

# **Doing Theology with the People of Primal Religion in India: Absence of Hymns and Praises to God has a Theological Reason in the Ancestral Religion of the Santals**

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**D**oing theology with the poetic traditions of India is being promoted, these days, through seminars and workshops in our country. The aim of the seminars is said to be stimulating participants in doing theology with the poetic traditions of India. Historically the poetic traditions of every people in this world are closely connected with the advance in civilization, literary activities (invention of writings) and the social organization, which never evolved uniformly in terms of time and space in the history of humanity. Those people, who in the earliest days of human history formed monarchical type of society and invented the art of writings have many hymns to kings and to god/s for explaining ruler-ruled and creator-creation relationship. In this class of people we may name Egyptians, Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonians and the Hebrews in the ancient West Asia and in India Aryans and the Dravidians.

Doing theology with poetic traditions of India is in fact a relevant challenge to us. But before 'doing history' let us turn our attention for a moment to the word 'theology' itself. The word is mainly used by Christians. It has become a very comprehensive word. Academically it includes everything that is taught in training for church ministry (i.e. including the biblical languages, church history, homiletics, comparative religions, Christian apologetic writings, explanation of Christian concepts by an individual, e.g., theology of Chenchiah etc.) These days theology is rarely used solely of the doctrine of God himself/herself as the etymology of the word would suggest. However, to be proximate to the etymological meaning of the word, we use the word "theology" in this paper as 'denoting about God and his/her relation to the world and all created beings'. It is only in this context we say that the absence of hymns and praises to God among the people of primal religion has deep theological reason.

In India the people of primal religion, namely the tribals do not have any impressive poetical traditions from ancient days as their most advanced neighbours, the Aryans and the Dravidians, have.

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The tribals have only some short lyrics or songs mostly of one or two short verses tuned to dancing rhythm. But in most cases their ancient songs do not have any trace of praise to God as we have them in the Old Testament or in the ancient Hindu literatures.

People (the tribals) have sung songs about their relationship, among parents, children, relatives, about young people, the beauty of nature, flower, birds and animals, human occupations of agriculture, hunting, fishing and other labour, their oppression by others, some fights and battles, disappointment and simple joys of life.<sup>2</sup>

What does the absence of hymns and praises among these ancient people mean? Is it due to their long primitiveness, or is it a theological lapse, or is it due to their theological depth? To understand the reason, careful exploration of the ancient tribal mind is called forth.

A fair number of Christians belonging to any denomination from Bihar to the North East India are from the tribal background. In recent years they also have started explaining their Christian faith through their ancient traditional religious concepts and terminology for the benefit of their own people, just as other Christians in India under Indian Christian Theology (a misnomer!) have explained Christian concepts through Hindu religious and terminology. At this point it should be fair to note that unfortunately Hinduism is as foreign to tribals as Christianity and Islam are to them. However, finding the teaching of Jesus close to their primal beliefs many tribals have enthusiastically become followers of Jesus in faith.

To clarify the proposition that the absence of hymns and praises to God among the people of primal religion has a deep theological reason, let us take up, for example, the case of a single largest homogenous Mundari speaking austric group of people, namely the Santals. They are about sixty lacs<sup>3</sup> in number scattered over Orissa, Bihar, West Bengal and Assam, in India and, in smaller number in Nepal and Bangladesh. They have fully developed culture and well defined administrative system of their own from very ancient time.<sup>4</sup>

They are non-idol worshippers. They believe in one supreme being who has no consorts nor a son, and also in the existence of other supernatural beings of whom some are good and the others evil supernatural beings. The people have no temple, no shrine, no regular worship in any definite place. They have no place of pilgrimage nor any mountain or river or animal to revere as Holy. Their places to show their reverence to the supreme being and his/her associates is anywhere under the sky within the boundary of their abode and the open air sanctuary of each Santal village surrounded with some trees, called the *Jaher Than*. That God is spirit and is approachable from anywhere has been known to the Santals from time immemorial.

