

Vol 3 Issue 9 Oct 2013

ISSN No : 2230-7850

Monthly Multidisciplinary
Research Journal

*Indian Streams
Research Journal*

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RNI MAHMUL/2011/38595

ISSN No.2230-7850

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SOCIO-CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT OF TRIBAL PEOPLE OF NORTH-EAST INDIA - A STUDY



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Abstract: The tribal culture blooms in the isolated highlands and forest of India. Our anthropologists and development planners take cognizance of the tribal tradition and a way of life lest the overwhelming non-tribal culture swamps their pristine, grass-root culture. The colourful mosaic of tribal culture with their exotic customs and rituals, apparel and adornment, song and dance, will continue to attract the scholar of various disciplines. The poets and novelists, too, find the tribal culture romantic. Economic development of tribal population, without cultural oppression or giving offence to their heritage or ethos will remain a challenging task for years to come. The advent of the industrial revolution and consequent urban exploitation particularly in the tribal belt of middle India, make the situation more complicated. The political awakening, renewed with the election to local bodies and state and central legislatures is giving a new dimension to tribal polity. The impact is being on the political and administrative power centres. The tribal culture of India is moulding itself, slowly but steadily, to find its niche in the national mainstream of culture.

Keywords: isolated highlands , anthropologists , political , original inhabitants .

INTRODUCTION

To, quote L.P. Vidyarthi & B.K. Rai, "The Tribal India lives in the forest hills and naturally isolated regions and hill or they are the original inhabitants and so on". The popular names are "Vanyajati" (Castes of forest), "Vanavasi" (inhabitants of the forest), "Pahari" (hill-dwellers), "Adimjati" (original communities), "Adivasi" (first settlers), "Janajati" (folk people), "Adimjati" (primitive people), "Anusuchit Janajati" (Scheduled tribe) and so on. Among all these terms, "Adivasi" is known most extensively, and Anusuchit Janajati, Scheduled Tribe is the most constitutional name covering all of them.

Nearly all tribal people of India have been in almost continuous contact with their neighbours, who live by forming and a large number of specialized manual industries. This contact goes back, at least, to the days of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, for in them there are references to tribal communities who are referred to as "Jana". Even in the Vedic literature, there are references to people who were different in physical appearance. They worshipped strange Gods. In other words, the contact between the tribes and the farming and cattle-rearing people who crowded in the more open plains has been a continuous one over the centuries. This must have led to a love-hate situation which eventually brought about great changes. Till today, the historical developments of the tribal communities of North Eastern India have been slow and they have retained their customs and regulations nearly all marry within their restricted local group and are sometimes guided by their own elders or political chiefs in their internal and external affairs. In other words, they form socially distinct communities in contrast to their neighbours. It is these communities which have been

designated tribes, and listed in schedule for special treatment.

Historical Development of Tribal Communities of North-Eastern India

In the socio-economic field, the tribal development in North-Eastern India has not slow but is yet to be explored. Some tribes in north-eastern India are still groping in the dark. For example, Naga tribes still remain to be discovered with their closed societies. Some Arunachales tribes are yet to be properly clothed. Some Assamese tribes like Rabhas are yet to be electrified, in the sense that they still have not got electric facilities. So, to say, they are still living in the primitive stage. Barring a very small fraction, there is little difference between their economic life and that of their neighbouring rural folk. Yet, as the tribes have more or less retained their social identity, and, on the whole, can be regarded as comparatively isolated and economically backward, they have been placed under the category of scheduled tribes. A historical appraisal of the tribes is, therefore, important in this context.

Coming to the tribal history, one finds that the tribes are integral part of the Indian civilization. Various elements in the ancient Civilization of India were contributed by the tribes; it is believed they were the earliest among the present inhabitants of the Country. So far as it is known, four main races, and cultures welded together into one person, the Hindu people. They are [i] the Austo-Asiatics, in their primitive form are represented by the Kals or the Mundas, Khasis and the Nocabarse [ii] the Mongoloid people speaking dialects of the Sino-Tibetan family who are found

largely among the Sub-Himalyan regions and who are represented by the Nagas, the Bodos, the kuki- Chins etc.[iii] the Dravidians-the Malers, the Oras, the Gonds and the Khonds -who are supposed to be the last to come to India. Thus, it can be seen that the first three racial and cultural elements made a great contribution to the formation of the Indian people.

