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## RELIGION IN THE TRIBAL ECO-SYSTEM

### Introduction

It was the 28th day of field-work in Pandevahi village. I was living among the Madia Gond tribals. They belong to Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra. Early in the morning there was a great commotion; people were moving towards the house of the village *panchayat* member, Vijja Pandu Pungati. The cause of the commotion was his son, who got married just a month ago. The son and his wife were severely affected with fever and headache. Their sickness turned out to be a grave concern for the whole village.

The couple became a point of controversy immediately after their marriage. According to the traditional custom, the wife was supposed to take off her blouse and wear only a white sari; because for married women, covering of breasts is a taboo. The woman being educated upto sixth standard, with the permission of her husband, had refused to comply with the traditional norm. And the common belief was that they will be punished by the spirits in course of time. It is in such an atmosphere that they fell sick and that too both of them were affected by the same disease. Hence the popular suspicion was proved to be true.

The next step was to call the local *Pujari*, the medicinal man. He arrived readily and did an elaborate *puja* and prescribed some remedies. However the fever did not abate. The situation became very serious; the villagers were willing to lend a hand to the afflicted at this hour of need. Three of them volunteered to go and bring the biggest *pujari* who is known as the *Perma*. He performed *puja* in front of the villagers assembled there; he diagnosed the etiology of the present crisis. In the course of his investigation, he found out that it has been caused partially by the jealousy of a woman of the village. That particular woman was brought in immediately; she agreed

about her sinfulness and showed her willingness to repair for her sins. The afflicted couple had to perform a few other sacrifices for their breaking of the law. Thereafter, day by day they improved their health and within a few days, they were completely cured.

### **The Inside View**

An outsider of the village may be taken aback by this strange and seemingly superstitious event. The etiology of the disease, diagnosis, treatment, the absolute authority exercised by the *pujari* or *Perma* and the acceptance of sinfulness by the woman who may not have even dreamt of it etc. may bring in more bewilderment. To a medical practitioner, the fever has occurred due to the exertion of external agents like the germs; it has nothing to do with a shaman who may diagnose the symptoms, engage in communion with the spirits and decide the course of action to be followed. But for an insider, one who is a participant of the culture, it is a religious deed expressing the depth of true belief exercised in solidarity with other members of the community. The social action is quite compatible and meaningful for them from within. Therefore, the attempt was to get at their inside view of realities. The prolonged stay with them in their natural habitat provided a chance to delve deeper into their cognitive map. An average member of the society was not aware of the significance or meaning of their social action. But there were expert story tellers who narrate the myths and legends on special occasions. These recitals help them to be proud of their cultural heritage. There was an expert story teller by name Bandu Irpa Varse of Udera village. He along with his trusted friends recited a few myths and legends which embody their world-view. Prominent among them are: how evil has occurred in this world, the origin of the cosmos, common meal and the role of *Jorswami*, the Supreme God of the Madias.

### **Root of all Evil**

The legend about the origin of evil goes like this: The sun and the moon, husband and wife respectively had a daughter. The parents were really fond of her. Generally they used to take food together. One day, while the girl had gone for fetching water, the father got a fish. As she was bringing water she saw a strange act of the father, that he was eating the fish all alone. This isolated act of the father embittered her. She cast her powerful eyes sternly upon him and uttered that the

thorns be stuck at the throat of the father; and so it happened. The father struggled very hard. At last he called a *Pujari* who was powerful enough to appease the gods and he was cured completely. Eventually the daughter fell down from the skies; this girl took the form of a fish in the waters and sometimes assumed the shape of a lady. She was nicknamed, '*kaniyam, bhut, daithu or hoite*'. People generally won't perceive her; she puts on new dress at every time; she is the root of all evil, jealousy and quarrel. She uses any medium to manifest her charms. The Madias believe that milk is a favourite medium used by '*hoite*' to cause her spell upon human beings. Because of that the Madias do not milk the cow or buffaloes nor drink the milk even today.

