

BOOK REVIEW

The Santals, Anthropological-Theological Reflections on Santali and Biblical Creation Traditions

by *Dr. T. Hembrom*, Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1996. pp. xii+287

This book is a thoroughly revised doctoral dissertation submitted to the Senate of Serampore College (University) in 1991. In it the author, a professor of Old Testament at Bishop's College, Calcutta, attempts to discover how the ancient Santal's world view and belief systems regarding the origin of creation and human-kind help us in our understanding of the role and goal of humanity in today's world. This is done by exploring whether there is anything in common between the ancestral faith of the Santals and the Judeo-Christian faith. The method of study followed is exegetical, analytical and phenomenological.

In the first chapter a historical introduction to the Santals and to their social, political organisation and religious faith is given. The second chapter studies Santal creation traditions exegetically. The third chapter is an exegetical study on the Genesis creation narratives of P and J. The fourth chapter makes a comparison of the theological motifs of the Santal creation narrative and the Genesis creation narratives. The fifth and final chapter provides the concluding findings.

The Santals are one of the largest homogenous tribal groups in India, numbering more than four million scattered over: in the States of Assam, Orissa, West Bengal, Bihar and outside India, in Nepal and Bangladesh. The religion of the Santals is a very ancient one, a type, which according to anthropologists emerged between the close of the food-gathering period, i.e. nine million years ago and the early agricultural period that is, about nine thousand B.C.. The creation narratives of the Santals were handed down orally from time immemorial until they were written down in the second half of the 19th century in two versions namely those of Rev. L.O. Skrefsrud (1887) and Rev. A. Campbell (1892). According to T. Hembrom Campbell's version represents the authentic spirit of the Santal tradition. It represents *Thakur-Jiv*, *Malin Budhi* (i.e. Gosā Era), *Jaher Era*, *Maran Buru* and aquatic creatures as pre-existing the world and humans. *Maran Buru*, *Jaher Era* and *Malin Budhi* are the national gods of the Santals. They are revered even today as deities for their contribution to the creation and to the well being of human kind under *Thakur-Jiv's* dispensation.

The comparison of the Santal creation narrative with the two Biblical creation narratives of P and J, in Dr. Hembrom's book shows that the differences between the three are not of theological motifs but of order and presentation, which is due to the human conditions in the midst of which the narratives were developed. The P narrative (Genesis 1.1.-2.4a) presupposes the existence of chaotic water, darkness and earth below water as pre-existing materials, before *Elohim* begins his act of creation. In it the act of creation begins with the creation of light, then the heaven and earth and then covers the creation of man and women. The J narrative (Genesis 2.4b-3, 24) presupposes the existence of heaven and earth and begins with the creation of man, the garden, the animals and birds and culminates in the creation of the woman. The Santal creation narrative pre-supposes the existence of heaven, the sun, chaotic water and the earth below it. It begins with a proposal of creating a pair of human beings and this necessitated the creation of the world. All the narratives represent the concern for creator-creation relationship from their respective given social conditions. For example P from the social condition of the exilic period shows creator-creation relationship refuting the Babylonian polytheism. In this narrative as per the need of the period the absolute power of the transcendent God is emphasized. The J narrative is written from an agricultural point of view where the vital production for human sustenance depended on rain water. Hembrom is of the opinion that in the Santal's creation narrative the interest in agriculture is vividly pictured, but the place of the origin of the narrative has remained obscure so far. In the J and Santal creation narratives the style is vivid and concrete, the presentation of the creator God is anthropomorphic and the perspective is human and earthly.

