The Tana Bhagat Movement: From Socio-Religious Reform to Political Rebellion

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to understand the Tana Bhagat movement that emerged in the second decade of the twentieth century in present-day Jharkhand among the Oraon tribal community. This movement began as a socio-religious reform movement but later turned into a full-blown rebellion against the colonial regime as well as native oppressive structures and agents. This paper will emphasize the role of religion by drawing upon the theories of Peter Berger who defined religion as a sacred canopy, and neo-Marxist theorists like Ernst Bloch who pointed out the 'anticipatory utopian function' of religion while underlining the role of religion in progressive social change. In light of these theories, this paper will explicate how the Tana Bhagats in the context of a dystopian 'present', imagined a utopian 'future' of Oraon Raj which was a resurrection of a utopian 'golden age', and the contents of socio- religious reforms were based on the reasons of their downfall from the golden age.

Keywords

Tribal movement, Oraon community, Religion, Social movement, Colonialism.

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1. Introduction

The objective of this paper is to understand the Tana Bhagat movement that emerged in the second decade of the twentieth century in present-day Jharkhand among the Oraon tribal community. The Tana Bhagat movement began as a socio-religious reform movement but later turned into a full-blown rebellion against the colonial regime as well as native oppressive structures and agents. One of the features of the Tana Bhagat reform was the freeing of the Oraon religion and the socio-cultural-spiritual world from a large number of spirits who exercised control over their lives. Instead of focusing on the economic factors that led to the movement, this paper will emphasize the role of religion by drawing upon the theories of Peter Berger who defined religion as a sacred canopy, and neo-Marxist theorists like Ernst Bloch who pointed out the 'anticipatory utopian function' of religion while underlining the role of religion in progressive social change. In light of these theories, this paper will explicate how the Tana Bhagats in the context of a dystopian 'present', imagined a utopian 'future' of Oraon Raj which was a resurrection of a utopian 'golden age', and the contents of socio-religious reforms were based on the reasons of their downfall from the golden age. This paper is divided into three sections. The first section discusses the theoretical framework in which this paper is situated. The second section discusses the Tana Bhagat movement in the context of the theoretical framework, while the last section further elaborates on the role of religion in bringing about social change in the context of the Tana Bhagat movement.

2. Theoretical Framework

In their seminal work, The Social Construction of Reality (1967) Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann argued that reality i.e. the social world which humans inhabit is socially constructed, by which they meant that an order or nomos is imposed upon the external world as

well as upon discrete experiences and activities of individuals. The nomos, since it is socially constructed, faces the constant possibility of collapsing in the face of threats, or marginal situations, like death, social/natural/economic catastrophe, etc. In order to protect reality or the nomos from the constant threat the nomos is legitimized through the sacred i.e. by mirroring the nomos with the sacred cosmos, which Berger and Luckmann called the sacred canopy or symbolic universe which provides security to individuals in the face of chaos. Since the sacred cosmos or the symbolic universe is a social construct, it requires continuous maintenance. In normal circumstances, the symbolic universe is self-maintaining and self-legitimating, but in certain circumstances, it requires a maintenance apparatus, especially when the symbolic universe becomes a problem, which can arise in everyday life as generations change, and the socialization process through which the symbolic universe is transmitted may never be complete and total.

The official symbolic universe can also face challenges from deviant versions of the symbolic universe or alternate definitions of reality emanating from within the same society which is labelled as heresy. However, the most detrimental challenge arises when a society is confronted with another society having a greatly different symbolic universe, which can entirely reject one's definitions of reality as mad, ignorant, or downright evil. As Berger and Luckmann say; "the appearance of an alternative symbolic universe poses a threat because its very existence demonstrates empirically that one's own universe is less than inevitable" (Berger & Luckmann, 1967 : 108), which leads to chaos and anomie among the members of the challenged symbolic universe. According to Berger and Luckmann, there are three responses to the crisis that emanates when one symbolic universe of confronted by another, namely :

a) **Therapy :** Whereby the plausibility structures (community, social institutions, specialists who maintain the 'reality') become active in preventing the members of the threatened symbolic universe from losing confidence in themselves by providing counseling, pastoral care, etc.

b) **Nihilation :** It involves the ambitious attempt to account for all deviant definitions of reality in terms of concepts belonging to one's universe.

c) **Outcome :** The outcome is decided by power relations which might lead to the destruction of SU which is weak in power.

