

Religion in North-East in India

Edited By
SOUMEN SEN



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Preface

Religion has always been a guiding principle of all societies. From the earliest times, we see the existence of religion in all human cultures. Religions of the world may be categorised into two, the major religions with written scriptures and pre-literate religions which are confined to small pre-literate groups, spread over. These religions may be called tribal religions, because pre-literate people are often designated as such.)

Primitive technology, subsistence economy, environmental hazards made the pre-literate groups of people largely dependent on belief in supernaturals. In north-east India, many tribal religions faded away when the tribes came into contact permanently with out side world or fighting a losing battle. Tribes which have accepted some world religions show signs of advancement. Is it necessary to conclude that within foreseeable future, all these tribal religions would be wiped away? In the above background North-East India Council for Social Science Research, held a seminar on the Status of Religion in Tribal Areas in North-East India on 15-16 February 1990 at shillong.

The seminar was dedicated to the memory of Pearson Hungyo, a young and promising Nage scholar who did some pioneering work in this field. Most Rev. Bishop Dr. Thomas Manamparmpil of Dibrugarh now at Guwahati and Rev. Father Dr. Sebastian Karotemprel of Sacred Heart Theological College, Shillong extended their patronage to this exploratory seminar to understand the tribal practices, cultures and religions.

Dr. Soumen Sen, the Editor of their volume has given a meaningful interpretation.

I take this opportunity to thank Mr. B.S. Uppal and Uppal Publishing House, New Delhi for undertaking the publication of this volume of great sociological importance.

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30th August, 1992

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Introduction

Soumen Sen

This collection of papers, contributed to a Seminar on *Status of Religion in Tribal Areas in North-East India* organised by North-East India Council for Social Science Research in February, 1990, at Shillong, has three main objectives. The first is to account for the present status of religions of different tribal communities of the north-eastern region of India ; the second is to discuss the challenge that major and global religions are continually presenting to the indigenous religions of the tribal peoples ; and the third is to examine the role of religions as symbols of tribal identity. The visible presence of ancient indigenous and modern global religions in the region provides an excellent backdrop for the discussion of religion as a vital social force. The contributions have, to large extent, achieved the objectives.

No attempt has, therefore, been made in any of the papers to 'theorise' religion in any particular point of view. Nor was it the objective of the seminar. The authors have rather preferred to discuss the 'religious experiences' of the peoples that make up the sacred for them. But, one must admit that religion, as a universal phenomenon, can be delineated into a

number of experiences that can be observed in all the religions of the world. We can, therefore, conceptualise religion, as has been done by Anthony Wallace in his book *Religion: An Anthropological View* (New York: Random House, 1966), 'as a series of building blocks' with 'minimal categories of religious behaviour', recognised by social scientists, theologians and laymen alike. There is very little controversy in accepting religion as a conglomeration of rituals and beliefs including cosmological conceptions and values expressed in myths and legends, whose components are integrated into cult institutions such as *individualistic*, whose rituals are performed by laymen; *shamanic*, whose rituals are performed by workers of magic and diviners; *communal*, whose rituals are performed by lay officials, who act as priests; and *ecclesiastical*, whose rituals are performed by a professional clergy organised into a bureaucracy.

I have purposefully utilised this 'conceptualisation' by Wallace in identifying religion as a series of building blocks in preference to many other equally valid 'conceptualisations' for the very simple reason that the findings of our contributors in this volume fit in this identification of religion and which put religion within the broader scheme of culture. While describing the religious practices of the peoples, attempts have been made to study the relation between religion and other spheres of social life. Functions of religion, mostly universal, such as the control of nature to bring it to the aid of human beings, propitiation of imagined supernatural forces for human well-being, organisation of human behaviour and revitalisation of society, have therefore received attention in most of the papers.

