

# THE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF NORTH-EAST INDIA

ABBIEGELIA RYNJAH

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**THE RELIGIOUS  
BELIEFS OF  
NORTH-EAST INDIA**

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To  
My Parents

# CONTENTS

<b>PREFACE</b> .....	7
<b>GENERAL INTRODUCTION</b> .....	12
<b>CHAPTER 1</b>	
1.0 <b>RELIGIOUS BELIEFS: A NORTH-EASTERN PERSPECTIVE</b> .....	15
<b>CHAPTER 2</b>	
<b>ARUNACHAL PRADESH</b> .....	18
2.1 <b>THE ADI TRIBE</b> .....	19
2.11 <b>RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE ADI TRIBE</b> .....	20
2.2 <b>THE APATANI TRIBE</b> .....	24
2.21 <b>RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE APATANI TRIBE</b> .....	25
<b>CHAPTER 3</b>	
<b>ASSAM</b> .....	28
3.1 <b>THE SONOWAL TRIBE</b> .....	30
3.11 <b>RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE SONOWAL KACHARI TRIBE</b> .....	31
3.2 <b>THE BODO TRIBE</b> .....	35
3.21 <b>RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE BODO TRIBE</b> .....	36
<b>CHAPTER 4</b>	
<b>MANIPUR</b> .....	40
4.1 <b>THE MEITEI TRIBE</b> .....	41
4.11 <b>RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE MEITEI TRIBE</b> .....	41
4.2 <b>THE KUKI TRIBE</b> .....	44
4.21 <b>RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE KUKI TRIBE</b> .....	45

**CHAPTER 5**

<b>MEGHALAYA</b> .....	<b>46</b>
5.1 THE KHASI TRIBE .....	46
5.11 RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE KHASI TRIBE .....	48
5.2 THE JAIÑTIA TRIBE .....	56
5.21 RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE JAIÑTIA TRIBE .....	57

**CHAPTER 6**

<b>MIZORAM</b> .....	<b>63</b>
6.1 THE MIZO TRIBE .....	63
6.11 RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE MIZO TRIBE .....	65
6.2 THE HMAR TRIBE .....	66
6.21 RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE HMAR TRIBE .....	67
6.3 THE CHAKMA TRIBE .....	69
6.31 RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE CHAKMA TRIBE .....	69

**CHAPTER 7**

<b>NAGALAND</b> .....	<b>72</b>
7.1 THE ZELIANGRONG TRIBE.....	74
7.11 RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE ZELIANGRONG TRIBE .	74
7.2 THE AO TRIBE .....	77
7.21 RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE AO TRIBE .....	78

**CHAPTER 8**

<b>SIKKIM</b> .....	<b>80</b>
8.1 THE LEPCHA TRIBE.....	80
8.11 RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE LEPCHA TRIBE.....	81
8.2 THE BHUTIA TRIBE .....	88
8.21 RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE BHUTIA TRIBE .....	89

**CHAPTER 8**

<b>TRIPURA .....</b>	<b>92</b>
9.1 THE TRIPURI TRIBE .....	93
9.11 RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE TRIPURI TRIBE .....	94
9.2 THE REANG TRIBE.....	98
9.21 RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE REANG TRIBE.....	99
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>103</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>104</b>
<b>WEB REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>105</b>
<b>INDEX .....</b>	<b>107</b>

## PREFACE

Geographically, India can be divided into five zones, namely, North, South, West, Central, East and North-east. This research work emphasizes on the regions within the north-eastern part of India which lie in an extension of the sub-Himalayan Zone. The region consists of lofty mountainous terrain, plateaus and river fed valleys. The zone is cut off from the rest of the country bearing a narrow corridor between West Bengal (Siliguri) and Sikkim. In early times the north-east has been the home of Kiratas or Indo-Mongoloids. Although an influence of the Aryan culture has swept the valleys in Assam, Manipur and Tripura, the Indo-Mongoloid group has not occupied a centre stage position in the history of India's civilization. In particular, the advent of the Mongoloid tribe and the Aryans seems to have collided in the State of Meghalaya which is a part of the north-eastern region where the tribe has a mixed physical appearance.

In the north-eastern region the Aryan-Hindu religious and cultural norms have played major roles. In some parts, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam which came later also influenced the region. The north-east has often been referred to as an anthropologist's paradise. A stock of folklore materials - verbal and non-verbal - still largely exist in these regions. That north-east is the traditional homeland of the Indo-mongoloid population in India can be noticed by traces of their existence in the north-eastern region. Recently the north-eastern region has been a topic of focus and much research is being conducted on the special character present in its society and culture.

