

POLYTHEISM IN THE RELIGIOUS BELIEF OF TRIBES OF NORTH EAST INDIA: A STUDY OF SOME SELECTED TRIBES:

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Abstract: Man is a social, religious and spiritual being. Religion gives people internal or mental pleasure. They believe and practices polytheism. Tribal people of North East India worship various God and Goddesses in their respective names. There are various tribes belongs in North East India. Among them, Boro Kacharies , Dimasa-Kacharies, Tiwas, Deuris, Karbis, Mishings, Rabhas etc. are prominent. They worship Sun, Moon, Lord Siva, Ailong, Agrang, khoili, Lakshmi, Sarawasti, Satyanarayana, Vishnu, Maheswara, Kali, Sonarai, Bura-Gosai, Ghar-Gosai, Nachani-Gosai, Kamakhya, Baithoung Deo , Santi-Gosai, Haza-Geraba, Hedeimati. Mibu, various kinds of Uie, Arnam Sansar Recho, Hemphu, Mukrang, etc.

Key word: Polytheism, tribes, religious belief and practices.

Introduction:

Man is a social, religious and spiritual being. Man gets an internal or mental pleasure from religion. Tribal people worship various kinds of God and Goddesses in the North East India. At primitive stage, the religious practices of various tribes of Assam associated with their social matter, food getting, marriage, birth, death, war, protection from the animals and weather are performed as their religious practices. Selfishness is found among the tribes in this matter. So, practices of polytheism are found in their religious belief.

They worship trees, Sun Moon, Stones, river etc. and also other God and Goddesses as a powerful energy and they thought that these have powerful soul which makes trouble in their life at any moment and thus they worship and make prayer to them.

Origin of the research problem:

Tribal are the aboriginal people of Assam and they have specific religious belief and practices from ancient period to till now. But, yet it has not been revealed adequately, though it is one of the primitive forms of religion. Thus, it is necessary to reveal it to the people of present society. Sufficient emphasis has been laid on the religious and social thought of tribal people which has a high impact on social life. No scientific and exhaustive treatment of the subject has been made by any scholar so far.

Significance of the study:

The subject matter of this topic has been selected on consideration of its originality, newness and importance. Animism, fetishism, totemism and ghost theory also practised and belief on polytheism in line with the Rig-vedic deities, Puranas and unlike the Upanisadic concept of Brahman are revealed through this topic. Tribal People belongs to various parts of Assam from ancient period and they belief and practices various God and Goddesses like Bathou, Siju plant, Ailong, Agrang, khoili, Lakshmi, Sarawasti, Satyanarayana, Vishnu, Maheswara, Kali, Sonarai, Bura-Gosai, Ghar-Gosai, Nachani-Gosai, Kamakhya, Baithoung Deo, Santi-Gosai, Haza-Geraba, Hedeimati. Mibu, various kinds of Uie, Arnam Sansar Recho, Hemphu, Mukrang, Ca'jun. Lungla, Jayanti Devi, Kundi Mama, , Kunwar Kundi etc. in their respectively ways, but are not revealed adequately. Hence, it is necessary to focus their social customs, rites, rituals and worships top the society.

Methodology:

The method of the present study is analytical in nature which is based on the primary and secondary sources of data. Secondary sources contains books, journals, leaflet, data collection from website documents published from research institute books particularly on tribes of Assam have been gone through. For fruitful and authenticity of this study, primary data are collected by the meeting of religious leaders of tribes, interview with renowned person relevant to the topic.

Brief History of Polytheism:

We, the people believe that the ultimate reality behind the world of appearance is an all-comprehensive perfect experience of the personal type and that world of physical objects and finite spirits are self- expressions of this Supreme Mind. When we react emotionally to this Supreme mind i.e. when we love, adore and venerate this Supreme Mind as the source of the highest ideals of human life, we make Him an object of worship and He becomes God of religion. The notion of God has taken various forms in different religious faiths¹. Polytheism is one of them.

Polytheism is the worship of or belief in multiple deities, which are usually assembled into a pantheon of God and Goddesses, along with their own religions and rituals. It was the typical form of religion during the Bronze Age and Iron Age up to the Axial Age and the development of Abrahamic religions, the latter of which enforced strict monotheism². There are some people who believe in an idea of many gods as distinct and separate personal beings more or less in conflict with each other. This idea had its origin in ancient Greece, Babylonia, Egypt and India³.

People believed many God and goddesses in ancient period and it is also continued among some of the tribes of North East Assam. These People speculate various God and goddesses from different things or circumstances in nature e.g. God Baruna from rain, Ingra from thunderstorm, Agni from fire etc. Worship of Idolatry, Physiolatry, Zoolatry, Psycholatry and Shakti began in their belief and practices⁴.

