

Role Of Totemism In Tribal Religious Life: A Philosophical Study

Dr. Dipen Tayung¹ , Ms. Nirupama Roy²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Bhattadev University, Bajali, Assam, India, Pin code 781325, drdipentayung1980@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Saraighat College, Changsari, Assam, India
Pin code 781101, roy26nirupamaniru@gmail.com

Abstract:

This paper tries to analyze the role and importance of Totemism in Tribal Religious Life. It is said that Totemism is the simplest and primitive form of religion. Totemism is the system of religion where human beings are religiously connected to Totems. Most of the tribal people believed in their mysterious relation with some sacred totemic objects such as plants and animals etc. The Totems are worshipped and protected by the tribal people. Totems are revered as spiritual entities that serves as the symbol of identity, kinship and shared values within the tribal communities. Totemism also promotes fellowship and well-being of tribal people. Hence, it plays an important role in tribal religious and social life as it establishes the relationship between human beings and nature by fostering a sense of unity and social cohesion.

Keywords: Totemism, Environment, Tribe, Religion, Taboo, etc.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Totemism is one of the primitive religions like Animism, Fetichism, Manaism, etc. It is closely related to Ancestor worship in the form of totem. The totem is a class or species of animals or plants with which a clan is associated. For example, different clan believed in different species as their totem such as Tigers, Snakes, Crows, Lizards and the like. The totem is regarded as the symbol of a particular clan. Totemism is not only a religion but it also represents the social and cultural aspects of a certain group. Hence, totemism has importance in tribal religious, cultural, and social life. Through the reverence of natural objects as spirit they maintained a sense of harmony with the natural world. Totemism provides religious as well as social framework for tribal people. Believe in Totemism has been found in various parts of the world, i.e. basically in North America, Africa and Australia.

1.1 Objectives:

The main objectives of this study are –

- To discuss about the concept of Totemism.
- To analyze the relationship between Environment and Totemism.
- To understand the role of Totemism in Tribal Religious Life.

1.2 METHODOLOGY:

The proposed study is based on secondary sources. The secondary data are collected from the different sources, viz. books, articles, internet, library works, etc. The research study is used descriptive and analytical method to authenticate the data.

1.3 REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

We have followed and collected data from several books to prepare the proposed research study. A brief review of some related literatures are as follows:

1. The book “**Handbook of Religion**” is written by Sanjay Sharma in 2006. In this book we have got an idea about totemism with related to Mana and Taboo. This book discusses Totemism as a special form of Manaism.

2. **“The Philosophy of Religion”** authored by George Galloway in 1920. This book describes totemism as the religious as well as social aspects of tribal people. It also discusses Totemism as the beginning of primitive religion which is in its religious aspect is allied to Ancestor worship.

3. **“Comparative Religion”** is written by Rama Shanker Srivastava in 1996. This book explains Totemism as one of the primitive religions. This book reflects that Totemism is the religion of primitive hordes which worship a totem animal.

4. The book **“Tribal Religion”** authored by Vinay Kumar Nulkar and M.K. Muthumani in 2014. This book discusses about the religious life of the tribal people with reference to the primitive religions such as Animism, Naturalism, Totemism, Taboo, Magic and Ancestor worship etc.

5. The book **“The Philosophy of Religion an Introduction”** is written by Dr. Charu Das in 2023. This book illustrated the concept of totemism, its basic features and also made the critical evaluation of Totemism. In this book we found the discussion on the different ceremonies and social practices of Totemism.

1.4 Background of the Study:

Like others religious practices tribal people also believe in the existence of supernatural power. They believe in that because of the experience of certain day-to-day sudden happenings, of diseases, death and so on. The tribal people tried to establish a kind of close relationship between themselves and this power through magic and religion. Tribal people believe in several form of primitive religion such as Animism, Naturalism, Totemism, etc. They believe that animals, plants, trees, ponds, rivers, stones, mountains, etc. all are the seat of Spirit. They also considered Sun, Moon and Earth are the creator or Supreme Power. Apart from these the tribal people believed in Totem and cognate themselves with the animals and plants. Another sacred belief of tribal people is Taboo, which is a negative custom of any belief. It is regarded as the ‘holy dread’. The tribal people believe that the violation of taboo may result in disaster. Many tribes also worship the spirit of their ancestors and seek their blessings. Hence, the religious life of tribal people is revolved around the nature and spirit. This paper is going to discuss about one of the tribal religious practices i.e. Totemism.

