

## ETHNIC RELIGIOUS BELIEFS IN THE BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY OF ASSAM

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In Assam the ethnic tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley and the surrounding hills were originally animists. Ethnicity pertains to the consciousness of belonging to a particular racial group that is exclusive, and different from 'the others' while animism, originating from Latin "anima" means breath or soul. Animism refers to different cultural beliefs whereby natural phenomena and things animate and inanimate are held to possess individual innate souls and includes belief in spiritual forces. The hypothesis was first advanced in ancient Greece, by Pythagoras and Plato, of an immaterial force animating the universe. By the nineteenth and twentieth centuries most ethnic groups in Assam had either been assimilated into the Vedic-Brahmannical fold or into Christianity. However they retained their earlier beliefs and practices which embraced their world view of the origin and nature of creation and the innate spirituality of natural objects. This paper proposes to examine the religious beliefs of the ethnic communities of the Brahmaputra Valley and the surrounding hills of Assam. The religious beliefs of the indigenous tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley and the surrounding hills centred round the belief of divinity of natural objects like stones, rivers and trees. With the gradual inroads of the Vedic Aryans into the valley their religious beliefs were greatly influenced by the Vedic religion. The result was that in course of time many of the tribes came to identify their local tribal deities with gods and goddesses of the Vedic Hindu pantheon.

### Main Discussion

Assam is home to myriad tribes. Among them the most numerous group is constituted by the broad group known as Bodo-Kachari, of the Indo-Mongoloid family. The Bodo-Kachari tribes of Assam belong to the Indo-Mongoloid family and are known in different part of the state as the Mech, Sonowal, Thengal Kachari and Bodo, as well as the Dimasa and the Barmans. Among them, the Mech and Bodos worship *Báthou* and his consort *Bali Khungri*. The former is represented by the *Siju* tree (*Euphorbia Indica*) which is planted in the north-eastern side of every traditional Mech household. The Mech believe that every tree has a soul that is transferable to human beings and animals and vice versa. (Sanyal: 1973:12) As the Mech are still in a transitional stage between animism and Hinduism, they identify *Bathou* with the Hindu god *Āiva* and *Bali Khungri* with the goddess *Kālī*. They also worship *Mâinao*, presently identified with the Hindu Goddess of Wealth Lakshmi. The Mech claim to be Saivites (Risley: 1981: 89-90). However, those Mech that have embraced Christianity no longer worship their traditional deities or the *Siju* plant. The Mech also believe that malevolent spirits are responsible for disease, and as such their traditional medicine man called *Ojha* or *Dousi* uses medicinal herbs and propitiates specific presiding spirits to cure patients. During

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the annual worship of *Bāthou Bārāi*, animals and birds are sacrificed to the deity and rice beer is also offered. But the Mech that have adopted the Brahma religion propagated by Kali Charan Brahma, worship only a single God called Brahma. Moreover, like the Vaisnavites, they do not believe in offering sacrifice or alcohol to their deity. (Bordoloi: 1991: 92)

The Sonowal Kacharis have embraced Vaisnavism but have not totally forsaken the worship of the Bodo-Kachari deities like *Bāthou*. To neutralise the ill effects of natural calamities like floods, the Sonowals observe *Bhur Utowa Sabah*, literally the casting adrift of a raft made of the trunk of the plantain tree. (Sharma Thakur & Bordoloi: 1988: 101-102) The worship of Bathou is important as the deity is believed to embody the *panchabhuta* or five natural elements, namely, the earth, water, fire, wind and the sky or ether. (Das,:1999: 103-106) Another Bodo-Kachari tribe, the Barmans like the Sonowal have embraced Hinduism and worship Shakti and Siva. Brahman priests officiate at their religious ceremonies. (Sharma Thakur & Bordoloi: 1988: 15-16) The Dimasa believe in the existence of evil spirits that cause disease, calamities and sufferings. To appease these spirits they sacrifice pigs, fowls and buffaloes. During the reign of the Kachari kings human sacrifice was also prevalent. In the year 1790 the Dimasa king Krishna Chandra and his brother Gobinda Chandra formally accepted Hinduism. However their traditional religious beliefs have not been totally forsaken and they still worship six benevolent ancestral gods, namely Sibrai (Siva) the great god, Doo Raja, Naikhu raja, Waa Raja, Ganyung Braiyung and Hamiadao collectively known as Madai. (Saikia et al.:1987: 42-43)

Another tribe of Assam the Deori also believe in the existence of household deities who have to be propitiated by the sacrifice of pigeons, fowls and other animals. Some of their important deities are Bakanmak, Miruchi, Kin, Dua Chitere, Bura Dangaria, Mora, Chakchik, Achira, Chanyan, Gharar Deo, Yan Terba, Jiomidi, Makchiba, etc. In essence, they believe like many other tribes that spirits protect the homestead, the garden, the fields, the forests, ponds, lakes, rivers etc and need to be appeased to avoid earning their wrath. (Saikia, *et al.*: 1987: 30-31)

The Karbi are a hill tribe who believe in the immortality of the soul, life after death and also in reincarnation like their Hindu neighbours. They regard the supreme deity Arnam Sansar Recho as the creator of the universe and associate different diseases with different deities. Two benevolent household gods are Hemphu and Mukrang. They also practice witchcraft and black magic. Like many other tribes of the region they propitiate the spirits of the universe by offering animal sacrifice and also rice beer.

