

Analysing the Customary Law of Totemic Species among the Gond Tribes of India

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Abstract: Totemism a traditional belief system based on a collection of tangible things that Savage considers with superstitious veneration, generally a species of animal or plant. Totemism functions as both a spiritual belief system and a framework for social organization. Totemism fosters clan unity and regulates relations between clans through mutual respect and protection between individuals and their totems. The Gonds, like other tribes in India, continue to follow their traditional practise of totemistic beliefs. Totemism holds significant importance among the Gond tribes in India. The Gond community has developed certain customary rules protecting their totems. The influence of these totemic beliefs has shaped religion and cultural identity. The present study, therefore, aims to highlight the customary laws associated with totemic beliefs among the Gond tribes in India. The qualitative research data used in this study was gathered from secondary sources, including books, journal articles, and online texts.

Keywords: Totemism, Customary laws, Gond tribes, India

1. INTRODUCTION

The word "totem," derived from *dotem* use by the Objibwa, an Algonquin people of North America to denote clan membership (Wagner, 2018), often refers to a type of plant, animal, or other symbolic object that represents or identifies a person or a social group, such as a clan, moiety, or decent line (Murugesan, 2014). Consequently, it establishes a foundation for numerous expansions of human natural relationships, such as mythology, shamanism, and ritual. Early anthropologists collectively categorised these phenomena under the umbrella term "totemism," seemingly to support their nations of supposedly primitive societies (Galvin, 2018). Many began their analysis of culture in terms of symbols by beginning with the totemic idea. The spelling totem in English has been entrenched via usage. A man and his totem have a mutually beneficial relationship in which the totem guards the man and the man honours the totem in different ways, such as by not killing it if it is an animal or by not harvesting or cutting it if it is a plant. A totem is never a single, isolated thing; rather, it is always a class of objects, usually a species of plant or animal, or, less frequently, a class of inanimate natural objects, or, extremely rarely, a class of man-made objects. Totemism is therefore a social structure as much as a religion. Its social components include the relationships between clansmen and men from other clans, while its religious components include the relationships of mutual respect and protection between a man and his totem (Goldenweiser, 1910). A totem clan refers to itself by the name of its totem, and its members generally think of themselves as true descendants of it.

Many anthropologists now hold similar beliefs so much, the term was first used in social theory in the late 1900s, when John F. McLennan's comparative study, "The Worship of Animals and Plants," was published. He postulated an evolutionary stage of human growth marked by the worship of plants and animals, in line with the prevailing wisdom of the period. E. B. Tylor contested this, seeing totemism as a tool for categorising the world and nature

but not as a foundation for structuring religion. Rather, he observed that totemism associated certain clans with particular animals, correctly highlighting its kinship function in combining clans and animals in mutual alliance as well as kinship¹. It may be interpreted as the origin of the human family and most communities practicing totemism, there tend to be a prohibition against members of the same totem engaging in sexual intimacy, as noted by Freud in his books Totem and Taboo (1913). In his extensive essay "Totemism and Exogamy," British anthropologist James Frazer stressed the hereditary nature of totems and the formation of laws controlling each society's totemic clans. His research explores the theological facets of totemism, encompassing the function of personal totems, sexual totems, and more topics (Frazer, 1910). Golden Weiser (1910) emphasised the impact of psychological elements shared by many tribal cultures and argued that totemism is based on a symbolic-mystical connection. The eminent French anthropologist and pioneer of structural anthropology, Claude Lévi-Strauss, offers a profound exploration of the concept of totemism in his seminal work "*Totemism*." Especially the idea of savagery, this groundbreaking book questions the conventional wisdom of primitive civilizations. Examining totemic categorization and totemism, Levi-Strauss provides a critical study of these cultural and symbolic systems that surpasses traditional viewpoints. His analysis reveals the various hierarchies and divisions present in totemic societies, offering insightful information on the intricacies of human belief systems and social organisation (Levi Strauss, 1964). Other notable anthropologists, like Emile Durkheim (2016), examined the religious and social dimensions of totemism and stressed its significance for social group cohesiveness in his book "The Elementary Forms of Religious Life." Radcliffe-Brown highlighted the purpose of totemism in social structure and organisation², whereas Malinowski examined the Trobriand Islanders and the functional perspective of totemism (Pulman, 2004).

As totems, the tribal people have also identified themselves with flora and animals. The majority of the Indian tribal people exhibits totemism and believes in a mystery affinity with certain flora and animals (Vidyarthi & Ray, 1976). The totemic importance of tribal life is still prevalent among the Indian tribes, according to research on totems at many levels and features. There are spiritual, religious, social, and cultural implications for how a tribe's population is classified. The tribal people are obedient to their beliefs and are disciplined due to the system of totemic categorization and the restrictions associated with totemic things (Goswami, 2017). The Gonds, like other tribal people, are one of the tribal and aborigines of Central India. It is probable that the Gonds are the oldest and largest aboriginal group of India (Mehta, 1984). The Gonds speak their own language called Gondi, which is classified as a Dravidian language (Srivastava, 2013). Most of them are also familiar with Hindi, Telugu and Marathi.³ They have a unique religious belief system. Hence, Gonds continue to follow their traditional practise of totemistic system. Totemism holds significant importance among the Gond tribes in India. The Gond community has developed certain customary rules protecting their totems. The influence of these totemic beliefs has shaped religion and cultural identity.

