

Introduction to Christian Theologies in India— Tribal Theology-1

TRIBAL THEOLOGY:

Excerpt from Introduction to Christian Theologies in India by Laji Chacko, pp 202-205.

Tribal Identity

Along with the Dalits, the tribals of India form the 'subaltern' section of Indian society. This sector forms four-fifth of India's population, but their corporate religious and cultural experience has been treated as inferior to that of the dominant class and less important for the India theological enterprise.²³ The English word 'tribe' is derived from the Latin word *Tribus* (*Tri-* three, *bhuour* or *bu* – to be) which means 'to be three'. It was used to identify the three basic divisions of the Romans – *the Tintieneses, Ramneses and Luceres* for the purpose of taxation, military conscription and census taking. The use of the term 'tribal' became popular with the colonization and spread of Christianity and it was used to denote a group of people speaking a common language, observing uniform rules of social of social organization and working together for some common purpose such as trade, agriculture and welfare. It is interesting to note that the term 'tribe' or 'tribal' does not originate with those people who are identified as tribals but it was imposed upon by the anthropologists, missionaries and later by the Constitution of India. The term carries a strong pejorative, negative and derogatory meaning in India that it implies backward, primitive and uncivilized people living in the hills and forests.

Tribal Christology

Taking the Biblical verse from Hebrews 1 : 1 ff, *"in the past God spoke to our ancestors...but in these days he has spoken to us through his Son Jesus Christ"*, Keitzar speaks on making Christ present in our midst as one of us, not as a foreigner, because God has spoken to our people, too, through him. Since God spoke to our ancestors, writes Keitzar, our cultural traditions are important, but it is in Christ God has finally spoken and so all our heritages must be reinterpreted in terms of God's final revelation in Christ Jesus. Keitzar insists that we have to take risks to reinterpret Christ in the contexts of our socio-cultural traditions and contemporary realities. *In order to develop tribal Christology we need to know the tribal ethos.* Tribal people have a strong sense of community. Each tribal exists because the community exists, and each one lives for the community and is ready to give his/her life for it. This community feeling is seen particularly in times of celebrations, clearing of jungles, preparation of fields for cultivation, wedding, harvesting, construction of houses, collaboration in times of need, of natural calamities, etc. It is enough to entrust something to a group of tribals, and one can be sure that it will be carried out provided

that they have accepted it whole-heartedly. This sense of corporate identity is very strong among the tribals. It is the communion of mind and heart the Good News in the Christian sense. A second characteristic is closeness to creation and attachment to the land. Land is more than a means of production. It is what gives birth to all the other gifts. It is "mother" earth. There is a strong spiritual relationship between tribal people and their land. It is strongly interwoven with their tribal identity. In the words of S. Tuwere, "it (land) is a heavily loaded term and

combines together economics, politics, history, sociology, ethnicity tradition, identity and spirituality. A third characteristic is a bunch of qualities together, namely, their democratic orientation, sense of equality, sense of independence, habit of open, frank discussion, absence of inhibitions, creativity, simplicity, sincerity, truthfulness, happy and jovial disposition, hardworking, hospitality, sociability, practicality, peace loving, etc. all these positive qualities are a reflection of the Goodness of God and an affirmation of Gospel values.”

Presenting Jesus as a Tribal

Presenting Jesus as a Tribal would help to show that Biblical revelation and early Christian tradition have much in common with tribal cultural realities; that the Old Testament expresses the faith of the tribes of Israel; that the Bible remains faithful to its tribal ethos even when its tribal structure was replaced by a monarchy and that the teaching of Jesus can be seen as a return to this tribal ethos in its most authentic meaning. *Presenting Jesus as a Tribal* would mean that biblical symbols can be very appealing and meaningful to tribal cultures; Jesus as the Healer, the Liberator, the Compassionate Friend of the poor and the needy, the Good Samaritan, the Good Shepherd, the obedient one, the Servant of all, the One who is interested in all peoples, the One who stands for truth, the One who wants to free us from evil and all corrupt practices and habits, the One who suffered for us all, the one who gives abundant life, the One who can lead us to Life Eternal- Life without end, the One who loves “My culture” and “All the Cultures,” the One who cares for our integral development and well-being, the One who builds communion of mind and heart with the whole creation, the One who is ever ready to listen to us, the One who has no prejudice, the One who

respects human dignity and freedom, the One who has a preferential love for the poor and the weak, the defenseless and the voiceless, the One who is the fulfillment of all our hopes, and the One who can obtain forgiveness of all our sins.