At times, '*hoite*' is considered to be more powerful. Even the Supreme God, *Jorswami* will give permission to take the life of people at her insistence. *Jorswami* will tell her that it is not yet the appointed hour; but still she may insist upon; she then takes the life of persons and keeps it in her custody. When the real time sets in, she releases the life force. Then follows real justice. Sometimes the medicinal man may not get at the real cause of disease or death. This is because the soul is in the possession of '*hoite*'. If the powerful spirits are appeased, the causes of the crisis can be brought to light. In the case of fever described above the local *Pujari* was not successful to diagnose it properly; whereas the *Perma* could do it owing to his communion with the spirits. It is by placating the innumerable spirits that the evils are abated. As Fuchs has observed "While the worship of the Supreme God is often neglected, hence he is so good and only distantly concerned with human beings, the veneration of the minor deities and spirits can never be relaxed. All these deities and spirits are jealous and easily offended and may take revenge if any offence is committed, by sending some misfortune making the offenders sick and even cause their death."<sup>1</sup> The Madias have staunch faith in benevolent and malevolent spirits. They are appeased through the mediation of local *Pujari* or the *Perma*. In order to understand the pivotal role of *Pujari* and *Perma* one has to know the origin of the universe and the institutions of *Jorswami*.

### Origin of the Cosmos

According to the oral tradition of the Madias, in the beginning there was no sun or moon; everywhere it was dark. However, there was

1. Fuchs, S 'The Concept of Salvation in Tribal Religions' in "Indian Missiological Review" Vol. 14, No 4, Oct 1982, p. 362.

a big and massive tree. Its roots spread over an area of 12 *kos*, i.e. 24 miles; and the branches spread around 12×12 *kos*, covering a vast area. The various spirits were living there. Their main occupation was to cut down the massive tree; their axe was made of gum; the tree was not falling down inspite of the best of efforts. On the tree there were birds; they were perching on the branches; they could get their food from the tree itself; there were enough of fruits for their survival and well being; so they never went out in search of food. When the spirits got tired of their endeavour, they searched for someone else; finally they came across a human being; he had no father or mother as to trace his origin; his name is Jorswami. With much reluctance this first man agreed to cut the tree provided that he is given an axe made of 12 kg iron and 12 types of vegetables as his food; these were supplied to him. On his arrival at the spot he saw very many leafplates and concluded that many have tried to cut the tree and failed; and he thought whether he could do it or not? When he was eating the food with 12 vegetables, the smell was felt by the spirits; they had an impression that if one takes such vegetables one could cut the tree quickly; so they all took his vegetables and ate; the poor guy had not enough for his stomach; all the same he started cutting the tree. The birds that were on the tree saw the impending danger – that the one who cuts the tree this time has no father or mother; so they have to listen to him. So they entreated him saying, 'if you cut the tree where shall we go? Give us some place and provide the needed sacrifice to the roots of the tree' *Jorswami* took all the birds on his back and placed them on other small trees; now the birds had the problem of acquiring food; they bargained for long, finally a compromise was struck – that the birds will seek their food by flying to different places – a practice started from that time onwards by flying and seeking their food. That is how the birds started flying.

Then *Jorswami* struck six times at one side and six times on the other side of the tree. The tree was split into 12 thousand pieces and fell down at two different sides. The spirits were asked to make a round of one side and lift it up. But it was not going up; then the man got ready to offer a sacrifice. He was asked to give turmeric; but there was none. So he cut his finger; after sometime it became yellow, the colour of turmeric and he offered it; then the spirits could lift up the half portion to the skies; and the moon was created bearing the yellow colour. For the remaining portion, the sacrifice demanded was blood; So the man offered that it can eat 12 lives when it starts and stops; and

the spirits lifted up the other portion which became the sun. The Madias believe that the red colour of the sun at dawn and dusk resemble the colour of blood offered at this sacrifice. Thus father, the sun and mother, the moon appeared on the top of the sky. Then the man requested a number of boons – human beings, intelligence, animals, flowers, fruits, rivers, land, forests etc. He consented that special puja will be offered to the dead and memorial stones will be erected in their memory, but the dead should not come back. If all these boons were granted, the man will go home and perform *puja*. Anyway, he was granted all the requests.

### **Common Meal**

After reaching home, the man offered a sacrifice by cutting the calf of a cow. The sun and the moon came down and accepted the sacrifice. They also partook in the feast that ensued the sacrifice. They enjoyed the delicious food thoroughly. The father ate his share completely whereas the mother kept a little in her mouth. While going back the father felt like eating the tasty food little more, but unfortunately he had no stock. The mother thought that there must be a little bit as in her own mouth. So she asked him to open the mouth widely and say 'ha'. After much coercion he did that; whatever little and minute particles were there, they all came out. These unobservable particles are wandering around the sun in the form of the solar system. But they cannot be perceived by the naked eyes; so they are called the children of darkness. Even the modern science has not found them out, a part and parcel of the solar system. On the otherhand, the mother who skilfully kept a bit in her mouth, opened her mouth and said 'ha' and the remaining particles came out and became the children of light. They are the bright stars in the sky, visible to human eyes and twinkling in their realms. As the mother had preserved the food, she is considered to be the protector and preserver of life; Thereafter the woman is entrusted with the procreation, protection and care of the young ones in the society.

