

Tribal Philosophy: Concepts, Issues and Methods

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Abstract

Attempts to ascertain the philosophies of various tribes and indigenous people are gaining currency, of late. In the contemporary discourse, the expression tribe and tribal stand for a group of people and their culture who inhabit a relatively inaccessible area and whose language, literature, culture and technology are different from that of the mainstream. This new found interest in tribal philosophy is partly due to the curiosity of the mainstream and partly due to the assertiveness of some scholars, particularly the tribal themselves. Tribal religions, myths, legends, folklores, folktales, proverbs etc. have been emphasised as the source materials of tribal philosophy. The method used in the study of tribal philosophy is to construct the worldview of tribals by relying on these source materials. And to understand the worldview of the tribes, one needs to understand the concept of worldview itself. In most cases, religion and worldview of people go hand in hand. Thus the issue of worldview undergoing change as a result of massive religious affiliational transitions over the past century and the role that a recovery of traditional worldview could play for an alternative future are also discussed.

Keywords: Tribal, Worldview, Myth, Freedom, Morality, Nagas

Presently tribal philosophy is very much in currency. *The South African Journal of Philosophy*¹ stands testimony to it. Even some scholars in North-Eastern part of India have started talking in terms of tribal epistemology. In what follows, I wish to explore what is involved in the concept of tribal philosophy and make a critical assessment of the issues and methods relating to it. The paper is partly conceptual partly empirical and ends with a case study presentation on freedom and morality in Naga Society.

The English word 'tribe' comes from the Latin word *tribus* which means a group of Roman people. But in due course of time the word has shed its old meaning and has acquired new ones. In the contemporary discourse, the expression tribe and tribal stand for a group of people and their culture who inhabit relatively inaccessible area and whose language, literature, culture and technology are not so very well developed. In the Indian context the term 'scheduled tribe' is being used to stand for those people who historically speaking have been living in forested and hilly areas and are disadvantaged in many ways. Sometimes the words tribe and tribal are also used in disapproving tone of voice.

1 <http://www.sajp.za.net/>

The fact that the expression tribal philosophy does not find a place in the history of philosophical literature neither in the East nor the West but in the contemporary period itself requires in depth analysis to arrive at a reasonable and cogent answer. I wish to suggest that it is part of that general tendency to discover and find out and establish what is known as tribal medicine, tribal art, tribal music and so on. It is also partly the result of that assertive mood of some scholars, particularly the tribal ones, that it is not only the non-tribals and plains people but also the hills wo/men and tribals who have contributed to philosophical scholarship throughout the world and it is because of political and cultural reasons the contributions of tribals to philosophy have not been recognised. According to some champions and advocates of tribal philosophy the best method of creating 'self awareness' among the tribals is to reconstruct and bring to bold relief what is known as tribal philosophy. Recently a professor of philosophy who happens to be a tribal delivered a lecture advocating that his identity consists in being a tribal. Therefore, according to him, the question of personal identity ultimately revolves round the question whether one is a tribal or a non-tribal. If somebody is a *tribal* by birth his or her identity is that s/he is a tribal and if somebody is a non-tribal by *birth* his or her identity is non-tribal.²

Interrogating Tribal Philosophy

There is greater need to bring attention to the concepts, issues and methods adopted by the protagonists of tribal philosophy in the recent past. Tribal religions, myths, legends, folklores, folktales, proverbs etc. have been emphasised as the source materials of tribal philosophy. Sometimes the totality of what the tribals have and are has been regarded as tribal culture and tribal philosophy has been treated as a part of tribal culture. The methods used in study of tribal philosophy is basically the empirical method of collection of data, i.e. legends, folklores, folktales, interviewing the elders and constructing the worldview of tribals by instituting comparison between tribal myths with the so called non-tribal myths. In the recent past, a study conducted on Mao Naga youth in a philosophy department compared the Naga youths with Lord Krishna because of their frolic, playful and happy-go-lucky life style which the latter is famous for.

In order to attempt a more serious introspection what needs to be examined more closely is the very concept of 'worldview'. What is involved in a worldview? In answer it may be said that worldview can mean any or all of the following:

Firstly, it may mean the synoptic vision of the totality, or in other words, taking everything together. Historically speaking, some metaphysicians argued in the past that it is the function of philosophy to present an overview of the universe. The philosophical systems developed by Spinoza, Hegel and Bradley could be cited as some of the examples in this connection. Besides philosophers, great novelists, dramatists and

2 The author is with the Department of Philosophy, NEHU, and is a tribal himself.

poets too present worldviews. But the difference is this. The Philosopher's worldview is based on arguments, logic and ratiocination whereas the novelists, dramatists and poets present their worldviews through depiction of human character and description of hidden aspects and dimensions of nature. In the contemporary period P.F. Strawson³ has characterised the worldview, philosophies as revisionary metaphysics.

