CHAPTER-TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Historical Perspective of the Study

So far, no one has done research on myth as a resource for liberative spirituality. However, studies of the Primal/tribal society of Chotanagpur were earlier attempted by colonial administrators for their own purpose of subjugating the people responsible for violent tribal struggles seeking justice and liberation or work best known to them. The Christian missionaries, anthropologists, human rights activists, development planners, theologians and social scientists made sincere effort to understand the way of life and struggle, the faith system of the Oraon people and their neighbors. The growing concern for the holistic liberation of human-kind, studies of these societies were undertaken at various points of history with a historical perspective the literature will reveal.

1. One of the earliest literatures dealing with religious beliefs of the Oraon or Kurukh was reviewed by Ferdinand Hahn, a German Lutheran missionary working in Lohardaga, the heartland of Oraons in Chotanagpur for 25 years and he wrote Kurukh Grammar published in 1900. The book included religious beliefs and practices. Subsequently a book entitled Kunrukh Folk-lore in the Original, was first published by Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta in 1905 containing folklores, myths, legends and customs which included the Asur Myth prevalent among the Oraons. A critical text with translations and notes was later written by A. Grignard another European missionary in 1931 entitled as Hahn's Oraon Folk-lore in the Original : A Critical Text with

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*Translations and Notes*™ and was very important for scholarly study and analysis of the religion of the *Oraons*.

The first essay on the religious beliefs and practices of the *Oraons* depicted *Dharmes* as the supreme spirit of the *Oraons* whose abode is thought to be in the sun with whom the supreme Godhead is almost identical. This supreme spirit is not the centre of worship because it is so good whose adoration is generally not needed. But when all efforts of getting rid of any disease fails, then the worshipper(*Oraons*) turn in prayer to ‘*Dharmes*’ saying *Akkun ninim ra’dai*’ which means “Now the same rests with thee”. Vows are made in sickness, to *Dharmes* and sacrifices are promised to obtain recovery by his aid. The sacrifice consists of fowls and goats, which must be of *white* colour. At the beginning of the harvest time *Dharmes* is generally worshipped, a white fowl being sacrificed in his honour. Hahn depicts the celebration of *Sarhul* and *Karam* festivals with *Oraon*’s concern for ecological balance and respect for Mother Earth. In addition to the Lady of the Grove, the spirits of ancestors are venerated for well-being of the community and malevolent spirits, the priests and the sorcerers. The above information was recorded for the sake of training the missionaries who were expected to learn the beliefs and practices of the Adivasi/tribal people among whom they had to work.

More important for the present study are the records of the various myths of the *Oraon* people, such as Rain of Fire, *Asur* Myth, Story of Karma and Dharma, Dead ancestors and some historical legends of the migration of *Oraons*. These informations were recorded for the first time which became the bases of subsequent research by anthropologists, theologians and development workers.

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2. The posthumous publication of this paper by a Jesuit missionary from Belgium is another important writing dealing with the religious beliefs and practices of the people known as Oraons/Uraons. Next to the contribution of F. Hahn, it was certainly the study made by this Jesuit which threw more and detailed light on the belief system and practices of the Oraon community. After describing a history of the people, Dehon attempted the study of religion of the Oraons with four elements as follows:

   a) The worship of Dharmes or God
   b) The worship of Barnda – the avenging angel
   c) The worship of Cigri Nad – the spirits of Asur women whose husbands were destroyed by Dharmes.
   d) The cult of their ancestors

While describing the religious beliefs and practices, Dehon also recorded the Asur myth popular among Oraon people used in their religious ritual and social customs.

3. S.C. Roy, an advocate turned anthropologist devoted his time and labour in recording the beliefs and practices of tribal people mainly the Mundas, Oraon, Kharias and others in the process of helping the suffering people legal aid in protecting their land. His records of customary laws of the tribals are being used by law courts in redressing the land problems of the tribals. He recorded the Asur myth prevalent among the Mundas and Oraons showing how they were two neighbouring communities borrowing several elements from each other.

