

Assessment Of Indigenous Religious Thought and Philosophies: Special Reference to North East India.

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ABSTRACT

The dead of relatives or legends of indigenous people or of their community is possibly the most accurate indicator and the sign of their religious thought and ideas. After the death of a person, and burial rites in early age, they pondered some question regarding afterlife as still do today. Where did the person gone? Will they live after death? Can they communicate again? Such though in their mind in one way give rise to the idea of Spirit. They assumed that there was something in the departed person that survived somehow in another existence. However, an early tribe could not found the answer to such a great question, and so to temper their question and their fear of death, it is believed that they started different rites and ritual or religious ideas to comfort themselves. Some scholars urge that Indigenous thoughts system is hard to consider as philosophy thinking at all. But such impression on indigenous philosophy and their ideas are regard misplaced confidence.

Keywords: Indigenous, tribal, religion, philosophy, worldviews, assessment.

Introduction:

Religion is an important aspect of human life which broadly connected with philosophy. Religion permeates all aspects of indigenous communities. In the traditional indigenous communities, there were no irreligious communities or people. In fact, they did not know to live without a religion. Their religion does not contain within creeds or scripture, instead, it's contained in minds and heart, or we can say in their oral history, rite and rituals, therefore each indigenous family, individual, clan and society is a living creed. Hence, One of the important features of the Indigenous tribal community is that religion exists within the whole system of their being.

Individual life and community life are inseparable in indigenous society. In order to understand the core of indigenous communities life religious journey of the individual from once womb to physical death and afterlife. For them, an individual or community action and belief cannot be separated; they belong to one single whole. Both action and belief go conjointly.

Indigenous religious meaning cannot be apprehended without understanding the creation theory. They see the self of the Supreme Being or God in creation and Supreme Being

expresses himself through his creation. Thus, for the indigenous communities of N. E India, the conception of creation or nature is a significant part of religious thought. Unlike any other major religion of the world, it does not have a religious reformer or specific founder. Their religion is not concentrated or focuses on a historical person or person. Rather, their religion is forces of creation or nature. Like other major religions (e.g. Hinduism) the indigenous religion too has a traditional idea of divine birth and manifestation but they are not worshipped by them. They also have, diviners, fortune tellers, priests, officiate elders, headmen and other famous men and women in the body of beliefs, doctrine and mythology. They have a holistic notion of the religion of reality. Indigenous communities do not create a distinction between spiritual and physical, sacred and secular, earthly and heavenly, all these views together compose the wholeness of life.¹

Taylor stated that an essential character of primal religion is the sense of cosmic oneness.

Similarly, M.M Thomas writes, that "in tribal world-view ...there is the sense of spiritual continuum within which the dead and the living, natural objects, spirit and gods, the individual, the clan and the tribe, animals, plants, minerals and man form an unbroken hierarchical unity of

spiritual force. The self of man is not an individual self, present and actively participating in all the parts of the totality. For the tribal, nature is life, and its powers are distinguished as personal because the human self directly experiences them".²

In Modern society and in compared major religions of the world, some religious thinkers and scholars consider indigenous community religion to be inferior. Hence, their religion is observed to be lacking in spirituality and morality.³ Material backwardness is taken to mean that indigenous communities and their religion is immature, primitive and under-developed. We are compelled to believe and accept a thought which asserts that human development is progressive and rectilinear and that the mind tends certainly towards greater and complexity and rationality. The more people develop mechanically the more people are higher up the ladder."⁴ They are industrially and machinery under-developed and thereby regarded as inferior. Anything that does not suit the mainstream worldview is taken to be primitive, irrational, inferior, and so on. Since the indigenous thought and their religious notions and their culture are centred on earth and nature, their religion is related as the earliest stage of religious consciousness. That is the main reason why tribal religion has been designated by some scholars and theology as without any system of thought and devoid of spirituality and morality.⁵

