

Christianity and Social Change-A Case Study of Kokborok Speaking People

Sukhendu Debbarma

In this paper an attempt will be made in brief to understand the traditional way of life and religion of the Kokborok speaking people. It will examine the influence of Hinduism. Finally how Christianity made inroads and influence among them. Among the many tribes in Tripura the *Debbarma*, *Jamatias*, *Noatias*, *Riangs*, *Uchais*, *Rupini* and *Kolois* speak the *Kokborok* language. However it is pertinent to mention here that although the *Kolois* speaks in *Kokborok* they are included in the *Halam* community in the government notification. The *Riangs* or *Bru* would call *Kokborok* as *Kokbru* but it is almost the same. Today the indigenous people identify themselves as *Borok*. Before discussing the impact of Christianity among the Christians of the *Kokborok* speaking family it will be appropriate to discuss in brief the traditional religion of the *Kokborok* speaking people.

Kokborok religious beliefs are centered on the worship of nature. The existence of the supreme God who is the creator of the universe and mankind is believed to live in waters. The belief in the supernatural powers is one of the most dominant features of their religion. At the same time the worship of deities and spirits can be broadly divided in two: benevolent and malevolent. They also have idea about the abode of the spirits. It is believed that the deserted homestead, joining of paths or the roads crossing *Lampra*, some of the hills, forest, big trees like *Charua buphang* are some of the abode of the spirits. One of the most dominating beliefs is that if a particular plot of land is considered to be abode of the evil spirit then cultivation in that plot is to be abandoned and if at all cultivated is considered very harmful. No one takes the risk of displeasing the spirit and avoid cultivation in such plots. Ceremonial offerings and sacrifices also form part of the rituals and most of these are done to appease the spirit. They believe that the fear of displeasure of the spirits will bring curse and misfortune. It is here that the role of the traditional priest *Ochai* becomes significant. It is he who decides which spirit has been displeased and the cause of remedy. In fact almost every village will invariably have one *Ochai*. In the course of the function the *Ochai* also acts as the medicine man.

The concept of soul *Phola* may take any forms and is invisible, untouchable and un-destroyable. It is believed that the soul of a person leaves the body in two ways-temporarily and permanently. During the sleep of the person the soul leaves the person and goes on wandering and comes back when the person is awake. However, the soul leaves the body permanently in the case of death. In the case of sudden death such as accidents, suicide etc. the soul of the person is supposed to transform in to evil spirit. The practice of offering food, drinks etc *Maikhlai* to the soul of the dead person is also prevalent among the *Kokborok* speaking people.

Some of the principal deities are as follows. *Mwtai kotor* is the most powerful and supreme deity of the *Kokborok* speaking people. *Mwtai kotorma* is his consort. The main purposes of worshipping these deities are for the security and prosperity of the individual and the community at large. *Lampra* is one of the most important deities of the *Kokborok* speaking people. In fact before the beginning of any social or religious ceremonies this deity must be worshipped. *Twima* is the goddess of water usually the worship or ritual carried out in the rivers or stream. She becomes more important in the villages and communities when there is the outbreak of water borne diseases such as cholera, etc. *Sangram* is considered to be the husband of *Twima*. This is the household deity and is specially connected with wealth and prosperity. *Malima* and *Khuluma* are the two deities of paddy and cotton respectively. The two deities are kept by every household in the two different earthen pots, which is filled with rice. These two earthen pots are the symbolic representation of the deities and are known as *Rondok*.¹ Two stone of unusual shape are also put along with the rice. These two deities are worshipped for wealth and prosperity, as paddy and cotton formed the principal crops produced in the *huk* of shifting cultivation. *Noksu Mwtai* is the guardian deity of the household. She is worshipped at the homestead to recover from illness. *Thumnairok* and *Bonirok* are the deity of all disease and the messenger of death. People worshipped these deities to escape from all diseases and the cruel hand of death. *Burasa Mwtai* is the deity connected with evil. The suffering in the family and more particularly children of fever and any kind of acute pain is supposed to be caused by this deity. *Haihchukma* is the female deity and is the wife of *Burasa*. She rules over the jungle and the wild animal. In the loss of some domestic animal people pray to this goddess. It is also believed that when some human being lose their way, it is caused by her. *Swkal* is the guardian deity of the witches.

