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## UNIT 2 DRAVIDIAN TRIBES

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## 2.0 OBJECTIVES

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After having read this Unit you will be able to:

- learn about Dravidian tribes;
- discuss about the *Ghotul* or the youth dormitory and its importance in tribal life;
- know the names of certain tribes belonging to the Dravidian family; and
- describe the origin and myths of *Gond* tribe.

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## 2.1 INTRODUCTION: THE DRAVIDIAN TRIBES

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Many scholars consider the Dravidians to be the oldest tribal group of India. They are found from Ceylon to the Valley of the Ganges and cover all South-Eastern regions of India, mostly Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Central India, Orissa, and Bihar. The Dravidian tribal population is conterminous with the Ghats on the east and west of the peninsular area of India. Farther north, it reaches on one side to the Aravallis and on the other side to the Rajmahal hills. There are numerous Dravidian tribes of India. Here is a partial list: the Maria and Muria, Baiga, Mal Paharia or Male of the Santal Parganas, Oraon, the Badaga of the Nilgiris, the Munda, the Gond etc.

One the most important and dominant Dravidian tribe of India is the Gond. In the following unit, we are going to discuss ethnography, life style, occupation etc., and original myths of the Gonds of Central India.

## 2.2 THE GOND OF CENTRAL INDIA

The Gond tribes form the largest single tribal group in India. The Gond tribe is composed of several tribes. Their homeland extends from the Satpura range down to the River Godavari, from Uttar Pradesh (Gond District) and North Bihar to Andhra Pradesh, and from Maharashtra to Orissa. They have lent their name to Gondwana, a historical region which gained prominence during the medieval period. The Gonds established their political power, founded states and exercised influence far and wide. There are as many as four separate Gond kingdoms in the Gondwana region, mentioned in the medieval accounts. These four kingdoms include the Panna District in the north, Ratanpur in Bilaspur district in the east, the Raisen district of Madhya Pradesh in the west and areas of the Deccan in Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh in the south.

According to the census of India 1961, the derivation of the name Gond is unknown. In fact, the Gonds call themselves Koitur or Koi. The name Gond was an appellation given to them by outsiders. According to some, the title of the Gonds, as of Khonds, is derived from the word "hill". Telugu speakers still refer to the Khonds as Gonds. Spread over seven contiguous states, the Gond population is largest in Madhya Pradesh. Their mother tongue is Gondi and it belongs to the Dravidian family of languages. However, now they are bilingual or even trilingual; they speak Gondi as well as Hindi and Marathi or Telugu depending upon their location.

The Gond tribe has an extremely rich tradition of folklore. During the rule of the Gond dynasties in Central India, the ruling class was the patron of the Pardhans group of bards, a sub-group of the Gond. The Pardhan played an important role as the custodians of Gond traditions and culture. With the fall of Gond kingdom, the relationship between the Gond and the Pradhan lost much of its importance, and was thereby reduced to a great extent.

### Check your progress 1

**Note:** 1) Your answers should be around 30 words each;

2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of this Unit.

1) Where do the Dravidian tribes of India reside apart from Central India?

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### 2.2.1 Religion

Many Gonds still follow the traditional tribal religions, which is known as the Persa pen cult. In Madhya Pradesh, the Gonds are mostly Hindu and there are also a small group of people of Christian religion. In the traditional Gond rituals, each clan believes in a god of its own, Persa pen or Baradeo is the supreme deity and the Gond believe that they are the children of Baradeo. Each clan has a separate shrine of Baradeo where they gather and offer prayer to their deceased ancestors. These rituals consist of the usage of three small sticks of bamboo, paddy, areca-nuts and a copper coin wrapped in a piece of new cloth. A priest performs a puja to unite the deceased person's soul with Baradeo and once the soul is united with Baradeo, it was His will whether the deceased person would be sent back to the earth or not, and in what form they would be sent back. Baradeo is generally worshiped during the month of Magh (between mid-January to mid-February). Besides Baradeo, the Gond worship several gods and goddess, namely Kalimata, Narayandeo, Marchimata, Dulhadeo, Dulhidevi, Baisasurdeo, Dudh guriakhut, Dulhariakhut, Chowra, Bajara, Banjaridevi etc. The Gonds give importance to ancestor worship.