Their religious faith include all the essential elements of so called developed religion (e.g., God, creation, theodicy, sin, judgement, retribution, grace, heaven, etc.) yet more civilized people have dominated their religion with all sorts of names such as animism<sup>5</sup>, spiritism<sup>6</sup>, and Bongaism<sup>7</sup>. They have no official founder of their religion. They have no deified incarnation either, nor they have any scriptures to keep themselves indoctrinated by. As such they have tremendous freedom of mobility in this pluralistic world in adopting and adapting '...whatever is true, honourable, lovely, excellent, pure and gracious' (cf. Phil. 4:8). The root of their religion originates from beyond any historical period, hence their religion is the primal religion.

Their political past history had been a history of being oppressed and despised, being dispossessed and driven out of their land<sup>8</sup> by the Aryan group of people until they came into the notice of the then British rulers in India<sup>9</sup> in about 1795<sup>10</sup>, and who gave them protection to settle down permanently in places wherever they were all through India.

In the past neither Hindu nor Christian missionaries were interested in converting the Santals<sup>11</sup>, as they are now in the recent years. Protestant missionary work among the Santals of Santalparganas was started from 1867 and that of the Roman Catholics from 1930<sup>12</sup>. According to available data only four to five percent of the total population of the Santals in Santalparganas is Christian<sup>13</sup> and only fifteen percent of the population of Santalparganas is literate.<sup>14</sup>

With this brief introduction to the Santals, let us come back to the theme that the absence of hymns and praises to God among a people has a theological reason, it is not a theological lapse. Santals do not have ancestral hymns and praises to God like those of the Hebrews and the Hindus. (This may be true of all other tribals in India). In their rich cultural traditions there have been songs such as referred to above. Why is there complete silence of hymns and praises to God in the ancient Santal community could only be understood by exploring their concept of God. In exploring this we shall keep in mind what James H. Cone has said:

Although revelation of God may be universal and eternal, theological talk about that revelation is filtered through human experience which is limited by social realities.<sup>15</sup>

The Santals never evolved a monarchical type of society where the ruler was looked upon as the custodian of one's security and welfare, holding absolute power to punish and reward. On the contrary the Santals continued in the egalitarian society, consciously or unconsciously holding a practice in equal rights, benefits and opportunities for everybody in the community. This may be the reason

why the Santals could not conceive of God like an ancient earthly King, surrounded by nobilities, for whose amusements and entertainments professional singers sang song of eulogy often bordering sycophancy and before whom dancers danced with all artistic movements to please him/her— a common phenomenon found in all ancient monarchical society; a human social reality which might have contributed in understanding God differently in the monarchical society than the understanding of God by the people who never evolved a monarchical type of society.

The Santals, on the contrary, conceived of God solely as a father as is evident from their epithets to the supreme being as *Serma Baba*, father in/of heaven, or *Chando Baba*, father of the sun and moon (father in the sense of symbolizing power and authority over). Their prayer begins and ends with *Joha bapu Thakurtin do*, greetings to my father, the Supreme being. The epithet is of course drawn from a social analogy but is redolent of some theology. A father, any father, does not require of his children to sing his praises before him like an ancient earthly king of the people with all eulogies. To do so would be embarrassing to a father or even to a mother. Neither a father wants his children to dance for him with singing to amuse him. To the contrary a father always wants his children to be happy and joyful. He likes them to be seen singing and dancing to themselves, which in fact is an outward expression of inner satisfaction and happiness of a harmonious human life. Hence we may assume that the analogy, God as father concept propelled the tribal mind to develop singing and dancing for themselves and not for God/s.

To the tribals, the people of primal religion, the supreme being (God) is a father, not a king of the kind of the ancient monarchical human community. He is a unique father of all, self existing self supporting. He does not require any one's service for himself as an earthly king would, rather he serves the needs of all that he has created and at the same time expects his children to help and serve the needs of one another. He does not need eulogies. He is a considerate father who desires his children to live happily and share one another's burden within the boundary of his laws which are only ethical and moral laws.

Therefore, keeping in mind the concept that to the tribals God is father (by analogy) and not a king or "rajah" and that 'theological talk about revelation is filtered through human experience, which is limited by social realities', we can safely conclude that the absence of praises and hymns among ancient tribals in India shows the magnitude of theological comprehension of the people of primal religion. The ancestors of the people of primal religion might have realized that 'the more words about God, the more vanity' (cf. Eccl.6:11).