### **Jorswami**

The word Jorswami means 'you are the lord of all.' He is the Supreme God. Among names, his is the first; among beings, he is the first. Among *gurus*, he is the *Adiguru*. His origin is unknown; he has no father or mother; so he is the Supreme. He is giving the seed to all

flowers, men and women and is in all beings. When rice is ready, the first grains are offered to him. He gives in front of the eyes, but he takes without our noticing it. He is the source of real knowledge; real knowledge is to discern the designs of the divine; it is to know the plan of the *Ādiguru*. He reveals the plans in dreams. Those who get it are the authentic *Pujaris* or *Perma* and the *Bhumihar*. It will be seen and perceived through their performance. When children grow into maturity and as they develop, they come to know more and more; the source and fountain of their knowledge is the same *Ādiguru*. All they learn is from him; therefore one has to pay homage to *Jorswami*. All are small before him. The story teller, infact called out and invoked the name of *Jorswami* at the very beginning of his narration.

If one proceeds by remembering the name of *Jorswami*, nothing harmful will happen; you will be quite safe and sound in his care. Snakes won't bite you, lions won't attack you, spirits won't entrap you. Day in and day out you can go anywhere; nothing will be injurious to you. In *Jorswami* there are three meanings or dimensions of godhead. The first meaning of *Jorswami* is that 'you are the lord of all'; the second meaning is that 'yourself are the great king' – *nimmagothumaharaja*; and the third aspect is that 'yourself are the most merciful' – *hudagothumaharaja*. These three attributes are held together. They reflect the power of the divine. Similar to these three aspects of the godhead, there are three divisions of labour ordered by *Jorswami*. These are the roles of the *Pujari*, *Perma* and of the *Bhumihar*. Though they are three, their functions have unity. Their function is to proceed according to the plan of *Jorswami*. The *Ādiguru* of all is the same and one. It is with one accord they have to decide matters after discerning the design of the divine. For effective functioning the *Ādiguru* has made a division of labour among the three. The *Bhumihar*, as soon as he learns the plan of *Jorswami*, goes and occupies a new area; then he calls the *Perma* and *Pujari*. They know what exactly are the obstacles that stand in the way of a permanent residence. They will do the needed *puja* to ward off the evil effects that are detrimental to the life of the residents there. Thereafter the followers will come and occupy the land. Thus all the three work together. There will be no dissensions or discord among them. Together they decide the affairs of the community – dates of feasts, life cycle ceremonies, invoking at various occasions etc. For instance, the members of the community will never touch the mangoes unless the above three fix up a date for the required *puja*; and the mangoes will be plucked only after the performance of the ritual.

*Pujari, Perma* and *Bhumihar* together form the best judges for any case. It is not the government or law courts that will dispense true justice; but it is these three honourable persons who know the designs of *Adiguru* can give justice to the affected. Hence whatever these three say will be abided by – whether it is an expensive *puja*, a punishment, a false implication etc. Deviation from the way shown by *Jorswami* is sinful. They become victims of the evil power.

### The Core of Culture

Through the incidence of fever in Pandevahi village and the narration of myths and legends prevalent in that society, one point has become very clear i.e. Madia Gond's traditional religion plays an important role. It is expressed through their world-view, interaction in the society, in festivals, life cycle ceremonies, agricultural operations, hunting, fishing, occupying of a new land, sickness etc. In the absence of a written tradition, the oral tradition is faithfully maintained through the narration of myths and legends, music and dance and through the traditional leaders. However, it is the triumvirate of *Perma, Pujari* and *Bhumihar* who exert maximum influence among the Madias. Their modelling after the role of *Jorswami, nimmagothumaharaja* and *hudagothumaharaja* have given them a clear justification for their office. Their decisions are binding upon the members and the society. Disobedience to their orders is considered to be sinful and practically punishable. The whole community will turn against such deviants. Hence the *Perma, Pujari* and the *Bhumihar* are the traditional leaders of the society; and the members are at their beck and call.

There are many agencies both governmental and non-governmental who are trying to introduce changes among them. These changes remain as cosmetic and peripheral. They do not touch the internalized values. When it touches the core of their religious belief and practices, the Madias avoid it and abide by the decisions of the *Perma, Pujari* and *Bhumihar*. The tendency is to hold on to the past and to the long traditions; more so in the context of an age old oral tradition.

