CHAPTER - ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Primal religious traditions, in earlier times, were primarily seen and studied as possible subjects of conversion, and less to learn something from them for mutual enrichment, and enlightenment. The first view was of colonialists and missionaries of great historical religions having missionary motives. Different from the above and second in order, is the view of social scientists (anthropologists and sociologists) and administrators and development planners, who consider the primal society as backward, uncivilized, without religion, or part and parcel of Hindu society and religion in India. These two views fail to accept the distinct identity and contribution of Primal religious traditions in the formation of Indian religious world.

Thirdly, some theologians, preoccupied with doctrinal models, seem intent to impose a monotheistic interpretation of primal religious traditions. This view fails to understand the complexity of their belief systems and also neglects the sociological dimension and crisis of life inherent in them. One author goes on even to the extent saying that the monotheistic concept has been more responsible than any other concept for ecological and environmental crisis.¹ This is perhaps one of the most crucial problems of the day. However, in recent years there has been a growing awareness of various crises: the world-wide ecological crisis, the crisis brought about by the capitalistic market economy, and similar progress-laden systems, the fragmentation of human life, the “Cry for life”, the situation of poverty, hunger, and injustice. All these have attracted considerable attention among Christian theologians and scholars of other disciplines as well. And they have been challenged to reinterpret the

religious world of the primal/tribal society of India and elsewhere. These thinkers have emphatically shown the urgency to explore and creatively appropriate the rich resources in primal religious traditions for the enlightenment, enrichment and for building a more humane world.

In this process the Asur myth prevalent among the Oraons of Chotanagpur seems to be a useful resource for a viable liberative spirituality. The research problem is to identify in detail the interpretative meaning of the Asur Myth of the Oraons and elucidate from it a contemporary liberative Spirituality for the Primal peoples.

1.1.2 Elaboration of the Problem

The contemporary interest in the option for the poor and the promotion of justice and freedom demands spirituality for involvement and action in the world. The indispensability of myth in religion and myth being an important resource for spirituality has been amply presented by a Russian Philosopher Berdyaev in the following words:

Myth is a reality immeasurably greater than concept………. Behind the myth are concealed the greatest realities, the original phenomena of the spiritual life. The creation of myth among peoples denotes a real spiritual life, more real indeed than that of abstract concepts and of rational thought…………… Myth presents to us the supernatural in the natural, the supra-sensible in the sensible, the spiritual life in the life of the flesh, it brings two worlds together symbolically.²

The above statement, which relates myth with spirituality, considers myth as a unique way of apprehending reality. The above-mentioned thinker views the life of the Church as a myth created within history, and opines that the process of creating myths and symbols should continue. As a spiritual thinker and mystic, Berdyaev was concerned with themes like freedom (liberation), spirituality and eschatology.

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An Indian thinker Subhash Anand taking the example of Mahisa-mardana myth from the Indian epic opines that it is an adequate resource for developing liberation theme. This myth, like others in the epic, describes the Goddess slaying the buffalo-demon and brings the liberative action in relation to historical and theological matrix. In the context of primal religion the relation between myth and spirituality and between myth and liberation has not been attempted so far.

Biblical scholars, who take a positive attitude to myth, distinguish Biblical myth from other myths arguing that, whereas the former involves a new understanding of one’s self and calls for decision, the latter simply exhibits the marvelous works, lacking any demand for decision and commitment. This distinction seems arbitrarily normative.

In the process of understanding the concept of spirituality, to use ‘spirituality’ and ‘mysticism’ interchangeably confuses the issue. Philosophers of an idealistic temper denote the interior of religious life, while ignoring the exterior aspect which involves decision and commitment for action. In the midst of varieties of connotations, spirituality may be understood as the inner dimension of culture, which surrounds and underlies its religious expressions. Taken thus, spirituality is synonymous with world-views. Further, it adds another significant dimension when spiritual world seem to be violated by all that violates life (e.g. warfare), by whatever impedes the fruitful interaction of human beings (e.g. racism), by whatever negates human aspirations (e.g. injustice), by whatever traps people at the level of the phenomenal (e.g. poverty, acquisitiveness) and by whatever does not fully accept human’s incarnatedness.