1.5 Significance of the Study:

This paper deals with one of the primitive religions called Totemism that is practiced mostly by tribal people. Hence, this paper will help to understand the tribal people’s religious life and social framework as well as about the origin of religion through the concept of Totemism. This paper will show the attitude of primitive people towards nature and natural objects. It also helps people to understand the importance of the interconnectedness of human beings with nature.

2. The Concept of Totemism:

Totemism is said to be the simplest and earliest form of religion. In Totemism, the primitive people accepted a species as the origin of their clan or group which is regarded as the totem. They believed that the totemites or the same group members have a blood relation. Similarly, the tribal people also have cognate themselves with the animals and plants in the form of totems.

There are several anthropologist, sociologist and psychologist which explained Totemism in their own ways. Some of the main patrons of this theory are W. Robertson Smith, F.B. Jevons, Sociologist Emile Durkheim and Psychologist Sigmund Freud.

William Robertson Smith, in his book ‘The Religion of the Semites’ said that a peculiar ceremony known as the ‘totem meal’ is an integral part of the totemic system. He found the origin of the whole sacrificial system is in Totemism. F.B. Jevons in his book ‘Introduction to the History of Religion’ maintains Totemism as the most primitive form of society and that polytheism is a relapse from it. Sociologist Emile Durkheim also regards Totemism as the most simple and primitive religion. Again, according to Sigmund Freud, all developed and cultured religions of today are totemic at their beginning. For him, the primitive people lived in hordes and worshipped totem animal as deity or God. He believed that totems are mostly non-ferocious animals such as cow, sheep, buffalo, etc., which are the protector and benefactor of the horde. In his book ‘Totem and Taboo’ he describes totemism as the theory of origin of religion. According to him, totemic animal or plant is a father-figure determined by the sons of the leader of the horde. For him, religions began and developed in ancient time through the worshipping and sacrificing such totem. In sacrificing totemic animal, they have two

ambivalent attitudes towards their father i.e. both love or respect and fear or hatred. Out of hatred they killed their dominant father which substitution is a totem animal and out of love and respect they ate totemic animal to get more strength and to united with their father. It is an essential rite for totemites that, after killing and eating the totemic animal, the remainder should be buried and the totem or father spirit should be worshipped.

The totem is regarded as a species of animals or plants such as crows, tigers, snakes, elephant etc. and very rarely a class of inanimate objects. It is believed that totem is mysteriously connected with all the member of a group or clan and different groups have different species as totem. The totem is considered as sacred and is deified and worshipped by the tribe. They gave respect to the totem as it is the divine ancestor of the tribe. So, it brings unity and solidarity among the group members. Totemites believed that totem can help and protect them in any problem. Totem is the material embodiment of an anonymous and impersonal power expressed in some animal, plant or objects. Primitive people also believed that happy and healthy totem showered blessings upon the horde and when calamities such as drought, pestilence, etc. arise then totemites sacrifice totem for the welfare of the group and replace others in their place.

Totemism includes some ceremonies of initiation into the tribe, various taboos and the practice of exogamy. Therefore, Totemism is sometimes regarded as a social custom rather than a religion. For example, though African Bantu tribes believed in totemic animal, yet they do not worship them.

2.1 Taboo:

Taboo is closely associated with the concept of totemism. Usually, taboo implies something forbidden or to be avoided. In Totemism it refers to the prohibitions of specific actions related to the totem. Commonly it is prohibited to injure, kill or eat any instances of totemic species. However, there is a special rite on solemn and sacramental occasions that totem may collectively be killed and ate by the group members in a common meal. Totemites believed that by consuming totem on that occasion the members of the group or the tribe will get more strength and power. But violating such taboo results in punishment by the authorities or by the community.

Again, there is another strict rule in Totemism i.e. the practice of exogamy. Because, in Totemism inter-marriage is also prohibited. This means that none of the member of a totemic group can marry their own totem class as they believed that the totemites have a blood relation. Hence, the members of a clan should seek their wives from another totem class.