The Tribes of The North-Eastern India Through Ages

In the ancient literature of India their names, in the ancient language, the Sanskrit, would appear to have been, respectively (i) Nishdas, Sabaras, Bhils, and Kalls (ii) Dasas, Dasyus, Sudras, Dravidian and Dramidas. The ancient and epic literature, the Vedas, the Puranas, Ramayana and the Mahabharata are present good accounts about the people of India. All these emphasize that India is the inhabitant of several types of the tribes or people.

In the eastern Himalayan region the tribes of Meghalaya, the Gaoas, the Khasis and the Jaintias are the most important. The Garos are divided into various Sub-tribes like the Awe and Chisakand which again are further sub-grouped into chatchi and then into sects or clans. The Chatchis affiliate a few machongs (clans) to themselves like the Marak, Momin, Sangma, Sira and Areng. They are regarded as “constellation of Clans”. But these are separated from one place to another Roads are not sufficient. The rate of literacy is not so high as to match present day needs. Some sects or clans are now on the verge of sub-division into sub-clans. Similarly, Khasis are also sub-divided into four social classes, i.e. Kissiem, Kilyngonh, the minister clan etc. and sometimes the tribes are divided into exogamous matrilineal families, thus, forming a group like Tribe - social class—clan—Family—Individual. The Jaintias have based kinship on “Kur” or clan. Many people of Meghalaya have assimilated with Hinduism, besides Christianity, Islam and other religion.

Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram, Arunachal, Tripura including Sikkim are all states, they ever require development. Assam is only partially plain state with number hill areas. In this region, the plains are comparatively advanced. But, however, there has been little industrial growth.

Religious Foundation of Tribal Communities of North-Eastern India

Features of Tribal Religion

With this general account of tribal religion in India one should outline the broad and specific features which exist and percolate in the spiritual life of tribes of India. Their holistic pictures can be drawn in the framework of a sacred complex which their sacred beliefs, types of spirit depend on the form of the effect produced or the action done by a superhuman or supernatural powers. The sacred place and symbolic articles or objects representing the different powers constitute the sacred geography. Sacred specialists are the persons or individuals who propitiate the so-called God of the group concerned and finally the sacred performances reflect the method of propitiation, rituals, worship, offering, and sacrifice etc. adopted by the people.

Nature OF Belief in Supernatural Powers

The Nature of belief in supernatural powers is one of the features of tribal religion. D.N. Majumder observes in this connection, “The tribal religions in India have long been described as animistic. Animism is that exceeding crude form of religion in which magic is the predominant element. It conceives of man as passing through a life surrounded by a ghostly company of power (powers), elements mostly impersonal of character, shapeless phantoms of which no image can be formed. Some of these are taken to be presiding over particular departments of life or spheres of influence. This animistic belief is rather a universal feature of the religion of the tribes have. For them, all spots and places are holy as they are the sorts of spirits. Animals, plants, trees, ponds, rivers, stones, hills or mountain is all about of spirits. The deads are no exception to this rule as they still exist though soul or are reborn in the shape offspring.

The whole neighbourhood whether village or forest in which the tribe lives are full of spirits. For all tribes whether major, like the Santhal, Munda or Oraon or minor, like the Birhor, Chengchu or the forest hunting tribes of the South India, the whole world is full of spirits.

Social aspect of tribal religion of North-eastern India is reflected through it. North East India collectively a seven sister's state (now Sikkim has added to it) sounds more human than a mundane political or geographical reality. Culture when looked at in terms of definition it is something that is something lifeless; politician wants the greater cultural entity to be tailored out into many; the geographers materialize this with their cartographic Kit. Geographically divided the sister states though stand as district political units; but the silent undercurrent of cultural kinship bond continues to exist intact.

It is also true that socio-economic aspirations are expressed through the common cultural linkages and goals. Differences are there in cultural level but interrogation is expressed through heterogeneity. This makes the region's culture indivisible. This edged out region is linked with India through a 22 km narrow space. Obviously geographical contiguity is not the only factor for comprehending a region political, economy, social linkage over the length of time and culture history as in the cognitive realness of power, the elite of the population, are also the input that goes into the process of defining a region.

