

Introduction To Christian Theologies In India

Topic: Tribal Theology

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1. Introduction:

This paper will be dealing with the Tribal Theology in North East India perspective.

2. The term Tribal and its Meaning:

The English word ‘tribe’ is derived from the Latin word ‘Tribus’ (Tri is ‘three’, bu is ‘to be’) which means ‘to be three’. It was used to identify the three basic divisions of the Romans – the Tintienses, Ramnenses and Luceres. This division was made for the purpose of taxation, military conscription and census taking. Along with colonization and spread of Christianity, the use of term ‘tribal’ became popular. It was used to denote a group of people speaking a common language, observing uniform rules of social organization and working together for some common purposes such as trade, agriculture and warfare. The term came upon the tribals was by the anthropologists, missionaries and later by the Constitution of India. None of the tribals called themselves “tribes”. They prefer to be identified by the name of their respective communities, e.g. Naga, Mizo, Khasi, Munda, Santal, etc.¹

3. What is Tribal Theology:

Tribal theology 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

¹ Yangkahao Vashum, *Christology in Context: A tribal- Indigenous Appraisal of North East India* (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2017), 2.

environment as sources of doing theology. Minz and Longchar explains tribal theology: 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.'²

4. The Development of Tribal theology in North East India:

4.1. Receiving Stages (1800-1950):

During this period, the churches were under the western missionaries. Perceiving the western culture is superior and the only valid expression of Christian faith, they attempted to translate the theological formulations of the mother churches abroad in appropriate native languages by means of adopting and adapting local terminologies, idioms and categories. Therefore, native culture and traditions were never considered valuable resources for doing theology. Christians who participated in traditional festivals were excommunicated from the church. Drums, traditional songs, dances and value systems were condemned as evil and prohibited among believers. There was very little or no awareness of the religio-cultural experience of the people.³

4.2. Learning stage (1951-1995):

During this period, the newly constituted Government of India ordered all western missionaries to leave North East India. However, the absence of western missionaries created more space for local people to exercise their rights, responsibilities and leadership in the Church such as education, health-care services. In the 50s, 60s and 70s very few people went for theological training but women were discouraged to study and very limited opportunity and role was given to them in ministry. Only in 1980s churches began to send both men and women for theological training. In the 70s and 80s, two distinct theological paradigms emerged in India. The first paradigm is "Dialogical Method." And the second is the "Liberational Method." In the initial period, American

² Samuel George, *Christology* (Kolkata: SCEPTRE, 2013), 81.

³ Wati Longchar, "Tribal Theology: Development, Issues and Challenge" *Theologizing in India Today: Interpreting the Signs of Time*, ed., Vincent Raj Kumar (Bangalore: CISRS, 2012), 159-160.

liberation methodology. These has influenced people to reread the Scripture from the perspective of the poor and the oppressed in their struggle for justice and freedom. This paradigm has generated new theological thinking among younger theologians in many ways. Commitment to the victims, the oppressed and struggling poor as the basis and the starting point of theology has inspired the alienated tribals to discover their identity, right and dignity. It has motivated people to engage themselves in new ways of doing theology by relating the gospel to the socio-politico-cultural realities.

4.3. Self-Theologizing (1995):

After the departure of the missionaries, self-government, self-supporting, and self-propagation in the Church was launched by many churches. However, self-theologizing was never considered as an important component for the self-identity of the Church by the churches in NEI. Only in 1995 that the Church recognized the importance of “self-theologizing” to make the Church and its mission rooted in the actual life’ of the people. So to promote and encourage self-theologizing, two prominent colleges in North East India have initiated “Tribal Study Centres:” 1. Eastern Theological College, Jorhat in 1995 with the objectives: (a) to reflect theologically on the tribal people's experiences of struggle for emancipation and rapid social change; (b) to rediscover some of the traditional values for the interpretation as well as expression of Christian faith in tribal people’s context; (c) and to study and understand the phenomena and heritage of the tribal people's identity, religion, culture and society. 2. Aizawl Theological college, Mizoram started its tribal study program in 2000 and is making good progress. Through colloquium, consultation, workshop and field research. Both centres have created awareness of many ambiguous factors and oppressive elements of tribal culture and religious values, and continue to help Christians to rediscover lifeaffirming values and tradition.⁴

5. Methodology of the Tribal Theology:

5.1.Synthetic- Praxis:

Ahao Vashum points out three reasons and suggested. Firstly, it takes seriously peoples cultures and their distinct socio-economic and political contexts. Secondly, it allows for critical interaction

⁴ Wati Longchar, “Trends in tribal Theology in North East India” *Dalit and Minjung Theology: A dialogue*, ed., Samson Prabhakar & Jinkwan Kwon (Bangalore: BTESSC/SATHRI, 2006), 59-63.

between Christianity and indigenous culture and values that result to a new form of Christian expression of faith and theology. Thirdly, it requires reclaiming past cultural traditions and values which is necessary in articulating contextual theology.