"The historical outcome of each clash of gods was determined by those who wielded the better weapons rather than those who had better arguments" (Berger & Luckmann, 1967 : 109).

Edward Shils reaches the same conclusion as he says that when a tradition comes in contact with an alien tradition i.e. becomes aware of another equally legitimate tradition, and/or becomes an object of attack by the proponents of the alien tradition, the native tradition undergoes a process of change. This change can take three routes, namely :

a) In some situations, the alien tradition may be assimilated by adaptation, with the assertion that implicitly the alien tradition was always contained within the challenged tradition.

b) The adherents of the challenged tradition might also seek to destroy its proponents by discrediting them morally, defeating them politically or annihilating them physically.

c) It might also incline the proponents of the challenged tradition of religious belief to lose confidence in the truth of their beliefs (Shils, 1981 : 98).

Similarly, Vincent J. Cornell, drawing upon Alasdair MacIntyre's concept of epistemological crisis, which emerges when one tradition is confronted by another tradition with superior claims, argues; "when a historically founded tradition confronts a new and alien tradition, it may be that some of the original tradition's claims to the truth will no longer be sustained. This threatens the integrity of the tradition as a whole. A feeling of crisis may be precipitated by the challenge of a completely new epistemology, or it may occur when social and historical conditions change such that the claims of a rival tradition provide newly cogent and illuminating explanations of why one's own tradition has been unable to solve its problems or restore its original coherence" (Cornell, 2010 : 29). According to MacIntyre, the solution to an epistemological crisis requires the discovery or invention of new concepts and the framing of some new type/s of theory which must meet three requirements. *First*, the new and conceptually enriched scheme must furnish a solution to the problems which had previously proved intractable systematically and coherently. *Second*, an explanation must be provided of what rendered the tradition sterile and/or incoherent. *Third*, these tasks must be carried out in a way which exhibits some fundamental continuity of the new conceptual and theoretical structures with the shared beliefs of the past (MacIntyre, 1988 : 362).

The advent of colonial rule brought an alien symbolic universe in confrontation with several symbolic universes/traditions in India, as the colonial machinery coupled with Christian missionaries began to criticize every section of the Indian society. Since the alien symbolic universe was backed by political power, the native symbolic universe/s were forced to rethink what went wrong with their culture/tradition. This line of thinking led to the genesis of several attempts to refashion the traditional symbolic universe/s which manifested into several socio-religious reform movements that were launched throughout the 19th century in different parts of India and among various communities. The Tana Bhagat movement was one such response to the challenge that was thrown at the Oraon community by the British colonial regime and its cultural and religious politics, as their traditional symbolic universe began to lose its plausibility and explanatory power leading to what McIntyre has called 'epistemological crisis'.

3. Epistemological Crisis of Oraon Society and the Tana Bhagat Movement

The Tana Bhagat movement emerged among a section of the Oraon tribal community in the year 1914 in the Chhotanagpur region of present-day Jharkhand after Jatra Oraon, a youth of 20-25 years of age claimed that he had received a divine message from supreme God Dharmesh along with supernatural power to restore the primordial Oraon Raj. Jatra emerged as the prophet-king of the future Oraon Raj and his message gained traction among the Oraon community which was undergoing societal stress due to the introduction of the new political-economic structure by the British colonial regime. Prior to the Tana Bhagat movement, the Oraons had been a part of the struggle for land (mulkui larai) in 1888 and later were influenced by the Brisa Munda movement. In fact, the origin of the Tana Bhagat movement followed the well-established pattern of previous revolutions like the Santhal (1855) and Munda (1900) rebellions in which the respective leaders claimed to have divine revelation and were entrusted with a mission to cleanse their religion from impurities and corruption and restore the long-lost political suzerainty (Singh, 1988 : 37).

The primary reasons for the rise of the Tana Bhagat movement lay in their acute exploitation facilitated by the colonial land revenue system, and the growing clout of money lenders and landlords

(zamindars) because of which they had suffered huge loss of ancestral land. This systematic-structural oppression was coupled with everyday exploitation by the British administration, as the Oraons had to act as beaters during the hunts of British officers; they were used as carriers of the baggage of the local police for paltry sums and were regularly thrashed for minor offenses (Chattoraj, 1999 : 639-640). In the context of the theoretical discussion in the previous section, it can be said that the Oraon society/tradition was undergoing a deep epistemological crisis induced by the colonial regime, which challenged the entire symbolic universe of the Oraons. As their entire way of life was threatened the Oraons realized that their gods were helpless to check their deteriorating condition, which pushed them to refashion their symbolic universe.

