

Religion Faith and Thought the Tribe of Meghalaya in North East India

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Abstract

While discussing the tribe and caste situation we cannot avoid reference to the tribe and caste of North Eastern India. This region is a veritable tribal museum of more than 200 tribes with variations culturally, linguistically and even socio-politically, comprising eight states almost all of whom constitute greater Assam under the common ethnicity called Indo-Mongoloids. The tribal populations of the region speak different dialects having distinct socio-cultural relations distinguishable from one another. Although generally the tribes belong to Mongoloid stock, yet Australoid element has also become discernable. North East India is a confluence of people, popularly described as tribes, living in different stages of under-development and, in most cases, without a written history of their own. Meghalaya is the homeland of three tribes- The Garos, the Khasis and the Jainties. This is the only state where the main inhabitants follow matrilineal system of inheritance. Through it inheritance to property and succession to tribe office, both run through the female line, passing from the mother to the youngest daughter. This is all the more striking because the three groups belong to different ethnic backgrounds. Like all tribal societies the Garos, the Khasis and the Jainties have certain social institution to form, guide and control the cohesive structure of family kinship and social relations among the clan within their respective traditional jurisdictions.

Keywords: *The Garos, The Khasis, The Jainties, Religion,*

I. INTRODUCTION

Religion is a set of beliefs, practices and philosophical values connected with the definition of the sacred, the comprehension of life and salvation from the problems of human existence. Religion is essentially an institutionalized or traditional path to salvation. All men in a society ultimately must face some of life's problems essential alone, despite all efforts of others to help. Religious traditions are the result of man's attempt to capture and enshrine his philosophical and spiritual insights so that they are available to the individual as he faces life and its stresses, confusions and complexities. Religion is a social phenomenon (as well as a psychological one) because it necessarily stresses fellowship in the development, teaching, and perpetuation of religious insight and knowledge. It is concerned with the common plight of all people at all times, regardless of age, sex or status within society. The concept of the supernatural or a path of salvation may work to bind man to the dictates of limited contemporary social values and social groups, or it may serve to provide the wisdom and techniques by which man may free himself from contemporary groups and values—it may give him periodic freedom to achieve values that transcend the demands of the social present. Thus religion is both intensely personal and intensely social.¹ The indigenous faiths of the tribal people of North-Eastern India follow a familiar and largely identical pattern. While all of them believe in the existance of a supreme being, a powerful creator and a benign protector, they also believe in a host of spirits, good and bad, whom they propitiate or appease by appropriate offerings. It may be said that their ordinary day-to-day life is believed to be influenced by action of these spirits, more manifestly perhaps by the malignant ones. Sickness, misfortunes and accidents are believed to be caused by their machinations, owing to some lapses on the part of the sufferer. It is because of this that tribal religion has for long been descrided as animistic. The fact, however, remains that in the last resort, tribal people must turn to the supreme being for deliverance. The above observations are equally true of the hill people of Meghalaya.²

II. OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the religion thought and belief and cultural faith of deferent indigenous people of Megalaya in North-East India.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research proposal was finalized after studying the indigenous people of Megalaya. Besides this, available books, magazines, journals, periodicals, historical documents, and internet were also consulted from time to time.

V. DISCUSSION

The mythology of the *Garos* is voluminous and intricate as that of the Hindu. And as they have no written record, nothing but memory of trust to the preservation of their traditional myths, their mythology varies with change of places and circumstances.³ Different divisions of the tribes have different names for their gods and goddesses and there are only a few spirits which are common to them all. Again, the same spirits are known by different names in different places, and it is impossible to get their religious concepts and mythology from the *Garos* animist. Besides the above difficulties, the names of spirits or mites are remarkable in their length and in some cases, they bear the teknonymous affixes for father to mother.

