

Contextualizing Religion and Festival in Transition: With Special Reference to “Oraon” Indigenous Tribe in India

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Abstract: Religion is believed to be transcendent of human ambitions. It is considered to be the key factor to maul human being at correction of the path in terms of morality, order and inner happiness. We human being lived in a condition of uncertainty but religion gives us the meaning and purpose of life. It fulfils the day-to-day performance, management of self, group, community, and society. The otherworldly never gives a true sense of satisfaction (like science and technology, money, and materials). The religion is human-made, socially constructed and instituted. It is not static but dynamic in its nature and feature. It is the constitution of social interaction and web of relations between human being and their institutions. The paper attempts to understand how religion is abstract till then gives the meaning and purpose of life, it strengthens to see the reality from different outlook, it exhibits the colour of life when one understands the given symbol and draws meaning out of it. The paper also attempts to understand the religion as a social institution sociologically and look through various dimensions that fulfil the society, community and groups. Although social institution has elements of social sanction, rules and regulation, cultural ceremonies, religious beliefs, customs and traditions to intact the social order of the society. The study also critically analyses and observed how religion and festival are in transition among tribes giving emphasis to a particular tribe called ‘Oraon’.

Key Words: transition, indigenous tribes, Oraon tribe, social institution, sociology of religion .

1. INTRODUCTION:

Religion and festival always intertwined with each other. It can't exist without each other's presence. To know more about it, let's first distinguish two concept- religion and festival. In sociology, religion is part of social institutions. Social institutions are the system of behavioural and relationship pattern that is compactly intertwined and continuing, and function through a whole society. They are ordered and structured through the behaviour of individuals, groups and community by means of their normative features. The social intuitions are family, marriage, education, class, civil society, conflict of interest, economy, labour market, power and power relations, mass media and religion. Having said about the social institution, religion is part of it which affects its culture, festival, music, celebration and others. These also translate and transmit the contexts of meaning, value orientations, and symbolic codes (Verwiede, 2018). On the other, the festival comes along with religion, ceremonies, birth and death events, ritual celebration and other considered being festive for all people.

In India, we celebrate multi-religion and multi-culture as a cultural pluralist nation. The nation celebrates all religious festival believing in its nature of integration, cherishing its plural religious belief, and strengthening fraternal brotherhood. In religion and festival, indigenous tribes have far-reaching unique celebration and worship. In India, there are 705 indigenous communities, groups and individuals (Xaxa 2014). They live all over India, mostly at six hilly regions; central tribal region, western tribal region, northeastern tribal region, northwestern tribal region, southern tribal region and island tribal regions (Singh, 1988). The indigenous tribes mostly practised the religion of *animism* and *naturalism*. They are close to nature and they revere and respect to nature and worship them as their daily belief and cultural norms. It is because, everyday life of indigenous tribes begin with nature and end with natural surrounding; it could be of their livelihood, economy, housing, wood for cooking, and forest product to earn their living. In fact, indigenous tribes are the real heroes who protect and safeguard the environment and its ecology and natural habitats become the source of everything for indigenous tribes.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

a. Definition Religion

In general sense, *religion* means the belief in and worship of a superhuman transcended power, especially a personal God or gods. Collins English Dictionary would define religion as religion is a conviction in a god or gods and the accomplishments that are related with this practice, such as praying or adoring in a house such as in a church or a temple.

This also indicates a particular system of belief in god or gods and having set certain rituals and healings with the concerned of structure and system. But other would define religion as a set of beliefs, feelings, dogmas and practices that define the relations between human being and sacred or divinity. The religion also can be defined within the frame of its three great characteristics; firstly, believes and different religious practices, secondly, the religious feeling as faith formation, thirdly, the unity among the community those who share the same faith (Retrieved, 2018). Therefore, religion is a complex phenomenon in the academic discourse and debate, the religious study and religious practice is two different epistemology altogether. We find religions are widespread and it has different typology. They are primitive or animists religion, oriental religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, Confucianism, Taoism and others), and monotheists religion (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). But the primitive or animists religion is unique to indigenous tribes in the entire world.

b. Religion and Indigenous Tribes

In academic and intellectual discourse religion is a key theme to understand society, religion, and human behaviour. The disciplines like theology, philosophy and sociology see religion as part of society, and these subject-matters always understand and interrogate its existence critically and provide a symbolic of it. To have a clear understanding of religion, let's understand what others say about it. In the academia of intellectual scholarship from India delineates tribes in an ambiguous manner- tribes were identified and described as *animist*. Later, they were expressed as '*tribal religion*' instead of '*animism*'. The census of India would enumerate following the certain criteria of geographical isolation, primitive conditions of living of tribes and explain this category. However, the aspects of religion described for them are 'animism or tribal religion'.

