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Religion shapes mind or mind shapes religion? A Psychosocial perspective

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Abstract

Religion has always been in the centre of discussion since its inception in society. Being an element of the culture, the forms and nature of religion are not the same everywhere in the world. Variably religion has different forms across different societies. Nonetheless, it has the most powerful influence over human minds. Nothing influenced the human mind more than religion in the human history. In the article efforts have been made to explore the various social settings and their impacts on human minds and also, to seek out the relationship between mind and society and how they both become affected in course of time. The article investigates the psychosocial roots of shaping human minds. It is suggested that religion is shaped by the society or the social environment in which a person is groomed and nurtured and later religion shapes the human mind, thus religion is social constructed through the process of socialization that is the region why other religions are external.

Keywords: Religion, Mind, Civilization, Belief, Cognitive Development, Culture

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Religion shapes mind or mind shapes religion? Psychosocial Perspective

Before all, religion is a system of ideas with which the individuals represent to themselves the society of which they are members, and the obscure but intimate relations which they have with it. This is its primary function; and though metaphorical and symbolic, this representation is not unfaithful. Quite on the contrary, it translates everything essential in the relations which are to be explained: for it is an eternal truth that outside of us there exists something greater than us, with which we enter into communion.

Emile Durkheim

Introduction

In different parts of the world people practice different type of religions, undoubtedly god proposed in various religions are not a universal reality and equally the same. Due to difference in concept of god, different people have different types of importance and reverence for the same object. Beliefs about God vary too much (Corte, 2010). People borne and brought up in different societies and culture, have different cultural values and social meanings for the same object, may live together, but they relate and define themselves in the framework of belief system framed by their ancestors. People reflect their identity by affiliating with the religious, cultural and political groups. In order to seek their identity people can know who they are only when they know are not and whom against they are (Huntington, 1996:21)

Religious identity plays a very dominant role in the society, it is very difficult to sustain in a society without a religious identity. An individual naturally becomes the member of a religious group in the childhood even without knowing the meaning or relevance of religion. Almost every religion is identified by a certain language usually the language in which the religious book is written or practice instructions have been described. Others usually judge the behaviour of an individual according to various identities such as religious, educational, economic, and professional as well as other cultural identities. In the beginning an individual does not give much attention to religious identity but the moment he realizes that religious identity is unavoidable, he starts giving the importance to the religious values and gradually he assimilates the religious elements and attempts to dissolve within the group. Usually the religious identity can be traced out by the name an individual holds. The name of an individual is given by the 'family described in the theme of culture and religion. Thus, religious identity of an individual is shaped by the name given by family in the childhood,

rest other rituals is learned by living in family as a member. John Bishop argues that a person can choose to have belief in God even despite having indistinct evidence for God's existence, instead person can choose to have faith commitment that does not involve the belief that God exists (Bishop, 2007).

Undoubtedly, the contribution made by religion can never ever be ignored or underestimated. Right from the beginning of human civilization, we find the presence of religious practices in some or the other ways. Since the enlightenment, scholars and philosophers from all over world paid especial attention to end up the discussion but there seems no end of the discussion at all. All the great religions guided the society in time of need and played a vital role in organising the social relations. However, oriental religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, which are considered the most ancient religions, despite having a trust and belief in supreme power kept doubting on one God and his empire. In Hinduism there are theistic, polytheistic, pantheistic, and even atheistic forms (Meister, 2009b:46). *Carwaka* is categorized as a heterodox school of Hindu philosophy known as *Lokayata* and *Brahaspatya* is the ancient school of materialism in Hindu tradition, he believes in direct perception and empiricism, rejects Vedic ritualism and supernaturalism (Raman 2012: 557; Thomas, 2014:164). They have their own hypothesis based on logic and action (*karma*). They strongly believe in reflection of *karma* as the prime cause of pain, pleasure, suffering and other associated happenings.

Nonetheless, the enlightenment in Europe can be considered as the extension of the project to enhance the knowledge and unravel the mysteries around the religion. Knowledge revolution in Europe brought innovation and scientific discoveries that changed the entire perception of human-being, on the other hand it opened new horizon which was unknown ever before in the human history. But the fact also cannot be denied that religion is a new phenomenon, human survived a major share of time without the religion that we see in society today.