Secondly, a worldview may mean the view that depicts the supposed creation of the universe exploring the Human-Cosmic-Divine relationship. Ancient myths and mythologies present copious instances of such worldviews. The more famous ones include the Vedic-Puranic as well as the Greek Mythologies. The mythologies of churning of the oceans arising out of conflict, tension and quarrel between gods and demons is very popular in the Indian sub-continent. Myths can be classified into various types and graded. In fact, certain myths are very profound and highly meaningful while certain others are less significant and less insightful.

Thirdly, worldview is understood in the sense of religious cosmology. Every religion whether Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity or Islam including tribal religions present and prescribe a worldview. This is otherwise known as the religious worldview of the respective group. In certain cases there is a conflict between the religious and the secular worldviews and in certain other cases they coalesce.

Fourthly, worldview stands for view of life and the world depicted and presented in folklores and folktales of groups of people. Storytelling and recounting of it is a universal phenomenon. Both literate and illiterate people compose stories and fables and transmit it for others. Such stories and fables do contain the worldviews, hopes, aspirations and ambitions of people.

Seen in this light it appears that the concept worldview does not have one meaning and one fixed connotation. Further, if this analysis of worldview is accepted one does not know what it refers to when one talks of tribal worldview in general or worldview of particular tribes because various tribes could have various worldviews and even a particular tribe may have different types of worldviews. As for example, the view of good life of the Mao Nagas comes in conflict with their view of creation. Even the Vedic- Puranic worldviews are full of conflicts and inconsistencies. As for example, there are passages in the Vedas that talk of creation *ex-nihilo*. On the other hand, there are passages that talk of beginninglessness and endlessness, of invisible things and the visible world. Further, it has been said that in the beginning God was alone, felt lonely, so he created the world. When one comes to the myths of the churning of the Oceans one comes across something very different that all great and good things have emerged out of the Oceans at the time of its churning. When one looks at the folktales of the Indian Sub-continent one comes across conflicting, contradictory and incompatible views of life and society. Which one is to be treated as the worldview

³ Strawson (1919–2006) was an English philosopher who wrote most notably about the philosophy of language, metaphysics, epistemology and the history of philosophy.

and on what basis? Those who talk of worldview of particular tribes and tribal people, presume without any argument and evidence that tribals of a particular group have a particular worldview where as this may not be the case.

It is necessary to discuss the religious worldview of tribal people in general. Religion constitutes one of the basic and fundamental dimensions of human existence. Perhaps there is no society under the sun that does not have religion of its own. It is the sense of 'initial wonder' and surprise that makes wo/men assume worshipful attitude towards nature. In this sense 'Naturism' is the basic and initial religion of human beings. Polytheism is the corollary of Naturism. In this sense monotheistic religions are abstractions of later day development. If there is some such thing as the basic religious instinct of humankind then there could have been only one Monotheistic or one Polytheistic religion throughout the world. But this is not the case. This clearly shows that religion as a social institution is a kind of growth and the result of an evolutionary socio-cultural process.

Throughout the world and more so in the North-Eastern part of India conversion of large chunk of tribals to Christianity and in certain cases to Islam has taken place. These monotheistic religions have their myths, mythologies, parables, folklores, folktales and the worldview of their own and such conversions have taken place even in the past. Without looking into whether conversion is good or bad, moral or immoral it can be said that to the extent one is converted to another religion to that extent one is likely to struggle with reappropriating the worldview of one's previous religion. It therefore creates and presents a conflicting situation.

In the North-East India, almost ninety percent Nagas and Mizos and seventy percent of *Khasi*, *Garos* and *Jaintias* have converted to Christianity. Accordingly their worldview has undergone sea change. Therefore, at this juncture to talk of the worldview of Christian tribals may not exactly be the same as to talk of culture sustaining and life capacitating force of tribal religion and thereby of tribal worldview. Deciphering and reconstructing tribal worldview can, therefore, turn out to be a mere intellectual and academic exercise or a worthwhile project that traces the past for a whole new generation.