### 2.2.2 Economy

The basis of the Gond economy is agriculture, but they also practice animal husbandry. Though the traditional occupations of agriculture and animal husbandry have sustained their economy since time immemorial, these occupations have started facing mounting pressure due to the large scale immigration of people into their land. Currently, the Gonds of Central India are engaged in various economic operations simultaneously other than agriculture. Other than that, there are Gonds who are settled cultivators, forest laborers, agricultural laborers, wage laborers, workers engaged in mining and quarrying, skilled laborers and musicians. For the settled cultivators land and water are the main resources, which are controlled by individuals, but sometimes they cultivate in the forest lands, controlled by the Government. However, among the Gonds, the Raj Gonds are mainly a landowning community. Only men plough the land and women undertake agricultural operations which amount to almost seventy percent of the total agricultural activities. The Gond women are expert in the transplanting of paddy, besides which they have a role in animal husbandry, collection of fuel and potable water and other economic activities. The main crops of the Gonds are kado, kutki (millet), paddy, jowar, wheat, tur, urad, masur (all pulses) etc. They have direct links with the local market which is fully regulated and they sell their products at the markets for cash to other business communities in the area. Most of the Gond tribes engaged themselves as agricultural labor, since many of them do not own any land.

### 2.2.3 Shelter

The Gonds use natural materials like mud, grass, palm leaves etc. to build their huts. The traditional Gond house has a large verandah, which is called the *oser*, sometimes it is larger than the rest of the house. The middle portion of the house is called *narma lon*. This portion contains the storeroom and winter quarters. The main living room is designated as the *agha* and *angadi* is the kitchen. All Gonds have the *bari* or garden in small or large proportion according to the wants and desires of the family. They grow tobacco, maize, chillies, tomatoes, sesamum and many other vegetables in their garden. Cattle are penned in the garden to take advantage of the manure.

The traditional Gond elite have substantial houses; they use heavy logs, carefully selected bamboos, mud mixed with straw and cow-dung to build their houses. Lately the heavy thatched roof, made with thick layers of grass is being gradually replaced by local mud baked tiles. Usually, the door of the houses faces the east and the walls of the houses are often made of vertical pole stock dings. The economically disadvantaged Gond people make their walls with bamboo wattle work and all floors, walls and portions are plastered with mud.

**Check your progress 2**

- Note:** 1) Your answers should be around 30 words each;  
2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of this Unit.

2) What kind of economic activities do the Gonds pursue?

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3) What type of houses do well-off Gonds inhabit?

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## 2.3 SOCIETY AND CULTURE

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### 2.3.1 Ghotul or the youth dormitory

The youth dormitory is not universally present amongst all the Gond tribes. On the whole it appears to be a result influence from Orissa, Bihar and Assam. There are usually separate dormitories for the boys, with two apartments: one at the entrance and another in the centre of the village. The boys and girls of the tribe meet after evening time to dance, sing and enjoy themselves. They sleep in their own barracks. If there is no dormitory, then the young men sleep in the granaries. The young men must not sleep near their parents.

The Gonds, like other societies, have an impressive body of traditional cultural practices and regulations. The most important of these is the Ghotul system (the organization of youth halls from both sexes). However, many sections of Gond population in India do not have Ghotuls due to various social influences to which they have been subjected during the last several centuries. The Maria and Muria tribes, which are sub-groups of the Gond tribe of Central India, have Ghotul and

it has been mentioned by Verrier Elwin. His work *The Murias and their Ghotuls*, is one of the important contributions to the study of a vital aspect of society and culture in India.