People in different parts of the world practice religion according the geographical conditions, give importance and respect to the locally available natural things. Further, emphasis was laid on knowing the philosophy and utility of religion, why people have faith in the religion, what drives a person to believe in God and so on. A variety of questions were tried to reply through the philosophy of religion. According to Wainwright, philosophy of religion can be considered as the part of enlightenment project that expanded the horizon and produced logics to think rationally (Wainwright, 2005). Religious beliefs, institutions, and practices are thoroughly discussed and critically examined in Hume's *Dialogues* and *The Natural History*

of Religion and Kant's reflections on religion and morality are examples of such effort. The “hermeneutics of suspicion” practiced by Marx, Weber, Nietzsche, and Freud can be considered as an extension of the same project. For these thinkers, religion is an expression of “false consciousness.” Its beliefs, feelings, and practices lack rational support and rest on motives that cannot be consciously acknowledged without destroying their credibility (Wainwright, 2007). In the article efforts have been made to look at the relationship of an individual with surrounding and society and analyse the impact of socialization in shaping the mind with particular emphasis on religion. The ultimate question I have tried to discuss in an analytical frame is that how the human mind is shaped around religion in society and how they both affect each other.

Origin: A hypothetical view

Human being has always been inquisitive to know the things around him and this tradition is continued till now. In seeking and understanding human enhanced their circumference and explored almost everything that came out around the way. However, in advancing the journey human would have confronted four type of situations which can be categorised as under:

1. Which was understood easily after applying little or some amount of mind in course of time and had supported to continue, however it was unorganised and confined to a certain basic needs. Human did not pay much attention on the things that was easily known. Human survived many years in this situation without any subtle ground. Most of the time was spent on understanding the things and compromising the most basic things.
2. Situation a bit complicated but ultimately human win over and searched until he got control over, in this situation it took generations to march further. Mostly it was concerned with food, cloth, housing, and safety. Hunting and gathering foods, choosing shelters, interface with plants, trees, animals. Collecting information on useful things and adapting with nature and climatic conditions.
3. Most complicated things of the mundane life including nature (hydrosphere, atmosphere, lithosphere and space etc.), living things (tree, plants, animal, human etc.) physical (visible things such as mountain, earth, rivers etc.). Tried to know about the complexity and how to use and handle. Human became thought oriented and seeking for purpose of life, established relationship with nature and unravelled the

mysteries of nature. Agriculture was largely in practice, economic conditions provided enough time and opportunity to think and develop.

4. Philosophical questions including life and death and beyond, causation of the world, origin, operation and other ontological mysteries, the most complicated parts involved under it, a larger proportion of such questions are till date unresolved and remains an enigma, despite the advancement of science. Though, some answers achieved but unacceptable by all those who are studying on these complexities. Even all the parapsychological questions may be involved in it.

Shaping of mind through cultural patterns

In order to seek the answers to the question the idea arise in mind and unravel the mysteries around the nature compelled human to struggle. With growth of knowledge some questions were replied through human civilization and some questions remained unanswered. The questions beyond the knowledge were given respect, and considered as sacred associating with divinity. Society plays a very determinant role in transmitting the knowledge from one place to another place and it makes human as medium to transmit. Knowledge is derived from observation, experience, imitation, attitude and practice. Therefore, it is based on evidences and experiences, and knowledge does not come in practice so soon, it may take long time than we perceive, then it becomes praxis. Experience based knowledge can be found in society in the form of proverbs, until we developed skill to document in writing.

