

Religion and Cultural Dynamics of the Tribal in Tripura: Issues and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the conceptual approaches with regards to the social change and continuity within the context of the tribals of Tripura. Contemporary events within the fold of religion and cultural dynamics are linked up within the institutional discourses on tribal and indigenous people. Therefore, it present certain caveats for social theorists. The representations of tribal people do not necessarily translate into an advancement of struggles for justice and equity. This paper therefore tends to determine and rethink the role with regards to social dynamics within the tribal society to be one of articulation rather than of representation of tribal issues.

Key Words: Reang, Culture, Religion, Ritual.

Introduction: Tripura with an area of 10,486 sq.km has always been a multi-ethnic state like most other Northeastern state of India. The total population of Tripura is 31,99,203 (2001 Census) i.e. 8.18% of the entire Northeastern states. There are 19 scheduled tribes in Tripura, namely the Tipras, Reangs (Bru), Jamatias, Noatias, Lushais, Uchois, Mogs, Kukis, Chakmas, Khasis, Garos, Halams, Bhutias, Bhils, Mundas, Orangs, Lepchas, Santhals and Chaimals. The tribals in Tripura who once constituted the majority of the population were reduced to a minority position by the successive waves of immigration of non-tribals especially after India's Independence in 1947. Tripura was a Union Territory until 1st July' 1963 and attained the status of a full-fledged State only on the 21st January' 1972. The State of Tripura is characterized by different diversities with varied mongoloid ethnic origins, linguistic variation and religious pluralism. Political identity and cultural identity have become part and driving forces of democratization. As such managing and accommodating identity politics, including tribal identity is part of the nation building and democratization projects. Today, tribal socio-cultural traditions in Northeast India are deeply threatened by the supposedly superior hegemonic mainstream cultures. Aspects of culture such as indigenous knowledge systems are being undermined. Tribal languages both oral and with distinct scripts are fast eroding. However it is not too late to rise above the politics of exclusion and marginalization to

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unearth the fast vanishing tribal traditions. The crucial question to this theme is how did religion and culture influence the ethnic identity formation?

There is a consensus that religion, language and culture are the main identity-makers of a community or tribe. The concept of identity tends to be stronger with the development of such ethics. Although, the complex relationship between religion, culture and the process of identity formation has yet to be sufficiently scrutinized. Religion played an insignificant role in bringing the people to believe for the development of a society. While, cultural ethos diversified the existence of a community in any society. Therefore, historical and contemporary religious beliefs and experience tend to shape ethnicity and cultural identity. Nevertheless, as racial, linguistic or class differences were not stable foundations for ethnicity construction, religious affiliation became by default the only discernable characteristic regarding the upliftment of a tribal society. Members of different religious hierarchy of both Hindu and Christianity tend to recognize a window of opportunity at an early stage to create a more congruent identity. Distinctive religious groups in modern times have often developed into ethnically self-conscious communities, but it has also often happened, that religious differences have been used or even created to establish or emphasize certain barriers.

Religion was effectively manipulated as a cultural marker and mobilized as a standard for ethnic exclusion of other groups. The process of ethno-religious identification can be initiated with regards to certain social settings conducive to such development. There is always a quest for self-identity on the basis of its religious and cultural identity, if denied; the periphery would obviously react to such as potentially hegemonic, as the identity of those in the periphery are felt to be extremely vulnerable. Such intensifying of identity crisis is most evident in the Northeast India than elsewhere in the country.

Tribal Religion and Culture: Religion has been an important aspect in the course of development regarding culture, heritage and social solidarity of any community. Infact, there has been a strong emphasis that religion and culture are inseparable. Religion is the system of worship of God as a means of code for the growth of spiritual and social behaviour of men. Man always believes in the supernatural as the cause, continuity and end of his existence. Infact, Religion permeates all aspects of life. An important characteristic of tribal religion is that it doesn't have any sacred scripture. The religious ethos is contained in the people's hearts, minds, oral history and rituals.