   Led by the prevalent evolutionary anthropological thought he described the religion of Oraons as animism, the lowest form of religion of humankind.

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4. Prof. Diwakar Minz, an indigenous thinker and follower of the traditional Oraon religion views Munda & Oraon religion as close to Hinduism with worship of several gods and goddesses like in Hinduism. While avoiding any discussion on absence of caste system in Oraon/Munda society, unlike caste-ridden Hindu society, he objects Christian missionaries/theologians’ depiction of Primal religion as monotheistic.

5. Boniface Tirkey, a Jesuit theologian has attempted to theologize the belief system and practices of the Oraons. The Asur myth for him is the work of redemption/salvation of the Oraon people initiated by Dharmes, the Supreme God of the Oraons. He strongly believes that Oraons are monotheistic and not at all inferior to any people professing religion, Christians, Hindus or others.

6. Another Catholic theologian Koonathan strongly presents the religion of the Oraons as monotheistic, against anthropologist’s view of animism.

7. John Lakra, strongly believes that Tribals are not Hindus and opines that Oraon religion should be seen and studied in its own right. He studies the spirituality of tribals as value of life for them and others too. He studies tribal myths of Chotanagpur and his studies open the way to explore the rich traditions of tribal myths.

8. The study by Fr. Prem Xalxo, another Catholic theologian unearths the ecological crisis facing tribal society and human society at large. The major focus of the study is on the right relationship with God, humans, creation and creatures. It brings out the powerful

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insight that human made ecological crisis the world is facing is the crisis of inter-relatedness. The study projects Asur myth as having the concern for ecological balance with God as the initiator in bringing the balance.

9. Francis Pereira in his book published in 2007 presents all known and available writings on Oraon religion in an encyclopedic volume. This is a valuable source for researchers for the study of original writings reproduced in printer form for the benefit of the public and intellectuals of different professions, lay and clergy as well.

10. The author Philip Ekka, S.J. situates the Asur myth in the ritual context of the worship of Dharmes, the Supreme God of Oraons. The study also explores the change and continuity in the religion of Oraons to keep the dynamic force of religion functioning. His posthumous publication of Ph.D. thesis from Oxford University situates the Tana Bhagat Movement of Oraons in a wider context of scholarship.

11. A pioneering work to record, classify and analyze the religions of the Tribal/Indigenous people of India was made by Henry H. Presler as early as 1971. The book entitled Primitive Religions in India by the author was an outcome of long research and patient study and used as a text book on the primitive religious type among India’s tribals for the theological colleges under the Senate of Serampore College (University). Henry H. Presler, serving on the faculty of the Leonard Theological College, Jabalpur, teaching History of Religions and Indian Culture was an important member of the executive committee of the International Association for the History of Religions and also its organizing secretary for India. Presler coming from the west and following the perspective of social science saw Primitive religions different from world religions.

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rather both portrayed as friends. Primal religions were seen inferior to historical world religions, though complementary to each other. He wrote, “It is partly due to the persistence of primitive religion that the great world religions also persist”. 48 The author failed to see what the primal religions could contribute to the world of religions or rather to the human knowledge and towards peaceful living. This was the failure on the side of the scholar or rather a theological bias when he declared that 'Primitive religion, aside from its fundamental surmises and its supernatural Reality, is in need of help from science, ethics and prophetic religions'. 49 However, it was good that he realized that the study of primal religions enlarges one’s understanding of one’s own theistic religion. The author could not come out of the pejorative term "primitive".

