



*A
Comparative
Study of
Adi Religion*

J. N. Chowdhury

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ADI RELIGION

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NORTH-EAST FRONTIER AGENCY
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To

SHRI B. DAS SHASTRI
Director of Research, NEFA,
a never failing friend and guide



FOREWORD

It has been held for a long time that religion is a product of civilization and that the so-called primitive people have no religion. It was not until the researches of E. B. Tylor who recorded a religious account of the tribal societies that the earlier notion was given up.

There are many theories regarding the earliest form of religion. Some believe that animatism came first, even before the concept of animism. Max Müller, on the other hand, propounded the theory of naturism as the beginning of religion. Whereas it is difficult to draw any firm line on the subject, it is clear that religion originated as a human requirement. The primitive man saw the various phenomena of nature such as the rise and setting of the sun, the clap of thunder or the downpour of rain. He saw the trees bear flowers and fruits. These observations led him to believe that there was some inherent power in the sun, in the thunder and in the trees. He came to worship these unseen powers for it was of daily concern to him as science and technology had not yet unraveled the mysteries of nature. To maintain his existence and health on this earth, he supplicated to the various potencies of nature to help him grow food or get rid of illness. He thus formulated a pantheon of gods each residing in an external agency. To the god of sun, the ancient man appealed for warmth to ripen his crops; to the god of rain, he entreated for timely showers to sprout his seeds; similarly, he prayed to the god of agriculture to render his crops rich and full of nourishing grains.

The ancient man's religion consisted of his belief in supernatural or spiritual beings. He conceived these

spiritual beings to be of two types, firstly the benign and the other malign. To the benign gods, he offered his gratitude and, in the case of malignant gods, he took to various rituals to propitiate them lest they should do harm.

The religion of tribal societies is marked by four distinct behaviours. The first is related to their moral attitude. Tribals feel little or no sense of moral obligation to anyone outside the circle of their own clan or tribe. Some of the typical addresses projected to the supernatural powers are, 'Let this family prosper, let our crops grow' and so on. In fact, the tribal moral concern is at times circumscribed by his own individuality only leading to the supplication, 'Let me live, find the enemy, not be afraid of him, find him asleep, and kill many of him'. As against this, the organized religions have gradually come to accept the doctrine of universal moral responsibility. To quote a ready example, see the religious bhajan which Mahatma Gandhi used to chant at his prayer meetings "Sab ko sumati de Bhagwan". Here in the address to Almighty power, the emphasis is wisdom to all the living creation.

The second feature of tribal religious thought is his belief that there is cosmological pluralism. Tribals look at each phenomena of nature separately and believe that a power resides in it. Thus he believes in many and diverse powers which control the various sides of his existence on earth. He does not think in terms of a single force or law pervading through the entire universe. Modern theology, on the other hand, rests its faith in ultimate monism. This philosophy is common to all the organized religions in their belief in one God who is the creator and who embodies in perfect form all the transcendent virtues.

The third distinction of tribal society is in regard to its conception of the human soul. Tribal ideas assume that

soul is a physical or quasi-physical entity which can be perceived tangibly with the breath that keeps the man alive or the shadow which is cast by the human body. The modern society banishes this notion and considers that a human being has the spiritual capacity to achieve perfection. The organized religions look upon the spirit as something invisible and intangible but which, at the same time, is real.

The fourth point concerns the tribal attitude towards the nature of human happiness. To him happiness consists in satisfying the natural desires. Thus the religious perception is confined to the emotional level only. It does not find extension beyond the individual. As against this, the organized religions lay emphasis upon the search for others' happiness as the true personal happiness of man.

