

Religion and Society

DEFINITION AND CONSTITUENTS :

In the primitive days there were mysteries and queries that the men experienced which remained unknown and unexplained for a long time. The people began to believe in some supernatural spirit beyond the control of man and this was conceived as the all powerful divinity. Religion is generally understood as a belief that explains supernatural spirit which is over and above everything else. E.B. Tylor defined Religion : 'Religion is the belief in supernatural beings'. This simple definition is not always accepted as an absolute one.

Durkheim offered the definition of religion from another angle. He categorised everything in this world into two—sacred and profane. To him sacred is related to supernatural. And he feels all the sacred things are also found inside the society, so to him, "*religion at its most profound level means society's worship of itself.*"

Malinowski defined religion taking a functional position, "*Religion is a mode of action as well as a system of belief and a sociological phenomena as well as a personal experience.*"

A shift and development took place in respect of definition of religion in the end of twentieth century.

Clifford Geertz in his essay 'Religion as a cultural system' gave an elaborate definition: "Religion is a (1) system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long lasting moods and motivation in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an area of factuality that (5) the mood and motivations seem uniquely realistic."

Thus, in recent anthropological studies religion is being seen from some other aspects, the interest in understanding cosmologies is developing.

While modern man aims at investigations into the causal connections between natural phenomena and human history, by observing every details logically, the early man was tied to dogmas based on emotional beliefs which were blind in most occasions. Belief, emotion and superstitions were the early substitutes for modern rationalism. Hence, early religions revolved around these elements.

The constituents of religion are as follows:

BELIEFS :

Durkheim's social theory of religious life provides that religion is mainly composed of 'belief' and 'rites' i.e. 'beliefs' about sacred things and rites addressed to them. Primitive religion was based on belief in an impersonal, invisible, unknown power. The conception of power varies from one group to another. For example, The Ho people believed in an all pervading life force that flows behind every object of nature, be it good or evil. Lodhas on the other hand believe in the existence of a 'God' who has a humane appearance—He is as tall as a human being, his body is covered with hair, he has wide eyes and he carries an axe in his hand. Whereas, The Korwa of the Sarguja forests believe that man can transform himself into animals, that the ancestors whom they imagine in stones, rivers and trees, that all these can speak with man and everything is actually living beings. Thus, belief is some understanding which can not be empirically proved or argued, it is just kept and maintained in the mind of the people through rituals and customs practised in society.

RITUALS :

Ritual is understood as the practical aspect of religion. D.N. Majumder and T.N. Madan observed, "*Ritual consists in the observance, according to a prescribed manner, of certain actions designed to establish liaison between the performing individual and the supernatural power, or powers*". Religious beliefs are concerned with sacred things, their origin, behaviour and significance for man, while the 'rituals' are actions performed in relation to those sacred things. For example, Mahalis worship 'Gorum Thakur' and 'Jugini Devi' in the month of Magh (in winter), prayers are offered to them so that, there is no outbreak of epidemics and they can live peacefully. This special prayer is a 'ritual' and the faith that the respective God will ensure their peaceful existence is the 'belief'. The Bhumij people perform 'Dhulla Puja' in the first month, every year, For the benefit of the village. chickens, goats, sweets, milk etc, are offered in the name of 'Gram Thakur'. In the same community, there is another ritual to be performed by the head of the family in each home. 'Garai Thakur' is worshipped in the month of Kartik (in Oct-Nov.) for the growth of cattle power, a teak pole is planted in the cowshed and head of the family offers a chicken in the name of the God. In every religion, ritual and belief supplement each other, both are equally important to understand the meaning and implication of specific religion.

SUPERSTITIONS :

The term implies faith in supernatural and a related fear for the unknown. Rituals are the practical aspects of religion and superstition means blind and repetitive practice of rituals without always considering the relevance of those or understanding the relations between the ritual and philosophy of the religion. Erroneous conception of reality by primitive man has clouded his vision and the superficial association of things in primitive mind causes errors of action. Another point is to be noted that, superstition is not always related to the concept of religion only, it may have socio-cultural implications without any direct religious implication. Also superstition is having a negative impact on society, rituals are to respect the positive power of

invisible spirit. Superstition leads to unnecessary fear, negative feeling, loss of confidence etc. Superstition usually ends up in the formation of a taboo. An example can be taken from the Kharia tribe. Once a Kharia woman came back from her father's place at night, and next morning it was found that her child and husband were caught with a serious illness. This gave birth to a superstition that whenever the women return from their father's place they may bring some infections. This led to the emergence of a ritual that without ceremonial purification no woman is to be accepted in the family after she comes from her father's place. Ultimately, among them, it is a taboo that any person coming from some other village should pass through the process of purification.