12. In the study of Primal religions, the insight from the book Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity published in 2004 50 is significant in providing a space for reconsideration of the subject. The book is as an outcome of an international conference on the said topic held in 1996 at the University of California, Davis. 51 Against those who claim that indigenous religions are irrelevant in modern societies and are fast becoming extinct, Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity argues for them as dynamic, progressive forces of continuing vitality and influence. 52 The book is a complete appraisal of indigenous religions as practiced across America, Africa, Asia and the Pacific today. At a time when local traditions across the world are colliding with global culture, it explores the future of indigenous faiths as they encounter modernity and globalization. The containing essays reveal the relevance of native religions to millions of believers worldwide, challenging

48 Ibid. p.308
49 Ibid. p.309
51 The present researcher had an opportunity to discuss with one of the participants Prof. Dr. Makhan Jha, the HoD, Anthropology, Ranchi University in 1997 about the deliberation of the said conference after it was concluded.
52 This opens the way to exploring deeper the spiritual traditions of the indigenous people world over.
the perception that they were vanishing from the face of the globe and demanding a much greater recognition.

The book rightly observed that classifying the religious studies into indigenous religions and world religions is arbitrary and this capricious bifurcation of religious scholarship fails to acknowledge the universality of religious systems of belief across the globe. It has pointed out the failure of existing scholarship in acknowledging very sacred spiritual traditions of Africa, the Americas, and Asia and wherever indigenous people inhabit the earth. The book has concluded that some academic perspectives of indigenous religious traditions are misguided. It would be not correct to categorize indigenous religions as “Little Tradition”. The book has observed that indigenous traditions like that of Sami people in Europe also survived centuries of Protestant missionary conversion campaigns. Sami religious beliefs continue to survive today.

13. The interaction between Christianity and Tribal religion was studied by a group of scholars ranging from various fields and from various geographical locations covering selected social groups. Among the areas covered by this important study include the Native Christianity in a New Guinea Village, Christianity and social Change among Tangkul Nagas of Manipur, “The Church in the Kond Hills (Orrisa),” and “Christianity among the Santals” and so on.

The first impact of Christian missionaries in tribal areas was felt by the Khasis of Assam (present Meghalya) in 1813, Oraons of Chotanagpur in 1850 and Bhils of Madhya Pradesh in 1880. As the Santals and Oraons are neighbors living in Jharkhand and surrounding districts of other states it is worthwhile taking note of the processed and result of Christian missions dealt with by this survey. Among the Santals, first missionaries reached in 1838 (American Free Will Baptist Mission) at the borders of

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54 Ibid.p.196
Bengal and Orissa. It was after Santal rebellion. It was the time when exploitation and oppression were most poignantly felt. The major breakthrough in the work was seen when in 1867, Mr. Boersen, a Dane and Lars Olsen Skrefsrud, a Norwegian, started the work after taking residence at Benagaria in Dumka sub-division. The author came with the observation that Christian impact on Tribal religion cannot be studied without referring to other spheres of life.

The Christian impact on Tribals was studied in the areas of:

a) Santal language and culture (an evangelical approach).
b) Spread of Education
c) Medical Care and Social Welfare.
d) Land Concerns – Question of Justice.

It has been observed that most of Santals were converted to Christianity to gain freedom from oppression. The missionaries said, “Show the Santals an interest in his land and you have found a way to his heart.” A similar observation was made by missionaries working among Oraons and Mundas.

One sociological problem was unearthed by the author. The most rooted objection, however, was the fast that the Christian method of evangelization often tended to draw the Santals out of their milieu, consequently posing a serious problem of tribal solidarity and making the converts fell insecure.

Santals have in constant interaction with Hinduism and Christianity. People's religious beliefs and practices (festivals, bongas, and rites of passage) bind the community together to the tribal spirits and their ancestors and thereby, their tribal solidarity is strengthened. In the midst of interaction with various dominant religions, the anthropologists expressed doubt of the survival of tribal religion. There is need to re-examine such anthropological assumption.

