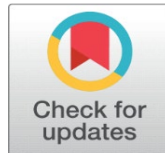# A GLANCE AT THE ROLE OF FOLK RELIGION FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF PEOPLE

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ABSTRACT

When religion is an inseparable aspect of the social and cultural life of people, it must be appropriated into the development framework to ensure their well-being, harmonious life, and sustainability. Keeping away from the rationalistic perspective on religion as well as the negative aspects of the creation of conflicts and tension, this study tries to look at religion as having the potential to address various problems associated with development in its broadest terms. Particularly, this article focuses on the role, nature and vitality of folk religion and its relevance for the implementation of development initiatives for the well-being of different communities. It highlights the fact that as everyday village life is shaped by their perception and worldview shaped by their religious ideas and practices and also encumbered with their religious experiences at individual and collective levels, the relationship between the uncodified folk religion and the social, cultural and economic development of community the development could be undoubtedly explored.

Keywords: Beliefs, Material Culture, Performing Arts, Economy, Community Life

1. INTRODUCTION

All human societies, in one way or other, have been seen associated with religious practices which are considered as nothing but the worship of supernatural and it is revealed that even the Neanderthal Man about 150,000 years ago had similar ones Messenger (1972). But from the accounts of archaeologists and historians, who had rallied on the unearthed artifacts and other historical records of the extinct people, could tell us that there is continuity from the ancient to the contemporary human societies in terms of the tradition of belief in the supernatural

forces ("beings"). The elements of continuity present in the all forms of practices of worshiping supernatural could be seen in the light of decolonizing attempt to develop a uniform perspective to handle different stages not on the developmental yardstick. Messenger writes that "...religions number more than 5000 in the world today, each is a composite of varying beliefs, behavior, specialists, and groups. Religious beliefs, ... must involve supernatural entities toward which sacred attitudes are directed by groups of people. ... Every religion recognizes several or all of the following entities: one or more deities, spirits and demons, personal and impersonal power, one or more souls, ghosts, fate, luck, magic, and witches" Messenger (1972), 201. The world is not unified, rather it is divided between supernatural and natural world; and similarly, the sacredness and profanity are also attributed to the objects, entities, time, space, etc. Indeed, all these religious sects irrespective of their position in the evolutionary trajectory, or whatever name they possess, all of them are having a common pattern of elements with variations in degree and vocabulary of usage. In addition, when they are all approached with the perceived and conceived dichotomy of sacred and profane, good and bad, benevolent and malevolent, formness and formlessness, natural and supernatural, etc., the boundary between all the types of religions has to be seen, and it helps us to see societies on the horizontal plane of co-existence rather than the hierarchical terms of priorities. SO, the focus on the role of folk religion and its role for the development of people must be seen here as an instance of religious practices and arrangements and also as a mode of and form of negation with the natural perceptual world and supernatural conceptual world. Further, it can be stated that each of the religion has the attributes that to mean or assign religious significance or religious value to the elements found in the socio-cultural and physical settings, or to some objects or to places, for instances, an insignia of a priest or the mountain abode of a deity. While there is a common thread could be seen between all the religious practices, this study focuses on the folk religious practices as a separate entity not merely for the sake of convenience, but the reason lies in the characteristics that demarcates and differentiates the folk who confine themselves to be with the folk religious practices. With the help of functional approach, this paper studies the contemporary relevance of folk religious practices not only in the development of the people but also its functioning as a factor that promises harmonious life among them. So, the functional approach of folklore has been extended in this study with the incorporation of current issues in the field of development studies.

2. UNDERSTANDING FOLK RELIGION

'Folk religion', as Trachtenberg called it as "the inner life of the people themselves Yoder (1974), 9, is not an undefined and commonsensical category; rather it is a well-understood category currently being used in various disciplines in humanities and social sciences, and thus, the usage of folk religion must be seen as an inclusive category under which many studies have been carried out by scholars. In the discipline of folklore, the folk religion is being the base for many folklore items that are founded on the very basic principles of associated beliefs. So folk religion cannot be seen as an entity without considering the many of the folk practices including lores related to it, and indeed, the sacred and profane are merely the attitudes people have towards the supernatural and natural worlds that function as parts of the religion than the whole entity. Though it is generally considered that the sacred attitudes are related to positive feelings, however, by referring to a number of religious experiences, *Outline of Cultural Materials* mentions the different account

