ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOKS

The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Readings on Tribe and Religions in India

Emerging Negotiations

Edited by Maguni Charan Behera

THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF CONTEMPORARY READINGS ON TRIBE AND RELIGIONS IN INDIA

Tribal societies in India observe a diverse set of religious practices which are a quintessential part of their community life. This handbook explores rituals, beliefs, ceremonies and festivals, liturgy, knowledge, and traditions that tribal people practise today and traces the history of their interaction with other religions, communities, and cultures.

The book provides analytical, intellectual, and cultural insights into the religious tradition of tribes within the interactive space of a pan-Indian civilisation. It examines contemporary religious practice within tribes while also exploring changes either brought on by interactions or political interventions. The volume reflects on the intersections of cultural or political life of communities and their religious worldviews. The book also discusses the processes of assimilation or adoption of different religions or religious traditions by tribes and the challenges of detribalisation and shrinking populations of vulnerable groups. It explores both established and emerging dynamics in the field of tribe and religion and provides a look into the unique systems of kinship, worship, and life within many different tribal communities in India.

This and its companion handbook, *The Routledge Handbook of Tribe and Religions in India: Contemporary Readings on Spirituality, Belief and Identity*, provide a comprehensive look into the religious life and practices of a very diverse group of tribes in India. It will be of interest to academics and researchers working in the fields of religion, anthropology, indigenous and tribal studies, social and cultural anthropology, sociology of culture, sociology of religion, development studies, history, political science, folkloristic, and colonialism.

Maguni Charan Behera was a former Professor of Tribal Studies at Arunachal Institute of Tribal Studies, Rajiv Gandhi (Central) University, Arunachal Pradesh, India. Dr. Behera was also a Professor of Indigenous Culture Studies and Dean School of Cultural Studies, Central University of Jharkhand. He has been working on tribes for about 40 years. His present interest is to develop tribal studies as an academic discipline and in this direction he is editing books on different themes from multidisciplinary perspectives. He has the credit of introducing tribal studies as an undergraduate course of Rajiv Gandhi University under distance mode.

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To

Students and Scholars Engaged in Tribal Studies

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The desire to prepare a handbook on 'tribe and religions in India', though intense, stumbled on four challenges at the beginning which were initially discouraging. First, the idea was new; scholars working on tribes have been familiar with the framework of 'tribal religion' and have created a huge quantity of material on diverse perspectives within it. To write an article on a new concept based on empirical data without any sponsorship undoubtedly discouraged many scholars. Second, writing a book chapter, instead of writing for publication in UGC-CARE (University Grants Commission Consortium for Academic and Research Ethics) and Scopus listed journals which have scoring credit, did not seem a profitable time investment to many. Given the workload in educational institutions, teaching and non-teaching (administrative, etc.), time constraints dissuaded some interested and committed academics. The third factor was my limitation of contact with willing scholars from across the states who are working on tribes and religion, the wide contact was envisioned in view of covering as many tribes as possible.

The fourth challenge related to disciplinary and ideological – academics and non-academic view points. When non-academic ideologies influence the argument, placing tribal religion only in academic and disciplinary context and thereby rendering myopic treatment of the subject, and trying to fit in a holistic perspective was not an easy pursuit. Openness of contributors to interdisciplinary engagement helped me to overcome this challenge.

To begin with I made a list of scholars, emic and etic, academics, administrators, and activists, who are working on tribal religion. But it was not easy to sort out scholars with an objective academic insight. While I was fumbling over the list a few friends came to my rescue by suggesting names from the list and outside; and this has made it possible to place the handbook in pan-Indian context. Many of them also contributed articles; a few friends helped me to access relevant literature and provided secretarial assistance. Had it not been for their ungrudging support it would not have been possible to make the handbook project a success. Obviously, this makes me obliged to all of them. I feel a deep sense of gratitude to Nilakantha Panigrahi, Professor at Department of Anthropology and Tribal Development, Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya, Bilaspur; Diganta Hatiboruah at Department of Political Science North Lakhimpur College (Autonomous), Assam; Sadananda Nayak, Associate Professor, P.G. Department of History, Berhampur University, Odisha; Dhiraj Kumar Borkotoky, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Royal Global University,

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Maguni Charan Behera

ABBREVIATIONS

AAP	Aam Admi Party
ADC	Autonomous District Council
AIMSU	All Idu Mishmi Students Union
BCM	Baptist Church of Mizoram
BJP	Bhartiya Janta Party
BTP	Bhartiya Tribal Party
CEM	Chief Executive Member
CoI	Census of India
DBD	Dakshin Bastar Dantewada
DMK	Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam
DNTs	Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Tribes
ECM	Evangelical Church of Maraland
EFCI	Evangelical Free Church of India
GoD	Gazetteer of Odisha, Dehenkanal
HR&CE	The Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments
ICI	Independent Church of India
ILO	International Labour Organizations
IMCLS	Idu Mishmi Cultural & Literary Society
INC	Indian National Congress
IPD-Igu	Identification, Preservation, and Documentation of Igu
KIRTADS	Kerala Institute for Research Training and Development Studies of Scheduled and Scheduled Castes
LIKBK	Lairam Isua Krista Baptist Kohhran
MDC	Member of District Council
MFP	Minor Forest Produces
MHIP	Mizoram Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl
MKHC	Mizoram Kohhran Hruaitu Committee
MLPC	Mizoram Liquor Prohibition and Control
MLTP	Mizoram Liquor Total Prohibition
MNF	Mizo National Front

MoC	Memorandum of the Census of British India
MPF	Mizoram People Forum
MTP	Mara Thutlya Pi
MUP	Mizoram Upa Pawl
NAIRCC	National Adivasi-indigenous Religion Coordination Committee
NBR	Nilgiri Biosphere Reserves
NDTV	New Delhi Television
NTK	Naam Tamizhar Katchi
OBC	Other Backward Caste/Class
ORP	Other Religions and Persuasions
PCI	Presbyterian Church of India
PCM	Presbyterian Church of Mizoram
PVTG	Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
TRC	Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak
VHP	Vishva Hindu Parishad
YCA	Young Chakma Association
YLA	Young Lai Association
YMA	Young Mizo Association
ZPM	Zoram People Movement

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INTRODUCTION

'Tribal Religion' Or 'Tribe and Religions': Engaging with a Contemporary Dilemma

Maguni Charan Behera

0.0 Introduction

Communities in India have lived together and interacted with each other from an ancient time. The underlying force behind these interactions has had variegated manifestations, such as the silent interactions between the Raji and their Kumaoni neighbours (*see* Majumdar 1944 and Alam & Jha 2019:41–42, fn 1); the ritualistic politics of alliance between the Bhils and the Rajputs (Tod 2002:347) or between the Paudi Bhuyan and the Bonai Kings (*see* Skoda 2019); inclusion through expansion during state formation in tribal areas (Pargiter 1922:3); conquest, coercion, and subjugation of the Indian population including the tribes by the British[1]; exploitation of tribes by British agents like the *zamindars*, *thekadars,* and *sahukars* (*see also* Gupta 1974:59-73 and MacDougall 1985:33); conversion to Christianity[2] and Islam (*see* Siddiqui 2004); adoption of Hinduism by communities like the Ahoms, the Deoris, and 'other' tribes[3]; reconstruction of identity and changing identity descriptions including being labelled as criminals, tribal, or the Scheduled Tribes during colonial and post-colonial regimes[4]; exposure to government policies and programmes[5]; and several others.

0.1 Interaction: Nature and Scope

These interactions have caused observable changes in many communities, impacting various aspects of their lives; while in some communities these changes may not be very distinguishable from indigenous traditions. For instance, we do not have data to show the extent of changes in the socio-cultural life of the Nicobarese and Andamanese tribal communities as a result of their silent trade or contact with Malaysian traders (*see* Portman 1899, *passim*); but evidently, a traditional Raji's livelihood had close links with their Kumaun neighbours; and girls from Andamanese tribal communities would enter into marriage or sexual relations with Malaysian/Muslim traders before British contact (Biswas 2015).

Interactions may not always result in having a tangible impact on socio-cultural life especially when it is irregular. In most of the cases, however, interaction brings changes in the socio-cultural life of people to different degrees. Cultural interactions can also lead to

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identity-formation and assertion. Many revival movements like the Sapha Hor movement, the Donyi-Polo movement, the Bhagat movement, and even protest movements against the British colonial rule, language movements, etc. are examples of this. The assertion of identity is often not a response against the incoming forces of change; rather it is a realisation that takes shape after the changes have taken place. *Gharwapsi*, a post-colonial phenomenon, is also a form of assertion of a prior identity; the operating force may be either persuasion or realisation.

Interaction between communities by itself is not an inducement to adopt elements from neighbouring communities; it is however a prerequisite to cultural assimilation or cultural integration. The process of assimilation or the adoption of culture, religion, language, beliefs, or practices by a smaller or 'weaker' community of a more dominant community can occur due to many reasons ranging from coercion or persuasion on the one hand, to a more spontaneous process of integrating practices as a means to 'keep up with the Joneses' on the other. It should be clarified that adoption is both a process and effect of such processes in a community. The adoption of the practice of wearing a sacred thread by tribal Bhagats or the practice of abstaining from non-vegetarian food by the Sapha Hors and Bhagats was an effort to emulate neighbouring Hindu communities and their socio-cultural status. It is what scholars of sociology, political science, and economics would call the *demonstration effect*. Persuasion may also play a role in the inducement of one community by the other to assimilate with traditions and practices for better status, wealth, or opportunities etc. The practice of wearing a sacred thread and *tilak* by the Kandhas of some parts of Odisha who adopted the Sanatan Dharma through persuasion, is an example of this.

The impulse to keep up with the Joneses is more spontaneous and self-induced, but is not also a simple desire to emulate the neighbours to acquire status. Often, it carries with it benefits due to cultural conformity. Expectations and aspirations in a cultural context, upon finding a parallel in a major or neighbouring culture, are likely to induce people to emulate these, if new or better benefits are envisaged. We can take the example of the *Jitia* ritual of the neighbouring Hindus performed by a section of the Oraon tribe (Roy 1928:247–249). The ritual conducted by mother's wishing for long life of their sons finds its reflection in Oraon patriarchy in which 'son preference' stands paramount. Adoption of this ritual is not evidently for status emulation; but it is a mother's concern for the long life of sons in a male dominated society. It should not be deduced that the Oraon people look down a female child, for her role is crucial in reproduction and the workforce component on which patriarchy has its standing. Nevertheless, in adoption of practices of a 'superior' neighbouring community, the status consideration cannot be ruled out, though it is not a manifest cause.

India is an ancient country and the communities living here, whether migrants like the Muslims, Parsis, and Siddis of Christian era, or others before them, have a history of migration. Narratives of tribal communities speak about their earlier settlements from where they migrated to present habitations. The history of state formation in tribal areas is a story of migration and interaction of the kings, Brahmins, king's retinue, and the tribes. The conquest of kingdoms and communities by the Muslim and the European powers is a saga of interaction between rulers and the ruled. Buddhist literatures describe trade and commerce practices during that time and monks' travel to different places to preach religion. Adi Shankar travelled through the length and breadth of the country and established four cardinal Mathas (religious seats) at Puri in Odisha, Srngeri in Karnaraka, Badrinath in the

Himalayas in Uttarakhand, and Dwarka in Gujarat which have been important places of pilgrimage. Several pilgrim centres like Parashuram Kund in Arunachal Pradesh, Gaya in Bihar, Tanginath in Jharkhand, and Tarini Peetha in Odisha are situated in tribal areas. It is also interesting to note versions of the Ramayan and the Mahabharat among tribes like the Bhil, the Karbi, the Khamti, the Gond, the Munda, and so on. The two great epics also have made mention of tribes like the Bhil. In the Ramayan and the Mahabharat tribes' interaction with non-tribes is vividly described. Besides, deities like Stambheswari, Samulei in Odisha, and Durga with 16 hands in Deori Mandir at Tamar in Jharkhand are visited and worshipped by tribal and non-tribal people alike from a long period in history. The tribal connection of Lord Jagannath in Odisha is an established history with *daita* of Saura tribe origin as servitors of the God.

The argument, therefore, is that interaction between communities in general and tribe and non-tribe in particular in India is a reality. Studies based on a category model[6] in the absence of reference to historical process of interaction, undoubtedly, would lead to partial and misleading representation of a social category such as a community. As is argued, communities have been existing from time immemorial in an interactive mode. Interaction undoubtedly has impact on one or the other, or on the both interacting communities. But the communities without any coalescence maintain their respective individual identities. Unfortunately, individual existence became the basis of categorisation during the colonial period. Categories like tribe, criminal tribe, race, caste, and caste hierarchy influenced thinking at different levels, creating a schism in interactive space and perception of people. The binarity of the 'self' and the 'other' emerged as a determining factor of social relations. The binarity even extended to represent sub-categories within each category following the notion of the 'self' and the 'other'. Moiety or sub-tribe divisions in a tribe are examples to the point. Designating a community as a tribe had lapses as lineages or clans were enumerated as tribes during the colonial period and thereafter. That is why in earlier census reports clans or lineages have been enumerated under the designation of 'tribe', several of which in the latest census have been rectified. The notion of the 'self' and the 'other' assumes the structure of a pyramid; it reflects with small groups within a tribe; then between a tribe and another tribe or tribes, and at the apex between tribe and non-tribe. A similar phenomenon exists in the non-tribe category also. This is not so simple. A few tribes also come together to form a greater identity on language or ethnic basis. The pattern of the 'self' and the 'other' normally presents a complex reality. Each group, or a sub-group within, or a further division in a sub-group is a 'self' in relation to 'all others' in different contexts (*see* Behera 2018). In the 'self' and the 'other' relations, exclusiveness lies at the perception of the former in the space of interaction. Assertion of community or religious identity is a reflection of a desirable exclusiveness, but intra-community division along religious lines reflects a different dimension of interaction and exclusiveness. A group within a tribe may share a religious interactive space beyond the community, while the tribal community remains as an ethnic whole. We can cite the connection between the Tana Bhagat sect of the Oraons and the Hindus (*see* Roy 1928:395) who are ethnically the Oraons.

Another dimension of identity has a cross community display of similar worldviews in religious practices even in the absence of interaction; but it is related to a similar stage of evolution, particularly agriculture. Agricultural tribes observe the ritual of eating new rice after completing the harvest. The Khamti tribe in Arunachal Pradesh celebrate *kin-khao mao* like *nawa khani* of the Oraon of central India. Even first fruits are offered to deities by

the gathering tribes. After harvest the Khamti, a Buddhist tribe, perform *Hongkho Khao*, bringing goddess Lakshami home; similarly, the Oraon perform *Kharapuja* or *Kharihani*. Worship of the threshing floor, Kharihani suggests bringing paddy to the threshing floor from the field and making it ready for storage. What is interesting is that agricultural festivals are not confined to tribal communities only. *Nuakhai* in Western Odisha is a festival of all communities, both tribe and non-tribe (*see* Pasayat 2007). The practice of worshiping threshing floor after its preparation and after completion of threshing activity is a household ritual observed in coastal districts like Bhadrak and Jajpur. It may be the case in other districts also.

Then the question arises how to conceptualise the religion of a tribe, i.e. tribal religion in the context of interaction within and without, and commonality beyond a community?

Studies on 'tribal religion', particularly in contemporary India, engage our attention to emerging conceptual and theoretical inconsistencies in the interface between a tribe and its religions. Empirically, a mismatch is noticed in one-to-one correspondence between tribe and its religion. The emerging mismatch questions the notion of 'tribal religion' studied in a holistic perspective. Members of a tribe, as observed, do profess wholly or partly Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, or Indigenous faith and beliefs (tribal religion). Cases are not rare to find members of a tribe professing at least three different religious traditions – Christianity, Hinduism, and Indigenous religion for example.

Evidently, religion slips away from its constituent place which it occupies in a 'culture', and thereby, loses its efficacy in asserting a religious identity of the community. It is not a surprise to notice absence of religion in contemporary identity (autonomy) movements of a tribe, though several tribes demand for the inclusion of tribal religions in census records.

It is worth noting that contemporary tribes are in transition, displaying spectacular changes in their social, economic, and political life-ways. So, religion is not the only field of change in tribal communities. But this change marks a visible distinction in identity constructs, for the changes in other fields, despite breeding inequalities, have not created conflicting and horizontally exclusive divisions like different religious groups in a tribe. Even a language shift does not create a sense of intra-tribe division. Members of a tribe or the tribe as a whole, by shifting to a new tongue due to one or the other reasons, take pride in the language tradition of their root as a cultural heritage. Members of a tribe may speak different tongues, but they do not disown their root language like they discard traditional faith and practices after conversion. Understandably, a religious shift creates a binarity of core philosophy between old and new faiths. The point is that religious divisions in a tribe understandably lack feelings of a cultural wholeness, though each group shows its community consciousness beyond religious affiliation. When a single tribe displays religious divisions, ethnographers record not a tribe based religion, but different religious traditions. Arguably, the notion of 'tribal religion' appears to be a misnomer in its community-specific connotation corresponding to emerging religious divisions in a tribe. Similarly, one religion, say Christianity, Buddhism, or Islam, has created a space across communities, and in this context, such a religion pursued by a tribe interrogates the community dimension of its religion.

The notion of 'tribal religion' also carries theoretical inconsistency in a generic sense right from its conception. Contrary to its specific sense that tribal religion belongs to a tribe, the generic understanding connotes a collective representation of religion of all tribes. In India, colonial administration constructed the social category of 'tribe' in contrast to caste-

based occupational groups called Hindus. Arguably, tribal religion was conceptualised as binary opposite to Hinduism. Similarly, the construct of tribe in general was the 'other' to Europeans and thus, to their Christian religion. Therefore, in their 'Civilising Mission' conversion to Christianity, particularly of tribal communities, was one of the main objectives. Moreover, there is no record available to establish tribe-Christianity interface in the pre-colonial period.

On the contrary, during the pre-colonial period, several tribes had interaction with neighbouring Hindu traditions and a few had adopted Hinduism. During the period of reference, there were tribes professing Islam and Buddhism also. Evidently, what the tribes were not exposed to during the pre-colonial period was Christianity. It is, therefore, argued that tribal religion was conceptualised practically in contrast to Christianity. Interaction with prevalent pre-colonial religions does not mean that tribes were assimilated or integrated with them. There were also tribes outside Hindu, Islam, and Buddhist folds. What these tribes professed is what we call tribal religion. However, they were but a small constituent of the category of tribe and their numbers are shrinking in our contemporary time due to religion-shift.

Some major tribes organise revival movements to protect traditional religion against onslaughts of external religions. In revivalism, what evolves is an institutionalised syncretic tradition of two or more religions. Not only in revivalism, but in other religious denominations like Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism in a tribe, what we see practically is religious syncretism – a conglomeration of features of tribal religion and the institutionalised religion in different degrees. Moreover, revivalism is not tribe specific; in Sarana and Donyi-polo religions it engages more than one tribe. Further, a crucial point about the influence of Hinduism is that the emerging tradition in many tribes does not adopt Hindu nomenclature for the religious tradition, but continues with its old name. Revival religious traditions, in contrast, are found adopting new names like Heraka, Sarana, Bhagat, Sapha Hor, Heraka, Donyi-polo, Rangfra, etc. It should be mentioned that traditional tribes in general did not have a name for the faiths and beliefs they professed.

Revival movements are not post-independence phenomena. Such movements were organised as a means to mobilise people against colonial rule. Interestingly, leaders of Bhagat and Sapha Hor movements went to the extent of denouncing their traditional gods and spiritual beings considered to be their protectors. Needless to say, new gods were incorporated in the traditional pantheon.

In the present context, a tribe fully or partly converted to new religions revisit them through the lens of an indigenisation perspective. For the fully converted tribe, indigenisation of the new religion might display tribe-specific nature, but the problem underlies where two or more new religions exist in a tribe. Tribe specificity in the former case still raises the question of understanding the notion of tribal religion as a constituent of culture in general. There is no denying the fact that a wide range of diversity exists across tribal communities in the sphere of faith and beliefs. The diversity takes different patterns even with exceptions such as the example of the Mirs of Gujarat who profess both Hinduism and Islam simultaneously to please both groups. Undoubtedly, the emerging issue of interface between tribe and religion is a very complex dynamic.

We arrive at a point where the notion of 'tribal religion' does not empirically stand adequate to explain a tribe's contemporary religious pattern. It is to be noted that several disciplines like history, philosophy, sociology, theology, contemporary religion, and even

historical and fictional novels in literature engage in the study of contemporary religions of tribes apart from anthropology that is used to approach the subject in the cultural perspective. These new disciplines have their respective perspectives other than the cultural one. In view of this emerging trend, fresh debates and discussions are imperative for a critical academic scrutiny of contemporary 'tribe and religions' interface in place of the notion of 'tribal religion'. Tribe and religions framework carry greater scope to engage with contemporary religious dynamics among the tribes without sacrificing the notion of tribal religion. Moreover, they give a sense of openness to engage in 'tribe and religions' contrary to the narrow scope of 'tribal religion' in terms of one-to-one correspondence.

Naturally, the present religious dynamics among the tribes opens up an interesting area of academic engagement. Therefore, the context of contemporary religions of tribes needs critical enquiry. In view of this, the present study formulates a few preliminary questions to engage in two handbooks. The first one is entitled ***The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Readings on Tribe and Religions in India: Emerging Negotiations.*** The questions are:

1. In a syncretic tradition are there practices which contradict the core of institutionalised religion? (Buddhism does not prescribe sacrifice. But Khamti villagers were found during field study in the 1980s sacrificing a hen to the village deity of the traditional pantheon annually for good crops and good health without the involvement of Buddhist priest). Do two religious traditions co-exist? Could the presence of traditional practices and associated beliefs be conceptualised to formulate the notion of tribal religion? What would be the relation between 'what tribal religion meant in the past' and 'the features of tribal religion to be restored' from syncretic tradition?
2. How could tribal religion be conceptualised in revivalist or syncretic tradition as it is often beyond a particular community and has accommodated reforms/borrowings? Does it suggest religious crisis in the community?
3. As corollary to one (1) and two (2) can we think of tribal religion in terms of Tribal Christianity, Tribal Islam, Tribal Hinduism, etc. or conversely in terms of Christian tribes, Hindu tribes, Buddhist tribes, etc. as typologies of contemporary tribal religion in a generic sense? Then how does one view a tribe and its community identity which is divided along the belief of its members in different religions?
4. To what extent have indigenous faiths and practices internalised Hinduism, Christianity, etc? (Ex: In a Galo (a tribe) village of Arunachal Pradesh, it was observed that a hunter used to do a ritual by cleaning a small patch in the jungle and making traditional offerings. But after conversion to Christianity he cleans the patch, but instead of making offerings, simply draws a Cross). Or to what extent have Christianity, Hinduism, etc. internalised traditional faiths and practices? (Ex: Interpreting traditional practices, norms, or personalities according to Christian, Islam, Hindu, and other traditions like, for example, equivalence of Supreme God with Lord Shiva of Hindu tradition). Or to what extent are similarities accommodated? (Traditional healing rituals and presence of relatives similar to healing prayers to reinforce the sense of belonging).
5. Does interaction between tribal and Hindu traditions suggest Tribe-Hindu continuum?

Attempts have been made to address these questions within ***Tribe and Religions*** framework.

0.2 Introducing the Handbook and Contents

The first volume of the Handbook includes 28 chapters, excluding the introduction chapter, with equal number of topical focuses on the subject of tribe and religions. It covers 17 states and 19 tribal communities – both individual and more than one tribe – in 18 chapters. One chapter is a chronological presentation of the notion of tribal religion in census records up to 2011. The remaining eight chapters have been engaged in conceptualising events prevailing in several tribal communities. In some of these chapters, tribe and non-tribe interface is clearly evident.

A thematic organisation of 28 chapters on different topical issues into a systematic presentation of changes, responses, and contemporaneity is a challenging endeavour. Serialisation of themes is still more challenging. However, a framework of presentation is outlined under seven thematic divisions for a systematic arrangement of the notion of tribal religion within the broader context of negotiation with emerging dynamics.

It is to be made clear that the notion of 'tribe and religions' is proposed as a conceptual departure from the notion of 'tribal religion' to situate tribes, both in general and specific contexts of the category 'tribe', meaningfully in changing dimensions of contemporary religious worldview.

Anthropologists use the framework of syncretism to study a contemporary situation of one or more tribes. They also study a syncretic tradition within the framework of change and continuity. Both frameworks present the situation, but do not explain how and why it is so. We introduce the notion of contemporaneity as an alternative analytical tool to change and continuity or syncretism so that we understand each stage of interface from the past to the present (Behera 2016). By definition, ***contemporaneity*** underlies historical process, but in seven chapters included under this theme, historicity has not been the core of discussion, though it is not completely absent. Study on historicity, however, cannot be simply a passing reference to understand the present. Many aspects of contemporary tribal religion have evolved from a process of interface between the state and tribal religion (Eschmann et al. 1978:128–129; *see also* Pargiter 1922). Under the theme ***State, Tribe, and Religion***, three chapters present the historical context of negotiation between state and tribe that explains emerging contemporary religious worldview across the individual tribal community.

One period in the process of Indian history marks tribal and colonial interface. Tribal religion encountered Christian religion brought in by missionaries and the traditional belief system of the tribes underwent change. In our contemporary period the interface between traditional and Christian belief systems is an interesting area of academic investigation that includes the ways the traditional belief system were situated within Christian worldview during the colonial period are being contested by tribal intellectuals leading to an emerging tradition of indigenous Christianity. Even revivalism of traditional religion against Christianity is a crucial dimension of religious tradition. The issues have been discussed in three research articles included under the theme ***Multi- and Cross Cultural Negotiations***. Primarily, the above three themes underlie the framework of contemporaneity but with different topical focus.

Study on changes provides several implications. We come across ***shifting religious worldview, conceptualisation of religious tradition*** and ***institutionalisation*** process along with emerging ***politics in religion***. Chapters have been discussed under the above thematic frameworks which give a picture of negotiation of tribal religion with empirical and theoretical perspectives.

All 28 chapters (excluding the introduction) have their respective core arguments with focus on single or more issues; and more issues carry the potentiality of further academic interpretations. Naturally, the tendency to classify themes under suitable headings for a broad comprehension by taking advantage of the wider scope reflects here. As a result, chapters have been classified under seven distinct thematic heads to complement one another, rather than repeating the matter. Evidently, classifications under different themes in no way indicate thematic homogenisation of chapters; rather, each one engages with a distinct core argument; and all together coalesces into a perspective reflected under a thematic head. However, all of the chapters broadly focus on negotiation with changes and contemporary responses, though focused areas are diverse. A brief critical review of the chapters included in this volume, and under seven themes is presented below:

0.2.1 Contemporaneity

Historical process is either explicit or implicit in any contemporary religious tradition (*cf.* Guha 1987:x) studied within the framework of 'change and continuity', syncretism, liminality, etc. Therefore, Behera (2016) has proposed the concept of 'contemporaneity' as an analytical tool to study all forces which interplay in giving shape to a phenomenon at any contemporary period. Contemporaneity suggests the possibility of multiple approaches to examine a phenomenon even though it is generally reducible to specialised treatment.

Study of syncretic religious/cultural tradition or change and continuity against the backdrop of either implicit or explicit historical process is the context of contemporaneity. Arguably, any cultural/religious tradition over time is exposed to historical process. In other words, all such situations can be studied using a contemporaneity approach. However, in doing so, other dimensions of studying religion/culture remain absent. Therefore, this volume introduces contemporaneity as a possible framework of engaging with religious studies, includes seven chapters on it, and at the same time focuses on other dimensions of importance as appear in the chapters under relevant thematic sections. In all of the themes, however, an overtone of contemporaneity can be appreciated; but it is kept silent while focusing on the importance of an chapter's core content.

The prevailing tradition of visits of non-convert Waddars and Yerukulas of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana states to Hindu temples like Venkateswara of Tirupati, Penchala Narasimha Swami Temple of Panchalakona, Malakonda Swami Temple of Pamuru, Veera Brahma Matham of Cuddapah, Mallamkonda Swami Temple, Peddamma temple of Nellore, etc.; and convert ones to the church has historical connections. But what **Malli Gandhi** has focused on is what they believe and practise at present; the historicity though plays a silent role.

Ahom's Hinduisation, a historical anecdote, and efforts of a section of the community belonging to Mohan, Deodhai, and Bailung, the priestly clans among the Ahoms at present, to preserve traditional beliefs and practices is the core of argument in **Diganta Hatiboruah's** chapter. The joint chapter of **Ubaid Ahmad Dar** and **Mitoo Das** has provided a systematic account of a syncretism of Islamic and non-Islamic traditions prevailing in pastoralist Bakarwal community. Religious tradition, as the authors have presented, is evidently community specific; but there are instances where the syncretic practice of primal and neighbourhood religions has influence over a section of the people. What is silent is the discussion on historical interaction that has shaped the contemporary belief system of the Bakarwals. The religious life of the Kabui tribe of Manipur is another example of a syn-

cretic tradition evolved over a period of interactions. The tribe as **Potshangbam Binodini Devi** accounts is divided between Christian Kabui and traditional Kabui; the latter following a revival tradition called *Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak* (TRC). In her chapter Devi has focused on change and continuity of rites and rituals practised by TRC group who forms one of the religious sects of the Kabui.

In a scientific age, sorcery is found to be in practice among the Sabar tribe of Purulia district of West Bengal; but what is crucial in the joint chapter of **Soumita Chatterjee** and **Sutapa Choudhury** is that non-Sabars in the neighbourhood are its takers. Sorcery as a religio-cultural practice of a community (*cf*.Chophy 2020) has spread to other communities on utilitarian grounds. In the chapter, contemporaneity of practice is viewed in relation to scientific rationality. A similar point is raised in the chapter of **Rupam Gogoi.** Examining four novels of Easterine Kire, Gogoi maintains that in today's technologically driven world, there remains a space for the folk customs, rituals, and beliefs to thrive. The complexity of continuity of rationality and folk beliefs, as he argues, gets mingled up with the politically surcharged binaries of majority and minority, or centre and periphery; but at the same time raises questions on spontaneous acceptance of a *belief* and justifications associated with the belief system.

Change and continuity understood with reference to time dimension, as has been mentioned, is at the core of contemporaneity. The time dimension may not point to a process, but to a comparison between two periods of time. This is evident in the joint chapter of **Utpal Kumar Chakraborty**, **Vinamrta**, and **Binod Narayan.** They have tried to understand dynamics of contemporary Oraon religion by comparing it with S.C.Roy's book entitled *Oraon Religion and Customs* and published in the year 1928. The changes are slow, but, as it is evident from the chapter, have meaningful implications.

0.2.2 State, Tribe, and Religion

Three chapters under the theme *Reflection of the Past* have unequivocally mentioned the role of the state in the historical process that helped shape the present nuance of religious discourse with regard to means and modes of conversion drive, and emergence of Ao Christianity and the Birsites. The state as an agent of influencing tribal religion has passing reference in some chapters, but it is not at the core of discussion as it is in four chapters under the theme *State, Tribe, and Religion*. The first chapter by **Pravat K. Mallick** explores how a tribal deity has found a place in the Hindu pantheon due to royal patronage and has become a regional deity in Southern, Central, and Western Odisha among both tribal and non-tribal communities. Stambhesvari, the name of the deity, undoubtedly has influenced the religious worldview of the people of the region across the communities and created a space of mutual religiosity. Understandably, religion of a tribe in this context has a cross-boundary perspective. Involvement of the state in religious life is apparently a political expediency aimed at legitimising power and authority over diverse people. This theoretical postulate underlies the argument advanced in the chapter of **Sasmita Rani Shasini** which provides empirical grounding to the context and content in Mallick's chapter.

Political expediency has diverse implications; one being administrative acumen, as is evident during colonial rule, to divide and rule by categorising people in one way or the other. Categorisation of a section of Indian population as tribe and confused efforts of assigning them a distinct 'religion' falls under this schema. The legacy of indecisiveness created with regard to religion has its continuity even in post-Independence India. But empirical

evidences show that tribal communities do not have a single religion to be categorised as 'tribal religion' or in some other nomenclature. Census records keep on changing the name of religion in the context of tribe also; we find curious names, even the name of the mountain or a sacred place like Luguburu (name of a mountain in Santal territory) as the religion of a tribe! **Rajesh Roshan's** chapter highlights challenges of enumeration and the religions followed by tribal communities in census reports up to 2011.

Another implication of religion's political expediency emanates from its perceived contribution to people's welfare within the ethics of the religion. Therefore, religious institutions and leaders either support or oppose state policies depending on usefulness of religion for the society which they perceive with reference to policies. Political participation of religious leaders has been justified on the ground of acting as a pressure group on the state to follow religious-sanctioned ways of human welfare. This is the essence in **Jangkhongam Doungel's** chapter in the context of the Mizoram state of India. State and religion interface for the 'welfare' of people has been graphically presented by him in the chapter of reference.

0.2.3 Multi- and Cross-Cultural Negotiations

Traditional religious worldview and Christianity (in its form and spirit as was introduced by missionaries during the colonial period) are apparently two different cultural traditions. In Christianity, traditional culture, particularly with regard to religious worldview, remained absent in practices. Christianity, however, could provide a religious space, but not a cultural space linked with the original identity of people. Over the course of time, convert tribes and other communities have attempted a negotiation between traditional culture and Christianity-bred culture. Such a negotiation is evident in the process of the indigenisation of Christianity (Sahay 1981 and Zhimo 2015). The process is articulated as 'decolonisation' in the context of Tangkhul Naga community by **Taimaya Ragui** in the chapter in which he argues for a 'decolonial thinking' in the contemporary religious tradition. The negotiation reflects how Christianity and traditional culture (without religious aspect) can co-exist.

Co-existence, however, was not smooth during the initial period of introduction of Christianity. It was a confrontation between two cultures – traditional and Christianity-bred. Nevertheless, the contemporary religious tradition, as **Rusievan Shangpliang** argues, is not divided practices; rather it is a syncretic form in the context of the Khasi people. The Seng Khasi tradition that emerged by opposing Christianity also shows a departure from the pre-Christian Khasi belief system to a perceptible extent. Shangpliang dispassionately gives credit to the impact of Christianity for the emergence of syncretic tradition among the Khasis.

The impact can be studied conversely, i.e. the impact of traditional religion, or the changed traditional one in the course of interaction, on Christianity. **Seiminchon Chongloi's** chapter explores the presence of changing traditional rituals in the religious worldview of Christian Kukis. He has provided a systematic rendering of meaning to the structure and spirit of rituals practised by them. While Chongloi or Shangpliang deals with one-to-one correspondence between traditional religious worldview and Christianity, **Marianmai Maisuangdibou** has expanded the sphere of interaction and impact to three religious traditions, namely (1) Characheng (primal religion of the Hamai) and its offshoots, (2) Heraka, (3) Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak (TRC), and (4) Christianity in contemporary Hamai (Zeliangrong) communities. At present traditional or reformist traditional religions and Christianity dis-

play a mutual negotiation perfectly matching with emerging intellectuality of the educated section.

0.2.4 Shifting Religious Worldview

Chapters in the volume unequivocally allude to changes in religious tradition of the tribes due to conversion, adoption, or influence of any such process. The changes are presented in rites and rituals. The question arises whether there is any corresponding change in perspective or not. Arguably, outward changes would accompany a shift to a certain degree in the perspective of appreciating emerging changes in faith and belief. The shift is universal, but not articulated in the context of religion. In a recent book, *Hinduism and Tribal Religions*, edited by Jeferry D. Long, Rita D. Sherma, Pankaj Jain, and Madhu Khanna, a shift in perspective is evident in the thematic focus. It is argued that modern Hindus need a 'rational rather than a devotional or traditional exposition of the religion'. **Amithy Jasrotia** and **Seema Agrawal** (*see* the section *Conceptualisng Change*) have made a remark on the shift from fear to devotion as a passing observation, though the central focus of the chapter is a conceptual nuance of understanding the change. **Madan Meena's** chapter in this section also engages in a shift in another context.

Meena has articulated a structural shift in perception with reference to the religious worldview of the Rathwa of Gujarat. In our time, the Rathwa believe in individual gurus of Hindu tradition in place of spirits/supernatural powers of the traditional belief system. The shift may reveal in material context as is evident in the joint chapter of **A. Poongodi** and **B. Cauveri.** Examining Pratibha Ray's novel, *The Primal Land,* the authors have pointed to the Bondo tribes' lust for money and dependence on government officers/teachers. For the Bondo, these officers are 'god'. Though satirical in taste, this is very much revealing of the shift of perception from spiritual to material life in response to development interventions.

But religious intervention by itself may bring in a shift in religious attitude. This is evident in **Nigamananda Das's** chapter where he argues with reference to two novels on the Northeast tribes how Christianity being anthropometric religion of the world stands opposite to tribal ecoethics of conservation as ingrained in traditional belief systems, particularly based on naturalism.

0.2.5 Conceptualising Change

A tribe neither used the designation of 'tribe' nor the nomenclature 'religion' to its faith, belief, and practices till the 'others', particularly British administration devised it and academics used it. In the course of time, the labels 'tribe' and 'tribal religion' have become ingrained into the vocabulary system of these people and have become a means of expressing identity and worldview (*see* Behera 2019). Nevertheless, academics have not stopped their engagement with tribal issues from their perspectives; they have their perspective approaches, conceptual frames, etc. to understand changes in tribal religion which is the core of discussion in this book. We find liminality, symbolism, and structural and functional approaches employed in three chapters to examine changes in tribal religions.

Amithy Jasrotia and **Seema Agrawal** have studied socio-religious tradition and its dynamics of Shariya tribe of Rajasthan consequent upon culture contact, reduced dependency on forests, and migration in search of alternative livelihood pursuits. All these, as the authors argue, have brought changes in the Sahariya tribe's religious outlook. In the process

of change, the people are observed worshipping both traditional and Hindu gods and goddesses. They neither belong to Hindu faith, nor do they follow the tradition in letter and spirit. The emerging situation of change and continuity is examined by the authors within the conceptual framework of liminality proposed by Victor Turner – a situation between traditional and Hindu religious worldviews.

Victor Turner's concept of ritual symbolism has been employed by **Nisha Kumari** and **Abhishek Kumar** to Dandakatta ritual of the Oraon to examine the nature and extent of changes. Change can also be critically studied with reference to a crucial element in religious tradition. **Digbijoy Giri,** in his chapter, has employed a structural functional approach to examine changes in village *Devgudi* (village temple/shrine) with reference to the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh state of India. Obviously, structural and functional changes in Devgudi point to the expanding religious worldview of the people of Bastar including both tribe and non-tribe population.

0.2.6 Towards Institutionalisation

One crucial trend that has emerged in contemporary religious tradition of the tribes is the process of institutionalisation of belief systems. Core arguments of three chapters touch upon this process explicitly. **Bindu Ramachandran** argues that traditional Kurichiyan religion has been largely institutionalised. But the institutionalisation process, as she suggests, needs a multi-paradigmatic approach to study given their unique identity as a matrilineal society and multi-dimensional changes right from the colonial period. But **Kanato Chophy's** chapter presents institutionalisation in quite a different perspective. He argues that 'Revelation' played a crucial role during reformist or revival movements during British regime and created neo-religious sects in traditional tribal communities. The new sects, having their respective authors (prophets, or founders), display institutionalised nuances vis-a-vis informal traditional religious worldview. The tribe like the Santal and the Munda have their neo-sects side-by-side traditional followers. The core of the argument is that revelation underlies institutionalisation processes in the emergence of neo-sect. **Tarun Mene** and **Rajiv Miso** differ from the above two and try to situate traditional priests in reformative religious movement in the context of Idu Mishmi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. In institutionalisation processes of traditional religion the place of the traditional priest, called Igu, is not defined, though his role is not abolished altogether. Preservation of culture is the slogan, but the views of traditionalists and contemporary intellectuals on the approach to institutionalisation of religion and traditional priests in it have not yet been conclusive.

0.2.7 Politics and Tribal Religion

From historical times, religion's instrumentality is well acknowledged in legitimising a king's power and authority by bringing different communities together. It is argued that religion has a discursive power and operates as a power category like race in modernity (Khan 2021:2; *also see* Fitzgerald 2015:304). In our contemporary democracy, religion is also used as an instrument to secure people's support in order to gain political power and position by political parties.

No doubt, a few political parties are branded in the name of religion (*see* Nandrajog 2010), while all parties use religion in vote bank politics. **Lipika Ravichandran's** chapter examines a broader context of these politics with reference to efforts of radical Tamil

nationalists to revive traditional folk religions by de-Brahminising the Sanskritic influence. Her chapter also problematises government intervention in temple administration through the Endowments Act of 1959 that deprive communities of their customary hereditary rights. In her chapter, the politics of religion has a revival overtone. In a different perspective, **Archana Rahul Khupte** presents politics of religious assertion as a protest against the homogenising tendency of dominant religions out to assimilate tribes into their fold. To her, politics of religious assertion are the struggles for identity assertion, as tribes visualise a discrepancy between the identity they claim and identity they are attributed, particularly in census records. The claimed identity advances an argument of rationality that the tribes have their respective religious traditions distinct from major religions. This perspective is the core of argument of **C. Maheswaran.** In his chapter, he puts his argument with reference to the religion of the Tribal Nilgiris and extends his support to the claim of Sarna code in the census by present Jharkhand Government and tribal leaders. But the politics and demand for Saran code have internal contradictions due to the tribe specific nature of belief systems. **Radhika Borde** is sceptical about the possibility of a single code, such as Sarna code. She has provided her justification by citing the myth of the Asur tribe and the current trend of Sarna movement led by Oraon women. Pointing out inconsistencies in the generalised claim, she argues that the struggle for a religious code is a means of some people to present them as astute political actors with an interest on 'being visible' in the state politics.

0.3 Conclusion

From the discussions made in 28 chapters under seven thematic organisations, we can safely conclude that tribal religion cannot be studied in the context of a tribe as a distinct community[7]. Obviously, the topic lacks the base of community dimension when different religious denominations or sects co-exist along with the traditional faith and beliefs of a tribe. Traditional faith, beliefs, and practices professed at present are, however, not the same as they were a few generations or a century ago. The traditional religious worldview of tribes had to negotiate with external forces to retain its existence. The contemporary context of tribal religion exists as it evolved/evolves from its interaction with state, political bargaining, neighbouring religions, and missionary activities; expresses in shifting worldview, etic perspectives; and through institutionalisation process and accommodation in multi- and cross-cultural space. These dynamics provide possibilities to understand tribal religion in perspective. The scope of these dynamics is further expanded in the companion volume entitled ***The Routledge Handbook of Tribe and Religions in India: Contemporary Readings on Spirituality, Belief, and Identity*** to engage our attention in reconstructing the perspective of tribal religion.

Notes

1 Tribal rebellions and movements for the fight for their rights against the British administration that levied heavy taxes and captured tribal lands and resources have been well-documented (*see* Raghavaiah 1971).

2 Conversion of tribes to Christianity was at the core of the 'civilising mission' of colonialism. Tribes of many Northeastern states of India were converted to Christianity as part the British colonialist policy. Tribal communities in states like Nagaland and Mizoram are also largely Christian. Andaman Home was built to assist in the mission to convert the Nicobarese tribal communities. (*see* Protman 1899).

3 The Ahoms and the Deories of Assam adopted Hinduism. The latter have adopted Hindu identity through the process of assimilation and acculturation. In more recent years several tribes have adopted various sects of Hinduism like Kabir panth, neo-Vaishnavism, Swaminarayan Sampradaya, etc.
4 The criminal category was instituted to persecute tribes through the Criminal Tribes Acts of 1871 and 1911. The term 'tribe' is a colonial construct that was used for a section of the Indian populace and is academically used even today. The Scheduled Tribe category has been defined and is used according to the provisions of the Constitution of India to safeguard tribal rights.
5 The government of India is committed to the social and economic empowerment of tribes and promoting social justice through various policies, programmes and schemes according to the provisions of the Constitution.
6 In the study of social categories, a sense of exclusivity is predominant.
7 About two or three tribes in Andaman and Nicobar Islands like the Sentenelese and Jarwa we can say that their religion is community based due to their aversion to outsiders.

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1

RELIGION, RITES, RITUALS, CUSTOMS, AND TRADITIONS AMONG THE DENOTIFIED/ NOMADIC TRIBES

A Case Study of Waddars and Yerukulas in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana States

Malli Gandhi

1.0 Introduction

This chapter discusses religious belief and practices of the two denotified communities of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana states, namely the Waddar and the Yerukula. They were branded as criminal tribes during the colonial period; and presently they belong to Nomadic, Semi-Nomadic, and Denotified category, though some of them are listed as Backward Class and Scheduled Caste. These people consider themselves tribe, but use the term caste in place of clan or lineage to present themselves, perhaps due to long exposition to caste people. Their life-ways are diverse and have changed to a certain extent in response to forces of modernity; but they largely follow traditional religious practices. However, a few of them have converted to Christianity and still very few to Islam. This chapter primarily focuses on the belief system of traditionalists as embodied in their life-ways with passing reference to converted sections.

1.1 The Waddars

The Waddars, also known as Katheras, Dasaris, Gudu Dasaris, or Mucherikalas inhabit all districts of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Besides, they live in Maharashtra and Karnataka also. The term Waddara is a corrupt form of the Sanskrit word 'Odhra', the name of the country now known as Odisha from where these people are supposed to have migrated. The members of the Waddars were nomadic, but the majority of them have settled in Kurnool, Guntur, Krishna, Banaganpally, Chittoor, Cuddapah, and Nellore districts, and in Chandragiri mandal of Chittor district. They live in detached settlements, conical huts similar to those of the Dommaras with a low entrance. Their huts are far away from any village. They have the tag of 'criminal' tribes activities though they pursued different occupations during the colonial period. Thurston (1909) in his Castes and Tribes of

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Southern India writes that these people have two sub-divisions according to their occupations.

1. Kallu or Rathi Waddars (stone workers)
2. Mannu Waddars (earth workers)

M Kennedy (1985) further subdivides these people as Bhandi Waddars or Gadi Waddars (cart men), Pathrat, Janti or Dagdi Waddars (stone dressers), Ghatti Waddars also known as Donga (thief) or Takku (cheat) Waddars. All Waddars are not 'criminals'. The Waddars of the ceded districts form as a separate section living by means of criminal propensities. The ordinary Waddars wander about the country living temporarily where they get work.

But the Waddars hold that they had number of sub-castes of which eleven are known today along with their occupation. They are as follows:

(i) Mannu Waddars – earth workers
(ii) Kallu Waddars – stone workers
(iii) Uppu Waddars – salt traders
(iv) Bandi Waddars – cart users
(v) Girini Waddars – grind stone workers
(vi) Raja Waddars – lac sellers
(vii) Aragu Waddars – lac sellers
(viii) Tudugu Waddars – thieves
(ix) Uru Waddars – town dwellers
(x) Takku Waddars – robbers and house breakers
(xi) Ghatti Waddars – forest dwellers

Mannu Waddars are largely found in the districts of Gulbarga, Mandya, and Mysore. Since the colonial period, they are employed in earth work such as well digging, construction of railway tracks, irrigation canals, tanks, dams, bridges and their repairs (Hassan 1989:19).

Kinship plays a very important role in the life of the Waddars. They like to live close to their relatives. They also prefer to establish marriage ties within their group members. They maintain their social ties with their kith and kin in different parts of the states. Being exclusively a Telugu sect, their language is a corrupt form of Telugu, but those settled in the southern districts are conversant with Tamil. They also speak Marathi or Canarese according to the district they live in.

The Waddars believe that they originally formed a single endogamous group, but in due course were split into a number of smaller endogamous groups. Each sub-caste (group) is named and the name indicates the occupation. They eat all types of animal food, such as rats, fish, pigs, black faced moneys, jackals, antelope, fowls, cats, deer, goats, and all sorts of birds, such as crows and sparrows, and squirrels. They beg and hunt. They smoke ganja and tobacco. They are addicted to drinking. They do not hesitate to mix with Dommaras, Madigas, Malas, and Yerukulas. Mannu, Kallu, and Bandi Waddars interdine with each other. The religious belief among the Waddars prevented them from wearing shoes of any kind on their feet, though sandals were worn. Their women were not allowed to wear cholis or jackets. Their legend tells that in the past rats stole all their shoes and cholis and as their

forefathers were deprived of them, they did not use them. That is why they are inveterate enemies of the rats and dig them up and eat them whenever they can.

1.1.1 Social and Religious Life

The Waddars consist of two types of families, namely nuclear and extended families. There may be some single member families also. They are generally divided under five main age groups viz. one (1) to 15, 15 to 30, 31 to 45, 46 to 50, and 51 and above. Altogether there are more than 30,000 families living in Andhra Pradesh. We have interviewed only some inmates of Siddhapuram Colony in the Kurnool District of Andhra Pradesh and gathered the information about the present state of affairs. The three thousand families comprise more than two lakh souls. Most of the Waddars are leading a nomadic life. Some of the converted Christians among the Waddars families came from Kapparallatippa settlement. The population of Hindus is larger. A total of 200 families of Hindus were converted to Christianity. This is because they are transferred from other settlements and managed by Christian missionaries. They are always cross with the Muslims who are still treating these Waddars as 'criminals'.

1.1.2 Marriage Ceremony among the Waddars

The Waddars follow their traditions while performing their marriage ceremonies. They propitiate different gods and goddesses while performing the marriages. The general marriage ceremony among the Waddars is performed in two stages: okkaku bettedi (tambulam bettedi) i.e. betrothal, and 2. pendli (marriage). This takes place in the presence of elders. Ganga Raju (the village head) plays an important role in conducting marriage ceremonies. When the parents of the boy or a girl find a suitable match for their son or daughter, the boy's family sends betel leaves, betel nuts, turmeric, and fruits to the girl's house accompanied by Ganga Raju and a few elder members. The family members of the boy and girl sit in two separate rows facing each other and bargain their demands. After receiving the betel nuts in the presence of village headman, the Brahmin fixes the auspicious day for marriage. Citing F. S. Mullaly, Rao (1901:121–122) informs that Brahmans exercise spiritual jurisdiction over these people and are consulted in matters associated with marriage and other ceremonies. The marriage ceremony is not a tedious one. It consists of the bride and the bridegroom walking three times round a stake placed for the purpose on the ground. The marriage involves a number of rituals and social ceremonies spread over a period of two days. The important rituals in a marriage are Nalugu, Gangapuja, Dare, Tali, Oli, and Muyee. The Nalugu ceremony is performed by five or seven elderly women of the community. The maternal uncle presents new clothes to the bride and the bridegroom. The bridegroom receives two white dhotis and a shawl; and the bride a white saree and a blouse. This ceremony is followed by a procession to the village temple where the bridegroom offers worship. After the visit to the temple, food is served at the bridegroom's house. The tali tying (tying mangal sutra) ritual is performed accordingly as it is arranged earlier. This ritual is performed by the bride's father who takes rice in both hands and drops it over the head of the bridegroom and the bride. This is followed by tying the tali or mangala sutra. The maternal uncle of the bride plays a prominent role in this function. He presents mettelu, a pair of copper or silver toe-rings. The oli (bride-price) and muyee (gift giving) ceremonies are generally performed after the feast. Ganga Raju begins the Oli ceremony. Its

cost is Rs.8/-. The bridegroom gives Rs.20/- to Ganga Raju as a payment to the community God. It was observed that these Waddars are slowly bringing changes into the institution of marriage. This is due to operation of the Sanskritisation process. The impact of higher castes is felt on these people. On one hand, the Oli system continues; on the other, the educated Waddar bridegrooms demand a dowry. Some marriages take place in the churches due to the influence of Christianity. A pastor performs the ceremony. Widow marriage exists by mutual agreement between the two spouses to live as husband and wife with the approval of the **kula panchayat**. No ritual significance is attached to such a marriage. The bridegroom and his party visit the bride's house with a saree, ornaments, and flowers. The headman performs the ritual. When these Waddars were first settled in Siddhapuram in Atmakur town, Kurnool District, they had no marriage ceremony. The practice of the tribe was that those members who happened to be out of jail would lock up in intimate relationships with women who are free. As some came out of jail and others went in, new alliances were formed between men and women. There was no such thing as a stable marriage relationship. This has changed largely through the influence of the Managers (controlling authority). The marriage ceremony and regular relationships are the order of the day with the Waddars at present. Divorce and remarriages were common among the Waddars. Thurston (1909) reports polygyny and divorce were freely allowed to men. Women who have seven husbands are highly respected and their blessings on the bridal pair are greatly praised. Divorce is possible at any time, but Rs.16/- has to be paid to the bride's parents. The children by the marriage are divided between father and mother as decided by the Kulapanchayat. Divorces are infrequent. Infant marriages are allowed, but seldom practised. Their marriages are arranged by the Kulapanchayat. Though they are particular in observing their gotrams (clan/lineage) in their marriages, slowly more inter-caste marriages are taking place now-a-days. They are following the modern rites and rituals followed by upper caste people living in their vicinities.

1.1.3 Festivals, Ceremonies, Beliefs, and Practices

The birth ceremony is a happy occasion among the Waddars. Though it is observed among all of the groups, the practice varies from one group to the other. It is customary for a Waddar woman to give birth to her first and second child at her natal home under the care of her mother. She is sent to her natal home during the fifth or seventh month of her pregnancy. The Waddars believe that the mother-daughter relationship is the most tender and affectionate one and a pregnant daughter always looks forward to her mother's care during the last stages of her pregnancy. The relationship of a daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law is one of great respect. The Waddars feel that a daughter is unwelcome to the family. They prefer male children to perpetuate the family lineage. A girl after marriage becomes a member of the other family; that is the reason why she is considered to be a loss to the family. The birth of a child causes pollution to the mother, child, and all other members of her conjugal household. The mother and the child are given a bath on the third, fifth, and seventh day after the childbirth. On the ninth day, turmeric paste is applied on the mother before she is given a bath to remove her impurity. No sacred offerings are made. On the ninth day the house is cleaned and purified by sprinkling water mixed with cow dung. The members of the family light a wall-lamp to worship the household deities. They prepare sweet pongal and offer coconut to the household deities. Among Mannu Waddars, the naming ceremony of the child is performed on the 11th day. Tonsuring in

the name of the deity is another important ceremony observed among them. The temples that the Waddars generally visit are Venkateswara of Tirupati, Penchala Narasimha Swami Temple of Panchalakona, Malakonda Swami Temple of Pamuru, Veera Brahma Matham of Cuddapah, Mallamkonda Swami Temple, Peddamma temple of Nellore, etc. When the death occurs, they keep the body with its head resting southward. Valuables are removed from the dead person. The eldest or the youngest son burns incense at the feet of the corpse. Rich people erect grave stones and monuments and the others put stones on the grave. The Waddars believe that the spirit of the dead visits the grave on the third day. Food is kept on a leaf and the people move to a distance so that a crow can come and touch it. The Waddars observe ritual pollution caused by death for ten days and participate in the purificatory rituals on the 11th day. If a death occurs on a Tuesday or Friday, they believe that the spirit of the dead normally remains malevolent for at least three months. The Waddars observe movement taboos considering omens. Some of their bad omens are:

- sneezing by any member when they are about to start
- the meeting of two sudras on their way
- a cat crossing their path
- the howling of a dog

If any of the above happens, they put off their expedition. Some of their good omens are:

- the meeting of a sudra on their way
- the neighing of a horse
- the braying of an ass
- the flight of a swallow across their path

The Waddars of Siddhapuram perform their religious functions just like the Waddars of Anantapur and Cuddapah districts. But they are not in any way related to one another by blood. The Waddars are accustomed to celebrating Hindu festivals and attend the Hindu temples for worship and prayer. Among the Waddars, the families who have been converted to Christianity attend the churches regularly and celebrate Christmas and New Year like other Christians.

1.2 The Yerykulas of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana

In Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, according to the 2011 census, tribal population accounted for 8.93% of the population, that is 42 lakhs in the total population of 53,549,679. In 1977, the Lambadis, the Yerukulas, and the Yanadis were included in the category of Scheduled Tribes. The tribal population increased substantially with the inclusion of these tribes (GoI 1981). These people occupy 30,000 sq. miles of area i.e. 11% of the total area of these two states. They are spread over 6197 villages (Lalitha 1995:173). In South India, among various tribes, Yerukulas occupy an important position. According to the 1981 census report the Yerukulas occupy the fourth place out of 33 groups of tribes, and their number was 300,557. These Yerukulas are found in almost all districts in Andhra Pradesh. However, their number is higher in Rayalaseema, Telangana, and coastal Andhra Districts. From the North Arcot district up to the ceded districts they are called Korchas or Korachas. From ceded districts (area ceded to the British East India Company by the Nizam in 1800) they

are called Yerukula. The Yerukulas, the Koravas, and the Korchas were in fact branches of the large Korava community operating in different regions of Madras Presidency. Yerukulas lived and traded in Telugu districts; Koravas in Tamil districts; and Korchas in coastal districts of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana (Radhakrishna 1989:3). In Andhra region, these people were called Yerukulavandlu or Korachavandlu, but they always speak of themselves as Kurru. In Nellore they address one another as Kurru and Kula. It has been suggested that Yeru is connected with 'Erra', meaning red (Thurston 1909). In Telugu, Yerukulavandlu means fortune-tellers and Oppert (1893) suggests that this could be the reason for which for the Telugu people call these people 'Yerukulavandlu'. He further connects the word kurru with the root ku, a mountain (Oppert 1893), and Thurston informs us that in a Tamil work of the ninth century (Tirumurukairuppadi) kurru or kuru is given as the name of a hill tribe (also see Oppert 1893). Each caste (clan) has its own sub-castes (sub-clans) and its own caste rules. Social customs, religious beliefs, omens, ordeals, and standards of morality vary from sub-caste to sub-caste and from one social group to another. Their social customs and religious beliefs are perfectly in tune with their career. From times immemorial, the members of the nomadic/ denotified tribes have been following Hinduism in its crude form. Similarly, these Yerukulas also have their own way of living, customs, traditions, taboos, rituals, and ceremonies. These traditions separate them from other populations. Originally the Yerukulas were temple servants. Subsequently, they took to petty trading and the selling of agricultural products in several places. With the development of communications, the Yerukulas discontinued their trade. This disorganisation in their social and economic life resulted in them become petty criminals to make ends meet. Generally they feel that it was an absurd thing to work a whole day for six annas (during that time). By courage and good luck one night adventure may bring in thousands of rupees (Oppert 1893).

1.2.1 Position of Women and Children

Traditionally, women were greatly oppressed and this has changed a little, for the better. They are expected to show respect to the male members of the family. In general, the brother-in-law or other children accept women as part of their family. They cannot call their husband by name. Some Yerukulas are particular about the reputation of their women and consider it a serious matter, if any of them return home without an escort after sunset. Debauchery is considered to be the most sinful act and is severely condemned. The fortune-telling women carry a basket, winnow, stick, and wicker tray in which cowry shells are embedded in a mixture of cow dung and turmeric. The basket represents the deity Kolapuriamma. The women go about the streets calling out 'Yeruko Amma Yeruka' which means 'prophecy, mother, prophecy' (Thurston 1909).

1.2.2 Gotras or Clans

They have their own 'gotras' or clans. They are Sathupati, Kavadi, Manepati, and Mandragutti (Hatch 1928). These are all corrupted Tamil words. Sathupadi is a corruption of Sattupadi which means adorning a Hindu deity with flowers, jewels, and vestments; Kavadi means a pole carried on the shoulders with two baskets, pendants hanging from both ends. Manepati is a corruption of manpadi which means stitching a pair of shoes and presenting them to the temple (Pratap 1974:14). In earlier days, these people were very particular about their gotrams. Of these four major divisions, Sathupati and Kavati

gotrams are considered superior. A Kavati man (styled as Pothuvadu in Telugu), according to the tradition, can marry into a Sathupati family as they are endogamous. However, the reverse is not generally acceptable, though there are very few exceptions. These people are said to have many sub-divisions but these refer chiefly to the various occupations they follow. Some of these are Kavali Yerukulas, Uppu Yerukulas, Dabba Yerukulas, Karrepaku Yerukulas, Parigimugga Yerukulas, Koot Yerukulas, Kotulas, Bhazantri Yerukulas, Ram Yerukulas, Nagi Yerukulas, Suvva Yerukulas, Kunchapari Yerukulas, Sathupati Yerukulas, Kuddikatti Yerukulas, etc. Some men who were appointed as watch men were called Kavali Yerukulas. Some men who maintained their livelihood by taking the business of salt were called Uppu Yerukulas. Dabba Yerukulas were those who prepared bamboo baskets. The people who sold Karvepaku leaves were called Karvepaku Yerukulas. Pamulas were those who caught snakes and exhibited them in the villages to earn a living. Parigamuggalas were those whose profession was tattooing. The people who obtained their livelihood by prostitution were called Koot Yerukulas. In Telugu areas, these people were called Bogamuvaru. They also kidnapped and sold children; Kotulas were those who trapped monkeys and performed rituals. The people who played the orchestra at the time of festivals, marriages, and other cultural proceedings were called Bhazantri Yerukulas. Ram Yerukulas were those who lived on the occupation of working in rocks. The people who ate monkeys were called Nagi Yerukulas. Some gathered roots in forests and made them into long brushes. They were excellent hunters. They were called Kunchipuri Yerukulas. Satupati Yerukulas were those whose main source of livelihood was preparing baskets. Etapulla Yerukulas were those whose main occupation was net weaving. Suvva Yerukulas were those whose main occupation was basket making with iron rods. Presently, these occupations are in decline.

Among the Yerukulas, there are basically three religious groups viz., Hindus, Christians, and Muslims. But the number of Hindus and converted Christians are large in number (Simhadri 1979:71). The Hindus worship Venkateswara, Lakshmi, Siva, and other gods of the Hindu pantheon. The Christians attend church services. But due to the influence of the American Baptist Telugu Mission, Canadians, and the Salvation Army there are a good number of people who go to church, though they are traditionally Hindus. Both Hindus and Christians celebrate their festivals like Dasara, Deepavali, Pongal, Christmas, and New Year's Day. Some of the people who engage in criminal activities are animists. They believe in natural forces and worship all kinds of idols, animals, birds, and supernatural forces. The Kula Dharma (caste duty) of Yerukulas was dongatanamu (stealing). Before going out on a house breaking excursion or a raid on a peaceful village they used to pray to the Moodhevi (goddess of sleep). The contents of the prayers are that they themselves would remain alert while heavy sleep might fall on their victims, and the police would not interrupt their operations.

In the settlements the people observe their gotras or kinship relations very strictly while performing marriages, ceremonies, rituals, and customary practices. They identify a certain person by his house name. Thus, they follow endogamous rules. Today, inter-caste marriages are taking place among the Yerukulas.

1.2.3 Rites, Rituals, and Religious Practices among the Yerukulas

Yerukalas worship Vishnu in the form of Lord Venkateswara and his consort Laxmi, the goddess of wealth. They also worship minor deities like Bhavani, Mahalaxmi, Maremma, Kollapuremma, Poleramma, Peddamma, etc. Pigs, jackals, crows, and other animals and

birds are used as offerings and sacrifices to these deities. They have faith in natural forces like the sun, moon, fire, etc. The presiding goddess of the profession of crime among the Korvas is Moodhevi, the Goddess of Sleep. Moodhevi is invoked in their prayers to keep their victims asleep at the time of their operation. They observe the new-moon day (Amavasya) and full-moon day (Poornima) or Krishna Paksham and Shukla Paksham respectively. They celebrate all Hindu festivals. In addition, these are animists. In their view, the world consists of not only human beings, but also of a multitude of beings including animals. They have a belief that if evil spirits are not worshipped properly they have to face the wrath of the God and hence diseases, such as small-pox and cholera are caused. To worship God, they need not go to any temple, nor are they allowed to enter any. In the Madras presidency, they generally kept a stone or a mud idol under a neem-tree, smeared it with saffron and red colours, called it by the name of the Goddess, and worshipped it, offering coconuts and burning incense and camphor. This worship was followed by a carousel, where toddy was drunk freely and meals were eaten heartily. The practice is still followed among traditionalists. During the Dussehra festival they worship a 'Durratu' (a pruning hook). They consult a Brahmin priest about the fixation of the date of the festival. If we take the present condition of life of the Yerukalas into account, it is observed that they no longer follow only old systems of sustenance viz. soothsaying and tattooing as the earlier generations used to live. The culture and social organisation of the Yerukalas is quite different from any other tribe of the country. Even now the code of conduct of these people is determined and controlled by 'Kulapanchayat' or caste assembly. They have great respect for the unwritten law or the verdict of Kulapanchayat. The caste assembly enforces rigid principles on them. Irrespective of their position in society, they subordinate themselves to the will of the elders. These elders decide whether a man is guilty of an allegation or not by dipping the fingers of the accused person in boiling oil or making him pickup a red-hot iron rod or walking through a crackling bed of fire, etc. Though the methods involved here look uncivilised and barbarous, they are very simple and do not have a chance of perjury or impersonation.

1.2.3.1 Marriage System

The Yerukulas strictly follow their religious beliefs while performing their marriages. The type of marriage that prevails among Yerukulas is polygyny. But it is now giving place to monogamy. Elders arrange the marriage of children. They freely admit other caste women into theirs, except those of the lowest order, such as Malas, Madigas, and the like. At present, they are admitting these women also into their fold. A marriage is generally negotiated between the parents of the bridegroom and the bride; and the former promises to pay a voli or bride price of Rs.3.50 for the first marriage and Rs.7/- for the remarriage of a man or woman (Sherring 1974:137). The amount now differs according to the social status of the family. Child marriages are not allowed. There was a custom, which is hardly seen now, whereby the maternal uncle may claim the first two daughters of his family as wives for his sons. Generally, the selection of a match is followed in the following manner. First, they select a suitable bride and the parents of the bridegroom visit the bride's house with all elderly persons. The village head plays the role of mediator between the two parties. If they find that the girl is suitable to their bridegroom, they give their acceptance. Instead of a bride-price, the dowry system slowly has stepped into their life due to the Sanskritisation process. People take dowry according to their social status. It is taken in terms of agricultural plots, cash, gold, vehicles, and other luxurious goods. Soon after the selection, they

celebrate the occasion with drinking of toddy in the presence of the village head. Parents of both parties exchange toddy and also supply one vessel to the head of the Kulapanchayat. A feast follows after drinking. After the betrothal ceremony is over, the parents of both parties are bound by the contract. Otherwise a meeting is called for, and explanation is given accordingly for the breach of the contract if any takes place. The Kulapanchayat gives its judgement and it is followed strictly. Generally, for those that follow Hindu customs, a Brahmin priest fixes the marriage muhurtam (auspicious time) and performs it. A Pastor performs the marriage for converted Christians (Oppert 1893). The Tali consists of black beads and Talambralu (rice grains over the heads of bride and groom) will follow (GoM 1903: 23–24). Widows are not allowed to participate in the function. Another custom that exists in their family is to make contract of marriage between two would-be fathers before the birth of their children. But if a Brahmin objects, then there is a scope for its breach.

1.2.3.2 Puberty

Puberty is a happy occasion in the community like marriage. If a girl attains puberty, the news is sent to her maternal uncle. The girl 'sits' for five days and observes pollution. Her uncle gives her new clothes, a comb, a mirror, flowers, kumkum (vermilion), nuts, bangles etc., and also arranges for a feast for her. Sweets are distributed to celebrate the occasion. They go to the temples and worship their tutelary gods.

1.2.3.3 Divorce

Divorce is rare and, if it takes place, the divorced parties may rake up their differences and become enemies. In the case of elopement, the father of a boy or girl summons a meeting at which the accused is penalised. The man who elopes with the girl is forced to marry her. If a married person elopes with another girl, both woman and man are strictly punished by the village elders in the Kulapanchayat. A certain amount is also fixed as a fine on the accused. This system is also implemented on those who have illegal relations. If a man, already having a wife, does not have children, then he is eligible to take a second wife. Otherwise, he is punished. He is obliged to pay for the maintenance to the first wife. They take oaths in front of gods and goddesses while being divorced from each other.

1.2.3.4 Widow Marriage

Widow marriages are quite common in this community. It is said that a widow can marry seven times. A woman who marries seven times is called Peddabeyasani. She is considered to be a sacred woman in marriages and other religious ceremonies. A person who wishes to marry a widow buys a new saree and accepts her as his wife in the presence of others. This is what is called (wearing the saree) cheerakattukovadamu (also see Hassan 1989). The head of the village acts as a mediator. They celebrate it with drinking toddy. Another custom prevailing among them is that in the absence of her husband who is in jail, his wife lives with other person. On his return, the husband again accepts her along with the new-born children (Hatch 1928).

1.2.3.5 Rites and Rituals: Birth Ceremonies

In earlier days, immediately after the birth of the child, they burned incense in front of the hut. They purify the hut with cow dung. After this purification, everybody is allowed to see

the new-born baby (Rao 1901). They also follow certain practices for the safety of the child in order to escape from supernatural forces. They bestow attention on mother and child. They take a bath on the ninth day (Oppert 1893). Toddy and dinner are served. Naming the child takes place after a few months. These names are most probably selected from their ancestors, sometimes from their heroes or from their gods and goddesses. Generally, the names are Venkatigadu, Gangadu, Nagi, Ankali, etc. After a name is given, a black string is tied to the wrist of the infant. The maternal uncle takes interest in the new-born child. They consider it a good omen if the child is born on the new moon night (Thurston 1909). If the child is born with an umbilical cord twisted round his neck, they take it as a bad omen and that might lead to, as it is believed, the death the of father or maternal uncle. They overcome this by killing a fowl and wearing its intestines round the neck and afterwards burning them along with the umbilical cord (Thurston 1909). The Yerukulas, during the colonial period, used to teach their children to answer negatively to whatever questions are put to them and also teach them all sorts of methods of committing crime. Writing about Yerukulas, T. Cain informs us that the religious belief among the Yerukulas is that, immediately when the woman feels the birth-pains, she informs her husband, who takes some of her clothes, puts them on and places the same on his head. She retires into a dark room where there is only a very dim lamp, and lies down on the bed, covering herself up with a long cloth. When the child is born, it is washed and placed on the cot beside the father. Asafoetida, jaggery (molasses), and other articles are given not to the mother but to the father.

1.2.3.6 Disposal of the Dead

If a wandering Yerukula dies, he is buried as quickly as possible, keeping the head to the north and feet to the south. They cover the corpse with new clothes and the dead are given a bath and a coin is placed in one corner. They invite crows thinking that the spirit of the dead moves around. After exactly one year, they perform a funeral function and that completes the major death ceremonies. More or less the same procedure is followed by converted Christians with minor charges. Some Yerukulas plant a tulasi (basil) plant at the place where the body is burnt. Each family has its snares and nets to catch edible birds for religious purposes; for offering to gods and goddesses while propitiating. However, they also use it to catch birds and animals for consumption and sale.

1.2.3.7 Taboos

The falling of a lizard in front of them is considered bad luck and if it chirps on either side, it is taken as a sign of good luck. While starting any journey or work, if any member of his family sneezes once, it is considered to be bad luck, but if it is done repeatedly, it is considered to be good. It is inauspicious to them to see an oil man, a barber, a police constable, and a cock-eyed man while they are going. A crow flying towards the right hand side is considered a good omen, but if it flies over the head of a person, it is considered a bad omen. If the crow cries, it is believed to mean that somebody is coming home for a visit. It is considered bad luck, when starting on a journey, if one sees widows, pots of milk, barking dogs, or a man leading a bull. Number three is considered ominous and an expedition never consists of three members. Sundays are auspicious for weddings while they are inauspicious for crime. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays are unlucky (Hatch 1928). It is a bad

omen to meet with a bundle of wood or cow dung cakes. If they meet a well-dressed widow or a cat it is taken **seriously as it is considered a very bad omen.**

1.2.3.8 Kulapanchayat

In the past, the village head played a very important role in tribal communities. He was the person concerned with registering births, deaths, and new arrivals into the settlement. All of the settlers were controlled by him. He was elected on the basis of his popularity, age, and ability to deal with the cases of various types. The Panchayat comprises five persons. These five elders of the tribe are called Berumanusom, big people or elders from the council. All of the individuals respect their unwritten law and obey the verdict of Kulapanchayat. Any violation of these conventions is seriously dealt with. The meetings of the panchayat are held at a common meeting place. The alleged culprit and his people usually sit to the left side and the aggrieved party to the right side or vice versa while the elders sit in between the two parties. The elders secretly decide the type of ordeal to test the guilt of the culprit. It is customary that the accused should dip his fingers into the boiling oil and it is an indication of his innocence or guilt. Still there remains traces of this custom. The other system of this sort is lifting a red-hot crow bar from a fire and carrying a pot filled with water to its brim without slipping a drop. The tribal panchayat usually deals with cases of immorality within the members of the tribe. If any woman is caught red-handed when she is involved in adultery, the husband brings the case to the members of the Kulapanchayat.

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2

RELIGIOUS WORLDVIEW OF THE TAI AHOM OF ASSAM

Present through the Past

Diganta Hatiboruah

2.0 Introduction

Assam, a state of Indian Union, is situated in the North-Eastern part of India and surrounded by Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh in the north, and Mizoram and Tripura in the south. It has common a boundary with Nagaland, Manipur, and Arunachal Pradesh in the east and Meghalaya and West Bengal in the west. It is located in the region between latitudes 24°3′ and 27°58′ North and longitudes 89°5′ and 96°1′ East. The state was annexed along with British India in different phases from 1826; and since then it is a politico-administrative part of the main land of India, though there are lots of oppositions in the state after India's independence. The present territory of Assam got its shape finally in 1972 as per provisions of state re-organisation Acts.

Assam has a long history of its own which dates back to the ancient period. It has also references in the mythologies in different names. In ancient time, Assam was known by different names in the epics and in early historical literature. According to the epigraphs and literature, Assam was known as Pragjyotisha or Kamrupa (Bharali 2005:61). Both the epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have mentioned this area as Pragjyotisha which includes whole of Assam and present Bangladesh as well as the hill tracts up to the border with China (Barpujari 2004:1). The popular name of this land, i.e. Assam is probably derived from the word 'Asama' which means uneven as distinguished from the *samanata* (evenness, plains) (Baruah 2013:76). The geographical composition of Assam is not homogenous. Hills and mountains prominently form the topography of the state. B. K. Kakati is of the opinion that the word *Asama* (peerless) might have been latter Sanskritisation of an earlier form of *Acham* which means 'undefeated' or 'conquerors'. On the other hand, some historians and writers, on the basis of relevant documents, argued that the word Assam might have been derived from the word *Ahom* (Baruah 2013:76), a race which ruled the state for a period of about six hundred years, whom history recognises as a warrior and unchallengeable community of those times (Saikia 2013:23).

The Ahom, a Tai-Mongoloid group who migrated to Assam from present-day Yunan Province of China in 1228, are basically the people of Syam-Chinese linguistic stock and originally inhabited the central and sub-central parts of China till 400 BC (Gogoi 2021).

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According to some historians, this community of people was involved in frequent fights and wars with other groups of Chinese people for their survival. Due to this reason and the unfavourable demographic and climatic condition of their original habitat, a fraction of the Tai community of China including the Tai Ahom started migrating to the foothills of the Chinese mountain range where they lived for several decades. In further courses of time, they spread up to the South-East Asian locations especially to Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, North East India, and many other places for permanent settlement (Gogoi 2021). S. L. Boruah mentioned that as a result of a dispute with a brother, Siu-ka-Pha, the first Ahom king in Assam, left his home land in 1215 AD and settled in Assam in 1228; and slowly and steadily through a policy of conciliation and assimilation and military might, he consolidated and expanded his position in the Brahmaputra Valley (Baruah 2013:220–221). The contribution of Tai Ahom towards the formation of Assamese society, culture, and tradition is remarkable. In Puspa Gogoi's *The Tai of North East and the Ahom Religion and Custom*, J. N. Phukan's *The Tai Ahom Language*, Umesh Chetia's *Tai Ahom Buranji Aru Sanskriti*, Lila Gogoi's *Tai Ahom Culture and Sanskriti,* etc. explicitly depict the contributions of the Tai Ahom to the composite Assamese culture. The Tai Ahom presently live in upper Assam, particularly in the districts of Sibsagar, Charaideo, Jorhat, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Golaghat, Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Nagaon, Morigaon, Kamrup (both Metro and Rural), and Karbi Anglong.

The Ahom are rich in their cultural heritage. Their culture and rituals are something different from other communities of Assam. They have an unambiguous system of social, political, economic, and religious traditions, beliefs, and customs, and a language and script of their own, which are completely different from the other people who have been living in Brahmaputra Valley. However, to assimilate with the other communities of the valley and considering the changing socio-political situation, the Tai Ahom adopted some traditions and customs of other local communities, probably as a political expediency. Due to this reason many Hindu rites and beliefs have been adopted by the Tai Ahom community. Similarly, the Tai Ahom have also come under the influence of the Neo-Vaishnavism movement of Srimant Sankardeva and Sri Madhabdeva. Hence, some Vaishnavite customs, rituals, and principles have also been adopted by these people. Despite the changes, the priest classes of Ahom such as Mohan, Deodhai, and Bailung still continue to observe their customary ceremonies, religious rituals, and festivals following traditional norms and practices. Here, an attempt has been made to discuss different traditional rituals, festivals, and customs of Tai Ahom of Assam which are still extant.

2.1 Agriculture-based Seasonal Festivals

Agriculture has been the main source of livelihood of the Tai Ahom since their migration to Assam. Naturally, the Tai Ahom observe various agro-based traditional festivals at the beginning and end of the agricultural activities. These festivals are celebrated both at community and domestic levels (within the family). Among these festivals the *Bihu*,[1] a set of three annual festivals among all communities in different names is mention worthy. The Bihu is regarded as the state festival of Assam and has its origin during the rule of Ahoms (Gogoi 1994:254). Jatindra Nath Borgohain, a renowned social scientist of Assam, opined that the Bihu as the festival of Assam evolved with the contributions of different Mongolian communities of the locality apart from the Ahom (Borgohain 1992:75). The set of three Bihu festivals observed by the Tai Ahom in Assam are known as the Poi-Chankien or Bohag

Bihu, Mai Ko Chung Phai or Meji Joluwa Utsav[2] or Magh Bihu, and Chip-song-ka or Kati Bihu. During Bihu different types of food items and traditional beer are prepared by the people and offered to the visitors.

The Poi-Chankien or Bohag Bihu is observed in Assam for seven days. Like the Tai Buddhist communities, the Tai Ahom people also celebrate Poi-Chankien or Bohag Bihu in different organised forms (Gogoi 1994:17). This Bihu is also known as Rongali Bihu or Haat Bihu. The seven events are known as *Chot Bihu* (second day of Chot, the name of the month corresponding to March and April), *Goru Bihu* (last day of Chot), *Manuh Bihu* (Bihu on the first day of the Bohag month), *Kutum Bihu* (celebration on the second day of Bohag month), *Senehi Bihu* (the occasion meant for lovers), *Mela Bihu* (community level celebration) and *Chera Bihu* (bidding farewell (*bidai*)) to Bihu, also known as *Bohagi Bidai* or *Phato Bihu*). The first event is preparation for the day of Bohag Bihu and this preparation begins with the second day of Assamese month Chot, corresponding to March and April. Similarly, the last occasion is observed as Goru Bihu. In Goru Bihu the cattle, who play a major role in the agricultural economy, are honoured. The cattle are washed, smeared with turmeric and other pastes, struck with sprigs of *dighalati* and *makhiyati* (native plants), and are wished to be healthy and productive. They wish: *lao kha, bengena kha, bosore bosore barhi ja/maar xoru, baper xoru, toi hobi bor bor goru* (eat gourd, eat brinjal, grow from year to year; your mother is small, your father is small, but you be a large one). After this the old 'cattle securing ropes' are cast away through the legs; and the cattle are allowed to roam anywhere they wish for the entire day and when they come back home in the evening, they are tied with new ropes. After Goru Bihu, the other forms of Bihu such as Manuh Bihu, Kutum Bihu, Senehi Bihu, Mela Bihu, *and* Chera Bihu are celebrated. During these days, the people of Tai Ahom and other communities celebrate Bihu by organising Hushari.[3] In this Husari the people dance and sing and play different musical instruments and bestow blessings. The arts of dancing and playing musical instruments are similar with people of Buddhist (Mahayana) of Louse, North Myanmar, and some states of South-Asian countries (Borgohain 1992:76). During the time of Bihu, the women of the family offer *gamosha* as *bihuwan*[4] to their relatives and loved ones as the symbol of love, respect, and Bihu greetings. Lila Gogoi, a renowned folklorist, has stated that like Poi-Chankien festival of the Tai Ahom, the people of Myanmar also celebrate the Pai Chan Kien festival (Gogoi 1994:17).

According to J. Borgohain, Swargadeo Rudra Singha established the new capital of the Ahom Kingdom at Rangpur in the year 1707. Since then the Bohag Bihu is celebrated in Assam as the festival of joy. In this festival every community of the Ahom kingdom took part and that tradition of mass participation continues to this day (Borgohain 1992:79). Another important Bihu of the Tai Ahom is Chip-song-ka or Kati Bihu, observed during mid-October. On this day, *sakis* (earthen lamps) are lightened in paddy fields to attract insects so that the paddy fields are protected from their attack. This Bihu is primarily celebrated to seek blessings from the gods, so that no harm is done to the crops while they are getting ready for harvest. This Bihu is also associated with the lighting of *akaxbonti*, lamps at the tip of a tall bamboo pole, to show the souls of the dead the way to heaven.

Mai Ko Chung Phai or Meji Joluwa Utsav or Magh Bihu (also called Bhogali Bihu) is observed at the end of the harvest season i.e. in the month of January (mid-January to be specific) which marks the end of the *kharif* (wet rice cultivation) season. For some social scientists, this festival is celebrated before the beginning of *jhum* (shifting cultivation) and after the end of the wet rice cultivation (Borgohain 1992:75). In this *Bihu* the Tai Ahom

people make *bhelaghar* (temporary huts) and Mejis (stacks of firewood). The people stay in the bhelaghar and stay awake all night guarding the Mejis. On this day a community feast is arranged and cultural programmes are also performed throughout the night. In the morning, people move out of their belaghars and take baths and burn their Mejis. Once the Mejis are burnt down, half-burnt pieces of wood are collected and thrown into fields, which is believed to provide a better harvest. J Borgohain stated that the concept of Mejis is the contribution of Pre-Aryan civilisation. It is believed that if the people worship *Agni* (lord of fire) then land will be fertile and harvest will be good (Borgohain 1992:75). On the other hand, it is also believed that in Magh Bihu, the Ahom people worship Lengdon (supreme god which is equated with Lord Indra, the god of rains and clouds). People worship him for good rains in following months, so that they can reap a good harvest. It is noted that the ancestor (*dam*) worship is the main part of these three Bihus. The occasions of Spring Equinox (Bohag Bihu) and Autumn Equinox (Magh Bihu) are celebrated as Dam Phi in the kitchen (Gohain 2022).

Apart from these rituals and festivals, the Tai Ahom community also observes some other rituals related to agriculture and farming. Among these the Khek-Hu-Chung-Khura, Phang Chi Mung, and Chora Utuwa Aai Sabah are mentionable. The Khek-Hu-Chung-Khura ceremony is observed in the front or by the side of the granary after completion of the storage of food grains. The Phang Chi Mung, another agro-based ritual, is observed for the well-being of villages and to safeguard from crop failure, epidemics, or bad weather. The Tai Ahom also worship Kaow-Kham (the goddess of crops and water-Lakshmi). To get rid of diseases in the rainy season another ritual is observed by the Tai Ahom, known as Chora Utuwa Aai Sabah (*Chora* means boat, *utuwa* means floating, *Aai* means mother and *Sabaha* is the name of ritual) so that the farmers can participate in harvesting with good health.

2.2 Ancestor Worship

Ancestor worship is an essential component in the religious worldview of the Tai Ahom. In earlier days, it was a custom of all families in the Tai Ahom community to worship their immediate ancestors, and the ancestors up to 14 generations during any occasion such as marriage, the beginning of a new business or enterprise, going on a long journey, etc. (Gohain 2022). The Tai-Ahom call the recently deceased *na dam* (*na* means new and *dam* means dead/ancestor), *chi-ren-dam* (*chi* means four and *ren* means house; *chi-ren-dam* means four souls of the deceased after the first death which dwells in the house); *ghai-dam* (*ghai* means main; *ghai-dam* means soul of the head of the house); and *jakarura dam* (the collective dead ones who died unnaturally). Now-a-days, when a household of a priestly clan of the Tai Ahom worships the spirits of the dead, then each family performs it on various occasions for the new spirits (*na dam*), the principal spirits (*ghai dam*), and ancient spirits (*chi ren dam*) inside the kitchen in the main house; while the more ancient spirits (*kha dai chi ren dam/jakhalamukhia*) are worshipped outside the gate of the house (Gohain 2022).

Considering the worship pattern of the Tai Ahom, the ancestor worship is divided into three categories. These are griha-dam (*girha* means house, *griha-dam* means household deity/ancestor spirit of the immediate dead-first generation), dam chang-phi ren (ancestor spirits from the sixth to 14th generations in heaven with temporary status of god), and chao-phi-dam (ancestor spirits from the 15th generation who have attained permanent status of god in heaven) (*see* Gogoi & Gogoi 1994). The people worship their ancestors of

up to four generations, which is conducted in individual families (*griha-dam* or *dam-phi ren*), particularly in the kitchen. The worshiping of ancestors from the fifth generation to 13th generation (*chang-phi ren)* is performed outside the house but within the territory of their own homestead land. The third category of worshiping is done at community level for their ancestors. The Tai Ahom offer oblations to all of their dead forefathers. The ancestors of the first seven generations to whom oblations are offered are regarded as *dam,* and the ancestors of subsequent generations are referred to as *phi* (Sarmah & Borah 2012:310). The category of ancestor spirits and their place of worship and status of godhood is apparently confusing but it is not ambiguous to the people in their religious worldview. They believe and so the belief is a reality.

The ancestor worship is a major component of Tai religion. The Tai people believe in Nature and hence, they follow the natural trail with regard to religious activities. Primarily, observance and performance of rituals and festivals, thus the culture veer around various stages of wet rice cultivation. The Tai, under the leadership of Chaopha (in Tai the elite groups and group leaders were generally called *Chao*) created the concept of heaven. In Tai religion or Taism there are concepts of heaven and earth. In between the earth and heaven there is *Mungklang* (the middle space in between the earth and heaven believed by the Tai people who came with Chaolung Siukapha) which establishes linkage between the two. They also believe that there was a ladder or steps linking the sky and the earth. The first batch of heavenly Tai led by two grandsons of the Lengdon (Gohain 2022) came down to the *Mung-Dun-Chun-Kham,* the golden land through the golden ladder. The Tai Ahom people believe that they are heavenly beings and belong to the clans of gods and goddess. Hence, they consider all of the gods and goddess of heaven as their forefathers. Therefore, they worship the spirits of the ancestors as the gods and goddess of heaven. In the understanding of Tai Ahom there is no concept of hell and no rebirth. After death, everybody goes to the heaven. Hence, the ancestor worship is a major component of the religious worldview of the Tai Ahom. Apart from the Bihu, the ancestor worship has been observed during other festivals and rituals. A brief discussion is rendered below:

2.2.1 Holita Joluwa

This ritual is observed every year. Presently, this ritual is performed by both the Hindus and the *Phuralung* sect[5] of the Tai Ahom. It is noted that the Tai-Ahom have no separate prayer hall. For worshipping ancestors they clean a place in the kitchen which they call *dam sthan*. They keep a lamp, and on a leaf or dish eatable items, betel nut, betel leaf, etc. on the spot for the purpose of dam worship. The priestly clans of Ahom namely, the Deodhai and Bailung set up their place of dam worship in the eastern corner of their kitchen while the Mohan do the same in the western corner. But, the non-priest Ahoms, set up dam place normally in the eastern side of the kitchen. This ritual traditionally was observed by the people before going out for some auspicious purpose (Phukan 2016:80). In the name of the dam they light lamps and sacrifice animals. In case of non-priest clans animal sacrifice is not compulsory. The Tai Ahom people make their traditional food items inside the house or kitchen and offer a quantity of it along with local *Luk – lao* (undiluted rice beer) (Phukan 2016:81) first to the ancestor with prayer and then food items are distributed among the members present on the occasion.

2.2.2 Me-Dam-Me-Phi

It is one of the ancestor worship rituals of the Tai Ahom which is conducted all over Assam every year on a fixed date since the 13th century, which at present corresponds to 31 January in the Gregorian calendar. The Ahom kings used to hold prayers on this day at Charaideo, the first permanent capital of the Ahom kingdom from the 13th century, in order to celebrate victory after the war and as a preventive measure against any misfortune. It was also the burial site for the kings of the Ahom dynasty. In Me-Dam-Me-Phi, '*Me*' means offerings, '*Dam*' means the ancestors, and '*Phi*' means god (Sarmah & Borah 2012:10). Today, this festival is popularly observed as a state festival for worshiping ancestors at community level. At present it becomes a more socio-religious festival where every section of people of the state participate. Following traditional norms, Ho-Phi is constructed (*Ho-Phi* is a platform constructed temporarily by bamboo splints and thatches) to worship the ancestors. In this ceremony the Chao Phi Dam or god of natural sources and Chao Chang Phi (ancestors from fourth to 14th generations) are worshipped (Sarmah & Borah 2012:312–313). Animals like pigs and hens are sacrificed in this ritual. Vegetarian foods are strictly prohibited in Phuralung rituals.

2.2.3 Kin-on-Meu or Na-Khuwa

Another important and the most popular ritual of the Tai Ahom is Kin-on-Meu or Na-Khuwa which is celebrated in the New Year's month of *Dinsing* or *Aghun month* (corresponding to November–December*)* (*Dinsing* and *Aghun* are corresponding calendar months of Tai and Assamese). In this festival, the first seasonal crops, vegetables, and fruits produced by the household are offered to the ancestor first (Gogoi 1994:182). It is observed both at individual and community levels. The Tai Ahom people pray to ancestors; the prayer is rendered below in English in the following words:

> "Oh, our ancestors, we pray homage to you on this day. Please bless us. If there is any misfortune likely to occur to any member of our family, we pray for its remedy and wellbeing of them. Because today is the occasion of Na-Diya (first use of the rice from the harvest - *explanation added*), the offerings are made to the deceased. May the deceased be satisfied at this offering and do away with any kind of disease, misfortune or evils that might occur; and may they bless the household with such abundance that granaries in the front and backyard remain full throughout the ages to come and the beggars and paupers may also be given enough of the grains from them".

2.2.4 Umpha Puja

Like other rituals, the Umpha Puja is also an important ritual of the Tai Ahom. In Umpha Puja, the Tai Ahom people worship their main god Lengdon or Nyu, the forefather of the Tai Ahom. According to the belief of Tai Ahom, god Lengdon sent Khunlung and Khunlai from heaven to earth after a discussion with two gods, namely Lankuri (mountain god) and Jasingfa (goddess of wisdom). On that occasion, the Tai Ahom observed a festival which is today known as Umpha Puja (Puja is a Sanskrit word but internalised). This ritual is observed by the Ahom for the prosperity of the king, kingdom, and the subjects; and also for gaining victory over enemies. It is generally observed in spring season. Animals are sacrificed in this ritual to satisfy their gods. Ducks, cocks, goats, pigs, bullocks, buffaloes, and

even elephants were also sacrificed in the past in the name of the gods. In this ritual gods and goddess like Lengdon (king of heaven), Langdin (goddess of earth), Khawkham (water god), Cheng-Mun-Cheng-Ban (sun and moon), Jasingfa (goddess of wisdom), Langkuri (mountain god), Lai-Lung-Khan (forest god), etc. are worshipped.

2.3 Life Cycle Rituals

Life cycle rituals, primarily birth, marriage, and death, are crucial aspects of the Ahom's total worldview. These are discussed in brief as under:

2.3.1 Birth Rituals

Several rituals and taboos related to births are also important elements in the Tai Ahom's religious beliefs. Just after the pregnancy of her daughter-in-law, the mother-in-law takes care of her. She keeps herself alert for any situation. She asks her son not to involve himself in any anti-religious activities during the time of his wife's pregnancy. Even he is not allowed to go out at night. The house is sealed and protected by the *mantra* (incantations). Some articles such as *jaal* (fishing net), *bogari kayat* (branch of plum tree), etc. are hung in the front and back doors and also in other entry or exit passages of the house with the belief that evil spirits cannot enter inside. It is believed that if the husband goes out from the house at night then evil spirits may enter the house with him and harm the foetus (Phukan 2016:82–83). In the fifth month *panchamrit* five different items such as milk, sugar, ghee, honey, and banana are fed to the pregnant woman. On the day of birth, the lady is segregated in a room and is looked after by a specially trained woman of the village. Men are not permitted to enter the room. After birth, a bamboo sliver is used to cut the umbilical cord of the newly born baby (Phukan 2016:83). The family members beat drums to inform the villagers about the arrival of a new member in their house. To protect the mother and child from bad winds and outside spirits, the movement of mother is restricted to a room. A fire is lit near her bed for quick healing of the womb and recuperating her strength (Phukan 2016:83). On the third day of birth, a ritual is conducted which is known as kacchujaal khuwa or jaal diya. In this ritual, mother is given a special meal with *kacchujaal* (tender colossi shoots cooked with the powder of black pepper). Along with kacchujaal, meat curry, preferably duck meat is prepared by the family members for the new mother and relatives who are invited to the ritual. After the umbilical cord is dropped off the baby, another ritual is also observed which is known as baj oliuwa. On that day, the new born baby is taken out by the mother's mother and sacred water is sprinkled on the mother and child for their wellbeing and protection from evil eyes. The ritual is followed by another ritual. The baby is placed on a *pira* (flat wooden seat) in the sunshine. The grandmother (mother's mother or father's mother) slaps the four corners of the *pira* with a *potaguti* (grinding stone). It is a symbolic action to protect the baby from dangers. With prayer to God, she slaps or hits the *pira* and says that 'from today your enemy and danger from air, water, fire, sky end and you are safe from these dangers'. Within nine to 20 days of birth, *hudhi huwa* ceremony is observed. It is performed for the purification of the mother, baby, and all members of the family. The social and religious elites of society who are invited to the ceremony give a name to the young for social identification. After this ceremony, the mother and the other members of the family are considered free from pollution related restrictions and allowed to go out and take part in any social ceremony (Phukan 2016:83).

2.3.2 Marriage

The Tai Ahom community have some specific and unique marriage rituals. Child marriage is restricted, but the marriage of a widow is permitted in the community. Polygyny was a practice in early time (Rajkumar 2000:64). Marrying a girl from other communities/clans is not a taboo, but they prefer their girls not to marry in other communities/clans. On the other hand, marriage in between same *khel* (same branch of the clan) is not permitted (Rajkumar 2000:64). For example a girl from the king's clan cannot marry a boy from the priestly clan, but a boy from the king's clan can marry a girl from the said clan. They also follow the rule of clan exogamy. So, for example, a Mohan (a priestly clan) cannot marry a Mohan or a Deodhai (another priestly clan) cannot marry a Deodhai, but a Mohan can marry into Deodhai clan and vice versa. It is also the practice that a boy from a lower ranked clan can marry a girl of an upper ranked clan, but a lower ranked clan's girl cannot marry an upper ranked clan's boy. The promotion and demotion of social rank, particularly of individuals, was determined through the institution of marriage. For example, if a prince marries a lower class girl then the social status of the girl would go up, but if a princess marries the boy from a lower ranked clan then her social status would demote. This rule prevails in other clans of the Ahom. Therefore, to keep away from same clan marriage the Tai Ahom people generally follow the *vamshawali* (their detailed genealogies) before the marriage negotiation. If everything is found in order, then both parties i.e. parents and relatives of the girl and boy fix a date for marriage. Before the date of marriage or on the morning of the marriage day, a ritual is performed which is known as *jurandiya*. It is a pre-marriage ceremony where the groom's party assemble in the bride's house to offer dress, ornaments, and other items to the bride for use on the day of marriage. After the *jurandiya, chak-long* is observed to complete the whole marriage system. Chalk-long is the age old custom of the Ahom marriage rule. In Chalk-long marriage, a circle, popularly known as *Mo-rol* is drawn on the ground with a beautiful design of a lotus of seven different colours where 101 earthen lamps are lit. The Tai Ahom people believe that burning lamps placed on the mural indicate the presence of ancestors as witness to the occasion. The bride and groom sit by the side of the mural with other relatives. Simultaneously, the three traditional priests collectively perform their religious rituals and recite the hymns from their traditional text while the ceremony goes on. Finally, the bride and groom take oath before the lit earthen lamp on the mural. The bride offers a traditional *sword,* known as *hengdang,* to the groom and says: "with this *hengdang* first you have to save the nation, then the family and finally me from the enemy". *Rik-khwan* is another important part of *chak-long*. It is also called as *ayu tula* or *pani tula* ceremony in which the female folks go to the tank, pond, or river to bring *khwan* or *ayu* (water). With that water the bride and groom take baths following traditional norms in their own houses respectively. Padmeswar Gogoi, a renowned Tai Scholar, mentions that the marriage rituals of Ahom are a perfect blend of ancient Tai-Ahom, Buddhist, and Hindu formalities. The ceremonies of Rik khvan, Deo ban, and Ap-tang; consultation of Buranji (history); presentation of *hengdang* (a sword with wider blade); the exchange of gold rings, lime box, and knife; and oblation to the five deities are from Tai-Ahom custom. But, the lotus circle with one hundred one lamps, ceremonial bath, and *uruli* (*hulu huli* sound made with tongue) are from Buddhist and Hindu traditions respectively. In recent years the design has changed to simple circles.

2.3.3 Death Ritual

The death ritual of the Tai Ahom community of Assam is performed in two different ways. One is typically Ahom custom and the other is Hindu influenced tradition. In the past the Tai Ahom people buried their dead in the *maidam*.[6] But after 1722, a section of the *Tai-Ahom* people started cremating the bodies of the dead under the influence of Hindu-Aryan culture (Rajkumar 2000:64). It is noted that though the dead body was cremated according to the Hindu-Aryan culture, the *maidam* was built for the dead. The practice of maidam way of burial is still in currency among the *Phuralungs* and a few sections of the Ahom who follow Moamoria (a section of Neo-Vaishnavism led by Moamoria Mahant – a high caste Hindu priest) and also by certain families professing Hindu religion (Rajkumar 2000:64). The *maidam dia* or *gor kora* is a unique custom of the Ahom. In a *ruk-dang* (coffin), made of *urium* (Bischofia javanica) timber, the dead body is brought to the burial place. Today, this timber is scarce or no longer available in many areas. Hence, the people who practise the maidam way of burial make their ruk-dang from other timber or bamboo. Before the dead body is put in to the ruk-dang, the body is washed with a special paste prepared from the combination of black gram and turmeric. Oil is also applied to the body. Then new clothes are offered to the dead body and wrapped around (Phukan 2016:83). In the case of kings of the Ahom dynasty it was different. The king was kept in a special room wearing his royal dress and ornaments along with other goods such as gold, diamond, silver, etc. which the king used in his life. Numbers of *ligira-likshow* (attendants) were also deployed to look after the dead body. Until completion of construction of maidam, the king was kept inside said room. After the completion of maidam, the king was buried along with all articles and some animals, such as elephants, and the servants (Rajkumar 2000:78). Other religious practices were done by the Deodhai, the Mohan, and the Bailong, the priest clan members of the Tai Ahom subsequently. This maidam system is still alive in some selective districts of Upper Assam.

The priest clans and converted Hindu Ahoms observe traditional *halita jaluwa* (also called *halita laguwa*) ritual in the house of the dead before the dead body is brought to the burial place. It is believed that just after the death, the dead transforms to a *griha dam*. The Ahom who believe in Neo-Vaishnavism of Sankardeva and Madhabdeva, do not believe in ancestor worship and hence, the *halita jaluwa* ritual is not observed in their households. Whether it is maidam practice of the Phuralung or cremation practice of Ahom Hindus to dispose of the dead, the death rituals performed by both sections follow traditional norms. The death ritual ceremonies of the Tai Ahom are generally observed on the third, tenth, and 11th day of death (Phukan 2016:84). Each three sections of Tai Ahom i.e. the Phuralung and the priest clans, converted Hindu Ahom, and the Ahom who follow the Neo-Vaishavism of Sankardev and Madhabdev, observe *tiloni* ritual after the third day of death. The tiloni is regarded a purificatory ritual and its observance differs from other sections. The Hindu, the Phuralung, and the Neo-Vaishnavite follow their respective customs. After the completion of religious activities they take local Luk – lao or laopani (rice beer) with a vegetable curry and salt. After the end of the ritual activities the family members and the relatives take boiled food.

The converted Hindu Ahom and followers of Neo-Vaishnavism sections observe *tiloni* in similar way. The villagers arrange a religious function followed by feeding of *pitha guri* (rice powder) to the family members and relatives so that they break the fast.

On the tenth day of death, Phuralung and the priest clans organise another ritual which is known as *chum phun ban phi* (ancestor worship). In a similar way, on the 11th or 13th

day, they observe *damotdiya* or *dam phi* to honour and remember the deceased ancestors. The other two sections of the Ahom observe *dahha* (ritual of offering *pinda* – the ball of rice and other items – in the river and performance of purificatory rituals) and *kaj* (socio-religious performance) on the tenth and 11th day of death respectively. Dahha and kaj are essentially ceremonial rituals of purification. On the tenth day, daha is observed by the villagers to purify the household from the *akhush* or *suwa* or pollution (the Tai Ahom people believe that the house in which death occurs and the houses of the family's relatives become polluted). If daha is complete it is believed that the house becomes purified. Accordingly, on 11th day of death, the kaj is organised widely in the house of the dead. In kaj the converted Hindu Ahom do their ritual following *Bamuniya Niyam* (Brhamanical precept). After the early part of rituals, *nam kirtan* (repeated recitation of the name of the Lord Krishna followed by playing of musical instruments like *khol* (a type of drum), and *tal* (cymbal)) is organised by the villagers (Phukan 2016:84). The Vaishnavites do not believe in Brahmin culture but believe in *nam kirtan* only. Therefore, they organise only *nam kirtan* on that day. On the night of the 11th day or the next day another ceremony is organised which is known as *giyatoli bhuj* for *maishya sparsha*.[7] The disciples of Srimanta Shankardeva Sangh (the largest religious organisation of the state of Assam, India) follow rituals which emphasise vegetarianism and hence they perform a *toilla sparsha* (touching oil) ritual. After completion of these rituals, the family members of the dead are free from all types of restrictions and permitted to take part in the social and religious functions of the society.

Apart from the gods and goddesses invoked during the festivals mentioned, the Tai Ahom people also observe several other rituals and worship other gods and goddesses at different times. Among them, worship of Jashingpha (goddess of wisdom) and Lakshmi (goddess of wealth) are worth mentioning. For enlightenment and knowledge, the Tai Ahom worshipJashingpha annually and perform Lakshmi Puja for peace and stability. The Ahom priests perform these rituals in the traditional method offering different materials, birds, and animals for sacrifice. The main aim of the worship of the goddess is to earn blessings for good health, wealth, prestige, and power.

2.4 Conclusion

The Tai Ahom people hold their traditional faith, beliefs, and practices very keenly to their identity even though most of them have been converted to various cults of Hinduism. Though the religious life of the Ahom more or less has changed in the course of time, traditional belief in ancestor worship and performance of rituals related to the birth, death, and marriage are still important among some sections. The rituals for immediate ancestors and the ancestors up to 14 generations are conducted during such occasions as marriage, beginning of a new business, going on a long journey, etc. Important occasions of ancestor worship are holita joluwa, me-dam-me-phi, kin-on-meu or na-khuwa, umpha puja, etc. In similar ways, in the case of birth and death some other rituals are also observed. They also observe various agro-based festivals at the beginning and end of the harvesting of crops. These festivals are celebrated at both community and domestic levels. Among these festivals the Bihu, which is now a national festival, is very famous. However, the Ahom as a whole do not celebrate traditional rituals uniformly. The study reflects that some sections of Tai Ahom who have reposed their faith on new religious beliefs are also seen fondly participating in community events organised as per indigenous Tai Ahom faith as part of their legacy.

Notes

1 Bihu is a set of three festivals named after the months of their celebration or the characteristics attributed to agriculture activities and enthusiasm. According to months of celebration the Bihu is named as Bohag Bihu (Bohag month, mid-April), Magh Bihu (Magh month, mid-January), and Katik Bihu (Kati month, mid-October) and correspondingly these are known as Rongali, Bhogali, and Kongali Bihu. Rongali Bihu is a sowing festival with much merry making; Bhogali Bihu is a harvest festival and plenty is available for feasting; and Kongali Bihu is celebrated for the protection of crops under the condition of short supply of food.

2 Utsav is a Sanskritised word. In fact Assamese has its root in Sanskrit and is an Indo-Aryan language. Having been Hinduised, the Ahom people extensively use borrowed words and a few of their native words even to express religious worldviews. However, a few Indo-Aryan words in the Assamese family of languages have phonetic variations for certain alphabets having 's' and 'sh' sounds which produce 'ch' and 'ha' sounds respectively.

3 Hushari is a practice of bestowing blessings to the individual household while performing Bihu dance. Only dance is not a part of Husari. The tradition began after Neo-Vaishnavism. In other words, the Neo-Vashnavisim practice of blessings is assimilated with the Bihu.

4 Gamosha – a traditional cotton towel. Bihuwan- *maan*, i.e. respect on the occasion of Bihu. *Gamosha* as *bihuwan-* the gamosha is used as a symbol of showing love and respect (*maan*).

5 The Ahom have their own religion which is called *Phuralung*. The *Phura* means the unified force of the world and the *Lung* means Dragon, a religious as well as royal symbol of the Ahom.

6 Maidam is a traditional burial mound and also the practice of disposing of the dead particularly in royal and aristocratic families of the Ahom community in Assam. It has one or two chambers inside. For details *see* Gogoi (1976).

7 A feast for relatives (*gyati*) with a fish dish so that they can take non-vegetarian food from then onwards. During pollution period, non-vegetarian food is prohibited for several relations of the dead. On this day social approval is given for non-vegetarian food for those who observed pollution taboo together; and gratitude is shown to those who helped the family in different ways.

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3

BELIEFS, RITUALS, AND TABOOS AMONG THE BAKARWAL OF JAMMU AND KASHMIR

Ubaid Ahmad Dar and Mitoo Das

3.0 Introduction

The Kashmir Himalayas are home to a few pastoral groups who migrate from the plains of Jammu to the higher elevations of the Kashmir and Ladakh valleys on a seasonal basis. Pastoralism in India has long piqued ethnographers' interest, but a dearth of field-based studies among pastoralists (Leshnik & Gunther 1975), particularly in the Himalayan regions, has been a major academic barrier. Similarly, there has been little significant work on the taboos associated with the region's pastoralist tribes. As a result of living with a nomadic pastoral tribe in the area for an extended period of time as part of doctoral fieldwork of the first author, he became aware of the numerous belief systems and taboos observed impulsively by the people known as Bakarwals. Thus, in this chapter, we discuss these rites, rituals, taboos, etc. which form an integral part of their daily lives and are more consistent with religion than with any other social institution. The chapter begins by summarising the research area and the tribe under study, and then discusses the rites and rituals associated with their yearly and life cycles, and then to the taboos associated with everyday life among them. Fieldwork for this account took place in three distinct topographical zones: the Greater or Inner Himalayas, the Kashmir basin, and the Middle or Lesser Himalayan Pir Panjal mountains. For convenience, these three zones are referred to collectively as 'the Kashmir Himalaya' throughout this chapter.