All these creation narratives take for granted the existence of the creator God, who lives with other supernatural beings who are subordinate to him. The nature of the creator God, the world view, and humanity's relationship with God as presented in the Santal creation narrative do not come into conflict in any big way with that presented in the first three chapters of Genesis. Speaking from the Christian point of view, which holds Genesis chapters 1-3 as the doctrine of creation, the Santals also hold the same faith as far as the first article of the Christian creed is concerned. But at the same time it is the bold conclusion of the author that the people of primal religion such as the Santals are in an advantageous position as compared to the people indoctrinated in a particular tradition of scriptures and messengers/avatars. They are more open to others in freedom to assimilate to oneself an acceptable theology and ethics. The book is a

valuable contribution to students of both Religions as well as Old Testament.

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Sacred Link. Modes of Communicating with the Divine

by Dr. Joseph Patmury, Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1996, pp. x+151.

The author, a professor of Religious Communication, explores in this book the various means humankind has utilized from time immemorial to communicate and eventually to commune with the sacred. Dr. K.C. Abraham in his foreword stresses the need for Incarnational modes of communication. Religious communication cannot be dismissed as irrational. As much of the available material is on communication theory, there is need to study the specific characteristics and role of religious communication and this book fulfils that need to some extent. Side by side with a study of Christian faith, the book also touches upon other faiths such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Islam. Apart from an introduction there are twenty chapters in this book-the titles being: Religious Communication, the Sacred Word, Sacred Scripture, Prayer, Sacred Stories, Sacred Space, Time Ritual, Initiation Rites, Sacrificial Meal, Priests and Preachers, Prophets, Saints, Tombs and Relics, Monasticism, Pilgrimage, Mysticism, the Medium of Art, Religious Architecture and Sacred Link. The book also provides a useful bibliography and index.

The word is a fundamental form of language which is also a central elements in every religious tradition. A scriptural corpus is conceived as a united whole both in its ontological origin as sacred word, as well as in its authoritativeness as scared truth. Prayer is verbal communication with Spiritual Entities. Sacred stories are narratives of supernatural happenings. Sacred space is the locus of divine-human encounter. Whether time is conceived as cyclic or linear, all religions have some concept of time that is considered as sacred, which is distinct from ordinary time. Ritual is the re-enacting of the mystery of sacred oneness.

Initiation rites are the gateway to the world beyond. Sacrificial meal signifies communion with the Divine. If a priest is an intermediary between the community and the deity, the preacher interprets the current relevance of the sacred story and writings. The prophets are messengers of God. The saints function as the mediators between the Sacred and the worldly. Tombs and relics connect the dead with the living. Disciplining is needed

for divine communication and monasticism helps in this process. pilgrimage is a journey to the source of sacred power. Mysticism stands for the most intense communication with the Divine. Religious art, dance and music are for intuitions that afford distinct, non-conceptual apprehension of the real. Religious architecture is for housing the Sacred. The sacred link or the Sacred means that religions use to point to the transcendent realm are symbols, myths and rituals. Dr. Patmury deserves our appreciation for the timely publication of this book.

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Doing Theology with The Poetic Traditions of India, Focus on Dalit and Tribal Poems

by Joseph Patmury, Bangalore: PTCA/SATHRI, 1996, pp. xii+192

This book is the outcome of a theological seminar/workshop organized jointly by the Programme for Theology and Cultures in Asia (PTCA) and South Asia Theological Research Institute (SATHRI), in Bangalore on 22-27 May 1995. There are fifteen presentations apart from a foreword by K.C. Abraham and an introduction by the editor. K.C. Abraham in the foreword which was originally the key note address affirms that theology must be rooted in the people and in a new language that expresses the power of love and the spirituality of the poor. Theology has to reclaim the richness of non-rationalist traditions and myths. The concerns of our theological task, when we take the poetic traditions seriously are a holistic view of reality and a right hermeneutical key to interpret the meaning of life. Also, there is a need to emphasize the two themes that commonly appear in our poetic traditions, namely earth and suffering of humanity. In the introduction Joseph Patmury justified the emphasis given on Dalit and Tribal poems for theological reflection by saying that on the one hand these exist primarily as oral traditions and hence have little access to the wider theological circles and on the other, Tribal and Dalit cultures, more than others depend on poetry for their cultural and communal expressions.