The aim and objective of the ghotul is to function as an institution for developing in both the sexes a love of the clan, and training them in conjugal and civic duties, not excluding opportunities for obtaining proficiency in hunting, dancing, music and the cultural life of the group. It may appear a paradox to non-tribal societies that they enjoy sexual liberties, and at the same time develop obedience and discipline, receiving opportunities for leadership in the institution. The place possesses an atmosphere of happiness, where life is full, interesting and useful. Other than this, the ghotul consistently promotes co-operation in all economic, recreational, ceremonial and social activities of the entire group. Thus primarily, the ghotul is meant to deal with the sexual life of boys and girls as they reach maturity. It aims to prepare them for sexual, marital and family responsibilities that follow with the coming of adulthood. It promotes a mixing of both sexes without adult and parental control, and develops a sense of responsibility by imposing self motivated leadership. The Ghotul probably originated to fulfil the need of special training for each sex under different local and tribal conditions. The taboo on sexual intercourse before the communal hunt, during sowing, reaping and harvesting operations have contributed towards keeping alive the institution of the dormitory though it originated in a period of struggle with the forest, wild animals and alien men. The Maria ghotuls are institutions which serve to provide opportunities for young men and women to stabilize and strengthen intimacies, which may be a prelude to marriage.

The male leader of the ghotul has been known as sardar and the female leader is known as Belosa, but their names varies from place to place .They practically monitor various activities of the ghotul.

### 2.3.2 Marriage

The Gonds have several types of marriage practices. The oldest among them is marriage by capture, known as Poysceottur. This practice varies from place to place. Another type of marriage practice occurs when the girl elopes with the boy. In some marriages, even after consent of the parent is obtained, the couple prefers a marriage by elopement. Elwin found that it also could be because of economic reasons; if the parents found it difficult to collect the required grain for the communal feast, or were reluctant to face some opposition from influential clan members. Sometimes, it also happens due to impatience. Romance and thrill all combine to lead elopement, the boy and girl run away to a friendly house or ghotul. At times the girl is made pregnant to compel her parents to agree to the marriage. The couple then has to face the clan jury, who will demand the feast or Mahua (local liquor made from Mahua flower) drinks, or a fine before agreeing to regularize this marriage.

Amongst the Gonds, a man may marry his mother-in-law or co-widow, or any women related to him closely, where the classificatory system of relationship is not prevailing. However, he cannot marry his wife's elder sister. First, cousin marriage is most common amongst all the Gonds.

The practice of giving bride-price is common with the Gond tribes. This nature of the bride price, the articles and quantities given, their value and the amount of

cash given with the gifts will naturally differ not only from place to place, but it also varies between different house-holds. The total expenses of marriage vary widely between a few hundred rupees amongst the economically disadvantaged Gonds, and more than a thousand amongst the Raj Gonds. The boy's father has to give to the girl's father grain and money as bride-price.

### 2.3.3 Death ritual

In earlier days the Gond used to bury their dead, but now they cremate the dead body. The Gond follow certain rules for dead body, for example if Gonds die of unnatural death, such as killed by tigers or commit suicide, are buried. It is believed that the Chanda, a sub-group of Gond might have introduced the cremation rituals. Now almost all clan follows the cremation rituals. It is also said that the old persons are burnt with special honour to save them from being devoured by beasts.

According to the Gond beliefs, any person should not die on a cot or bed. Because the body should touch the "bhum" or earth is easy to understand since death is believed to be caused by the earth spirit. The body, therefore, is put on the ground when life is ebbing out. In most cases death is attributed to the departure of breath, though the ghost or soul is clearly identified as "hanal". The dead body of a Gond anywhere is always placed such that the feet faced the north, and the head faces the south. The home of their deities is believed to be in the north. The Maria however, is known to place the corpse facing west. When the body is buried it is naked. The corpse is bathed in water, and sometimes milk is sprinkled on it. In some places it was rubbed with Mahuwa oil, turmeric and charcoal. Whenever burial is practiced, after the grave is dug waist deep the body is placed in position, face upwards, and the nearest relatives throw a clod of earth on the head of the corpse, saying "this is all I can do for you, and I give you my portion". The female corpse is buried face downwards.