Every culture has certain proverbs and parables which are commonly used by the people living in their respective society. Norms, mores, rituals are the tools to control and regulate the people and their behaviour in society. What is approved and believed by the society are naturally imposed on the people living in the society through the norms. For example in North India (Eastern Uttar Pradesh) despite so many science colleges as well as other higher as well technical institutions of learning, there is a considerable influence of witchcraft healing in the lower as well as medium strata of the society. They are known as *Shokha*¹ and

¹ *Shokha* is considered as a divine person who believed by people has power to control the devils, ghosts and heals the influence on a person caused by these ghosts. Caste of *Shokha* is not important, he may belong to lower or higher, and usually most of the *Shokhas* hail from lower castes. Among the Hindus there are particularly nine days period that falls twice in a year. *Shokha* become active and heal such cases. Though, the *shokha* heals person affected throughout the year using some locally available substances such as flower, cloves, sandalwood, menthol, water mixed with some herbal fragrances. Alcohol and animal slaughtering especially the goat, pig or chicken also sacrificed to appease the deity and thus deity in the form of wind rides the affected person. And the affected person starts weeping, laughing, jumping and showing some abnormal behavior and during this time he/she utters the cause of influence, time of influence and if any known person involved behind

have respectable position in society. Some people visit to *Shokha* if they feel any sickness or loss of possessions. *Shokha* visiting practice, I have observed personally in many families from illiterate to high and technically educated. In such families, people despite having scientific education they believe in abstract forces or spirits which are beyond their understanding of the scientific inquiry. They are borne and brought up in their family around such belief system and their minds are tuned accordingly, thus they never mix up their college learned knowledge with their family learned knowledge.

It has been observed that right from the beginning infants are very much sensitive to the emotions of the other people, particularly those who are surrounded by the infant. Trevarthen (1979) called 'intersubjective sympathy'. In human intersubjective awareness works as a motivator and motivates to learn all types of knowledge and information. Religion, education, rituals, norms, mores all are learnt through intersubjective sympathy. He endorses that "in humans' intersubjective awareness motivates cultural learning- the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and skills with all the conceptual and material consequences" (Traverthen, 1979:18). In the 1970s, researchers in different fields found in their study about live interactions between adults and infants of a few months old (Bateson, 1971, 1979; Brazelton, Koslowski & Main, 1974; Stern, 1971, 1974, 1977; Tronick, Als & Adamson, 1979). Emotion play a dominant role in learning the language, behaviour and other elements of the culture as emotional attachment works like a stimulant. An infant's mind usually starts shaping during his early childhood, a six month old baby starts responding to various conspicuous change occurs. It can be assumed then that social reality determines not only activity and consciousness but to a considerable degree organismic functioning (Berger, 1986: 202).

Religion and mind: Religion is an integral part of culture relates with faith one holds to conclude something that is beyond his perception. It is completely a learned behaviour of a person through intersubjective sympathy and emotional imitation. A child learns at initial level from his mother, siblings and other members in the family as well as vicinity. Culture is a broad term contains several elements of society from abstract ideas to concrete. A person by living in the society highly influenced by the others. Other people's views build, change and maintain his self-image; thus, there is an interaction between how we see ourselves and how others see us (See Cooley, 1922). Society itself is responsible in shaping not only the mind

the witchcraft. People including children, women, men of all ages sit around the event and thus at large they are likely to be affected by the act. And they consider the *Shokha* as reverend and show respect to him onward.

but also the entire personality, appearance, attire, food, belief and other so many things which affect our daily life. Society provides all that an individual to survive and develop, religion itself devised by society as a tool to organize people based on certain common belief and natural characteristics. Durkheim argues that Religion is characterized by their division of the world into sacred and profane phenomena (Durkheim, 1995: 34-5).

As a member of a particular society a person learns to practice a particular religion in which his family, friends and other surrounded people hold belief. A person usually practice a religion what is practiced by his family and parents. A person believes in the faith held by his family due to his desire to be assimilated in his family as part of collective consciousness. Right from his birth he participates in the rituals and gradually he develops respect for the faith. By showing respect to the faith followed by his family and neighborhood he gets respect and considered as a responsible member of the family and community. By doing this, others trust in his actions and behaviors hence others provide him opportunity to share the responsibility and recognize his dignity. Thus religion shapes the mind of a person as part of socialization. If the society a person live in, is religious then the person will become religious. Proper socialization will make a person to learn everything correctly. The entire process of socialization through which a person learns can be categorized in three steps according to Cooley (1922).

- 1) To begin, we imagine our image of ourselves, traits and personalities.
- 2) We then see the reactions of others to interpret how others look at us. Society acts as a glass and reflects back to us our image
- 3) We develop our own Self-concept, based on our interpretations we made, or the image society reflected back. Our Self-concept can be enhanced or diminished by our conclusions.