3.1 The Bakarwals

The Bakarwals, like their counterparts, the Gujjars, are Himalayan pastoralists who migrate seasonally with their flocks of sheep and goats in search of green pastures. They have long relied on adaptable social and ecological strategies to thrive in harsh and severely disadvantaged environments along with other herding communities in the region, such as the *Chopans* (local shepherds). As such, we provide an overview of the people referred to as 'Bakarwals' in this section of the chapter, drawing on a sizable corpus of historical and anthropological literature currently available on them.

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The Bakarwals are primarily goat and sheep herders in the northwest Himalayas, alternating between summer and winter pastures in the greater Himalayan and Pir Panjal ranges. They are mostly found in the Poonch, Rajouri, Kathua, and Kishtwar districts of the Jammu division in the winters and the high altitude passes of all districts of Kashmir division. Based on the availability of grasses for their livestock and the rising of temperatures, the Bakarwals start their journey from their winter pastures in April and take about two months to reach the meadows in Kashmir. There they spend around six months tending to their sheep and goats and, with falling temperature and the exhaustion of grasslands, the tribe starts their downward journey in September/October every year. With a population of over one lakh (census 2011), researchers disagree on the origins of Bakarwals. Cunningham (1871) attributes their origin to the Scythian tribe[1], which conquered Kabul around 100 BC and established settlements in Kashmir, Punjab, Rajasthan, and Gujarat, eventually establishing the Gujjar empire. Smith (1904) attributes them to the white Huns, who arrived in India in 465 AD as nomadic hordes. Munshi (1944) took the opposite position, claiming that Gujjars are not a foreign breed but are descended from Indians. He asserts that Gujjars were once kings who ruled over Rajputana, Malwa, and modern Gujarat (the whole region was known as Gurjjaradesa – the land of Gujjaras). However, their dominion ended with the demise of the Chalukya Empire in the late 13th century AD[2] (Bamzai 2007).

Huthi, a Georgian[3] academic who travelled to India in 1967 to study the Gujjars, advanced the Georgian origin theory. He was able to establish a relationship between the Georgian tribes and the Indian Gujjars after conducting research on the Gujjars in northern India. He believes that a number of cultural and linguistic similarities, as well as oral traditions and archaeological evidence, suggest that the tribe may have Central Asian ancestors (Sofi 2019). While Cunnigham believes Gujjars are descended from the eastern Tartar Kushan and Yachi tribes (USSR), the majority of experts believe Gujjars are Georgian (Bhardwaj 1999). Additionally, the Gujjar and Bakarwal communities are linked to Central Asia by the fact that the term Gujjar was coined in Turkey[4] and was first used by Central Asian Turks in the third millennium BC (Rahi 2011). Based on the ethno-archaeological studies conducted during this research and the archaeological research in the area (Spate 2019) it can be asserted that pastoralist communities in the northwest Himalayas retained flexible ethnic identities, dynamic settlement and subsistence patterns, and maintained trade and exchange relationships with adjacent groups over this historical period, similar to the pastoralists in Kenya as studied by Sobania (1988).

3.2 Beliefs, Rituals, and Ceremonies

According to both field and literary research, the Bakarwal society is patriarchal in nature and is governed by elderly male members. They are the adherents of Islamic faith and follow *Sunni*[5] school of thought. Nonetheless, the entirety of their system of beliefs, rites, and ceremonies must be viewed through the lens of their pastoral way of life. According to Khatana (1984), these social systems fall into three categories: annual cycles, life cycles, and unique rituals and avoidances.

According to yearly cycles, the Bakarwals practise religious festivals, irrespective of their faith, the most important of which are *Eid, Nawroz*, and *Baisakhi*. Although Baisakhi is not a Muslim festival; rather it is a cultural festival and mostly celebrated in Punjab and Jammu regions. As Bakarwals share the cultural traits with these areas and share historical roots in this respect, they also celebrate Baisakhi with rigour. Additionally, during their annual

migrations, they visit several holy men's or pirs' shrines for blessings and prayers. They make offerings to these shrines in the form of animals, cash, or fabric and in exchange seeking protection of their families and livestock from supernatural perils. These shrines are scattered throughout the region, and many of them have been spotted in the Himalayan peaks as well. They may take the form of graves or the shapes of stone memorials. Additionally, they visit several significant mountain passes, such as *Rattan Pir Shah* and *Pir ki Gali*, which are named after these *pirs*. When speaking with one of the elderly Bakarwals[6] about this, he stated:

> Pirs and their memorials have been an integral part of our lives. They are regarded as the intermediaries who stand between us and God. If any of us wishes for our prayers to be accepted, there is no other way than to please these almighty's beloved.

On various occasions, Gujjar-Bakarwals pay homage (*Niaz*) to these shrines and pirs by slaughtering an animal, offering clothing or blankets, and so on. When the Bakarwals cross the high-altitude mountains, they frequently tie woollen threads to the shrines as a sign of good fortune (Figure 3.1). Khatana (1984) also observed that they tie a bundle of offerings together that may consist of eatables and other household items, in a piece of cloth, and

Figure 3.1 A Shrine in the Greater Himalayas Where the Bakarwals Tie Threads While Traversing the Passes

Source: Author

throw them into high altitude lakes; if they float, it is interpreted as a good omen for human and animal welfare. However, if the same item sinks into the water, it is regarded as a bad omen for the entire group.

Figure 3.1 displays a shrine in the Mathar region of the Greater Himalayas. This shrine is constructed entirely of stone that has been arranged in a circular pattern and is supported by tree branches. The structure, being situated on the high altitude pass of Mathar, paves the way to the summer pastures, which are only a day's travel away from this location. This spot for the shrine is supposed to have been utilised by their *pir* as a resting area in ancient times, and as such is believed to be blessed with a little water stream that bursts in the centre. Thus, drinking a glass of water from this site and tying a woollen ribbon or fabric for the wellbeing of both humans and animals is considered a good omen while crossing the pass. When asked if the region has a presiding deity, they stated that the spirits of their *pirs* are constantly present and bless them and their animals as they traverse these routes.

As the concept of life cycle rituals is defined, it includes rites associated with birth, marriage, and death.

3.2.1 Birth Rituals

Children born into the tribe experience a variety of significant life stages. It is recommended that after the birth of a child in the Bakarwal family, the child's ear is whispered with the Islamic call to prayer, '*Azaan*'. This ritual is usually performed by the *pir* or the *molvi*, but if neither of them is available, any senior and respected member of the community may perform it. This assures that the child's first words are those of the *Azaan*, which laud God and declare His oneness, as well as the veracity of Prophet Muhammad's teaching. Following that, the community is invited to a feast during which a goat or sheep is slaughtered, and the child is given a proper name chosen by their family or kafila pir. Naming is done on the day of birth, on the third day, or on or after the seventh day. A child is given a suitable name that is followed by the family names. In the case of a female child, her name is typically suffixed with 'Akhter', 'Bi', or 'Banu'. Following that, male children are circumcised by a barber who may or may not be a member of the tribe or a medical practitioner in front of community members. Because there is no set age for this practice, Bakarwals typically circumcise their children prior to the age of five. Circumcision[7] is performed on children as young as three days old and as old as five years old as is found in this study. It is known locally as *Khutna*, and on this occasion, women perform traditional songs; a sheep or goat is sacrificed in the name of God – *Allah*,[8] and a feast is thrown for relatives and friends. They all pray to Allah for the child's welfare and long life. Additionally, blessings are bestowed by wishing the child to possess large flocks and horses.

3.2.2 Marriage Rituals

Marriage is one of the most culturally diverse social structures among Muslims. It is an obligation in Islam. "The best people in my nation are those who marry and choose their wives," the Prophet Muhammad states, "and the worst people in my nation are those who avoid marriage and live their lives as bachelors" (Nuri 1987). Islamic marriage is intended to follow *Shari'ah* principles as closely as possible, with the least influence from traditional practices. However, the majority of Bakarwal marriages incorporate rites and rituals in addition to those mandated by Islam, and both families adhere to them wholeheartedly.

This fusion of Islamic law and cultural elements culminates in a highly polished affair that exemplifies cultural synchronisation to the hilt.

After approximately 25 years or sooner, Bakarwals marry and are considered adults. Previously, they married off their offspring at a much younger age following the guidelines set by Islam whereby the early marriages are preferred, but as a result of continuous interaction with indigenous populations of Kashmir and Jammu regions like Kashmiris, Dogras, etc., the age of marriage has increased as new elements are introduced. Bakarwals practise endogamy and patrilocal marriage, with the women relocating to their husband's family following marriage. The ceremonies connected with marriage have been directly influenced by their mode of life and their belief system. After both parties agree to marry, the groom's relatives pay a visit to the bride's home to deliver gifts and schedule the nikah ceremony. The ceremony starts with the recitation of Islamic prayers and all the people present in the gathering ask for the goodness in the marital bond from the Almighty. Then while selecting the dates for the marriage ceremony, Tuesdays, as well as the third, 13th, and 23rd days of the traditional calendar month, are typically avoided as they are considered inauspicious for any economic activity or important social events. Additionally, days that coincide with migrations are not recommended for the ceremony. When both parties agree on a date, the groom, along with relatives and friends, pays a visit to the bride's house to perform the nikah ceremony in the presence of the *molvi* or *pir*. But before going to take the bride, the groom and the people accompanying him should visit the graveyard where their kin are buried and pray for them and get their blessings for the marital bond. Following this the bride price (*mahr*)[9] is determined by the elders in the presence of the bride and groom's fathers and is then handed over to the bride's father during the nikah ceremony. The girls' family hosts a feast for community members and the groom's family. But if we look at this from an Islamic standpoint, then the groom's family is supposed to give the feast to relatives from both sides which is known as *Walima*.[10] But this aspect of Bakarwal marriage is now replaced by the feast given by the bride's family. Following that, the bride is escorted to the groom's house by her family and friends, who are treated to a reciprocal meal at the groom's house. Among the Gujjar Bakarwals, marriages are not consummated immediately after the wedding, even if the bride visits the groom's family. The girl is to remain with her mother-in-law for seven days, or in some cases three days, and is not to be seen by her husband during this time. Violation of this rule is regarded as a grave disrespect to the bride's family.

Due to the Bakarwal society's patriarchal nature, sons are preferred over daughters, resulting in a large gender disparity. Additionally, it was observed that many men have died at a much younger age as a result of the Himalayas' difficult terrain. Thus, this demographic imbalance has a direct effect on their marriage pattern, as women are more likely to marry multiple times. This has also resulted in a relaxation of marriage-related norms within specified social boundaries. Widow marriages are also common and preferred among the Bakarwals. The first author was able to identify three such polygynous relationships in which men married for the second time as a result of the women being left alone following their husbands' deaths. Thus, there is no taboo against widow marriage in Bakarwal society. Islam also promotes widow marriages and allows the marriage of one man with the maximum of four women and this is evident among the Bakarwals as well. As the daily life revolves around the concept of *Sunnah*[11] among the tribe, it is also regarded as a good deed to marry a widow to support her and her children both socially and economically.

3.2.3 Death Rituals

Death rituals vary by culture and are typically related to religion (Chachkes & Jennings 1994). While Islam has established criteria for rituals from birth to death, the historical context and process of acculturation have a significant influence in deviating from the established regulations. Kashmir's cultural diversity has facilitated the development of rituals linked with many religious groups, resulting in rites that are distinct from those observed by groups in other locations. When a person is on the verge of death, he or she is laid in the direction of Mecca, i.e., *qibla*, and fellow Muslims are invited to assist by bringing the dying person some water to drink or by reciting the *shahada*.[12] It contains passages from the Quran and prayers ("I bear witness that there is no deity but God, and I bear witness that Muhammad is God's messenger"), as well as Quranic chapters and prayers. It is considered *sunnah* of the prophet to encourage the dying to imitate the shahada in order to reassure them that these are their final words.

When a Bakarwal dies, his or her eyelids are closed and, preferably, a white cloth is wrapped around the head to bind the jaw. Later, the body is undressed and draped in a clean white cloth, while the limbs are straightened in unison with the body. Then, family members and friends are permitted to have one final glance at the deceased's face; and the body is quickly prepared for ceremonial cleansing (*ghusl*), shrouding (*kafan*), and burial (*dafan*). *Ghusl, kafan, salat-al-janaza* (funeral prayer), and *dafan* are all regarded *fard-e-kifaya* (collective obligations) of Muslims, and as such, if these commitments are met by a large number of individuals, other persons may be excused from their responsibilities.

Bakarwals bury their dead according to Islamic traditions and execute the same procedures on their graves. If a person dies while migrating, the deceased is buried along the migration route. At the location, a heap of stones called a cairn is built, and each year, they pay homage to the departed soul by passing by it and lighting a candle on the grave. They perform *Fatiha Khwani*[13] on the anniversary of the deceased's death, in which a *pir* is summoned to read Quranic verses for the deceased's better afterlife; and a sheep or goat is sacrificed for a community feast. As per the Islamic belief, even if the body of the person dies, the soul enters the *Barzakh,* a state of waiting, until the day of judgement.[14] On the day of judgement, all of the souls shall be blown into the graves of their owners and the day of resurrection will begin. The Bakarwals also follow this belief and pray for the better afterlife of the soul and the good reward at the time of resurrection. These rituals vary substantially according to region and season. If the death occurs in the summer pastures, the *pir* is unable to attend the incident. In this instance, the deceased is either carried to the mainland or the ceremonies are conducted during the subsequent migratory cycle. During the research for this study, a woman died in the highland meadows, and her body was carried down to the Kashmir valley, approximately 60 kilometres away, where she was buried in a local graveyard and ceremonies were performed during the following migratory cycle. Thus, rites and beliefs are strongly influenced by ecological factors and are well suited to the Bakarwals' migration cycle.

3.3 Taboos

Taboos are a critical component of tribal lifestyles because they guide the sustainable use of natural resources. They are closely adhered to since they are self-imposed (Sharma, Thakur & Uniyal 2021). Throughout the research, a variety of taboos were gathered. These can be classified as taboos concerning birth, marriage, death, and animals.

3.3.1 Taboos Related to Birth

If a child is born in Bakarwal culture, the mother is considered impure until the 40th day after the birth. During this time period, she is not permitted to engage in religious activities like *namaz,*[15] *fasting, recitation of the Quran,* etc., or household chores. There are also specific taboos related with the pregnant woman, such as the prohibition of her wandering in the dark without the iron object in hand. Pregnant ladies almost always carry an iron knife with them to fight off evil. Similarly, pregnant women are not permitted to leave their homes or cut anything during a lunar eclipse. If she cuts any object, such as a tree branch, it is believed that the resulting child will be disabled. If a male owl perches on the house and begins hooting during the pregnancy, it is believed that a baby girl will be born; if a female owl sits on the house and begins hooting, it is believed that a baby boy will be born. If the mother does not take her first bath after childbirth on or after the 15th day and her second bath on the 40th day, it is interpreted as a negative omen for both mother and child. If all of these norms and taboos are followed, the infant and mother are considered blessed and can live happily ever after. Nonetheless, these taboos are mostly related to their traditional faith and practices rather than to Islam.

3.3.2 Taboos Related to Marriage

In the Bakarwal community, marriage outside the tribe is severely outlawed. The Bakarwals marry primarily within the clan, and cousin relationships are preferred. When it comes to decide on wedding dates, Tuesdays, as well as the third, 13th, and 23rd days of the traditional calendar month, are not regarded as auspicious. Similarly, marriage between two *Eids*, namely *Eid-ul-Fitr* and *Eid-ul-Adha*, is discouraged if it is the family's first marriage. During field study it was not possible to obtain an explanation for this even after asking. After a marriage is fixed, the girl is not permitted to venture into the darkness or outside without assistance; and she should constantly wear an iron bangle and carry an iron knife. This is to ward against the forest's and night's evils. Sudden death of a family member or animal shortly after marriage is interpreted as a negative omen on the part of the bride. If there is an abundance of grass and animals following the marriage, it is believed that she brought with her good fortune.

3.3.3 Taboos Related to Death

In case of a death in the Bakarwal society, the herding group in it, in which death occurred, gets involved in death rituals. For four days, immediate family members are not permitted to engage in any economic activity. Following that, 40 days of mourning are observed, during which neighbours and close relatives spend the night at the deceased's home. They would chant prayers and read verses from the Quran during these nights to ensure that the deceased's soul is at peace. The funeral ceremony is held on the fourth day, and the deceased's family invites relatives, friends, and local residents to the feast. A *pir* is invited to participate in the feast, and he prays for the deceased person's soul. On the 40th day of death, a similar but smaller feast is also held. During this period, people abstain from celebrations and marriage ceremonies. Additionally, wearing bright apparel is discouraged during the first ten days after the death. Male members of the society are expected to visit the grave daily and pray for the deceased's better afterlife. Females are absolutely forbidden

from visiting graveyards, as it is believed that females visiting graves may harm the soul of the deceased. After 40 days of grief, the family can resume normal activities.

3.3.4 Taboos Related to Animals

It is observed that the Bakarwals place high value on the taboos related with animals in specific situations. They adhere to these taboos religiously, and any infraction is viewed as a threat to their survival. For instance, if a snake crosses the route of a travelling Bakarwal group, it is seen as extremely unlucky, and the group will ask permission from the *molvi* or *pir* to continue. They typically butcher a chicken before proceeding. Similarly, a dog howling at night is regarded as a portent of doom. If a mule gives birth while ascending to the summer pastures, it is not regarded as a positive sign for the herd. While it is regarded a good omen if it delivers on the downward journey towards the winter pastures. Bleating of sheep is also regarded as a positive omen. Similarly, the Bakarwals see the non-eating of goat on Baisakhi and the fasting of sheep during Ramadhan as good omens. The owl's hooting is not thought to be beneficial to pregnant mothers. When it comes to dreams, seeing a bear is seen as extremely unlucky, and blessings from the *pir* or *molvi* are considered imperative. Additionally, seeing horses or sheep in dreams is regarded as a positive omen for the family.

3.3.5 Taboos Related to Daily Life

The Bakarwals' daily life is also governed by omens and ordeals. As Khatana (1984) notes, meeting the two women who have filled pitchers with them is regarded as a favourable sign. When asked why, the Bakarwals explained that water is a lifeline for their community and animals. Because water sources dictate their halting points along the way, two women with filled pitchers symbolise the tribe's availability of water and are regarded as a good omen. Similarly, the tribe has a widespread belief in the evil eye (*bad nazar*), which is believed to be the cause of illness and death. Its primary targets and victims are youngsters and animals. The first author recalls one such episode from the field, when a youngster had a fever and his mother filled a jug of water and went to seven tents, requesting that seven people put their fingers in the water. Following that, she sprayed some on the child and the remainder around their tent. When they were questioned about it, they stated that the fever was caused by the evil eye and that by following this procedure, she was able to ward off any negative events that might have happened to the child. Other methods are employed to ward off the evil eye, including beads, shattered pottery, black cloths, and amulets (*taveez*) obtained from the pirs. Bakarwals also believe in black magic, with *Banbuddhi* or *Rantas* being the greatest fears. This legendary beast, which the Kashmiris refer to as Rantas and the Gujar Bakarwals refer to as Banbuddhi, is regarded as malevolent and widely dreaded. It is thought by some to be a wild man, while others believe it to be a wild woman, tall with long, tangled hair and burning hollow eyes, with beast-like feet attached backwards to the legs, causing its tracks to appear to be travelling in the opposite direction from the direction in which it actually travels.

3.4 Changing Dimensions

The changing dimensions of the Bakarwals' religiosity can be seen in the light of the changing social and physical landscape. The tribal world is neither static nor closed;

rather, it has always been dynamic in incorporating new parts and reforming the old, as seen by the development of myths and general beliefs. Historically, the Bakarwals and other economic groups in the Kashmir Himalayas had little association among each other. However, in the last several decades, as a result of technological advancements and globalisation, Bakarwals have been in regular contact with the outside world, resulting in the dissemination of new cultural components into their way of life. There has been the syncretisation of both religious and cultural elements among the community, and this has led to the denunciation of things that were formerly seen as vital characteristics of Bakarwal culture. When speaking with younger generations, they do not believe in or adhere to all of the rites and taboos outlined in this chapter. Additionally, there has been a trend of social mobility among the region's new generation tribal members, which has helped define the concept of the stated belief systems. There has been a significant change with respect to the rituals pertaining to yearly and life cycles and that change is evident while studying the different social institutions among the tribe. Suppose in case of marriage, love marriage was seen as a taboo by the Bakarwals, but in contemporary times, there have been many such incidents and there has been no negative response by the community. Similarly, taboos related to animals have also died out and have been seen as the happening of the 'past'.

Despite these considerable modifications, observation of essential rites remain with them whether at the household or community level. As a result of the impact and incorporation of other cultural characteristics, their rituals have evolved into a synthesis of old and new. The traditional practices have not been abandoned, but the inclusion of new elements forces the tribe to either adopt new rules in the course of economic development and modernisation or face the loss of a generation that bears little or no significance to such phenomena. As a result, this study may contribute to the preservation of such cultural characteristics.

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Notes

1 Scythians were a group of ancient nomadic warrior tribes who originally lived in present-day Siberia.
2 Between the sixth and eighth centuries AD, the Chalukyas ruled the Deccan. And then, in the tenth century AD, they reclaimed their dominance and ruled until the twelfth century. The Chalukyas' fabled history casts doubt on their origins. However, following Chalukya rulers' usage of the terms Gurjar Nath and Gurjeshwar it is abundantly evident that they were Gurjjars by origin. They were previously feudatories of the Maitrik Gurjars but later declared independence.
3 Georgians are an indigenous Caucasian ethnic group native to Georgia and the south Caucasus.
4 The term "Gujjar" is thought to have originated from the Turkish word "Göçer," which refers to seasonal pastoralist nomadic settlements.
5 As per the Britannica, Sunni is one of Islam's two primary branches, constituting the majority of the religion's believers. Sunni Muslims see their denomination as the majority and traditional branch of Islam – in contrast to the Shia minority.
6 Mohd Yousuf Khatna, at Bandipora, J &K, on 16 July 2021.

7 Circumcision is one among the rites of Islam and holds religious importance among the Bakarwals as well. It is considered obligatory to circumcise the child before he attains the age of puberty.
8 According to Islamic belief, *Allah* is the word used to represent God.
9 Mahr is the groom's commitment to the bride in the form of money or possessions at the time of Islamic marriage.
10 Walima is the second of two customary Islamic wedding components, the other being Nikah.
11 In Islam, Sunnah are the traditions and practices related to Prophet Muhammad.
12 It is an Islamic pledge, one of the five pillars of Islam, and a component of the Azaan.
13 Fatiha Khwani is a local name for an Islamic tradition whereby the closely related people like relatives and friends assemble to pray for the deceased's better afterlife.
14 As per the Bakarwal belief, the soul goes to the Almighty after death and it will be given back to the body on the day of resurrection. If a person has done good, then his soul will live happily in the world created by Allah for the souls and if it has done wrong in this world, then it will be tormented in that world as well.
15 Namaz, also known as Salat, are the prayers offered by the Muslims.

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4

RELIGIOUS LIFE OF THE KABUIS OF MANIPUR

Potshangbam Binodini Devi

4.0 Introduction

The Kabui, who are also known as the Ruangmei/Rongmei (*Rong/Ruang* = south, and *mei* = people) is believed to be an indigenous ethnic community living in the north eastern part of India. They are presently distributed in the seven districts of Manipur state, and one district each in Assam and Nagaland. The highest concentrations of Kabui are found in the Tamenglong, Noney, Imphal East, Imphal West, Kangpokpi, and the Senapati districts of Manipur. Scattered pockets are also found in the Cachar district of Assam, Kohima district of Nagaland; and Bishnupur, Thoubal, and Chandel districts of Manipur. Census 2011, Government of India, records the total population of the Kabui tribe in Manipur as 103,908 individuals. They mainly inhabit the hills of Manipur and Nagaland, the valley regions of Assam except that of Haflong areas. The Kabuis/Ruangmei/Rongmei of Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland had their own traditional religious beliefs and practices. In this paper the present author puts more emphasis on the Kabuis/Ruangmeis/Rongmeis of Manipur, who are followers of Tingkao Ragwang as the Supreme God, i.e. Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak (Chapriak meaning followers), in short TRC group. This group has its own distinctive socio-cultural, traditional, and linguistic variants. The Kabui religion consists of the worshipping of gods and goddesses (Dampapu and Dampapui; Napsinmei, Champei, etc.), deities (Karampou-Karampei, Kairao, Kaipa bhamboo, Kaipi bhamboo, etc.), benevolent spirits (Apouna/Ragwang, Bisnu/Bonchanu/Manchanu, Koklumei, Chonchai, Karangong, Kunmei, Lang-bhangla, etc.), and malevolent spirits (Changlhu,Changlhu-lhudai, Changbang-lhudai, Lam-la, Changmei, Chagamei/Pa Ra, etc.). While worshipping, they generally perform sacrifices with a strong belief that they would be helped by the deity and their desire would also be fulfilled. The sacrifice may consist of offerings such as a kind of grass, grains, animal's blood, or a small chicken *(suong-loi)* considered to be the substitute of the ailing person. The worship has general and specific purposes; general purposes involve the community's cause, while specific ones involve individual cause such as the curing of a sick person. Omen prediction process, locally called *gulim-dansanmei* (literally ritual offering of ginger) and libation of rice-beer *(joupaankeimei*) is an essential element of all worships. They believe in a Supreme God whom they call Tingkao-Ragwang/Lagwang.

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Besides, they also worship natural objects such as stones for the deities like Kaipi bhamboo, Kaiba bhamboo, and Kairao.

Against this background, the present research intends to unfold traditional religious beliefs and practices, rites and rituals, feasts, and festivals of the Kabui of Manipur who are followers (*chapriak*) of Tingkao as Ragwang, the king of gods, i.e. the Supreme God. They can be named as a TRC group. However, they have also been exposed to certain forces of change with the advent of Christianity and modernity. The present paper attempts to explore the extent of changes taking place in their religious life. Moreover, it also aims to examine how far the people strive to retain their traditional customs, beliefs, and practices to uphold their identity.

This chapter is based on primary sources of data collected from a field study by employing survey and observation methods. The traditional Kabui people can be found following Heraka faith (a revival religious tradition), Christianity, and traditional faith, beliefs and practices. These people are known as Kabui, Rongmei, or Ruangmei in different localities spread over Assam, Nagaland, and Manipur. This chapter however uses the nomenclature Kabui, and covers those living in Manipur and follow Tingkao Ragwang as the Supreme God. In other words, this chapter engages with the traditionalist Kabui with reference to their gods, deities, rituals, festivals, etc. Ragwang and Lagwang are phonetic variations of the word, meaning Supreme God; in this chapter the name Tingkao Ragwang is used throughout.

4.1 Gods, Deities, and Spirits

The Kabui believe that the destiny of human beings is in the hands of God who is called Tingkao Ragwang or Tingkao Lagwang. He is believed to be the supreme creator of the universe through different deities, and is believed to be living in heaven. Ragwang or Lagwang literally means "King of Gods", that is the Supreme God; the two words representing phonetic variation in different localities. Tingkao is the Supreme God and as **He** is believed to be the king of gods, His name and attributes go together and He is known as Tingkao Ragwang; **He** can do everything for humans. Thus, **He** can make them happy, healthy, wealthy, and prosperous or just reverse of it, if **He** likes them to be so. **He** possesses all human attributes. **He** has a wife, children and so on. **He** is said to have seven sons. It is also believed that the Tingkao-Ragwang eats food and drinks rice-beer like any human being. **He** is just a benevolent God who is dealing with humans according to his deeds. In recent years, **He** is worshipped in a *kalumkai* (temple), and **He** is described as omnipresent.

Obviously, Tingkao Ragwang punishes the robber, the wicked individual, and the wrong doer by putting them in all sorts of distress and disappointment during their worldly life here or by making their lives shorten; while the honest people, the hard-working people, and those good men who help the poor and needy are rewarded by **Him** with happiness and a longer life. Therefore, the Kabui revere Him as the protector of human beings and animals from evil spirits, death, and disaster; and as the remover of every obstacle, giver of health (*meicravmeicric/meicravgaymei*), wealth (*lanv*), longer life (*panty sangmei*), and so on. **He** is in fact believed to be the final judge and protector of all living things in the world. **He** lives in heaven where peace prevails for eternity; **He** is immortal, eternal, and has no birth and death. **He** is believed to have ever-wakeful eyes *(ka-mheek*) with which **He** can see everything in the universe.

In recent years, as it is observed during field study, Tingkao Ragwang is equated with Kubai religion. He is interpreted as rules and regulations and thus the religion of His followers (the TRC). He is the God, and at the same time He is the founder of the religion.

In addition to this Supreme God, there are many other gods and goddesses. For instance, as has been mentioned, Tingkao Ragwang has seven sons, who are also gods. Moreover, there are many benevolent and malevolent spirits too. Among the Kabui, the TRC group never worship the evil spirits, but they are used to give their shares while worshipping or offering other gods/deities/good spirits, so that they do not disturb the occasion or ceremony. Some important spirits, good and evil, believed by the Kabui are listed as under:

Apouna/Ragwang (good spirit)
Bisnu/Bonchanu/Manchanu(good spirit)
Napsinmei (god of paddy)
Koklumei (good spirit)
Chonchai (good spirit/god for prosperity)
Karangong (good spirit)
Charakilongmei (good spirit, for the welfare of humankind)
Kairao (presiding deity of the house/ancestors)
Kaipibhamboo and *Kaibabhamboo* (village deities, both of them are also collectively known as *Soang/Shong*)
Dampapu-Dampapui (God and Goddess of creation)
Champei (Goddess of birds and animals)
Karampou-Karampui (presiding deities of the locality)
Zongumei (evil spirit)
Kaibhamei (evil spirit)
Changlhu (evil spirit)
Changlhu-lhudai (evil spirit, north)
Changbang-lhudai (evil spirit, south)
Taroi Gang (presiding deity in the land of death)
Pung-la (presiding deity of mounds, considered to be an evil spirit)
Maigang (fire god)
Pong-Gwang (wind god)
Ting-Gwang (rain god)
Mong-Gwang (cloud god)
Bangla-Gwang (earthquake god)
Di-tingpu-Di-Zangpui (Father & Mother goddess earth)
Kaikulla (presiding deity of each corner)
Lang-bhangla (spirit dwelling under the bedsteads)
Lam-la (evil spirits)
Laora (god of paddy field, evil spirit)
Kapakara (evil spirits/devils)
Duira (water god)
Thingphalla (forest deity)
Kunmei (good spirit, considered to be the protector of the village concerned)
Chagamei/Pa Ra (evil spirit)
Kapenpu and *Kapenpui* (evil spirits, who are in-charge of any kind of epidemic etc.)
Kunmei (good spirit, considered to be the protector of the village concerned)

Changmei/Pa Ra (evil spirits residing by the roadsides)
Kapenpui (evil spirit, who is in-charge of any kind of epidemic)

Here, the author would like to list some gods, goddess, and deities that are regularly worshipped by this community to appease them on different occasions. Though some of them are frequently worshipped, others are not worshipped as frequently. Due to space constraints, the author has selected and listed the most frequently worshipped gods and deities under the following headings:

4.1.1 Apouna/Ragwang (Good Spirit)

He is the eldest son of Tingkao Ragwang. The Kabui of TRC group worship him as the protector of the village concerned, for he is a village god. If there is any occasion in a village, or in a family, the *Peimei/Peikai* (member/office of the traditional village council called *Pei*) or the host perform *gulim-dansanmei* (ritual offering of ginger), and *joupaankeimei* (libation of rice-beer) and he is invoked and worshipped. Here a difference is clearly seen in the case of gulim-dansanmei. If it is performed at the village level, it is meant for predicting an omen, whereas when it is performed at the individual level, simply offerings are made without the process of predicting an omen relating to the occasion.

4.1.2 Bisnu/Bonchanu/Manchanu (Good Spirit)

Among the seven sons of the Supreme God, he stands in the second position. He is considered by this community as the good spirit. According to the mythology of the community, he left Manipur and stayed in a cave of Bhubon hill, located in the Cachar district of Assam. Hence, this god is mostly worshipped by the Kabui of Assam, particularly the so called Heraka group. The TRC group also believes in Him, though they do not worship Him like the Kabui of Assam or Heraka group.

4.1.3 Kairao (Household Deities/Ancestors)

Literally, *kai* means house, and *rao* means deity. The Kabui believe that the Kairao is the deified soul and embodiment of the departed souls of ancestors. Generally, this tribe has a firm belief that the surviving members of the family enjoy prosperity, good health, etc. with the blessings of their ancestors. It is also said that Kairao is the giver of offspring, corn, cattle, pigs, dogs, etc. as well as the remover of obstacles and the protector of individuals of the family concerned from unnatural death. There is a deep-rooted faith among the Kabui that the untimely death of any person in the family takes place only when Kairao has handed over the soul of the person concerned to the evil spirit(s). Above all, the anger of this deity causes barrenness of the surviving members (female) of the family and their (female) domestic animals.

The Kabui people believe that Kairao dwells on one of the legs of the tripod, made of upright stones or iron, of every family hearth. The other two legs are also dwelling places of two deities of wealth, Kambupui to the left and Charaipui to the right of the dwelling place of Kairao. However, Kairao is worshipped on any important occasion of the family, particularly by the head of the family and his wife. On such occasions, the head of the family offers rice-beer to the deity, while his wife offers cooked rice, cooked-meat, and also rice-beer.

To appease Kairao, the Kabui also perform another religious ceremony locally called the Kairao-thee. The first one, related to important occasions, is performed on a small scale seeking blessings so that family members do not commit any mistake. The Kairao-thee ceremony is, however, held on large scale and meant to appease the Kairao for the welfare of the community. A full-grown pig is generally sacrificed in a large scale ceremony with customary rites and rituals.

Regarding the belief and practices of the TRC followers in urban areas, it was noted that most of the families still continue believing in Kairao and worship it with some modification. Though they are using gas stoves or other appliances in the urban areas for cooking purposes in the kitchen, they setup these hearths either for the time of worship or permanently in the house for the purpose of worshipping. In every Kabui village the author visited, followers of Heraka faith were not reported. Even though Heraka faith is common for the Zeliangrong people, it is mostly accepted among the Kabui of Assam.

4.1.4 Kaipi Bhamboo and Kaiba Bhamboo (Village Deities)

According to my informants, these village deities are worshipped from the time of yore; hence, belief and worship of these deities have formed in an important component of their religious worldview. Both of these deities are also collectively known as Soang. The Bhamboos/Soang are small menhirs. They are found in each and every Kabui/Ruangmei/Rongmei village, one to the north (*kaipi*) and the other to the south (*kaiba*) of the village concerned. The duality of these deities is also indicated by the dual names by which they are known. Thus, the deity in-charge of the northern side or gate of the village is called Kaipi Bhamboo, while the other one standing in-charge of the southern gate is known as Kaiba Bhamboo. These deities (Soang) are regarded by the TRC group of the Kabui as the protectors of the villagers, birds, and animals of the village from evil spirits and diseases. To date every Kabui village has these structures regardless of their religion. But the TRC group has a deep-rooted faith in them and continue to perform rituals; whereas those Kabui who are baptised to Christianity have abandoned their beliefs and practices, but have not dismantled the structures.

Conventionally, no temple is built for these deities. Simply, one particular spot with a miniature menhir on either side (northern and southern) of every Kabui village, is kept reserved for these two deities. Now-a-days, in some villages the author has come-across two smaller huts meant for these deities. In fact, such places are rather sanctified places unfrequented by men, women, and children. Chickens are generally sacrificed in these places from time to time to propitiate the deities for protecting them from unwanted events like epidemic, death, and other natural disasters.

4.1.5 Dampapu-Dampapui (God and Goddess of Creation)

This god and goddess are generally regarded as the Father and Mother of all living beings of the universe. Thus, whenever a child fails to have his or her normal growth certain rites like Dampakhonmei and Dampagallhou are performed so that the young child resumes his/her normal growth.

4.1.6 Champei (Goddess of Birds and Animals)

It is strongly believed among the Kabui that without the favour of Champei one can never succeed in hunting, fishing, etc. So, the first thing a hunter has to do before his venture to a

forest for hunting or trapping is to offer ginger, or an egg, or release a chicken in the name of Champei with a prayer for big game. Hunting is restricted in these days due to a ban by the Government of Manipur. Hence, hunting on a large scale, i.e., group hunting is reduced except on religious ground. Nevertheless, individual hunting and trapping are still pursued to keep the belief and tradition alive.

4.1.7 **Karampou-Karampui** *(Presiding Deities of the Places)*

The Kabui have a firm belief that various gods and goddesses are always in-charge of various places of the entire surface of the earth. Thus, according to them, no inch of any part of the earth's surface is without a presiding deity since one or the other god/goddess is always in-charge of this or that place. However, they also believe that all the places and their presiding deities are under the charge of Karampou-Karampui and so, the duo is worshipped in every place. Whenever one feels a sense of fear while moving in the woods or meadows he or she offers the deities anything in possession to avert it. And in that case, if he/she has nothing with him/her at that moment, he/she may offer the deity any loose thread from any part of his/her own clothes, or he/she may offer the deities even green grass or green leaves available there.

In this way, for successful hunting or trapping a hunter may offer something that he can afford to the Karmpou-Karampui of that place before he actually starts hunting or trapping there.

There are some evil spirits like Kapakara, Kunmei, Zongumei, Changlhu, Changlhu-lhudai, Chabang-lhudai, Chagamei/Pa Ra, Kaibhamei Taroi Gang, Pung-la, Lam-la, etc. These evil spirits are not worshipped by this tribe (TRC group) separately, but for every religious rite and ritual, a share (particularly the ritual offerings) is always given to each of them so that they do not create disturbance during the occasion.

4.2 Religious Rites and Rituals Associated With Some Annual Festivals

Various religious rites and rituals are usually held while celebrating different annual festivals by the TRC group of this region. There are 12 annual festivals of this community. They are: Chakan-Gaan-Ngai, Ri-Ngai, Nanu-Ngai, Napkao-Mei, Ginki-Mei, Guidui-Ngai, Toon-Ngai, Pukphai-Ngai, Ten-Ngai, Changdon Ngai, Dongjao Ngai, and Nei-Mei. Most of the festivals are associated with a number of rites and rituals, whereas some are not. In Kabui dialect the terms *ngai* and *mei* are meant for festivals but *ngai* is always associated with grand feasting, singing and dancing, and merry making.

4.2.1 Chakan-Gaan-Ngai/Gaan-Ngai

The most important religious significance of the Chakan-Gaan-Ngai/Gaan-Ngai is that it is a sending off (farewell) ceremony for the departed souls of the deceased persons during the year. In other words, this festival is for the souls of those persons, who had passed away during the period between the last year's Chakan-Gaan-Ngai/Gaan-Ngai and the commencement of the current year's Chakan-Gaan-Ngai/Gaan-Ngai. The festival lasts for five consecutive days. Each day of this five day festival has its own name and speciality; and each act in these days has its own significance. They are listed below:

1 The first day – *Ngai-gangmei*
2 The second day – *Ngai-dai* (the greatest festival of *Chakan-gaan-ngai*)
3 The third day – *Tuna-gan-ngai*
4 The fourth day – *Ngai-ba*
5 The fifth day – *Nap-chan*

4.2.1.1 Ngai-Gangmei (the First Day of the Festival)

At dawn, the elders of the village offer ginger and eggs to the gods/deities of the village (Soang) at the village gate. At the declaration of the festival, individuals from other villages may come to participate in the athletic competition. There are stories that gods in the guise of humans come to compete with human beings. The offering of ginger and eggs with a prayer to Soang is to seek favour for winning by the villagers in the competition and also for protection of the villagers from misfortune, battle, bad weather, and disputes among them.

The village elders, after the prayer at the village gate is over, come to the boys' dormitory, where they perform the *meirapmei* (installation of the new sacred fire ritually in the dormitory in place of the old one) for the prosperity of each and every family of the village concerned during the year. This new sacred fire is then collected by each and every family and taken to their respective homes to light the hearth. In every good occasion of starting something new (like settlement of a new village, inauguration of a new house, organising a festival, etc.), a sacred fire is installed to signify the casting of the old and receiving of the new. On the first day of Chakan-gaan-ngai with the installation of the new fire, the year long awaited festival starts. In some villages the sacred fire is extracted in each and every house in the evening. Easy extraction of this sacred fire is believed to be a sign of prosperity for the coming year.

A full-grown pig is killed and its spleen is carefully examined. By examining the position of the spleen, the village priest foretells the omen whether the coming year will be good and prosperous or not. Thereafter, the meat (pork) of the slaughtered animal is cooked with its blood and all members of the youth dormitory (Khangchu) consume it.[1] Before eating such cooked-pork, they shout *Hoi*, the traditional yell invoking the gods and goddesses. The eating together of this kind of pork, cooked with its blood, is a symbolic vow they make to stand as one in times of happiness and woe.

As the sun moves westward, every male member starting from the eldest to the toddlers wear shawls meant for their age. Attired in colourful shawls, headgear, and holding spears in their hands, they march through the length and breadth of the village with the shout *Hoi*. The march comes to a halt when they reach the Thenpung (an area marked for athletic events, particularly for long-jump and shot-put throw). The youth and elders, after the performance of long jump and shot-put throw ritually, go back to their respective dormitories with the shout of *Hoi*.

At nightfall, one of the village elders holds a stick and beats the door of every house and warns them that there should be no quarrel during the festival; this manifests their concern for every household of the village. Every family prepares various types of dishes for the evening meal. Girls and boys in separate groups go in turn to the houses where they perform singing and dancing with the beating of drums. The songs and dances that they enjoy that particular night are not strictly bounded by traditional norms.

4.2.1.2 Ngai-Dai (the Second Day of Chakan-Gaan-Ngai)

It is the second and also the greatest festival day out of the five days of the Chakan-Gaan-Ngai. In the early morning all of the boys and girls of the village concerned bring eatables to their respective dormitories. In ancient times there was a convention that different items of eatables and materials for making chutney called *taam* should be brought by the members of Khangchu and Luch*u* to their respective dormitories at regular intervals on all five days of Chakan-gaan-ngai. Now-a-days, instead of contributing in kind, a fixed amount in cash is collected. The members of both dormitories who had died between last year's and this year's Chakan-gaan-ngai contribute their share. In return, a share of eatables is given by the respective dormitories to the bereaved families. In addition to this, the boys and girls of both dormitories of the village concerned have their parting meals with the deceased person(s) at the graveyard arranged by the family of the deceased person(s). It is the belief of the Kabui that the soul/spirit of the dead does not leave for the land of the death until the parting meal is over. Drinks and eatables are placed over the grave as a way of sharing the meal with him/her.

In the afternoon, girls and boys bring eatables from their respective dormitories (that they had already collected) to the village court, old women's shelter, the Khanchu (boys' dormitory), the Luchu (girls' dormitory), and hosts (for their respective houses) as gifts to be presented to the elders. While presenting these gifts the boys and girls of both dormitories sing songs and dance as well. Last of all, they hand over one of their own ornaments to the host showing their love and respect. Thus, they pay respect to the elders of the village court as they are the people who maintain law and order and the tradition. The old women are the persons who are responsible for bringing up the people of the village concerned. They are considered to be a source of love, and owners of the girls' dormitories (Luchus). They are respected for having taken great responsibilities on these matters.

On this particular day, the village old men and women have their own time of merriment. They visit four different centres/institutions to give their blessings. The centres are:

1 Old Women's Shelter (Meipui)
2 The Village Court (Pei)
3 Boys' Dormitory (Khangchu)
4 Girls' Dormitory (Luchu)

Here they act in a jovial manner. Men and women form different groups. From a distance they come shouting 'clear your traps' (*Su than pat tho*). And after they arrive there, one of them, in the male group, pretending to be wounded, lays down dead. They ask for sacrifices so that he can come back to life. After the sacrifice has been made, he rises to life and narrates what he had seen in the land of death. He tells that prosperity is on the way to the dormitories (for boys', girls', and old aged women's). Then they sing the song of fertility as blessings. It is believed that they bless them for many offspring. Likewise, the old women also visit those dormitories to perform the same function. The performance of this act, which is sanctioned by their religion, is associated with the fertility cult and which they still have deep rooted faith in.

4.2.1.3 Tuna-gan-ngai (the Third Day of Chakan-Gaan-Ngai)

On the third day of Chakan-Gaan-Ngai, known as Tuna-gan-ngai, all the members of the boys' and girls' dormitories and even small children take part in the dance. Therefore, the Kabui dance is neither limited to the professionals, nor does it serves any commercial pur-

pose. Rather, it is a part and parcel of community life. Every person has his or her own dress needed for the dance.

Though the Kabui are good dancers, they used to perform their dances only on certain conditions. The possible occasions under which the dance can be performed are listed below.

1 On the Tuna-gan-ngai day of the Chakan-Gaan-Ngai festival, all of the members of the boys' and girls' dormitories used to climb a hill for sight-seeing and they chose from amongst them a queen and a king. They adorn the heads of the king and the queen with *phaak* leaves as crowns. A dance is performed in their honour.
2 In every boys' dormitory, younger boys are assigned to collect firewood, enough to last the whole festival. On the third day of Chakan-Gaan-Ngai those younger boys of each boys' dormitory are upgraded to the next grade; they become free from the duty of cutting firewood. A dance is performed for their promotion.
3 If a member of the boys' dormitory is upgraded to Pei (village elders' council) it is a must for members of both the boys' and girls' dormitories to perform a dance in honour of him during the festival.
4 If any member of the dormitories, cited above, dies in that year, another dance is performed during the Chakan-Gaan-Ngai festival, bidding farewell to the dead.

Thus, the whole day of Tuna-gan-ngai is spent with dancing.

4.2.1.4 Ngai-ba (the Fourth Day of Chakan-Gaan-Ngai)

Ngai-ba is the fourth day of the Chakan-Gaan-Ngai festival. On this day, married women have their feast at their respective dormitories. They perform dance in honour of the new members enlisted in their respective dormitories. In Kabui community, woman plays an important role in every sphere of life. Though there are 12 festivals in a year, it is only in Chakan-Gaan-Ngai that a time for merriment is allotted to them.

4.2.1.5 Nap-chan (the Fifth Day of Chakan-Gaan-Ngai)

Nap-Chan is the closing day of Chakan-Gaan-Ngai. It is the day of prayer to Kambuipui, the patron goddess of wealth. During the past four days there might have been wastage due to the lavish use of things. To call back the wealth wasted, the goddess who lives in the form of the hearth-stones in the house is offered the best part of a sacrificial animal (i.e., the liver) with cooked-rice and rice-beer. The same offering is made on the grain jar, which is considered to be the core of all wealth.

On this day, in each dormitory, a special meal is arranged for all. It is believed that having a full meal on Nap-Chan ensures plenty of food in the year that follows. After the feast is over, there is an assemblage of singing together, mocking, joking, and praising those persons who are taking more responsibilities in the feast.

In addition to, all these activities, every night from the first day up to the fifth day of Chakan-Gaan-Ngai, there may be:

i) a song competition between boys and girls

ii) performance of a dance called Pajeimei (specially a dance performed by the boys and girls by waving clothes)
iii) Kailang-Ruanmei (guarding the village)

On the sixth day of Chakan-Gaan-Ngai, there is an important event called Raang-Pat. On this day, at the village gate, sacrifices are made to the pantheon of gods, goddesses, and other supernatural beings worshipped by the villagers. Though this is an important event for every Kabui villager, they never consider it a part of the five day Chakan-Gaan-Ngai.

On this Raang-Pat day, any vacant post of *Pei* (village court/village elders' council) is filled up by a suitable person. The process of filling up the vacant post is very simple. Village elders (Peikai) or members of Pei go to the house of the individual concerned, and declare by holding a traditional hoe (Lougai) that he (mentioning the name of the person to be upgraded/filled to the post) has been appointed for the vacant post. The same procedure is continued if there is more than one vacant post.

The Chakan-Gaan-Ngai festival, which the Kabui community holds dear, comes to an end on the sixth day. But the thrill at the thought of it lingers on and they cherish every moment of it throughout the year.

To the TRC group, the Chakan-Gaan-Ngai is the biggest, most important, and colourful festival. Due to its dynamic character, this festival covers almost all vital aspects of life. It fulfils the needed social, religious, and cultural aspirations of life. Indeed, it is a multi-faceted festival playing multiple roles in shaping the life of the TRC Kabui.

4.2.2 Some Other Rituals and Festivals

In addition to the above important rituals and festivals, there are also some other popular rituals and festivals conducted by the TRC Kabui. These are as follows:

4.2.2.1 Ri-Ngai

As stated earlier, Chakan-Gaan-Ngai is the most important festival of this community. It is followed by another important festival called the *Ri*-Ngai festival. It is usually celebrated in the month of February. This festival lasts for three consecutive days. It consists of the rituals for the purification of one's body, soul, and mind, thereby making oneself prepared for every challenge of life –– ready for war, hunting, fishing, cultivation, etc.

In olden days, inter village feuds were frequently taking place. For this, the Kabui community needed healthy people, who could fight to protect themselves from enemies. Now-a-days, such beliefs and practices have some changes due to modernisation. It is performed in some villages strictly, whereas it is performed in others with slight modification. Now-a-days, the plain dwellers are not continuing collective hunting or fishing or warfare; hence the performance of rituals for the purification of body and mind is not strictly followed by every individual of the village concerned. They perform it to mark the tradition without following every detail of the rituals. It has been observed that some traditional families perform the rituals by offering eatables (like cooked-rice, rice-beer, and the cooked-meat of a full grown cock, particularly the liver portion) to Kairao, Kambupui, and Charaipui. In this occasion, like traditional practice, they also revere the *napsamlai* (rice-keeping pot), *semeu/semmu* (gong), *ayeisen/sendai nakuak* (a special disc used as bride price), etc., strictly following the tradition. At the same time several families only worship the hearth, as according

to their belief, it is the dwelling place of Kairao, Kambupui, and Charaipui. Selection of the colour of the full-grown cock is also very important. If someone has selected white cock, the host will perform the ritual three times. There has been a change in the choice and now-a-days the *duijin* (yellowish brown in colour) is mostly selected.

4.2.2.2 Nanu-Ngai

In the month of March, Nanu-Ngai festival is performed. It is the ear-piercing festival. During this festival all children born after last year's Nanu-ngai till the present festival day get their ears pierced.

For this festival, all of the families (having new born babies), who wish to perform Nanu-Ngai festival, should prepare the following materials:

i) a big pot of rice-beer
ii) some local sweets made out of roasted rice and sugarcane molasses locally called Kabokathumahao

This festival lasts for two days. One day ahead of the actual festival, the village priest (*mooh*) offers the rice-beer along with the full-grown hen and some local sweets to their Supreme God Tingkao Ragwang at night. It is known as Zou-Pan (oblation of rice-beer to appease). The next morning, villagers, invitees, and friends assemble in the house of the performer. It is followed by the ear-piercing process, done either by the village priest (mooh) or an experienced old woman of the village. He/she pierces the ear of the child (ears of those children wishing to join). On this day, village youths (boys and girls) sing their traditional songs, while aged woman dance. It continues till the next day morning. The people have a deep-rooted faith in singing songs; while Nanu-ngai is performed because of the fact that such singing prevents the village concerned from serious epidemic diseases. Thus, the significance of observing this festival is for the protection of the children as well as the villagers from serious epidemic or diseases.

4.2.2.3 Napkao-Mei

It is a festival related to agricultural works. This festival is performed with the hope of getting a plentiful harvest in the coming season. It is similar to the worshipping of the goddess of paddy by the Meitei (also spelt as Meetei) community locally called the Phouoibikhuramba. All of the Kabui agriculturists perform this festival. Now-a-days, it is abandoned by all of the Christian convert agriculturists. And even among the TRC group, it is mostly performed by the rural agriculturists.

4.2.2.4 Ginki-Mei

This festival is similar to the Cheiraoba, New Year's Day of the Meitei. It is performed by plain dwellers of Manipur in a festive mood. It usually falls in the month of April. It has two meanings. One is to propitiate the ancestors of their respective families for their blessings, and the other is to ward off evil spirits from their surroundings.

To propitiate their ancestors (Kairao), each and every family of the community prepares plenty of food and drinks for the particular day. The best one from their collections they

offer to Kairao (ancestor), who dwells on one of the leg of the family hearth, as has been discussed. They also pour rice-beer (libations) to appease their ancestors.

4.2.2.5 Guidui-Ngai

This festival is performed in the month of May. It is performed only for one day. On this day the Kabui worship goddess Di-Tingpu-Di-Zangpu (father and mother earth) for the fertility of soil and good harvest. Rites and rituals are also performed to ward off insects and pests. Besides these, they drink ginger soup ritually for good health. Moreover, tug-of-war is held between the age-groups and sexes.

For the Guidui-Ngai festival each and every family prepares a special soup made from different herbs, shrubs, and a special fish called Ngakha (*Puntius tictoticto*). Well-to-do families use chicken soup instead of Ngakha soup. The herb includes ginger, onion, coriander, salt, and *Cynodondactylon*. In the morning, the soup is offered to each and every guest by the host; and in the evening the host (of the morning), when visiting other houses of the village as a guest, receives the same treatment. In addition to this, the members of each youth dormitory contribute a small pot of rice-beer to their respective Khangchu (youth dormitory). The rice-beer thus collected is drunk by the village elders. Now-a-days instead of the materials mentioned above, ginger and chicken are used for the soup.

If Guidui-Ngai is performed, all members of the village concerned believe that said festival prevents against all evil spirits, insects, and pests.

4.2.2.6 Toon-Ngai

During the rainy-season Toon-Ngai festival is performed. It lasts only for one day. It usually falls in the month of July every year. On this day, they also clean the village ponds and the paths leading to the village ponds; and paddy fields are also repaired and new ones are constructed (if necessary) in a festive spirit and under conventional procedures (ceremonially performed).

On this day they usually worship their respective family ancestors. It is believed that if they celebrate Toon-ngai to propitiate their ancestors by offering them their favourite eatables, consumable and non-consumable items, articles or objects or both (while the ancestors are alive), they get their blessings.

4.2.2.7 Pukphat-Ngai

It is usually celebrated in the month of August or September. At this time most of the crops have ripened. This festival solemnises the testing of new crops and it provides the eating of one's heart's content after the exhausting and long hard-working days of the rainy season. If the new rice is tested, they feel afresh and again ready for the great harvest of the year till the lean season. There is also a deep-rooted faith among the Kabuis that if one can not take a meal with one's heart's content on this particular day, he/she can not eat full stomach during the whole year till the next Pukhpat-Ngai.

4.2.2.8 Ten-Ngai

Ten-Ngai is meant for testing the new bread and it is normally held in the last part of October or early part of November when the harvesting for the year is over. On this day of Tengngai,

they offer the newly collected rice to Kairao, Kambupui, and Charapui ritually with the libation of rice-beer. Thereafter, the offered rice is cooked and tested.

4.2.2.9 Changdon Ngai

Changdon Ngai is particularly meant for repairing the village road. It is performed by the members of both boys' and girls' dormitories under the guidance of Peimei (members of traditional village council). It falls in the month of September, but before the harvesting. Now-a-days it is observed mainly in the hilly areas where stiff and windy paths exist. Before conducting the actual process of repairing, a Peimei (member of the village court) or the village priest (mooh) performs a ritual to protect them from any unwanted incident. Due to the development of communication systems, in urban areas, it is performed like a social service for cleanliness of the locality.

4.2.2.10 Dongjao Ngai

Dongjao Ngai is a competition among the farmers of the village concerned organised by the members of Pei (traditional village court/council) for all the village peasants. It is held when the harvesting is completely over. They bring a yardstick along with them, and check every barn located in the village and measure the volume of the collected paddy. After completing the checking process, the Pei announces the best harvester of the year and in return the host offers food and drinks to the Peimei.

4.2.2.11 Neimei

The Kabui have the custom of observing a holy day, collectively called Neimei. On this day the people abstain from different works like weaving, carpentry, cultivation, etc. In addition to this, all married male members of the society are required to live apart from their respective wives. Eating, drinking, playing, chatting, and merry-making are permitted.

The traditional village council announces the day for celebration of Neimei. During celebration a ritual is performed with the oblation of rice-beer and the sacrifice of an animal, particularly a pig. The sacrifice of the animal is followed by a process of predicting omens, locally known as *gokpai*. Thereafter, meat of the slaughtered animal is distributed to each and every household of the village concerned. And each family cooks the meat and consumes it. Now-a-days the sacrificial animal is replaced by either a big cock or hen. However, the process of meat distribution and consumption remains the same.

There is no particular fixed day of Neimei ritual. On the first day of rainfall or first hailstorm of the year (or both), Neimei is observed so that a good rainfall may come for the year.

Neimei may also be performed or observed on such unusual occurrences as the earthquake or arson (particularly burning of the houses) in the village concerned. If Neimei is observed they believe that such calamities may not take place again. With this hope in mind, every villager observes Neimei. For instance, when a house burns in the village suddenly, they put off the fire first, and then the village is kept under Neimei observance for five consecutive days.

There are many Neimeis which are observed at different stages of cultivation. For example, some Neimeis are observed for fertility, some are for good sowing and germination, some are for warding off insects and pests, some are for plentiful harvest and so on.

Sometimes, Neimei is observed for the welfare of the village. During community level observation, the village gates (of the village concerned) are kept closed for the whole day. All of the villagers remain within the village and no outsider is allowed to enter the concerned village. Nothing is allowed in or out of the village during the period of Neimei observance. These restrictions are the measures to keep the village holy and protect from the defilement or pollution. For the Kabuis Neimei is a mode of collective *genna* (movement taboo) for material as well as spiritual benefits.

4.2.2.12 Nouna Mungkhao Kalummei

It is a blessing ceremony for a newly married couple of the village concerned. It is normally performed when a boy elopes with a girl, and their spousal is without formal marriage. In this case, the village priest (*mooh*) performs a ritual for the welfare of their married life with the chanting of hymns and offering of rice, fruits, flowers, etc. to *Tingkao Ragwang*. They also perform a ritual song requesting the Supreme God to bless the couple forever. When the ritual is over, the couple along with their parents together bow down and pray to their Supreme God for **His** blessings.

4.3 Conclusion

The Kabui people worship different deities, gods, goddesses, and benevolent spirits, in addition to their Supreme God *Tingkao Ragwang* for prosperous life, and also safety from unwanted events. They treat their ancestors as their household deity, and collectively call Kairao in their tongue. They usually perform a number of rituals. Every ritual is associated with one or more processes of predicting omens like *gulim-dansanmei, lang-paimei, gokpai,* and release of a small chicken (*suong-loi*), oblation (*napchanmei*), and libation of rice-beer (*joupaankeimei*). This community has 12 important festivals of their own. Of them, the most important one is the Chakan-Gan-Ngai. It is not only performed by the TRC group of this tribe, but also by its kindred tribes like the Liangmai, Zeme, and Inpuime (commonly known as Zeliangrong). Now-a-days it becomes the common festival of these four communities and the Government of Manipur has also declared it as a state festival. All the Kabuis who follow traditional religion, known as the Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak (TRC), join this festival. In this way, to date the followers of the Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak (TRC) share and practise all the festivals and ceremonies along with their associated rites and rituals; thereby, sustaining their forefathers' primordial religious practices. Like the TRC Kabui, the Liangmai and the Zeme feed the souls of the deceased person(s) of their respective families with food and drink till the common farewell day, called Chakebou (by the Liangmai), and Hegaaze(by the Zeme). They have a common theme of sending off the souls of the deceased persons of the year either in the last part of December or early part of January every year.

The primordial religion of the Kabuis is confined to the followers of the Tingkao Ragwang only. Further, the emerging religious tradition has spread to other tribes who follow Heraka tradition. It is to be mentioned that, the TRC group of the Kabuis have constructed a *kalumkai* (house of worship) for the Supreme God and it is named as Tingkao Ragwang Kalumkai – the house of worship of Tingkao Ragwang.[2] It is a hall with sacred sanctum inside with the inscriptions *Au Haipou Tingkao Ragwang*.[3] The Supreme God Tingkao Ragwang is represented by a circle with six divisions inside. The circle represents the cosmos, the universe, while the blank spaces represent the planets and the stars. The two

horizontal (*ditung*) lines and the two vertical (*didet*) lines represent zodiac signs. The middle of the top three divisions carries the symbol of the Sun while the middle of the bottom three divisions carries the symbol of the moon. Other seven cells/divisions are kept blank. At the pedestal is kept a spear (*kkhun*), a long-bladed knife (*buibang*), and a small hoe (*lougai*), and items such as rice (*nap*), fruits, flowers (red coloured flowers are excluded), scented sticks, and sacred fire (now-a-days it is replaced by candles). There are writings like *Busin Meipu* (the owner of/the one who holds the souls of all living things), *Bucha Meipu*, (the originator/the one from whom originates the lives of all living things) and also *Budam Meipu* (the owner who gives the lives of all living things) to a side at the front of the sanctum.

The Supreme God in kalumkai is worshipped by the permanent priest (mooh) of the village. It is normally worshipped on every Sunday and full-moon day, but there are exceptions also. In special cases, if someone needs to worship, they request to open the kalumkai; it is permitted and he performs worship.

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Notes

1 Due to modernisation, most of the children stay in their respective homes, but rituals are celebrated on occasion in their dormitories (Khangchu and Luchu). Till date they have their separate dormitory houses, attached to the houses of their respective care takers.
2 The information is based on the *kalumkai* of Chingmeirong village.
3 *Au Haipou Tingkao Ragwang*, an address with respect such as *Oh Lord Tingkao Ragwang*. I visited the *kalumkai* of Chingmeirong village on 3 April 2022. Though a Sunday, normal worship ritual was conducted. However, a special blessing ceremony (***Nouna Mungkhao Kalummei***) was performed for the welfare of a new couple.

5

SORCERY IN PRACTICE

A Contemporary Reading Among the Sabars of Purulia, West Bengal

Soumita Chatterjee and Sutapa Choudhury

5.0 Introduction

Individuals engage themselves in numinous activities irrespective of culture and ethnicity. Some of these activities may occasionally get them into a scrape. Clouded faith, poverty, lack of proper education, and inclinations to adopt an easy path to resolve their complications in life lead many people to select sorcery as a means of livelihood. However, most of the time they invite trouble when they go ahead with magical practices like sorcery. It has been seen that many of the Sabar people of Purulia district in West Bengal have become victims to sorcery. The Sabars are a type of hunting-gathering tribe. Beside the Sabars, a large number of other people practising sorcery can be found all over India. They generally belong to the economically poor class and the sorcerer takes advantage of superstitions and blind faith of the people. This mystical practice is studied through a behavioural approach and a relationship approach. The relationship approach deals with the bond between the sorcerer and the victims. The behavioural approach unveils how the believers of sorcery look at this mystical practice when it provides them with some success and sometimes, it is believed, to propel them towards utter despondency and even unnatural death.

The present research has been organised into three parts to understand different aspects of the practice of sorcery and how the people deal with this magical practice. The first part deals with the cultural aspects and the manifestation of sorcery. The study reveals how clouded faith and unfounded and unnatural beliefs associated with various ritualistic performances result in a large scale victimisation. The central point of the second part is to locate sorcery among the Sabar, a hunting-gathering tribe in the district of Purulia in West Bengal. This study reflects the dichotomy of belief of the Sabar people to sorcery as a key unit of supernatural power and their awe and fear towards it. The third part deals with the concept of sorcery and its exact contemporaneous position in our society.

5.1 Understanding Sorcery

There is no single agreed upon definition of sorcery. Opinions differ depending on practices in different cultures. However, a common thread runs through differences which are evident from the discussion below:

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5.1.1 Sorcery as a Global Phenomenon

Sorcery has a long history all over the globe. It is one of the hallmark research areas for anthropologists. The mysteries of magical spells and faiths towards the rituals have time and again attracted the attention of anthropologists to delve into in-depth research (Niehaus 2010:715). Renowned anthropologists have discussed in detail the ways of practice of sorcery, its motives, and the cultural significance among the inhabitants in different corners of the world (Pilling 1962 and Moro 2017). Evans-Pritchard (1937) mentioned that sorcery is nothing but a skilful practice of rituals with the help of some particular substances and utterance of magical spells with a strong intention (Evans-Pritchard 1937:8).

The term 'sorcery' was derived from the Latin word 'sortiarius' around the 12th century (Hanks 1979). The practitioner of sorcery means a sorcerer (male) and the word originated from the Old French word 'sorcier' (Illustrated Oxford Dictionary 2011:647). The word sorceress (female) has its root in the French word 'sorceresse' from the middle of the 13th century (Hanks 1979). In the early Christian era, the term 'sorcery' was applied to recognise any magician or sorcerer. From the Middle Ages it was attributed only to those who practised magic for the purpose of allegedly harming others (Melton 1998). Sorcery generally indicates some magical spells, especially created songs and some strange or abnormal gestures of the practitioners. The spells of this magical practice remain a perpetual mystery to the whole world. In this regard, Kallet (2009) has mentioned about mystical songs like 'Stop! In The Name Of Love' which is enchanted during rites for a couple to make the boundary between the two (Kallet 2009).

On a global level sorcery connotes varied meanings depending on geographical contours, traditional beliefs, and cultures. Accordingly, studies of sorcery have been made through various flexible approaches depending on the parameters mentioned above. According to cultural practice, sometimes sorcery has been analysed metaphorically and then subjected to a reality (West 2005:43). Sometimes people talk about sorcery while others openly discuss the same on democratic political level through radio and media (West 2005:39). It is treated as a kind of political language in Cameroon and Papua New Guinea (Lattas 1993). Social control of the four tribal people – Paiute, Arande, Trobriand, and Zuni – are predominantly dependent on sorcery. For these people sorcery and social justice are almost synonyms. The presence or absence of super-ordinate punishment actually gives an idea about the social acceptance of sorcery. Absence of super-ordinate punishment portrays that sorcery is not that important to the particular society (Pilling 1962). McKnight studied the relation between sorcerer and victim from their first to fifth generations in terms of the impact of sorcery on various domains among the Lardil community of Morington Island. He emphasised on numerous activities of life – initiation, marriage, elopement, scarcity of food, stealing of food, etc. Moreover, the techniques of sorcery have also been used to take revenge for the death of someone's father (McKnight 1981). The deep influence of sorcery on menstruation and sexual intercourse has also been observed (Dukun community) in Java (Retsikas 2010) and the death rituals in South India (Nabokov 2000). Sometimes, both sorcery and witchcraft are denoted as special forms of 'socially regulated conflicts' among the clans or different linguistic groups who share a common territory (Patterson 1975).

Social status and economic conditions of the victims are important elements in sorcery. The sorcerer never performs any activity without money and other earthly materials (Davidson 2017). Studies reveal that the sorcerer wants to position himself as a regulatory unit of the entire population (Davidson 2017 and Forsyth 2016). The practitioners come

from various socio-cultural backgrounds and most of the time they are outcasts. Every sorcerer seems to be endowed with some cajolery abilities. Throughout the globe, sorcerers are categorised under several types, such as chaos sorcerer (who derived their power from any natural elements like air, water, soil, etc.), storm sorcerer (who received their magical power from lightning, thunder, and storm), cosmic sorcerer (who gained power from the continuous cycle of the sun, moon, and stars) and dragon sorcerer (who received magical powers through some instinctive connection with the dragon, either through blood ties or any magical infusions) (Tweet, Cook & Williams 2003:48–50). These special types of sorcerers are presumed to be presiding over the celestial world of the enigmatic mingling of good and evil. Sorcery usually gets aired through cultural speech and the language of symbols and people experience this by means of threats, accusations, allegations, and so on (West 2007:46–56).

5.1.2 The Making of a Sorcerer

Most of the sorcerers comprehend their distinctive power on or before their adolescence regardless of the society. The origin of the sorcerer's power is rendered with manifestations of unexpected and often annoying behaviours, such as ghostly lights or mysterious sounds. In the course of time, several sorcerers perceive that they were solely responsible for a chaos due to the rendition of their act and an afterthought which makes them try to fix the situation (Tweet, Cook & Williams 2003). After comprehension of their magical abilities, sorcerers get trained in their abilities of magical spells from any expert through a long term learning process. Sorcerers can select the way of applying their works either for noble purposes (healing practice) or for harmful purposes (Callan 2007). During the mystical practices use of substances like vermillion, animal blood, etc. is common (Padmanabhan & Sorrels 1958). Sorcery is believed in some quarters to be a manipulative phenomenon irrespective of culture (Mackay 2009). The enchanter can practise the cultural rites both privately and in a public place or secretly at private places. At the initial phase of their training, these practices are generally performed at secret places. To be an effective sorcerer one must go through some specific rituals. These enigmatic rituals could vary on the basis of cultural traditions and geographical boundaries. Mackay (2009) has emphasised on these unrevealed parts of sorcery. We find mention of such rituals in earlier works. *Malleus Maleficarum* is the first pillar of the literature on Demonology, published in 1486 in Greek language. *Hammer of Witches* is a translated version of this magical epic by Mackay (2009). He expressed the stages of sorcery as the motive of Satanism and identified the 'six basic beliefs' about the activities of a sorcerer. These are:

i. "a pact entered into with the Devil", which refers to transformation of magical power of a sorcerer into the power of the Devil to make it more powerful
ii. "sexual relations with the Devil" which indicates the establishment of both imaginary and real sexual relations with the Devil (their omnipotent God)
iii. "aerial flight for the purpose of attending", which refers to a special power used to meet with the Devil or Satan to fulfil a particular purpose
iv. "an assembly presided over by Satan himself", which means getting some instructions directly from Satan, how to execute some notorious activities
v. "the practice of maleficent magic", which is a specially performed rites to intentionally harm someone

vi. "the slaughter of babies", which is a mischievous act of killing babies in a large number (*see* Mackay 2009:21)

5.1.3 Sorcerer and Witch: Gender Stereotyping

Numerous studies have distinguished *sorcery* from *witchcraft* by saying that it depends on the learning process. Evans-Pritchard differentiated the terms *sorcery* and *witchcraft* on the basis of the intention of the activity and manipulation of the human body (Evans-Pritchard 1937:8–9). Forsyth and Eves (2015) have mentioned the 'gendered nature of sorcery and witchcraft' in their famous book *Talking It Through*. They emphasise the nature of perpetuation of these two magical practices. Women always play a predominant role as a *witch;* whereas men play a predominant character in *sorcery* in Papua New Guinea (Forsyth and Eves 2015:07). Lardil of Australia identified sorcery as a male dominated magical practice (Fortune 1932 and McKnight 1981). Mitchell has focused on the magical spells especially in the Middle Ages. He highlighted "the roles of Witch, a female by gender had seen a decline whereas the belief in sorcerer increased over time in the north" (Mitchell 2013: 199). In Greek and Roman literature of the 14th century, women were solely responsible for both sorcery and witchcraft. In *The Hammer of Witches*, Malleus targets the entire feminine gender as perpetrators of sorcery (Mackay 2009:26). However, it is not a fact that women are always exclusively selected for witchcraft and not for sorcery. In the Medieval period (16th and 17th centuries) several countries like Iceland, Scandinavia, and northern parts of Europe expressed that women get privilege in obtaining knowledge of magical practices in both witchcraft and sorcery (Mitchell 2013:175). Contrastingly, Fortune mentioned that, "witchcraft is the woman's prerogative, sorcery the man's" (Fortune 1932:150). In terms of cultural rites, the gender rigidity has been seen throughout the globe. Analysis of the perception of magical practices through different ages in history demonstrates that up to the medieval period both genders were equally capable of being experts in sorcery and witchery; whereas in the modern period witchery is dominated by women and sorcery elicits male identity.

5.1.4 Sorcery in the Indian Scenario

Magical practice, including sorcery, is one of the age-old practices in India. The Mahabharata (Hindu scripture) mentions Ghatothkacha (son of Bhim, the second brother of the Pandavas) having some magical skills which were exposed in the battle of Kurukshetra (Zlatar 1997 and Jain 2018). Now-a-days, the term sorcery is locally termed as *bhanamati* or *banamati* in Karnataka and Telengana; *jhar-phook* and *jadu-tona* in Bihar and West Bengal; and Mayong[1] in Assam (Bhardwaj 2017; Menon 2014; Keshavan 1989; Rahman 2013 and Nag 2020).

There are many evidences of sorcery and their ritualistic behaviours. Blind faith and irrational thinking may result in an emotional state of suffering which drives a human being to lean towards sorcery. In the recent past two boys died and two fell severely ill during the performance of some bizarre enchantment in the Malda district of West Bengal (Nag 2020). A little girl (ten years old) was brutally sacrificed for the enchantment in Magadi, Karnataka (Bhardwaj 2017). During the practice of sorcery the unexpected disappearance of a child is very common. It is said that the practitioner generally tries to please and control some spirits using these acts. In India a sorcerer usually follows any one out of the five, namely

magical spells, gestures, cabalistic designs, drugs, and mysterious actions (Padmanabbhan & Sorrels 1958). Sacrifice of a child and necromancy are very much prevalent in several districts of Karnataka like Chamarajnagar, Kalaburagi, and Ballari. Moreover, residents of Gadagi or Bidar of Karnataka strongly confide that *bhanamati* is the only reason for their physical difficulties such as body ache, vomiting, dizziness, etc. (Keshavan, Narayanan & Gangadhar 1989). On several occasions, incidents of the practice of sorcery and the details of victimisation had occupied the front pages of numerous newspapers in Karnataka. The stoical occurrence in Gulbarga in Karnataka is one of them. The villagers of Pastapur in Gulbarga of Karnataka are closely connected with sorcery. Pastapur has numerous stories of afflictions and miseries associated with the practice of sorcery. Sudden appearances of prominent scars on the thigh and abdomen of a man resembling tattoo marks, and the abrupt sharp voice of a young woman abruptly turning into a 'gurgling sound' are some of the instances of the manifestation of sorcery (Menon 2014).

The practitioners of such mysterious enchantments are widely known as *Tantrik, Ojhaa,* or *Baba* in different corners of India. Lemon, chilli, and vermilion are the main substances used by them irrespective of culture and geographical areas (Rahman 2013 and Benzow 2012). Magicians and sorcerers or witches were recognised equally before the advent of *tantra* in India and everyone continued to perform rituals for recreation and healing. There is no evidence that they were *tantric* in any significant way. It is not clear whether they were associated with each other in terms of ideology even though they have their own distinct identities and specific deities (Davidson 2017). Davidson (ibid.) tried to focus on the durability of these systems in the present era and their continuity as a source of some specific rituals and community based *tantric* traditions (Davidson 2017). The way of execution of cultural rites is feasibly different for these weird practices. On the basis of the implications of *mantra* or magical spells, it is hard to distinguish between sorcery, witchery, and *tantra*.

Barua (2013) emphasised the implications of *mantras* in sorcery practices in Assam. *Zara Mantra* (fever spell) reveals that fever is propagated as a black monster with six arms, four legs, three heads, and nine bright eyes. *Bhut*, *preta, pisad, daitya, jakh, jakhini, khetar, khetarani, dakini, gulai,* and *mor* are the eleven local popular names of invisible spirits who are considered gentle in the district of Kamarupa (the land of necromancy and magic) in Assam in medieval times. Mythology says Assam was popular as Kamarupa when Kamadeva was restored to his original physical form on this land after getting burnt by Shiva's wrath. It spread far and wide in Kamarupa that it is the land where even a dead person can be resurrected (Barua 2013). An aged sorcerer mentioned that in the past *luki mantra* (magical spells applied to hide in thin air) and *bagh badhon mantra* (magical spells used to control a tiger) were applied at Mayong in Assam (Rahman 2013). A huge mantra literature has been developed in Assamese language. This mantra can be categorised into two i.e., *Karati-mantra* and *Dharani mantra* which have tremendous effect on the local people. The language of these mantras is really mysterious and also very difficult to extract the meaning (Barua 2013). Now-a-days, sorcery is practised in different corners in Assam and used for various purposes, such as avoiding misfortune, curing diseases of both human beings and animals, curing snake bites, inducing others to sleep, persuading a woman to follow a man, and so on (Barua 2013).

Now-a-days, sorcery is practised in different corners in India like Karnataka, Bihar, West Bengal, Assam, and some other states. It is used for various purposes as mentioned above.

5.2 Sorcery Among the Sabar

5.2.1 People and the Area

At present the Sabar, a hunting and gathering tribe of India, is popularly called by various names i.e., Sabar, Sora, Sabara, Savara, Saor, and Saura (Sudhanarao 2017). The name of the tribe originated from the Sanskrit word *Sabara* meaning *malicious* or *offensive* and known as 'savage' (Mallick 2006). The Sabar is one of the Mundari speaking tribal groups who use Savari language to communicate within the group. This group is closely associated with the Kol-Munda linguistic group of Munda Language (Sudhanarao 2017 and Stampe 1965). The Sabar people are dispersedly distributed throughout India.

The name of the Sabar people is found to have been mentioned in the Hindu epics such as the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and in various other puranic texts like the Vamanapurana, the Matsyapurana, and the Vayupurana (Sudhanarao 2017; Das 2015 and Mallick 2006). The name 'Sabar' is mentioned along with the different divine incarnate forms of Narayana (Hindu God Bishnu). The name is also closely tied with Lord Jagannatha in Odisha. In this case the story started with the death of Sri Krishna (Lord Krishna) by Jara Savara in a forest. The feet of Sri Krishna appeared like the ears of a deer. A Sabar hunter targeted a poisonous arrow towards the ears of an apparent deer thereby killing Sri Krishna on the spot. After this blunder Jara Savara left his Prabha (native area) and settled down in a forest near Kalinga (the erstwhile name of Odisha). Over the course of time the people of the area started admiring him as chieftain. Subsequently a new dynasty emerged through him. It is claimed that Vishwavasu is a direct progeny of Jara Savara (Das 2015). Historically Nilmadhava[2] is a *murti* (icon) of an incarnate form of Lord Vishnu, who was mostly worshipped by Vishwavasu (Das 2015). Further the Ramayan depicts that Sri Rama had met with a pious Sabar woman, namely 'Sabari'. Sabari was a princess of King Sabara (at present Chattisgarh), and a great devotee of Narayana (Mallick 2006 and Sitapati 1938). In spite of all this, the Sabar, as it is believed, is one of the ancient forest dwelling tribes of the country.

The ancient and mythological anecdotes reveal that the Sabar dynasty travelled a long journey to establish their socio-cultural identity. During the colonial period, they were treated as one of the 'criminal tribes' under the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871 because of their rebellious attitudes and nomadic nature. Furthermore, the Sabar tribe was designated as a *Denotified Tribe (DNT)* in 1949, after the independence of India as the Act, 1871 was repealed. The Sabar tribe has obtained a new identity as a 'Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group' (PVTG) in the year of 2008 in consideration of its members lower literacy rate, primitive subsistence pattern, etc (Gamang 2008 and Reeta 2017). In West Bengal, the Sabar has been identified as the Lodha-Savaras and the Kheria-Savaras in the Midnapur and Purulia districts respectively (Devi 1992, 2002).

The present study has been conducted among the Sabar of Bangthupi village in the Puncha Block of the Purulia district in West Bengal. Cultural homogeneity has been noticed in this Sabar village. The total population of the village is 102 (53 male and 49 female). Educational status of the Sabar people is quite disappointing in this village as 50% of the entire population (51 individuals) were unable to sign their own name (35.84% male and 65.3% female). About 15.68% of the people have crossed the IV standard and children of school going age are almost of the same percentage. The highest qualification is X standard of which 5.66% is male and 2.04% is female. Their major subsistence pattern is gathering and to some extent hunting also. Apart from this, they work as daily labourers to earn their livelihood. Females are also engaged in making handicrafts (brooms, mats, leaf plates, etc.).

5.2.2 Sorcery and the Sorcerer

The term sorcery is predominantly associated with 'male identity' throughout the globe. This is also true for the Sabars of Bangthupi village. Lalu Sabar (name changed) was a renowned male sorcerer of this village. At the time of the interview, he claimed to be 108 years old. He has been practising sorcery for the last 58 years.

5.2.2.1 Normal Life of the Sorcerer

The enchanter usually wears *dhuti/dhoti* (long cotton cloth) and *jamah*[3] (shirt) when he needs to visit somewhere; otherwise, he prefers to use *lungi* (a kind of cloth tied around the waist ending at the ankle) and the upper part of the body remains bare. He has lots of beaded *sud* (beads) on his neck, several *angti* (rings) on his fingers and one *luha* (thin iron armlet) on the wrist of his right hand. On every full-moon and new-moon night he worships his almighty, he wears specially prepared *angti* (ring made of Kharai grass (broom grass)) on his right thumb and a black coloured *dhuti* (long cotton cloth) with golden strips.

He lives alone in a secluded area far away from the village. Some raw materials were seen in this house i.e., *mati* (clay or mud), *baans* (bamboo), and *khar* (straw). The *mati* (clay) and *baans* (bamboo) have been used to build walls and pillars of the house. *Khar* (straw) and large palm leaves were used for roofing. There were no prominent windows or door at all. For illuminating his house, he used *aagun* (fire) at night. On the four corners of his house he planted eight banana trees and also planted a *neem* tree behind his living room. Villagers say that these trees help him during sorcery, especially when he performs the rites of exorcism; because each and every time after the completion of the rites of exorcism a branch of *neem* tree is broken and the sorcerer announces that the phantom or the ghost has been driven away from the victim's body and it has gone away by breaking the branch of that *neem* tree.

He starts his day with a cup of salted tea. The villagers generally take three principal meals like lunch, refreshment, and dinner to fulfil their daily food requirements. The sorcerer is not an exception. *Bhaat* (cooked rice) is a common item of every meal. At lunch he generally prefers *bhije bhaat* (wet rice), *aar* (potato), *indur* (a kind of rat),[4] or *machh* (fish) and some vegetables. In the evening, the surplus meal is used along with a special dish of *jamru sap* (a kind of local snake).[5] Moreover, the villagers also give him a share of their hunted animals like *sosha* (rabbit), *kachim* (tortoise), etc. *Bhije bhaat* is a staple food for dinner. *Jworo* (water) of the Kashai River is used for both drinking and household usage. Apart from the food elements, narcotics like *biri, taari,* and *hanriya* (a sort of country liquor) also occupy an important place in his daily life. Before worshiping his omnipotent God he undertakes fasting and does not even take narcotics or water until the time he completes his worship.

5.2.2.2 Sorcery is Learnt or Inherent

The sorcerer of Bangthupi village under study was born and brought up at Purru village in the Purulia district of West Bengal. His father was a farmer and didn't have any knowledge of sorcery. While narrating the story of his life the sorcerer said,

> *I spent a life of a normal human being up to the age of 38 and had a nuclear family. There was a transformation in my life when I met my Guru (teacher) who belonged to the Oraon community of a neighbouring village. He lives in the eastern Himalayas*

now. There were five apprentices including myself who started to learn sorcery under the Guru. *Our learning sessions continued both day and night. During the training period out of five learners, two died due to uttering the spells wrongly. I practised magic and sorcery for 17 to 20 years. In this village, the wizard also went under the same flow of learning.*

The sorcerer commented on some specific conditions relating to his magical practices. He stated that "*after completing apprenticeship with the Guru, I started to stay with my family and I did such practises in my native village*".

He narrated that due to his practice of sorcery, one fine morning his eldest son died, apparently without any particular cause. Later, his Guru advised that if he wished to practise sorcery he would have to stay far away from his family and village. So, he left his family and his village and started to live in Bangthupi village. He claimed that an important condition for performing sorcery is that a sorcerer cannot live with his family – he must live alone for the success of his magical prowess. The sorcerer told that he practised the methods of healing at first and later he practised the methods of spirit control (necromancy). During the interview he declined to disclose the secrets of his magical spells.

5.2.2.3 Link with Supernatural Powers

The sorcerer of Bangthupi village usually performs his mystical events twice a week on either Friday or Sunday as per the instruction of his Guru. His activities are mainly spread over areas surrounding the *joor* (river). In sorcery, divination is usually performed with water-gazing for human beings (Fortune 1932:199). According to the sorcerer studied, he can manipulate everything – plants, animals, and human beings, but not the natural climatic components. He stated, "I need some natural elements or substances to manipulate others". He used water, soil, etc. with his magical spells to execute the special practices. He claimed, "I must have the spells and the natural elements to accomplish my deeds, if I get both of these things, I can control anything in this world".

5.3 Some Examples of Sorcery Practices

Detailed descriptions of the phenomena of sorcery were gathered from the practitioner or the enchanter, and also from the affected persons or witnesses i.e., Sabar villagers who happened to be the prime witnesses of the phenomenon (Raychaudhury 2004). Living memories of suffering and blissful life through the impact of sorcery were narrated by the villagers. In South India a sorcerer is closely associated with birth and death rituals, and the same is true among the Sabars of the study area (see Nabokov 2000). Here are some examples of the events of sorcery practices:

5.3.1 Birth Ritual

At the seventh month of pregnancy, members of the pregnant woman's in-law family arrange a ritual named *law-manshi.*[6] In this ritual, the family members offer some good food items like chicken, sweets, and a kind of fried sweet locally called *pithe* to the pregnant women. Along with this, an *ojha-maduli*[7] (amulet) specially prepared by the sorcerer is given to the woman for wearing on her left hand. The villagers believe that the amulet will protect both

the pregnant woman and the child from all evil spirits. This ritual is followed by each and every villager. The ritual creates a perpetual bond between the sorcerer and the villagers.

5.3.2 Death Ritual

The villagers burn the dead body of a person. The Sabar people are extremely poor and cannot afford to cremate their deceased ones. Instead they bury the dead in their own premises. After completing the entire process of burial, *khoi* (milky white parched rice) is spread all over the burial ground. The first person of the group returning from the burial place has to put a *kodarbant* (wooden handle of the axe) and *saalpata* (leaf of *Shorea robusta*) on the soil in front of their living rooms. At this stage, a sorcerer enchants some magical spells and all of the family members of the deceased person have to touch two objects placed on bare soil in front of their living rooms so that they can remain safe from the spirit of the deceased.

5.3.3 Destruction of Agricultural Fields

Mathan Sabar, 56 years old, said that the sorcerer destroys their crops if any villager refuses to give him food or denies to fulfil his desires. In fact, each and every villager is scared of him and is under constant threat of being the victim of his magical spell. Villagers shared their stories of suffering for his magical practices. These Sabar people occasionally cultivate potato (*aar*), maize (*butto*, the Sabar use this word for maize), and tomato (*bilati*). Once a sorcerer appeared at the doorstep of a villager and demanded three ducks for his personal use. When denied, the sorcerer got angry. As a result, the person received an open threat that his life would be ruined within a week. The 1,656 sq. ft. tomato garden (*bilati bhur*) of the villager dried within three days. His family confronted starvation due to this huge financial loss. After this incident, the villagers try their best to fulfil the demands of the sorcerer. The misery delineated above was faced by 38 year old Gurupada Sabar.

5.3.4 Death of a Child

The story of Golapi Sabar is really heart touching. The 29 year old mother stated that sometime back, her five-month-old baby was suffering from high fever and was vomiting profusely. Her husband and mother-in-law had both decided to call upon the sorcerer. The sorcerer entered the house with a small stick in his hand, and stared at her baby's face for some five to seven minutes. There upon, he started to scratch the soil where he was standing and started whispering his magical spells. The sorcerer then collected some scratched out soil and started rubbing the same over the entire body of the baby. Within an hour the baby died. The death of the baby left a deep scar on the mind of the mother and immediately thereafter she had severe convulsion, fever, and hematemesis. Fortune (1932) also mentioned in the case of Dobuan people that "the sorcerer causes sickness and death by using spells". The villagers solely believed that the sorcerer was responsible for the death. To get permanent relief some of the villagers complained that they do not want the sorcerer in Bangthupi at all any longer.

5.3.5 Stopping Cow's Milk

Muthun Sabar (a milk seller) misbehaved with the sorcerer. The sorcerer threatened him, saying that he would stop his cow's milk with his enchantment. Surprisingly, his cow's milk stopped. There after Muthun apologised to that sorcerer and pleased him with fruits,

vegetables, and milk. He also added that after admitting his mistake to the sorcerer, he was having his cow's milk like earlier. After the incident Muthun Sabar used to give milk to that sorcerer every Sunday.

5.3.6 Setting Fire to a House

On a chilly winter evening the villagers heard shouting from outside Dipsa Sabar's house. Dipsa's house was on fire. The villagers rushed to the spot and tried to extinguish the fire. On the very next morning, that old sorcerer appeared before the burnt-out house of Dipsa and shouted at the top of his voice, "don't dare to disturb me again". Later the villagers said that Dipsa had earlier told the sorcerer to stop doing any of those magical spells on his agricultural field and it was out of vengeance that the sorcerer set fire to the straw on the roof of his hut with the help of magical spells. The villagers got scared and did not disturb him again.

Apart from the above mentioned mischievous activities, sorcery also has a long history of positive performances like healing, remedial agents in several spheres as observed in South India (Nabokov 2000) and Assam (Barua 2013). The villagers also have experiences of some happy and peaceful moments through his benevolent acts.

5.3.7 Relief from Menstrual Pain

Madhu Sabar, a 17 year old girl, enthusiastically shared her experience. She was suffering from catamenial menstrualphase for 13 days in a month. The health centre being far away from the village, the villagers usually avoid visiting the health centre unless there is a serious problem. Madhu Sabar, without visiting the health centre, visited the sorcerer along with her mother. Hearing her problems, the sorcerer subjected her to some magical spells and gave her a banana flower which he claimed to have filled with his magical spell. She was advised to eat that vegetable regularly in small quantities. Madhu said that she was cured within two days. For this, the sorcerer charged only Rs. 20.

5.3.8 Hunting

Mitu Sabar, 27 years old, and his group consisting of six people visited the sorcerer before starting their journey to a forest for the purpose of hunting. The group asked for his blessings for the success of their hunting. The sorcerer collected some water from the nearby Kanshabati River (Kansaijoor) and poured that water into an earthen vessel. He manoeuvred some mysterious magical spells on the water in the earthen vessel and sprinkled the same prepared water on their spearhead which they would use as a hunting weapon. The group successfully hunted two wild boars and five rabbits. For this he demanded only a small share of that hunted meat.

5.4 Reasons for Visiting the Sorcerer

According to the sorcerer, various people visit him from the neighbouring villages for their personal problems. He confided that it was a matter of great pride for him to be able to solve the problems of the people through his power of sorcery. Most of the people, other than the Sabars and people from other indigenous groups, come to him to cure sicknesses like fevers, body aches, snake bites, vomiting, etc. Lalu Sabar, the sorcerer, stated that, "I

demand high remuneration like 100 to 200 rupees from those outsiders". In the case of the Sabar villagers, either he demands a comparatively lower amount or some small articles in exchange.

People generally live in their own societies and follow particular cultural behaviours. However, when people stand face to face with crisis they hardly act logically and think rationally. Rather, they rush to people who lure them to magical imaginations or miracles and pretend to be the ultimate real element next to God (West 2005, 2007 and Forsyth 2016). Surprisingly, persons from the local police station also visit the sorcerer to find remedies for their family problems. Sorcery, therefore, appears to bridge up people from different cultural paradigms through mysterious faith.

5.5 Changing Dimension of Sorcery

Life is dynamic. The dynamism in the Sabar society through generations has ushered in several changes in the qualities of life of the people. Now-a-days, numerous health awareness programmes are organised in health centres to motivate these poor and illiterate people. The majority of the villagers now earn their livelihood by engaging themselves as daily labourers. Hunting-gathering is another means of subsistence. Notwithstanding all of these activities, blind faiths also exist among the people. Sorcery and its effects have become so embedded in their daily life that several Sabar inhabitants still prefer sorcery as their primary remedial measure during sickness. In the earlier days, sorcery was the first choice for curing snake bites and not any health centre. As a result, they confronted the death of many of their loved ones. Tuna Sabar, 68 years old, of the village stated, "In my childhood, I have seen three sorcerers. They used to provide all the essential remedies for running our daily life. Out of them, the eldest sorcerer died of high fever. The second one left Bangthupi. At present Lalu Sabar, the youngest among the three, is the lone sorcerer in this area".

It appears that preference of sorcery outwardly might have reduced, but as evidenced through their comments and flashes of activities, faith in mystical practices silently resides in their hearts.

5.6 Belief, Culture, and Sorcery

The enigmatic practices of things like sorcery are deeply embedded in our minds in the name of faith. Sorcery indicates the vibrant relationship between empirical and theoretical knowledge (Schapera 1952). Anthropologists state that sorcery is another social phenomenon. The implicit understanding of individual psychology is purely grounded on the efficacy of the mystical practices. The study of the mental setup of individuals of a particular society expresses the psychological approaches towards the phenomenon. These approaches convey that individual's psychology always triumph over the social actualisation (Middleton, Gilbert & Jolly 2021). Needless to say, the expression towards sorcery actually reflects an intellectual conflict between sorcery believers and non-believers (Kapferer 2002). Sometimes magical practices like sorcery depend on the change of cultural mechanism, stating whether the 'teleological function' remains the same or not against the structural performance (Spiro 1961). The pertinent terminology of sorcery is very much culture specific. However, its approaches towards society are static (Kunin 2003:40). Cultural myths or historical circumstances might be different in terms of the social structure of a community, but this mystical belief gains stability based on the 'localised belief system' which Frazer emphasised boldly (Palmer, Steadman, Cassidy and Coe 2010). Evans-Pritchard (1929) compared the

structural and functional approaches of magical spells by studying rituals of the Trobriand and Zande people. According to him, magical practice is "not something discovered but as something co-existent in time with man, not as a vague impersonal power but as a tangible weapon of culture, not activated by the spirits of the dead but deriving its power from the knowledge of tradition and the abstinence of living men" (Evans-Pritchard 1929).

In the case of the Sabar, sorcery is rooted in their major rituals, whereas in other domains its applicability is reducing. The Sabar people still have a mentality for sorcery. The effects of social advancement are the key factors of declining magical practice, indicating logical and rational thinking of the people. On the other hand, outsiders are getting involved with this magical practice. Here, credulousness of the people and a lack of analytical thinking are the primary capital to run sorcery. To breathe such kinds of practices, it must be embedded into a culture. The practitioner has gained a cultural tag, but the empirical data claims that sorcery is not bounded within a culture. It is a transcendental knowledge deeply rooted in belief systems and executed by means of cultural rites as per functional requirements (Spiro 1961).

5.7 The Present Scenario

Several countries have banned this practice. But in various tribal societies like Dobu, Muduans, and others like Lardil, Arapesh, Dukun in Mozambique, Tanzania, and some other African nations, sorcery is still an inseparable part of their daily life (*see* Fortune 1932; West 2007; McKnight 1981 and Pilling 1962). Forsyth (2016) has shown how sorcery has been presumed to be a part of divine power. She primarily focused on the issues of law and justice. According to Forsyth (2016), sorcery victimises innocent people and robs them of their hard-earned wealth and land, and in some cases drives them towards death. It has been advocated that this practice needs to be abolished as soon as possible. Legally a sorcerer deserves to be punished for robbery and murder (Forsyth 2016). Keshavan (1989) reported the belief that the people of Gulbarga in Karnataka were suffering from mass hysteria under the influence of sorcery (Keshavan, Narayanan & Gangadhar 1989). Eradication of the magical practices of witchcraft and sorcery has been declared to be the first priority in Jharkhand and Maharashtra. In Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Maharashtra some persons have been arrested for such magical practices. In Odisha the tribal districts like Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Sundargarh, Rayagada, Malkangiri, Gajapati, and Nuapada report more than 83% of the people still believing in sorcery. Nevertheless, the age-old practice of sorcery is still breathing life into many poor and helpless common men capitalising on their blind faith and undesirable traditions (Jain 2018).

5.8 Conclusion

Various national Governments in different parts of the world have enacted various anti-black-magic laws (in some of the African States). In India legislation at the Central as well as at State level has been enacted. The states of Kerala, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Odisha, and a few others have enacted legislation for the prevention and eradication of superstitious practices like sorcery. In spite of all of these endeavours, the harmful practices of sorcery and black magic are eating into the souls of poor tribal peoples in many places. It is, therefore, suggested that along with the promulgation of legislation, awareness programmes, and mass movements against the ill effects of such practices need to be organised

at the governmental and non-governmental levels. Alongside the enactment of laws for the prevention of sorcery and mass awareness programmes, issues like the economic conditions and educational status of the people, the tribal Sabars, the subject of the study, are also to be addressed.

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Notes

1 'Mayong' is the name of the village situated in the Morigaon District of Assam. The inhabitants of this village designated sorcery as *Mayong tradition* as the village has a remarkable age-old tradition of *tantra* and black magic as well. Mayong is used to denote the name of sorcery after the name of the village.
2 After the death of Krishna, as the story goes, his soul transformed into a small stone, which was traced out by tribal chieftain Vishwavasu; and he started worshipping him in a cave. The auspicious stone is named as Nilmadhav. *Neel* means blue and *Madhav* is one of the names of Lord Bishnu. After knowing the story of greatness about Nilmadhav from pilgrims, king Indradyumna of Lunar dynasty of Udra Pradesh (present Odisha) met with Vishwavasu and later established an idol in a newly built temple at Puri.
3 Sabar people have shared their own words with several Bengali terms. During fieldwork it has been observed that they mostly use Bengali words even when they communicate among themselves.
4 Chalua, Bourdia, and Khatua are different types of rat (their specific local names) which they preferred to eat on any normal day.
5 Oriental rat snake or Indian rat snake (*Ptyas mucosa*), non-venomous in nature. Locally known as *jamru saap*.
6 It is a bathing ritual of a baby among the Sabar.
7 Amulet provided by a sorcerer which contains a piece of root (name of the root was not disclosed to the first author).

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6

TO BELIEVE OR NOT TO BELIEVE

A Study of the Folk Beliefs of the Nagas in the Novels of Easterine Kire

Rupam Gogoi

6.0 Introduction

The strategically located north-eastern frontier of India is a home of ethnic communities with a rich socio-cultural heritage. A region that has been witness to severe internal strife at times, imperial massacres and widespread separatist movements post-independence, the literature of the region has realistically presented the everyday lives of the people at times of strife and during days of self-contentment. The authors, whether writing in English or in vernacular languages, have attempted to portray the rich folk life in all its contours. Prominent authors of the region like Easterine Kire[1] have extensively worked on and portrayed the folk beliefs that shape the lives of the people in the Naga Hills and their relevance in a fast-changing world where different worlds interact and evolve newer patterns of folk belief.

The term 'belief' can have varied connotations and paradigm on being viewed from diverse critical perspectives though simplistically it can be taken as the assortment of such tenets on which an individual or a folk group expresses faith as being the truths capable of defining and determining the contours of an individual's or a folk group's essence and existence. Underlining the relationship between belief and knowledge, Owen Egan opines that "the definition of knowledge or cognition as justified true belief seems to have been particularly successful" (Egan 1986:315). Depending on the parameter of logical basis and adherence/presence of reason or otherwise, belief can be presented as in figure 6.1.

Again it cannot be negated that the entire notion of formation/generation of truth involves parameters more than the personal. As philosophers like Michel Foucault (1977) have pointed out truth is deeply linked with power and the determining elements of truth and subsequently belief can also vary depending on the dominant discourse of a society. Daniel Goldstick refers to various philosophers to show the different dimensions of the term 'belief' in his essay *Belief*:

> Philosophers like Descartes and James have made a point of insisting that the according of belief to something is a committing of the will. Others such as Hobbes and Price

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> have made the objection that, in point of psychological fact, it is not really possible as a rule– if ever–to believe something just at will.
>
> *(Goldstick 1989:231)*

The common man is often confronted with the issue of why exactly he/she clings on to certain ideologies, legends, myths, religious practices, moral duties, socio-cultural traits, and *believes* in them to the extent of such aspects determining the thought process of an individual which subsequently forms the basis of existence. Thus, every individual is governed by *belief systems* whether it is religious, social, moral, political, or economic. It is the body of such beliefs that leads to the creation of knowledge and then *knowledge systems* which then direct the patterns of thought and belief of a folk group. Magnus Osterholm in his essay *Beliefs: A Theoretically Unnecessary Construct?* has stated that:

> if all members of some type of group have a specific belief, then they might not label it as a belief but as knowledge … that for something to be seen as knowledge it has to satisfy some type of truth condition–a condition that is negotiated and agreed upon within a community … Thus, depending on what social community you belong to, you can have different views on what is seen as knowledge and what is seen as belief.
>
> *(Osterholm 2009:156)*

The determinants of belief can be seen to have numerical as well as socio-political connotations besides having a strong psychological dimension. This shows that what a group ultimately believes to be true is not the result of its subjective concerns only but it also involves factors even beyond the realm of subjectivity that combine together to forge its identity. At this point it can be surmised that the essential being of every individual and by extension the society to which he/she belongs to is governed by belief and knowledge systems. Moreover, despite the *belief systems* and *knowledge systems* being inter-linked it would be pertinent to analyse their differences, on the basis of Osterholm's study, to understand what comprises knowledge and determines a belief which ultimately goes on to determine a folk group's socio-cultural legacy.

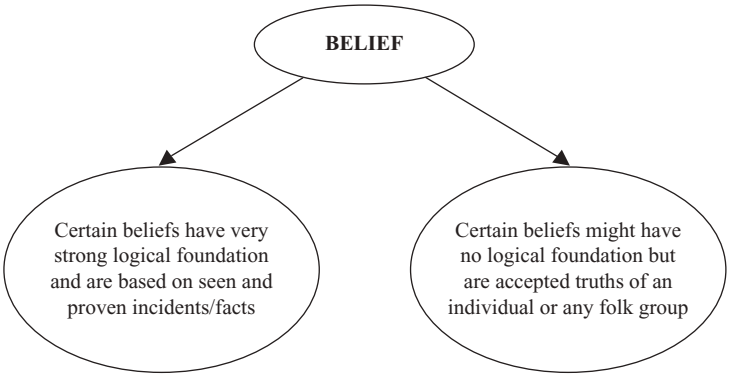

Figure 6.1 Foundation of Beliefs

Source: Author

6.1 The Context

India's Northeast (also spelt as North-East) comprising eight states has been an anthropologist's paradise and folklorist's delight. The more than hundred ethnic groups residing in this space speak languages and dialects numbering more than 400 with some of them spoken within only a few square kilometres. The advent of institutionalised religion is recent among most tribes who preached (some of them are still practising) indigenous faith earlier. With the absence of written script among the tribes oral literature had a position of prominence. The rich oral tradition of the tribes still determines the identity and existence of the people. Caroline Marak in her essay *Relevance of Oral Literature* has opined that:

> We live in a period in which orality, print and electronic media overlap. If orality is dependent on the spoken word in oral, non-literate cultures, that orality will continue though a part of the society has become literate … Oral transmission continues, and it carries with it the bulk of a community's traditions. In the context of North-East India, oral literature and traditions matter, and must be taken seriously.
>
> *(Marak 2007:16)*

It is through this rich oral tradition that the contemporary society has inherited various customs, traditions, and beliefs that define human existence. Humans have always held on tightly to these pillars of the society in testing times. The relationship between orally transmitted folk knowledge (oral literature) and written literature in which the oral forms shape the writing of a folk group can be figuratively presented as follows:

It may be surmised that oral literature is the base upon which the body of written literature of the folk groups is formed. Considering the fact that the span between the time of formulation (followed by exclusive oral transmission) and the moment of inheritance of such customs, traditions, and beliefs can be substantial questions regarding their relevance and mode of acceptance might be raised, but their universality and contemporaneity can be easily gauged in most cases. However, it cannot be denied that the gradual transformation from a totally agrarian and forest based society to a gadget prominent industrial society might have led to the disappearance of many of the beliefs and customs that our forefathers had adhered to. Looking at the issue from a scientific perspective, it appears that the generations that primarily depended on the orality did not initiate customs and fostered beliefs without sound reasoning aimed at making lives comfortable and socio-economic progress sustainable[2].

Easterine Kire is one of the most prominent English writers of contemporary India. She has vividly presented the folk beliefs of the Nagas in her novels, short stories, and poems. Her novels include *A Naga Village Remembered, A Terrible Matriarchy, Bitter Wormwood, Son of the Thundercloud, When the River Sleeps*, *Mari*, *Bitter Wormwood*, *Don't Run my Love,* and *A Respectable Woman*. The author has been very vocal as regards to the socio-political upheavals disturbing the Naga society and has beautifully presented the socio-cultural milieu of the Nagas for the readers. She is acutely aware of the politically troubled times that her *home* and Northeast India by extension has been witness to, but at the same instance she is deeply aware of the vibrant and pulsating myths and legends of her people and the time-tested customs and beliefs that have sustained the socio-cultural fabric of the Naga society through thick and thin. Kire's novels cover themes as wide as status of women in Naga society, pre-independence as well recent political history in addition to the rendering

of legends and myths. The people she paints are common people suffering, challenging, and attempting to triumph over the odds; but a significant feature of her works is the space that she provides to the folk customs and beliefs which adds to the aesthetic charm of her works.

Kire's *A Naga Village Remembered* is regarded as the first Naga novel in English. Though the work is viewed by many as a historical novel centring on the famous Battle of Khonoma[3], the socio-cultural life of the people of the village has been very beautifully depicted. Caught between the warrior spirit and the dominating and marauding colonial troops, the warriors try their best to overcome the harrowing times, but with very limited success. The author also brings in the issue of the advent of Christianity into the Naga Hills, something that was to change the entire socio-cultural scenario within the next few decades. The subject of the novel has been captured in the following words:

> the rich cultural life that fostered the spirit of the people of the village is captured … Warriors jostle with enemy warriors and with the spirits in a pre-Christian world of taboos, rituals, and festivals where women worked as hard as men and men strove to live up to the obligations of manhood–protecting their village and their womenfolk, making the name of the village fearful and ensuring the survival of the old religion in the face of the ever widening influence of modernisation.
>
> *(Kire 2016a, blurb)*

Set in Kohima, the capital of Nagaland, *A Terrible Matriarchy* is about the status of women in the basically patriarchal Naga society (Tenyimia[4] culture to be more precise). As the title suggests the novel portrays how the concerted efforts of making a woman fit into an already existent social mould are made with the overt support and active participation of the matriarch(s) of a family. The novel seems to dispel a commonly held notion that the status of women in the societies of the north eastern states is encouraging by revealing how patriarchy designs its customs, beliefs, and propagators for its sustenance and transmission. In the process, the author has been able to elaborately present to the reader the various rituals, practices, and beliefs shaping the Naga way of life.

English writings from India's Northeast and violence for a separate homeland are inseparable entities. A considerable quantum of literature deals with the subject, showing the various contours of the movement. The mainland-periphery divide is one of the common concerns of the majority of the authors of all of the states of the region, though it has to be accepted that there has been an increase in the number of refreshing exceptions as regards to the subject matter. Many authors have taken up oral literature, social customs, and beliefs as their literary material. *Bitter Wormwood* portrays the troubling times of the Naga society with insurgency and counter-insurgency operations sapping out the people both physically and psychologically. The title of the novel is significant as it has been named after a herb (scientific name: *Artemisia absinthium*), which is believed to have curative qualities along with the faith that if tucked beneath the ear can dispel spirits.

Son of the Thundercloud is the novelist's attempt of fictionalising a legend by utilising literary devices like magic realism which can be defined as the literary practice wherein:

> Realistic details and esoteric knowledge are intertwined with dreamlike sequences, abrupt chronological shifts, and complex, tangled plots. Magic realists also frequently incorporate fairy tales and myths into their works.
>
> *(Murfin & Ray 1998:195–196)*

It relates to the legend of a woman living secluded in a small Angami village whose husband and seven sons were killed by a tiger. She waits for an event that would change the course of her life and that happens in the form of a raindrop falling on her that subsequently leads to her conceiving a child who would go on to avenge the death of his father and brothers. Though that forms the main fabric of the story, the picture of the Naga society is equally appealing and precise.

Easterine Kire's novel *When the River Sleeps* bagged her 'The Hindu Prize for Best Fiction' in 2015. The gripping story telling technique of the author keeps the reader deeply sheltered in a world where dreams, spirits, and other supernatural entities and developments shape and reshape the life of the protagonist. The man-nature interdependence that forms the core of most indigenous communities of the region seems to be another concern of the novel with the protagonist strongly asserting that the forest is his 'wife' while trying to avoid the issue of his marriage as and when tossed up by his enthusiastic aunts.