In Arunachal Pradesh, there are 82 tribes and sub-tribes. Most of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh are animists. Venerating natural and elemental deities or spirits and often practising ritual animal sacrifices (notably of the Mithun, a semi-domesticated Gour or a wild ox). Among the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, the Monpas and the Sherdukepens are the first group of Tawang and West Kameng district. They follow the Lamaistic traditions of Mahayana Buddhism.

Some of them worship the sun and the moon, namely, Mishmis, Mijis, Tangsas etc. Who worship the sun and the moon, namely, Donyi Polo and Abotani, the original ancestors. Their religious rituals largely coincide with the phases of agricultural cycles. They invoke nature deities and make animal sacrifices. The Noctes and wanchos, are hard working people known for their structured village society in which the hereditary village still plays a vital role. The

Noctes also practice elementary form of Vaisnavism. Unlike some other parts of India casteism is not practiced very rigidly in Assamese Hindu Society. Various reasons can be attributed for this liberal ethos of the Assamese society. One may be the Vaisnavite movement launched by Shrimanta Sankardev, a socio – cultural reformer and religious preacher of the fifteenth century.

Of the tribes the Bodos practise on animistic kind of religion. Neither an idol nor any temple is built but a spacious elevated with soil that is considered holy. In their primitive belief, all the elements of nature like earth, air, sky etc. are full of some invisible supernatural agencies called “Modai” and “Hamdang” (evil spirit). The causes of diseases are ascribed to them. The Bodos pantheon in line with Hinduism comprises a long number of gods and goddess. The traditional community worship is performed in a sacred grove of trees or bamboo. Bathou (Siva) is regarded as the guardian of the family interest and honour. Siju (Euphobia Splendens) can be seen in the primitive Bodo-Kachari homesteads surrounded by bamboo fences.

'Kherai' is the most popular and widely celebrated ritual of the Bodos. This is celebrated after the transplantation of wet rice or 'Sali' paddy generally in the month of 'Kati' or 'Aghon', i.e., October to December. It is also celebrated in the months of 'Ahar' and 'Shaon' of the Assamese Calendar.

The Dimasas mostly worship Lord Siva (Shibrai), Goddess Kali (Garmadi), Goddess Durga (Matingma), Goddess Lakshmi (Mainuma), Goddess Saraswati (Lairadima) other Deities and also demi- gods as well. “Heremdi” is like Goddess Kamakhya among the Dimasas.

The Sonowals Kacharis, however, have got totally assimilated with the Assamese Vaisnavism was preached among them after 1603 Saka Era when Keshab Dev Mahanta of Auniati Satra fled away to Sadiya to defend himself against persecution by the Ahom King Godadhar Singha.

They worship various gods and goddesses, e.g. 'Baitho' (Lord Siva), 'Gajai' (Lord Vishnu), 'Monai', 'Sthal Dangarigya', 'Jaldangariya', 'Godess Kechai Khanti', 'Burha – Burih', 'Phul Konwar', 'Mani Konwar', 'Mani Konwar', 'Malini' and others in a simple manner.

Among Tiwas, Hinduism prevails in a modified form. They worship mainly 'Siva' and 'Parvati' along with other Gods and Goddesses under the influences of Hinduism, simultaneously with pagan pantheon like Jayanti – Landabar Goddess Lakshi (Sankhang or Chhang Khang), 'Lang Khun', Kechai Khanti of Sadiya 'Chhong Khong' worship is generally performed soon after 'Bahag Bihu'.

The Deuries were formally priestly section of the Chutiya society. The word 'Deuri' in Assamese means not only the 'priest' of the temple, but it also means and assistant or servitor to the priest at the time of worship, especially in the Goalparia dialect areas. Though the Deuris are a tribe, yet theirs is not a much 'closed' or 'self – contained' society as that of others. They have much adapted to Assamese language and culture.

Hinduism, Assamese Vaisnavism are popular religions, although the Karbis are pantheistic in essence. Christianity has not found much popularity in the Karbi society. 'Cinthong Arnam' is the Supreme Deity of the Karbis

as manifestation of the Hindu Trinity, Brahma, Vishnu, Maheswara (Siva) all in One, and the women are regarded highly with esteem in the Karbi society. Besides, the worship of the forces of Nature like Moon, sun, tree, river cave etc. pervades 'Arnam', the creator of the Universe in majority of Karbi people's heart. 'Cinthong' is the chief pantheism Deity of the Karbi People's worship.