The above description reflects that spirituality is a dynamic concept and phenomenon and not as static thing. This further implies that there is an attempt to go beyond a concern to acquire

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holiness and a sense of the presence of God through prayer, meditation and other religious practices. Thus there is a growing tendency to break out of the religious straightjackets. For this reason and with the concern of liberation for the oppressed and marginalized, the scholars suggest that a search of spirituality is inescapable even in the pursuit of scientific knowledge of society even when it rejects institutionalized religion.\(^6\)

Similar views have been put forward by other Christian theologians reflecting on Asia’s social and cultural geography. Asia’s reality is seen in terms of division in caste and class, prejudice and discrimination based in religion, race, ethnic origin, sex, the case of the tribal and indigenous peoples whose lands and forests are grabbed, ravaged, and flooded, and the people marginalized.\(^7\) This reality of Asia calls for the openness and responsibility from Christians and others, which would include discernment, evaluation and criticism (criticism of society, economic policies, political spheres, religions, churches, theologies and traditional spiritualities), and willingness and readiness to respond to significant realities and situations of import for life.\(^8\) There is critique of different kinds of spiritualities, such as of relief, reform, in favour of a liberative spirituality.

In the yearning and quest of life-affirming holistic spirituality, it is hoped that eco-feminist and the cosmic spirituality of the indigenous, tribal people can empower each other.\(^9\) It has been further observed that the spirituality of the indigenous people (of Asia, Africa, so also of Australia, Native America), seems to exude life-giving values: sacredness of land, reverence for all creatures, judicious use and conservation of earth’s resources, compassion for the weak, oppressed and marginalized, which can become a healing and transforming experience for all. As an illustration of it, it is aimed at exploring such life-affirming value in

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the Oraon version of the *Asur* Myth. A brief narration of the core of the *Asur* myth is necessary here.\(^{10}\)

_Dharmes_ (Supreme Being), inconvenienced by the large iron-smelting works of *Asurs* and Lodhars, sends word to minimize work, but is not obeyed. He then, in the disguise of a “leprosy boy” comes down to them, but is rejected by the proud and greedy *Asurs*. Taken in by a widow, he performs miracles and spoils the iron of the *Asurs*. Finally, through his own self-sacrifice in the furnace _Dharmes_ lures the *Asurs* to their doom. In the process the widows of the *Asurs* are turned into spirits; the oldest of them became _Cala Pacco_ or Lady of the Grove and was given the task of guarding all vegetation. These spirits have to be offered sacrifices by the people.

A brief narration of the *Asur* myth indicates a disruption of the harmonious relationship between humans, nature and God due to human disobedience and greed. The uncontrolled exploitation of the Mother Earth threatens the survival of creatures and creator alike, indeed of the whole cosmos. Ecological concern, establishment of priesthood, institution of the sacrificial system, origin of spirits, God himself as the actor in restoring the broken relationship (theological dimension) are some of the obvious elements of the myth. Thus, the important themes of the myth seem very close to the values of life of the indigenous people as described above.

At the same time the myth indicates the environmental degradation very much resembling the growing industrialization in contemporary Chotanagpur. This industrialization has been a major factor in the displacement of the indigenous, tribal communities, their exploitation,

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deforestation, and has been protested from time to time by various movements.\textsuperscript{11} Jharkhand movement is the latest of such efforts for the liberation of the exploited people and it indicates the self-assertion of the people. Indeed this may be seen as the culmination of movements, which were already initiated among different tribes of the region beginning from the 18\textsuperscript{th} century.

It has been observed that the Asur myth has kindled the religious imagination of the Adivasi people in recent times, and has empowered them to fight against the growing exploitation of their habitat by modern industry.\textsuperscript{12} From this it can be inferred that the elements of indigenous spirituality do have the power to transform the society, and that such spirituality may be best represented through liberation movements.\textsuperscript{13}

The Oraons are the second largest indigenous community of Chotanagpur plateau region and have played an active role in the movements. The non-violent Tana Bhagat movement initiated by Jatra Oraon in 1914-15 needs special attention here. Perhaps more than any other movement it has struggled for the land as a spiritual heritage of the tribals, and is still active in promoting a vegetarian food habits, in agitation against alcoholism and reclaiming the land to tillers which were lost to landlords due to non-payment of rent. Tana Bhagats had strongly resisted the realization of land tax, for they argued that land is the gift of God, hence should not be bought or sold. Rather, with a number of indigenous peoples, it can be affirmed that human beings do not own land, but land owns humans.\textsuperscript{14}

The above conviction that land is a spiritual heritage of humankind is central to the spirituality of several, including Australian indigenous peoples. This view has led Native

American Scholars to propose a new paradigm of theologizing for the indigenous people.\textsuperscript{15} It is argued that the Native American spirituality and existence are deeply rooted in the land, and hence conquest and removal from land is culturally and genocidally destructive. Thus out of their spiritual experience and praxis, Native American argue that God reveals God’s self in creation in space or place, not in ‘time’. Land has been a central issue in the liberation of the Native Americans, and it involves certain rituals and arts. The same can be inferred from illustrating such phenomena throughout the world.