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Tripura has traditionally been the home of different cultures and people. The tribal culture and their traditions and practices pervade almost all of the aspects in the society. The distinctiveness of the tribes lays their rituals, cultures, beliefs and above all the harmony in which they survive in unison with nature. Their custom depicts their belief in simplicity. Most of the tribes now share patriarchal cultural ties with some other tribal societies. The tribal people are clinging to their identity despite of the external influences that threatened the tribal culture. However it is seen that Christianity has bought a change that can be termed as a total transformation in the tribal lifestyle and out look particularly in the North Eastern States of India.

Each of the tribes found in the North East Regions of the country are marked for their unique and distinguished cultures. They have their own rituals, beliefs, festivals, dances, songs and ways of living. But one thing that is common in all the tribal people is that their cultures display a lot of power, joy, vibrancy and enthusiasm. Their festivals are specifically marked for their hospitality and a strong bond of love for each other.

The present paper seeks to explore various alternative views with reference to the tribals of Tripura in general and the Bru/Reang in particular with special issues relating to their religion and cultural idea of an inclusive society that influence their identity. Religious or cultural exclusion may occurs when the culture of a group, irrespective of its language, religion or traditional customs, are denigrated or suppressed by the State. Conversely, religious-cultural inclusion may refer to the domain of public recognition and support to it.

The Reang usually call themselves as '**Bru**', but the term '**Reang**' is used as an appellation to denote the tribe. The Bru/Reang basically belonged to the Mongoloid group and speaks the Tibeto-Burmese language. The Bru/Reang has been identified as the "Primitive Group" during the sixth plan period by the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India on the basis of their pre-agricultural level of technology, extremely low level of literacy, declining or stagnant population.

The Bru/Reangs are the second largest tribes in Tripura but they are also the most vulnerable section of the society. Among the Reang (Bru) community, with regards to the religious population (2001 Census) those who are adherents to Traditional Belief or Animists consist of 84 per cent, Christianity accounts for about 9.98 per cent, while Hindus of all sects is about 6.02 per cent.

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The Reang (Bru) follow their religious practices and usages for ages. They have a belief on the benevolent (*Buraha, Longdrai*,etc.) and the malevolent (*Songrongma, Mainokma, Khunokma*,etc.) spirits, Animatism (Attribution of life to physical objects), Animism (Belief on the natural objects), Totemism (Transmigration of soul), beliefs in Dreams/Divinations, Magic/Witchcrafts, Omen, etc. But the faith and belief that the majority professes is animism. The belief of animism is probably one of man's oldest beliefs. From its earliest beginning it was a belief that a soul or spirit existed in every object. Infact, this religious practice has been the core of the indigenous way of life. Traditionally, the tribal religions are historically evolved. The Reang (Bru) have been loosely described as animists, having their own belief of local spirits. In general, they see their world filled with various invisible spirits (often called *Phola*). They associate spirits with rice, soil, water, fire, stones, forests, etc. Priest (*Akchai*) in each village contact these spirits and prescribe ways to appease them. In times of crisis or change, animal sacrifices may be made to placate the anger of the spirits. Illness is often believed to be caused by evil spirits. In addition to belief in spirits, villagers believe in taboos on many objects or practices. The worship of the supernatural beings is supposed to protect them from all evils and calamities. Religion also serves to engender and strengthen group consciousness and solidarity. The Reang (Bru) village has a community priest known as *Akchai*. It is he who performs all worship individually and also on behalf of the whole village. Major pujas/rituals of the Reang (Bru) community performed by the priest includes the entire rituals starting from birth to death viz., *Gbeing Bumo, Aabu Sumo*, etc before and after the birth of a Child. *Mai Khlungmo, Mtai Ktor*, etc. to get relief from diseases. *Nohsuh Mtai, Maibaohmo, Ha Splehmo*, etc. held after the death of a person. The priest is also regarded as physicians possessing knowledge of medicinal herbs and capable of curing the diseased by means of herbs as well as magical incantations. He is held in high esteem by the villagers and enjoys manifold privileges.