The tribal religions of the north-east India like all other tribal religions of the world may be termed as pre-literate religions as they do not have written scriptures. These religions are the expression of human experiences like history, folklore, myth and way of life that come into one shape. Tribal religions in most of the cases are found in villages: beginning from the family, clan and society.

Religious belief here relates to the existence, nature and worship of a deity or deities and divine involvement in the universe and human life. It also relates to certain values and practices being transmitted by a spiritual leader. Unlike other belief systems, it is passed on orally. In literate societies, religious belief tends to be codified but religion in non-literate societies is still largely passed on orally. Religious belief can also involve causes, principles or activities believed in with careful devotion, concerning points or matters of belief or conscience. North-east India is famous for its tribal cultures which are circled around the traditional religions of the tribal people inhabiting this region. Each and every tribe has its own distinctive cultural and religious beliefs. Their religious beliefs are related with their day to day activities. Moreover, their beliefs are associated with their festivals, rites of passage, birth, initiation, marriage, death etc., agricultural activities, sickness, natural phenomena, spirits - both malevolent and benevolent, gods and goddesses, magic and sorcery, sin and taboo and so on.

A brief description of the different tribes of the north-east is given at the outset. This work is an attempt to lay out the intricate traditional life and cultures, customs, and religious beliefs still followed by these distinctive tribes. To these traditional believers, who are now becoming a minority, religious belief is the be all and end all of their day to day life. These beliefs which

are to be unfolded in the following pages are associated with rites of passage (including birth, marriage and death ceremonies), sin or taboo, sacrifices of animals, ritual practices and the omnipotence of spirits both benevolent and malevolent.

The methods that are applied in the research are the library and interview method. Other methods applied in collecting of data are schedule and questionnaire methods. A number of books and the internet have also been consulted for secondary information. These works have been duly mentioned and acknowledged in the references and bibliography.

At the outset I gladly take this opportunity to express my sincere thanks and gratitude to Father Joseph Puthenpurakal, Director, Don Bosco Centre for Indigenous Cultures, Shillong for this opportunity to work on this project and also for his support, guidance and patience. I sincerely thank Mr Ryan Reid Kharkongor, Research Scholar from the Department of English, NEHU, Shillong for patiently going through the manuscript, making the necessary corrections and suggesting improvements.

To Ms Betty Laloo for her unconditional help and encouraging words. I am thankful to Ms Amanda Tongper, Lecturer, Lady Keane College, for her selfless effort and for making the necessary corrections. I thank the informants for providing all the required materials that are needed in completing this work. I remember with gratitude Ms Chitrani Sonowal and Mr Sanbok Synrem thank you for providing me the necessary books for pursuing this research. My gratitude goes to Mr Prafulla Nath, Mrs. Twelsina Pde, Mr Lowis Pohlynjar, Mr Donglangki Pde, Dr Hunibou Newmai and Mr A. Huthonbou Newmai, and for their cooperation, their most valuable time and kind response in collecting data that I required for the project, and also for giving information about their tribe.

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**Abbiegelia Rynjah**

# GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Religion is a part of the life of all communities and it must be analyzed in the backdrop of the environment in which the present beliefs and practices took the form of a religion and of the environment in which the tribal communities led their life (<http://www.cicds.org/?p=104> dated 10/08/09). Human beings have been fascinated by extra-natural and super-natural powers since the dawn of history. Humans attributed extra-ordinary powers to spirits and gods. Whenever they were unable to explain natural phenomena, it was attributed to the supernatural. Humans then started to offer sacrifices to propitiate the gods/spirits so that they would bless and protect them in their daily life. Slowly and gradually certain social values too were included into religious beliefs.

Religious belief refers to a mental state in which faith is placed in a creed related to the supernatural, sacred, or divine. While the term 'religious belief' is often considered to have the same meaning as religion, the latter term usually deals with both ideas and practice (<http://.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion>, dated- 30/07/09).

