

SHORTER NOTE

RELIGION OF NOCTES IN TIRAP DISTRICT OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH, INDIA: A SYNCRETIC VIEW

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Introduction

The Noctes of Tirap district, Arunachal Pradesh live in the Patkai mountain ranges of Northeastern India, bordering Myanmar. Noctes people are one of the major tribe of the state with around 30,000 populations out of the total population of Arunachal Pradesh (Census 2011). “Etymologically ‘Nocte’ means people living in an organized community. In the Ahom and early British periods Nocte tribes were referred to as Borduarias, Panduarias, Namsangia and Jaipurias. They had come into close contact with the people of Assam in the middle of the 19th Century (India netzone). Racially they belong to mongoloid race and “this tribe is believed to have migrated from Hukong Valley of Burma as they were attracted by the highland salt and pleasant climate of the Patkai Hills. The Noctes have cultural similarities with their neighboring Konyak Tribe of Nagaland such as the tradition of tattooing their faces and bodies, and like the fierce Konyaks, the Noctes also took part in headhunting” (Pastures; 2015).

“Noctes have been practicing an Indigenous Faith since time immemorial. It is based on Nature worship and upon a belief that the all powerful unseen God exists in the sky above. In the past, this indigenous Faith had sobering effect on the people and was a unifying factor for the Noctes of different groups. The Indigenous Faith is known as *Rangsom*. It believes in a Supreme Being known as *Rangkathak*. The God is called *Jooban*, *Jongban* and *Huaba* by various groups of Noctes” (Lowang; 2013).

Syncretism is a neutral term used to describe existence of two contradictory belief systems at a particular time within a particular group of people or society. ‘Syncretism is found in different spheres of human life, especially society, culture and religion, in politics known as syncretic politics,

and also in art and culture termed as eclecticism' (Taylor and Francis, 1998). Syncretism may take place within a society due to some causes such as culture contact, migration, conversion of religion and globalization.

The present study has been carried out to study syncretism from anthropological perspectives under Socio-Cultural anthropology among the Noctes of Tirap district, Arunachal Pradesh, India. Here in this paper, the primary objective is to document the religious life of Noctes in Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh and whether their traditional animistic religion simply continues or has become syncretic in nature during the course of time. Intensive fieldwork data have been interpreted to fulfill the objective of research which is collected through observation and interview method. Data from secondary sources have been also interpreted in the research.

Religion of Noctes at a glance

Originally Noctes are followers of traditional animistic religion, but in course of time they have followed different religions at the same time. At present, they followed different religion in different areas some times within a village itself, but they are syncretic in nature.

Noctes in the past were the ardent follower of their animistic religion and are famous for head hunting tradition. Which was highly practiced among them. As an evidence of their head hunting tradition, there are remains of human skulls and its fragments which are preserved in *Pang* (youth dormitory), in Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh as *Kheti basti* and *Namsang basti*. Noctes' worship of nature basically comprises of worship of various stones and forests of a particular area on different occasions. This practice has been followed by them from ages and is continued to be followed till date.

At one time Noctes were followers of Theravada Buddhism, which is a dominant form of religion in Myanmar and from where the Noctes migration is traced. "The 1961 census reported some Buddhist among the Noctes". (Das 1989).

In Past, Noctes came into contact with the Hindu people from the plains of Assam, with whom they traded salt and from the Assamese people they learnt the Assamese language and adopted the Hindu faith. "Noctes of Tirap profess the Mahapurushia form of vaishnavism propagated by Shrimanta Sankardeva in Assam" (Bose; 1997). The influence of Sankardevaa brought them closer to the Hindu once. "The first chief of Namsang and Borduria, was known for his spirituality. The chief was baptized as "Narottam" by Sri Ram, Gukhai of Bareghor Satra. A place was named in honour of his name as Narottam nagar, where now the reputed institution, RK Mission is situated". (Dutta, 1978). "Lotha Khonbao and his man joined the Vaishnava faith between 1669 and 1745 under the influence of Shri Ramdeva the vaishnava saint of Bali satra in Naharkatia. After his initiation Lotha was given the name Narottama". (Thakur, 2006) Now some of the Noctes in Tirap district are

Hindus and follow vaishnavism. But the ratio of vaishnavism followers is very low. Due to negligence of some vaishnavait sathas and leaders of Assam, vaishnavism started vanishing from among them and today only a few of them are vaishnavait. Due to lesser visit from the satra who taught them about vaishnavism the activities in the *Namghars* reduced and people became less attracted towards the religion. Primary data reveals that around 1972 Vaishnavism was being spread by some representatives and *satradhikars* of *satras* from Sasoni and Nagira area of Assam.

