

## **Religious Belief and faith of Sonowal Kacharis of Assam**

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### **1. Introduction**

Tribal believe in the existence of human, nature and spirituals worlds and continuous interaction between these three worlds is well established and maintained. The tribal belief in the existence of a spirituals world and its influence on their daily life is their age-old animistic philosophy. Indeed, their strong belief in the influence of a spiritual world and divine being (of both benevolent and malevolent nature). This is predominantly seen in all the tribal communities, where tribals propitiate the spiritual world and the divine beings of human origin, natural origin, and supernatural origin through rituals, ceremonies, and festivals to get blessings in the form of good social lives, health, harvests

These Tribal worldview practices are always integrated with indigenous knowledge and every rituals or festivals has its own rationality. These development oriented worldview practices and indigenous knowledge are cultural mechanisms of the tribal communities. The animistic philosophies form the basis for evolution and socio- cultural identities, their community life is always based on these customs, worldviews, traditions and related practices and taboos and so on.

There is probably more diversity of religions in India than anywhere on the earth. Apart from having representation from almost all the major religions of the world, India was also the birth place of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and the home of one of the oldest religions of the world, Zoroastrianism. The People of India survey has revealed existence of greater adherents of “tribal religions” in Eastern India. In North- East for example, the “tribal” Hindu, Christian and Buddhist groups continue to hold old tribal religious beliefs.

### **2. Sonowal Kachari**

The North Eastern part of India is the hot spot of culture. The region is characterized by multi ethnicity, multi culture and multi linguistic. Ethnic identity and cultural traits have never be frozen in time or space, they have been in state of flux. Each group or community has a distinctive identity and ethos of its own. Each tribe represents variations in culture, religion due to its multi ethnicity, multi linguistic and varied ecological settings.

Sonowal Kacharis is an Indo Tibeto Mongolian tribe, who belong to the Tibeto Burman language family. The Badu-hunoloyan group of Kachari people establishes their territory named Hemali and Halali, which were situated in and around present day Sadiya of upper of Assam. The community is internally divided into a number of units, viz. Hans or Family and Bansha.

### **3. Objective**

This paper explores and gives descriptive account of numerous beliefs and faith, among the Sonowal Kacharis

It also tries to illustrate how this tribe exists and adjust in a multi dynamic network. The inter faith convergence and tries to gives an outline for future development and prospects.

To conclude the paper by examining the phenomenon and impact of radical social change traditional tribal society

### **4. Religious Beliefs and Faith**

Traditional Sonowal Kacharis, like their counterparts in other parts of the world, are acutely aware of the distinction between the physically living (men and women of flesh and blood who constitute the actual visible community), and ancestral spirits and other supersensible beings who belong to the invisible order. It is much more than simply a social grouping of people bound together by reasons of natural origin or deep common interests and values. It is both a society as well as a unity of the visible and invisible worlds; the world of the physically living on the one hand, and the world of the ancestors, divinities and souls of children yet to be born to individual kin-groups. Thus the religious dimension is clearly very important as traditionally they rely on the supernatural power and divine authority of ancestors and other spiritual patrons to validate their worthwhile activities and to ensure the lasting success.

For Traditional Sonowal Kacharis, the idea and structure of human society are essentially part of fundamentally holistic, sacred and highly integrated. Their belief in ancestors and the supernatural order, in addition to its inherent religious are prominent. The direct relation with God is rarely explicit but the belief in one God, Who is Creator and God, underlies everything else. God does not intervene in the day-to-day affairs of life. These are governed by other invisible forces, good or evil, from whom it is possible to win favours through the ritualised experience of the ancestors. Besides praying to God and the deities, there is a common theme of sacrifice in Traditional Sonowal Kacharis. The invisible members, especially ancestors and spiritual beings are powerful and by far superior to human beings. Their reality and presence in the community are duly acknowledged and honoured among various traditional Sonowal Kacharis. Neglect could spell disaster for human beings and the community.

