

The Philosophy of Life Among the Tani Group of Tribes of Himalayas

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Abstract

The Tani group of tribes, consisting of the Apatanis, Nishis, Hill Miris, Galongs, Adis, Tagins, Ramos, Poilobos Misings etc., inhabits the south Himalayas. They are called Tani group of tribes because of their belief that they all are the progenies of a common father called Tani or Doni. These tribes have the common mythology with local variations, common language (Tibeto-Burman) with local variations, and common culture, again with local variations. Their philosophy of life is based on two interrelated premises: 1) the creation of the universe including living and non-living beings and (2) the guiding force of their life. The Tanis believe that the creation of the universe took the evolutionary course from 'nothingness' called *Keyum* in their language. In the Tani worldview, there is no place for any god, especially a Supreme God, who created the world and takes care of it. So there is no scope for praying to any such supernatural being in that society. They are rather concerned with nature and the immediate surroundings in which they live. In such a situation what one can expect in the name of philosophy is the simple thought for the well being of humans. They simply believe one is to live on the earth strictly adhering to the social customs.

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The Tani group of tribes inhabits the south Himalayas spreading over to the foot hills of Assam in North East India. They are called Tani group of tribes because of their belief that they all are the progenies of a common father called *Tani* or *Doni*. This group consists of the Apatanis, Nishis, Hill Miris, Galongs, Adis, Tagins, Ramos, Poilobos Misings etc. Of these, the Misings came down to Assam during the twelfth-thirteenth century CE and settled mostly in the foot hills on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra; only a few crossed the river and settled in the southern bank. These tribes have the common mythology with local variations, common language (Tibeto-Burman) with local variations, and common culture, again with local variations.

A study on their philosophy of life is based on two interrelated premises of their life: 1) the creation of the universe including living and non-living beings and (2) the guiding force of their life. So far as the creation of the universe is concerned their faith is very much comparable to the "big bang" theory. Unlike the primeval Supreme Being in the major religions of the world, which is variously called God, Iswar, Allah, as the creator of the universe, in the faith of the Tani group of tribes the creation took the evolutionary course from nothingness called *Keyum* in their language. From this 'Nothingness' the evolutionary process starts functioning. In that sense their faith itself

can be called 'scientific'. Further, as Lummer Dai¹ has pointed out, the *Donyi* (the Sun) and the *Polo* (the Moon) are the product of evolutionary process. For the Tani, these two phenomena are the provider of sustenance to all living cells. Dai has specifically mentioned of *Donyi* from which flow all energies on which life is dependent.

To understand the guiding force of their life one has to know how the Tani came into this world as per their mythology. As it has been pointed out *Keyum* is the starting point from which evolution began, and after a number of stages *Sedi* (earth) came into existence; and this *Sedi*, in conjugation with *Melo*, which I believe to be the atmosphere, gave birth to a few spiritual beings like *Yidum Bote* (a kind of male force), *Dadi Somi* (another male force to help creation of living beings), *Kine Nane* (goddess of agriculture and wealth), *Doyi Bote* (goddess of knowledge), *Bomong* (*Donyi* or Sun), *Boh* (*Polo* or Moon) etc. Till then mundane beings have not been evolved. For that another five stages were to cross; and the fifth stage from *Sedi* is called *Pedong* (female) that came into being. And this *Pedong* is the mother of all living beings; and she produced them all in conjugation with *Yidum Bote*.

Again one enters into an interesting aspect of Tani's birth from which one can understand properly the philosophy of human life as evolved by the *Tani* group of tribes. Unlike in the Hebrew/Christian Old Testament and the Hindu Vedas or the Islamic Koran in which man is said to have been created by God, Iswar or Allah with special care and love, in *Tani* mythology, the *Tani* (Man) was not only not created with any care or love, but was created with all prejudice and carelessness. The first thing is that *Tani* is the last born of *Pedong Ane* (Mother *Pedong*) of all the living beings. By the time *Tani* was born, the milk in *Pedong Ane*'s wrinkled breasts had gone completely dry. In absence of mother's milk *Tani* went on crying and crying; and the helpless mother ultimately threw him to a dry pond telling "your cries may bring rain on which you will have to live". Rain did, of course, come and *Tani* survived.