While attempting to study Naga folk beliefs it has to be pointed out that the term *Naga* is more of an umbrella term used to denote many groups who together forge the *Naga* identity. The groups are: Angami, Ao, Chakhesang, Chokri, Khezha, Kom, Konyak, Lotha, Maram, Nocte, Phom, Sangtam, Sema, Tangkhul, Tangsa, Thangal, Wancho, Yimchunger, Zeliangrong, etc. Thus, it is distinct that when one speaks of an author writing about the socio-cultural life of the Nagas, he/she is in all probability not portraying the life and times of all of the groups who identify themselves as Nagas.

6.1.1 Objective

The objective of the current research is to make an analytical study of the patterns of representation of social customs and associated *beliefs* of the Nagas as portrayed in select novels of Easterine Kire. The research concentrates on the relevance as well as socio-religious influence and contemporaneity of such beliefs.

6.1.2 Methodology

The research is qualitative and based on five primary texts of Easterine Kire. The novels short listed for the study have been objectively analysed focusing on the fictional representation of various *beliefs* of the Nagas and the patterns of impact of various *beliefs* and *belief systems* in their socio-cultural life and their contemporaneity. The latter is based on the researcher's interaction with Naga friends over a period of two decades.

6.2 Fictionalised Folk Belief and Studying Their Social Relevance

> Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf's impression, one of the earliest impressions of the Nagas, was that the "highly developed megalithic ritual of some of the Naga tribes seemed to be of crucial importance in the elucidation of the ideology which led men to commemorate meritorious feats by the erection of crude stone monuments" and that his concern with this particular aspect of Naga culture led him "to a general appreciation of the archaic patterns of life persisting in the remote hill tracts along the Indo-Burman border".
>
> *(Haimendorf 1976:1)*

The statement throws light on the Naga spirit and art and the impact that it had on one of the greatest scholars to have lived with and studied on them. Though in a state of oblivion from the views of most in the Indian mainland and the world beyond that, the Nagas have been able to mesmerise and inspire the souls who have tried to peep into their lives. Kire's role in taking her people to the outside world is immense. She has repeatedly tried to overshadow the commonplace impression of literature of the state being centred on violence and political apathy and this she has done by bringing to the contemporary reader the varied manifestations of the four fields of folklore as classified by Richard M. Dorson (1972): oral literature, material culture, social folk custom, and folk performing art. A study of the selected novels show that the novelist is very concerned about the presentation of the following:

i) myths
ii) legends
iii) beliefs regarding nature and relationship with it
iv) customs and beliefs related to birth, marriage, death, agriculture, hunting, community living and other such practices/aspects that have a direct impact on the lives of the people
v) belief in the supernatural elements: heaven, hell, gods, angels, benevolent, and malevolent spirits
vi) rebirth/life after death
vii) beliefs related to material culture

The folk beliefs as presented by the author can be enumerated as follows:

1 All of the novels have elaborate descriptions of the age-group houses, *thehou*, where a child would be put into after attaining puberty. It is considered a seminal social institution believed to be of utmost importance for initiating young males into the village way of life. Much of the task of transmission of the customs and beliefs from one generation to the next can be found taking shape in such dormitories.
2 Much like the modern education system's insistence on apprenticeship followed by hands-on sessions, stay in the *thehou* also involves *thekra* earning where boys of a particular age group work collectively in fields of the villagers to collect money for the customary feast. Such a practice is believed to instil a sense of having grown up so that the young man may come up to take worldly responsibilities.
3 The Nagas are famed warriors. Clashes among warring clans and villages have been described elaborately by historians and travellers in their accounts. But it is taboo to live in villages having instances of ghastly bloodshed. Every raid is preceded by elaborate rituals where a young rooster is sacrificed and if it dies with the right leg crossing over the left the omen is believed to be congenial. The novelist talks about *ghost villages* left empty after such bloodbath:

> In the second village, the members of the upper clan killed a man from the lower clan in a drunken brawl. The murder led to a war between the two clans and, by the end of the seventh day, so much blood had been spilt in the village that it became taboo to live there. The women and children filled their baskets and their belongings and

> walked out, weeping loudly. The men followed them with guilty hearts; they knew that if they had stopped the killings they would not have lost their homes.
>
> *(Kire 2016a:13)*

It can be easily perceived that violence is not encouraged in the social system and redemption lies in tasks like vacating the entire village and settling somewhere else.

1 Despite being warriors they have some steadfast beliefs of whom never to harm. For instance the marauding warriors abstain themselves from harming a woman in the loom. This symbolically shows their immense belief in the creative potency of the loom.
2 The Nagas have elaborate hunting rituals. Killing a tiger is always considered a very brave act to perform. The rituals that start as the hunter(s) killing the beast approaches the village and what he/they have to do in the next few days has been elaborately described by Kire in her novels:

> The headman was waiting at the gate and said, 'Do not come. You have killed our elder brother, do not come.' … 'It was not I, Apfu-o. It was the spear who killed Tiger'.
>
> *(Kire 2016a:131)*

After the carcass of the killed tiger is brought inside the boundary of the village the male members start the *tekhukete* ritual wherein:

> Turn by turn the men came to strike the dead tiger with their spears. Male children were encouraged to thrust their spears at different parts of the tiger's body so that their fear of the tiger would be diminished and their hearts strengthened.
>
> *(Kire 2016a:32)*

In addition to that they have to honour certain customs rigidly not to invite the wrath of the malevolent spirits:

> cook from a new fireplace for five days and eat separately, using a different set of pots and pans. He needs his clansman to guard him for a week … He also had to use freshly cut wood.
>
> *(Kire 2016a :131–132)*

> When the fire was made, Vilau killed a pig and chopped off the right leg to give to the *tekhutheno-u*, the man who had injured the tiger … he divided his food into 39 shares and ate all the portions after careful counting...On the fifth day, he would store the remains of the fireplace and put away the cooking stones. Then he would fetch water again in order to complete the tiger killing rituals.
>
> *(Kire 2016b: 33–34)*

The reason behind such elaborate ritual is the belief that in the past *Omei* (man), *Orah* (supernatural spirit), and *Okhe* (tiger) were brothers and fratricide is an unpardonable crime. The answer is tricky and ambiguous, but assumed by them to be logically tenable. Such moves would curtail reckless killings. The belief in *tekhumiavi* (weretiger) springs

from their belief in the existence of this ancient relationship. Constructing a conversation between two fictional characters Kire writes that tigers are:

> The men whose spirits had metamorphosed into tigers…Legend said that every weretiger began as a smaller animal, possibly a wildcat … Men whose spirits were turning into weretigers would begin to behave strangely … It is not only the tiger that men transform themselves into … Can you turn back into a human when you get tired of being a tiger? … Only with great difficulty and as though you are going through living death. The spirit is tormented so greatly that the pain itself is a deterrent to those who want to stop being tigers.
>
> *(Kire 2014 :26–28)*

Nagas are hardworking agriculturalists and have deep faith in their gods and the benevolent spirits for a good harvest. They attempt to avoid any untoward incident that may invite their wrath. One prominent practice is observing *genna*[5] days. It is a taboo to work on such days in the field:

> If you work break the taboos, you break yourself, her father had always said that.
>
> *(Kire 2016a:31)*

Such practices help the people to get some time from their busy schedule as well as help in the replenishment of the soil so that it does not become barren with over-cultivation. Despite being known for their warrior spirit the Nagas strongly believe that:

> a household is not worthy of its name if its granaries are empty … War is part of a village's life but if we have grain, we can withstand war. If we do not have grain, a few days of war will overcome us.
>
> *(Kire 2016a:30)*

They have *genna* to save the paddy from withering, to prevent the soil from becoming sterile or barren, and subsequently to keep the fertility of soil intact. Thus, the taboo associated with not working in the field on certain days has deep rooted relation with their activities.

1 *Terhase* after *genna* days is a ritual carried out to pacify the spirits so that they do not harm the fields and the people continue getting good harvest, and to keep the people in good health. *Thena* is part ritual and the people believe that one should not do anything other than working in the fields.
2 *Rhuotho* is a seed sowing ritual involving two young children who walk in different directions sowing the seeds. After the ritual gets over the hosts cannot work on that day and also cannot talk to the sojourners. The belief seems to put the hosts away from influences that might distract them.
3 Birth rituals are observed by all communities and are important treasures. The elaborate birth rituals have been beautifully shown by the author in the novels. The beliefs centre around the urgent necessity to keep the spirits away from harming the newborn:

> As the baby squealed into the world, Kovi quickly smeared saliva on his finger and touched it to his daughter's forehead with the words "I am first". That ensured that the spirits could not claim the child before him … There had been too many deaths of newborns in the village because their fathers have not been alert enough to stake claim before the spirits.
>
> *(Kire 2016a: 23–24)*

The belief appears out of place in the contemporary circumstances but the inherent motive of bringing the family together through the belief is deep rooted. Another such practice is that of *nuou* when meat is given from the maternal relatives.

Performance, observance, and the nature of death rituals of the Nagas depend on the nature of the death. Natural deaths involve vigil and decent burial. The different kinds of *apotia* or unnatural death are not mourned and any display of grief is forbidden. Such deaths may be death in childbirth, death by drowning, or in the face of natural occurrences like landslides or rockslides, and any other accidental deaths not caused by ill health or old age. *Lashu* death or death while giving birth is considered the worst of all *apotia* deaths. The dead is taken out of the house through a new passage carved in the wall instead of the usual exit passage and the mat covered body is put in a grave for a hasty burial. Expression of grief in such deaths is believed to bring bad luck to the family members of the dead. Life after death is also believed by the Nagas:

> Death parts us but after death, the spirits of the loved ones return to lead us away from this life to the land of the dead.
>
> *(Kire 2016a: 158)*

Belief regarding sightings of the dead is not uncommon. Though it can be assumed that repeated telling of such incidents spread news and fear fast but a belief exists beyond the plane of enforced notions, in the realm of *assumed realities* of the common folk. One such tale enumerated by the author goes as follows:

> At first she forgot that he had been dead two weeks, because he was sitting in the same spot that he used to sit when he came to drink, and looking the same as before. When she realised that it was his spirit, she cried aloud … Then the lady of the house recollected herself and spoke to him and said, 'Zekuo, we understand that you are longing for us and want to come back but yours is a different route now. You must not return again…'. The spirit did not reply but he got up and pulled on his body-cloth and walked out the front door.
>
> *(Iralu 2007:90–91)*

The belief goes that it is more common for the spirits of those who die young to come back to their cherished places as they could not fulfil their heart's desires. The living trying to avoid the spirits have belief that such a spirit can be dispelled by striking the machete at different spots in the doorway. It is believed to be taboo to raise one's voice near the body of the deceased.

> Marriage rituals of the Nagas also have thier own sets of do's and do not's. The author has given an elaborate description as to what marriage rituals are and how are they performed. Just as any other society they also believe in ascertaining that the relationship that they are attempting to forge shall be strong and lasting, the ritual involves sacrificing a chicken and then:
>
> let it fall on the ground. In death, the chicken's right leg crossed over the left and Viu pronounced it as a good ritual.
>
> *(Kire 2016a:78)*

Such beliefs help the people in putting themselves whole heartedly into the performance of the marriage rituals.

1. *Kerutsu* is the first day of going to the fields for a married couple and the husband is to avoid piercing the ground with spear. The reference to a spear shows that the ammunition is kept handy by the men, another pointer by the author to the warrior spirit.
2. Mother Nature is held in deep reverence by the Nagas. In *When the River Sleeps,* Vili calls the forest his wife showing the magnitude of his attachment. The forests are store houses of endless stories of people being taken control over by spirits and sightings of supernatural beings like the *weretigers*. Besides the productive and benevolent dimension of nature, there is the unclean forests called *Rarhuria* which are believed to be frequented and infested by spirits and as such are to be avoided.
3. The Naga society is basically patriarchal with the women enjoying no land inheritance rights. This has led to the creation of a notion of an 'ideal woman' who would fit into the 'marry – bear and rear children – anage the household' mould. It is such a belief whose execution breeds people like the grandmother of Dielieno, the protagonist of the novel *A Terrible Matriarchy*. The matriarch confidently says:

> I hope her mother realises that you have to raise girls on a tight leash...
>
> *(Iralu 2007:7).*

The existence of *Kirhupfumia*, immensely feared women having lethal powers, is another belief of the Nagas. They try their best to keep such women in good humour. In *When the River Sleeps,* she writes thus:

> People came to her with the first of their harvests, be it vegetables or fruit or grain and even eggs, chickens and bigger animals. Parents warned their children never to neglect to greet the old woman.
>
> *(Kire 2014:131)*

The societies across the world seem to be very harsh on the common people at times. One such instance is the blaming of an individual in the face of repeated tragedies in a family. The women seem to become soft targets in the face of such beliefs. Such an instance has been portrayed (Mesanou's words) in *Son of the Thundercloud*:

> There were two women who said it was my spirit, and not the tiger, that had killed all my sons and my husband. The village refused to have anything to do with me after that. Their children were warned not to come to my house and I was isolated from the village, even while living with it … sometimes people think that repeated tragedies have a source in the family itself.
>
> *(Kire 2016a:104)*

'From indigenous faith to Christianity' has been the route traversed by the Naga society after the arrival of the British forces and missionaries in the Naga Hills. The initial years saw a clash between the pre-Christian belief system and the emerging Christian doctrines, but gradually the old world order could not sustain the new social undercurrents. The act of the neo-converts ploughing on a *genna* day as depicted by Kire in *A Naga Village Remembered* is a reminder that what was once believed to be a *truth* gets transformed into a superstition. Their words once believed to be potent enough to invite the wrath of the spirits soon became acceptable. The picture of the Naga Hills stood different. However, it was not easy to flip beliefs. Such a picture has been depicted by the author in *Bitter Wormwood*:

> Though they had been Christians for six years now, they still observed the taboo days of the non-Christians.
>
> *(Kire 2013:69)*

To be precise, it was a change in approach from believing in propitiating the spirits to believing in a god brought in by the people whose entry they had vehemently opposed and resulted in bloody clashes.

6.3 Observations

The everyday life of the Nagas is rooted in a strong belief system resulting from the nature and extent of their relationship with their immediate surroundings. Beliefs shape an individual's psyche and determine the state of the society at large. Without beliefs to cling on to chaos will be an imminent fall out.

1. The beliefs aim at sustaining the society as a cohesive unit by raising the level of interdependence among the people.
2. The beliefs attempt to maintain a social decorum by preventing the people from doing things that can harm or create discomfort to the other members of the society.
3. The beliefs are the edifice for ascertaining discipline both at the individual and social levels.
4. It is human to attempt achieving all that he/she thinks/feels worth achieving, but such attempts can hamper the fragile nature-man relationship and inducing some fear can be a factor behind such beliefs.
5. Dependence on nature is perennial. It has creative and redemptive aspects.
6. It is difficult to identify the spirits whose existence the Nagas believe in from the real men and women and appearances are deceptive. This heightens the sense of mystery around the supernatural.

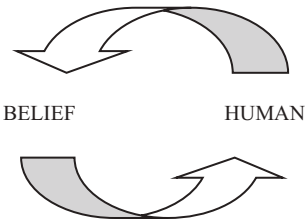

Chart 6.2 Cyclical Nature of Human and Belief Interrelationship

Source: Author

7 The advent and spread of Christianity changed the contours of the Naga belief system, but the people have kept alive the unique features of their rich oral literature and material culture rooted in the old world system.
8 Every belief should be read in the context of the time of its generation. It cannot be that such a belief evolved without a cause. The matter of contemporaneity needs to be addressed from the perspective of the time and social setting of evolution and the function it was intended to serve.
9 The human-belief interrelationship is cyclical in essence and complementary to each other which can be shown as: (Chart 6.2)

That beliefs cannot exist without being conceived of by men is given and as such any belief can be deemed a *human construct* resulting from socio-political compulsions of the dominant folk group in social, political, and economic parameters and psychological concerns. But once a belief is constructed or put into existence in the social plane it is all set to determine the subsequent flow of beliefs thereby determining the contours of men's socio-political and psychological world thus attempting to propagate the notion of a common belief for the cause of creation of a homogenous society at least in the thought and belief parameter.

6.4 Conclusion

Human societies are governed by codes established professedly for ascertaining healthy living conditions for the citizens. However, one cannot deny the workings of power equations in determining the workings of the socio-religious, economic, and political structures within a society and the nature of folk beliefs upheld by the people. The social and religious discourse of the Naga society prior to the advent of Christianity was rooted in the indigenous religious faiths and the people followed such beliefs by attributing truth value to them. However, the advent of Christianity changed the nature of such beliefs and the new religious discourse advocated that what the people believed to be truth earlier cannot be deemed to be of socio-religious utility anymore and only beliefs professed and advocated by the Christian faith have truth value. So, what was belief suddenly turned to superstition and certain new aspects got the recognition of being logical beliefs. There is a fine divide between 'superstition' and a rational 'belief'. It is pertinent to trace where and how a belief becomes superstition. The change in individual/social perception regarding an incident, phenom-

enon, or object leads to such a transformation, but the *creation of truth* is dependent on the notions of knowledge and power which complement each other to create truth which is again strongly rooted in the existence of a strong social hierarchy. For Nagas, the *Bible* became the source of knowledge and church the agency for disseminating such knowledge in the society. The power shifted from the community to the church. This shows the working of power structures on determining the dynamics of the creation of truth. Foucault opines, as has been discussed, that the nature of power which functions in the contemporary societies is disciplinary power and it is the act of disciplining that leads to establishment of the dominant discourse as the centre and basis of folk beliefs and its acceptance at the cost of peripheral discourses. Easterine Kire is deeply conscious of the changes gradually seeping into the socio-cultural and religious lives of the people in the Naga Hills with the increase in interaction with plainsmen and the imperial powers alongside the spread of Christianity. Whereas the religious faith of the people gradually transformed so much so that Nagaland is a predominantly Christian state now, but the beliefs and cultural practices of the pre-Christian era continue to remain relevant among the people to the extent of determining the contours of Naga identity, might be with changes induced by political, economic, and socio-religious circumstances. The post-colonial concept of hybridity stresses that in the context of race and ethnicity the term "is used to describe the newly composed, mixed or contradictory identities" (Brooker 2017:143). In the Naga context it's a new religious identity that the people got by identifying themselves with the new religion, but as things stand today considerable folk beliefs of the pre-Christian era exist along with the beliefs and practices that Christianity brought with it and this co-existence of the two worlds shape the contemporary Naga folk life and belief. Of course, the traditional beliefs and practices no more belong to religious worldview; rather they are socio-cultural aspects of life.

Notes

1 Easterine Kire and Eaterine Iralu are the same person. Other than *A Terrible Matriarchy* (author name: Easterine Iralu) all the other works taken up for discussion have been published with Easterine Kire as the author name.
2 The focus in above paragraph is on functionality of oral tradition and its status in response to changing dynamics. The issue is theoretically explained following Malinowski's functionalism with reference to myth and its limitations in changing situation in Doye (2018:90–92 & 210).
3 The battle of Khonoma, fought between the Nagas and the British forces ended 1880, is said to be the last major encounter between the two sides and the Nagas were greatly subdued after that as the Nagas were "besieged for about four months and starved out" (Chasie & Hazarika 2009:2).
4 Tenyimia is a grouping of ten fraternal Naga tribes which believe in a shared ancestry. The tribes are: Angami, Chakhesang, Rengma, Zeliangrong, Poumai, Inpui, Maram, Memei, Thangal and Pochury.
5 *Genna* is taboo associated with activities in the Naga society. It is believed that performing certain restricted activities during *genna* days brings bad luck.

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7

SOCIAL DIMENSION OF FAITH AND BELIEFS OF THE ORAON

Revisiting S.C. Roy

Utpal Kumar Chakraborty, Vinamrta, and Binod Narayan

Introduction

S.C. Roy wrote his monumental work on Oraon religion entitled *Oraon Religion and Customs* in the year 1928. In his book he presented Oraon religious beliefs and practices imbibed in their culture and thus, integrated with other aspects of life. He organised his study into six chapters namely: *Religion, Magic and Science; Deities, Spirits and other Supernatural Powers; Socio-Religious Rites and Ceremonies; Religious Feasts and Festivals; Black Magic and White Magic;* and *Revival Movements and Modern Tendencies in Oraon religion*. As is evident, in the third chapter he explained the embedded social aspects in the religious tradition of the Oraon people. This signifies their sociological dimensions of faith and beliefs. Roy was more inclined towards the Malinowski's idea of religion (Hodson 1928:xiii), where religion is a part of social solidarity (Barla 2019). According to Roy, the Oraon's religious beliefs of that time can be put somewhere near a 'primitive' and vague stage of animism or spiritism. In this worldview, the Oraon do not discriminate between spirit or soul and the body or object they reside in; rather attribute *manna*, an impersonal magic force of nature towards certain living beings, natural objects, and even to some objects of human art. The Oraon have organised their religious beliefs around the hierarchically arranged spirits. These spirits are mainly of two types: nature spirits and the spirits of the dead human beings which are categorised as inferior or superior, and as potentially beneficent or maleficent. Apart from this they believe in impersonal powers and forces. Roy also wrote that the religious rites which include supplications and prayers, offerings, and sacrifices, ceremonial sharing of sacrificial food along with some taboos are mainly meant to establish a harmonious relation with the supernatural powers and beings.

Over these years, the Oraon, particularly non-converts have been exposed to modern forces like education, technology, formal sector of employment, and so on. These forces always associated with their migration from a traditional village set up to the urban centres and also to the metro cities. The more interaction with people exposed them to the diverse ideas and ideologies. Notably, Roy also mentioned about some earlier works (1928) such as the works of Rev. P. Dehon and Col. Dalton, and attempted correction of facts and interpretation also. He mentioned that originally the Oraon did not consider any spirit

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as beneficent. However, due to contact with other cultures, they considered some of the spirits as potentially beneficial. He also presented his study about the on-going revival movements specially the different kinds of *Bhakti* movements and Christian movement in which the Oraon religious rites and festivals are modified along with their social and economic life. There is a confrontation with Christian ideology and a revival commitment under the banner of S*arna* religion. Further, co-existence with Hindu and other communities also influenced the Oraon traditional religion. The exposure of Oraon community to these forces makes it important to revisit S.C. Roy to understand the changes in social dimension in Oraon faith and beliefs over a period of almost 100 years. With this argument at the core, the chapter is organised in five sections as follows: Introduction; S.C. Roy and social dimensions in Oraon religion; Present scenario; Comparative dynamics; and the conclusion. To know about the present scenario of Oraon religious beliefs and practices, Kanke and Ormanjhi blocks from Ranchi district and Sisai and Basia blocks from Gumla district have been purposely selected. Secondary sources have also been used to compare the facts of S.C. Roy's time with the present practices.

7.1 S.C. Roy and Socio-Religious Dimension of the Oraon Worldview

Roy wrote his book applying an anthropological approach. In this approach, the tribal religion and its connection with social aspects or institutions is understood and explained through rites, rituals, and beliefs around natural objects (Chakraborty 2018). Social dimensions in religion include life cycle rites, community rituals, and worship practices involving different spirits or deities, totems, taboos, and most importantly the festivals. Roy was also aware of the social dimension of the religion, and he distinguished it from the magic, which he terms as the business of an 'individual specialist' (Roy 1928:6). In community dimension of religious practices, the institution of *pahan* (priest) is very important among the Oraon.

7.1.1 Institution of Pahan

In theory, the community is represented by the *panch* (village elders); it constitutes the priesthood; but in practise only one or other of the elders of the village or clan proficient in the ritual practices conducts the sacrificial rites in the presence of the panch. In case of offering sacrifices to village deities, a priest or priests are appointed or elected by the Oraon village community. In Oraon religion, the propitiation or worship is really congregational. The village deities receive periodical propitiation from the appointed priest, the pahan (or *baiga* in some villages). This pahan or baiga may have one or two assistants namely *panbhara, pujar, tahalu, susari,* or *murgipakoa.* Presence of representatives of people of the village is mandatory on the occasion of propitiation. The office of pahan is hereditary in some villages while in others it changes at an interval of three years. In Oraon belief the selection of pahan is done by deities themselves. Bachelors of Oraon are not eligible to be elected as pahan, as the marriage of pahan with his wife (*pahanain)* has to be celebrated at the end of *sarhul* festival every year in the month of April. Their marriage is taken as the marriage of the Sun with the Earth signifying 'Earth may fructify'. If pahan happens to be a widower, then the marriage of pahan's married son (if any) with his wife is celebrated with the same process. In villages where pahanship[1] is not hereditary, but *pahankhunt* (family/lineage of the pahan) is present in the village, then the pahanship does not pass out of *khunt*. In villages, where the pahanship is hereditary, but the pahan family got converted to Christianity

or some other religion or become extinct, the selection of new pahan follows the same procedure as of other villages. The election of pahan takes place on the full moon (15th) day of Magh month (January-February) and in a few villages in Aghan month (November–December) following a procedure which involves assemblage of all adult male members of the village at Sarna. It is interesting to note that in an Oraon village, if there live one or more families of earlier Munda settlers (*bhuinhars*[2]) then the post of pahan automatically goes to the Munda. If there is the presence of a *mahadania* spirit (spirit who demands human sacrifice) in the villages, then the appointment of a separate mahadania pahan is also done and this post is received from descent. Both pahan and mahadania pahan enjoy some rent-free land for their services.

The institution of *pahan* plays an important role in offering sacrifices and performing different rituals on various occasions. These offerings are made to the deities and other supernatural powers which are embedded in their life cycle rituals and festivals.

7.1.2 Socio-Religious Rites and Ceremonies

For maintaining friendly relationships with the unknown supernatural powers (explained in the form of deities and spiritual beings or spirits) the Oraon have different ways of offerings and sacrifices on different occasions. Their special life cycle occasions like birth, childhood, puberty, marriage, and death are marked with different rites and ceremonies to protect themselves from unknown supernatural risks and dangers and to have a better economic life during the year. Kinship and surrounding community along with specialised ritual performers have different roles during these rites and ceremonies.

7.1.2.1 Birth and Childhood Ceremonies

Ceremonies related to birth and infancy start right from the time of pregnancy of an Oraon woman. She is barred to go out of the house in night; she has to cover herself with cloth while going out in day time in order to be protected from mischievous spirits. Pregnant woman's parental family perform *jodakamna* (literarily the wish for both) ceremony to appease *khunt bhuts* and worship deities in their village with a view to protect both the unborn baby in the womb and expectant mother (for the first time). During delivery and thereafter pollution is observed.

In some villages until the *danda-katta* ceremony is performed, the new born is not taken out of the house due to the fear of evil spirits and evil eyes. In this ceremony either on the eighth or ninth day after birth a professional spirit doctor or an Oraon man who knows the ceremonial process is called upon to perform elaborate rituals of cutting the evil teeth so that evil spirits and evil eyes keep a distance from the new born. The danda-katta ceremony is followed by 'name giving' ceremony known as name-pinjna. The time period to perform this ceremony differs from fortnight to six months or even a year after birth. Till the ceremony the child is called by the name of the day he or she was born, like *Etwa* for a male or *Etwaria* for a female child born on Sunday; *Mangra* and *Mangri* for male and female child respectively born on Tuesday. If the child is born on some festive days then they are called after the name of that particular festival. For example, if a child is born on *Karam* festival, he/she gets the name *Karma* if a male or *Karmi* if female. Traditionally, the child naming ceremony involves an unmarried Oraon boy or village *gorait*[3] for shaving the head. A small amount of hair is left out on the head at crown position and shaved hair is thrown into a

water tank or running stream nearby with a belief that the hair meets the hair of the future spouse. If previously the child's head has been shaved then some part of hair is left out for this ceremony. After this comes the customs of three rice grains through which one of the ancestor's names is given to the child on the belief that the named ancestor soul guards the child from evil spirits. In the past, the real name of the child was not told to outsiders in fear of witchcraft. When the child is called by his real name by chance, the wife of gorait anoints the child with oil and turmeric paste and gives a bath in cold water.

An Oraon girl gets her nose pierced at the age of five or six years by some older girl or by a goldsmith. There is no special ceremony or feast for nose-piercing unlike the ear-piercing. At the age of seven or eight, the Oraon girl gets a tattoo on her forehead and temple for the first time by a Malar woman[4] which later on is elaborated at the gap of four to five years. There are also some other rituals like cicatrisation which has social context rather than any religious significance.

7.1.2.2 Marriage Ceremony

Marriage ceremony in traditional Oraon community is considered essential. No bachelor or maiden is known among them. Even most of the Oraon deities are believed to have at least a consort and the Oraon celebrate the marriage ceremony for their water tank and fruit trees as well.

Adult marriage is the rule in the community. The young men and women were allowed free sex in the past. They could choose their spouse by themselves and their choice was communicated to the elders or parents through their friends or relatives. Boys used to get married at least after eighteen or nineteen years of age and girls not before the age of fifteen years. However, there is restriction on having a sexual relationship in the same *gotra* (totemic clan), but it is not condemned and the punishment for this was to organise a feast for the community or sacrifice a white cock to Dharmesh, the Supreme God. In Oraon tribe it is believed that when the rice with turmeric powder is thrown on the newly wedded couple, their premarital sins get expiated. Widow marriage also prevails in the community.

In practise now-a-days Oraon people consider three generations bar to the marriage between the members of different gotras. In addition to this, the children of two brothers or two sisters cannot marry each other. It is also followed among the Oraon that even though fathers are different but mother is the same, and children sucked milk from the same breasts, so they can not marry each other if they belong to opposite sex. Similarly, the marriage between two families is barred if there is ceremonial friendship between the elders of the house. However, after permanent migration of one of the families the restriction is relaxed. Village endogamy is rather infrequent among them. The Oraon do not marry their eldest child to the eldest child of another man. For breaking any rule related to forbidden marriage, punishment is decided by the panch. In the case of marriage between an Oraon and a non-Oraon, the punishment given to the Oraon offender is excommunication from the Oraon tribe until the non-Oraon partner gives up. Although monogamy rule prevails among Oraon, in case of no child from the first wife, a man can have a second wife. Ghardamad (a male who lives in his in-law's house) tradition also prevails, but the damad does not enjoy right on bhuinhari land (land that belongs to bhuinhar as he is not from the lineage).

Marriage in Oraon tradition is full of rites and rituals, and involves the kinsmen and gifts for them at various occasions, especially for women participants in the ceremony.

Marriage is a very long drawn out procedure. Every ceremony involves rituals where they seek blessings of the spirits, especially the ancestor spirits. Huge feasts for community people or close relatives are organised on many occasions at both bride and bridegroom houses. Roy explained each ritual with minute details starting from approaching the *agua* (go-between) of the boy's family to the girl family after the Karam festival in the month of *Bhado* (August-September).

There are various rituals involved in marriage, such as observing the omens, making offerings to deities and spirits as per the customs of different ceremonies, involvement of pahan and gorait and other community members, deciding on the marriage date and fixing the bride price before the actual wedding ceremony. The articles involved in marriage are generally the easily available ones made up of paddy straw, earthen pots, buckets, and some grains. The Oraon observe many omens during *khed-norhna* (feet washing ceremony), especially watching the light of the earthen lamp during dinner. If the lamp goes out, the negotiation is immediately broken off as it is considered the sign of death of any partner. Apart from this, during the dinner when the boy's relatives stay at the girl's house if some earthen vessels get broken, a branch or tree falls down without any high wind inside the premises of the girl's house, or an oil-pot gets overturned then negotiation is called off considering these events as bad omens. At the end of the *lagan bandhi* (fixation of date for the marriage) ceremony, panch from both the sides sit together to finalise the customary bride price and the number of clothes to be given to the bride's people. In the early 20th century the bride price was different in each *parha* (a confederacy of several Oraon villages; the whole tribe is divided into 40 parhas) which varied from Rs.7/- or Rs.9/- to Rs.25/-. If high bride price is demanded then the boy's side negotiate it by citing the examples of those brides who go with a lower bride price. Panch has no right to intervene in matters of clothes demanded from the girl's side and generally boy's people meet the demands.

7.1.2.3 Death Ceremonies

The ceremonies related to the death in Oraon community depend upon the season of the year when death occurs. If a person dies in between the sprouting of the new paddy seedlings and its harvest, i.e. in between June and November, the dead body is temporarily buried in the *masan* and then before the *harbora* ceremony it is taken out and cremated permanently. Apart from this if a person dies before the setting of the monsoon rains his or her corpse is cremated only once.

During death rituals the community support the aggrieved family in the form of gifting paddy grains and pots of rice beer, accompanying them to masan with wooden sticks, carrying the corpse and contributing towards community feast. *Mahto* (secular head of the village) and pahan receive honorarium from the bereaved family for performing different rituals and making offerings to the deities and spirits. There is only one case when Oraon mutilates the corpse. The case is the death of either a pregnant woman or during child birth. All the ceremony performed in this case is to scare away the *churail* (the spirit of the women who died during pregnancy or child birth) to return to her village. The corpse is not burnt in this case and is buried face downwards outside the village after sewing the eyes with thorns, pinning thorns into palms and soles, and breaking the hands and legs. When this corpse is carried away from the house mustard seeds are scattered all the way by a *mati* (spirit doctor) with incantations. They have a belief that marriage is an auspicious occasion and death an inauspicious occasion. So a reversal of order is followed. In weddings they

use right hand and *arua* (raw) rice while in funerals the left hand and *usna rice* (rice from boiled paddy) are used.

7.1.2.4 Religious Feasts and Festivals

Rites, rituals, and festivals not only ensure individual and village safety and prosperity, but also social solidarity. Prosperity relates to their economic pursuits like food-gathering, hunting, cattle tending, and agriculture for which they appease and worship supernatural beings. Fishing is not among the main economic activities of the Oraon community but it is a sacred ceremony during the sarhul festival.

Originally, the sarhul or khaddi was a food gathering festival and later has been modified with other rites connected with changing economic pursuits of the Oraon from food-gathers to hunters and then to a settled agriculturist over the course of time. There are two important food-gathering festivals, one is sarhul and the other one is phagu; the latter has been borrowed long ago from their neighbouring Hindu community. The Phagu festival is celebrated in the month of *Phagun* (February–March), which is not just the end month of a year, but also marks the beginning of New Year. In this festival Hindu land lords of the village also distribute snacks. The significance of Phagu to Oraon people is related to Phagu *Sendra,* the spring hunt. During the period from the first moon appearance in the month of Phagun till the night of the next full moon day, Dhangar Pahan (unmarried pahan) goes naked to ceremonially bathe Chandi (the deity of hunt) with a jug of water or goat's milk. To keep the spirit quiet for the next year, the fowl is sacrificed after Loddo-Sendra[5], the ceremonial hunting performed by young Oraons. It is customary to collect the dried corolla of the *mahua* flower only after the Phagu-Sendra. In some villages the edible herbs, flowers, and leaves are gathered after sarhul celebration and offered to Chala-Pachcho, the deity at Sarna first, before consumption.

In the month of *Chait* (March–April), when the varieties of trees blossom and edible leaves and tubers start sprouting, sarhul is celebrated. The Sarna and sal flowers are the essential element of this festival. This festival is also known as Khaddi, Khekel-benja, or the marriage of the mother earth. The day of the celebration differs from village to village. When elders notice the blossom in the trees of sal, the panch decide the day and the villagers are informed one or two weeks before about the celebration day through pahan or pujar (pahan's assistant).

The festival rites and rituals involve participation of each household. From the day of announcement pahan, his wife, and pujar and his wife go to each family of the village to collect one *paila* (a wooden pot used to measure around one pound) of either marua (*Eleusine ooracana*) or paddy in the name of Chilgi-maiya (name of a spirit). Pahan, pujar, and mahato, with their wives, also participate in different rituals and offerings. Collected grains are sold and the money is used to pay the price of earthenware, knife, *karchhul* (ladle), and *bainthi*[6] needed for the festival. It is also utilised to pay the gorait for playing instruments during celebration and in purchasing ingredients for preparing home-brewed rice beer at *pahan's* house. People also donate rice to *pahan* during the three-day celebration of sarhul festival.

Hunting is no longer the primary livelihood of the Oraon tribe. It is organised during the festival to perform magic associated with the belief of obtaining a good harvest of rice. There are three major hunting festivals of Oraon; first is the Phagu Sendra or spring hunting, second is the Bisu-Sikar or summer hunting, and the third one is called the Jeth-Sikar

or rainy-season hunting. Like every other festival, hunting festivals are also followed by *jatra*. A large gathering at Jeth-jatra (jatra in the month of Jeth or May–June) is considered a sign of abundant harvest in the coming season. These jatras, parha flags, etc. are symbols of their social bonds.

The festival connected with cattle is the sohorai, which is long borrowed by the Oraon from the *ahir* caste; ahir also have borrowed the Oraon custom of jatra and perform a reunion dance at the end of the festival. The sohorai festival is celebrated in the evening of the new moon day of the *Kartik* (October–November) month. At the end of the ceremonial function of this festival the appointed ahir present rice beer as a tribute to the villagers which he receives from some Oraon families. This is a ceremonial part; otherwise they enjoy the privileges of free brewing.

In the month of *Asarh* (June-July), the principal agricultural festival *hariari* is celebrated when paddy, marua *(Eleusine ooracana),* and gondli *(Panicum miliare)* start germinating and the whole area looks like a green carpet. Only after celebrating the common hariari festival an Oraon can do the transplantation in his fields and also perform the private hariari ritual by offering sacrifices to the ancestors and khunt spirit. The date of the common hariari ritual is decided by village elders and announced through gorait. Like other festivals, women are not allowed to have sacrificial meat except unmarried girls, if meat is brought home. This is followed by kadlota, an agricultural festival, when rice-plants start bearing paddy grains; and marua *(Eleusine ooracana),* gora *(Panicum miliare)* are about to be harvested. The aim of the festival is to ward off the evil eye and evil attention of spirits on crops standing in the fields. On the next day of *Kadlota,* the *Karam* is celebrated. The *Karam* is the festival of women and specially of the maidens. But married daughters also come to their parent's house to celebrate this festival. Many maidens in the preceding nine days of the festival keep sprinkling water on the barley seeds for germination in their dormitories and avoid having any flesh, fish or crab, during this period. This is the principal Karam festival and other forms of Karam festival are also celebrated at different Oraon villages. Some of them are Dasai Karam celebrated on the full moon day of Dushara, a Hindu festival; Sohorai Karam in connection with sohorai festival, and Jitia Karam during jitia festival. The Oraon also celebrate Burhi Karam once in three years or in case of drought or pandemic. Old women take part in it. Burhi Karam is celebrated like the main Karam festival with the exception that no telling of stories by pahan or any elder in order to omit the epidemic disease takes place.

The jitia[7] festival, a festival of mothers, although borrowed from the Hindu community, is celebrated after 12 days of Karam festival. It is not regarded as a common festival; rather women celebrate it in groups at someone's house or in a courtyard area in turns. However, in many villages, in this festival rice gruel is offered to the ancestor spirits of the family in the individual houses separately. In this festival only a Brahman priest is called to perform the ritual and tell the jitia story at night.

The *dhanbuni puja,* the local name for the sowing festival, is celebrated in a few Oraon villages along with the *bangari* (marriage ceremony of paddy seedlings), the marriage of the paddy seedlings at the time of transplantation. The festival for eating the new rice, *Nawa Khani* is one of the important festivals celebrated only among the Oraon without inclusion of any other villagers. The festival is marked with chiura (flattened rice) making by pahan or pujari's wife at home with the upland rice collected by their husband from the neighbouring village. This is shared with all the prominent Oraon elders of the villages along with rice

beer and after that individual household celebrates this festival by making chiura at their own home and sharing it with rice beer with Oraon friends, neighbours and relatives (Roy & Haddon 1915). The last agricultural festival is the *kharapuja* or *kharihani* (threshing floor) *puja,* celebrated in the month of Aghan (November–December) as the festival of the threshing floor. An Oraon prepares their own threshing floor only after pahan has prepared his own threshing floor and the community khara puja is performed in the village. After pahan, bhuinhar family of the village and then each khunt perform the kharapuja at own khunt's threshing floor by sacrificing fowls to khunt spirits. The threshing floor is prepared by cleaning some tanr or some waste land or rocky land with cow dung diluted water.

The danda-katta ceremony is an important part of Oraon rites and rituals in almost every occasion like birth, marriage, and death of an individual; it is performed during each festival and community feasts as well. Secondly *karsa-dance*[8] which is a symbol of prosperity, happiness, and social solidarity is performed in festivals and also at individual's critical life events. For the periodic community festivals like sarhul, kadlota, khairhani, kariari, etc., as a custom, pahan provides rice and home-brewed rice beer for the sacrificial ceremonies and the feast.

7.1.3 Deities and Spirits

All spirits and deities are categorised into ten different classes of supernatural powers in Oraon religion. The supernatural world arranged in a hierarchical order by the Oraon consists of objectifying the impersonal forces of nature, personifying the supernatural entities, and, most importantly, individualising it.

The highest status of divinity is ascribed to Dharmesh[9], and the Oraon regard Him as Creator of universe, and Author, Preserver, Controller, and Punisher of all those that exist in the universe, either visible or invisible; men, gods, and spirits. Various classes of spirits are associated with different rites on the occasion of important life-cycle stages of an Oran's life and also during the festivals. For example, danda-katta (name of a ritual) is performed only for Dharmesh during festival and other occasions to ward off the evil and mischievous spirits. Many festivals are specially related to a particular class of spirits. Annual harbora (bone immersion) ceremony is very important for ancestor spirits for their inclusion into the community of the Pach-Balar (the group of ancestral spirits). In this ceremony the bones of dead in the course of the year are ceremonially drowned in the clan *kundi*[10] (burial ground). Before this ceremony, the corpse is buried either in the village masan (burial ground) or bari land (kitchen garden) attached to the deceased's house or inside an extra hut. Influence of outside culture can be noticed in the division of ancestor spirit into beneficent and maleficent categories, throwing out the bones into pool of water, and putting up the *pulkhi* (memorial stone slabs), because at some point of time in the past all departed souls (included in Pach-Balar*)* were regarded as mischievous by them. In the beneficent category they consider spirits of persons who died naturally; and in maleficent category specifically spirits of women who died during pregnancy or child-birth are included.

The spirit class consists of village deities, and spirits have special significance as they have special sacred places in the villages. Chala Pachcho or Sarna Burhia (old lady of the grove) or Jhakra Burhia[11] comes first to whom pahan offers periodical sacrifices. The first fruit of the fields is also shared with Sarna Burhia. She occupies a special compartment, called Chala-Kutti in pahan's house. Every Oraon village has a special sacred grove of sal trees (Shorea robusta) for this deity.

Many of these village spirits like Pat or Pat Raja, Darha, Darha-Deswali, Mahadania, Devi Mai, and Mahadeo[12] are related to the protection of villagers from sickness, epidemics, and other calamities. Roy has mentioned that the notion of the main spirit and minor spirits vary from village to village, and accordingly, rituals are performed. In villages having Darha-Deswali as leader spirit, a portion of upland plot, called as Darha-tonka or Darha-tanr[13], situated near the boundary of that village, is cultivated to meet the sacrificial expenses of the spirit. The rest of the land is left fallow. The Oraon believe that displeasure of Darha causes harm to men and cattle, and to pacify it expensive and elaborate sacrificial rituals are performed. However, delay in sacrifices to Pugri Bhut[14] or visit by witches is also believed to cause epidemics in the village. A dreadly spirit known as Mahadania is also a village spirit which is offered sacrifices periodically. In the past, even human sacrifices were made to this spirit in case of famine or drought.

There are also some special village spirits which are adopted by a particular village and periodical sacrifices are offered to them. Sometimes, Gairahi Bhut or Khunt Bhut or Manita Bhut (special spirit of individual family) is promoted as village spirit and the expense of offerings are derived from the Gairah Bhutaha Khet[15] of that particular family. There are some minor spirits as believed by the Oraon who reside in the woods, rivers, streams, and along four boundaries of the village, and are called Garha-dhorha-chatur-siman[16]. Occasional sacrifices are offered to them.

Chandi is the deity of hunting and war; Achrael and Joda are the special spirits related to women. The sacrifices to Chandi are done only by unmarried male members in the month of Magh. Chandi appears in different forms on special occasions of offerings, and a pahan is not afraid of her different forms.

7.1.3.1 Achrael: The Special Spirit of Oraon Women

Achrael is the special spirit for women and is not represented by any image or symbol. Her worship is done once in one generation for the well-being of all females (married, unmarried, young, and old) of the family. All married daughters of that particular family (brother's daughters, cousin's daughters, and cousin sisters of the father's side) attend this ritual along with their husbands. If any female is absent on that day, then a clod of earth is placed in the row to represent her. For unmarried daughters a clod of earth is also placed by their sides to represent their future husbands. The following morning all married women return to their houses. In some villages Achrael has a companion spirit called Joda and she is worshipped the following day for the well-being and happiness of the female members of the house.

7.1.3.2 Spirits Associated with Natural Objects and Community Symbols

Certain totem symbols, village flags, village emblems, some particular natural objects like tree, tank, well, etc., certain musical instruments, and weapons are also treated as spirits in Oraon religion. In the past, few Oraon clan totem emblems received the honour of being the clan symbol of the bhuinhar of that particular village. For example, the *ekka* (tortoise) clan possesses wooden image of a tortoise; similarly, a village with original bhuinhars belonging to the *lakra* clan possess a wooden image of tiger. However, in recent years it changed to arbitrarily adopted emblems or the totems of the first Oraon settler of the village. It can be said that at a certain period in the past, Oraon religion was intimately associated with

totemism, but now-a-days there is no evidence of religious observation of totemism apart from following the taboos attached with the clan totem.

Every village has a special pattern on its *bairakh* (flag) which is exclusively carried and unfurled at jatras[17] by them. Whenever a fight occurs between two villages at any gathering or hunt, the Oraon believe that their bairakhs encourage them with a special sound and because of that village flags receive special offerings in a jatra meet. The wooden post near jatra ground, known as jatra khunta (the wooden post of religious significance in jatra place) also receives sacrifice of a fowl as a prayer to pass off jatra peacefully with no quarrels and fights. Sometimes, a strong bamboo stump with good shape is carried along with a jatra flag to bring luck; it is treated as sacred in some Oraon villages because they believe that it is possessed by a strong 'soul'.

Phallic and other sex emblems also have their place in Oraon religion; an emblem of female organ was seen in few Oraon *dhumkurias* (village dormitories or cultural centres). Although no religious or magical ceremonies are performed for these emblems, Oraon bachelors anoint their mandar-salas (pyramid shaped mounds of earth on some upland outside the village) with *potni-mati* (whitish clay) and perform ceremonial rites for Chandi spirit for her blessings of more male members in the tribe. There is another sacred emblem connected with dhumkurias, the Bull-Roarers, a wooden structure which first produces a low humming sound but soon rises to a muffled windy roaring noise. These structures are kept carefully at dhumkurias as a part of their ancient paraphernalia. It is believed that this sound scares away spirits which want to take part in their celebration and dance by possessing a person. Traditional Oraon ceremonially anoint every new purchased sword, shield, and musical instrument. Some even put turmeric water on new clothes before wearing them and this process is known as 'marriage' for that particular object. Especially for musical instruments, before using it in any ceremonial function, three vermilion marks are put on them by the women of the house on the belief that instruments produce good sound. Similar marriage ceremony is also observed before using a newly dug well or tank, taking fruit from a fruit garden, and transplanting paddy seedlings into rice-fields.

There are some trees considered sacred in Oraon religion which are not cut for use in making doors or as fuel-wood. Karam (*Nauclea parvifolia*) and Jitia Pipar (*Ficus religiosa*) trees are worshipped like neighbouring Hindu castes during Karam[18] and Jitia festivals. Similarly, as *neem* (*Azadirachta indica*) wood are used in the *rath* (car) of Lord Jagannath, the tree is considered sacred though car festival is not their tradition. However, these taboos against trees are neglected by many due to economic stress. Sometimes, old trees of mahua *(bassia latifolia)* or mango are believed to be possessed by some spirits and they are also treated sacred by Oraon people. Bark, leaves, small branches, and accumulated water in tree trunks are used to cure diseases. In some Oraon villages cairn stones, known as Pathal Punji or Kudha Pakhna[19], are seen along with pulkhi stones dedicated to ancestor spirits. These are built on the spots which are connected with some supernatural physical strength achieved by some Oraon people or where a tiger bites a person to death. Every passer-by puts a stone, twig, or dry leaf on these pebbles in order to suppress the spirit so that it cannot harm the passers-by. After a long time, the stack of these pebbles looks like the remains of human beings or their weapon and is regarded as sacred by Oraon. Sometimes, these stone objects are really the remains of some ancient Hindu temples and images of Hindu Gods. These are anointed with oil and vermillion occasionally.

The spirits of persons who met unnatural deaths (like women who died during child birth, a person who died due to starvation or by tiger) and certain water spirits known as Sat Bahini (seven sisters) along with stray disease causing spirits are called Bhulas (tramp spirits). These spirits are not entitled to religious rituals; but magical rites and exorcism are performed. The Oraon people believe that earth is full of spirits as the trees are full of leaves. So, they try to enter into a friendly relationship with disease causing spirits. In case an important spirit is offended and brings some disease, the sorcerer performs the magic to expel them.

Next comes the class of *pugri bhuts* and *dain kuri* (a female spirit) which are secretly adopted by some individuals for selfish and anti-social purposes. A pugri bhut is adopted by a wizard or dain kuri bhut by a witch. If a mati (spirit doctor or sorcerer) reveals the name of the bhut in case of frequent disease in a family or area then the village panch compel that particular person to provide *asthan,* a fixed seat, by planting a wooden peg. In case of more than one pugri bhut, incisions are marked on the wooden peg corresponding to each one.

The last one, i.e. the tenth class of spirit consists of the mysterious occult energies including the evil eye, evil mouth, evil influence, evil touch, and evil sound. Some plants and objects are believed to have some mysterious energies or *manna*. There is also a belief that an iron exposed during sun-eclipse, if worn, then lighting strokes and certain other calamities are averted.

7.1.4 Oraon's Standard of Morality and Belief in a Supreme Deity

Among the Oraon, Dharmesh, the Supreme God is believed to be the guardian of morality and punishes with sickness, death, or other calamity for any violation. The Oraon's standard of morality is determined by their customs and tradition. The elders of each Oraon village and parha are the recognised custodians of their customs and traditions. According to the customary tribal code of morality, quarrelling with fellow tribes, seducing other's wives, not paying one's debts, etc. are offenses and violators are punished by Dharmesh. These customs also prescribe the expiation of certain offenses against social laws, e.g. the sacrificing of a white cock or white goat to Dharmesh. This code of morality has been highly influenced by contact with other cultures and standard of living practices, especially by the new generation. However, anti-social practices like causing harm to others with the help of maleficent magic or witchcraft is punished by expulsion from the community. A few years back the offender had to pay with his/her life for these crimes. The Oraon believe that people get punishment for their misdeeds in this life only, not in the after-life. However, in some cases they also believe that a son has to pay for the sins committed by his parents.

7.2 Present Scenario

The rituals and festivities of the Oraon are in response to seasonal variations. It suggests their philosophy of maintaining harmony with the nature, securing good will of the benevolent spirits, and avoiding displeasure of the malevolent spirits (Debnath 2003). Most of the Oraon festivals relate to their economic pursuits(Xalxo 2007). On this basis, they are categorised as food-gathering festivals, hunting festivals, festivals connected with cattle, and agricultural festivals (Roy 1928:190). In a different way they are also categorised as

hunting, forest, agricultural, cattle and socio-religious gathering festivals (*see* Xalxo 2007). However, with the changes in the economic life of the Oraon, the practices and rituals of festivals are modified and recent studies show that the traditional functional categorisation of festivals consciously or unconsciously has changed into the family, clan, and community level festivals among the Oraon, specially living in urban areas (Biswas 2017). It has been noted that Oraon who migrated to an urban area and have different occupations have started celebrating the festivals in their respective families only. But if their clan and community people live in nearby areas they celebrate it as a group festival. The trend has been observed in the Kanke block headquarters of Ranchi district as well as in the Sisai block headquarters of Gumla district. The role of the institution of pahan is more popular and functional in rural areas of Ormanjhi block of Ranchi district and Basia block of Gumla district. However, the people of these areas who have migrated to various cities for livelihood and do not have access to pahan and other Oraon people nearby, celebrate rituals by themselves at their homes.

Presently, the Oraon are far ahead of other neighbouring communities in social, economic, political, religious, and educational spheres of life (Barla 2019). The educational development specially has modified the beliefs of Oraon in deities and spirits. Many of them with higher education stop believing in those spirits who are considered as malevolent for them. The belief in churail, bhut, and witch practices is less common in urban areas, but some incidents of performing rites and rituals to get rid of these malevolent spirits or to pacify them are still prevalent in rural areas. The cases of human sacrifices are no more observed. Offering pig and eating it during festivals are no more practised among the Oraon living in urban areas, while in some villages the practice has traditional fervour. However, the rituals related with rice beer are still in practice among all Oraons. Several taboos have been dropped due to rising awareness. Their access to education, awareness about their rights, duties, and constitutional provisions, along with measures and policy keep them moving forward in all areas of life (Xaxa 2005). However, they are still concerned with the environment and show their obligation towards it; respecting totems related to birds, trees, flowers, fish, and animals is one of the practices having link with environmental conservation (Xaxa 1992). During the field observation it has been noted that all the Oraons, whether Christian converts, Sarna followers, followers of Bhakti cult, or Hinduised ones, have retained their totem name which shows that with all these years 'clan' is the most stable identity among them. Followers of Sarna conduct traditional marriage rituals as identity markers. It has been found that convert Oraons also follow traditional marriage rituals to a certain extent at home and then go for a 'church wedding' (Arati 2021). The converts still try to follow exogamy and tribe endogamy, but if they do not get the proper match, they take spouse from other communities also. A non-convert Oraon with higher education now prefers a spouse of his choice, but marriage follows traditional norms. However, the community feast organised at different stages of traditional marriage got modified into 'reception parties.' It is to be mentioned that land law and property law affect the partner choice among Oraon people. For example, if an Oraon marries outside the community he is deprived of his father's property. Roles of parha and panch are visible on various occasions like marriage, festival celebration, and in maintaining the morality standard.

At present educated Oraon people shift largely to non-agricultural occupations. Many of them even migrate owing to poor agricultural production also. These variations in livelihood sources impacted the festival practices among the Oraon. Their festivals can be

categorised as 'ideal type', which are the traditional ones and the 'modern type', which are influenced and borrowed from the Hindu community (Biswas 2017). It has also been noted that traditional festivals, especially the sarhul is now celebrated in different modes with many modified practices in both urban as well as rural areas. It is celebrated on a very large scale unlike in the old times where it was celebrated within the village only. At present, specially in urban areas, the celebration of sarhul involves the large gathering of Oraon people from all over the district in the form of *jhanki*. This jhanki is also used as a platform to show the tribal culture as identity marker in front of other communities. Now-a-days, a good coverage from media has been also seen; many political leaders belonging to different communities join this celebration. This large scale of events converted *sarhul* from a community level festival to a festival of inter-community dimension in the festival map of Jharkhand. Christian converts also take part in these celebrations as a symbol of maintaining their tribal identity. However, the current celebration of *sarhul* in urban areas involves political leaders belonging to different communities. The scale of events organised during this celebration is the sign of beginning of tribal festivals accompanied by dance and music of Oraon community. The articles used in various festivals are now available in market as a commodity and the practice of making them in community is decreasing day by day. Similarly, the way of contribution during the festival celebration is modified from providing kind to cash, often the amount being decided by the panch. The recognition of festivals and their importance by the government and employer organisation also impact the mode of celebration. Institutions working in an area, where the festival is celebrated, declare a holiday and facilitate their Oraon employees to celebrate it with family members. It has been seen that time constraints have impacted participation. At the same time festivals like Karam, Jitia, and Sohrai which have the involvement of other communities have become more popular among the Oraon, particularly those living in urban areas.

The improved facility related to health, awareness regarding nutrition, and disease control impact birth practices and rituals. Delivery in hospitals and access to health facilities in urban areas have reduced incidents of rituals related with protection from evil eyes and spirits. The birth rituals related to birth of a child and community involvement have been modified due to the influence of the Hindu community. It has been observed that the transportation facility and advancement in technology have expanded the sphere of interaction and participation from neighbouring communities. Several taboos relating to child birth have been relaxed or abolished.

7.3 Comparative Dynamics

S.C. Roy in his book talked about the traditional religious beliefs and practices along with changes happening to these beliefs and practices due to the Christian movement, and other revival movements like Tana Bhagat movement and influence of the neighbouring Hindu community. The book is based on the data collected during or before 1928; therefore, changes due to government policies and programmes have not been mentioned therein.

Influence of Hinduism is evident from the address of Oraon deities in Hindu names, such as Bhagwan designation to Dharmesh. Hindu goddesses like Parvati (in a version spouse of Dharmesh) and Sita are found mention in their religious worldview. Sometimes, the Sun is also considered a visible symbol of Dharmesh (Roy 1928:20). However, it has been

seen during the field visit that many people greet each other with words like *Jai Dharmesh,* which is again in the line of Hindu way of greetings, like *Radhe–Radhe, Jai Shrinath,* etc. are greetings found among members of different Hindu cults.

The influence of Hindu culture on some village deities, especially *Devi Mai* and *Mahadeo* has also been seen in the form of construction of shrines for them at the entrance of village; and rituals like the shaving of a child's head, offering of milk and *Trishul* (trident) for these deities are found in few villages having mixed Hindu and Oraon population (Roy 1928). This influence has extended in different ways to the *Sarna sthal* (Sarana place), *akhra* (meeting ground for different purposes), and *masan* (burial ground) which have now boundaries and decorated entrance gates.

Some families pay service charges to pahan while offering sacrifices to household deities. The sacrificial offerings to household deities are observed with the practice of fasting by the family members during sohrai festival, *Goensali Nad Puja, Surjahi Puja,* and *Chigri Nad Puja* (Roy 1928). The role of pahan has changed over the period of time. At many places pahan also has different livelihood sources apart from ritual remuneration. It has been seen that the Oraon people who migrated to nearby areas often call their village pahan for offering sacrifices to spirits and performing danda-katta ceremony in case of child birth. Due to delivery in hospitals the service of traditional midwives is not required in urban areas; however they receive remuneration during the feasts organised for childbirth which is again the influence of other communities on the Oraon people. In village areas, midwives still have a role in cleaning the houses and giving massage to the new mother. The remuneration process of midwives, gorait, ahir, and many other service castes like barber and potter has changed with time. They are now remunerated depending on the nature of service and the place where service is rendered. The ceremonies and rites have also changed. Roy (1928:134) has mentioned that the ritual of 'tying the hair for the first time' has been discontinued for a long time. It has been reported that Hindu morality against premarital sexual laxity has influenced their attitude toward premarital sexual freedom. Moreover, feminist ideology among educated women also denounces such attitudes. The institution dhumkuria no longer exists as a centre of culture due to school education. This has been replaced by community halls constructed from a government fund for social gathering, community festivals, and organisation of other programmes. The Oraon children are now enrolled at different types of schools for education, but a list of young people belonging to particular age groups is maintained in the dhumkuria register separately for boys and girls. With the decline in this institution associated rituals are not performed. This institution also does not exist in urban centres. However, the Oraon people still select the bachelor pahan following traditional norms. It has been seen that Oraon people who migrated one or two generations ago hardly participate during the community selection process of the pahan.

Several taboos relating to marriage and widow status have been given up. The taboo of a widow touching anything during the marriage ceremony, the ritual of tying the bride's hair in knots, prohibition of taking cooked food from the hands of a non-Oraon person, etc. are no longer observed.

Earlier, a person from the village in which sarhul is not celebrated could not touch the well, spring, or enter the house and touch any food or drink in the village where it is celebrated. Even a visiting daughter or relatives from such a village are accommodated outside of the house and while serving food and water nobody could touch them. It is the custom

that daughters visiting parental house for the offerings to the Achrael spirit had to return the same day. However, all of these taboos do not exist in urban areas. Even in villages with high literacy these taboos are seldom practised.

The Oraon of *Tana Bhagat* sect do not believe in bhut and celebrate the festivals with animal sacrifices. They do not eat non-vegetarian food items. At present these followers have a respectable position in society and are recognised by the government for their way of living and contribution towards environment. During the COVID-19 pandemic it has been reported that the village of *Tana Bhagat* of Ormanjhi block of Ranchi district reported zero covid cases (Kumar 2020).

Christianity is hailed for its provision of education among the Oraon. But it has been reported by many scholars in the past that these convert Oraons have not totally given up their ritual practices of different life cycle stages and the celebration of the festivals. The church accepted many modified versions of ritual practices for achieving their religious purpose like allowing the bridegroom to put vermillion on the bride's forehead during marriage (Sahay 1968). Although the Christian Oraons celebrate many festivals, they do not take part in worship of deities and spirits. The revivalists, who demand Sarna as tribal religion, oppose the tribal status of convert Oraons and their access to the benefits of government schemes and policies as a scheduled tribe. It has been significant to note that while Jaipal Singh Munda fought for the equal rights of Christian tribals along with the policy of protective measures of reservations, Kartik Oraon unsuccessfully introduced a bill in year 1968 in the Parliament to de-schedule the Christian tribe(Yadav 2014). Sometimes, rituals are performed to accept them within traditional religion once again; and the process is termed as *gharwapasi* (Singh 2021). It has been seen that convert Oraons have started practising tribe exogamy. The same situation of accepting the spouse from other community is reported among the Oraon migrated long ago to different locations having very less Oraon population (Purkayastha 2018). As S.C. Roy (1928:408) has also mentioned, the Oraon have selectively assimilated those elements of Hindu religion and culture which are suitable as per their needs within their own religious traditions and ideas. This also stands true at present.

7.4 Conclusion

The journey of Oraon in the past 100 years has been impacted with the advancement in the educational system, independent India's tribal development, and other welfare programmes, changing the economic system and various revival movements. These forces have a great impact on the societal structure of the Oraon tribe of Jharkhand which can be easily seen by revisiting S.C. Roy's book and comparing it with the present scenario. The beliefs and rites involving deities and spirits have changed over the years depending upon the literacy level of the area. Migration and non-agricultural occupation have been a crucial factor of changes in religious worldview. The type of involvement of community leaders or representatives like pahan, mahto, panch, and parah raja (the hereditary post of the head of a particular parha) has changed and been affected by government programmes. Especially in urban areas the ways of celebrating ritual and festivals, and maintaining community bonding have been modified according to the available resources and the financial status of the family.

With the revival movements like *Tana Bhagat* movement, influence of neighbouring Hindu community, and conversion to Christianity, the Oraon tribe has been divided along

religious lines. Nevertheless, they maintain their clan identity through their surnames based on totems.

Notes

1 The hereditary office of village priest belonging to a particular family/clan.
2 The descendants of the original founder or founders of an Oraon village.
3 A person belonging to a special group who plays music during festivals and ceremonies.
4 Malar is a different tribal community.
5 The ceremonial hunting expedition performed by young Oraon on the following morning of Phagua festival.
6 Long curved iron blade fitted into a wooden foothold for cutting purpose.
7 Jitia, known as *Pua Jiuntia* in Western Odisha and *Dwitibhana puja* in other parts of Odisha is a ritual performed by mothers for the long life of their sons. This is also a popular ritual in Bengal and Jharkhand. Oraon families, particularly living with Hindus perform it 12 days after Karma *puja* which corresponds to the eighth day of dark fortnight in the month of Aswin (September–October), the day Hindus perform it.
8 A type of dance performed by Oraon women with earthen pots filled with raw rice, turmeric, tender grass, and mustard seeds known as *karsa bhanda* (*bhanda* means pot) during festivals and ceremony.
9 The supreme deity of Oraon, who is believed to be the creator of the universe, controller of other gods and spirits, is referred to the Sun.
10 The group of ancestral spirits and their living descendants are regarded as one family. The spirits are believed to live underground near the village *kundi.*
11 Different names of the deity residing in Sarna. The suffix *burhia* indicates Hindu influence.
12 Name of village spirits/deities of the Oraon.
13 The place where sacrifice is offered to *Darha* spirit.
14 The familiar spirits of an individual that receives sacrifices secretly.
15 The piece of land from which expense for the sacrifices to *Gairahi Bhut* is derived.
16 The minor village spirits residing in river/pit (*garha)*, streams (*dhorha)* and the four corners (*chatur)* of the village boundaries (*siman)* (Roy 1928:59).
17 A periodical fair or festival held for religious purpose.
18 The word Karam is used by S.C. Roy. But in recent years it is spelt as Karama/Karma.
19 Heaps of pebbles seen in the outskirts of an Oraon village.

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PART 2

State, Tribe, and Religion

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8

FROM KHAMBESWARI TO STAMBHESWARI

The Journey of a Tribal Deity into Hindu Pantheon

Pravat K. Mallick

8.0 Introduction

The dichotomy of tribal and non-tribal (Aryan/Hindu) religions virtually disappears in the religious tradition of some regions of Odisha inhabited by both tribes and non-tribes. Such a fusion has taken place from historical times, thereby giving rise to a regional typology across the communities. One of the indicators of such a typology is the belief in particular gods and goddesses by different communities in a region. The present chapter engages in the study of a deity, named by Stambheswari, popular among tribes and non-tribes equally in a vast region of Odisha. Essentially, this chapter presents tribe and non-tribe interface in historical process. This chapter is based on secondary sources and on observation of the authors for more than 30 years in different villages of the region.

Stambheswari[1], also known by the local colloquial name of Khambeswari, is one of the popular goddesses of Odisha worshipped widely in the hill tracts of southern, western, and central districts of this province. This formless autochthonous deity is worshipped by the people to ward off epidemics like cholera, small pox, chicken pox, and sometimes propitiated by offerings for a good harvest. She is worshipped as a manifestation of female energy or Sakti[2] in forms of wooden or stone posts or pillars locally known as *khamba*[3], a variant form of the Sanskrit word *stambha*. It is for her association with this khamba as the object of worship, the goddess is called Khambeswari or Stambheswari.

The cult of Stambheswari is very old; its history may be traced back to fifth century AD (Rath 2009:85)[4]. She was the tutelary deity of some of the early ruling dynasties of Odisha like the Parvata Dvarakas, the Sulkis, the Bhanjas, and also by some prominent feudatories of the Somavamsis[5]. Since then the worship of this goddess is popular in Ghumusar regions of South Odisha; Boudh and Sonepur districts of Western Odisha; and Anugul and Dhenkanal districts of Central Odisha; and its adjoining regions of Cuttack district like Baramba Narasimhapur, all of which consist mostly of hill and forest tracts indicating the tribal origin of the deity and her association with hills and forests.

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8.1 The Mother Goddess of the Tribes

In the Vedic and post-Vedic literature we come across references made to mother goddess being worshipped by tribes like the Sabara and the Pulinda. In the Mahabharata the tribal mother goddess has been referred to as Vindhyavasini (resident of Vindhya Mountain) and one fond of liquor and flesh (Bhattacharyya 1999:68). In the Mahabharata the Nishadas are described as tribals living in the Vindhya region. In the Buddhist Jatakas and Padma Purana different tribal sub-groups such as the Kirata, the Bhill, the Nahalaka, the Bhramara, the Pulinda, and others are described as the descendants of the Nisadas (Dash 1997:850). Among these above stated hunting tribes, distributed in different parts of India, the culture of mother goddess was very popular. In this context the Rudradhyaya of the Yajur Veda mentions that out of the eight tribes associated with the Nisadas, four were directly hunters, while others *taksan* (carpenter), *rathakara* (chariot makers), *kulala* (potter), and *kamara* (black smiths) who were unable to maintain themselves by hunting had to settle in the Vedic society on the basis of occupation. The working of such a social process can be seen in India even today (Bhattacharyya 1999:68).

8.2 From Tribal Deities to Village Deities

In this process the so called tribes of the past started living in the settled villages and the tribal deities maintained as before became Hinduised. Even though the local peasants/ Hindus propitiated them in fear of their power, the rites and rituals remained the same, and they were to be propitiated by the tribal priests or non-Brahmin priests. Thus, it is accepted that most of the Grama Devati[6] or village tutelary deities were originally tribal deities. Bishop Whitehead (1921) after his investigation of the village deities in South India remarked (Dash 1997: 839):

1 The village deities symbolise the village life and are related not to the great world forces, but to such simple facts as cholera, small pox, cattle disease, etc.
2 The village deities with very few exceptions are females and are almost universally worshipped with animal sacrifices.
3 The priests are not Brahmins, but are drawn from all other castes.
4 In many village shrines, a deity is simply a rough stone platform under a tree as in case of the Sarna of Kudukh/Kurukh, Zahira/Zaher of the Santals, Kudmi, etc.
5 In some villages the goddess is represented simply by a stone pillar or by a brass pot filled with water.

Among the tribes of Odisha, the tradition of Grama Devati is very popular and greatly valued. Even the local caste people living amidst tribal population worship tribal goddesses, offer sacrifices, and consider the tribal priests and deities as very powerful entities. The *Sarna Budhi* among the Oram (spelt Oraon in Jharkhand), *Jahira Era* among the Santals and Mundas, *Kalapat, Balanipata* and *Thakurani Maa* among the Bhuyans, and *Barada Devi*[7] among the Khonds[8] are some of the mother goddesses in tribal Odisha[9]. It is to be mentioned that a number of goddesses having tribal origin in Odisha at present are propitiated in the name of Hindu Goddesses. A very interesting account on the tribal origin of Grama Devati has been presented by Jagannath Dash (1997:851) with reference to Jamini Mohan Das. This worship of the malevolent spirit through the medium of shapeless stone

is an off shoot of the fetishism[10] of the aborigines. It still includes, though to a restricted extent, the sacrifice of an animal which is one of the most important characteristic features of aboriginal worship. The restriction of the priestly function to the *sudra* caste[11] is another link in the chain of circumstances which indicate the tribal origin of this form of worship. When fitted to the above theoretical analysis, Stambheswari appears to have had been originally an aboriginal goddess[12] worshipped by the tribes of the hinterland Odisha either as a village deity or the tutelary deity of some tribal chiefdom. In due course she, like many other tribal deities, got a place in the Hindu pantheon. Analysed in the light of Jamini Mohan Das's observations about tribal origin of village deities, as mentioned earlier, and Bishop Whitehead's (1921) proposition, she was and still is worshipped with animal sacrifice, and is represented by a stone or wooden pillar. The priests of Stambheswari are not Brahmins, but are drawn from all other castes and tribes; and she is worshipped to ward off epidemics like cholera and cattle disease.

In due course she, like many other tribal deities, entered into Hindu pantheon and came to be worshipped by the non-tribal (mainly Hindu) rulers who had settled amidst the aboriginal (tribal) communities (Mazumdar 1925:107 ff). Subsequently, she was transformed from a *tribal cult* to *sakti cult* of the Brahamnical Hinduism. The shift of tribal goddess to shakti cult is theorised by R. S. Sharma (1974/1958) with reference to the emergence of tantricism.

8.3 The Process of Aryanisation and Brahminisation

When the chief of the *Aryan*[13] invaders established small chiefdoms of their own, they had to count upon these sturdy forest dwellers for the defence of these newly established states. The *Aryan* kings too needed the service of these tribes for clearing of the forest tracts for expansion of agriculture (Pargiter 1922:3). Expansion of agriculture was needed for production of surplus food crops and to generate revenue for the ever increasing civil and military expenses of the state. This process contributed to the peasantisation of the hunting and food gathering tribes and inclusion of some of the tribal groups into Hindu caste and religious systems. It should be mentioned that a group of scholars who propagated Aryan invasion support Aryan mechanism of Hinduising the tribes. They argue that political subordination combined religious ascendancy not only in territories conquered, but also in surrounding areas. F. E. Pargiter is of the opinion that "the Aryans met with the religious practice and beliefs among the peoples whom they ruled over or came into lasting contact with, and have assimilated some of them thus gradually, thus modifying their own religion to a certain extent" (Pargiter 1922:3). How far the statement is authentic is a matter of debate, but the line of argument follows colonial rule and propagation of Christianity in India. This mind set is extended to tribe and non-tribe interaction. Whether Hinduisation happened in the process as argued by colonial historians or not, the tribes did not replace their traditional faith and beliefs in the way it is experienced during tribal conversion to Christianity. But the fact is that tribal deities were adopted by the Hindu kings.

By patronising the dominant autochthonous deities, the kings could consolidate and legitimatise their power in the Hindu tribal zone of the hilly hinterland of Odisha Kulke 1978a:128–129). In this process dominant tribal deities like tiger faced Goddess Vyaghra[14] Devi, pillar shaped Khambeswari underwent Aryanisation and became Hinduised (Rath 1989:12). In the semi forested areas of south and western Odisha we find Goddesses like

Karanjei, Kochilei, Dokri because of their association/place of worship under Karanja, Kochila tree, etc.

From Pargiter (1922:3) we know that the kings needed the service of the tribes to expand agriculture for revenue. To engage the services of the tribes their goddesses became the point of approach. Brahmins played a major role in helping the kings in this regard. The tradition of free grants particularly to the Brahmins in tribal areas played an important role in the process of tribe and non-tribe interaction. One crucial dimension of this interaction is Hinduisation of tribal goddesses as informed by A.K. Rath (2009:85–86) citing works of D. D. Kosambi (2016), R.S. Sharma (1965:32–39 and Ch-V & 1974), and N.N. Bhattacharyya (1999). No doubt, Khambeswari worshipped by the tribes in the form of a *khamba* or pillar entered into Brahminical pantheon under a Sanskritised Brahminical name of Stambheswari (Bhattacharyya 1997:55–59). It may be mentioned here that in the tribal community women enjoy more freedom and have more equality with their male counterparts as compared to the caste women. Hill tribes as believers in matriarchy, therefore, worshiped female energy or Sakti (Bhattacharyya 1999:58). Further, if we analyse various names of Goddess Durga as specified in Saptasati Chandi such as Sailaputri, Girija (the daughter of a hill or one born from hill) points to the tribal origin of Durga (cf. Mazumdar 1925:180) and her variant forms. Stambheswari, therefore, may be taken as the best example of a tribal goddess which underwent the process of Hinduisation in earlier time.

8.4 Kshatriyaisation of the Tribal Chieftains and Aryanisation of the Tribal Deities

Another factor that helped the Aryanisation/Hinduisation of the tribal deities was the Kshatraiyisation and Sanskritisation of the tribal chieftains and feudatories by emulating Kshatriya status. Some important ruling dynasties of Odisha are alleged to have tribal ancestry. In case of the Kadamba ruling family of Bonai, colonial administrator cum historians like Osley and Dalton observed that "there can be no doubt that the Raja of Bonai was originally nothing more than the tribal head of Bhuiyan clan" (ODG 2012:62). This hypothesis is further strengthened by the fact that Kadambavamsi rulers of Boani have accepted Kanta Kuanri[15], a ring shaped tribal goddess having abode in the Khandadhara hill and worshipped by the Paudi Bhuyans as their Ishta Devi. During Durga Puja festival this tribal deity starts her journey to the palace receiving animal sacrifice on the way and after getting her final worship in the palace returns to her original place. The Rajput origin of the Bhanja kings has also been denied by historians (Dash 1997:848). There are several historical accounts, legends, and other socio-cultural facts, on the basis of which tribal origin of some kings in Odisha cannot be ruled out and along with Kshatriyaisation of the tribal chieftain the tribal deities also became Hinduised.

Even when tribal chieftains were dislodged from their chiefdom and replaced by Kshatriya Rajas, tribal deities too came to be patronised by the so called *Suryavamsi*[16] or *Chandravamsi* rajas. Hermann Kulke (1992) has discussed in detail about the patronisation of tribal deities by the Garhjat rajas. To him, up to the early 19th century the legitimacy of suzerainty of most of the Garhjat rajas over the tribal hinterland was mainly based on their position in the culture of the tribal gods or goddesses who became the presiding deity or Rashtra devatas of their states. In this connection, the example of Bhattarik in Baramba, the ring shaped Kanta Devi of Khandadhar hill in Bonai, or Maninageswari in Ranapur may be cited. These tribal deities therefore were a direct link between these chiefs and the tribes.

The patronage of these powerful gods or goddesses helped the kings in securing the support of the tribes and ensuring the safety of their states. In this process many tribal deities came to be worshiped both by the tribal and non-tribal inhabitants. In this process many tribal deities have either become tutelary deities of the state or presiding deities of the village. The village tutelary deities named Kalapat and Bolanipat in Bonai subdivision of Sundargarh district; and Karlapat, Dokari (old lady) and Danteswari of Kalahandi district of Odisha are some of the tribal goddesses who are worshipped both by the Hindus and tribes. Similar examples are to be found in the case of the tutelary deity of the Barhiha ruling family of Borasambar Zamindary in undivided Sambalpur district. The Barhiha Zamindar belongs to the Binjhal community and the tutelary deity of this family is Vindhya Vasini (the resident of Vindhya Mountain), which points to the tribal origin of the deity. She is worshipped both by the tribal and non-tribal subjects of this erstwhile Zamindary and the people of the neighbouring areas around it. In these many ways tribal deities have been Hindisued and entered the Brahminical pantheon.

8.5 Royal Patronage and Transformation of Aboriginal Khambeswari to Stambheswari

It is against this background we have to study the transformation of Khambeswari, a tribal deity, into Stambheswari under royal patronisations. Khambheswari was perhaps the earliest tribal deity to be converted into the tutelary deity of the states. Some parts of Western and Southern Odisha in fifth and sixth centuries AD were ruled by the rulers belonging to the Parvata Dvaraka family. The very name Parvata Dvarak (mountain serving as the gateway of the king) bears evident testimony to the association of this family with the culture of the hill men or tribes. King Tushtikara who ruled over this kingdom covering tracts of the Kalahandi, Sonepur, Boud, and Ghumushar regions of Western and Southern Odisha was the first person to patronise this goddess. In his Terasingha copper plate (named after the village Terasingha from where the plate is found), Tushtikara styled himself as a "devout worshipper at the feet of the Goddess Stambheswari", while praying goddess for recovery of his ailing mother Sri Sobhini from fever. This copper plate was issued from his capital Tara Bhramaraka in favour of a Brahmin named Arya Drona Sarma (Rajguru 1950:107–110). Most probably this Brahmin Dronaswami (or Drona Sarma) was instrumental in converting the tribal goddess of pillar into a Hindu goddess under a Sanskrit name.

This capital city of Tara Bhramaraka has been identified by historians with Tala Bhramara, a village located at a distance of two miles (about 3.25 KM) from the confluence of the river Udei/Uttei with Tel in the Belkhandi region of Kalahandi district in Western Odisha (Rajguru 1950:109). This place is located at a distance of 76 KM from Bhawanipatana, the headquarters of the Kalahandi. J. D. Beglar (1882) who visited this region in 1874–1875 and 1875–1876 reported that this area full of archaeological vestiges was a prosperous region from sixth to eighth century CE. On the basis of Beglar's report in 1946 Mr. Kedaranatha Mohapatra undertook the excavation of this area on an experimental basis and the excavation unearthed a number of Sakta images like Durga, Sapta Matrikas, Hara-Parvati, or Uma-Maheswara. Most probably this Parvata Dvaraka ruling family had converted this region of Western Odisha into a place of Sakta importance and the fame of this place as Sakta centre continued unabated till the end of Somavamsi rule in tenth century AD (Sahu et al. 1979:77).

8.5.1 Stambeswari Under the Sulki Ruling Family

From eighth century to tenth century AD, the coastal region of Odisha was ruled by the rulers of the Bhaumakara family, while Western Odisha and South Odisha were respectively under the rule of the Somavamsis and early Eastern Gangas. In between these kingdoms there sprang up some semi-independent principalities known as Mandala states. The rulers of these Mandala states owed allegiance to the Bhaumakaras of Tosali and assumed feudatory titles like Ranaka. But to all intents and purposes they were independent rulers, had their own army, and even issued charters without referring to the names of their overlord (Sahu et al. 1979:125).

The Sulki dynasty was one of these families ruling over a Mandala state named Kodalaka Mandala as one of the feudatories of the Bhaumakaras. This Kodalaka Mandala corresponds to the present Dhenkanal-Angul-Talcher region which was then a tribal belt earlier ruled by a tribal chief named Dhekata who is identified by Pandit Binayak Mishra as Dhenka Savara (1933:32), after whom the kingdom later on was named as Dhenkanal (GoD 1972:51 and 427–428). Sulki King Kalastambha defeated this tribal chief and established his rule over this region. Stambheswari most probably was the tutelary deity of the tribals and the Sulkis accepted her as their family deity after establishing their rule over this region. The association of this ruling family with goddess Stambheswari is attested by the fact that the rulers of this family like Kanchanastambha, Kalahstambha (or Kulastambha), Ranasthambha, Jayastambha, and Kulastambha used *stambha* as a component part of their names in their inscriptions (Shastri 1916:395–428). The Sulkis owed their kingship over the region to the grace of goddess Stambheswari. Thus, in the Dhenkanal grant of Kulastambha we come across the epithet *Stambheswari varakalabdha prasada*[17] (Rath 2009:86). We find the same phrase with minor alternation in other plates of Ranastambha Deva like *Stambheswari datta vara prasadat*[18] (Mazumdar 1925:106) or *Stambheswari labdha vara prasadesu*[19] (Chakravorty 1895:125) in Puri plate, for the plates were secured from Raghava Dasa Math in the town of Puri (Chakravorty 1895:123), and *Stambheswari datta vara prasadat* in another plate of the same ruler (Shastri 1918:169). Further, in the Dhenkanal grant of Ranastarabha goddess Stambheswari has been taken as the witness (*sakshni*) of the grant with a view to legalise it. The use of the deity's name in the charter as witness explains the explicit faith of the king and people on this goddess.

We may draw two conclusions from the association of the Sulkis with Stambheswari as prime patron. If Kalahastambha (or Kulastambah) as known from Dhenkanal plate defeated the aboriginal chief Dhekata and established his rule over undivided Dhenkanal district, then he, with a view to enlist the support of the tribes must have accepted this tribal deity as the state deity by patronising it.

Secondly, if the Sulkis as described in Brihat Samhita of Varahamihira and Markandeya Purana, were the member of the Saulika tribe living between Kalingas and Chedis of Dakhina Koshala then they in due course of time had entered into Kshatriya fold and accepted and royally patronised Stambheswari, the dominant autochthonous goddess of their own region as their tutelary deity (Kulke 1978a:130).

8.5.1.1 *From Stambheswari to Durga*

The rulers of Sulki dynasty as a mark of their unflinching devotion for this deity, as has been mentioned, used 'Stambha' as a suffix to their name like Kanchanastambha, Kalahastambha,

Kulastambha, Ranatambha, Jayastambha, etc. In a similar manner, to upgrade this autochthonous tribal deity as a prominent Hindu Goddess, Kulastambha alias Ranastambha in his Dhenkanal grant used Bhagavati and Bhattarika, variant names of Goddess Durga, respectively as a prefix and suffix to the name Stambheswari (for example Stambheswari Bhattarika and Bhattariak Stambheswari Bhagavati (Shastri 1916:399 and 404)). Thus, tribal deity Khambeswari under the patronage of the Sulkis became Bhagavati. The first known historical ruler of this family Kanchanastambha or Kanaka Stambha built the Kanakeswara Shiva temple at Kuanlo often identified as the capital of the Kodalaka Mandala located on the bank of river Brahamni, then known as Sankha Jyoti (Sahu 1988:120). To the east of this Kanakeswara temple we see a ten armed image of goddess Durga, locally known as Kanak Durga. Thus, Stambheswari, the Kula Devi (family/clan deity) of the Sulkis appear to have been converted to Bhagavati, Bhattarika, and Durga in later time.

8.5.2 Stambheswari Under the Patronage of the Bhanjas

When Kodalaka Mandala was ruled by the Sulkis; the region of Baud, Sonepur, and Phulbani on the other side of Mahanadi, organised into another semi-independent principality called Khinjali Mandala, was ruled by the Bhanjas, another feudatory of the Bhaumakaras from their capital at Dhritipura. The third ruler of this family named Rana Banja though described as a devout worshipper of Lord Shiva, had equal respect for Stambheswari (Mazumdar 1916: 167 and 169). In his Tapsikera copper plate grant, he considers himself as a boon of Stambheswari (*Samanta vandita Stambheswari labdha vara*). Both the Bhanjas and Sulkis ruling on either sides of Mahanadi had common identity as the feudatories of the Bhaumakaras. This cordial relation between two feudatory families had bearing on the Bhanjas, having their devotion for the tutelary deity of their neighbouring Mandala state. Vijaya Devi, the queen of Rana Bhanja also identifies herself as a Sakta (Parama Maheswari i.e. devout worshipper of Mahaeswari i.e. Durga or Parvati). This indicates that the Bhanjas had accepted Stambheswari as a Skata goddess and started patronising her.

After being defeated by Janmejaya, the Somavamsi king of Koshala, the Bhanjas were expelled from Baud-Phulbani region and fled away to Ghumusar region of the Ganjam district and established a new kingdom which included the regions of the present Nayagarh district and Ghumusar region of Ganjam with their capital at Vanjulvaka.

After occupying Bauda Sonepur region, the Somavansis too appear to have come in contact with this cult. This is evident from the Kamalpur copper plate grant of Ranaka Jayarnnama, a feudatory of the Somavansi king Karna Dev (1090–1118 AD). In this plate, the same sentence of the Bhanja record *Sri Khambeswari vara labdha prasad* is repeated (cited in Rath 2009:87).

Ghumushar being a table land inhabited by tribes like the Kandhas, the Savaras, and the Koyas, Stambheswari worship gained popularity among these people who had the tradition of pillar worship like the Sulkis. Some of the officers of this new Bhanja ruling family used *stambha* as suffix to their name. This is attested to by the name of Shri Stambha the Sandhivigrahi (minister of war and peace) of Vidyadhara Bhanja who drafted the texts of the Odisha Museum plate in the year 933 AD (I.O. 1974: 135 and 141; *see also* Sahu 1988:112–113).

Later on another branch of this family ruled from Kullada Kataka in the Bhanjanagar region of the Ganajam till its occupation by the English East India Company in the year 1835. The rulers of this Bhanja family too patronised Khambeswari and regarded her as the protect-

ing deity of the Southern gate of the Ghumsar kingdom. One of its powerful rulers Pratapa Dhananjaya Bhanja renovated the Khambeswari temple at Aska to commemorate his victory over the Raja of Dharakote in 1647 (Sahu et al. 1979:331). In this temple, Khambeswari is worshipped both in the form of pillar and image while in the sanctum sanctorum the goddess is worshipped in the form of image; she is worshipped at the entrance in the form of a pillar. The same pillar is also used as *Yupa Kashtha* or sacrificial post. The main image is a stone pillar which has been anthropomorphised by an addition of a disk as head. She has a slightly carved nose and mouth, while her three eyes and the protruding tongue are made of gold. There is a thick layer of vermillion pasted on her face from time to time (Rath 2009:88). She has been adorned with a gorgeous silken cloth to give an impression of a real Hindu image but the form of pillar is still evident in spite of the dress (Eschmann 1978: 93). These changes have intentionally been introduced to project Stambheswari as a Sakta goddess either as Durga or Kali. According to S.N. Rajguru (1950:110), the goddess Khambeswari worshipped at Aska was included in the kingdom of Gangas of Khimedi (Khemundi) and thus, there is all reason that it is one of the oldest centres of worship of the goddess. As the place names occurring in the Teresinga plates of Parvata Dvaraka King Maharaj Tushtikara have been identified in the Aska region, in all probability this goddess at Aska was enshrined by Tushtikara circa fifth century AD (*see* Rajguru 1950:107–110). This goddess later on came to be patronised by the Bhanjas of Khinjali Mandal, Vanjulavaka, and Ghumusar. Another important thing to notice here is that the old tribal name Khambeswari is still used here.

8.5.3 Stambheswari and Subhadra

Authorities on Jagannath cult like Kanhu Charan Mishra (1971:14–15) and G.C. Tripathi (1978:285 ff) have discussed the link of Stambheswari with the Jagannath cult. In their opinion, the great trios of the Jagannath temple with Sudarshana, the weapon of Lord Jagannath, are all made of wood in the form of a pillar. In their opinion, these peculiar iconographic features of these images are the mutated form of the tribal deity Kitung, Jalari Penu, Tana Penu, Murni Penu, and Stambheswari[20]. From the copper plate of the Somavamsi king Yayati, we learn that Panchambari Bhadrambika was the tutelary deity of the Somavamsis. In the tribal pockets of Western Odisha, the local people either worshipped a stone or wooden pillar by pasting vermillion on it. Yayati-I, who consolidated Somavansi rule in Western Odisha, and his sister Prithvi Mahadei were familiar with this form of worship of the tribes. Hence, for the appeasement of the greater tribal subjects, instead of installing images as approved by the texts of Hindu Iconography, Yayati appears to have opted for wooden images similar to a pillar. Sudarshana, the disc of Lord Jagannath Vishnu, instead of being made of Iron, is a wooden pillar in Jagannath temple (Kulke 1978:142). In the similar manner, Subhadra, though the sister of Jagannath Krishna representing Vaishnavism, is worshipped as Sakta goddess and worshipped through the Sakta incantation as Bhubaneswari (an incarnation of Goddess Sakti). Some scholars, therefore, identify Subhadra as a revised edition of Stambheswari Bhadrambika, the tutelary deity of the Somavamsis (Eschmann, Kulke & Tripathy 1978:177–178). The Hinduised iconography of Khambeswari, therefore, might be taken as the prototype for the development of Subhadra figure in Jagannath temple.

8.5.4 The Tribal Servitors and Institution of Dashandhi

Stambheswari worship was quite popular throughout the medieval period in the Tel Valley region, Boud, Sonepur, and Bonai region, and continues to be a popular form of worship

in Dhenkanal and Anugul districts, and Baramba Narasimhapur region of the Cuttack district. In South Odisha, it had extended up to Bhanjanagar and Aska region. Bamur and Tarasa in Anugul district, Barimul near Baramba in the Cuttack district, Talcher and Bamur in Anugul district and Gandharadi in Boud district are the popular seats of Stambheswari worship.

In all these centres non-Brahmins designated such as Jani, Roul, Mali, Dehuri, Barua, and Suddha, both from tribes and backward castes, officiate as priest or servitor. Even in some Stambheswari shrines female priests such as Janiani, and Mai Jani perform the daily rituals and worship. At Aska in the Ganjam district the priests of Khambeswari were earlier known as *Khamba muni*. Now, they have deleted the word Khamba and identify themselves as Muni community (Rath 2009:87) apparently with a view to make their tribal or *sudra* origin less known to alleviate their social status equivalent to Brahmin. Animal sacrifices are offered here on festive occasions and the *bhoga* (offerings) cooked by these non-Brahmin priests is taken by all the devotees irrespective of caste.

Another significant ritual associated with Stambheswari worship is Dasandhi which is like the Navakalevara[21] ritual of the Jagannath trinity. Wood being a perishable or fragile object, the wooden post of Stambheswari is renewed at a regular interval of ten years called Dasandhi. Like Daitapatis[22] of Jagannath temple, who trace their origin to Savara Viswabasu, a tribal king and worshipper of Nilamadhava, the non-Brahmin priests of Stambheswari perform this Dasandhi ritual.

8.5.5 The Vali Jatra *of Khambeswari at Sonepur*

Like Dasandhi ritual, another popular festival associated with Khambeswari worship at Sonepur is the *Vali Jatra* at the time of Dusserah (Durga worship) festival. Though people of the erstwhile feudatory state of Sonepur were familiar with this pillar worship, the present icon of Khambeswari installed in the shrine at the district headquarters of Sonepur came as dowry from Khemundi, state of Ganjam. The fourth ruler of Sonepur state Rajaraj Singh (1700–1725) was married to the princess of Khemundi, who was a devout worshipper of Khambeswari. She brought with her the image of Khambeswari[23] and king Rajaraj Singh built a temple for this deity in his capital town (Mazumdar 1925:107), and a village called Khambeswari Patana was set up (field data) to settle the servitors of this temple. Khambeswari at Sonepur is worshipped as Vana Durga and during Dashahara or Durga Puja Festival, she is worshipped for 16 days, and this festival is known as Vali Jatra or Sacrificial festival. In this festival, tribal priests like Barua and other non-Brahmin servitors play a major role.

8.6 Khambeswari as Agrarian and Village Tutelary Deity

In Dhenkanal, Anugul, Boud, and Baramba, Khambeswari is worshipped both as goddess of agriculture and village tutelary deity. As village deity, she is worshipped for warding off epidemics, and protecting the livestock from disease. In Anugul region she is worshipped as an agricultural goddess during the rainy season in the month of *Bhadra* (corresponding to August–September) at the time of transplantation of paddy seedling in the field by the cultivators (Pattanaik 1922:80). Rath (2009:87) has gone further to associate the festival with *kadua* (mud) to justify its name Kaduali Puja (worship during cultivating season).

8.7 Impact of Stambheswari on Other Cultures

Stambheswari is one of the best examples of a tribal deity, which after having undergone the process of Hinduisation has influenced other folk religious beliefs and tradition. *Baadi Puja* or worship of stick[24] by the Dumala Community[25] (Eschmann 1978:271) of Boud-Rairakhol and Sonepur region, the *Bada Jangha* (large thigh) worship of the Gonds, in which they worship a long wooden log representing the thigh of their deity Bada Jangha Deo and the *Danda* worship during Danda Yatra, in which Lord Shiva is worshipped symbolically through a wooden block (Mohanty 1997:679), appear to have been influenced by the *khamba* worship of Stambheswari cult. Similarly, in *Ghanta Patua* worship in the whole month of *Chaitra* (corresponding to March–April) in which a *ghata* (pitcher) is placed on the head, on a stemming wooden stand or pillar representing various goddesses such as Sarala, Hingula, Charchika, Bhagavati, and Chandi, which appear to be a variant form of this pillar worship. The servitor who dances carrying this *ghata* on a wooden stand, accompanying the sound of *ghanta* (brass gong) is known as *Ghanta Patua* or *Ghata Patur*. These Ghanta Patuas are non-Brahmin servitor of the deities and their dance is very similar to Karaga dance of Mysore (Pattnaik 1997:661). In this way Stambheswari cult has influenced various cults of Odisha and goddess Stambheswari, therefore, occupies a specific place in the religious and cultural history of Odisha.

Legacy: The worship of Stambheswari in the form of a pillar appears to have influenced other sects and denominations. In the Jagannath and Vishnu temples, Garuda, the conveyance of Lord, is placed on a pillar called Garuda Stambha and is worshipped by the devotees. So, also we find Aruna Pillar before sun temples and small Vrushav (Bull) Stambha before Siva temples. A fragment of Asoka Pillar discovered from Bhubaneswar has been converted into Siva Linga of the Bhaskareswara temple (Panigrahi 1981:313). This bears evident testimony to the facts that Stambha or Pillar was treated as divinity. In this way the pillar is worshipped which originated from the cult of Stambheswari has influenced the religious customs and beliefs of Odisha.

Notes

1 Stambheswari is a compound word formed of two words, namely *Stambha* and *Iswari*. The term 'iswari' means goddess, the feminine form of 'iswwar'- the god. The literal meaning of Stambheswari is pillar or post goddess.
2 Saktism is a popular Hindu religious sect in Odisha and India underlying the worship of eternal female energy.
3 *Khamba*, meaning pillar, is not a tribal term, but a corrupt form of Sanskrit term *stambha* with same meaning. At some phase in the history this term has entered into the tribal vocabulary system. Obviously, pillar goddess Khambeswari originated or got its name during that phase of history or thereafter. The suffix 'swari' is also not a tribal term. Had it been in their belief system before the influence of non-tribal language, it would have its tribal name. Due to a language shift, the original tribal name might have been forgotten. What is important to note is that tribes worshipped the pillar deity before non-tribes or kings (cf. Mishra 1971:14). Still a further corrupt form of 'Khamba' was used by the Dumals as they addressed Khambeswari as Khamsiri (Mazumdar 1925:108).
4 To be particular, the history of the goddess in her Hinduised form dates to fifth century AD because Khamba or Stambha are Aryanised term. Such a trend is noticed in its climax around

sixth century AD in other parts of the country. As R.S. Sharma (1974/1958:180) informs, the cult of the mother goddess, widely prevalent among the tribes acquired significance in Buddhist and Brahminical traditions; the aboriginal mother goddess came to be worshipped in the form of *shakti* in the later tradition.

5 The dynasty believed to have originated from Panduvamsis who trace their origin from the Pandavas of the Mahabharata. The Somavamsis entered into Odisha after being expelled from their patrimony in south Koshala by the Kalachuris. Somavamsi literarily means descents (vamsi) from the Moon (Soma).

6 Devati (goddess) is the feminine form of Devata (god). *Grama* in English is village.

7 Devi means goddess and feminine form of Deva. Barada is name of a Kandha deity, but its meaning is not known. Barada means palm leaf. How the deity assumed this name is also not known.

8 The colonial historians have spelt Kandhas of Odisha as Khounds, Khonds, etc.

9 The importance of mother goddess also has territorial significance in that regions are named after them. For example, geographical name of Keonjhar is formed from the name of Goddess Kinchikeswari, a non-tribal goddess (Mazumdar 1925:134–135).

10 An object of worship for its supposed magical power.

11 The lowest group in Hindu Varna system.

12 Mazumdar (1925:180) has observed while conducting field study in the then Sambalpur that both the Kandhas and the Dumals (Hindus) of Sonepur area worship Khambeswari in their villages in the form of wooden pillars. This places the goddesses of tribes and non-tribes. Interestingly, neither Brahmins nor Kshyatriyas worship Khambeswari in Sonepur. Mazumdar further states that the Dumals 'worship their tribal goddess' when Durgapuja is celebrated.

S. N. Rajguru (1950) also supports tribal origin of Stambheswari. According to him, "Wooden pillars are posted at a corner of aborigine villages representing their village deity. This wooden-pillar-deity was named Stambheswari by Brahmins who incorporated this tribal deity in the Hindu pantheon" (Rajguru 1950:110).

13 The Aryan- Non Aryan Divide has been contested by many schools. However it has become a convention with most of the historians to associate the invaders from the north who occupied the tribal hinterlands and carved out a kingdom for them as Aryan. However, we find some deviation to this theory. The Kadambavamsi ruling family of Bonai claims their origin to Ceylon. They appear to have entered India by crossing the Pak Strait, but not Hindu Kush.

14 The goddess with a tiger face; it is the presiding deity of Ghumusar's Bhanja rulling family.

15 The goddess is addressed as Kanta in Khandadhar Hill, in the palace of the Bonai king as Kanta Devi and among the Bhuyians Kanta Kuanari.

16 Many ruling families of Odisha claim themselves as *Suryavamsi*, descents (*vamsi*) from the Sun-God.

17 Obtained from the grace/blessings of goddess Stambheswari.

18 Given as boon/blessings of Stambheswari; by the grace of the boon got from the goddess Stambheswari (Chakravorty 1895:126).

19 "By the grace of the boon got from the goddess Stambheswari" (Chakravorty 1895:126).

20 Deities of the Kandha tribe are worshipped in form of wooden log.

21 Navakalevara is a ritual in which the old images are cremated and new images are installed in the temple of Puri.

22 Daitapatis are a community who serve Lord Jagannath of Puri from *Snana Purnima* (Bathing Ceremony) to *Ratha Yatra* (Car Festival).

23 There is another version which states that Raj Sing Deo found this pillar from debris of old ruins and brought it to light(Mazumdar 1925:107).

24 The *badi* (stick) made of *rohini* wood (Indian red-wood, scientific name: *soymida febrifuga*) or *mahua/mahula* in Odia (bassia latifolia) wood is addressed as Maheswari, i.e. the spouse of Maheswar, the Lord Shiva.

25 Dumal community presents a case of tribal and non-tribal interface in the matter of worship. They worship two goddesses, Parameswari and Stambheswari in the form of two posts, the former of *rohini* wood and the latter of *mahua* wood. They engage Brahmin priest to worship Parameswari and while they themselves worship Khambeswari 'their tribal goddess' (*see* Mazumdar 1925:110–111).

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9

IN SEARCH OF LEGITIMACY

Tribal Rituals, Native Chiefs, and Colonial State in Orissa[1]

Sasmita Rani Shasini

9.0 Introduction

The collaboration of state and religion in Orissa can be traced back to the period of Kharvela's[2] rule. This collaboration became intense in the fourth and fifth centuries when the process of land grant to the Brahmins and temples and other religious institutions became widespread. The Brahmins and the religious institutions played a significant role in propagating the ideals of a new socio-religious pattern influenced by the Bhagavata religion[3] and codified the duties and status of the numerous social elements in the social hierarchy of Orissa. They were the media through whom the kings or rulers extended their control over far off regions and hitherto excluded social elements[4]. This process of indoctrination was achieved by the gradual inclusion into the lower strata of the caste system, paradoxically usually as 'outcasts' and/or through their inclusion into the military of the ruler. This process has been characterised as 'Kshatriyaisation', which was initiated in tribal areas by the Kshatriyas i.e. zamindars, chiefs or Rajas to strengthen their claim to legitimacy in the society and broaden the base of their economic and political power (Kulke 1993:5, 90–92). The process of 'Hinduisation and integration' developed out of interdependency between the Hinduised Rajas and the tribal population of ancient Orissa deeply influenced Hinduism and the means of legitimisation of Hindu royal power in these regions. The inclusion of tribal groups into Hinduism initiated a process of Hinduisation of their deities. The assignment of military duties to tribal groups led to the royal patronage of the dominant autochthonous deities of the respective area (Kulke 1993:5–6). The kings were highly dependent on military and economic support and political loyalty of the tribes. Royal patronage of autochthonous deities was an essential presupposition for the consolidation of political power. Most of them also accepted the dominant autochthonous deities of their territories as family or tutelary deities of their kingdoms. For example, Goddess Mani Nageswari (Goddess Cobra/Serpent with the Pearl) of Ranapur, Shiva-Gokamaswamin[5] popularly known as Gokarneswar Shiva of Mahendragiri, Stambheswari (Goddess of Pillar) in South of Sonepur and Goddess Bhattarika[6] (the Goddess of Power) of Baramba were the family and tutelary deities of different royal dynasties of those respective principalities. These autochthonous deities were gradually included into the pantheon of Bhakti Hinduism. The

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Bhakti religion "with its emphasis on personal faith and self-sacrifice became the best religion … to hold this type society and its state together" (Kosambi 1962:32).

9.1 Interdependence Between the Temporal Power and Sacred Domains

To point out the relationship between these two domains, we argue that if temporal power needed 'legitimisation' from 'spiritual' authority so did the human agents of spiritual authority for sustenance from temporal power (*see* Chattopadhyaya 1995:195–232). The legitimisation of political power was determined with the collaboration of the kings and the priests. Bhakti paved the path for political legitimisation in two ways: introduction of the divine theory of kingship (*see* Mallik 2005:199–200) and the overlord-feudatory relationship between the 'sacred domains' and the 'temporal power'. This process is illustrated by the stages through which the cult of Jagannath emerged as the central cult in Orissa and the ritual surrender of temporal power to the divinity by king Anangabhimadeva (Sahu 1984). The patronage of Gangas[7] (Singha 2005:213–214) took the shape of making land grants and other gifts to Lord Jagannath, construction of the temples of Jagannath at different places of the empire, and accepting Vaishnavism as their personal faith; accepting Lord Jagannath as the sovereign of the empire was the climax of the trend (Kulke 1976:5).

The King-Brahmin alliance reached in its climax during the rule of the Gajapatis[8] (Singha 2005:213–214). Since the Brahmin priests[9] were the custodians of Lord Jagannath and they monopolised the 'spiritual domain', and the kings derived their legitimacy with the help of priests, interdependency or an alliance developed between them. Kapilendradeva[10] dedicated the Orissan Empire in favour of Lord Jagannath and accepted the *sevak* (servitor) status. This gave the priests a significant political voice and played a crucial role in succession rules of the empire. It is evident from the selection of Purusottamdev[11] as the successor of Kapilendradeva (1434–1467), since he was not the rightful heir. The claims of Kapilendradeva's other sons were overruled by the tradition created and legitimised by the priests to acquire more power and prestige than that of the king. As the legend goes, Lord Jagannath wanted Purushottamdeva (1467–1497) to be the successor. Thus, Purushottamdeva accepted a lower position than that of the priests. He had to agree to the institution of Chherapahnra[12].

During the period of Islamic rule (1568–1751) (Sarkar 2004:409), the temple was attacked by various Islamic rulers. The series of invasions were led by Illias Shah, the Sultan of Bengal in 1340 AD, by Feroze Shah Tughlaq in 1360 AD, by Allauddin Hussain, the Sultan of Bengal in 1509 AD, by Kalapahar in 1568 AD, and subsequently by Mughal rulers in the 16th and 17th century (Sarkar 2004:409–410). Apart from the objective of plundering the wealth of the temple, the intention of destroying the political and ritual legitimacy that the institution carries was the main reason behind such continuous invasions (Ray 1981:187). The Marathas ruled Orissa from 1751 to 1803 (Ray 1960:5). They took special interest in the administration of the Jagannath temple and made necessary facilities for the pilgrims. They patronised the rituals, customs of the temple, and also sanctioned funds for its maintenance. The Raja of Khurda supervised the administration of the temple on behalf of the Marathas. Raghuji Bhonsle's donation 'Satais Hazari Mahal'[13] for the smooth financial maintenance denominates the political as well as the ritual importance of the temple.

9.2 The Cult of Jagannath and the Colonial State

The acceptance of tribal deities as family and tutelary deities was a desideratum for state formation in tribal tracts in Orissa. The aboriginal and autochthonous tribals in this area experienced the process of integration and assimilation and the rulers legitimised their rule over these realms. The combination of politics and religion was a dominant feature in Orissa since the origin of the Jagannath cult. Lord Jagannath was believed to be a tribal god worshipped as god Nilamadhav by the Savaras[14]. Under the process of Aryanisation, he was brought to Puri and was installed in a new temple by the king with the new name Lord Jagannath,

The king as the representative of Lord Jagannath on the earth is seen as the moving Vishnu (incarnation of Lord Jagannath). The socio-cultural milieu created by the Jagannath cult in Orissa had actually facilitated regional integration and social solidarity among people. In 1230 AD, Anangabhimadeva III declared Jagannath as the sole state deity of Orissa and he was ruling under his Overlordship, thus, getting religious sanction for his political power (Mallik 2005:205–206). Frias Odoric (Stirling 1825:35), a European traveller, reported about the association of the Gajapati kings of Orissa with the Car festival of Jagannath in the year 1321. Later on, the Suryavamsi kings like Kapilendradeva and Purussottamdeva sought legitimation of their rule as both of them were usurpers of the throne. They claimed legitimacy achieved by maintaining an intimate linkage with the Jagannath cult of Puri. Even Kapilendradeva was not reluctant to call himself a servitor and described attacks on him as attacks on Lord Jagannath.

This relationship between the Gajapati[15] kings of Orissa and the Jagannath cult of Puri culminated under the Rajas of Khurda (Shasini 2021:91). The Raja of Khurda declared himself as the local successor to the imperial Gajapatis after the defeat of King Mukunda Deva in 1568. The Rajas of Khurda, after suffering defeats at the hands of the Mughal armies, turned their attention to Puri and enlarged their influence over the Jagannath cult. Thus, an intricate and ambiguous relationship developed between the temple and the palace. By maintaining their control over the temple and its rituals, the Rajas of Khurda claimed to be successors of imperial Gajapatis and granted certain privileges to the feudatory kings in order to get their loyalty and political support. The political power of the Rajas of Khurda declined after their defeat at the hands of the Marathas in 1751. Though the Marathas took over the administration of the Jagannath Temple in 1760, the Rajas of Khurda were able to maintain the ritual sanctity of their position and all the feudatory kings of Orissa looked at them with veneration. The temple played an important political role in the sense that it granted legitimacy and recognised the authority of the king over Orissa and its people.