2.2 Characteristics of Totemism:

The characteristics of Totemism given by Robertson Smith are as follows:

1. The totem is a species of animals or plants; not an individual animal or plant and these are considered as sacred. The member of the clan or tribe has a deep respect and reverence to the totems. It is believed that the clan or social group has some intimate relationship with totems
2. Totemism involves some kind of taboo. Since the totemic animals or plants are treated as sacred; hence, killing or eating of totemic animals or plants are prohibited in Totemism. However, the totemites believed that for the well-being of the clan or the group collectively killing or eating of the totems on solemn and sacramental occasions is good.
3. In Totemism it is believed that the totemic animals or plants are the origin of a particular clan or group and totemites have a blood relation. Hence, inter-marriage is prohibited among the members of the same group or clan. It strictly followed exogamy i.e. the member of a clan or group should marry from another clan.
4. Totem is considered as the symbol of the remote ancestors of a clan that provides a group name for the members of a social group. Totem represents the group's identity, values, social rites and restrictions.
5. Totem is not exactly regarded as God but a cognate being that is treated as sacred and subject to respect and devotion.

3. Totemism and Environment:

In Totemism totem is regarded as the species of animals or plants or sometimes inanimate objects. So, we found a deep connection between Totemism and the environment. Totemism plays an important role in environmental conservation as totem is considered as sacred and each of the group or clan wants to protect their respective totem. In primitive age Totemism is one of the ways to realize the value of natural elements. It perfectly represents the interconnectedness of human and Nature. Through the respect and reverence for totem it shows that people should respect the natural elements since without these elements people cannot even survive. By putting religious value to some natural elements' totemism helps to conserve biodiversity which is very important and an integral part for maintaining the health of ecosystems and for the existence of human life.

Again, there is a concept associated with Totemism is Taboo which implies that harming, killing or eating totemic species are prohibited. Hence, it helps to protect and preserve some species of animals or plants that are regarded as totem. It can also contribute to resource conservation and prevent over exploitation. Totemism fosters a sense of responsibility for the well-being of the environment that cultivates a strong connection between humans and nature.

4. Role of Totemism in Tribal-Religious Life:

Totemism is basically associated with tribal people and linked with the wellbeing of the tribes. A totem is a class of animal or plant and the member of a group adopt its name which is their peculiar identity. The primitive people believed that the totemistic rites are the means of increasing the food supply of the tribe and totem itself is a magical protector for people. As the totem is closely linked with the life and social well-being of the tribal people. Hence, totemism is one of the significant aspects of tribal's religious as well as social life. Totemism developed the essential and intimate relationship between human beings and nature. It established a sacred relationship between a tribe and its totem; which developed spirituality among tribal people. This leads them to live ethical and moral life that constitutes a peaceful social structure. It also represents unity of society, cultures, rites and rituals, fellowship among all the members of a tribe. Totemism is the way to bind people together by promoting unity, respect for tradition, and a sense of collective responsibility. The tribal people believed that totemic animal or plant has some healing power. They also believed that totem protect as well as guide them in every dangerous situation and totemistic rites are the means for certain earthly benefits. The rites and rituals, taboos etc. all are the reminder of the community over individual's desire. From this individual learnt to adhere to the social norms and uphold the welfare of the tribe. Totemistic rites and rituals developed the sense of responsibility and obligations for one another as well as the Nature.

There are many tribal groups in India, like the Bhils, Munda, Oraon, and Gond; which have totemic beliefs. This belief binds them together. Also, by identifying with a specific totem tribal people feels connected to their ancestors, history, and cultural heritage. Different tribes have different totem and each totem help clan or group to distinguish one from another. Therefore, we can say Totemism plays a vital role in representing religious and social life of many tribes around the world.

CONCLUSION:

From the above discussion we find that Totemism is the religious as well as social aspect of a clan or tribe. It has a great impact on people's life and the environment. The totem is a species of animals or plants or sometimes natural objects; which is regarded as sacred. Hence, Totemism implies respect for and prohibition against the killing, harming and eating of totemic animal or plant. In tribal religious life Totemism plays a very important role as it provides a spiritual connection between human beings and nature. Each totem work as a symbol of the particular clan or group; which represents group identity, social cohesion, rituals and taboos, cultural values etc. It also fosters a sense of unity and responsibility of the group members. Therefore, Totemism is sometimes regarded as social custom rather than a religion.

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