that: "oppressive fear of malevolent higher powers, overwhelming awe of divine might, luxurious sense of dependence upon a benevolent and all-knowing superior, reassuring feeling of security through conformity, prideful conviction of right, grateful release from the burdens of a guilty conscience, groveling humility of self-abnegations, ecstatic release of inner power, mystic sense of identification with or absorption in the divine essence, aesthetic thrill in religious art, music, or ceremonial" Murdock (1950), 127, cf. Messenger (1972), 218-219. In fact, religious practices (as folk practices) seen as acts of behaviour could be consisting of a list of practices and quoting Murdock (1950), 127-129 Messenger gives a list of religious practices with an example for each one having their subcategories: "propitiation, purification, expiation, avoidance, taboo, asceticism, orgies, revelation, divination, ritual, and magic" and subcategories for propitiation as "obeisance, laudation, prayer, sacrifice, vows, endowing of shrines, among others" Murdock (1950), 219. Are these practices associated with any specialists within a given in a homogenous society or with any specialists of a specified social group or even sanctioned for laymen also to practice them? While looking at societies in a diachronically, and also on synchronically in some cases, societies are seen as having specialists to perform these religious practices, similarly, laymen had not been prohibited to practice these practices. In Indian context, one could see both laymen and specialists involve in these religious practices but there are social, cultural, and economic factors to play a significant role in deciding it – thus differentiating them by serving different functionaries. So 'priests' who perform religious practices cannot be treated as general category since they occupy different social positions as well as functions. For instance, 'priests' in some societies are engaged merely for performing religious practices, whereas in other communities, they are the healers of diseases and sorcery and witchcraft – thus occupying significant place in the magico-religious practices of communities. However, Wallace (1966), 52-101 who, according to Messenger, conceptualized religion as a series of building blocks, 'proposed thirteen minimal categories of religious' behaviour such as 'prayer, music, physiological exercise, exhortation', reciting the code, imitating things, touching things, not touching things, feasts, sacrifice, congregating, inspiration, and the use of symbolic object' and these categories could be seen as parallel with the list of religious practices of Murdock (1950), 219-220. While' superstition' was considered as the term in the place of 'folk belief' and vice versa, the term 'folk religion' had also been received in opposition to 'organized religion' Yoder (1974). He prefers to scrap the term 'superstition' and substitutes it with term 'folk belief' and it has also been widely accepted and following in folklore studies Yoder (1974).

The dichotomy of orality and literacy could be seen reflected in the religious practices of people and the nature of the forms of literature communicate either the type of the society or its social conditions - that is, they mean uncodified oral literature of the folk communities on the one hand and codified literature of the literate societies. While the oral narratives associated with supernatural entities display the functions of describing the origins of things, explaining the nature of reality, and asserting the proper organization of values, they become codified in written literature taking a consistent form, logically integrated and closed system of thought to explain the whole phenomena of the universe Messenger (1972). In all ritual practices, the role of priest is defined, but there is no uniformity other than their role of mediation activities in the cult institutions, which are classified by Wallace into four categories namely individualistic (practiced by laymen), shamanistic (performed by workers of magic and diviners for laymen), communal (performed by lay officials as priests for particular group at particular time), and ecclesiastical (performed by professional clergy organized into a bureaucracy)

Messenger (1972), 220. It is to be noted that these categories of priests also denote the presence of four types of cult institutions.

Defining folk religion in Indian context is not a difficult task, but it needs to take into account the existence of social groups who beyond their common language always assert their identity by worshiping deities that are more of ancestral in nature. And another factor that needs also to be considered is that the intersection between social groups may also be resulted in the overlapping properties of religious practices. Thus, applying folk religion to homogenous communities of believers within a politically consolidated group needs to begin by defining what a folk is and also by demarcating what does bind the group as a folk. Further, understanding a group as a 'folk' is founded on the basic framework which is the distinctive feature of the discipline of folklore, that is, it moves on to explore the artistic or creative materials produced by a 'folk' which, according to the functional definition of Alan Dundes, "can refer to any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is – it could be a common occupation, language, or religion – but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions, which it calls its own. In theory, a group consists of at least two persons but generally, most groups consist of many individuals. Individual members in a group may not be knowing all other members, but they will probably know the common core of the traditions belonging to the group, traditions which help the group have a sense of group identity" Dundes, (1965), 2. The benefit of accepting this definition lies in its inclusiveness in conceptualizing a group that is distributed across different geographical boundaries. However, 'lore' is also an inclusive term that has been assigned with a long list of expressive items produced by a folk in its socio-cultural life as well as part of its community production, and as such the term includes many items under its four broader categories such as 'oral traditions', 'social customs and beliefs', 'material culture' and 'performing arts' Dundes, (1965) – among them folk religion is one of the item that could be seen as the one that integrate elements from all categories of folklore. Therefore, the study of folk religion must be seen in the background that the folk religion must be studied with the help of folklore items from all the four categories. It is important to note that though there is a long list of terms are available in the religious studies, such as popular religion, local religious, traditional religion, nonofficial religion, people's religion, among other, the 'folk religion' is used in this article as an umbrella term to accommodate and mean the religious practices of people that are part of oral traditions, and also it means a system of belief that is more closely associated with the community life that play as one of the binding factors of family, clan and community. And also, it becomes a system that produces for the community a large amount of tangible and intangible materials and behavioural patterns – that must be seen as a means by which cultural knowledge is being transmitted among the members for the purpose of creating an identity. So, the study folk religion of a given society offers insights into a variety of things associated with the religious practices and they include items that fall under four broader categories of folklore, but also their economic activities. In fact, the elements involving in the collective religious practices of folk could be the sources, as this article proposes, for exploring the intriguing functions of folk religion that cover socio-cultural, economic, political, and psychological aspects. Thus, the study of folk religion has to be holistic and inclusive of all the elements that are directly and indirectly associated with the religious practices of the respective communities either in isolation or in comparison with other communities. In addition, the study also necessitates the points that the interactions between individuals and communities in relation to the tradition of religious practices must also be included