Mead also illustrate in his theory about how the mind and self emerges from the social process of communication by signs (See Mead, 1934). Mead considers that self is constructed in society and it can be understood in social context only. Outer reality that we perceive in our everyday life affects our mind intensely our self is constructed around this. According to Subhash Kak a computer scientist and artificial intelligence analyst argues that between the outer reality and the experiencing self lies the agency of the mind (Kak, 2005). Outer reality we perceive through our senses which is collected in the form of knowledge to apply in society for understanding mundane life and social phenomena.

Outward and Inward Excursion of Human Mind:

Outward: Human mind is always active and dynamic in nature. Physically we may not visit to a place instantly of our imagination but mentally we can go to anywhere we want even without moving our body parts. The outward journey begins through our physical movements. By outward, human can discover new places outside of our body. One can explore earth, planet, space, ocean, or any known sphere, even one can invent the means to travel. He can invent a suitable vehicle to accomplish his journey. In order to fulfil his desire human invented boats, ships to travel in water, motors/rails/aeroplanes to travel on earth and aircraft as well as spacecraft to travel beyond the earth above in the sky. Simply he dominates the entire known-unknown places and establishes his authority. Whatever development we see today these all happened due to this outward exploration. In most of the situation this happens in the beginning of development process. Under this stage we believe in physical appearance of evidences, like we do in science. Scientific development can be put under this category. To establish authority we can witness conflict between the culture, races, and countries. Most of the conflicts are happening today because of outward journey followed by encroachment on other's culture and identity (See Huntington 1996). Culture and identity both are most important factors, it has been observed that an individual feels delighted and proud after he looks back on historical roots of his culture. When another culture attempts to prove his culture wrong then the adherents of the culture feel disdain and inflict like situation.

Inward: After reaching a certain level of wealth and prosperity the mind travels to inward-where it attempts to explore inward and inherent spaces of the body. The inward journey to exploration cannot begin unless the outer spaces are not known. The surrounding, lifestyle, thinking process, rituals, religious practices, economic conditions are some primary indicators to attain the eligibility for the inward exploration. Inward exploration is utmost requirement for the self- development as well as overall development of an individual in society. In order to fulfil the basic needs today, science made all required material things easily available. This all became possible due to increased understanding of the material phenomena, nature, structure, complexity and other concerned knowledge. Over production of consumable items resulted stiff competition in the market. A competition not only to increase production but also this tendency propelled the competition for consumption. Consequently individuals are converted into consumers for the companies and all people became buyers. This process produced intersections at all levels and further caused conflict in the society.

Inward travel is most essential to seek out the direction of self as well the society at gross. Logic, philosophy and science most important component to understand the complexity of nature but inward exploration also is an unavoidable process for cognitive development because our all development is ultimately for the human development. Religion drives human mind toward the self-exploration and which later leads to self-awareness and inward exploration through spiritual awakening and compassion.

Shaping the mind and the contemporary culture:

My own approach to understand the shaping of mind, is firmly rooted in the pragmatist assumption that the mind is fundamentally shaped by its bodily existence (embodiment) and cannot be understood in isolation from its environment (embedment). In *Mind, Self and Society* (1934), Mead describes about the role of social process in construction of the self of an individual and how it emerges out of social process, rather than approaching human experience in terms of individual psychology, he analyses experience from the standpoint of communication as an unavoidable part to the social order. For Mead individual psychology can be understood only in relation to the social process. The construction and development of the self of an individual and consciousness of the self within his experience is predominantly based on social process and environment. Mead considers that social process is in the root of structure and process of self through the individual experience. Communication plays a catalyst role in the entire process of self-consciousness. Religion related consciousness or belonging to the religion is the latter development of an individual self through the process of socialization and an individual learns to accommodate with the persisting social customs and rituals in which he takes the part right from his beginning. Thus the mind of an individual is shaped by the faith and belief he is accustomed to live in. A man what is today is because of the traits he inherits from his ancestors and modulated by the environment (Kak, 2011).