Indigenous religious ideas

Most of the indigenous religions of North East India are designated through animism and primitive notion. The traditional indigenous religion believed in the presence of supernatural forces at the object like the High Mountain, big trees, rivers etc. Hence, to please these powers they worship and propitiate them differently by different Indigenous groups. It is believed that the natural object and phenomena are inhabited by the souls of spiritual beings. Accordingly, trees, hills, rivers, animals etc. have a radiant soul. Hence, the concept of soul is fundamental in their religion. According to John Mbiti "...all the spirits of the rivers would have one major spirit in charge of them and the same tree, rocks, lakes and so on. Accordingly, this gave man the idea of many Gods (polytheism) which in turn involved further to the state of one

supreme God over all the departmental spirits."⁶ Hence, according to John . S. Mbiti all this type of interpretations by different thinkers places the monotheistic idea of religion at the top and places the indigenous religious idea at the bottom of the table.

The term "Primitive Religion" is used to describe the indigenous or tribal religion. To them, primitive religion itself denotes inferiority, who practice and experience them. Such concept of indigenous religion is a precondition by popular or mainstream value judgment without proper knowledge of indigenous religion and without proper exploration in their religious value.

J. H. Thumra state that "tend to use the term primitive in the sense of being inferior, and thus when it is applied to human beings and their religions, it implies the mistaken notion of mental processes which are pre-logical and qualitatively inferior to that of the so-called civilized people. This attitude comes from the standpoint of value judgment of people who assume the superiority of race, knowledge and culture over against other races."⁷ In the account of Material backwardness, it is very unfortunate that the Indigenous religious worldview is taken to be primitive and underdeveloped. That is why many scholars have cut down the traditional religious ideas to the position of mere preparation evangelic. Hence, this is not the correct understanding and interpretation of their religious notion.⁸ Therefore Thumra refutes such a view on indigenous (tribal) religion and writes when we examine the so-called primitive people mentality or other ways of life objectively, it will find that indigenous tribal of N. E India people are not primitive but mentally spiritually and in their moral standard. These people have a sharp mind and inherent intelligence and have a deep thinking and rationalistic aptitude in their own way. They have a long history, though unwritten, behind them.⁹

Hence, from the close study of their religious ideas of indigenous communities of North East India one will learn that their traditional religious ideas such as the concept of the Supreme or God, the Spirit or spirits, the relation between humans and Supernatural beings and also relation with nature and natural

phenomena are well-developed and have ethical value and never out-dated for them.

The concepts of “Symbol” have great value in their religious worldview. But some dominant societies of modern days term such notion as lacking cogency of reasoning. To them, symbol cannot be studied systematically as symbols it has to be translated in reasoned concepts. But we know that all people in the world have been evolved from a systematic scientific or philosophical stage.¹⁰ According to Subonglemba, “When we say tribal religion, it does not mean the people who practice this religion are in tribal stage of organisation, because the term is not applicable to modern generation. The term is used simply to mean a living religion, practice or belief by many people in different parts of the world, and the religion which still continues to uphold and preserve society. It is still a growing religion.”¹¹

Supreme Being

Like most of the major religions of the world Indigenous (tribal) of N. E India has also a strong sense believed in the existence of Supreme Being. They regard the Supreme Being as creator, sustainers and dispenser of the Universe. All the Indigenous people have a common idea of the Supreme Being. Although there are no scriptural doctrines or dogmas regarding their idea of Supreme Personality or God but their ideas were well expressed in their traditional myths, songs, stories, folktales. But the notable difference between the tribal idea of God and any other major religion is that no special worship and offering is given to the Supreme Being. The fundamental idea of most of the Indigenous people is that they identify the Supreme Being with the natural objects or phenomena such as Sun, Moon and the Earth. The Supreme Being is the utmost hope of all and He is the authority of all knowledge or wisdom, nourishment and reproduction.¹²

L. P. Vidyarthi States, “Worship of nature is another form of belief which prevails among the tribal. Sun, Moon and Earth are considered the creator or Supreme power.”¹³