The *Khasis* worship numerous God and Goddesses. It should be remarked that the *Khasis* never symbolize their gods by means of images, their worship being offered to the spirit only. Gurdon mentions a numbers of spirits in his book. They are as followes- *U'lei muluk*, *U'lei umtong*, *Ulei longspah*, *U Ryngkew*, *U phan U kyrpad*, *Ka Rih*, *Ka Kham*, *Ka Duba* etc. the *Khasis* also venerate spirits of their ancestors. It is they who protect their descendants as long as they lead good lives and after death it is the hope of everyone to be able to join them in the house of God. Among the malignant spirits are those believed to be responsible for several kinds of diseases like malaria and cholera.

Garos

Garos are very religious and god-fearing people. They do not believe in an all-powerful supreme God. Their supernatural world consists of a number of spirits which act and behave like human beings but have no shape. These spirits fall into two categories: (i) Spirits embodying– natural forces ; such as *Saljong*, the spirit of the sun; *Goera*, the spirit causing thunderbolts, who is generally thought of as the god of power; *Susime*, the spirit of wealth and (ii) Spirits who cause illness; such as *risi*, the spirit causing wasting diseases, *delwa*, the spirit causing pains in the body; *melia*, the spirit causing diseases in children. However, the assignment of particular ailments to particular spirits of the second category is rather vague, because the spirit causing a particular disease in a particular person and the animal to be sacrificed to the spirit is determined by divination. *Saljong* is annually propitiated at the end of the harvest, as *Saljong* is considered to be the spirit causing the crops to grow. This annual propitiation is held at *Nokma*'s house, for the whole village. There are very few such spirits that are communally propitiated for the well-being of the village community in general. Other spirits are propitiated by individual persons whenever necessity arises. The usual rites of propitiation of spirits consists of making a sacrificial altar (which differ in details of construction for different spirit) in front of which food and drink are offered to the spirit and the animal appropriate for the spirit is sacrificed after chanting incantations in a obscure language by the spirits. Often in the sacrifice, the blood of the sacrificial animal is smeared upon the altar. A feast where food and rice beer are provided to all persons present concludes the functions.⁴ When a person falls sick the first thought is that some demon must have caused it. The priest must find out which demon causes the illness and offers an appropriate sacrifice. If a chicken is offered, he holds up the entrails to see if the demon has let the sick one go; if they fall apart, it is a sign that he has released him. Sometimes the priest

squats on the floor and calls on the demon while he doubts the patient's body with the blood of the fowl. A few old counting folk to whom powerful drugs are known, have a reputation for skill in doctoring, and one of these should be called. Charms are believed to be very efficacious.⁵

In all the *Garos* non-Christian villages, different kinds of altars and shrines are erected to make offerings to the deities who are believed to have caused sickness or mishap to a person. These sacrificial altars are erected out of bamboos in varying shapes and designs according to the spirit to whom the offering is to be made. One kind of altar consists of an upright, oblong panel composed of a bamboo frame about 4 ft long and 2 ft broad, filled in with reeds and the leaves of trees. Another kind of altar is erected to offer sacrifices to a deity named *Chorabudi*. This consists of bamboos struck into the ground so as to form an inverted cone about 3 ft high, filled with earth. A third kind is called the *Sekrek*. It is merely a short bamboo stuck upright in the ground, the top section being split into narrow strips to form a conical basket. Food offerings and sometimes money are placed inside this altar. Another form of this *Sekrek* is the *Wa'dambeng Sekrek*, which consists of two bamboos lashed together in the form of a cross. The top and the horizontal extremities of this cross are opened out so as to make the shape of a conical basket. Yet another kind of altar is an image of straws lying in the roadway, pierced through a bamboo stake, or a recumbent figure of mud or sand over which have been hung a few strings tied to upright bamboo sticks. The strings are ornamented with coloured rags, while on the images has been left the beak of a fowl or a duck. The other kind of shrine is a fenced-in enclosure at the foot of a tree, within which an altar has been created. All the above-mentioned altars are created in order to make sacrificial offerings for its' own particular spirit. Besides the altars and shrines described above, there are a number of ling bamboos with leaves on, placed upright in the ground in front of and close to many of the houses. Different kinds of altars, shrines and other bamboo posts with leaves and the ears of paddy and cotton are a common sight in the non-Christian villages.⁶ Today over the Garo Hills district there is a large number of Christian converts. Those who are following the old faith as described above are known as *Songsarek*. Christian converts are to be found in large numbers in the areas adjoining the plains. The more interior the area is, the lesser is the number of converts. In the Garo Hills, the large number of converts is Baptist Christians. There are a few Roman Catholics. The people following the traditional faith are not at all hostile towards Christianity. The older generation does not care to get themselves converted. Often we hear from the old men 'our boys and girls are nowadays becoming Christian but we are *Songsarek*; we are going to die soon; what is the use of foresaking the customs of our forefathers?' However, the *Songsarek* Garo are very liberal in religious matters. They do not interfere with the individual choice of a faith, indigenous or foreign. They allow their children to become Christians without ostensible opposition.