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- To highlight the customary laws of totemic beliefs among the Gond tribes in India.

3. METHODOLOGY

The article delves into the legal aspects entrenched within totemic beliefs, offering a comprehensive analysis of this complex relationship. It scrutinises customary laws associated with these totemic beliefs. This examination

¹ <https://anthropology.iresearchnet.com/totemism/>

² <https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/social-sciences-and-law/anthropology-biographies/alfred-reginald-radcliffe-brown>

³ <https://www.everyculture.com/wc/Germany-to-Jamaica/Gonds.html>

involves synthesising information from diverse secondary sources, such as books, articles, and texts sourced from libraries, e-journals, and online repositories.

4. TOTEMIC BELIEF AND CUSTOMARY LAWS AMONG GOND TRIBES

The totemic belief system holds profound significance for numerous indigenous tribes globally, including those in India. It is a foundational aspect intricately woven into their spiritual, religious, social, and cultural fabric. Specifically, the Gond, a prominent indigenous tribal group residing predominantly in Central India or Gondwana region, highly value their totemic beliefs and practices. The Gond people's social structure, rituals, and worldview revolve around totemism. Their reverence for specific animals, plants, or natural elements as sacred symbols, representing their ancestors or spirits, is a cornerstone of their spiritual identity.⁴ This belief system is deeply intertwined with their religious rituals and communal life, contributing significantly to their cultural ethos. Moreover, the Gond communities' dispersion across different regions of India has led to the enrichment and diversification of their totemic beliefs. Despite their geographical spread, the Gond tribes have retained and evolved their totemic practices, adapting them to their local environments while preserving the essence of their ancestral traditions⁵. This cultural dispersion has fostered an amalgamation of beliefs, resulting in a rich tapestry of totemic heritage among the Gond people. There are more than sixty groups within the Gonds, and they are divided into many phratries. These phratries are further divided into a number of clans and subclans. There is at least one totem connected to each clan and subclan. The totems have their own mythical beliefs and customs, and they might represent either the local flora or wildlife. On the other hand, they have adhered strictly to clan totemism. Each Gond clan has its own deity, and the majority of these deities are animistic or based on plants. At specific periods, the Gond people continue to worship their different totems.

Verrier Elwin (1947) distinguished five phratry groupings in his well-known book "The Muria and Their Ghotul." The phratries are divided by many clans, each of which has its own totems (Table 1). A large number of the clans have historical journeys as part of their ancestry. A significant number of Gond people may trace their clans through certain totems. An additional significant empirical investigation was carried out among the Gond group residing in Maharashtra State, Central India. Twenty Gondi clans, including six subclans, were included in this study (Table 2). Every Gond clan has its own totemic species, which includes trees, insects, reptiles, fish, and mammals (Heda, 2012). As mentioned, the Raj Gonds have the commonest totems, which include *Suribons*, or sun, *Bhagbons*, or tiger, *Nagbons*, or cobra, and *Kachchimobons*, or tortoise (Rao, 1910).

Most of the tribal communities are endogamous group and prevalence the practice of totemism in India. Among them a number of clans are named after plants and animals (Jain & Sharma, 1996). In totemism, the tribesmen regard themselves as related or descended from the totem animal or plant (Heda, 2012). Tribal communities hold the belief that totemic plants or animals have safeguarded or supported the ancestors of their respective clans, or have rendered some unique benefit or vital service. As a result, they exhibit deep reverence toward these totemic entities and strictly avoid harming or destroying them. They also abstain from consuming their fruits or flowers. If a totemic being is discovered in a diseased or distressed state, it is carefully nurtured back to health and subsequently released. These sacred animals or plants are accorded the utmost respect and are compassionately cared for during their final moments. At the same time totemic kinship makes exogamy obligatory (Vidyarthi & Ray, 1976).

Gonds, however, have different clans, each associated with a specific totemic entity such as animals, trees, rivers, or natural objects. For instance, they might revere animals like tigers, leopards, snakes, or vultures are their totemic

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gondi_people

⁵ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345502967_Gond_tribes_of_India

symbols. These totems are regarded as sacred and are integral to their cultural identity and social organisation. Gond clans, therefore, observe certain customary rules for totemic beliefs and taboos. These totems are deeply embedded in their religious and social practices, guiding behaviour and shaping their kinship system. Individuals won't harm the totem. Hunting totemic species is prohibited and some have touch taboos within their own group. They have taboos consuming the flesh of specific totemic animals consider sacred. The practice of marriage between families belonging to the same totem is prohibited among the Gond community. Sex relations between same totemic clan members as incest, which they punish with temporary or permanent expulsion from the community according to customary laws of Gonds.