B.B. Kumar in his 'Brief Note on Tribal Religions of North-East India' has rightly pointed out that tribal religions are the product of the tribal world-view. There is often a known-unknown continuum in a broad frame of 'man-nature-spirit' complex. The known and unknown are equally feared or not

feared. The worship is simply a contract and mostly propitiatory in nature and in some cases the expression of gratitude. The religions of the peoples of north-east India generally fall in this category and reflect the expressions of the totality of human experience in specific context.

E. Nilkanta Singh maintains that these religions with a belief in spirits and deities should not be called 'animistic'. Examining the religion of the major tribes of Manipur he emphasises the need for studying the meaning of symbolism associated with these religions which have distinctive perception of the nature, of the soul (sometimes multiple souls), land of the dead, doctrine of *Karma*, Supreme deity and gods and spirits including ancestor spirits and tutelary deities of the village etc. The core of these religions as reflected in the life-style of the people of the hills of Manipur is the belief in magic and ancestor-cum-deities and other spirits. It is also possible that the hill people have forgotten the symbolism of the ancient and stuck to conventional forms of religion having lost the sense of communion with the various deities. Only a few priests and priestesses preserve this tradition with some occult powers which are often utilised for non-spiritual and egoistic purposes.

Discussing the religion of the Meitei of Manipur, R.P. Athparia and S.S. Datta Choudhury maintain in their paper that even after their conversion to *Vaishnavite* Hinduism in the first half of the 18th Century, the Meitei still retain their earlier religious beliefs and practices, worship the indigenous gods such as *Senamah* and *Leimaren*. The medicine men and women, *Maiba* and *Maibi*, still exert influence in regulating the religious life with various forms of ancestor worship, snake worship, witchcraft etc. The religious practices of other hill tribes of Manipur also depend upon the usual 'building blocks' and 'cult institutions' such as the concept of a Supreme Being, malevolent and benevolent spirits, nature deities, land of the dead, a ritual

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system with prayer, libation, propitiation and sacrifice and 'priests'.

This can be said to be a general pattern of religious practices of the peoples of the hills of north-east India. J.N. Chowdhury describes these practices of the Khasis of Meghalaya with veneration of ancestors associated with the practice of erecting megalithic structures and collection of bones, reverence for trees, sacred groves, mountains and other sacred spots, spirits, and the conception of an androgynous deity or high god combining the male and female principles of creation. In Chowdhury's opinion these practices establish the Austriac link of the Khasis.

But the indigenous religions of the peoples of the Hills had to face challenges from other organised religions and in the process, sometime an opposition movement was even created for the purpose of reinvigorating indigenous religion and values. This has been shown in great details in the paper of R.T. Rymbai. After discussing the essence of Khasi-Pnar religion with a belief in only one God, a formless Supreme Being with no particular name, who has no partner, helpmate or associate, and whose presence is felt everywhere, Rymbai proceeded to show how the Christian missions acted in tandem with the colonisers in denigrating the indigenous customs and religion to serve the colonial interests. He even went to the extent of observing, quoting theologians, that the missionaries of yesteryears were as much colonialists as their kinsmen administrators and shared the grand feeling of belonging to the ruling race chosen to carry 'the whitemen's burden' to their 'heathen' subjects who must be preached to not only give up their own religion but also to be taught and influenced to look down upon their traditions, customs, culture and way of life stemming from the roots of their religion which bound them together. Thus the progress of Christianity was considered as a challenge to the national culture of the Khasi-Pnars and so a

small group of social reformers formed an association in 1899 called *Seng Khasi*. The principal objective of this association was to work for the retention of their socio-cultural and religious heritage. A Khasi is declared to be a Khasi only because of his religion; to understand him, one has to go deep down into the very roots of his religion, which is in no way inferior to any other religion as the colonisers would want us to believe.