There is evidence to indicate that the \textit{Asur} myth is recited along with the story of creation of the world during the important ritual of \textit{Danda Katta}.\textsuperscript{16}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure1.png}
\caption{Dharmes creating Golden Kilkila and the Kilkila diving into the water}
\end{figure}


\textsuperscript{16} P. Dehon, \textit{op.cit.}, pp.127, 131; The \textit{Danda Katta} ritual derives from the first part of Oraon Cosmogenic myth which describes the origin of humans and institution of some customs.
Danda Katta is an act of worship to Dharmes, performed expressly to obtain protection against evil.\textsuperscript{17} The ritual performer of the Oraon traditional religion addresses:

‘Neen Dharme akkun Neenim ra’dai’

'Now God you are the only one to save us' after failure of all efforts in overcoming illness or difficulties. The Christian Oraons address God with the same word Dharmes when they pray with thanksgiving and sing Halleluyah to Dharmes. One of the very popular Christian songs sung in the Oraon (Kurukh) language in traditional tune during marriage in the Church or in social gathering runs like this:

\begin{align*}
\textit{Hullonū nīn Dharmē ālārin kameckai,} \\
\textit{Unim jurī āārin nīnim kameckai!}
\end{align*}

\begin{align*}
\textit{Hullonū nīn Dharmē juri-pāntī nanj kai!} \\
\textit{Unim jurī ālārtī rajīn nindkai!}\textsuperscript{18}
\end{align*}

English Translation:

In the beginning You made human beings, O Dharme!
But a pair You did make them!

In the beginning You made them man and wife, O Dharme!
But with this man and woman You did fill the world!

\textsuperscript{17} Boniface Tirkey, \textit{Oraon Symbols}. Delhi: Vidyajyoti, 1980, p.27.
\textsuperscript{18} Boniface Tirkey, \textit{The Smiling Uraon}, 1989, p.54; \textit{Kurukh Dandi} (Church Hymn Book in Kurukh/Oraon Language), Ranchi: GEL Church in Chotanagpur & Assam, 2009, Song No.296.
This suggests that Asur myth is a living myth and the Oraon tradition itself is a living tradition in traditional as well as in neo-primal forms. Moreover, many scholars of religion affirm that a number of beliefs and values, primal world-views, that may be called ‘primal vision’, may survive the loss of its overt religious system and continue to provide at least part of its terms of reference in a new and more complex situation, indeed even within a new religious faith and practice.\(^1\) Thus as suggested, there is a clear correspondence between primal vision and indigenous spirituality. This can be further confirmed from the programmes of Sardar movement,\(^2\) initiated by Oraon and Munda Christian leaders for the protection of land of Chotanagpur tribals in the 19\(^{th}\) century. The movement was quite strong and had wide impact inspite of discouragement from Christian missionaries.

1.2.2 Importance of the Problem

There is a changing perspective on the meaning of myth in recent times: myth as far from opposed to scientific thought, as not pure fiction but as true story, as not against history rather complementary to it, as not against reality, rather as ‘means to express reality’. All these have inspired research in the area of myth. Thus scholars have been asserting that myth is the cornerstone of religion. In the context of primal religion, myth is thought to be the fountainhead of religion. Thus, for understanding the religious expression of a people as well as for investigating spiritualities underlying such religious expression, the study of myth seems indispensable.

The treatment of cosmogenic myth as paradigmatic, initiated by Van der Leeuw, and developed by Eliade, has inspired the scholarly world significantly. Eliade’s thesis of the ‘eternal return’, which means the cyclical recurrence of what has happened before, represents a significant aspect of the spirituality of the primal peoples, and helps to understand how it differs from the linear and progress-laden understanding of history by western people. Some scholars even argue that for many cultures, myths of creation are the linchpin which provides for them a basic pattern of living, building a village, raising a new house, celebrating the New Year, etc. This circular understanding of life is central to Native American wisdom or world-view. This circularity expressed through sacred hoop, the concept, the ritual, the art, the myth, which helps recover the feminine principle, the ecological balance, the relatedness, wholeness of life. The primal peoples are believed to have mythological thought, ecological wisdom, which considers the world as a living whole. On this basis it is suggested that Christian faith is likely to get advantage from the primal

people’s movement to remythologize life in terms of creating new images, stories, rituals to restore a sense of wonder at creation and to venerate creation’s holy source.\textsuperscript{24}