According to Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio “consciousness is a state of awareness of self and surrounding” (Damasio, 2010: 122). Awareness is a most essential part of socialization through which an individual realizes about the existence of him in relation to his total surrounding. Religion is a social reality and most acceptable aspect of the culture, people simply believe what is element of the religion without any argument. There is a conceived belief that religion and associated rituals are not supposed to be neglected. Culture shape a person’s mind in the various ways. For example education is another element, if education and logics get value in the family the individual will give importance over religion, he can give importance to both of them equally depends on the culture of family. Say for example

among the Hindus they value to the religion but religion may not be allowed to encroach the education. Religion is given importance by those who are free to spend their extra time in the family such as parents are other senior members in the family. The children are never compelled to participate in the religious activities. The mind of a child is free to learn education without any inhibition and interception, so there is no contradiction. Mind is left to be shaped in a free and fearless environment, the focus of a child is on the education. I have observed personally in several families from lower to higher income they never impose their children to visit the temple or to be involved in any of the rituals. Even the rituals are allowed to cut short if it is likely to disturb the main work.

The distinction of religion is based on human learning, thus inclination of human mind towards religion neither natural nor inherent through biological process. Religion is completely an outward phenomena which is learned by cognitive development and social conditioning. Piaget (1973) believes that child play an active role in the growth of intelligence and learns by doing himself. He considered that child is like a philosopher he perceives the world only after he has experienced it. In his theory of cognitive development he was particularly focused on mental processes such as imitating, perceiving, remembering, believing and reasoning. Reasoning is the crux of intelligence. For Piaget reasoning is necessary in order to know how we learn (Singer & Revenson 1997: 13). Religion is shaped by society but learned by individuals in their childhood. Right in the beginning a child's mind remains in the concrete operational stage and deals with the present, he can think and shape about the future and abstract.

In recent years there has been a growing trend to globalise the culture and religion by the economically dominant and politically powerful nations imposing through education, banking, market, fashion and other modern tools. It can be characterized by a growing convergence and conformity between different religious traditions in which particular religious ideals are sought. There is regular congregational rituals, adoption of a sacred day a week, centrality of scriptures and texts, an engagement with secular issues such as human rights, refugees, the environment etc. (See Nagata 1999). The influence of globalised religions are increasing and impacting the mind of people through hyper media. Religious elements propagated by media and endorsed by the academic researchers and other statesmen are largely accepted. The current example can be of Yoga which have traditionally been a methods practiced by Hindus and Buddhists to stay healthy and purification of mind for enabling meditation. But it was spread through media all across the world now it was

declared Yoga Day on 21 June by the UN, 194 nations expressed their consent and endorsed it. However, the role of media seems dubious and creates a world of the hyper reality where one abolishes the real world and the world of appearances in the postmodernist society (Baudrillard, 1994). We are living in hyper reality by forms and simulations, we are distancing ourselves from the true meaning and true value of things. Religion is an unavoidable part of culture and contemporary culture relies on displacing economic notions of cultural production with notions of cultural expenditure. Consumption is dominating over the production which leads the dominance of material influence over human thus the hermeneutics as well as the “*koine*” of religion also interpreted based on group interest either justifying the existing change or conflicting with the changes occurred due to material dominance. These influences can apparently be found all through the societies across the world. Religion can be understood in social context only. The divinity part is associated with reward and punishment to balance the social order and maintain the social rules in society.

Conclusion:

Religion is completely a social reality which constructed in society. Being a social reality it is associated with social process which can be changed, turned or shifted according to individual freedom and personal convenience. People perceive religion right from the beginning while they are infant. A child grasps the religious elements from the environment he is groomed in. Religious affiliation is associated with identity of an individual. People keep religious behaviour changing according to their choice and suitability, most often perform their religious behaviour differently in community than what they perform individually. An individual is less religious while he is living individually he becomes more religious while he is living with the religious community of his faith. There seems a considerable variation of behavioural aspects of human being. Initially religion is shaped by human approved by society and afterwards religion shapes human minds. Self develops through socialization which includes the assimilation of various sociocultural norms and of course religion too is one of them. Self of an individual constructs and develops in a social environment, of which an individual is an integral part as an agent of social process. Therefore, his mind is naturally shaped by the social belief and social environment he is surrounded with.

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