In discussing tribal religions of Manipur, vis-a-vis Christianity, H. Kamkhenthang maintains that the decay of these religions and acceptance of Christianity is to be traced in the philosophy of the 'traditional' tribal religion which is 'shallower than that of the World religions'. Kamkhenthang says, 'The nature of life after death was established in the fashion of tribal life and culture on earth. The nature of life in the land of the dead as conceived by the Paite, Zou, Mizo, Hmar etc., is the reflection of the people on earth as revealed in the folktales. Then religion provides an easy means to the earth bound spirits of the dead to forget the living members by drinking *Lungmuan dantui* which means water of no-more longing in the case of the Paite or by plucking a flower called *hoi lou par* (a flower of no turning back). Christianity offers much wider scope for the spirit after death. Besides this, the atonement of the sins of the people by the blood of Jesus Christ has a parallelism in the offering of animal blood to the evil spirits to emancipate them from their illness through exorcism. This made the tribesmen easy to understand Christian religion at the expense of tribal religion Another factor that leads to the decay of tribal religion is that traditional societies are clan based and activities are more or less restricted to the clans whereas Christianity enlarges the social circle. This made christianity more attractive leading to the decay of tribal religion.' Kamkhenthang also maintains that the tribes did not give up totally all their beliefs originally associated with the 'traditional' religion. Despite the efforts of the Christian preachers to discourage the tribal religious practices, the people

still adhere to some of them. In the process Christianity has been modified to an extent as the tribal culture has been modified by Christian ethos.

In tracing the history of Christian proselitisation in Manipur, Asok Kumar Ray finds that Christianity was introduced in Manipur at a comparatively later period in north-east India because of a British policy of religious neutrality declared in 1831 which actually meant a policy of non-interference with the religions like Hinduism and Islam. It is to be noted that as early as the 15th Century A.D. Hinduism provided an ideological force for the royal authority in Manipur. This happened mostly in the plains. The peoples in the Hills were by and large free from the direct political authority of the Hinduised Kings of Manipur and as such Hinduism could not extend itself in the Hills. Thus when it was realised that the endeavour for proselitisation in the valleys of Manipur would be politically inexpedient because of the presence of Hinduism, the missionary activities were shifted to the Hills and as was usual, education became the most important mode of evangelism. After tracing this history, Ray has shown that proselitisation was used to extend the colonial authority in the Hills and that state support and use of the state power in initiating and sustaining missionary movement was a characteristic feature of the colonial rule.

D.N. Majumdar considered Christianity as a factor of change in the Garo society. He maintains that Christianity has helped the Garos to accept the modern world with much interfering with their social framework. In Majumdar's opinion the factors contributing to the decline of the traditional religion are :

- (i) spread of modern education,
- (ii) greater contact between different sections of the Garos in and outside the Garo homeland and also greater

contact with the outside world through rapid development of communications,

- (iii) extension of medical facilities, and
- (iv) impact of the Christianity Garos on the Garos still following the traditional religion.

Although the cognitive and expressive needs for the Garos in the traditional setup were fully met by traditional cosmology and traditional magico-religious rites, but because the slash and burn cultivation was declining due to ecological factors and plough cultivation was increasingly practised, the traditional rites became less meaningful, the traditional religious practices were on the wane and that has directly helped Christianity. In the process, Christianity became a factor of change although it cannot be singled out as the only factor. However, Christianity has been the window for the Garos through which they, for the first time, got a view of the outside world.

Another religion that is spread in some parts of north-east India is Buddhism. G.C. Sharma Thakur shows how a distinct identity emerged among the Tai Phakes of Assam through their affiliation to Buddhism. This small ethnic group, with less than 3000 members spread in two upper Assam districts of Dibrugarh and Tinsukia and interspersed among nontribal and non-Phake populations, have been able to preserve their age old socio-religious beliefs and practices specially because of their feeling of pride in being affiliated to a world religion i.e. Buddhism and their economic self-sufficiency.