along the fluidity of them with reference to the changes that are due to globalization and modernization processes. Studies on folk religious practices, by folklorists, for example, must show a number of ways and it does mean that there are number of approaches, frameworks and perspectives – the availability of number of approaches could be seen as a positive sign for understanding individual and communities who have been constantly in negotiation with their deities and supernaturals, and beliefs. Another interesting point is that the need of various approaches to folk religious practices communicate that there are application of good number of theories and theoretical frameworks. It is also be noted that the application of theories is proved to be more subjective and reflects scholars' political and ideological orientations and independent objectives. For instance, influenced by Antonio Gramsci, many European scholars focused on the role of religious practices for the dominated classes and also, they interpreted the religious practices 'as a means of cultural and political resistance.' In this context, Leonard Norman Primiano mentions that "[g]radually throughout the century, archives and museums were established in Europe for the preservation, study, and display of the oral, literary, and material evidence of the people's traditional religious beliefs" Primiano (2011), 1081.

Another example can be given to show how folklore studies made influence on the perspective of the religious practices. By adapting European approach for North American context, Don Yoder, the American folklife scholar, as Primiano writes that, "conceptualized folk religion as unorganized religion that is both related to and in tension with the organized religious systems in a complex society" Primiano (2011), 1082. For Yodor folk religion is primarily unofficial religion and thus it is having a dichotomical relationship with the official institutional religion, and this conceptualization has resulted in the understanding of folk religion as dependent and also having residual quality compared to the formal religious institution. Primiano (2011), 1082. Discussion on the line contribution by Yoder, which implied that "religion somewhere exists as a pure element that is in some way transformed, even contaminated, by its exposure to human communities" Primiano writes that "Religious belief should be viewed as the integrated ideas and practices of individuals living in human society. It is this elemental aspect of the interface of individual religiosity and folklore that can never be categorized into a genre or identified primarily because of group affiliation or regional association" Primiano (2011), 1082-83. However, the individualized religious activities are uncommon in Indian context since group or folk activities are given priority over the individual. The sentiments associated with individuals are also having its foundation in group activities that are considered as most essential for binding the society for its stability and sustainability.

There is a need to see folk religion as a system that is consisting of various elements, bu the knowledge about all of them are being transmitted in oral form for generations and generations, and it is due to the fact that there is a strong system of beliefs that guides the experiences of the community members. The emphasize on the nature of beliefs and their logicality for the community members can reveal a lot of information associated with beliefs and the behaviours and attitudes. The connection between beliefs and experiences with reference to the study of folk religious practices was introduced by David J. Hufford, a student of Don Yoder. Termed as the experience-centered approach, he highlighted than "the importance of systems of belief as the foundation both for the variety of expressions of belief and the subsequent variety of healing contexts that individuals consider valid" Primiano (2011), 1084 and this approach accommodated both the system of beliefs as well as the individuals who involve in the practice – that is folk and the lore are