Any such effort is a two-step process. Why we are in this situation? Is the first question that is asked, followed by, what is the way out? Let us see how the crisis, its diagnosis and its prognosis played out in the Tana Bhagat Movement. The theorizers of the new Tana sect, who can be called organic intellectuals in the Gramscian sense, located the source of this crisis in the corruption of their religion, which was not separate from their economic, political or social life. They argued that, as a community, they had drifted away from the original precepts of their true religion, which they called the Kurukh Dharam. The Tanas argued that their religion had been corrupted and it required cleansing. The socio-religious world of the Oraons was full of ghosts and spirits who exercised control over every domain of their existence. The belief in these spirits, they declared, was no part of their ancient tribal faith but was a later importation from the Munda religious system and the reason for their present degraded state. Jatra Oraon claimed to have received magical spells and incantations that would pull out (tana) these ghosts and spirits (This was the most important aspect of this new sect as it got named after this practice of pulling out ghosts and spirits). Accordingly, they named their new reformed faith- the Kurukh Dharam or the 'true' religion of the kurukhs or Oraons (Roy, 1928 : 247); (Singh, 1988). It was against this backdrop that the original religion of the Oraons was proclaimed, which has two primary components namely;

  a) Belief in One God Dharmesh, and Sita/Parvati as his consort.

  b) Bhakti as a path to reach Him, without any mediator.

The reconceptualization of theological components of their religion also led to a reconfiguration of their symbolic universe/ tradition and pattern of life.

4. Salient Points of the New Pattern of Life as conceived by the Tana Bhagats

The Tana Bhagat movement in its initial phase was essentially a socio-religious movement as it tried to chart out a new pattern of life for the Oraons. This new conceptualization was influenced by Vaishnavism and Kabir panthi tradition that had a long presence in the Chhotanagpur region (Kumar, 2008). Some of the features of the Tana sect were :

a) Ghosts and spirits were to be purged, along with dains (witches), matis, and ojhas (those who dealt with the spirit world).

b) animal sacrifices, violence, and non-vegetarianism were to be abhorred.

c) austerity and abstemiousness were to characterize religion and society. Accordingly,

   i. socio-religious festivities were forbidden, and

   ii. embroidery and ornaments were discarded.

d) bonds between men and women outside marriage were discouraged.

e) pure thought and speech, knowledge, wisdom, understanding, intelligence, and strength were regarded as virtues to be inculcated.

f) Customs related to birth, marriage, and death were re-fashioned in opposition to the mainstream Orion society. New diktats regarding commensality, inter-marriage and widow marriage were added.

g) Tana refused to accept the jurisdiction of the panch that was constituted by bhuinhars. Tana disputes and differences were required to be settled by a mandali (congregation), and later by the panchayat (assembly); Tanas not abiding by the decisions of the mandali were excommunicated.

h) the traditional leadership of the pahans (village priests) and mahtos (village headman) was to be questioned.

i) followers were to work no more as coolies or laborers for men of other castes or for the government.

j) reverting from settled agriculture to an ancient traditional form of cultivation, i.e. "shifting cultivation" (Dasgupta, 1999; Singh, 1988; Kumar, 2008).

This reconfiguration - largely conceived in religious terms- had both moral/ethical (from a- h) and political components (g-j). It was the political component that invited the ire of the traditional Oraon elites, the native Hindu-Muslim elites and the British colonial regime. Some of these new precepts were definitely inspired by Vaishnavism and protestant Christianity, but they were also an outcome of how the community understood its downfall. This can be gauged from a folk story narrating how the Oraons came to Chhotanagpur, which goes like this :

The Oraons "once dwelt on the Rohtas plateau under a king of their own tribe. The place was well fortified so as to defy the strongest enemy. The Oraons had erected a stone rampart about a mile in height, and the enemy long sought in vain to affect a breach. At length, the Hakims caught hold of a milk woman of the Ahir caste who used to supply milk to the Oraon Raja, and who had therefore free access to the fort. Inducements were offered to this woman to suggest to the enemy a practicable means of occupying the fort. She accordingly advised them to wait till the ensuing khadi or sarhul festival when all the Oraon makes were sure to get dead drunk. This turned out to be correct, and the enemy followed her instructions and succeeded in entering the fort" (Roy, 1915 : 35).