Whatever be the world-view, beliefs and practices, religion in that society plays a major role in integrating the various activities and

engagements in the society. Religion contributes its share in the patterning of a culture in the context of a living and vibrating community.

### **Ethnographic Studies**

A quick look at the various ethnographic records show that the description about religion in that society is a *sine qua non*. A study devoid of the input of religious systems remain an incomplete work. Therefore in the history of the anthropological studies on various communities, religion is described as an important variable. Apart from such general studies there are also works specially devoted to the deeper study of religion in a particular tribal community. In the works of S.C. Roy on *Oraon Religion and Customs* (1928), Elwin's *Religion of A Tribe* (1925) Vidyarthi's *Maler* (1963), Ferreira's *Totemism in India* (1965) Troisi's *Tribal Religion* (1979) etc. we get a deeper understanding about tribal religions as practised by the respective communities. In the general descriptions about tribal religions as evidenced from the various monographs, there seems to be a tendency to compare and contrast with one's own ethnocentric views; whereas in the indepth studies on tribal religion one can get a comprehensive and holistic picture about the traditional religions as practised in their communities.

### **Pre-animism to Monotheism ?**

The anthropological approach to tribal religion is marked by the postulation of animism as proposed by E.B. Tylor. Animism is the belief that inanimate objects as well as living beings are endowed with spirits of various kinds. As Tylor defined, "it is the belief in spiritual beings."<sup>2</sup> Thus the tribal religion was placed at the lowest rung of the ladder of religions. And the gradation has been from animism to monotheism as per the evolutionary trend of the times. However, the field data had challenged many of the assumptions of animism. Tylor had neglected the role of magic which was rectified by R.R. Marett and Frazer's *Golden Bough*. Thus the conception that a pre-animistic period preceded animism was generally accepted. Further gathering of evidences from field data shows that the evolutionary approach does not hold water when one seriously engages in the study of tribal religion. Victor Turner has very convincingly pointed out the complexity contained in

2. Tylor. E.B., *Primitive Culture*, New York: Henry Holt & Co. 1889.



the study of tribal religions. He has said, "in matters of religion as of art, there are no simpler technologies than our own. Man's imaginative and emotional life is always and everywhere rich and complex."<sup>3</sup> He has demonstrated it in his study of religion of Ndembu tribals from Northwestern Zambia. Hence the evolutionary trend of pre-animism to monotheism is no more valid in present day findings.

### **Nature-man-spirit Complex in Tribal India**

The role of religion in the tribal India is termed as the nature-man-spirit complex by Vidyarthi in his cultural ecological approach to the *Maler*. It clearly brings to light the complexity involved in the traditional religion. The tribals have developed a religious system suited to their immediate concerns and environment. Their selective interaction with the thick forests, wild animals, reptiles, birds, trees, fruits, tubers etc. have evoked various interests in their struggle for existence. People took recourse to several totems, and symbols in order to adapt to the elements in nature. In coping with the realities in nature religion has given a persistent perspective for the tribals.

### **Persistence of the Little Traditions**

The pressures of modernization and the contact with outsiders have drawn the tribals to the fast and rapid changes around them. Though they want it or not, whether they like it or not, they are irresistibly facing the dramatic transformations. In such a context their religion is also affected by the onslaughts of changes. In the foreward to the first reprint of the *Census of India 1931*, K.S. Singh has observed that "the number of tribals following their religion declined by 31 percent between 1921 and 1931. It has fallen from roughly one third of the tribal people in 1931 to about six percent in 1981"<sup>4</sup>. Yet we cannot set aside the autonomy of tribal religion. He continues to add that "tribal religions have not disappeared as feared eventhough the Census continue to return most of the tribes as Hindus or Christians. Many elements of tribal religion are as alive, even vigorous as ever. As recent studies have shown tribal religion has not lost its identity in spite of its

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3. Turner, V.W. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Antistructure*. London: Kegan Paul, 1969.

4. Singh. K.S. in Foreward to *Census of India* by J.H. Hutton, Vol. 1, Delhi: Gian Publishing House, p. iii. 1931.

long years of interaction with Hinduism or Christianity. It has maintained its system of religious beliefs and practices including propitiation of spirits, magic and witchcraft and the priesthood. Recent trends even suggest revival of many pristine elements of tribal religion by those who have gone out of its fold."<sup>5</sup> Thus revitalization and revivalism are taking place in various parts of tribal India. A clear instance of such a movement is the emergence of *Gondi (Koya)*-religion in Central India, in the former kingdom of Gondwana.