taken care by this approach. His approach also emphasized the integrity of belief and health related expressions, that is a large part of folk medicinal practices has their foundation on belief systems. On this ground of relationship between health and belief, one could place folk religion of one community is having a conflicting relationship with the other communities. However, the role of folk religion is highlighted here because of the fact that the whole belief system is founded on the agenda of assuring welfare of the people. Priminano writes that "[Hufford's] conceptions of folk religion and folk medicine share such similar qualities as a reliance on oral tradition, regional variation, group identification, and the unofficial status of particular systems or beliefs in relationship to an official, normative tradition" Primiano (2011), 1084. Associating religion and health as the aspects of beliefs can offer something to understand the larger system of truth and its reflections in the guidance of behaviour of both individuals and communities. In fact, belief system that guides individual and community behaviour cannot be available for empirical study, rather it must be studied from the expressions that individuals and communities manifest in their socio-cultural and spiritual contexts. Thus, a belief system must be seen largely as a 'combination of thoughts or opinions, or convictions' that is retained by individuals or community members on a particular topic or issue in order to fulfil cognitive functions, and this system is not developed in isolation, rather it is associated with or influenced by many systems Primiano (2011), 1084. It is opt to cite Louis Schneider who clarifies that "a folk religion, as the name suggests is bound to a particular people, folk or tribe, just as the particular people, folk or tribe bound to the particular religion" 1970:73-74, cf. Yoder (1974), 10.

Considering folk religion as "traditional, inherited, group oriented, deliberate, and involved in performative verbal art" Primiano (2011) and seeing their on par with the binary structure of culture and language as system and expressions or competence and performance or hidden grammar like and manifestations, the materials, process and the ideas associated with folk religion must be focused. Referring to Goldstein (1964), 22-23, M. Ramakrishnan and Subhashree Sahoo write that "while dealing with the folklore materials, one could realize that they are not available in isolation rather they are the products of folklife and manifested in their original contexts for fulfilling various requirements of the people. Thus, it is expected that the folklore field data must accommodate folklore materials, folklore process and folklore ideas and in which the materials refer to the genres and sub-genres, the processes denote the actual process in which folklore is manifested and the third on the folklore ideas concern about the folk and their attitudes, feelings, themes, and aesthetics, and social and psychological reactions to the folklore materials" (2022: 322-323). Thus, studying folk religion methodologically involves the conjunctions of various elements that can be put under three major items of materials, processes, and ideas of the folk and among them the last one integrates the views and perspectives of the folk who find their relationships with the practices and also justify it. Folk religion cannot simply exist there as ornamental, rather it is a lived experience as well it guides those who practice it to fulfil various cognitive activities that make their life meaningful and thus to become their identity. Those who have folk religious practices have internalized the belief system that makes these elements get imbibed into their epistemological system which helps them to make things meaningful in their community life. Considering the importance of these elements, the learning and acquisition of this complex system of beliefs is possible through participatory learning and also through different types of negations with the community members as believers. And this negotiation between believers could be seen as at the conscious and unconscious level and it makes the

members of a community to have a shared system of beliefs for functioning within the community. In each society learning of verbal, behavioural and materials things associated with folk religious practices is part of community responsibility and participatory learning is employed almost in all communities. Further, while folk religion meets the demand of the society in the same way community members acquire what is required by the folk religion, and within the structure of folk religion, like the one of the formalized, it has also had a hierarchical structure but with flexibility of positions. Moreover, the hierarchical authority of the formalized religion cannot be seen as such in the case of the folk religion, because the authority is in folk religion is a temporary arrangement of the community, and the religious y display their authority within the limitation as set by the community. As mentioned earlier, the deities in the folk religion can be seen as ancestral, particularly, the folk heroes of the people who did some tremendous role for the community in crisis time.

Having some discussions on the nature of folk religion, its role in the development for people needs to be paid attention – to find answer for questions that how can the process of development be interlinked with religion to play a constructive role without compromising on the native elements? Or, in other way, how far the folk religion can make influence on the lives of people so that developmental question can be related to religion? That is, the shift from cognitive function of religion to the developmental contribution must be validated and justified in the globalization context where things are being analyzed and evaluated on the or with the help of rationalized conceptual framework. Considering the vital role it plays in daily life, folk religion must be relooked and re-approached by exploring the practical experiences in order to propose the developmental processes that directly or indirectly support the community. While proceeding further, it is to be clarified on the part of religion and development that how far they mutually associate with each other either in a complementary way or as supplementary one? If the religion is potential to be instrumental in development of people, the marginalization of religion with reference to development must be discarded and it must also be included in the discourse of development. Thus, the gulf between religion and development must be bridged, and the focus of this article moves in this direction of establishing the link between them. Particularly, the framework and pattern the folk religion provides to its people who largely console themselves or justify or pacify them with possibility of acceptance to the existing condition of social reality. Sometimes one has to broach delicately the issue that interlinks religion and poverty. Katherine Marshal writes that "Poverty is an issue as old as human thought, and it has often arisen first or primarily in the framework of religions and religious debate. Theologians from every religion have grappled with the whys and hows of poverty and misery, and faith institutions, everyone, play a role in helping those in need and, in much more varying ways, working to overcome underlying roots of poverty" (2001: 345).

