

Evolution of Religions in North East India with special reference to Assam (1449-1971)

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The word 'religion' comes from the Latin word, re(1)igio, which means 'together or observe'. This is a wide term and it is defined by scholars from the different fields like Anthropology, Sociology, Philosophy and History etc. Whatever might be the meaning of religion from different epistemological spectrums it may be described as a system of beliefs and practices adhered to and followed by different types of societies. It is a human phenomena representing the transcendental concern of man and constantly interacting with the social aspects of life. Therefore, it is coming through an evolutionary process from primitive to modern civilization as well as affecting the social changes of human life. Its composition is also being changed in course of time. In this paper we would like to discuss the six major religious compositions of North East India which emerge through the changing times.

In the Epics and the Puranas the northeast is said to have been inhabited by Mlechhas and Kiratas.¹ They were undoubtedly Austric and the Mongoloid people. They are said to have been driven by Naraka to the hills and marshy region. Naraka established his Kingdom and brought large number of Brahmins from Kanauj for performance of the Vedic rites. Since then Aryan culture was introduced in this region. This Aryan culture is claimed to be far more advanced than any other culture of the aborigines, the Aryans conquests of the various non-Aryans or the aborigines of North East India. Their absorption into Aryan society by being progressively Aryanised in their culture, their out look, their way of life and the inevitable acceptance of the sanskritic culture and language by them are too glorious as events to go unnoticed.

The aboriginal tribes of North East region such as the Boros, Mikirs, Manipuries, the Lalungs etc., succumbed to the universal Hinduisation by the Aryans who came to North East India with more advanced culture.

It is difficult to say about the religion and its origin, because when we say about Hinduism then we could call it ethical dogmas entwined with the cross cultural heritage of bygone days. According to Prof. M. Taher, it is to be noted that the first millenium A.D. was a period when the Hindu religion spread and consolidated its position in North East India. A large number of ancient temples and shrines were constructed during this period not only in the Brahmaputra valley but also in the Manipur valley and along the Himalayan foot hills.

Ahoms entered into North East India and established their rule in 1228 A.D. They gradually extended their dominions over almost the whole of the Brahmaputra valley and ruled for 600 years up to 1826 A.D. From that time the historical record started about this region because of their tradition of writing chronicle or 'Histories'. The historical and political events are recorded in their original mother tongue 'Tai'. They came to this region from Thailand and came under Buddhist-Hindu influences. Ahoms as the members of the Thai race had shared in that influence, it can be found in the Ahom scriptures. It is well known that Assam or North East India had come under Hindu influence since early times. R. C. Majumdar also has remarked that "the main spring of the civilisation of most of the Thai States lay in India, not in China".³

Ahom history reveals that the first Ahom King to accept Hinduism formally was Jayadhawj Singha though Hinduism had crept into the royal household since the days of Sudangpha Bamuni Kowar. From 1648 to 1681 the newly Hinduised Ahom kings were all disciples of Vaisnava Gosains, and Sakta influence entered the Ahom court with the ascendancy of the Tungkhungias.⁴ Thus in a chronological method Hinduism took a larger position in North East India. The Census of India (1971) also has shown the position in every district of Assam where Hindus account for 72.51 percent.

Hindus constitute the majority of the population in all the districts of Assam but the proportion varies from 92.41 in Dibrugarh to 53.92 in Goalpara. The districts with higher proportions of State average are Sibsagar (92.22), Karbi Anglong (90.27), Lakhimpur (89.57), Darrang (78.45) and North Cachar Hills (77.03). In the remaining three districts of Kamrup (69.96), Nowgoan (59.70) and Cachar (58.71) percentage are lower than the State average.

The earliest Hinduism was the Tantric form of Hinduism which is known as Sakta Hinduism and Saivism, it prevailed in Assam from about the 7th century A.D. "The worship of Siva

prevailed in Assam from a remote period and it was the popular form of religion both amongst the aboriginals and the Aryanized people. An analysis of the names of the sacred places of Assam, as given in the Kalika Purana, clearly shows that the number of sacred places connected with Siva worship is larger than that of places associated with Vishnu or Devi worship".⁵

Saivism is the counterpart of saktism, and mixed with Tantricism Kamakhya became a famous centre of Tantricism. It is generally believed that Kamrupa or ancient Assam was at one time the home of Tantricism. Because in Assam there are many temples from one corner to another; for example we can say about the Kamakhya temple at Guwahati, the Kechaikhati temple at Sadiya, the Mahadeva temple at Dergoan and the net-work of Sakta temples in North Lakhimpur. But this types of religions also have tried to reform into a different religion which is known as 'Vaishnavism'. It was Sankardeva, the great Vaishnavite Saint (1449-1568), a Kayastha of Nowgoan, started the Vaishnavite movement. In the early part of 1500 A.D. as a Hindu reformer he preached a purer Hinduism based on prayer rather than on sacrifices. "The distinctive features of this religion is marked in its stern monotheism in the non-idolatrous mode of worship, its abolition of mantra and diksa and the introduction of Nam and Sarana. With these specific features, which marked it off from the Brahmanical Vaishnavism of the time, this religion came to be known as the *Ek Sarana Nam Dharma* or the *Mahapurusiya Dharma*. It is designated as the Neo-Vaishnavism also."⁶ Mahapurush Sankardeva founded the Sattra or Monastery at Patboushi near Barpeta. Madhavdeva, a disciple of Sankardeva set up a Satra at Barpeta which was the important centre for missionary work. There are some other subsets of the Ek Sarana Dharma and one of this was Damodaria form of Vaishnavism. It is found that after the death of Sankardeva, implications of caste consideration with the Bhakti Path gave rise to conflicting dogmas. The Damodariya form of Vaishnavism has a striking affinity to the Chaitanyite Vaishnavism of the late period.⁷