It is not the object here to draw any comparison between the religion of tribal man and that of the advanced communities. The important thing to remember is that, like every other department of human life, religion too has gone through a process of evolution. Polytheism was the early religion of all human beings on earth which gradually through education, metaphysics and scientific knowledge developed into monotheism. It has been customary for modern man to look down upon tribal religious rituals and beliefs. Those who do so forget that their own so-called modern religion has passed through the stage of polytheism whose ceremonies such as offerings and sacrifices to propitiate the evil gods were not dissimilar to what is witnessed among the tribal societies. Unfortunately, much of the energy of religious missions that have entered the tribal areas for welfare work, has been devtoed to the replacement of the indigenous faiths by their own. This is nothing short of a religious invasion and speaks of the egoism and parochialism of

such visitors. Equally and unfortunately, the history of tribal administration has very few instances where government staff or social workers of various denominations have approached the tribal religions with a sincere desire to gain knowledge or to assist in the organic development of their theological heritage. Tribal religion in many parts of India has suffered irreparable damage at the hands of such ardent reformers. However praiseworthy may have been their work on education or medical treatment, they have displayed intolerance and narrow-mindedness towards the tribal faiths. A religion which does not respect universality of human life and respect for others' beliefs is in the very nature antithetical to the spirit of religion. The word religion comes from the Latin word, religio, which means 'to gather or observe'. Thus anyone who has pretences to religiosity should enter the tribal areas in the humble attitude of 'gathering and observing' the religious storehouse of the people.

In the North-East Frontier Agency where the Government staff are specially trained to enter the territory in the spirit of respect for the tribal way of life, a scheme was launched in recent years to study the religious faiths of the tribes inhabiting it. Studies have shown that the tribal pantheon of gods and the related rituals bear a distinct similarity to the Vedic times of India. The Administration of the Agency, concerned with the all-round development of the people, has paid due regard to the growth and evolution of the tribal religion. In this respect, the Administration has followed a dynamic policy of helping the people to indite their ancient religious legend and lore. Far from any attempt to supplant the people's faiths, it has been the earnest desire of the Administration to help the people develop confidence and pride in their own religious heritage. This has been an important item in the Administration's programme because, under the impress of change, many tribal insti-

tutions which were assiduously built up through centuries of endeavour, stand the risk of damage and demolition. Tribal religion is very vulnerable. In his anxiety to jump the centuries and become modern and civilized at once, the tribal man undergoes psychological pressure from the outside world. He sees grandiose temples and rich theological literature of the other communities. He thus become vulnerable to frustration and inferiority complexes which can lead to his urge to shed his own faiths and adopt those of others. Happily, this has been avoided in NEFA because the Administration has taken pains to generate confidence among the people for their own religious traditions.

In the years to come it will be interesting to see how the tribal upsurge for strengthening and reviving their own religion makes headway and the shape it will eventually take. The religious thought of the people of NEFA will be subject to impacts from other religions. As a result the people will absorb fresh ideas from outside leading to a process of osmosis. From the national viewpoint it is important that the ancient culture of India should display its age-old latitudinarianism so that the indigenous faiths of the people can occupy an important place within its fold. Expansion and accretion have been the keynotes of India's religious tradition and it is hoped that the historic vigour and tolerance of the majority communities in our country will once again come into action in respect of the religions of NEFA people.

Shri J. N. Chowdhury, the author of this book, has done great service by producing literature on the religion of NEFA people and its comparison with the other religious denominations of India. He has entered into a novel field and his work is a product of his scholarship and observation which will go down as a pioneering effort. It will not doubt be widely read with much interest and

will prove to be of immense value not only the people of our country who have little information on the subject but also to the people of NEFA itself whose religious heritage has not hitherto found any written record. The book deserves appreciation from all quarters because of the novelty of the subject and exposition of a vital aspect of NEFA people's life whose knowledge is limited to the few engaged in service in this territory.