In the villages the different kinds of illness are supposed to be caused by her. The spirit of this deity may enter in any one of the women and she in turn act on behalf of the deity. When someone gets ill in the village usually a women is suspected to cause that sickness. There are also instances where such women are socially boycotted or even killed.² *Saklakmwtai* is the household deity and is the God of health. It is worshipped in the courtyard of the house and mostly worshipped during the winter season. *Ker* deity is worshipped for the protection and welfare of the village from all kinds of danger. The deity is worshipped by all in the community and everyone takes part in it. Once in every year each village will perform rituals to this deity. *Goriya* is the God of success. This deity is usually worshipped in the month of April and worshipped by all in the community and everyone takes part in it.

Childbirth : In the traditional *Kokborok* system once women conceived there were many do's and don'ts. After the child is born *Lampra Wathop* is worshiped. The child is given two names, one being secret. In many cases where in the family new born child survives less, the new born is given a name like *Tokhirai*, *Wakhirai*, and *Punkhirai* etc. *Tokhirai* being the excreta of fowl, *Wakhirai* being the excreta of pig and *Punkirai* being excreta of goat. It is believed that if such names are given then the new born child survives as the evil spirit is not attracted by the name.³ The system of *Lakha Khamani* with black thread after child is born both by the mother and newborn child form the protection of evil spirit.⁴ Under the influence of Hinduism a ceremony called *Hakarwmani* ceremony is held which is akin to *Surya Darshan* of the Hindus.

Customs connected with marriage : In the traditional system there are various types of marriage arrangement such as – *Hamjuk tubuwi kaijakmani*, *Hamjuk tubumani*, *Chamari kamani*, *Chamari Ompa*, *Sindul pholmani* etc. In the system – *Hamjuk tubuwi kaijakmani*, *Hamjuk tubumani*, the marriage system provides for a normal marriage where the bride is brought to the house of the groom. *Chamari kamani* is a system where the bridegroom leaves his own house and goes to live in the house of the bride and *Chamari Ompa* is where the groom had to live and serve in the house of the prospective in-law. This system may be compared with service before marriage or probation in marriage.⁵ *Sindul pholmani* is where the widow or widower get married for the second or third time. In the traditional system to facilitate the marriage there are people who are chosen, the male being known as *Aia* and the female as *Aiajwks*. There has to be two *Aiajwaks* – *Aiajwak okra* and *Aiajwak kusu* meaning

elder and younger respectively. They in fact help the *Ochai* in performing the rites and rituals during the marriage. A beautifully decorated platform is made out of bamboo called *Bedi*, where the marriage ceremony is conducted. Before the marriage the *Lampra Wathop* ceremony is to be performed. Specially kept water in the bamboo during the *Lampra Wathop* ceremony is later used by the elders and well wishers to sprinkle on the newly wedded couple. This is done in order to bless the couple. Later again after the marriage is over the newly wedded couple is blessed with sprinkling of rice, cotton and sesamum i.e. *siping* which signifies prosperity.

Death : In the traditional custom the dead body was cremated. The deceased is given a good bath with warm water. Before the dead body is taken for cremation the last rite is performed by killing a fowl on the feet of the deceased by his eldest son. The fowl has to be killed by striking. Thereafter the meat of the fowl is cooked and offered to the deceased. The dead body is carried in the *Tolai*. On the way to the *Simalwng* i.e. place for cremation cotton etc is scattered. In case on the way if any river is to be crossed then first of all white thread is tied on both sides of the river and the thread is broken after the crossing of the dead body.⁶ After the cremation is finished, the bones and ashes are thrown in the river which is known as *Hangar Sukurup* and thereafter no other ceremony is held. A white pieces of cloth called *Pola* is raised in the place where the cremation is done. Side by side a temporary house is also made called *Simangnok* for the soul of be protected from sun and rain. Articles like glass, knife, basket etc are placed in the hut. It is to be mentioned here that the place for cremation is always near the river. One striking peculiarity in case of the Riang or Bru is that a dance is performed in front of the dead body throughout the night.⁸ Under the influence of Hinduism all rites connected with the death have influenced the Borok people. *Teredin* which is the corrupt form of *Terodin* meaning 13 days in Bengali language when the Shradha ceremony is held for the deceased. During such ceremony the Brahmin is to be given what is called *Suladan* and *Soidan* meaning sixteen and six gifts respectively in Bengali. Such gifts include landed property, cattle, gold, silver, utensils etc. almost everything required for household. This is one of the factors for the deterioration of the economic condition of the *Kokborok* speaking people.⁹ In case of unnatural death the ceremony is *Horsini* meaning seven in *Kokborok* when the ceremony for the deceased is held on the seventh day after the death. At one point of time and even now many of the

Borok people under the influence of Hinduism would take the services of the Brahmin during such ceremony. Thereafter the remains of the deceased bone and ashes were to be thrown in the Ganges. The system of *Neremsi Chamani* which is also the influence of Hinduism is known as *Neramis* is also prevalent.