I wish to suggest in this connection that religion and worldview of people go hand in hand. As a matter of fact, the worldview and religion of a people get so inextricably mixed up that it is not only difficult but impossible to separate the two from each other. Take for instance, the Vedic-Puranic worldview and the broad features of Hinduism. The Vedic-Puranic tradition is a literate tradition but it was preceded by a long and diverse oral tradition containing various types of worldviews. The phenomenon of oral tradition preceding literate tradition is almost ubiquitous and universal. This clearly proves our point that each one of us has had a tribal ancestry and in due course of time, the oral tradition got pruned, criticised and ultimately got transformed into

what is known as the literate tradition. But this is not to say that the literate tradition is just a replica of the oral tradition. There has been a meaningful and creative synthesis between oral tribal tradition and literate written tradition. The tribal *puranas* are yet to be composed through a collaborative venture of its adherents who have changed their religion, almost disowning their mythology and those who haven't. This situation of recovery is true for almost all tribal religions and worldviews across the world.

A worldview is not just a compendium of viewpoints known only to the elders of a society; it permeates and sustains the life style and culture of a particular community. It may not be out of context to mention in this connection how the oral traditions of worship of the mother Earth, the Sun, the Moon, some rivers and oceans have been amalgamated into what is known as the broad features and contours of Hinduism. In certain parts of India it is widely believed that the mother earth, before sowing season undergoes menstrual period in the middle of June. Till date Hindus worship the mother earth to get bumper crop. Innumerable instances could be cited to show how the native aboriginal and tribal traditions have been fused into Hinduism. It being polytheistic in nature has retained synthesised and transformed myriad forms of so called tribal worldviews and forms of worship. Further in India the Hindus believe that from 15th July to 15th September, all the rivers undergo menstrual period hence bath in the river during this period is proscribed. This is a kind of mythical belief but is coupled with intuitive insight, knowledge, wisdom and utilitarian considerations. In the beginning of rainy season the rivers are full of dirt and filth. Therefore it is not good for health to take bath in the rivers. This is how myths become part of religious life and with change of religion myths lose their significance; they become lifeless as it were.

Besides what has been said, it is possible to look at the concepts and issues of tribal philosophy altogether from a different stand point. Are the concepts and issues of tribal worldview specific to the particular tribal group or they are universal and all pervasive? In answer to this question it may be said that there are both universal and particular elements in tribal worldview. In almost all tribal traditions, nature is worshipped. Celestial bodies like the earth, the rivers, oceans, mountain, some kinds of animals and birds, trees and forest are the universal elements. But the specific trees and animals, plants and birds, mountains, rivers and rivulets constitute the particular elements or features. The protagonists of monotheistic religions without appreciating significance of nature worship in general tried to dub it as animism. Till date some social science scholars continue to characterise tribal religions as animistic and they go unchallenged because the majority of tribal have become Christians and have embraced monotheistic religion. Therefore they are in a dilemma, as to what is to be done with their original polytheistic worldview? Interview and interaction with elders in the community who are supposed to be in know of legends and myths of the respective tribe have been employed by the scholars of the tribal worldview. Since it is available in oral tradition only, the scope of verifying the authenticity of particular myths is very

less, except by recording, codifying and describing the myths and legends. Further, when a particular tribe consists of many sub-tribes it is difficult, nay, impossible to specify whether a particular worldview revealed through analysis of some legends and myths could be regarded as the worldview of the entire tribe. Take for instance, the Nagas of North-East India. Today they consist of so many sub-tribes and each sub-tribe has its own myths and legends. Therefore it is impossible to generalise and say that a particular worldview is the worldview of all the Nagas.

Some scholars are keen on applying comparative method in studying tribal philosophy or tribal worldview. As has been said earlier in this paper comparison of Mao Naga Youth with Lord Krishna and drawing similarity between the Samkhya principle of *Prakriti* with the primacy of matriliney of the *Khasis* is not only farfetched but philosophically un-illuminating for the simple reason that anything can be compared with anything else and in the process comparison as a method of understanding loses its significance and credibility.