Religious rituals and ceremonies marking the transition of individuals and groups from one significant stage of life to another abound in their community. Similar rites are also found in several parts of the world outside. Initiation rites have far-reaching implications for the life of individuals and the community at large, which involve different aspects of life including the psychological, social, economic and political. They also rely on speech-forms such as myths,

proverbs, wise sayings and songs, as well as art-forms like sculpture, dance, ritual objects, etc to preserve and impress their key beliefs, ideas and values in the minds of successive generations of society. Example : Hogra dance.

## **5. Belief In The Ancestors**

The belief in ancestors is an important element of Traditional Sonowal Kacharis and occupies an important place in harmonious living among Sonowal Kacharis peoples. The ancestors, or the living-dead, are believed to be disembodied spirits of people who lived upright lives here on earth, died 'good' and natural death, that is at ripe old age, and received the acknowledged funerary rites. With the completion of prescribed funeral rites, a deceased person is believed to transform into an ancestor. The funeral rites in this case, serve as some kind of 'rites du passage'. The disembodied spirit joins the esteemed ranks of fully achieved ancestors in the spirit world. They could be either men or women, but male ancestors are prominent since patrilineage is the dominant system of family and social integration. Example : Bura Puha

Traditional Sonowal Kacharis hold the ancestors as the closest link the physically living have with the spirit world. "The living-dead are bilingual; they speak the language of men, with whom they lived until 'recently', and they speak the language of the spirits and of God ...They are the 'spirits' with which Sonowal Kacharis peoples are most concerned. It is through the living-dead that the Spirit World becomes personal to men. They are still part of their human families and people have personal memories of them". They (Sonowal Kacharis) believe that the ancestors are essentially benevolent spirits. They return to their human families from time to time and share meals with them, however, symbolically. They know and have interest in what is going on in their families. Example "Mitakak Diya"

For Sonowal Kacharis peoples, the belief and ideas about ancestors to form an essential part of the effort to inculcate, mobilise and promote the community ideal of harmonious living in society. They are benevolent spiritual guardians of their respective families and communities. The lineage head make periodical offerings of gifts, food and drinks to the ancestors at appropriate times. Furthermore, ancestors are generally held to be the custodians of the land on which their children live. They are guardians of family affairs, customs, traditions and ethical norms. Ancestors are thought to mete quick and severe punishment on people who disregard the hallowed traditions of the community, or infringe taboos and norms of acceptable behaviour in society. The community therefore, try to strictly observe such taboos and norms, thereby ensuring peace and harmony in their relationship with one another, with ancestors and other supernatural beings.

## **6. Animal Sacrifice**

Besides praying to God, the deities, there is a common theme of animal sacrifice in Sonowal Kachari Community. The act is part of various "pooja" ritual offerings performed. They

kill animals to sanctify weddings, new homes or religious festivals. When an animal is to be sacrificed, however, it should be an uncastrated. The form of the ritual slaughtering of an animal on the deity's altar in front of temples, the main focus of ritual was therefore not inside the temple which served mainly as the 'house' of the god. The details of the ritual and the type of animal sacrificed varied from one ritual to another.

Devotees who cannot afford to sacrifice a goat, pig, lamb or water buffalo, offer a less expensive chicken or duck. Carcasses remain the property of the believers who brought them, and are carried home or taken to the chamber where the temple's butchers skin and debone the meat for a small fee according to devotees' requests. Everyone seems to think the slaughters will please the gods and grant a boon to whoever makes such an offering.

## **7. Normative Standards of Behaviour**

Every social group evolves its distinct ethical code. Every society has its norms of acceptable behaviour, taboos and prohibitions. Religion may be distinct and separate from morality, as many scholars have rightly argued. For traditional Sonowal Kacharis, however, the line dividing the two is very thin indeed. It plays a crucial role in the ethical dynamics of Sonowal Kacharis. In the traditional religion 'gods serve as police men'. Human conduct is seen as key in upholding the delicate balance believed to exist between the visible world and the invisible one.