The Gonds believe in rebirth and life after death. They believe there is continuity beyond death because it is the substantial foundation of all worship of the dead. The dead have wishes, desires and needs which the living must satisfy for their own sake, as also for the benefits of those who survive after them. The ghost soul, in certain cases remains with the dead body till stones are discovered in which they will remain with the living forever. The ghost-soul is capable of leaving the body, and at times re-entering any other body, both during life time as well as after death. Thus are diseases explained, and belief arises in possession, black magic, or the power of ghost spirits. Baradeo is worshiped and ceremonies are performed to mingle the dead with Baradeo. Such ghost souls are expected to take a new birth.

**Check your progress 3**

**Note:** 1) Your answers should be around 30 words each;  
 2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of this Unit.

4) What is the importance of the Ghotul in Gond culture?  
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5) What is marriage by elopement among the Gonds?

6) What do you know about the Burial ceremony of the Gonds?

### 2.3.4 Handicraft products

The Gonds have rich tradition of handicraft products which includes body tattooing, rangoli (floor paintings), pottery and basket-making, etc. The Gonds are proficient in wall painting, which they do in red and black on a white background. They draw many natural objects such as animal, birds, trees, human figures, hunting scene, dancing poses, as well as geometric forms to decorate their walls. The decorations are made with thick sticks, mud or clay mixed with chaff and water. The Gonds are also proficient in woodcarving and they decorate the doors and panels with beautiful carvings.

### 2.3.5 Ornaments

The Gond women can be identified by their ornaments. One of the most important is the bhimindia dhar (head ornament), various types of necklaces called as hamshi and a series of hairpins. They also tattoo their body with various patterns like half moon, star, cross, comb, flower, deer, rabbit, peacock, scorpion, flies etc. The men often wear a choker around their neck made up of two or three rows of cowrie-shells stitched to a cloth band. It is believed to possess magical powers and these little shells are also used by them as tassels for their purse-bags or on their waistcoats and belts.

## 2.4 ORIGINAL MYTHS OF GOND TRIBE

According to the Gond belief the primordial male ancestors of their society is Wen. There are four groups of Wen such as Yerung, Sarung, Siyung, and Nalung, they are numbered as 7, 6, 5, and 4 by the Gonds. The Gond belief that these four Wen who were emerged from the cave in which they had been imprisoned by the God Mahadeo. Later they married twenty daughters of four gods of the underworld and became the forefather of the Gond tribes. The four Wen and their wives divided into four groups which are the prototypes of the present Saga (Phratries) known as Yerung Saga, Sarung Saga, Siyung Saga and Nalung Saga. In the beginning the families of these four Saga lived in one village and later they shifted to other places and formed their own village. The names of this Saga can be found in the Gond legend. Apart from legends, the numbers corresponding the Wen (original ancestors) are found involved as persons, actions or as articles in many rituals associated in Gond life (Furer-Haimendorf, Christoph von.1956. Bulletin of the School of oriental and African studies. University of London. Vol.18.No.3.pp.499-511)

According to a Gond legend regarding their origin, that they had divine ancestors who were nurtured by the goddess Parvati, but her consort Sri Shambhu Mahadeo imprisoned them in a cave. These principal Gonds were ultimately liberated by the Gond culture hero Pahandi Kapar Lingal with the assistance of Jangu Bai, a goddess well disposed to the Gond, and still regularly worshiped. When the primeval Gonds, referred to as the Parenda Khara Koya Wasi Penk, literally meaning the twelve threshing floors of the Gond gods, emerged from the cave, they appeared in four batches, and this division into four groups laid the foundation of the basic structure of Gond society.

### Check your progress 4

- Note:** 1) Your answers should be around 30 words each;  
 2) You may check your answers with the answers given at the end of this Unit.

7) Who is Wen and what are the four groups of Wen?