Presenting Jesus as the Tribal will help the tribal people as the fulfillment of the people's mythologies, folklore, stories, proverbs, festivals etc. Jesus the Tribal does not negate but radicalizes true, praise (Phil. 4:8-9). It is in the nature of tribal ethos to remain open to Healing ministry, Praying ministry and Music ministry as we proclaim and present Jesus Christ. He is the healthiest ancestor who is still alive among them. He is the master of initiation. "Who do you say I am"? (Mark16:16) is one question that can receive the most enriching answers from the tribals. The tribals are continually writing theology with dances and celebration, with their music and drama, with their art forms and architecture, with their living experience

as disciples of Jesus Christ. The tribal response to God who has spoken through his son is being formulated from the struggles they go through, from their joys, their pains, their hopes and anxieties and frustrations of everyday life.

Though basically the tribals are the same, they are different in their resourcefulness, aspirations and characteristics. The adivasis of Chotanagpur origin, for example are different from the Nagas and Kuki-Chin tribals of North East India. Hence, in developing a mission theology for the tribals, and in making Jesus "Real" to them, the tribal contexts must get more attention: their spirituality, their poems, myths, songs, tales, legends, dances, stories, music, rites of passage (birth and

childhood rituals, marriage customs, family, death ceremonies) which become also part of the resources to theologizing. The place of Christ who is originally related to everything in creation etc., are part of a tribal theology in the making. Presenting Jesus as a Tribal will give more relevance to Christian faith among the tribal people when Jesus appears to them as their Primeval Ancestor, Tribal Chief, the Centre of their festivals and celebrations, the Guardian of Creation, the One who will never separate them from their land.

Introduction to Christian Theologies in India-- Tribal Theology-2

Tribal Theology

Broadly speaking there are two different kinds of tribals in India: *Adivasis* (the tribals from the plains) and tribals from north-east India hills. *Adivasis* had some kind of contact with the prevalent religion – Hinduism, however there was very little contact between tribals from north-east India. The north-east India hill tribes with the exception of a few are all Christian converts. Christianity provided them with access to education and modernization.

United Nation Sub-commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities puts forth a working definition of indigenous/tribal people: 'Indigenous communities, people and nations, are those which having an historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generation their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institution and legal system'.

The tribal communities in north-east India are represented by three major racial groups: (i) the Sino-Tibetan communities who began to move into the region as early as the third millennium BC; the Boro-

Bodo tribes in the Brahmaputra Valley and other tribal groups in Arunachal Pradesh trace back their origin to that early migration; (ii) the Siamese section of the Mongoloids migrated around eighth century BC, and later the Thai tribes entered the region, established the Ahom kingdom, and ruled over Assam; the Kuki-Chin tribes also came and settled in the southern region; (iii) a large number of northern tribals – the Mundaris, Hos, Santalis, Oraons, Gonds, and others were brought to Assam by the Britishers to work in tea estates.

Major tribes in north-east India are: Austro-Asiatic (Khasis, Jaintias); Bodo (Dimasa, Boro, Kachari, Rabha, Garo, Ghutia, and Tripuri); Dravidian (Dom and Kivartas); Indo-Burmese (Nagas); Indo-Tibetan (Miri, Mishmi, Nishi, Akhas, Apatani, Adi, Monpa, Nocte, Wancho, Tangsa); Kuki-Lushai (Mizo, Hmar, Halam, Thadou, Ralte, Paiti, Pawi, Lakher, Riang); Chin-Kuki (Moriang, Phadang, Mikirs, Amri); and Indo-Aryan and Shan-Tai (Assamese, Ahom, Khamti, Phakial, Aitonia).

Indigenous/Tribal theology is a newcomer and this emerging theology among the alienated and marginalized minorities may be called 'Indigenous peoples or tribal theology.' It is a people's theology born out of the experiences of injustice and exploitation in the context of their assertion for right and identity. It is also a liberation and resistance theology. It attempts to express Christian faith in the context of the socio-cultural, religious, traditional, and liturgical through pattern of the indigenous people. It uses the experiences of oppressions, and hardships; traditional stories, myths, symbols, dances, songs, and their connectedness to land and environment as sources of doing theology. Minz and Longchar explains tribal theology in the following words: In terms of doing theology, the point of departure of the tribal theology from other contextual theologies is that the tribal theology seeks

liberation from the perspective of 'space.' In their search for liberation, the issue of space is central and crucial in doing

theology. A peculiar character of tribal world view is that the tribal people's culture, religion, spirituality, and even the Supreme Being cannot be conceived without 'creation/land' or 'space.'

Humans always understand themselves as 'an integral part of creation/land and not apart from it.'

Tribal theologizing, therefore, has to interact with these if it has to become relevant contextual theology. The question of justice, identity, and human dignity therefore is crucial for tribal theology.