They believe that success in life; including the gift of off-spring, wealth and prosperity, are all blessings from the gods and ancestors. **Man's daily activities are supervised by different spirits who appear in different forms and performs different functions. The purposes and situations of one sacrifice are different from the other. To cite one of the most popular purposes amongst them as an instance will suffice our present purpose.**

**One of the most popular sacrifices made at the individual level was the "Khin Bhang"**

**One of the most popular sacrifices made at the Community level was the "Gojai Bhuj"**

They also believe that community is basically sacred, rather than secular, and surrounded by several religious forms and symbols. People generally return to their villages from their residence in the cities from time to time to join members of their village community to celebrate important traditional rituals and cultural events. The individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries.

## **8. Rituals and Ceremonies observed particular ancestors or spirit being**

The idea and structure of human society for traditional Sonowal Kacharis, are essentially part of fundamentally holistic, sacred and highly integrated. It is an essential article of belief in Sonowal Kacharis religions that a fundamental delicate balance and equilibrium exist in the universe, between the visible world and the invisible one. The Creator, *Khring Khring Bathow*, created everything that exists and set everything in its place. They basically view the universe as comprising basically two realms; the visible and the invisible realms. They grasp the cosmos as a three-tiered structure, consisting of the heaven above, the physical world and the world beneath. Each of these is inhabited by different categories of beings. The Creator and a host of spirit beings, including archdivinities inhabit the heaven above, other divinities, ancestors, and myriads of unnamed spirits dwell in the world beneath, while human beings occupy the physical earth. Human beings may be less powerful, but their world is the centre and the focus of attention. It belongs to human beings as sensible beings to maintain the delicate balance in the universe. This is what assures the happiness and prosperity of individuals and the community.

## **9. Radical Change Among Sonowal Kacharis**

The situation has changed radically today. The experience of modernization have given rise to a radically different socio-political and religious background in among the Sonowal Kacharis. While it is true that the traditional religion still has considerable influence in the life and culture of many peoples, it no longer enjoys exclusive dominance and control over the life of the vast majority of the population. Certain traditional beliefs, customs and practices associated with the idea and promotion of community-living have been outlawed. They were considered either too cruel, or simply opposed to modern world. The traditional belief in ancestors and other spiritual patrons, as well as the vital role they were believed to play in fostering community-living, have been seriously related in most contemporary societies. The dramatic changes in the socio-political and religious aspects of life bring considerable pressure on the people's sense of community. Thus Sonowal Kachari societies are visibly in a state of transition,

## **10. Traditional Sonowal Kacharis and Vaishnavism**

Many tribes of North East India has gradually substituted itself for the traditional religion, sometimes under the influence of external factors and in the overwhelming majority of cases for the self identity. Ancestor worship, for example, is something fundamental to traditional religion if ever anything was, and yet it is completely foreign to present religion. Vaishnavism has never expressly forbidden these. Gaining access to the Vaishnavism community has always been very easy. Although is no real break in the passage from one community to the other, but simply a progressive disengagement from the one and a progressive integration into the other. The long cohabitation of vaishnavism with traditional Tribal religion has also had an effect at the cultural level. It has brought together many tribal group to the main stream. For them Vaishnavism is not an imported religion and for many, abandoning the

Traditional Tribal Religion is equivalent to the rejection of all their family and tribal traditions, so intermingled are the two socio-religious universes.

## 11. Conclusion

On account of various levels of culture contact, adoption and incorporation, the tribes of India had often borrowed cultural traits and religious practices of various sects and major religious. Religious movements and plethora of religious ideas, in varied historical phases, motivated the people and brought them closer towards numerous religious cults, sects, reforms movements and diverse beliefs systems. Mingling with exterior religious beliefs with pre-existing religious beliefs of Sonowal Kachari tribe facilitated the ground to growth of multifaceted religious beliefs systems as a rational order within the Sonowal Kachari. H.H.Risely had noted long ago in 1873 that the tribal people were never swallowed up by any cultural or religious adoption or incorporation. They indeed perpetually adhered to original religion and practices. The tribal priesthood has not only been reinstated old tribal festivals and rituals but also are being enacted and celebrated in greater zeal, and even caste Hindus endorse them and participated in them.

In different societies the pre-change cultural traits, cultural patterns and religious customs survive in greater or lesser degree. It is also not a system within system but the survival and situationally determined growth of multifaceted religious beliefs systems existing as a rational order.

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