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Significance of Totemism among the Tribes of India

M. Amirthalingam

The term totem is of Ojibwe (North American) origin. A totem can be defined as being an object or symbol representing animals or plants that serve as an emblem of a group of people such as a family, clan, group, lineage or tribe that serves as the link to their ancestry or mythic past (Merriam, 2004). Totemism denotes a mystical or ritual relationship among members of a specific social group and a species of animals or plants. However, totemistic beliefs are not restricted to Native American and aboriginal people in North America. They are also widely prevalent among the people of Africa, Arabia, Asia, Australia, Eastern and Western Europe and the Arctic polar region.

The term totemism also has a non-traditional connotation. A person who is not a member of a tribal group or clan but adopting a personal spirit or animal helper can also be brought under the definition of totem. This practice was common during the New Age movement and the mythopoetic men's movement.

Totemism implies respect for and prohibition against the killing and eating of the totemic animals or plants. Underlying this practice is the belief that the members of the group are descendants from a common totemic ancestor and thus are related. Such a group may adopt the group symbol of unity which also becomes the protector of the group. These totems hark back to a mythical past during which a mystical relationship existed between the tribe and the totemic symbol. The group that observes totemism is called the totemic group. Each totemic group is clearly differentiated from the other groups by its own unique totemic symbol.

Totemism can also be defined as a complex of varied ideas and ways of behavior based on a world view drawn from nature (Dagba, et.al., 2013). The totemic group has ideological, mystical, emotional, reverential and genealogical relationship with the totems. It is necessary to differentiate between group and individual totemism (Encyclopaedia Britannica).



There are various ways of viewing the totem for they are considered as a companion, protector or helper. It can also become an object of awe and fear. Sometimes special names and emblems are used to refer to the totem. There is a specific ban on killing and eating the totem animal. Certain totemistic rituals are always followed. A common method of depicting the totem is to erect a totem pole upon which the figure of the totem is carved or painted.

In India, totemism is most widely practiced among the tribal groups. The Santhals are an example of a totemic group which is named after plants and animals. The Kamar tribes have totemic groups named after Netam (tortoise), Sori (a jungle creeper), Wagh Sori (tiger), Nag Sori (snake) and Kunjam (goat). Among the Todas of the Nilgiris the buffalo is the totemic animal. The Toda's economy, culture, morality and naturally their religious life revolves around the totemic animal (Rivers 1906). In Maharashtra, the villages are generally farmed by a biradari or kinship group and even today we can find examples of the clan name usually after a totem like Magar, Landage, Vaji and More.

Another example that can be cited from Maharashtra is that of the Koliya tribe. There is a clear reference in the Jatakas

to the Koliyas having the Kol tree (Indian jujube) as the clan totem (Kosambi, 1985, p.23). The same word also means spider and fisherman. Prehistoric fishing camps have been unearthed in Maharashtra and the Koliya caste still continues to fish as an occupation.

According to Kosambi (1964), in Maharashtra, the pipal is the totemic tree of the Pimpleys. A later Vedic Brahmin clan too is named as "Paippalada" named after the pipal tree.

The Kadambas who ruled over present day Karnataka sometime during the 4th and 5th centuries A.D. derived their clan totem from the kadamba tree. In fact, the kadamba tree is still worshipped as a totem by the Gaadas and other tribes of the Western Ghats (Kosambi, 1985, p.37).

Madhya Pradesh in India is the home of many totemic groups such as the Gond, Bheel, Kol, Aurand, Kammar and Saharia. The members of these tribes are mostly illiterate and very poor. Their main economic activity is the collection of wild plants from the forests. The staple food of the Saharia consists of sorghum (*Sorghum vulgare*) maize (*Zea mays*) or sometimes wheat (*Triticum* spp.), which they eat with salt and some leafy vegetables. Some of the taboos that these tribes observe are no marriages between the members of the same clan. They do not even eat the plant to which their clan name belongs.

