myths** (e.g., YouTube channels featuring Adivasi storytelling).

✓ **Tribal festivals are being revived** through government and NGO support.

3. Protection of Sacred Lands

- **Protests against mining projects** in tribal areas (e.g., Niyamgiri Hills protest by Dongria Kondh tribe).
- Some **tribal communities are reforesting sacred groves** to protect their religious spaces.

✓ **Legal battles for land rights** under **Forest Rights Act (2006)**.

Adivasi spiritual beliefs are under **threat from modernization, industrialization, and political forces**. However, **legal movements, cultural revival efforts and youth-led initiatives** are helping to **preserve indigenous identity and traditions**.

8. Conclusion

Adivasi spirituality is deeply **rooted in nature, ancestral worship and animistic traditions**, making it distinct from organized religions. Unlike Brahmanism, Christianity, Islam, tribal belief systems **lack a centralized deity** ("Parmeshwar") and instead focus on **local spirits, sacred natural sites and community-driven rituals**.

However, **modern challenges** such as **urbanization, industrialization, religious conversions and government policies** threaten the survival of these indigenous faiths. **Sacred lands are being destroyed, traditional practices are fading and Adivasis often lack legal recognition for their spiritual identity**.

Despite these challenges, **efforts to preserve Adivasi spirituality**—such as the **Sarna Dharma Recognition Movement, cultural revival programs and legal battles for land rights**—are gaining momentum.

The Unique Spirituality of Adivasis

Adivasi belief systems are **not just religious structures but an integral part of their way of life**. Their faith is tied to **the environment, ancestors and community ethics**. Key aspects that make Adivasi spirituality unique include:

- ✓ **Nature-centric worldview** – Worship of forests, rivers, mountains and celestial bodies.
- ✓ **Community-driven rituals** – Collective festivals, ancestor veneration and spirit appeasement ceremonies.
- ✓ **Oral traditions** – Myths, folklore and songs passed down through generations.
- ✓ **No rigid religious hierarchy** – Shamans (Ojha, Pahan, Dehuri) act as spiritual guides without institutionalized power.

Importance of Recognizing and Respecting Tribal Belief Systems

The **recognition and protection of tribal spiritual traditions** are essential for preserving **India's cultural diversity and indigenous heritage**. Governments, scholars and mainstream society must:

- ✓ **Acknowledge tribal religions** as separate and distinct from Brahminism and other faiths.
- ✓ **Ensure land rights** for Adivasis to safeguard their sacred spaces.
- ✓ **Promote tribal languages and folklore** to keep oral traditions alive.
- ✓ **Support cultural revival movements** through education and media representation.

By respecting and preserving Adivasi spirituality, we can uphold **their identity, cultural richness and ecological wisdom**, ensuring that these traditions continue to thrive for future generations.

The concept of a Creator / Almighty in tribal societies (Adivasis) varies widely across different communities, but indigenous traditions do not subscribe to a singular, omnipotent "Parmeshwar" in the way that organized religions do. Instead, their beliefs often **revolve around nature, ancestral spirits** and a deep connection to the land. Here are some key aspects of tribal spiritual traditions. Finally, there is **no existence of parmeshwar / creator**. All Adivasis (Tribes) affirm the philosophy of Buddhism which is very-very scientific and progressive. Therefore, all indigenous people are of scientific temper by their blood which proved in 2004 when **Tsunami** erupted, the **Jarwa Tribes of Andaman Island** perceived the destruction of humanity and they moved to a safest places. Historically, tribes are civilized people. But it is very pathetic that they are oppressed, marginalized and kept away from education. In the nation there is no representation in administrative offices, executive, legislative, media, academic universities etc. It is a burning issue in our country.

Nature-Centric Beliefs

Adivasi communities often revere nature as sacred. Elements such as the sun, moon, rivers, mountains and forests are considered divine forces. Rather than worshipping a single god, they recognize multiple spirits dwelling in natural objects.

Animism and Spirit Veneration

Many tribal societies follow animism—the belief that all things (plants, animals, rivers, stones) possess a spiritual essence. They also practice ancestor worship, believing that deceased elders guide and protect the living.

Absence of a Centralized "Parmeshwar"

Unlike Brahminism, Christianity, Islam, others where there is a defined, all-powerful god, **Adivasi religions** do not have a singular deity governing the universe. Instead, they believe in multiple **spirits** and **local deities** specific to their region and clan.

Supreme Beings in Some Tribes

While many Adivasi groups do **not have a concept of "Parmeshwar,"** some do believe in a supreme being but perceive it differently from organized religions. For example:

- **Santhal Tribes** believe in *Thakur Jiu* (Great Spirit) but also venerate other spirits.
- **Munda Tribes** venerate *Sing Bonga*, a solar deity.
- **Gond Tribes** have *Bara Deo*, a guardian spirit.

Rituals and Festivals

Adivasis conduct rituals that connect them with their **environment**. Festivals like **Sarhul** (Jharkhand), **Karam** and **Sohrai** involve prayers to nature spirits, often accompanied by dances and songs.

Influence of Mainstream Religions

With external influences over time, some Adivasi groups have assimilated Brahmin, Christian and Islamic practices, leading to the adoption of new deities and syncretic forms of worship. However, their indigenous spiritual traditions remain distinct.

Adivasi spirituality is deeply rooted in **nature** and **ancestral reverence** rather than a singular "**Parmeshwar.**" Their belief systems reflect **harmony with nature**, respect for the **spirits** and a **communal way of life**, making them **fundamentally different** from mainstream religious doctrines.

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This list includes **books, journal articles and research reports** that cover **tribal religious practices, animism, nature worship, Sarna Dharma, Brahmins influence and missionary impact** on Adivasi spirituality.