The religion of Mishing is based on the belief in supernaturalism. They believe in the existence of a supernatural being, which is all-powerful, omnipotent and omnipresent. Everything that exists in the Universe has been created by a supernatural power or a creator who is called “Se: di-Babu”. It is believed that the name of 'Dony-Polo' (the Sun-Moon God) comes next to 'Sedi' – the creature. The creator becomes obscure and silent after the creation; so, no sacrifice is offered to his/her name.

The religion of the Rabhas, like that of other tribes of Assam, is basically pantheistic. Hinduism and especially Assamese Vaisnavism also have made its way into Rabha Culture.

'Rantak' or 'Runtukuk' is the household Goddess of the 'Rangdania', 'Maitory' and 'Kocha' Rabhas. This Goddess is worshipped socially in a congregation. The Rangdania and Moitoria Rabhas also worship the Goddess 'Khukchi' or 'Baikho' in community form. Thus, it turns into a sort of festival connected with agriculture or cultivation. The Pati and Dahuria Rabhas worship this Goddess as prime one of their pantheon. The Rabhas worship some ghosts, demi-gods and evil-spirit also. They are believed to be causing harm to human life.

Christianity is the religion of the large majority of the Nagas which is perceptible in their educational, intellectual and many of the socio-cultural matters. It is through Christianity that they have made immense progress in the socio- economic life.

In Manipur where Hinduism is a mark of respectability, it is never safe to rely on what men tell of their religion. The only test is to ascertain what they do, and by this test the readers are justified in holding them to be still animists.

It is curious to note the complete absence of any traces of Buddhism in Manipur, although it is reasonably certain that in historic times there has been a steady flow of intercourse with Buddhistic Burma.

The chronicles enable us to know the names and in some cases also the functions, of a few of the popular Deities. Thus, Panthaibi, to whose service Brahmins were appointed by Pampheiba (Gharib Nawaz) is said to be the wife of Khaba, probably the divine ancestor of the Khaba tribe and to be the Deity of birth and death. She is certainly connected with the worship of the sun.

The 'Pnar' religion of the Jaintia plays a prominent role like the religions of Australia and some religions of South America in matters of social discipline. It is strange indeed to note that the 'Pnar' religion supports the idea of judicial system, such as, detection of crime, confession of sin, expiation of sins either through confession of guilt in the Christian way or in their traditional way to serve as a sort of punishment for reformative measure.

According to a fable, the primitive Khasis believed

in the creator or God is known as 'U'ble Nongthoi' among them. According to this myth, once a man living on the earth was innocent like Adam and Eve. Man used to commune freely with God. Even the beasts used to live together in peace and harmony in a sort of paradise. There was then full faith in God and his creation and religion were considered as 'Upai' of 'living system', ka Nuam khein ka niam uichar', i.e. a reasonable system. Accordingly, prayers, sacrifices and even the funeral rites were all regarded as pathways to God.

As far Mizo's religion, they traditionally believe in 'Khanjangpa'. 'Khanjangpa' as the creator of the universe. The Lakhers like the other people of Asia, especially in keeping with the Indian belief of the Aryan and Mongoloids, believe in Pagan or Heathen Deities controlling the forces of Nature like Air, Woods and forests, Hills and Dales. Thus, a king of Pantheism prevails among the Lakhers. According to their popular belief, the creator 'Khanjangpa' and other god can be worshipped with animal sacrifice.

According to L.P.Vidyarthi and Binay Kumar Rai, 'naturalism, Totemism, Taboo, Magic, Ancestor worship, Polytheism' are special aspects of "Belief in Supernatural Power" All the ancient kings of the region were Hindus through assimilation rather than conversion. The majority of the inhabitants of Tripura are Hindus. Christianity like in Mizoram and Meghalaya has not been widespread in this province.

Cultural Practice of Tribal Communities in North-East India

The concept of culture as maintained already is an exceeding complex one. It is one of the most difficult concepts to define. Various disciplines like anthropology, sociology, philosophy and other social sciences have attempted to define culture. Everyone seems to be familiar with culture and everyone seems to understand it. Yet, no one can claim to have succeeded in giving a specific definition of culture. Basil Poholong comments:

"The concept not only varies, according to the various aspects emphasized by concerned social scientists, but according to the time frame". Sujata Miri observes in this connection, "In fact, every 'philosophy' is the product of a culture. A 'philosophy' is culture's rationale".