TABOO

The word 'taboo' has been taken from Polynesian vocabulary, meaning 'to forbid' and 'forbidden'. In every group of tribal people some behaviour is forbidden so that social order remains intact. These are almost like verbal laws which were having three major functions— a) Protective, b) Productive and c) Prohibitive.

The protective taboo is generally applied on the weak children, women or old people so that they do not fall in any problem. In some cases men also remain away from certain places, actions or objects so that they can be secured to certain extent. Among some of the tribes the killing of a particular animal is forbidden because those animals are useful for the society, and those should be protected and the entire group can be protected from being led towards danger due to the loss of that animal.

Productive taboos are those which are mainly connected with agricultural production. If the women are not allowed to touch the plough it may indicate that, this particular agricultural work can not be done properly without physical strength which is available in men only. Thus, for the perfection in production such productive taboos are made.

Protective and Prohibitive taboos are almost the same. Prohibitions are made to protect people from some evils or to protect that particular animal or plant from the interference of man. Often the question of purity is raised in respect of a behaviour or action which is prohibited for a particular individual or a group. The Todas of the Nilgiri hills do not permit their women to enter the dairy and Gonds of the Madhya Pradesh do not touch a woman during her menstruation period, for they believe in the first case the dairy products will be spoiled and in the second case the prospects of harvest will be destroyed. Probably, on a particular occasion the involvement of women with such action spoiled the job and from then the prohibitive measures have been taken or initially the prohibition was implemented to protect the women during the time of their physical weakness and of late it turned into a taboo. The exact reason is not known to us but prohibitive taboos are more or less similar to protective taboos.

There are several examples of protective, productive and prohibitive taboos. When the new crop is tabooed before it is ceremonially offered to the goddess of corn, it is the productive taboo. When the tribal chief is tabooed so that no person can touch him or come in contact with him, it protects his person against harm. A Kharia woman who is married outside the village cannot enter the cattle shed of her parents house or of any other's house, this is a prohibitive taboo to safeguard the animals from any disease or other harm.

Taboos are meant to safeguard ritual operation from the religious side. They protect religious persons and places of worship and to prevent any pollution in religion. It is believed among Nagas of Assam that a place or a person is made taboo by supernatural displeasure. From social aspect, taboo is having a special use. Often we find the taboo is aimed to create a desirable situation. For example, the taboo forbidding social and sexual relationships between brother and sister saves the society from some major complications. The elder brother is taboo to younger brother's wife, he is 'fear' to the korwas, the elder brother under no circumstances can approach the younger brother's wife, and can never be on speaking terms with the latter. The marriage timings are fixed in many tribal societies considering the climatic condition and the harvesting season. Marriages in other times are tabooed in those societies. Among the Mundas a custom of divine marriage between Sun God and the nature is observed in the spring, after this only the other marriages are celebrated, the period of marriage comes to an abrupt end immediately before the rains set in and the sowing operations begin. Thus a taboo regarding marriage dates are present there which is having a material purpose to serve in the life of local people.

The utilisation aspect of taboo provided the basis of social control among the primitive people. The sanctity of the taboos could be maintained by associating with religion and the supernatural forces. The concept of power shaped by the priests, magicians Sorcerers and sometimes the tribal chiefs provided the sanction of taboo though it originated out of fear, imagination, illusion, ultimately it began to serve some useful social purpose. The mechanism of social control could easily be operated by taboo as in small, localised societies, the identification of the offender was not at all difficult. Other correctives to social behaviour in primitive cultures like omens, oaths, ordeals, dreams, divination and the like do not have similar sanction like the taboos, but these are also visited for the purpose of social control.

All the social ceremonies like birth, pregnancy, sowing and reaping etc. are carefully protected against the 'evil eye' by wearing amulets, charms, fixing auspicious hours and in other ways. The failures, sufferings, disappointments are also believed to have happened due to some evil forces and the situations in which those happened are attempted to be avoided. The Veddhas of Ceylon leave the house where death has occurred. Fever among the Korwas of Mirzapur is caused by Bhowan and a promise of some sacrifice or offering to this malignant spirit is expected to effect a complete cure. A diseased person or a pregnant woman may sometimes be tabooed as it is believed that their presence may cause discomfort to others.

Radcliff- Brown opined taboo is one of the various social mechanisms by which social order and stability can be maintained. These are essential for the survival of the society as restrictions imposed on people develop values and awareness among them. These are the symbols of negative actions and influences in society and with the help of such symbolic practices the people can develop social solidarity, faith in power and sometimes economic needs of the society are taught to them.