In Sikkim, Aparna Bhattacharya finds a harmonious co-existence of Buddhism and Hinduism. Of the three major communities of Sikkim, the Bhutias and the Lepchas are Buddhists whereas the Nepalese are Hindus. Since the day of formation of Buddhism-oriented kingdom by the Lamas, Tebetan Vajrayana Buddhism was recognised as the state religion of Sikkim till its merger with Indian Union. To the

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Bhutias, who formed the ruling class, Buddhism was a way of functioning their life. Whatever a Bhutia does, he transforms it as a religious practice. Buddhism thus acted as the central axis of the social life of the Bhutia and Lepcha communities. The Nepalese started migrating to Sikkim from Nepal only from the last two decades of the Nineteenth Century. British Government encouraged this migration and settlement of Nepalese in Sikkim. In their anxiety to curtail the Tibetan influence through Buddhism, the British Government encouraged the influx with a fond hope that in Sikkim, as happened in India, Hinduism would assuredly cast out Buddhism. But it did not happen. Till today Buddhist Bhutia-Lepchas and Hindu Nepalese live a harmonious life of co-existence in Sikkim. Aparna Bhattacharya finds that although the majority of Nepalese settled in Sikkim are Hindus, some tribes who came from north-east Nepal, such as Sherpa, Tamang and Tsongs of Lhasa gotra profess Buddhism. Thus the Nepali settlement pattern in Sikkim, which was essentially inter-religious, inter-tribal and inter-clanish, also paved the way to wider intercourse among them. They practised a healthy form of Hinduism free from orthodoxy and caste system or social distances which grow out of rigid religious conservatism. So these Hindu Nepalese were not anti-Buddhists, as was expected by the British rulers. There is rather a perfect religious harmony among the Hindu Nepalese and Buddhist Bhutia-Lepchas in Sikkim.

That a religion can contribute substantially in an identity movement has been shown in two papers of this volume written by S.K. Mukherjee and Nilotpal Sarma. In his paper, 'Religion among the Boro-Kacharis of Assam', S.K. Mukherjee says that the religion of the Boro-Kacharis needs to be studied in two parts: traditionalist and reformist. The original religion of the Boro-Kachari, what Mukherjee calls 'traditionalist', was based characteristically on the principle of fear or dread. The pantheon is extensive in the broad frame of man-nature-spirit

complex. The popular deities fall into two classes—the household deities and village deities. The 'reformist' movement was led by Kalicharan Mech, later known as Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma, and the faith propagated by him came to be known as *Brahma Dharma*. He was initiated to this faith by Param Hansa Sri Narayan Swami of Calcutta. The followers of this faith took upon themselves the task of reforming their society under the leadership of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma. They opened schools, articulated socio-political issues, abolished the practices of brewing and drinking of rice-beer, reduced the incidence of bride price and minimised expenses on socio-religious observances and rituals. Thus customary norms and practices underwent changes due to the spread of *Brahma* faith.

Nilotpal Sarma shows how and to what extent this *Brahma* movement led by Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma has contributed in the change of outlook among the Bodos and in the evolution of Bodo identity. The Brahmas among the Bodos became educationally and culturally more advanced and provided the leadership in the socio-political life of the Bodos. With the conversion of a sizeable section of the Bodos to the *Brahma* faith, a leadership has eventually emerged that led movements for preserving their distinct socio-cultural and linguistic identity. The present movements for autonomy and assertion of political rights is a sequence of the earlier movements. Sarma maintains that this has largely been possible because of the spread of *Brahma* faith among the Bodos.