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## 2.5 LET US SUM UP

The Gonds belong to a category of very large tribes (also including Santals and Bhils) that have traditionally dominated the regions in which they have lived. Traditional Gond religion involves a distinct pantheon of gods and spirits, practiced by many Gonds along with Hinduism. Gondwana or “land of the Gonds”, is a loosely-defined area of southeastern Madhya Pradesh, eastern Maharashtra, and parts of Chhattisgarh, Orissa, and northern Andhra Pradesh. The region was home to several Gond kingdoms from the 15th century to the mid-18th century, when the Marathas expanded into the region from the west.



The Ghotul or the Youth dormitory is a central institution in the life and culture of the Gonds. This institution not only gives both the sexes opportunities to mingle with each other, but is a highly developed and carefully organized institution. It is also a school which provides co-education in every aspect of tribal life, and it is here that boys and girls, at an early age, are trained for marriage (B.H. Mehta.1984. Gonds of the Central Indian highlands.Vol.1)

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## 2.6 ACTIVITY

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Look up pictures of the Gond tribes and more literature on them and other Dravidian tribes at the nearest library. If you live close to a tribal settlement try to visit them and learn more about their lifestyle. Write down your observations and discuss with your friends or co-students if possible.

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## 2.7 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS

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- i) Furer-Haimendorf, Christoph von. The decent group system of the Raj group in the Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African studies, University of London. Vol. 18, No.3. Honour of J.R. Firth (1956).pp.499-511
- ii) Mehta, B.H. Gonds of the Central Indian highlands.Vol.1 and 2. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company,1984.
- iii) Singh, K.S. Scheduled tribes of India. New Delhi: Oxford University Press,1984.

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## 2.8 GLOSSARY

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<b>Dormitory</b>	:	An apartment with arrangements for rest or bedding for people to rest.
<b>Communal Feast</b>	:	A faest given by the host for his entire community.
<b>Elopement</b>	:	Running away to marry secretly, usually without parental consent.
<b>Classificatory system of: classification</b>	:	A system of organizing various familial relationships on the basis of kinship, blood-ties etc.
<b>Egalitarianism</b>	:	Relating to ideas of the social equality of all individuals.

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## 2.9 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

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- 1) The South-east regions of India including areas of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh and the states of Orissa and Bihar are the areas other than Central India inhabited by the Gond tribes.
- 2) The primary economic activities of the Gonds are agriculture and animal husbandry. Due to encroachments on their lands, of late the Gonds also work as forest-laourers, wage-labourers, mining and quarrying workers and musicians among other activities.

- 3) Well-off Gonds live in substantial or large houses that are built of heavy logs, carefully selected bamboos and plaster of mud mixed with straw and cowdung. Lately local mud baked tiles are replacing the traditionally used thatched roofs made of heavy layers of grass.
- 4) The Ghotul or youth dormitory is a pair of apartments one for boys and one for girls situated at the entrance and center of the Gond village or settlement. Boys and girls meet in the evenings to socialize. The Ghotul is meant to prepare the young for sexual, marital and family relationships that will accrue upon adulthood. This is a very important feature of Gond culture as this is where a love for the clan is cultivated along with values of self-leadership and responsibility.
- 5) The boy and the Girl in Gond communities may sometimes run away and find refuge in a friendly Ghotul or youth dormitory. At times, even after parental consent is obtained the couple may prefer to run away for various reasons.
- 6) Gonds prefer to bury those who die unnatural deaths such as by suicide or tiger-attacks etc. As death is believed to be caused by the earth-spirit, the body is placed on the ground when life is ebbing out. The body is usually placed with the feet pointing to the north and the head pointing to the south. The Grave is dug waist-deep and the body of male is placed face upwards, if female, she is placed face downwards. Nearest relatives throw a clod of earth upon the body thus placed saying, "this is all that I can do for you..."
- 7) According to the Gond belief the primordial male ancestors of their society is Wen. There are four groups of Wen such as Yerung, Sarung, Siyung, and Nalung, they are numbered as 7, 6, 5, and 4 by the Gonds.