This story had two functions;

a) It provided the reasons why the Oraon community experienced their downfall i.e. excessive indulgence, consumption of liquor and festivities, consequently informing their areas of reform as consumption of liquor, non-vegetarian food and festivities were banned entirely.

b) It served as the template for envisioning the future of the Oraon Raj.

The Tana Bhagat Movement initially began as a socio-religious movement but soon transmuted into a political movement because it challenged the political structure of the society. As K.S. Singh writes; "As the movement progressed, agrarian issues came to the fore. Ghost-hunting gave way to a no-rent payment campaign. The protest against zamindars or landlords took on an atavistic form: Oraons

would not plough or do work of any kind, for either the Government or the zamindars, whose servants were beaten up and turned out of the jungles…" (Singh, p. 37). This political movement was articulated through the concept of Oraon Raj which was reflected in their songs and stories expressing their desire to restore their perceived lost political power and independence, as they called upon God (Dharmesh and Parvati) to deliver them from the Kali Yuga - the age of Sin to the Satya Yuga- the age of purity and prosperity, which brings us to the question of religion and social transformation and how it played out in the Tana Bhagat movement.

5. Anticipatory Dimension of Religion and the Utopia of Oraon Raj

From the sociological perspective, religion has been understood as a social institution that plays a conservative role in maintaining the status quo and as a source of social conformity. However, there also exists the view that religion could challenge the inherited social order and induce social change (McGuire, 1981; Hinman, 2013). In this paper, I take the second view while presenting an analysis of the Tana Bhagat movement. According to Ernst Bloch and Paul Ricoeur religion, apart from legitimizing domination and justifying status-quo, can also function as a force of social change and liberation from oppression. Bloch and Ricoeur identify this potential of religion in its utopian dimension. According to Ricoeur; religion functions as an ideology when it justifies the existing system of power… [and]…functions as a utopia to the extent that it is a motivation nourishing the critique [of ideology] (Ricoeur, 1986 : 231). Ricoeur thus identifies a positive function of religion in its capacity to envision a future society in response to the ills of the past and present.

Ernst Bloch in his work The Principle of Hope (1995) argued that "religious stories of emancipation and oppression possess a utopic function in that these stories reveal the inherent contradictions of human existence and, in so doing, open the door to understanding the need for the transcendence and transformation of existent society" (Reed & Goldstein, 2022 : 3). Religion has an anticipatory function of offering an alternative vision of a society that is free from injustice, suffering and oppression. This anticipatory-utopian drive of religion is characterized among other things by an active and activist attitude toward the present reality from the perspective of the future. In Bloch's theory, this attitude is called 'militant optimism'

and has a fundamental role in rebellions/revolutions because it "allies subjective, imaginative factors with real, historical tendencies and actively correlates the present and the future. It turns wishful dreams into will-full acts and maintains the momentum towards the Novum (newness) of the future by being a constant reminder that the 'undecided material' of present reality can be, however, decided through work and concretely mediated action" (Prosic, 2022, p. 120). In the anticipatory-utopia operationality, religious stories and themes of the triumph of 'good' over 'evil', the victory of true faith and perseverance, etc. get interpreted in the context of everyday life becoming a motivating factor and driving power in the struggle against oppression and injustice. Some of the songs (mentioned in the next page) of Tana Bhagats' expressed the anticipatory-utopian drive of their newly conceptualized religion which fuelled their militant optimism to achieve the utopian Oraon Raj which would be free of injustice, oppression, wickedness, etc.

Come O Father, bringing Thy golden shield; Come bringing golden symbols, golden crown, bringing Sat Yuga

Come father bringing holy rain, the golden kingdom and the golden altar; Come, Father, bringing Thy golden bench and golden chair.

O Father, come with Thy accoutrements complete,

Father, come bringing Thy golden castle, come Father for eternity,

O Father the Kali Yug is finished; it is used up. O Father, the age of sin is at an end.

O Father, the world of sin is ended.

O Father, do Thou drive off and scatter abroad the miseries of this country.

O Father, do thou drive off the diseases of this world

O Father, do thou destroy and cast out the wicked men of this world.