There is a growing tendency to remythologize or remythicize in social, religious as well as in political spheres. This has positive (constructive) as well as negative consequences. The scholars with a positive attitude to myth assert that the content of myth can be described only through mythical thought and not by any other means. The limitations of scientific language and the necessity of using the mythical language are to be seen in the biblical or other myths of creation.\textsuperscript{25} This implies that a myth of creation expresses dynamic qualities of reality which cannot be stated in rational terms. This proposal is a corrective to Rudolf Bultman’s theory of demythologization or existential interpretation of New Testament myths, which ‘attempted to strip away the trappings of cultural discourse from the biblical texts, effectively rendered them abstract ideas, divorced from the social conflicts in which they were uttered’.\textsuperscript{26}

Inspired by scholars like Norman K. Gottwald and with an approach of political hermeneutics and sociology of the Bible, Ched Myers argues that the ‘war of myths’ as it happened in Jesus’ struggle with the ‘powers’ of Roman Palestine continues today. The social and political struggles between groups are articulated in terms of “war of myths”.\textsuperscript{27}

Taking insights from the functionalist like Malinowski, the Jewish German Philosopher Ernst Cassirer viewed political myths as desperate means to certain ends when reasons failed.\textsuperscript{28} He takes the illustration of Hitler, the leader of Nazism who used the myth of the superiority of Nordic race. This had powerful destructive effects on the emotions of the German people

\textsuperscript{25} B.H. Throckmorton, op.cit., p.102.
\textsuperscript{27}Ibid., p.16.
leading to the killing of millions of Jews. An Indian Theologian, proceeding on similar lines, argues that in twentieth century there is a lot of myth politicized and politics mythicized. Within this category he puts the Ayodhya myth which tries to demonize Muslim community and others in order to establish a Hindu Rashtra, projected by Bharatiya Janata Party.\(^{29}\) This involves hegemonic, imperialistic thrust and corporatism. The Ayodhya myth or similar religio-political myths are seen as emotion-charged fantasies and have tremendous effect on the masses.

The above illustrations put forward the challenge to explore the power and function of myth in general and in the primal society in particular. Theologians of Asia argue that Asia’s myths and legends, poetry and drama, its symbols, philosophical writings and religious texts reflect Asia’s reality.\(^{30}\) They further provide rich resources for liberative spirituality. People’s stories of their struggle for life and wholeness inspire and invigorate those who seek a liberative spirituality.

Here comes the task of exploring such resources of spirituality among the Oraons who have been enslaved in different ways like exploitation, powerlessness, injustice and poverty. Apart from the socio-political, economic systems, even Christianity has been criticized by scholars for being a divisive factor in the tribal society.\(^{31}\) The Oraons have for instance, been divided in different church-denominations, and this, weakens people’s struggle for their liberation from exploitation. The above criticism does not solve the problem because the alternative to conversion is sought in conversion to other religions (Hinduism) only and no attempt is made to explore the indigenous resources.


At this juncture insights from the eco-feminists are of much help for the humankind. Many eco-feminists in their search of resources for cosmic spirituality, tend to reject the spirituality of traditional western Christianity for its dualistic, hierarchical, androcentric bias, and try to opt for the spirituality of the indigenous peoples. In the same way, the Hindu understanding of spirit in terms of its intrinsic otherness in relation to its “expression” can be distinguished from the holistic and communitarian understanding of reality by the indigenous/tribal people. It is argued that the spirituality of the indigenous, tribal people gives full values to creation as a dynamic and highly integrated web of life. This has not been sufficiently explored.

Since the Asur myth in its contents encompasses such a holistic vision of life, and this is a heritage of people of Chotanagpur, the myth can help the self-understanding of the people, their assertion of identity in relation to others, and hence can be a good resource for liberative “holistic” spirituality for liberation from various kinds of oppressions, domination and exploitation. Myth can be understood the “Prime” Bible for the primal society, as a means to express reality of life. It has been strongly suggested that it is through myth that one can enter into the investigation of primal world-views very effectively. Such study can aid in discerning the spirituality of the primal peoples in question.