Social anthropologist G. S. Ghurye was discontented with making tribes as simply a tribal religion or animism. He depicted tribal religion or animism as Hindu caste structure in which the lower rungs of the group were in practice of animism as their religious practice. So, he added tribes into Hindus caste system of religious practice calling them as '*Backward Hindus*' (Ghurye 1963). The scholarship of tribal religions comes to academic discourse during the two phases of tribal studies firstly, formative period (1874-1919) and constructive period (1920-1949) (Vidyarthi 1982). According to Durkheim 'religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices that relate to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into a single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them' (Durkheim 1976). For him, religion is a system of beliefs and practice that has both the *sacred* and *the profane* aspects. In his understanding religion is the social aspect of it not the psychological; it is just a simple way of social life and sharing of stress and issues of sadness to a transcendent being. He also studied the Indigenous tribe called 'Australian Aborigines' and named their religious beliefs as 'totemism'. For him, it refers to simplest and basic form of religion in which indigenous aborigines divide themselves in certain clans system. In the clan's system, every clan has totem in the form of animate beings like animals or plants and inanimate beings like rock, sand, and others. The totem represents the community or group, it symbolizes and emblem the clan by which every clan could distinguish by them. For them, the totem is a sacred symbol which has been considered very unique that protects and safeguards the community or group (Peterson 1972). Just to simplify more, I am belonging to Oraon tribal community; my totem is 'Banyan tree'. For me, the banyan tree is everything; I keep referring to it as my saviour and protector. I keep faith in this totem, it represents my community. This is the ancestor belief that's been perpetuated again and again. The soul and spirit of the community rest in the 'Banyan tree'. It is, therefore 'the outward and visible form of the totemic principle or god' among the indigenous tribes all over the world. It integrates the community, individual, and group. It strengthens the social life by sharing social values and moral beliefs forming the 'collective conscience' according to Emile Durkheim. Therefore, religion in the form of totemism reinforces collective conscience among the indigenous tribes.

Even Bronislaw Malinowski who did fieldwork among the indigenous tribe called Trobriand Islanders the small-scale non-literate societies to develop his scholarship on religion. He elucidates religion as part of social solidarity in dealing with the situation of emotional stress among the indigenous tribes. In the form of 'crisis of life' includes birth, puberty, marriage, and death are religiously interpreted to elaborates everyday life cycles (Retrieved, 2018). The whole existence of "personal attachments and the fact of death, which of all human event is the most upsetting and disorganizing to man's calculations, are perhaps the main sources of religious beliefs" (Malinowski, 1954). In Indian context of indigenous tribes as well particularly in my community (Oraon tribe) same things occurs during the death ceremonies, the source of moral supports get through are the community or group members who express their sadness and do comfort disease person's family through social solidarity and be with them till the whole funeral is over. Talcott Parson elaborates religion as part of the cultural system. For him, religious beliefs are a guideline for human action and standard for human conduct. These establish the principles and moral beliefs and keep the society function orderly in a stable manner. He also adds religion as the instrument of mechanism to adjust the strain in social life and restore the normal functioning of the society (Parson 1951). English Social Anthropologist Alfred Radcliffe- Brown who keeps talking about religious function as a sense of dependence. He strongly builds his argument around the religious fear and emotional strain that groups undergo. For him, it is more important for the survival of the group rather than survival of the individual, it is because, without the social survival, the individual survival is worthless. Therefore, Radcliffe would

argue, the function of religion is a twofold feeling of dependence and individual social norms that aims for social survival (Radcliffe 1945).

c. Evolution of Religion

Any society in the world is not static, it is dynamic and changing. The society is constituted of a different system of social institution family, marriage, economy, polity and religion. In India, religion influences most of the social institutions in the hierarchical social stratification system. It plays out the religious card in the election, caste system, politics, economic, and social life. The origin and evolution of religion started around the 19th century at the discipline of sociology of religion. The main concern of religion was to satisfy the unanswered question, answer the mysterious question of birth and death, and provide a symbolic meaning of different objects and others. As we know, indigenous tribes are the worshipper of nature and animal. They always interlinked their life with environment and worship in order to find the correct and perfect meaning of life and search a newness to begin the life in a certain context.