5.2. Postcolonial:

Ahao suggests three main functions because of the people's struggles against the forces of marginalization and oppression. Firstly, the tribal Christian theology is certainly a “liberating struggle”, a struggle for liberation in all its social, political and economic contexts. Secondly, to take seriously the history, memories and experiences of the people. Remembering the past may be critical but it serves as both affirmative in building and shaping the future the people desires. Thirdly, it must be equipped to recognize the “differentiated complexities” that goes beyond the simplistic binary of colonizer/ colonized.

5. 3. Cohesive or Integration:

Ahao pointed out that, Today, most tribal Christians think to be an authentic Christian which mean they must ignore anything that is of the past and embrace whatever comes from the Christian West. This way of thinking is so deeply embedded in the tribal Christian’s belief that they consider their most important obligation as Christians to be their strict adherence to the tenets of Christianity introduced to them by the missionaries.⁵

6. Tribal Understanding of Land, God and Human Spirituality:

6.1. Land:

Wati Longchar stated that in Naga tribes some dialects Ao and Sangtam, the supreme being is essentially called Lijaba, Li means ‘earth’ and Jaba mean ‘real’ which mean the supreme being is ‘the real earth’ or ‘the one who enters or indwells the soil’. In Nagas view Lijaba was believed to have entered the soil in the same way as a vital seed is buried in the soil and germinates as the life of the plant. In fact, in the primal religious worldview everything on earth was perceived as being animated by spirit. Being indwelled by the spirit, land was sacred. For tribal, land like a holy ground or a temple through which they discerned the will of god. It is both temple and scripture.

⁵ Bendanglemla Longkumer, *Christ, The Healer: Exploring Indigenous People’s Spirituality* (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2018), 106-110.

They worship god and offered sacrifices and prayers. Through the land they read and discerned god and the spirits and know their will. Like Hebrew, “The heavens are telling the glory of god; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (psalm 19:1). The tribal read about God through land.⁶

6.2. Pathian:

Mizos called him Pathian, a God which perceived to be a male deity. Pa means father and thian derived from the word thiang meaning holy which mean holy father. This god was believed to be a benevolent being and was considered to be the creator and sustainer of all things.

And also this god in feminine terms such as Khuanu. Khua means weather or nature and nu means mother which means mother of nature. In Mizo world view, god was conceived to be living heaven with a family just like human being. Pathian was considered as kind deity, merciful and loving. They did not regard him as the cause of suffering and misfortune. He is an active onlooker from heaven and prayed when in trouble.⁷

6.3. Sakhua:

Literally, the word sa means animal and khua mean village or weather. Zairema believe that Sakhua was the family or clan god who build up, protected and care for the family. For Kipgen sa stands for the god worship by the ancestors and khua for nature or creator. It is more likely to understand that Sakhua is a practice of animal sacrifice which was offered to a clan deity by the village community, family rather than as the name of any particular deity. According to mizo tradition every family reared castrated pigs, the largest of which called Vawkpa sut nghak were offered to the family or clan deity.⁸

6.4. Khuavang:

Khuavang was believed to be a benevolent spirit, who was active in the world and was closely involved in human affairs. Zairema describes Khuavang as the God who blessed marriage. It

⁶ L. H. Lalpekhlua, *Contextual Christology: A Tribal Perspective* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2007), 175-176.

⁷ Ibid., 180-182.

⁸ Ibid., 185-186.

appeared to be not much different from other evil spirits. Its appearance to a human being was thought to be able to cause illness.⁹

7. Conclusion:

From the above mention we can understand that the Tribal theology is born out from the experience of injustice and exploitation in the context of their assertion for right and identity. It attempts to express Christian faith in the context of the religious, traditional, and socio-cultural concepts.

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⁹ Ibid., 187-188.