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56 Ibid.p.184.
57 Ibid.
58 Fidelis de Sa, Crisis in Chotanagpur, Bangalore: Redemptorist Publication, 1975.
14. One of the most recent accounts of Primal religion of India along with other religions is found in an effort to study "South Asian Religions" in the traditional form as well as in modified form. The book published in January 2013 starts with a new concept of ‘shared world’ putting Tribal religions in India, in the first place and continues with Hinduism, Jain Traditions, Buddhism in South Asia, South Asian Judaism, South Asian Christianity, and Islam in South Asia and concludes with Sikhism as practicing tradition today. The contributors are from various fields, such as social scientists, scholars of humanities, religious studies and Christian theologians.

The present book was conceived under the background of inaccessibility of text book on Eastern religions. It was taken as a challenge by the editors. More importantly, the unavailability of book on world religions text book that acknowledged the existence or the complexities of South Asian minority religious traditions was realized. The editors' main contention was that the textbooks to date contained a 'bias' in their lack of coverage of the minority religions of Islam and Christianity, while Sikkhism and Jainism received greater coverage; yet Muslims and Christians are much more numerous in India.

The present book rightly acknowledged that the Tribal/Primal religions very much contributed to India's pluralistic script, informing Hinduism and, in a different key, Islam and Christianity through the negotiation of past and present in the conversion process. It argues that a model of shared yet distinct paths, rather than a model of singularity was more relevant in the study of South Asian religions. The editors' approach emphasized building; it prioritized learning from others, especially in the sense of gaining insights from others. The work being called collaborative aimed at work done with others and not against them.

On the Primal/Tribal religions of India, Joseph Marianus Kujur the Assistant Research Director and Head of the Tribal Unit of the Indian Social Institute, New Delhi, follows the definition of the religions of the tribes in India as 'Adi', which literally means

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61 Ibid.p.3
62 Ibid.p.4
63 Ibid.p.5.
'beginning'. Following the definition of Dr. Ram Dayal Munda, the former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ranchi, Jharkhand names tribal religions in India as 'Adi-Dharam' which means the basis, the roots, the beginning (adi) of the religious beliefs and practices of the Adivasis, the first settlers of India. Such beliefs have been variously known as: animism, animistic religion, Adivasi or Janjati Dharam, Sarna Dharam, Sansari Dharam, Jahera Dharam, Bongaism etc. Father Kujur, himself a member of the Oraon community has three assumptions:

First, tribals, although demographically non-dominant in India, are culturally distinct from non-tribal groups and are threatened to be assimilated by dominant traditions; second, rather than their characterization by homogeneity, tribes are marked by their diversity and pluralism, and hence there are as many tribal religions in India as there are tribes; and third, religion is only one of the many aspects of tribal identity. Language, territory, social organization, economy, cultural ethos, philosophy, world view, political consciousness, arts and aesthetics, are other aspects of their identity.

Considering into Tribal epistemology, Kujur asserts that experience is the starting point to analyze hermeneutics of the tribal religious consciousness. To him oral tradition as encapsulated in the traditional myths is the foundation of Tribal epistemology. He has rightly observed that there is no dichotomization and compartmentalization of tribal religion and culture, and they are inseparably interwoven with beliefs and practices, rites and rituals, and signs and symbols. Myth transmitted from one generation to another over centuries, is an entry into the unthought and unthinkable. The spirituality of tribals can be understood in terms of their relationships with nature, one another, and the supernatural. The author affirms that this symbiotic relationship is harmonious and accommodative and not exploitative and oppressive. The author has also asserted that the tribals of India have firm faith in the Supreme Being. The author has critically reviewed the earlier notions such as 'Backward Hindus', 'spiritism' 'animism' and asserted the religious identity of each tribe of India with concrete examples from the Oraon and other

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65 Ram Dayal Munda, referred to by Joseph Marianus Kujur, Ibid.p.21.
66 Ibid.
67 Joseph Marianus Kujur, Ibid.p.26
68 Ibid.
tribal religions of Eastern and Central India. It is a significant contribution to the subject of present research undertaken.

Figure 3
Map of India Locating Jharkhand