Though, Buddhism emerged in India in sixth century B.C. as a reform movement of Hinduism, it penetrated into North-East India much later. The Buddhist monks preached their faith in India as well as in many foreign countries like Srilanka, Burma, Nepal, Tibet, China and Japan. Bhaskaravarman's and Indrapala's Grants have led some scholars to believe that Buddhism did exist in Assam at the end of 7th century. The Buddhist penetrated

in the Tawang monastery of Arunachal Pradesh in the 17th century. N. Sarkar⁸ stated that it was established by Mera Lama. The geographical location of Tawang as it is border area of Tibet perhaps influenced all the Manpas and others towards Buddhism. This way Mera Lama and his associates from Indian side perhaps visited often to Tibet side and converted into Buddhism. The spread of Buddhism could be possible to Serdukpen area only after the establishment of Tawang. A decadal variation of Buddhism as stated by Census of India since 1911 to 1917 in Assam revealed that it decreased up to less than one percent which may be considered as nil in the state. The same thing happened to Jainism which is further lower than the percentage of Buddhism. Jainism if at all exists in North East India it is perhaps due to interstate migration from Rajasthan rather than through propagation. It constitutes only 0.09 percent of the population in the State.

Muslim is the second largest religious group of Assam. During the six hundred years of Ahoms there were 18 invasions and incursion by the armies of the rulers of Delhi and Nawabs of Bengal. Nawab Mirjumla himself entered the fort on February 26, 1662 and expressed his wonder at the fortifications of the place.⁹ The whole period of the Mughal's stay in Upper Assam from March 1662 to January 1663, was a terrible chapter of suffering and misery. In Ahom period Muslim religious leaders or pirs paid visits to Assam to minister to the spiritual needs of their co-religionists. The Ahom rulers encouraged these pirs to settle in Assam. Some Musalmans who had been taken prisoner in former times had chosen to marry there. Thus Muslim population increased in North-East region.

The proportion of this group in North-East India (1971 census) are higher than the state average in Goalpara (42.25%), Cachar (39.89%), Nowgoan (39.39%), and Kamrup (28.93%). Except Darrang where they constitute 15.19%, the proportion is less than 10% in other districts, namely, North Cachar Hills (0.86), Karbi Anglong (1.30) Dibrugarh (3.09), Sibsagar (5.27) and Lakhimpur (7.54). In the districts of Sibsagar, Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur, Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills the proportion of Muslim population is higher.

Christianity in North East India is a very significant development during British rule. It has brought tremendous change in the life of the tribal people of North Eastern India. In India as a whole, it is a well known fact, many waves of Christian missionaries came from early eighteenth

century and preached the Gospel of Christ to the Indians. Even in North-Eastern India the Welsh mission established their centre at Cherrapunji of present Meghalaya State. The Brahmaputra valley and Barak valley including Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills were taken over by the British between 1826 and 1829. During the same period Khasi Hills (1833) and Jaintia Hills (1835) were also annexed. Parts of Arunachal Pradesh, especially the then Sadiya Frontier Tract (now Lohit District), were brought under the British rule in 1842. Nagaland was annexed in parts between 1842 and 1879.¹⁰ Manipur was finally subjugated in 1891 after long period of struggle from 1835. Mizoram was the last to be annexed by the British. Its northern part was acceded in 1875 and the southern part in 1898. On the other hand, from the analysis of census data (1971) the Christians found in Mizoram are much higher (85.35%) than in any other State of North-East India, though British annexed on it much later in this region. It is followed by Nagaland (66.86) and Meghalaya (46.93%) where tribals dominate. Significantly the tribal dominated Arunachal Pradesh shows lower percentage of Christianity (0.85%) It is however, perhaps because of Buddhism in Arunachal Pradesh and many of them retained their old traditional tribal religion among them. So far Assam is concerned the percentage of Christians is less than 2.61% till recent year (1971). The district-wise break up of Christianity is as follows :

The proportion of Christians is higher in North Cachar Hills (21.87) followed by Karbi Anglong (7.99), Darrang (5.06), Goalpara (3.59) and Dibrugarh (3.5). It is below the State average in Lakhimpur (2.60), Sibsagar (2.09), Cachar (1.32), Kamarup (0.88) and Nowgoan (0.71).

Like Buddhism and Jainism, Sikhs also formed the smallest religious group with 0.08% of the population of the State. They are found in all the districts of Assam. The proportion of Sikhs is higher in Dibrugarh (0.20) followed by Sibsagar (0.12), Nowgoan (0.11) and the lowest percentage is found in Cachar (0.01).

Noets & References

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3. R. C. Majumdar, *Hindu Colonies in the Far East*, 1944, pp. 225-227.
4. S. K. Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations*, Gauhati, p. 13.
5. A. Barua, 'The Religious Form of Life in Assam with special reference to the Vaishnavism of Sankardeva', Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis, NEHU, Shillong, 1989, pp. 7-8.
6. A. Barua, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
7. *Ibid.*,
8. N. Sarkar, *Monpas of Tawang*, Shillong, p. 11-13.
9. S. K. Bhuyan, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
10. M. Taher, 'Tribes of North-East India, A diagnostic Survey of Spatial Patterns', *The North-Eastern Geographer*, Vol. IX, No. 1 & 2, Gauhati, 1977, p. 16.

N.B.— The percentage of different religions mentioned in this paper have been calculated from the Census of India, 1971.