Chapter VII

Transcending the Infinite: Looking Beyond the Traditional in the Anthropology of Religion

In the foregoing I have presented the Parsi culture with emphasis on practiced Zoroastrian religion. The ethnography deals with beliefs and practices pertaining to religion. Later the analysis is done in perspective of ‘Aims and Objectives’ of the study. ‘Aims and Objectives’ were framed after analyzing secondary data, which was given in comprehensive manner in third chapter. As expected from any exploratory study, the most seducible phase was the analysis. Though, the analysis is done for Parsi community, but I would say that it not only holds true for Parsis but for other communities as well.

In the introduction I have presented various definitions of religion from different academic perspective. As said, those definitions of religion are not complete in themselves. I think there can not be one definition which can universally define religion. Religion is viewed from different perspectives and defined in that manner. That is the perfect way of dealing with something which is so vast and mystic. One aspect which I felt was missing in traditional way of defining religion was the, perspective of non-believers. There was no mention of non-believers in any context. The definitions seemed to incorporate believers and partial believers as one group and talked about them. Perhaps it was assumed that religion could only be viewed from the perspective of believers and partial believers. Non-believers are part of culture; they influence, and are influenced by religion in one form or the other. At the end of my thesis I do not intend to redefine religion because I think holistic definition of religion is extremely difficult to frame. Like in previous definitions, I might concentrate on one aspect more which will bias the definition. In this thesis I am more interested in giving perspective on religion.

Religion is very much part of culture and no human being can remain unaffected from it. Considering this context, we cannot overlook religion from the perspective of non-
believers. In my analysis I have presented data from the perspective of believers, partial believers and non-believers, shown in Table 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, and 7.4; and Illustration XVI. The terms I have used here are from *etic* perspective. From *emic* perspective Parsis might not agree to this distinction between believers and partial believers. I have divided partial believers into – orthodox partial believers and reformist partial believers. These terms are written from *emic* perspective and most Parsi can relate to either orthodox or reformist group. There is a thin line between orthodox partial believers and reformist partial believers, which I have discussed in the analysis.

*Illustration XVI - Analysis*

As Berger and Luckmann in their theory of ‘Social construction of reality’ talked about – correspondence between ‘my meaning’ and ‘their meaning’ (Berger and Luckmann: 1967, 37); it won’t be wrong to say that the same holds true for religion. There is a difference between individual religion and social religion. Not that it is a new concept; many scholars have talked about personal religion and social religion while defining religion from the perspective of psychological and sociological theories. I have not come across any study which talks about the difference from the perspective of non-believers. In the analysis I have talked about the personal and social religion of the community.
members. There is a difference in personal and social religion which influences social structure of any community.

Considering the number of Parsis are a few thousands and are located in Mumbai, which can be called ‘melting pot of cultures’. It was interesting to study the small community from this perspective to come up with results. The reason which makes the study of this community interesting is the cosmopolitan environment. In my interaction with people of Mumbai, I have realized that the number of non-believers is increasing, especially among the educated younger generation. People are unsure about the existence of God. Not that religion is unimportance in their lives, but it definitely takes a secondary position. The same is true for Parsis. For most young people religion takes a secondary position. That is how I could find some people who were non-believers.

The analysis clearly shows that there is a distinction between believers, partial believers and non-believers especially while deal with personal and social religion. Considering the analysis of the data, I would say that non-believers and partial believers are the ones who bring in change in the social structure and functioning, the example of which are given in analysis. Personal religion and social religion affects and is affected by all the three segments of the society. Personal religion only influences believers and partial believers. Social religion influences all the three segments - believers, partial believers and non-believers. Though we cannot analyze personal and social religion as distinct entities, one influences the other. In case of non-believers, it is the social religion which affects them more and is affected by them, which results in change in the community.

Personal religion has no direct effect on the social structure but indirectly brings in change. It is on the basis of personal religion, an individual acts on social religion. Social religion also defines the religious identity of an individual. The acceptance and excommunication in the community is defined on the basis of social religion. Boundaries are always made on the basis of social religion in everyday life. In theory, personal religion is always given importance but it is social religion which gives religious identity to an individual.

Change in personal religion at everyday level is easily made as compared to change in social religion. People follow social religion as much as they can, to avoid criticism.
They want acceptance in the society and to be appreciated by fellow men. On the other hand, personal religion remains a matter of choice. An individual is not answerable to anyone, which makes accepting change easily. Moreover, acceptance and rejection in the community is based on social religion as compared to personal religion. Social religion defines criteria for boundary making and excommunication. Change in social structure is brought in by changing norms of social religion. If personal religion of majority of community members is strong, the change is rejected and is lost. On the other hand, if personal religion is not strong enough, the change is accepted by a few people and in a few years it becomes part of the everyday life.

According to many of my informants, religion may be referred to a sense of the infinite since they often refer to it as being limitless, unbounded etc. However, in the everyday of the Parsis people often follow rules different from those that were dictated by the religion, especially the book view. These rules are broken not because of any wanted willfulness of the people but because of contingent everyday situations that impinge on their lives. People extend the meaning of their everyday lives beyond the existing limits of Parsi religion as it exists today. Yet in trying to maintain a uniquely Parsi way of life, they transcend even the infinite limitlessness of their religion. Depending on everyday practical necessities that religion becomes part of culture or remains separated.

When we look at Parsis, the above idea holds true and I have explained it in detail during my analysis. It won’t be wrong to mention that such an analysis could perhaps be extended to a study of all small communities if not large ones.

Perhaps it is important that personal and social religion is seen from the perspective of believers, partial believers and non-believers because all of them are integral part of the society and influence the social structure by bringing in change in personal and social religion. I would suggest that for future studies on religion, the perspective of non-believers should also be considered for holistic perspective.