Within the existing Indian society, which is divided on the urban and rural dichotomy, the folk religious practices can primarily seen in villages as well as adjacent areas of urban centres, and further, since the urban space is to some extent occupied by the population of the rural areas who migrate to it due to available employment opportunities, other social issues back home in villages and other reasons. That is, the urban space cannot be seen as an entity completely away from or in opposition to the rural life. However, the folk religious practices that are found in both urban and rural could not seen serving the same functions. The religious values constructed through with folk religious practices are very much associated with the community life which has interconnectedness with other community

members in daily life. Further, religious beliefs and related activities are important aspects in the lives of folk communities and they play different roles for the members at their different ages. However, it cannot be understood within the theoretical notion of religiosity because the folk religious practices never confine the daily activities of the community members. Even studies such as Benson, Donahue, & Erickson (1989), King (2003) have shown that there will be decline in the religiosity among people when they grow from childhood to adolescence, it cannot be the same in the case of folk religion, nor cannot be generalized for all communities. But it is an undenying fact that folk religious practices play a significant role in socialization of not only children and adolescents within the community but also does the similar role for the newly inducted members into the community by the process of marriage. The community or group identity that is established by the practices of folk religion cannot be seen with a single framework, and the identity formed dying some of the folk religious practices are having different phases, some of them being at family level, others are being at the clan level, community level and even village level. There are instances we can cite here to show that there are religious practices that are gender specific, that is, they are organized merely for a particular gender of a particular community or members from heterogeneous village. Myers (1999), Beek & Allan (2000), Wolfensohn (2011) and Selinger (2004) had expressed their concern for the inclusion of religion for uplifting people from poverty and also for effective development programme.

3. DEVELOPMENT ASPECT OF FOLK RELIGION

The folk religious practices in India have not been fully documented by scholars, however, there are good number of studies on them that have delineated the different facets of folk religions along their interaction, encounter, and reciprocal appropriation with the established religions. Thus, bringing the folk religious practices under the purview of development paradigm requires careful attention and the proposal must not be an academically invented rather, it must be the theorization of what people already have with them as part of their daily life. In one way or other, this paper is an attempt to contemporarize the current debate on the role of religion for development with reference to folk religious practices. Some of the discussions presented here are based on the observations by the corresponding author on the rural life activities comprising of folk religion of Tirunelveli and Tenkasi districts in Tamil Nadu. However, this move also incorporates the traditional notions of the functions of folklore in a way to reiterate the socio-cultural and psychological functions folk religion – that can supplement the argument from the development point of view. Further, it will help us to argue that though the role of religion in development is considered as an emerging topic, it has been an integral part of the discipline of folklore since the inception of folklore studies. Otherwise, the focus on the role of religion is considered as a phenomenon of twenty-first century and it is also predominantly linked with the global agenda of poverty eradication, particularly of United Nations Sustainability Development Goals United Nations (2020). While the global agenda of development gives priority to the eradication of poverty, for which all option are being engaged – including religion, the folk religious practices could be seen inherently as a medium for the folk communities inclusive of addressing not only poverty but also other socio-cultural and psychological issues. On the other, the so-called established religions have always been dissociated themselves with the notion of development – this ignorance is considered as the result of conflicting objectives. Unlike the established religions that provide eschatological hope for poor, the folk religious practices are

seen as having arrangements through which the poverty and other hardships are being handled successfully. Another point that distinguishes folk religious practices from the established religions is that the former never involve in constructing and promoting a kind of religiosity to be seen in conflicting position with the notion of secular framework – that is, the eradication of poverty and the achievement of development are understood as they would make religions to disappear gradually. Thus, such preconceived notions on institutionalized religion can be seen as irrelevant for folk religions since the latter function as development catalysts and having all ingredients for the communities' (upward) social mobility and economic stability. When the earlier studies looked at the established religions as they were away from the developmental framework, as they didn't anything to do with the improvement of livelihood, the later studies revealed that religious institutions participated in the struggle of the marginalized communities. It is evident from the missionary activities in developing countries, and subsequently other religious organizations are following them. So, it can be briefly understood that it is a new phenomenon and an acknowledgement to the institutionalized religions to be part of development programmes, and also it is also considered as a way to justify the importance of religion in development, that is, as noted by Barbara Bompani that "religion has gained traction and acceptance in development, leading to an emergence of a new sub-discipline dubbed Religion and Development" Bompani (2015), 181, cf. Dabula (2020), 142-143.

