# COMMUNALISM IN ASSAM

## A CIVILIZATIONAL APPROACH



SUJATA MIRI

The book is a study of the rise of communalism in the north-eastern part of our country–the part which constituted what one might call greater Assam before it was split into the several states of today. The book's primary contention is that communalism is, by and large, a modern phenomenon; the ecological rootedness of the original–so called "tribal" religions–of the people–while these religions were still going concerns–not only instilled a deep sense of respect and reverence for nature around them, it also taught the people that religious diversity is not an aberration to be obliterated, but is something natural and necessary and, therefore, to be accepted with the same sense of wonder that is due to nature itself. With the advent of the "world" religions into the region–"world" religions, because of their lack of ecological specificity or rootedness–the scence changes dramatically. The doctrinaire, dogmatic aspects of these religions, necessary as they are to their identity, confines them to an exclusivist circle which makes conflict and mutual disrespect natural elements in their practical inter-relationships. The book contends that as tribal religions are no longer going concerns, and as "world" religions have, more or less effectively, replaced them, the only creative way to combat the inherent exclusivism of the great organized religions lies in a deeper appreciation of Gandhi–his ideas as well as his life.

The book is part of a larger project on a civilizational approach to our history.

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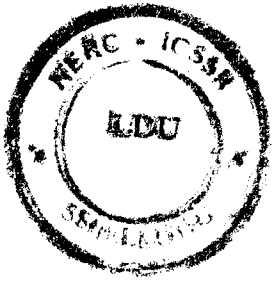
Sujata Miri is Professor of Philosophy at North-Eastern Hill University. She has authored several books and contributed papers to professional journals. In all this, her abiding interest has been the understanding of the religions of our tribal peoples. It will not at all be an exaggeration to say that her work has opened up new ways of approaching indigenous religions. Among the books she has already published are: Suffering, Religion and Society of North-East India (Ed.), Introduction to the Study of Tribal Religions, The Khasi World-view: A Conceptual Exploration.

# *Communalism In Assam : A Civilizational Approach*

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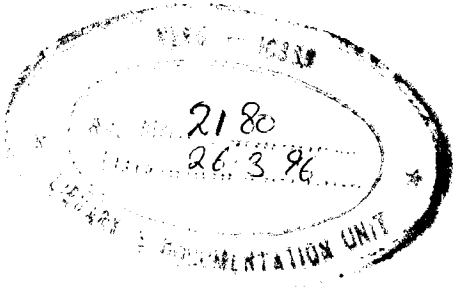





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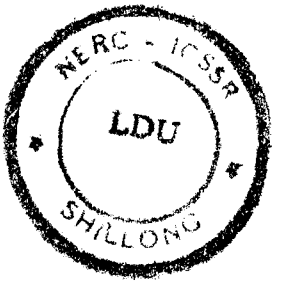


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# *Introduction*

The rise of violent communalism in this country in recent times—and its extreme proliferation into ever new areas of man's social existence—is a somewhat unprecedented phenomenon, if we take the total history of the country into account. In this work I confine myself primarily to religious and, peripherally, to *linguistic communalism. Religious communalism*, rightly seen as the gravest threat to the very concept of a modern India, is frequently seen—unsurprisingly perhaps, but nonetheless with a touching naivety of perception of social reality—as a result of a sharpened awareness of the differences between different religions among their respective adherents. When the awareness of religious difference was perhaps at its sharpest in this country—when *Buddhism* and *Jainism* as distinct religions were established, when *Islam* came and perhaps forcible conversions took place—communal violences of the kind that we witness today did not—I venture to suggest—take place. A historical perspective is, therefore, essential in understanding our present predicament.

But I am not a historian, and had therefore to teach myself a little history for the purposes of the present work. I chose Assam as the arena of my investigation for three reasons: (a) I wanted the scope of the work to be limited so that it remained within my grasp; (b) the civilizational history of Assam is fascinating in itself and (c) contemporary Assam has fallen prey to the same tensions and conflicts which are stalking the rest of the country. I would like to make clear

at the outset that I do not believe whether in the history of Assam or of anywhere else for that matter, that there was a golden age of civilized life which was, as it were, the picture of harmony and of moral and material fulfilment. Earlier societies in Assam were not conflict free, at different times in its history, different cultures came into active contact with one another, leading sometimes to creative fusions of cultures and sometimes to sharp conflicts. The important point, however, is that conflicts, whenever they arose, were almost always resolved in terms of a shared system of values operating within a large enough normative framework. This, of course, does not seem to happen any more.

Most of the small societies have been pulverized and made helpless by the onrush of alien elements into their culture—and acculturation seems to be the only way left. The situation may not appear to be as catastrophic as in the case of the Tasmanian aborigines and the *North American Indians*; but it certainly answers to *Malinowski's* description of a process—painful and occasionally traumatic—"of reorganization on entirely new and specific lines"—except that the people themselves are not very often aware of these "specific" lines. Conflicts are no longer resolvable in terms of the old values and agreed methods.