Polytheistic belief and practices was found among the primitive men in the name of animism, fetishism, totemism, mana and taboo. They worshiped trees, stone, Sun, Moon,

¹ Sanyal Jagadiswar, Guide to general philosophy, Sribhumi Publishing Company, P.181, Cultta-9,1993

² Kimmerle, Heinz (2006-04-11). "The world of spirits and the respect for nature: towards a new appreciation of animism". The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Sounthern Africa.2(2):15,doi: 10.4102/td.v2i2.277. ISSN 2415-2005.

³ Sanyal Jagadiswar , Ibid, P. 181

⁴ Bhattacharya Dr. Jyotsna, Darsanar Parichaya, p. 171, Book Emporium, Ghy-1.

Soul etc. and thought that these have spiritual power which may remove their pain and bring pleasure in their life.

Polytheistic belief of different tribes in North East Assam:

Man is said to be incurably religious. Religion gives man an internal or mental pleasure. Various kind of religious practices are prevailing in the tribes of North East India. The concept of God is essential to every form of religion. The tribes of North east India mainly follow polytheism in their religious belief and practices.

Boro- Kachari:

Boro-Kacharis are one of the major tribal groups in Assam. Of the tribes the Boros practise on animistic kind of religion. Neither an idol nor any temple is built but a space elevated with soil that is considered holy. In their primitive belief, all the elements of nature like earth, air and sky have some invisible supernatural agencies called “Modai” and “Hamdang” (evil spirit).

The Boro-Kacharis are one of the s largest group of scheduled tribe (plains) of Assam. They are mainly concentrated in the riverine areas of Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat and Sonitpur districts of Assam. The religious philosophy of the Boro- Kachari tribe centres round the super power of ‘Bathou Barai’ which is analogous to ‘Sibrai’ or Siva of the Hindu Trinity. The Sizu plant is regarded as representing the ‘Bathou’—the supre deity of adoration. Every traditional Boro-Kachari household is seen planting a ‘sizu’ tree along with a sampling of ‘jatrasi and a ‘tulsi’ in the northern concern of their courtyard. It is more prominent in every family of the present Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Chirang and Goalpara districts. ‘Mainao’ (Buli-Buri)is worshipped as the goddess of wealth. Besides these two primary deities, the Boro-Kacharis worship many other gods and goddesses comprising Agraug, Khoila, Khaji, Rajkhandra, Rajputhur, Bura Ali, Ali Bura, Asu Mainao, Sali Mainao , Kherai etc.⁵. In their primitive belief, all the elements of nature like earth, air and sky have some invisible supernatural agencies called “Modai” and “Hamdang” (evil spirit). They believe Lord Siva (Khoiriya Boirai) and mother Goddess Kamakhya (Khoiriya Burhi)

⁵ Bordoloi, B.N., G.C.Sharma Thakur, M.C. Saikia, Tribes of Assam Pt-i, Tribal Research Institute, Assam, Ghy-28, P-8

as the protector of human beings. Some Bodos-Kacharis too worship “Luba-Lubini” as “jankha diba” and “Jankhi” whom the Rajbanshis worship in a modified form of “Jaka” and “Jakini”. The Bodo-Kacharis utter the name of “AHAM” before worshipping any God or Goddess.⁶

Bhaben Narzi describes the various Kherai dances. When the ‘Deodhani’ sits on the ground, the people believed that the Goddess Laksmi has entered into his body. The ‘Deidini’ in behalf of goddess offers blessings to all. In this connection, Kameswar Brahma observes as follows, “After the dancing is over, she tells the fortune of the people the good and bad days of the villages, success and failure of cultivation and regarding the duties and responsibilities of the villages for their safeguard from any danger in near future⁷.”

Dimasa Kacharis:

Inspite of the influences of Hinduism, the religion of the Dimasas is pantheistic in essence. According to Playfair, the Dimasas have ten Gods. ‘Aloraja’ is the supreme Deity, while “Jantaijao” is the priest. He mentioned about the practice of human sacrifice in the primitive days⁸.

There is a Dimasa tale that narrates the plan of Supreme Deities ‘Batangraja’ and his wife ‘Ariki-dima’. The religion, at present followed by the Dimasa Kacharis, is rather a mixture of their btraditional religion and Huiduism. Six benevolent ancestral gods, namely Sibrai, Doo Raja, Naikhu Raja, Waa Raja, Ganyung Braiyung and Hamiadao, who are called ‘Madai’ are still worshipped by the Dimasas with great reverence. Of course, Sibrai (Siva) occupies the highest place and his name is to be uttered first in their worship. The evil spirits are to be worshipped so that they might not creat troubles in future by way of scanty rainfall. Pest-infection etc and allow the people to reap a good harvest.⁹

N.N. Barua tells us about the folk worship of a number of ghosts and witches like ‘Jagagma’, ‘Madai Dilaujik’. The latter was feared by the Dimasa unlettered folk to be causing cold cough and fever. “Langlai’, ‘Hachong; etc. are also some demi-Gods feared for

⁶ Choudhury , K.N, Tribal Culture of the North East (Punthi Pustak), 2003. Ibid. P. 201

⁷ Kameswar Brahma; A Study in Cultural Heritage of the Boros, 1998, P.106.