Among the two districts, Tenkasi is recently formed one by carving out from Tirunelveli, and being remote districts almost six hundred and fifty kilometers away from Chennai, these both the districts are less influenced by big urban cultures, that is, display of folk religious practices are common across all the caste groups or communities. And these both the districts are also known for conflicting relationships among different communities with not uncommon caste clashes. However, temples festivals, worships, rituals are some of the occasions where social relations between communities will be on delicate conditions - while the youths of marginalized communities are tend to demonstrate their assertiveness and consolidation of strength through cultural programmes in their premises, dominant communities will display their money power by arrangements and cultural events. Thus, both the communities utilize these occasions for establishing as well as displaying their self-esteem and self-satisfaction. Folk religious practices are being taught to the younger generations through the informal participatory learning method, and the participation of youths that must be seen beyond line of religiosity revitalizes the youth functions and bring them together and orient them towards the community development. Considering the positive side the folk religious practices, psychological health of both community and its members is being rejuvenated with vigor and strength, which lays foundation for the activities of the forthcoming years. Some more aspects that need to be mentioned here in connection with the folk religious practices include the following: 1. food practices specific to the community are recollected; 2. ancestors are being remembered, so that the history of the community and its different clans being retold; 3. provide an alternative way of satisfaction for members of the community or clan or family; 4. opportunity for the consolidation of community members; 5. they motive the community members to believe in spiritual ideas, values and principles; 6. through the practices, the members get the psychological assurance of protection by everyone's presence and participation; 7. provides mental health to all the members by preventing their unhealthy behaviours by developing positive attitude; 8. develops positive fear for the better future of the younger generations; 9. they help the community members to seek consolation, forgiveness, judgment as well as to

give confession; 10. They help the community members to practice the sharing behavior; 11. Establish and maintain relationship with the belief system; 12. Maintaining personal, household hygiene, and creation of sacred space, restriction of people' movement to go out of the villages; 13. Establishing the community identity among the members to participate with other community members; 14. Protection and proliferation folklore items namely oral traditions, material culture, performing arts social folk customs and beliefs, and maintenance of sacred forest or sacred grove; 15. to coping up with difficulties, resolving personal problems, reestablishing their relationship with the environment and their worldview; 16. They provide an opportunity to newly wedded girls who have given other villages in marriage to visit her native village; 17. To provide testing ground for introducing elements of modernity; 18. Informal training on cognitive tools for making life meaningful; 18. they provide opportunity for maintaining the livestock economy which is known for larger with buying and selling with other communities; 19. To wear new attire on the occasion; and 20, the temporary dilution of social structure or community interaction beyond the social boundary, i.e., people belonging to higher order make visit to the temples / worshiping places of the lower order and get blessings and offerings from the priests of the lower groups. It is noted here that the list is not an exhaustive one, because there are items that can also be discussed under the negative side of the religious consolidation such as caste or community clashes, personal vendetta, sexual harassment, torture in the name of subscription amount, death like events is treated as low profile affair, etc.

Though religious experience is an inward and subjective matter, it has been greatly shaped and conditioned by cultural system in which it has to be learned and practiced, so it does not require any definition provided by academic discipline or scholars – that is, each member of a community or a folk defines it in his or her own way according to their experiences. Within the folk-community, religion gives its members an individualized experience, but at a minuscule level, to confine its members with the group identity. But the goal of development as far as the folk religious practices is not merely achieving economic prosperity, rather it an integral factor of human development towards their sustainability, or an essential pre-condition founded upon the principle of co-existence and harmony. At the same time the folk religious practices are not constrained for any sorts of modernization and globalization processes, because they are adaptive in nature and incorporation of new things for change could not be ruled out because they involve in the identity construction process. Importantly, in the Indian social context, development must not be understood by ignoring the hierarchical nature social structure which resists the upward mobility of lower communities through development and economic prosperity. Thus, in many cases, lower communities' (folk) religious practices are associated with their assertiveness and also as the opportunities for the display of their identity – social, cultural, economic and political identity. Therefore, with in a heterogeneous villages or even urban settings, folk religious practices have different goals and objectives including economic and social stability. However, development initiatives through folk religious practices must consider various aspects such as social structure, social relations, political power, and other change-resisting elements. Development for the lower communities or people of disadvantaged communities is merely is a self-propelled strategic move, mediated by religious practices – in some cases, that can be considered as intrinsically disruptive of exploitative social order. When members of the lower communities, youths particularly, participate in the temple festivals with the intension to showcase their assertiveness by organizing grand events which can be seen as mobilization of

funds, public gathering, folk performances, sacrificing chicken and goat sacrifices, distribution of offerings, inviting guests, etc.