Shillong,
January 7, 1971

P. N. LUTHRA
Adviser to the Governor of Assam

PREFACE

The present book aims at a comparative study of the Adi religion within rather a short compass and is, therefore, bound to be of a tentative nature. I humbly feel that a more exhaustive study after prolonged and deep research will be rewarding, and will help dispel such unfounded prejudice as would dismiss all other religions, not conforming to its own conception, as worthless, primitive or 'animist'. I have based my study, if I may call it so, on readily available material scattered over a limited number of publications and reports which only incidentally deal with the Adi religious beliefs and practices. I cannot, therefore, claim this short treatise as a product of original research, and, furthermore, I am not equipped to undertake a more serious work.

I may, perhaps, point out here that the distinction between high religion and low religion is more popular than scientific. Religions of all denominations have their origin in the same kind of emotional upsurge and symbolic process of reasoning as underlie a common human approach to the problems of existence. Through all elaborations of myths and rituals, it is, perhaps, possible to detect a uniformity of psychological reaction to the mysteries of life and death as revealed, for instance, in the longing to foresee future events and the quest for a sense of personal security and permanence in the midst of a hostile changing world. Keeping these facts in view, one should not be surprised to notice correspondence of ideas and similarity of ritualistic practices etc between religions widely separated by space and time, by geography and climate, however important they are otherwise in conditioning human mind.

We humbly believe that what we have said above about the nature of religious feelings will justify our attempts

here at drawing parallelisms between Adi religious ideas and practices with the religious beliefs and ritualistic practices of early Indians as found in the vedas, puranas, epics and popular mythology.

Now, the historic religion of the Indian people has an unusually long history of syncretic development and slow evolution extending back to centuries. Nowhere else, perhaps, in the world, one can observe a continuous and uninterrupted evolution of a religion from very rudimentary ideas to the dizzy heights of metaphysical speculations; from the rudimentary nature worship, involving beliefs in different grades of spirits and sacrifices to the highest philosophy of the Vedanta.

It is common knowledge that migrations of different ethnic groups of people into India took place in prehistoric times and they commingled their blood and culture on the soil of India to constitute the present Indian people. It is no wonder that these various peoples originally contributed to the birth of what has been termed as 'protohinduism'. The contributions, for instance, of the Indo-Mongoloids in the north-eastern region of India to the rise of a cult of *shaktism* or *tantrism*, synthesizing shamanistic trance and magical incantations with a developed philosophy of *Prikriti* and *Purusha* have been widely acknowledged by scholars. We should not, therefore, be surprised, if it should be pointed out that the substratum of the main Indian religion, namely Hinduism, though commonly tracing its origin to the vedas, contains much of what in modern parlance will be termed as tribal beliefs and practices. The uninterrupted process of integrated or organic growth naturally permitted the co-existence of various grades of religious beliefs and practices and this fact particularly has always governed a basic catholicity of attitude to all religions.

The Adis have been obliged by various factors, the difficult nature of the terrain being the foremost, to live in

comparative isolation for ages. But this has not prevented them from developing a culture and a religion. In common with many simple and archaic religions, they no doubt believe in a host of spirits, bent on doing harm to mankind. The Adi religious beliefs, though often of a rudimentary character, nevertheless conceptualize higher deities, showing a definite trend towards metaphysical abstraction as, for instance, in the imagination of a first cause of all creations. The enigmatic *Keyum* is invisible and unknowable. We have reached the conclusion in this book that the Adi religion with its conception of infinitely powerful and benevolent moral gods possesses all the ingredients of a high religion.

In the first place, I am deeply indebted to Shri P. N. Luthra, the Adviser to the Governor of Assam, without whose sympathetic and active interest in the progress of the book I might not have been able, after-all, to persist in the task. I cannot hope to measure in words my indebtedness to Shri B. Das Shastri, Director of Research, NEFA, who with his encyclopaedic store of knowledge was ever ready to guide me and draw my attention to appropriate books and references.

I am glad indeed to acknowledge here my great appreciation for all the assistance, I received from Shri Priyatosh Dutta of the Library section. He ungrudgingly took upon himself the tedious task of typing out the manuscript.

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