⁸Choudhury,K.N. Ibid. P.165

⁹ Bordoloi, B.N., G.C.Sharma Thakur, M.C. Saikia, Ibid P. 47

and appeased accordingly. However, there is some community worship like “Langlai’ puja which is performed at time of drought. This is said to be performed on Tuesday or Friday in the midst of a wood¹⁰.

Tiwas or Lalungs

Tiwas or Lalungs call themselves “Tiwas”. The name Lalungs, they opine, was given by non-Lalungs. The word “Tiwa” is said to have its component roots in “Ti”, i.e. water, “Pha”, i.e. father or “wa”, river bank. The first two conjoined makes “Tipha” which literally means, the “Father of Water”. This may relate to God of Water in the pagan way of deification of the forces of nature. Thus, they also trace their origin to God of water whom they acknowledge as their Father or creator.¹¹.

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–Londabar, Goddess Lakshmi (Sankhang or Chhang Khang), ‘Lang Khun’, Kechai Khanti of Sadiya etc. ‘Chhong Khong’ worship is generally performed soon after ‘Bahag Bihu’. Assamese Vaisnavism too has laid deep imprints in the Tiwa Societies. But their traditions do remain alive in spite of these influences¹².

Deuri:

The Deuris are one of the four divisions of the Chutiyas. These divisions are Hindu Chutiya, Ahom Chutiya, Borahi and Deuri.

The Deuris were originally the priests of the Chutiya Kingdom. The Deuris are inhabited some villages covering some parts of the districts of Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Darrang, Madhupur area in Assam and the Namsai Sub–Division of Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh.

All the sections of the Deuris are still maintaining their traditional beliefs and practices. Deuris are worship Lord Siva and Parvati as chief deities. The Dibangias call this

¹⁰ Choudhury, K.N. Ibid. P.169

¹¹ Choudhury, K.N., Ibid. P.184

¹² Choudhury, K.N., Ibid. PP.187-188

supreme deity as 'Kundi Mama'. 'Kundi' is identified as Lord Siva and 'Mama' as Parvati of Hindu pantheon. Another name of this chief deity is 'Gira Girachi', 'Pisa Dema' or 'Balua Baba' and 'Pisasi Dema' or 'Kesaikhati', the son and daughter of 'Gira Girachi' are two other important deities of the Deuris. They also worship 'Gailurung Kundi' as Ganesh and 'Kunwar Kundi' as Kartick¹³. Besides the major deities, the Deuris have a good number of household deities. Some of the important household deities are 'Bakanmak', 'Miruchi', 'Kin', 'Dua Chitere', 'Bura Dangaria', 'Mora', 'Chakchik', 'Achira', 'Chanyan', 'Gharar Deo', 'Yan Terba', 'Jiomidi', 'Makchiba' etc¹⁴. Some of the Hindu rituals like Durga puja, Saraswati puja, Janmastami etc. have been incorporated recently into religious structure of the Deuris.

Karbis :

The Karbis who were formerly called Mikirs feel it derogatory to be called so and they now prefer to identify themselves as 'Karbis'. Mikir Hill is their main place of habitation. Besides, their population is scattered in the districts of Sibsagar, Golaghat, Nagaon, Kamrup North-Cachar Hills in addition to the other parts of the North-East Karbi Anglong is an autonomous Hill District within Assam¹⁵. Karbis can be regarded as animist. Hinduism in its crude form finds manifestation in their worships of God and goddesses and deities. They believe in the immortality of the soul, life hereafter and reincarnation. 'Arnam Sansar Recho' or God Almighty is considered to be the creator of this universe. Among the innumerable deities, some are considered to be benevolent and some malevolent. Each disease is associated with a presiding deity. Hemphu and Mukrang are two benevolent household gods. They also believe in witchcraft and black magic. A smaller section of the Karbis has embraced Christianity¹⁶.