The relationship that the Jagannath Temple had with the colonial state should be understood in light of the colonial state's adventure to control and govern a religious space with political connotation so that it can legitimately control the subject population through the colonial governance and its machinery. This was done within the broad framework of colonial legality and governmentality. After occupying Orissa in 1803 (O' Malley 1979:19), the British purportedly went on to control the Jagannath temple of Puri as it was the religious as well as the political nerve centre of Orissa. The British arrested the Raja of Khurda and imprisoned him in the fort of Midnapore (*also spelt* Medinapur). The British made a detailed plan and administrative arrangements to govern the affairs of the temple and its resources as well as the pilgrims, thus exercising colonial governmentality over the Oriyas. The nascent colonial state in early 19th century used various techniques of surveillance to

control the temple and the pilgrims. The British resorted to enormous documentation detailing out all the information about the pilgrims. The legal machinery such as the police was used to control the pilgrims. Charles Grome[16], in 1805 submitted a report to the Company and prescribed the mechanism to govern the temple. In this way the sacred entity of the pilgrim was transformed into a subject category under the rudimentary colonial state. It used the *dak* (postal service), the legal machinery and brought surveillance over people through rigorous documentation, registration of pilgrims, and other bureaucratic arrangements. The colonial government's obsession in controlling and ruling a religious space invited criticisms from the Evangelicals and the Christian missionaries, as well as the anxiety of the Oriyas. The Court of Directors in 1809 asked the Company to specify the degrees of interference in matters of native religious practices (Ghose 1848:34). Under constant pressure and criticism, the Company appointed the Raja of Khurda as the Superintendent of the Temple and assigned him the right to manage the interior economy of the Temple while retaining the power to remove the Superintendent as and when it wished. The Regulation IV of 1809 vested the superintendence of the temple in the hands of the Raja on a hereditary basis (Ghose 1848:34). The colonial bureaucracy institutionalised surveillance. The subject population were further controlled when the colonial bureaucracy used the labour of the prisoners of Puri and Cuttack jails to construct the New Jagannath Trunk road.

Abolishing the violent superstitious rituals and customs of the natives was central to the colonial state building in India. It was necessary to justify the theory of 'benevolent paternalism' of the British. At the same time, it was also essential to maintain law and order to safeguard British commercial interests in India. For the Evangelicals and the Christian missionaries, indigenous rituals and customs were inhuman and against civilisation which needed to be rooted out by the British as part of its civilising mission. Many European travellers wrote in detail about Jagannath and his Car festival since the 14th century. Thomas Bowrey's (Ghose 1848:34) account is more informative. His accounts described in detail how people voluntarily casting themselves under the wheels of Lord Jagannath were crushed to death. This was considered as the most noble and heroic act in order to attain a sacred death. The practice of self-immolation of pilgrims under the car of Lord Jagannath has been reported by William Bruton (Ghose 1848:34) when he visited Puri in 1632 A.D. According to him, it was the belief of the pilgrims that they would attain heaven if they got killed under the wheels of Lord Jagannath's chariot. Sebastain Manrique (Ghose 1848:34) in 1636 said that people used to immolate themselves under the car of Jagannath. Bernier in his travel account had mentioned this practice in 1676. Apart from blind religious beliefs he pointed out another dimension of the practice. According to him, the huge crowd, the arduous journey, and the fatigue squeezed people to death who used to fall on the ground in the way of the car. Colonel Harcourt who came to Puri in 1803, however, said that though the pilgrims had talked about the self-immolation practice, much of the observations were based on exaggeration (Ghose 1848:34). Andrew Stirling (1825:27) writing in 1825 said he witnessed three cases of self-immolation; and one of the cases was accidental. In other two cases, the devotees were suffering from incurable diseases and in order to relieve themselves from this burden of life they preferred this mode of suicide. James Fergusson in 1837 told about how the people were delighted to be present at Puri during the Car festival despite so much written accounts of horror stories about the death of people during the Car festival (Ghose 1848:34). Claudius Buchanan who visited Orissa in 1806 provided the horrible accounts about the temple, its festivals, and customs (Ghose 1848:34). He particularly nar-

rated the practice of pilgrim's self-immolation under the chariot of Lord Jagannath. William Bampton and Sutton's preaching against idolatry received violent opposition from people (Ghose 1848:34). Charles Buller, the then Commissioner of Cuttack wrote back to the Court of Directors of the East India Company that he had not seen horror and wretchedness during the Car festival. He reported to have seen one case of self-immolation under the wheels of the car (Ghose 1848:34). He vehemently denied that this ritual practice was an established duty thrown upon on any sect of Hinduism. Thus, it can be said that the self-immolation of the pilgrims during the Car festival was not so an established and religiously sanctioned practice unlike the Meriah sacrifice[17] of the Khonds[18]. The cases reported by the European travellers and British officials were primarily individual in nature and took place out of blind devotion of the devotees to get relief from the pain and sorrow in their life.

The Pilgrim Tax in Puri was collected since Mughal rule and also continued during the Maratha and British period. The political economy of the colonial state justified the collection of this tax in the capacity of a legitimate ruler (Patra 1968:292). The British claimed to have spent the pilgrim tax in developing various amenities for the pilgrims as well as in facilitating smooth administration. But in reality the tax was an important source of government revenue collected to strengthen the surveillance mechanism over the people. The Christian missionaries opposed the collection of Pilgrim Tax and described it as "inhuman, impolitic and unchristian". In 1831, Lord William Bentick (Patra 1968:293–294), however, supported the collection of Pilgrim Tax for the smooth conduct of religious rites, care, and protection of pilgrims. But Charles Grant criticised the Company and accused it of patronising idolatry. In 1833, the Court of Directors banned the collection of Pilgrim Tax, ceased the interference of the British on the rituals, customs, and the internal economic affairs of the temple (Ghose 1848:36). Further, it is said that the police force required for the maintenance of peace and security of the pilgrims would be paid out of the general resources of the country (Ghose 1848:36–37). Act 10 of 1840 abolished all of the taxes and fees upon pilgrims. However, the lands of the temple were still under the control of the revenue authorities before it was finally transferred to the Superintendent of the Temple (the Raja of Khurda) in 1843 under the direction of the Court of Directors.

Thus, legitimacy to British rule in colonial Orissa was sought to be established by the East India Company by first locating the place of Jagannath and his temple in the hearts of Oriyas. The East India Company conspicuously brought the temple and its patron (the Raja of Khurda) within the broad framework of colonial political economy. The instrument of the 'Rule of Law' facilitated the task by enforcing rigorous surveillance over the subject population. The efforts to abolish and regulate the superstitious religious rituals displayed the benevolent paternalism of the alien ruler. The East India Company generated huge revenue from the vast landed properties of Jagannath and by collecting Pilgrim Tax which helped it in conducting the administration smoothly. It enabled colonial governmentality over the subject population through surveillance (Shasini 2021:93–94).

9.3 Rituals, Natives, and the Colonial State

Communications between the 'political' and the 'religious' domains were an important instrument for establishing authority and legitimacy. The chiefs and Hindu kings were often giving royal patronage to these inhuman practices. The kingdom of Jeypore, the present day Koraput District was ruled by the dynasty of Jeypore *Suryavamsis*[19]. They established power in the mid fifteenth century and retained it up to modern times (Misra 2005:234–

235). An important means by which the kings exercised authority over the indigenous population was through patronage of tribal goddess to be found in Rayagada – known as goddess Majhighariani. She was worshipped in the form of seven white stones. The largest of the seven stones was painted with vermillion to represent her head. Sacrifice of a human being on the eighth day of Durgapuja was an established practice there. The priests of the temple were the low ranking caste of Paiks. They were also the king's militia. It was believed that the human sacrifice would bring good fortune and wellbeing of its inhabitants, increase the fertility of the land, and end the droughts and other calamities in the life of an individual or of the community as a whole. The king was nominally subordinate to Gajapati kings of Orissa. Other goddesses, where human sacrifices were performed, included Khambeswari in Aska, Thakurani in Berhampur, and Mohuri Kalua near Berhampur. Kulke (1993) sheds light on how the tribal deities were patronised by the Gadajat kings and how their legitimacy over the tribal regions was based on their position in the tribal cult. Goddess Khambeswari is widely worshipped in Southern and Western Orissa by Sudramunis who are of tribal origin. The Terasingha copper plate (Mishra & Behera 2018:114, 115–116) found on the river bank of Rishikulya river mentions the temple of Khambeswari (the Goddess of Pillars) worshipped by local tribes. The worship was appropriated by Tushitkara ruling over Kalahandi, Baudh, and Ghumsar during the fifth and sixth century AD. She was also the deity of the Sulki royal family (600–800) of Kodalakamandala and the Bhanja dynasty (ninth Century AD) in Khinjilimandala (Mishra & Behera 2018: 116–117). The rulers appropriated the local gods and goddesses in order to extend their ritual as well as political legitimacy over these regions and people. These tribal deities later on became their Rastrdevatas, for example Bhattarika of Badamba and Maninageswari in Ranpur. This patronage secured the kings the support and the loyalty of the tribe and safety of their kingdoms. Another example of such ritual and political appropriation is the case of Vyaghradevi, the guardian deity of Bhanjas of Ghumsar. She was the goddess of Khonds and Savaras of Ghumsar. Kulladaha, the Khond chief who was worshipping her in 13th century AD was defeated by the Bhanja king of Ghumsar and the latter appropriated the goddess (Satapathy 2017:57). With the establishment of the British legal system these practices were held as barbaric and the local political authority was held responsible to curb such practices. The local king submitted himself to the British authority to remain an ally in British civilising mission. However, many times, they became involved with the practice to win over the trust and support of their people. Thus, the local elites played double games by pretending to be good legal subjects of the British on one hand and retaining the support of the people on the other. In both games, they had nothing to lose and the colonial legal machinery fell heavily on the innocent people.

The foremost target of the British was the 'collective crime' or the crime committed by a group of people. Collective crime refers to a particular group or some people of the group committing a crime. In the 19th century, the colonial government discovered that certain communities of Orissa are aberrant factors and had to be controlled coercively. Sandria Freitag (1990:231) has narrated how the British legal system created two realms to deal with the law and order problem. One was with the individual and the other was for the collective realm. The British brought different regulations and structures to contain individual crime. The collective realm was taken more seriously as the British perceived collective crimes as being directed against the state and a challenge to their authority. The 'Criminal Tribes Act of 1871' was introduced to deal with these communities. The CTA provided

registration of all dictated criminal tribes and imposed restrictions on the movement of the members of such 'criminal tribes'. Under the Act, the members of the tribes declared as criminal were to report to the police station at regular intervals. They required passes for travelling outside their settlement and the members without passes were imprisoned. Escaping from any settlement or reformatory invited imprisonment or fines or both. The colonial administration identified the criminal groups from anecdotal evidence provided by indigenous informants and control was established over them through registration, surveillance, and incarceration. Further, reformatories and mental asylums were established for the children and mentally unstable people of the tribe and classes.

This Act was amended in the year 1897 to make punishment more stringent going up to seven years of imprisonment and transportation for life[20]. Provisions were made to separate children of four to 18 years of age from parents. These children were sent to the reformatories established solely for the children of declared criminal tribes and classes[21]. The British colonial authority and the discourse of rule of law defined crime and criminality which were culture bound and contextual. In the words of J.A. Sharpe, "the law was a cultural and ideological force so widely diffused in English society as to inform the notions and actions of the population at large" (Sharpe 1999:143).

One such criminal tribe were the Khonds residing in some parts of the districts of Ganjam and Vizagpatam in the then Madras Presidency and the Tributary States of Baud, Daspalla and Nayagarh, Angul and Kondhamal during the colonial period. They were also found in the northern part of Kalahandi and the south of Patana (Swaro 1987:46). The Khonds believed in the offering of *meriah* (human sacrifice) for propitiating the deity for the maintenance of the fertility of the soil and to avert diseases and natural calamities (Swaro 1990:119). The cruel practice was more prevalent in the Taripenu sect of the Kondhs (Campbell 1986:141). The Kondhs buried the flesh of the victims in the soil which, as believed, had the power of fertilising the land. In the case of the turmeric crop, the Kondhs had a belief that the tears of the victims brought rains and the blood of the victims caused redness of the turmeric. The Oriya hill rajas also performed human sacrifice to get divine blessings when they assumed power or wished to avert danger (Padhi 1986:180). Captain John Macpherson of the Madras Government service was selected to become the first Agent of the Government of India to work for the Meriah Agency[22]. The Meriah Agency was given the authority over the entire tribal tract which was then divided under the administrative jurisdiction of the Governments of Bengal and Madras. To abolish this inhumane practice, the British followed the policy of persuasion and repression. Captain Macpherson tried his best to identify himself as one among them and collaborated in their day-to-day life. He went hunting with the Khond chiefs, distributed beads to the Khond women, and gave presents to dissuade them from the practice of human sacrifice (Gangte 2017:120). The British went on establishing schools, providing medical aid, and developing infrastructure in Khond territories to bring them under the control of the Colonial government.

9.4 Sati: Royal Tradition and Legal Invasion of a Ritual Space

Sati or widow burning was a socio-religious practice and was in vogue in Orissa from the 12th century (Pattanaik 2005:267). The occurrences of Sati are known from the Sati stones found at various places of Orissa. The wives and mistresses of the Raja of Jeypore Biswanath Deo (1713–1752) committed Sati at his capital Rayagada. The stones erected for the purpose are still found and that place is still called 'Satigarbha'. At Papadahandi, a village of the

Koraput district, are found many weather-eaten Sati-stones in a temple complex. In Ganjam also a fairly large number of Sati rites were known to have occurred (Pattanaik 2005:267). The Hindus believed the practice to have been sanctioned by the Vedas. It was also believed that Sati practice was given a religious colour by the Brahmins. So, Sati was basically a practice in Hindu society, particularly among the royal/zamindar families. Then how is it related to tribes? In this context it should be mentioned that the native chiefs representing the Gadjat areas were mostly from the present day tribal dominated districts and a few had tribal origin. Their patronisation and respect to their own religion and culture was an essential support to the tribal ritual practices in order to gain legitimacy and win their loyalty. Such support, however, earned the king a status as 'protector of religion'. In many literary sources we frequently get reference to 'Dharmik' or 'Dharmavastala' Raja[23] (Raja committed to religion) referring to someone who patronises and functions as per established religious norms and traditions. By doing so he gains people's support and confidence. During colonial rule, the British government also showed its lenience towards the Sati so that the people are not annoyed.

The British were initially reluctant to interfere in the socio-religious practice of the natives. However, informal orders were given to the Darogahs (police constable) to report such cases and dissuade the women from performing the rite. The Rajas in Orissa sanctioned this practice. This is evident from the reply given to the Superintendent of Tributary Mahals in 1814. When they were asked to state the position of the *Ranees* (queens) after the death of their husbands, they replied "after the Raja's death it is usual for all the Ranees to become Satis". But who does not become Sati receives a maintenance[24]. The zamindars helped in continuance of this practice when they demanded half of the property from the widows who were childless; the widows preferred to die than to live in abject financial misery[25].

As has been mentioned earlier, the British did not want to directly intervene in the ritual rights of the Hindus on the ground of the principle of religious toleration. It was after strengthening the foundation of British rule over India that Lord Wellesley gave instructions to the British officials to ensure no force was exercised on the widows whether by their relatives or Brahmins to commit Sati and they should take steps to prevent the intoxication of the women for the accomplishment of the object. They were also to ensure that the widows had attained the age of maturity. This worked as a sort of regulation to restrict the occurrence of Sati. However, Sati continued. In 1809 after the death of the Raja of Angul, Jaya Singh, his queen committed Sati. In Kanika, nine queens committed Sati in 1812 when its Raja died (Pattanaik 1989:108). Local police Darogahs were instructed to be present in the spot and counsel the parties about the criminality of the practice, and the noble intention of the government on putting restrictions on the practice. Darogahs were sending full reports to the Magistrates who were in turn forwarding them to the Sadar Nizamat Adalat (Pattanaik 2005:270). Another deterrent measure was taken in 1817. The principal member of the family of the intending Sati was made accountable to give notice to the police Darogah about the proposed occurrence as early as possible failing which he would be punished with imprisonment or a fine. The minimum age of the widow to be a Sati was fixed at fifteen (Pattanaik 2005:270). However these circulars bore no legal sanction. At the same time, the government decided to issue a small sum as subsistence allowance to all those widows who were refrained from committing Sati. Further, the zamindars were not permitted to exercise any more right of taking half of the property of the widow who had no children as they did before (Pattanaik 2005:270).

In 1827, one remarkable type of Sati was reported to have occurred in Killah Pattia of Cuttack district. When its Raja died, his two queens and two of his slave girls burnt themselves. The immolation of the slave girls was not permissible, but it could not be prevented as the police officers could not get timely information. However, it was observed that all those who were associated with the immolation of the slave girls ought to have been brought under trial. It was in 1829 the British decided on taking stern action against the practice of Sati. Thomas Pakenham was the first to write to the government "to prohibit the rite of Sati". W. Winkinson, the Collector of Cuttack and Puri, and H. Brownlow, the Magistrate of the southern division of Cuttack district reported to the government "that Sati might safely be put down by authority" (Pattanaik 2005:270).

The British authorities and scholars prevailed upon the orthodox Hindus and spoke to them with a utilitarian language to dismiss the ritual significance of the practice. The approval of God was discredited under the principles of humanity and conscience. The priestly domination over the sacred ritual under the approval of the sacred Vedas was questioned and put down upon the western utilitarian liberal philosophy. The Christian missionaries also heavily criticised the British for bearing with the practice for so long. It was on 4 December 1829 that a regulation was passed by the Governor-General-in-Council declaring the practice of Sati as illegal and punishable by the criminal courts. The zamindars, talukdars, or other proprietors of the land were held accountable to report any intended sacrifice to the immediate police station or else bore legal action. The Darogah was instructed to immediately proceed to the spot and persuade people to disperse. In the event of their persistence they would become subject to punishment by criminal courts. If the rite was already performed the Darogahs were directed to register a case of unnatural death and report to the Magistrates. All persons convicted of aiding and abetting the sacrifice of a Hindu widow should be guilty of culpable homicide and liable to punishment. A similar regulation was also passed in Madras on 2 February 1830 under the governorship of Stephen Lushington[26].

The practice, however, continued in tributary states of Orissa. In 1839, the wife of the younger brother of the Raja of Mayurbhanja became Sati after the death of her husband. The queen of Keonjhar also committed Sati when the Raja died. The Superintendent of the Tributary Mahals was asked to submit the report about these cases on 18 September 1839. The government of Bengal instructed the Commissioner on 25 November 1839 to appraise the Rajas and their subjects of the regulation concerning the abolition of Sati[27]. The Superintendent of the Tributary Mahals was directed to prepare some definite rules for the management of the Tributary Mahals. Among such rules was incorporated the practice of burning and burying alive widows of Hindus within the Tributary Mahals as illegal and punishable[28]. The government order was violated in the state of Khandapara. When its Raja died on 25 January 1842, two of his queens and slave girls immolated themselves on the funeral pyre[29]. The trial was conducted by A.J.M. Mills. He recommended to the Government of Bengal to give punishment to all such persons guilty of crime. Accordingly, punishments were awarded to them[30].

9.5 Conclusion

The indigenous practices such as Merriah sacrifice among Khonds, witchcraft, Sati, self-immolation under the wheels of the Car of Lord Jagannath, etc., as publicised in colonial narratives, had enjoyed the royal patronage during the pre-colonial period. The king

used to provide patronage to these practices to gain legitimacy among tribal communities. These practices came under the colonial lenses in the 19th century and the British developed a legal structure with a specialised police force along with specific treatment in court and specific techniques of investigation. This resulted in the development of a series of legal strategies and structure to penetrate deep into Oriya society to strengthen the colonial authority and strengthen the state-subject relationship. Initially though the British adopted a cautious attitude towards these practices, but later on adopted the rule of punishment to prevent these barbaric and inhuman practices. The colonial narrative of weeding out the wild, uncivilised, and terror elements from the society promoted such interference and brought indigenous communities under the radar of colonial governmentality. The native chiefs who were earlier part and parcel of these practices played a double game. They became collaborators of the British in their civilising mission and on the other hand secretly endorsed such practices in order to secure their legitimacy over the indigenous communities. However, the British enjoyed the support of the upper and middle class under the cloak of good and law abiding subjects in its civilising mission. The complexity and the technicality of the colonial legality and governmentality was beyond the comprehension of the common people which enabled the colonial government and the native chiefs to play their own game to gain the political and legal subordination of these communities.

Notes

1 It is the English spelling of the present day state of Odisha, the eighth largest state of India. The name was changed from Orissa to Odisha by the passage of the Orissa (alteration of name) Bill, 2010 and the Constitution (113th Amendment) Bill, 2010 in the Parliament. Since topic of the research engagement deals with historical period the spelling Orissa is used.
2 A king of Kalinga, the present day Odisha who ruled some time in second BCE or first BCE.
3 In Hinduism, the worshippers and followers of Vishnu in his personal incarnation as Krishna are called Bhagavatas. It represented the beginning of devotional worship called Bhakti in Hinduism.
4 This refers to people who remained outside the ambit of the initial state formation in Orissa, such as the hill tribes and other indigenous population of far and distant regions.
5 A form of Shiva, Hindu deity worshipped by the Sauras (a tribal group residing in Southern Odisha appropriated by the Gangas (the imperial rulers of Orissa ruling from early fifth century to early 15th century).
6 She is one of the manifestations of Shakti.
7 The Gangas belonging to the Eastern Ganga dynasty ruled Orissa from fifth to early 15th century (Singha 2005: 213–214).
8 The Gajapati dynasty established by Kapilendradeva ruled Orissa from 1434 to 1541 after the fall of the Ganga dynasty (Singha 2005:213–214).
9 The Hindu society during the early Vedic period was divided into 4 *varnas* viz; Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya, and Sudra. Brahmins were the priestly class and specialised in the performance of religious rituals, Kshatriyas performed warfare and administration, Vaisyas specialised in agriculture and trade and commerce, and Sudras belonged to the menial working class.
10 Founder of the Gajapati dynasty of Orissa.
11 The second ruler of Gajapati dynasty from 1467–1497.
12 The ceremonial sweeping of the car of the three deities during the Car festival.
13 27,000 villages, a vast area of landed property was donated by Raghuji Bhonsle of Nagpur to meet the day-to-day expenditure of Lord Jagannath (Ghose 1848:32).
14 A tribal group, also known as Sabara, Saora, and Saura found in the states of Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, and Andhra Pradesh.
15 In Odia 'Gaja' means elephant and 'Pati' means master. It means master of the elephant army. The Gajapati kings possessed a huge army of elephants that supplemented their military strength.

16 Charles Grome's report on the temple of Jagannath 10 June 1805. Orissa State Archives, Dept. of Culture, Govt. of Orissa, Bhubaneswar
17 It is the practice of human sacrifice prevalent among the Khond Community of Orissa (Gangte 2017:114).
18 A tribal group of Orissa, also spelt as Kandha, Kond, etc.
19 An ancient branch of Solar dynasty which ruled the districts of present day Koraput and Rayagada from the 15th century onwards. They were earlier the vassals of Gajapati kings. Later on they founded their independent kingdom and ruled from their capital of modern day Rayagada. Later on, they shifted their capital to Jeypore (Koraput district of Odisha) (Misra 2005:234–235).
20 CTA amended in 1897, section 23.1 and 23.2.
21 CTA amended in 1897, Sections 16 and 17.
22 The victims of human sacrifices were called Meriah in Oriya although the Khonds called them Toki or Keddi (John Cambell 1864). The Meriah Agency was established in 1845.
23 Sarala Das's *Odia Mahabharata* (Judhistira as Dharmik Raja) and *Vilanka Ramayana* (Rama as Dharmik Raja); Jayadev's *Gita Govinda*; Upendra Bhanja's *Baidehisa Bilasa,* etc. throw light on the concept of Dharma and Dharmik Raja for their patronisation of religion and rituals of subjects.
24 Twenty Five questions addressed to the Rajas and Chiefs of the Regulation and Tributary Mahals by the Superintendent in 1814 and the answers given there to, Calcutta, 1861, p-17.
25 Papers relating to the East India Affairs viz. copies of all communications received from India since 10 July 1821 related to the burning of females on the funeral pyres of their husband (printed, June 19 1823):78, Gregory's Report 11August 1819.
26 Board Proceedings, Judicial, vol-542, 1829, p-422-23, Sati Regulation XVII, 4 December 1829, Indian Historical Records Commission, vol-XVII, p-39, West Bengal State Archives.
27 Board Proceedings, Revenue, A. J. M. Mills, Commissioner to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, 11January 1840, Accession No-87, Orissa State Archives.
28 Board Proceedings, Revenue, Secretary to Government to A.J.M. Mills, 25 Novembe 1840, Accession No- 87, Orissa State Archives.
29 Board Proceedings, Revenue, Mill's Minute, 23 January 1847, Accession No-134, Orissa State Archives.
30 Selections from the Records of the Bengal Government, No-III. A.J.M. Mills papers on the Settlement of Cuttack and on the Settlement of Tributary Mahals, 1847, p. 62.

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10
TRIBE, RELIGION, AND CENSUS OF INDIA
(From 1871 to 2011)

Rajesh Roshan

10.0 Introduction

India has a long history of Census. There are references in *Rigveda*, *Artha Shastra* of Kautilya and *Ayine-e-Akbari* about census of contemporary periods. The present form of Census to be taken across the country at a regular interval of ten years was introduced by the British Government in India from the year 1881 vide Home Department Circular no. 2 of 23 July 1856. Thus, there was no enactment for it. However, the Census Act was passed in the year 1948 only after independence. The Seventh Census of the country and the first after independence was conducted in the year 1951 and the subsequent censuses are being conducted under this Act. The Census organisation collects, tabulates, and publishes the data based on actual information voluntarily furnished by the informants during the census enumeration. On the subject of religion, census instructions to the enumerators allow all religions to be recorded fully and faithfully as reported by the respondents. The enumerators are specifically instructed to record the religion as returned by the respondents and not to involve into any dispute. The informant has the liberty to check/verify the details recorded in the Census Schedule. There is no change in the instructions for the recording of religion from the earlier censuses. Thus, all the religions have a fair and equal opportunity to be recorded during the census as reported by their followers. It is noteworthy that every decennial census provides an interesting picture of the religious persuasions of the people of the country. In this chapter an attempt is made to present followers of tribal religion as recorded in census reports following the classification of these people by the administration in every census.

10.1 Recording of Religion in Pre-Independence Census

The Census data on religion was presented under the category of Social and Cultural Tables Series from 1872. In the pre-independence period presentation of religion related data was more elaborate. In most of the earlier Censuses, for example in the Censuses of 1911, 1921, and 1931, there were more theme tables on the distribution of population by each major religion. Themes were: age and sex break up by religion; education by religion; and break

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up between town and city divide in addition to Province and State. It is important to mention that in the Census of 1881, two tables showing (i) number of persons with unsound mind by religion arranged by Provinces, and (ii) state were also presented. In the 1941 Census, however, no religion table was presented owing probably to war like conditions prevailing then which restricted the tabulation of Census data.

10.1.1 Census 1872–1891

Table A.10.1 shows the population by tribal religion in 1872, 1881, and 1891 Censuses. Though the circular for census operation was made in 1856 it was in the year 1871–1872 that the first effort was made to the taking of a general Census for the whole of India. Unfortunately, the enumeration was not carried out in all of the provinces on the consideration of expenses and possibility of disturbance it might cause in certain provinces (MoC 1871–72:5). In 1872 the population of tribal religion was clubbed under the 'Others' category which included chiefly the aboriginal or hill tribes. If we see the Table A.10.1 of 1872 census column, we can find that a maximum 40 per cent of population returned who professed tribal religion. Similarly, in Bengal Province 32.8 per cent were found following tribal religion. The majority of population reporting tribal religion belonged to Central and Bengal Provinces. A total of five million persons under the category of 'Others' came from the Central provinces, Bengal, Assam, and Berar.

In the 1881 Census the tribal religions were clubbed under the 'aboriginal' category. Here, if a person belonged to some aboriginal or Non-Hindu tribe, enumerators entered the name of his tribe, as Garo, Khasi, etc. In the 1881 Census, most of the population by tribal religion was returned from Bengal Provinces (32per cent) followed by Central Provinces (27.3per cent). The religions which have been considered eligible for separate entry, whether on account of the number of their followers in Bengal or of their importance in other provinces are 14 in number; viz., Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Brahmos, Jains, Jews, Parsis, Santals, Kols, Other Western Aborigines, Eastern Aborigines, and lastly all others. In the Census of 1872, the population by religion was divided into five categories only viz., Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, and all others.

Nevertheless, there were ambiguities. With regard to some of the above faiths identified in 1872, there was no doubt that they stood distinctly apart. The followers of a religion were well distinguished. They were also well acknowledged people and an appreciable constituent of population in the country. The Sikhs, the Mahomedans (Muslims), the Jews, and the Parsis, even during the time of first enumeration had an individuality which was impossible to mistake. The Christians professed a faith which separated them from all other religious followers even within a community. The Buddhists and the Jains also differed from each other and from the other religious groups around them in terms of beliefs, rituals, and manners, though they have been said to possess much in common. But the problem was with the tribes who displayed much in common with neighbouring Hindu practices. Nevertheless, efforts were made for an objective assessment of differences and enumeration.

In the 1891 Census, the term 'Animistic' was adopted comprehensively for the religions of 'Forest Tribes' who did not accept the Hindu system, and were not converted to Christianity or Islam (CoI 1891: 87). Though during that time much debate already prevailed on the concept of animism, the Census officers extensively used the definition for-

warded by Dr. C.P. Tiele, a Dutch theology scholar. His definition was somewhat wider than those which other writers on the subject had given. It is useful to cite his definition here:

> Animism...is the belief in the existence of souls or spirits, of which only the powerful-those on which man feels himself dependent, and before which he stands in awe-acquire the rank of divine beings, and become objects of worship. These spirits are conceived as moving freely through earth and air, and, either their own accord, or because conjured by some spell, and thus under compulsion, appearing to men (Spiritism). But they may also take up their abode, either temporarily or permanently, in some object, whether living or lifeless it matters not, and this object as endowed with higher power, is then worshipped or employed to protect individual or communities (Fetishism).
>
> *(Tiele:9)*

Thus, in the census, tribal religion was distinguished on the basis of animism, though there was confusion about its relation with Hindu castes. However, Hindus were not confused to declare them as Hindus. According to the Census 1891, the highest 24.7 per cent from Bengal Province, 20.6 per cent from Central India State, 17.2 per cent from Central Provinces and 10.4 per cent from Assam Provinces are returned who were following tribal religion under the 'Animistic' category. The details of population by Tribal Religion as per the 1871–1872, 1818, and 1891 Census are given at Table A.10.1.

10.1.2 Census 1901–1911

Table A.10.2 shows the population by tribal religion in two censuses, 1901 and 1911. In the 1901 Census, there was a doubt about the notion of tribal religion. Though it is recognised as 'the oldest of the religions recorded in the Census' its nomenclature in general and specific to a tribe was a problematic. It was coined as animism despite 'heterogeneous and uncomfortable superstitions'. The problem was to name the religion of a tribe. This problem had two dimensions. First was, as it is mentioned in the respective Census reports, that several tribes did not have the name for their faith and beliefs, except that they did not identify themselves as Hindus, Muslims, or Christians. The other problem, more challenging, was to make an objective assessment of differences between animism prevalent among the Hindus and the tribes. The dividing line between Hinduism and animism was thin and so also even at present. Moreover, amongst many of the lower caste Hindus the real working religion is nearer to the beliefs of the tribes than to the teaching of the *Vedas* (CoI 1901a:62). Despite this conceptual problem a working formula was prepared and the enumerators were instructed in the case of tribes who are neither Hindus nor Muslims, but had no word for their religious beliefs, to name the tribe itself in the column for religion (*see* CoI 1901:349).

According to the 1901 Census, the total number of animists in India, including name of the tribe in the column of religion slightly exceeded 8,000,000. Out of them nearly 26.1 per cent was recorded in Bengal; 17.1 per cent in the Central Provinces; 12.4 per cent in Assam; 11.6 per cent in the Central India Agency and 7.5 per cent in Madras. In these British territories tribal religion, as it was recorded in the name of animism, had a large concentration.

In the 1911 Census, 'Animism' was also used to cover the miscellany of 'superstitions' which prevailed among the primitive tribes in all parts of the world. These tribes were very vague in their religious conceptions. However, they were unanimous in their belief in the presence on earth of a shadowy crowd of powerful and malevolent beings. These beings lived in a hill, near a stream or patch or primeval forest, and were interested in the affairs of men. Illness and misfortunes of all kinds were attributed to their malevolence. This understanding which was prevalent then was the basis of identifying animists, like previous censuses, in the 1991 census. Broadly speaking, it may be said that the persons shown as animists in the Census returns are those who have not yet made a practice of worshipping Hindu gods and have not remodelled their original tribal organisation on the line of a Hindu caste.

According to the 1911 Census, the term animist was applied to forest tribes, Mundas, Santals, Bhils, etc. There is no name for these beliefs in any Indian vernacular, and in practice it is very difficult to draw the line between animism and Hinduism as already discussed. All persons who said they were Hindus, Muslims, or Christians, etc., were recorded as such. Those who did not declare belonging to any recognised religion were entered under the name of their caste or tribe. In the course of tabulation all such persons were treated as Hindus if they belonged to a recognised Hindu caste. Those who belonged to forest tribes outside the caste system, e.g. Bhils, Khonds, Garos, Todas, etc., were classed as animists. The population by Tribal Religion as per 1901 and 1911 Censuses are given at Table A.10.2.

10.1.3 Census 1921–1941

Table A.10.3 shows the population by tribal religion in the 1921, 1931, and 1941 Censuses. In 1921, the enumerators were given standing instructions that they should enter in the Census Schedule the name of the tribes who were not converted to Hindus, Muslims, Christians, etc. These entries were classified and tabulated under the heading 'Tribal Religion' in the Census Table. In 1931, the Census terms were Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, Sikh, Zoroastrian, Jew, Muslim, Christian, Tribal, and Others. In case of the tribe, the name of tribe was recorded as the name of their religion. Similarly, in the 1941 Census, the same procedure was followed for enumeration of tribal religion. Tribal name was recorded. The figures of Tribal Religions show a decrease of 15.28 per cent since the 1921 Census; these figures being primarily due to the losses by conversion to Hinduism or Christianity. Similarly, the figures of Tribal Religions show a big hike of 207 per cent since the 1931 Census. The result has been unknown due to World War II.

In the 1921 to 1931 Censuses the general arrangement was the same table VI in the Indian Census Table of 1911 except that the heading 'Animist' changed to 'Tribal Religions'. Again in 1941 Census the heading 'Tribal Religion' changed to 'Tribes' only. The population by Tribal Religion from 1921 to 1941 Censuses is given in Table A.10.3.

10.2 Recording of Religion in Post-Independence Census

In the post-independence period, the concerns and priorities changed. This is evident from the cautious approach adopted with regard to presentation of religion related data in the form of religion tables. In almost all the Censuses of the post-independence period, only one religion table was presented which generally showed distribution of six major religions for

total, rural and urban areas separately for state, district, *tehsil,* and town levels. The table generally had an appendix and or an annexure.

10.2.1 Census 1951

This was the first Census after independence, where the population of tribal religion is clubbed under the category 'Tribal'. Although the classification of statistics by religion was considered not satisfactory as early as 1921, the difficulty really lay in finding a suitable basis of classification to take the place of religious differentiation. Despite the political independence won in 1947 and the emphasis laid on the secular character of the Indian Union, classification of religions still remained hazy. Whatever little doubt that existed previously about religious doctrines influenced the determination of the social custom considered so vital for demological studies. Up to 1941, there was focus on classification of population according to religion. Then the focus of attention shifted from religion to economics. In the Census of 1951, therefore, the exhibition of statistics for details of sex, age, and civil condition was done with reference to economic classification and not by religion or community. A separate table D-II showing simply the record of the number of followers of each religion by males and females has been inserted (*see* CoI 1951:413).

After several censuses, it is not necessary to explain what is meant by religion or community or to expatiate on the definitions of the different religions, viz., Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, etc. It is, however, worth bearing in mind that the criterion of classification of the population by religion in some cases has undergone changes in the past. Up to 1921, the tribal population (with a tag 'primitive') was classified as 'animist', but in 1931, they were known as 'tribal'. In 1941, the designation changed to 'tribes' while in 1951, it finally stood as Scheduled Tribes. It is to be mentioned further that the change introduced was not confined to nomenclature alone. The component-groups changed from time to time. As a result, it becomes risky to compare unadjusted census population of different censuses. Moreover, in 1941, the classification was done by communities rather than by religions as was being done before, largely on account of the difficulties in the classification of the tribal population. In the Census of 1951, the population has been classified by religions, namely, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jains, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Jews, and Other Religions – Tribal and Non-Tribal (CoI 1951:413–414).

Individual's choice was given importance in the determination of an individual's religion in the Census of 1951. Obviously, the ground of investigation for the enumeration agency was not the determining criterion. The instruction given to the enumerators in the matter of recording the religion was as follows:

> you are particularly cautioned not to have any controversy on religion. Accept the reply as given by the person to be enumerated … if the person says that he does not believe in any religion or has no religion, record him as Atheist.
>
> If a person given the name of a caste or sub caste as his religion, you should enter the religion of which it is a sect. In case of doubt you may record the exact answer as given by the person. If a person is not able to give the name of his religion but appear

> to be an adherent of some religion, you may ascertain the religion by asking the name of the deities or by making enquiries from co-villagers.
>
> *(CoI 1951a:392–293)*

Evidently, it indicates how people were not concerned about the name of religion; though every person or community followed some sorts of faiths and beliefs without bothering about a name which is now very crucial.

The old classification of population by religions followed up to the 1931 Census was replaced in 1941 by a classification by communities. This change of classification affected the 1941 figures relating to the tribal communities to an extent which had made their comparison with previous Censuses. The 1951 census being the first census after Independence is crucial to understand post-Independence perspective. Therefore, Table A.10.4 presents the population by tribal religion in the 1951 census.

10.2.2 Census 1961–1971

Table A.10.5 and A.10.6 show the total population return by tribal religion in the 1961 and 1971 Censuses. In the 1961 Census, figures of other religions which were numerically less important are grouped in a 'Other Religions and Persuasions' (**ORP**) category. The faiths in animism were clubbed under this category.

The category of ORP was divided into three sub-categories namely:

(i) animist: faith in animism (i.e. belief in natural objects and phenomena like trees) were proposed to be grouped under the category animists'
(ii) faith/belief/persuasion observed by the tribal communities: Various tribal beliefs, persuasions and faiths based on spirits, deities, rituals, superstitions, etc. which were referred to as indigenous tribal religion in the literatures of previous Censuses were grouped under this category
(iii) unspecified: There were several religions with names which did not denote any specific religion/faith/persuasion

Similarly, in the 1971 Census the same procedure was followed for 'Others'. Recording of the actual religion was returned fully. Figures of other religions were grouped together in the column ORP. Details of ORP, the strength of which at the country level was 100 and above each appeared in Appendix 'A' accompanying the table. In case of each of the remaining faiths the strength of which was less than 100, the total population for each of the States/Union Territories has been given in Appendix 'B' (CoI 1971:87).

A total of 45 different individual Tribal Religions were returned during the Census enumeration in 1961.

In West Bengal 'Others' names returned as Tribal Religion are Santhal (38), Paharia (six), Marangburu (701) and Saridharam. In 1951 Census, Saridharm, which was hitherto not found a place in the returns for religion in Bengal, was recorded as the religion of 35,928 persons all of whom are tribals chiefly belonging to the Santal tribe who were enumerated in the districts of Bankura and Purulia.

'Sari' means truth. Saridharm may, therefore, mean either true religion or religion based on truth. The Special Officer for Tribal Welfare, Purulia, reported that the founder

of Saridharm was one Sadhuram Murmu of village Khamarbandi, Pargana Silda in the Midnapore district who sub-divided the Santals into three groups viz., (1) the Um-hor i.e. the Christian, (2) the Saka-hor i.e. the followers of Lord Siva, and lastly (3) the Bonga-hor i.e. the followers of Saridharm. Towards the beginning of 1961, in a meeting he urged Santals to return Saridharm as their religion. A section of the local opinion was reported to be inclined to the view that Saridharm was not essentially a form of religion or belief, but a politically conceived movement directed towards exploiting the separatist tendency amongst the tribals (CoI 1961a : 219–226).

In Nagaland the majority of Nagas who were Christians enumerated themselves as Christians; and so they have been presented under 'Christian' entry. Other Nagas who were not Christians and who professed their own tribal religion have been shown under ORP (CoI 1961b: 154). In the 1961 Census, Konyak (1,452), Chang Naga (3,005), Wanchoo (2,557), Lumbasabo (1,452), Yimchunger (1,255), etc. were returned under tribal religion.

In 1961 the majority of tribal religions were enumerated as Sarna (428,687), Ho (191, 239), Garo (175,236), Khasi (174,052), Santhal (91,063), and so on. The details of population by Tribal Religion in Census 1961 are at Table A.10.5.

Census 1971 provided a variety of answers on religion, some spurious and some being merely sects of a major religion. The Census enumerators had instructions to record the religion as actually returned by a respondent. For the sake of convenience of recording the answers as well as of subsequent tabulation, abbreviations were prescribed for major religions as 'H' for Hinduism, 'I' for Islam, 'C' for Christianity, 'S' for Sikhism, 'B' for Buddhism, and 'J' for Jainism and in respect of others the actual religion as returned was recorded. Where a person said that he had no religion, it was recorded accordingly.

In the 1971 Census a total of 93 different followers of tribal religion was recorded. The majority of tribal religions were returned as Sarna (951,558), Saridharam (161,942), Songsarek (951,558), Khasi (138,739), Tribal Religion (108,225), Santal (82,473), Nishang/Nisssi/Bangni/Dafla (78,321), Adi (52,456), Dono Pholo/Doni Polo (36,954), Meitei (33,075), and so on. The details of tribal religion in 1971 Census are given at Table A.10.6.

10.2.3 Census 1981–1991

Table A.10.7 and A.10.8 show the population by tribal religion in the 1981 and 1991 Censuses. In the 1981 census the table gives data for persons, male and females separately for each of the six major religious communities viz., Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains, and the combined figures for 'ORP' and religion not stated by total, rural and urban for India, States/Union Territories. The figures of other religions have been grouped together in the column 'ORP'.

In the 1981 Census, 116 individual tribal religions in total were returned, where 44 tribal religions were from Arunachal Pradesh. The majority of tribal population were returned as Swarna (Sarna) (1,391,178), Sari Dharma (221,991), Doni Polo/Sidonyi Polo (218,489), Khasi (148,437), Gondi (127,926), Songsarek (127, 201), Shnong (40,774), Santal (32,252), Adi (27,130), and so on. The details of Population by Tribal Religion as per Census 1981 are given at Table A.10.7.

In the 1991 Census, the same procedure and method were followed for the recording of other religions. The combined figures for 'Other religions and persuasions' (including

unclassified religion returns) and 'religion not stated' by total, rural and urban for India, States/Union territories, districts, etc. were published under C-9 Religion Table of the Census Report.

Compared with the 1981 Census, only 50 tribal religions were returned in the 1991 Census. The majority of tribal population were returned as Sawrna (Sarna) (1,820,454), Sari Dharma (380,007), Doni Polo/Sidonyi Polo (279,450), Khasi (111,750), Songsarek (94,846), Gond/Gondi (67,111), Niamtre (61,599), Tribal Religion (32,718) etc. and so on. The details are given at Table A.10.8.

10.2.4 Census 2001–2011

Table A.10.9 shows the population by tribal religion in the 2001 and 2011 Censuses. In Census 2001, the religion details were collected in respect of every individual and this information was classified/grouped under six main religions namely Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, and Sikhism. The minor religions, tribal names, or beliefs and other persuasions were clubbed together and shown under the category 'Other Religions and Persuasions'.

In the 2011 Census, the enumerators were instructed to record the religion of each member of the household as returned by the respondents in reply to question number seven of the Household Schedule. Religion subject was asked in question number seven of the Schedule. Here it is important to mention that the recording of the name of the religion of each and every individual/respondent was the sole discretion of the respondent itself. The enumerators had to fill the name of religion as reported by the respondents without any argument or dispute.

In Census, religious data are published under the headings: (I) Hindu, (II) Muslim, (III) Sikh, (IV) Christian, (V) Buddhist, (VI) Jain, (VII) Other Religions and Persuasions (ORP), and (VIII) Religion Not Stated. At the time of compilation of religious data the 'No Religion or Non-Religious' returns are tabulated under the heading 'Religion Not Stated'. The details on the population by Tribal Religion as per the 2001 and 2011 Censuses are given at Table A.10.9.

10.3 Conclusion

Religion is an important component of human society. Tribes are not an exception to it, though the majority of the population may not know its name till they have a religon. Each tribal community holds its religion in high respect and admiration. Each tribe wants to be identified in terms of its religion. In the decadal Censuses, the respondents have full liberty to record their religion as and what they wish to and the enumerators are directed to record as it is. As tribes could not name their religion in earlier Censuses, enumeration became problematic. So, their religions have been clubbed under different names and headings. In the Census Report of 1891 J. A. Baines, the then Commissioner for Census of India, classified some groups of people as 'Forest Tribes' under the sub-heading of 'Agricultural and Pastoral Castes'. In the 1901 Census, Sir Herbert Hope Risley classified them as 'Animists'. In 1911 E. Gait further classified them as 'Tribal Animists' or people following 'Tribal Religion'. J.H. Hutton (1931) categorised them as 'Hill and Forest Tribes' and again in 1941 Census the heading 'Tribal Religion' has been changed to 'Tribes' only. In all these censuses, the word tribe has not been defined. After independence, in the Census of 1951,

the population has been classified by religions, namely, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jains, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Jews, and Other Religions – Tribal and Non-Tribal. In the 1961 Census, figures of other religions which were numerically less important have been grouped in 'Other Religions and Persuasions' (ORP) category. The faiths in animism are clubbed under this category. In the 2011 Census the same procedure has been followed.

The population by Tribal Religion in Different Census years has not been identical; there have been a lot of changes in it. If we observe the growth rate in the different censuses, it has been shown that the figures have decreased from 44 per cent in the 1891 Census by 7.5 per cent in the 1901 Census. Similarly the population under tribal religion has decreased in 1921 (-5.05 per cent) and 1931 (-15.28 per cent). It is very interesting to look at the growth rate of the 1941 Census; there is an increase of 207 per cent in the tribal population by religion. In the first Census of independent India in 1951, again 80.4 per cent of tribal religion population decreased. The percentage of tribal religion population also deceased in the 1961 (-74.31 per cent) census. In the 1971 census annual growth rate was 59.62 per cent; in 1981 it was 24.99 per cent; in 1991 it was 15.2 per cent; in 2001 it was 117.46 per cent and in 2011 the growth rate was found 21.66 per cent.

Lastly, in each and every census there is a change in the type of professing tribal beliefs and persuasions. Sometimes, even completely new tribal religions are found. As a result, the numbers of tribal religions keep increasing and decreasing in every census. As per the procedure followed during the census, the enumerators have been instructed to record the religion of each member of the household as per the answer given by the respondents to the question. In the case of other religions, the enumerators are instructed to write the full name of the religion indicated by each respondent. 'Other Religions and Persuasion' (ORP) is the category under which the innumerable tribal religions, beliefs, and persuasion (among a few others) reported by the respondents during the census work are classified and published in the Appendix Table of Religions. It is obvious, recording tribal religion in censuses is yet problematic. This has become a cause of asserting religious identities by communities in recent years.

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ANNEXURE 10A

Table A.10.1 The Population by Tribal Religion (as per 1871–1872, 1818, and 1891 Censuses)

Sl. No.	*India and Provinces*	*Others (1871–1872)*		*Aboriginal (1881)*		*Animistic Religions (Forest Tribes etc.) (1891)*	
		Total	*%*	*Total*	*%*	*Total*	*%*
A	**INDIA**	**5,102,823**	**100**	**6,426,511**	**100**	**9,280,466**	**100**
B	**PROVINCES**	**5,102,823**	**100**	**6,426,511**	**100**	**5,848,427**	**63.0**
1	Bengal	1,672,058	32.8	2,055,822	32.0	2,294,506	24.7
2	Assam	16,640	0.32	488,251	7.6	969,765	10.4
3	North West Provinces	586	0.01	–		–	–
4	Ajmere	65	0.0	–	–	–	–
5	Punjab	945,919	18.53	–	–	–	–
6	Central Provinces	2,041,276	40.0	1,753,917	27.3	1,592,149	17.2
7	Berar	163,150	3	37,338	0.6	137,108	1.5
8	Mysore	57	–	–	–	–	–
9	Coorg	10	–	–	–	–	–
10	British Burma	110,514	2.16	–	–	168,449	1.8
11	Madras	4,328	0.1	–	–	472,808	5.1
12	Bombay Presidency	148,220	2.9	931,894	14.5	213,618	2.3
13	Rajputana	–	–	166,343	2.6	–	–
14	Baroada	–	–	101,522	1.6	–	–
15	Central India	–	–	891,424	13.9	–	–
16	Andamans	–	–	–	–	24	–
C	**STATE**	–	–	–	–	**3,432,039**	**37.0**
17	Hyderabad	–	–	–	–	29,130	0.3
18	Baroda State	–	–	–	–	29,854	0.3
19	Rajputana	–	–	–	–	411,078	4.4
20	Central India	–	–	–	–	1,916,209	20.6
21	Bombay State	–	–	–	–	97,641	1.1
22	Central Province State	–	–	–	–	489,572	5.3
23	Bengal State	–	–	–	–	458,555	4.9

Sources: (a) MoC 1871–72: 50.
(b)The Indian Empire, Census of 1881: 9-32.
(c) CoI 1891: 93.

Table A.10.2 The Population by Tribal Religion (as per 1901–1911 Censuses)

Sl. No.	*Provinces, States & Agency*	*Animistic (1901)*		*Primitive [Animistic (1911)]*	
		Total	*%*	*Total*	*%*
A	**INDIA**	**8,584,148**	**100**	**10,295,168**	**100**
B	**PROVINCES**	**5,899,194**	**69**	**7,348,024**	**71.30**
1	Ajmer–Merwara	–	–	3,979	0.0
2	Andaman and Nicobar	8,198	0.1	9,711	0.1
3	Assam	1,068,334	12.4	1,109,187	10.8
4	Bengal	2,242,770	26.1	730,182	7.1
5	Bihar and Orissa	–	–	2,220,526	21.6
	Bihar	–	–	792,686	0
	Orissa	–	–	101,483	0
	Chota Nagpur	–	–	1,326,357	0
6	Bombay	–	–	170,355	1.7
	Bombay (Presidency)	69,930	0.8	161,484	0
	Sindh	–	–	8,869	0
	Aden	–	–	2	0
7	Burma*	399,390	4.7	701,473	6.8
8	Central Provinces and Berar	1,465,537	17.1	1,744,921	16.9
	Central Provinces	1,335,573	–	1,617,060	0
	Berrar	129,964	–	127,861	0
9	Coorg	3,305	0	19,227	0.2
10	Madras	641,730	7.5	638,463	6.2
C	**STATE & AGENCIES**	**2,684,954**	**31.3**	**2,947,144**	**28.6**
11	Assam State (Manipur)	–	–	130,093	1.3
12	Baroda State	176,250	2.1	115,411	1.1
13	Bengal State	537,698	6.3	598	0
14	Bihar and Orissa State			499,762	4.9
15	Bombay State	24,915	0.3	149,879	1.5
16	Central India Agency	992,458	11.6	483,394	4.7
17	Central Provinces State	408,973	4.8	745,434	7.2
18	Hyderabad State	65,315	0.8	285,722	2.8
19	Madras State	32,175	0.4	19,953	0.2
20	Mysore State	86,627	1.0	72,196	0.7
21	Rajputana Agency	360,543	4.2	444,702	4.3

Sources: (a) CoI 1901a:62; (b) CoI 1911:42.
*Burma Provinces is presently part of Republic of the Union of Myanmar.

Table A.10.3 The Population by Tribal Religion (as per 1921 to 1941 Censuses)

Sl. No.	*Provinces, States or Agency*	*Tribal Religions (1921)*		*Tribal Religions (1931)*		*Tribes (1941)*	
		Total	*%*	*Total*	*%*	*Total*	*%*
A	**INDIA**	**9,774,611**		**8,280,347**		**25,441,497**	
B	**PROVINCES**	**6,904,167**	**70.6**	**5,779,709**	**69.8**	**16,713,256**	**65.69**
1	Ajmer–Merwara	4,736	0.0	1,509	0.0	91,472	0.4
2	Andamans and Nicobars	9,174	0.1	9,955	0.1	11,076	0.1
	Andaman Islands	–	–	474	–	–	0.0
	Nicobar Islands	–	–	9,481	0.1	11,076	
3	Assam	1,124,809	11.5	711,432	8.6	2,484,996	14.9
4	Baluchistan (District and Administrated Territories)	–	–	66	–	3	0.0
5	Bengal	845,780	8.7	528,037	6.4	1,889,389	7.4
6	Bihar and Orissa	1,881,009	19.2	2,048,809	24.7	6,776,653	26.6
	Bihar	819,159	–	888,370			
	Orissa	65,046	–	74,891			
	Chota Nagpur	996,804	–	1,085,548			
7	Bombay (Presidency)	122,939	1.3	129,135	1.6	1,651,117	6.5
	Bombay	115,134	–	128,931		1,614,298	
	Sindh	7,803	–	204		36,819	
	Aden	2	–		–	–	
8	Burma*	702,587	7.2	650,388	7.9	–	
9	Central Province and Berar	1,614,013	16.5	1,351,615	16.3	2,937,364	11.5
	Central Provinces	1,453,312	–	1,302,463		2,663,959	
	Berrar	160,701	–	49,152		273,405	
10	Coorg	20,722	0.2			19,723	0.1
11	Madras	578,398	5.9	348,763	4.2	562,029	2.2
12	Uttar Pradesh	–	–	–	–	289,422	1.1
	Agra	–	–	–	–	289,244	
	Oudh	–	–	–	–	178	0.0
13	PanthPiploda	–	–	–	–	12	0.0
C	**STATE and AGENCIES**	**2,870,444**	**29.4**	**2,500,638**	**30.2**	**8,728,241**	**34.3**
14	Assam State (Manipur)	131,832	1.3	280,958	3	339,137	1.3

(*Continued*)

Table A.10.3 (Continued)

Sl. No.	*Provinces, States or Agency*	*Tribal Religions (1921)*		*Tribal Religions (1931)*		*Tribes (1941)*	
		Total	*%*	*Total*	*%*	*Total*	*%*
15	Baluchistan (Agencies Tracts)**	–	–	2	–	–	0.0
16	Baroda State	163,077	1.7	44,890	1	373,207	1.5
17	Bengal States	3,265	0.0	1,382	0	751,022	3.0
18	Bihar and Orissa States	456,934	4.7	360,600	4	–	0.0
19	Bombay States	66,942	0.7	25,903	0	–	0.0
20	Central India Agency	399,469	4.1	340,752	4	1,137,716	4.5
21	Gwalior State	161,629	1.7	–	–	245,066	1.0
22	Central Provinces States	500,033	5.1	617,599	7	–	0.0
23	Hyderabad State	430,748	4.4	544,789	7	678,149	2.7
24	Kashmir State	–	–	134	–	29,374	0.1
25	Madras State	13,005	0.1	2,907	0	8	0.0
	Cochin State	368	–	–	–	5,183	0.0
	Travancore State	12,637		2,907		132,682	0.5
26	Mysore State	62,831	0.6	23,828	0	9,405	0.0
27	Rajputana Agency	480,679	4.9	229,092	3	1,624,488	6.4
28	Sikkim States	–	–	26,940	0	63,206	0.2
29	Western India States Agency	–	–	862	0	17,211	0.1
30	Chhattisgarh	–	–	–	–	1,817,712	7.1
31	Deccan (Kolhapur)	–	–	–	–	8,678	0.0
32	Gujarat	–	–	–	–	626,892	2.5
33	Madras	–	–	–	–	8	0.0
34	Orissa	–	–	–	–	864,914	3.4
35	Punjab	–	–	–	–	779	0.0
36	U.P States	–	–	–	–	3,404	0.0

Sources: (a) CoI 1921:44; (b) CoI 1931:519 and (c) CoI 1941:101.
*Burma Provinces is presently part of Republic of the Union of Myanmar.
**Baluchistan (Agencies Tracts) Now in Pakistan.

Table A.10.4 The Population by Tribal Religion (as per 1951 Census)

Sl. no.	*Provinces, States or Agency*		*Other Religion (Tribal)*	
			Total	*%*
	INDIA		**4,985,645**	**100**
	STATE AND SUB-DIVISION		**1,661,891**	**33.33**
1	Bihar		871,434	17.47
		North Bihar Plain	–	0
		South Bihar Plain	4,394	0.08
		Chhota Nagpur	867,040	17.39
2	Orissa		2,576	0.05
		Orissa Inland	2,576	0.05
		Orissa Coastal	–	0
3	West Bengal		109,294	2.19
		Himalayan West Bengal	22,130	0.44
		West Bengal Plain	87,164	1.74
4	Assam		527,712	10.58
		Assam Plains	37,727	0.75
		Assam Hills	489,985	9.82
5	Manipur		124,485	2.49
6	Tripura		684	0.01
7	Madhya Pradesh		1,183	0.02
		North West Madhya Pradesh	56	0
		East Madhya Pradesh	1,127	0.02
		South West Madhya Pradesh	–	0
8	Hyderabad		24,503	0.49
		North Hyderabad	24,503	0.49
		South Hyderabad	–	0
9	Andaman and Nicobar Islands		20	0
	ZONES, REGIONS & SUB-REGIONS		**3,323,754**	**66.66**
10	East India		1,636,191	32.81
11	Central India		25,686	0.51
12	Himalayan Region		675,017	13.53
		Western Himalayan Sub Region	–	0
		Eastern Himalayan Sub Region	675,017	13.53
13	Northern Plains Region		91,558	1.83
		Lower Gangetic Plains Sub-Region	91,558	1.83
		Upper Gangetic Plains Sub-Region	–	0
		Trans Gangetic Plains Sub-Region	–	0
		The Desert Sub-Region	–	0

(*Continued*)

Table A.10.4 (Continued)

Sl. no.	*Provinces, States or Agency*	*Other Religion (Tribal)*	
		Total	*%*
14	Peninsula Hills and Plateau Region	895,302	17.95
	North West Hills Sub-Region	–	0
	North Central Hills and Plateau Sub Region	56	0
	North East Plateau Sub-Region	870,743	17.46
	North Deccan Sub-Region	–	0
	South Deccan Sub-Region	24,503	0.49

Source: CoI 1951:16–17.

Table A.10.5 The Population by Tribal Religion (as per 1961 Census)

Sl. No.	*Name of Tribal Religion*	*India/State*	*Total*
1	**Sarna**	**India**	428,687
		Bihar	427,080
		Orissa	1,498
		Madhya Pradesh	109
2	**Ho**	**India**	191,239
		Bihar	191,239
3	**Garo**	**India**	175,236
		Assam	175,236
4	**Khasi**	**India**	174,052
		Assam	174,052
5	**Santal**	**India**	91,063
		Bihar	91,024
		West Bengal	38
		Andaman and Nicobar Islands	1
6	**Naga**	**India**	51,626
		Assam	567
		Nagaland	51,059
7	**Saridhram**	**India**	35,928
		West Bengal	35,928
8	**Konyak**	**India**	33,820
		Nagaland	33,820
9	**Sansari**	**India**	28,664
		Assam	189
		Bihar	28,346
10	**Mikir**	**India**	20,891
		Assam	20,891
11	**Animist**	**India**	14,818
		Assam	14,818
12	**Bonga**	**India**	5,351
		Bihar	5,351
13	**Paharia**	**India**	3,868
		Bihar	3,862
		West Bengal	6
14	**Nicobarese**	**India**	3,201
		Andman & Nicobar Islands	3,201
15	**Chang Naga**	**India**	3,005
		Nagaland	3,005
16	**Wanchoo**	**India**	2,568
		North East Frontier Agency	11
		Nagaland	2,557
17	**Adivasi**	**India**	2,281
		Bihar	1,784
		Maharashtra	497
18	**Munda**	**India**	1,593
		Bihar	1,584
		Andaman and Nicobar Islands	9

(*Continued*)

Table A.10.5 (Continued)

Sl. No.	*Name of Tribal Religion*	*India/State*	*Total*
19	**Lumbasabo**	**India**	1,452
		Nagaland	1,452
20	**Yimchunger**	**India**	1,255
		Nagaland	1,255
21	**Boro**	**India**	1,215
		Assam	1,215
22	**Rabha**	**India**	1,110
		Assam	1,110
23	**Miri**	**India**	1,053
		Assam	953
		North East Frontier Agency	100
24	**Hajong**	**India**	1,052
		Assam	1,052
25	**Kharwar**	**India**	987
		Bihar	987
26	**Marangburu**	**India**	768
		Bihar	67
		West Bengal	701
27	**Manipuri**	**India**	486
		Assam	486
28	**Minyong**	**India**	414
		North East Frontier Agency	414
29	**Gallong**	**India**	291
		North East Frontier Agency	291
30	**Birsa**	**India**	290
		Bihar	290
31	**Ahom**	**India**	285
		Assam	285
		Bihar	275
32	**Mahili**	**India**	213
		Bihar	213
33	**Bhumij**	**India**	202
		Bihar	202
34	**Kharwal**	**India**	167
		Bihar	167
35	**Sing Bonga**	**India**	158
		Bihar	158
36	**Dafla**	**India**	155
		North East Frontier Agency	155
37	**Kharwa**	**India**	150
		Bihar	150
38	**Adidharma**	**India**	144
		Bihar	144
39	**Apatani**	**India**	136
		North East Frontier Agency	136

(*Continued*)

Table A.10.5 (Continued)

Sl. No.	*Name of Tribal Religion*	*India/State*	*Total*
40	**Onges**	**India**	129
		Andaman and Nicobar Islands	129
41	**Padam**	**India**	117
		North East Frontier Agency	117
42	**Bhundari**	**India**	116
		Bihar	116
43	**Mizo**	**India**	112
		Assam	112
44	**Tagin**	**India**	112
		North East Frontier Agency	112
45	**Krupa**	**India**	104
		Bihar	104

Source: CoI 1961:497–507.

Table A.10.6 The Population by Tribal Religion (Census 1971)

Sl. no.	*Name of Tribal Religion*	*India/State*	*Total*
1	**Abutani**	**India**	**1,930**
		Arunachal Pradesh	1,930
2	**Adi**	**India**	**52,465**
		Meghalaya	5
		Arunachal Pradesh	52,460
3	**Adi Dharma**	**India**	**1,309**
		Bihar	1,309
4	**AdiGallong/Adi-Galo/Gallong/Galo**	**India**	**4,959**
		Arunachal Pradesh	4,959
5	**Adi- Min Yong/Min Yong**	**India**	**2,151**
		Arunachal Pradesh	2,151
6	**AdiPadam/Padam**	**India**	**1,074**
		Arunachal Pradesh	1,074
7	**Adivasi**	**India**	**2,116**
		Bihar	2,116
8	**Aka**	**India**	**1,841**
		Arunachal Pradesh	1,841
9	**Amang**	**India**	**1,046**
		Manipur	1,046
10	**Animist**	**India**	**413**
		Meghalaya	184
		Andaman and Nicobar Island	229
11	**Apatani**	**India**	**12,753**
		Arunachal Pradesh	12,753
12	**Ashing**	**India**	**425**
		Arunachal Pradesh	425
13	**Baite**	**India**	**152**
		Manipur	152
14	**Bangro**	**India**	**1,050**
		Arunachal Pradesh	1,050
15	**Birsa**	**India**	**280**
		Bihar	280
16	**Bogum**	**India**	**455**
		Arunachal Pradesh	455
17	**Bokar**	**India**	**1,907**
		Arunachal Pradesh	1,907
18	**Bonga**	**India**	**4,391**
		Bihar	4,391
19	**Charawang**	**India**	**311**
		Manipur	311
20	**Chimprai**	**India**	**481**
		Manipur	481
21	**Chingtharai**	**India**	**347**
		Manipur	347

(*Continued*)

Table A.10.6 (Continued)

Sl. no.	*Name of Tribal Religion*	*India/State*	*Total*
22	**Chuna**	**India**	**105**
		Manipur	105
23	**Danpu**	**India**	**498**
		Manipur	498
24	**Digaru Mishmi/Taron Mishmi**	**India**	**3,431**
		Arunachal Pradesh	3,431
25	**Doibom**	**India**	**2,257**
		Manipur	2,257
26	**DoniPholos/Donipolo**	**India**	**36,954**
		Meghalaya	5
		Arunachal Pradesh	36,949
27	**Haokip**	**India**	**314**
		Manipur	314
28	**Hill-Miri**	**India**	**4,708**
		Arunachal Pradesh	4,708
29	**Ho**	**India**	**923**
		Bihar	923
30	**Idu-Mishmi/Idu**	**India**	**7,813**
		Arunachal Pradesh	7,813
31	**Jairea**	**India**	**185**
		Bihar	185
32	**Indoi**	**India**	**1,362**
		Manipur	1,362
33	**Kabui**	**India**	**5,020**
		Manipur	5,020
34	**KachingKarai**	**India**	**1,784**
		Manipur	1,784
35	**Kaman Mishmi/Miju Mishmi/Kaman Miju**	**India**	**4,315**
		Arunachal Pradesh	4,315
36	**Kasarai**	**India**	**385**
		Manipur	385
37	**Kharwal**	**India**	**146**
		Bihar	146
38	**Kharwar**	**India**	**7,418**
		Bihar	7,418
39	**Khasi**	**India**	**138,739**
		Meghalaya	138,739
40	**Kirako**	**India**	**293**
		Manipur	293
41	**Lagang**	**India**	**198**
		Manipur	198
42	**Lasang**	**India**	**111**
		Manipur	111
43	**Loibom**	**India**	**118**
		Manipur	118

(*Continued*)

Table A.10.6 (Continued)

Sl. no.	*Name of Tribal Religion*	*India/State*	*Total*
44	**Longmi/Ching**	**India**	**149**
		Manipur	149
45	**Mao Naga**	**India**	**147**
		Manipur	147
46	**Maramha**	**India**	**643**
		Manipur	643
47	**Marangboro**	**India**	**4,495**
		West Bengal	4,495
48	**Maring**	**India**	**2,457**
		Manipur	2,457
49	**Meitei**	**India**	**33,075**
		Manipur	33,075
50	**Mikir**	**India**	**3,285**
		Meghalaya	3,285
51	**Miji**	**India**	**3,450**
		Arunachal Pradesh	3,450
52	**Mishing/Miri**	**India**	**222**
		Arunachal Pradesh	222
53	**Mishmi**	**India**	**1,554**
		Arunachal Pradesh	1,554
54	**Munda**	**India**	**107**
		Bihar	107
55	**Naga**	**India**	**12,804**
		Manipur	12,804
56	**Nishang/Nissi/Bangni/Dafla**	**India**	**78,321**
		Arunachal Pradesh	78,321
57	**Nocte**	**India**	**15,980**
		Arunachal Pradesh	15,980
58	**Oraon**	**India**	**412**
		Bihar	412
59	**Paharia**	**India**	**3,384**
		Bihar	3,384
60	**Paomei**	**India**	**1,391**
61	**Paramha**	Manipur	1,391
		India	**1,094**
62	**Pasi**	Manipur	1,094
		India	**154**
63	**Nar (Pnar)**	Arunachal Pradesh	154
		India	**32,217**
64	**Pret Puja**	Meghalaya	32,217
		India	**388**
		Bihar	388
65	**Pusha**	**India**	**946**
		Manipur	946
66	**Rampou**	**India**	**1,361**
		Manipur	1,361

(*Continued*)

Table A.10.6 (Continued)

Sl. no.	*Name of Tribal Religion*	*India/State*	*Total*
67	**Rangang**	**India**	**334**
		Manipur	334
68	**Sansari**	**India**	**4,241**
		Bihar	4,241
69	**Santal**	**India**	**82,473**
		Bihar	79,970
		West Bengal	2503
70	**Saridharam**	**India**	**161,942**
		West Bengal	161,942
71	**Sarna**	**India**	**951,558**
		Bihar	859,701
		Orissa	91,857
72	**Sharabui**	**India**	**205**
		Manipur	205
73	**Sing Bonga**	**India**	**1,439**
		Bihar	1,439
74	**Singpho**	**India**	**163**
		Arunachal Pradesh	163
75	**Sohrai**	**India**	**106**
		Bihar	106
76	**Songsarek**	**India**	**143,206**
		Meghalaya	143,206
77	**Sulpi**	**India**	**115**
		Manipur	115
78	**Sulung**	**India**	**4,176**
		Arunachal Pradesh	4,176
79	**Sumtong**	**India**	**224**
		Manipur	224
80	**Swarna**	**India**	**24,034**
		West Bengal	24,034
81	**Tagin**	**India**	**13,547**
		Arunachal Pradesh	13,547
82	**Tana Bhagat**	**India**	**898**
		Bihar	898
83	**Tangsa**	**India**	**8,671**
		Arunachal Pradesh	8,671
84	**Tangsa/Longchang**	**India**	**118**
		Arunachal Pradesh	118
85	**Tangsa Longri**	**India**	**153**
		Arunachal Pradesh	153
86	**Tangsa/Morang**	**India**	**175**
		Arunachal Pradesh	175
87	**Tangsa/Mossang**	**India**	**899**
		Arunachal Pradesh	899

(*Continued*)

Table A.10.6 (Continued)

Sl. no.	*Name of Tribal Religion*	*India/State*	*Total*
88	**Tangsa/Rongrang**	**India**	**325**
		Arunachal Pradesh	325
89	**Tangsa/Tikhak**	**India**	**439**
		Arunachal Pradesh	439
90	**ThambungLainingba**	**India**	**502**
		Manipur	502
91	**Tribal Religion**	**India**	**108,225**
		Nagaland	108,152
		A and Nicobar Island	73
92	**Wancho**	**India**	**28,585**
		Arunachal Pradesh	28,585
93	**Yumlai**	**India**	**376**
		Manipur	376

Source: CoI, 1971: 97–109.

Table A.10.7 The Population by Tribal Religion (as per 1981 Census)

Sl. No.	*Name of the Religion*	*India/State/UT*	*Total*
1	**Abutani**	**India**	**208**
		Arunachal Pradesh	208
2	**Adi**	**India**	**27,130**
		Bihar	3,563
		Meghalaya	22
		Arunachal Pradesh	23,545
3	**Adi Dharm**	**India**	**356**
		Arunachal Pradesh	356
4	**AdiGallong/Adigalo/Gallong/Galo**	**India**	**5,724**
		Arunachal Pradesh	5,724
5	**AdiPadam/Padam**	**India**	**145**
		Arunachal Pradesh	145
6	**Adijor**	**India**	**390**
		Bihar	390
7	**Adivasi**	**India**	**25,377**
		Andhra Pradesh	32
		Bihar	15,862
		Gujarat	13
		Madhya Pradesh	6,768
		Maharashtra	1,381
		Orissa	18
		Punjab	20
		Rajasthan	20
		West Bengal	1,263
8	**Aka**	**India**	**1,882**
		West Bengal	27
		Arunachal Pradesh	1,855
9	**Amang**	**India**	**366**
		Manipur	366
10	**Animist**	**India**	**119**
		Nagaland	6
		Andaman& Nicobar	112
		Mizoram	1
11	**Apo Rangang**	**India**	**103**
		Manipur	103
12	**Baiga**	**India**	**1,097**
		Madhya Pradesh	1,097
13	**Bara Deo**	**India**	**302**
		Madhya Pradesh	302
14	**Bhumia**	**India**	**494**
		Madhya Pradesh	494
15	**Bidin**	**India**	**1,296**
		Bihar	1,296
16	**Birsa**	**India**	**522**
		Bihar	522

(*Continued*)

Table A.10.7 (Continued)

Sl. No.	*Name of the Religion*	*India/State/UT*	*Total*
17	**Boro**	**India**	**731**
		Meghalaya	718
		Tamil Nadu	13
18	**Bokar**	**India**	**108**
		Karnataka	5
		Kerala	4
		Meghalaya	4
		Arunachal Pradesh	95
19	**Bonga**	**India**	**327**
		Bihar	327
20	**Bori**	**India**	**219**
		Arunachal Pradesh	219
21	**Borung**	**India**	**548**
		Arunachal Pradesh	548
22	**Deori**	**India**	**2,169**
		Arunachal Pradesh	2,169
23	**Desauli**	**India**	**557**
		Bihar	557
24	**Digaru/Taraon Mishmi**	**India**	**972**
		Arunachal Pradesh	972
25	**Doni Polo/Sidonyi Polo**	**India**	**218,489**
		Arunachal Pradesh	218,484
		Manipur	1
		Meghalaya	2
		Chandigarh	2
26	**Dupub**	**India**	**2,043**
		Bihar	1,874
		Orissa	169
27	**Dupul Dharma**	**India**	**101**
		Bihar	101
28	**Gang**	**India**	**517**
		Arunachal Pradesh	517
29	**Garo**	**India**	**1,481**
		Meghalaya	1,481
30	**Gond**	**India**	**6,975**
		Madhya Pradesh	1,757
		Maharashtra	4,508
		Orissa	36
		Uttar Pradesh	674
31	**Gondi**	**India**	**127,926**
		Madhya Pradesh	127,926
32	**Hajong**	**India**	**112**
		Meghalaya	112
33	**Halba**	**India**	**101**
		Gujarat	13
		Madhya Pradesh	88

(*Continued*)

Table A.10.7 (Continued)

Sl. No.	*Name of the Religion*	*India/State/UT*	*Total*
34	**Hami Henowa**	**India**	**419**
		Arunachal Pradesh	419
35	**Heathen**	**India**	**1,215**
		Manipur	1,215
36	**Hema**	**India**	**157**
		Nagaland	157
37	**Heraka**	**India**	**1,450**
		Nagaland	1,450
38	**Ho**	**India**	**4,133**
		Bihar	4,104
		Orissa	19
		West Bengal	10
39	**Hori**	**India**	**623**
		Mizoram	623
40	**Idu/Idu Mishmi**	**India**	**5,539**
		Arunachal Pradesh	5,539
41	**Jaban**	**India**	**1,354**
		Arunachal Pradesh	1,354
42	**Jagan**	**India**	**965**
		Arunachal Pradesh	965
43	**Jahar**	**India**	**6,440**
		Bihar	5,426
		Madhya Pradesh	10
		Orissa	1,004
44	**Janbow**	**India**	**2,489**
		Arunachal Pradesh	2,489
45	**JarajoDeo**	**India**	**153**
		Meghalaya	153
46	**Jishomi**	**India**	**119**
		Nagaland	119
47	**Jobene**	**India**	**219**
		Arunachal Pradesh	219
48	**Jowangoon**	**India**	**1,066**
		Arunachal Pradesh	1,066
49	**Jungwansom**	**India**	**1,020**
		Arunachal Pradesh	1,020
50	**Kabui**	**India**	**4,728**
		Manipur	4,728
51	**Kachingkarai**	**India**	**227**
		Manipur	227
52	**Kaman/Miju Mishmi/Kaman Mishmi/Miju**	**India** Arunachal Pradesh	**214** 214
53	**Mikir**	**India**	**3,444**
		Meghalaya	3,444
54	**KayamKhani**	**India**	**216**
		Rajasthan	216

(*Continued*)

Table A.10.7 (Continued)

Sl. No.	*Name of the Religion*	*India/State/UT*	*Total*
55	**Kharwar**	**India**	**12,168**
		Bihar	12,134
		Orissa	12
		West Bengal	22
56	**Khasi**	**India**	**148,437**
		Meghalaya	148,437
57	**Kolha**	**India**	**170**
		Orissa	170
58	**Kom**	**India**	**305**
		Manipur	305
59	**Korku**	**India**	**123**
		Madhya Pradesh	123
60	**Lagang**	**India**	**1,406**
		Manipur	1,406
61	**Lasang**	**India**	**446**
		Meghalaya	446
62	**Lima**	**India**	**1,082**
		Nagaland	1,082
63	**Longchang/TangsaLongchang**	**India**	**1,646**
		Arunachal Pradesh	1,646
64	**Mao Naga**	**India**	**412**
		Manipur	412
65	**Marambanga**	**India**	**231**
		Orissa	231
66	**Marangboro**	**India**	**7,512**
		Bihar	370
		Orissa	235
		West Bengal	6,907
67	**Messinie Gudism**	**India**	**270**
		Mizoram	270
68	**Miji**	**India**	**2,774**
		Arunachal Pradesh	2,774
69	**Minyala**	**India**	**145**
		Arunachal Pradesh	145
70	**Mishmi**	**India**	**6643**
		Arunachal Pradesh	6643
71	**Moglum**	**India**	**785**
		Arunachal Pradesh	785
72	**Momba**	**India**	**224**
		Arunachal Pradesh	224
73	**Munda**	**India**	**1,160**
		Bihar	674
		Madhya Pradesh	28
		West Bengal	374
		Arunachal Pradesh	1

(*Continued*)

Table A.10.7 (Continued)

Sl. No.	*Name of the Religion*	*India/State/UT*	*Total*
74	**Muria**	**India**	**108**
		Madhya Pradesh	108
		India	**1,296**
75	**Naga**	Andhra Pradesh	1
		Manipur	1,252
		West Bengal	19
		Arunachal Pradesh	2
76	**Nash**	**India**	**171**
		Manipur	171
77	**Niamtre**	**India**	**7,903**
		Meghalaya	7,903
78	**Nishang/Nissi/Bangni/Dafla**	**India**	**2,814**
		Arunachal Pradesh	28,144
79	**Nocte**	**India**	**2,824**
		Arunachal Pradesh	2,824
80	**Oraon**	**India**	**484**
		Bihar	89
		Madhya Pradesh	246
		West Bengal	127
81	**Pagan**	**India**	**796**
		Manipur	243
		Meghalaya	283
		Nagaland	270
82	**Paharia**	**India**	**1,813**
		Bihar	1,746
		Himachal Pradesh	67
83	**Paomei**	**India**	**3,282**
		Manipur	3,282
84	**Pardhi**	**India**	**246**
		Maharashtra	246
85	**Pfutsana**	**India**	**1,701**
		Nagaland	1,701
86	**Pnar**	**India**	**9,404**
		Andhra Pradesh	2
		Meghalaya	9,402
87	**Push**	**India**	**294**
		Manipur	294
88	**Puyim**	**India**	**779**
		Nagaland	779
89	**Rabha**	**India**	**1,255**
		Meghalaya	1,255
90	**Rang**	**India**	**16,043**
		Arunachal Pradesh	16,043
91	**Rangang**	**India**	**129**
		Manipur	129
92	**Rangwan**	**India**	**1,541**
		Arunachal Pradesh	1,541

(*Continued*)

Table A.10.7 (Continued)

Sl. No.	*Name of the Religion*	*India/State/UT*	*Total*
93	**Rimit Matai**	**India**	**187**
		Arunachal Pradesh	187
		India	**739**
94	**Rongmei**	Manipur	739
95	**Rongrang/TangsaRongrang**	**India**	**399**
		Arunachal Pradesh	399
96	**Sanamahi**	**India**	**1538**
		Manipur	1538
97	**Sansari**	**India**	**6,699**
		Bihar	2,483
		Nagaland	3,909
		Orissa	307
98	**Santal**	**India**	**32,252**
		Bihar	20,814
		Haryana	2
		Maharashtra	2
		Orissa	477
		West Bengal	10,957
99	**Saora**	**India**	**371**
		Bihar	254
		Orissa	117
100	**Sarang**	**India**	**138**
		West Bengal	138
101	**Sari Dharma**	**India**	**221,991**
		Bihar	105
		Meghalaya	1
		West Bengal	221,885
102	**Sarisar**	**India**	**149**
		West Bengal	149
103	**Sauriya**	**India**	**262**
		Bihar	262
104	**Shnong**	**India**	**40,774**
		Meghalaya	40,774
105	**Sohrai**	**India**	**315**
		West Bengal	315
106	**Songsarek**	**India**	**127,201**
		Meghalaya	127,201
107	**Sajangnai**	**India**	**885**
		Arunachal Pradesh	885
108	**Swarna***	**India**	**1,391,178**
		Bihar	1,101,436
		Madhya Pradesh	108
		Maharashtra	2
		Manipur	7
		Orissa	269,208
		West Bengal	20,412
		Andaman & Nicobar	5

(*Continued*)

Table A.10.7 (Continued)

Sl. No.	*Name of the Religion*	*India/State/UT*	*Total*
109	**Tadvi**	**India**	**164**
		Maharashtra	164
110	**Tagin**	**India**	**1,489**
		Arunachal Pradesh	1,489
111	**Tana Bhagat**	**India**	**1,825**
		Bihar	1,825
112	**Tangsa**	**India**	**3,061**
		Arunachal Pradesh	3,061
113	**Tribal Religion**	**India**	**7,384**
		Nagaland	7,384
114	**Tutcha**	**India**	**1,134**
		Arunachal Pradesh	1,134
115	**Wancho**	**India**	**9,335**
		Arunachal Pradesh	9,335
116	**Yumasam**	**India**	**1,751**
		Sikkim	1,751

Source: CoI 1981:827–1062.
*Sarna religion is clubbed under Swarna. The difference is in rendering the name in English phonetics.

Table A.10.8 The Population by Tribal Religion (as per 1991 Census)

Sl. No.	*Name of the Religion*	*India/State/UT*	*Total Person*
1	**Adi**	**India**	**311**
		Arunachal Pradesh	311
2	**Aka**	**India**	**286**
		Arunachal Pradesh	283
		Maharashtra	1
		Orissa	3
3	**Animist**	**India**	**1,458**
		Assam	1
		Nagaland	1369
		Haryana	1
		Andaman and Nicobar	87
4	**Apatani**	**India**	**126**
		Arunachal Pradesh	125
		Assam	1
5	**Bhil**	**India**	**1,224**
		Gujarat	15
		Madhya Pradesh	459
		Maharashtra	686
		Rajasthan	59
		Delhi	5
6	**Bhumij**	**India**	**137**
		Bihar	20
		Orissa	28
		West Bengal	89
7	**Boro**	**India**	**389**
		Arunachal Pradesh	51
		Assam	331
		Meghalaya	7
8	**Deori**	**India**	**437**
		Assam	437
9	**Doni Polo/Sidonyi Polo**	**India**	**279,450**
		Arunachal Pradesh	275,385
		Assam	4,039
		Goa	2
		Meghalaya	10
		Orissa	3
		Uttar Pradesh	5
		West Bengal	2
		Pondicherry	1
10	**Enoka Israel**	**India**	**497**
		Mizoram	497

(*Continued*)

Table A.10.8 (Continued)

Sl. No.	*Name of the Religion*	*India/State/UT*	*Total Person*
11	**Garo**	**India**	**1,187**
		Assam	9
		Meghalaya	1,178
12	**Gond/Gondi**	**India**	**67,111**
		Andhra Pradesh	427
		Bihar	3
		Madhya Pradesh	54,552
		Maharashtra	12,055
		Orissa	8
		Uttar Pradesh	66
13	**Halba**	**India**	**239**
		Andhra Pradesh	2
		Madhya Pradesh	192
		Maharashtra	45
14	**Ho**	**India**	**1,464**
		Bihar	1,261
		Orissa	186
		Uttar Pradesh	17
15	**Idu/Idu Mishmi**	**India**	**2,315**
		Arunachal Pradesh	2,314
		West Bengal	1
16	**Jahar**	**India**	**7,003**
		Bihar	163
		Orissa	6,782
		West Bengal	58
17	**Jaintia**	**India**	**231**
		Meghalaya	231
18	**Kabui**	**India**	**5,411**
		Manipur	5,411
19	**Miju Mishmi/Kaman Mishmi/ Miju/Kaman**	**India**	**174**
		Arunachal Pradesh	170
		West Bengal	4
20	**Karbi/Mikir**	**India**	**110**
		Assam	110
21	**Kharwar**	**India**	**3,619**
		Bihar	3,564
		Orissa	28
		West Bengal	15
		Delhi	12
22	**Khasi**	**India**	**111,750**
		Arunachal Pradesh	2
		Assam	2
		Karnataka	1
		Maharashtra	5
		Meghalaya	111,729
		Delhi	6

(*Continued*)

Table A.10.8 (Continued)

Sl. No.	*Name of the Religion*	*India/State/UT*	*Total Person*
23	**Kolha**	**India**	**474**
		Orissa	474
24	**Korku**	**India**	**282**
		Madhya Pradesh	40
		Maharashtra	233
		West Bengal	9
25	**Longchang/TangsaLongchang**	**India**	**114**
		Arunachal Pradesh	114
26	**Mikir**	**India**	**164**
		Bihar	1
		Meghalaya	163
27	**Munda**	**India**	**891**
		Arunachal Pradesh	6
		Assam	29
		Bihar	374
		Gujarat	4
		Madhya Pradesh	2
		Maharashtra	11
		Meghalaya	7
		Orissa	213
		Uttar Pradesh	47
		West Bengal	198
28	**Niamtre**	**India**	**61,599**
		Assam	54
		Meghalaya	61,545
29	**Nishang/Nissi/Bangni/Dafla**	**India**	**331**
		Arunachal Pradesh	330
		Orissa	1
30	**Nocte**	**India**	**11,723**
		Arunachal Pradesh	11,720
		Assam	3
31	**Oraon**	**India**	**550**
		Arunachal Pradesh	3
		Assam	38
		Madhya Pradesh	126
		Orissa	32
		Uttar Pradesh	27
		West Bengal	245
32	**Pagan**	**India**	**1,711**
		Manipur	882
		Meghalaya	306
		Nagaland	523
33	**Paharia**	**India**	**1,102**
		Bihar	1,067
		Orissa	2
		West Bengal	33

(*Continued*)

Table A.10.8 (Continued)

Sl. No.	*Name of the Religion*	*India/State/UT*	*Total Person*
34	**Pardhi**	**India**	**340**
		Andhra Pradesh	125
		Gujarat	8
		Madhya Pradesh	8
		Maharashtra	195
		West Bengal	4
35	**Santal**	**India**	**23,645**
		Assam	32
		Bihar	9,409
		Orissa	305
		Punjab	2
		West Bengal	13,896
		Delhi	1
36	**Saora**	**India**	**102**
		Madhya Pradesh	44
		Maharashtra	1
		West Bengal	57
37	**Sari Dharma**	**India**	**380,007**
		Bihar	243
		Madhya Pradesh	4
		Orissa	1
		West Bengal	379,755
		Delhi	4
38	**Sarisar**	**India**	**1,939**
		Orissa	315
		West Bengal	1,624
39	**Sauriya**	**India**	**256**
		Assam	7
		Bihar	82
		West Bengal	167
40	**Sing Bonga**	**India**	**123**
		Bihar	120
		Orissa	3
41	**Songsarek**	**India**	**94,846**
		Assam	1,471
		Meghalaya	93,375
42	**Swarna***	**India**	**1,820,454**
		Arunachal Pradesh	1
		Bihar	1,417,427
		Madhya Pradesh	81
		Maharashtra	5
		Manipur	1
		Orissa	384,768
		Uttar Pradesh	64
		West Bengal	18,107
43	**Synteng**	**India**	**1,884**
		Meghalaya	1,884

(*Continued*)

Table A.10.8 (Continued)

Sl. No.	*Name of the Religion*	*India/State/UT*	*Total Person*
44	**Tadvi**	**India**	**386**
		Maharashtra	386
45	**Tagin**	**India**	**605**
		Andhra Pradesh	6
		Arunachal Pradesh	89
		Nagaland	485
		Tamil Nadu	5
		West Bengal	20
46	**Tai/Tai Ahom/Tao**	**India**	**153**
		Arunachal Pradesh	8
		Assam	145
47	**Tana Bhagat**	**India**	**723**
		Bihar	723
48	**Tangsa**	**India**	**570**
		Arunachal Pradesh	570
49	**Tribal Religion**	**India**	**32,718**
		Andhra Pradesh	9
		Arunachal Pradesh	380
		Assam	8
		Bihar	352
		Madhya Pradesh	190
		Maharashtra	1,741
		Manipur	244
		Meghalaya	24
		Nagaland	1,500
		Orissa	536
		Punjab	9
		Uttar Pradesh	109
		West Bengal	27,613
		Delhi	3
50	**Wancho**	**India**	**21,020**
		Arunachal Pradesh	21,020

*Source***:** CoI 1991: 213-344.
*Sarna religion are clubbed under Swarna.

Table A.10.9 The Population by Tribal Religion (as per 2001 and 2011 Census)

Sl. No.	*Name of Tribal Religion*	*2001*	*2011*
		Persons	*Persons*
1	Adivasi	63,630	–
2	AdiMinyong/Minyong	188	–
3	AdiPadam/Padam	212	–
4	Animist	967	4,130
5	Apo Rangang	364	133
6	Baiga	1,043	1,884
7	Bangni/Dafla/Nishang/Nissi	339	–
8	Bara Deo	106	–
9	Baske	149	–
10	Bhil	5,196	1,323
11	Bhumij	523	–
12	Birsa	1,357	2,395
13	Bogum	130	–
14	Bonga	447	–
15	Bori	255	113
16	Buru-Banga	105	–
17	Chang Naga	3,401	462
18	Chimprai	123	–
19	Deori	126	–
20	Dongi	149	278
21	Doni Polo/Sidonyi Polo	302,928	331,370
22	Dupub	325	3,326
23	Fralung	6,709	2,381
24	Garo	455	121
25	Gond/Gondi	586,723	1,026,344
26	Halba	346	532
27	Haokip	308	–
28	Hema	127	–
29	Heraka	8,718	9,956
30	Hill Miri	197	111
31	Ho	638	1,418
32	Idu/Idu Mishmi	252	591
33	Jahar	1,176	–
34	Jaintia	138	–
35	Jaira	255	–
36	Kaitha	379	–
37	Kaman/Miju Mishmi/Kaman Mishmi/Miju	1,314	133
38	Kandha	365	–
39	Karbi/Mikir	1,569	204
40	Katkari	982	316
41	Khadia/Kharia	297	–
42	Kharwar	1,237	493
43	Khasi	122,694	138,512
44	Kheduala	120	–

(*Continued*)

Table A.10.9 (Continued)

Sl. No.	*Name of Tribal Religion*	*2001*	*2011*
		Persons	*Persons*
45	Kisan	455	146
46	Kolha	224	–
47	Korku	293	234
48	Koyatur	6,107	364
49	Mahali	202	–
50	Marangboro	2,120	176
51	Maring	161	–
52	Merido	550	–
53	Miji	419	–
54	Miri/Mishing	539	–
55	Mizo	512	–
56	Munda	2,556	1,086
57	Muria	132	–
58	Naga	1,160	–
59	NaniIntiya	7,036	4,528
60	Nature Religion	657	5,635
61	NiamShnong	6,121	915
62	Niamtre	78,266	84,276
63	Nocte	5,071	1,511
64	Non-Christians	2,230	1,538
65	Nyarino	386	1,365
66	Oraon	4,447	1,091
67	Pagan	2,070	2,088
68	Paharia	135	591
69	Pardhi	1,999	533
70	Pfutsana	394	–
71	Pnar	241	–
72	Rabha	220	–
73	Rang	3,375	–
74	Rangang	888	–
75	Rongmei	162	–
76	Rongrang/TangsaRongrang	296	–
77	Santal	17,775	6,485
78	Saranath	4,449	837
79	Sari Dharma	638,266	506,369
80	Sarna	4,075,246	4,957,467
81	Sarnam	4,060	1,494
82	Shabar	332	–
83	Shnong	1,399	–
84	Songsarek	49,832	19,834
85	Soren	361	–
86	Swarna	1,303	121
87	Tadvi	6,323	1,786
88	Tagin	170	

(*Continued*)

Table A.10.9 (Continued)

Sl. No.	*Name of Tribal Religion*	*2001*	*2011*
		Persons	*Persons*
89	Tana Bhagat	554	1,108
90	TangsaTikhak/Tikhak	157	–
91	Tharu	106	–
92	Tribal Religion	3,167	17,393
93	Wancho	6,754	
94	Yumasam	13,504	19,093
95	Budhadeo	217	1,345
96	Dulha Deo	294	–
97	Intaya	180	1,208
98	Rangfra	6,694	10,598
99	A.C.	297	1,317
100	Ausho Commune International	162	–
101	Bahai/Bahais	11,324	4,572
102	Jews/Judaism	4,650	4,429
103	Nirankari	2,734	1,781
104	Parsi/Zoroastrian	69,601	57,264
105	Sadri	10,338	153
106	Sanamahi	223,742	222,422
107	Shara	501	–
108	Traditional Religion	313	1,239
109	Bamanya	–	121
110	Hidmaraj	–	102
111	Subba	–	171
112	Rangkhothak	–	152
113	TikaoRagong	–	373
114	Paniyar	–	233
115	Mannan	–	118
116	BaiganiDharam	–	488
117	AdiKurum	–	235
118	Adimdhamm	–	57,022
119	DeraSarsa	–	139
120	AdiDharam	–	82,255
121	Bidin	–	29,553
122	Atheist	–	33,304
123	Krupa	–	140
124	Hajong	–	110
125	Bhumia	–	181
126	Bodo/Boro	–	294
127	Bhoi	–	602
128	Addi Bassi	–	86,877
129	Adi	–	24,381
130	Aka	–	297

Sources: (a) CoI 2001 and (b) CoI 2011.

11

INTERFACE BETWEEN THE STATE AND THE CHURCH IN MIZORAM

A Historico-Political Reading

Jangkhongam Doungel

11.0 Introduction

The topic of relationship between church and state is the most problematic issue, debated and deliberated from generation to generation. There are certain responsibilities which belong exclusively to both the state and the church respectively, and so both systems are expected to work faithfully within their spheres of responsibility. But there are some areas of mutual interest and concern where both confront each other or work together. The ongoing deliberation of the church-state relationship automatically leads to negotiating and balancing the role of the church and the state. If the two structures, the state and the church in the areas of mutual or diverse interests maintain balanced negotiation, peace, and tranquillity, society is expected to prevail. However, imbalanced negotiation between the two may lead to unrest, law and order problems, and disturbance in society. The church-state interface also emerges as a significant issue of discourse in the Mizoram Political System and deliberation is still going on in different forums, such as academic, literary, church, and others. Over and above that, it is an undeniable fact to admit that church plays a significant role for maintenance of peace and tranquillity in Mizoram's political system.

The concept of secularism emerged as a result of the interface between the state and the church which means to restrict them to their respective domains of responsibility so that they do not interfere in each other's activities.[1] However, as the head of the state and government, and head of church are both church members in Christian states, amicable relationship between the two is required for maintenance of peace and tranquillity in society. Western countries, namely, countries of Europe and America emphasise separation of the state and the church for freedom of religion and religious toleration as a concept of secularism which has been incorporated in their constitutions. However, in India the interface for resolving the crisis is not emphasised on the basis of freedom of religion but equal treatment of all religions (Chander nd.:520). In India, the word 'secular' or 'secularism' is used not as an anti-religious concept, but equal treatment of all religions without any discrimination. According to Dr Radhakrishnan, "Secularism does not mean irreligion or atheism or even stress on material comforts. It proclaims that it lays stress on the universality of spiritual values which may be attained by a variety of ways" (cited in Fadia 1991:99–100).

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The word 'secular' is enshrined in the preamble to the Constitution of India; and the concept of secularism is also enshrined in articles 15, 25, 26, 27, 29, and 30 of the Constitution of India. Article 15 of the Constitution of India prohibits discrimination on the ground of religion. Article 25 enshrines freedom of conscience and free profession, practice, and propagation of religion. Article 26 gives freedom to manage religious affairs. Article 27 restricts the state to levy taxes for the promotion of a particular religion, whereas, Article 29 and Article 30 lay down provision for protection of religious and linguistic minorities (Bakshi 2006:1, 26, 62, 64 & 66–67). Article 15 of the Constitution of India prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, and place of birth or any of them. Thus, discrimination on the ground of religion is totally prohibited by the law of the land. Article 25 permits freedom of conscience and free profession, practice, and propagation of religion. Article 27 prohibits payment of taxes for promotion of any particular religion and this very article affirms equal treatment of all religious groups and it does not give any scope for special treatment of any particular region or religious groups. Article 29 enshrines protection of interests of minorities and Article 30 allows the minority communities to establish and administer their own educational institutions (Government of India 1996:XXI, 5, 8–9). The word 'secular' is added in preamble to the Constitution of India by the Forty-Second Amendment Act, 1976; and the concept is meaningfully enshrined in the above mentioned articles of the Constitution of India. Articles 15, 25, 27, 29, and 30 emphasise equal treatment of all religions and advocate religious freedom to all religious groups. Therefore, collection of taxes for benefit of a particular religion is unconstitutional as provided in Article 27. Further, minority religious communities are also provided certain constitutional safeguards in articles 29 and 30 of the Constitution of India.

11.1 The Mizo, Mizoram, and the Advent of Christianity

Mizoram completed 100 years of Christianity on 11 January 1994 and a grand centenary celebration was organised in the same year. It was way back in 1894 that two missionaries, namely J.H. Lorraine and F.W. Savidge, sponsored by Arthington Aborigines Mission landed in Mizoram (erstwhile Lushai Hills) to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Arthington Aborigines Mission could be established by the sole contribution of rich businessman, and Arthington was responsible for Christianisation of Mizoram within a half century (Kipgen 1996:192–193 and Zairema 1997:51–52). Population of Mizoram now constitutes 87 per cent Christians and 13 per cent non-Christians as per the 2011 census (Government of Mizoram 2020:8). Different tribes of the Zo[2] ethnic group within and outside Mizoram can now be claimed Christians but the non-Christian population in Mizoram mainly include non-Zo ethnic groups,[3] such as Chakmas, some Brus, Hindus, and Muslims. However, the church-state dichotomy is still an issue in Mizoram in different eras, such as the colonial era, District Council era, Union Territory era, and statehood era. The British Authority and missionaries cooperated well during the colonial era because education was entrusted to missionaries, but crisis cropped up between them on the issue of the Bawi system due to an extreme campaign for its abolition by Dr Fraser which had ultimately resulted in the expulsion from Lushai Hills by the governing authority in 1911. Dr Fraser was a missionary who was a medical Doctor by profession and who was also very concerned with social reform (Kipgen 1996:163–166). In District Council era, crisis cropped up between the church and Mizo District Council upon the issue of celebration of Chapchar Kut (a traditional agro-based spring festival) from 1960 to 1963 which celebration was discontinued from 1965

due to the plea of the church. Little crisis surfaced between the state and the church during the Union Territory era but the church took initiative for peace and acted as a mediator between the MNF and Government of India, and the role of the church should not be forgotten for return of normalcy in Mizoram. The main issue of crisis between the state and the church in the statehood era is mainly upon the issue of liquor which the church opposed tooth and nail irrespective of the party in power at the time. Liquor locally known as Zu has been prohibited by the church particularly by the two largest church denominational groups of Mizoram, namely Presbyterian Church of Mizoram (PCM) and Baptist Church of Mizoram (BCM) since the colonial era (Lalrinthanga 2013:93–94 & 198).

11.2 Uniqueness of the Role of the Church in Mizoram

As 87 per cent of the population in Mizoram constitutes Christians, the role of the church is significant; and the church also plays a unique role in Mizoram's political system (Government of Mizoram 2020:8). The church teaches its members to be obedient to the governing authority as found in Romans 13:1. It states, "Everyone must obey the state authorities, because no authority exists without God's permission, and the existing authorities have been put there by God" (Holy Bible: Good News Edition 2003:201). Different church denominational groups also issue circular to their members to be responsible citizens of the country and urge their members to cast their votes faithfully in every election. The church is also involved in peace initiatives which brought MNF and the Government of India to the negotiating table[4] and tireless efforts of the church subsequently led to the signing of Mizoram Accord on 30 June 1986 (Zaihmingthanga 2016:140–142). The church also fights against social evils, namely drug abuse, corruption, discrimination of poor people, and organises seminars for awareness of the members in social and political issues. The eradication of social evils is one of the welfare functions of the state. In this way, the church cooperates with the state. Besides, the church propagates Biblical teachings and cannot accept steps taken by the government which are against Biblical teachings. Therefore, the church fought against the Mizo National Front (MNF) Government led by Laldenga on the issue of liquor in 1988; and it also fought against the Indian National Congress (INC) government led by Lal Thanhawla on the same issue in 2018. The church does not support or oppose a particular party, but it opposes any political party or ruling party on ethical and Biblical considerations only. The church also opposes Yoga as it is purely based on Hindu philosophy and takes necessary steps for inculcating the right type of awareness among its members. Another unique role of the church is the establishment of the Mizoram People Forum (MPF)[5] as an election watch-dog civil society in 2004 for enabling free and fair poll in any election in Mizoram and it is the first of its kind in India (Mizoram Kohhran Hruaitu Committee (MKHC) 2014).

The main objectives of the MPF are to work for good governance and to clean up the electoral system of the state of Mizoram. Affiliate members of the MPF from the various church associations are the Presbyterian Church of India (PCI) Mizoram Synod, Evangelical Church of Maraland (ECM), Catholic Church, Evangelical Free Church of India (EFCI), Independent Church of India (ICI), Lairam lsua Krista Baptist Kohhran (LIKBK), and Wesleyan Methodist Church. Whereas, affiliated members from the civil societies and voluntary associations are Young Mizo Association (YMA), Mizoram Upa Pawl (MUP), Mizoram Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl (MHIP), Mara Thutlya Pi (MTP), Young Lai Association (YLA), and Young Chakma Association (YCA). The MPF also stresses to

reform the society in general and the electoral system in particular through Christian ethics and biblical teaching on the basis of Psalms 37:3: "Trust in the Lord, and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land". As Christians constitute more than 87 per cent of the population in Mizoram, the MPF urges people of Mizoram to reform themselves morally and ethically through biblical teaching and to implement the Christian morality for cleansing politics as well as for the introduction of good governance. The reason being, holders of high political office, bureaucrats and politicians are all church members, as such, effective pursuance of biblical teaching seemed to be the panacea for all the social and political ills. The MPF is also registered under the Mizoram Societies Registration Act, 2005 (Act No. 13 of 2005) as a registered body. It is also interesting to state that more than 80 per cent of the populations in Mizoram are members of the MPF by dint of their membership in the church, civil societies, and voluntary associations (Doungel 2020:199).

11.3 Critical Evaluation of the State-Church Interface in Mizoram

As Christians constitute 87 per cent of the population of Mizoram as per the 2011 census, important machinery of the state is manned by church members only. Therefore, the interface between the state and the church is essential to be negotiated well to maintain social order and tranquillity. Opinions have often been expressed by intellectuals from different backgrounds, namely academicians, journalists, freelancers, social reformers, etc. with regard to utilisation of government properties, such as vehicles, halls, building, and other resources without payment by different church denominational groups in their respective church programmes. But it is learnt from government sources that issues are different. The church and the state government help each other in their programmes on payment.[6] In this regard, there is no misuse of government properties or resources by any church denominational groups in Mizoram (Doungel 2021:50–51).

The issue of liquor locally known as 'Zu' is one of the most complex political issues in Mizoram. The reason being, political parties have won and lost election upon the issue of liquor. The MNF Government led by Laldenga enforced a liquor policy after its enactment by the State Legislative Assembly which legalised the use of liquor in 1988, but it was fought tooth and nail by the church. The biggest denominational church in Mizoram, the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram (PCM) requested the then Chief Minister, Lal Thanhawla to enforce total prohibition in the state in May, 1988; but it was not fulfilled. The MNF Government was defeated in the mid-term poll election of 1989 and the Indian National Congress (INC) led by Lal Thanhawla formed the government. The Mizoram Liquor Total Prohibition (MLTP) Act, 1995 was enacted during the INC rule which was effective since 1997 (Hnamte 2014:xv & 96).

The INC Government led by Lal Thanhawla which enacted the Mizoram Liquor Total Prohibition (MLTP) Act, 1995 enacted the Mizoram Liquor Prohibition and Control Act in 2014 which became effective from January 2015. The Mizoram Liquor Prohibition and Control Act legally allowed the sale and consumption of liquor within the ambit of law. However, it was vehemently opposed by the church again as with the then MNF Government in 1988. In fact, the enactment of the Mizoram Liquor Prohibition and Control (MLPC) Act, 2014 was a suicidal game for the INC which automatically led to its electoral defeat in the eighth State Legislative Assembly election which was held in November 2018. The church stiffly opposed it and the Mizo National Front (MNF) and Zoram People Movement (ZPM) campaigned on liquor prohibition that liquor would be totally prohib-

ited if they could form government (Lalremsiami & Lalhmanmawia 2021:36). A Review and Evaluation Committee was constituted by Mizoram Government to study upon the impact of the MLPC Act and a study group was set up under the Chiarmanship of Dominic Lalhmangiaha as Chairman to specifically analyse and evaluate the socio-economic impact of the MLPC Act, 2014 with effect from April 2016 to April 2017. The research findings of the study group revealed that revenue profits received by the state government during the specific period from ware houses and vendors was Rs. 23.52 crores. The report also highlighted that income generated from the sale of liquor, which was estimated at Rs. 28 crores, benefitted only government liquor vendors and commercial sex workers. The report also highlighted that during the year 2016–2017, there was a rise in alcohol related vehicle accidents, rise of criminal cases, medical expenses on accidents and illness, andf 431 out of 2734 deaths were related to alcohol consumption. Out of 25 commercial sex workers who were interviewed by the study group, 61 per cent of them stated that their clients increased after the opening of liquor shops. The study group also estimated that the cost of vehicle accidents due to drunken driving was Rs. 16 lakhs; but as this was only from the survey within Aizawl city, it might increase had a survey been done for the whole state (The Hill Times 2018).

The critics alleged that the church interfered too much and crossed its limit in its opposition to the liquor policy of the MNF Government in 1988 and in the liquor policy of the Congress Government in 2018. However, the church justifies its standpoint vividly and states that it cannot accept anything which is described by the Holy Bible as uncleaned and declined to accept it in future too. The church further clarifies that it wants all born-again Christians to refrain from liquor and it will fight against any lenient policy of the government on liquor. Therefore, the Mizoram Kohhran Hruaitu Committee (MKHC 2014a)[7] issued a press release on 7 July 2014 and stated its displeasure against the initiative of the Indian National Congress (INC) government led by Lal Thanhawla for the steps which it had taken at that time for the modification of the Mizoram Liquor Total Prohibition Act, 2015. The press release also further highlighted that permission for sale of liquor is against the teaching of the Bible, so, the church declined to accept it and warned stiff opposition (MKHC 2014b). The MKHC also issued a press release on 17 June 2015 and stated its displeasure for circular of the Government of India for celebration of Yoga day on 21 June 2015 which fell on a Sunday which happened to be worship service day of the Christians and urged the church members not to participate in the Yoga celebration (MKHC 2015). The MKHC again issued another press release on 6 June 2016 and urged the church members to refrain from Yoga because it is purely based upon Hindu philosophy. Over and above that, the encouragement of Yoga is a step for assimilation of minority religious communities; therefore, church members should not be involved in any way, the release further added (MKHC 2016). Thus, the different church denominational groups under the initiative of MKHC fight tooth and nail against liquor and Yoga in all aspects. It should also be recollected that the said two parties which adopted liquor policy during their rule against the wishes of the church were defeated in the state Legislative Assembly election of 1988 and 2018 respectively. It is really regrettable to admit that some political leaders openly spoke against church leaders in press conferences which was really unwanted, unnecessary, and uncalled for. In fact, it was a suicidal step for politicians and their political party to openly criticise church leaders for the steps; they have taken to preserve and protect the Biblical teachings and ethics.