Superstition and belief in evil spirit : The society of the *Kokborok* speaking people is full of superstition. From the time the child is in the womb superstition begins and continues till one's death. Thus, it will not be wrong to say that the *Kokborok* speaking people are born in superstition, live in superstition and die in superstition.

Festivals : There are many festivals of the Borok speaking people viz. *Maikwtal chamani*, *Kharchi*, *Ker* etc. In all such festive occasion it is compulsory that *Bwtuk* and *Chuwarak* i.e. homemade liquor are served. Any one who does not participate in such drinking is seen as not in keeping with the traits of the society.

Place and manner of social gathering : In the traditional *Kokborok* speaking society, usually the youth gathers in the *Jainok* or the bachelors' dormitory but that has been forgotten long back.¹⁰ There is no particular place and day for the gathering of the *Kokborok* speaking people. At best the gathering used to take place in the residence of the *Kamiphang* or Choudhuri or the village headman's house. Such gatherings may take place once or twice a year. There is no specific day or date.

The *Kokborok* speaking society is patriarchal. Traditionally the *Kokborok* speaking women are considered lower in status than the men. This is indicated in many ways – like works are divided in most of the cases. In case any man happens to do a work which is usually done by women then that person will be laughed at by his friends. In most of the religious matter women do not take part. Women cannot become *Ochai* or priest. The most important being that women are not involved in the decision making process in the society at any level nor do they have any group of their own. She has to prepare *Bwtuk* and *Chuwarak* i.e. home brewed liquor which is very lengthy, complicated and time consuming process. Any guest coming to the house had to be entertained and served with *Bwtuk* and *Chuwarak*. Not only that the scenes created in the house after consuming *Bwtuk* and *Chuwarak* is something which one cannot imagine and the concept of time is not there. The drinking may continue for days together without caring for food and health. Such

drinking without proper food is sure to cause many health problems. The lady of the house had to solely shoulder the responsibility of entertaining the guest. There are cases where, when the lady of the house did not drink and showed some reluctance for entertaining the guest with *Bwtuk* and *Chuwarak*, she was ostracized from the society for sometime. Since *Bwtuk* and *Chuwarak* was not served by that lady even many of the relatives do not visit the family.¹¹

The exact period when the Maharaja of Tripura followed the Hindu Religion is not known. The existence of the Hindu Brahmins in the royal court, however, goes back as far as 16th century during the regime of Maharaja Dhanyamanikya.¹² The subjects of the Maharaja also adopted Hinduism side by side along with the traditional religion. It was during that time that the religion of the *Kokborok* and non-*Kokborok* speaking people to some extent got the admixture with the Hindu religion. However, inspite of such admixture there is a distinct difference which can be noticed. So the *Kokborok* and non-*Kokborok* speaking people worship the traditional religion side by side with Hindu worship.

The earliest reference to Christianity in Tripura can be traced to the period between 1676-1685. It was during that period the Maharaja of Tripura Ramdeb Manikya invited the Jesuits, the Roman Catholic Missionaries to come to his palace and preach the Gospel. In fact the Maharaja before adopting Hinduism as the religion of his kingdom wanted to hear about the Gospel.¹³ However, the seriousness of the Maharaja could not be assessed as Sir Edward Maclagan writes, "In 1676-1685 at one point of time there seems to be a possible outlet in the small kingdom of Tipperah as the people there were less trying than in Bengal, and the Raja had invited the Jesuits to come and discuss Christianity with them; but before it was discovered that the Raja was a drunkard and his main object was to secure help against the Mogul officials, so that alternative also had to be rejected."¹⁴

The Raja showed interest for Christianity and asked for a missionary in 1683 and accordingly Fr. Ignitius Gomes, S.J. made a visit to Agartala but returned disappointed. The beginning of the Christian village in Tripura began during the time of King Amar Manikya as he was the first to employ the Portuguese mercenaries in his army to ward off the Mughs of Arakan and the Chittagong Hill Tracts adjoining the state. The need for the Portuguese mercenaries became more important as the state capital at that time was at Udaipur in south Tripura. The capital was later shifted

to Agartala in and around 1760 and many of them followed the Raja. These Portuguese Christians were given rent – free land in a village not far away from Agartala and their village was given appropriate name as Mariamnagar i.e. Mary's village.¹⁵