Table. 1: Classification of Gondi Phratries, Clan and Totemic species

Phratry	Clan	Totem
The Nag (Cobra)	Buyi	Bullock (<i>Bos taurus</i>)
	Dhurwa	Goat (<i>Capra aegagrus hircus</i>)
	Duga	Cobra (<i>Naja naja</i>)
	Kola	Cobra (<i>Naja naja</i>)
	Karanga	Wild buffalo (<i>Bubalus arnee</i>)
	Kaudo	Goat (<i>Capra aegagrus hircus</i>) and horse (<i>Equus caballus</i>)
	Maravi	Goat (<i>Capra aegagrus hircus</i>)
	Kassi Maravi	Kassi tree (<i>Bridelia retusa</i>)
	Etikal Maravi	She goat (<i>Capra aegagrus hircus</i>)
	Nei Nuroti	Dog (<i>Canis lupus</i>)
	Nuroti	Cobra (<i>Naja naja</i>)
	Partabi	Goat (<i>Capra aegagrus hircus</i>)
The Kachhim (Tortoise)	Kawachi	Tortoise (<i>Nilssonina leithii</i>)
	Komra	Tortoise (<i>Nilssonina leithii</i>)
	Markami	Tortoise (<i>Nilssonina leithii</i>)
	Naitami	Tortoise (<i>Nilssonina leithii</i>) and dog (<i>Canis lupus</i>)
	Parchapi	Tortoise (<i>Nilssonina leithii</i>)
	Poyami	Tortoise (<i>Nilssonina leithii</i>)
	Tekami	Tortoise (<i>Nilssonina leithii</i>)
The Bakra (Goat)	Gaude	Goat (<i>Capra aegagrus hircus</i>)
	Karhami	Goat (<i>Capra aegagrus hircus</i>)
	Komra	Goat (<i>Capra aegagrus hircus</i>)
	Kunjami	Goat (<i>Capra aegagrus hircus</i>)
	Ori	Goat (<i>Capra aegagrus hircus</i>)
	Uika	Kassi tree (<i>Bridelia retusa</i>)
	Wadde	Goat (<i>Capra aegagrus hircus</i>) and Kassi tree (<i>Bridelia retusa</i>)
The Bagh (Tiger)	Sori	Tiger (<i>Panthera tigris</i>), buffalo (<i>Bubalus bubalis</i>), and bod fish (<i>Bagarius bagarius</i>)
	Wadder	Buffalo (<i>Bubalus bubalis</i>)

The Bodmink (Fish)	Halami	Bod fish (Bagarius bagarius)
	Hurpundi	Bod fish (Bagarius bagarius)
	Kachlami	Kassi tree (Bridelia retusa)
	Kuhrami	Kassi tree (Bridelia retusa)
	Kumoti	Kumot bird
	Usendi	Usi bird (Leptoptilos dubius)

(Source: (Elwin, 1947))

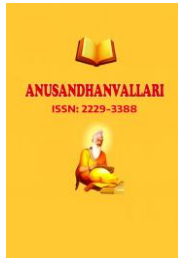
Table. 2: Distribution of Gond clans and Totemic species

Gondi Clans	Totemic Species
Naitam	Hemul (Tortoise- Nilssonia leithii)
Duga	Kadka Budhal (Snake)
Tofa	Hirkanda
Kirangami	Bondgesaral
Narote	Kadka Budhal (Snake)
Hichami	Nulee mutte (Insect)
Halami	Bodi min (Fish-Bagarius bagarius)
Gavde	Goat (Capra hircus) Goda nil (Nilgai- Boselaphus tragocamelus)
Uike	Usya Mudyl
Usendi	Goat (Capra hircus)
Darro	Halayal (Male Buffalo- Bubalus bubalis)
Kumoti	Dagad Dev, Mango (Tree-Mangifera indica), Sal (Tree-Bowellia serrata)
Pada	Kunda
Poreti	Goda nil (Nilgai, Boselaphus tragocamelus)
Salame	Bodi min (Fish-Bagarius bagarius) and Kasai tree (Bridelia retusa)
Katengi	Goat (Capra hircus)

(Source: (Heda, 2012))

5. CONCLUSION

The totemic belief system among the Gond tribes in India is deeply embedded in their cultural, religious, and social practices. Totems symbolise their ancestry and connection to nature. Gonds identify with specific animals, plants, or natural elements as sacred symbols, forming the foundation of their cultural identity and heritage. Gonds worship totems, attributing spiritual significance to them. They believe in the protective and nurturing qualities of these symbols, incorporating them into their religious rituals and ceremonies. Totemic customs regulate social norms and interactions within the community. They govern marriage practices, prohibiting unions within the same totemic group, fostering social harmony, and maintaining the integrity of their social structure. Adherence to totemic customs, taboos, and customary laws is crucial for preserving Gond traditions. These practices are passed down through generations, safeguarding their cultural heritage. Totemism fosters a sense of community and unity among the Gond tribes. It strengthens social bonds, reinforces shared values, and establishes a sense of belonging.



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