According to E. B. Tylor, animism is a kind of beliefs system in spirits and souls or it can be also called as 'Spiritualism' (Stocking 1971). This is an act of worship and reverence to spirits and souls. For him, animism is the earliest form of religion; and it became prominent in the scholarship of discourse in the sociology of religion because of two components; firstly, the difference between a living body and a dead one; secondly, the discourse of human shapes appearing in the forms of dreams and visions. Formally the concept of souls and spirits were connected to human being alone but later part they were connected to the natural and social environment as well (Tylor 1970). As, Tylor would put forth the argument, religion in the form of animism instigated in order to content man's intellectual nature and encounter the need of answering sense of birth, death and dreams and visions (Tylor 1870). According to Max Muller who discussed religion through the lens of nature; and he calls it as naturism. It means the belief in the forces of nature and its supernatural power. For him, it was the earliest form of religion which arose from man's experience with nature by man's emotion and sentiment attached to nature (Muller 1892). The ecosystem of the universe on earth, particularly with nature, is so beautiful; it includes powers of its own in the creation of floods, droughts, volcanoes, thunder and lightning. Therefore, indigenous tribes believed that nature is powerful; it can sustain the living or it can destroy the living. Considering the pros and cons of it, Indigenous tribes believe in nature by worshipping, revering and protecting the nature and natural surroundings. The indigenous tribes see the abstract forces in the form of supreme connection to nature for personal agents including the spirit of wind and sun. They personified the nature of their living, economy, shelter, and others. In support of the theory of naturalism, Spencer gives the idea of self-preservation and self-satisfaction through primitive instincts and natural impulses as religious believe that originated among the primitive man (or indigenous tribes) (Shawal, 2018). Hence, indigenous tribes believe in the concept of spirit, they associate dreams with the souls of ancestors and ghosts as their belief system in the form of supernatural powers. The prominent scholar James George Frazer also supports the concept of naturalism in the part of religion and magic in his book "*The Golden Bough*". The whole subjects of the book underlie between two keys idea; the idea of the spirit of plants in its various appearances and the performance of god-killing and god-eating as ritualism of indigenous beliefs (Frazer 1891).

4. DISCUSSION:

The transition of religion among indigenous tribes

None of the perspectives is static, it always changes. As human wants are never fulfilled or stratified, so also the idea of religion and festival in all communities and groups changes over a time. Here, I particularly observed the religious beliefs of indigenous tribes, how it is practised and celebrated different festival; how the religion itself changing according to time and space in the modernization, secularization, and globalization process. The mental phenomenon of the religion of indigenous tribes also changes. However, we know religion is social construction for the betterment of society and to explain the unexplainable objects, situations or events.

In the beginning, Indigenous aborigines believed in a supernatural force or different power existence in the form of animals, plants, persons both animate and inanimate objects. These kinds of beliefs and practices were referred to as 'animatism'. The power in animatism is called as '*Manas*'. The term was introduced by Robert R. Marett (1900) who borrowed it from Tylor's concept of *animism*. Further, Marett enlightens with the concept of *Manaism* in the system of beliefs in impersonal, supernatural power attaching to individuals, objects and actions of peoples. In the Indian context, D. N. Majumdar (1942) introduced the concept of '*Bongaism*' among the indigenous tribe (*Hos Munda*) in Singhbhum district of Jharkhand. This is a kind to 'animism' and 'animatism' believing in the supernatural power of trees, natural objects and others. The 'Bonga' refers to god for *Hos* community. It is the manifestation of power and energy for the community. However, the scholarship of religion by Karl Marx, Max Weber and Talcott Parsons totally shaped differently. They question the religion and ask for nationality and scientific of it. They didn't accept the religion as it functions or plays its role for people. As Talcott Parsons' the discourse elaborate the two things in the religion of Christianity giving shape to the process of secularization; first is 'civil religion' and second is 'Marxian socialism'. Here, Parson extensively put forth idea how the rationality and scientific knowledge has overpowered the religion and religion are in questionable (Homans 1941). According to Karl Marx's opinion "religion is the opium of the people".