O Father, destroy and cast out the sinful enemies of this world.

O Father, do Thou cast out and destroy the wicked enemies of this world.

O Father, do Though bring and establish Thy Holy kingdom.

O Father, the law of God is being accepted, -O Father-accepted

O Father, God's justice is beginning to reign, - Father, Beginning to reign.

No More, Brethren, no more, the Kali Yuga is no more- it is past and gone

No more, brethren, no more, the Age of sin is no more, - it is fled for aye.

The destroyers of life, O Brethren the destroyers of life shall be totally destroyed-destroyed

Sinful people, O Brethren, Shall Be utterly destroyed-destroyed

Meat-eaters, O Brethren, shall be utterly ruined- shall be ruined

O Brethren, the ungrateful shall be utterly destroyed-destroyed

The wicked, O Brethren, shall be utterly destroyed-destroyed

Thieves, O Brethren, shall be utterly destroyed-destroyed

No more, O Father, no more, the obstinate enemies [of man] are no more- O Father, the world (age) of sin is ended.

In these songs, we can identify the motif of Kali Yuga (symbolizing the 'present' as the age of sin and suffering) as the dystopia against which the motif of Satya Yuga (an anticipatory state free of sin, suffering, and oppression) functions as the utopia which served as the catalyst for their social action. The imagined utopia of Oraon Raj as conceptualized by the leaders of the Tana Bhagat movement was a place of virtue, truthfulness, abstinence, teetotalism, vegetarianism, and austerity in the moral realm, while in the material-political realm, it was :

 a) A land of self-rule free of foreigners (Zamindars, Talukdars, Merchants, and Christians/British).

 b) A land where a few grains of rice would suffice to prepare a sumptuous meal, and rich crops would grow in the fields

without the necessity of tilling the soil or sowing or weeding (Fuchs, 1965).

It was this utopic imagination resulting from the desire for deliverance from the acute economic-political and everyday humiliation that propelled the Tana Bhagat's to challenge the British colonial empire in the early decades of the 20th century.

6. Conclusion

The Tana Bhagat movement along with other tribal revolts and rebellions like the Santhal Hul, and the Birsa Munda revolt that happened in the 19th and early 20th centuries in colonial India has been characterized as a millenarian movement, and this characterisation has informed a majority of the studies on this movement. But the Tana Bhagat movement, when it began, was not millenarian in character. Though there was indeed the dimension of deliverance, an important characteristic of the millenarian movement, apocalyptic nature, the defining characteristic of millenarianism, appeared in the later phase of the movement and proved only to be momentary in nature which only resulted from the repeated failure of newly reformulated religion (read symbolic universe/s) to ameliorate the socio-economic condition of the Oraons population. Jatra Oraon was arrested on 23rd April 1914 and sentenced to imprisonment. He was released in 1915 but by then his charisma had faded. The next leader of the Tana Bhagats' was a woman named Litho Oraon who was able to galvanize the movement for a short time but she too was arrested and upon release faded into oblivion. The next person to take the mantle of leadership was Mangor Oraon in the fall of 1915 but he too met the same fate at Jatra and Litho. The movement lost its momentum with repeated police action only to regain it in the year 1919 when a 20-year-old youth Sibu Oraon declared himself to be the leader of the Oraons and proclaimed the return of the Oraon Raj. In 1919 he gathered a band of 700-800 followers who migrated to Satpahari hills in the present-day Hazaribagh district of Jharkhand expecting the advent of the deity who would guide them to the utopia of Oraon Raj but it too failed, upon which the Tana Bhagat's slowly drifted towards the Indian National Congress which was gaining traction under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi (Kumar, 2008; Singh, 1988).

In the context of the theoretical framework, it can be seen that the Tana Bhagat movement initially was a movement to reconfigure the

symbolic universe of the Oraon society as the leaders of the Tana sect tried to reform their religion which they found to be inadequate for meeting the challenges introduced by the complex of colonialism. Only whence the attempt failed, the movement became millenarian in character i.e. after almost five years since Jatra proclaimed himself to the prophet-king of Oraons which in the end met the same fate of Santhal and Munda uprisings. But despite its failure the Tana Bhagat's were able to challenge the colonial regime thereby playing an important role in the Indian freedom struggle as the movement was born with an anti-colonial consciousness as a critique of colonialism expressed in religious terms.

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