The constant attempt of Rev. John Tackle of the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society ultimately bore fruit in 1909 when permission was given by the Maharaja Radhakishore Manikya to send two Bengali Christian workers to preach the Gospel.¹⁶ However the permission was restricted and the Christian workers were not allowed to preach but could converse with the people. The beginning of the Christian movement can be traced back in the State to 1912. The Mizo people in the Lushai Hills had already been under the influence of Christianity and a group of those Christians migrated to the Jampui Hills in North Tripura. The migration of the Mizo took place after the conquest of the Lushai Hills by the British. There were about 130 families and were led by their Chief Dokhuma Sailo and first settled in Hmuntha village near Kailashahar. After about five years the same group shifted to Jampui Hills and settled at Phuldungsei village. There were 80 Christians among them. As days passed by the numbers of the converts increased. The New Zealand Baptist missionaries used to visit Agartala, the capital of Tripura regularly. The missionaries were not allowed permanent mission station nor were allowed to preach the gospel. Their main objective was to look for opportunities to contact the officials of the Maharaja who could be a help in getting a permanent mission station. The effort of the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society ultimately bore fruit when permission to live and work in Tripura was received in the later part of November 1938. As soon as the letter was received by Rev. M.J. Eade, the next step was to finalize plans for the purchase of a suitable site for the mission centre. Accordingly a suitable plot was identified for a reasonable price about two miles south of Agartala, which is now the headquarters of the Tripura Baptist Christian Union. The land comprised of about 20 acres with natural boundaries of roads and valleys. Later another 5 acres was also purchased. There was enough space for the staff, medical work, a boarding school and Bible and Training School. Thus began the work of the Christian missionary in a systematic manner. Among the *Kokborok* speaking people the Riangs or Bru were the first to become Christians. In 1922, Khua Rai, the first Christian among the Riang or Bru community was baptized.¹⁷ The largest tribe among the *Kokborok* speaking people are the Debbarmas, the first Christian was Manindra Debbarma and was baptized in 1938.¹⁸ At present

there are about 70 thousand Christians among the *Kokborok* speaking people.¹⁹ Let us now see as to how Christianity has influenced the *Kokborok* speaking people in their day to day life.

Childbirth : The new born child is brought to the Church and is dedicated to God. The name of the new born child would be proclaimed in the Church. The Pastor or Priest does all that is required. Some families would hold services in their residence where tea, sweets etc are served.

Marriage : In the Christian marriage these *Aia* and *Aiajwks* have been replaced by Best-man and Best-maid. The roles of the *Ochai* have been taken over by the Pastor or Christian priest. The beautifully decorated platform made out of bamboo called *Bedi*, where the marriage ceremony was to be conducted is now being replaced by the beautifully decorated church. In the Christian marriage all the ceremony concerning the marriage takes place in the Church. It is pertinent to mention here that in the traditional marriage there is no specific place for conducting the marriage. However, in spite of the changes brought about by the Christians, marriage is still a community affair and the whole village takes part in the celebration.

Death : *Kokborok* speaking Christians bury the dead. Christian hymns are sung and funeral service is held in the house of the deceased and thereafter the dead body is taken for burial in the cemetery. The Christian priest does all rites that are required. Once the burial is over at best the family members would call for a prayer meeting where tea and snacks are served.

Superstition : The *Kokborok* speaking Christians have done away with all kind of superstition. In short the belief in the numerous evil spirit to whose malign influence all the death and suffering were ascribed has been completely abandoned as it happened among the Mizo community.²⁰ At the same time the worship in the traditional religion is accompanied by bloody sacrifices which is burden to the people and are offered by them not for love and joy but because of fear. The whole process is in fact to appease the evil spirit and get rid of sickness. However in contrast it is found that the *Kokborok* speaking Christians believe in the supreme God – *Kaitor* and stopped sacrificing fowls, animals etc to appease the evil spirit. It is also found that as in the case of the Garo Christians the *Kokborok* speaking Christians are also more perceptive to modern drugs than the non-Christians.²¹ At the same time there are instances where the non-Christians have been to some extent influence by the Christians to be perceptive to modern medical sciences.²²

Festivals : Christians celebrate festival but drinking of *Bwtuk* and *Chuwarak* are forbidden. For instance a harvest festival is held once a year and the harvest is brought to the Church. Tea has become a symbol of Christian hospitality among the *Kokborok* speaking Christians as in the case of Garo and Mizo Christians.²³

Place of worship : Christians gather compulsorily once in every week i.e. on Sunday for Sunday services in the Church. Prayer meetings are also held in the homes. Festivals like Christmas, New Year, and Easter Sunday are usually celebrated with community feast. However the striking difference is the absence of *Bwtuk* and *Chuwarak*.