Interestingly, anthropologists, bureaucrats (unsurprisingly perhaps), and even social reformers working through voluntary organizations are very keen to minimize the significance of this loss of tradition. The changes, they claim, have brought about much good to these societies—think only of the work of the *Christian missionaries* in the fields of education and health, of the government's own effort at spreading education and of the various quite tangible "developmental" works undertaken by the government. In any case, modernization, so it is claimed, is inescapable for any society; and this is bound to bring in its wake its special pangs and traumas to the society whose old values cannot any longer be the foundation of a fulfilled life.

This brings me to mention some of the key terms which

form the framework of discourse in this work: civilization, *secularism*, communalism and religion. The usual claim is that civilization has undoubtedly made progress because people have moved from their primitive circular prisons of the cognitive, affective and the amoral to enlightenment and secularism, however inadequate this move at the moment may be; violence, of course, is there, but this might also be a price one might have to pay for eventual fruits of enlightenment. I have made an attempt to understand these terms in the context of the region itself—which is my primary field of investigation. (In the investigator's report (Chapter VII), there is an interesting account of what a cross section of "laymen" think of *religion secularism*, culture and civilization and of the 'other'.) The problem, as I see it, lies not only in our altered conception of what constitutes the *other*, but, mainly, in a radical misconception of what is religion. The inalienable links between a people's God and their *land* so clearly a part of all *tribal religions* (indeed of many *"non-tribal" religions* too) are all but incompre-hensible to the modern man who thinks of religion as man's link with the *other* world.

In Chapter I, I try to say something about the idea of a civilized life. My account is not scholarly, nor does it take into consideration the theories of civilization propounded by western thinkers. A peep into our own civilization tells me that four great virtues—charity, sacrifice, restraint and reverence for nature—were the organizing principles of this civilization—whether we take Indian civilization at large or that of its smaller communities. These organizing principles have now been replaced by materialism, individualism (manifested paradoxically in groupisms or one kind of another), secularism and the fairly new notion of nationalism.

Chapter II deals with the history of Assam in a necessarily summary form. In this I have relied mainly on the authority of acknowledged historians, and my main purpose has been to study some of the important conflicts that arose during the course of this history. The next chapter takes me to

problems which have arisen in more recent times in Assam—problems connected with language and religion. This brings me to the centre of the discourse on communalism in our times and a critical appraisal of this discourse particularly in the light of developments in Assam.

The relegation of religion to the sphere of the transcedent, of the other world, seems to me to be one of the gravest mistakes of our modern day understanding of religion. The very identity of different communities was inalienably linked with their ecologies and it is these links that their religions articulated, symbolized and extolled. It is this more than anything else that accounts for the distinctiveness of each religion.

Chapters III and IV deal with the present situation—a situation where all traditional organizing principles are in disarray and proselytisations of various kinds are making desperate and more or less unsuccessful attempts at replacing these principles. The break with the past for many communities seems now complete—but the past whether in the life of an individual or that of a community does not leave one alone: it haunts the community may be in its dreams, in its everyday life, in its inarticulate despairs and in its socalled abnormal, erratic behaviour.

Assam, much reduced in size, flooded annually by the waters of its great rivers and with regular periodicity by "immigrants" from the immediate west, has now to articulate for itself a new identity, a new allegiance, The old fusions of culture and values seem now strange and remote. In the agony of the emptiness within, anything can now become an issue, be it language or village borders. The emptiness is obviously the result of deprivation—but deprivation of a much deeper kind than simply economic deprivation—it is as though their inner, real being were under a grave threat.

This threat—articulated as it is in very many different ways—is, to my mind, linked profoundly to the people's alienation from their own land—the land which in

multifarious ways defined the horizons of a meaningful human life for them. The passage from "holy"—"holy" in the deepest ecological sense—land to the holy books of the proselytiser has brought in its wake confusions and tensions which were never a part of the emotional life of the people. This work sees the present predicament of Assam—and indeed of much of the rest of country—as the loss of the centre of its old civilization—the centre defined by its ecological rootedness. This rootedness which gave people the strength to be truly generous and the ability to recognize the similar rootedness of others, has now given way to exclusivisms defined primarily in political and economic terms although they might wear disguises of various kinds. The non-exclusivist ideologies such as *democratic liberalism*, the so-called world religions seem in curious ways only to promote and cement the new exclusivisms. One of the aims of this work is to try and understand this curious phenomenon.

The alienation of traditional religion from its ecological centre seems irreparably complete. It does not any longer seem possible to understand the wonderful diversity of human life in terms of religion; nor does religion seem any longer to provide the ground for a deep sympathy for the other and the different. Well, perhaps not altogether. For, the Gandhian discourse of religion in our own times, is a powerful attempt at restoring to religion its traditional capacities. It is to a consideration of this discourse that I turn in the following chapter.