We cannot even postulate that the people who have hymns and praises to God have more profound understanding of God or that they are more close to God than the people who do not have them. The case may be just the reverse. 'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor or who has given a gift to him that he may be repaid?' (Rom. 11:34-35).

In doing theology with the poetic tradition of India, attention is always drawn to the Psalms of the Old Testament as paradigm. It is somehow, one feels, as leading some one to temptation. Study of the Psalms tells us that 'Old Testament Psalms are cultic expression of doctrine. Psalms were used as liturgy in their temple worship and that their worship consisted of sacrifices'.<sup>16</sup> Further we are told that some of the leading theologians in the Old Testament itself did not consider Israelite sacrificial worship whose integral part the Psalms were, of the highest grade of worship. Jeremiah flatly denies that Yahweh ever commanded Israelite to revere him with sacrificial offerings (7:22ff) and Amos asks people not to bring sacrifices to God and to sing to him, instead only follow his ethical and moral commands. These objections to sacrificial worship whose integral part the Psalms were, have received support from other great thinkers of the Old Testament such as Is. 1:13-14, Hos. 6:6, Mic. 6:6-8, Ps. 40:6, 51:16-17, though their objections and suggestions regarding worship never prevailed over the people of the Old Testament, for reasons best known to them.

One may say that behind these objections to sacrificial worship whose integral part was singing of Psalms, there was theological reason. Truly there was, but what was that theology? Was it only to remind the people that sacrifices accompanied by appropriate psalms (liturgies) are not the end of worship? If so, are they not redundant appendage to human life prescribed for communion with God? Were these thinkers not expressing dissatisfaction with the form of Old Testament worship? And consciously or unconsciously indicating with their sayings the desirability of going back to the primal form of communion with God?; which was there with all humanity prior to the rise of monarchical type of society—to the form of communion with God which still is found among the people of primal religion in India?

Biblical poetry like Job and Ecclesiastics are really theological treatise grappling with the unending universal question of theodicy and the creator-creation relationship. Whereas Psalms with few exceptions are mostly descriptions of either individual experiences or national experiences that have come out of definite historical situation in to which a modern person can only artificially enter to make them his/her own.

While doing tribal/primal theology one should always ask why some of the so called religious concepts and expressions are totally absent from the primal religion and try to see the theology behind them. Only then a tribal/primal theology would emerge rooted in primal thought and concept itself. A theology based on borrowed experience and social realities will be entirely an artificial mechanical repetition of theology for a people who never had that kind of social realities and experiences. We may, for example ask that how far it will be realistic to expect all people to understand God the way the Psalms of the Old Testament understood him? Can a people outside the Hebrew community of the Old Testament share the thrills of joy which the latter experienced in their social political life and for which they have showered praises to God?

The claim of the Old Testament for the Hebrew people are unparalleled among human history. It claims them as a people who have done themselves nothing under the sky, everything was done for them by God. It was God who chose and protected their ancestors. He like a mighty king delivered their ancestors from the clutches of Egyptians pharaohs. He led them out of slavery, gave them laws and regulations relating social, religious, political, judicial, ritual and cultic activities and the temple plan. He ordained their hierarchical priesthood, he sent rules and regulations for offerings and sacrifices and gave them directions for the appointment of kings and criteria for judging true and false prophets. Then he gave them a land defeating the inhabitants of that land. He gave them judges to protect them from their enemies and kings to protect the territory and rule over them. He fought for them and gave them both victory and defeat, and for better communication of his will to them he gave them prophets. What a tremendous social realization! Naturally a people experiencing so much of God's favour and guidance will burst forth in praising God with hymns and praises and approach him with prayers and offerings as prescribed by him to them.