Now a day Christianity is spreading very fast. Followers of Christianity are in high ratio among the Noctes. Many of them have converted to Christianity, specially those living in Khonsa and Borduria. Borduria is the only place in Arunachal Pradesh which Mother Teresa had visited in the year 1993. There is an influence of the great American missionary Miles Bronson, who arrived in Tirap with the intention of spreading Christianity. Now majority of the Noctes have converted to Christianity. In the area, among Christians present in the population, most of them are either Baptists or Catholic with Baptists being in majority.

Syncretism in Nocte religion

It can be clearly noticed in the Noctes religion that they never stuck to any one kind of religion from the past till present. In their unknown past they were animist, having beliefs on a supreme God who is unseen and who is believed to be their creator and the environment. They have belief on both malevolent and benevolent God and spirits and so they offer worships to them since the long past till present as they do not care about their present religion while performing their traditional animistic religious activities.

Megaliths which are found in various regions of Nocte inhabited area are also representative of their head hunting tradition. In certain festivals the practice of worshipping at megalith fields is still practiced by them which involves the local priest. Megalithic fields are also believed to be a sacred place and therefore entry of outsiders or commoners is prohibited in the megalith fields. This taboo is followed by both the Christian and non Christian Nocte population. Priesthood is followed by the Noctes to conduct various worships prevalent among them. Sometimes the priest also acts as a diviner while some have separate people for the same. Vaishnavait Noctes deeply follow the virtue of Bareghoria Satra in addition to their animistic religion. Vaishnavait Noctes follows the pattern of animistic deviation in the name of their animistic supreme God and worships their traditional deities. There are some remains of *Namghar* that can be noticed in the Nocte inhabited area and some of them are still in good running condition. Vaishnavait Nocte used to pray at *namghar* regularly. A person who regularly visits the *namghor* for worshipping is referred to as *namgharia*. Religious performances have some differences from main stream Vaishnavite religion of Assam. Village Namsang

is a good example having large number of Vaishnavait Noctes. This village has both Catholic and Baptist Churches. Noctes whether they are animistic, Vaishnavait or Christian, usually perform sacrificial ceremonies in their festivals and also following of various taboos. Noctes possess beliefs in various malevolent spirits who are believed to reside in trees and hills of the area and who can be manipulated by black magic. So it can be noticed that almost every household has put some skulls and bones of wild animal and feather of fowls at the main entrance of their houses. It is believed as these animal and fowl remains keep safe the house save from such malevolent spirits entering the house.

By the influence of Christianity most of the population has adopted Christianity as their religion. Although people have adopted Christianity it is found they combine their basic elements of Tribal culture as well in the Christianity that they follow which are not prescribed in the Bible. Followers of Christianity also practice animal sacrifices and traditional taboos associated with it. People often prepare and drink such alcoholic beverages which are not prescribed in the norms of Baptistism. Noctes have not accepted Christian names for them and often follow animistic beliefs such as beliefs in *Rango*, worshipping of natural objects such as natural stones and Megaliths present in the area. "They often follow traditional norms during festival time besides they are Christian. Other malevolent and benevolent deities are also worshipped by offering of food and water given to the gods in order to apprise them". (Dutta, 1978). The Noctes visit the church celebrate Christmas and follow the Christian norms alongwith that bury practicing animistic beliefs and rituals. In case of marriage norms, only tribe endogamy and clan exogamy is strictly followed, but religion never comes as verdict in case of marriage there are marriages take place between non Christian and Christian mate. Christian Noctes use dead bodies as per Christian norms, but offering of Nocte headgear and cloths of deceased person at the grave can be noticed, which is not a part of Christian norms.

Conclusion

It is not simple to conclude the discussion religious life of Nocte people in Tirap, Arunachal Pradesh in a short conclusion, as it has passed through many conversions and different forms of religions are present among the Noctes. However it can be determined that, Noctes people do not follow a particular religion at present. Since they have adopted different religion in their past, now in their society followers of Animistic, Vaishnavism and Christian can be found, where the ratio of Christian population is highest among them. Within the same area and a village itself Noctes have followers of different religions.

Syncretism can be noticed in terms of religion among the Noctes of Tirap, Arunachal Pradesh. As many aspects of the animistic roots are still alive among them it does not matter which particular religion they are following. People can be noticed following certain kind of beliefs which are not

permitted by a religion which they are presently following. Vaishnavite and Christian Noctes also follow traditional animistic religious beliefs and follow all traditional festivals and ceremonies. Thus religious life of Noctes can be observed and termed as syncretic in terms of religion as they follow one religion combining elements of their age old animistic religion with it.

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