For him, religion is the capsule to ease pain created by exploitation and oppression from the ruling class, the dominants. In another word of Marx, it is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. Here, religion is transited in form of oppression and exploitation by the capitalist or bourgeoisie. The religion is seen as the instrument of oppression in which its performances as a mechanism of social control, maintain the existing system (Marx and Engels 2012). Further, Max Weber in his essay “Protestant ethics and spirit of Capitalism” talks about how religion is shaping the economy of the community or group. He specifically emphasizes numerous sects which emerged out of different social groups who are marginal in society. Here, the consciousness or nationality is produced in the form of religion. The members of the marginal section of society feel they are the outside of the mainstream society; they feel deprived of prestige and economic power. So, they form sects as ‘sense of honour’ within the group and withstand with their belief system. Here, they withdraw from a traditional belief system and search for ‘new universe of meaning’ (Weber 2002).

5. ANALYSIS:

Contextualizing religion and festival of indigenous tribes

India is land of pluralism in respect to its religions, cultures, languages, foods, clothes, festivals and different customs and ceremonies. There are 705 indigenous communities present according to Census of India (2011). The society is known for its heterogeneity than its similarities. Indigenous tribes are distinguished by many scholars, administrators, anthropologist, sociologist, ethnographer and orientalist who made clear about tribe and caste in their own way and for their own purpose as well. V. Elwin talked about tribes into four categories; Vidyanarayan talks tribes as living in forests, living in rural areas, semi-aculturated, acculturated and assimilated; Risley and Gait talks so-called animists; G. S. Ghurye talks aboriginals as backward Hindu; Census of India (1881) refer indigenous as ‘forest tribe’; Martin D. Stringer (1999) refers to animism to “tribal religion” and it goes further in different categories of distinguishing tribes (Xaxa, 1999). There is also an attempt to distinguish between tribal people and caste people which is problem for sociologist, anthropologist, administrators and politicians as well, as an article explains the existence of tribes and castes look through the different criteria such as tribal peoples are isolated from mainstream society and live in hill and mountainous places without having line of communication, the language they have is totally different from caste groups, the worship they do is mostly of animist, economy they practised is backward and they are the ‘Adivasis’ means originated or inhabitant of land (Bailey 1961)

a. The Context of Oraon Tribes in India

As time passes, the discourse on tribal identity, religion and festival also shaped by that advocated integration of tribal citizens of a nation-state through assimilation, isolation and integration within Hindu. Today the fastest growing tribes are such as Oraon, Karia, Munda and Kisan in India; they all have absorbed into Hindu or Christianity. But they are unique in their own customs and tradition. They don’t believe in Hindu structure of caste system; they are outside of caste system. Today interestingly among indigenous tribes, Oraon tribe is far ahead in all sphere of life concerning social, economic, political, religion, and education. The Oraon tribe is almost picking up the other mainstream society. And it is an obvious for this tribe because of access to education; they know the rights, duties and other privileges that are offered by constitutional provisions and government implementation; they also know the measures and policy up gradation (Xaxa, 2005).

Oraon tribe is interactive between the human being and environment which basically reciprocal; and these influence to each other. Another culture and custom are intertwined with religion, and religion and environment is one the interplay of Oraon as a tribe. It depicts the orientation of Oraon on the environment which shaped by religious beliefs and customs. This tribe is unique because of their differences and similarities. They are in modern context differ in their income due to conversion to Christianity. They themselves call kuruk and their language and group belong to the Dravidian group. They are the fourth largest group in India after Bhils, Gonds and Santhals inhabiting mostly in Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand. The social of life Oraon is linked with nature in their least activities to most eventful. They have their relationship with environment mostly in ritual forms which put as ‘belief system’. Oraon believes in Spiritual beings as “Dharmes” is the ‘Supreme Spiritual being’. They also follow the ancestor and spirits as many anthropologists define the concept of animism and naturism. They worship Sun and ancestor in their own way. They always look at the environment as their day to day religious beliefs and practices. They have also numerous spirits which they believe to be powerful who protects and safeguard the community. The Oraon also constitutes different music, dance and ritual on their nature’s signal such as Khaddi/ Sarhul. There is also a lot of customs such as Phaggu, karam, Bhado and Jitthia etc. In another way also a tree, plant, flower and specific place become important to them such as tusgo ceremony, kadleta festival etc. Another way they also show the obligation towards environment like using the birds, trees, flowers fish and animals as their totem (Xaxa, 1992).