'Cinthong Arnam' is the Supreme Deity of the Karbis as manifestation of the Hindu Trinity, Brahma, Vishnu, Maheswara (Siva) all in one. 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. Similar to the Vedic polytheism, they too worship the other Deities like

¹³ Bordoloi, B.N., G.C.Sharma Thakur, M.C. Saikia, Ibid, PP.33-34

¹⁴ Bordoloi, B.N., G.C.Sharma Thakur, M.C. Saikia, Ibid, P.34

¹⁵ Choudhury, K.N., Ibid. P.133

¹⁶ Bordoloi, B.N., G.C.Sharma Thakur, M.C. Saikia, Ibid, P. 67

‘Hemphu’, ‘Peng’, ‘Chujum’, ‘Rongker’, ‘Rita Anglong’ and ‘Arnamphar’. ‘Rita Anglong’, is the God of crops, while ‘Arnamphar’. “Rita Anglong” is the god of crops, while ‘Arnamphar’ is said to be the manifestation of primordial Female energy¹⁷.

Mishings:

The Miris, also known as Mishings are the second largest group of scheduled tribe (plains) of Assam. They are mainly concentrated in the riverine areas of Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat and Sonitpur districts of Assam. The present religion of the Mishings is the synthetic product of animism and Hinduism. That religion among them is known as Kewalia or Kalhang or Nishamila. In spite of the mixture, they are worshippers of Uyu or spirit. The name of the Donyee- Po:lo (the Sun and the Moon) is recited in every ritual and festival. Some of the main Pujas-cum-festivals of the Mishings are Po:rag, Ali-ailigang, Taleng Uyu (pujas-cum-festivals concerned with agriculture), Dabur, Ashi Uyu, Yumrang Uyu (pujas for the deceased) and Doggang, Urom Apin (pujas for ancestors or ancestor-worship). Thus the pujas can be divided into three broad headings e.g. group puja, self puja or personal puja and pujas due to causes¹⁸.

It has been mentioned earlier that the Mishings are the worshippers of numerous Uyus (spirits). In this context the Miboo (the priest) plays a significant role among them. One of the important rituals of the Mishings is the Dobur-uyu. The women are debarred from participating in it¹⁹. Now Mishings prefer to introduce themselves as Hindus and they are followers of the ‘Bhaktia’ cult—a doctrine having Mishing and Baisnavism cum Tantricism mingled together.

Rabha :

Rabhas are one of the nine Scheduled Tribes in the plains district of Assam. They are scattered undivided districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Dudhnoi and Lakshimpur. Besides Assam, their distribution spreads over Meghalaya, Bangladesh, Nepal, West Bengal,

¹⁷ Choudhury, K.N., Ibid. P.144

¹⁸ Mipun Jatin, The Mishing (Miris) of Assam Development of a New Lifestyle, Gian Publishing House, New Delhi, P.25-26

¹⁹ Mipun Jatin, Ibid, P.26

Manipur etc. E.A.Gait identified them as a distinct tribe and said that they were also known as Totlas and Datiyal Kacharis²⁰. The Rabhas is of various parts, namely, Rangdani, Pati, Maintori, Bitolia, Hana, Chonga, Totla, Dahuri, and Madahi etc. '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. It is said that this worship requires certain rigid rules and so the Rangdania lay more emphasis on 'Hazong' worship, which may be called a new reform of 'Baikho'. Similarly, the Pati Rabhas of south east Goalpara and south-west Kamrup give more importance on 'Langa' or 'Monasa' (Marai or Bishahari i.e, the queen of serpents.) worship²¹.

The Rabha pantheon too, like that of the Mech-Bodos comprises large number of Gods and Goddess. But there is no prevalence of images, but some effigies symbolized by the elevated soil, trees and rocks. However, the Rabhas worship some ghosts, demi-Gods and evil-spirit also. The Rabhas now participate in Durga Puja, Kalipuja, Ras Yatra, Lakshmi Puja, Dou Yatra etc. Some Rabhas converted to vaisnavism and follow vaisnavite culture.

Conclusion:

From the above discussion we come to the conclusion that as social, religious and spiritual being tribal people of North East India practices polytheism i.e. worship of various God and Goddesses. They believe more than one God and Goddesses for their self and social pleasure and remove pain in their respective way. They worship Sun, Moon, river, Lakshmi, Sarawasti, Satyanarayana, Vishnu, Lord Siva, Bathou, Bura-Gosai, Ghar-Gosai, Nachani-Gosai, Kamakhya, Baithoung Deo, Doo Raja, Naikhu Raja, Waa Raja, Ganyung

²⁰ Census Reports 1891 as reprinted in Census of India 1961, P.62

²¹ Bordoloi, B.N., G.C.Sharma Thakur, M.C. Saikia,,Ibid, P. 139

Braiyoung and Hamiadao, 'Lang Khun', Kechai Khanti , 'Gira Girachi', 'Pisa Dema', 'Hemphu', 'Peng', 'Chujum', Po:rag, Ali-ai-ligang, Taleng Uyu, 'Hazong' etc. in their respective names. But Lord Siva has got prominent place in their religious belief and practice.

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