### The Gondi Religion

The Gonds are a major tribal group in Central India. They had a glorious past of ruling over the gondwana kingdom for several centuries. The educated among them are rediscovering the sterling qualities of the traditional religion and its noble value systems. That specific identity separates them from the major established religions. In their magazine, *Gondwana Darsan*, they had reminded the followers that they should inscribe Gondi Religion in the respective columns when the Census enumerators of 1991 ask about their religion.<sup>6</sup> Thus an awareness about their identity is being asserted. They are also trying to develop in written form their rich cultural heritage. Recently there was an attempt to bring together all the scattered knowledge and vision about the Gondi Religion in a book form. It is entitled as *Gondi Dharma Darsan*<sup>7</sup> written by Motiram Kankali. The main features about the Gondi Religion as per the above work can be summarized as follows:

1. The religion of the Gonds is known as the Gondi (*Koya*) Religion.
2. It was founded by Pari Kubar Lingo.
3. It is an ancient religion, survived by several onslaughts unleashed by the outsiders.
4. Pari Kubar Lingo had divided the entire Gonds into 750 clans.
5. For each clan he had assigned one animal, one bird and a tree or shrub as their identification mark. Thus there are  $(750 \times 3 = 2250)$ . 2250 beings in nature which are taken care of as well as preferentially consumed keeping the optimal balance in nature.
6. Lingo has named the Supreme power in nature as *Parsapen*.

5. *Ibid.*

6. "Gondwana Darsan" (Hindi Magazine) Vol. 7 July 1990 p. 3.

7. Kankali Motiram *Gondi Dharma Darsan* (in Hindi), Nagpur: Gondwana Vikas Mandal, 1989.

7. It is through the mutually exclusive but complementary principles of plus and minus (*Sallang and Gaagra*) that the universe is going on.
8. Marriage is based on the above principle.
9. Marriages are with the number of gods different from one's own.
10. The supreme aim of religious practice is the welfare of all. Hence the spirit of service is given more importance; the individual won't count much; it is the community that gains prominence and thereby the individual also develops his potentialities.
11. To enculturate the young ones, Lingo had instituted the *Ghotul* system of holistic training imparted from the third year onward.
12. Lingo had given the principle of *Ahimsa*.
13. He had taught the disciples to be honest, straight forward, to speak the truth and above all treat others well by serving them.
14. Lingo had initiated the Gondi language.
15. He had taught them music and dance both for worship and for relaxation.

### **Gondi Symbols**

These main tenets and teachings are symbolized in the following diagram which is set on a leaf of a tree. The various symbols and their significance are provided below :

The figure can be divided into two parts : the outer layer and the inner layer. The outer layer comprises of :

- A- *Jai Seva*, meaning praise be to the service; the ultimate goal of life being the happiness of all, one has to strive for the service of others. *Jai Seva* is the pattern of life of the Supreme power in nature.
- B- *Jai Parsapen*, praise be to the supreme force in nature called *Parsapen*.
- C- *Jai Sagapen*, praise be to the clan gods.
- D- *Sallam*, the plus principle, father principle.
- E- *Gaagram*, the minus principle; mother principle.
- F- *Mod Vercci*, shining in darkness.



- G- 750 : at the basement. Number 750 represents the total no of clans.
- H- the physical dimension of the body.
- I- the intellectual aspect of the body/the male principle.
- J- the psychological features of a person.
- K- the female principle.
- L- represents the fullness of life brought about by I & K.

### **Beyond Ethnocentrism**

An outline of the Gondi Religion indicates that this religion is a class by itself. It is to be studied seriously bereft of the spectacles of ethnocentrism. Unfortunately people bring in their own cultural values and judgements in dealing with a complex and intricate subject like the religion. This is very much reflected in the attitude and approach

to tribals and the values cherished by them. Norbeck has rightly said "Much ethnocentrism revolves around the term 'primitive' which has come for many persons to connote inferiority and when applied to human beings to imply the mistaken notion of mental processes which are prelogical or qualitatively different from those of the civilized men. Much of the writing on primitive religions until fairly recent years reflect this view and it may still be found in current writings on religion despite the fact that it has no scientific support from anthropology. The most luxuriant growth of ethnocentrism revolves about religion. In the history of the West, this attitude has been the rule rather than the exception". What Norbeck has noticed long ago has come to stay in the case of many writings about tribal religions in India maintaining and perpetuating bias and prejudices. Perhaps it is in this context the emergence of the tribalization of religion is of paramount importance in India.