b. Problems of Oraon tribes and Christianity

The problem in the policy of integration and assimilation at the administration in India has made the indigenous tribes (Oraon tribe) pathetic and vulnerable in particularly when they were absorbed, acculturated, assimilated, and integrated with Hinduism. They faced a lot of problems, as Hinduism is based on the caste hierarchy in social groups of *Varna* model as Hindu social order. The indigenous tribes don't come under this *Verna* model. So, they are excluded from it; they are outside the caste system of Hindu social structure. Even they don't come under the untouchable categories; there is literary outside of it which make them inferior and discriminated in and out often in a different circumstance and different forms. Therefore tribes don't feel comfortable sharing their life with caste Hindu. But they are more comfortable with Christianity which is of less discriminatory to Hinduism.

c. Difference between tribes and clans

Indigenous tribes are homogeneous in their outlook though they are not. The Oraon community is homogenous and they do have a similar practice, beliefs, ceremony and others. However, when comes to clans, within Oraon indigenous community have differences for example (Barla- Banyan tree, Kiro- Tiger, Ekka/Kacchua- Tortoise, Minz-fish, Kerketta- birds and others). Although tribes and clan are used interchangeably there is a difference. A tribe is a social category, a political or ethnic unit; it is used at a large scale or small scale in a whole nation. But a clan is more specific where many tribes of the national or ethnic group come under multiple clans groups and identified themselves with certain ancestor objects both animate and inanimate (Jacobs, 2018). They are unique in their social, cultural, economic and religion in particular but they are the people who practice gender equality, sharing the work with men and women, they don't want to create disparities among men and women based on work and other activities. Tribes always represent an absence of features attributed to caste. Tribe governed by kinship bonds, equality principles, lineage and clan, food, dance and song in a homogenous way. But caste which operates in Hinduism as inequality, dependency and subordination; hereditary division of labour; hierarchy; principles of purity and pollution; civic and religious disabilities-these above make tribes difficult and uncomfortable; therefore indigenous tribes mostly transition to conversion to Christianity.

d. Changing trends of indigenous tribes

In the 21st century, globalization and localization have an impact on the transition of the religion of indigenous tribes especially the Oraon tribe. The Oraon is the tribe which close associate with all kinds of primordial social, economic, political and religious life. It has drastically evaluated and changed. The religion which was practiced during the era of pre-British such as supernatural being, spirits, ancestor and obligation towards totem so on; but in recent times as the change which has taken place among the Oraon tribe is because of the missionaries and British education which has changed the totality of it with regards to their faiths, believes, customs, practices. They have been uplifted from the traditional way of worship to modern worship through the assimilation, integration and acculturation towards Hinduism and Christianity. They knew the aspects of change that are in front of them and they chose to be more rational and practical life. One should not forget that in past Oraon tribe was also in absorption with Hindu but later in the influence of better offering (in terms of education, employment, opportunity) and who could understand them better were the British Colonizers and Missionaries who help them in all aspect of life includes education, health, job opportunity another benefit as well which attracted them to be with them. In order to benefit, the Oraon tribe has now assimilated, acculturated and integrated with the Christian community as Christianity by the approach of taking the religious identity and become part of the order of Christian. It is because Christian institutions provided them safety, and make them as their own member to live as dignity- though there will lot of difference with others that's the reality.

6. CONCLUSION:

The religion and Oraon tribe in totality at present most of them are taken part in religious conversion to Christianity. Since then, now they have improved their livelihood in a different way, especially the education which they have received from the religious institution and now they become a doctor, teacher, nurses, administrators, ministers, researchers, academicians, politicians and others. It's the obvious and visible improvement of Oraon tribes with respect to social, economic, political, education, cultural and other aspects. Furthermore, according to me, Oraon tribe is a dominant social group within tribes in middles east India. Even, I have seen many educational institutions where the Oraon tribe students are more in number than other indigenous tribes. On the decision-making body as well, Oraon tribe is much ahead than other tribal groups.

When one analyzes the transition that has taken place in religion and festival in Oraon tribe of religion; one could find a lot of things which I could cite limited way; there are innumerable things to discuss and look it meticulous and understand the religious discourse of Oraon tribe in transition – change and continuity. However, this has become one of the factors for other tribes to refer Oraon tribe as exemplary in order to uplift themselves. In the contemporary period, Oraon tribe is in the transformation to fastest developing and absorption to mainstream society like any other social groups like the class group in general with competing with others social groups.

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