

**RELIGION: TRIBAL AND UNIVERSAL\***

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Whenever the term “tribal religion” is uttered, a picture of fearful, emotional and superstitious endeavor comes to our mind, because it is usually pictured so in history by many scholars. For many scholars, tribal religion is merely an expression of the fear of mystical spirits. Tribal religion is also defined as a collective approach where individual preference does not enjoy a primary place. In the case of tribal religion, individual aspirations are subject to the laws of a tribe. That means, in the case of religious endeavor, individual human beings has to follow the rules and regulations provided by the concerned tribe. It is supposed to be a narrow religious approach because in the case of a tribal religion, a particular tribe does not want to share their God with other tribes. Therefore, tribal religion stands in history as a narrow native superstitious approach of primitive mind. These are the general assumptions about the nature of the religion of tribal people of modern mind. On the other hand, we come to know that the religious approach of tribal people was loaded with the magical ideas. The presences of magical elements in the religion of tribal people make it unworthy in its essence. Because most of the time it does not fulfill the aspirations of tribal people. The religious endeavors of tribal people were basically directed by a sense of fear of the dead ancestor, of loosing material goods of life etc. The relation of fear rather than love is found to be present between the worshipper and the worshipped within the domain of tribal religion. As Prof. Galloway says “No doubt we find various rites of an elaborated nature performed by uncivilized tribes – initiation ceremonies and dances, for example. But in these cases the significance of the ceremonies is magical much more then religious.”<sup>40</sup> They worshipped the spirits or the natural objects either in order to fulfill their basic needs or to pacify the spirits. Therefore, it is said by many scholars throughout the world that the religion of tribal people never goes beyond their physical needs.

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40 *Philosophy of Religion*, George Galloway, International Theological Library, Edinburgh, 1914, p.108

E.B Taylor (1832-1917) defines the religion of primitive people as "...the belief in spiritual beings."<sup>41</sup> He believes that all the low races possess a belief in the 'spiritual beings' with whom they feel connected. But the journey through which primitive minds started to believe in the mystical power of spirits is quite interesting. By following the scholarly works of George Galloway we come to know that primitive mind lacks the ability to separate animated beings from the inanimate objects. The moving objects and events of nature like river, rain, moon etc. and many more things left an impression of fear and wonder into their mind. Under such influence primitive mind spontaneously started to impose a kind of life power or breathing power within these objects of nature, as they feels within themselves. In this way primitive man peopled this world. In later times such projected objects and events of nature were worshiped by the tribal people in order to fulfill their basic needs. This is, in brief, a short history of the journey of the religious ideas of the tribal people. For Taylor and many other scholars the ignorance with regard to the material status of the world ultimately gave birth to the religious phenomena of tribal people.

However, the great German Philologist F. Max Muller is not quite satisfied with the way Prof. Taylor describes the religious consciousness of the savage mind. Like Herbert Spencer, he disagrees with such conception that primitive minds were unable to separate the inanimate objects from the animate one. He writes that "I cannot help calling it irrational when we are asked to believe that at any time in the history of the world a human being could have been so dull as not to be able to distinguish between inanimate and animate beings, a distinction in which higher animals hardly ever go wrong...Even Mr. Herbert Spencer protests against this insult to the human intellect."<sup>42</sup> However, Max Muller emphasizes upon the early man's use of language. According to Max Muller, at the earliest stage of primitive society the minds of primitive people understood and conceptualized everything in terms of an agent. For him, the general notion of causality was not clear to the primitive

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41 'Animism' by Edward Taylor in *Theories of Religion A Reader*,(ed.) by Seth D. Kuhin with Jonathan Miles Watson, Edinburg University Press, p.104.

42 'Summary of the results of phsycical religion' by Max Muller in *Theories of Religion, A Reader*,(ed.) by Seth D. Kuhin with Jonathan Miles Watson, Edinburg University Press, p.75

people. And the roots of their language were essentially expressive of agency. That's why they named the events, objects of nature in terms of a human agent. That's why, instead of searching for the causes of the events of nature, they searched for an agent who makes these actions possible. For Max Muller, such conception of agent was gradually transformed into the idea of a super human agent.

There is a difference between the opinion of Max Muller and the Prof. Taylor. But in another sense there is also a similarity between their thought. Both of them put emphasis upon certain kind of disabilities of tribal people. Like prof. Taylor he also points out another sort of disability of intellect of tribal people, i.e. the disability to differentiate between the agent and action. In the voice of these two great philosophers a similar tone can be heard regarding the foundational basis of the religion of primitive people. Both of them hold that certain kind of physical and mental disability of primitive people sets the foundation of their religion. It is not only their opinion but it is the opinion of the many modern minds that the religion of the primitive people is based on the misconception about the true fact of the nature. Their misconceptions give rise to the spirits rather than God, it gives rise to the magical ideas rather than religious ideas.