Infact, the religious life of the Reang (Bru) tribes revolves around the process of human life cycle in relation to cultural events and cultivation (Jhum). All the ceremonies and festivals are linked to invoke a blessing from different gods and goddesses in order to obtain greater happiness and prosperity. Such numerous deities are commonly worshipped through various rituals to safeguard and cure them from different evils and illness.

Christianity: The wave of Christianity entered Tripura during the reign of Amar Manikya (1577 A.D. to 1585 A.D.) whereby Jesuit Missionaries were invited to work in Tripura. Later, different Society of Christianity like British Baptist Missionary Society (1879), New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society (1890), etc. reached to the different sections of the people of Tripura. Infact, there are different

denominations of Christianity like the Catholic, Baptist, Evangelical Free Church of India, Seventh Day Adventist, Presbyterian, United Pentecostal Church, Salvation Army, etc. who undertook their evangelistic works among the tribes of Tripura. Christianity reached the Reang (Bru) community after Khu Rai was baptized in 1922, thereafter more evangelistic works took place from 1926 onwards. The advent of Christianity among the Reang (Bru) has infact been a new era which ushered into the Reang (Bru) Society. Christianity provided an ideology that helped the people to maintain their identity during the course of serious defects in the traditional sphere of life, socio-cultural and political institutions. Many evils, superstitions, burden of animal sacrifice, etc. were transformed by the teaching of Christian ideology.

Conclusion: The influence of Christian and Hindu religions has been a dominating force in eliminating most of the traditional religious belief and practices. The Reangs (Bru) essence of religion is their belief in the law of *Karma* and rebirth, where both Hinduism and Christianity have a special effect on their traditional belief and practices. But, their influence among the Reang (Bru) community has been revitalization for the search of a new ideology, which aims at securing an efflorescence of a new identity. The worship of different deities is a system to get relief from different illness or diseases. Indigenous religion and Christianity are fundamentally incompatible. The former is essentially tribal and animistic. It shares with other primal religions a belief in ever-present spirits that use natural objects as instruments to bring about good or evil. The spirit world is at work in human beings and nature alike. Particular geographical features, plants and animals are thought to have special powers to help or harm the tribe. Rituals are designed to express adoration or achieve propitiation of such mysterious and dangerous entities. In tribal religion, there is no any sharp distinction between the spirits and the essential unity of nature and humanity. The world is filled with spirit beings, which can be approached and reverenced through the material objects to which they have attached themselves. Ritual actions that celebrate the significance of these signs are acts of faith through which each generation binds itself. In contrast to deep indigenous curiosity about the beginning of things, Christianity believes that creation is the unparalleled act of divine love that cannot be explained by any scientific concepts of causation. But the Reangs (Bru) recognize that their ancestral religion is incapable of reshaping any appeal to its apparently simple virtues and beliefs.

Religion is a powerful forces that influences how people think and act. One of the biggest changes is that a century ago, people were born with their parents' religion. They tended to stay with that religion for their entire lives. Now people choose their religion. They switch; they go back and forth. Human existence and history have also given a relative value. Because the transcendent God confers their ultimate purpose and destiny, human beings are free to engage in historical, sociological and psychological studies without

calling upon gods for support. The influence of Christian and Hindu religion is seen in the celebration of Christian festivals like Easter, Good Friday and Christmas and Hindu festivals like Durga Puja, Laxmi Puja, etc. The Reang (Bru) communities are therefore now mostly motivated towards other religions viz., Vaisnavism, Hinduism, Christianity, etc. Such conversion has significantly affected the socio-cultural life of the Reang (Bru) community and in the process; most of the traditional religion belief and practices are either lost or intermingled with the process in the worshipped of the different sects of the Hinduism.

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