Cultural practices of North-Eastern Tribes manifested in the ways an individual and especially a group of people, who live, think, feel, organize, celebrate and share life. These are further marked by languages, gestures, symbols, rituals, lifestyle, and relations which inclusively govern life, the thinking and the actions of people. People acquire their value in a similar fashion from the experiences, norms, observances and principles that have taken the form of lifestyles and relations which inclusively govern the life, the thinking and the action of people.

The North-Eastern India in the context of Indian tribes has certain practices which almost common practices with other tribes as those tribal religions like animism, Bongaism, Naturalism, Totemism and other and natures. Still, there are a few tribal features which are peculiar to the tribes. The Assamese tribes, such as, Rabha, Bodo, Mishing, Karbi, Deuri etc. have special social practices of their own. Likewise, all other tribes have certain cultural practices of

their own. In fact, every tribe has some important characteristics of its own. As for example, in Assam, Dimasa Kacharis now live mainly in the autonomous hill district of North Kachar, Barak Valley, Sibsagar, Karbi-Anglong and Nagaon districts. The word "Dimasa" in their dialect means "Great River-folk", the river-folk of the Brahmaputra. They are supposed to be an original tribe in Assam. The relics of Dimasa Kachari kingdom are yet to be found at Dimapur, Maibang and Khaspur.

According to Allen's Report (1859) on the hill tribes in North Cachar similarly as Maffat Mill's Reports in 1854, these tribes consisted of Hill Kacharis, Hazai Kacharis, Mikirs, old Kookies, New Kookies, Aroong Nagas. There is a rapid increase in population of Dimasas. They too have their own cultural practices.

Kinship and descent is one of the most principles on which the organization of individual into social groupings, role and categories is carried out in society. All societies use kinship as a basis for forming social groups and classifying people; through a deal of variability exist in kinship rules and patterns. Kinship also provides for a means of transporting status and property from generation to generation. It is not a mere coincidence that inheritance rights usually are based on the closeness of kinship links.

CONCLUSION

Finally, we may come to the conclusion that the tribes of India mainly live in the forest hills and naturally isolated region and hill. They are the original inhabitants. Popularly, they are known as "Vanyajati" (Caste of forest), "Vanavasi" (inhabitant of forest), "Adivasi" (first settlers), "Janajati" (folk people), and "Adim jati" (primitive people), "Anusuchit Janajati" (scheduled tribe) and so on.

In the socio-economic field also, the tribes in North-East India are slow but is yet to be explored. Some of them are still in the dark. For example, the Naga tribe, Arunachales tribes, Assamese Rabha tribes. They are still in a primitive stage. But, the tribes of North east India more or less retained their social identity. They are comparatively isolated and economically backward but now they are going to be developed and they have been placed under the category of scheduled tribes.

The tribes of North east India belong to different origins, namely, Austro- Asiatic, Mongoloid, and Dravidians etc. Among these groups, the Mundas, the Khasis and the Nocabarse, these three racial and cultural elements made a great contribution to the formation of the Indian people.

All the tribes of North east India including Sikkim require development. But, the plain tribes of Assam are comparatively advanced amongst the other states of North East Indian tribes and also the hill tribes of Assam. However, there has been little individual growth.

In religious believe and practices, the tribal people follow animism. They believed that all spots and places are holy as they are the sorts of the spirits. Animal, plants, trees, ponds, rivers etc. are all about spirits. Worship of ghost and ancestors' soul prevails in them. The tribes of North East India worship benevolent God and goddesses for their peace and pleasure and also worship malevolent Gods to remove from their disease, pain etc. Totemism, naturalism, taboo,

polytheism are special aspects of belief in supernatural powers. The tribes of North East India are familiar with the culture. The Assamese tribes such as, Rabha, Bodo, Mishing, Deuri, Karbi etc. have special practices of their own. Likewise, all the other tribes in the different states have certain social and cultural practices of their own. Kinship and descent is one of the most principles on which the organization of individuals into social groups, their role and categories is carried out in society. Kinship also provides for a means of transporting status and property from generation to generation.

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