According to them, Supreme Being is not created but creator, he continues to create, and they also regard Him/Her as in the outside of him and still within his reach. Thereby, He is both immanent and transcendent. Because

Supreme reveals himself in natural objects, they turn Supreme Being and they are instruments for worship.¹⁴ The whole world is the house of Supreme Being or God. He is not limited to particular places and activities. Hence, this shows why the indigenous peoples see the dynamic presence of God in all creation. The involvement of the Supreme Being is not the only experience in his creation but also see His generosity in his preventing calamities and supplying rain for fertility, cultivation and so on. They always regard the rich harvest and wealth as a blessing of Supreme Being.¹⁵

The Spirit: Belief in spirit or spirits occupies the core of all indigenous religions of N. E. India. Due to the strong belief in the existence of spirit/spirits the indigenous religion has been categorized by many Christian missionaries, Anthropologists, Sociologists as animism. Spirit according to indigenous people may appear in the dream, unexpected phenomena as peculiar shape and size, as wind etc. They belief in two types of spirits that working in cosmic order i.e. the benevolent and malevolent spirits.¹⁶ The general thought of indigenous people is that the spirit is responsible for the welfare and prosperity of individuals and families. It acts as the protector from any natural devastations like floods, storms and failure of crops, disease etc. Hence, the spirit is worshipped not out of fear but out of love and reverence. This type of spirit is called the benevolent spirit. Nevertheless, the spirit might not protect people if the right offering or sacrifice is not offered on right time. On the other hand, malevolent spirits are generally thought to be dangerous and injurious to all humans. These spirits are those who die of accident or killed, person who died in child birth etc. These spirits are thought to be live on the roadside, outside the village, ponds, rivers, trees etc. Offering and sacrifice are also given to them so that they may not harm them.¹⁷ Besides these spirits, they also believed in the spirit of their ancestor. Belief in ancestor spirit is an integral part of their religious life. Moreover, to them, all humans, animals, plants possess a spirit. They see the presence of spirit in all the creation. Therefore, they keep in touch with the spirits for a secured and flourishing life.

Myths: To provide a systematic exegesis about their worldview the indigenous communities do not have written dogmas or scripture. Their entire lifestyle and religious ethos is rooted and

embedded in myth, ritual and oral history. Through the myth, they learn how the Supreme Being operates and manifest his/her mysteries through creation. Hence, myth works as scripture and creed for them.¹⁸ Indigenous wisdom and moral is situated in the myth-tradition of a community. Myths are exemplary and valid sources that guide and control their worldview. Accordingly, Mircea Eliade defines myths as “a ‘true story’ and beyond that, a story that is most precious possession because it sacred, exemplary significant.”¹⁹ He further asserts “myth describes a sacred history; which relates to an event that took place in primordial or elementary time, the fabled time of the beginnings. Myth tells how through the deeds of Supernatural Being a reality came into existence, be it, the whole of reality, the cosmos or only fragment of realities an island, a species, a plant, a particular kind of human behaviour, an institution. Myth, then, is always an account of creation, it relates how something was produced, began to be. Myths tell only what really happened, which manifested itself completely. The actions in myths are Supernatural Beings”.²⁰ Similarly, David Scott asserts myths of indigenous as- “A myth is a story that is sacred to and shared by a group of people who find their most important meaning in it; it is a story believed to have been composed in the past about an event in the past, or more rarely, in the future, an event that continues to have meaning in the present because it is remembered... Myth, then, is a story about the sorts of questions that religion asks stories about such things as life after death, supernatural /divine intervention in their lives, transformations, and the creation of the world and human nature and culture- and basically about meaning itself.”²¹ Hence, myth eventually becomes the foundation of the Indigenous (tribal) religion of N. E India. It contains the truth of a particular community or society. However, if we employ modern scientific methods of assessment and analysis which interpreting and explain the indigenous myths, their true meaning and significant methods of assessment may be acute in the discernment of the truth, but this is not adequate to uncover the full truth. Therefore, if we want to apprehend the true meaning of the indigenous myths one must go beyond scientific methods of systematization because for indigenous people reality is a totality.²²