Though the folk religious practices are contributing to the development of the rural communities, they are not being treated with much attention due to the politics of absorption and appropriation of institutionalized religions. And, both the folk and institutional religions may share a common value as per the system of religious practices, the hierarchical aspects of the dominant communities helping the one to be a marginalized one and the other as the dominant one. However, whether it is folk or established religion or religious practices, their validity cannot be judged purely in terms of their contributions to meet the development goals, and it is with the understanding that religion must not be a stumbling block in the path towards the development. At the same time, considering the nature of human societies, some amount of role religion or religious practices have to place in order to facilitate the development process. Mukti (1974), 413 In fact, it is very naïve to state that both must has complementary or supplementary relationship, or at least helping each other, for assuring human sustainability, progress, development, and harmonious life.

Don Yoder mentions that when "religiöse Volkskunde" ("religious folklife"), as a technical term, was coined by Paul Drews in 1901, it meant the investigation of religious life of the folk "in its totality, its psychological and sociological dimensions and its many sided expressions" Mukti (1974), 2-3 and it exposed the fact that "the conception of Christian religion by the people in the rural congregations was radically different from the official doctrinal versions represented by the clergy" Yoder (1974), 3. Since the early period, "superstitions" had been associated with folk religious practices and it was even criticized by rationalist clergy of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. However, the sympathetic look at folk religious elements within a culture was started with the German folk-cultural scholarship of Wilhelm Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, German founder of scientific Volkskunde and he treated folk religion as a concept within Volkskunde Yoder (1974). Don Yoden mentions that "by the 1930s there were good theoretical studies of "religiase Volkskunde," among them the volumes by Josef Weigert (1924), Werner Boette (1925), and Max Rumpf (1932). All of these focused on peasant culture, and the German shaper of folk community studies and the functionalistic approach to folk culture, Julius Schwietering, saw in religion a creative force in the community culture of the German villages" Yoder (1974), 3. It is an undeniable fact that historically, folk religion has been defined on the basis of the preconception that is in relation to institutionalized religion. And it is also true that the relationship between folk religion and the established one is not an amicable or harmonious, that is, there will also be a tension always between these two traditions. But is important to quote Don Yoder who writes that "most American definitions of folklore provide no categories in which to include religious phenomena, unless it includes them under that impossible survival from the Enlightenment, the word "superstition," which blocks any sympathetic understanding of the belief elements in folk religion. "Religion" is obviously not a "genre," and cannot therefore be included in the old-fashioned genre-oriented definitions. With the newer culture-oriented definitions. obviously religion can be included as it has been in Europe" Yoder (1974), 9. To end some of the discussions on folk religion, Yoder writes that "In my own conceptualization of folk religion I differentiate it from organized religion, primitive religion, popular-level religion, and sectarian religion. Folk religion exists in a complex society in relation to and in tension with the organized religion(s) of that society. Its relatively unorganized character differentiates it from organized religion" Yoder (1974), 11. The concluding part of this discussion on folk religion

the practical definition Don Yoder can be seen here as relevant. By considering the presence of active and creative and passive and survivalist elements' and moreover the elements of tension, he mentions that "folk religion is the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion" Yoder (1974), 14.