The critics also alleged that the church regularly excommunicates adultery; marriage not solemnised by Pastor, drunkards as per the guidelines of the church in line with the Biblical teachings, but it never excommunicates corrupt officers and corrupt politicians who are also church members. It should also be noted that excommunication of church members due to corruption issues has not yet been done by any church in Mizoram and even churches outside Mizoram. The church is not interested in taking outright action against its members but it wants to guide its members in the right spiritual path. Even church members who are excommunicated due to different reasons have been guided to live the right spiritual life as per the Biblical teachings. Thus, the church is not interested in taking drastic action against its members but it is interested in giving the right spiritual guidance to its members through spiritual counselling and guidance. Leaders of the local church usually visit the excommunicated church members, interact with them, give biblical teachings, pray for them, and encourage them to participate in the various church programmes as far as practicable. It should also be recollected that a comment given by leaders of the Mizoram Kohhran Hruaitu Committee (MKHC) with regard to disqualification of Pu Lalduhawma as MLA by Speaker of Mizoram Legislative Assembly in 2020 was regarded by many church members as unnecessary. The MKHC leaders appealed for maintenance of peace and tranquillity and urged the political leaders not to further problematise the issue. In fact, it would be better for the MKHC not to interfere in such a controversial political issue of the state as church leaders (Doungel 2021:52–53).

Hue and cry has been raised few years ago with regard to the involvement of pastors and church leaders in active politics as well as their engagement in some official works of the state government. Involvement of pastors in active politics and in official work of the government at the cost of pastoral ministry cannot be out rightly commented as right or wrong but the involved pastors or person concerned should ponder over its conformity with the calling of the Living God. In this regard Rev JJM Nichols Roy should be briefly reflected. Rev JJM Nichols Roy was a pastor in the Church of God and he was also a great social reformer. By dint of his guidance to people to engage in orange farming which improved the economic status of many families of the Khasi Hills and his concern for socio-economic development, he was requested by the people to contest the election for Member of Assam Provincial Legislative Council, but he replied that he would first pray to God and take decision as per His (God's) guidance. He also made one condition that he would agree to become Member of the Provincial Legislative Council if he could combine it with his pastoral ministry. Later when he became Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) after independence of India, he stuck to the same condition of combining his political status with pastoral ministry. He was Member of Assam Provincial Legislature and later an MLA[8] from Khasi Hills in Assam Legislative Assembly for 38 consecutive years from 1921 till his death on 1 November 1959 and was Cabinet Minister four times both under Muhammad Saduallah and Gopinath Bordoloi. He was also a member of the Constituent Assembly and Member of the North East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Area subcommittee, also known as Bordoloi sub-committee. Rev JJM Nichols Roy carried on with his pastoral ministry even when he was MLA and Cabinet Minister, and he plunged into public service because of the call of the people (Kyndiah 1993:48–52). Therefore, if pastors at present are receiving demand from the public to become involved in politics and administration, they have to ponder whether it is at the cost of sacrificing prestige of pastoral value or not. This is a problematic area in Mizoram. While Rev JJM Nichols Roy's example

holds a possibility, there are also oppositions. Several church members hold the firm view that pastors are theologically trained to guide the church members spiritually and to render the service of God from church platform, but not for political activities and official work of the government.[9]

A new trend has been noticed when temporal leaders like MLA, MP, etc. are accorded higher status in church programmes than the church leaders. One critical question which is often raised in this regard is why a temporal leader is given higher recognition in spiritual matters? Some church denominational groups are criticised for giving too much recognition and significance to earthly VIPs, such as Minister, MLA, Chief Executive Member (CEM), Chairman, Executive Member (EM) of Autonomous District Council (ADC), and Member of District Council (MDC) than pastors, Missionaries, and Evangelists in church programmes and conferences. Likewise, some church associations, such as Lairam Isua Krista Baptist Kohhran (LIKBK) usually invite Minister, MLA, CEM, and Chairman as Observers in Church Assembly which is often contested by many church members whether it is appropriate to offer such important responsibility to political leaders in the church programme. It is also often questioned whether it is necessary to engage Chief Minister, Minister, and MLA to inaugurate some church related programmes which has been done by some church associations. Is it not more appropriate and more dignified for a pastor to inaugurate church related programmes with prayer than inviting Chief Minister or Minster to inaugurate with earthly VIP culture. Therefore, it is argued that the church should exercise its spiritual duties sparingly, and not unnecessarily engage temporal leaders in its affairs (Doungel 2021:54).

11.4 Conclusion

The state-church interface is a significant topic of political discourse since the evolution of Christianity and it was deliberated by political thinkers of the medieval and modern period. The issue of the state-church dichotomy or interface is comprehended in terms of secularism as enshrined in the constitution of many countries and in the Constitution of India as well. The negotiation of this interface is also required for the management of crisis between the state and the church in the political system. Mizoram also experiences the interface between the state and the church and discourse in different eras, such as the colonial era, District Council era, Union Territory era, and statehood era. The main issue of this interface in the statehood era is on the issue of the liquor policy of certain ruling parties. Other than the liquor issue, free use of government properties by church, involvement of pastors in active politics, the importance given to some political leaders in church programmes rather than pastors, the inauguration of church programmes by political leaders and government officials, the invitation of some political leaders by some church denominational group in Church Assembly, etc. are major debatable issues involving the state-church interface. Therefore, the state-church interface should be analysed, negotiated, and settled amicably for the common good of the society, church, and state as well.

Notes

1 The origin of the word 'Secularism' can be traced to western countries which relates to the separation of the state from the church and it professes a position of neutrality of the state towards different religious groups. The word 'secular' is also used more or less as contrasting with 'reli-

gious', but in the Indian context it is not anti-religion but equal treatment of all religions without discrimination (Fadia 1991:99–100).

2 Zo is professed as a generic and inclusive terminology for identifying the kindred tribes who are known as Kuki-Chin tribes or Chin-Kuki Mizo group. The terminology began to be used popularly at the formation of Zo Reunification Organisation (ZORO) at Champhai, Mizoram in 1988 and it is now a popular terminology for identifying the kindred tribes who are ethnically, culturally, linguistically, and culturally related and who trace their common origin from mythological caves known as Chhinlung, Sinlung, Khul, Khurpui, Khutu bi jur, Hurpi, Khor, Puk, and Lungkua.

3 The tribes and communities who are not within the Chhinlung or Khul origin people and who are ethnically, historically, linguistically, and culturally different from the Zo ethnic group are classified as non-Zo ethnic group, namely Chakma, Bru, Gurkha (Nepali), and other plain communities.

4 The church played a significant role for bringing both the MNF leaders and Government of India to the negotiating table though some hurdles were faced mid-way. Just after the bombing of Aizawl and different places of Mizoram by the Indian Air Force as a result of the unilateral declaration of independence of Mizoram on 1 March 1966 by the MNF, the Christian Peace Committee was formed where different church denominational groups were represented. The committee met MNF leaders at their jungle headquarters and also met representatives of the Government of India; and the repeated appeals of the Christian Peace Committee convinced the MNF leaders to negotiate with the Government of India. The tireless effort of the Christian Peace Committee since 1966 bore fruit and the Mizoram Accord could be signed on 30 June 1986.

5 Mizoram has been known for conduct of free and fair polls since the District Council era and there was never any poll related violence in the state. However, as the involvement of some armed groups from outside the state was said to be detected in 2003 State Legislative Assembly election, the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram (PCM) took the initiative for adopting corrective measures to fight against poll related violence in line with the teaching of the Bible. Subsequently, the Mizoram People Forum (MPF) was formed in 2004 and it regularly takes initiative in all elections from Village Council to MP (Lok Sabha) so as to purify and clean elections. The MPF strictly enforces the Model Code of Conduct of the Election Commission of India with Biblical teachings.

6 Different church denominational groups use government vehicles, halls, and buildings for different church programmes, but payment is made by the users as per government norms and rules. Different church denominational groups allowed the government to use their church halls and Sunday school buildings for quarantine purpose during the covid-19 pandemic.

7 The Mizoram Kohhran Hruaitu Committee (MKHC) also literally known as Mizoram Church Leaders Committee is an association of the church leaders of Mizoram where all church denominational groups are represented. The standpoint of the church and dos and don'ts of the church are usually decided and publicised by MHKC from time to time. Further, the MKHC also circulates its decision to different church denominational groups and it is the apex body of the various church denominational groups of Mizoram which is often consulted by the state government.

8 Legislature of the British India Province during colonial rule was known as Legislative Council (Rao and Hazarika 198: 38) and it was known as Legislative Assembly or Vidhyan Sabha (Lower House) and Legislative Council or Vidhayn Parishad (Upper House) after the independence of India as per the provision, provided in Article 168 of the Constitution of India. Members of the Lower House are known as Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) and Members of the Upper House are known as Member of Legislative Council (MLC) (Bakshi 2006:147). However, many states have unicameral legislature; and only few big states have bicameral legislature.

9 The appointment of Rev Zosangliana Colney, ordained Pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram by Congress Government as Chairman of the Mizoram Public Service Commission (MPSC) in 2017 and the candidature of Rev Dr K. Thanzauva, ordained Pastor of the Baptist Church of Mizoram (BCM) and prominent church leader from Lunglei South III from ZPM in the State Legislative Assembly election of 2018 happened to be the heated deliberation of people of Mizoram whether it is the right thing for a pastor to be engaged in an official position by government as well as to be involved in active politics.

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PART 3

Multi- and Cross-Culture Negotiation

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12

DECOLONISING TRIBAL RELIGION OF THE TANGKHUL NAGAS

Taimaya Ragui

12.0 Introduction

Tribes of Northeast India had their own distinctive beliefs and practices – or rather, tribal-traditional religion – before the arrival of the colonials i.e., British administrators, ethnographers, and Western Christian missionaries[1]. While there may be a question or two about the *name* of tribal traditional religion, the beliefs and practices of indigenous communities were sustainable in terms of principality. The arrival of the colonials brought with them a new faith with a distinct set of beliefs and practices, along with socio-religious expectations from the indigenous communities. Specific to the Tangkhul Nagas[2], they imposed a foreign socio-religious conception to their already sustainable socio-religious practices. While it is generally assumed that the colonials managed to do away with the tribal traditional religion, I will argue that the key values of tribal traditional religion were retained, along with the institutionalisation of the new religion. This is to suggest that the indigenous beliefs were subsumed with the practices of the colonials, but were not lost (Downs 2001:63)[3]. Though the colonial religion dominated the indigenous socio-religious beliefs and practices, some key elements of tribal traditional religion linger in the contemporary context.

To fulfil the said task, I argue for *decolonial thinking*[4] of the Tangkhul traditional religion in the contemporary context. Arguing for decolonial thinking does not mean reverting to tribal traditional religion, but it is to argue for historical and contextual sensitivity of the indigenous community; and to be historically and contextually sensitive means recognising the chronological development of socio-religious beliefs and practices in and from the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial period for theologising. This will be done by being critical of the adoption of colonial values and also by showing how some aspects of Tangkhul traditional religion are adapted in the contemporary faith and practices.

What this means, in terms of praxis, is that though the contemporary Tangkhul religious institution (or church) is critical of theological tasks that engages with tribal traditional religion, they are uncritical of how they freely adopt socio-religious values of the colonials and of the pre-colonial Tangkhul traditional religion (*see* Wilson 1982)[5]. This is to further argue for *colonial difference* which points to the key aspects of tribal traditional religion which

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were adapted – from the pre-colonial period to the present – in the thinking and practices of contemporary Tangkhul religion or church.

12.1 Conceptual Framework

In terms of methodology, I adopt (and adapt) the concept of *decolonial thinking* of Gerald M. Boodoo (*see* Boodoo 2015, 2019). He argues for the necessity of *decolonial thinking* and of its potential in "decolonising our theology as well as creating avenues for realistic and feasible epistemologies, active engagement and spiritualities" (Boodoo 2019:52). While he focuses on the Caribbean context, his method can be employed in the Tangkhul context as well. When talking about decolonial thinking of religion, Boodoo identifies three areas that need consideration[6]. First, there is a need to understand that *modernity* (or colonisation) has brought "a world system that for the first time in the history of world has linked all (or virtually all) parts of the world and subsumed them into a connected system" (Boodoo 2015:68; *see also* Quijano 2008). What that means, in the case of Tangkhul Nagas, is that the arrival of British administrator-ethnographers and Western missionaries brought with them new religion (i.e., Christianity) and new cultural values, which undermined the indigenous values and practices.[7] That which was planted a century back now influences how the indigenous community think and practice, as their perceptions are being merged or colonised by and with the colonial worldview. Long after the colonials are gone, the beliefs and practices of the indigenous communities are still being colonised. This means that the colonials planted a deep sense of admiration of the colonial faith and practices in the thinking of the indigenous communities i.e., what they planted then dominates the present way of life. Second, Boodoo argues that there is "a 'coloniality of power' which privileges and enshrines Euro-American thinking by constituting itself" in all areas of life of the indigenous community (Boodoo 2015:68). This is to suggest that the local knowledge and histories of the Western missionaries and British colonials are projected with 'global designs' (Mignolo 2000:17). Specific to the discussion of this chapter, the new faith and practices brought by the colonials dominates the contemporary religious beliefs of the Tangkhul Nagas. In the meantime, the beliefs and practices of tribal traditional religion are absorbed with Christian beliefs and practices (*see* Ragui 2021a). In the contemporary context, the contribution of the indigenous community or locals are neglected – or not appropriately identified (or acknowledged). Such captivity is apparent not only in the discussion of tribal traditional religion, but in all areas of life – *and it towers over them*. Third, decolonial thinking invites "a new way of thinking" which "seeks to produce knowledge formed from the colonial difference" (Boodoo 2015:68). This is to suggest that there is an apparent colonial tendency as well as the presence of the beliefs and practice of the indigenous community. There is an urgent need to prioritise the concerns that come from places of neglect – the values which evidently come from tribal traditional religion. If that is the case, there is an urgency to argue for *colonial difference* where theologians engage in identifying the beliefs of tribal traditional religion which are conveniently adapted in the practices of the new faith. This can be a corrective from the colonial tendency where religion is seen as "a movement taking place from centre to the periphery, and from the privileged to the marginalised of society" (Keum 2013:5). It is a re-visioning of religion where its belief and practices takes place '*from* the margins' i.e., tribal traditional religion has always been a part of the new found faith since they became Christians (*see* Keum 2013:5). This is not to revert

to tribal traditional religion, but to inform the contemporary believers that there were tribal socio-religious beliefs which are not very different from the colonials or the Christian faith.

12.2 Tribal Traditional Religion

If the socio-religious values and practices of tribal traditional religion were sustainable, what were its defining features? What was the *name* of the Tangkhul traditional religion? Who was their God? How did they address their God? The 'Pre-Colonial Period' section will try to answer these questions. The following section, 'Colonial Period' explains how a new religion with its set of practices and expectations were introduced to the Tangkhul Nagas. With the arrival and influence of the colonials in the Tangkhul inhabited areas, a new religious system was imposed while dismissing tribal traditional religion. The section on 'Post-Colonial Period' shows how colonial beliefs and practices were adopted by the indigenous community. This section also shows that some elements of tribal traditional religion were carried forward into the new faith.

12.2.1 Pre-Colonial Period

There was a distinct Tangkhul traditional religion before the arrival of the colonials. However, there are some key challenges when attempting to identify and describe the nature of the Tangkhul traditional religion. First, as Tangkhul Nagas practise oral tradition, most, if not all, of their socio-religious practices were not written down. Instead, their religious beliefs and practices were passed down from one generation to another through folksongs, folktales, folkdances, myths, etc. Consequently, there are no written sources for the Tangkhul traditional religion[8]. Until recently, there was hardly any discussion on the topic (*see* Joy 2014a; Kharay 2017; Mataisang 2019; Kapai 2019a and Kharay 2021).[9] Second, apart from the oral tradition, early reference to the Tangkhul traditional religion is found in the works of the colonials (*see* Pettigrew 1909 and Hodson 1911). While some of them tried to draw a comprehensive picture of tribal traditional religion, their reference to indigenous beliefs and practices were derogatory. This is to suggest that their description of the Tangkhul traditional religion came with biased perceptions, i.e., it is expressed in a condescending manner. Third, when the locals began writing about their indigenous society and religion, it was long after they had become Christians (*see* Horam 1977 and Thumra 1988, 2003, 2008). Hence, when they write about their ancestral beliefs and practices, it comes with the influence of the thinking and practices of the new faith (i.e., Christianity).

Considering this reality, I have given careful attention to distinguish tribal traditional beliefs and practices from Christianity. While there are several differences which are distinguishable, there are key similarities which helped Tangkhuls to merge their beliefs with Christianity. These features of tribal traditional religion are sustainable in terms of principality – and to some extent, compatible with the colonial faith. *This feature is the colonial difference* i.e., the elements of tribal traditional religions that were adapted with Christian beliefs and practices. For our purposes and clarity, the remaining part of this subsection analytically describes the key features of Tangkhul traditional religion.

The pre-colonial Tangkhuls believed in the existence of the *Supreme Being*, a benevolent spirit who is the creator and sustainer of the universe (*see* Pettigrew 1918:i)[10]. But there seems to be some confusion about how the Supreme Being is referred or called. One of the early Tangkhul scholars who wrote about tribal traditional religion, Jonathan H. Thumra,

suggests that the Supreme Being is called *Kasā Akhavā/Reisang Chonme/Varivara* (Thumra 2008:246).[11] The terms *Kasā Akhavā* and *Reisang Chonme* are synonymously used with the term *Varivarā,* while the latter term is that preferred by the contemporary Tangkhul church. To date, the usage of the term *Vairvarā* is prevalent both in the works of the church and in the writings of contemporary scholars (*see* Joy 2014b:76–78)[12]. However, the pre-colonial Tangkhuls were not accustomed to calling the Supreme Being *Varivarā*. This is the doing of William Pettigrew (1869–1943), a Scottish-British Christian missionary, who was the first Western missionary among the indigenous communities of Manipur. In his *Tangkhul Nāga Grammar and Dictionary* (1918), the term God, Jehovah, deity, divinity, creator, or Supreme Being is translated as *Varivarā* and those who believe in God as *Varivarā likaphaning mi* (Pettigrew 1918:463). However, if we look at the oral tradition of Tangkhuls, the epistemology of the *Varivarā* comes from a miscommunication between Pettigrew and the locals. According to a Tangkhul oral tradition, the said miscommunication happened in the following manner[13]:

As Pettigrew engaged in a civilising mission, he felt the need to learn the local language i.e., Hunphun/Ukhrul dialect. As he began his mission work in Ukhrul, he was caught in a predicament: he was not able to understand Tangkhul nor did the locals understand Manipuri or English. This situation compelled him to learn Ukhrul dialect. As he began to learn the local dialect, he asked the locals about how they refer to God. His question was understood as referring to that which *does not change*; this miscommunication was likely because of the language gap between him and locals. The locals pointed to the term *vārivārā,* birds of all kinds, suggesting that nature does not change (Luikham 1974:458). While taking this expression literally, Pettigrew told the locals that the creator of this *vāri-vārā* is the Christian God–*Varivarā*. In the long run, the term was used in his preaching, translation work, hymns, etc (*see* Pettigrew 1904, 1907).

Uncritical of the epistemology of the term *Varivarā*, the colonials began to use the term in reference to God. To this day, the word *Varivarā* is conveniently used along with *Kasā Ākhavā Varivarā* (God, the Creator) or *Kasā Ākhavā ĀvāVarivarā* (God, the Father and Creator). However, as indicated earlier, that was not how the pre-colonial Tangkhuls referred to their God or were accustomed to. Instead, they would call their Supreme Being, *Āmeoa* or *Zingungleng,* the Creator and Sustainer of the whole universe (Luikham 1974:17). Again, there seems to be some misconception about how the Tangkhul traditional religion was called. Some suggest that the Tangkhul traditional religion was called 'Hao' (Joy 2014a:74). But this is a misunderstanding. The term is used by outsiders in reference to hill people or as a reference to the Tangkhuls original name (Somingam 2014:36). The Tangkhul ancestors called their traditional religion *Āmeoyan* (Luikham 1974:17). Regardless of what their God or religion was called, contemporary Tangkhul theologians are hesitant to use the term *Āmeoa* in reference to God (Konghay 2016:35). They hold that the term *Āmeoa* is a derivative of *kameo* which refers to traditional gods or spirits.

Along with a belief in Supreme Being, the ancestral Tangkhul believed in the existence of the land of the dead called *Kazeiram*. When a person dies, they hold that their soul/spirit would travel to the land of the dead. This concept of the land of the dead is like that of *sheol* of the Old Testament (*cf*. Ps. 6:5; 88:10-12; Is. 38:9-20 and Johnston 2000:443–445). In the Tangkhul traditional belief, this place of afterlife is governed by a god called *Kokto*. In their belief, the afterlife is a continuation from the living i.e., they go to the land of the dead and

"live the same kind of life as they were before" (Thumra 1988:72). Hence, when a person dies, their family members bury him or her with their personal belongings and items[14]. They believe that the dead would continue to use their belongings and personal items in the land of the dead. If a family member forgets to put their items, the deceased would communicate to them in their dreams, which is another important feature of Tangkhul traditional religion (Thumra 1988:72).

The pre-colonial Tangkhuls also believed in the existence of spirits called *kameo*; these spirits can be benevolent or malevolent spirits (Thumra 1988:49). These spirits are "the guardian spirits of various landscapes, places, spaces, and objects, such as *shim kameo* (house spirit/deity), *luikameo* (field spirit/deity), *lung kameo* (rock/stone spirit/deity), *kongkameo* (river spirit/deity), and *kaphungkameo* (mountain spirit/deity)" (Kharay 2021:15). Along with a belief in *kameo,* they believe in the existence of evil spirits called *chipee* (or *chipi*) (Luikham 1974:49). At this point, it is unclear whether they offer worship and sacrifice to both *kameo* and *chipee*. But when they do, Thumra suggests that they offer worship and sacrifice to the spirits for their benefits i.e., "for protection from danger, for blessing of wealth, children, cattle, health, and all forms of prosperity" (Thumra 1988:50). It was done to make sure that the spirits do not cause harm to the humans and to make sure that they live in peaceful coexistence. As an agricultural community, harmony between the human, nature, and spirits was preferred. In fact, most of the 'religious ceremonies and festivals' of the Tangkhuls relate to their agricultural field (Horam 1977:39).

An important element of Tangkhul traditional religion was commutation with the spirits or spiritual world. This was done by priests called *sharva* or *sharvawo,* the king-headman of the village. It is the *sharva* who makes sacrifices on behalf of and for the village, clan, and family (Peter 2004:151). At the corporate level, sacrifice is offered for the village when a village raids another village, hunts monsters and wild animals, or an epidemic breaks out; and at the individual or family level, sacrifice is also offered in times of sickness or continual suffering from sickness (Peter 2004:151–152). It is said that the position of *sharva* is not chosen by the people. Instead, a person takes the role of *sharva* when *Āmeoa* gifts an individual to heal sickness, understand omens, recognise herbs for healing purposes, commute with *kameo,* etc. (Mahaphang 2015:51). As someone who intercedes with the spirit and looks after the welfare of the villagers, the role of *sharva* was highly valued in the pre-colonial period. In the contemporary context, their role is taken-up in two forms: the task of commuting with the divine is taken up by the pastor/elders of the church and the task of healing with herbs, massage, and health advice is given by *khanong,* local healer (which is an adaptation of *sharva*). A part of their task also involves interpreting *dreams* – especially dreams that were unusual – as Tangkhul Nagas believe that the spirit communicates in their dreams (Kashung 2012:73). Like the concept of the land of the dead, the dream was a continuation with their present world.

What is also distinctive about tribal traditional religion is the interface of social and religious events. In their beliefs, their everyday affairs and festivals were carried out with a strong sense of spirituality or religious connotations. For instance, when boys and girls pierced their ears during *chumpha* festival, *sharva* offered some portions of the meat to *kameo* (Kashung 2012:82). In their beliefs and practice, everything was connected; there was no separation between the sacred and secular (Thumra 1988:48–49)[15].

12.2.2 Colonial Period

Early mention of the Tangkhul traditional religion is found in the works of American missionaries and British administrator-ethnographers (i.e., colonials). While they recognised the presence of tribal traditional beliefs and practices when they arrived, they also dismissed traditional religion. The colonials assumed that their religion and worldviews were higher than tribal traditional religion. Yangkahao Vashum suggests that "At the heart of the issue is the claim of European superiority" (Vashum 2020:131). In doing so, they labelled tribal traditional beliefs and practices as the worshiping of evil spirits, the devil, or false gods (Thumra 2003:53).

Pettigrew commenced his missionary work amongst the Tangkhul Nagas in 1896 (Pettigrew 1897:526). As his original plan to spread the good news to the *Meiteis* (Manipuri) did not materialise, he shifted his work amongst the hill areas. In terms of his work and interactions with the indigenous community, it appears to be seen as an unpleasant compromise.[16] In his first missionary report, he described the Tangkhul Nagas as 'uncivilised', 'demon worshippers', and 'superstitious' (Pettigrew 1897:526). In addition to the use of such derogatory words, he saw his work amongst the Tangkhul Nagas as a service to them i.e., he saw his work amongst them as a favour to the community. This critique is not to take away from what he did and accomplished amongst the Tangkhul community. But it is to identify that Pettigrew stayed in the Tangkhul inhabited areas with a strong superiority complex. While he claimed to do the Lord's work, the researcher could not find any expression of love and concern for the indigenous community in his writings (i.e., letter, report, or articles). As he referred to Tangkhuls in derogatory terms, he was more comfortable talking about his works and achievement in his reports.

As someone who was engaged in a civilising mission, he began his missionary work by starting a school in Ukhrul. However, the indigenous community was hesitant to attend the school. The locals were sceptical of the intention of starting a school. In fact, his arrival in Ukhrul was met with suspicion (Pettigrew 1897:526). T. Luikham, one of the early students of Pettigrew, informs that people came to school only after the political agent, Major Maxwell, threatened the village king and his council (*hangva*) (Luikham 1948:17–18). On his way to Burma (now Myanmar), Maxwell threatened them that they would be beaten, jailed, or their houses burned if they did not attend the state run school (Luikham 1948:17–18). Even with such threats, the village councils found it difficult to bring the learners to the school. It was only with the personal initiative of Raihao, the king of Ukhrul (or headman), that they were able to gather 20 students.

As the indigenous community suspected, running a school came with ulterior motives. It was used not only to impart Western education, but to spread the Christian faith amongst the indigenous community. Pettigrew states, "The books they study aim to inculcate Christian truth. The school is open daily with singing and prayer. On the Lord's Day they come together for singing and to listen to the Gospel story" (Pettigrew 1899:53). J.S.M. Hooper suggests that those who were engaged in missionary work during this period were convinced that a vernacular approach to primary education and evangelism was seen as the way forward (Hooper 1963:11). They were convinced that being able to communicate in the same language/dialect would bring a positive outcome of their missionary work. On the surface, such an effort can be said to be done with good intentions. But the school was used as a snowball to the neighbouring village and to spread the Christian faith to them. Such a task was achieved with the help of the British colonials by way of using force. This

is another way of saying that Christian mission started with a sense of forcing a belief system onto the indigenous community. And it was done with disregard for the existing belief system of the indigenous community. Gradually, as the colonials forced their socio-religious values, the surface practices of the indigenous community began to slowly fade.

After Pettigrew worked in Ukhrul for five years, 12 of his students were baptised (Pettigrew 1996:v). As more students were admitted to the school, more people began to slowly accept the new faith. In 1907 (after more than a decade), the church in Ukhrul had grown to seventy members (Luikham 1948:22). Such advancement came at the cost of doing away with their socio-religious and cultural values i.e., as their traditional religion was deeply integrated with the social life, it came with a price. However, as the missionaries could not understand this reality, there was a continual attempt to reform the indigenous way of life in conformation with the colonials (Luikham 1948:23). For example, in between 1906–1909, the new believers were asked to stop drinking *khor,* rice beer, their staple food; they were prohibited to attend festivals or cultural events which involved the invoking of *kameo* (Luikham 1948:23). While there were believers who did not want to go back to the life of drinking rice beer, eating the meat used for sacrifice or to the practice of sacrifice, they constantly had to deal with the struggle of adopting to the new faith (Luikham 1948:34–35). The new believers faced the struggle of reverting to their traditional religion as they were persecuted by those who were holding on to the beliefs of *āmeoyan,* the traditional religion.

This struggle became more real as the community-oriented religion was being institutionalised with the plantation of churches in and around Ukhrul. With the planting of churches amongst the Tangkhul inhabited areas, a new set of practices and values were imposed. While these values and practices came with denominational bias and cultural imposition, the Bible, as the Word of God, was instituted as a key element of worship and community[17]. According to Down, this is evident "Through their organisation, literature, educational activities, and ideology the Christian missions provided the tribes with the skills and perspectives necessary to maintain distinctive identities" (*see also* Downs 1980, 1981, 2001:63). Rather than helping the Tangkhul Nagas see their socio-religious ingenuity, the idea of cultural inferiority (compared with the colonials) was planted in their thinking. Their belief in the all-powerful *Supreme Being* was replaced by a belief in the Triune God, God the Creator, Jesus the Saviour, and Holy Spirit the Comforter; their pietistic or spiritual practice of sacrifice by *sharva* (local priest) was taken over by the role and position of pastor; and their ceremonial singing of folksong was replaced by hymnal singing (and singing Western worship songs).

While many Tangkhul socio-religious practices were done away, some key aspects of the traditional faith were conveniently carried forward. This was done by way of camouflaging with the new faith. Though several features of traditional religion were adapted, in this case, only the key features that are evidently apparent in the post-colonial period will be identified.[18] First, their belief in the all-powerful Supreme Being was adapted with Christian Triune God, who is also the creator of the whole universe. As indicated earlier, with the influence of Pettigrew, God, the Creator is now referred to as *Varivarā* in the present context. Reference to God as *Āmeoa* is not preferred. Second, the role of *sharva* – now adapted as *khanong* – is continued in the contemporary context. They are now the local healers. They assume the role of prophesying, spiritual adviser, or local healer. Some aspects, if not the key aspect, of this role are also taken by the pastor or the elders of the church.

Third, associated with the role of *khanong,* the locals continue to belief in dreams. There is a general tendency to allow dreams to dictate the affairs of day-to-day living. Such belief comes with the assumed understanding that the divine communicates to the living through dreams. This belief is further reinforced by biblical instances of God speaking to the people in dreams giving divine instructions (e.g., Matthew 1:20; 23; 2:13; 19). Fourth, in terms of practice, both the pre-colonial and post-colonial Tangkhul bury their dead. They both believe in life after death; the former goes to *kazeiram,* the land of the dead, while the latter goes to the *kazingram,* heaven or *meifa̲*, hell, depending on the consequence of their life on earth. The key difference is in the belief in Christ i.e., only those who belief in Christ will go to heaven. Fifth, as Tangkhul Nagas are a patriarchal society, certain social-customary practices are carried forward to the teaching and practices of the church. For instance, the practice of village council, *hangva̲,* is imported to the practices of church leadership. Like the village council is made up of only male members, Tangkhul churches have adopted a male dominated leadership system into the church. What that means in terms of practice is that churches are hesitant to appoint women pastors or ordain women.

12.2.3 Post-Colonial Period

After the last missionary left the state of Manipur in 1954, missionary-evangelistic work, school work, and translation work were carried forward by the locals. These locals were those who studied in the mission schools; and they were the ones who were associated with the Western missionaries. All of them became Christians through the direct influence of the Western missionaries. Consequently, their religious or mission work came with a strong Western missionary influence.

This is to suggest that their religious work and activities which used to be a part of their social life are limited to the church and church building premises. As the indigenous community was prohibited to participate in social events, especially events that involved the invoking of *kameo* or *Āmeoa* of Tangkhul traditional religion, they avoided social events when they embraced the new faith. For example, Pettigrew strongly opposed the celebration of *thisam phanit,* the festival of the departure of the soul of the dead, where the living gives farewell to the soul/spirit of the dead (*see* Pettigrew 1909:37–46). Along with such prohibition, the new believers were discouraged to participate in socio-religious activities and events that are indicative of the traditional religion. And since the new believers had moved to a new village (also known as 'mission compound') with the help of the colonials, they got further detached from the social reality of the people (Luikham 1948:35). As the new believers were persecuted, moving at the periphery of the village was seen as providential. But, in the long run, detachment from the larger community had a negative impact i.e., detachment from the social reality. *Their reality is now limited to the activities of the church – their new found community.* Unfortunately, after years of Christianity, they naturally remained detached from the socio-political realities of the larger Tangkhul community (*see* Ragui 2021b). While such detachment has much connection with coloniality[19], it is also related with the influence of the school of thought (Thomas 2016:185–186). Liberals or free thinkers readily engage with the social-political realities, while the conservative-evangelicals are hesitant or precautious of dealing with secular issues. As Tangkhul Nagas tend to lean towards the conservative camp, they are slow to respond to social-political realities.

As indicated earlier, as religious beliefs and practices of the indigenous community are being shaped and influenced by the narrative of the biblical text, oral tradition is sub-

consciously allowed to fade away. K. Thanzauva and R.L. Hnuni suggest that tribals of NEI transferred their understanding of supernatural power to the Bible (Thanzauva and Hnuni 2002:343–358). Such understanding came in conformation with the colonials which alienated the indigenous community from their culture (Thanzauva and Hnuni 2002:347). While the biblical text is foundational in their thinking, their view or reading of the Bible tend to take a dominant approach. Specific to the Tangkhul context, there was an attempt to do a contextual translation of the Bible (Kaping 2010). Translators tried to make use of Tangkhul phonetics attempting to contextualise certain key words of the Bible. However, such an initiative invited negative responses from across Tangkhul churches and by different church leaders. They hold that the contextualised Tangkhul Bible is awkwardly translated i.e., to read the names of people and places with Tangkhul phonetics (pronunciation)[20]. As Tangkhul Nagas adopt colonial agendas, they are now indifferent to their own socio-religious values and practices, including their own indigenous phonetics.

Considering such colonial captivity, informed Tangkhuls began to question the presence of colonial influence in the 1970s. While reacting to colonial dominance, they questioned the influence of colonialism. This period saw some efforts to make the Christian faith culturally relevant and relatable to the people. M. Horam observed that "Some devotional songs, especially songs with agricultural flavour, have been composed in their tribal fashion and sung during their worship" (Horam 1977:14). Such indigenous pursuit was also expressed in different parts of NEI (Natarajan 1977:193; *see also* Thanzauva 1989). In fact, a group of scholars began to argue that what was perceived as Christianity or Christian theology in NEI was irrelevant to the context and experience of the people (*see* Thanzauva 1997 and Longchar 1997). Thumra argued for the need to do contextual theologies that are relevant in NEI (Thumra 1973:5–7; *see also* Thumra 1995). Tribal theologians began to develop a sense of suspicion of the dominant theology, especially those that were associated with the Western missionaries and colonialism.[21] This emphasis of contextual theological reflection was considered significant as the thinking and practices of the indigenous churches were perceived as 'too superficial' or unconnected with their culture (Keitzar 1982:310). In the later period, indigenous scholars would further argue that the prevailing theology of the time failed to connect with the indigenous worldview (Longchar 2003:1–16). Such an argument was a confrontation to the preaching and practices of the indigenous churches that seem to prioritise only the spiritual aspect of the indigenous community/church.

12.3 Contemporary Context

With reference to the above *post-colonial period*, theological development of the late 20th century triggered some discussion in terms of engaging with tribal traditional religion and indigenous culture (*see* Wilson 1982:323–332). Tribal theological scholars attempted to liberate the religious system from colonial captivity; it was also done by engaging with the contemporary socio-political concerns of the tribals (Shimray 2003). However, such theological discourse was limited in academia and within a particular school of thought (i.e., those with ecumenical or liberal pursuits). It did not receive the desired impact in the dominant religious setting or ecclesial setting of the indigenous community (i.e., those with conservative pursuit). This resulted in an apparent gap between what is taught and discussed in academia and what is preached and practised in the church or religious institutions.

This seems inevitable. Though Tangkhuls are all Christians, the institution of church or the leader of the church tends to be more conservative. On the other hand, Tangkhul

Christians, who are in the academy, tend to be more open minded or liberal in their theological discourse. Consequently, when tribal theological scholars critiqued the presence of colonial influence in the church, it made the adherents and policy makers of religious institutes/church uncomfortable. Instead of embracing the input of contextual theological discussion, they deemed such discussion a 'compromise and syncretism' of tribal traditional religion and culture with Christian beliefs (Keitzar 2003:21). However, what the religious institutes/churches failed to recognise is that all along, they have uncritically adopted beliefs and practices that are colonial in nature – and not necessarily Christian orthodoxy per se[22]. And, they also adopted beliefs and practices that are of tribal traditional religion in origin. This is the *colonial difference*.

If that is the case, their dismissal of constructive engagement with the context and tribal traditional religion is built on shaky ground. In light of this reality, there is a need to reconsider and reread colonial text, such as Bible and Bible translation, hymns, church documents, church history, etc. There is also the need to reconsider and reread socio-religious values that have come to be a part of Tangkhul culture – values that are indigenous and colonial, but not necessarily biblical in nature or origin (e.g., denominational biases).

When talking about the adoption of colonial values, the heart of colonial captivity emerges from the understanding that what they brought is better than what the indigenous community had. Pertinent to the current discussion, they brought the understanding that they have a high view of God or religion. While that is not explicitly stated, it is evident in their dismissal of tribal traditional religion as *a worshiping of the evil spirit,* and in their use of derogatory words when referring to tribals and their religion. Initially, it helped the colonials market their religious concerns i.e., Tangkhul Nagas became Christians with the arrival of the colonials. However, their presence and continuing influence planted the understanding that everything that comes from them is good or beneficial for the indigenous society. In doing so, it implicitly planted the seed to be critical of tasks – whether theological or anthropological – that deals with tribal traditional religion. While they are critical of indigenous values, they continue to uncritically embrace colonial values – even in the contemporary context. For example, they have comfortably embraced hymn singing and playing of musical instruments during religious events, though such practices are very much a part of Western culture[23]. But in doing so, Tangkhuls have neglected their traditional musical instruments (like *tingteila,sipa, talla,* etc.) and folksongs, *hao laa*.

Concerning the adaptation of tribal traditional religion, the indigenous community has brought in the patriarchal *system* of the contemporary socio-religious structure. Like the *hangva* (village council) is made up of men, the role and responsibility of *sharva* (priest) is limited only to men. Such gender dominance is directly adapted in the contemporary context in the form of male dominated religious leaders. It means that the policy making and the role of priest-pastor is given mostly to men. Backed by patriarchal thinking, Tangkhul Nagas are still hesitant to give equal opportunity to women in religious leadership i.e., there is no gender equality in the area of church leadership. In terms of praxis, such Tangkhul socio-religious reality comes from the perceived notion that men are better than women i.e., men pastors are preferred over women pastors. To suggest that Tangkhul Nagas have adapted socio-religious thinking and practices of the pre-colonial indigenous community confronts the tendency of the religious institutions/church to dismiss tribal traditional religion at the surface level.

12.4 Conclusion

The argument to decolonise tribal-traditional religion of the Tangkhul Nagas is not to return to the pre-colonial indigenous beliefs and practices. Instead, it is to identify the presence of colonial difference in the contemporary Tangkhul religious thinking and practices. It is to recognise that Tangkhuls have uncritically adopted colonial values as well as adapted tribal traditional beliefs and practices in their contemporary belief system. The contemporary Tangkhuls need to be aware of this reality.

If that is the case, then, the dismissal of academic engagement with tribal traditional religion and culture by the church or church leaders is unfounded. All along, from the colonial period to the present day, they have adapted the beliefs of traditional religion into the new faith practices. This reality invites the contemporary Tangkhul Nagas to reconsider and reread colonial texts and socio-religious values that are not necessarily biblical in nature or in origin. When reconsidering and rereading these texts and values, one must take careful attention to consider what is colonial or indigenous.

Notes

1 With the knowledge that the term tribe/tribal is an imposed term by the colonials, the term is synonymously used with the term indigenous or indigenous communities. Meaning, like other Nagas, Tangkhuls are an indigenous community of Northeast India. Hereafter, the terms 'Northeast India' will be referred to as NEI or 'Northeast' as NE.

2 Tangkhul Nagas are the indigenous community of the state of Manipur (India) and the Northeastern part of Myanmar. Through the Western missionary influence of the late 20th century, they are now all Christians. In fact, they are the first indigenous communities who became Christians in Manipur.

3 Frederick S. Downs is of the view that the "traditional system could not survive under the centralised British administration and jurisprudence" (Down 2001:63).

4 In recent years indigenisation of church is an engagement in some quarters. In this chapter I have preferred concept decolonisation in place of indigenisation. The term decolonisation is used as an intentional effort to identify and reconstruct that which was planted/imposed by the colonials amongst the indigenous community. Indigenisation, however, would be an attempt to conceptualise something by relating to or connecting with the cultural context of an indigenous community of a particular place/region.

5 In the 1970-80s, a group of tribal theologians began to actively engage with tribal heritage in NEI. Tribal churches found such constructive engagement as syncretistic and unbiblical.

6 Though Boodoo focuses on Christian mission, this chapter focuses on tribal 'religion.' It attempts to do decolonial thinking of beliefs and practices of the Tangkhul Naga community.

7 Christianity came to the Tangkhul Nagas with both denominational colouring (in this case, Baptist denomination) and input of colonial cultural values.

8 Since Tangkhul Nagas follow oral tradition, there are very limited written resources on pre-colonial religion or Tangkhul traditional religion. Most of the socio-religious practices are not available in the written form.

9 In the recent past, there has been much interest in the tribal traditional religion of the Tangkhul Nagas amongst the university students and professors.

10 During the arrival of the colonials, there were about 150 Tangkhul villages with their distinct dialects. For the purposes of spreading the gospel in the Tangkhul inhabited areas, Pettigrew made the dialect of Hunphun-Ukhrul village the lingua franca of the Tangkhuls. As I belong to this village, and my knowledge of tribal traditional religion is limited to Hunphun-Ukhrul village, when referring to the Tangkhul traditional religion and its terms, the focus will be on the beliefs and practices of Hunphun-Ukhrul village.

11 This seems to be a correction from his earlier writing where Thumra refers to the Supreme Being as *Uri Ura* (Thumra 1988:47–48).

12 Such usage is prevalent in the Tangkhul Bible, hymns, and other church documents.
13 Unlike the oral tradition of dream-like vision of the coming of Western missionaries, there is no written record of the current oral tradition (*see* Prongo 1996:5–6).
14 A similar belief and practices are found in other tribes (Pongen 2016).
15 The above features of Tangkhul traditional religion are not exhaustive. While providing the basic features of their beliefs and practices, it rectifies some misconceptions of the Tangkhul traditional religion. For a detailed feature of tribal traditional religion, see Thumra (1988).
16 He came to Calcutta (now Kolkata) in the year of 1890 as a missionary of the Arthington Aborigines Mission. He worked amongst the Bengalis for two years and turned his attention to the kingdom of Manipur. This attention towards Manipur was triggered by an incident in 1891, which is known as the Anglo-Manipur War, or Khongjom War. It instilled a deep desire in Pettigrew to enter Manipur and began to fervently pray to "go and work in Manipur" (Pettigrew 1897; *see also* Kapai 2019b; Anonymous 2021).
17 The Gospel of John was the first book that was translated in Tangkhul, while the final translation was the book of the New Testament (*see* Pettigrew 1904, 1927).
18 Joy suggests that there is continuity from the traditional religion to the present context in the area of belief system, priest, offering, conflict resolution, burial, life after death, and festivals and rituals (Joy 2014a:4–5).
19 Robin Boyd is of the view that most, if not all, of the 19th century missionaries, who arrived in the NE region, were conservatives or evangelicals (Boyd 1969:88).
20 Their underlying assumption was to translate the Bible literally i.e., from English words to equivalent Tangkhul words.
21 It might be worth mentioning that as early as the 1960s, there were talks of Christian response to 'tribal concerns' in Northeast India and other parts of India (*see* Anonymous 1961:60–83, 1962:80–85 and Thomas & Taylor 1965).
22 The term Christian orthodoxy refers to right or correct beliefs of Christianity. For instance, Christians across different church denominations believe that God revealed Godself through the birth and incarnation of Jesus Christ.
23 In the meantime, traditional songs and traditional musical instruments are slowly fading away (KS & Arunkumar 2021:311–318).

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13

THE IMPACT OF CHRISTIANITY ON KHASI SOCIETY OF MEGHALAYA

An Analysis on Contemporaneity

Rusievan Shangpliang

13.0 Introduction

Khasi is a generic name given to the people of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills in the state of Meghalaya, one of the states in Northeast India, who are occupying the Hills and are having the same customs and traditions (Giri 1990:6). They are further categorised into a number of communities as per the territory demarcation. The Khasi people who live in the central highland areas of East Khasi Hills are known as Khynriam; the people living in Jaintia Hills are known as the Jaintia (they are also called the Synteng or the Pnar); the Bhoi occupy the northern slopes of the Khasi Hills under the Ri-Bhoi District; the ones who occupy the southern slopes of the Khasi Hills are called War and those who inhibit southern Jaintia region are known as War-Jaintia; the Maram live in the Western Region of the Khasi Hills, while the Lyngngam inhabit the Western area bordering the Khasi Hills and the Garo Hills. The Khasi language is of the same group with the Mon-Khmer language which belongs to the Austro-Asiatic family (Gupta 1989:1). Time and again scholars have made several attempts to determine the original home of the Khasi; however, it is hard to trace their origin since they do not have written records prior to the coming of the British. This led to many assumptions that they might have migrated from somewhere or have been the original settlers of the Hills. In this article, emphasis is laid on the Khynriam Khasi who occupy the Eastern and parts of Western regions of the Khasi Hills.

The Khasi society follows matrilineal system in which lineage is traced along mother's line. This system has its roots in the Khasi socio-cultural, political, and religious life. Both males and females are equally treated in the society and their importance can be seen from their involvement in different activities especially in economic sphere. The society is casteless and does not have practices such as *purdah*, dowry or child marriage, but has flourished under societal norms orally passed down through generations. Before the establishment of the British administration and Christianity, the people maintained a number of separate political structures, e.g., Village Durbars, Councils, and State Durbars. The smallest political unit is the village (*Shnong*) and the highest is the State (*Hima*) which runs with the leadership of village headman (*Rangbah Shnong*), the guidance of the minister(s) (*Myntri*), and

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the chief (*Syiem* or *Lyngdoh* in some states).These traditional authorities exercise democratic principles in running their administration. The chieftainship was hereditary and was reserved to those from the ruling clans (Snaitang 1993:168). Traditionally, the Khasi do not have an organised religious system like Christianity. In fact to the Khasi, religion means all aspects related to matriliny; kinship and socio-political relations are encompassed and integrated into the rituals associated with the family (*Ka Niam Ing*), the clan (*Ka Niam Kur*), and the state (*Ka Niam Hima*). Economically, the traditional Khasi society largely depended on agriculture; however trade relations were carried out with the people of the plains too. Markets have developed from pre-colonial era where both male and female participated in the economic affairs in their respective villages and travelled from one place to another to sell their products and procure their requirements. It was from the nineteenth century onwards, the Khasi have encountered both enculturation and acculturation within their society with the coming of British colonial rule followed by the activities of Christian missionaries and the establishment of Christianity in the Hills.

The emergence of Christianity among the Khasi people is due to the contribution of the past events not only in Khasi Hills, but particularly in the West (discussed later). Thus, the nature of the impact of Christianity that has been harnessing western influence on both western and non-western societies deserves deliberations from time to time. The impact on customs and traditions, and economic and socio-religious domains provides a new identity formation that eventually brought disagreement in their approaches towards their culture as well as assimilation with the whole process. Relying on history as a source in dissecting the knowledge with more insights and analysis that needs more acute attention and discussion, it is important to gather fresh insights from new historical and philosophical perspectives regarding the establishment, presence, and impact of Christianity in the Khasi Hills. On this background, the article tries to attend to the relevant queries and analyse different aspects of change that have an impact on the traditional religion, the social life of the Khasi, and their culture as a consequence of introduction of Christianity as well as the response and reaction to it.

13.1 Theoretical background of the study

When we talk of the history of Christianity it does not mean only the history of missions, role of missionaries and followers, contribution in the forms of health and education, and other spheres; but the doctrines and theological implications are also crucial to the understanding of the work of a religion that continues to capture the imagination, faith, and belief of population across the world. The instruction to spread Christianity from Israel to all parts of the globe was given by Christ himself when he says, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations" (Matt.28 Verses 18 to 20 - *Bible*, King James Version, *see* Carroll & Prickett 2008). As soon as it gained mass support and became an institutionalised religion, Christianity became a major factor that changed the history of ancient, medieval, and modern societies in the West. Eventually, it spread to other societies around the globe and drastic changes fell on them too. The Age of Discovery has helped the spread of Christianity to a great extent and by the turn of the seventeenth century the Church is no longer against scientific discoveries, but sought to venture into the corners of the world thereby expanding its missions which subsequently created a religious impact of a large magnitude wherever it landed.

Since then Christianity itself has experienced changes and have evolved from one stage to another. Christianity has gone through a tremendous transition that would transform human thoughts and history throughout the West and parts of Asia. Thus, began the start of Christian missions that brought about phenomenal change in every society, and thereby making it a multi-cultural religion. This change was not witnessed only on the societies, but on Christianity too thereby bringing a massive shift of Christian culture, its nature, and practices. The spread of Christianity is seen as a gigantic move which initiated an encounter between the advanced and the traditional life, the literate and the illiterate, between the West and the East, and Christians and non-Christians. Hence, Christianity in its wider context has definitely given shape to the traditional society in its religious pursuits and in the same way the latter has also narrowed down the various concepts of Christianity to its own socio-cultural stance. In this regard the words of Phyllis Tickle in her work would help to place the above argument in a more acceptable logic. She writes, "Just as surely as one of the functions of religion is to inform, counsel, and temper the society in which it exists, just so surely is every religion informed and coloured by its hosting society" (Tickle 2012:19).

It should be reminded that when Christianity entered the Hills of Northeast India, the Western societies and that of the Eastern (here particularly refers to the Khasi Hills) were entirely different in terms of culture, polity, economy, and other aspects of life. By that period of time, the West has progressed so much in literature, science and technology, while the Khasi did not even have their own scripts. However, it is important to mention that the Khasi were not isolated as claimed in many quarters, since evidences and records show that they have been in contact with people of the plains through their involvement in trade and commercial activities. It was at this point of time that the numerous changes faced by the traditional society would transform its social behaviour, its cultural identity, and religious worldview too. What could be the appropriate and acceptable name for this period of sudden shift that has altered the Khasi society? Should it be a 'Period of Transition and Transformation' or is it a 'Period of Sudden Shift' or to be more precise, should it be categorised simply as a 'Period of Change'? In the early years of Christianity it has tremendous influence on the political scenario and the changes that have been witnessed in the West and within every decade, one after another change in the political, economic, and religious arenas also influenced Christianity and its approaches on its works and followers. It is not difficult to understand the Christianised western world and the changes that occurred there; however, it becomes a huge task to draw an analytical conclusion on the nature of impact that these changes have on the Khasi society and its members. The unprecedented influence that the West had on the Khasi is thus a matter of crucial importance and requires more deliberations to understand socio-religious and cultural history of the Khasi from a new perspective, and to grab the history of Christianity from a philosophical standpoint. Thus, what we see in the twenty-first century Khasi society is largely based on the things that has been written and done over the past two centuries.

What the Khasi people experienced when Christianity was firstly introduced to them was the exposure of their society to a religion which seeks to expand its teachings and gain membership. The traditional society and its culture have now come in direct confrontation with a complete belief system with its new elements that would touch many aspects of the Khasi life. Eventually, the progress led to a mild abandonment of things that are not suitable to Christianity's ethics and principles. One question to be asked, why it took so long for Christianity to reach the hills. We, however, can relate the work of Christianity in

the Hills to a bigger picture that is the doctrines of the faith and the events that shape it through centuries. It should be kept in the mind that without the help of scientific discovery, geographical discovery, expansion of trade and commerce, particularly by colonisers and also the expansion of missionary activities, it would have been impossible for Christianity to venture into such unexplored areas and make such a rapid progress. Another aspect that we may point out is the challenging task for the historians to determine the relationship between Christian missionaries and the Imperial Powers. History tells us about the influence of political scenario on the journey of Christianity in the West; similarly, the political condition in the Khasi Hills in the nineteenth century attracted the passage of entry for the missionaries in the same manner, as political events following Constantine promulgation of Milan in 313 AD shaped Christianity of that period from being a superstitious belief into becoming a state religion of the Roman Empire after half century. Hence, it may be a challenge here to speak of the link that colonialism might have or might not have supported Christianity or vice versa; however, it did provide an easier route for the missionaries. The help rendered by the British officers such as Captain Francis Jenkins to Nathan Brown and Oliver Cutters at Sadiya, Assam in 1836 or that of Lieutenant Lewin of the British government at the time when Thomas Jones arrived in Sohra in 1841, though not in evangelistic measures cannot be seen as a help of the government, rather it was a personal evangelism and attachment of the officer to his faith. Taking a short divergent from the discussion in the debate that colonialism supported Christianity and vice-versa in colonised countries, one also has to see the relationship between the indigenous converts with the missionaries and the colonial power. For the devout Christians, all these material developments, following the Age of Discovery as mentioned above, might have been prepared by God for a great mission. This is one important feature of the beliefs among Christians that when something is achieved or became successful, it is generally attributed as miracles or blessings of Christ.

13.1.1 Review of existing Literatures

Before going further in our discursions, it is important to relook at the historiographic developments in writing the history of Christianity in Northeast India, particularly in Khasi Hills. Throughout the years, histories of Christian missions in the Khasi Hills have been written by scholars both indigenous and foreign. When it comes to the history of Christianity in the hills, mostly descriptive in their approaches, some scholars opine that there have been adoption, assimilation or counter reactions which have taken place. However, there are scholars who view this process as one of the factors which has prevented detribalisation, while at the same time helping the tribes to come to terms with the process of modernisation. Of the early works available, mention may be made of the work of Nalini Natarajan (1977), which is considered by many scholars as one of the early historical studies about the beginning, contribution, and impact of various Christian Missions and indigenous churches in the Khasi Hills. The work of R. D. Warjri (1981) focuses on the attitude of the people, the motives of the Government, and the role of Christian missionaries in promoting education in the Khasi Hills. P.N. Dutta (1982) in his work stresses on the impact of the Christian missionaries on the social, political, and religious sphere of the Khasi. In his two comprehensive works on Christianity in Northeast India, Frederick S. Downs (1992, 1983) throws light on the beginning of the rise of Christianity in the region as well as the changes that followed thereafter. With regards to the influence of Christianity on women and their role in the Church, Downs (1996) provides an assessment of the impact of Christianity upon

the status of women among the Khasi society. O. L. Snaitang's (1993) work focuses on the impact of Christianity on the traditional culture of the people of Northeast India. In his edited work on indigenous churches, Snaitang (2000) provides insights into the emergence of denominations which have been started in Northeast India, particularly from the beginning of the twentieth century. Concentrating on the impact of Christianity through literature and education on the Khasi and Jaintia society, O. L. Snaitang (2011) in his another work points out that these factors have helped to create a 'unified tribal community' among the tribes. R. B. Sharma's (1988) work analyses different Christian missions, their relation with the Government, and their impact on the hill societies of Northeast India. H. Kelian Synrem (1992) highlights the influence of Christian missions and Western education on the Khasi culture and how reaction to the same was witnessed with the rise of socio-cultural movement led by the Seng Khasi. An edited work of M. S. Sangma and D. R. Syiemlieh (1994) also sheds light on the key role played by Christianity as one of the prominent religions in the region which has brought significant changes in the social, cultural, and religious life of the people. P. Kharakor (1997) in her work emphasises the significant impact of the Christian missions on the Khasi Hills as reflected in literary works and use of Khasi language by both Western and indigenous writers who have been influenced by the *Bible*. S. D. Talukdar (2004) in her work mentions the organised effort made by the Khasi to preserve their culture and retain their identity in the midst of the works of the Christian missionaries which brought rapid changes to the Khasi society. An edited volume by T. B. Subba, J. Puthenpurakal, and S. J. Puykunnel (2009) consists of chapters that deliberate on the significant role of Christianity in bringing about socio-cultural change in Northeast India. T. Vanlaltlani's (2009) article 'Participation of Women in the Church: With Reference to North East India', stresses on the exclusion of women from taking part in the Church's Ministry among the different churches in Northeast India. J. F. Jyrwa (2011) in his work concentrates on the issue of enculturation of the church and its contribution to the development, transformation, and enrichment of the Khasi-Jaintia culture. Besides these, there are a number of studies done on particular denominations and Christian missions both in English and in vernacular.[1]

From the review of existing literature, it is understood that the writings from the Christian mission point of view have been dominating the historiography of Christianity and clearly indicates the orientation of the missionaries and missionary historians. There have been numerous instances that the importance of the indigenous people's cultural and religious outlook has been neglected. And at times the prejudice of superiority dominates the interpretations of the authors (*see* Varghese 2012). The influence of some of the writings can be seen when the church tends to neglect and denounce most of the customs and traditions of the Khasi which they have been practising for a long period of time. As part of the movement to protect and promote the indigenous culture, literary activities in the early years of the twentieth century mostly focus on Khasi traditional religion whereby writers openly declare Western ideas and Christianity as the main causes of putting the Khasi culture in a state of jeopardy. As a result of these developments, a vast difference of opinion was created regarding conversion and cultural resistance between those who have converted to Christianity and those who still believe in Khasi traditional religion. Hence, looking at these developments, the historical analysis of the reaction and response on the impact of Christianity becomes imperative to obtain a comprehensive study of Khasi society and its encounter with the religion of the West. Hence this problem in historiography cannot be addressed from a church history perspective only, but other perspectives such

as social history can also be used (Shangpliang 2016:177).[2] As suggested by John C. B. Webster in his comprehensive work on Christian historiography, "new historical situations beg new historical questions that may require fresh assumptions and new methods for answering them" (Webster 2012:247). He adds that the present historian of Christianity in India has plenty to work since the socio-cultural perspective as propounded by the Church History Association of India has not yet exhausted its potential when combined with newer post-colonial studies (Webster 2012:244–247). Moreover, since religion is part and parcel of society and culture, hence a relook at the contemporaneity as a result of the impact of Christianity will throw more light on the socio-cultural change, adaptation, and assimilation of the indigenous people in general and the Khasi in particular.

13.2 Advent of Christianity

Significant developments in political situation motivated the initiation of Christian mission works in the Khasi hills. After the Treaty of Yandaboo post the Anglo-Burmese War 1824 and the subjugation of the Khasi Uprising in 1829-39, most of the Khasi States (Hima) came under the control of the British. The changes in the political scenario gave an easy access to the western missionaries beginning with the Serampore Baptist Mission in 1813.[3] However, the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Mission, later called the Welsh Presbyterian Foreign Mission, was the first to start a firm base for Christianity in the Khasi hills from 1841 onwards. During this time, the Khasi did not realise that this new development would be one of the agents with rapid acceleration towards socio-religious and cultural change. Although resistance to colonialism was expressed through the eruption of the Khasi Uprising of 1829 and the Jaintia rebellion in 1860, the transition that took place enabled the Christian missions to proceed without much difficulty. For the Christian mission enterprises, the Khasi Hills as any other part of Northeast India was a virgin field that was necessary for expansion of Christianity while for the British colonial power, the new region served as a lucrative area for economic ventures. Acceptance of Christianity initially by the Khasi was not in response to its doctrinal philosophy, but to attraction of temporal provisions made available by the missionaries. On this development, Snaitang writes:

> At the initial stage, the growth and development of Christianity in the Khasi Hills was a slow progress. It was only towards the end of the nineteenth century that it gained a significant foothold among all sections of the tribe. Schools, churches, and medical service were established and the tribal response to change was positive.
>
> *(Snaitang 1993:121)*

The difference in approaches, ideas and objectives, and doctrines and philosophy between the different missions/denominations is clearly seen from the fact that the mission fields were strategically divided. For instance, in the same period when Thomas Jones of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Foreign Missionary Society established Christianity in the Khasi Hills, Nathan Brown of the American Baptist Mission was trying to do the same at Sadiya, Jaipur and Sivasagar in Assam. Subsequently, other Christian Missions followed suit.[4] It can be argued that the emergence of a number of new denominations or Christian movements seems more like an ideological and theological anxiety rather than a socio-cultural influence.

13.2.1 Reactions and Responses to Christianity

In the initial stage, opposition to Christianity had slowed down its expansion. The sudden emergence of a foreign religion was seen as a tool of intrusion into the traditional culture since many young people who began to follow the missionaries refused to join their family religious rituals (N Natarajan 1977:64–65 and 116–117). It became obvious that this ultimately led to the barring of girls from attending schools. We may point out that this opposition was not confined to common people only; even converts belonging to ruling clans were also targeted (Downs 1992:73). However, this was not only due to the attitude of the people towards the entry of new religious practices, but the church also played a key role. It may be noted that strict rules and regulations were applied to converts who desired to become members in the Welsh Presbyterian Church. In this case, it was decided that a person would not be accepted as member of the Church if one could not read, one who did not renounce traditional practices, and one who did not abstain from all kinds of intoxicants (Morris 1939:192–211). Seeing the reaction of the Khasi towards Christianity, the early missionaries adopted a common strategy in which preaching was considered secondary and learning of the language of the local became primary objective. They could have used an educated translator; however they tediously embarked themselves on this difficult task. Soon they were able to speak and preach in the local language. In addition to this effort, the most remarkable achievement of Thomas Jones in particular was introduction of the Khasi script by adopting Roman alphabets and letters. It was until the introduction of formal education in the 1840s that the male and female students who attended missionary owned schools were able to read and write. Although the main objective of the missionaries might be to enable the young Khasi students to read the Bible; however, with the learning of other subjects, western education and its ideals gradually passed into the pupils; and finally, the gradual acceptance of Christianity was easier among them. The introduction of the script to the Khasi language and the start of Western Education revolutionised the whole thinking process and enabled the Khasi not only to develop their literature, but they were also able to explore Western literature and ideas too. Soon, the causes of prohibition against girls to attend schools proved baseless and subsequently led to increase in female education (GoM 1996:182). This was the turning point in Khasi society followed by various aspects of modernisation. The decision to use Roman script instead of Bengali script was done without any hesitation. It set the Khasi language and culture at a different social status, away from the influence of the Bengali in the plains, and moreover, enabled the Khasi intelligentsia to learn English at a rapid pace. The decision has given the Khasi the art of writing without which it would have been difficult for the Christian mission to go on and progress, and for the Khasi to come up with a new method of preserving their custom and tradition in black and white. It is also interesting to note how the language of Christianity from Latin culture to Spanish or English have taken roots in Khasi society by adaptation; and more importantly the barrier between the literate world and the society which possessed no scripts of its own was finally broken or collapsed. The background was set for Christianity to make an expansion into the Khasi Hills in which denominations worked their way from urban areas into the rural by gaining followers who then made up about sixty five per cent of the population. The role played by early missionaries along with the first converts among the Khasi is vital in this regard.

13.3 Impact of Christianity in contemporary period

When we look at the contemporary times, in spite of the massive Christianisation of the Khasi population, the social structure of the Khasi has withstood the challenge of change. The matrilineal system of the Khasi might have certainly surprised the early Christian missionaries when they first came into contact with the people. They saw that despite being surrounded by patriarchal societies, matriliny had deeply rooted in the culture of the Khasi and hence they decided not to interfere with the system. In fact, though the missionaries and even the colonial administrators could properly understand the concept of matriliny, none of the Christian denominations felt the need to alter the system. As a member of the Khasi community I can say with authority that there have been certain rituals of matriliny which are non-religious in character, but are parts of customs that are being incorporated in the Christian marriages. Therefore, keeping in mind that the rituals involved in traditional matriliny have been detached and hence, we may say that a new form of matrilineal system has evolved as a secular social phenomenon especially when it comes to marriage and kinship.

13.3.1 Changes in the Matrilineal System

The tradition followed by the Khasi for marriages is also one of the factors which signify the close ties between them and culture. To the Khasi, marriage is not only a contract, but it is a sacred bond between a man and a woman and between their respective clans as well. Marriage is strictly exogamous which means that marriage within the same clan is *Ka Shong Sang* (an unpardoned sin). It is mention worthy that the *Ka Shong Sang* resulting from marriage between members of the same clan, irrespective of their religious background is still observed along with other Khasi customary laws of marriage. *Ka Shong Sang Synrai*, that is marrying one's sister-in-law or mother-in-law is also an unpardonable sin. Further, *Ka Sang Sohpet* (marrying the children of one's father's brother) and *Ka Sang Syngken* (marrying father's sister or their grandchildren) are forbidden among the Khasi. A Khasi cannot marry his *Bakha* (maternal uncle's daughter) during the lifetime of the maternal uncle, but he can never marry *Nia Kha* (the daughter of his paternal aunt) as it tantamounts to *Ai Khaw Kylliang*, (name of a taboo) which is an insult to the father; because it means a return of bread and luck and the person of his father to his clan (Giri1990:13). There are instances of *Iateh Kur* (clans being connected with one another). Although P. R. T. Gurdon observes that there is no custom of hypergamy among the Khasi, however, we may relook into this when we study the inter-marriage relation between ruling and non-ruling groups in Khasi society (Gurdon 1975:76–79). Perhaps the doctrinal philosophy and teachings of Christianity itself have prevented the churches from adopting any stringent measure towards any couple found of *Shong Sang* and solely believe that such a sin will be punished by God himself since it brought shame and bad omen to the family, clan, and society as a whole. In fact, even Christian missionaries upheld the system and were ready to comply with this traditional custom within the church. While discussing about Christianity as a secondary participation agent of change which has helped in creating a new cultural set up, Snaitang (1998:67) opines that there was no intention on the part of the missionaries to modify the matriliny and kinship ties of the Khasi. For instance, the Welsh Presbyterian constituted the Standing Incest Committee to look after those involve in incestuous marriages. Although the traditional believers strongly believe that culprits are punishable by *Ka Tait-Kur* (ex-communication from the clan or *Ka Beh Shnong* (exile from village), but I

must admit that till date myself as a Khasi who follows Christianity have not come across any reference about the punishment adopted by any of the Christian denominations in this regard. Thus, it is observed that the traditional norms of matriliny still very much applicable in contemporary times among the Khasi. However, there are groups such as Ka Syngkhong Rympei Thymmai who wanted to adopt patriliny claiming that for so long matriliny had held back the society from progress, besides other reasons. One cannot say that this could have been the impact of Christianity since the issue of inheritance of ancestral property among Khasi family might have been one of the dominant factors for such a proposal.

13.3.2 Changes in Marriage and Kinship

With regards to marriage among the Khasi, it is the duty of a man to propose to a woman. Once consent has been arrived by both families, the *Kni* (maternal uncle) has the moral duty of ascertaining that no incestuous relationship takes place. This is usually done during *Ka Jingiateh Ktien* (engagement*)* held at the woman's place and only male members of the man's family can attend the function. *Kni* of both parties play active role in the pre-marital arrangements in order to make sure that marriages are done as per the traditions and norms of the church. On the wedding day, the *Kni* of the bride would lead her during the time she came out of her house to go to the place or church arranged for the wedding ceremony to take place.[5] Relatives of the bridegroom deliver a pig to the bride's house a day before the wedding. It is made sure that they choose the best pig which is well built and free from diseases; otherwise if any defect is found in the pig that would be a big shame to the bridegroom's family. On the wedding day, male members of bride's family deliver plain rice and well cooked pork without using any salt in it to the bridegroom's house in well cleaned pots. Before the bridegroom leaves his place, his mother blesses her son; and prayers of blessings are offered by other elders of the family; and the same ceremonial formalities are also done in the bride's house. On the same day, *Ka Ring Kongor* or *Ka Shaw Kongor* is observed. It is a tradition for the bride's relatives to wait for the bridegroom and his relatives halfway before the latter reach the place where the wedding is supposed to take place; the former offer refreshment including betel nut and betel leaf (*Kwai)* to the bridegroom party. After the marriage ceremony is over, the newlywed male goes to the wife's house to receive blessings from the latter's mother and other close female members of her family. Before entering the house *Ka Tah Umphniang* (a welcome ritual of putting a little bit of oil on bride and groom's forehead) is performed; this is followed by offering of *Kwai* from the family to the couple. Towards the end of the day (after the reception in modern times), again the newlywed couple go to wife's house along the male members of the husband who finally deliver the groom to the wife's family and this tradition is known as *Ka On Kongor*. Here the husband offers *Pla Iew* (a traditional bag) to his wife as a mark of his commitment; it is also symbolic way of giving her the authority to look after the household activities. Three to four days after the marriage, *Ka Leit Kai Kha* is performed which means the husband takes his wife and her family members to his parental and relatives' houses. Before entering the house, his mother puts some oil on the couples and prayer of blessing is offered by the members of the family. Another unique trend which can be found among the Khasi and which distinguishes them from other tribes of the Northeast India, with the exception of the Garos, is that after marriage the man has to leave his parents and family to stay with his wife, but the family being under the jurisdiction of the *Kur* (clan), they cannot be detached from it. In case of divorce, the man or woman can return to the *Kur*. They continue to live in

wife's parental house till they build their own (Dutta 1982: 206). Therefore, the traditional norms and social obligations still have some weight in matters relating to the marriage ceremony. Thus, it may be observed that the traditional practices still carry some weight in wedding ceremonies; however with the onslaught of modernisation and the diversities of denominational norms, the significance of following the traditional marriage customs as described above seems to vary from one family to the other both in rural and urban set up.

Another factor which has helped to retain some of the elements of Khasi customs is kinship. In this regard Synrem (1992:20) opines that "kinship still provides the essential basis for the Khasi structure; as a matter of fact, it has proved the most conservative element in Khasi society". With a family as the nucleus unit of lineage and kinship, the clan (*Kur*) is a binding force that unifies the family. The code of necessity ensures that there develops a larger sense of kinship solidarity transcending the clan. This implies that members of a clan irrespective of their difference in their faith come together for meetings or gatherings of a clan. Hence, we may say that matriliny has a strong essence in the cultural identity of the Khasi which many of them find it hard to depart from. Although Christianity was built on a firm patrilineal concept, the Christian missionaries, however, from the early period of their work in the Khasi Hills have not challenged the matrilineal system, contrary to the strong propensity in Christian teaching and practices where man takes precedence over women. The churches have not insisted on a radical transformation in terms of a transition from matriliny to patriliny having realised the rootedness of matriliny in Khasi society. In addition, ancestral property of a family is still being given to the *Ka Khadduh* (youngest daughter) who acts as a guardian and caretaker of the property.[6] For followers of traditional belief she still plays a major role in rituals of the house and the clan; but for the ones who have adopted Christianity, they do not follow the traditional practice anymore. However, the impact of Christianity cannot be totally overruled since the converts tend to follow the tenets of their new faith which somehow collided with the fundamentals of the traditional culture. For instance, difficulties arise when the position of *Ka Khadduh,* who converted to Christianity, was in conflict with traditional norms; thus arises the problems of maladjustment.[7] Gradually, the Khasi-Jaintia have been adopting western models in their dress, professions, food habits, and even western names for their children (Shangpliang 2018:18).[8] The change is not restricted to kinship, but Christian concepts and practices take over the traditional ones even in affairs related to the cremation and burial practices.

13.3.3 Changes in the disposal of the dead

Till date, when a person dies it is the custom of the Khasi to visit the concerned house for consolation and preparation of the funeral. The relatives prepare food for themselves and for all attendees for a minimum period of three days. We can witness some changes here. When a person who follows traditional religion, the village Durbar informs the people through *Ka Pyrta Shnong* (sending message); while for Christians the church takes the responsibility to ring the church bells to inform the people about the death. Traditionally, it was believed that it was not wise for the close relatives of the deceased to take bath until the corpse is cremated. We find this practice declining since many questions the logic behind this tradition. The burial practices have also changed among the Christians in which the corpse is no longer cremated, but is buried according to Christian traditions based on the denomination's ritual norms. After the funeral, relatives stay at the deceased's house and seldom leave for their works for a period of three consecutive days. In between these days,

relatives visit the cemetery to offer prayer and food as a mark of remembrance, respect, and care. P.R.T. Gurdon informs that the Khasi (traditional) collected uncalcined bones and ashes of the deceased members of the clan and bestowed in the *Mawbah*, or great cinerarium of the clan. This practice was the most important religious ceremony that the Khasis performed. The bones are buried in the village under a large slab of stone (the Khasi stone cinerarium), and a monolith is erected outside the village to commemorate the deceased (Gurdon 1975:140–144). During the first anniversary of the day, the member of the family of the departed soul come together for remembrance and prayer, and in the evening, feast is prepared for the family members, neighbours, and friends. This shows that the Khasi ways of treating the dead with respect has strong foundation from earlier times, although a number of changes have taken place with the coming of Christianity. In the contemporary period, the above tradition and the erection of monoliths by a clan has come to a standstill. One significant change is the emergence of modern cemetery where every denominations and churches possess a land used for burial of their members. This occurred with the coming of the Welsh Presbyterian Missions who established the first cemetery at Nongsawlia located in Sohrain in 1845, and have a major influence on the Khasi Christians from that time onwards. Another notable change is the use of western style of coffins among the Christians, but this practice is also adopted by many followers of traditional belief system.

13.3.4 Changes in other cultural traits

Most of the beliefs which have been laid out by the forefathers through word of mouth are still kept by the non-converts. Certain beliefs are also still being followed by the Christians as well. To name a few: One cannot start a new work, buy new things like house, land, car etc., marry, divorce, during the month of April; a woman cannot fish or cut her hair while being pregnant, one cannot put a lid on the top of a vessel while warming the water for taking bath, etc. There are number of writings both in English and vernacular language in the form of prose and poetry, which are collections of principles and moral etiquettes that every Khasi is expected to follow; and by failing to follow, one is looked down by the others which implies that an individual loses his/her self-respect, and at the same time is believed having no respect for others and for the forefathers. Respect for others and a forefather as well is a virtue which shows an individual's community sense. Another element here is the aspect of protecting nature. Sacred groves are considered to be sacred not only because of the belief that the spirits resided in the forest and any harm done to it would incur bad things to happen to that individual/accused, but also it symbolises the Khasi's love for nature. People were forbidden to commit nuisance, to cut trees or branches, to fish or to kill any living thing in these groves. The fear of social rejection, the feeling that violation of these prohibitions would bring divine displeasure kept the traditional Khasi within the bind of taboos (Rymbai 1993:68–102). This is strictly followed by the non-converts and annual rites are performed by the *Lyngdoh* or local priest to pray to the Gods. Among the Christian Khasi, even though the belief in the existence of spirits and demons is slightly lessened but they are still clinging to the idea that misfortune occurs to any person who defiles the premises of the groves through prohibited acts. Therefore, the concept of protecting these groves is still very strong among all the Khasi, and both converts and non-convert contribute immensely to it.

Another remarkable feature of the Khasi people is their love for music. Khasi culture like other cultures, such as tribal ones, possess its own indigenous music which explains the

folk and traditional ingenuity in the field that has developed a long time ago. Christianity brought with it influence of western music which had an adverse effect on the Khasi music and eventually led to the decline of the use of Khasi indigenous music. A number of writers like Nigel Jenkins, J. Fortis Jyrwa, Radiancy Rnga, E. W. Kharshohnoh, and others have pointed out the harm done by the early missionaries with regard to the exclusion of Khasi thought and musical traditions in the church. However, from the 1980s onwards, there has been a movement among the youths, church members, and music composers who have expressed their taste and liking for Khasi indigenous tunes. This has also inspired many local music composers to compose songs and choral music in indigenous forms (Ksoo 2008:12–13). With this development, Khasi traditional musical instrument which are previously used during the festivals by the Seng Khasi, now get a boost in demand from all corners of Khasi society, and in the church programmes as well. This clearly indicates that interest of the Christian Khasi in traditional music and songs cannot be discarded. The people understand that religion cannot detach them from the strong attachment with their cultural practices.

Related to music is the involvement of the Khasi people in dances, both sacred and secular. There are a number of dances all over the Khasi Hills which are performed on a number of occasions and are gradually disappearing due a number of factors. Some of these which can be mentioned include *Ka Shad Hima* (dance of the state), *Ka Bam Khana Shnong* (community feast), *Ka Shad Beh Mrad* (hunting dance), *Ka Shad Phap Kwiar* (fishing dance), *Ka Shad Shyngwiang Thangiap* (a ceremonial dance performed on the occasion of death in the family), and *Ka Shad Kynjoh Khaskain* (house-warming ceremony dance) (Nongkynrih 1994:20). Similar changes are seen in many dances associated with agricultural rites such as *Ka Shad Shoh Kba* and *Ka Shad Nongrep*, and although they vary from one village to another they have nearly disappeared and are seen performed only in some parts of the West Khasi Hills. Many factors might have contributed to the decline of these dances. One of the obvious factors is the impact of modernity where youth prefer to move out of the villages in search of better education in the cities and towns. No doubt, with the passing away of elders, the traditions also decline with time. Another factor might be the involvement of certain traditional rituals with religious connotations which made it difficult for Christians to take part in the dances.

13.4 Counter reactions towards Christianity

The progress of Christianity was considered as a challenge to the traditional culture of the Khasi; and the official patronage to the missionaries made it apparent that the traditional religion would soon be totally extinct. This culminated into the rise of an intellectual class among the Khasi who used the education they received from the missionaries, and government aided schools and institutions to counter the change brought in by the advancement of Christianity and the rising power of the British colonial regime. They, thus, found their expressions through a literary movement initiated by Jeebon Roy which soon led to a cultural awakening and eventually to the establishment of an organisation known as Seng Khasi in 1899. The *Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem* literally meaning 'Dance of the Joyful Soul' was introduced in 1911 by the Seng Khasi to bring the Khasi who then had retained their faith in the traditional religion under one umbrella. This annual thanks-giving dance related to agricultural cycle is held annually (month of April-June) at Weiking ground of Shillong and in villages all over the Khasi Hills.[9] In due course of time, the Seng Khasi takes upon itself

the claim to uphold not only cultural identity, but considers it to be the conscience keepers and protectors of Khasi traditional religion. Perhaps it is the changing nature of the Seng Khasi in its approach and traditions that made the Christians not to take part in this festival, and hence, the traditional dance is strictly attended only by followers of the Seng Khasi.

One significant change that requires attention relates to social life of the Khasi. It may be pointed out that Christian missionaries introduced the Gregorian calendar of seven days in a week; it altered the traditional calendar of eight days in a week followed by the Khasi. Before the advent of Christianity, Sunday was never observed as a special day, but daily life was occupied with work except days which involved festivals or family gatherings such as marriages, death or some special occasions. However, the alteration introduced by Christian missionaries made Sunday a day of attending church congregations and visiting family members/relatives. Earlier the Seng Khasi used it as a day for rest, but presently in most of the places, *Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem* is used to conclude on Sunday and even meetings similar to the Christians' Sunday-schools are being organised to provide teachings and trainings related to traditional customs and religion. Another interesting development is the closure of major economic activities on Sundays. Thus, we may say that although there is a division along religious lines between the followers of Seng Khasi and the Christians, however, as discussed above, several traditional ethos of culture and community feeling are retained in different forms and spirits.

13.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the study of contemporary Khasi society and the impact of Christianity can be looked at from different dimensions keeping in mind the heterogeneous character of the cultural uniqueness of the land and its people. Long before the advent of Christianity in the Hills, other religions have already existed. Apparently, trade relations, constant interactions and the presence of non-Khasi who followed Hinduism and Islam hardly influenced the Khasi and did not have perhaps intention or enough force to introduce any dynamic in the Khasi society (Lyngdoh 1981:1). It might be possible that while communicating with the people of the plains, the Khasi realised that the beliefs and practices involved in outside religions have vast differences with their traditional ones. But what could have led them to accept Christianity and leave their traditional religion is a matter of speculation. Though it is a difficult task for scholars to separate culture and religion in everyday life of the Khasi, however, when it comes to the process of change that has taken place, one can study it from many angles. The Khasi culture is not in an endangered state because of the coming of Christian missionaries to the hills; a number of factors intruded and merged into the existing culture. Emotional experiences by the early converts does not entirely explain the impact of spiritual bonding, rather, one should look form an angle as to why Christianity has its strong foothold on the Khasi society and why it continues to gain popularity in the hills. To answer this query, writers, philosophers, and historians keep on dwelling on the various forceful commitments and logistics rendered by the British government itself to the missionaries. Many forget to look at the possibility that the locals themselves wanted a change, or had an urge for a new prospering atmosphere of change, or had the mind of openness to change, or were not satisfied with the traditional way of life anymore, or were not able to obtain any answer from traditional gods to their prayers. The transition from a non-scripted religion to a well scripted religion must have filled them with elation. Another possibility is that some of the converts must

have seen more material benefits once they aligned themselves with the foreigners, for the missionaries had brought with them modern clothing, food, medicine, and above all, education. The Khasi also began a new way to look at their belief system with the shift from *Ka NiamIng* to a consecrated worship of more than two believers coming together to associate in a church. To get a clear picture of the impact of Christianity among the Khasi, there might be hundreds of arguments that need more discussions and debates. Christians would put it that it was the 'work of the Holy Spirit' while in the words of historians it was a 'universal impact of Christianity' that happened in the nineteenth century since during this time, it was not only the Khasi who began to have their first experience with Christianity, but other communities in India and other parts of the world had too. With regards to polity, the effect of Christianity is nearly negligible. There are opinions that the traditional institutions have become weak with the coming of the British; the blame cannot be entirely laid on Christianity. It was the British government which tried to demoralise the Hima and curtailed its powers in order to prevent further rebellions. Till date, there is no distinction made between adult Khasi males belonging to Christian and non-Christian traditions on the matter of participation in the Durbar or becoming a *Rangbah Shnong, a Myntri* or in some states even to become *a Syiem*. Similarly, in modern democratic elections to the Legislative Assembly or to the Autonomous District Council, there is no distinction on the basis of their religious affiliation for the candidates to contest from any constituency.

Overall, the growth of Christianity and its development in the Khasi society in contemporary period is a reflection of the conjuncture that took place for nearly a period of two centuries. To converts, who directly inherited doctrinal philosophy and procedures of the new faith from the first missionaries, experienced a complete break from the past beliefs and practices. There are two views concerning religion and culture link. One group argues that conversion to Christianity means transformation of the inner being more than the outward expression and does not involve abandonment of one's culture. So, culture and conversion go together. On the other hand, another group views that any aspect of culture that is contrary to the teaching of Christ must be rejected. But we find many Christian houses and families have adapted to the practices of Christianity and at the same time still want to retain many aspects of their culture. The assimilation and acculturation go parallel to several aspects of tradition. A crucial dimension of it is emerging influence of individualism and gradual decay of tribal community life among the Khasis. The change in dress pattern and eating habits and hygiene is apparent in the daily life of both Christians and non-Christians through adoption to modern fashion and latest dietary trends. The society has begun a new way of looking at daily happenings and hence there are many people who opt for modern living standard and discard traditional beliefs and practices. This phenomenon can also be looked at the similarities between the rise of middle class in Europe after the Reformation and the emergence of an educated middle class in Khasi society particularly from the last quarter of the nineteenth century. While the Seng Khasi movement stresses to rebuild the traditional customs by incorporating religious elements to certain festivals and dances, some of the traditional rituals associated with agricultural cycle and production, birth and child naming ceremonies, cure of ailments and other aspects have been detached from tradition under Christianity. In general, some of the human conducts that were prohibited in the past have become acceptable now, while others that were allowed before are considered morally wrong today.

Notes

1 Among a significant amount of works, few that can be mentioned include: John Hughes Morris (1939), G. Maliekal (2005) and Hamlet B. Ngapkynta (2009).
2 In one of my research articles, I have pointed out that "it would be wrong to assume that the missionaries left the comfort of their homes and came all the way to this region with all its inaccessible forest terrain and other difficulties to attend to the needs of the colonial government as asserted by some scholars. Though the missionaries were able to enjoy the benefits of security and grant for the schools provided by the government, however, there are many instances they were not in good terms with each other". For more readings on this aspect, *see* Lal Dena (1988).
3 Movement of Christian Mission works thrives in the West particularly in the United Kingdom and United States of America in the nineteenth century with the formation of the American Baptist Mission, but before that the Welsh had ventured into the Khasi Hills.
4 In 1874 another mission of Anglican Church had started functioning in the hills. In 1976, its Church by the name All Saints' Church was established. The Roman Catholic Church made its appearance in the Khasi Hills around 1890. The Seventh-day Adventist mission started working in the hills as late as 1933. Other smaller missions include All-in-One Church (1947), Church of Christ (1940) and Pentecostal Church (1968). Not only churches which trace their origin from foreign missions, but indigenous churches incepted in the hills also played a major role in bringing about change. Among the indigenous churches, the Church of God (1902), Church of Jesus Christ (1932), Turoi Gospel (1941), and Full Gospel Fellowship (1974) are some of them.
5 In contemporary times, in certain families where there is an absence of a *Kni*, the father of the bride is frequently seen accompanying her into the church.
6 To clear the confusion proposed by many scholars, *Ka Khadduh* does not inherit the property, but simply acts as its guardian. For details relating to matriliny please refer to the edited volume by Chacko (1998).
7 This aspect is discussed at length in Keith Cantlie (1934).
8 O. L. Snaitang (2018:152) in his latest work opines that Christianity came along with certain elements of western culture. This is evident in dress and style adopted by converts initially. He provides a number of changes in the living standard of the Khasi who now want to adopt the western cultural traits and in the process, discard many of the traditional practices.
9 For detail information about *Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem see* Seng Khasi (2011).

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14

RITUALS IN TRADITIONAL KUKI BELIEF SYSTEM AND THEIR PLACE AMONG CHRISTIAN KUKIS

Seiminchon Chongloi

14.0 Introduction

Rituals are crucial elements in any religion, whether it is a tribal religion, or institutionalised religions like Christianity, Islam, etc. They define a domain of connection of humans with sacred and profane realities of life. Precisely, rituals, particularly among the tribe, help people to experience the sacred, and at the same time, affirm the relationship with the sacred; fulfil the implications of that relationship in everyday life through the institution of the priest, and in responding to crises like diseases, etc. with a view to enjoy peace, good health, prosperity, and so on. No doubt, success in hunting, agriculture, etc. requires invocation of blessings of supernatural beings through rituals. Symbolic elements used in rituals convey a sense through which a belief system gets meaningful expression. However, when there is a shift in religious beliefs, the meaning and performance of rituals also change. This is the case of the Kukis of India who have undergone enormous changes, and do not function any more according to the traditional system because of their conversion to Christianity. In view of this, the chapter aims to understand the changes in traditional rituals by situating them in the contemporary context. The research chapter is organised in four sections keeping the above perspectives in view. The first section focuses on the institution of *thempu* (traditional priest), for he is the pivot around which rituals revolve. The second section discusses important traditional rituals, purpose of their performance, etc.; while in the third section the change in traditional rituals, and nature and extent of their presence in Christian traditions is explored. We conclude in the final, i.e. fourth section.

14.1 The Institution of *Thempu* (Priest) and his Role

The term *thempu* (priest) in Kuki tradition carries different meanings[1]. The *thempu's* advice or opinion is, in fact, sought in all matters of life, because he is believed to know the root causes of what happens in people's life. He is unquestionably believed by the community members to be the master in his field of knowledge or expertise. The *thempu* generally offers prayer and sacrifices on behalf of the village or community (Longkumer & Moanungsang 2012:106)[2]. Every occasion in the life of a traditional Kuki requires the services of a *thempu*

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in one way or the other (Haokip 2010:83). In times of sickness and suffering the *thempu* is sought often; and even in times of celebration, or during the performance of death rituals, without the presence of the *thempu* nothing is carried out. His importance is only next to that of the village chief; even the chief has a lot of respect for him and consults him in matters concerning the health and well-being of the villagers. For the village as a whole, he performs *Kho vangboh* (blessing ceremony of the village), *Chang lhakou* (invoking soul of the paddy for rich harvest), *Salha kou* (prayer for successful hunting), etc.

A *thempu* may be like anybody else in social life, but in the sphere of religion he has no equal. Therefore, a *thempu* can be called "the only professional specialist in the trade in the Kuki society" (Gangte 1993:163). He is one who has access to the supernatural world of the deity and the spirits; he is considered only medium between the supernatural world and the world of humans; and he can read and interpret the signs and symbols of the numinous realm through omens, dreams, and nature[3](Haokip 2010:86). Thus, the *thempu* is practically indispensable for the village (Haokip 2010:84) and its people.

14.1.1 Significance of Thempu *and his Relevance in Today's Context*

Having projected briefly the traditional Kuki priesthood we propose to examine its relevance in today's context. In an increasingly secularised world, which affects even priesthood and those being trained for priesthood in the church, there is a need to re-emphasise that the basic orientation in priesthood is the notion of sacred. Peter Berger calls it 'a rumour of angel' or 'signals of transcendence' (Berger 1990:xi–xiii). It implies that in order to counter a highly secularised and consumerist culture, or to maintain a balance between secular logic and religious temperament, the priest has to be an embodiment of cultural values and the epitome of religious morality. The formation of Kuki priesthood in today's context is both a cultural and religious factor, genuinely Kuki by cultural outlook and Christian by faith (Haokip 2000:90). This notion of distinction between culture and religion contrasts the anthropological approach to understand culture in a total perspective in which religion is an institutionalised, interactive, and integrated component.

As noted above, the traditional *thempu* plays a very important role in the community, and so the institution of priesthood can be considered as community oriented and community centred. There is hardly any role of a priest *per se* beyond the community concern. For every important moment of life, from birth to death in a traditional Kuki society, the service of *thempu* is required and this is parallel to the Christian priest engaged in active pastoral ministry.

One area of difference between traditional Kuki priesthood and Catholic priesthood is celibacy. The present day Kuki Catholic priest follows his traditional counterpart in many fields to make the ministry and life more relevant and acceptable to people and meaningful to himself. As for the traditional Kuki, the most blessed man is one who begets seven sons to carry on his lineage (*Chapa sagi hing pa chu, Pathen phatthei boh chang ahi, ama khangui a pat khang thah kisut ding ahi*)[4]. Hence, a man who has no children, especially male issue, is one who is under curse called *in gam;* literally *in* means house or family, and *gam* means destroyed or destruction (Chongloi 2013:110).

Further, looking into the context of the Kuki Christian Catholic Father, it is observed that the pastor lives a life of a Kuki and at the same time that of a devout Christian. For example, the Pastor's role is vital and elaborate; his life and ministry is very much commu-

nity oriented and church oriented; rituals related to the cycle of human life from birth to death are performed by the pastor. He officiates all the festivals and rituals of the community. He performs his role of a pastor for the purpose of the Kuki people of Kuki community who are also converts.

With regard to the institution of marriage, the ceremony conducted by the traditional Kuki community is officiated by the *thempu* (priest). In the process of the rituals, the priest has to bless the bride and bridegroom to sit together at the middle of the house. The priest sitting in the same fashion, faces them holding the cock in his hand, and passes his hand over the cock nicely all over its body so that even if some loose feathers fall or have already fallen, but remain between the feathers, are made to fall on the ground (Haokip 2019:19). The priest then chants an invocation for propitiation. After the completion of the propitiation ritual, the priest lifts the cock's leg for a good omen. In doing this, he throttles the cock, over the newly wedded couple. The cock whose respiration has almost stopped, struggles by spreading its legs and wings. In the course of such struggles if the feathers fall in a large number, it is considered to be a good omen for the couple; it is believed that the couple is to be blessed with many children. But if the cock passes its excreta, it is considered to be a bad omen, and is believed that the marriage will not last long.

The priest then tightly holds the wings in his left hand and strangles the neck with his right hand. He then observes the movement of the cock's legs which struggle vigorously. In the process, if the left leg spreads slightly, closely followed by the right leg, and after a moment pause, of both the legs, the right leg slightly makes movements, it is considered as a good omen. But if it is the left leg that slightly moves, then it is considered a bad omen. If the omen is found bad, another observation is preferred with a second cock until the omen shows a good ending (Haokip 2019:20). This ritual is performed to see whether the union will prove lasting or not in future.

Interestingly, the traditional designation of a Kuki priest i.e. *thempu* is used for the pastor. He is addressed as *thempu/kin thempu*, for he acts as the celebrant or minister at time of marriages or any sort of religious and social programmes like the traditional counterpart. Therefore, the role of *thempu* in traditional Kuki society and the role of pastor or Catholic priest have commonality as far as their communitarian socio-religious role is concerned.

14.2 Study of Selected Rituals of the Kuki Traditional Religion

The Kukis traditionally practised a number of rites and rituals related to all aspects of life – cultural, religious, social, political, and economic. But today, most of them are celebrated just as reminiscent of the past. All kinds of rituals and their celebrations underlie more or less the same purpose at the core, that is thanks giving, as discussed below, and dedication to the divine who has once again blessed his people to a period of plenty (Haokip 1991:22). Except thanks giving rituals there are familial worships or rituals which are done as per vows[5]. There are village rituals and these are performed during the spread of epidemic diseases, or the occurrence of any crisis affecting the village. Performance of rituals and associated sacrifices are made according to the time and occasion i.e. some rituals are performed on a seasonal basis, such as the *hun* ritual that is performed and observed before the sowing of seeds. However, most of the rituals and sacrifice are carried out to appease different evil spirits (Haolai 2006:92–93)[6]. Rituals can also be seen as a symbol of unity. It holds the family, clan, village, and tribe together as one. Rituals bind the whole community together

(Zhimomi 2001:83). Therefore, in the following paragraphs we shall discuss a few selected traditional rituals and incantations of the Kuki and try to see the relevance in today's context. Some selected important rituals associated are presented here:

14.2.1 Lhakou *(Invoking Souls of the Departed)*

Lhakou ritual is important and a frequently performed ceremony in Kuki traditional religion. This ritual is usually done for the villages, animals, and also vegetation (Haokip 2000:53). The literal translation of *lhakou* would be *lha*–soul and *kou*–to call; so in simple terms it would mean 'invoking or calling of the souls.' A genuine meaning would still be difficult as *lhakou* is of different forms depending on time and occasion in which these rituals are to be performed. Under *lhakou* rituals may be (a) *chang lhakou* (b) *salha kou* (c) *milha kou*. We shall discuss briefly the significance of these rituals.

14.2.2 Chang Lhakou *(Invoking the Soul of the Paddy)*

Chang lhakou literally means calling/invoking the soul of the paddy. This ceremony is performed for the whole village at the time of planting or sowing seeds or when the seeds start germinating. Sometimes, the performance also depends on the convenience of the village (Haokip 2000:53). It is mainly performed during the *chang kut* festival, the time when the paddy starts to ripen and when *chang nungah,* a special paddy stalk (virgin paddy), is found during harvest[7]. However, *chang lhakou* is not only meant for paddy, but also for different varieties of seeds and pulses. It consists of sacrifice of a fowl to appease the soul of the paddy for blessings of good yield (Haokip 2011:116). The *chang lhakou* incantation, as paraphrased in English, is as follows:

Phe … (spraying wine through the mouth).
One that is from the river bank of *Phaipi* coming out from the hole of *Mao* (bamboo specie). Mother Squirrel has floated by an *aidel* leaf.
May paddy soul come today?
May paddy soul that flocked to my grandfather come?
May paddy soul who blessed my father come?
May that one in the possession of *Thingkennu* come?
May the one carried by *Tellhangnu* come?
May paddy soul of right and left come?
May paddy soul of a filed with great length come?
May paddy soul of a broad field come?
Paddy souls of progeny *Khongman* come.
Paddy souls of progeny *Lengmang* come.
Paddy soul of Japanese[8] come.
Paddy soul of *Guite* clan come.
Paddy soul of *Telvum* clan come.
Paddy soul of *Telsom* clan come.
Paddy soul of *Lunkhel* clan come.
Paddy soul of primordial race come.
Paddy soul of pedigreed race come.
May paddy soul come?

Paddy soul of my grandfather come.
Paddy soul of my father come

(Chongloi 2008:338–339)

The main objective of performing the *changlha kou* ritual is to placate the soul/spirit of paddy so that the fields of the entire village would be blessed by the deity of paddy for bountiful crop yields. So, the Kuki continued to perform this rite every year for the spirit of the paddy. This has been incorporated in Christian traditions of prayers and thanks giving to god.

14.2.3 Sa Lhakou *(Invoking the Soul of the Animals)*

The rite *sa lhakou* is another important village or communal ceremony of the traditional Kuki. The literal meaning of *sa* is meat/animal, but here it denotes wild animals; *lha* is soul/spirit; and the word *kou* means invoking/calling[9]. *Sa lhakou* literally means invoking/calling the spirit of animals. Hunting animals for food was one of the important livelihood pursuits in the traditional Kuki society.

The ritual is performed once in a year. Tradition does not specify the exact day in which the sacrifice is to be performed. So, it varied from one village to another, corresponding to the village custom. Hence, at least once in a year, the *haosa pu* (village chief) with the help of the *thempu* performs this ceremony for the hunters of the village so that they may have providence in their hunting (Haokip 2000:56). For this ceremony, the *haosa pu* invites all the hunters and the *thempu;* and he sacrifices a cock. The ritual is performed by the *thempu* holding the cock that is meant for sacrifice; he blesses the rite with chants (Haokip 2000:56–57).

O you cock! You are the progeny of my grandmother, black and white hens and cocks.
You who descended from the highest layer of heaven, who have reached *Kangmaiphai*.
O you cock! You were caught by my *Pi Chongneng*.
You were reared in *giljom, gilbem* when my grandfather fed you.
When my father fed you, from today and onwards.
O you Cock! I captured you from the trap and from nowhere.
Today I called the soul of *Jalhenglha* (elephant) and *Javomlha* (bear) in you.
O you cock! Let flutter your feathers.
I called the soul of *Juhleng* (reindeer), *Juhlhun-sajuh* (wild boar).
I called the soul of *Abahkai* (lion), and soul of *Humpi* (tiger).
O come the souls of wild boar, deer, big and small animals.
O come the souls of my forefather.
Come O souls of *manchin* and *manphal*.
Come O souls of my forefather, "*Kongloi*" the village wants your presence.
Come O souls who came from *Chamlipia*.
Come O souls who come from *Lailipia*.
Come O souls from *Noichin bolpi*.
Come O souls of animals from everywhere.
Come O souls of unknown animals.
Come to my village, come O where we burn.
Come to the way side, come O like the ants.
Come O souls of animals, the village wants your presence.

You have liver, pretend as if you do not have liver
You have heart, pretend as if you do not have heart.
Never doubt, and never be gloomy.
Come O souls to our *Um*, and occupy your place.
Come O souls inside our pot[10]

In Kuki tradition it is customary for a man, who holds a high position of respect on killing a required number of wild game, to perform *chon* (the highest feast of merit) during his life time. Therefore, the profession of hunting in traditional Kuki community was not important only to meet dietary requirements, but to achieve high social status while living, and to secure a paramount seat in *mithikho* (the land of the dead) after death; a successful hunter is also ensured happiness in afterlife (Haokip 2019:74–75). However, in today's context, hunting wild animals is strictly prohibited even though some illegal hunting is still in practice. The ritual ceremony remains significant for the Kuki as traditional reminiscences, but has no relevance for the present Christian Kukis.

14.2.4 Mi Lhakou *(Invoking the Soul of Humans)*

Another important version in the ritual of *lhakou* is *mi lhakou* (invoking/calling the soul of humans). In this too, *kilha lah lhakou* (invoking the soul by reclaiming) is significant. If a person encounters a traumatic experience, the traditional Kukis believe that the soul of the person has flown away. It is also believed that if a person is seriously ill some evil spirit is holding back or keeping the soul in chains[11]. *Mi lhakou* ritual is performed for both men and women; for women it is known as *chhim*[12]. It is usually done by her relatives when she visits her parental house. The ritual *chhim* (barrenness in woman) is performed as follows; a white hen[13] is caught just after it laid an egg if available. However, the performance of the ritual and the hen laying eggs may not coincide. Under such a situation a white hen is often caught and put into a nest basket along with an egg from outside; the hen is kept their till the *thempu* comes and says, "Oh, ho! So your hen has laid an egg!" then the hen is killed at the head of the sleeping platform *khumpi*, under which the *sherh*[14] are placed in a basket till sunrise the next morning (Shakespeare 1912:76). For men they can perform the ceremony by themselves or with the help of a priest (Haokip 2000:58)[15]. Generally in most cases *mi lhakou* ritual is performed by sacrificing a black hen for men and a female pig for women. In this ritual, the woman is required to hold the pigtail. This performance can be called a fertility ritual. The priestly incantation goes like this[16]:

Chalha hungin
Chapalha hungin.
Chanulha hung in
Athem achinglha hungin.

Literal translation

May the souls of children come?
May the souls of sons come?
May the souls of daughters come?
May the souls of wise and clever come?

Here, what is invoked is the gift of children which means asking *Chung Pathen* (Supreme Being), who is the *Pen kipatna, Poh kipatna,* meaning the 'origin of birth, origin of life' (Haokip 2008:78); as it is believed that Chung Pathen (Supreme Being) has gifted children to all the clans. There are two ways of performing this *cha lhakou* ritual. Some invoke all the names of the clans, while some limit the names to their own clan and sub-clan[17]. This ritual is still relevant among the Kuki Christian today, however the practical aspect of rituals and animal sacrifice is replaced by prayers either by the Christian priest or the father being the head of the family (Haokip 2000:59).

The significance of performing the *lhakou* ritual indicates the importance of knowing its origin, be it a human, animal, plant, stone; or anything is tantamount to knowing the divine secret, and this knowledge places the human person in a position to a heuristic employment.

14.2.5 Indoi *(Bundle of Charms) and* Hun Ahkang Tha *(Sacrifice of a White Cock)*

The practice of *indoi* ritual is considered to be one among the most important religious practices among the Kuki as it occupies a centre stage of Kuki religious symbolism (Touthang 2003:95). William Shaw terms *Indoi* as 'house god' or 'house-magic', or a 'bundle of charms' (Shaw 1997:73) which is made either by the *thempu* or by person who has the expert knowledge of what is required (Gangte 1993:217). Each house-holder has its own Indoi. It serves the whole family so long as the members all live together, but on separation new Indoi may be made (Shaw 1997:73)[18]. The components of Indoi proper are taken from the flora and fauna of the Kuki world and household items (Gangte 1993:209–210). The following elements are the components of Indoi:

1 *Vohpi maikem* (slanted skull of a mother pig)
2 *Kelchal kiheh* (curl/twisted horn of he-goat)
3 *Peng/Hailhi/Um* (small gourd)
4 *Khaokol* (bamboo bangle/wristlet made of *gopi*)
5 *Chemkol* (knife or *dao* made of *gopi*)
6 *Teng/Tengdop* (spear made of *gopi*)
7 *Miluh/Pothul/Pocha* (small basket made from *gopi*)
8 *Khaopi*/Vomgui (a cord made from a fibre tree called *ghaopi*)
9 *Belval* (a circular stand for a jar made of bamboo/*gopi*)

The above mentioned components are bound together and placed at *hongcha,* the roof of the portico; and the place where Indoi is hung is called *biching*. Worship of *Indoi* once a year is obligatory; but in some exceptional cases, when illness, death and other exigencies demand, it can be worshipped as many times as necessary (Gangte 1993:210). When all the components as described above are ready, the father or the *u-pa* and the *thempu* (priest) prepare ritual for new Indoi. Then the *thempu* (priest) invokes the blessings of Pathen for the owner of the house with the following incantations (Chongloi 2008:235–237):

Bless me as you have blessed the mother pig with the slanted forehead.
Bless me as you have blessed the he-goat with its curved horn.
Bless me as you have blessed the beautiful bangle.
Bless me as you have blessed the indispensable sword.

Bless me as you have blessed the useful gourd jar.
Bless me as you have blessed of smooth trunk of the *se* tree.
Bless me as you have blessed the metal procured from Burma.
Bless me, do not form deformity in me or deal with me in careless manner.
Throughout the year may I offer you with meat and wine.

Let the one known to my ancestors bless me.
Let Mother-God bless me.
Father-God bless me, the father-of me.
Let the mother-giver of grain bless me, the father-giver of grain bless me.
Let the mother-benefactor of labour bless me, the father-benefactor of labour bless me.
Let mother-benefactor of wealth bless me.

Create me neither in deformity, nor deal with me in careless manner.
As your cattle are taken care of efficiently, may it be so with mine.
As you take care of yourself, may it be so with me.
As your spouse and descendents are well look after, May it be so with me.
Bless me as proprietor of seeds of all kinds.

Endow me with grains numbering tens and thousands.
Deal graciously with me till such a time when my skins shrink with age as is the case with gourd.

Take care of me even as you have done to the blessed *thinghe* tree[19].
Bless me as you have done so with *khaopi* tree that has ten layers of cortex[20].
Bless me even as you have done so with the *gopi* (bamboo species) that grows to maturity with magnificent bend.

Create in me no deformity, nor deal with me in unconcern way.
Throughout the year may I offer you with meat and wine.
Bless me even as you have taken care of the *vomgui* plant[21].
Deal with me generously till old age as is the case with the gourd.

So after saying this, the *thempu* takes the bits of articles enumerated above in a small gourd and hangs them outside the front wall of the house above the door. Thus, the ceremony ends and there is much drinking of *Zu* (fermented rice beer) and eating. The Indoi thus made is carried by the owner of the house wherever he goes until his death. Indoi therefore, is apparently for the protection of the person for whom it is made, which is also evident from the ceremony of the institution and chants (Gangte 1993:216–217).

The symbol of Indoi signifies the presence of Chung Pathen. The possible means to define and describe the Kuki religiosity is found in the symbolism of Indoi as the component or ingredient used in Indoi symbolises longevity of life[22]. The significance of Indoi lies in the incantation. For instance, there will be no slanted skull of female pig unless the pig grows to old age, so also the curled horn of he-goat. So, when the *thempu* (priest) invoke the Indoi, the first two lines are about a request to bless the owner of that particular Indoi; as Chung Pathen had already blessed *vohpi maikem* (slanted skull of female pig) and *kelchal ki heh* (curled horn of he-goat).

The significance of *indoi* ritual can also be viewed as having ecological significance. Because it is through the binding together of all the components that *Indoi* is made up, the interconnectedness of all organisms and their environment is manifested through which ecological harmony is perceived (Haokip 2007:78). Another significant point that can be drawn out is that the relationship between Kuki and their environment seems to be more ambivalent and less clear-cut. Everything is sacred and everything is also profane, i.e. differentiation of the sacred and the non-sacred becomes difficult. Therefore, the Kuki ecotheology while acknowledging all in nature as originating from Chung Pathen recognises them as a special channel of god's grace and uses them to invoke god's favour (Chongloi 2013:116). In each of the rites one could see a common theme running, or in other words, the result aspired to achieve is one and the same, i.e. *one could heuristically make use of the sacred power manifest in these creatures*. In order to establish the fact that the one ritually slaughtered is imbued with sacred power of the incantations; and invariably it has to trace its origin in heaven or to the ultimate reality itself (Chongloi 2008:180).