From the time immemorial myths and mythology in tribal communities are a method of dealing with the domain of unknown. But with the advancement of time and increasing of science and technology or modernity people have viewed such notion of mythical ideas as unreliable and focuses on others tools to deals with the intensify tendency of the unknown. “The unknown can be terrifying. But if there are good reasons behind the unknown then it is easier to access for the mind to accommodate and reconcile. The better we comprehend the world and what makes it work, the fewer we worries. There are still many certain things and wonders then even these advanced developments of science and modern technology cannot approach. Hence, in such a case we rely on myths and mythical ideas.”²³

We cited to the divergent division that builds up the knowledge tree when we speak of human wisdom. For example: history, myths, philosophy, science and so on. The question is how these branches combine, cooperate and collaborate to form a universal body of cognition. Hence it is noted that “We observe things happening around us, we hypothesize, we conduct experiments, we analyze and we have the scientific body of knowledge”.²⁴ But such knowledge of things is only a small part of it. Of course, scientific experiences give explanation of many things but not all. There are still much more things in the universe, life and world that are still to be explained. In such cases, philosophy plays a significant role in supplying the reasoning. Philosophy and science do the great duty for forming human wisdom than what about the myths? “Is the myth is only a figment of collective imagination and if so then where do the myths fit in the spacesuit of human knowledge”.²⁵ It is the philosophy from where science evolved but from where did philosophy evolve. The answer must be the myth. It is regarded as the primary storehouse of the origin of our cognition. According to Joseph Campbell “Every myth are psychological symbolic. It narratives and images are to be read, therefore, not literally but as metaphors”.²⁶

The meaning that shows by myths are always more than it seems to be, they are covered with various layers of meanings. We use words, feels, emotions or thoughts to communicate our spectrum but these tools are not always

sufficient arrangement to surround the whole form of the psychological states of mind. Hence, we required the assistance of myths to enhance those state of mind. In the early ages of the evolution of human society when scientific knowledge did not prevail among us it was philosophy that was imparting response to our inquiries and curiosities to know the known. The question that was remained unsolved by philosophical inquiries we always had myths and mythologies to resolve the issue. In the modern world the huge progress of science and technologies it seems to be shade the value and utility of myths. Still, there are many significant domains that even science and technology are unable to reach. For example: regarding our existence, value, reality or means and purpose of life. etc. There it is said that “One side of the spectrum of philosophy is mythology and the other side is science. Though it is a wonderful bridge between mythology and science but with these extreme powers it has got abridged”.²⁷ Myths deals with the similar set of problems as that of philosophy but with the course of time philosophy evolved and took a diverse perspective from myths to deals the problems.

Tribal Core Value

Indigenous people's approach to life and happiness is found in their concrete life experiences. They considered rich crops, numerous cattle and sound health as their most adored possessions and abundant blessing of almighty. They are opposed to the growth of materialism, commercialization, industrialization and modernization. Happiness for them is good health, good crops, cattle, children which they believed come by performing good actions as well as ritual offering to ancestor spirit and god. For the wellbeing of them, it always believed in the Supreme Being. The goal of life is eternal happiness which rests in the belief that after this life they will heavenly abode and join community of their ancestor which is free from all forms of suffering and death. They enjoy their eternal happiness under the divine care and bliss of God. The living community has it always their root with ancestor as the source of life, goodness and happiness. On the other hand evil for them is also a concrete experience. It is understood as physical suffering such as illness,

disease, death and loss of property. Suffering is always evil for them because it causes pain, agony, harm, injury etc upon the individual or community. Hence, the acts which threaten the good of a person, family or clan are evil for indigenous (Tribal) communities of North East India. An action is assessed and judged to be right or wrong in reference to the good of the individual and all the members of the community. Their ethical ideals to be followed by one and all people of the community. The negligence towards the wellbeing of the community, mistreat or breaking of some important taboo is the greatest moral evil. Breaking taboos is a violation of the profound reverence for the value protected by the tribe. Doing so is disrespect shown for what has been determined and it is equally against the will of the god.