A case study of three villages of Assam done by P.N. Bharali and A.K. Borah reveals how the Deoris retain their socio-cultural identity by adherence to their traditional religious beliefs. By drawing attention to the fact that Deories, also known as Deori Chutiyas, are one of the four divisions of the large Chutiya family, Bharali and Borah shows how they have retained their age old traditions including religious beliefs and

practices in the face of various factors of change while other three divisions of the Chutiya family, the Hindu Chutiya, the Ahom Chutiya and the Borahi Chutiya could not retain their old traditions and religious beliefs. This has happened because of spatial migration during Ahom rule. Considering the Chutiyas as threats to their rule, the Ahom kings strategically ordered a large number of Chutias to migrate to different places of the Ahom kingdom and in the process of this forced migration some groups accepted the Hindu culture, some followed the Ahom traditions and some accepted the Kachari traits depending upon their proximity to each of these cultures. The Deori Chutias, presently known as Deori, however retained their own tradition and culture presumably because they were the priests of the large Chutiya family and were permitted to stay in their original abode. Their religion, a conglomeration of rituals and prayers in the frame of man-nature-spirit complex, is based mainly on one cult institution—*Shamanic*. Bharali and Borah maintain that the practice of *shamanism* is another major factor for Deories retaining their age-old traditions and religious system.

Another case study by Prafulla Medhi gives an account how the Sonowal Kacharis, a branch of the Kachari tribe of Assam adhere to a dual religious practice. As early as 17th Century A.D., the Sonowals, coming in contact with the *Vaishnavite* Hindus of Assam, adopted *neo-Vaishnavism*, popularly known as *Ek-Sarana Namadharm*, preached by Sankardeva. But even after their near assimilation with the greater Assamese culture as a result of accepting the *Ek-Sarana-Namadharm*, they still retain much of the early tribal religious beliefs and ritual system. Interestingly, their devotion to both is unquestionable. The *Ek-Sarana Namadharm* allows worshipping of only one God, *Vishnu*, and forbids worshipping other gods or goddesses, sacrifice and rituals but the Sonowals are found to worship numerous deities and perform rituals with sacrifices. It appears that they do not find any contradiction

in following both the religious practices. Medhi maintains that the Sonowals felt that total abandonment of their earlier religion would result in the loss of their cultural identity. Hence, despite their devotion to *Namadharm*, they continue to worship other deities and spirits and perform rituals with libations and sacrifices.

A case study of the Sulungs of Arunachal Pradesh by Bibhas Dhar presents a unique scenario. The Sulungs have a religion of their own with the usual belief in the existence of a number of malevolent and benevolent spirits and deities to be propitiated by libation and sacrifices through communal-ritual system. But now they cannot effectively observe their religious practices because they are slaves of the Bangnis and the Nishis. They do not have any community festival; rather they cannot afford to have. Whatever religious ceremonies they observe, they do it very occasionally and privately and mostly when there is illness and death in the household. Dhar, in the course of his study, has found that the absence of communal practice of religions among the Sulungs is due to the fact that they do not have any communal existence at all, to the extent that they cannot even live in their own villages. They are slaves and their lives and existence are claimed by their masters belonging to the Bangni and Nishi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh.

Because of the presence of a heterogeneous population with varied ethnic and socio-cultural background, the tea plantations in Brahmaputra Valley, presents a different religious scene discussed in the paper by Geetanjali Baruah. It is known that batches of labourers belonging to different tribes and castes from all over India were recruited in the tea plantations. When they came they surely brought with them their own socio-cultural traits and religious traditions. But over the years, a new identity emerged, the identity of tea garden labour. Baruah has shown in her paper how this new identity has brought changes in almost all the spheres of their life resulting in 'dis-organisation' and 'reorganisation' of the traditional ethnic

cultural and religious traits and concludes that while retaining much of their earlier religious practices, the labourers have also accepted some changes in the sphere of their religious attitude. It has been observed that any religious ceremony of any particular group is equally subscribed to and participated by other groups. No group seems to have abandoned its own ethnic religious tradition or to have accepted a new religious faith. What is discerned is an attitude of religious tolerance and identifying oneself with the changed social situation.

The papers in this volume thus presents an account of diverse religious experiences of the peoples of north-east India. Without claiming a very exhaustive analysis of the situation, we can perhaps feel happy that our contributors have atleast presented successfully a systematic understanding of the inter-relations between society and religion in the context of the north-eastern region of India.