14.2.6 **Hun-Ahkang Tha** *(Sacrifice of a White Cock)*

Another ritual practice in relation to Indoi is *hun ahkang tha*. Literally *hun* is a specific time of worshipping god by a family. The Kuki worship Chung Pathen as a final resort and besides, they worship and appease the minor deities (Doungel 2009:55). Doungel gave a comparative study on the significance of *hun* in relation with today's context[23]. *Hun-ahkang tha* ritual is done on the occasion of worshiping god by head of the family (*insung mipa*). *Hun-ahkang tha* is also the time when Chung Pathen is worshipped and appeased by killing a spotless white cock and cooking it without breaking its bones (Kipgen 1982:88)[24]. The ritual time is the occasion when the old Indoi is replaced and the installation of new Indoi takes place; it is also the time to worship god for a year before all works begins. And the worship of Indoi is not necessarily done only for Chung Pathen, but also for other deities.

On the occasion of *hun* the Indoi bundle is taken down from its original place as described above and hung on the *doikhom* (ritual post), which was then meticulously decorated with the feathers of a spotless white cock (Chongloi 2008:203). In view of the fact that Hun Ahkang Tha (sacrifice of white cock) is a family ritual, and the father being the head of the family can act as the *thempu* (priest) and perform the rituals ceremony along with the *tubul* (head of the *tuchas* - could either be the eldest son-in-law or the sons of father's sister). The three-tiered relationship is mainly derived from marriage alliances. The household forms a closely knitted unit in the social structure of the Kuki. In this system all households in the village are connected through the network of Tucha – Sunggao – Becha relationship (Gangte 1993:67–69)[25].

According to the tradition after decorating the doikhom (ritual post) by the tubul, the rituals begin by asking permission from Chung Pathen (Supreme Being) by the priest about the spot where the ritual post would be erected. The priest talks to himself – questions and answershis questions himself, as if the answer is the response/instructions of Chung Pathen (Supreme Being). In this process he is believed to have received advice from Chung Pathen (Supreme Being) to enquire about the spot from *Noimangpa*[26] (Lord of the underworld). The priest then would ask Noimangpa for the spot, in the process of questioning and answering, and would identify the spot, in the front of the house, as if shown by Noimangpa. After identifying the sport to erect the post, the priest continues with the following incantations (Haokip 2000:19–20):

Let mother God, let father god bless me.
Let *Lhoutin nu Lhoutin pa* the spirit bless me.
Let the mother-giver of grain take care of me.
The father-giver of grain take care of me.
Let *Lenthang* progeny bless me.
Let *Thanglen* progeny bless me.
Let *Golkhup* bless me.
Let *Paikhup* bless me.
Throughout the year may I provide you with meat and wine.

Taking the spotless white cock the following incantation is chanted[27]:

Let mother god and father god bless me.
Bless me as you have blessed *Gopi* that grows to maturity with magnificent bend.
Bless me as you have blessed the *puthul* (basket made of bamboo).
Bless me as you have blessed the *vomgui* (wild creeper) plant.
Bless me as you have blessed the indispensable *gopi chemjam (bamboo knife)*.
Bless me as you have blessed the beautiful *chaotin* (bangles made from bamboo).
Bless me as you have blesses the *khaopi* (wild creeper) that has ten cortex layer.
Bless me as you blessed the *Gopi tengcha* (bamboo spear).
Deal graciously with me till such a time when my skins shrink with ages as is the case with gourd/bless me as you have blesses the *Thinghi* tree.
Bless me like you blessed my friends, *Lenthang*, *Thanglen*, *Golkhup* and *Paikhup*.

When the chanting of blessing prayer is over, the *thempu* would throttle the white cock and thus, carefully would observe the legs. If the right leg moves or spreads widely it is considered to be a good omen and the performer of the ritual is hopeful to perform *hun* ritual the next year; it is considered a good omen for him and his family. Otherwise, the omen is treated as inauspicious. After observing all of the omens, the *thempu* kills the cock and cooks it whole, and eats only the flesh portion without breaking the bone. The bones are carefully taken and placed inside *doibom-puthul* (a small basket – one of the components of *Indoi*) and after putting bones inside the basket he continues with the following incantations[28]:

Let mother god and father god bless me.
Bless me mother god;
Bless me father god.
Let *Lhoutinu, Lhoutinpa* bless me.

Continuing with the following incantations after putting the bones in the *puthul* (bamboo basket) the *thempu* then proceeds toward his house. Going out to the *kellim* (porch) he continues with his incantations[29]:

Come O soul! Come O soul.
Come O my soul, come the soul of my wife,
Come the soul of my children, our wine tastes better than any other wine.

The last part of the *hun* is sacrificing a cock by divination with the following incantation[30]:

O you cock! You are the progeny of my grandmother black and white hen and cock.
You come from the lower layer of the soil.
My grandfather brought you and protects you from other animals.

I have now replaced you for soul in exchange.

Then by strangling the cock *thempu* says: *khovei tulai phat tokah a thitoh inte, mantoh inte natileh, navei in hinkhen inlang, navei hungme in, phanante hoinante natileh, najet in hinkhen inlang najet hungme hen*. The literal English translation would be "till this time for the coming year whether should I expect death or be lost, and if it is so you show it through your left leg, but if it is the opposite you show it through your right leg". Then the *thempu* strangles the cock by its neck and sees the position of the legs. If the right leg is parallel it is a good sign for the next *hun*. Finally, the priest takes the cock towards the ritual post (*doikhom*) and drops the cock to the ground from its top; he observes the position of the falling cock's head. It is believed that if the head turns to the courtyard of the house it is a good omen.

14.3 The Trend of Change and the Kuki Traditional Religion

Although rituals in the Kuki society are lost in their real sense, the contemporary Kuki society makes use of many rituals knowingly and unknowingly to mark the beginning or as fulfilment of significant events in their life; the completion of important tasks or performances; the transition of one state or time period to another. Traditional rituals reflect the culture of the society[31]. The Kuki of the past are understood to have been uncontaminated and un-encroached. The spirit of oneness, togetherness, so called instinct, leads the individuals to form a society. The Kuki society of today has undergone a change in almost all spheres. Unfortunately, the traditional religion and custom is losing its significance at an appalling rate that now the educated youth do not understand or conform the ways of the society, but rather attempt to adapt themselves to the track of modernisation. However, the rejection of their past is not based on a self-conscious realisation of its short coming, but is a result of secularisation as in the case of western societies (Paokai 1981:62–63)[32]. Agents like *thempu* in Kuki society for instance, who have served as an instrument for helping in retaining and absorbing their own tradition and cultural past, with the advent of Christianity have become irrelevant. But the essence of his role is found in the Christian priest as has been discussed.

14.4 Some Findings

As stated, the transition that took place in the Kuki society has had great impact upon the present Kuki people. No doubt total extinction or total abandonment of their traditional religion and practices is not there; though to some extent many practices have been abandoned. The concept brought out here in this study is, how far the traditional rituals of the Kuki can still be relevant in today's context. What strategy can be taken up if necessary to revive and incorporate them in today's Christian context? Questions raised on the above issues form a part in the present study. Therefore, we shall briefly look into some findings.

Table 14.1 Analysis of Response According to Various Age Groups

No	*Respondent*	*25–35*	*36–50*	*51–60*	*61–70*	*70 Above*	*Total*	*Percentage*
1	**Yes**	09	15	15	16	04	59	29.5%
2	**No**	12	11	09	14	03	49	24.5%
3	**Can't Say**	09	11	07	05	x	32	16%
4	**No Idea**	12	08	06	04	x	30	15%
5	**No Response**	x	x	x	x	**x**	30	15%+
6	**TOTAL**	**42**	**45**	**37**	**39**	**07**	**170**	**100%**

Source: Author

Q. Is *Kilha Lhona* ritual still relevant among the Kuki in today's context, and can it be incorporated in today's Christianity?

From the findings, kilha khona have virtually become an unknown topic in the life of the present Kuki and the question raised concerning this ritual is to find out the relevancy of this rituals in today's context and see how the Kuki can incorporate this traditional practice in today's Christianity. It is to be clarified that the ritual practices are part of the tradition; even after accepting Christian faith, the people feel the need to incorporate some practices similar to biblical healings in their life. Table 14.1 gives us different answer to this.

About 29.5 per cent of the total respondents were of the view that there is continuity in one way or another in practicing traditional ***kilha lhona*** in today's Christianity. As this ritual is mainly a prayer seeking the blessing of Chung Pathen (Supreme Being) for health, and blessing of the person who is *kilha lho*[33]. Like other rituals, kilha lhona is also a prayer offered for the child and for barren women to have child. As our findings suggest, this ritual is still relevant in today's contexts.

On the contrary, 24.5 per cent are of the opinion that this ritual has no meaning in today's Christian context as it deals with the supernatural power of invoking the souls of the departed for seeking their blessings to bear a child, which involved a kind of divination by strangling a cock. Therefore, this superstitious belief is incompatible in today's Christianity of the Kuki. Moreover, scientific and medical facilities are available which are safe, preferable, and suitable.

It is recorded that 16 per cent of the total responses had no idea about the ritual practice. No doubt, kilha lhona ritual is done by divination; the opinion poll suggests there is a variation between the traditional practice and today's practice. The actual practice may not be very much applicable, but the significance of doing it can be celebrated. Therefore, kilha lhona ritual is still relevant in today's contexts, but in a different way by replacing the elaborate performance of the rituals and following a Christian way.

Q. The ritual practice *Chaang Lhakou*, *Sa Lhakou*, and *Mi Lhakou* are important for the traditional Kuki. Is it possible to incorporate the same in today's Kuki Christianity?

Rituals like chaang lhakou, sa lhakou, and mi lhakou in today's context have become an unknown topic especially to the younger generations. Therefore, the main thrust of this work is to find out the significance of each ritual and see whether these rituals can be incorporated in today's Kuki Christianity. Table 14.2 shows the response from various age groups.

Table 14.2 Analysis of Response According to Various Age Groups

No	*Respondent*	*25–35*	*36–50*	*51–60*	*61–70*	*70 Above*	*Total*	*Percentage*
1	**Yes**	10	12	15	19	05	61	30.5%
2	**No**	09	09	13	11	04	46	23%
3	**Can't Say**	10	07	07	10	01	35	17.5%
4	**No Idea**	09	05	06	07	02	29	14.5%
5	**No Response**	x	x	X	x	**x**	29	14.5%+
6	**TOTAL**	**38**	**33**	**41**	**47**	**12**	**171**	**100%**

Source: Author

From Table 14.2, it transpires that 23 per cent of the responses are not in favour of incorporating rituals like chaang lhakou, sa lhakou, and milha kou in today's Christianity as these rituals are done to appease the 'spirits' or souls and making sacrifices for good harvest, and it is done through divination. Moreover, in today's context there is no practice of these traditional rituals as it was.

However, 30.5 per cent were of the view that being blessed by gods through bumper harvest or wild animals in game and fertility for women are signs of blessing. Therefore, in return giving glory and giving thanks to Chung Pathen (Supreme Being) is an essential aspect that strengthens the relationship between god and humans. No doubt the elaborate and complex incantation and performance has been substituted by Christian prayer at church or at home. Therefore, these rituals can still be practised and relevant among the Kuki.

Q. The Practice of *Indoi* was important to the people. Can we incorporate *Indoi* practice in today's context?

The practice of Indoi is said to be the core of the Kuki traditional religion. Therefore, our aim is to find out the relevance of Indoi worship and question how the people conceive Indoi and see whether it can be incorporated in today's context of the Kuki.

Table 14.3 shows that 22.5 per cent of respondents opined that Indoi worship can still be incorporated in today's context, not as the object, but taking the significance of the ingre-

Table 14.3 Analysis of Response According to Various Age Groups

No	*Respondent*	*25–35*	*36–50*	*51–60*	*61–70*	*70 Above*	*Total*	*Percentage*
1	**Yes**	08	09	13	12	03	45	22.5%
2	**No**	10	07	08	09	02	36	18%
3	**May Be**	10	13	15	18	05	61	30.5%
4	**No Idea**	08	06	05	10	02	31	15.5%
5	**No Response**	x	x	x	x	x	27	13.5%+
6	**TOTAL**	**36**	**35**	**41**	**49**	**12**	**173**	**100%**

Source: Author

dients in the object. The object of Indoi symbolism brings out the revelation of god and the best of its creation i.e. the components are the best of its kinds. Therefore, according to the responses god's blessing is upon everything and in anything. However, the actual practice may not be relevant in today's contexts.

Still if the Kuki believe Chung Pathen (Supreme Being) as the sole creator and author of all, there is no doubt in seeking the blessing of the creator god. Apart from this, Indoi is also known as 'house hold deity', Indoi represents Pathen in each family. Therefore, it is considered as a distinctive mark of the Kuki religiosity. About 18 per cent of the responses do not accept the concept of Indoi; according to them any sorts of magical formula or superstition in religious practices are not acceptable. Therefore, Indoi worship cannot be incorporated in today's context. Yet the highest percentage received i.e. 30.5 per cent of responses are of the opinion that the symbolism of Indoi cannot be regarded as god that can be worshipped, but as something sacred to the Kukis. It is to be mentioned that the practice does not exist; however, the symbol is still owned by many households. This ritual and the significance of the religious symbolism are studied from ecological perspectives, theological perspectives, and social and political perspectives (Chongloi 2008 and Haokip 2007). But we have limited the study to highlight the importance, and its relevance only.

The significance of Indoi lies in its place in traditional religion as it shows the blessings of god; however, incorporating it in its original practice may lead to deteriorating the Christian faith as Indoi also incorporates magical charms. Therefore, they do not come to any definite point whether it is good to incorporate in today's Christianity or not.

14.5 Conclusion

In the traditional Kuki religion, rituals were considered to be the strongest element in their existence. It symbolises the integrating force, it is something shared by the whole community. The ritual enactment may look different in its practical sense, but the central idea of performing ritual and sacrifice had purposes and meaning in them; it signifies the approach to the Sacred or God for a different purpose. Ritual acts as the medium of communication between God and humans. The traditional ritual accompanies every endeavour of a Kuki and for which the role of *thempu* (priest) cannot be ignored. As stated, the role and ministry of traditional *thempu* and the Christian priest have commonality as their ministry is community oriented for the well-being of humans.

The role and ministry of traditional *thempu* and Christian priests are very important as they are commonly connected with those who offer prayer on behalf of the village or community, for good health, good crops, and so on. He is believed to communicate with the supernatural beings. Almost every moment in the life of a traditional Kuki the services of a *thempu* (priest) is required. His role and service is substituted by the Christian priests engaged in active pastoral ministry. We can see in today's context the Christian priests are the chief intermediary between God and human like traditional *thempu* (priest).

From our ritual studies we find that not all rituals are relevant in today's context. No matter whether the context be different, the ritual becomes so significant up to the extent that the status of a person in the society is determined by the kind of rituals one performs. The change and borrowing in the Kuki society is another aspect that gulfs between the traditional religion and the modern society. Therefore, in today's context for the Kuki the transition from the old to the new is bound to bring certain changes to the traditional. In other words, modernity must be dependent on the tradition, consistency, and continuity

between the old and the new. Nevertheless, the central focuses of traditional rituals remain significant for the contemporary Kuki people. Therefore, further suggestion can be made in terms of renewing some of the traditional rituals which are still relevant, and incorporating them in their daily life. In this direction the Church can help the present generation to bridge the gap between the old faith and the new faith. Further, rituals can thus be seen as a reinforcing agent of unity

Notes

1 The term *them* signifies one who is expert in something. *Lekha them* would mean someone who is an expert in academic studies. Similarly, *la them* would mean one who is gifted in songs and music. The term signifies a respect accorded to a person for his/her mastery in a branch of learning or life experience itself. We shall use the term *thempu* in our discussion for the priest.

2 For simple ceremonies at home and in the field, the head of the family acts as priest and for ceremonies which concern the whole community or clan, then service of an expert *thempu* is engaged.

3 According to the Kuki world view whatever happens to human beings has an origin in the supernatural world; the priest only can decipher and interpret the will and intentions of supernatural beings; can forecast impending dangers and advise corrective measures by way of rituals or sacrifices in order to avert these impending dangers. A *thempu* may decipher what may happen to a person through the interpretation of the entrails of the sacrificed animals like the intestines, liver, etc. for example. Before sacrificing a cock, the priest holds it and gradually strangles it; he watches the movement and positioning of the legs and the toes of the fowl and can tell whether ill fortune or good fortune will fall on the person for whom the ritual is performed. There are other ways of deciphering good or bad omens. These may differ from one priest to another.

4 The idea was shared by Lamkhothang Lhouvum of Kangpokpi, Manipur through a telephonic talk on 5 September 2021.

5 Kuskis ask deities for good harvest, good health, good catch during hunting, etc. with the promise of rituals in exchange. In agriculture, they take a vow, for example of good crops; and even if it fails they perform post-harvest rituals like *chavang kut, mim kut*. It seems that they perform rituals as a matter of custom irrespective of fulfilment of vows or not. But rituals after crop failures are for the appeasement of deities in advance for next year's expectation of good yields.

6 The different type of rituals normally practised by the traditional Kuki includes *naopen thudol* (birth rituals), *lhakou* (invoking soul of the departed), *doibom* (bundle of charms), *phunsan* (divinations/prognostic rites), *chon* (rituals of merits), *lou chan* (agriculture ritual), *toltheh* (sweeping ground/rituals of atonement), and *thidam lhah* (death and burial rituals). All these rites and rituals are based on all aspects of the Kuki life and are performed mostly by the *thempu* (priest). These rites and rituals are elaborate and continue for days, and procedures and rules are strictly adhered to; divinity is revered as handed down through generations; it is religiously observed in their day-to-day life. However, in the present day most of these rites and rituals are performed in a Christian way.

7 The practice of performing *khopi changlha kou* rite by the traditional Kuki was based on a story. According to the narrative, famine was rampant all over the earth. No one had anything to eat. Then a poor woman staggering with weakness came to one of Kuki villages and asked to be looked after, but no one would feed her at first because they themselves had not enough for themselves. Eventually, she was taken in by an old lonely widow and in return for the kindness rendered to her, the old woman gave the widow some paddy which would never die, so that she (the widow) would never be want of rice. This came true and the widow became rich and paddy seemed to come to her even without cultivation.

8 According to Lhunkholun Doungel, the Kuki people migrated from different places. In the course of their migration they might have come in contact with the Japanese during the World War II. Hence, it is evident that they might have come across the paddy brought or used by the Japanese (Cited from Chongloi 2013:160).

9 Therefore, the full meaning of *sa lhakou* is, invoking/calling the spirit-soul of the wild animals.

10 The incantation in Kuki is from Letkhojam Haokip. The translation in English is our own.

11 The ritual is done to make the soul return to the person or for the release of the soul possessed by the spirits. In the second case, a kind of substitute is sent in the form of a chicken.
12 *Chhim* is name of the ritual; the word also literally means barrenness in women.
13 Black fowl is also usually sacrificed in the *chhim* ritual and eaten. The *sherh* are wrapped in a wild plantain before being placed under the bed in a basket; the feathers are bound with thread used for tying the woman's hair and hung on the wall opposite the fireplace.
14 *Sherh*: This term is used to describe the portions of the animal sacrificed and which are reserved for the gods. These portions vary slightly in different sacrifices, but, generally they are the extremities and some of the internal organs, such as the heart, liver, or entrails. In every case the extremities are included. *Sherh* is also used in the sense of taboo. Thus, a house in which a sacrifice has been performed may be said to be *sherh*, meaning that no one outside the household may enter it.
15 This *chhim* ritual is generally performed if a woman does not become pregnant during the first year of marriage. *Mi Lhakou* ritual is also performed for an issueless couple. In the strong patriarchal Kuki society, having no male issue is considered to be the greatest misfortune that can befall on a couple. In such case the husband is called *in gam* (one whose house is ruined or destroyed) and as is believed, such a man does not find place in the list of ancestors. It is because genealogy is a very important tradition of the Kuki society.
16 The incantation in Kuki is from Letkhojam Haokip, the translation is our own.
17 *Chongloi* is a clan; and sub-clans within *Chongloi* are *Lutsong, Loisei, Sandou, Haocheng* and even within this there are sub-sub-clans i.e. lineage.
18 The religious symbol Indoi itself is a ritualistic practice. According to traditional belief, the ritual was mainly done for a family; so, each household installs its own Indoi. It was the tradition that the eldest son being the inheritor of the father's property would inherit Indoi after his father's death. However, for the younger sons it was customary for each of them, to install their own Indoi after marriage and setting up a new house. Installing Indoi was considered mandatory as the household is looked upon socially, economically, and religiously complete and fully-fledged. The owner of a household, who did not install Indoi was considered immature; and so one who was to set up a separate hearth would give first priority to accomplish it. Otherwise, the family is not recognised as a complete one.
19 *Thinghe* is a particular tree having almost similar property as the *se* tree. Se (it is of the oak family, commonly used for posts of house) is a particular tree singularly chosen for ritual post in rituals like *selkhom* for *sa-ai, chang-ai,* and *chon*. It is also the chosen one to serve as *doikhom*, *sekon* upon which the *Indoi* is suspended before being inducted by the family, or during *hun* days, in which case meticulous care is taken to ascertain the one chosen being free from infested by worms. So selected, that particular *se* becomes cosmic by virtue of remaining healthy, meaning free from worm.
20 Literally, *khaopi* means 'the mother of all ropes'. It is a species of wild creeper and symbol of the strength of a rope made from this particular creeper. It has up to ten layers in a mature creeper. This rope is specially made measuring about nine to ten *lams* (an indigenous method of measure spanning between the tips of the left and right hands stretched horizontally straight at the shoulder level) to tie all the components of Indoi. This action of tying various components together is called *doikhi*, i.e., 'tying the Indoi component.'
21 *Vomgui* is a wild creeper plant (wild grape), whose stem is used to bind the *gopi* and *thinghe* branches to the *se* trunk after the two have been attached to the trunk. Its stem as a rope is particularly used in certain rituals. In the preparatory stage of Indoi installation called *sekon tun* (erection of a post made from *se* tree; should not be confused with *selkhom*), this creeper rope is selected for binding Indoi to the post.
22 God's blessing is on all human beings, but it shines more brightly over the saints. So too, God's blessing shines in nature, but more brightly in the component of Indoi. So they can be called 'saints of nature'.
23 For instance Baptism is a covenant or sacrament in the Christian beliefs and practice. It is believed that among the traditional Kuki people, even if a person sets up his own family and lives with his children, if he does not have or installed Indoi of his own, he is still considered immature in the society.
24 The ceremonial rite of *hun-ahkang tha* is normally held in the month of May for seven days after the sowing of paddy seeds in the jhum field are over. For performing this ceremony every house

hold is required to contribute two posts of *Ju*: one for the husband and the other for the wife and posts are called *sekhom/doikhom* (*shething* and *thinghi trees* are used for the ritual post). The post has two projecting horizontal arms, one near the top and the other near the ground, if the branch faces towards the east it is much preferable. This ritual post is meant to hang Indoi or Doibom.

25 The uniformity of the institution of family council, called *Tucha-Sunggao-Becha,* is clearly expressed as they follow MBD (mother's brother's daughter) rule of selecting the bride. Let us look briefly into the structure with one reference point. Mr. X's. *Sunggao* relatives are the maternal family member related through his mother. The mother's brother or son as *sunggao* is entitled to claim *long-man,* (a token acknowledgment of the mother as the progenitor. It is the price of a dead body, the death of every son born out of the *sunggao* relatives have the right to charge the *long-man* on death. Worth of each *long-man* is a Mithun and the people who get the price over the corpse are only the *tucha* relatives of the *sunggao*. The X *sunggao* relatives are passive participants in the religious undertakings of X, contributing in kind as per norms, offering sound advice (but never involved directly in the family affairs). If X is not the eldest among brothers, his eldest brother will appoint two or more *tuchas* for him, one of them being *tubul,* literally translated as head *tucha*. They are taken from families who have procured brides from the family line of X. The head *tucha* is one closest in this bride giver-receiver reckoning. Two or more *bechas* for X are also appointed from families who are neither *tucha* nor *sunggao* relatives. The *bechas* are taken from any clan, but usually from X's clan members. The head *becha* becomes the spokesman for X in all undertaking and decision making that concerns X. As in a patriarchal society the Kuki also trace their genealogy on the male side, but certain social relationships are built on the female side as well. *Nulam* is a term used for the relationship between households who have married wives from the same family. These households formed a close-knit unit in the social structure of the Kuki. Great importance is also given to the status of women in the *sunggao* (mothers) relations, and as noted above the recipient of *long-man* is reckoned on this relationship. In fact the bond between the *tucha* and *sunggao* relationship may be the strongest in Kuki kinship structure. In this system all households in the village are connected through the network of *tucha-sunggao-becha* relationship.

26 Another divine being mentioned is Noimangpa, believed to be ruler of the underworld region. This name also occurred in many incantations, paired with Pathen as *Chunga Pathen nalhaiyin, noiya Noimangpa nalhaiyin* (May Pathen above be pleased; may Noimangpa below be pleased). The name Noimangpa is invoked in incantations of rituals which involve disturbances of the soil, e.g. digging of holes for *sekon, doikhom, selkhom* etc. (they are different posts erected in connection with the performance of different rituals). In the origin myth, it is narrated that *Chongthu* and party escaped from the underworld region ruled by Noimangpa. Noimangpa is declared in charge of affairs below but ultimately Pathen grants permission.

27 The incantation in Kuki is from Letkhojam Haokip (2000), the English translation is our own.

28 The incantation in Kuki is from Letkhojam Haokip (2000), the English translation is our own.

29 The incantation in Kuki is from Letkhojam Haokip (2000), the English translation is our own.

30 The incantation in Kuki is from Letkhojam Haokip (2000), the English translation is our own.

31 After accepting Christianity as their new religion, the Kuki people gradually do away with some of their ancient traditions due to influence of Christianity in the 20th century. For any primal or tribal society or community, like that of the Kukis, traditional rituals and ceremonies reflect the culture and the soul of it. The feelings remain that the tradition which is soul deep is bound to come back since the influence of Christianity is only a skin deep. Whether a person is a Christian or not one cannot do away with his/her tradition and culture.

32 Precisely, the problem faced by the present day Kuki Christians is a lack of understanding of the context of change from old religion to new religion. Unfortunately, in the early times the Christian missionaries had no idea what truly and exactly are the practices of the people; they framed certain dos and don'ts and new ideas were introduced to them. This is one of the main causes of the changing of the Kuki mentally resulting in a total change in their social system. The traditional religion of the Kuki and its significance has been almost rejected in preference of a religion from the west.

33 One visible sign of *Kilha lho* is *Sa O* and *Saleng*. In today's context replacement is made i.e. in place of *Sa O* and *Saleng* a necklace with cross or a chain is received, but some still prefer to use *Sa O* and *Saleng*. From the response received, a large percentage of respondents agreed that its performance depends on the family who is performing this ritual.

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15

INTERFACING PRIMAL RELIGION OF THE HAMAI (ZELIANGRONG), CHRISTIANITY, HERAKA, AND TINGKAO RAGWANG CHAPRIAK

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15.0 Introduction

Hamai[1], also known as Zeliangrong, has a unique history of religio-cultural continuity amidst change. In the course of extinction of several pre-Christian tribal religions of Northeast India, Characheng[2] (primal religion of the Hamai) has been metamorphosed into Heraka[3] and Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak (TRC)[4] religions, and internalised in Christianity[5]. These two contemporary religious traditions have their foundation in primal Hamai religion. In addition, several elements from the dominant Christian and Hindu faiths have been appropriated in them. There is clear proof that Characheng (primal Hamai religion), while losing the battle against Christianity, has several elements accommodated in the latter, and such a development is noticed even at present in Hamai society. Likewise, the Hamai religion has evolved into two religious traditions, Heraka mainly in Nagaland and Assam, and TRC in Manipur. They are the antitheses, the counter-proselytising forces against the dominant Christian conversion in Hamai society (*see* Dangmei 2019:59). Despite Heraka and Tingkao Ragwang's resistance against Christianity, they are hugely influenced by Christian beliefs and practices, leading to a syncretic understanding of religious faith and commitment. Hence there is a circular yet asymmetric convergence, divergence, and interaction among primal Hamai religion, Christianity, Heraka, and Tingkao Ragwang. Thus, this chapter attempts to explore and analyse the influence of these religions on one another. For this purpose, the researcher employs comparative and dialogical methods to study the nature and extent of interconnection and influence of these religious faiths on one another.

15.1 Mapping the Context

Hamai, also known as Zeliangrong, is the traditional nomenclature of the four kindred communities or tribes, namely Inpui, Liangmai, Rongmei, and Zeme of Northeast India. It is originated from the name Haang, the ancestor of the Hamai people (Newmai 2014:15 and Daimai 2018:2–3 and M. Nampibou, telephonic Interview, April 24, 2017). It was the generic name of the community before the four kindred communities mentioned above separated from one another after the Makuiluangdi (also known as Makuilongdi) village

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republic disintegrated, hundreds of years ago. The term 'Hamai' has lost currency in recent times, and it is less employed in the socio-political discourse. Historically, its narratives have been diminishing specifically after dispersion of the Hamais from Makuiluangdi village and subsequently after the establishment of new villages and new identities, such as Liangmai, Inpui, Rongmei, and Zeme. In this context, it needs to be mentioned that the different Hamai-kindred communities preferred to call themselves with their own local names according to their peculiar linguistic inclination, such as Liangmai, Inpui, Rongmei, and Zeme. However, this ethnic identity was fluid and flexible until the 1990s[6]. Anyone can change his/her identity depending on the socio-geographical milieu.

The term 'Hamai' or 'Haomei' in Rongmei was the preferred nomenclature to unite and identify the four cognate communities of the Makuiluangdi descendants. Gaidinliu, one of the founders of Heraka religion, and several others argued for the word Hamai/Haomei as the common identity (Pamei 2001:39, 43). In contemporary times, certain Hamai scholars erroneously traced the word 'Hamai' to a Manipuri word *haomei,* which means hill people or tribe and have pejoratively connoted as primitive, undeveloped, and savage (Samson 2014:48–75). Due to this reason, some Hamais have uncritically rejected the traditional nomenclature. But the fact is that 'Hamai' has nothing to do with the Manipuri word *haomei*. In its place, the nomenclature Hamai is a historical identity of cognate kindred groups, and the identity bears indigenous connotations. Therefore, it has no bearing with the Manipuri word 'haomei'. In the midst of diversity and unity, the term 'Zeliangrong', deriving from the prefixes of Zeme, Liangmai, and Rongmei, was coined in 1947 as a collective unit to advance its economic, social, and political ideals (Pamei 2001:51).

The history of the Hamai beyond Makhel in the present Senapati District of Manipur is shrouded in mystery and mythical discourses[7]. There is no historical evidence beyond Makhel; therefore, V.K. Nuh (2002:2) agrees with P.D. Stracey's opinion that different tribes have their own version of the story of origin and migration, and it is not a surprise that the origin of the Naga still remains a mystery. An oral tradition talks about the people who migrated from *tingpi lam* (north). However, the place located in *tingpi lam,* from where they migrated, is not identifiable. The history of the Hamai became intelligible from Makhel and its subsequent settlement. It is said that the Liangmai language, which is considered 'the language of God' by the Hamais, was the language of the Hamai people (*see* Taleping 2006 & Daimai 2000)[8].

From Makhel, the Hamai moved to Makuiluangdi, south of Makhel, and settled there. The unique history, identity, and culture of the Hamai are located in Makuiluangdi village republic. R. Taleping (2006) remarks that at Makuiluangdi, the Hamais' "inherited ancient traditions were ameliorated, which became a rich distinct custom, culture, and religion" (Taleping 2006:28). The village-nation or village republic flourished, and it reached 7,777 households as oral tradition affirmed (Taleping 2006:27; Pamei 2001:14 and Miri 1991:2). Here, the society began to develop into a complex system at various levels such as social, political, cultural, economic, religious, and others. For instance, the society continued to be structured in a communitarian model without social distinction of class or caste systems. The Hamai transformed its social pattern with an intricate system with clans, subclans, and new kindred groups. Further, the institutions of morungs – *khangchiu* (bachelors' dormitory) *liuchiu* (ladies' dormitory) – were permanently set up with multifaceted structures. From Makuiluangdi, the Hamai split into four cognate tribes/communities: Inpui, Liangmai, Rongmei, and Zeme, and spread to different places which these communities

occupy today. These communities inhabit a geographical territory lying between 93 degrees E and 94 degrees E longitude and 24.40 degrees and 24 degrees N latitude in the tri-junction of Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland (Pamei 2001:28).

Historically, the Hamai society was a relatively homogenous community having a shared culture, religion, tradition, history, and worldview until the British colonisers annexed its land in the 19th century. The only significant diversities of the four kindred groups are in linguistic variations, geopolitical autonomy, and social distancing due to inter-village feuds[9]. The colonisation of the Hamai territory was followed by Christian missionary activities and the process of Christianisation (Maisuangdibou 2022:288–303). The Christian proselytisation gradually led to the destruction of the Characheng, and the remnants of this primal religion revived as Heraka and TRC religions that began in 1920s. These two sects are like the two sides of the same coin as both sects trace back their foundation to Characheng or the primal religion of the Hamai.

15.2 Characheng (Primal Hamai Religion)

Primal Hamai religion is known as Characheng, which means 'God's way of life' (Hunibou Newmai 1992:98). In general, primal religions are misunderstood as 'animism' (as conceptualised by Edward B. Tylor (1871))[10], 'pre-literate', 'primitive religion', and considered as a degraded and pre-logical inferior mental quality to that of the so-called civilised peoples (Thumra 2001:45–46; Longchar 2000c:6 and Kamei 2004:262–263). Animism is a term formerly used to describe traditional or primal religions based on misconception and wrong research[11]; however, it was dropped because its connotative meaning of 'spiritism' was felt to be misleading (Tilby & Yule 1982:392). The drawback with animism is that it is a religion connoted only with spirits without the Supreme Beings. However, current studies concluded that primal religions are not animistic or primitive. These traditional religions are not limited only to the spirits, but they believe in the Supreme Being. Moreover, primal religions cannot be separated from the Supreme Being because it is the latter that the whole idea of belief and practice systems of the former are developed and established.

It is observed that the primal Hamai religion is not just a simple set of beliefs, but it is a highly developed religion. The Supreme Being is known as Tingwang[12]. At the same time, there are also numerous demigods such as Charasingrangpui, Charawang, Banglawang, Puichamiu (Bisnu), Asabou, and others. There is also a belief in different spirits. Remarkably, the primal Hamai religion is categorised into three phases (Newmai 1992:76–99). The first phase is when the Hamais exclusively worshipped the Supreme Being. That is recounted in their mythical narratives. In the second phase, they venerated the imminent deities such as Charawang (literally translates as *king of gods*), a demigod, and others. The third and final phase was in the recent past when they began to appease the spirits. They believed in both benevolent and malevolent spirits. However, in all the phases, Tingwang, the absolute reality, was the community's ultimate concern, though he became more transcendent in the second and third stages. That sidelined him from the centre stage. Nevertheless, his importance was always the definitive affair of the community.

Appeasement of the spirits by offering *taniya* (rites and rituals) was typical in the community to avoid misfortunes in life. However, it may be noted that such *taniya* were offered especially to the malevolent spirits with the belief that such spirits would not harm the community or individual. This religion upheld the idea of life after death or *manalounbo* (rebirth) and the concept of *charuidih* (land of the dead, where the dead lived before their

rebirth in this world). Further, the Hamai community was a very spiritual and religious one. There was no clear distinction between sacred and secular in its worldview, as every aspect of life was religious and spiritual in nature. Not only that, this primal religious worldview intricately celebrated the interconnectedness of *Ting-kadi-maina* (God-world-humans). Here the world, especially the land, was considered the space of interconnection between the three realities (*see* Longchar 2000b:52–60).

This religion also had well-developed systems with explicit worship, liturgy, prayer chants, *kaniu-kari* (gennas), *taniya* (rites and rituals), and others. For instance, gennas are observed or performed for the wellbeing of the community, clan, family, and individual. It is observed for varous reasons such as good health, long life, prosperity, protection, fields, crops, domestic animals, wars, natural elements like sunshine, rain, storms, etc.; and it is believed that breaking of any genna could bring curse and misfortune (Thou 2008:242). It did not possess any written scripture; however, it considered the community's oral myths, the world, and the entire universe as its unwritten scripture (Longchar 2000c:3). Not only the absence of written scripture, but the Hamai religion also did not have a particular place of worship like a Hindu temple or a Christian church. In other words, it was not bound by any specific space or location for religious activities. Followers considered the entire world as sacred, a worship place. They freely worshipped everywhere in the land. Thus, the whole spatiotemporal domain was regarded as a holy place for worship (Longchar 2000c:3–5). Two offices that performed the religious duties are *aku* (priest) and *phaimiu*[13]. The moral-ethical concepts like *niubo* (taboos or dos and don'ts) and *chaliuraobo* (moral-ethical principle of selflessness) of the religious life of the Hamai cannot be separated from its community life in totality. Here, a profound relationship is observed between god, the world, and humans. Thus, the three entities, god-creation (world)-human constitute the whole reality in the Hamai worldview; as Longcher comments, "the tribal worldview is very unique because of its affirmation of the centrality of the interrelatedness of all realities" (Longchar 2003:8). This is the essence of Characheng (primal religion) and the primary foundation of the traditional Hamai community.

15.2.1 Heraka and Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak (TRC)

Heraka is monotheistic. It teaches that only Tingwang[14], the Supreme Being, should be worshiped, and all other demigods and spirits should be rejected (Longkumer 2010:8; Zeliang 2015:81 and Dindu 2018:21). On the other hand, Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak (TRC) is polytheistic. It believes in Tingkao Ragwang[15] and other gods such as Charawang, Bisnu (Puichamiu), others, and spirits. Both Heraka and TRC are different only at the levels of linguistic, territorial, and system of beliefs. These two sects are indigenous socio-religious reform movements among the Hamai (Zeliangrong) community of Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland (Yonuo 1982:39–43; Longkumer 2010:738 and Dangmei 2013:30). Historically, Heraka is the pioneering movement, and TRC follows it. They transformed the ancient religion by modernising and making it relevant and acceptable to the contemporary Hamai communities. Their primary aim is to safeguard the indigenous religion and make it relevant.

It was Jadonang who fought for the Naga Raj that initiated these religious movements. He began a 'religious modernisation' and political struggle in the 1920s, which later came to be known as Heraka (Longkumer 2010:46; Pamei 2001:84 and Kamei 1982:6, 2004:262). John Thomas notes, "Jadonang undertook the project of redefining the existing

belief system, culture and integrating it with the immediate material and political needs of the Nagas" (Thomas 2017:67). Gangmumei Kamei asserts that Jadonang's reformation was a systematisation and rationalisation of the primal religion of the Hamais by synthesising monotheism, idolatry, and temple culture that were inspired by other religions. Jadonang abolished various taboos and other traditional practices which were harmful; however, he did not deviate from the primary essence of the primal religion. His main aim for socio-religious reformation was to bring social solidarity among the Hamai people and also to revive the common past and origin (Kamei 2006:53, 55). After Jadonang died in 1931 (Mahadevan 1974:256), his follower Gaidinliu continued the reform movement, which turned more political and radical by demanding a Zeliangrong Homeland until a political dialogue began in 1966 (Yonuo 1982:121; Pamei 2001:85–88 and Zeliang 2010:9). Today, the Zeliangrong nationalist movement has become dormant; however, the religious reform sects have reached another level. They have been established as full-fledged indigenous religions of Northeast India. Both of the orders claimed the continuation of the primal Hamai religion in a dynamic and transformative manner. Significantly, Heraka and TRC observe identical religious beliefs and practices, but in different forms and manners due to linguistic variations, distinct versions of the holy scripture, and separate areas of influence. Currently, out of around 3.7 lakh of Hamai population, Heraka and TRC followers constitute about 30,000 members as mentioned by Kamei (2012) in Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak[16], almost eight per cent, and Christian devotees form the remaining 92 per cent of the Hamai's population (the rounded estimations are based on the 2011 Census of India).

15.3 Primal Hamai Religion Encountered with Christianity

The advent of Christian missionaries from the west along with British colonial power in the Hamai territories in the 19th century marks a watershed in Hamai history. It was the first time that the Hamai civilisation encountered western culture and Christianity, and the result was the nerve-wracking shift and alteration of Hamai society from tradition to modernity as well as the loss of primal religion. In spite of the ferocity of changes brought about by the British Empire and the Christian Missions, they could not totally eradicate Hamai tradition and culture. Several cultures and traditions, to a certain degree, survive the Christian onslaught. However, the maximum impact was felt in the religious aspect as it was the main target of the new religion. Here, missionaries and natives perceived Christianity as the fulfilment of the primal Hamai religion. Similarly, the effect of Christianity was felt on the native's morung (*khangchiu*, bachelors' morung and *liuchiu*, ladies morung), which was the cultural and religious backbone of all Hamai villages. The morungs in entire Christian villages were abolished and replaced by churches symbolically; thus, the latter became the centre of the community. K. Thanzauva opines, "The writer here argues that the physical structure and traditional form of a community home [morung] certainly died, but the form or spirit of a community home was transformed into the Christian church and the educational hostels" (Thanzauva 2004:177).

The opportunity for Christian missionaries to penetrate the Hamai areas was mainly facilitated and opened up by the works of the British colonial power. Before the arrival of missionaries in the Hamai areas, the British colonial rulers had already colonised the Hamais and the Naga village-nations in general. Their political power initiated the way for the missionaries to evangelise the Nagas and the Hamais in particular (*see* Kamei 2004:280; Vashum 2007:2–22 and Maisuangdibou 2014:41). The missionaries thus, with few excep-

tions, worked, hand in glove, with the colonial rulers in the expansion of their mission as well as colonialism (*see* Vashum 2007:2–22; 2017:1–15 and Maisuangdibou 2014:41). In the early stage of colonialism and missionary activities, the Hamais vehemently opposed the new ways of life out of fear and suspicion. However, after a while, a receptive situation arose, which was friendly and tolerable for the penetration of the Gospel.[17]

Apart from intended missionary incursion, the immediate pre-Christian background of the Hamai Characheng (primal religion) provided a favourable avenue for conversion. Primal Hamai religion before the arrival of Christianity was submerged into extreme *kaniu-kari* (gennas), *niubo* (taboos), fear of evil spirits, *taniyabo* (rites, rituals, and animal sacrifice), and *chiuniune malum* (superstitions), and *tapilubo*[18] (Newmai 2009:80; Singh 2009:287 and Samson 2012:324, 2015:362–363)[19]. Saphulang Newmai observes that the Hamais were lost in innumerable gennas, taboos, abstention, and observances, and also religious sacrifices and rituals.[20] Ramkhun Pamei observes, "The Zeliangrongs, prior to the coming of Christianity, were bound and blinded by all kinds of superstitions and practices" (Pamei 1996:43). As noted earlier, the religion of the Liangmais, in the beginning, was monotheistic, ideal, and pure in nature. However, in the later stage, the religion had become polytheistic with overburdened rituals and filled with superstitions. In this regard, Hunibou Newmai writes, "Our fore-fathers (sic) lived in constant fear due to their superstitious beliefs, and in fact, it is the root cause of all social evils prevailing in our society even till today" (Newmai 2003:xi). Indeed, in all the activities of life, big or small: from festivals, celebrations, birth, death, seed sowing, harvest, hunting and fishing, feuds, construction of a house, marriage, etc., there were various *kaniu-kari* (gennas) with intense observances (Marilungbou 2000:16–17 and *Liangmai Kenpatbo Racham* 2003:2). Such extreme ritualistic and superstitious ways of life were rampant, and they paralysed the village's functioning in countless cases. For instance, those village members observing genna were not allowed to visit the bereaved family, even if it was their close relative.

Another severe predicament of primal religion was its sanction of the unending inter-village feuds, popularly known as *tapilubo* (taking of heads) and *rikhumlubo* (revenge) among the Hamais[21]. This inter-village feud has an overarching religious connotation that upholds the view that any warrior dying in the feud or taking another's head has a safe passage to *charuidih* (the other world) for his rebirth. Therefore, feud, revenge, and conflict became endless as a religious undertone was attached. Such a tradition had weakened the grip of primal religion over its followers when the Gospel came to their land (*see* Newmai 2003:xi and *Passover History of Liangmai* 2003:xi). Such was the context of primal religion in the Liangmai community in the immediate pre-Christian era. *Kaniu-kari* (gennas) have numerous positive effects; however, the extreme imposition of these gennas, superstitious beliefs, taboos have led the people to alienate themselves from socio-religious realisation and emancipation (*Passover History of Liangmai* 2003:xi).

In such a state of affairs, Christianity arrived in the Hamai's land, intending to proselytise, and that led consequently to the slow elimination of the native's religion and culture (*Passover History of Liangmai* 2003:xi–xii). Here, are a few advantages Christianity had enumerated over the primal religion and became the accepted religion of the Hamais. First, the Christian message of Jesus Christ, the saviour who has the power to destroy the fear over the evil spirits and demonic forces, overwhelmed the Hamai society. Secondly, the idea of love, grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation in the name of Jesus Christ was a transforming and life-changing phenomenon amid inter-village conflicts, feuds, killings, and revenge.

Thirdly, the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ as once and for all was a compelling message that abolished the primal religious practice of excessive sacrifices in appeasing god(s) and spirits. Fourthly, the teaching that Jesus' blood cleans every believer's life from sin without any precondition, but only to live in god's grace, was different from the everyday practice of genna in traditional religion. Fifthly, Christian rejection of all religious tradition and practices, gennas, abolition of morungs, and denunciation of myths and other oral traditions as inferior to Christian Scripture and practices led to the natives' dismissal of their own values. Sixthly, the psychological game played by the missionaries by condemning the locals as 'inferior', 'savage', 'barbaric', 'cultureless', 'uncivilised', etc. (*see* Vashum 2008:47 and Thong 2009:22–39) directed the natives' to think of themselves as inferior, and thus they mimicked the colonisers and missionaries. Seventhly, Christian missionaries brought in economic, educational, and medical facilities and impoved living standards that lured the majority of Hamais to convert to Christianity. Finally, the local coverts, who became missionaries, played a massive role in converting the primal religion followers in masses into Christianity.

Christianity almost wiped out primal religion in the Hamai context. However, Christianity did not penetrate effortlessly in the Hamai community, as there were countless cases of resistance from the locals. From the very beginning, there were suspicions about the missionaries destroying the native culture. The allurement of the missionaries with the unswevering zeal and evangelism, and in association with exceptional facilities such as schools, education, medical amenities and hospitals, economic development, and western values had persuaded the natives to convert to Christianity one after another. The conversion was a historical process that achieved the first Christian convert among the Hamais in the person Namrizinang Pamai in 1914 (Kaipisinnang 2000:107–110 and Daimai 2014:1). In the midst of conversion and survival challenge, the primal Hamai religion, though it was losing ground, transformed into new movements, Heraka and Tingkao Ragwang, under the leadership of Jadonang and Gaidinliu, as mentioned earlier. However, the members of these two groups are dwindling annually as some followers leave for Christianity every year due to Christian missionaries' works. To date, local Christian missionaries continue to operate among the Hamais in proselytising the followers of Heraka and Tingkao Ragwang.

15.3.1 Similarities and Differences between Hamai Religion and Christianity

Comparatively, there are several resemblances and divergences between primal religion and Christianity. Here are a few comparisons: Hamai Religion is polytheistic (where Tingwang is worshipped and gods and spirits are appeased), whereas Christianity is monotheistic. Primal Hamai religion is more compatible with Old Testament Judaism than the teachings of the New Testament. The creation myths of the Hamai and the Bible are relatable in numerous ways (*see* Newmai 2000:79). Both narratives highlight that god created the universe, humans, and others in the beginning. The interconnectedness of god, creations, and humans in the primordial period is recounted in both myths[22]. Significantly, creation is an overarching subject in primal religion, whereas creation in Christianity is less emphasised as anthropocentrism is taken centre stage. Likewise, the ethical principles which Gods in both religions commissioned the followers are compatible. Yet, Hamai's ethical values are overtly communitarian, whereas Christian ethics has a balance between community and individual. Hamais believe in continuous *manalounbo* (rebirth), whereas Christianity upholds life after death, that is, once and completed. Again, primal religion believes in *charuidih* (land of the

dead), and Christianity has the concept of heaven and hell. For the Hamais, *charuidih* is just another world that is neither a blissful abode like heaven nor a tormented site like hell. It is an alternative world (with some distinctions from the present world) where the dead dwell for the time being before their rebirth. Hunibou Newmai affirms, "it is said that men in the land of dead or *charuidih* always pray to God the Almighty to release them as early as possible so that they can enjoy their life on earth" (Newmai 1992:88). Significantly, the Christian tenet has a dichotomy between sacred and secular; however, primal faith does not separate between sacred and secular (see Longchar 2000c:5; Vashum 2011:10 and Maisuangdibou 2014:99). For the latter, every action and value are connected to its spirituality.

All primal religions, including the Hamais, have no founder of their faith systems, whereas Jesus Christ is considered the founder of Christianity (*see* Kamei 2004:262). Longchar maintains, "Another distinctiveness of the tribal religion is that unlike other religions of the world, it does not have a founder(s) or a reformer(s)" (Longchar 2000c:4). Primal Hamai religion has no written scripture, whereas the Bible is the written scripture of the Christian religion. For Hamai religion, their myths and oral narratives, nature, and the universe as a whole are their unwritten scripture. Similarly, primal religion regards the whole world as sacred, and any location is a place of worship; therefore, it does not have buildings like churches or temples. In contrast, churches are the centres of the Christian faith. Apart from that, the Hamai religion has no sense of mission beyond its disciples; Christianity, for that matter, is a mission-centred religion. The mission is the heartbeat of the Christian faith; hence the core of Christianity is conversion, which they consider God's mandate – the commission to be fulfilled. Further, both religions have priests and prophets and other offices along with explicit rites and rituals and other religious practices (*Passover History of Liangmai* 2003:1).

15.3.2 Influence of Hamai Religion on Christianity

Despite the destruction of primal Hamai religion with the advent of Christianity, the former had left enormous legacies in the Hamai Christian setup. These primal ideas and practices are imprinted in various forms, such as at linguistic and conceptual levels of the native Christians, in the church administration and functioning, at their subconscious and conscious levels, and in the practical aspects. Intrinsically, the native language was the primary tool of spreading the Gospel, and one cannot separate this language from the native culture and religion. The missionaries translated the Bible and other Gospel books employing the local language, especially the religious terms such as Tingwang (the proper name of the Supreme Being), Charawang (the proper name of a demigod), *aku* (priest), *nuan* (sin), *niubo* (taboo), and many more. As a way of explanation, the name of the Christian God in the local language is translated as 'Tingwang' in Liangmai and Zeme, and 'Tingkao Ragwang' in Rongmei. These two names, 'Tingwang' and 'Tingkao Ragwang' are derived from the proper name of the Supreme Being. Likewise, other terms such as 'god', which is interpreted as 'chara,' and 'charawang' is a derivation of the proper name of one of the demigods called Charawang; and likewise, the Hamai Christian understanding of 'hell' is translated as *charuidih* which is the original name of the land of the dead as per the belief in the primal religion. Hence, linguistic and conceptual transference of the native language in Biblical terms has several primal inputs. Regarding this narrative, the native Christian understanding of the word 'Tingwang' is no more the Tingwang of the primal religion, but the God of the Christian faith.

The influence of primal religious structure on the Hamai church administration and functioning is profound. The community-based Hamai religious system where the community way of life – communitarian living and interconnectedness of all realities – is emphasised is witnessed in the function of the church in Hamai areas. The Hamai church has never been experiencing communitarian as much as the primal Hamai setup; however, there is a clear indication that the church tries to establish communitarian values at its best. The idea of classlessness, castelessness, and equal participation of all are inspired by the primal religious ideals in addition to Biblical teachings. The notion of oneness of the god, the world, and humans, which is emphasised in the primal order, has a profound impact on Hamai Christians. Similarly, the ecclesial structure in the Hamai context is motivated by primal social structure. All the clan groups' equal participation and representation in the church organisations such as deacons and other offices is a replica of clans' involvement in primal religion[23].

Hamai Christians are a very superstitious lot, and this tradition is hugely borrowed from the primal ways. There are several old superstitions that are inculcated in the Christian faith among the Hamai, consciously and unconsciously. For instance, the beliefs in evil-eye and witchcraft are widespread. Apart from that, numerous gennas and taboos of dos and don'ts that were constructive or positive have been added to Christian values. For example, the concept of *nitnai* (day of rest) is candidly related to the Christian notion of Sunday as a rest day. The idea of Sunday as a sabbatical day is intensely epitomised in the Hamai understanding of *manitbo* (abstention or observation as part of genna). In like manner, the primal religious office of *phaimiu* (prophet and shaman) explicitly or implicitly impels the germination and thriving of Christian prophets, visioners, shamans, and healers among the Hamai. Several Christian prayers and healing centres with so-called Christian 'visioners' and 'healers' are set up in diverse parts of the Hamai areas[24].

There are no concepts of Christian images of heaven and salvation in primal religion. For the latter, all the deads have to depart for *charuidih* which is the land of the dead (Maisuangdibou 2022:246–248). This *charuidih* is not heaven or hell. It is simply a dwelling place, another world, for the dead. There is no bliss or suffering in *charuidih*, but it is a resting place like the present world for all the deceased before their rebirth. For the Hamai religion, this world is considered the best world that needs to be safeguarded and protected (*see* Marilungbou 2000:16 and Newmai 2000:80). Therefore, their folklore claims that the dead wish to be reborn as quickly as possible to return to this world. The primal principles of *charuidih* and *manalounbo* (rebirth) simplify and make the Hamai Christian tenets of hell and salvation intelligible.

Another enormous contribution of primal Hamai religion on Christianity is the cosmovision of the interrelatedness of the whole realities and the vision of ecological sustainability. The primal religious philosophy of the communitarian interrelationship between god(s), the world, and humans (god-world-human continuum) (Thanzauva 2004:186–202 and Maisuangdibou 2015:122–124) is deeply rooted in Hamai consciousness. Hamai spirituality emphasises mutual interdependence of continuum reality (*see* Vashum 2011:10–11, 2012:31). Although the Hamai Christians have not fully incorporated the spiritual oneness and integrity of all, the imprint of this entwinement in their subconsciousness is categorical. For instance, in spite of hundreds of villages being Christianised, the ideas of land, nature and its resources, forest, etc., are still primal in their perspective. Likewise, communitarian ownership of land is still the norm in every village (*see* Imsong 2011:167–171 and

Longchar 2000b:59–63). Like any other tribal worldview on ecology, Hamai's religious worldview has a more progressive vision of ecology than Christian teaching on the subject. In this regard, there is a fundamental variation in the understanding of reality between the tribal-indigenous worldview and the dominant Christian traditions. Humanity is the central point of reference and norm in the prevalent Christian teachings, but it is the other way round in the tribal worldview. It is the creation that is the central point of reference. The whole reality, including the Supreme Being, humanity, the world, and the spirits, is approached from creation's perspective (Longchar 1999:69).

It views creation or nature as an integral part of the cosmic community. There is recognition, acceptance, and interrelationship of nature; therefore, primal life treats and respects the land, plants, animals, and all other living and non-living beings as one and correlative. This ecological vision is not thoroughly inculcated in Hamai Christian theology as the latter continues to interpret ecology from an anthropocentric perspective as earthly, materialistic, and mundane. Regarding this narrative, Longchar argues, "The dominant Christian theology looks at creation from the point of view of humanity" (Longchar 2000c:64). At the same time, the influence of the primal eco vision on Christianity cannot be denied and vice versa (*see* Longchar 2000a:64–68 and Maisuangdibou 2014:150). Hence, there is a sense of preservation of ecology on one side; and simultaneously, there is also destruction on the other side. Overall, one cannot negate the impacts of primal heritages on the Christian faith and practice in the Hamai context.

15.3.3 Influence of Hamai Religion and Christianity on Heraka and TRC

As much as Hamai's primal religious vision impacts Christianity, the latter also impacts Heraka and TRC in various ways. To put it into perspective, the reformation in these two new sects was a historical process that happened not linearly, but as a result of the ongoing interaction between the different religions. As noted earlier, Heraka and TRC are indigenous reform orders of the primal Hamai religion. Their primary source of religiosity and spirituality is primal beliefs. Almost all primal ways are upheld and appropriated in these two denominations with few reforms such as belief systems, rites and rituals, myths, religious functionaries, and others. However, several elements are transformed and altered to make them relevant and applicable in the (post)modern Hamai community. Basically, they carried out the reform by taking various tenets of Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam (Roy 2013:77 and Kamei 2004:274, 1997:17). Hence, Jadonang reformed the primal Hamai religion by simplifying and relieving it by means of eliminating overloaded and exploited beliefs, gennas, and practices.

Remarkably there is a distinction between Heraka and TRC in the understanding of god/s. Heraka emphasises monotheism as the impact of other religions such as Christianity and Islam (*see* Kamei 2004:276). In contrast, TRC believes in polytheism (Kamei 2012) a continuation of primal religion. Polytheism is the primary tenet in primal religion; it venerates different gods, namely Tingwang (the Supreme Being), demigods like Charawang, Puichamiu, Charatingrangpui, Asa, Mang, and others; nevertheless, the reformed movements at the core have shifted from polytheism to monotheism. They emphasise the worship of Tingwang, the Ultimate Reality. Here, Jadonang discarded the ritual and sacrificial practices invoking demigods, but allowed such performances to the Supreme God, *Tingwang*. However, his concept of the Supreme Being included god, his consort and their children (Roy 2013:77).

Primal religion reformed from polytheistic to monotheism is a clear indication of religious impact from other religions such as Christianity and Islam that uphold monotheism. In contrast, Heraka's monotheism is not a pure monotheism; instead, it is only a perspective shift from gods to the Supreme God in order to eliminate all the overburdened and exhaustive rites, rituals, and sacrifices. As in the words of Roy, "Heraka today believe in only one supreme god, do not perform any sacrificial ritual, abstain from beef-eating, believe in cleanliness (purity/pollution), sin and virtues, karma and rebirth, and have a clear concept of heaven and hell, etc." (Roy 2013:77).

The origin of Heraka and TRC is traced back to Jadonang coming into contact with god Bisnu (Puichamiu in Liangmai) at the Bhuvan cave in the present-day Cachar District of Assam (Kamei 2021:1). The name 'Bisnu' might be a corrupt name derived from Hindu god Vishnu and Liangmai name Puichamiu[25]. The name Bisnu connotes one of the demigods of the primal Hamai religion. It was at Bhuvan cave where the god revealed Jadonang (Pamei 2001:39). Later, Gaidinliu too acquired god's blessings like her predecessor Jadonang at the same location (Dangmei 2018). Ajailiu Niumai narrates, "She [Gaidinliu] went to the cave with some village elders where she was given some cups of healing water from the cave" (Niumai 2018:353). This spatio-spiritual transformation had led to the notion of holy land/site in Heraka and TRC just as Jerusalem for Jews and Christians, Varanasi for Hindus, and Mecca for Muslims. As highlighted above, traditionally, primal religion does not have any specific location as holy or sacred. As for this religion, the whole world is sacred, and every place is holy and consecrated to worship the divine. Apart from the holy site, the importance attached to the water from the Bhuvan cave is similar to the Christian understanding of the holy water of baptism and the blood of Jesus Christ in the Holy Communion and the sacred water of the Ganges for the Hindus.

In any primal religion of the world, there is no founder. This primal vision is traced back to the origin of the primordial world and civilisation. Therefore, there is no idolisation and glorification of any single person. The popularisation of the present notion of 'religious founder' is mainly in so-called reformed (reform of traditional tradition) religions, such as Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and others. In the same vein, Heraka and Tingkao Ragwang, as reformed religious-social orders, identify their founder as Jadonang and Gaidinliu duo who popularised them. This view is in direct contrast to Hamai's primal belief. The idea of hero-worship or veneration is popular in Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, where Jesus Christ, Muhammad, and Buddha are esteemed, respectively. It is an undisputed fact that the popularisation of Jadonang and Gaidinliu by Heraka and TRC as opposed to the tenet of primal Hamai religion is associated with other religious founders and the significance of idolising someone as a uniting factor.

Tribal religions such as Characheng have no written scripture. For them, scripture means the oral tradition such as myths, incantations, songs, and the sacred voices of the world, nature, stars, mountains, and forests. All these entities are sacred, and they are the words of the Ultimate Reality. In contrast, all major religions have written scriptures. Here the influence of Christianity and other major religions can be felt in Heraka and TRC in the matter of scripture. In the recent past, Heraka had published a written scripture known as *Hingde* or *Tingwang Hingde* in Zeme and *Tingkao Ragwang Hingde* in Rongmei (Newme 1991 and Longkumer 2010:13). The word *hingde* means 'rules governing everyday life' (Longkumer 2010:13, 99). It is the scripture of Heraka order which was given to Jadonang and Gaidinliu at Bhuvan cave (Longkumer 2010:99), and later on, it was canonised as

the holy book. In this regard, Longkumer comments, "Hingde is the divine rule that was given by Tingwang to Jadonang and Gaidinliu in Bhuvan cave … Hingde is an attempt to define authority, which is divine and seen as 'orthopraxy'" (Longkumer 2010:13). Overall, it is to systematise and canonise the basic tenets of Heraka in order to teach and defend its spiritual orders. Today, they have canonical scripture as well as a set of religious liturgies, including songs, hymns, prayers, chanting, sermons, and others.

The concept of *charuidih* (land of the dead) has been Christianised in various manners in Heraka and Tingkao Ragwang. As noted earlier, *charuidih* is not heaven or hell, but it is only the land of the dead before their rebirth; therefore, the Heraka idea of *charuidih* and the newly constructed term Tingkao Kaidai, the abode of TRC as heaven-like or land without sorrow (Zeliang 2001:93–94) is an assertion of Biblical concepts. For Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak, it believes in the existence of heaven called 'Tingkao Kaidai', the abode of Tingkao Ragwang. Tradition opines that there is no suffering, pain, no jealousy, no conflict; and everything is like the concept of heaven. It is also believed that only the righteous, who is free from sin in words and deeds, and by following the doctrines of the Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak and performing great sacrifices such as Ragaidai, Bamjou Kimei, Muleng, Banru and Taraang will go to the land of the dead (*see* Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak 2002:63–65; Chaoba Kamson 2009:3; Kamei 2012:1). This concept is not according to the basic tenets of the primal Hamai religion; therefore, it could be an amalgamation of the Christian notion of heaven and other religions.

Primal religion did not have a particular place of worship like church (Christians) or temple (Hindus). For them, the whole world is a worship place, because the Supreme Being, Tingwang, created it. Therefore, as mentioned above, every location, mountain, cave, river, pond, house, morung, village gate, forest, farm area is the place of worship. However, the reformed groups, Heraka, and Tingkao Ragwang, have set up proper places of worship, known as *kelumki* or *kalum kai,* similar to all the major religions which have their worship places (*see* Kamei 2004:277). Thomas confirms, "Temples were not part of the traditional belief system, but were a structure that increasingly gained significance with the coming of Vaishnavism and Christianity in the neighbouring areas" (Thomas 2017:71). Budha Kamei delineates, "Kalum Kai, the house of worship was constructed for prayer cum religious congregation on every full moon day and every Sunday" (Kamei 2012, Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak). He adds, "There are twenty Kalum Kais in the three states of Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland. More Kalum Kai is expected to be constructed as it is a must to have a Kalum Kai in every traditional Zeliangrong village" (ibid. 2012). Regarding religious offices, today, TRC is managed like a church structure where leaders are selected to govern it (*see* Kamei 2004:277–279). One can observe that TRC is regulated by a religious authority called the Zeliangrong Religious Council, under which there are two important organs, namely: (1) the Executive Council, and (2) the Ecclesiastical Council. It is the Council that compiled and published the *Ringlon Khatni Theilon* (*Rites of Passage*), *Noushonmei Kathek Karek* (*The Marriage System*), and *Thousumei Kashoi Kadam*, which in the form of TRC Scripture (Kamei 2012:1). Such a religious institution and the construction of a temple for public worship is an essential requirement in the present age. Building of places of worship in Heraka and TRC traditions, the offshoot of Hamai religion is a historical development.

One of the culminations of Christianity on Heraka and TRC is the elimination of several *kaniu-kari* (gennas), *niubo* (taboos), and *taniya* (appeasing god(s) and spirits through animal sacrifice). The impact of Christian teachings such as 'Jesus sacrificed once and for all',

'Jesus the saviour of the world', the name 'Jesus has the power over demons, evil spirits, and satanic power' etc. are an inspiration to Heraka and TRC to abolish several unethical practices and beliefs such as war, evil eye, witchcraft, animal sacrifice, and more, in the Hamai Primal Religion. Today, the emphasis on Tingwang, the Supreme Being itself, is an indication of rejecting appeasement, veneration, and sacrificial activities to other gods and spirits. In one way, Heraka and TRC have critically reformed the primal Hamai religion. There is more to realise, and the interaction between these religions promises more understanding, relationship, respect, and social harmony.

15.4 Conclusion

As observed, the interrelationship of Hamai Primal Religion, Christianity, and the indigenous reformed movement Heraka and Tingkao Ragwang Champriak (TRC) during the last hundred years and more are significant. Primal religious tenets have played a central role in the Hamai community, explicitly or implicitly up to now. Despite it losing the battle and being disseminated, its spectre continues to visit the Hamai community primarily at the subconscious level. The reformed movements embarked on in Heraka and TRC have shown the richness of Hamai's religion and culture. Moreover, the transformation of these sects deriving several tenets of Christianity and other religions for their survival, enrichment, relevance, and adaptability in the (post)modern world is critical. Hamai religion and its offshoots, Heraka and TRC, are *at par* with other major religions worldwide. In a nutshell, Hamai indigenous vision is a significant aspect of the community; it encompasses all spheres of life, living, and actions.

Notes

1 The word 'Hamai' is the traditional name of the Zeliangrong community, which includes cognate communities, namely Inpui, Liangmai, Rongmei, and Zeme. The term 'Hamai' is preferred as the common nomenclature because of its originality, historicity, and inclusiveness (Taleping 2006; Niumai 2019; Newmai 2009; Daimai 2018 and Newmei 2018).

2 Characheng, meaning God's way of life, is the primordial religion of the Hamai (Zeliangrong). In this chapter, the terms 'Characheng', 'Poupe Racheng' (meaning 'ancestors' religion'), 'primal religion of the Hamai', and 'primal Hamai religion' are interchangeably used to denote the same religion.

3 The word 'Heraka' is a Zeme word meaning 'pure' (Zeliang 1998:3; Newme 1991:1; Longkumer 2010:8 and Zeliang 2010:19). Literally, *hera* means demigod, and *ka* signifies 'fenced out', 'avoided', 'outcast'.

4 Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak (TRC) is derived from Rongmei words: *tingkao* signifying heaven, *ra* meaning god, and *gwang* meaning king, and *chapriak* signifying religion. Hence, TRC implies the religion of 'god of heaven' or 'almighty god'. Hereafter, the short form TRC will be used and the long form will be used only in exceptional cases.

5 Heraka and Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak (TRC) can be best considered as two sects or denominations of the reformed primal Hamai religion. They have their origin in the works of Jadonang and Gaidinliu. They are similar in almost all aspects except in linguistic, geographical entities, and belief systems. Heraka is a Liangmai and Zeme dominated group, whereas TRC is a Rongmei dominated religious sect. Heraka followers are based mainly in Assam and Nagaland, whereas TRC followers in Manipur. Heraka believes in monotheism, whereas TRC in polytheism.

6 Interview with Kenhiping Newmai, village elder, Chiang Village, Manipur, April 23, 2021.

7 A history of the Hamai and the Nagas, in general, is traced back to Makhel (Shimray 1985:26). It is from Makhel, the cradle of the Nagas, that the Hamai groups migrated to their present territories.

8 Other languages such as Inpui language, Rongmei language and Zeme language among the present Hamai community are later versions that have root words in Liangmai. These languages evolved after the Makuiluangdi period some hundred years ago.

9 Inter-village feud was a seasonal event among the Hamais. Each village had two/three enemy villages and only within them war, conflict, and killing occurred (*see* Newmai 1992). Few villages such as Rianglong Village, in Tamei, Manipur had no enemies and there was no history of war (Interview with K. Palungbou, Liangmai Scholar and he is an authority in Liangmai/Hamai culture; Tamei, Manipur, 03 April 2021).

10 Primal religions or any religions of the tribals or small and homogenous communities have a belief in Supreme Being, gods, spirits, ancestors; however, Tylor (1871:384–385) picked only the belief in spirit categorically and unfairly declared such religions as 'animistic' or 'animism'. Thus, animism is a study that investigates the deep-lying doctrine or practice of Spiritual Being.

11 Several tribal-native writers uncritically accepted tribal religion as animism. Veprari Epao (1993), *From Naga Animism to Christianity*; Asoso Yonuo (1982), *Naga Struggle against the British Rule under Jadonang and Rani Gaidinliu*, 1925-1947, 31-57; S.R. Tohring (2010), *Violence and Identity in North-East India,* 72, and others are some examples.

12 *Ting* means universe, and *wang* means king; Tingwang, therefore, means King or Ruler of the Universe. Izieteilung Nsarangbe comments that different names are attributed to the Supreme Being in Hamai community such as *Tingwang (Ragwang), Heratingrangpui, Ngaukemakrampau* (*see* Nsarangbe 2007:281–282).

13 *Phaimiu* foresees future, prophsises, and gets vision of spirits; he or she also practices medicine. He or she is a shaman in the community. *Aku* involves only in religious rituals.

14 Tingwang is the name of the Supreme Being in Liangmai and Zeme languages.

15 Tingkao Ragwang is the name of the Supreme Being in Rongmei language. Both Tingwang and Tingkao Ragwang denote the same being.

16 Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak is an article published in e-pao.net in 2012. Please refer to the reference section.

17 Conversion was possible due to several factors such as colonisation over the natives, the introduction of various facilities like western education, medical facilities, job opportunities, abolition of *kaniu-kari* (gennas) and inter-village wars, and many more.

18 The practice of taking the head of the defeated enemy as a trophy during inter-village feuds. Colonial writers have wrongly used the phrase head hunting to describe the tradition. The connotation behind the phrase head hunting is at the backdrop of designating Nagas as savage.

19 Elungkiebe Zeliang writes, "Generally they [Hamai] lived in the grip of fear of evil spirits or malevolent spirits that were thought to be the cause of all the misfortunes in life … However, since the coming of the Gospel to the Nagas in the 1870s, Christian Nagas have experienced liberation form the traditional fear of evil spirit" (Zeliang 2001:88).

20 Interview with Saphulang Newmai, Pastor, Namdilong Baptist Church, Kanglatongbi, Manipur, 12 April 2020.

21 The concept and practice of inter-village feuds varied from tribe to tribe among the Nagas (Newmai 2000:81–85).

22 Hamai community has various myths such as *Creation Myth, Myth of early civilisation, Myth of Charawang and his brothers, Myth of the Feast of merit of Mang*, and others. The first narrative *Creation Myth* talks about the creation where Tingwang, the Supreme Being, created the whole universe; he created a tree, bird, and a human. The human, with the help of the tree and the bird, went in search of his partner. Finally, he found her partner, Charatingrangpui, the daughter of God, in the southern part of the earth, and he married her. When they returned, they reached a junction which is divided into eight roads;there Charatingrangpui gave birth first to all the plants and animals, birds, landforms, and other things, and finally, she gave birth to humans. This story depicts the creation of all animals, birds, plants, landforms, and humans and the interrelatedness of all entities.

The second story on *Myth of early civilisation* narrates the spread of all plants, animals, and humans and the beginning of a primordial civilisation. God, deities, and spirits were part of this civilisation; they spoke one language, and everything was peaceful and cordial. However, humans became arrogant, and they discriminated against plants and animals. Due to that reason, plants stopped bearing fruits, thus leading to famine. With this wretched condition, humans had no

choice but to request God Tingwang to help them. God admonished humans to do justice and change their behaviours, and God helped them and gave them two sacks of paddy to plant and cultivate. In spite of the blessings and help, humans did not repent or reform. Thus, this situation led to the end of the early primal civilisation. For further reading Newmai 1992; Miri 1991, 2008; Tunchapbou 2012 and Maisuangdibou 2014.

23 Interview with Saphulang Newmai, 12 April 2020.

24 Interview with Saphulang Newmai, 12 April 2020.

25 His other names are Munsanu in Zeme, Munchanu in lower Liangmai, Bonchanu in upper Rongmei (Thomas 2017:70).

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PART 4

Shifting Religious Worldview

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16
FROM SPIRITS TO PERSONAGE
Changes in Religious Faith Among the Rathwa Adivasi of Gujarat

Madan Meena

16.0 Ethnological Perspective

Ethno-geographically the region around Chhota Udepur of Gujarat is recognised as *Rath Vistar*[1], the hilly area of the south-eastern part of Gujarat state. Physically, it falls in the centre of the larger Bhil Pradesh encompassing the present-day states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra of western and central India inhabited by various sub-groups of the Bhil tribe. Rathwa[2], Naik, Tadvi, Dhanak, Dungra Bhil, Bhilala, Vasava, Chaudhari, etc. are offshoots of the main Bhil tribe. The Rathwas of Gujarat, resemble the Bhilalas of Alirajpur (in the state of Madhya Pradesh) and have matrimonial relations in the bordering areas. Thus, they are sometime recognised as Rathwa-Bhilala.

The undocumented archaeological sites in the Rath region lying mainly in the forests show evidences of prehistoric men dating back 15,000 to 20,000 years. One such site in the Koraj hills of Vindhyachal range has rich drawings of hunting scenes. During the medieval period small sovereign states of the Khichi Chauhan (Rajput) kingdom ruled in this region (Panchmahals[3]) as they were forced to survive in the interior forests by the powerful Sultanate, Maratha, and Mughal invaders. Champaner being in its proximity was ruled by the Sultanate in the 15th century AD. Thus, the Rajput rulers established alliances with the Adivasis[4] of the region for political reasons. Maratha rule, which was established in Champaner was harsh and noted for killings, displacement, and migrations (Ratnagar 2010:27). From 1817 the British started applying pressure in central India forcing the local rulers to accept their authority. The Adivasis were affected when the forest rights were taken away during the 1870s by the British, and trees were cut to lay railway lines, and build bridges and buildings. There was a great depletion of the forest during the 19th century across central India. The first half way railway line up to Bodeli from Baroda was laid in 1865 AD. This was further extended to Chhota Udepur in 1910 AD during the period of Fatehsinh Chauhan (1895-1923), the ruler of Chhota Udepur. These elements of development also find their representation in the religious Pithora paintings of the Rathwa (*see* Figure 16.1)[5].

The alliance with the Rajput rulers and assimilation of their cultural practices seems to have laid the earliest foundations of Hinduism among the Rathwa, in particular in the

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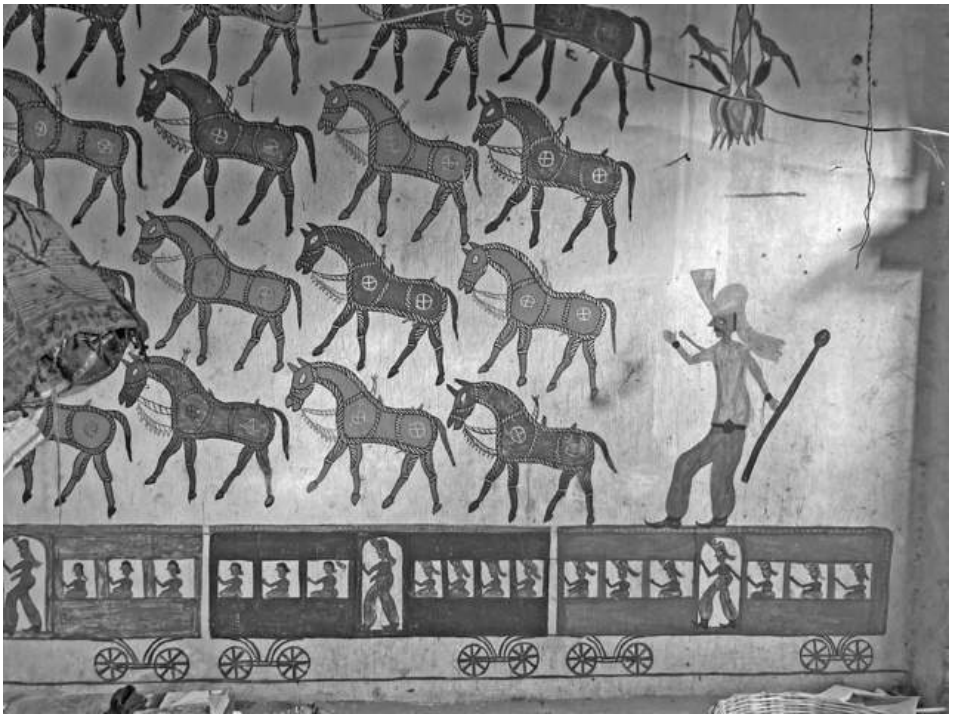

Figure 16.1 Pithora Paintings Showing Train with Passengers and Guard

Source: Author

Chhota Udepur, but also among the other Bhil Adivasis in adjoining regions. Thus, the fascination of the Aryans (Rajputs) for horses slowly became an integral part of the Rathwa's cultural tradition[6]. While studying the iconography of the Pithora paintings of the Rathwa we find the prominence of the horse as a symbolic representation of their own deities and ancestors.

Post-Independence and even prior to that, the Hindu Nationalist forces have tried to integrate the social, cultural, religious, and linguistic diversities into mainstream Hinduism. Though it evolved out of the demand for unification and nationalisation of diversities, it has resulted in further complexities of identity and development among the Adivasis, leading to conflict, hierarchy, fragmentation, and diverse aspirations.

Presently, the Rathwa population is spread in all the *talukas* of Chhota Udepur district, and the Baria, Halol, Godhra, Jambugoda, and Kalol *talukas* of the adjoining Dahod and Panchmahal districts. Their population as per the census of 2011 stands at around six lakh 42,000 persons in the state of Gujarat; and their literacy rate was estimated at 35 per cent, the lowest as compared to other tribes in the state. Their language is recognised as Rathvi-Bhili[7], though presently due to their constant migrations in search of livelihood they are also well conversant in Gujarati and Hindi. The livelihood of the Rathwa is dependent on rain fed crops, having small land holdings on an average between one to two acres. Due to the shrinkage of the land holding in successive generations and strict forest laws combined with the decrease in the number of *mahuwa* trees[8], they are compelled to migrate to cit-

ies. There is little sustainable subsistence opportunity in the villages giving rise to distress migration which has harshly exposed them to the outside world. The trauma of leaving the native land and merging with the developed urban societies has exposed them to the complexities of socio-cultural, economic, religious, and political parameters. This switch over has robbed them of their identity and language, and has compelled them to adopt culture and customs of the 'outside world'[9].

16.1 Chronology of Religious Divisions

Religion is one of the major contributions of human civilisation. Around 30,000 to 40,000 years ago, the beginning of religion and painting is usually seen as indicative of spirituality and aesthetics amongst the most advanced species of humans i.e. *Homo sapiens* (Mitra 2015:9). Speech as a mode of expression is also said to have developed during the same period. It was during this time that the modern human or *Homo sapiens*[10] discovered new sources of livelihood such as fishing and fowling; and their tools became more sophisticated i.e. microliths. They spread to the Ganga valley from the south and gradually further moved to present day Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh. Among them the practice of burial of dead started which emerged as the first ritual (Mitra 2015:9). Slowly agriculture practices developed for sustenance of life. While observing religious practices among the Adivasis it is clear that their faith is set in local settings and natural elements. It is of an animistic nature as compared to philosophical Hinduism and 'humane' Christianity (*see* Dave 2004:9). Also it is of a participatory and communal nature rather than based on individual faith or creed (Figure 16.2).

Throughout history there has been a gradual shift of the Rathwa towards adopting Hindu practices. As stated above this has happened due to their initial association with the Rajput clans (Khichi Chauhans)[11] who came into contact with them when Mohd. Begada (1459–1511) took over the kingdom of Champaner. Later during the British rule, in the late 19th century, the missionaries started social work, along with education and health, and simultaneously converted them to Christianity in their effort to civilise them. The missionaries targeted the practices which were seen as 'primitive' and inhuman, thus, preparing the ground for socio-cultural and religious conversion (*see* Figure 16.2, the practice which for missionaries are primitive). The religious leaders of various sects also termed many of the 'primitive' practices as uncultured and uncivilised, forcing Adivasis to convert to the newly established Hindu religious beliefs. During the early 20th century, on the border of present day Gujarat and Rajasthan, Guru Govindgiri[12] (1858–1931) initiated a movement to demand an autonomous Bhil Raj (kingdom) (Nilsen 2015). At the root of it were various reformatory measures, such as to give up consumption of meat and liquor. Many Bhils became followers. The main medium of its propagation was *dhunis*[13] and night time *bhajan* (singing the name of god in chorus) known as *jagarans,* in honour of Hindu deities. Later, the social reform and nationalist movement initiated by Mahatma Gandhi in the 1920s installed values of vegetarianism and liquor prohibition which were alien to the Adivasi culture. Alice Tilche in her thesis writes, "In north Gujarat Amritlal Thakkar set up the Bhil Seva Mandal in 1923 AD, a welfare organisation modelled on those of Christian missionaries, which also combined social work with the project of reform. This included the introduction of stories from the Ramayana and other (Hindu) religious books" (Tilche 2011:93). Thus, the reformatory movements led to Sanskritisation marginalising Adivasi culture, rituals, and languages.

Figure 16.2 Primitive Practice during the Bhanguriya Fair in Which the Badvo is Nailed and Swung over the Pole to Test his Piousness

Source: Author

Pre-independence education policy of the ruling Gaekwad dynasty was instrumental in establishing residential schools called *Ashrams* in tribal belts of Gujarat. These Ashrams spread the Hindu values among the Adivasi school children. Post-Independence Ashramshalas[14] were opened based on the Gandhian school model. Presently, these residential schools are spread across the tribal belt of Gujarat, even in remote locations. They have a strict curriculum and schedule, in which one has to get up early for *prabhat feri* (a procession march during early morning), say prayers three times a day, and also recite Sanskrit verses before having breakfast, lunch, and dinner. This prepared the ground for the adoption of Hindu values from an early age. Most of the Ashramshalas are run by non-Adivasi trustees. There are a few which have Adivasis on the Board, but the practice and model remains the same. These schools played a significant role in erasing Adivasi identity. Thus, fertile ground was prepared for Hindu forces to sow their seeds in the form of various sects which are now active in the region.

When the first generation of educated tribals came out of the schools they joined hands with the reformatory 'Bhagat' movement primarily aimed to promote Hindu values of purity. This was idealised by the Adivasi population as the 'civilised class'. Thus, a mass of Adivasi in Rath Pradesh converted to *bhagats* who had to abandon liquor, animal sacrifice, and give up primitive religious practices including the practice of Pithora painting (ritual) which requires offering of liquor and sacrifice of animals. During the same period, the Devi (goddess) movement took place in south Gujarat. Purity of spirit was at the heart of the Devi movement. With these various movements the religion of the Adivasis has been institutionalised under various sects which had previously been nature and spirit oriented. With this institutionalisation, the distinction between the pure and impure (i.e. *bhagat* and

jagat) has been created. Similarly, there is also gender discrimination found in the practice of various sects, particularly in Swaminarain where men and women have to sit and dine separately. This distinction has divided the community at many levels. In tribal society gender division while eating food is not a practice.

Over the past seven to eight decades, and as early as the mid-19th century AD, there has been a religious shift happening across the nation, particularly in tribal pockets. In Gujarat for example, there was a wave of Christianity followed by the Bhagat reformatory movements and Gandhian nationalist thoughts (pre-Independence) which later prepared ground for evolution of the various Hindu sects, now predominant across the state. The beginning of religious conversion has one common root, i.e. to elevate from 'primitive to civilised' stage which was propagated by most of the spiritual and religious leaders. This conversion was coined as 'bhagat' in the Adivasi Bhil belts of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Gujarat to differentiate from the 'jagats' who lived an archaic life. The bhagats perceived themselves to be a civilised class entitled to jump higher in the social order of society. This has affected the ethos of the community, leading to social fragmentation. Today, many Hindu sects have impregnated the Adivasi societies, constructing various temples, organising community *jagarans,* festivities, which are presided over by the *panth* gurus, and so on. It is leading to friction between the various religious and philosophical sects within a tribe.

Many Chhota Udepur Adivasis have found a middle path balancing the traditional practices while simultaneously following the teachings of the Bhagat movement. The Bhagat movement prepared the ground for various Hindu oriented sects to follow. First came Pragat Purshottam, followed by Sat Kaival, Swaminarain, Kabeer Panth, Mataji, Rai Muni (Rathwa Guru), and finally the Jains, who have also established themselves.

Migration has been the other key factor for Sanskritisation among the Adivasis in the post-independence industrial era. In Chhota Udepur the land holdings are small, particularly in the case of Nayak, Dhanak, and Tadvi Adivasis; thus, they have to migrate seasonally. When they return to their villages they bring back different values and customs. These are then adopted by the masses. At the same time their lifestyle, food pattern, and language also change. In modern times one may see food stalls of Chinese and Punjabi dishes in various parts of Chhota Udepur, and boys and girls dressed in modern outfits such as jeans and tops. The traditional *kasotas* or *dhotis* (loin cloth) are now considered to be signs of 'backwardness'.

Migration has also contributed to gender, class and intergenerational division within the Adivasi communities (Tilche 2011:99). At the same time the political aspirations among the Adivasis have created factions. Various political parties, the prominent ones being the Congress, Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP), Aam Admi Party (AAP), and Bhartiya Tribal Party (BTP), have contributed in fracturing the unity, which they already had, instead of fostering unity among them in the changing context. During the political processions the Rathwas seem to be restating their identities being clad in traditional costumes with drums, bow and arrows, but within society they are fractured due to the differences of their religious faiths and political affiliation.

The Godhra Hindu-Muslim riots in 2002 in Gujarat affected the Adivasi areas by creating religious polarity and separating Hindus from Muslims and other minorities. This has paved the way for gradual acceptance of Hindu norms by the Adivasis with the propagation

of one strong ideology 'fear to Hindu religion from the Muslims'. Since then the right forces became more active in the Adivasi region to establish Hindu faith and practices.

16.2 Rathwa Identity and Religion

There are layers of historical development, migrations, social-political movements, and religious divisions which have been responsible for establishing the identity of the Rathwa tribe. From the outsider layman's point of view, tribes are 'primitive' people engaged in timeless traditions identified by their agricultural based life practices. But at the same time through the ages, these identities have shifted, from a rustic lifestyle to one that is catching up with modernity. In the present time two parallels are clearly visible, one leading to retaining the originality of Adivasi identity[15] and the other merging with development so they can present themselves as civilised/modern human beings.

There is an important political dimension that needs to be understood in determining the identity of the Rathwa community. Pre-independence, to improve their position and caste identity, the Rathwas attempted to pass themselves off as Kolis (who had a Rajput like status) and they got themselves registered in the Census of that time as 'Rathwa Kolis'[16]. But this identity has been recently challenged by the government as Rathwas need to prove their tribal status to qualify for the category 'Scheduled Tribe' which entitles the holder to significant advantages in terms of job reservation and concessions in education. This has led to the development of consciousness among the youth regarding their original identity. They are seen readopting 'Rathwa' identity with a sense of pride, as well as compulsion. Thus, to reclaim this identity, Rathwas dress up in their traditional attire, playing drums and flourishing bow and arrows in political demonstrations and melas[17] of Chota Udepur (*see* Figure 16.3).

Jyotindra Jain in his book on the Rathwas' Pithora paintings writes, "Rathwa tribe … endeavours to demonstrate that the ritual paintings of a tribe are one of the structural elements of that particular society which is an organic whole"(Jain 1984:1). These paintings are a sacred entity in themselves and there is a complex organic relationship between the representation and the represented. The priest, painters, and medium become immaterial once the work is completed. The space becomes magical having a spiritual power devoted to the myth. The Rathwas find religious significance and cultural validation in the painting. But in modern times this religious significance is lost when the Lakhara[18] artists paint Pithora on canvases to sell to urban clients in craft fairs. One may also see such paintings done on government buildings and digitally-printed on T-shirts of the Adivasi youth. Thus, there is a clear shift from religious belief to mere visual identity of indigeneity. In the outside world, Pithora paintings that identify the Rathwa Adivasi community have become a commodity or an art piece appreciated for their aesthetics without an understanding of context. In contrast, within the Rathwa community, through the lens of the bhagats, the Pithora have been seen as a cause of impoverishment of individual households as each one involves lakhs of expenditure in its execution.

In the case of the living traditions of the Adivasis we find that there are shifting realities incorporating changes. These changes cannot be dated and measured as there are no written records of antiquity unlike in the Indian classical traditions. Therefore, one has to look at the changes within their contextual framework. For example, in the case of the Pithora paintings practised by the Rathwa and the Bhilalas, "The character of a given painting was determined more by the prescription of a particular 'school' of belief, ritual, and mythol-

Figure 16.3 Rathwa Youth Dressed in Traditional Attire to Assert their Identity and Unity at the Gair Holi fair in Kanwat, Chota Udepur

Source: Author

ogy rather than a 'school' of painting" (Jain 1984:1). Thus we observe stylistic variation in the Pithora paintings practised by the Rathwa and Bhilala across Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. The structure of these paintings varies according to the size of the space available in the house, i.e. single or double, which is referred to as the *verandah,* but is always inside and hidden.

The religious beliefs of the Rathwa are interwoven with various deities picked up from mythology (like Babo Ind, Pithoro, Ganeh and Rani Kajal) and linked to their immediate ancestry depicted on iconic horses. There are also deities of a more down to earth nature like Gamdev (village god), Himodi (goddess of village boundary), Khetrapal (field deity), Bhehato (protector of buffaloes), Tundvo and Tundvi (two hills), and the primordial sun and the moon. All these find expression in paintings, sculpture, and votive terracotta offerings. But unlike in Hinduism, these gods don't reside in the idols or paintings. Instead, they are approached by a *badvo* (shaman) when necessary and asked for solutions to the problems faced by the people. When approached by the affected person the shaman goes into trance to seek out these spirits (Ratnagar 2010:68). The gods do not reside in temples; but they are summoned by the badvo. Badvo has authority over the Pithora; he conducts the ritual and makes offerings to the gods. He calls each of them by tapping the freshly painted wall with his sword imploring them to be present at the culmination of the ritual. After completion of the ritual, he takes his portion from the goats and chickens which have been sacrificed. In the Pithora ritual there is a continuous fluidity which finds its completeness with the sanction of the badvo who authenticates it. Here badvo is only a medium, while the spirits are the main subject.

Among the Rathwas, badvo is considered a highly respected religious practitioner. "He directs all the religious activities and holds formidable influence over all social and economic matters of the village" (Jain 1984:8). He is consulted for regular problems related to women's fertility, children's illness, cattle, monsoon, theft, etc. He even solemnises marriages in the absence of the *pujara* (priest who solemnises marriages). The same badvo also works as a healer by recommending herbal medicines, and applying tantric practices to the affected persons. He is respected and well regarded for being the carrier of the spiritual power of the ancestors, but not as a supreme entity in his individual capacity. When not possessed by the spirits, he is considered a normal human being.

16.2.1 From Spirit to Personage: Changes in Religious Faith

The religious changes among the Rathwa are clearly visible in the shift from the installation of the legend from spirits (Pithora) to Dharama Gurus of various panths active in the region. These panths have motivated the Adivasi population to convert to becoming bhagats. Becoming a bhagat gives a sense of moving away from the past identity of 'primitivism', and adopting a more cultured life as instructed by the panth guru. The educated class has stopped believing in the badvo and in his curing power through the *mantras*. They prefer to visit hospitals during illness. Several hospitals have been setup by the panths itself like the one in Bodeli setup by Swaddhaya Parivar. Adivasi believe that panths have given them opportunity to connect with the outside world to become part of the larger family consisting of other castes and groups. With this they also get an opportunity to travel outside to the main seats (temples or community centres) of these panths. This has helped them to move out of the oppression (if any) in their villages and to adopt a new identity of which they feel proud.

Becoming a bhagat has the implication of moving away from the sins and wrong doings and living a cultured life with daily *pooja* (worship) in the temple. Thus, many bhagats now bear red vermillion *tilak* marks on their foreheads. Tilak identifies one as being a bhagat which means abstention from alcohol and meat. In the ceremonial meals meat has been replaced by *puri-subji* (a kind of pancake and vegetable curry) and liquor by cold drinks, sweets, and tea. But the change in their food pattern has also given rise to, as reported in many quarters, malnutrition among the tribal population of Chhota Udepur. There are regular jagaran (singing sessions at night) in the *phaliya* (hamlets) in which the Gurus preside (*see* Figure 16.7). These Gurus have no association with the Pithora or Gam Shai who have been the traditional deities of the Rathwa. New festivals such as Navratri, Ganpati Sthapana, Janmashtmi, and Hanuman Jayanti are now widely celebrated. The rituals like Pithora and Gam Shai; the worship of Baba Hudor or Timberva Dev for curing illnesses of buffaloes; Chapallyo Dev for predicting the rain; Barya Bap for curing chicken pox; and Verai Mata for protection of children and family are being forgotten. Adivasi festivals like Diwasa, Dev-Diwali, Holi, Akhateej, etc. have their association with the season unlike the *tithi* (dates based on the Vedic Hindu calendar). Nature has always remained an important part of all their festivals.

Marriages are now solemnised by the Brahmins and not by the pujar among the bhagats. Their houses generally hoist red or white flags; posters of gurus are often put inside the house covering the *Pithora* painting without a sense of respect. Both are worshipped with the changed consciousness. This is a new kind of modernity spreading among the Adivasis

Figure 16.4 Hindu Temple at Devhat, Chota Udepur

Source: Author

of Chhota Udepur. Simultaneously there is a new kind of untouchability and separation spreading among the bhagat and jagat, and sometimes within the members of different panths. This has highly influenced the matrimonial alliances and the socio-cultural fabric. There are splits in the families leading to separation of houses. Physical boundaries are constructed by dividing the house and setting up separate kitchens. Many a time the panth guru advises building a separate house different from that of the Jagats to start living a separate life. This leads to division of the land holdings and separation of brothers.

As stated by Alice Tilchea a new wave of Bhagatisation is taking place against a background of various religious, political, and development agencies, including the Hindutva organisations such as the Sangh Parivar (Tilche 2011:165). It is like forgetting the past redolent of primitivism, backwardness, and poverty and adopting a more progressive life of better values connecting with the outside world facilitated by the panth guru. It is about believing the reality in the form of a panth guru rather than gods or spirits of the past. Pantha is more futuristic to synchronise with the new developments. In the beginning, conflicts between the bhagat and jagat were evident, but presently most of the Adivasi population have shifted to adopt one or the other panth, the impact of which is visible from the weekly *haat* (street market)[19] and the change in life style, house structures, food pattern, and rise of political parties propagating the Hindutva agenda. The panth also have direct connection with political Hinduism (*see* Figure 16.4).

Various Hindu panths (sects) active in Chhota Udepur region among the Rathwa and other Adivasi communities are as under:

1 Ramanandi: This was initiated by Vishvanath Maharaj among the Rathwa, Bhil, and Tadvi in the Bhil Pradesh[20]. The Maharaj noticed that Adivasi communities living on the banks of rivers were catching fishes to eat. He initiated the Bhakti movement among them to stop these killings and inspired them to adopt the path of *ahimsa* (non-violence). Now a temple in memory of Vishvanath Maharaj stands on the river in Pala village where he preached his teachings and asked people to give up hunting and adopt agriculture. This was the first panth who arrived in Chhota Udepur some hundred years ago.
2 Swaminarain: Based on the teachings of Hindu *Vaishnava sampradaya* this is one such sect which has spread across the world and millions of people of different castes and creed are its followers. In the later years this sect has become divided into many sub-sects such as Narain Dev, Lakshminarain Dev, Bochasan Akshar Purshottam Samradaya (BAPS), Abaji Bapa, Sokhada Haridham, Maninagar, etc. The followers of these various sub-sects have internal conflicts and politics.

   The reason for the popularity of the Swaminarain sect has been because of the preaching of its founder Sahajanand Swami, believed to be the incarnation of Krishna, was very much appreciated and adopted by the social leaders, modern historians, and advanced communities. He was regarded as a man of great personality and philosophy of scientific and practical preaching. Thus, during the 19th century most of the religious leaders from India and abroad; Hindu, Muslim, and Christians, appreciated his efforts to eradicate the superstitions prevalent in most traditional religions. The Swaminarain sect encouraged education of women; discouraged the practices of sati and infanticide, animal sacrifice, liquor consumption, etc. By combining religion, devotion, knowledge, and meditation this sect has synergised monotheism among its disciples.

   The Swaminarain sect has its main seat in Ahmedabad. It spreads to the Adivasi region of Chhota Udepur in 1981 AD. Since then various temples have been constructed through contribution of land, money, and labour by its followers.
3 Kabeer: Kabeer Panth was founded by Dharmdas and Surti Gopal. There are various oral and written myths regarding the birth of Kabeer and his religious identity whether he was a Muslim or a Hindu. Rambhakt (followers of Ram) and Sheikh Taqi (Muslim) are recognised as initiators of Kabeer Panth.

   Kabeer Panth evolved during the Bhakti Period (or Sant Mat, meaning teachings of the saints) between 13th and 17th centuries. It is based on the philosophy of the teachings of Kabeer which is about devotion to him as one guru leading to salvation. Its followers belong to different religious backgrounds as Kabeer did not force a change of religions but highlighted their limitations. In Chhota Udepur this sect arrived some fifty years ago. In this there are two types of figures, those who are *sannyasi* (celibates) and those who are worldly saints. Some of the temples of Kabeer Panth are around Bodeli. Its saints have different names and roam in the area for jagaran. Their food is prepared separately as they do not dine with the community members. In their service they are offered money along with flowers (*see* Figure 16.5).
4 Purshottam: Purshottam is associated with the Swaminarayan Sect started by a different section of its followers. Unlike the Swaminarain sect there is no supreme guru to preside over the chair. Their last guru was Daya Maharaj whose photo is worshipped

Figure 16.5 *Jagaran* Presided by the Guru of Kabeer Panth at Tejgadh

Source: Author

by the followers. It has its greatest influence in the border villages of Chhota Udepur adjoining Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. It has a history of around 30 years and has four big temples in the region (*see* Figure 16.6).

5 Sat Kaival: Sat Kaival means to believe (Sat, Eng. Equivalent: soul) in one God i.e. who is Kai (devoid of) Val (name, form, figure and qualities). This sect has existed for the last 40 years in villages around Pavi Jetpur and Tejgadh. Its foundation was laid by Paramguru Shreemat Karuna Sagar Maharaj in 1772 AD. He was Pragat (materialised) in a Forest in Kasor Gaam, Gujarat, India. Its largest temple is in Sarsa near Anand, and another one is in Kikawada. The head of the sect teaches his followers to view him as a Guru who will lead his followers to Karta[21] believing that God is one.

6 Dasha Mata: It has been popular for the last 20 years mainly among the De-notified tribes, Dalits, and some of the Adivasi in the region, particularly Tadvi and Nayak.

7 Rai Muni: This sect was also part of the Swaminarain, but later it separated and moved to Pratapnagar (Pavi Jetpur). It is now led by Rai Muni Maharaj who himself is a Rathwa Adivasi and believes himself to be an incarnation of Krishna. Their tradition is not of sanyasi but worldly. On the day of Janshatmi (Krishna's birthday) a large festival is organised in Pratapnagar by the followers (Haribhakt) of Rai Muni.

8 Apart from this, in Kanwat, Pavi Jetpur, Bodeli and Sankheda blocks there are a few cases where the Adivasis have converted to Jainism. The reason is that they find employment in the Jain temples.

Figure 16.6 Posters of Various Gurus of Pragat Purshottam

Source: Author

Large gatherings of these panths are presided over by the gurus[22] of particular sects who are greeted and honoured with flowers and cash. Money is an important part of service to the guru in most of the sects. Many followers have also donated lands for construction of temples, particularly those of the Swaminarain sect. In Rai Muni panth, the guru is weighed in cash (generally coins) when he visits a community (*see* Figure 16.7). Sometime, these gatherings are filled with fun and enjoyment rather than sermons or religious preaching. During the day an invitation is sent out to the villages, a pandal is prepared, sound systems are installed playing bhajans and food is prepared for the devotees.

In this way the panth guru wanders from village to village collecting donations for building temples. According to an understanding it is in exchange for giving up alcohol leading to savings which should go to the guru which they spend on temples. But in spite of this, these sects have failed to eradicate social differences and casteism among the Adivasi groups. Within the Adivasi groups of Chhota Udepur, Rathwas believe themselves to be higher in the caste hierarchy as compared to others. For example Nayaks could be *Kotwal* (messenger or drum players) to the village deities, but not allowed to touch them like the Rathwas. In jagarans also they are seen sitting separately at a distance from the Rathwas.

16.3 Conclusion

With the entry of different panths the equality of tribal life is being fragmented into caste and class. We can see that the Rathwa discriminates against the Nayak and Tadvi. Even the panths have been unable to break this and one may see this clear divide in the night jagaran. The political and economic class is also becoming clearly distinguished with their

Figure 16.7 A Guru of Pragat Purshottam is Seen Weighed in a Balance

Source: Author

social status. With the integration of the Adivasis into various sects the outside world look at them as 'Backward Hindus' as they have adopted Hindu customs and practices much later motivated by various gurus of different sects. The upper caste groups of Indo Aryan origin treat them as a backward class, though being part of the same sect. One may see that many Adivasis from the Pavi Jetpur area work as cleaners and labourers in Swaminarayan temples across western and northern India. Few have qualified to be *sants* (guru) of higher status. But mostly this has always kept them low in social status as compared to the higher caste communities. Thus, the element of casteism has evolved with the activeness of the Hindu forces promoted by various panths in the region.

The practice of the traditional customs and rituals depends on the memorisation of the past and clan genealogies which the new generation see as primitive and backward. For example, the practice of commissioning a Pithora painting is a symbolic enactment of the past. This 'past' has been marked as backwardness and a reason for poverty and distress among the Adivasis by the active Hindu panths. Condemning indignity has been at the heart of the Sangh Parivar[23] to claim native rights over the land. Thus, they call Adivasis Vanvasis which is synonymous with the word '*jungli*', which is perceived as intended to suppress the Adivasis in terms of caste hierarchy, religious practice, and development parameters. The nomenclature may be about the identity on the basis of the place of residence. But this has been used in its figurative meaning having a derogative connotation. This latter meaning creates an inferiority complex leading to adopting one of the Hindu sects which guide them to a path of development and a new identity. But in recent times this has conflicted with the reservation system in which the Rathwa are being categorised as OBC (Other Backward

Castes) for having converted their caste surnames to Rathwa Koli. To assert their true identity the community has been protesting and trying to assert their true tribal identity on occasions, but this has been a symbolic visual representation rather than imbibing the true identity of being an Adivasi.

In recent years there have been incidences of illness, distress, and accidents which have made the Adivasis regret distancing themselves from their ancestral deities, local gods, and goddesses. The local badvos have also warned the community of further hardships and severe repercussions if they distance themselves from the rituals. Thus, in the last few years there have been various ceremonies for the re-installation of the forgotten deities (Pithora and Gam Shai) and resumption of rituals. Being committed to their bhagat identity, many have found a middle path in which they worship the Hindu deities and follow the spiritual leaders of various sects, as well as performing their age old rituals. Here the animal sacrifice has largely been replaced by coconut breaking and liquor replaced by water offered through sea-shell (conch) and neem (*Azadiracht indica*) leaves. The village potters have also witnessed a rise in demand for terracotta horses. All this shows that there is a renaissance of past practices (of invoking the spirits), but all blended with Hindu traditions instructed by the panth gurus. Thus, faith around panth gurus dominates religious thinking among the Adivasis in the public domain, but has not led to the wholesale abandonment of their traditional beliefs which coexist in the private domain as a form of insurance policy.

Notes

1 Rath Vistar or Rathbistar means an inhabitant of a forest or hilly region.
2 Also spelled as Rathawa, Rathva, Rahava, Rathia, and Rathiya.
3 Comprises five small princely states of Rajputs.
4 The word 'Adivasi' represents the indigenous tribes who have been inhabitant of the land for ages. Here Rathwa are sub-group of Bhils who have been indigenous tribes of western India, whereas in the Indian Constitution these communities have been categorised as 'Scheduled Tribes'.
5 Pithora are pictorial histories of the community. They keep changing with time.
6 The horse became representative of ancestors and spirits, and is used as a terracotta votive offering and finds expression in the Pithora paintings of the Rathwa (*see* Figure 16.1).
7 Mixture of Gujarati and Malvi. The Rathwas are believed to have migrated from Malwa as many folklore references indicate this claim.
8 Mahuwa (*Madhuca longifolia*) is a source of secondary income for the Adivasis. Its flower (used for making liquor) and pods (used to extract edible oil) are sold in the market.
9 In the context of the Adivasi the 'outside world' refers to the land that falls outside their geography, generally marked by a mountain or a river in their region.
10 *Homo erectus* or the 'upright man' is an extinct species of archaic human from the Pleistocene period dating back to two million years ago. They are considered to be the first recognisable members of the genus *Homo*. They became extinct around 17,000–108,000 years ago (*see* Mitra 2015:9).
11 These Rajput clans fled to interior jungles merging with the Bhils and Koli, as has been a case with the Rathwas of Chhota Udepur.
12 Guru Govindgiri is known for Bhil uprising at Mangarh on the border of Banswara (Rajasthan) during October–November 1913 in which hundreds of Bhils were killed by the British forces (*see* Behera & Verm 2022:376–380).
13 Holy fire which is kept alive (burning) continuously.
14 Residential schools. Presently run by various Trusts in different parts of Gujarat.
15 This is more political in nature rather than social.
16 In Sankheda and Pavi-Jetpur taluka, they are also known as Baria Kolis.
17 Particularly at Kanwat and Chhota Udepur.

18 Specialist artists within the Rathwa community who are always male.
19 The shops are not selling bow and arrow, chicken, meat publicly. Similarly, sale of liquor is banned.
20 Region falling in Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Maharashtra inhabited by the Bhils and their sub-groups.
21 Karta does not have a gender, race, body form, or figure. It is believed to be one god.
22 Along with the politicians.
23 Word used to represent Bajrang Dal, Vishva Hindu Parishad and Rashtriya Swam Sevak (RSS).

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17
ON THE THRESHOLD OF CHANGE
Religious Beliefs and Practices of the Bonda as Revealed in Pratibha Ray's *The Primal Land*

Poongodi A. and B. Cauveri

17.0 Introduction

Religion is broadly defined as a set of beliefs practised by a person, group, or community of people. As defined by Clifford Greetz in his essay 'Religion as a Cultural System', religion is "(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (Greetz 1993: 90). Every religion has its own system of beliefs, practices, and values. The way of worship, rituals, and practices differ from religion to religion. It is generally believed that religion is a way of life. India is a pluralistic nation, where people of different religions, languages, and beliefs live together in harmony. Vivekananda's speech at the World's Parliament of Religions, Chicago, is explicit in describing religious plurality of India. He states,

> I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true. I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and all nations of the earth.
>
> *(Advaita Ashrama 1989:75)*

India has accepted and treated all religions equally, irrespective of their origins and belief systems. All of them co-exist with Hinduism, the traditional religion of India, and flourish. Not only world religions, but religions of tribal communities in India also have been co-existing with Hindu religion since time immemorial. However, in India, religious traditions and practices undergo changes as there are more and more incursions of scientific, technological, and more so, economic changes. Tribal religions are not exceptions to it. Some of the changes in traditions can be for the betterment of the community while simultaneously some may be for the detriment. When unscrupulous and selfish persons are given charge of implementing the progressive measures in tribal areas, the changes in all aspects of life are for the worse. The traditional religious outlook gets new meaning. The changes that have

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taken place among the Bonda in general and in the sphere of religion in particular have been portrayed in Pratibha Ray's novel *The Primal Land*.