Christianity was introduced among the *Garos* by missionaries from Europe and America in the second half of the nineteenth century. Today more than 50 per cent of the *Garos* have accepted this new faith. Conversion involves not only a change of religious belief; it also simultaneously makes its impact on other traditional institutions as well.

Khasis

Today, many members of the *Khasi*, like many members of the other hill tribes of Meghalaya profess Christianity. The religion, which was first introduced in the middle of the 19th century, has caused tremendous change in the tribes' social structure. Nonetheless, the old religion beliefs and social structures still exist.

Traditionally, the *Khasis* have believed that their religion is good-given, not one founded by man. Their religions is neither animistic nor pantheistic, it is purely monotheistic, It is based on t belief in one supreme god, the creator commonly known as *blei Trai Kynrad* who is formless and can manifest himself in various guises. The early western Christian missionaries contemptuously characterized the *Khasi* as worshippers of idols but it was a misconception since they don't practice true ancestor worship

the spirits who inhabit mountains, rivers or trees,. Respect is paid to ancestors as they are believed to keep watch over the family.

There are no *Khasi* churches or temples since all ground is considered sacred, and there are no saints, martyrs or priests since it is believed that each man can save himself by his own actions, *Khasis* have no fixed days of congregational worship, There is no common written book of worship on which their faith is based. Killing animals like fowl, pigs, doats and bulls and breaking eggs are part of the *Khasi* religions rites and ceremonies. A *Khasi* is a deeply religious person, who has on intense love of life. He believes that life is God's greatest gift and he has to account for it again in the hereafter. That is why mans' supreme duty is to preserve this life on earth as well and as beautifully as he can.

It may not be wrong to say that traditional *Khasi* religion, which is professed by the *Khasi* tribe of Meghalaya, goes back to the origin and antiquity of the race itself. Written sources may be too scanty to throw light on such a vast subject and that too, touching the 'core' of the society. But one can feel and understand the traditional beliefs and practices, rites and rituals which are still found to be consistent, persistent and are still practised within the society, the prevailing culture and way of life of the people. There is undoubtedly, no denying the fact that the thought process, the philosophy of life, the moral code and conduct are still being held in high esteem both by those who profess the traditional religion and even by converts.⁷

When we speak of *Khasi* traditional religion, we are bound to refer to the 'Kur': the Clan. The Kur is the nucleus around which every institution revolves. The Kur is the pivot without which the entity and the identity of being a *Khasi* is lost. Traditional *Khasi* religion starts within the Kur. The Kur will perform the rites and rituals for the 'Living' and the 'Dead'. Among the *Khasis*, there is nothing that can be called a special form of worship because they believe in a 'God' who is the Creator, the Maker, the Designer, One who is omnipotent and omnipresent. A *Khasi* speaks to God through the window of his heart, he prays to God daily, at any time of the day, he sees God in nature, in his daily activities and in the countless blessings bestowed on him; he speaks to God through every calamity he faces.