1.3 Scope and Limitation

A short description of some of the important concepts and concerned topics need elaboration. The study will be limited to the State of Jharkhand to justify the objectives of the research.

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1.2.7  **Oraons and their place in Chotanagpur**

Oraons, having a population of over 2.6 million in India are concentrated in Chotanagpur. The Chotanagpur plateau is a rich source of minerals, and hence has attracted many industries like Tata Iron and Steel Company, Bokaro Steel City, Heavy Engineering Corporation Ranchi, and so on.

1.2.8  **Jharkhand Movement**

A movement initiated by the tribals of Chotanagpur for the upliftment (socio-economic) of the tribal people, later brought forth a demand for a separate State. Jharkhand was given the status of Statehood on 15th November, 2000. But the movement in a different form still exists. The primary leadership of the movement lies in personnel from major tribes like the Santal, Oraon and Munda. In recent years it has incorporated some non-tribal indigenous communities like **Sadaans**.

1.2.9  **Sarna Religion**

The traditional religions of the region are collectively called *Sarna* religion. *Sarna* literally means sacred grove, where the people generally worship and offer sacrifice. This adjective is prevalent in the Jharkhand region. *Sarna* religion is synonymous with Adivasi/Tribal religions in this sense.

1.2.10  **Tribe and Tribal**

By the word ‘*tribe*’ it is meant here the indigenous communities which are generally classified as Scheduled Tribes in the Indian constitution, irrespective of their religious affiliation. Historically, the term tribe has colonial and pejorative connotations to mean uncivilized, backward, Non-European. These are rejected here. However, due to the lack of an adequate alternative, and its extensive use in anthropological, historical as well as theological literature, occasionally the term ‘tribe’ is retained, which has basically a cultural connotation in this context. The tribes, and their members, called as tribals, are the ethnic
minorities as well as some of the earliest settlers of land. For example, Santal, Munda, Oraon, Kharia and Ho are the larger tribal/indigenous communities of Chotanagpur, popularly known as Jharkhand.

The researcher himself is a member of Oraon tribe and this tribe has its own language called Kurukh. Among the tribes, Oraons were the first converts to Christianity in the region. Yet majority of them still practice Primal religion on traditional or neo-primal forms.

1.2.11 Asur

Asur is the name of a tribe that inhabits the Netarhat plateau of Jharkhand. They speak an Austro-Asiatic language akin to Mundari and by profession they have been iron smelting people

1.2.12 Spirituality

Spirituality refers to the experiential dimension of religion in contrast with formal believes, external practices and institutions, it deals with the inner depth of the person that is open to the transcendent. Spirituality also means to allow the Spirit to function. Liberative spirituality refers to such phenomena and dynamic force which aims at liberative human being in time and space.

1.5 Objective and Hypothesis of the Study

The traditional pattern of the Study of Primal religion in general and that of Oraons in particular has left the endeavour of widening of religious knowledge with very little meaning in many contexts.

There has been growing demand to make research based on problems faced by the Oraon people. The theological community also has awakened for people-centered issues with possible solutions.
The objective of the present research is:

1. To study the contents and meaning of the Asur myth of Oraons in the context of Oraon and other tribal people.
2. To explore the power and function of myth in general and primal society in particular.
3. To assess the meaning of Spirituality inherent in the Asur myth prevalent among the Oraon people.
4. To explore life affirming values the Asur myth can provide for harmonious living.
5. To promote Ecological concern for Liberative spirituality and encourage balanced relationship between God, people and nature.

The research will be valuable addition to the world of knowledge and be a source of guide for action for humans including preachers, theologians, teachers, researchers, intellectuals in enriching knowledge about suffering of Oraon people and provide motivation for the liberation of the same.

1.6 Research Methodology

The present study is based on Library research. The researcher visited several libraries and research institutes and their libraries of which following can be listed with important materials in terms of literature: Tribal Welfare Research Institute, Ranchi, Regional and Tribal Language Department of the University of Ranchi, United Theological College Library, Bangalore, Mythic Society of India, Bangalore, Dharmaram College, Bangalore, Library of the University of Mysore, Bishop’s College Library, Kolkata, St. Albert’s College Library, Ranchi, Library of Gossner Theological College, Ranchi and the library of the Gospel and Plough School of Theology, SHIATS, Allahabad. In addition to important books, published and unpublished journals were consulted to get insight into issues of concern. For current discussions, internet was accessed and all kinds of print and electronic materials were perused in course of study.