Tribal Christology

For reasons unknown there is so little written on Christology from the north-east Indian tribal perspective. Shohe opines that the strand of Christianity that was preached to the tribals in north-east India too has its influence on its Christological formulations. These were more from pietistic influence. Probably that explains the dearth of Christological formulations from the north-east India tribal context. Here we present some of the available Christological formulations from a Naga perspective.

Vashum argues that vision of tribal/indigenous theology is to become a self-theologizing community. Such an effort needs moving beyond the existing norms of Christian theologizing. He uses local/ indigenous cultural categories to construct a Christology of culture and liberation.

He proposes Jesus as the Rooster. Every society identifies a special or sacred animal/bird that symbolizes their identity. For the Nagas, Rooster is a sacred animal/ bird. As a community Nagas have had

various observances and ceremonies. Animals/birds were often used as sacrificial offerings. Of all these, the rooster was by far the most valued sacrificial object. It was regarded as something that possessed the right qualities for being a sacrifice: purity, aesthetic beauty, and physical charm. "A rooster is decorated with beautiful ornaments from head to toe. He not only looks gorgeous, he also appears very gracious at the same time." It is also considered one of the most alert, intelligent and humble creature. Humility was an important trait, a blameless rooster was often chosen for sacrifice.

Rooster Sacrifice for Human Protection

Rooster sacrifice was conducted for restoring wellness and harmony among individuals or community. When an individual was sick, the family members of the sick would invite the *khanong* (Tangkul Naga) – the medical practitioner to conduct a sacrificial ceremony (*Tanula* – soulcalling ceremony among the Ao Nagas). A blameless rooster is taken to the outskirts of the village, it is then tossed up into the air and released into the jungle by the medical practitioner while reciting these words: "Take this rooster instead of [the suffering individual] and release the soul immediately." It is expected that the rooster would not return back to the village, which was considered a good omen. The sick would then recover. But if it returns back then it is understood that the sick would never recover from the illness.

For the purification of the whole community too rooster was used as a sacrificial object. *Genna*, is the purification ceremony practiced by the Nagas. The medical practitioner along with the members of the village would move to the outskirts of the village and toss up the rooster into the

air and release the same to the jungle while asking the Sacred Being's blessings upon the community. The "releasing" of the rooster meant its imminent death. The whole purpose of the ceremony was the purification of the village from all kinds of evil and protection from future epidemics and calamities. Rooster was also a mythic figure that was responsible for persuading

the Sacred Being to provide sunlight to the world thereby maintaining the duration of day and night.

Jesus and the Rooster

Vashum uses rooster as a representative of Jesus and begins with rooster and looks unto Jesus' sacrifice as a relational aspect from the scripture. He says, In the sacrifice of the rooster and the death of Jesus Christ, the underlying significance is that both the rooster and Jesus died so that the people might live. There are, of course, limitations in the use of the rooster as the representative of Jesus Christ. While, the rooster sacrifice is temporary and significance is limited to the particular community on whose behalf the sacrifice is made, the death of Jesus Christ is permanent and has universal appeal. However, notwithstanding the limitations, there is a great deal of significance attached to the vicarious suffering of the rooster and Jesus on whose behalf they both sacrificed their lives.

Jesus, the Elder Brother

Vashum, offers another metaphor – the Elder Brother to explain the significance of Jesus. He says, "...the Gospel writers describe the status

of Jesus as being the 'firstborn son' (cf. Lk. 2:7; Mt. 1:25). As firstborn son, 'he constituted not only the continuation of the family but also the continuity and permanence of Israel's covenant relationship with God.'

He further says: "Jesus Christ is truly an 'elder brother' whose life demonstrated the qualities that were expected of an elder brother. Jesus is the elder brother par excellence, for in him the desires and expectations of an elder brother came into its fulfilment."

Jesus, the Ancestor

Vashum offers yet another metaphor in speaking of Christ – the Ancestor. He writes, The ancestor and the elder brother exercised a critical role of being mediators. The elder brother being the eldest son in the family was charged with religious duties including offering sacrifices to the Supreme Being on behalf of the family. On the death of the father the eldest was expected to carry out all family ceremonies and sacrifices. On the other hand, the ancestor played a mediating role between the spiritual world and the living.

He further writes,

'In the worldview of the tribals, the notion of the community, encompassed not only the living but also the dead and the spiritual beings; the ancestors were an integral part of the community. Additionally, as a life giving source in the sense that through the ancestors generations of human societies have come to exist, the ancestors were closer to the Source.'

He also writes, "In adapting the role of Jesus to the tribal cultural context, one can substitute Jesus as the Ancestor who represents the mystery of the invisible God."

<https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/unpfii-sessions-2.html>

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Dr. Yangkahao Vashum teaches indigenous/tribal theology at Eastern Theological College, Jorhat

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