The Umariya clan is associated with the Umar tree (*Ficus recemosa*), Peepar Barodiya is associated with the Pipal tree (*Ficus religiosa*), the Dhanik clan is associated with the *Dho* plant (*Anogerssas latifolia*), the Semariya clan is associated with *Semal* plant (*Salmalia indica*), Samria clan is associated with *San* (*Crotolana jucea*), the Salaiya clan is associated with *Salai* (*Boswellia serrata*)

and Jhilmalia clan is associated with Siris (*Albizzia lebeck*). Some clans do not eat the flesh of the totem animal. Some Munda tribes of Bihar state are named after plants (Gupta, 1981).

The Sahyadri hills are the home of the Katkaris, a poor poverty stricken forest tribe. They speak a corrupt form of Marathi intermixed with Gujarati words. They live chiefly on roots and herbs and eat flesh. They eke out their living by working as catechu-makers or as daily wage labourers or as gatherers of fire wood. They worship gods such as Chaide and Mhasoba. They also pay obeisance to bhuts and pishachs (ghosts and demons). The community does not have any priest and the tribals themselves perform the marriage ceremonies (<http://archive.is/TgDvc>).

The Mandla Kols of Central India have a number of totemic sects or clans. The Bargaiyan are named after a village called Bargaon, but they connect their name with the *bar* or banyan tree and revere it. At their weddings, a branch of this tree is laid on the roof of the marriage shed and the food is cooked on a fire made of the wood of the banyan and served to all the relatives of the sect on its leaves (Russell and Lai, 1995).

According to the folklore of the Saharia tribe of Central India, a marriage party once took shelter under a pipal tree because it was raining. Within a short time the branches and leaves of the pipal tree arranged themselves closely to save the marriage party from the heavy showers. Since this incident, they have been worshipping the pipal tree. It is a totemic tree of the Barodia clan of Central India (Mandal, 1998).

Till today, the bilva tree is the totemic deity of the guardians of the eastern Indian forests, the Santhal tribals

(Patnaik, 1993). From ancient times, *vilvam* has been a totemic tree for *Saivaites*. It is always associated with Lord Shiva. It is also called Shiva's Tree, tall, stern, austere with dark leaves, and the trifoliate leaf which symbolizes the three eyes of Shiva. It is said that offerings of water sprinkled with these leaves at any shrine will always remain fresh.

The Mahobia group, whose name is undoubtedly derived from the town of Mahoba, has adopted the mahua tree as their totem, and digging a small hole in the ground they place in it a little water and the liquor made from mahua flowers, and worship it (Crooke, 1926).

According to Verrier Elwin, the Dumariyan clan worships the cluster fig (*Udumbara*) tree for the gift of a child (Gupta, 1991). The Chandan clans of central India worship the sandalwood tree and never harm it.

Even in mainstream Hinduism we can find examples of totemic manifestation. Among the Hindu pantheon of gods the vahana is the mount or vehicle of the god or goddess. For example, the vehicle of Brahma is the swan. It has been argued by some authorities that the worship of the humped bull in pre-Aryan times is evidence of prehistoric worship of the proto-Shiva (Kosambi, 1985, p.18). And finally, the existence of Brahmin gotras with names like Kaushika (from kusha grass) and Bharadwaja (skylark, a bird) means that even traditional Vedic Hinduism was not immune from totemism.

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Conservation of Marine Faunal Communities in India

R. Sabesh

Introduction

India has a coastline of about 7500 kilometres and nearly twenty five crore people live within fifty kilometres of the coast. The coastal zone is also endowed with a very wide range of ecosystems like mangroves, coral reefs, sea grasses, salt marshes, sand dunes, estuaries, lagoons, etc., The protection of coastal regions has assumed greater importance in

recent years due to the ever increasing human population, urbanization and accelerated developmental activities, mainly the anthropogenic activities like dumping of hazardous wastes and letting untreated sewerage and industrial waste into the oceans. This causes tremendous pressure on this fragile ecosystem and affects the life of marine flora and fauna. Invasive species and disease vectors with