17.1 Tribal Religion and Pratibha Ray

Religion plays a crucial role in any society since it is associated with the identity of a person. While the mainstream societies follow institutionalised religions, the tribes have their own religious practices and rituals, which may seem irrational and mysterious to outsiders. Yet, the tribal religion is not inferior to the institutionalised religion since it is also an attempt to understand the universal truth. Though there are quite a number of works on tribes, only a handful of Indian writers have dealt with tribal life-ways in their works, and Pratibha Ray, an eminent Odia writer, is one of them. *The Primal Land* (2001) is the translation of her Odia novel *Adibhumi* (1993). The novel deals with the life of the little-known Bonda tribe of Odisha. For thousands of years, they have lived amidst nature, in the jungle in the Eastern Ghats of the Konda Komberu range where the states of Andhra Pradesh and Odisha meet, away from civilisation. The author recounts their traditional customs and the legends behind them. They perceive god in every aspect of nature, in various forms and shapes. The narrative resonates Chinua Achebe's portrayal of Igbo culture and tradition in *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe deals with the religion and culture of the African Igbo community and the impact of Christian missionaries. Similarly, Ray depicts the religion and culture of the primitive Bonda tribe and the impact of the intrusion of outsiders on their land.

> Using techniques such as myths, legends, and stories of the origin of Bonda tribe and its past glory, the novel not only records the tribal past and narrates their glory but it also tells what had happened to them and what had been lost.
>
> *(Chitra & Tenzin 2021:45)*

The Bondas call themselves 'remo' which means 'man.' They are raw as the forces of nature. Life amidst the unpredictable, fearsome, and rugged nature has made them too volatile, vengeful, and plain. Thus, they seem 'barbaric' and 'criminal' to the people of the plains.

> He is naked like the mountain and the river, the sky and the earth, like the beasts of the forests. To the men of plains he seems barbaric and brutal. There is no falsehood or deceit in his blood; only vengeance. He does not know the meaning of forgiveness. In the land of Bonda, there is only one end to strife: death. The history of Bonda is linked not to birth but to death. His history begins with death.
>
> *(Ray 2001:3)*

17.2 Creation Story in Bonda Religion

The author delineates the history of the Bonda through the central character Soma Muduli, the narrator of the story. Soma Muduli himself is an "unwritten history of the Bonda" (Ray 2001:6). According to him, his ancestors were the first men to live on earth.

Every religion has its own stories of creation. Bondas are not exceptional since they have different versions of stories of creation of their own. Soma Muduli has heard the story of earth's beginning, from his grandmother. According to the story, when the earth was born,

there was no soil and rock. "The world was one vast pond" (Ray 2001:6) and there lived a wild boar. The boar with its tusks and snout raised the bottom of the pond and scattered, and the earth appeared. The spots not scattered by soil became rivers, waterfalls, and streams. The world was created: the trees, birds, beasts, and so on. This story rings a faint bell of the Varaha avatar of Lord Vishnu in Hinduism though in this avatar Lord Vishnu saved the already created world from Hiranyaksha the demon who took the earth to the bottom of the ocean. In the Bonda legend, the wild boar jumped over a *salap* tree (fishtail palm tree) and flung into the sky "two tender branches of the tree" and "an armful of *salap* flowers" which became the sun, the moon, and the stars (Ray 2001:6) respectively. This again reminds us of the Hindu Vaishnavite creation story, according to which Brahma grew the lotus on which He was sitting into a great tree and split them into three parts and created the Earth, the Skies, and the Heavens (Gallo 2019, para 6).

17.2.1 Birth and Settlement of Bonda

The Bonda feels that no one knows how man was created except *Bhagban* (the Almighty). The first *puru* (man) and the first *selani* (woman) came from nowhere. There are many legends behind the remos populating and spreading their kind. The purus and selani were wanderers initially, roaming the forests, looking for food to satisfy their hunger. Even when the man and woman met accidentally and produced offspring, they went their separate ways. But when the *yong* (mother) repeatedly had to face the loss of her child in the forest due to the attack of wild animals, she persuaded the man to stay with her, and thus, began the settlement of the remos (Ray 2001:6–10).

There is another tale that explains the birth of the remos. The *Mahapru* (the supreme God) taught Soma Badanayak, the first man who lived with his two wives on the mountain, to dance. It is believed that the remos were born out of the dance and they spread through the mountains (Ray 2001:258–259).

In yet another legend, the first purus and selani were living happily as brother and sister for a long time when the Mahapru got worried as to how the remo race would survive if there was no procreation. So, He created *Gurang Poi* (evil spirits), two shadowy figures, from his grime and sent them to enter the eyes of the brother and sister as dreams and teach them "the act of love" and how to procreate (Ray 2001:204).

It is a common belief that the Bonda country originated with the twelve brothers who built their houses in twelve villages. "Its name was *barajangar des* – the land of the twelve forests" (Ray 2001:12). Those who occupy the mountains are known as upper Bonda and those at the foothills are called lower Bonda.

Pratibha Ray sets her novel in Mudulipara, an upper Bonda village. She narrates how Mahapru, the Supreme God, came to reside in a banyan tree in Mudulipara. According to their religious belief, in the beginning, Mahapru dwelt in Nandpur with his sister Damuli Dei. They lived a happy life. One day, when Mahapru returned home after hunting, He saw His sister naked while pounding grain, and felt ashamed. She was unaware of His return. Mahapru pierced her lightly with an arrow to make her feel His presence. Startled, Damuli Dei disappeared with the wooden pestle and broom into the earth. Mahapru's effort to stop her ended in failure. The "Mahapru withdrew into the hollow trunk of the banyan tree in Mudulipara, high up in the Bonda mountains, … Damuli Dei had left her garment behind in Nandpur. So great was her shame that she turned into stone" (Ray 2001:15). In grief, Mahapru also turned into stone and dwelt in the tree. In his book published in

1950 Verrier Elwin records this story, which Pratibha seems to have incorporated in her novel. But, interestingly, Dr. Debashis Patra in his article 'Lord Patakhanda of the Bonda Tribes' says that during his decade long visit to the Bonda country from 1999 to 2009 nowhere there did he hear this story (Patra 2013:68–69) though he renders a few other versions. In one such version, the origin of the worship of Lord Patkhanda Mahapru is traced to a historical event that transformed into the mythology of the Bonda tribe. Hundreds of years before, Jagadek was ruling Bastar from the capital of Chitrakot. His minister Madhurantak plotted against the king and killed him in order to capture the throne. To save her son and princeling, the queen Gundi Mahadei escaped with four loyal soldiers and, after many tribulations, came to the Bonda country. According to Debashis Patra (2017:68), the original name of the queen was Gundidei and she changed it to Bundidei to win the confidence of the Bonda. Raja Kishor Mahana (2017:5) opines that the present Bonda tribe gained its name from Bundi/Bondi Mahadei. She used the sword of the dead king to rouse the spirit of nationalism and win the Bonda's loyalty. The four soldiers merged into the Bonda community. And according to Ray, "Bundi Mahadei was worshipped as the mother" (Ray 2001:5) and the sword subsequently has gained the status of deity by the name of Patakhanda Mahapru and is being worshipped during festivals (Mahana 2017:5). The articles by Patra (op cit.) and Ashok Vardhan (2020) exemplify myths wherein Mahapru is worshipped as a sword while Ray's novel exemplifies the legend wherein the Mahapru is worshipped as a formless stone. Perhaps, as times change, some versions gain the seat while others go under. But Ray too narrates Bundi Mahadei's legend in *The Primal Land* and refers to it in connection with two aspects of Bonda life – their marriage system and their violent nature which are explained later in this chapter. Whatever the version be, the fact is that the legend of Bundi Mahadei has become part of the religious mythology of the Bonda tribe.

It is important to recall Tara Douglas's views on mythologies in this context. She corroborates Verrier Elwin's view that mythologies are orally transmitted history about the construction of identity of a tribe socially and territorially (*see* Douglas 2017:20).

17.3 Bonda's Relationship with God and Supernatural

The Bondas are god-fearing people. Fear, but not gratitude or love for gods lies at the root of their religion. They sacrifice themselves to preserve their traditions and customs but for ordinary occasions they depend on priests and "shamans to deal with the malice of sorcerers" and the territorial ambitions of the supernatural world (*see* Elwin 1950:132).

The Bondas have their own concept of god as those of mainstream religions, for as Humra Quraishi and Kushwant Singh state, every religion has its symbol for its god and the power which people attribute to Him (Quraishi & Singh 2014:35). Bondas find god in every aspect of nature, in various forms and shapes.

> The gods and goddesses whom the Bondas worship do not need stone images carved by man: they manifest themselves to him in different forms, as they please–a rock, a tree, a lake, a tiger, a ghost … The gods create human beings, but human beings do not create gods.
>
> *(Ray 2001:199)*

They believe in different gods as well as ghosts and demons, as people of most religions. The story behind the Bonda worship of various gods is intriguing. In fact, according to their belief, gods were created after the remos, and the remos knew cultivation and hunting even before the gods. Once Mahapru was worried on thinking that the Bonda in their prosperity would become proud and disrespectful. Hence, He sent the gods to destroy the remos' wealth and bring them under the control and fear of gods. On His instruction, the gods went and stayed with the remos and demanded feasts of meat and drink. They also stipulated that all the Bondas in the village are to be fed if they were to accept the Bonda's offerings to them. So "the entire village had to feast when a god was fed" (Ray 2001:151). In order to manage them, the *disari* (soothsayer and medicine man) named each of them and assigned each a different place to reside – Dumbar in the mango and jackfruit trees; Urseli, the tiger-god in the jungle; Rutka in the village stream; Singraj in the waterfall; and Sindbore in the stone platform at the centre of the village. Further, the Bondas began worshipping Gurang, Poi, and Dagoi as the Bonda household deities (Ray 2001:149–151).

As delineated by Ray, Mahapru is the king of the Mountains. Soma Muduli, the disari, knows the power of the supreme God. If He is pleased, the Bonda village prospers, and when He descends, the village witnesses calamities – the tiger turns man eater, and people become disease-stricken. Thus, in the novel, we see *birus* (ritual sacrifice offered to a deity) being performed across the Bonda country during an epidemic of brain fever to appease *Goi Gigey* (god of death). *Mantras* are chanted, cattle are slaughtered, and the "dead cremated" (Ray 2001:201–202). Bagha Bindu, who became the *naik* after Soma Muduli, also offers a biru when his second wife Chhotli falls sick due to this illness. Buda Muduli's wife Sukri Toki who has a bad dream also feels that a biru has to be performed to ward off the evil. The author describes in detail the *gunam* rituals carried out to exorcise Soma Muduli of Lachchma Toki's spirit and put the *duma* (the spirit of an ancestor) of Lachchma Toki to rest. Somra and Mangla play the roles of *sairemba*, the ancestors of the dead one. Gunam involves the sacrifice of a pig, feeding meat and rice to the sairembas, everyone "gorging on meat" and drowning "themselves in drink," and dancing nightlong by the young and the old, to the accompaniment of "tomkas, flutes and *dungudungas*" (Ray 2001:259). Finally, a memorial is constructed with four pieces of flat stones in front of the private *sindbore* (stone platform) of Soma Muduli, and one more is placed in the collection of stones in the common sindbore (Ray 2001:260). The author vividly brings out the Bonda belief in spirits which also reflects the blending of Hindu and indigenous elements.

They believe both in *jiu* (soul) and *duma* (ghost, the shadow of the *jiu*). According to them, a *selani's jiu* seldom returns, unless otherwise she has an unhappy death; but a man's always returns to keep a watch over the merits and demerits of its relatives (Ray 2001:210–211).

There are different birus to appease different gods. Ray says, "the Bonda's life is intertwined with birus and sacrifice. He performs ***birus*** to live and lives to perform birus" (Ray 2001:148). Theirs is a religion "of magic and of sacrificial rites. The deity is thought to be propitiated by certain formal acts when duly performed" (Everett 1900:487). The ancient Bonda feared god as well as the demons. The Bondas strongly believe that they have to appease the ghosts of the dead, or else the demons will cast a spell on their crops and cattle, and strike the people with disease. To appease the angry gods, there are priests who conduct specific rituals. Elwin is of the opinion that the priest is not really a gifted person since he has no special powers to guard, but "he is a religious hack on whom a great burden

of responsibility and many an arduous duty is laid" (Elwin 1950:247). In the novel, when Soma Muduli, the disari and the much turned-to man, feels helpless when the Bondas' simple traditional life meets with massive changes and they are exploited, Somra the youth gets furious and frustrated and kills him with an arrow.

17.4 Celebration of Important Occasions in Personal Life and Festivals

17.4.1 Naming Ceremony

In the Bonda community, the naming of an infant is done after ten days of its birth. A rooster is sacrificed. The maternal uncle holds the leg of the sacrificed rooster. If the infant clenches its fist as if to hold the blood dripping leg at the mention of the name of a particular ancestor from the recitation of a series of ancestral names, then the infant is named after that particular ancestor as it is believed to be the reincarnation of that ancestor. Otherwise, the men and women are named after the day of their birth. A man is named Soma if he is born on a Monday and a woman as Sanki if she is born on a Saturday. The *barik* (barber) from the Domb community holds the baby to avert evil befalling the baby. In some of the Hindu sects too, the baby is given a name on the 11th day, and most often, it is named after the paternal grandfather or grandmother, depending on the gender.

17.4.2 Marriage

The young Bonda women sleep in the *selani dingo* (female dormitory) and are visited by men from neighbouring villages. It is there that the Bonda children above five come along with their seniors to look for suitable partners. Men of the same village do not visit the selani dingo in their own village. The young men and women within a particular village partake of the same sacrificial food offered to Patkhanda Mahapru and hence they are considered brothers and sisters, *soru bhai*, to each other and so cannot marry between themselves. B. B. Mohanty in his chapter on 'Marriage', among the Bondas, also validates this practice of sacramental brotherhood (*see* Mohanty 2009:38).

Even when the girls and boys in a village belong to different *kudas* (clans), i.e., though they are the descendants of different mythical ancestors, they cannot marry among themselves because they are attached to the same sindbore (where the god of sindbore is believed to dwell).

Though Ray in the latter part of the novel says that it is in the selani dingo where the young learnt their life lessons and now receive the education, whenever Ray pictures the selani dingos, they tinkle with the Bondunis' bracelets and laughter and heave with the sound of the dhangras and dhangris turning around. As Sarat Kumar Jena states in his essay, "The representation of the selani dingo (the female dormitory) is … evidence of judgemental puritanism. The selani dingo in every Bonda Village is a cultural marker and bears a traditional value for Bonda society but in the narrative it appears reductively as a habitation of flesh and desire, stripped of its cultural significance" (Jena 2019:135).

The Bonda custom dictates a Bonda boy marry a woman 10 or 15 years older than him. Ray raises a query with regard to this. She ruminates:

> It has always been thus among the Bondas: when a boy is ten years old, he is married to a bride of twenty. Why have the Bondas adopted this strange custom? The age of the female is the age of Bundi Mahadei while the age of the male that of her pre-

> pubscent son. They are more mother and son than wife and man. And so the woman looks after everything while the man roams free.
>
> Does the purus take shelter in the arms of his wife-mother because he can trust no one, because he is haunted by the shadow of death? Is the story of Bundi Mahadei and her defenceless son repeated in every Bonda life?
>
> *(Ray 2001:11)*

Ray in fact begins the novel with a description of the locale of the Bonda country and a description of their character, and as already quoted, says that "The history of the Bonda is linked not to birth but to death. His story begins with death" (Ray 2001:3). Immediately after, she wonders, "Who knows when the Raja of Chitrakot died" (Ray 2001:3)? Then she goes on to narrate the legend of Bundi Mahadei who came to the Bonda country and stayed there after the murder of her husband, the king of Bastar, to save her son from death. Thus, she connects the Bundi Mahadei legend with Bonda history and customs. It is said that the Bondas became suspicious of outsiders as they were suspicious of the four soldiers who accompanied the queen. They felt if a minister could betray the royalty, the ordinary soldiers were well capable of it. She also further conjectures: "The germ of suspicion has grown in Bonda minds. Who knows when treachery, passed on through the blood of the four warriors, will raise its hood? The Bonda suspects everyone except himself: everywhere he sees an enemy waiting to pounce. Is that why the Bonda has turned violent, a terror to all" (Ray 2001:5–6)? But she does not stop with that but throws open whatever she has said so far: "Is the story true? Is this the real history of Bonda suspicion and violence? Who knows" (Ray 2001:6)? In another context also, Ray asserts that "The system of marriage is a safeguard against death" (Ray 2001:51), and a Bonda makes provision against death in every way. The father of the boy, given the proneness of Bondas' violence, aware of imminent death, wants someone strong to take care of his son so that his progeny will not suffer.

Once the bride is found, from the selani dingo, there is the ritual of dance around the sindbore. Prior to the wedding, the dhangras (young men) and dhangris (young women) dance and sing to the beat of the drums around the buffalos to be sacrificed. Soma Muduli's wedding to Sombari represents the customs followed in a Bonda marriage. For Soma Muduli's wedding, his father's kinsmen bring three buffalos. The whole village contribute rice and liquor. The buffalos to be sacrificed are led to the villages where invites have been sent and they are slaughtered and sacrificed once the Dombs and the relatives who accompany the sacrificial buffaloes return to the village. Thus, when Soma Muduli weds Mangli after the death of his first wife Sombari, too, "Sacrifices were made to appease gods, spirits and witches; [and] the disari who performed the rituals went away satisfied" (Ray 2001:49). There is no offering to the *agni* or *havan* during the marriage. The relatives of the bridegroom go to bring the bride to her in laws' house on an auspicious day chosen by the disari. Once she comes to the groom's house, she is blessed by the village priest and shaman (disari) who are present there (Mohanty 2009:47). Any important occasion like birth and death in the family is accompanied by "public feasting" (Ray 2001:71) ordained by the gods. Similarly, as soon as the bride brings a pot of water from the stream soon after her arrival at her in-laws' house, which signals the completion of wedding, the wedding feast begins in the selani dingo. After the wedding, the family deity is worshipped to the chanting of mantras by the disari, and the newly-weds enter their new home. B.B. Mohanty says that marriage "is a kind of indissoluble bond between husbanded [sic] and wife backed by

supernatural sanction which does not break ordinarily, as only death of either of the partners can break such a tie" (Mohanty 2009:38).

During the house warming and the ritual of two persons becoming *maitarbais* (blood/adopted brothers), mango leaves and rice mixed with turmeric are used along with other things to denote the auspiciousness of the occasion. Patra also confirms this when he says that traditionally "the Bonda houses are built in accordance with the Vaastu Shastra of Hindu tradition. While making the Griha Prabesha (first entering to a new house) Puja is performed by hanging a string stitched with mango leaves on the door" (Patra 2013:51).

For building a house, the disari performs a worship of mother Earth and chooses an auspicious place where the house is built. No house is built without a central wooden pillar as the Bondas believe that their dead ancestors live there and guard them, and punish them when they commit sins. That is why the Bondas refuse to help build the Indira Awas row houses built by the Sarkar without consulting the disari and without the central pillars. Initially they are afraid to occupy those houses. Finally, it looks as if their fears turn into reality when the poorly built house collapses; and Sanki, Katu's pregnant daughter, is caught under the weight of the debris and dies.

17.4.3 Festivals

Festivals are a part of a Bonda's life. The author notes, "The Bonda's festivals are as self-assured as death, returning in their appointed time. They wait for no one … festival arrives in the village–as inexorable as the cycle of day and night" (Ray 2001:93).

In the month of *Aswin* (September–October), Dussera is celebrated. The disari invokes the Patkhanda Mahapru. The women weave new *ringas* (short skirts worn by women) and *ghusis* (loin-cloths worn by males) for men as illustrated by Budei Toki who weaves a new ringa for herself and a ghusi (loincloth worn by men) for her husband Bagha Bindu in jail. There is heavy drinking by men and women but no dancing and singing (Ray 2001:93–94).

In the month of *Magh* (February–March), the Magh festival is celebrated. The dhangras dance in a circle surrounding which the dhangris dance. There is also the raving sound of musical instruments like tomkas, dungudungas, and bugles. On the first Monday, the disari prays for a good harvest after the sacrifice of a black rooster. But the important part of the festival is measuring out, in a bamboo *mana* (a unit of measurement), the blood-soaked seed from the common pool, after completing the prayers to Mahapru (Ray 2001:157–158).

Once the *mandia* and *suan* are ready for harvest, the Bondas do a biru in honour of the goddess Lakshmi. Crabs are used for the ritual on this occasion.

The *Chaitra* (March–April) festival reverberates with the dhangris singing songs of hunting, taunting the dhangras "for failing to kill a single antlered deer" (Ray 2001:97). This is also the festival when the Bonda offer their first yield of mangoes to the Mahapru before they taste them (Ray 2001:96). After the festival, the dhangra gets drunk, hunts animals (the author adds "and equally men"), and also "cuts down towering trees" (Ray 2001:148). The undergrowth, shrubs, and creepers are also slashed, burnt, and the new tender plants springing from the ash are also cut and left to rot in the rain so that the soil becomes fertile again.

There is no dearth of festivals in Bonda country. The Pusa festival arrives after the harvest during January and February. The festival lasts for seven days. Rice, *suan*, fruits, and tubers are in plenty. The backyard gardens' vines are laden with broad *simba* beans. The important part of the festival is the eating of "the first tender pods of simba" (Ray 2001:143). This fes-

tival again is about offering the produce to god before humans eat them. Harvest festival is celebrated across India by different names as Makar Sankaranthi, Pongal, Lohri, and Magh Bihu, to name a few. Like the Bondas, the Tamilians also cook tubers, legumes, freshly harvested vegetables, and rice on different days of the four-day Pongal festival.

During the second day of the festival, the ritual of 'beating with brooms' takes place. First the young boys and then the older dhangras lash each other in their age group, with the dried salap branches. The Bondunis bring *pithas* (cakes) made of freshly pounded grain. They also take oil and turmeric to apply on the bleeding wounds of their sons and husbands. No child or dhangra cries out when beaten by brooms. It is a test of their manliness. But once the whipping is over, each pair embraces each other in a show of friendship. However, any time the violence can spill into life threatening situation. Hence, the author remarks, "The Pusa festival arrived bringing showers of joy but frequently left a trail of grief and death" (Ray 2001:145).

The Bonda's life is filled with festivals. They are not to be missed at any rate. Even when the near and dear ones are in jail or dead, the festivals do not stop. "The Bonda's life and his festivals are intertwined, like the Bonduni's beads" (Ray 2001:93). Thus, we see Budei Toki joining the celebration of Dassera along with other selanis. This is different from the Hindu code followed in a Brahmin household. There, the son who loses his father or mother observes mourning for a year and does not celebrate any festival during that period. With regard to the Bondas, Elwin feels, "Every ceremony, festival, wedding, funeral is … drawn out in tedious monotony, yet the Bondos seem to enjoy it – it gives them a lot of leisure and it makes things sure".(Elwin 1950:164).

17.5 Infusion of Hinduism and Bonda Religion into One Another

In the Bonda religion, there are many generic references to God and specific names of gods as found in the mainstream Hinduism[1].

There are examples of similar names and concepts between the two religions in Ray's *The Primal Land*. Some of them are as follows: "Bhagban" (p. 26), a general reference to God; "Bata Debta"(p. 83), the god who resides in the banyan tree at the entrance of the Bonda village, similar to the 'kaval deivams ,' in Tamil Nadu, who guard the villages at the entrance and are worshipped by the villagers; "Lachhmi" (p. 50), the goddess of fortune, spelt as "Lakshmi" elsewhere (p. 122) in the text; "Yama" (p. 72), the god of death; "Jama dutas" (p. 278), messengers of the god of death; and "Shiva" (p.1 and p. 106), the Supreme God. Interestingly, the Bondas consider Thursday as the sacred day for Goddess Lakshmi, a belief in Odisha, though in some other parts of India, people believe it is Friday. The malevolent forces are represented by "Sani", the planet Saturn (p. 148) and "brahma rakshas" (p.14). Though the Hindus believe in the periodical seven-and-a-half-year influence of Sani bhagvan in everyone's life, they also believe that Sani during the last two-and-a-half-year period of its influence bestows all good fortunes. As in the Hindu rituals, the Bondas also use mango leaves, rice and turmeric powder for auspicious occasions such as house warming and the ritual of becoming "maitarbais" (pp. 83–84).

There is also a fascinating, yet disturbing complaint by Mangla Dhangramajhi and other Bondas who have gone to school, as to how Lord Jagannath, the dark tribal god, was stolen from a tribal chief and consecrated in Puri temple hundreds of years ago, and presently the city dwellers have made a flourishing trade of it, such that, the tribals who were the

original worshippers of Lord Jagannath have to pay money to have a darshan of Him (Ray 2001:230).

Ray makes it clear that the Bondas do not accept any foreign god or religion easily. She portrays the resistance and questioning of the Bondas whenever a foreign god is introduced. Thus, when the Christian missionaries build a church, the Bondas drive them away and capture it (Ray 2001:85); when someone tells them that they are Hindus, Soma Muduli retorts that they are not Hindus but they are remos and have their own gods; again, when they are told that it is alright if they eat the flesh of cows, but should never eat pigs and should pray to only one god, the Bondas tell them to their face that the outsiders have no business to instruct whom the Bondas should worship (Ray 2001:92). When Bagha Bindu brings the faded picture of the god Ishwar, they put it to test by placing it on the sindbore to check whether it gets blown away by the wind over night or not. But their attitude changes when their repeated attempts to break the different parts of the gulang babus' goddess Ma's statue (which represents Sarkar) fail. Slowly, they begin to accept the goddess and start offering Her the green branch of a tree as they do to their Ma Takrani. The new goddess becomes an addition to the already existing pantheon of Bonda deities (Ray 2001:199–200).

The book *Ethnographic Atlas of Indian Tribes* sums up: "The Bondas are primarily animistic. At the same time, they are also Hinduistic. But they go against some of the strict norms of Hindu religion, like consumption of beef" (Singh 2018:263).

17.6 Ethics

While religion is about man's relationship to a transcendent Supreme Power or Supreme Powers, ethics is about the moral norms to be followed when a man interacts with another man or society at large. It includes what is permissible or impermissible in a society as in the dress code and eating habits. Such aspects can be relative and not absolute as the society undergoes changes or evolves. Michael Kent, in 'Ethical Decision Making', Module 4, Lesson 1, elaborates on the 'Absolutist' and 'Situational' stand people take before taking decisions. Absolutists possess a 'moral compass', have inflexible views on what is right or wrong and apply them to situations. Situationalists think that situations dictate what is right or wrong, and ends justify the means. They justify "'right and wrong' as what is 'good or bad' for the individual(s) involved at a particular time"[2.]

Pratibha Ray time and again makes a statement that the Bondas' life contexts and living conditions determine their code of conduct. She comments, "For the Bonda, adherence to a moral code is a matter of necessity" (Ray 2001:47). She registers this in the different aspects of the Bonda life she portrays.

17.6.1 Women's Attire

Traditionally, Bonda women are to have clean shaven heads and bare bodies except for a foot or two of colourful ringa to cover their private parts. This can be traced to an ancient legend. Long ago, when Sita Takrani was bathing naked in the Kingubodak stream, a group of Bondunis who happened to come there laughed at her nudity. The goddess, in anger, cursed them. "Naked you shall be to every eye! And not a hair shall cover your heads; you shall walk with your heads shaven, bare from head to foot"! She also warned them, if they break the rule, "not a blade of grass will grow on these mountains! The Bonda people will be destroyed!" When the selanis cried and pleaded, the goddess took mercy on them. She

drew a thread from the border of her sari and told them that they could weave a garment to the length of the thread and not more, and if not, "the mountains will remain bare like their skulls" (Ray 2001:25).

The Bondunis comforted themselves thinking that in fact it was thoughtful of the goddess to have given this curse, as otherwise with a long sari tied around them, they would find it very difficult to toil in the land, and also, shaven heads save them the time from oiling the long hair. But the clever selanis found a partial way out to evade the shame of nudity. Except for their bare backs, buttocks, and calves, no one can see their nakedness as they adorn themselves with brass or bronze rings and bracelets that cover their neck and arms; wear on their chest strings of colourful beads that hang down to the navel; and tie the *thumia* (the holder) to which their ringas are attached. The article 'Myths and Ornamentation of the Bonda Women: A Continuity and Change' provides different versions of this myth from different places of Bonda region. In the one that includes the character of Sita, it is Lakshman who curses the selanis, and Sita who pities them (Vardhan 2020:118).

17.6.2 Position of Women

In the Bonda society, it is the women who take care of the family, land, and economic activities. But still, a Bonduni is not allowed to perform any religious ritual and sit on or close to the sindbore (stone platform on which the village council assembles) as it is considered polluting. Ray says, "At tribal festivals, she [Bonduni] may not offer sacrifice to gods and spirits or participate in the rituals. She may approach the sindbore in the centre of the village but she may not touch it. Her touch is polluting" (Ray 2001:79). That is why though Budei Toki performs *sapung-sunung-bok-gigey*, "the ritual worship celebrating the first yield from the salap tree" (Ray 2001:102), after that, the function of hanging the pot from the branches of the salap tree to get the first pot of *sapung* (sap of salap tree) and offering it to the dumas of the ancestors and later sharing it with the kinsmen is performed by a male elder cousin as Bagha Bindu is in jail (Ray 2001:102–103). So, sometimes, "The narrative revolving around the uncommon cultural practices of the Bonda tribe … makes the reader question whether their beliefs secure their existence or problematize it" (Chitra & Tenzin 2021:38).

17.6.3 Violence and Killing

Bonda men are quick of temperament, and at the slightest excuse, shoot the arrow and kill the opponent. They are also wary of outsiders. This is attributed to their long association with Bundi Mahadei, the queen of Chitrakot, who was betrayed by her own minister who killed the king, her husband. Their logic behind this is that if a minister could betray the king, the ordinary soldiers who accompanied the queen could do the same. The author also feels that the blood of treachery could have passed into the Bondas through the four soldiers who in due course merged with the Bonda tribe, and the treachery may raise its head any time and hence they have to be cautious. It is also believed that it was Bundi Mahadei with a few of her soldiers who trained Bonda men in the art of war (Ray 2001:5).

One other reason for their violence can be attributed to their addiction to drinking sapung (fermented juice of the palm tree). It is said, once upon a time, a father and then the mother left their babies in the shade of a palm tree to eat the flesh of a deer the man had hunted. In the meanwhile, the babies cried of hunger. The palm tree took pity on the infants and spread its roots deep below the ground to the ocean, served it well, took some

of its water and turned it into sapung, fed the babies with it and satisfied their hunger (Ray 2001:11–12). Thus, the salap juice becomes "the Bonda's lifeblood as well as Death" (Ray 2001:11). Ray observes,

> The salap has been the cause of murder, rioting, incarceration, and hanging. Still, the Bonda's relationship to the salap is that of the flower to the stalk. An eternal link. The Earth Mother, he believes, has given him the salap to nurture him.
>
> *(Ray 2001:11)*

So, from the birth the Bondas' life is entwined with liquor and drinking. At the same time, the author says that, though it is a tree, it shares the joys and sorrows of human beings and it makes life possible on the fearful mountains. The Bondas believe that Burusung the goddess is the protector of the salap tree. Thus

> Religion of the tribes of Orissa is based on their belief that their life and work are controlled by supernatural beings having their abode around them in the hills, sky, rivers, forests, habitation, and home. Thus, man, nature and supernatural powers, according to them are intimately related.
>
> *(Ota et al. 2010:33)*

Being volatile, Bonda men do not think twice before killing someone. "To the Bonda, the killing of a human being is neither crime nor sin. He who causes another to anger dies: he who is angered kills: thus it has been for countless generations" (Ray 2001:72–73). But the author presents a dual perception of the Bondas with regard to killing someone. This is because the Bondas also follow what is called "the cleaning of the water ceremony" to end the feud between the killer and the murdered one's family. Bagha Bindu who undergoes this after his return from the jail is made to repeat three times the following words: "I have done wrong; I have killed your kinsman. I ask your forgiveness. If I should do such a thing again, may I be forced to eat your excrement, to drink your urine" (Ray 2001:119). He offers *landha* (an alcoholic drink made from rice) to each and drinks the polluted remains from the cup of each. This shows the divergence between traditions and the practice in real life.

17.6.4 Communal Living

The Bondas live as a close community sharing each other's joy and sorrow.

> When a Bonda finds another remo in need, it becomes his duty to give, to share. Since the dumas observe everything, every selfish act is witnessed by them and punished. If a remo has failed to help a neighbour in his need, the dumas will seize him and cause him harm: he will be struck with disease, or his crops will wither.
>
> *(Ray 2001:157)*

Thus, if there is a man-eating tiger prowling, it is the duty of the dhangras from all 32 villages to join the hunt to trace and kill it. Similarly, bound by the age-old injunction of gods, whenever there is a celebration the whole village feasts. During weddings, as already exemplified, everyone brings rice and liquor to the house celebrating the wedding. "In the Bonda community … for one to feast while another watches is an offence" (Ray 2001:256). That

is one of the reasons why Bagha Bindu rages and refuses to eat when the leader babu sends a peon to invite only him, Soma Muduli, and Katu to eat the meat and rice (Ray 2001:256).

17.6.5 Fight over Gods

The Bondas believe in different gods and spirits, but the supreme deity is Patkhanda Mahapru. There are no infightings among the Bondas due to their religious beliefs. In fact, the Bondas justifiably take a dig at the mainstream society when Bagha Bindu brings the picture of the Ishwar, bought from the warder in the jail in the city. The people grow cautious, and Sukra Madra, a returnee from Assam, says in earnest: "The towns-people are always fighting over different gods – killing each other. Now the same thing will happen to us" (Ray 2001:120)!

17.6.6 Straightforward Nature

There is no deceit or falsehood in the Bondas' blood. They take their words seriously. The author says that "the Bonda's promise, once given, can no more be retrieved than an arrow shot from his bow" (Ray 2001:35). Generally, swearing ceremonies and oath taking are done over objects considered sacred, especially the Mother Earth. Thus, Soma Muduli makes Sania's wife take the oath, over earth, cow dung, salt, and a tiger's tail, that she will wait for Sania's return from the jail. So too does Budei Toki vow to wait for Bagha Bindu though the details of the ceremony have not been provided in this case. When Buda Muduli approaches Budei Toki to set up the *dia* with him, after Bagha Bindu goes to jail, she says that she cannot do it as she cannot break the oath that Bindu made her to take. Buda Muduli too leaves her untroubled as he too believes that "Nothing prevails over oath" (Ray 2001:78). In another instance, Soma Muduli asks Sitanath to swear on the Mother Earth that he will not take away the Bondas' land, and when Sitanath does it, Soma Muduli feels reassured (Ray 2001:136). The ritual of the oath taking ceremony for becoming *maitarbais*, which Ray describes at length, is also based on religious faith. The rituals by the disari begin with the selection of "a lump of clay" and coating it with cowdung. Once the Domb leader and the Bonda *naik* agree to become maitarbais,

> The disari made them stand, then stood up himself. Bowing in all four directions to the gods of the earth and the sky, he chanted mantras: "… patkhanda mahapru … these two here, why Thou knowest, have become maitarbais. Let their love grow; let it last forever. Let there be no quarrel among them. If it comes to pass otherwise, let my eyes be blind. Be Thou my witness!"
>
> *(Ray 2001:84)*

Then after a few more steps, "Liquor was sprinkled on the ground to placate *Dhartini Ma,* the Earth Mother, and the spirits of ancestors" (Ray 2001:84). Elsewhere the novelist says that a Bonda will never harm anyone whom he calls his friend (*see also* Mohanty 2009:42).

The Bondas are connected by a sacramental brotherhood and soru bai fellowship, as already discussed, resulting from living in the same village protected by gods, sharing the same food offered to Mahapru and being attached to the same sindbore. So, as one big family, they are true to one another. The maitarbais too "stand behind each other firmly and provide moral and physical support at the time of need" (Mohanty 2009:42). The Bondas

are also afraid that the dumas of their ancestors are watching over them and will punish them for their misdeeds. And also as Ray says, "They [Bondas] were nature's children – as open, as clear, as harsh and as exposed as nature. They did not know what falsehood was: they were as straight as the trees that grew on the mountains. As uncomplicated" (Ray 2001:5). Hence, lying is considered a disgrace to the tribe and a breaking of their traditions. That is why, when Bagha Bindu is counselled by his advocate to lie in the court, he shouts at him saying that one who is supposed to protect truth is working against it. Unflinchingly he announces in the witness stand that he killed Mangla Madra. When asked to take oath in the witness stand, he sharply reacts, "We remos never lie. Why should I swear to tell the truth" (Ray 2001:104)? Bagha Bindu feels ashamed and hangs his head in remorse when he mistakenly gathers the dhangras from 32 villages on an expedition to hunt the man-eating tiger which, under a false lead, he wrongly suspects has killed his son Sukra. The accompanying party accuses him "No Bonda tells a lie! Bagha Bindu has disgraced us" (Ray 2001:155)! He meekly accepts the punishment of giving a feast to the whole village. The Bondas consider their traditions sacred. The promises they make are also sacred to them. Budei Toki waits for 14 long years for Bagha Bindu's return from jail as she is under oath. Soma Muduli, even when provoked, does not attempt to kill another person though it is Bonda nature, because of his promise to Lachhma Toki. Buda Muduli is murdered by his friend when he cannot keep his promise of going with him to Assam. No Bonda doubts another's words. When Soma Muduli's father pays only half the bride's price and assures that he will pay the rest at the time of marriage, Sombari's father accepts it without ever thinking that he may be cheated. Even when the Bondas mortgage the land to get a loan from the *sahukar* (money-lender) and at times become his *goti* (bonded labourer), there is no written contract; everything goes by word of mouth as we see when Budei Toki mortgages the land to meet the expenses of the cleaning of the water ceremony and the ritual of getting readmitted into the tribe.

But their love for their fellow beings and straightforward nature are cast under doubt when we see that their law allows a person who lends money to attach the cattle and land of the debtor if there is a default in the repayment, without giving him any leeway. Strangely, the Bondas do not hold any grudge against the sahukar under whom they become gotis and get exploited more and more. He is just a man to turn to for help in times of need. That is all. Again, no one raises any voice when a fellow man snatches the land and even the wife of another Bonda who goes to jail. Bagha Bindu too lies after he along with his friends kills and eats the old and weak ox that Tanko Khemundi tricked him into buying. He tells Sitanath that a tiger has eaten the ox. Sitanath who seems to know the Bonda tradition of being truthful placates him to bring out the truth by way of saying, "I know you will always tell me the truth because we are brothers" (Ray 2001:186).

17.6.7 Relationship with the Environment

With respect to the Bonda's relationship with the environment, we see two different treatments. The Bondas revere earth as mother and worship her. She is *Tubu Yang* or *Dhartini Ma* to them. They believe that the Earth will be displeased if they use artificial fertilisers. Hence, they refuse to use them even when they grow non-native plants like orange or pine-apple. But they, due to necessity, cut down the trees and clear the forests in patches to grow rice in the mountain slopes. This is what is called as *podu* (shifting cultivation). This has its dire consequence. "As podu cultivation had denuded the mountains, there were no trees

now to reach out and milk the clouds of their moisture" (Ray 2001:221). Hence, a severe drought hits the place and people eat up even the seed grain set apart for sowing.

Animal sacrifice is a part of almost all rituals, and the Bondas eat the flesh of animals, be it of cattle, rooster, or pig; they also eat small living creatures like crabs and termites. They use ox for ploughing the land. While animal flesh is food for them, they do not drink the milk of cattle. They believe that the milk belongs to the calf or the young one. They are different from the Hindus in that beef is not forbidden in their religion. They see gods in a tree, tiger, stone, and other elements of nature, and unlike the modern man who exploits nature to more than maximum as an economic resource, majorly their relationship with the environment is for subsistence, livelihood, and utility.

Taking into account the legends behind the Bonda women's dress code and communal feasting, and also their beliefs and rituals, it can be safely deduced that the Bondas also have "A theological system of ethics [that] involves certain pre-suppositions concerning a superhuman order and man's relation to it [and] in such a system the accepted ethical principles appear as commands, or laws, of the deity or deities" (Everett 1900:486). Their relationship with god is one of fear, and they obey those commands. At the same time, we also observe how sometimes they circumvent the immutable laws, based on the demands of situation. Still, they live as one community under the umbrella of common beliefs, traditions, and practices.

17.7 Outside Contacts and their Impacts on Bonda Culture

The Bondas have come into contact with their neighbours, modern forces like education, government agencies, and new ideas. These outside contacts have influenced their culture to varied degrees. A brief account is presented here.

17.7.1 Dombs

The Bondas are suspicious of outsiders including the plainsmen. They have a *runukbore*, a protective wall, running along the pathway to the village to prevent anyone from entering their area. They do not go to the plains except on a haat (weekly market) day to exchange their produce for salt, turmeric, and dried fish. But civilisation does not leave them in peace. The Dombs, in the name of helping them by bringing them news about what is happening below the mountains, cunningly make the Bondas accept them as maitarbais and enter their country. "Wily as a fox" (Ray 2001:82), they twist words, increase and intensify the animosity between the Lower Bondas and Upper Bondas, picture them as violent and threatening to the officials, lie to the higher officials regarding their needs, increase their power over the Bondas, and finally bring most of the Bonda land under their control. They swindle the Bondas' money while helping them to buy cattle and land and arranging for bank loans. It is they who help bring other tribes and castes into the Bonda country following whom the government officials "ventured into the Bonda country" (Ray 2001:91), and that is the beginning of the change in the life and lifestyle of the Bondas.

17.7.2 Project Leaders

The first project leader Sitanath Sahu who takes charge of the Bonda Development Project under the Bonda Development Authority tries in earnest to raise the Bondas' living standard by imparting improved methods of agriculture, introducing commercial plants like

orange and pineapple, and more importantly, persuading them to get an education, without in any way hurting their sentiments and traditions. He arranges for bank loans, supplies the necessary materials for farming, and offers them jobs in the project office, paying them salary. He attempts to make them take responsibility for their own development. But unfortunately, the introduction of money changes the Bondas for the worse. The Bonda men become more and more lazy and leave off tilling their land as things are available for free and their women have started earning (Ray 2001:177). There is also a change in the women's attitude towards Bonda men. Sombari and Mangli, two of the three women who first begin to work in the project office, tell Sitanath, "we find the dhangras too wild and drunken; we don't like them. We are working now and so we would like to marry working dhangras, not these lazy good-for-nothing boys" (Ray 2001:177)! Adibari too accuses the Andhrahal and Barbel dhangras as "murdering dhangras" (Ray 2001:177) and "wild dhangras" (Ray 2001:178). As the Bonda men like Mangla Dhangramjhi begin to get educated and work as peons or clerks, they also break the tradition of marrying women from within the Upper Bonda community, from villages other than their village, but marry women from outside, from the Lower Bonda, whom they despised earlier. Traditionally, getting married is a must for a Bonda man or woman, but because of the changes, there are also more and more single men and women in the Bonda community. Mangli Toki remains single as she feels she does not completely fit into the Bonda community after working in the project office.

But the great change that is effected is the Bonda women forsaking their traditional ringa and wearing a sari, like the Dombunis and others from the plains, to earn a living to save their families from starvation. The author declares: "she [Adibari] abandoned herself, her shame and her future, to the gulang people … The young snake has been stripped of is [sic] scales; the covering that had protected and preserved the tribal identity through countless millennia was gone" (Ray 2001:175). Once they begin to wear a sari, the three women do not feel at ease with the other selanis. They no longer visit the selani dingo daily as they used to do. The communal living slowly gets frayed at the edges.

The tear becomes larger and more visible, when Adibari who wants to marry Soma Sisa, Katu the Andhrahal Naik's son, falls prey to the *gulang babu* constable's physical desire and gets pregnant by him. As gullible as any Bonda, she believes that he, who is already married to someone else, would accept publicly his fatherhood. But he belies her hope. As he would not pay the compensation for this, Adibari, now, will not be able to find another husband from within her community. He asks her to abort the foetus and promises to put her up in Jeypore and take care of her though he will not be able to marry her. Trusting his words, to her anguish and much against her will, she commits the horrendous crime of killing the life within her and abandoning it in the forest. The author reflects on the Bonda's belief: "The yong gives birth to her child, but it is not natural for her to cause its death" (Ray 2001:195). Further, to her dismay, he deserts her in the city to fend for herself.

The elder Bondas are shocked at finding the dead infant. "This was the first time such a thing had happened in the Bonda country. Another natural law had been broken" (Ray 2001:194). They conclude that a man-eating tiger has carried Adibari away. They feel that "sin and guilt had entered the Bonda mountain when Adibari shed her ringa for a sari" (Ray 2001:195). But unlike before, the dhangras from the 32 villages do not gather to go hunting the man-eating tiger. This is another ethical code or tradition broken in the Bonda country. No report is made to the police either.

The changes from outside can also be observed in the jail returned, Assam returned, and educated Bondas. They no longer wear the traditional ghusi; instead, they wear shirts, pyjamas, trousers, or lungis. Instead of *dhungia* (locally made tobacco cigar), they learn to smoke cigarettes and hashish and to drink tea. They bring mirrors which the Bondunis believe bring bad luck. They also begin to use umbrellas and torches. But still they cannot let go of their age-old beliefs. Most believe that the wind god is confined in the fan as a captive and the dimming of the light in the torch is due to the evil spell or evil eye cast by someone.

The officials following Sitanath exploit the Bondas abominably. They pacify the questioning Bonda men by offering cigarettes, tea, and drinks. When the women learn to count and ask about the unwarranted reduction in their salary, they are removed from the jobs. Shiva Biswal, the second Project Leader, does not possess the warmth of Sitanath. He always carries a gun with him. Already introduced to the fear of guns by the police, this further alienates the people from the leader and terrifies them. The courageous and independent Bondas lose their courage before the guns. When roads are being laid, the Lower Bondas are offered the jobs and the Upper Bondas are denied jobs in their own country. After some struggle and representation, they are employed as coolies in the road laying project. The remos who so far have bowed before no one except the Patkhanda Mahapru now have turned into beggars before the government.

The third Project leader Bijoy Bal introduces the training of the carpet weaving to the Bondunis. He also knows the trick of the trade on how to project himself and let his fame carry far and wide. Pratibha Ray reveals how the Bondunis are being shamelessly shown off: "Bonduni backs were much in evidence at the Carpet Weaving Centre, but no stomachs! Photographs taken from the rear revealed a row of bare Bonduni backs and hips" (Ray 2001:265). A select few are paid high wages and flaunted as the tribe's showpieces whenever a VIP visits. Annually, on 26 January, there is an exhibition organised in Bhubaneswar on the tribes of Orissa. Everything about them, from their food, hut, produce of the forest, dresses, gods they worship, and the sacrifices they perform are displayed as models, paintings, and photographs. The crowds throng the exhibition to watch the Bondas as if they were curious creatures from another planet. On this day, selanis like Sombari are asked to shed their saris, wear ringas, and dance before the people to entertain them. Though the government wants to protect the Bonda traditions, "there were a thousand hands conspiring in the destruction of those traditions: those of officials, politicians, social workers and journalists" (Ray 2001:179).

17.7.3 Other Outsiders

Foreigners come to Bonda country to take pictures of the Bondas and record their songs and dance. The Bondas feel afraid and lost, to protest. Tourists, social workers like Sevak Das, and researchers now easily enter the Bonda country where any outsider was afraid to enter earlier. The Bondas too have changed. They have been tutored well by the Dombs to stretch their arms for money. The author writes,

> The Bonda had unhesitatingly opened his home to the visitors: anyone was free to inspect his utensils, his weapons and tools, his Bonduni's ringa and beads. But the moment someone produced a camera to take a photograph, even a child would stretch out his arms for payment!.
>
> *(Ray 2001:191)*

So, it is not only the gulang babus who make a profit out of Bonda culture, but the Bondas themselves are now ready to sell their culture.

17.7.4 Education

Between 1966 and 1977, the government builds eight primary schools in the Bonda country and appoints teachers, but the schools do not function as the teachers do not come to the schools. The schools function only on records. Sitanath attempts to convince the Bondas of the importance of education by equating education with *Akshara-Bhagban* (god of learning). He says that all the problems of the Bondas will be solved if they worship Akshara Bhagban. The children go to school for the midday meals, if not for anything else. But later on, the government-appointed teachers like Khara Babu (who runs a grocery store in the plains), instead of teaching, "stayed in their homes in the plains and gave away certificates against gifts of chickens, goats, and rice" (Ray 2001:233). Pratibha Ray spins the legend of Eklavya on its head. She wryly remarks:

> Distance had not prevented the learner from learning or the teacher from teaching!
>
> Was it surprising then, that Bonda children were getting educated on the mountain while their teachers remained below?
>
> *(Ray 2001:218)*

The simple hopes of Somra are dashed while he is in high school. To his pain, he is taught the difference between an *Arya* (a literate, civilised, and refined person) and an *Anarya* (an illiterate, primitive, and barbaric tribal) like him. He is treated with contempt, and laughed at for his ignorance. The teachers and city students alike hate him for receiving everything for free from the government. Tribals like him are exploited by the teachers:

> From morning to night, the students were engaged in *guru seva* – offering their devoted services to their teachers. Soiled utensils were washed, dirty clothes laundered. The tribal students were made to clean the lavatories.
>
> *(Ray 2001:231)*

Again, the author refers to the story of Eklavya and shows how mythology and belief can be misused in the hands of so-called *gurus* to shift the blame on to the tribals.

> His [Somra's] teachers told him stories of past generations of pupils whose devotion to their gurus had become legendary. Some had given up their lives for their teachers; others, like Eklavya, had sacrificed their limbs to discharge their debts to teachers. But their education had not suffered. If the tribal students of today were unable to learn, whose fault was it?
>
> *(Ray 2001:234)*

Somra wants to learn as per his capacity and works hard to secure the marks he deserves. But the teachers never teach anything meaningful to the tribals, and when Somra is infuriated at this discrimination, they pacify him saying that he should practise archery and preserve his tribal tradition. His traditions have become the laughing stock in the city school,

which angers him further. Bondas like him feel that they do not belong either to their village or the city. When Somra returns home, he does not feel like a Bonda. "...he was unable to laugh, to dance, drink, shout in rage or walk about semi-naked" (Ray 2001:235). Ray points out that "education has deprived them of home and identity" (Ray 2001:224). Other than this, the author also briefly but impactfully discusses the violent protests against reservation based on caste category and the innocent lives of the students caught in the crossfire. Somra hopes for a day when the tribals would earn their rights and not snatch them away from someone else, and hopes for a day when they will no longer come under "protected list" (Ray 2001:237).

17.7.5 New Gods

Once money, politics, and gun power begin to rule the Bonda country, the Bondas lose their innate courage. Thereafter, their whole jargon changes. The Bondas begin to associate the Sarkar with god. Adibari, Sombari, and Mangli Toki are happy "that the Sarkar Mahapru had begun to bestow its blessings on them" (Ray 2001:176) when they are being paid wages for the work they do in the project office. Bagha Bindu too exclaims, "How generous the sarkarmahapru was!" (Ray 2001:184) when Chhotli, his second wife, would be paid wages for working both in the project office as well as on the land. Initially, the Bondas believe that Sitanath is capable of giving whatever they want, but when he is transferred, they realise that "there were still more powerful personages in the Sarkar. Higher gods" (Ray 2001:203). In contrast, when Somra feels the hatred and contempt of the teachers and his fellow students from the city, he thinks, "the *Sarkar mahapru* was being excessively kind to Soma and his brethren, for reasons that he could not fully understand" (Ray 2001:236). However, Ray bluntly pinpoints that "Kindness bred inequality and inequality generated fire" (Ray 2001:236).

Similarly, the political leaders are referred to as the new divine beings from the city, and the election, the *bhut parab*, is paralleled with a festival. Despite Sitanath telling them that it is not a festival, the Bondas believe that "The new gods from the city brought their own festivals to the mountain" (Ray 2001:206). Like any other festival, this too is accompanied by feasting, dancing, and drinking, which the Bondas do not realise is to placate them and win their votes so that the politicians can have more power over them. But, later, at one point, the roles of the god and the devotee are reversed. They are amazed that the political leader, who bowed to them for votes, once he wins the election, expects the Bondas to show their devotion to him. When the contractors along with the officials loot the money allotted for laying roads into the Bonda mountains by laying poor ones that are washed away again and again, the author has a bitter laugh over it. She says that like the other Bonda gods, the roads have also become invisible. She seemingly questions: "If the Bonda's mountains, fields and jungles could attain godhood, why not his roads" (Ray 2001:242)?

The head of the region who is supposed to visit the Bonda mountains to inspect the drought affected area and know at first hand the facts about the starvation deaths is satirically paralleled to Patkhanda Mahapru who periodically is believed to go on tours "to observe the welfare of His subjects" (Ray 2001:280). When the Paramount Ruler asks whether any Bonda has died of hunger, Soma Muduli answers, "*You* should know if you are the Paramount Ruler! … Our Patkhanda Mahapru knows everything" (Ray 2001:285)! He goes on to say that no one dies of hunger, but only dies when his time on this earth is over. This gullibility and ignorance, the impression that has been created about them that

they are barbaric, along with the rebelliousness of the youngsters lets the outsiders in power overpower them with cunning and force. The plainsmen in the haat cheat the Bondas by not giving them their dues when they go to sell things. But the project office and the officials cheat the Bondas even more. "The Babus took everything" (Ray 2001:230) – the best of their fruits, timber, and other things. Whatever belonged to them has passed into the hands of the aliens, including "the gods themselves. And finally their freedom" (Ray 2001:230), the author says in culmination.

Mangla and other *dhangras* are provoked by the dishonouring of their women by some men from the plains. When they go to complain, they are further humiliated, and hence they flare up and shake the collar of the contractor who does it. They are severely beaten with sticks and rifle butts by the police for this. Everyone keeps quiet, against the original nature of the Bondas, at the face of this injustice. "The pansati never met in protest; there were no calls for revenge. The Bondas had been tamed" (Ray 2001:277).

When Somra is arrested on a false accusation of murdering Chhotli, the pansati sits helpless. The Bondas are afraid of the police. "The rifles of the gulang babus were the new Bonda deity" (Ray 2001:290). The author scathingly attacks: "Once the Bondas had been free in a slave country; now they were slaves in a free country. This was the measure of the tribe's progress" (Ray 2001:290). Somra's father is advised to take Somra on bail by paying money. His dreams for his son are shattered. His grief and disillusionment find vent in the following words:

> Were the gods asleep? Had Patkhanda Mahapru gone abroad on one of his travels?
>
> Wasn't the Sarkar one of the Bonda's gods too? Like any other god it demanded sacrifice.
>
> Money. That was what everyone demanded: the Bonda, the Domb, the Sarkar, the gods, the spirits … Money turned sin into virtue, made the guilty innocent.
>
> *(Ray 201:294)*

The following lines capture in a nutshell the plight of the changing Bonda life:

> But now a new power had arisen. Anyone who visited the Bonda country behaved as its king. The pansati, the naik and the disari – the foundations on which Bonda society rested – were powerless. Patkhanda Mahapru Himself had retreated before the gods of the gulang babus.
>
> *(Ray 2001:245)*

17.8 Conclusion

The novel *The Primal Land* is a poignant portrayal of the changing life of the Bondas. Soma Muduli, the guardian of the tribe, turns senile and inactive when the above discussed changes gather momentum and roll down the age-old characteristics of tribal life. Youngsters like Somra and Mangla are not able to digest the injustice meted out to them. Finally, Somra breaks loose and kills Soma Muduli, and he himself is killed by the police gun. But the author shows all is not lost. Before the past and present lying dead, there is heard the voice of Somra's new born child, signifying the birth of the future Bonda. But at

the same time, the author makes a profound existential statement: "Kings die; their subjects die; but Man lives on. His struggle continues" (Ray 2001:298).

The above statement is not only true of Man in general, but still true of the Bondas in particular. As stated by Jitendra,

> Though the BDA has been in existence for over 40 years, developmental activities have hardly touched their [the Bondas'] deprived lives. There is only one Primary Health Centre (PHC) in the upper hills, which is headed by an AYUSH doctor. Cases of malaria and diarrhoea are very common in this area, says P K Parida, chief medical officer of the PHC.
>
> *(Jitendra 2018, np)*

The article 'The Isolated Life of the Bondas', in *The Hindu BusinessLine*, updated on 10 May 2019 (Bhaduri 2019) is also a testimony to the fact that nothing much has changed between 1993 when Pratibha Ray originally published this novel and 2019 when this article was published. Another article in *The Hindu* assessing the situation in Malkangiri in 2020, the year when the Covid wreaked destruction, confirms that "despite years of government intervention, there has not been much visible development among Bondas" (Barik 2020). It further throws light: "Of the 32 habitations, 16 villages do not have all weather roads, and hamlets can be accessed only by rough footpaths" (Barik 2020). Despite their love for their homeland and despite the belief that the Bondas should not leave their homeland because those who do will not be born again in their native land, due to lack of employment opportunities in their land, due to inability to sell their produce in the market, and due to lack of online facilities for education, the adults and children (as young as in class eight and nine, dropping their education) went to other states to work on labour contracts (Barik 2020). An article, that appeared as late as 2022, titled 'Fight against Covid-19: Odisha's Bonda Tribe shows the way' in the *Telegraph Online* points out that the Bondas still adhere to "1000-year-old traditions" and till recently were averse to "modern medicines" (Mohanty 2022, online), but have now come forward to receive Covid vaccinations. The reason for the aversions as discussed earlier in the chapter is that they believe that the diseases are caused by the gods' anger and the gods have to be propitiated with ritual worship to rid themselves of the diseases. Even now, Dr. Debabrata discloses that, to make them volunteer for vaccination, along with persuasion, the health professionals had to lie to the Bondas that they will not receive the facility of the government's free rice if they do not take the vaccination (Mohanty 2022, online).

All the above articles on the present status of the Bondas and the novel *The Primal Land* make clear that the developmental projects should bring about a real change and progress in the lives of the deprived people. Also, *they* should be the beneficiaries, and not the middlemen or politicians who manipulate and swindle money for their own benefit. *The Primal Land* shows that though communal feuds and rivalry are common among the Bondas, as a community, still they are united and almost always fight against the outsiders to preserve their culture and traditions. If religion in its essence preaches love and unity, then the Bonda religion is no less than any of the mainstream religions. At the same time, like any other religion, it also changes when there is a voluntary or an enforced acceptance of contradictions between the religious codes and their practice.

Notes

1 Elwin is of the opinion that the word Mahapru is "of purely Sanskrit derivation and means 'great master'. In Sanskrit it may be used of any mighty lord, human or divine. Its use throughout Orissa is probably due to the fact that Chaitanya, the founder of the Bengal school of Vaishnavite Hinduism, was known as the Mahaprabhu. After he settled in Puri, where he was later identified with Jagannath himself and called a living, peripatetic Jagannath, the title was also attached to the latter deity" (Elwin 1950:197).
2 https://www.pagecentertraining.psu.edu/public-relations-ethics/ethical-decision-making/.

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18

TRIBAL ECOETHICS AND RELIGION

A Study of Select Ecoethical Narratives from Northeast India

Nigamananda Das

18.0 The Context

The tribes all over the world are an integral part of the evergreen nature. But the modern industrial world has devastated the green nature, and the tribal world. The ever expanding urbanity and concrete jungles of the present day world has not only accentuated the *waste colonialism*, but also spread the ecocidal wasteland, decimated the green world, and displaced the tribes from their green environment. There have been worldwide resistances by the tribes against this ever expanding anthropocentrism. Ian Bradley in his *God is Green* has exposed Christianity as the most anthropocentric religion and has commented:

> In absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions, it not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends … Certainly on the face of it Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism, or the worship of Mother Earth, would seem much more congenial faiths for an environmentally conscious person to espouse than Christianity.
>
> *(Bradley 1992:2)*

The statement in Genesis 1:26 regarding God directing man to dominate the earth and all the creatures on earth may be the root cause of human arrogance and indifference towards the world of nature. Of course, this is Christian fundamentalism which is responsible for the anthropocentrism against the original ecocentrism of ancient religions, and the tribal animism and even paganism. But in the same Christianity, there is a mystical tradition of ecological spirituality which is ecocentric. Hence Matthew T. Fox, a Roman Catholic priest and professor of Religious Education at the University of St. Thomas, Houston, Texas who was also a lecturer at the Thomas More Association was silenced for a year in 1988 and was removed by the Vatican from his post of Director of the Institute in Culture and Creation Spirituality, Holy Names College, Oakland, California because of his controversial views. He established his own University of Creation Spirituality in Oakland, California thereafter and propagated his experience of Creation Spirituality/Spiritual Ecology drawing on many earlier Christian scholars like Meister Eckhart, Hildegard of Bingen, Francis of Assisi, and

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Julian of Norwich. He emphasises the importance of nature/creation in the mystical tradition with the sense of sacred, the sense of awe and wonder, and the unconditional love and delight that binds the whole creation. Fox pleads for a shift in Christianity from an ethic of duty-oriented stewardship to ecological spirituality founded on mysticism and the Cosmic Christ. He proposes four paths to spiritual ecology, viz. (i) experiencing the Divine in terms of delight, awe, and wonder at being present in the world which involves the intuition that creation is a blessing, and a response of gratitude (Via Positiva); (ii) experiencing darkness, deprivation, suffering, and pain (Via Negativa); (iii) moving towards a third path though human experiences with these first two journeys that leads to a rebirth of creativity (Via Creativa) and involves identifying new ecological virtues for living, such as vegetarianism, recycling, relearning the sacredness of nature, defending creation through political action, and making new rituals to celebrate sacred places, times, and beings in nature; and (iv) transformation to a more compassionate society in which all beings love one another (Via Transformativa). This fourth path of creating a compassionate society includes the making of justice (Fox 1998:228). These four paths of creation spirituality hold good in the upkeep of the stability of both the internal and external green environment and the sustainability of the cosmos.

18.0.1 Influence on Matthew T. Fox

Some ideas of the earlier Christian saints which influenced the views of Matthew T. Fox are the ideas of Meister Eckhart, Hildegard of Bingen, Francis of Assisi, and Julian of Norwich. Meister Eckhart said, "I pray God to rid me of God" (Fox 1998:229) which emphasises on our praxis of living in this world. Eckhart also said, "Every creature is a word of God and a book about God" (Fox 1998:229). Fox insisted on the recovery of the mystical tradition in Christianity in the line of the British monk, Bede Griffiths, who said, "If Christianity cannot recover its mystical tradition, then it should simply fold up and go out of business. It has nothing to offer" (Fox 1998:229). Responding to the opinion of Hildegard of Bingen regarding the web of justice between humanity and other creatures, Gregory Bateson in his book *Steps to the Ecology of Mind* analyses three main threats to human survival, e.g., (i) technological progress, (ii) population increase, and (iii) errors in the values and attitudes of Western Culture. With the advancement of science and technology, and the industrialisation and urbanisation, the green environment was mercilessly devastated. Francis of Assisi fell in love with the beauty of nature and considered God as beauty (Fox 1998:231) and even he considered the non-human creatures and agents of nature as brothers and sisters in his *Canticle of the Sun* (Francis 2022:1–2). This perspective necessitates protection of the environment so that our future is safe, and hence, the world's future is an engagement in the *deep ecology*.

18.0.2 Tribe and Nature Interface since Colonial Intervention

All the tribes of the world have been living amidst the green nature in consonance with its ways. After the industrial revolution in Europe with the advancement of science and technology, there has been ever-expanding degeneration and exploitation of nature and depletion of natural wealth. The Europeans started colonising the other parts of the World mostly since the 16th century. With their mission of colonisation, the process of industrialisation, urbanisation, and propagation of Christianity also continued. The European

colonisers brought the Christian missionaries with them thereby colonising the other parts of world in religion also. The tribes in different parts of the world, who were considered heathens by the colonisers, had their own glorious and rich praxis of living, often and narrowly called animist practices. They basically believed in spirits and the world of spirits. The spirits were their gods only. Their praxis of living was simple, humble, honest, immaculate, and unbiased and their community chiefs were in constant communion with the spirits from whom they were drawing inspiration for doing anything and everything. The advent of Western culture in the colonised worlds created tremendous confusion and the colonised worlds also resisted it vehemently. During the colonial and postcolonial regimes there have been continuous protests and reactions against the *modus operandi* of the colonisers. The postcolonial writers have etched several narratives depicting the tribal resistances that narrate several tales. These narratives are available in different parts of the world like Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* depicting the pre-colonial Nigerian animist practices and the accidental triumph of the new religion besides the nostalgic and idiosyncratic animist world of the Ezeulu and exasperation of the Nigerians against the White men who drove away all their customs (Achebe 1986:84). There are also several Native American fictional narratives like those of N. Scott Momaday (Jamir 2018:38) and Leslie Marmon Silko (Jamir 2018:67) that depict the ancient animist practices and significance of the natural world which was devastated by the colonisers resulting in turmoil and disequilibrium in the natural environment.

In British India, Northeast India was then mostly known as Assam. The province of Assam was annexed to the British Empire in 1826 AD. The present-day provinces of Northeast were the different districts of the then Assam with a few princely states, though the larger part of it, known as Brahmaputra valley was ruled by the Ahom; and the tribal pockets were ruled by the respective tribal chiefs or village councils. The region as a whole was evergreen being a confluence of two major biodiversities of the present-day world with variegated species of flora and fauna. With the British colonial annexation, it was explored by the colonisers for wider connectivity and further colonisation of tribal pockets where there were several tribal chiefs with multiple tribal ecoethical practices and animist beliefs. With colonial exploration, the Christian missionaries also explored the region for setting up their missions in remote regions thereby colonising the tribes with Christianity, the new religion.

18.0.3 Foundation of Analysis

This chapter intends to examine two ecofictional and historical narratives etched by Mamang Dai of Arunachal Pradesh and two other ecofictional narratives by Easterine Kire of Nagaland. Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* (2014) depicts the sad quest of Father Nicolas Krick, a French Jesuit Priest and dates between 1847 and 1855 AD, whereas her *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) depicts the ancient tribal ecoethical lore, advent of the colonisers and the sad transition of the Adi ecoethical praxis and the current reactions against the same. Easterine Kire's *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003) tracing the British expedition since 1832 AD to 1879 AD, depicts the final fatal challenge to the British crown in 1879 by the Khonoma village and subsequent reactions against the new religion till its assimilation and adoption in a localised transformation where *Kepenuopfü,* the Angami birth spirit is compared with *Isu*. Easterine's *When the River Sleeps* (2014) furthers the depiction of the Angami ecoethical practices which were divine to the hearts of the tribe. *When the River*

Sleeps explores the magic of Heart-stone and Vilie, the hunter protagonist's possession of it through a difficult quest from the sleeping river as he dreamt and the powers of the stone and a tribal's initiation to the world of ecoethics, what we call religion. Her *A Naga Village Remembered* presents the Angami ecoethics of virtues and rituals as well as the rites of sovereignty, as Angami hinges on.

18.1 Understanding Ecoethics in *The Black Hill*

Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* while depicting the adventurous journey of Father Nicolas Krick from 1847 to 1855 and his sad murder, narrates the ecoethics of the Mishmees (also spelt as Mishmis), Abors,[1] and partially of Tibetans in the midst of the sky, the mountains, the black hill and deep and dense valleys. The lives of Abors were disciplined by the *Kebang*, the village council, and that of the Mishmees by the Chieftain called *Kambring*/the Shaman. Inter-tribal marital relationships were a betrayal to the community. A woman has to look after the house, prepare food, feed her husband and children, and be happy. If she performs her responsibilities perfectly, only then she will be loved (Dai 2014:48). Women are anonymous and are generally forgotten in the story of blood lines and again like "a bend in a road, a separate heartbeat makes a woman into a wild woman, a wild gene embedded in the marrow" (Dai 2014:63). A woman is supposed to avoid water and she is neither to wade across streams, nor rivers in the middle of the night (Dai 2014:64). Besides that, there are other taboos which are considered evils like the fire-demon, the *uyus*, the evil spirit, *ksha*-ghosts/ evil spirits, certain evil stones, strange birds, outsiders, and different unlucky symptoms like laughing loudly, birth of twins, and the loud cry of unseen birds (Das 2020:12).

The shaman is the interpreter of dreams. He can read the dreams and tell the future (Dai 2014:67). There are legends regarding the evil spirits like the serpent spirits. These spirits are described to be very long like a river. They keep themselves hidden in water to avenge the killing of their children by men(Dai 2014:84). The birth of twins is unlucky. Hence the twins are killed at birth. It is also believed that the souls of children who died at birth go to a middle world under the earth and when they dance joining their hands, it causes earthquakes (Dai 2014:85). Hence, mothers pray for the safety of their children, "Save me, spirits of sky and stones of the great mountains! Come to my rescue. Help me to endure and nurse my baby. Make him strong" (Dai 2014:86). The Kambring prescribes taboos to observe, to get rid of the wrath of the evil spirits. Evil spirits roam all over the hills and the tribes are prey to evil spirits. Hence the spirits are to be appeased. In every life there is a turning point influenced by the past deeds. These past deeds move a person along a certain path (Dai 2014:49).

Claim over the land is a challenge as well as right, which the Mishmees, Abors, and sister tribes observe. Clan brothers fought so hard to win the land.

> If a man clears the forest and builds a house and harvests his fields the land belongs to him. If a man owns land he owns rest. He can live his life with nothing to worry about. He can plant crops and fish in the river, and he can raise his sons and daughters and live on from generation to generation
>
> *(Dai 2014:112)*

"Land is a place of ownership and rest" (Dai 2014:112). The nomadic Brokpa herdsmen were the trespassers who wandered across borders in search of grazing ground. But life

on the black hill was his own where a man could fall asleep at night without guilt or fear (Dai 2014:114–115). The family life in tribal society as a whole is cordial amidst the green environment. But a couple without any child has no acceptance in society (Dai 2014:128).

There are several stone stories. Some evil stones swallow up children and even a bride. The stones were living and malleable beings. "They were soft like dough; they could change shape, migrate from one place to another. Sometimes they rolled right up to your doorstep and stayed there resting, waiting" (Dai 2014:128). In the chapter titled 1852, Kajinsha pronounces some names of Gods like "Matai, Amik, Broh, Khroney" (Dai 2014:139). He mentions that they honour the gods when their Kambring tells them. But again he mentions that they honour only their land. They do not read books like Lamas for the knowledge of God. They read only the land.

> land is our book. Everything here on this hill, the grass and rocks and stones is saying something. And what falls from the sky – rain, thunder and lightning – are the voices of spirits telling us something. It is how we have learnt what is good and what is sweet or bitter, by living here and remembering what happens during the day and the night, every day, for hundreds of years.
>
> *(Dai 2014:140)*

He again says,

> The time we have is what we call our life. It is how I stand, hunt, sleep, breathe. Who knows when life will end, and how death will come – by fire, water, a falling tree, illness, or from the hand of an enemy? But whether one will live a long life, a successful life, these are not considerations. The desire is to live!
>
> *(Dai 2014:140)*

From the above-mentioned lines, it is understood, the tribals do not have gods and the idea of god, as the other religions have. The nature/biodiversity along with the elements of the environment like the trees, rain, hill, stones and all other moveable and immoveable all over the land is their god and the desire to live is their religion and the activities connected with the desire to live are the rites and rituals. The time they spend in different activities is their life. At difficulties they do not pray to any God. They pray to earth and sky: "'We must pray to earth and sky for bringing you home safely': he said. 'Don't speak anymore. Now we must only say the words we give to the living. Pray, Do not let death enter this house" (Dai 2014:167). Even they believe in the humans as a shape of god and do not believe in an unseen faceless god: "It was something only a mother could do, not an invisible, faceless god, she silently hissed at the shaman" (Dai 2014:169). They also believe that the innocents are always protected by the god: "The innocent are in God's hands" (Dai 2014:168).

The prayers and rituals have a special place in the life of the Mishmees and Abors. The *miri (*shaman*)* tells stories of mysteries in their lives. His chants and prayers mesmerise them:

> I know about prayer. I have prayed all my life. Since the day I was born I have been moving from ritual to ritual. The miri says we came from a land beyond the skies. It is there we will return when we die. So be it. Every prayer, every ritual is a knot. This is

> the way we measure time. But all the prayers and rituals will not ease what has happened. This is fixed forever as another knot in my life.
>
> *(Dai 2014:171–172)*

Trusting the instinct is also another ecoethical praxis the tribals follow to survive peacefully (Dai 2014:238). They pronounce: "Benevolent spirits, loving mother, sky father, hear the words of the living: We offer sacrifice! Do not let death enter this house"! For such a ritual they would require preparation of food-rice, maize, sacrifice of *chal* and baskets of meat and fish (Dai 2014:258).

18.2 Ecoethical Praxis in *The Legends of Pensam*

Mamang's *The Legends of Pensam* unravels Adi cosmology and explores the challenges to the Adi ecoethics during the colonial and postcolonial times. The novel explores a symbolic travel from the earliest past to date depicting an Adi tribal's journey from the most remote past to date amidst the British colonial incursion which has caused utter harm to the Adi ecoethics and their ideas of *deep ecology*. Hence the Adis have challenged the colonisers and resisted their trespass into their evergreen world. The shaman/miri dances and chants and with that he explains the very purpose of a tribe's existence/habitation in this world. He says,

> Our purpose is to fulfil our destiny. The life of a man is measured by his actions and his actions are good if their origin is pure. From nothingness, we have come to be born under the stars, and almighty Donyi-polo, the sun and the moon, whose light shines on all equally; in the invisible force that guides each one of us. All life is light and shadow; we live and we die, and the path of destiny is the quest for faith
>
> *(Dai 2006:57)*

This faith is the ecoethic that guides the tribe in his life by inspiring him in the lore of truth, humility, and honesty. Again regarding the origin and development of this cosmos, the shaman says:

> In the beginning, there was only Keyum. Nothingness. It was neither darkness nor light, nor had it any colour, shape, or movement. Keyum is the remote past, way beyond the reach of our senses. It is the place of ancient things from where no answer is received. Out of this place of great stillness, the first flicker of thought began to shine like a light in the soul of man. It became a shimmering trail, took shape and expanded and became the Pathway. Out of this nebulous zone, a spark was born that was the light of imagination. The spark grew into a shining stream that was the consciousness of man, and from this all the stories of the world and all its creatures came into being.
>
> *(Dai 2006:56)*

The shaman thus gives the idea of the evolution of the cosmos and the internal and external ecology and the essence of ecoethics that guides the whole cosmos. The community was led/ruled by the chieftain and his words were like the words of the God and there was proper

administration which was far better than present-day democracy. Justice was delivered to the aggrieved honestly and there was no favouritism at all:

> No one stole or killed and any man who could find his way into the compound of a chief's dwelling was automatically protected from all danger. In a dispute the chiefs would look up to the sky, consult the sacred fire, speak to the spirits and there would be justice. Food was sown, harvested, stored and dispensed fairly. It was a clan. Fathers and sons followed in the footsteps of their ancestors.
>
> *(Dai 2006:42)*

But with the advent of the colonisers, the mountains were levelled, roads were built, and impenetrable dense forests were destroyed. The routes of serpentine rivers were discovered and cities were built on mountain tops. The big trees were cut and forests cleared. With the fall of the tall trees, the spirits of ancestors who dwelt in the tall trees fell and went away cursing the future generations. The hills, forests, and valleys are the home of the tribes. They live peacefully in the bosom of nature and they are a part of the nature. But with the British colonisers oppressing the evergreen nature of Arunachal Pradesh, the Adis resisted the ways of the colonisers. Hence, they were challenged several times. In 1911, Noel Williamson, a British political officer was struck down by an angry Adi. With him a tea garden physician, Dr. Gregorson, and 47 sepoys and coolies were also killed by the angry man and other men of his tribe which resulted in the punitive expedition of 1912 (Dai 2006:48).

The Legends of Pensam presents several ideas of evils/sagas of evil spirits. By appeasing the evil spirits a tribal can survive peacefully and progress in his life. Appeasing the evil is inevitable and that is a responsibility and prime ritual in a tribal's life. The evils surround him and it is his way of life to invite the miri and hold rituals to appease the evil spirits. Mamang Dai presents an ecohistory of the Adis and a detailed ecoethic mapping the colonial and postcolonial regime. The novel gives accounts of different types of evils honoured by the Adis like supernatural evils (*Biribik, Mitimili, Dimitayang,* and *Danki*), physical evils, hunting accidents, the python spirit, the tiger/fire spirit, *si-ye*, black moments, symbolic evils, ecological evils, and mysterious/mystical evils (Das 2012:70–77).

The natural world is the abode of the spirits. One has to be cautious and treat the environing natural world with love and respect or else one has to face the consequence. *Biribik* is a mysterious water serpent which Hoxo's father had seen and also a fisherman on a night of heavy rain saw this serpent with a head with horns coiled up in the branches of a tree under which he was sheltering. The fisherman had a terrible vision of this water serpent and died of wasting illness within a year (Dai 2006:9–10). *Mitimili* is a race of supernatural beings who first prepared the mysterious *si-ye* cakes out of the white powder of yeast mixed with ground rice, roots, and berries. A bad spirit lurking the *si-ye* cakes makes men go mad and hence these cakes are forbidden before a hunt or a journey (Dai 2006:28–29). *Dimtayang* is a lonely spirit who stirs up the lake waters and clutches the trespassing men in an embrace of ice. Adis during their journey to the snow mountains in winter for harvesting deadly aconitum for the preparation of poison arrows pray to this spirit before return and perform rituals to ward off the danger. Sometimes, in spite of prayers they also face cyclonic wind as wrath of this spirit (Dai 2006:59–60). *Danki* is a fabulous vessel made of the strongest metal alloy owned by the Lotang family of the Migu clan which was believed to be an auspicious gift from the gods. With the disappearance of this vessel, the Migu clan also finally disappeared (Dai 2006:62–63). Besides these supernatural evils, the Adi tribals

face the evils like hunting accidents, snakes, evil elements of nature like wind, river, treacherous paths, and some trees having evil spirits in them. These are the physical evils. Adis believe that some spirits are instrumental for the hunting accidents. These accidents are ferocious and hunters do not know how they kill each other or get killed. Lekon, Pinyar's husband died in a hunting accident and Kalen was killed by Loma in a hunting accident also.

The spirit of a python killed by Togum in the timber depot took revenge on his son Kepi, making him suffer from a long fever. While performing a special ceremony to appease the python spirit, Hoxo, the miri invoked the spirit and called the spirits back and got Kepi recovered from the fever (Dai 2006:24). Like the fire/tiger spirit completely gutting 20 houses in Duyang village and the villagers performing special rituals to propitiate the fire spirit (Dai 2006:122), Pinyar, the widow's house also caught fire and she was banished to the outskirts of the village and had to undergo the taboo (Dai 2006:28). But fire watching was a sacred duty and the young men were expected to devote time and keep vigil through the night in their *bango* for fire watching. The angry fire spirit causes immense harm (Dai 2006:121). At some moments evil spirits board on humans and make them go mad and kill others or chase others with weapons to kill. It happened with Kamur, the son of Pinyar, who killed his infant daughter and younger son with a sword one afternoon and chased his wife with the bloodied sword. This is called black moments when the evil spirits board on humans (Dai 2006:30). There are some symbolic evils like right/wrong kind of marriages, or right/wrong kind of life, which is traced to defects in the bloodline. Due to the defects in the bloodlines some see visions visited by spirits. Beyond these, there are certain things/agents that represent good or evil values, e.g., the tooth of a tiger and a wild boar are symbols of luck and success (Dai 2006:35), whereas the aubergine plant growing into a size of a tree with small poisonous-looking flowers and long bloated fruits, becomes a ghostly tree that brings psychopathic behaviour in people who come under it. It is a taboo for women to go near rivers/streams/water sources after sunset as those places are visited by spirits (Dai 2006:83). Agents of nature like wind, water, fire, sky, open space in valleys, and gorges are also inhabited by spirits, which are mysterious and magical (Das 2012:77). High mountains/peaks, dense forests full of wild animals, poisonous snakes, insects and reptiles, ferocious rivers, streams, steep gorges, and dangerous intense valleys with wild and innocent tribes prove to be a difficult terrain and an eco-evil for the tribes and strangers, whereas outsiders, thieves and diseases, and roads are symbolic evils (Dai 2006:156).

The ideas of evil/taboo and fear/respect for spirits/ghosts make the tribe cautious, humble, and honest in their living style and keep them engaged in maintaining a life of rituals/celebrations for propitiating these evils so that they would escape difficulties, dangers and sufferings in their lives. As their abode is the bosom of nature, and they themselves are integral to nature, it is their ecoethics to observe rituals and propitiate the spirits. Hence, this is religion-like and their objects of worship/appeasing/propitiation are their gods and the whole paraphernalia of propitiation with invocation, singing, dancing, and associated activities come under their ecoethics. Mamang Dai in both of her ecofictional narratives has dealt with the ecoethics of Adis, Mishmees, trespassing Brokpas, and bordering Tibetans.

18.3 Angami ecoethics

Easterine, in her novels *A Naga Village Remembered* and *When the River Sleeps*, explores the Angami ecoethics which have been the guiding principles of the Angami tribe of

Nagaland. A discussion is rendered with reference to each novel. Implicitly, the discussion points to tribal ecoethics in our contemporary time.

18.3.1 A Naga Village Remembered

A Naga Village Remembered upholds the Angami ecoethical dictum, "The Sky is my father, the Earth is my mother, I believe in *Kepenuopfü*"(Iralu 2003:57). In *When the River Sleeps* the importance of *Kepenuopfü* is also reiterated. At the time of any difficulty and danger, the name of *Kepenuopfü* is uttered to get rid of all difficulties: "*Kepenuopfü zanu tsie la mha talie"*, meaning "in the name of the creator-deity retreat at once" (Kire 2014:105). *A Naga Village Remembered* upholds other virtues which are the mainstay of tribal ecoethics mostly followed by the Angamis. The mannerisms, etiquettes, and morals which are adhered in the Angami society are also recorded in the pages of this novel while depicting the chivalric challenges displayed by the Khonoma villagers in resisting the colonial aggression against them. The fixed moral ways of living recorded in this novel include: "(i) a household is not worthy of its name if its granaries are empty", (ii) "The sun and rain are the Creator's blessings. They rain and shine in turn for us to make our fields and get our harvests". (iii) "War is part of a village's life but if we have grain, we can withstand war. If we do not have grain, a few days of war will overcome us" (Das 2021:163). There are also *genna* days and such ritualistic days are honoured by all. There are several other obligations and mannerisms which an Angami strictly follows such as: honouring the elder, controlling one's greed, not mourning *lashü* death, etc. Besides these there are certain aphoristic sayings which are significant in an Angami's life, like: (i) "It is not manliness to be so overcome by drink, it goes by another name", (ii) "If you are at a community feast, and take more than two pieces of meat, shame on you. Others will call you glutton, worse, they will think to themselves, 'has no one taught this boy about greed?' – This is the key to right living – avoiding excess in anything – be content with your share of land and fields", and (iii) people who move boundary stones bring death upon themselves. Every individual has a social obligation to the village.

> When you are a few years older and your hearts are strong within you, you will take on the responsibility of guarding the village while others will go on to earn a great name for our village. Your roles are different but each is as important as the other. Never be arrogant, respect yourself sufficiently so that you fulfil the responsibilities of manhood … A real man does not need to roar to show that he is a man.
>
> *(Das 2021:164)*

On the occasion of marriage, the Angami bride's mates pronounce the following blessing in the groom's household after reaching there with bride and receiving the bride price:

> This household will fetch and drink water from the water source as long as others are fetching and drinking of it. They will be able to make a fire as long as others. Their progeny shall be numerous, as numerous as the progeny of spiders and crabs; They shall be blest with long life. They shall live to be ancestors and grandparents and prosper in their life.
>
> *(Iralu[2] 2003:49–50)*

While entering a new house, the priest performs *geida* ritual by touching a rooster to the inner posts of the house and killing it and sprinkling its blood on the middle of the beam with the chanting of blessings:

> The blessings of your father and grandfather will visit you in this house, my children. You have done well to build a new house. Your lives are starting now and it is good that you have heeded the old ways. May you always keep the blessings.
>
> *(Iralu 2003:52)*

The ritual of *geisu ruotho* is performed to appease the spirit for recovery of a person from sickness. The priest sacrifices a rooster and chants blessings in a loud voice:

> We refuse to take disease, death or any ill encounter with spirits from any place and therefore we are substituting your life with this unblemished chicken which is greater than your life and we will appease the spirits with it, *kha kenie, dia, pengou, sorou*.
>
> *(Iralu 2003:54)*

The spirits favour the persons who perform the rituals. Hence, the rituals are to be performed in regular intervals and the genna days also must be observed. The *rhoutho* ritual of seed sowing is performed with the elder pronouncing blessing for the appeasement of the spirits to cause good crop harvest:

> My paddy may you grow up well, though the weeds are abundant, my paddy grow you around the tree stumps and boulders. It will be food of generations, the food of wartime, grow bent over with full-husked grain.
>
> *(Kire 2018:82)*

Besides these, the other agricultural rituals performed by the Angamis are *Tiemvukie* (a ritual preceding harvest), *Liede* (ritual initiation of harvest by a woman called *Bilipfü*), *Kelipie* (a festival/ritual in the middle of the agricultural year), *Terhunyi* (harvest festival), *Thekranyi* (a festival made from the earnings of the age-group), and *Kerütsu* (the ritual of first day of field going for married couple) and above all the festival of *Sekrenyi* (the important festival of sanctification). Though they call the sky father and earth the mother and Kepenuopfü, the creator god/spirit, *Vo-o* is the spirit which is propitiated at the seed sowing ritual and *Chükhieo* is the guardian spirit of wildlife (Das 2010:46–47). The bitter wormwood gives protection against all evil spirits in the Angami tradition (Das 2010:47) whereas the wild ginger gives protection against the evil spirits in the Adi tribal tradition (Dai 2006:94).

18.3.2 When the River Sleeps

In *When the River Sleeps*, Easterine explores an Angami hunter's life, ecoethics, and the ecoethics of Angamis in the ancient times depicting their living in the midst of the natural green world amidst the ecosophical tradition of the world of spirits. Vilie recurrently utters "the forest is my wife" and gives the reason for such words: "the forest is my wife. She provides food for me and more, she is the sanctuary I need and I am content with that" (Kire 2014:142). Angamis observe some animal ethics also. A hunter does not kill always.

It protects the animals also: "You come from a long line of warriors but you have chosen to be a hunter. You trap animals for food but also protect the ones entrusted to you. Not many men can keep that balance" (Kire 2014:141). The spirits in the forest enchant hunters or any intruder or trespasser and draw them to unclean forests so that they would die there (Kire 2014:76). The hunters and forest dwellers must be aware of these. For a forest dweller, honesty is very important. If one is honest, he will have no fear, one's evil action determines his safety and self-security:

> Remember when we are out at the sleeping river, there can be no room for fear. If you harbour fear, you are a dead man. If you came here after committing something terrible, like a murder or sending a man to death by a false testimony, your spirit will not be able to outwrestle their spirits. Any evil action of yours will weigh on your conscience, and make you vulnerable to their onslaught. It is an attack, there's nothing gentle about it. So your protection is your own good heart and your clear conscience. Harbour no evil against any man when you are going on this trip.
>
> *(Kire 2014:93)*

The sleeping river in the forest is enriched with the sacred heart stone which is spiritual and is a blessing with the heavenly virtues. If someone catches the heart stone from the sleeping river, he can use it for blessings of wealth, cattle, and beautiful women and more than that. The heart stone is very precious and if someone tries to possess wealth with the help of the heart stone, he will lose something more precious. Hence it is said:

> It is not wrong to have wealth but your relationship to your wealth defines everything else. If you are grasping at wealth, you are going to lose something that wealth cannot buy for you. You will lose the knowledge of the spiritual. And you will lose the power it offers you. That is true power; that is the only power to aspire to because it gives you power over both the world of the senses and the world of the spirit.
>
> *(Kire 2014:95–96)*

The heart-stone has such divine powers whereas the screaming stone is evil. In the village of Zuzie, there were two screaming stones that used to scream in the evening. When the stones scream, the mothers hid their children and cover their children's faces with their body-cloths or with the border of their waist cloth to protect them from whatever evil thing the stone was to emit over the village as it screamed. They would even plug their children's ears and pull them inside their houses and shut their windows and doors (Kire 2014:140–141).

Vilie struggled ferociously with the cold water of the sleeping river to dive it at the time of flood to catch the heart stone which was guarded by the widow-women spirits. The sleeping river itself was a spirit and to get rid of all of the evils, Vilie had to utter the spirit words:

> Sky is my father, Earth is my mother, stand aside death! Kepenuopfü fights for me, today is my day! I claim the wealth of the river because mine is the greater spirit. To him who has the greater spirit belongs the stone!
>
> *(Kire 2014:103)*

The spirits are very interested in the heart-stone because it has the power to turn the hearts of others to the owner. But it is only the humans who can enter the sleeping river to catch the river and the heart-stone as the spirits cannot do that as they cannot touch water, because the water of a sleeping river is also a spirit (Kire 2014:111).

To get rid of the widow-women spirit and *Kirhupfümia*, Vilie had to utter the name of the Creator Spirit: "*Kepenuopfü zanu tsie tuomhatalie*" (Kire 2014:193) like other way of chanting/shouting the name: "*Kepenuopfü zanu tsie la mha talie*" (Kire 2014:105) (meaning, 'In the name of the Creator-deity/god, retreat at once'). Use of the name of the Creator-spirit saves an Angami in critical moments of life and in all dangers. The heart-stone is divine, but

> it is not an object of worship … It is not for making profit for oneself … The wisdom of the stone is more spiritual than physical. It helps us discover the spiritual identity that is within us, so we can use it to combat the dark forces that are always trying to control and suppress us.
>
> *(Kire 2014:238)*

In the whole of the colonial countries in different parts of the world, with the advent of the colonisers and their colonising new religion, the traditional autochthonous ecoethics and religions started losing their virginity, pristinity, integrity, and identity and in several regions also started disappearing. In the tribal worlds to be integral to the nature and to follow the ways of nature was the religion of the tribes. Now most of the tribal worlds have been Christianised and thus anthropocentrically colonised, devastating and degenerating the green virginity and alienating the tribes in their own habitats and depriving them from their animist ecoethics and forcing them to an anthropocentric new world order. Hence, they are suffering from alienation, nostalgia, desperation, and deprivation in a diasporic state of life in their own diseased habitats always being idiosyncratic of the forgotten world or living a hybrid mode of life pining of the old world order.

18.4 Conclusion

The four ecofictional narratives discussed above narrate how the tribal ecoethics lost their significance and are now almost forgotten with Christianity emerging as the religion of the tribes. With the consequent modernisation and urbanisation, the green world of the tribes now has grown into the barren brown wasteland. This transformation has occurred due to what Chinua Achebe has mentioned as "the white man, the new religion, the soldiers, the new road- they are all part of the same thing" (Achebe 1986: 85). The tribal ecoethics have been lost in amnesia. After this amnesia, the narratives are making us realise the significance of the great tradition and how we have inherited a wasteland out of the devastation of a real ecotopia where there was a unique ecocracy. To revive the lost tradition, it is difficult now. But efforts to ecocratise the lost green world through shallow ecological practices will positively bring peace and prosperity to our aggrieved world and repair the loss to some extent. Hence, the discussed narratives make us nostalgic of the glorious past, promote green awareness in us and caution us to safeguard our future through revival of the lost ecoethical tradition by blending the past with present.

Notes

1 Abor is the old word used for the present day Adi tribe.

2 Easterine Iralu and Easterine Kire are one and the same author. Her maiden surname is Kire. After marriage, she changed her surname to Iralu. Her initial publications were with the surname of Iralu. But afterwards she changed her surname and published new editions under the maiden surname of Kire.

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PART 5

Conceptualising Change

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19
LIMINALITY
Religion of the Sahariya of Rajasthan State, India

Amithy Jasrotia and Seema Agrawal

19.0 Introduction

In historical times, the communities known as simply tribes, or some of which are now designated as Scheduled Tribes in administrative parlance inhabited forests, hills, and other inaccessible terrains. They developed themselves into self-reliant socio-economic and political units through their interaction with their immediate physical environment. Practically, they lived in relative isolation except for limited economic interaction through trade with neighbouring communities. It is worth mentioning that not only socio-economic and political systems, but their religious worldview was also shaped in isolation through interaction with nature – forests, hills, rivers, and so on. It is evident from the fact that each tribe has its culture specific religious worldview – its faith, beliefs, and practices; its deities and other supernatural beings; its mode of engaging with supernatural powers in nature, house, etc. and ancestor spirits. Though nature, belief in life in animate and inanimate objects, and belief in supernatural power including the souls of dead ancestors underlie the religious worldview of the tribes, each tribe has shaped its faith, belief, and practices within its cultural perspective by which the community stands distinct from those of other tribal communities.

But tribes have not remained in isolation throughout; they have been exposed to different historical forces in different degrees and have come in contact with other communities, particularly the Hindu communities during the early period of exposure. One of the reasons of exposure is found to be economic and encroachment majorly by the Hindu communities on tribal land (Bose 1953:164). During the colonial period, many traders, moneylenders, and other peasants started to penetrate into their area. The new trend disrupted the old system of the tribals due to contact and colonial regulations.

The initial contact, however, points to a situation where tribal culture stands distinct from the culture of the Hindus; gradually, the contact also points to emergence of an intermixed tribal space. The very process of culture contact and emergence of an interactive space is seen in almost all tribal pockets in India and has always been an interesting area of academic engagement. Studies on the new situation have introduced dichotomies like little/great, urban/rural, elite or urban/folk, or popular traditions in academics. The initial

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dichotomies in the course of time present an interactive space about which scholars differ in terms of its conceptualisation. Particularly in the Indian context, scholars have attempted to explain the emerging pattern of cultural space between dichotomies by offering a number of concepts such as tribe-peasant-caste continuum, assimilation, acculturation, syncretism, hybridity, change and continuity, and so on. Some of these concepts are popularly used to study the emerging religious worldview of the tribes consequent upon the contact.

From the above discussion three significant but interrelated implications emerge; that tribes encounter outside forces; that in the field of religion (along with other fields) an interactive space emerges; and that scholars attempt to conceptualise the emerging interactive religious space in the context of the tribes.

Keeping in this line of argument, the present chapter intends to examine the space of religious interaction using the concept of 'liminality' coined by Arnold Van Gennep (1960), and extended by Victro Turner (1991), with the Sahariya tribe of Rajasthan as a case study. The chapter also argues that the Sahariya came in contact with Hindu culture in search of alternative economic pursuits consequent upon decline in natural resource base, i.e. forests.

The main objective of this chapter is to understand the phase of transition that is impending in the Sahariya's life with foremost focus on their religious aspect. The major questions are: What are religious practices of neighbouring Hindu communities finding place in the sphere of tribal religion? What are the push factors responsible for this transition?

19.1 The Sahariya: Trajectory of Economy and Religion

Rajasthan is the only state in India that consists of a huge sand desert, a vast range of Aravalli hills, plains, and the plateau of Hadoti region. Rajasthan is known for its vivid culture and heritage; hence, it is divided into different cultural regions. These regions have their own dialects and exhibit distinct socio-cultural lives of their inhabitants. As per the census report of 2011, the tribes of Rajasthan state constitute approximately 13.48 per cent of the total population. There are 12 scheduled tribes in the state. The southern part of Rajasthan is known as 'homeland of tribes' where Bhil and Garasia tribes are found in majority.

Among tribal communities, the Sahariya is the only Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) in the state predominantly found in Shahabad and Kishanganj Tehsils of Baran district of Hadoti region. The Hadoti region includes the eastern and south-eastern part of the state. Traditionally, the Sahariya are forest dwellers. Their nearly self-sufficient economy resulted in their relative isolation from neighbouring castes and communities for a long time. However, some of the forest produce which they collected were either sold to or bartered with the communities in the nearby villages whenever needed. Bhasin (2000) in her work mentioned that the Sahariya of Rajasthan had actually migrated to the Kota district around 16th century where they bartered with another caste group called *Bohare* (shopkeeper or money lenders) for things other than the forest products (Bhasin 2000:412). Due to strict laws of restriction on use of forest areas, their original livelihood pattern was hampered and they got trapped in the vicious cycle of starvation.

Now-a-days, the Sahariya do not reside in forests. In fact, they live in the multi-caste villages, where they have their separate clusters known as 'Saharana'. They belong to the lowest rung of the social hierarchy except the untouchable castes such as scavengers. The life of the Sahariya used to revolve around the forests. The traditional social and cultural life could be well described in terms of Vidyarthi's (1963) *Nature-Man-Spirit Complex* approach. This approach takes into account the tribal way of life that exhibits interaction of tribal

people with their habitat, social institutions, and the supernatural world. At present due to overpopulation, exploitation of the natural resources by the outsiders, and other forces of modernisation, their entire life ways have been divorced from forest dependency.

It is to be noted that the Hadoti region of Rajasthan was covered with the dense forests with the variety of important flora and fauna on which the entire livelihood of the Sahariya community was dependent. Steadily, after the encroachment and the arrival of the contractors, the dense forests of this area got badly wrecked in the last 30–40 years. Due to all of these activities, the flora and fauna of the area had a major setback. The wildlife that existed earlier is now shrinking gradually. Many species such as tiger, leopard, bear, sambhar, cheetal, neelgai, fox, jackal, sloth bear, and bush rat have declined in numbers due to poaching, and many legal/illegal human activities. After independence even the government has failed to give them the required protection and economic opportunities for a longer period of time. Understandably, the Sahariya livelihood was closely associated with the collection of *chironji, tendu* leaves, *katha* (catechu), *moosli,* etc. But, when the contractors took over the area and its forests, the whole collection and manufacturing of the *katha* industry was acquired by these contractors. The Sahariya, being experts in making *katha,* were subjected to exploitation by these contractors. They had no other way but to work as labourers on very low wages. The dependency of the Sahariya on the forests for wild seeds, herbs, and tubers was apparently very high. The extraction of forest products from their forests by the outsiders slowly and steadily disturbed their life and sources of livelihood at a greater extent. Thus, these increasing turbulences not only shook their economic life but also posed new challenges to their social and cultural life.

Since the Sahariya's whole livelihood was reliant on the forests and its ecosystem for food they were mainly in the habit of gathering, hunting, collecting forest produces, and fishing. They also depended on forest products for house materials. Since they believed in life in animate and inanimate objects their religious worldview comprised recognition to and worship of supernatural beings dwelling in forest, trees, hills, etc. for forest related activities. It is worth mentioning in the context that shifting cultivation was the main agricultural operation and they were heavily dependent on it. The Sahariya would put the part of forest to fire for the purpose of shifting cultivation and at that time they would propitiate their deities for good yields. But in the course of time, the shifting cultivation was abandoned. During field study it was found that knowledge about religious practices related to shifting cultivation is withering with time. Even certain restrictions (taboos) followed with regard to the use of forest land and collection of minor forest produces (MFP) have declined, with the decline in these activities.

At present their relationship with the forest is confined to the collection of minor forest produces like catechu, lac, tendu leaves, chironji, gum, honey, tubers, etc. and, that too, for a short span of the year. In a nutshell, they run from pillar to post to make ends meet. Now-a-days the Sahariya cut the grass and wood for selling in the nearby market of the Kelwara area of Baran district.

Over the length of time, their religious practices and beliefs were exposed to other communities. Lately, they have also started worshipping some folk deities like Tejaji, Gogaji, Devnarayan ji along with Hindu gods and goddesses. It is evident by their participation in the regional fairs and festivals. However, such adaptations cannot be treated as a total shift in tribal religion because their own belief system and traditional practices are also going along. Such situations can be termed as syncretism where change and continuity can be seen

as a measure to respond to an emerging situation in social and cultural contexts (Behera 2000:79f).

19.2 The Sahariya's Religion and Practices

Traditionally, the Sahariya have their own deities whom they worship and hold them with deep reverence. In the course of their exposure to other non-tribal communities, the worshipping of other folk deities is also seen in their religious practices. Their religion, deities, and practices followed at present are worth mentioning here.

19.2.1 The Place of Worship: 'Chabootre' and Temple

During fieldwork, the author observed *chabootre* and small temples as the most prominent worship places. Chabootra is a colloquial term, used for a rectangular or square platform raised at some height from the ground level, made up of stone, lime, raw material, and is painted with ochre or limestone colour. A vertical stone, either in natural form or painted with vermilion, is erected in the centre of this chabootra and symbolises a particular deity. If there is any tree present at a shrine, the Sahariya people consider it very sacred; hence, they do not cut it. On the occasion of *Saptami*[1] in the month of *Bhadrapada*[2], all the deities are worshipped with great joy and enthusiasm by the people of tribal community. It is called *Badi Saptmi* or *Mai Saaten*.

The Sahariya villages also consist of small temples, 'the shrines' to appease their deities. Here, the priest is known as *bhopa*. He is one who acts like a bridge between the natural and supernatural world. Some of them, not all, can go into a trance and help the people to overcome their problems by seeking the advice and directions of the deity. The position of bhopa commands great respect on the part of the community people. He wears an ornament made of gold or silver, called *patdi*, around the neck and silver bracelet in his hand as a sign of that particular deity. Generally, it is the male member that acts as a bhopa.

19.2.2 Deities Worshipped by the Sahariya

The Sahariya worship their own deities such as Valmiki ji *Maharaj*, Thakur *baba*, Moti *Maharaj*, Mehttar Baba, Merani Mata, Ashmani Mata, Nagarkot Mata, Pret Baba, Kul Devi; folk deities like Tejaji, Hiraman Baba, Ramdeora ji, Gogaji, Devnarayan ji, and Hindu gods and goddesses. They also believe in the worship of their ancestors, locally the ritual is named as Pitr *puja*, obviously a Hindu influence.

The following are the detailed descriptions of their deities whom they worship from time to time:

19.2.2.1 Valmiki Maharaj

The Sahariya show deep gratitude and reverence towards sage Valmiki who belongs to the epic Ramayana. Goddess Sita who was the consort of Lord Rama, was exiled to Valmiki's ashram. The tribal people worship him to seek his guidance in their social and economic matters. According to the Sahariya people, goddess Sita stayed here in the Valmiki Ashram. It is now also known as Valmiki temple situated at Sitabari in Baran district. A huge fair is organised here every year in the month of June for a fortnight. This fair is very significant for the Sahariya community that it is known as 'Kumbh of the Sahariya' (Kumbh *mela* is a religious

festival of Hindus that belong to the Great tradition). At this time the Sahariya also organise the meeting of *badi-jati panchayat* i.e., regional tribal council in the Valmiki ashram.

19.2.2.2 Thakur Baba

Originally, the community had been a forest dweller for a very long time. So, they worshipped Thakur baba, whose abode is believed to be in the forest, to get relief from any kind of physical, mental, and economic problems. Every family or clan of the Sahariya may have its own Thakur Baba. Whenever any of their wishes get fulfilled, they worship this deity. Even today its abode is said to be in the forest. A statue made of stone is often placed in the temple. This deity is usually worshipped on the 11th day or on *Amavasya* (new moon day). They offer coconut, dry fruits, and incense sticks to the deity. Before going outside the village, they always seek the blessings of Thakur Baba. When the Sahariya came in contact with other communities, especially whom they felt superior to in social status, they started adopting and propitiating other folk deities of the region such as *Teja ji Maharaj*, *Bhairav ji*, and *Ramdeora ji* to get rid of the problems. Currently, they have started going to *Teja ji Maharaj* **especially for remedy to snake bite.**

19.2.2.3 Moti Maharaj

Moti Maharaj is especially worshiped to get rid of problems like typhoid, jaundice, and other diseases. For the treatment, a thread is tied around the hand or neck which is called as *bandha* to seek the blessings of the deity. They offer coconut, *rewari* (made of jaggery), and *kheer* (made of milk and rice) occasionally.

19.2.2.4 Mehttar Baba

Mehttar Baba is worshipped in the Sahariya community especially to get rid of ghosts, vampires, and malevolent spirits. A kind of local liquor is made by this community, which they call '*Panchpayala*' (the colour of this liquor is black). This local liquor is offered to the deity to placate it and is consumed by the devotees as *prasad* (sacred food).

19.2.2.5 Merani Mata

Merani Mata is worshipped by the Sahariya community to get rid of the problems caused by the malevolent spirit. Normally, the deity is worshipped when the cases turn serious. After interaction with some of the Sahariyas, it is found that when an individual is possessed by some evil spirit, *bhopa* advises them to sacrifice a cock in order to appease the deity.

19.2.2.6 Ashmani Mata

Ashmani Mata is especially worshipped in the month of Ashwin[3]. The Sahariya worship this deity as prevention against any kind of disease.

19.2.2.7 Nagarkot Mata

The temple of Nagarkot Mata in situated on a hillock in Shahabad district. This deity is worshipped during *Navratra* (Navratri is a Hindu festival that is celebrated for nine days

every year in the months of October or November by all of the communities in this area). It is believed that Nagarkot Mata protects all people and their villages from unforeseen problems. There is also a tradition of sacrificing a he-goat to Nagarkot Mata in their community. An oral story about Nagarkot Mata prevails in this region that around 15th century there was a king called Mukutmani, who brought this deity from the forest to the plains after worshipping her very hard.

19.2.2.8 Kul Devi

Belief in and worship of Kul Devi is also very popular in the Sahariya community. Every family has its own Kul Devi such as *Kali Mata, Beejasan Mata,* etc. The Sahariya also sacrifice the he-goat occasionally to appease Kul Devi. After marriage, the newlywed couple among the Sahariya visit the shrine of their respective Kul Devi for a successful married life and blessings of children.

19.2.2.9 Pret Baba

It was reported that every family has its own Pret Baba. No chabootra or shrine is found in public places in the name of this deity. A family's mental, physical, and financial prosperity depends largely on appeasement of Pret Baba. It was reported during field study that the Baba generally demands for a place either in agriculture field or in the house by appearing in dreams or when a family member goes into a trance. Since they hardly have any agricultural field now, Pret Baba often finds place inside the home.

19.2.2.10 Pitr (Ancestor Spirits)

The tribal people also believe in the existence of the spirits of their dead known as *Pitr.* At times, a stone is erected in the name of their Pitr near the house like other communities. They do so for the welfare of their family and for the peace of their dead. The community also goes to Gaya (Bihar) to carry out certain *shradha* (a ritual) for the dead.

19.3 Belief in Folk Deities

Lately, due to the increase in economic activities in the forest area and after the development of communication means, the culture of the Hindu castes has spread in the Sahariya community. When the people of this society started moving from their area towards towns and cities in the search of livelihood, they came in contact with the 'others'. This migration exposed the Sahariya to other community people and their culture. This exodus helped them to interact with people other than their own community. Gradually, they also started following belief systems of others to some extent. They started to follow and worship folk deities of that region like Hiraman Baba, Bhairunji, Teja ji, Ramdeo ji, Gogaji, and Sheetla Mata; but apart from Teja ji and Sheetla Mata, the acquaintance of the Sahariya with other folk deities is not very old. They did not know them until 15–20 years back. Description of some of the folk deities is as follows:

19.3.1 Hiraman Baba

It is said that basically Hiraman Baba belongs to the Gujjar community of this region. Gradually, the Sahariya also started to propitiate it to protect their cattle from any unto-

ward happenings. It is believed that Baba is capable of getting rid of the disease and ghosts that intrude in the body of their cattle. Occasionally, this community also offers milk to this deity to get his blessings on the devotee's family and their cattle.

19.3.2 Bhairuji/Bhairav Ji Maharaj

Bhairuji is believed by the Shariya as the incarnation of God Hanuman. This deity is particularly worshipped by them to have protection for those cattle and domestic animals which roam or go grazing in the forest areas. They have devotion or reverence for this deity as he gives protection to their animals from all types of diseases. *Kheer-Puri* (rice pudding and deep-fried bread) is specially made for his worship. Earlier he was just Bhairuji, but later they started calling or equating this deity with Hanuman ji.