The religion of the Tiwas consists of worship of some deities. Primarily the Lalungs are the follower of the Saktâ religion but their images in the *Thāns* (shrines) and modes of worship differ from those of the non-Tiwas. The hill Tiwa worship stone images in their *thān*, but the plain Tiwas do not install any images or idols.

The Tiwa deities are required to be regularly propitiated by offerings and sacrifices. Besides Mahādeo, Ganesh, Parameswar, Badormaji, Bāolākong and Kuber are their benevolent male deities while Āi Gosāi, Lakhimī, Padumī, Kālikā, Kāmākhya, Saru Āi Bar Āi, Ākari, Jagatjuri, Kāni Andheli are important benevolent female deities. (Bordoloi: 1991: 102) Lord 'Mahādeo' is their supreme God. All worship starts with a prayer to Lord Mahadeo. According to G.C. Sharma Thakur "The presiding deities differ from area to area but in all Lalung villages Mahādeo is considered as supreme god." Sharma Thakur: 1985: 76)

Another tribe, the Rabha were originally animists according to the 1911 Census Report of India, but most of them, especially the group known as Pati Rabha have totally accepted the Hindu culture of their neighbours and perform Hindu religious festivals today. Being an agricultural community like other tribes of Assam, they perform the Baikho or Khoksi puja before the start of agricultural operations to propitiate Baikho the Goddess of Wealth and prosperity. They also propitiate the deity Kechai-Khaiti (literally eater of raw flesh) who is believed to be the protector of all humanity. This deity is believed to be powerful enough to control the evil spirits and witches that might haunt a village. In western Assam the Rabha tribe also worship the snake goddess Manasa in a festival known as Maraipuja, primarily to seek blessings against fatal diseases, natural calamities and to allay fear of serpents. (Saikia, *et al.*: 1987: 130-131)

The Mishing also believe in Uie or spirits and are animists. They worship the spirits of their ancestors as well as that of natural phenomena like thunder and lightning, storm, drought, etc to ensure peace and prosperity and freedom from illness and natural calamities. Their officiating priest is known as the Mibu who is believed to possess supernatural powers. (Saikia, *et al.*: 1987: 113-114) The Mishing are descendants of the Abors (Adi) of the hills of Arunachal Pradesh and initially followed the Mirui cult, worshipping Donyi (Sun) and Polo (Moon), (Saikia, *et al.*: 1987: 100) but today many have either embraced Vaisnavism or Christianity.

The Hajongs of Assam were originally animists, though at present they call themselves Hindus. However, they still worship the basil (*tulsi*) plants. In the evening the women of every household sing devotional songs around the plant in their courtyard. They also worship the bamboo tree during the annual Bash Puja performed in Baisakh, the first month of the Assamese lunar calendar. While some scholars consider it akin to Bhatheli or worship of the Vedic God Indra, others claim that the three freshly cut bamboos that are decorated and worshipped represent the Indian cupid Madana or Kamadeva. Singing and dancing by the youth form a part of this worship. They also worship snakes and the snake goddess Manasa or Padma is worshipped during Padma Puja every year, on the last day of Shraavan, (fourth month of the lunar calendar) by sacrificing goats, tortoise and white ducks. In the month of Kartik (seventh month of lunar calendar) the Hajong women alone worship images of Kartik, believed to be the one that bestows sons and crops.

Other religious rites include the performance of Brat Puja marking the end of wet-rice cultivation, Garam Puja to propitiate Goddess Lakhmi, giver of wealth signified by the harvest, and Bastu Puja. Clay images of elephants and horses are placed under a tree on in a temple and worshipped. The Hajongs also believe in evil spirits like Bhut, Maila, Daini, Zukhini, Jarang Deo and Machang Deo, that can be appeased by sacrificing goats and birds. (Bordoloi: 1991: 31-34)

In the North Cachar Hills of Assam and the areas adjoining Mizoram and Meghalaya we find communities of hill tribes like the Rengma and Zeme Nagas, the Hmars as well as the Jayantia, Garo and Khasi people. The religious belief of the Jayantia tribe is centred upon the worship of the spirits of natural objects as well as that of their ancestors. The erection of memorial stones, to commemorate the dead, forms a fundamental practice of their religious system. However they have been greatly influenced by the religious practices of their Vedic-Hindu neighbours. Thus, like the Hindus, they believe in life after death, rebirth, heaven and hell. They also perform annual *shraddha* ceremony where oblations are offered to the dead. However, the food offerings are to be cooked only by females due to their matrilineal family structure. (Bordoloi: 1991: 56).