The second difficulty *Tani* had to face was his elder brother, *Robo*, a devilish type of fellow with some supernatural elements. By the introduction of *Robo* in the mythology, done with great ingenuity, man even in the primitive stage of the society introduced the concept of good and evil in human life. It is the universal concept of a great divide - good and evil, light and darkness, honest and dishonest etc. - common to all religions: Hebraism, Christianity and Islam have the concept of Satan pitted against God or Allah, Hinduism has got *Soni*, *Rahu*, *Ketu* against Iswar. But for this great divide of good and evil common to all religions, human history, it seems, would have been very dull. There would have been no need of a Jesus Christ, a Prophet Muhammad, a Buddha and so on.

The commonness in all religions including the *Tani* faith, however, ends here. From here the *Tani* faith takes a new direction from which one can study the philosophy of

1 Lummer Dai (1940-2002) was a public intellectual from the North-East India.

their life. In all the great religions there is always some supernatural force to help man in his struggle against evil. But with respect to *Tani* there was none to fight against his devilish brother Robo. He went on overcoming the evil deeds of his brother, but new evil things kept on coming to him, and ultimately things went to the extent of his elder brother's plotting of killing him and then marrying his wife. The plot was, however, foiled. When Tani came back home and saw his brother sleeping with his wife, Tani attacked the evil as the fight unto the last. In his doing so, Tani lost all senses of good and evil and went on attacking anything that came his way. And in the process he entered into *sitking-kedeng* (the Hades of a sort) which is the world of diseases and bad elements. In spite of his fighting gait he was attacked by various diseases. He came out from *sitking-kedeng* and kept on moving pale and haggard without even a house to live in. At the sight of Tani moving like that *Kine Nane* had some sympathy for him and she consulted the matter with *Gumin Soyin* and *Doying Bote* about how best Tani could be brought back to normalcy. Tani was shown how a house could be constructed by him under the direction of *Gumin Soyin* and that house is the first house for the common use of all. *Doying Bote* taught him the knowledge of singing and dancing. *Kine Nane* herself taught him the art of agriculture. Tani got back to normalcy. But the very existence of his brother Evil whom he could not kill, kept him ever conscious for fighting against evil forces. It is from these situations of life that the Tani tribes derived their philosophy of life.

In the process of social evolution, humans have found themselves surrounded by all kinds of nature's elements including living and non-living beings. At this stage it is but natural that they would discover some spirits, of which some are beneficial, while others are harmful. On the other hand, at times of difficulty, mainly diseases and mishaps, they had none to look towards for help. They had to help themselves. So they fought diseases and mishaps all by themselves. From such a situation two sets of people might have emerged - (a) the Shamans, the section of the people applying the trial and error method for relief and cure of the disease, using various plants; (b) some very shrewd people, trying to invoke some supernatural powers in getting relief and cure. They were later called the necromancer or the sorcerer. It is, perhaps, these people who named the spirits, as it was required for their vocation. Those who could not be cured by the shamans were taken up by the necromancer for exorcising the particular spirit responsible for a particular disease. It is from this section of the people, another set known as the priestly ones emerged, who have the knowledge of taking precaution and to take care of the soul of a human even after their death. However, one thing should be noted that these sets are not water tight in themselves. In ancient Tibet, wherefrom these people had migrated to their present habitats, the historians and social scientists have found out that these various sets overlap, many a times.

Thus, in the Tani worldview, we find no place for any god, especially a Supreme God, who created the world and takes care of it. So there is no scope for praying to any such supernatural being in that society. Interestingly, there is no specific place

for praying to a god or a spirit in Tibet; similarly among the Tani group of tribes, there is no specific place for the propitiation of any god or spirit. Whatever places the necromancer or sorcerer points out for making a sacrifice of some bird or animal to some spirit, as detected by the Miri or Mibu (priest), is improvised as an altar of sort. A German scholar, writing about the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet, says that the Tibetans had missed the concept of a Supreme God during their long sojourns in Tibet.² I would argue that it is not that they had missed the concept of a Supreme Being, but they did not have such a Being at all. For a people who led the life of a Nature-Human the very idea of a Supernatural Being would not come to their mind. They would be too much concerned with their immediate surrounding; and their immediate surrounding was full of animals, birds and reptiles etc.; and then rain, hail storm, cyclone, lightning, thunder, earthquake etc. They could not understand what these things are to them. So they tried to attribute some spiritual quality to them, giving these elements of nature some specific names as spirits or gods. The primitive human, which pre-Buddhist Tibetans were, with whom the present Tani groups of tribes are identified, saw some elements of nature useful whereas some others as harmful. Simple rain, for instance, was considered as useful as it brings freshness to the earth with new grasses and foliage and fruits to them; hail storm, on the other hands, causes harm to them breaking and felling trees to the cause of their miseries and even death. Accordingly, they invented some names for them individually and began to perform some rites. In this respect, there is no worship of any god or goddess or any prayers to them. One may, perhaps, use the term 'propitiation' to such spirits. To the harmful spirits, they adopted the policy of ransom, to offer something to the spirit to satisfy the spirit, so as to persuade the spirits from doing any harm.³ Sometimes they take the help of a benevolent spirit in exorcising the harmful ones so that it cannot do any harm to the people.