The main body of the book starts with a poem of O. Jathanna which is a plea to make one a candle of light. M.E. Prabhakar examines the poems of the Christian Telugu poet Joshua who focussed on poverty and caste discrimination. A lay person Joshua though well grounded in Christian ideals, transcended the bonds of his own religion and adopted a secular outlook. Moreover he was totally committed to the liberation of the Dalits. He created a new hermeneutical situation informed by his social and cultural analyses, using primarily Indian thought patterns and

linguistic styles. Sathiasatchy analyses the ancient Tamil poems, especially those of the *Tolkapiyan* era (second half of the second millennium BC), and the *Sangam* age (300BC-200AD). David C. Scott provides us with a glimpse of the rough rhetoric of Kabir. Kabir through his poems wanted to make people honest, because complete honesty, and nothing else, provides a realisation of complete truth-understanding of the nature of consciousness, the relation of the individual and the universe, inside and outside, life and death. Edward Noronha presents and interprets a poem entitled *My People* composed by the award-winning Kanada poet Siddalingiah. The poem in a moving fashion highlights the sufferings of the down-trodden. Abraham Ayrookuzhiel gives an interpretation of *tottam* (song) of Pottan Teyyam, the God of the Dalit Pulaa community of North Malabar. The song sung during worship is a powerful attack on the practice of untouchability and caste discrimination, and an affirmation of the fundamental equality of all human beings.

J.H. Anand gives us a glimpse of the Marathi, Bengali and Hindi Dalit poetry. He informs us about the Marathi Dalit poet Namdeo Dhasal who founded the political party Dalit Panthers in 1974. He also draws our attention to two brahmins who wrote Dalit poetry namely Rabindranath Tagore in Bengali and Suryakant Tripathi Nirala in Hindi. It was the Marxist Nirala who first used the word 'dalit' in 1919. Israel Selvanayagam studies the inter-religious lyrics of the Tamil Catholic Christian poet Munsiff Vedaynayakar of Mayuram written in 1878. These can be sung by all devotees to the one God, irrespective of their particular religious adherence. William Madtha provides a theological interpretation of a Kanada folk-song on rain which depicts the dreadful days of the famine, probably at Bijapur, and ends with a hope and surprise at the fall of rain. W.S. Annie presents a study on the *Ballad on Nandanar* written by Gopalakrishna Bharati in 1887 depicting the Dalit Paraiya Nandanar as a rebel against the cruel caste system. She joins S. Manickam to believe that Nandanar was not undergoing a purification by fire, rather he was thrown into the flames by brahmins for entering the temple.

Wati Longchar undertakes a creative theological study of a creation-poem of the Aó Naga Primal Religious tradition. His affirmation is that by the rediscovery of creation/land as the central focus of doing Christian Theology, the tribal people who are struggling for survival and an identity of their own can find a more dignified life in God's wider *Oikos*. Lalnghak Thuami studies the Mizo poem *Hla Do* sung by victorious head hunters and shows the oppressiveness of it from the feminist perspective. She also emphasises that the term used for God in the poem is *Khuanu*-which is a feminine term, capable of empowering women.

The Santal concept of good life (*raska*) includes song (*sereni*), poetry (*onorhe*), dance (*enej*) and story-telling (*gamkahini*), realised through a complete cycle of festivals and we are introduced to these by Ganesh Murmu. The traditional songs of the Oraons of Chotanagpur are centred around all the chief religious feasts and an analysis of some of these songs is provided by Shanti Khalkho. Manmasih Ekka discusses some of the Tana Bhagat prayers. These prayers reflect the agony of the tribals of Bihar at the loss of their land and forests as well as their passionate plea to the supernatural powers for intervention. The book is a valuable contribution to Indian Dalit-Tribal theologies. We can hope that the organizers in future will provide an opportunity to focus upon theology through other poetic traditions of India as well.

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