It could be noted in this connection that some of the easily drawn up ideas of tribal philosophy and tribal worldview have beclouded the original issues. The issue is how best oral traditions of the people have to be preserved? There are no two opinions that the oral traditions of a people who are on the verge of extinction has to be preserved and these traditions include language, legend, myths, folklore, folktales, proverbs, moral and legal codes, music, dance forms, indigenous medicine and so on. Sometimes there are insurmountable hurdles on the way. Take for instance, the Nagas of North East India. There are large numbers of sub-tribes under the broad tribe Naga. The sub-tribes are so diverse and different even one sub-tribe fails to understand the language of another sub-tribe. Though, Nagamese, a hybrid of Hindi, Assamese and with some words from major Naga tribes has evolved yet it is not accepted by all the Nagas.

Now the question arises as to how to study the legends, myths and parables etc available in oral tradition of the tribals? There may be historical, political and cultural reasons behind a myth but basically a myth is an imaginative creation of meanings. Seen in this light wo/man may be regarded as a myth making and meaning creating animal and there are different levels and orders of meanings. A great tradition is the one wherein very sophisticated types of meanings are created. The two great epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are the embodiments of such sophisticated types of meanings. Classics in all traditions stand for such types of meanings.

The intention, motive and purpose of the myth-maker are reflected in the meanings that s/he creates. The objective of the study of such meanings is to decipher the various dimensions of existence that lie hidden behind the myth. These meanings may have various purposes to serve. It might aim at projecting a value, uprooting one or caricaturing a society and culture of a particular type. Moreover, the possibility of mutually incompatible value systems and conflicting worldviews existing side by side

in a particular society may not be ruled out at all. Further, it is quite possible that there may not be any compatibility between thought and action of a particular society at all. As for example, it is not at all surprising to come across high flown value system and low level of morality in certain sections of Indian society today. In other words, it is quite likely that there may be a very big gap between text and context of a value system in a particular society and tribal societies are not free from this type of conflict.

An area where this disconnect is visible is in the attitude to strangers. There is prevalent almost in all societies, and more so in tribal society, a particularly suspicious attitude towards strangers. In Khasi society the word for strangers is *Dkhar*. In certain parts of India even in the so called non-tribal society a stranger is referred to as a *pardeshi* (absolutely stranger). Further, in certain tribal societies head hunting was in practice. In fact, they were very rough and tough towards the strangers. Now in the face of such glaring instances it is inappropriate to generalise on the basis of certain folklores and folktales that tribals are very hospitable and cordial to others. In short, the text alone does not reveal the real nature of a particular group of people. To talk about people is to take into account both the text and the context. Otherwise any study and any generalisation is bound to be incomplete and inadequate. The distinction between worldview and belief system, philosophy as a way of life and a way of talk has to be kept in mind. Metaphysics presents a worldview but all worldviews are not instances of metaphysics and if a tribe has not been able to develop metaphysics or philosophy of its own it does not mean that the tribe is inferior.

Historically speaking metaphysics and experimental sciences have appeared very late in human civilisation but this is not to accept Augustus Comte's views that human mind and society passes through various stages like magical, theological, metaphysical and scientific ones. As a matter of fact, these different dimensions of mind have manifested in various degrees and intensity simultaneously in human society. The Vedic-Puranic mythology including pre-Socratic Greek philosophy contained proto-scientific theories besides other things. The Sanskrit word *Vasundhara* (containing jewels and diamonds) referring to the earth is very significant in this context. This clearly shows how intuitive insight about the world and the environment has been reflected in analysis and formation of words in Sanskrit language.

Some tribal scholars under the influence of existentialism have started arguing that discovery of tribal worldview is likely to create authentic awareness' among the tribals. However, I wish to suggest that the objective is misplaced. The plan and programme designed for the purpose are defective and inadequate. To study people means to study their language and culture and the worldview of a people or a tribe cannot be studied without knowing their language. The Garo worldview and the Khasi worldview cannot be studied through second hand data of listening to and collecting folklores and folktales narrated by the elders of the respective tribes. Language, thought and culture are intimately and internally connected.

Malinowski, the social anthropologist lived among the Trobriand islanders and learnt their language and Max Muller learnt the Sanskrit language and studied the Vedas and the Puranas before saying anything and commenting on the worldview of respective people. Therefore, the study of language of the particular tribe is the sine qua non of a programmatic requirement to study culture and worldview of tribals. Language is a point of access. Keeping this in mind we shall end this paper with an insider's view of Naga philosophy of freedom and morality.