On the development framework, folk religious practices are not in conflict, rather they are somehow help us to understand the present "conditions" of the people who are associated with them. Since the development is meant for the people, then their religious practices cannot be ignored in framing the development policy, but, at the same time, the religion cannot be the stumbling block for people to achieve development. Unlike religious organizations of the established religions, the folk religious practices don't have such an organized and systematic framework for carrying out the development-related tasks, and some of the tasks such as conflict management, controlling negative emotions, community life, humanitarian assistance, social mobilization, protection of nature, cooperation with government agencies for welfare programmes, initiatives for wellbeing of fellow beings, etc., are internalized and manifested in their everyday life facilitated by religious practices. In most of the examples from South India, one could find that temples or places of worship in rural areas play a significant role by being the centralizing force, that is, they are the points where all the members of the community gather for any purposes. The places of worships or temples and their premises turn into public spaces, and public spheres, if required, to become points of intersections for different communities to have interactions for various reasons, including conflict management, political gatherings, social gatherings, etc. Moreover, frequent social gatherings and the role of place of worships as public space play a vital role in preventing any kind of proselytizing attempts on the community members who are being retained as members of the community facilitated by the place of worships. In some of the case, as a matter of venting out their anger, community in total make effort to embrace different belief system – here the same temple premises are utilized for the purpose. So, the elements of folk religion must be seriously taken into account before framing and implementing any development programmes, and also the motivational aspects of folk religious practices must be considered for developmental activities and also while planning whether development initiatives or social harmony promotional events. Another point is that since folk religious practices reflect the worldviews of the people, then development must have political, social, cultural, spiritual, and environmental dimensions along with economic and technical aspects. Because the community gets its moral values and ethical base from folk religion, the development initiatives must be holistic, comparative; and also guided by local factors and guided scale ad and also having and guided local factors. The most positive aspect of folk religion is that though there are different (folk) religious groups present in heterogenous villages or rural settings, the folk religious pluralism is in no way to create disharmonious situation. This religious diversity is a social reality that shapes the everyday life of the rural population. In rural settings, life is not contaminated by religious ideology particularly of folk religion, that is, it functions as a binding factor for establishing harmonious relationship among communities, whereas in the case of established religion, it is quite opposite, that is, religious ideology is used by people to vent their anger at others. As far as the official religion is concerned, it is apt quote Ward Berenschot and Henk Tieleman who say that "The 'positive' and 'negative' sides of religion are not separate entities: as religious doctrines and social power relations are very closely interwoven and are interwoven time and time again, religion cannot be seen as a separate entity within a society alongside an economic, social, or

political environment. The question as to what religiously inspired organisations bring about is therefore equally crucial and complex when identifying possible partners" (2009: 244-245, quoted in Boender et al. (2011), 18.

The vitality of folk religious practices religion could be evidenced from the everyday life of people, and thus the relationship between the people, folk religion and development cannot be underestimated, rather their relationship needs to be handled positively by considering all aspects that are found reflected in their daily life contexts. In order to accommodate folk religion into development discussion, first of all, folk religious practices must be understood in the context, their relevance must be realized by keeping apart the aversion to religion; the lack of knowledge or ignorance on the various aspects of folk religion must be realized in order to understand their inevitable role they play; one must be able to understand and accept different worldviews; the zone of conflict between folk religious practices and modernity must be understood; there are intersections of different folk religious practices of various communities for identifying the hybridity; nature of folk religious practices and their relationship with public and political life of people must be considered; the impact of social changes on the religious practices of rural communities; the facts that in many cases folk religious practices become the identity of individual community must be covered; those who involve in the development activities must be given due multi-disciplinary training with fieldwork in connection with folk religion; folk religious practices must be seen the beyond the line of personal or private life; the community's access to science, technology, modern medicine and formal/higher education must be given focus; and there are many folk forms are having folk religious practices as their natural context, that is, they exist on the substratum of folk religious practices must be understood thoroughly not only to see the livelihood aspects. Another important feature that differentiates folk religion from the official religion is the learning process – there is no separate process of learning as far as the former is concerned and the opportunities are created in daily life in an informal way of participatory learning method. In the absence of spiritual teaching, the religious ideas, religious beliefs and religious practices are not governed strictly by any written rules, rather they part of community life, so the emphasis on various concepts such as good and evil, right and wrong, justice and injustice, peace and violence, etc., are taught to younger generations in an informal way, and it indicates that the values and attitudes that are learned in daily life may not emerge as stumbling blocks against any developmental programmes. Finally, the transcendental power of folk deities including their deified ancestors is meant give energies to the community for its welfare, that is, there are plenty of opportunities for the community to achieve progress and development.

4. CONCLUSION

The role of folk religion for the development of people cannot be denied, but the people who involve in the development activities are expected to have religious empathy which facilitates them to go away from the instrumental approach to pay attention to the outlook of those who are concerned. Religious practices of different communities living in heterogeneous villages are not in conflicting conditions; rather they display a kind intersecting and overlapping settings that assure both independent and reciprocal qualities of these practices. Thus, religious ideas, religious beliefs, religious practices, and religious experiences associated with folk religion are potential enough to appropriating development initiatives, and similarly, rituals, customs, material culture, and performing arts existing as part and

parcel of folk religious practices are essential components and integral aspects of various developments. The moral and ethical values that the folk religion imbibe on the community members, its cognitive guidance for meeting the daily life, and its ability to draw people can be seen as vital for improving living conditions of community members and also provide awareness about the development requirements. As folk religion lays foundation for its people about philosophy of life, worldview, cognitive abilities, economic viability, chances for mobilization, different identity, provides engagement through entertainment, allows testing of modern things, improves sharing behaviour, transference of traditional knowledge, festivity with integrated arts and crafts, livestock improvement, etc., - they together make that folk religion is relevant for addressing developmental issues.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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