Their conservation ethics is not something an outlying practice but it is embodied in their worldview and institutionalized in all norms of life. For instance, Nyishi tribe, which is one of the large Indigenous community of Arunachal Pradesh, they do not hunt or kill a hornbill bird while flying alone. They believe it as not a normal sign and anything abnormal was a bad omen for them. If it killed then it would invoke supernatural punishment. The actual reason behind such belief is that an alone flying hornbill is a male bird out in search of food for the partner bird during hatching time. Hence, killing it would mean killing the family. Traditional Nyishi may or may not know the reason but it is clear that such traditional beliefs and practices have saved species of birds. In some indigenous communities, we found that they hunt the animals but they were well aware that hunting more than their needs is not allowed. Hunting more animals or catching a large amount of fish was possessed by some evil Spirits. Similarly cutting down more forest land meant to call the anger of forest god which will eventually lead a supernatural abuse. Among the Khampti tribes, if big trees fall/cut down, their branches were placed on the stump. They do so that the forest god would not notice the loss of the tree. There are many such examples, but the crucial point in such practices is that they preserved the natural recourses. One may consider such beliefs and practices as superstitions but in fact, these tribal worldviews have been helpful in serving nature and its resources in which modernity failed

miserably.²⁸ They have managed to find a way of living in a given ecosystem. Their practices are always connected to livelihood pursuits. They used resources to a limited extent to meet their undiversified wants. They never viewed the land, forest species or any other natural object as “commodity” which can be sold or bought in the impersonal market instead they have been preserving such natural objects from generation to generation. They learn how to use natural resources and how to live in harmony with nature without disturbing them. Hence, their worldview has huge positive impact on environmental conservation which is the urgent need of the hour.

Conclusion:

The academic recognition of Indian philosophy came only after many generations of Indian and sympathetic European thinkers translated the existing Sanskrit texts like Vedas and Upanishads, discovered many manuscripts, which were critically edited and published and translated and interpreted and presented to the western world. When the western scholars could no longer reject it and had to accept Indian thought or philosophical system or method. But in the case of tribal philosophy, their philosophy nor from sympathetic others, that has been made yearning and attempt to present and the mature presentation of their so called philosophy has not appeared so far. So, tribal philosophy cannot place among the India philosophy.²⁹ Such misplaced confidence in the western type of theoretical knowledge as the one and only type of knowledge has left a very limited space to other systems of thought which could be termed rational. The ideal rational understanding is one that moves on the pattern set by the western civilization. This I feel is the primary fact which has led to the evaluation of tribal communities as backward as pagan and also barbarous.³⁰

In the Analogy of early British perception of India Philosophy stated that at the beginning of the colonial period, British ruler perceived India people as primitive, barbarous, uncivilized, immature, irrational, sentimental without any decent religious idea and philosophical thought. And such an impression on Indian philosophy changed by the end of the colonial period. Some scholars viewed it as the same in the case of tribal religious ideas and their worldview or philosophical method. Now the Indian scholar

evaluated tribal as primitive and immature and lack of belief system comparable to their philosophical method.

Indigenous (Tribal) thought from the perspective of western and Indian may be assessed to be irrational, primitive, sentimental, barbarian. But to understand their thought and rationality, their religious idea, belief system, worldview as well as their philosophy we need to account the complexities of the entire framework of tribal traditions and cultures. It is mainly generated out from the myths, legends, symbols, folklores, stories, poetry etc. Moreover, to understand their concept of the world in which they lived.

Their ideas are not pop up or occur suddenly from any individual beliefs, emotions and sentiments. Indigenous knowledge or worldview is the effect of practical engagement in everyday practice and life and is continuously resistant by experience of trial and error. Their worldview or system of thought is characteristically the outcome of many generations of intelligent analysis, deduction reasoning and experiment and since its failure has immediate consequences for its practitioner. Their thought process is tested in the careful and rigorous laboratory of survival.

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