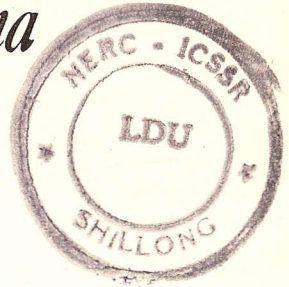


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Religion and Society of North-East India

Edited By

SUJATA MIRI



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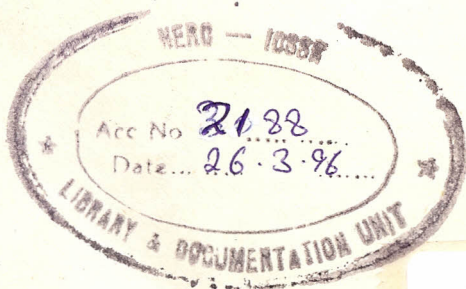
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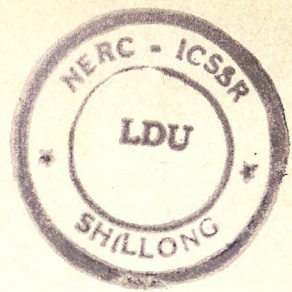
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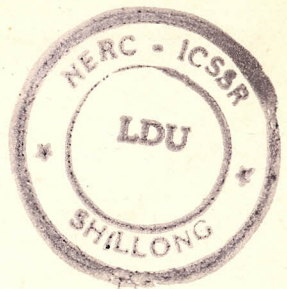
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Foreword

This book is the result of a seminar held in the Department of Philosophy, North-Eastern Hill University, in June 1979 on the subject of "Religion and Society of North-East India." The importance of the subject is undeniable, and this university was obviously the most appropriate venue for such a seminar. I am glad that the Department of Philosophy took the initiative in this respect. This was bound to ensure a degree of dispassionateness in the discussion without which the seminar could easily degenerate to the level of a useless and acrimonious debate. The proceedings of the seminar make it quite clear that the required degree of dispassionateness was there throughout the discussion, and the result, I am sure, is a very significant contribution to the study of an area which has received so little attention till now.

The seminar was also important in another way. It brought together persons not only of diverse academic disciplines but also those who are committed practitioners of different religions including tribal religions. The danger here was of talking at cross-purpose. But as the proceedings abundantly show, this danger was successfully averted. The credit for this surely goes to the sincere and intelligent desire on the part of the participants for a genuine understanding of each other's position.

Dr Sujata Miri has edited the proceedings with imagination. The discussions particularly make lively reading and the focus always remains on significant issues. I have, no doubt, that this book will be an extremely valuable addition not only to the literature on North-East India, but to the general discussion of problems of religion.

A. DHAN
Vice-Chancellor
North-Eastern Hill University

Editor's Introduction

India is a country which offers a real picture of a plurality of religions co-existing. It is also governed by a Constitution committed to secularism which signifies an attitude of equal respect for all religions. Laudable as this provision of our Constitution is, the intellectual issues involved in this particular conception of secularism have hardly been discussed by our academics. They seem to have left the matter almost entirely to the discretion of the politicians. To make up to some extent, for this academic inertia, the Department of Philosophy, NEHU, organised a seminar on 14, 15 and 16 June 1979 on "Religion and Society of North-East India."

We started with many apprehensions as well as warnings from friendly quarters—"any free discussions of the theme will end in political conflict," "there will be a dead lock," etc. But much to our delight, we did not need any caution. The scholars appeared full of fellowship and concern, eager to learn from each other. There was no holding back on the part of the participants even about sensitive issues like conversion, specially, in the light of the resentment expressed in the press and other media about the "Freedom of Religious Bill" which was then pending for discussion in the Lok Sabha.

The seminar took up for deliberation, first of all, some of the philosophical issues involved in the plurality of religions co-existing. Section I contains two papers, "My Religion and Yours" (K. J. Shah) and "Religions and Being Religious" (Sujata Miri). Both in their own way draw a distinction between the "Truth of Living" embodied in religions and the network of theories and rituals associated with different religions. The reader will find implicit in the papers as well as the discussion the acceptance of the following idea: there was *no* philosophical justification at all for regarding one religion as superior or inferior to another. The equality of religions being recognised, the ground work for a sound basis for secularism is established.

As a corollary to this, it should also follow that if there is any religion whose theology contains any anti-secular ideas in the sense of "secularism" which involves, minimally, an equal respect for all religions, efforts should be made by the practising intelligentsia of the religion to weed such tendencies out.

The religions of the tribal people of North-East India have not received much academic attention. This is partly due to the lack of descriptive literature in this area. There are many tribes each with its own tradition of religion and spirituality. However, in spite of our best efforts to represent as many tribes as possible in the deliberations of the seminar, it was not possible for us to get participants representing the Mizo tribe and the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh.

Section II contains two papers on the religion of the Khasis by two prominent Khasi intellectuals—R.T. Rymbai and Kynpham Singh.

Section III has two papers on the Naga religion. The reader might feel in both these papers a kind of light-heartedness in their intellectual approach to the Naga religion. This is perhaps not surprising; because unlike in the case of the Khasi elite, there is no section of the Naga intellectual elite (present in the Seminar) which is genuinely convinced of the Naga religion being just as adequate spiritually as any other religion. As a section of the Naga population has accepted Christianity and as Kanito Sema's paper puts it, the people have modified Christianity to suit their purpose. The following three papers—"A Critical Assessment of Christian Acculturation of the North-East India" (Section III), "Commitment and Conversion" and "The Spread of Christianity in North-East India: An Exchange of Theory of Conversion" (Section IV)—the reader will find both useful and informative.

In the understanding of religions the role of myth has been of great importance. Hence the paper, "Ranachandi: Transformation of a Dimasa Deity" has been added to the main body of the book. Similarly, though not connected with the main theme of the seminar, the paper "Lamaism: A Combination of Sutrayana and Tantrayana" has been retained in the Appendix, as it gives an insight into the existing situation of Buddhism in Sikkim. Along with this is the summarised form of a paper also presented for discussion in the seminar.

A central debate in the philosophy of religion today is about the question, "Does a religion represent a form of life which is, in some strong sense of the term, 'autonomous'?" An answer to this question is to be sought from not merely those who have an academic interest in the study of religion and society but also from those who are committed practitioners of various religions. The seminar which had a fair number of participants belonging to either category evolved the consensus that any interpretation of religion in purely sociological, psychological or merely conceptual terms would leave out something crucial in the idea of the religious. The responses and reactions to the papers in Section IV would substantiate this claim.

We, in the North-East region, are very fortunate in having as Governor Shri L. P. Singh who though a bureaucrat is an intellectual of outstanding ability. His persistence and commitment to clarity and honesty in all matters has been an example for us. The Department of Philosophy is beholden to him for having given the inaugural address at the seminar.

Though the proposal to hold this seminar had been drafted and submitted to the NEHU authorities towards the end of 1976, it was Dr A. K. Dhan who on his appointment as Vice-Chancellor finally sanctioned the project. I am specially grateful to him for his encouragement and guidance in matters relating to the organisation of the seminar as well as the publication of the seminar proceedings. Professor Miri, Head of the Department of Philosophy, has been a great support. I must specially acknowledge with gratitude his active involvement in all matters relating to the preparation of the manuscript. My colleagues and students have helped whenever asked but for transcribing and other secretarial matters, Shephali Panigrahi, Bishon Buam, Querang Lungalang and Lalthansanga deserve special mention. My thanks are also due to Miss K. Marbianang for typing the final manuscript.

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