Education & literature : Side by side with the spread of the Gospel the Christian missionaries also opened educational institutions. The establishment of school was felt essential by the missionaries mainly from two points of view-to provide educated native leadership for the future as well as for teaching the basic facts of the life of Christ.²⁴ The first school established by the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society was St. Paul's School in 1943 at Agartala, Mission Compound, the headquarter of the Society. *Kokborok* speaking students were brought from the far flung villages and were given education, the objectives being the training of the natives for the future leadership. The missionaries proved right as when the foreign missionaries were asked to leave Tripura in the early 70's, the leadership was taken over by the native Christian leaders. Now the General Secretary of the Tripura Baptist Christian Union (TBCU) is Rev.R.Debbarma, who is from the *Kokborok* speaking community.

It may be mentioned here that the Maharajas or rulers of Tripura did little to develop the *Kokborok* literature, rather Bengali language and literature was encouraged and patronized. As *Kokborok* language did not have any script, in the writing of the *Kokborok* language did not have any script, in the writing of the *Kokborok* Bible, the New Testament i.e. *Smai Kwtal* the Roman script was used. The New Testament *Kokborok* Bible, *Smai Kwtal* was completed in 1976. It was not only the delight of Christians and the non-Christians. The timing was significant as the *Kokborok* language was trying to establish itself in the State.

Woman : With the coming of Christianity the status of women has undergone some change. Educational institutions were opened by the missionaries where female education was given stress. In addition to the basic academic subjects they were trained to be more effective home-

makers through instruction on how to improve kitchen garden, health and hygiene, sewing etc. For instance the Christian women go for worship in the Church along with her husband. Women groups are formed within the Church where women take care of their own affairs. Women are represented in different bodies of the Church's organization at different level. Not only that women also takes the responsibility to chair and deliver sermons in the Church. These changes have elevated women from an inferior position and made them active in roles previously exclusively reserved for men.²⁵ Now Christian women are to some extent free if viewed from their role in the traditional society and can give more time for the family. This may be one of the factors as to why more educated people are coming up from the Christian background. Nevertheless whatever changes have taken place are attributed to the combination of Christianity and education.

Notes & References

1. Personal interview with Ms. Kunjeswari Debbarma, 58 years, Chandithakur Kami, Latia Chherra, West Tripura on 2nd September, 2002.
2. Personal interview with Ms. Mogolaxmi Debbarma, 60 years, Morgang Kami, West Tripura, on 9th September, 2002.
3. Personal interview with Shri. Bimal Debbarma, 70 years, Morgang Kami, West Tripura, on 9th September, 2002.
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6. Debapriya Debbarma, *Treatise on Traditional Social Institutions of the Tripuri Community*, (Agartala, 1983). p. 42.
7. Personal interview with Shri. Bimal Debbarma, 70 years, Morgang Kami, West Tripura, on 9th September, 2002.
8. R.K. Acharyya, *Insight into the Reangs*, (Agartala, 1999), p. 79.
9. Personal interview with Shri. Bimal Debbarma, 70 years, Morgang Kami, West Tripura, on 9th September 2002. It is pertinent to mention here that Shri. Debbarma became Christian on 20th April 1979.

10. Sukhendu Debbarma, 'Transition from Jainok to Modern Education System' *Tui* (A Quarterly Research Journal on Tribal Life & Culture) Vol.II-1997, Sl. No-16, p.92.
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16. Sukhendu Debbarma, *op. cit*, p.30.
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18. *Ibid*, p. 64.
19. Personal interview on 25th September 2002 with Rev.J.B.Debbarma, 51 years, Executive Secretary, Central Association, TBCU, one of the first Pastor among the Kokborok speaking people. Rev. Debbarma is also associated with the translation of the Bible.
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22. Personal Interview on 25th September 2002 with Rev. J.B. Debbarma, 51 years.
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24. Sukhendu Debbarma, *op. cit*. p.77.
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