Religious beliefs on sin or taboo and sacrifice among the tribes of north-east India are very strong. These beliefs are those that deal with marriage, speeches, adultery, murder, property, etc. The people, in order to appease the gods and goddesses and also to be able to live a life of peace and prosperity, perform many ritual sacrifices such as animal sacrifices, human sacrifices, etc. They have strong faith in these sacrifices and believe that only these sacrifices can bring about a good understanding between them and the supernatural, the latter can use their power either to bless or curse them. Sacrifice pervades virtually

all religions, but it is extremely difficult to say precisely what the meanings of sacrifice are perhaps because these are so many. Sacrifice has been understood as punishment of fault or sin.

The concept of sin is synonymous with taboo according to traditional believers. Sin or taboo is a term that is used mainly in concordance with religious context. It can be described as an act of violation of the ancestral set of moral code of conduct. Literally taboo means a forbidden activity or something that is not permitted in the society or something which stands against social approval and is disallowed by norms of behaviour. It is believed that the supernatural force always looks after these social restraints and those who break the rules are punished by the supernatural.

The first taboo that is important and strictest in the north-eastern society is the incest taboo. There are also several taboos associated with birth, marriage and death. Therefore the tribal people of the north-eastern States adhere to the traditional ways during any ceremony that have been practised since time immemorial (Sinha, 1977, 104-105).

The concept of sacrifice is the offering of something, animate or inanimate, in a ritual process which establishes, or mobilizes, a relationship of mutuality between the one who sacrifices (whether individual or group) and the recipient who may be human but more often is of another order, that is, god or spirit. Sacrifice involves drama, ritual, and action, transforming whatever it is that is sacrificed beyond its ordinary role: in general, nothing that is sacrificed has natural worth or holiness before it is set apart; it is the sacrifice that gives it added value.

Sacrifices are performed for many reasons. They are means of purification from fault or sin, as an expression of gratitude to God for his blessings, establishing union

with God or with others in a community, as a celebration, as a means of coping with violence in a community. Animals and plants are devoted during sacrifices (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacrifice> dated- 10/08/09). Human sacrifice was practised in various cultures but has now become extinct among the tribes of north-east India.

In tribal society the rites and sacrifices are performed to propitiate the supreme God or the benevolent spirits to gain their favour and kindness. Also rites are performed to appease the malevolent spirits to avoid their evil effects (Sinha, 1977, 104-105). Rites are the practical activities in animistic belief. In every tribe community rites and individual rites are performed distinctively. A particular set system is followed in the performance of the rites. The rites of divination and sacrifices are performed by the priest. The priest on the basis of divination will announce the mode of sacrifice and also decide what kinds of animals are required. There are sacrifices are connected with every rite. As they believe that spirits are the main cause of all misfortunes they try to appease the spirits. This belief led them to propitiate the spirits which later on became rituals. They also believed that the animals which are taken as food can be offered to please the spirits so that they themselves are not harmed. Thus began the concept of animal sacrifice (Panchani, 1989, 214).

## About the Book

The tribal religions of north-east India like all other tribal religions of the world may be termed as pre-literate religions as they do not have written scriptures. These religions are the expression of human experiences like history, folklore, myth and way of life that come into one shape. Tribal religions in most of the cases are found in villages: beginning from the family, clan and society. Religious belief relates to the existence, nature and worship of a deity or deities and divine involvement in the universe and human life. It also relates to certain values and practices being transmitted by a spiritual leader. Unlike other belief systems, it is passed on orally. Religious belief tends to be codified in literate societies but religion in non-literate societies is still largely passed on orally. Religious belief can also involve causes, principles or activities believed in with careful devotion concerning points or matters of beliefs or conscience. North-east India is famous for its tribal cultures which are circled around the traditional religions of the tribal people inhabiting this region. Each and every tribe has its own distinctive cultural and religious beliefs. Their religious beliefs are related with their day to day activities. Moreover, their beliefs are associated with their festivals, rites of passage; birth, initiation, marriage, death etc., agricultural activities, sickness, natural phenomena, spirits both malevolent and benevolent, gods and goddesses, magic and sorcery, sin and taboo and so on. The book entitled *The Religious Beliefs of the North-east India* is an attempt to bring out these intricate traditional religious beliefs, customs and practices still followed by the tribes of north-east India.

## **About the Author**

Abbiegelia Rynjah, born on 17 November 1982, hails from Shillong. After graduating from St Mary's College, Laitmukhrah, Shillong, she did a Diploma Course on Folkloristics from the Centre for Cultural and Creative Studies, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong and later completed an M.A in Cultural Studies from Tezpur University, Assam.

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