The traditional religious belief of the Garo tribe is their faith in a nameless Supreme Being who is however neither worshipped nor propitiated. They also believe in a host of other malevolent and benevolent deities that pervade the sky, earth, water, hills and mountains, caves and other spheres, each assigned specific duties. Their chief deity is Tatar-Rabuga, the presiding deity of different fevers. He commanded his sub-ordinates Nostu-Nopantu and Machi to create the earth. While the former is required to be appeased by expensive animal sacrifices, the two sub-ordinate deities are benign and do not require sacrifice. Other deities include Chorabudi, protector of crops, Goera, god of lightning and thunder, Goera's brother Kalka who protects humans from danger due to disease and wild animals, Susime the goddess of wealth, and Saljong the sun-god, who bestows all to mankind. Saljong is honoured in the great harvest festival of Wangala. Although most Garos of Assam have today accepted Christianity they still believe in the cycle of life, death and rebirth like their Hindu neighbours. To be reborn into the same machong or sub-clan is considered to be the highest form of reward for a virtuous man or woman. (Bordoloi: 1991: 10-11).

The Khasis like the Garos also believe in one Supreme God whom they call U Ble Nongthaw, the creator of all life on earth. His consort is Ka BLei Synshar, a goddess that protects and preserves life. In spite of accepting Christianity, the traditional Khasi religious beliefs in benevolent and malevolent spirits persist. They also worship natural objects like the sacred groves of Mawphlong, hills, peaks, forests, rivers and the great snake god U Thlen who is feared and to whom in early times human sacrifices were secretly made. The Khasis believe in the concept of heaven and hell and also worship their ancestors. ((Bordoloi: 1991: 72).

The traditional religion of the Hmars is also animism. Like many other tribes of Assam they believe that all natural objects are possessed by either benevolent or malevolent spirits to propitiate whom they sacrifice birds and animals to ward off disease and misfortune. They also believe in the existence of a Supreme Being called Pathien who is the creator of all animate and inanimate objects in the universe. They also believe in the immortality of the soul. According to their philosophy the spirits of the dead journey to three heavenly bodies according to their order of merit, namely Mithkhuo, (equivalent of purgatory), Perial (intermediate heaven) and Vanram (where true heavenly bliss awaits). However, after serving time in the first two stages a spirit may finally go to Vanram to enjoy a blissful life. (Sharma Thakur & Bordoloi: 1988: 40-43).

The Kukis who are a neighbouring tribe of the Hmars have a similar belief system and their Chief God is also called Pathien. However, they believe that after death a virtuous person goes directly to the village of death called Iti-Kua, while for others the path to Iti-Kua is barred by those they have wronged. Moreover, persons killed by animals do not find a place in this village of the dead, but have to reside in another village called Shara-kua where life is hard. The Kukis also believe in rebirth like their Hindu neighbours and it is said that after a number of years the spirit of a dead man returns to earth in the body of a new-born child. (Sharma Thakur & Bordoloi: 1988: 58).

Before the advent of Christianity the Rengma Nagas worshipped the great god Terunya along with a number of other gods and goddesses that were propitiated by the sacrifice of oxen, pigs and fowls. Among the household deities the most important were Nichagyu and his consort Nichagyi, the god and goddess of wealth, worshipped by each family thrice a year by observing sixteen days of Genna or period of isolation and abstinence from work. (Sharma Thakur & Bordoloi: 1988: 80).

The Zeme Nagas also observe similar belief in a supreme god whom they call Tingwang who guides the other deities, both malevolent and benevolent. Hence Tingwang is worshipped to protect the village from epidemics and other evil spirits. The Zeme also worship Suhprai, the god of crops. They also observe Genna during the performance of religious rituals and believe in life after death and rebirth.

### **Conclusion**

Thus the foregoing narrative leads one to conclude that the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam and the surrounding hills is the home of myriad ethnic groups who were originally animists, believing in the existence of spirits in all creation. It needs to be kept in mind that the Vedic Aryans also worshipped nature and its different manifestations as divine. With the gradual advent of the Vedic culture into the valley of the Brahmaputra the ethnic religious beliefs underwent a change. But this change was limited to a small population in parts of western and central Assam

alone. Up to the end of the nineteenth century and the middle of the twentieth century the tribes surrounding the valley remained virtually isolated from the religious beliefs of what is today known as Hinduism. With the advent of Christianity, western education and other changes, many abandoned their earlier beliefs, displaced as they were from their original homelands, and denied access to forests and mountains by political and economic compulsion and a modern way of life. In course of time many were greatly influenced by their Hindu neighbours while others embraced Christianity. The result was the association of their indigenous deities with Brahmannical gods and goddesses and the adoption of Hindu philosophy like life after death and rebirth. But it was not a one-way traffic as many tribal beliefs were also assimilated in the rituals connected with birth, death and marriage, of their Hindu neighbours. Today Assam presents the picture of the Indian ethos of a multicultural society where differences not only exist but are celebrated together with common rituals and festivities of an essentially agricultural society.

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