Religious endeavor of human being made a long journey. It is believed that with the growing age of time we have transformed the narrow boundary of tribal religion and have developed a better form of religion than our ancestors. Unlike our ancestors, our present form of religious\_endeavor leaves a room for personal aspiration. It is more inclusive than the religion of tribal people.

Let us reflect upon nature of tribal religion. Is it a fact that we have developed a higher form of religion than that of the tribes? Was tribal religion really resulted from the misconception about nature and is ours the true one? Was the tribal religion loaded merely with magical ideas and nothing else? It is true that the minds of tribal people were basically directed by their basic needs. It may also be true that they tried to approach the events and objects of nature in order to secure their basic requirements of life. Within the uncanny and challenging environment it was rather practical to do so. Uncanny environment leaves very little room for spiritual speculation. Tribal group of people never think their religious endeavor as separate phenomena from their life and society. They lived with their objects of worship.

Now let us reflect upon the present form of religious consciousness. Is our present form of religious consciousness free from the basic needs and demands of life? Do we not approach towards our God in order to satisfy our needs of life? Religions always include necessities of life of people either in past or in the present. It is true that with the development of consciousness our aspirations are different in some respects from that of the tribal people. But this change of aspiration may not prove the inferiority of tribal religion. Present environment and developed consciousness provides us with a condition for speculation. But it cannot be a criterion to judge the status tribal religion. Dr. Kalidas Bhattacharyya suggests us with the idea that this growing form of speculation should not be a criterion for religious divergence. He says “so, high level religions cannot, as religion, be assessed against one another. Each is alternatively as highest as another. Of them one may be richer with contents than another, but not on that ground a superior religion.”<sup>43</sup> The same may be said in comparing universal and tribal religions.

We may consider the religious approach of tribal people in a different way. The worship of natural objects of tribal people can be thought in terms of their spontaneous gratitude towards the nature, in terms of their curiosity to know the beyond. The problem regarding the nature of tribal religion arises because we always try to look at its nature through the looking glasses of evolution and due to our own understanding of evolution in terms of progress. The evolution of human consciousness may not necessarily point to progress. To identify with nature may not be a lower activity of primitive mind; it only points to the fact that they were different. It may not be the inability of the consciousness of tribal people that they felt identified with the nature. In a sense they felt their inability to live life without the help of nature. They realized the impact of natural events upon their life. So they spontaneously made a way to approach their life- sustaining forces of nature.

The *Upaniṣadic* philosophy is the fruit of the mature age of Indian civilization. It maintains a belief in the existence of an eternal consciousness within every natural object. *Upaniṣadic* religion provides us with the idea that natural objects are nothing but the manifestation of one absolute consciousness. Therefore

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<sup>43</sup> *Possibility of Different Types of Religion*, Kalidas Bhattacharyya, The Asiatic Society 1975, p.76

each and every object of this world is conscious in the true sense of the term. The one absolute consciousness flows through every single entity of this world. Here *Upaniṣadic* philosophy somehow reminds us the tribal animistic conception of the world, where tribal people spontaneously felt a life breathing power in every objects of nature as they felt within themselves. No doubt the basic theme of *Upaniṣadic* philosophy is not similar with this religious endeavor. Therefore, difficulty lies in applying *Upaniṣadic* terminology to understand the religious approach of tribal people. But let us think our own religious attitude. What do we do actually in worshipping something? We believe in a sort of life power in the idol. Otherwise we will not worship it at all. From our own activity, it is not difficult to assume the activities of tribal mind. In a sense, religiously speaking, we do not practice completely a separate thing from our ancestor. The difference is that they have done it a spontaneously, whereas we do it consciously.

The journey of human religious consciousness is not a separate and flawless journey. It is a gradual and contentious process of our conscious mind, which takes no rest since the time of its beginning. It is gradual but constant. If the endeavor of the tribal people started to flourish on the basis of the misconception of the natural facts then it can be said that our present approach is also grounded on the same pillar. Prof Galloway himself says that our present form of religion bears the traces of much tribal religious conception. In his view many of the today's religious concept or ideology develops from the same tribal conception. As he says: the conception of spiritual brotherhood in modern religions comes from the tribal conception of blood-bond unity. He writes "More over the tribal blood-bond uniting all the members of the primitive group, there appears the rudimentary basis out of which was to develop the idea of spiritual brother hood society of religious society." Therefore it can be said that the religion of tribal people is not just a belief in superstitious power of sprits or natural objects.

Here, in this paper I am not denying altogether the evolutionary theory of religious consciousness. I am just trying to say that it is not always justified to judge the religious endeavor of tribal people through the glass of modernity. It may be possible that our modern glass is unable to grasp the true colors of tribal religion. Our modern glass of reason may make us unable to see the emotional connection between

the tribal people and nature. Somehow if we may encounter with the tribal people then they may say that it is we who fail to see the truth.

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