Freedom and Morality in Naga Society

In this final section, I shall attempt to explore and explicate the concepts of freedom and morality in Naga society. The fact that human beings are endowed with the rational faculty, to that extent each human being or a community has a view or attitude towards life. In this broad sense, the indigenous communities have their own philosophies, but not in the narrower technical sense of philosophy as having a conceptual framework along with a number of jargons. Tribal in general and Nagas in particular are freedom loving people. The idea of freedom is manifested or embodied in their myths, legends, folktales, folksongs, and folklore and on top of it in their lifestyles. Their closeness and proximity to nature explains why the idea of freedom is ingrained, in their very lifestyle that is the reason why the Nagas and other tribals strongly resent, protest and sometimes they become very violent when their freedom is curtailed. Subjugation, exploitation, oppression and disrespect in any form are strongly detested by them. Perhaps, this is the reason why of all the tribals in India the Nagas rank or rate very high for their love of freedom. In the past, the brutal military subjugation of Nagas by the Government of India had given rise to equally if not more virulent and violent protests leading to the systematic and well organized political struggle for complete sovereignty and independence along with extremism and terrorism. One cannot understand and appreciate the political problem in Nagaland without understanding the Nagas love for freedom. The concept of freedom is an integral part of the concept of morality. In other words, freedom and morality go hand in hand. In nutshell, freedom and morality are the converse and obverse of the same socio-cultural situations. In the Mao-Naga community, the two fundamental concepts like "*Rachiithobo Kopfo*" (upholding of the eternal divine righteous path) "*Chiiliichiichu Hrii*" (Pure-truthful life) are something like Kantian universal categorical imperatives. Usually an elder of the community reminds any one with these moral injunctions, whenever one is in a likely situation to commit moral offence.

Unlike the society in the mainland, the Naga society does not suffer from depression or nervousness because the Nagas are a happy-go-lucky people. Besides it explains why the incidents of suicide are very low in Naga society. Consequently this view of freedom of the individual, sometimes comes into direct conflict with the social and collective good. The extreme love of freedom of the Nagas makes them courageous, bold and dauntless and as a result it has given rise to serious inter and intra social

problems. Absolute freedom of one individual negates the freedom of the other. In other words, valorisation of individual freedom logically leads to subjugation of other fellow Nagas. By implication this has given rise to intense head-hunting warfare in the past and the present fratricidal factional clashes and fighting; the subjugation of one village by another village and one clan by another clan within the same village. There are contradictions embedded in this concept of the absolute freedom of the individual. Possibly because of this reason in Naga society, the principle of 'live and let live' is not very popular, and as a result they are not likely to realise their common political goal in the near future because of fragmentation, ignorance, greed and violent culture.

Absolute freedom of the individual is one of the essential components of the morality of the Nagas. Further freedom, morals, courage and physical prowess go together. Within the Naga cultural milieu, a Naga cannot afford to be a coward. Consequently, cowardice is almost unknown in Naga society. A coward cannot be respected in a Naga society. But this negative value comes in direct conflict with respect for the other. If one is very strong what is one's relationship with the poor and the weak. The logical implication of this is that a Naga does not want to be subjugated and disrespected by others. But at the same time, they subjugate and enslave other fellow Nagas and this is a clear contradiction in their culture. Perhaps, the idea of mutual tolerance, respect for others and the spirit of self-sacrifice are yet to be cultivated in Naga society.

All the tribal societies throughout the world including the Nagas could not evolve and take a natural course of self-fulfilment. They could not critically reflect, comment and criticise their culture and tradition. The society develops only when it criticises and reflects on its own culture and tradition. This has not happened in a big way in tribal societies in general and Naga society in particular. The reasons are as follows: the so called big societies became powerful and as a result politically and culturally they overpowered the tribal societies imposing their views of freedom and morality on tribals. Tribals including the Nagas are presently at the cross-roads because the adjacent powerful societies are imposing their views of freedom and morality on tribals. The tribals, on the other hand, till date have not been able to advance and move forward their views of freedom and morality on a strong intellectual platform. Therefore, hitherto, the studies conducted by sociologists and social anthropologists on the Naga concept of freedom and morality are primarily historical and not critical. The problems of living in today's society with its rampant corruption and senseless violence; the individual's search for security and happiness is ever illusive. The true freedom is the need for oneself to free oneself from one's inner burdens of fear, anger, envy, sorrow and greed. We have to grasp the subtle workings of the human mind, and realise the importance of making our daily life deeply meditative, reflective and spiritual. Only such a radical change can bring about a new orientation and a new culture embracing all humanity. It is only such culture that can produce true virtues of innocence, wisdom, moral courage, and compassion, which are founded in true freedom of living and morality.