But what about the people whose social realities have never experienced God the way Old Testament Hebrews experienced him/her? Can they sing praises and make poems the way of the old Testament has made for God? Ancient social phenomenon shows that in a theocratic country like that of the Hebrews praises fluctuated between God and God's anointed one, the earthly king. Hence the form of praises, hymns and prayers to God in the Old Testament are different from the form of prayer to God of the people of an egalitarian society like those of tribals in India. Now to imitate the form of the former by the latter for the advancement of theology will just be a mechanical imitation of theology. Theology and worship borrowed from and based on others' experience cannot be termed as

indigenous theology. If tribals are to help theologically their own people they need to first identify their own primal theology, for God has been known since creation to them (cf. Rom. 1:20), (please note here that tribals in India do not share in what is said, in general, in Rom. 1:21-24) and then proceed to present Christian theology. The suggestion 'you in your little corner and I in mine' is a helpful suggestion to begin with in making theology in our present context of ecumenical pluralistic community.

God's father figure is not as prominent in the Old Testament as his kingly figure is. In the teaching of Jesus God's fatherly figure is more prominent than his kingly figure. In fact Jesus does not refer to God directly as king. His reference to God as king is analogical and mostly in the context of judgement (cf. Math. 22). Rather Jesus' reference to God as father are direct and numerous. God is father, Jesus taught, who knows 'what you need before you ask him.' (Math. 6:9) and he warned '...in praying do not heap up empty phrases...; for they think that they will be heard for their many words' (Math. 6:7 cf. Eccl. 5:2).

The primal religious concept of God as father who does not require cajolery with eulogies come close to the teaching of Jesus on God. In an utter helpless situation a Santal may be heard crying *Haere Chando cedak'em bagiadiña*, O God why have you left me alone (cf. Math. 27:46). At other times his/her prayer is simple and this worldly much close to the Lord's prayer. Consider for example the following prayer, which the village priest on behalf of the village community offers at the time of their seed sowing festival.

Salutation to you creator father *Thakur (Jiv)*, *Jaher Era*, *Marang Buru* and others. In the name of the sowing festival, we are offering sacrifice to you so that we may sow in one quarter and in twelve quarters these may flourish in a bumper crop. Let the wind bring rains. Let rain shower in profusion. Let no diseases visit the villages such as colic pain, headache and bowel complaints. Carry these disease away from the direct harm of the people. Let our cattle increase in number. Protect them from the attacks of wild animals. When they will frequent the jungles, father my *Thakur Jiv*.<sup>17</sup>

People of tribal/primal religions have prayers to God such as mentioned above, which show their absolute dependence on God, but no hymns and praises to God. The reason for this is their theological association of God with the father figure, the symbol of protection, and guide who has held authority over members of a family in the ancient egalitarian human community. The association of God with the father figure did not provide any room to the ancestors of the tribal/primal religion to make any hymns and praises to God,

like other ancient people who had theocratic/monarchical community from ancient days. Therefore, the absence of hymns and praises to God among the people of tribal/primal religion should not be conceived as lapse of theology, rather it should be conceived as presenting some deeper theology. As much theology is present in the presence of hymns and praises of a community to God, so much theology is present in the absence of them in another community. The absence of some biblical concept and practices in the tribal/primal religion should not be glossed over while making tribal/primal theology, for in them lies concealed the theology of the tribal/primal religion.

## References

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13. *Ibid.*, p. 265, n.55.
14. V. Manuel Raj *op. cit.*, p. 15.
15. James H. Cone, 'The Social Context of Theology' in *Doing Theology*, ed. C.S. Song, Madras, CLS., 1976 quoted from M.E. Prabhakar, 'The Search for A Dalit Theology', in *Towards A Dalit Theology*, ed. M.E. Prabhakar, Delhi, ISPCK., 1989, p. 44.
16. Ronald E. Murphy, O. Carm, "Psalms" in the *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Raymond E. Brown, S.S. et. al., Bangalore, Theological Publication in India, 1968, p. 575. Also W.O.E. Oesterly, *The Psalms*, Vol. I, London, SPCK., 1939, pp. 1-2. The Psalms In The Jewish Church, London, Skeffington & Son, 1910, pp. 110ff. S. Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, Vol.I., Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1967, pp. 13-14, 61ff.
17. Cf. Mukherjea, *op. cit.*, p. 234. *Thakur Jiv* is the name for the Supreme being in Santali. *Jaher Era* & *Maran Buru* are the supernatural beings who took part in the act of creation at the command of *Thakur Jiv*.