This is an overview of a primitive society which is yet to conceive a Supreme God as the creator of the universe and the caretaker of it. They are rather concerned with nature and the immediate surroundings in which they live. In such a situation what one can expect in the name of philosophy is the simple thought for the well being of humans. Chinese philosopher Confucius enunciated such a philosophy for the human wellbeing without invoking higher gods and goddesses or even the Highest God. We can be good to ourselves by being benevolent to others, and not relying very much on some supernatural being. The same may be called the philosophy of the Tani group of tribes. It is no wonder that they do not seek any help from others whenever they are in need of; they are rather dependent on themselves. In this regard, however, one should consider an individual as something like a cog to the machine of the society- the machine becomes inoperative without the cog howsoever insignificant it might be outside the machine. Hence, an individual in any society of the Tani group of tribes is not allowed to suffer alone from any difficulty, whether it is from disease, absence of

2 Helmut Hoffmann, *Religions of Tibet*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1961, p.17.

3 David Snellgrove and Hugh Richardson, *A Cultural History of Tibet*, New York, Frederick A. Praeger, 1968, p.55.

shelter, shortage of foodstuff or from getting lost in the jungle. The society considers it to be their duty to save the individual from any such problem, so that s/he does not feel outside society, suffering alone. It is no wonder that there is no beggar in any of the Tani group of tribes. They consider it below the dignity of a human to beg from anybody including god. If necessary they would compensate for the help extended by any spirit or god in the shape of sacrifice of something to the spirit or god.

The message that is to be drawn is that it is the individual alone who is responsible for one's happiness or sufferings, not their fate. They never keep themselves idle expecting some one's help, even from god or spirit. Even in respect of finding a partner in marriage it is the youth himself/herself to find out his/her life's partner; no luck or spirit finds one a partner. Oshong Ering, an Adi administrator-cum-scholar tells, "a youth who does not find and attract a young girl to him for marriage or otherwise is too stupid to be a man."⁴ So far as their concept of soul and 'life after death' is concerned, they seem to have been influenced by a dream, that universal phenomenon. When a primitive man saw in dream his relative who was already dead and disposed, he developed the concept of soul who lives beyond life. Not only that he lives beyond life, but also he believes in rebirth of that soul in a person. Though the Tanis do not have the clear concept how the soul comes into another child at the time of its conception or the time of its birth, the philosophy is reflected in their custom of dumping the essential items of one's belonging during one's earthly life, by the side of their tomb or burial. They believe in a concept that if the essential items of living they enjoyed during this life are not put by the dead body in their grave, in one's next life one will not get a life similar to the life they had led before their death. Among the Adis, there is a philosophical institution called pengey. As per this philosophy, the soul of a dead person is soon led to the border of an unknown world and then it stops since it does not know what lies beyond the border. Yet they believe in rebirth. But they do not have the clear concept of sin or merit which may decide the kind of next life one would lead. They simply believe one is to live on the earth strictly adhering to the social customs. Violation of such customs does not necessarily send one to a fiendish world called hell. Rather one lives in the atmosphere disturbing the members of the society by coming to them at night as ghost or spirit. The souls of those who had followed the customs of the society, and lead an ideal life, are led to the border land of a world. And no one knows what lies beyond that. They simply call it a world of the dead. And those who die abnormal death like suicide, drowning, in an accident, in child-birth, snake bite etc. are not allowed to go to that world of the dead: they are to hover over this atmosphere as pointed out earlier.

4 Shared in a private discussion.