Khasi traditional religious rituals are seen at their best during the death ceremony. The rituals are rigid and it is here that one can see the real color of *Khasi* traditional religion which still exists within the Kur or the Clan. Cremation of the dead body alone without collection of bones (Lum Shying) is incomplete in the ritualistic sense of the term. *Khasi* traditional religion is at its best in 'Ka Thep Mawbah' (collection of the bones) from different units of the Kur to be kept in the 'Mawbah' (Big Stone). One will still find such rituals prevailing among the Kurses. The bones of the father cannot be kept with the bones of his children because he belongs to another Kur. If his children wish to keep his bones either for a number of years or otherwise, this should go through a proper ritual. It is here that *Khasi* traditional religion can be well perceived and understood.

Khasi traditional religion has also penetrated into *Khasi* polity. There is no denying the fact that *Khasi* native states have withstood the test of time and are still competent and well recognized by the people at large. The rituals performed every year at the Nongkrem Festival speak of the religious belief even at the level of the *Khasi* Native State. The 'Dorbar Sla' or the divine durbar, the 'Knia Muhuri' or the ritual for the flageolet (traditional flute) are fitting examples of *Khasi* traditional religion and divine belief of the natives. (*Taditional Khasi Religion* by Helen Giri)

With the advent of the British, the *Khasi* society had received a great setback. Christianity encouraged conversion. This posed an impending threat to *Khasi* culture in general and traditional religion in particular. Emotions among the *Khasi* thinkers rose high. Seeing the challenge ahead, the *Seng Khasi*, a socio-cultural organization was established on 23 November 1899. The *Seng Khasi* was formed with various aims and objectives, the principles of which are:⁸

1. To foster a sense of brotherhood among the *Khasis* who still retain their socio-cultural religious heritage.
2. To encourage national spirit through archery, cultural dances and other social festivals in which people from all over the district participate.
3. To undertake welfare and developmental activities such as maintenance of cremation grounds for those who dispose of the dead according to tradition and religion. Advancement of education and so on.

It was during such a period that the great awakening, the Literacy Movement, the *Khasi* Renaissance, stimulated by the great intellectuals of the time, shaped and moulded *Khasi* thought. Needless to say the Seng *Khasi* strengthened the roots of being a *Khasi*. Till today, the contribution of the Seng *Khasi* stands unparalleled and unsurpassed in its effort to keep alive the indigenous belief and tradition of the *Khasis*. Though the major chunk of the native population have discarded the traditional religion, one can still witness a rejuvenated and a revitalized enthusiasm among those who really care to preserve their own. There may be a controversy on the conception of ‘ancestor worship’ as practised by the *Jaintias*. Whether it is a form of ‘remembrance of the dead-ancestors’ or it is a form of ‘worship’ as ‘worship’ is understood in case of reverence to a deity. No doubt, the *Jaintias* like the neighbouring *Khasis* remember their dead-ancestors, offer food, pray to them (dead) and solicit their help. Common elements in a ‘worship’ are,—conception of superior Being or Being capable of doing good to the earthly mortals, appeasing them by anything like food-offering, prayer or sacrifice for a favour. So, mere remembrances of ancestors are not worship proper unless they are appeased by some means for some boons. This element of appeasement for some favour is present in *Jaintia* ancestor-worship. So, I use the notion in the sense of worship as against mere remembrance.⁹

V. CONCLUSION

In most of the religious activities, the element of ancestor-worship got mixed up. Ancestor-worship, as already mentioned, is predominantly a female enterprise which speaks of its originality. Again the element of prayer (to the God Supreme or to the nature God) is present in every religious activity. Also, prayer can be made individually or commonly, either outdoor or indoor and on any occasion. Again, prayer being a common element may be supposed as an original one. So, the conception of the Supreme-Being (Blei), ancestor-worship and prayer may be considered as the original elements in *Jaintia* religious life. The apparent animistic beliefs and practices are due to the struggle for survival in the new place. Therefore, it is very natural that animistic beliefs and practices are vanishing gradually as the people are learning to live on scientific aids and knowledge.¹⁰

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