

Essence of Bon Religion: Among the Hill Tribe

Sudas Lama

Religious beliefs and practices have been a universal feature of human society. Religion, like other cultural elements such as family, marriage, incest prohibition, etc. is found everywhere in the world. But the concept 'religion' is not adequately defined to comprehend the large assortment of the kinds of belief and behavior which exist world over and which diverse opinions on the subject might place under it. The system of belief and practices, doctrine and behavior gradually evolved and was organized to face the unknown supernatural world and restore confidence to the mind of the community and the individual when it is shaken by crisis and dangers.

The term 'tribal religion' is used in a generic sense to include all religious traditions of known tribes world over in general and in India in particular. Each tribe has its own religion, exclusive to its members. But when religions of different tribes are compared with one another, these religions form a set of overlapping religions, each individual tribe's religion being a sub-set of it. In one religious tradition, ancestor worship could be prominent, while in others it could be magic or Shamanism. And in others it could be belief in supernatural being or supernatural power. But all of them contain rituals, beliefs and traditional experience.

II

As we know that "Bon" is the primitive native religion of Tibet and it has, in spite of the influence of Buddhism, preserved itself till the present day, but not in its original form. Bon was originally a cult of nature worship. They worshiped God in an iconic form represented by a lump of earth or made of grain. It is said to have been widespread in Inner Asia, China, East and West Turkistan, Manchuria, Mongolia and the Tibetan Plateau. Tibetans of the early days were apparently completely subject to their formidable natural surroundings. Their religious ideas, which were rooted in and

dominated by nature, revolved round the various good and evil spirits with which they peopled their wild, highland landscape. These spirits in time became gods who had to be propitiated to avert harm and worshiped to secure help. The belief in the spirits developed into a cult with its own elaborate ritual. There were Shamans or specialist priest who professed to be experts in controlling nature through their knowledge of the ways of propitiating the spirits. These practice varied from place to place and from clan to clan. The original 'Bon' rites were aimed essentially at assuring protection and assistance to the person, as well as the tribal chieftains and certain privileged families against evil in situation of crisis and in the face of danger to life.

If we go back to the history of Tibet when Buddhism made its way to the land of snow in 7th Century A.D. during the kingship of Srong-tsan-gampo who made the good relationship with the king of Nepal and China through the marriage. So when Tibet patronized the Buddhism, there was encounter with bon, and Bon lost its importance in Tibet and thus compelled to migrate to other area. Bon in its nature is very much animist and it has practice of sacrifices of animals and even human beings and such other practices were openly indulged in and they formed an important part in the religious observances of the bon. A fair idea about the original character of the Bon can be had from the ancient manuscript (9th or 10th C A.D.) where the Tibetan rites are described (R.A.Stein, *Tibetan Civilization*). "The officers are assembled once every year for the lesser oath of fealty. They sacrifice sheep, dogs, and monkeys, first breaking their legs and then killing them, afterwards exposing their intestines and cutting them into pieces. The sorcerers having summoned, they call of the gods of heaven and earth, of the mountains and rivers, of the sun, moon, stars, and planets, saying: should your hearts become changed, and your thoughts disloyal, the gods will see clearly and make you like these sheep and dogs". The victims sacrificed as men, horses, oxen and asses and prayers are offered in this form.

The form of religion practiced by the tribal people of that time is regarded as Animism. The basic premise for this cult is that the animistic belief is to communicate

with supernatural beings not about metaphysical or dogmas of moral life, but about urgent practicalities like securing food, curing illness and averting danger. Bon religion had to go through various challenges and changes because of the Buddhism. But change in the ritual and ceremonies affected its appearance- the form, the essence or spirit of the religion remaining intact.

III

Inner Asia is largely populated by the many ethnic groups, out of which Tibeto-Mongoliad form the largest group of Himalayan region. Because of their Tibetan affiliation and tribal in nature they preserved the Bon religion or its spirit till modern days but not in original form. The modern Himalayan tribes are Murmi, Limbu, Khambo, Toto, Bhutia, Lepcha, Gurung, Kiranti, and many more are ethnic group who practice the rites of bon. There is a few worship or *puja* among these groups which shows the essence of Bon till date preserved by this Mongoloid family. The animistic nature of primitive Bon is reflected by the rites of different tribe of Himalayan region:

1) Ancestral Worship:-

Among the tribal we find the system of worshiping their ancestor once in a year. For this rite they need specialized *shaman* who chants the mantra in order to please the ancestor. They do not have any idol of ancestor but this *puja* is followed by the sacrifice of hen. This was for the protection of their *Kula* from any disease and dangers. Tribal people believe that their well-being lies in the hands of their ancestor and they think that the Kula or ancestor is very sacred.

2) Worship of Rivers:

To avert the natural calamities and to please the gods of river, the Tibeto-Mongoloid group worships the river to bless the inhabitant by fertile land. This worship is followed by the sacrifice of goat. And worship is performed by the clan priest of particular tribe. This worship of nature is specially meant to enhance the fertility of land.

3) Soil Worship:

Soil or land being the integral part of nature as well as of agriculture, the followers of animism worship the soil collectively once in a year near the village. For this worship they choose the highland of the village and made the *than or stan*, where they gave the sacrifice of birds. Villagers believe that if Soil god is pleased by the *puja* and sacrifice, their production will be good. Side by side they also worship god of rain. Tribal people have the conception that if the rain-god is not pleased, there will be no rain and it can cause draught, famine and many more. So in order to get the blessing of god of rain these tribal people offer the *puja* by sacrificing lots of goat, sheep and birds collectively by all the villagers once in a year.

4) Worship of cowshed:

As Bon culture of tribal people is totally related to the animistic form of worship and is tribal in nature they also give preference to cattle. To avoid the illness of cattle, and to assure the good quantity of milk from cow they worship cowshed.

5) Worship of Manasa (the snake Goddess);

Bon religion is based on supernatural power and three divinities of the world and *Manasa* is one of them. So this culture of worshipping Manasa is totally bon culture and by this they want to have the blessings of the goddess. Besides the above-mentioned belief there are many rites and culture like worshipping of trees, Mahakala and giving sacrifice during the *puja*.

This culture of worshipping natural phenomenon and celestial body by the hilly tribal of Himalayan region especially by the Tibeto-Mongoloid group shows that Bon in original form has declined but its spirit or essence remain till today in the form of tribal ritual.

To conclude, we can say that Bon religion being the primitive native religion of Tibet and having been chased by the Buddhism has lost its original nature, but its essence or belief lies in the mind of people which passes generation to generation. The Tibeto-Mongoloid group of people being influenced by the creed of Buddhism

and Christianity are able to maintain their ancestral religion by following the rites and culture.

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