19.3.3 Teja ji

Tejaji's chabootra or temple is found in every village of Rajasthan and all communities venerate him, so does the Sahariya. He is a legendry folk hero, invoked as the incarnation of the Hindu god, the Lord Shiva (Ahuja 2002). He is also known as a miraculous snake-bite curer. It is believed if a thread is tied on the right foot of the patient in the name of Tejaji, then the deity gives protection to the sufferer from snake-venom. Tejaji's fair is held every year on the tenth day of Bhadrapada month at Parbatsar in Nagaur district of Rajasthan state.

Folk deities and *Pir* find a significant place in the life of common people of Rajasthan. A Pir can be a Hindu or a Muslim, but both the communities believe in Pir and worship him. There are a number of Pir, but five of them (*Pabu, Ramdeo, Meha, Harbhu*, *and Goga*) are worshipped by the people of Rajasthan as well as of other neighbouring states such as Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, etc. including the Sahariya.

19.3.4 Ramdeoji

Ramdeoji is believed to be the incarnation of Lord Krishna. The fair of Ramdeoji is held in the months of August–September every year in the Jaisalmer district of Rajasthan. Initially, he was worshipped by untouchable castes in Rajasthan as a social reformer and for having miraculous healing power to cure any kind of ailments. But now almost all communities worship this deity and follow his rituals. Ramdeoji was believed to be born in the 15thcentury in the Jaisalmer district of Rajasthan. He was a son of king Ajmal. It is said that the king remained childless for a long period after his marriage, but he was a big devotee of Lord Krishna. Finally, pleased at the king's devotion, Lord Krishna incarnated in the form of the king's son, named Ramdeo. Ramdeo was born with miraculous powers and later, he dedicated his life towards the uplifting of poor people. Both Hinduism and Islam worship him. For Hindus, he is an incarnation of Lord Krishna, whereas Muslims worship him as Ramshah Pir (Ahuja 2002).

19.3.5 Goga ji

He is a folk snake-deity, worshipped by tribal and non-tribal communities with full respect and reverence. Goga ji was a Chauhan ruler in Rajasthan who fought bravely against Turks. He was a contemporary of the king Prithviraj Chauhan. His shrine is known as Gogamedi,

situated in the Hanumangarh district of the state. According to a popular saying, every village has its own *Khejri*[4] tree, and likewise, every village has its own Goga-Pir (Ahuja 2002:42).

19.3.6 Sheetla Mata

Sheetla Mata is worshipped not only in the Sahariya community, but in almost all communities of this region and also across many communities across India. Earlier it was worshipped to get rid of the epidemic like small-pox. But, even after the complete eradication of small- pox, propitiation of Sheetla Mata continues. Among the Sahariya, it is reported, that it is compulsory for a newly married couple to visit the shrine of Sheetla Mata to seek her blessings for a happy and prosperous married life. To appease this deity, people offer food prepared one day before which in local language is called *Basyoda* or *Shiloda*.

Apart from the deities mentioned above, in the Sahariya community there is also the deep-rooted tradition of worshipping trees and plants such as *amla, banana, peepal, tulsi,* etc. Amla tree is especially worshipped by women in the *Kartik*[5] month for their husband's long life and prosperity.

Additionally, in this community at the time of the marriage ceremony, there is also a tradition of inviting their deities. They have the custom to offer yellow-rice (rice soaked or mixed with the turmeric powder) on their chabootre on this occasion.

Apart from all these deities the Sahariya people also worship other Hindu gods and goddesses like Lord Ganesha, Durga, Hanuman, Amba Mata, and Balaji with great reverence and seek their blessings.

19.4 The Concept of Totem Among the Sahariya

The Sahariya tribe also believe in the totems and their sacredness. More than 40 clans are found among them. Their clans are said to have roots in animals, plants, places, and ancestors. Sharma and Sharma (1998) state that dog is the totem of the Gogya clan, *ansa-pola* tree (a native tree) is a totem for the Raichohan clan and banyan tree for the Parondiya. These totemic objects are surrounded by certain taboos, such as, a totemic animal cannot be killed and its flesh cannot be consumed, although the consumption of meat is part and parcel of their food habit. Likewise, a tree has a totemic value. It is neither cut, nor its wood used for the purpose of fuel. On special occasions, such as marriage and festivals like Holi and Diwali (festivals of colours and lights respectively), the Sahariya worship their totems. Nevertheless, after the exposure to non-tribal communities their belief in totem is on decline (Sharma & Sharma 1998:350–351).

19.5 The Stage of *Transition* and the Visibility of *'Liminality'* in the Sahariya

In the present times, like many other tribes, the Sahariya have also experienced many changes in their life. Historically, tribes were mainly living in isolation with little interaction and interconnection with other non-tribal communities. The tribal situation across the country and globe are not the same and they vary from one region to another. In India, it was only in the British administration that efforts had been made to bring them in the mainstream. Indian tribes in contemporary times have transformed in many aspects, but the complete transformation is not yet clear and majorly experiential in the transitional point. The very process of Sanskritisation, Hinduisation, and also assimilation is seen almost in

all tribal societies due to the presence of their non-tribal neighbourhoods. These neighbourhoods can also be seen for them as their reference group, who were and are actually or notionally more powerful in many aspects. These kinds of emulation and imitation by the tribal communities are leading them to the state or position where they are showing the signs of assimilation of traits of other communities. They are now adopting, borrowing, and also integrating with a number of cultural facets of the so called dominant groups with whom they are sharing their proximity.

In this context, Sinha (1958) labelled tribes of India as the part of 'little tradition' following Redfield (1956) conception articulated in *Peasant Society and Culture*. He also stressed that tribes as community could only be understood when seen in relation to the great tradition. Indian Scholars like D. Kosambi (1975), A. Beteille (1986), N. K. Bose (1941), and S.S. Deogaonkar and S.G Deongakar (1990) observe that there has been fusion of the elements of tribes into the society which considered themselves above them. But the nature of change which is registered among almost all tribal communities are not of losing their own identity and their cultural heritage; rather it is of assimilation with nearby communities and castes which are residing near them. There is a space or position that lies in between and can also be called *'liminality'* following Gennep and Trurner.

As several concepts are available to study the interactive space, the choice for 'liminality' needs an explanation. The interactive space of the Sahariya is a manifestation of theirs and of Hindu religious worldviews, but within the Sahariya perception. They worship Ganesh, Durga, and other Hindu gods and goddesses, but do not get a space in Hindu structure. Similarly, they equate Bhairuji with Hanuman and Ramdeo ji with Lord Krishna thereby creating a space for Hindu gods in their traditional belief. Further, they follow the tradition of believing in and worshipping their traditional deities like Mehttar Baba, Moti Maharaj, Ashmani Mata, etc. which are not found at the core of the Hindu belief system. They also believe in deities like Gogaji, Teja ji, etc. having regional importance and Sheetla Mata that has cross-region importance in India. Undoubtedly, it does not point to a third space as the emerging reality does not occupy a distinct space in between the Sahariya or the Hindu; rather the community retains its Sahariya identity and as such concepts like syncretism, hybridity, etc. are likely to oversimplify the religious worldview that spreads across two boundaries – the Sahariya and other communities, particularly the Hindus, but do not present a visible third space for the community identity. Moreover, the liminality concerns the weaker Sahariya, but not the stronger Hindu tradition. Here Turner's argument is useful to understand the context. He states, "The liminality of the strong is socially unstructured or simply structured; that of the weak represents a fantasy of structural superiority" (Turner 1991:168). What the Sahariya's contemporary religious tradition reveals is not structured in Hindu society, but it is structured in the former's religion that shows the situation in between its tradition and adoption to Hindu traits within the Sahariya worldview.

The Latin word *'limen'* means threshold that lies somewhere in-between. During socio-economic progression individuals/people generally pass through some transitional phase where they along with their own conventional cultural traits adopt some new arrangements. Chakraborty (2016) mentioned that during this process the shift from one social position to another might not get transferred completely; it remains incomplete (Chakraborty 2016:146). Further, Homi K Bhabha while mentioning and using the 'liminality' termed it as a border situation, where subjectivity tuned with sameness and alterations results in new kind of forms (Chakraborty 2016:146). He mentioned that this, "interstitial passage

between fixed identifications opens up the possibilities of a cultural hybridity that entertains differences without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Bhabha 2004 in Chakraborty 2016:146).

The term 'liminality' was first used by anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep in his work on the ritual patterns to understand the societal process of transition. Lately, Victor Turner popularised Gennep's idea of liminality. According to Turner (1991:95), "Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial". His idea is elaborated by Dara Downey, Ian Kinane, and Elizabeth Parker (2016) (cited in Bode & Jacobson 2018:3). They write, Turner contends that

> in (post) modern societies, in which rules of law and traditional customs have undergone major upheaval or change, individuals and communities are left in a continually unfixed, destructed, and liminal state of existence, caught between the conventions of customary social practices and the burgeoning social practices of new and radically different social formations.
>
> *(Bode & Jacobson 2018:3)*

In many changing facets of life-sketch, religion was mainly considered as the core element of tribal life. In its earlier form, almost all of the tribal communities' religions were in the form of 'animism' due to closed habitation in nature and forests. Lately, in contact with Hindu communities they have been introduced to other folk deities and gods across all of the states.

Among the Sahariya, it has been found that the main factor responsible for their following other's deities and gods is the perception of their neighbourhood's powerful position. They carry the faith that other's deities and their gods help them in acquiring a better economic and social position in the society. Added to this, even the derogatory outlook of their neighbours towards them, attached with their position of being less developed, traditional, and marginal, and attributed to their old practices of 'animism' make them conscious to relook and reframe their own religious methods like the fading of totemism in them or accepting others deities and festivals.

19.6 Conclusion

It may be analysed that whenever society moves from a simple to complex stage, changes are inevitable in their religious and cultural life too. Since religion is the integrated part of almost all cultures, its practice can be seen in the family, marriage structure, and other social organisations. Edward B. Tylor has also mentioned that traditional people generally have fixed and definite attitude towards religion which affects their social and economic life to greater extent (Upreti 2007:143). The Sahariya are not the exception to it.

Now-a-days, the Sahariya also believe in folk deities that were earlier worshipped by the local caste communities only. The culture contact of them with other caste communities brought them quite close to Hindu communities. Therefore, now religion of the Sahariya could not be seen in its exclusivity or culture-specific dimension. The signs of belief in folk deities of the region are quite predominant.

Singh (1998) also pointed out that traditionally, the Sahariya professed their religion with all its specificity. But their long interaction with the caste Hindus has motivated them to worship Hindu gods and goddesses (Singh 1998:835). At present the Sahariya's religion can be seen as an admixture of their own religion as well as of Hindu communities. This characteristic can be attributed to close and continuous contact with neighbouring Hindu communities. It is difficult to say exactly when these changes took place. Despite changes folk religion operates largely at the subconscious level (Bhatti 2000:9).

The Sahariya worship Hindu gods and goddesses out of devotion along with their own distinctive deities. Since, in the later part of their life they moved to plains and faced new kinds of problems especially related to their livelihood and survival; therefore, for solution of such problems, they sought solace in folk deities of that region. Though tribal religion and Hindu religion of great tradition are like two opposite ends of a pole, consequent contact with other tribal religions of a particular region acts as a continuum. A movement between both ends often gives a distinct expression, but without belonging to either. The degree and rate of the movement from tribal religion to Hindu religion and vice-versa varies greatly depending on the emerging socio-economic scenario. The continuum in case of the Sahariya, however, appears as a distinct space combining traits from both the Sahariya and Hindu religions. The distinct space, often conceptualised as syncretism, or change and continuity or third space, in fact is a peripheral space within the Sahariya religious worldview though distanced from the traditional sphere to a great extent. It is a liminality in Sahariya religious worldview, but not a distinct space in between the Sahariya and the Hindu religions.

Further, the change that placed in a liminal position has economic content. Whether it is their migration to towns or non-Shariya's interest in their resource, the economic factor is obvious. The economic reasons brought them in contact with other communities and affected their religious worldview.

Notes

1 *Saptami* is the seventh day of the fortnight according to Hindu Lunar calendar.
2 *Bhadrapada* is a month of the Hindu calendar corresponding to August and September.
3 *Ashwin* month is the seventh month of the Hindu calendar and corresponds to September–October.
4 *Khejri* is a sacred tree which was, historically, protected by the *Bishnoi* community. The movement to protect this tree in the 1730s laid the foundation of Chipko movement in the 1970s. Khejri tree, Gogaji and other Pir are part and parcel of folk people's sentiments and religious beliefs. Every village can have its own shrine for Gogaji or other Pir. The above saying also signifies that the faith in Gogaji and other Pir is not caste or community specific.
5 Kartik month is the eight month in the Hindu calendar and falls in the months of October and November in the Gregorian calendar.

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20

DANDAKATTA RITUAL IN THE ORAON RELIGION

A Symbolic Interpretation

Nisha Kumari and Abhishek Kumar

20.0 Introduction

Anthropologists study tribal religion in terms of faith and beliefs, practices, and supernatural connection in a cultural perspective. This can be conceptualised as religious worldview within the total perspective of worldview of the tribes, the concept of worldview being forwarded by Robert Redfield (*see* 1953 and 1962). In the Indian context, *Nature-Man-Spirit Complex* also provides an analytical framework to study tribal religion (*see* Vidyarthi 1963) in a holistic perspective. There are also conceptual and theoretical discourses to study tribal religion with reference to its various elements. Symbolism is such a discourse that generally examines ritual symbols to present a critical understanding of tribal religion. In this study an attempt is made to understand the belief system of the Oraon by studying Dandakatta ritual, also called *Bhelwa Phadi*[1] and symbols used in it.

Focus is made on people's perception. Dynamics of symbolic interpretation are attempted in an interactive space as is evident from practices and meanings observed common to the Oraon and the neighbouring Hindu communities. The study is qualitative in nature and based on both primary and secondary data. Field study was the major source of primary data.

20.0.1 Objectives of Study

The study is based on the following three objectives:

1 to study the Dandakatta ritual of Oraon tribe of Jharkhand, India;
2 to understand symbolism as related to Dandakatta, and how people perceive it; and
3 to explain the present status of Dandakatta ritual.

20.0.2 Research Methodology

The present study is based on data collected from both primary and secondary sources. For gathering the primary data, we used data collection methods and tools such as schedule,

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observation, case study, interview, photography, and audio and video clips. For the secondary sources, the review of relevant lectures, the internet, published research materials, and magazines have been taken into account. Both emic and etic approaches are also applied to know the viewpoints of the Oraon as they perceive symbolic meanings of materials used in Dandakatta rituals. Perception of the Oraon about the ritual, chants, ritual materials, etc. have been examined to capture emic view point. Folk narrative about the ritual is also considered as an expression of emic perspective. Focus on these topics in the study is nothing but emic approach adopted during investigation. At the same time, an attempt has been made to study this ritual using theoretical framework of symbolism with a view to understand the religious worldview of the Oraon. Attempt to understand a phenomenon within available theoretical and conceptual frameworks is an etic approach. Undoubtedly, our study of Dandakatta within the framework of symbolic interpretation is etic approach as the framework is not a ritual specific case selected for the study. In this way the data has been compiled and analysed in a balanced way using both approaches. The present study is carried out in villages of Mandar block in the district of Ranchi in Jharkhand. Murma, Sursa, Chund, Mandar, Brambe, Punagi, Karge, and Mesal villages were studied for data collection. Data have been collected using the interview method; and the respondents included *pahan*[2], *panbhara* (assistant of *pahan*), and other knowledgeable members of villages from both sexes. The respondents other than religious heads belonged to different age groups. In total 54 respondents were interviewed; out of which six were pahan of different villages, four were assistants of pahan, 18 knowledgeable elders, 25 were common villagers of both male and female groups, and 11 were educated youth.

20.1 Symbolism – A Conceptual Framework

Literally, symbols can be defined as an object, word, or action that stands for something else with no natural relationship with what is culturally defined. Several things one does throughout one's life are based and organised through cultural symbolism. In fact, every field of human action and idea embodies symbolic meanings. But its scientific investigation gained popularity among anthropologists during the decade of the 1960s when Clifford Geertz, an American anthropologist and Victor W. Turner, a British anthropologist showed their interest in understanding the symbols used by people in their daily life, and in the social and religious process. The core of symbolism underlies the assumption that symbols are culture specific and have cultural meanings. In this regard Geertz deserves mention. He defines symbolism as ideas based on cultural learning. He believed that during enculturation a person learns the cultural meanings of symbols. People use the system of culture to define their world, express feelings, and make judgement. However, Victor Turner developed an approach to the analysis of symbolism in rituals. As per the idea given by Victor Turner, religion is the key to culture and ritual is the key to religion (Turner 1966:6 and Segal 1983:327).

Symbols are used to define and convey a relationship between supernatural beings and humans. In this sense, relationships among humans, between humans and nature (objects/symbols), and both with supernatural beings is conceptualised in rituals. People believe that these symbols convey the message of their sufferings to god and thus, help protect them from crises in life. So, such ritual symbols are also known as religious symbols. Symbol and religion are both interrelated and connected to each other. According to Clifford Geertz, the model for and the model of aspects of religious belief are mere transpositions of one

another (Geertz 1973:118). Religious symbols offer a model of the relations between the self and the world, and also a 'model for' how to act in this world (Geertz 1973:118); whereas Victor Turner argues that symbols can be used instrumentally, to trigger social action (Hoskins 2015:861). It follows that the crucial explanatory variable in the study of symbolism are culture, religion, rituals and cultural objects, and their meaning. As culture changes the meaning of symbols also change.

A number of anthropologists following Geertz (1973) and Turner (1966) have contributed to the understanding of symbolism and in doing so they have enriched symbolic anthropology as a branch of discipline. In general, symbolic anthropology studies symbols and the processes such as myth and ritual by which human beings assign meanings to these symbols to address fundamental questions about social life. No doubt, the use of symbol lies at the core of human culture. It is through symbols that we create our culture and communicate it to group members and future generations. In brief, symbols are abstract human creations from a group's non-material culture, such as belief, rules, and family patterns linked with the material objects.

Conceptualisation of symbolism by Geertz and Turner and its subsequent growth as a branch of symbolic anthropology give us an insight to formulate an analytical frame to study rituals and symbols. A simple analytical frame can be constructed with such elements as people of a culture, religious rituals they perform, and associated beliefs and objects they use. Undoubtedly, this study is designed within the scope of symbolic anthropology. It is evident from the fact that it studies objects (symbols) used in Dandakatta ritual of the Oraon, and myth associated with it. Further, it studies meanings associated with ritual and ritual objects. It is to be mentioned that Dandakatta ritual of the Oraon tribe has been purposely selected for the present study.

20.2 The Oraon and Dandakatta

As per the census 2011, the Oraon tribe is the second largest tribe of Chhotanagpur region of Jharkhand. Their faith and beliefs and practices have been conceptualised by the name of *Sarna* religion in recent years[3]. Nevertheless, their religious philosophy is essentially based on nature worship. They perform many rituals occasionally and annually in their day to day life. Among those activities and rituals, Dandakatta is considered an important ritual which is necessarily performed at least once in a year in every Oraon house. According to the genesis myth of the Oraon, it is the ritual that was first performed by their ancestors (Mahadev and Parvati – the Hindu god and his consort). Later, they taught the process to their descendants who are known as the Oraon. In Oraon culture, Mahadev is known as Dharme or Dharmesh (Bhagat 2013:19). During Dandakatta ritual, Dharmesh alone is worshipped (Toppo 2008:2). Dharmesh is considered as the creator and almighty (Tirkey 1980:20). Therefore, in this worship, they pray before Dharmesh to protect them from enemies in times of crisis, save them from evil eyes, and increase animal wealth, crops, and other material wealth. This ritual holds much importance as it symbolises different meanings relating to happiness, prosperity, and protection. Materials used in this ritual are culturally prescribed and connected with the religious philosophy of the people. These materials carry abstract cultural meanings. In any ritual other than Dandakatta, other deities are worshiped followed by the worship of Dharmesh at the end. A white chicken is sacrificed in his name. It is believed that if any mistake arises in the worship of a deity in a

ritual, then Dharmesh comes to the rescue. So, he is worshipped after the concerned deity is worshipped.

20.3 Findings and Discussions

As has been mentioned, Dandakatta or Bhelwa Phadi ritual is performed by the Oraon tribe. As the tribe believe in ancestor worship and nature worship, in Dandakatta they remember their ancestors and the forces of nature. They believe everything they possess is the gift of nature and blessings of ancestors. The people believe that ancestors communicate them the process of Dandakatta. In their worldview, Dandakatta is a symbol of communion with Dharmesh through the ancestors. It is their belief that successful performance of the ritual ensures good fortune and averts misfortunes in the forms of impending crises.

Dandakatta is not only performed for testing the fortune; but as a ritual of auspicious beginning. It is performed before the beginning of any important event or work to get blessings of god. For instance, Dandakatta is performed when a pair of oxen is bought and brought into the house, or it can also be observed on the occasion of house warming. Any important work of the Oraon tribe is normally initiated after Dandakatta. There is no particular date fixed for Dandakatta as it can be done corresponding to the occasion of auspicious work. It is obligatory for the Oraon to perform Dandakatta at least once a year despite occasional household or individual performance. Its annual performance takes place on the very next day of Karma festival[4]. But it can also be performed on any day of the year before any auspicious occasion.

20.3.1 Materials Used in Dandakatta Ritual

In this ritual a number of materials are used and these materials have symbolic significance with cultural meanings. The materials are as follows:

- *Amm* (water)
- *Arkhi* (a kind of alcoholic drink made from flowers of *mahua* tree (*madhuca long folia*))
- *Arwa/ Abdha tikhil* (a type of raw rice)
- *Bhelwa dahura* (branch of bhelwa tree)
- *Chulha khajja* (soil collected from the hearth)
- *Dhup-dhuwan*, diya/khajj tatthi (earthen lamp) and *agarbatti* (incense sticks)
- *Gobari/Maiend/saare* (cow dung)
- *Jhara* (a kind of alcoholic drink made from rice)
- *Kancha/dhibba* (coins) (as token fees)
- *Kanto* or *binthi* (knife)
- *Keter* (a kind of winnowing plate made up of bamboo strip)
- *Kher bee* (egg of fowl)
- *Koila powder/ Koiela chind* (charcoal powder)
- *Lota* (a round water container made of brass or copper)
- *Sakhua (sarai) atkha or sakhua kheta* (leaf cup or bowl made of saal (*Shorea Robusta*) leaves)
- *Tatkha* (mango leaves and branch)
- *Tikhil gunda* (rice powder/flour)

20.3.2 Ritual Process

This ritual is obligatory, as has been discussed, before starting any auspicious work. It is performed by any male person other than the one from the house that organises the ritual. Performance of the ritual by a person of the house is not considered auspicious or fruitful (Tirkey 2011:50), though during field study by the first author, it was reported that any male member of the house can perform this ritual, but not by one from outside. The logic provided against outside performers seems simplistic. It was argued that the benefit accruing from the ritual would go to the outside male performer. That is why performance of the ritual by any male member of the household is desirable. But if there is not any male member in the house or no member of the house knows the process and chants for Dandakatta ritual, then any adult male member of the Oraon tribe, well versed in the method of performance can do it[5]. Dandakatta is performed inside the house by the performer and a few members attend it. The person, who performs this ritual, arranges ritual items in *keter* and takes it to the place of worship; he faces to the east and smears the place with cow dung. The tradition of facing toward the east is a mark of respect to the sun which rises from the east and is also the symbol of their God Dharmesh, also known as *Bidi Belas* (Roy 1985:61).

20.3.3 Steps Followed in Dandakatta

Step 1: First, a part of the floor inside the house is cleaned and *gobri* (cow dung) mixed with water is smeared on the surface by the performer. Participants sit at a distance from the place marked for performance of Dandakatta.

Step 2: A ritualistic shape/diagram or symbol is drawn using white rice flour (*tikhil gunda*), charcoal powder (*koila),* and soil from the hearth (*chulha khajja*). The shape/design is drawn on the surface where cow dung was smeared.

Step 3: *Kherbee* (egg) is kept at the centre of the diagram on the heap of tikhil (rice).

Step4: *Bhelwa dahura* (bhelwa branch) is chopped into three long pieces using the *kanto* (knife) marked for the purpose. The first piece is slightly sliced along the length and split; the second piece is cut into three small pieces and all are sliced along the length and split to obtain six small split pieces. One of the six small split pieces is fixed on the first long piece which is kept on the egg. The third long piece having leaves is kept aside.

Step 5: The rest of the five small sliced pieces are mixed with tikhil on the *keter* (winnowing basket which is convex with depression inside).

Step 6: All five pieces of bhelwa dahura placed in an inverted manner along with rice are picked up using both the hands and thrown back on *keter* after a small prayer or chant. If all of the pieces fall in the same position as they were picked up, it is considered a good omen. In case of any discrepancy, trials are repeated till all pieces fall in the desired position. The pieces which do not fall according to desired position are picked up and placed on the *keter* for further trial. Others, which fall in the right position, are kept aside. It is like a probability exercise in picking up lots without replacement. However, in this case the probability is expected to be always one as trials are repeated till all the pieces fall in right position[6]. This trial is conducted in odd numbers. Generally, it is considered a good omen when all of the

five pieces turn into the proper side in five throws. Otherwise, it is considered a bad omen. So, this process is repeated till the proper side of the pieces are obtained, but it is not appreciated.

Step 7: All the items except *tikhil* on the keter (winnowing basket) and bhelwa twig which is fixed with another split bhelwa piece are collected in a *kheta* (bowl) and kept aside.

Step 8: The performer goes outside the house to throw all the collected items. It is their belief that collected items are thrown at crossroads that are received and taken by creatures of Nature. Usually the rice grains which are thrown are taken by different creatures. The ant takes it to abysm; birds take it in every direction, and so on. The belief is that happiness and prosperity follow the reverse of the directions towards which the items are carried. The rest of the rice kept on the *keter* is put at different places and mixed with other grains of house, so that peace, prosperity, and happiness prevail in the house.

Usually, the best time of worship is evening as items used in the ritual could be thrown by the performer unnoticed at a three-way or four-way cross roads. After throwing the items, the performer returns to the house holding a knife and *lota*, (a small spherical water container of brass or copper) and shouts the householder's name. Outside the house at the gate or door a conversation takes place between the performer and one interrupter (may be the head of the family or any participant) and the process is known as *tokna*[7].

Step 9: After re-entering the house, the performer asks the head of the family to drop a few drops of *jhara* (rice beer) and *arkhi* (wine made from *mahua* flowers), considered as holy water, in the name of ancestors at the place where Dandakatta was performed. Dropping of jhara or arkhi on the sacred place or the process of dropping is called *tapvan*. This supports the argument that people see the god in the shape of human form; that is why they offer gods what the human considers useful to them. The attribution of a human body and human qualities to a god is conceptualised in terms of anthropomorphism (Mackintosh 1910–11:120). A devotional offering (*prasad*) made of egg and rice is eaten by the performer. Women are prohibited to eat this offering but male members of the family are not prohibited. After taking prasad all involve in entertainment; they eat, drink, sing, and dance. This is secular part of the ritual.

Tokna

Performer:- *Mangra Erpa Ekda Hikai?* (Is it Mangra's house?)
Interrupter:- *Nin Aindra Bhalam Hikday, Chor – Chilhar to Malday?* (Who are you? Aren't you a thief?)
Performer:- *Bhala, En Choran Gutthi Maldan. En Ratu Mahrajas Hi Bel Jharia Kerka Rahchkan, To Murukh Amm Onka Laga Lagi. Aaanwge En Aas Ghee Airpa Beddan, Aikda Hike?*
(No, I am not a thief. I had been to Ratu Maharaja[8] doing labour work, that's why I am thirsty. So, I am searching for Mangra's (a fictitious name, actual name is uttered, Mangra is a popular name given to a male born on Tuesday) house, which one is his house?

Tokna:- *Aindar Akhoye Nin, Thakday ka Aindar Nanday, Nin Kanto- Binthi Dharchaka Raaday, Lota Gutthi Dharchakaday, Nin Choray Hikdai Ka Aindra Hikday.*
(What do you know? You are cunning and you are holding a knife and a lota. I doubt, if you aren't a thief.)
Performer- *Mala ain Choran Maldan, Nel Jharia Kerka Rehachkan.*
(I am not a thief; I had gone for labour work)
Tokna:- *Achha. Thik Rai, Iddim Airpa Hike, Bara.*
(Okay, fine, this is the house, come)

20.3.4 Chants During Dandakatta Ritual (in Contemporary Kurukh Language)

20.3.4.1 Chant in the Name of Earth and Ancestors while Dropping Water/Arkhi/Jhara

Aide, Inna Murma Padda Nu, Karam Be Kare. Dharti Hi Naame Kare Ain Chuaaba lagadala. Aiman hormarin Dav Leka Uike.

(Hey, today, in Murma village (name of actual village in which the ritual is conducted is taken. Murma is the village where field study was conducted), on the second day of Karma, in your name, in the name of earth, I am dropping. Keep us healthy.

20.3.4.2 Prayer to God Dharmesh While Throwing Rice and Bhelwa Branch

Aide Inna Murma Padda Ghee Dharti Nu Ukka Raadam Awur Dandakatta Lagadam, Karam Basi Ghee, Mangras Airpa Nu. Hormarin Dav Keka Uike, Aayo-Baba. Ninim Hikdi Hurmi

(Hey, today, we are sitting on the land of Murma and we are doing Dandakatta on the second day of Karma, in the house of Mangra. Keep all healthy, mother-father. You are everything.)

The above conversation is an example of tokna process which is a small part of Dandakatta ritual. After this process, members of the family shut the door of the house so that no evil re-enters the house. That is why when the performer comes after throwing objects used in the ritual and knocks on the door, they confirm that he is not a person who can harm them.

The Oraon is an agrarian tribal community. People are agriculturists and primarily engaged in the cultivation of paddy. So, in each phase of agriculture; whether it is time to prepare the field before agriculture, to plough, to pluck the seedlings, to transplant saplings or at the time of harvesting; Dandakatta is performed. Naturally, success in each stage of cultivation, it is believed, depends on successful observation of Dandakatta. This does not mean that it is performed only by cultivator families. Families involved in non-agricultural works also perform it. The ritual is organised on every auspicious occasion such as *Phagu, Khaddi (Sarhul), Hariari, Kadleta, Karam, Nawa-Khani, Sohrai, Khalihani, Maghe* (name of rituals and festivals), and various rites of passage such as pregnancy and birth rites,

puberty rites, marriage rites, funeral rites, re-admission rites[9], and even during entry into *dhumkuria* (dormitory).

During a field visit by the first author in 2019, it was reported that only the Oraon tribe perform Dandakatta ritual. However, the Oraons who are converted to Christianity do not perform this ritual as they don't believe in traditional religious ideology of the community and its Supreme God Dharmesh. There is a myth related to the Dandakatta ritual that tells why the ritual is so important to the Oraon tribe. According to this myth, when the rainy season came, God Dharmesh gave them (brother and sister duo) seeds to sow. As the crops grew in the field, the rats, grasshoppers, and lizards began to destroy them. Seeing this they were very upset and discouraged. Then Dharmesh came and told them to do Dandakatta ritual to ward off the pests and protect crops (Pereira 2007:89). Since then, they are still performing this ritual as it gives protection to themselves, their crops, and animals. The ritual prescribed for protecting crops from pests is now performed on various occasions for welfare and wellbeing. The ritual also has the potency to protect them from the evil eye and misfortune. The concept of the evil eye is closely related to belief of divine power given to some men for something good, but misused for evil (Paudel 2018:40).

20.4 Symbols and Meanings

Dandakatta ritual has its own meaning, as do the objects used in it. The Oraon interpret the meaning of these symbols within their belief system. During field study by the first author, a key informant stated that the structure made with the help of rice, soil of hearth, charcoal powder, egg, and bhelwa branch symbolises the universe. It is also symbolic way of warding off the evil eye or scathing words. Materials, structure, and colours of materials used in it symbolise a crucial dimension of their belief system.

Egg of Fowl: It symbolises the earth. The Oraon believe that the Earth or Dharti as they call it, is egg shaped. The Earth produces life on its surface like an egg that produces a chick. They believe that nobody knows the door to life on the earth. Only a hen knows about the door to life as it pecks out after incubation of a period of 21 days. Life comes out of earth as a chick comes out of an egg. It is also said that an egg is a pure source of life and complete in itself, and is without any face *(nirmukhi*) and head (*nirmund*) (Toppo 2008:4). So, they sacrifice an egg considering it as self-contained, full of life, and also at the same time lifeless.

***Arwa tikhil* or unboiled rice:** It symbolises good life and prosperity. Also rice forms an important produce of the economy and is a major source of subsistence livelihood. Hence it is considered as a symbol of life. The Oraon people offer rice in the name of the God Dharmesh, who is the creator and well-wisher of humanity (the Oraon), beseeching prosperity and good life. As reported during field study, rice grains kept beneath the egg during ritual represent stars.

***Chullha khajja* or soil form hearth:** It symbolises the spirit of ancestor. The Oraon believe in worshipping of *chulha* (hearth) as it protects them from diseases, epidemics, evil eyes, ghosts, and bad omens. It is considered sacred as the soil turns red after being heated by the fire of the hearth. Therefore, for the destruction of evils and bad omens, soil from the hearth is used in the ritual.

***Koila* or Charcoal powder:** It symbolises evilness. This powder is used in the name of Chandi. Chandi seems to be an influence of Hindu pantheon; for the Oraon, she protects villagers by prohibiting entry of evil power, ghost, and bad omens from across the village boundary. She is a village deity in the study area.

There is a belief among the Oraons that black colour is used by thieves, witches, or anyone who intends to cause harm to another. It is the belief that Dharmesh has destroyed such sinners or evil eyes by raining fire, due to which all the sinners were burnt to coal. So, for the destruction of sinners coal powder is used in the making the shape.

Bhelwa branch: Bhelwa branches are supposed to attract the insects of the whole field, which are later eaten by the birds. All the crops then are protected promising a bumper harvest. During the ritual process, bhelwa twig is split in two parts. As the twig is divided, it is believed, so also the effect of evil eye is separated from the victim. Bhelwa twig also symbolises the male and female and it also represents the spindle of earth on which the earth moves. It is believed that both male and female become one body and offer sacrifices to Dharmesh.

***Hadiya*:** It is considered a sacred drink for the god. Also, rice is considered a staple of food of the Oraon. So, the rice beer symbolises a sacred drink for god, and also of ancestors who lived on rice during their life time.

Colours: White, red, and black colours represent time: present, future, and past phases of life respectively of the person or family. It also symbolises three types of supernatural power: gods, goddesses, and ancestors who act as protector from the third supernatural power, malevolent in nature; such as ghosts and witches who attack human beings.

Signs and Shapes: Cross or plus signs represent four directions i.e. East, West, North, and South. It means that the Oraon pray to god for protection from all directions. Circular figure means the god is the master of the whole universe (Lakra 2006:12). Seven semi-circles constructed symbolise seven days and nights. The nine triangular shapes made in the ritual structure represent nine planets (same as in the Hindu tradition). Other than these shapes, the performer makes the structure with other figures as per his knowledge and convenience.

***Sup*/Winnowing Basket:** It is an auspicious object in the Oraon community as it is also considered the residing place of Goddess Sarna or Goddess Chala Pacho other than the Sarna place or sacred grove. They invoke Goddess Chala Pacho to reside in the *keter* (winnowing basket) and rice in it, and pray her to guide them.

Cow dung: It is used to clean the worship place as it is considered sacred. It is the belief that cow dung surrounds the family with *dav ghaukh sawang* (protective energy) and ensures good fortune. Also, it acts as a natural disinfectant. Other than this, ants, lizards, and other insects do not come to the surface smeared with cow dung. It is also their belief that gods and souls of ancestors reside in clean places.

It is evident from the above discussion on Dandakatta ritual of the Oraon that the practice does not reflect the tribe's culture exclusively. The Oraon belong to Dravidian race of Proto Austroloid groups, who call themselves Kurukh, and speak Kurukh language belonging to Dravidian family (Vidyarthi and Rai 1985:68–70 and *see also* Roy 1915). For sure, their tradition does not subscribe to the presence of the Hindu gods and goddesses in their

belief system and Sanskrit influence in their language. The presence of the Hindu gods like Mahadev and goddesses like Parvati and Chandi, and vocabularies belonging to Sanskrit tradition point to their interaction with the Hindu over a long period of time, but without sacrificing their identity. It is a case of assimilation and adoption. In other words, the religion of the Oraon as understood with reference to Dandakatta ritual manifests Hinduised features.

The name Dharmesh, given to their supreme deity, shows influence of the Hindu faith and Sanskrit language. The names Dandakatta (*danda* meaning stick and *katta* meaning cutting) and Bhelwa Phadi (*bhelwa* referring to the common name of oriental cashew nut tree in this region irrespective of communities and *phadi* meaning slicing/splitting) do not belong to Kurukh vocabulary system. Interestingly, the respondents and other persons interviewed/contacted do not remember its Kurukh version.

The item *gobari* (cow dung) used during the ritual, that signifies purifying the spot of worship, is used for the same purpose as by the Hindu. Besides, gobari is not a Kurukh word. Use of the name, such as 'Ratu Raja', signifies recognition to non-Oraon authority or at least to a space of interaction. The tradition is silent about the time and the reason of the entry of Ratu Raja in their ritual conversation.

Names of several objects, or prefix or suffix to names of ritual objects are found not belonging to Kurukh tradition. The words *gunda* in *tikhil gunda*, *chulha* in *chulha khajja*, *koila* in *koila* powder, and *gabari*, *lota*, coins, *dhup-dhuna, diya, agarbati;* and the name *Dharti* to the Earth allude to their adoption from Sanskrit language (in fact from the neighbouring language of the Hindu). The steps undertaken at the time of the ritual performance, such as cleaning by using cow dung and preparation of ritualistic designs with different colours are also practised in the Hindu rituals.

Internal contradiction is noticed with regard to who can be the performer of the ritual in a family. While an opinion goes in favour of the male member of the family, the other justifies in favour of a male member outside the family. This indicates to the emerging trend of re-interpretation in beliefs and practices.

Performance of the ritual is seen as significant at the level of an individual family to ensure individual or family welfare and wellbeing. However, it was reported during field study that Dandakatta is performed at village level when epidemics or other calamities like crop failure visit the village. Pahan of the village performs the ritual when it is done for the purpose of prosperity of the whole village. It is also observed that at the time of Hariari festival, pahan of the village used to perform the ritual for good amounts of rain and harvest.

During a field visit the first author observed structure (pillar) over Murma Khunt[10] similar to the diagram used in Dandakatta by splitting a long bhelwa twig. In both structures it represents the male and female that symbolise the unification of male and female and also is considered as axis. It is their belief that Dharmesh is present in the sky, ancestors under the earth, and human beings reside on earth. Combining all, it shows the belief of communion with God Dharmesh through ancestors. Dandakatta ritual is performed during Murma Jatra by the pahan of Murma village before pahans of other villages join, for they believe that Dandakatta relates to the origin of the Oraon and Murma Jatra to their settlement in their present location. Evidently, Dandakatta ritual is performed by the people from earlier times, but Murma Jatra has been organised after the settlement of the Oraon in Chhotanagpur region resulting from their migration from Rohtasgarh to escape

Muslim attack. That is why, as it was reported during the interview, the structure (pillar) over the Murma Khunt corresponds to their belief embodied in Dandakatta. Performance of Dandakatta before the jatra is undertaken to seek blessings of Dharmesh and to avert misfortune during the occasion. Except in the household, no tokna process is followed in community performance of Dandakatta ritual in any public place. As reported during field study, Dandakatta is performed first before starting any activity to avoid obstacles. The notion is similar to the Hindu worship of Shri Ganesh as remover of obstacles before beginning of any activity.

The interpretation of some ritual objects seems to be based on the contemporary idea. Bhelwa twig is compared with the spindle of the earth which seems to be a modern interpretation. The split of the twig symbolises male and female, but their significance is not clear. As Mahadev and Parvati are considered their ancestors who taught the Oraons the ritual, the splits with all probability symbolise the divine couple.

In the present scenario, *Dandakatta* is still an essential ritual of the Oraon people but its occurrence gradually decreases. Due to modernisation and culture contact, younger generations of the Oraon are not using Kurukh language. They generally use Nagpuri language to connect with other people. Even parents don't speak in Kurukh with them, so they don't like to involve those chants in learning. Apart from this, the collection of the materials that are used in the ritual are the toughest task to do as the Oraon also shift their interest from agriculture to office jobs, factory work, etc.

Though this ritual is performed by those Oraon who have migrated from villages and settled in urban places, the changes can be noticed in the traditional way of worship. For example, there is an increase in female participation, absence of smearing of gobari because of cemented houses, less use of hadiya (rice beer) and so on. There can be various factors behind these changes; among important factors shifting to non-agricultural activities is a crucial one. The respondents informed that the Dandakatta started for the good production of agriculture, but due to shifting interest towards service sector and other non-agricultural works for livelihood its frequency has decreased among the Oraon people living in urban places. Due to modern influences, like education and technological advancement, youth are becoming rational; they have started questioning the rationality behind tradition and customs. The young generation is distanced from the traditional ambience (due to school going or residing in hostels, for example) suitable for oral transmission of knowledge. The chants and procedures are still orally transmitted in villages. They are not even coded in urban areas as the priority of people seems different. The community level decline in the practice can also be attributed to the incidence of conversion of the Oraon to Christianity.

20.5 Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is evident that symbols used in rituals reflect the religious worldview of a community. With changing times and the influence of external forces, interpretation of symbols keeps changing. In Dandakatta ritual of the Oraon the structure used in the ritual is interpreted as the universe; bhelwa twig symbolises male and female, egg symbolises the earth; rice is considered stars; and the split bhelwa stem as a whole is interpreted as spindle. Even the use of rice is interpreted by emerging intellectuals in terms of its importance in their agricultural economy. The colour of the materials represents the notion of present, past, and future time where white represents present time, black represents past, and red future. Also, diagrams such as nine triangles and seven semi-circles made of rice on

the floor are interpreted representing nine planets and seven days and nights respectively. That means a small ritual design conceives the meaning of the whole universe. These typical symbolic interpretations of the Oraon people are purely based on their belief. So, we can say that this ritual fits well with Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz's concept of symbolic anthropology and those ritual symbols connect the Oraon people to their supreme deity and act as a protective shield as they believe. It is also clear that the process and material used in it are based on ecology. But with the passage of time, changes have also occurred. Due to the disintegration of the Oraon society and migration, there is a decreasing interest in this worship. People are forgetting this ritual and its chants. As the structure and objects for worship are somewhat complicated and rare, that is why now-a-days its importance and the process is not known to everyone especially to the younger generation. Nevertheless, even today, the Oraon people have preserved its popularity and importance and perform this Dandakatta ritual at least once in a year as it is an integral part of the Oraon community.

Notes

1 Dandakatta ritual is known as *Bhelwa Phadi*, meaning splitting of (*phadi*) Bhelwa (*Semicarpus anacardium*) twig. In recent years the ritual is called *Rongoli* (colourful floor design) because of similarity between Rongoli designs of the Hindu festivals designs and of Dandakatta ritual structure. Usually, the name Rongoli is used during communication between the Oraon and Hindu neighbours.
2 Pahan is a religious specialist. The name is used commonly among the tribes of Jharkhand in recent years, though originally he was the religious specialist of the Mundas.
3 Traditionally, the term Sarna refers to a place of worship, which is a sacred grove.
4 Karma is a major agricultural festival (coincidentally celebrated on the 11th day of *Shukla Paksha* (waxing/rising moon) of *Bhado/Bhadra* month (August–September)) in Jharkhand and in neighbouring states to pay homage to the Karma tree (*Nauclea Parvifolia*) that symbolises fertility prosperity, power, and anything that is auspicious. It is very popular among the Oraons.
5 The logic that benefit of the ritual would accrue to the performer challenges belief in the institution of priesthood, i.e. mediation between god and people. Further, in the argument, the role of mediator is not altogether ruled out. A critical insight shows that the male member of the family as the performer of the ritual also does mediation on behalf of other family members. In this sense, the argument that benefit accrues to the performer seems fallacious. It may be an interpretation in emerging intellectual tradition without a cultural perception, for even in household rituals the performer is one individual.
6 For example, if we consider the brown and white side of small bhelwa pieces as heads and tails of a coin respectively, then either the white side or the brown side or any one side of all pieces will appear. If all pieces do not fall in the desired way then the trial continues until all pieces are found in expected side. The probability is expected to be one.
7 *Tokna* is a Hindi word meaning interruption or prevention. The Oraon have borrowed this word into their vocabulary system.
8 The key informant during field study mentioned the name of Ratu Maharaja in the context. However, it is also recorded that the performer knocks the door and tells the owner that he is coming from very far and has come here to give blessings for peace in the house (Tirkey 2011:61).
9 Re-admission is a rite performed when a person returns to the religious tradition of the community which he or she had left on conversion.
10 Khunt means post/pillar. The sacred post situated in Murma village of Mandar Block in Ranchi district is popularly known as Murma Khunt or Jatra Khunt or Bhut Khunt.

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21
DEVGUDI
Village Sacred Shrine of Chhattisgarh Now and Then

Digbijoy Giri

21.0 Introduction

Religion is a set of beliefs and practices generally held by individuals and community; practices are generally various rituals including prayers, songs, dances, offerings, and sacrifices. In essence, religion tries to manage supernatural power for the benefit of its followers. Individual faith and practices normally reflect the community context in which one is a member, for the community's belief system is what an individual professes. That traditional religion has a social or community dimension is a truism. Understandably, there are community ways of displaying its people's religious life. One such way goes through village shrines, particularly in non-propaganda types of religions like those of the tribes. Of course, other types of religions also have their respective village shrines, but differ from the former in the sense that these are formally organised.

As shrines reflect the belief system of tribes, it is quite logical to understand religious life of a tribe by studying its shrines. Moreover, as the socio-cultural life of tribes change, shrines offer an opportunity to study the nature and extent of influence these changes exert on the belief system.

It is, therefore, not a surprise to find scholars studying shrines of tribes in India, particularly of village sacred shrines which exist in different forms, such as altars, menhirs, sacred groves, etc. Villages in Bastar have three kinds of Sacred Shrines are found namely *matagudi, devgudi*, and *gaondevi* (Giri 2005). Different tribes have their own *mata* or *gaondevi* (village goddess) in the *devgudi*. Studies are mainly descriptive in nature on the themes of socio-religious significance or conservation ethics or political dimensions of sacred village shrines. They have been rallying points of rights assertion.

Two important studies have been cited here on socio-religious themes. V. Elwin (1943) has presented shrines of the Maria Gond in a wider context. He perceives religion of the Maria of Bastar round the earth, the state, and the clan. He talks about the shrine of the village mother goddess on the outskirts of the village and in a groove nearby where the shrine of one of the clan gods is present. About 60 years ago in 1963, P.K. Bhowmik had studied sacred shrines of the Lodha of West Bengal. Though he has highlighted its structure, rituals, etc. what is important in his study is the sense of common property resource attributed to

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these shrines by them. In the same year (1963) the joint study of A.K. Das and M.K. Raha also describes the shrine (*gram than*) of the Oraon of Sundarban in West Bengal and its presiding deity *Devi Mai* (Mother Goddess) (Das & Raha 1963:240–241). The shrine is a sacred grove amidst *sal* trees and therefore, the authors named such shrines as Sal Shrines. The study of D.N. (1990) has pointed out the changes in shrine culture in a discussion of women and forest. He has noted construction of temples in the spot of shrines or replacement of local deities by the idol of Mahavir Hanuman. He argues it as a mark of subjugation and marginalisation of the tribal communities by 'the mainstream' Hindu civilisation.

On political dimensions, studies by J.J. Roy Burman (1992, 1995, 1996) are significant. In a series of articles, he has articulated the political dimension of sacred shrines in the local and regional context. He informs that sacred shrines have often been supported by the local rulers. Sahu Chhatrapati, the king of Kolhapur, for example, is known for his support to a sacred grove dedicated to *Amba Devi*. Similarly, J. Troisi (1978) has pointed out the political aspect of the traditional shrine of the Santal. He has noted that the sacred shrine serves as a rallying point of territorial claim and social solidarity of the Santal.

Rights issue is at the core of several studies. In this regard, J.J. Roy Burman (1995) has highlighted self-assertion among the Gond of Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra. He states that the Gond revived the Danteswari sacred grove to assert their identity and right of self-determination. Before him: C. Hembram (1983) informs that by the Sarna Dharma (religion of the sacred grove), discrete ethnic groups in Chottanagpur, i.e. in present Jharkhand, were brought to a common platform to assert their rights of self-determination. The Sarna Dharma, in fact, helped them in consolidating their common identity and solidarity between the Christian and non-Christian sections of the region. V. Bhasin (1999) deals with the religious and cultural aspects of sacred shrines of the Sahariya. She has noted that the shrine serves as a rallying point of the Sahariya's rights assertion movement. She has also noticed the decline trend experienced by shrines due to pressure from humans and cattle. Study of D. Deb and K.C. Malhotra (1997) has focused on the conservation dimension of sacred shrines. They have highlighted the interface between biodiversity and tribal cultural heritage and found the use of forest products for different socio-religious purposes. In the face of severe economic hardships of the tribes, their persistence on socio-religious ethos in the field of protecting bio resources reveals the strength of the conservationist tradition of indigenous culture. Deshmukh, Gogate, and Gupta (1998) describe the conservation ethos attached with the sacred shrines of Maharashtra (of the region or tribe) and have studied the chronology of sacred shrines, changing proportion of species, occurrence of exotic species, decrease in plant cover, regeneration status, forest degradation, and thus, impact of human activities.

Studies on sacred shrines of tribes as mentioned here are merely suggestive. One important point needs mention. L.P. Vidyarthi (1961) was the pioneer in conceptualising sacred shrines. In his study on *Sacred Complex of Hindu Gaya*, he has conceptualised sacred geography, sacred centres, sacred specialists, etc. Shrines have been discussed under sacred centres. He has also applied these concepts to study religious practices of tribal villages (Vidyarthi and Rai 1985:254–265) of central India.

A unified system of beliefs and practices related to sacred shrines of tribes, which unites them into one single 'moral community' (Durkheim 1961:62) is observed in the villages of the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh. The sacred centre/shrine is popularly known as devgudi (in some areas as *matagudi* and *gaondevi*) in the villages of the region. The shrine unites

the tribal community and reflects elementary forms of their religious life. The village religious life of the tribes of undivided Bastar, now inhabitants in the areas of Dantewada, Narayanpur, Kondagaon, Bastar, and Kanker, moves around devgudi. In religious studies pertaining to this region, however, anthropologists, sociologists, and other social scientists have not given adequate attention to the study of sacred village shrines. The present chapter is a preliminary inquiry in this regard and aims to fill up the gap in the study of village shrines of tribes in Bastar region in the present context. Its thrust area is structure, function, and importance of devgudi in Bastar region in contemporary time. So, the study aims to highlight changes introduced in the shrine culture and focus on its importance in the belief system of the people.

21.0.1 Methodology

The state of Chhattisgarh, with 16 districts, was bifurcated from Madhya Pradesh on 1 November 2000. Later in 2011 the number of districts increased to 18; and at present there are 28 districts with five regions. The regions are: Bastar, Raipur, Bilaspur, Durg, and Surguja. The study area falls in the Bastar region consisting of seven districts, namely Dakshin Bastar Dantewada, Uttar Bastar Kanker, Sukma, Bijapur, Narayanpur, Kondagaon, and Bastar. In the Bastar region, devgudi, the village shrine, is a characteristic feature of every village. In this region about 3,983 villages have been recorded having devgudis. But out of 34 tehsils in this region, Narayanpur, Dakshin Bastar Dantewada, and Bastar have a large concentration of devgudis. It was reported that 14 Nagar Panchayat and eight municipalities were rural with their devgudis; but these devgudis do not exist at present probably due to the growth of urban centres and clearance of forests. An interesting fact that came to notice was that Jagdalpur, a municipality since 1951, became the Municipal Corporation, just before 2011 (Census Report 1951, 2011), but its devgudi was converted to the temple of Maa Danteswari back in 1890 by the then king. There is no iota of doubt to state that devgudies are a part of village culture. Data were collected from field studies conducted during several visits to the area from April to November 2021. Particularly, for study of the village shrines, data were collected from tribal dominated areas of Bastar, Dakshin Bastar Dantewada, and Narayanpur districts. However, key informants were selected purposely from among those involved in devgudi activities. Interviews and observations were main tools used during field study.

Three villages, namely Garawand Kalan, Madpal, and Balikanta of Bhatra tribe from Bastar district; three villages namely Gamawada, Chitalanka, and Samlur of the Halba tribe from the district of Dakshin Bastar Dantewada (DBD); and three villages, namely Gadhbengal, Kukdajhor (Mawalibhatha), and Naumunjmeta of the Muria tribe from Narayanpur district were purposely selected for in-depth study. The villages in Bastar and DBD districts are near to the district headquarters, namely, Jagadalpur and Dantewada; but in Narayanpur district the study villages are quite interior and situated in the area of Abujhmad (Narayanpur has two Tahasils-Narayanpur and Abhujmad (Orchha)). Abhujmad is an inaccessible area. *Abhuj* means fool and *Mad* means Hill. The tribes of Abhujmad are known as *abhujmadia*.

In each village of three districts, devgudi priests, also called *pujari*[1] or *gayata*, belonging to the Bhatra, Halba, and Muria tribes were interviewed. The selection of districts was done on the basis of traditionality and change observed during official field visits. The change

Table 21.1 Profile of Sample Villages

S. No.	*Name of Village*	*District*	*District Headquarters*	*Distance from Dist. Headquarters (km)*	*Population*			
					Male	*Female*	*Total*	*Total ST*
1	Garawand Kalan	Bastar	Jagdalpur	4	414	452	866	524
2	Madpal	Bastar	Jagdalpur	16	1405	1533	2938	1228
3	Balikonta	Bastar	Jagdalpur	7.6	554	545	1099	804
4	Gamawada	Dakshin Bastar Dantewada	Dantewada	14	732	842	1574	1520
5	Chitalanka	Dakshin Bastar Dantewada	Dantewada	4	1133	1157	2290	1135
6	Samlur	Dakshin Bastar Dantewada	Dantewada	17.5	815	785	1600	638
7	Gadhbengal	Narayanpur	Narayanpur	4.1	839	886	1725	990
8	Kukdajhor	Narayanpur	Narayanpur	11	535	494	1029	862
9	Naumunjmeta	Narayanpur	Narayanpur	8.2	225	225	450	380

Source: Census Report 2011

was noted during these visits related to financial assistance (an amount of Rs.7.51 lakh) of the government for the development of devgudis. However, during study, focus has been given to understand change beyond this financial assistance, particularly with reference to the outlook of the people.

The sample villages for study have been taken close to the urban setting in Bastar district, and quite interior as well as traditional in Dakshin Bastar Dantewada (DBD) district. Devgudi (the sample villages for the study have been taken closer to the urban set in Bastar district and in Dakshin Bastar Dantewada (DBD). In Narayanpur district one village was fully traditional, but two devgudis were found non-traditional. All of the above villages have been taken as a sample village under the study to know the importance of devgudi in the district of Bastar close to urban centres and in rural areas. Three villages each from three districts have been taken close to district headquarters and far from district headquarters. Garawand Kalan, Chitalanka, and Gadhbengal are close to districts of Bastar, Dakshin Bastar Dantewada, and Narayanpur respectively. Madpal, Samlur, and Kukdajhor are far from district headquarters. The rest of three villages Balikanta, Gamawada, and Naumunjmenta from three districts namely Bastar, Dakshin Bastar Dantewada, and Narayanpur are taken as sample villages for comparing the data and to know the diversity of village deities. Information is presented in Table 21.1.

21.1 Structure of Devgudi

The sacred shrines are very small patches of woodland where the place is in the control of its own community, and its area is less than one acre. Area of the shrines depends mostly upon the land control regime under which it is located. In community-controlled or private land, the size/area of shrines/devgudis is very small, which in some cases is as small as ten by

ten meters with one or two large mature trees as the abode of the presiding deity. The ruling deity of the grove is worshipped by the community in such shrines. Socio-religious and magico-religious rituals are performed by the pujari or gayata or sirha, who is considered to be a specialist in establishing connection with the presiding deity. Mature trees are normally found around the seat of the deity.

Sacred shrines which are found in the revenue land and in the *chote jhadka jungle* (small bush forest) and *bade jhadka jungle* (big bush forest*)* normally have a small area, but the shrines which are found in the land under the control of the forest department are larger in area, and even the entire locale is sometimes called sacred grove/shrine which may be of a few hundred hectares in area. But, mostly the area of a sacred place is less than one hectare and has very sparsely populated trees.

Devgudi or the village shrine, as is mentioned, is a seat of deities in a tribal village of the Bastar region. It is rarely found in tribal settlements in urban areas, but none in non-tribal settlements. The name, however, varies from region to region. The shrine is a simple hut/enclosure made of wood, mud walls on three sides, and open in the front. This is a common sight in both interior and semi-urban Bhatra villages. Some of the gudis are made of pucca structure. It is to be mentioned that most of the *pucca gudis* of the Bastar district have been built from village funds without any government assistance. In these villages the deities have been shifted from old to new buildings. In Dantewada villages the tribal people are observed preserving their traditional shrines. Though they have been provided with financial assistance to develop devgudi, the village deities are kept in the traditional way (traditional way means the gudis are situated in traditional hut, thatched with wild grass and mud walls but with a regularly maintained compound). Anthropomorphic and Zoo-Morphic curvings are found on the poles of most of the devgudis showing symbolical respect for nature and their ancestors. In Dantewada, 143 villages have been given financial assistance to develop devgudi (Collectorate, DBD, Dantewada).

A tribal dominated village is different from a tribal village. In a tribal dominated village, non-tribes (caste people) also live there. The caste people are engaged in cleaning and supplying water as and when necessary in the devgudi.

Devgudi is a symbolic representation of faith, beliefs, and practices followed by the tribes only. It brings village people together on different occasions and acts as a binding chord, and maintains social solidarity. In the tribal society, the goddess is mainly established in devgudi and the faith is that the goddess protects the people from evil spirits, diseases, and from wild animals. Actually, it is the holy spirit of their ancestors which they started worshiping in reverence to their noble deeds. This is the reason that tribal societies worship their holy souls who are formless and mere apparitions. The chief priests of devgudi are their descendants, and therefore, the worship practice continues on a hereditary basis.

The chief priest is a descendant of the ancestor whose spirit is worshipped in devgudi. His descendants, but ancestors of the contemporary priest, are worshipped in a different mode at individual houses. After death, it is a custom to bring the soul of the deceased home and keep it in a pot. It is called *aana kudma* (*aana* – soul, *kudma* – pot). *Aana kudma* is set up in the room of the eldest brother of the house. Only people of the Muria and Gond tribes worship *aana kudma*. People of other tribes celebrate *pitri paksha* (annual fortnight of the ancestors) according to Hindu religion.

The tribals consider their deities in devgudi as living entities. They share their joys and sorrows with them. In times of sorrow, they ask their *presiding deity* to solve the problem.

The god/goddess interacts with the villagers and the work of establishing this contact is done by a person from the village who is called *sirha* (person possessed by god/goddess). Sirah is a person whom the goddess herself chooses.

There are priests to perform the puja/ritual in devgudi. These priests are assisted by *gayaita/perma*, the assistants take care of the cleaning, maintenance, etc. of the devgudi site. On the occasion of special festivals the people of Raut caste of the village also help in cleaning and maintenance.

There is a presiding deity along with associate deity/deities in devgudi. The number of associate deities can be more or less. A list of presiding deities and associate deities is presented in Table 21.2.

It is evident from Table 21.2 that there may be one or more associate deities of a presiding deity. Even in some shrines, the presiding deity has no associate at all as is the case with Mawali Mata of Kukdajhor village or Bhandarin Mata of Nau Munjmeta village. Further, it is observed that associate deities can be male such as Dharamraj, Bavandei, Potraj, Girel Bhimsen, Gaja Bhimsen, Mungaraj, Bhumuttel, and Parraja as is the case of associates of Gaondevi of Chitalanka. But, mostly associates are female deities.

Apart from the above deities, the Bastar region is also abode of several other deities. These deities are invited to the *Bastar Dussehra* (the longest festival of 75 days) by the Dussehara Committee which is held in the Jagadalpur district of Bastar during September and October (Panigrahi 2011).The Dussehara Committee has been formed under the Chairmanship of a renowned person or Member of Parliament, and members being the local MLA, District Collector and District Magistrate, Municipal Commissioner, Local Superintendent of Police, and other old experienced persons. Special invitation is made personally by the head of the royal family to Mawli Mata (goddess) residing in Dantewada Temple, Dantewada district of Dankshin Bastar Dantewada. The deities invited by the Dussehara Committee are presented in Table 21.3.

Table 21.2 Village-wise Distribution of Deities

S.No.	*Name of Village*	*Name of Presiding Deity*	*Name of Associate Deities*
1	Garawand Kalan	*Pardeshin Mata*	*Mahamai Mata, Mawali Mata, Dwarmundiya*
2	Madpal	*Patan-Patni*	*No associate deities.*
3	Balikanta	*Mauli Mata*	*Pardeshin Bawadi, Telginmata, Dand Pat*
4	Gamawada	*Angadev*	*Satbahini Devi, Shitla Mata, Ana-Manda Devi, Lele Devi*
5	Chitalanka	*Gaondei*	*Dharamraj, Bavandei, Potraj, Girel Bhimsen, Gaja Bhimsen, Mungaraj, Bhumuttel, Parraja*
6	Samlur	*Kolakamini Devi*	*Bavada Dev, Hiramraj, Mera-aama Telgin, Katakolin Mata*
7	Gadhbengal	*Sonkunwar*	*Pikri Budhin Matwari Dokri*
8	Kukdajhor	*Mawali Mata*	No Asso.
9	Nau Munjmeta	*Bhandarin Mata*	No Asso.

Source: Author

Table 21.3 Invited Deities during Dussehara

1 *Bade Mawali*	2 *Bethbudi Mata*	3 *GadhdalaMawali*
4 *Bhagdei Mata*	5 *BhangaramDev*	6 *GoupariMatabahigaon*
7 *Bhudhi Mata*	8 *BidaDhurwa (Odisha)*	9 *HathkariMawali*
10 *Budhai Mai (Odisha)*	11 *ChandelinBudhi Mata*	12 *Hinglajin Mata*
13 *Chaurasi Mata*	14 *Chhedoli Mata*	15 *HirindiMawali*
16 *Chikhla Mata*	17 *Chikhlahin Mata*	18 *Jakrin Mata*
19 *Dal Mawali*	20 *ChingdoMawali*	21 *Jamidarni Mata*
22 *Danteshwari Mai*	23 *Dhawandavir*	24 *Jarhi Mata (Odisha)*
25 *Dulardei*	26 *Durpata Mata*	27 *KamleshwariMawali*
28 *Fulmati*	29 *PilaBabu*	30 *Kankalin*
31 *Ganga Dei (Odisha)*	32 *Ratai Mata*	33 *Karibudin*
34 *Hameshwari Mawali*	35 *Semarmudin*	36 *Kenwara Budin*
37 *Hatiyarin Mata*	38 *Tapesi Mata*	39 *Khandi Mawali*
40 *Hira Kunwar*	41 *Utraan Mawali Mata*	42 *KunwariMawali (Odisha)*
43 *Jadibudin*	44 *Pahadin Mawali Mata*	45 *Limdarin*
46 *Jalni Mata*	47 *Ranbir*	48 *Lohjarin Mata*
49 *Janmigudi Mata*	50 *Rewagadin Mata*	51 *Mata Maay*
52 *Kala Kunwar*	53 *Suraj Kunwar (Odisha)*	54 *Murka Mawali*
55 *Kana Hurra*	56 *Tengahu Mawalihiri (Odisha)*	57 *Naik Mata*
58 *Kari Kankalin*	59 *Langoor Mata*	60 *Pahadbani*
61 *Karnakotin*	62 *Lingo Mawali*	63 *Mundara Mawali (Odisha)*
64 *Khanda Kankalin*	65 *Mandra Mawali*	66 *Murki Mawali*
67 *Khokhlin Dokri Mata*	68 *Nawaparin Mawali*	

Source: Author

Along with the physical and social dimensions of the devgudis of the area, the religious sphere bears greater significance. The worship system in shrines of the region is very similar. In some places, coconut, *agarbatti*, bangles, *chunari,* etc. are offered to the deities, but in all others, domestic fowls, goats, and even buffaloes are sacrificed in the name of deities. Naveen Kashyap (39 years old) of Garawand Kalan village of the Bastar district reported that once in a year in the month of *Baisakh* (Apri–-May) three goats, one duck, one rooster (black colour), nine eggs, bangles, and *chunri* (scarf) are offered to the village deity Pardeshin Mata. Rituals are performed on every Tuesday; coconut and banana are offered on the basis of availability; otherwise only *agarbati* is offered to the mother deity. A goat is sacrificed on the last day of *Navratri* (nine nights before Dussehra observed by the Hindus).

Devgudis also have annual/monthly festivals which are celebrated in the form of *jatra, mandai, mela*. Mandai is the native term synonymous with jatra and mela; mandai or jatra is a group worship performed in a *pargana*. However, people use these terms interchangeably. On behalf of the deity of the village where the jatra is organised, the deities of nearby villages are invited and group worship is performed. This is also called mela. There are three jatras organised by the tribes of Bastar.

1. Hesang jatra: The jatra is celebrated after the harvesting of paddy. When the paddy is ripe, the people of the village wrap some paddy in leaves and hang it in the *saja* (*Terminalia tomentosa*) tree down a rope and an oath is taken to the effect of harvesting paddy properly. After a few days, another jatra, called Hasang jatra is organised to take the wrapped paddy down.
2. Kakasad jatra: It is a *jatra* organised for clan deity. The jatra of clan (gotra) deity is celebrated in the month of *Paush* (December–January).
3. Devi jatra: This is a jatra celebrated after Kakasad jatra to conduct mass worship.

During these occasions, devotees sacrifice goats/chickens, etc. to fulfil their wishes.

21.2 Festivals

In devgudi of Chitalanka, devotees from different *parganas* gather 8–10 times in a year thereby giving the place a festive look. The following are the festivals celebrated in all of the nine villages under study:

21.2.1 Amus *(Hariyali)*

This is the first festival of the year which is celebrated in the *amawasya* (new moon day) in the month of *Shravan* (July–August). On this day, farmers worship all the agricultural tools and implements at home and in devgudi as well. Cows and oxen are also worshipped. The people here perform *gendi* dance which looks very attractive to see. On this day, *neem* branches are kept at the entrance of the house with the belief that no disease enters inside.

21.2.2 Nava Khai (Naya Khana)

This festival is celebrated in the month of *Bhado* (August–September) after the new paddy is harvested. The first *crop* is offered to the presiding deity along with associate deities; only then it is prepared for consumption in the house.

21.2.3 Diyari

This is the Halbi version of the Deepavali festival. But the Muria tribe calls this festival as *Diwad*. The festival is celebrated for three days. It begins on the second day of *Dhanteras* occasion; and this first day of Diwad is called *Roop Chaudas* or *Narak Chaudas*. Since it is the first day, it is also called *suroti*, meaning to start. On this day devgudi and other sacred places are cleaned and *diyas* (earthen lamps) are lighted. The other sacred places are places of *Aana kudma* (clan deity), Jagarani (the deity with many children), *charubeda* (resting place of Rav baba), *nukang lon* (sacred room for keeping rice urns), barn, and cow shed. Normally, gayata enjoys the right to light lamps at Aana Kudma and Jagarani while Dand, head of the farmers in the village (generally a rich farmer) lights the lamp at Charubeda in the names of Rav Baba and Kaudo.[2] In the domestic sphere, the elderly woman of the family performs the task of lighting lamps in nukang lon, barn, and cow shed.

On the second day of Dewed, households offer new vegetables, rice, and tapioca (the offering is called *jogani*) to deities and then it is consume as *prasad* (sacred food). On this

day, the women of a household invoke the clan deity, the presiding deity of the cow shed, and the deity of land by offering rice-flour. Then these deities are duly worshiped with betel nut, coconut, incense sticks, and alcohol. Domestic animals are also worshipped on this day. A dish, known as *kichidi* (food prepared with rice, lentils, and sometimes vegetables) is prepared for self-consumption and feeding of pet animals like cattle.

The third day is known as *kolang endna*; on this day, in the afternoon, villagers visit gayata's house for *johar bhenth* (to greet gayata with lentils and rice on the plate). This is also the day of merry making and the village girls perform dance (known as Diwad *endna*); lamps are lit at all places like the day of suroti.

21.2.4 Charu/Choru

This ritual is performed in the month of *Kartik* (October–November), just before the paddy is harvested, in a certain corner of the village; this site is called Charubeda. It is believed to be the place in the village where their god Rav Baba who visits a devgudi every three years had rested. The place is marked and Charu is celebrated at the same place. The way of marking the place among the tribes also differs. If a person of the village sees strange incidents in the village like snakes coming out of the same place again and again, wild animals coming and sitting at the same place, etc., then it is considered to be the resting place of Rav Baba. Then that place is confirmed through sirha, and marked as Charubeda. Before the ritual of charu, a meeting is held in the village and the time is fixed. Coconut, incense sticks, and a rooster are offered as part of the worship in the devgudi to mark the beginning of paddy harvesting. The villagers pray to the village deity located in devgudi for trouble free paddy harvesting.

21.2.5 Semi Pandum

When *semi* (beans) starts fruiting in early December, the tribes here first offer it to the goddess; only after that the vegetable is cooked in someone's house. It shows the gratitude of the tribes towards nature and their adored goddess.

21.2.6 Mahashivratri

Here on the day of *Mahashivratri* Lord Shiva is worshiped in their respective homes followed by a fair in devgudi on the second day. Only a one-day fair is held in the first year; the second year is observed like first year. After that a 12-day fair is held in the third year, which is called *Jagar* commemorating the visit of Rav Baba, the Celibate God who is nomadic in nature and visits to every devgudi *once* in three years. Hence, the elaborate fair is organised in a three-year cycle. After the third year, the first year of the next cycle begins.

21.2.7 Amapandum

Like *Semipandum*, *Amapandum* is also celebrated in which the first fruit of mango is offered by the villagers to their presiding deity.

As it has been mentioned, rituals are performed every Tuesday in devgudi in which people sacrifice cocks and goats. In earlier days, the people of the area used to sacrifice human also. Through s*irha*, the goddess used to demand human sacrifice *(narbali);* then she wards off calamities in the village. But not every god/goddess was offered human sacrifice in the

past, because some gods/goddesses do not like human sacrifice. A myth is prevalent about it. Balram Bhaskar (58 years old), priest of Gamawada village in the district of Dakshin Bastar Dantewada, tells about his village goddesses called *Satbahini*[3]. Satbahini (seven sisters) had come from Warangal, present Telangana to Dilmili in the district of Dakshin Bastar Dantewada; but after some time, they settled in Gamawada. Gamawada village is/was adjoining to Dilmili and people started sacrificing cock and goat in the honour of seven sisters and for fulfilment of their own wishes. Gradually, the goddesses started demanding human sacrifice too. Sister Danteshwari, one of the seven sisters, did not like this at all and left that place and came to Dantewada and settled there since then. She is enshrined in the name of Danteshwari in Dantewada. The rest of the sisters are in Gamwada itself, but idols of the seven sisters are installed in the sacred shrine of Gamawada

21.3 Importance of Devgudis

Devgudi, a symbol of the faith of Bastar tribes, holds an important place in the lives of the community. From birth to death, and on different occasions, rituals and festivals are organised in the village devgudi, and the deity enshrined is worshipped. In fact, from the very beginning of the civilisation, the tribal society has believed in both evil and good spirits. While a good spirit protects them, an evil spirit on the contrary hurts them. Thus, the faith in good spirits has grown as they consider them as their protectors. In this way, they choose a place where they can be placed so that the people can seek blessings. They have installed them at an elevated place outside the village to protect the village from evil spirits. In return, animals are sacrificed to make them happy, though the practice is in decline. There are also rules made by the ancestors of the village relating to devgudi, which all the villagers follow. The rules are:

- prohibition of entry inside devgudi except the priest
- prohibition of felling nearby trees and plants
- presence of people at least 30 feet away from the main deity at the time of sacrifice of cocks and goats
- prohibition of entry of women in the devgudis

The importance of devgudi is understandable from the fact that rituals are organised in it whenever an important event is held in the village. Undoubtedly, devgudi is important in various ways.

A presiding deity residing in each devgudi is related to the clan of pujari or perma (priest), for the deity was installed by an ancestor of the pujari. Hence, pujaris in the village devgudi, as has been mentioned above, are hereditary. Apart from the presiding deity, associate deities are also worshiped during jatra, mandai, and mela.

Tribes are normally closely related to the nature. They consider trees and gudi as part of their culture. The cultural unity as well as its diversity in relation to other villages is expressed through devgudis. No two villages share the same devgudi; thus, they act as geographical boundaries and markers of the village area. The people have full faith and belief in the deities established in devgudi. They believe that if the god/goddess is pleased with them, then they would live happily. The goddess of devgudi protects them from disease and other calamities, keep crops and livestock safe, and protects their children from evil spirits.

In devgudi, various types of puja/rituals are performed to please the goddess. Their likes and dislikes are taken care of. The Pardeshin Mata is seated in the Garawand Kalan. The people there believe that by worshiping and pleasing the mother, their wishes are fulfilled. There the red and black colour sticks belong to Mawali Mata and Mahamai Mata respectively. It is believed that these sticks are rolled over women who do not have children. The sticks are also rolled over the body from top to bottom on the patient for diseases like cold, fever, etc. To fulfil the wishes of the people or after the wish is fulfilled; the goddess is appeased by making offerings here. Tribal people believe that the deities protect them and at the same time punish the wrong doers. *Angadev* is installed in devgudi of village Gamavada; he performs the task of punishing the guilty. Crop failure, causing sickness in the house, etc. are his ways of punishing wrong doers. Various measures are taken by the villagers to avoid this.

21.4 Change

The people of the area have their versions of worshipping the deities. The respondents told that in early days, when people depended on hunting and gathering, they found it safe to live in groups; living in groups got rid of the fear of wild-animals, but not the fear of safety during hunting, or the unseen power of nature. Failures were attributed to the unseen power governing the nature. However, they did not settle in one place. Living in one place in the group and learning agriculture subsequently led to formation of a village. Settled life began. But fear related to failure of crops and disease haunted them. The reasons were attributed to an unknown power. So they tried to appease and worship the unknown power of the nature and all the living and non-living beings of nature. Still their suffering was not over. It dawned on them that ancestors who looked after them when they were alive would also take care of them during sufferings and bad days. This belief was based on another belief that prosperity or calamity is the result of blessings or curses of ancestors who are present only around them in non-physical form. So, they started worshipping the souls of dead ancestors.

The people further believed that there are two types of spirits or souls of ancestors like the supernatural powers in nature; these are malevolent (evil) and benevolent (good) spirits. To protect against malevolent power, people worshipped benevolent powers which included both the power of nature and that of the ancestors. Gradually, the power of ancestors was given primacy as it is believed that they can also negotiate with the power of nature to a greater extent. Thus, the tradition of animism and ancestor worship combined to characterise faith and beliefs of tribes, as was reported during the field study. This emerging tradition shows a change from belief in the power of nature to belief in the power of ancestors. The people built devgudis for the ancestors to reside, though, as they reported, prior to it, no specific place was marked for appeasement or worship of the power of the nature. It can be further argued that the beginning of ancestor worship led to a shift of the presence of supernatural power from outside to inside, for ancestors also have no accommodation in the family as has been discussed earlier.

As reported, the ancestor, who established a village or was the common ancestor of a clan became the main deity of that village or clan based village. They were installed in devgudis. Later on, other important persons and relatives of the first person were installed as other main and associate deities. Those who belonged to the in-law's side are called *Tadodev* and his progeny are called *Mandodev*. It is worth mentioning that all the souls of

ancestors are not included in associate deity category; they have got a place in individual families as discussed.

The tradition continues. Even today people have been following the rules made by the ancestors. Shri Maansai Nag (52 years old) of vilalge Chitalanka in Dantewada says that *Gaon Dei* (village deity) was installed in his village as the main deity followed by *Panch Pandav Dharamraj* as associate deity at the devgudi complex of the village. The customs and rules made for traditional devgudi are still maintained. Entry of women is strictly prohibited in devgudi; and they cannot partake prasad there. Women's entry is prohibited because women are considered impure during the menstrual cycle. Only priests enter devgudi. The tradition of annual thatching of the roof of devgudi is still strictly maintained.

In recent years, the devgudis of the Bastar region receive funds from the Government of Chhattisgarh for infrastructural development. Community maintenance is supported by government grants. Two things have been observed. First, it is observed that *sian* (knowledgeable persons of the village) in some villages have accepted modernisation efforts of the devgudi complex through government funds. Compound walls and new devgudis have been constructed and deities shifted to the new shrines. In some villages, the deities are not shifted but remain in the traditional ones. Due to development induced displacement, the deities are rehabilitated in new villages with newly created infrastructure.

Shifting of deities either to the newly constructed devgudi in the original village or in rehabilitated villages has created an emotional crisis. The traditional people oppose the shift and so in some villages deities remain in old devgudis within the newly constructed compound. In rehabilitated villages, it is reported, the deity even objects to the shift. The deity conveys her/his wishes through sirah, the person whom the deity possesses. Near Gangrel dam of Dhamtari District goddess *Angarmotimata* refused to move to the rehabilitated place and so she is worshiped on the bank of the dam only. The deities, it can be argued, refuse to leave their natural surroundings which are absent in rehabilitated villages. The mind that visualised the deity in natural surroundings feels distressed in its shift to an unfamiliar surrounding. This is evident when the deity is believed to speak through sirah, because sirah, the deity, the natural surroundings, deity's communication through him, etc. represent a reality which is absent in a new a place. *Nature-Man-Spirit Complex* as conceptualised in the context of the Maler (*see* Vidyarthi 1963) still captures the imagination of many villagers and religious specialists even in our modern age.

Change and continuity in the study of devgudis in the Bastar region throws some questions whose answers have not been investigated in this chapter. There is no data to prove whether the ancestor who established the village was a male and female. The village deities are observed to be female in many cases. As the tribes follow patriarchal lineage it is obvious that the ancestors were male. But how the ancestors changed to female deities in many villages remains a mystery as the respondents have no clue of it. Was it a possibility that both matrilineal and patrilineal traditions existed in the past? There is no answer, even in the folklore of the people. But whatever, information could be gathered, it can be argued that tutelary deity of a king became popular as the main deity with local versions. This is not always the case. In western Odisha, it is reported during one field study that the tribal female deities were adopted by the kings who later became Hinduised. Male and female division of deities in tribal areas in historical perspective demands in-depth study which in fact is beyond the scope of this chapter.

There is another issue that relates to deities with Sanskritised names. There are few folk tales to throw light on it. But it can be safely inferred that this is a result of the Hinduisation process (co-existence of cultures) in historical time. Moreover, the link of devgudies, deities, etc. has a Telgu dimension, for devgudi is a Telgu word for 'temple' in English. Obviously, tribal religion shows a cross-tribe and cross-community dimension beyond the territorial boundary of a tribe. The study of devgudis poses a number of questions whose answers can help understand objectively of its past and present.

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Notes

1 Because of language contact, pujari is commonly used in the region by both tribes and non-tribes. However, in the dialects of the Bhatra, the Halbi, the Gondi, and the Muria priest is known as pujari.
2 It is believed that Kaudo along with his female counterpart Keina, lives in all permanent water sources/bodies located in the village territory or in the forests. If there is not any permanent water source/body in a village, it means Kauda does not exist in that village.
3 The seven sisters are *Mawali Devi, Maa Danteswari, Sitala mata, Hinglajin mata, Pardesini mata, Katgudin mata,* and *Kategudin mata*. In recent years it is interpreted that Goddess Danteswari has 32 names and is worshipped in different devgudis in one or the other name. Popular among them are *Danteshwari, Kotgudin, Pendrawadin, Kankalin, Pardesin, Mawali, Bijilikarin, Sitala, Jalnibudi, Dayamule, Gangadayi, Kesarpalin, Hingalajin, Dabagosin, Dulardeyi, Rewagdin, Hirmadai, Kolakaamini, Ganganadai, Paatakadai, Peeladai, Ghaasbedindai,* and *Semariya*.

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PART 6

Towards Institutionalisation

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22

ISSUES OF INSTITUTIONALISATION AND KURICHIYAN RELIGION IN THE CURRENT SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT OF KERALA

Bindu Ramachandran

22.0 Introduction

The state of Kerala is experiencing a speedy process of transforming rules and procedures that influence human interactions across cultures despite the differences in caste, political affiliations, and religious ideologies. Regulations of social behaviours happened through the institutionalisation of a set of practices and rules consolidated with ideas and new orientations. In that sense, institutionalisation is totally a human activity that connects, familiarises, installs, and make changes in the socio-cultural and political spheres. It is understood that institutionalised behaviours once existed as rules and regulations in all societies and became stabilised over time and space. German sociologist Max Weber (1963) clearly differentiated the goal oriented and idea-consolidating rule formations with his understanding on the process of institutionalisation. For example, starting from the simple societies like the food gatherers and hunters, the division of labour and decentralisation of power are institutionalised both as institutional frame work to organise the societal procedures and also to function as a code of conduct to regulate and safeguard individual interests. Here, individuals and groups are an indivisible part of the system because of the collective efforts in making an unpredictable subsistence. However, this may vary between societies with different subsistence activities because of the changes in institutional structure and function.

It is a fact that rules and regulations originate out of necessities and indispensable requirements materialised in societies and cultures. The rules developed for a mandatory requirement or purpose sustain for a certain period of time and are later established into institutionalised behaviour. The reason for these purposes includes uncertainty in availing resources, the problems connected with division of labour and distribution of power, differences in perspectives towards a common goal, and ideological disparities in attaining fundamental necessities. Sometimes, finding solutions to some of these situations leads to social crises. Moore (1960) suggests that when there is struggle in finding a solution to certain basic problems, the society or social system is subject to change. So, it is clear that change and adaptation are the basic and fundamental aspects that always substantiate the process of institutionalisation. This process is continuously in search of and concerned with the solution for existing problems in a social system in order to accommodate its members

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with sufficient survival capabilities. The constant interaction between the newly added or created trait and the people in that system pave the way for institutionalising that new trait. It is a process of compromises and sharing between a system and its members and also the functional requirement of the cultural trait which decides its role in the institutional structure or cultural patterns. These traits sustain and survive because they are established, or are internalised; and they became norms of action because of its connection and ability of sharing with other factors.

It is established that increase in population irrespective of the availability of resources naturally creates internal struggles and issues in coordinating social activities including resource management (Johnson 1982 and Bandy 2004). Socio-economic and political hierarchies develop as part of adaptations to the newly created strata which later institutionalise as integrative institutions. However, it is significant to note the differences and similarities in the process of institutionalisation among groups of people sharing the same environment, both social and biological. Tribal communities are the best examples of such societies where the process of institutionalisation varies from one group to the other. This chapter focuses on the issues of institutionalisation among the Kurichiyan, one of the matrilineal tribal communities in Kerala. The primary data discussed in the chapter was collected from key informants belong to Kurichiyan community in the Wayanad district of Kerala. People from both the older and younger generation were interviewed to collect information across generations. Relevant secondary sources were also consulted to supplement primary sources keeping in view the central objective of the chapter.

22.1 Tribal People in Kerala

The tribal community around the globe faces many challenges of institutional change and continuity. Differences in subsistence economy associated with the control over key resources are some of the factors affecting institutionalisation in tribal societies. In Kerala, the representation of Scheduled Tribes to the total population of the State is only 1.28 per cent (Census of India 2011). The Scheduled Tribes in the Wayanad district constitute 18.76 per cent of the total population of the district. In Kerala, the Wayanad District stands first with 35.94 per cent of the Scheduled Tribe population of the State, followed by the Idukki (12.42%), Kasaragod (11.21%), and Palakkad (11.01%) districts (Scheduled Tribes of Kerala, Report on the Socio-Economic Status 2017). Only 10 per cent of the total tribal population living in Kerala cultivate their own land, whereas 40 per cent are agricultural wage labourers (Govt. of Kerala 2013). There are a total of 36 tribal communities in Kerala belonging to different socio-cultural and economic backgrounds. Thurston (1909), Singh (2002), and Luiz (1962) gave descriptions of the castes and tribes of India; and small ethnographic accounts were also given about the tribal communities. Among the tribal communities in Kerala, five communities are classified as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs)[1]. This chapter discusses the issues of institutionalisation among the Kurichiyan, a settled agricultural tribal community in Wayanad.

The Wayanad district is located in the north eastern side of Kerala state and this district is a trijunction of three linguistic traditions,Malayalam, Tamil, and Kannada, because the district shares boundaries with the States of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala. The district is bordered on the North by Coorg District and on the East by the Mysore District of Karnataka State. On the South is the Nilgiri District of Tamil Nadu, and on the West are the Malappuram, Kozhikode, and Kannur Districts. Rajasenan, De Venanzi, and Rajeev

Figure 22.1 Map of the Wayanad District

Bhaksar (2019) wrote that the Paniyan represents 22.5 per cent of the total tribal population, followed by the Kurichiyan (9%) and the Malayarayan (8.9 %). The Malayarayan shows a classic literacy rate of 94.5 per cent corresponding to the general population of the State. However, the Kattunaickan and Muthuvan show very low literacy rates, 40.2 and 41.5 per cent respectively. The Paniyan is the economically downtrodden group among the tribes in Wayanad. Among the tribes of Kerala, only 1.7 per cent of members are cultivators, whereas 65.7 percent are agricultural wage labourers under tribal or non-tribal communities. Tribal communities like the Kurichiyan, the Malayarayan, and the Muthuvan include a greater number of cultivators, whilst the majority of the Adiyan and the Paniyan are agricultural wage labourers. The Adiyan and the Paniyan were bonded labourers before the abolition of the bonded labour system by the State. The Kattunaickan were food gatherers now engaged in wage labour and a very few employed in forest department as mahouts. They are also known as *thaenkuruman*[2] because of their involvement in honey collection.

22.2 Cultural Profile of the Kurichiyan

The Kurichiyan is one of the Scheduled Tribes distributed in the Wayanad and Kannur districts of Kerala. They are well known for their joint family system and matrilineal pattern of inheritance with the *karanavan* (maternal uncle) as the supreme authority. This combination of matriliny and joint family are academically interesting from the perspective

of ecology, economy, and society. Suma reported that in Wayanad district there are as many as 286 joint families, each consisting of about 35 single family units on an average (Suma 2014). The Kurichiyan claim that they are 'hill Brahmins' and practice 'untouchability' with other castes and communities in and around their geographical location. Regarding their practice of untouchability, Aiyappan (1990) stated that the Kurichiyan claim themselves as Nayars[3] of Wayanad. But the Nayars (also spelt as Nairs) from the plains who have settled in Wayanad are not ready to accept this claim. However, Nayars treat the Kurichiyan as inferiors but not untouchables. Like the Nayars, the Kurichiyas regard the Thiyyars[4], another predominant caste in Kerala as untouchables though not as low and unapproachable, as do the Nayars from the plains. The Kurichiyan treat the Paniyan[5] as untouchables and they believed that the Paniyan would pollute them from a distance of thirty feet. Mathur (1977) added that Kurichiyan considers themselves superior to other communities and follows a set of practices that could be called untouchability with other tribal communities. The practice of untouchability was institutionalised as a cultural symbol and in the course of time it was subjected to transformations due to internal and external changes in the society. It is understood that the new generation of the Kurichiyan are less bothered about this system due to their exposure to mainstream societies and social interactions. Even today some of the elders in the community try to maintain this practice.

The Kurichiyan are highly religious and follow an animistic form of religion. They practice ancestral worship and offerings were given to please the spirits of ancestors. These practices are still prevalent in some of the families. According to local knowledge, the Kurichiyan is divided into four groups such as *Jaathi* Kurichiyan (located in Wayanad), *Anchilla* Kurichiyan (families excommunicated for various reasons and located in Thirunelli panchayath), *Kunnam* Kurichiyan (families located on hillocks of Kannur district) and *Pathiri* Kurichiyan (families accepted Christianity). The Kurichiyan have a distinctive system of social organisation with matrilineally based joint families, kin-based system of land governance, and cooperative farming. The collective land holding prevents land alienation and fragmentation of the *tarawad*[6] property. The unique social organisation based on matrilineal succession and subsistence-based agriculture has survived as a sustainable model of natural resource management.

A joint family of Kurichiyan consisted of 25–75 or more members. Both men and women irrespective of their age engage in almost all agricultural operations. However, men are engaged in ploughing, digging, and tilling whereas women do all other agricultural activities. It is significant to note that the joint ownership of property and labour coordination is institutionalised among the Kurichiyan and there was no hierarchical order among them for doing agricultural operations. But now the situation has changed and the joint property system started to dissolve with the introduction of land reforms, new property laws, and ownership rights. Even though leadership in traditional[7] economic pursuits often rest with the most skilled and knowledgeable persons, it is seen that this ability is not sufficient to determine an institutionalised position in the social system. It is significant to note that individuals or members of the group express themselves as social actors in the system and social institutions as a condition for the manifestation and reconstruction of social structures.

The Kurichiyan are economically categorised as an agricultural community. Their traditional settlements are found close to the agricultural fields for the convenience of doing agricultural operations. They have been engaged in agriculture for a long time and the entire social structure is designed to meet the requirements of a large joint family with

acres of land. The social institutions are also functionally linked to take forward a system focusse on joint families with collective farming. This tribal community is highly significant in anthropological literature because of their involvement in collective food production, distribution, and management of agro-biodiversity. They were considered the first agricultural settlers of Wayanad with deep knowledge in traditional paddy cultivation. The unique land management system and agricultural practices gave them a special status among other agricultural tribes in Kerala. They practised ceremonial hunting as part of religious celebrations and were experts in archery. Their traditional hunting practice shows the intimate relationship they maintained with nature especially the fauna. God Malakkari[8] was propitiated before they starts hunting and there existed procedures for distribution of the hunt. Hunting was an institutionalised activity attached to religious practices. Now hunting is almost vanished from their society due to the enactment of new forest laws, a ban on hunting, and changes in customary practices with the disintegration of joint family and joint ownership of property.

22.3 Influence of Non-Tribal Religions

As in the case of any other tribal community, the belief system of the Kurichiyan is part of their culture with its own characteristics. Some of its elements havesimilarities with other religious traditions prevailed in the wider cultural context of Kerala. The concept of untouchability restricted the Kurichiyan from making close interactions with other belief systems in their neighbourhood and even today they continue to follow at least some of the traditional traits in beliefs and practices without much change. This adherence is more visible in the traits associated with life cycle rituals. In Kerala, Brahmanical influence is larger in the rituals and practices associated with the belief system, but until recently this has not affected the local beliefs of the tribal communities, and the Kurichiyan is also not an exemption. Aiyappan wrote, "except getting the sacralised purificatory (*punyaha*) water prepared by the Brahman ritualist to cleanse their shrines ritually, the Kurichiya have no other transactions with the Brahmans" (Aiyappan 1990:78–79). At the time of rituals to remove pollution, they collect *punyaha* (sacred water) from the Brahman (also spelt Brahmin elsewhere) priest. They believe that *punyaha* has greater purificatory powers for ritual cleansing. During other occasions in life cycle rituals, they use coconut water for sprinkling and it was done by their religious functionaries.

The Kurichiyan consider Brahmins as superior to them and even today sacred water from no other Hindu castes will be accepted for purificatory rites. In the case when settlements have been polluted due to the entry of persons from lower castes and communities, they sprinkle sacred water prepared by a Brahman priest. If the Brahman priest visits the house for doing purificatory ceremonies, the Kurichiyan invite their relatives and clan heads to participate in the ceremony. Since it is a costly ritual, only economically well off families conducted it. Otherwise, they are satisfied with sprinkling sacred water collected from the Brahmin priests. Now it is significant that the elaborate kinds of purificatory rituals associated with pollution are not in function because of many reasons as reported by the younger generation. They said that the pollution related purificatory rites will distance them from other castes and communities of their area in the middle of subsistence issues. The younger generation is not interested in continuing with the tradition of purity and pollution and they do not want it to become institutionalised in the present Kurichiyan society. The Kurichiya

have not fully adopted ritual traditions and ceremonies from the Brahmanical traditions as other castes of Kerala have. Other traditions in their area have notinfluenced them much until recently as they tightly hold their own religious traditions and belief system.

The process of ostracism or excommunication due to various reasons was practised by the Kurichiyan. Adultery and breach of incest taboo are considered some of the crimes charged for excommunication from the territory. They performed rituals such as cutting a banana tree into two pieces symbolise the detachment of a woman from her natal family as punishment towards breach of taboo or adultery. The victim was considered as dead and some funerary rituals were also conducted to symbolise the death of that woman. At present the excommunicated persons live in the same area or a place away from the original settlement and some of them were converted to Christianity. It is important to see that this type of excommunication locally called *bhrashtu* also prevailed among the Namboothiri Brahman[9] families in Kerala in the 19th and early 20th centuries. This was done after a trial of caste offence conducted according to Vedic traditions. The difference is that in a matrilineal society like the Kurichiyan, both the accused were ostracised but among patrilineal Namboothiri, only woman was subjected to such an excommunication.

In Kerala, apart from a few tribal groups like the Cholanaickan (whose traditional settlements are in the reserve forest and have less interaction with other communities), other tribal families established relationships with neighbouring[10] religions such as Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. However, they very often interact with local Hindu castes and their traditions. It is seen that tribal religion has similarities with certain traits in Hinduism such as the worship of flora and fauna, worship of mother goddesses, and worship of environmental factors such as wind and fire. This made them believe that tribal religion is not far from Hinduism and the diffusion of religious traits happened in very little time (Srinivas & Shah 1968). Srivastava wrote,

> Tribes that had more Hindu traits and any who called themselves so were categorised as 'Hindu'. It is quite likely that tribes without a name for their indigeneous religion called themselves Hindu, since it was the easiest category with which they could identify, and also, it was considered to be respectful.
>
> *(Srivastava 2010:9)*

The Jain[11] society contributes a major share in the socio-cultural and economic life of Wayanad. The belief system based on Jain philosophy was opposed to the heterogeneous sects of society including the caste system and domination of Brahmanical traditions based on elaborate and expensive religious rites. Like Hinduism and Jainism, Buddhism is also focussed on the law of Karma and believes in the theory of rebirth. The belief in transmigration of the soul is prevalent in Hinduism and Jainism and the Kurichiyan believe that the soul which revitalises the human body and leaves the body after death is immortal and acts as the same way as they did in mortal life. The spirit of the dead is called *nizhal*, which literally means shadow and the Kurichiyan believe that the connection between the dead and the living is symbolically represented through the worship of this *nizhal*. Van Gennep (1960) stated that the ritual acts not only shift the individual or group from one category to another, but they are expressive symbolic enactments of the transformations. These kinds of rituals act as a meta-social form for highlighting the social relationships of the key actors, or participants in the shape of concrete images or symbols. It should be viewed as a generalised medium of

interaction in most instances linking every individual to his own culture or other cultures through significant and shared life meanings. These shared life meanings support a system or a trait to institutionalise in a structure which is exposed to the process of transformations.

22.4 Between Isolation and Assimilation of Belief System

Anthropological studies on tribal integration show the process of assimilation of cultural traits through contact with other castes and communities. The process between isolation and assimilation is highly significant from the context of cultural institutionalisation among the Kurichiyan where Hindu concepts such as Karma, purity, and pollution have adopted and assimilated in the local beliefs and practices. It is an established fact that interactions between the tribal people in Wayanad and their non-tribal neighbours have not only resulted in the influence of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism on tribal beliefs and practices but also in the transformation of traditional rituals and performances of the tribes.

The agricultural economy of the Kurichiyan paved the way for their social and economic relations with the immediate neighbours and that influences them a lot in adapting with the Hindu way of life and belief system. The close location of agricultural lands of the Kurichiyan and the neighbouring Hindus influences them a lot in adopting the Hindu religious rituals and practices associated with agricultural operations. Offering toddy to lord Muthappan (a Hindu deity not worshipped earlier by the Kurichiyan) is one among such rituals. In Kumbhappattu (a ritual song of the Kurichiyan sung during the Thira festival), a folksong in which the Kurichiyan share their belief that devils and evil creatures existed on earth and their goddess Malakkari protected the earth and the sea. The Kurichiyan are under the belief that evil spirits are responsible for the destruction of agricultural crops. According to their legends, God Malakkari invited the folk deity, Muthappan[12] to Wayanad to teach the techniques of toddy preparation to the Kurichiya. After teaching them the process of preparation of toddy, Muthappan offered toddy to the evil spirits. They started to dance in fury and Malakkari easily destroyed them. It is significant to note that Muthappan is identified in their legends and folk tales but was not worshiped as a popular deity until recently. It is also reported by the informants that the local Hindu deity Valliyoorkkavu Bhagavathi was not worshipped by the elderly Kurichiyan. Now the situation has changed and the majority of the families started to worship Hindu deities and thereby Hindu belief systems started to institutionalise in the religious realm of the Kurichiyan.

Aiyappan (1990) discussed the changes that happened in the purificatory practices adopted by the Kurichiyan with the influence of Brahmins. He wrote that for the *ucharal* (1st of Makaram (January–February), when the earth is said to 'menstruate') ceremony they used to sprinkle holy water over their shrines, houses, and fields. For routine ritual purification, the holy water prepared by a Brahman is replaced by coconut water. In order to make an adaptation to this trait and sustain it (because now they believe that keeping pollution is not supportive to their social system in the present context of Wayanad), they attribute any change in tradition to the will and command of their god Malakkari. These changes in ritual practices seem to be compromises to the high level of purity-pollution complex of the Kurichiya. According to recent information from the Kurichiyan, the use of holy water from the Brahmin priest and coconut water are still in use for removing pollution and there is no change to this practice for the last many years. Their explanation for the existence of this practice is that the same rite is also practised by other non-tribal Hindu castes of their area towards purificatory rituals.

Animal sacrifice was done as part of religious practices by some of the castes and communities in Kerala including the tribes. But the Kurichiyan have no such practices in their ritual traditions. They believe that the God Malakkari was responsible for putting an end to animal sacrifices and instead of sacrifice they offer toddy to their deities. It is important to mention the influence of Jainism in curtailing rituals like animal sacrifice in Wayanad. Later, the offering of toddy as a ritual practice became institutionalised in the rituals of tribes including the Kurichiyan.

22.5 Role of Religious Functionaries

Currently, Hindu gods and goddesses have assimilated in the religious system of most of the tribal communities in Kerala and the flexible nature of Hindu religion facilitated tribal societies with different combinations of deities, beliefs, and practices to coexist and claim to follow Hinduism. In this particular context of religious institutionalisation, it is significant to note the changing role of religious functionaries among the tribal communities. Tribal religion generally centred on religious functionaries who may also function as political heads and medicine men in most of the tribal societies.

Among the Kurichiyan, *pittan* is the senior most male member of a clan. Traditionally, pittan acquired certain roles and responsibilities such as he should not sit in the same line along with others in a feast. He should not himself perform any religious rites and rituals, but should take the help of his juniors and get it done. He should not leave his household or settlement for negotiating marriage proposals, but he can give directions to others for coordinating the function. He is not entitled to give money to the shaman for his religious interventions. In the past, a Kurichiyan Karanavan was an honoured person in the society. Religious matters related to the clan and their settlements are reported to him and his consent is formally taken for action. But today the situation has changed and with the disintegration of joint families, the central authority of the pittan has shifted to head of the nuclear families. The functional role of pittan is also limited to some of the rituals where all the family members are required to participate.

In addition to pittan, each settlement or *mittom*, has a local head belonging to the clan of that settlement. There was a third category of functionaries called *moonnaman* who is generally an elderly affinal relative (elder in age) or a person who is not related to them, but from the same community. Traditionally, in every settlement there were one or two families from outside the clan of that settlement and the selection of moonnaman was made from these families. Moonnaman generally acts as a mediator in making resolutions during conflicts and other situations where it is difficult for the pittan to take a decision. Now-a-days, these cultural traits have almost disappeared and in the place of pittan and moonnaman mainstream political workers with party affiliations started to intervene in making decisions which has resulted in social stratification. Intervention of political parties in family affairs has also resulted in the decentralisation of power and wealth from the hands of matrilineal authority to the head of nuclear families. Regarding the origins of institutionalised grading, involving the inequality in material assets and power inherited through generations, Smith and Codding (2021) wrote, "Although large-scale, highly stratified state systems arose only in the context of intensive agriculture, evidence shows that reliance on domesticated crops is neither necessary nor sufficient to generate institutionalised inequality at smaller scales" (https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2016134118). However, these inequalities and power articu-

lations depend on the way members of a social system approach modifications and changes in their respective social systems. Youngsters in the Kurichiyan community welcome the new interventions of mainstream politics as they have said that such changes can only help the community to come forward in the competitive world. However, they are not much against the role of religious functionaries and most of the religious performances. They believe that 'religion is a symbol of identity' and that should be protected.

22.6 From Warfare to Sport – Institutionalisation of Archery

The Kurichiyan were experts in archery. Logan (1887) explained the archery skills of the Kurichiyan and mentionedthe link the community had with Pazhassi Raja. They served in the army of Pazhassi Raja as bowmen while fighting guerrilla warfare against the British. It was because of the Kurichiyan Pazhassi Raja survived and continued his battle against the East India Company. The Kurichiyan revolt of 1812 showed the way they were organised to fight bravely against the policies of Britishers. They challenged the British supremacy in Wayanad and continued their struggle even after the death of Pazhassi in 1805. The fight was against the land taxes and land grabbing activities of the British. The life and property of the tribal people including the introduction of restrictions in revenue administration were threatened by the British soldiers of the Company. The agricultural products of the Kurichiyan were destructed by the Company's revenue officers and the government decided to seize their agricultural land. This resulted in a rebellion against the colonial government in 1812. The Kurichiyan were skilled and expert archers; and they fought courageously against the British.

According to the Kurichiyan informants in Mananthavady thaluk, in the olden days, they used bows and arrows as weapons of security. The large acres of land owned by them often faced attacks from wild animals and robbers. So, the self-made bows and arrows were trusty weapons for self-defence and also used for protection from the attack of wild animals. The religious significance of archery is associated with hunting, especially the ceremonial hunting which initiates the hunting season. They strongly emphasised that the frequent use of bow and arrow for ritual hunting made them good archers which helped to assist Pazhassi Raja during the revolt in 1812. Now hunting has been banned by the state government and archery became an item in sports. It is seen that KIRTADS (Kerala Institute for Research Training and Development Studies of Scheduled and Scheduled Castes), is organising an archery competition every year in the name of Sri Thalakkal Chandu, who was an archer and commander-in-chief of the Kurichiyan soldiers of the Pazhassi Raja who fought British forces in Wayanad during the first decade of the 19th century. Now, archery has been institutionalised as a sport among the Kurichiyan. Families who can afford the cost of archery training used to send their children for training in order to participate in competitions. However, the bows and arrows were maintained by the Kurichiyan with utmost respect.

22.7 Conclusion

This chapter brings into focus the way the Kurichiyan are managing to handle the manifold forces responsible for bringing changes in the domains of religious faith and practices. These are clearly visible in the changes in traditional spheres of joint family system, joint ownership of property, and matrilineal form of inheritance. Some of these changes are

intentional in the sense that they accepted these changes to adapt the transforming social and biological environment. The large-scale unplanned immigration, introduction of wrong and non-eco-friendly agricultural practices, large scale deforestation, labour migration, and political interferences forced them to change and adapt to alternative models which they are trying to institutionalise. In the case of the Kurichiyan, it is significant to note that the process of institutionalisation can be better interpreted in a multi-paradigmatic perspective. Here, the functionaries of the social system especially the religious functionaries act as mediators through which new elements are identified, included, and taken forward for the process of establishing institutionally. The external and internal accomplishments get legitimised over time through the process of reciprocities inside the social system which slowly support institutionalisation of at least some of the traditions. In the case of the Kurichiyan, joint family and joint ownership of property are some of the symbols of their identity. With the disintegration of joint family, the joint property system was also subjected to change leading to changes in traditional customary practices associated with it. It is understood that many of the rites and rituals are also replaced with the Hindu religious practices and some are in the way of transformation to become institutionalised as per its suitability to cope with the social system. It is a fact that Hindu temples, religious rituals, worship patterns and Hindu celebrations changed the mind set of the majority of Kurichiyan families. The way Hinduism was institutionalised reveals how Hinduised models and norms were executed consciously or in camouflaged ways. Those who were excommunicated from the system due to various reasons adopted Christianity with the influence of Christian missionaries of different denominations. All these show the way the Kurichiyan negotiate with the emerging wider socio-political realities of life.

Notes

1 There are five Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups in the State viz. Kattunaickan, Cholanaickan, Kurumbar, Kadar and Koragar settled in the Wayanad, Nilambur, Thrissur, Kasaragod, Kozhikode and Palakkad districts respectively (Govt. of Kerala 2017).
2 In Malayalam language, *thaen* means honey.
3 Nayars (also spelt Nair) are a matrilineal community, who once constituted a large section of the landowning class in Kerala. They lived in matrilineal joint families composed of people related to each other in the female line. As a matrilineal society, the identity of the Nayars is attached to the matrilineages and joint residences.
4 The Thiyyan is another matrilineal community in Kerala whose traditional occupation was toddy tapping.
5 The Paniyan is one of the Scheduled Tribes in Kerala distributed in the Wayanad, Kozhikode, and Kannur districts. They were bonded labourers and now they are engaged as wage labourers under other tribes and non-tribal communities in the area.
6 Fuller (1976) interprets the word *tarawad* as that segment of a descent group which constituted the matrilineal joint family, and whose members owned property collectively and lived together in one house. Tarawad composed of several matrilineages and joint residences.
7 Rukbo wrote, "Tradition means the way of living of a society practicing its socio-religious culture, economic life, the way of preserving history, literature and all others norms of social life inherited from time immemorial which may be called social character and identity" (Rukbo 2005:33).
8 Malakkari is considered superior to all gods and goddesses worshipped by the Kurichiyan. One of the legends about Malakkari highlighted that it is he who stopped the sacrifices of animals to various gods.
9 Namboothiri Brahmans are a patrilineal (except Payyannur Brahmans because they are matrilineal) caste of Kerala engaged as priests in the temples of Kerala.

10 In Wayanad the predominant number of Hindu families is distributed throughout the district and the tribes, including the Kurichiyan, have close interactions with them. However, the Kurichiyan maintained untouchability with the Hindus except Brahmans and Nayars. Number of Jain families were also settled in Wayanad, but when compared to the Hindus their population is comparatively less.

11 A number of Jain families were also settled in Wayanad but when compared to Hindus their population is comparatively less. As a religion, Jainism distinguishes the law of Karma and advocates in the theory of rebirth and movement of the soul. They believe in *ahimsa* (non-violence) and do not kill animals. This has a profound influence in stopping animal sacrifice practised by many communities in Wayanad including the Kurichiyan.

12 The main temple of Lord Muthappan is situated in Kannur, a district adjacent to the Wayanad plains. Muthappan is associated with the local beverage toddy and during religious rituals the lord is given toddy as offerings.

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23

THUS SAYS THE SUPREME GOD

Examining the Idea of Revelation in the Tribal Movements in India

G. Kanato Chophy

23.0 Introduction

In India the study of the so-called tribal religion remains pivotal to the anthropology of religion[1]. During the colonial period varieties of religious beliefs and practices of tribal people in the Indian sub-continent had intrigued travellers, missionaries, military officers, and administrators, who wrote considerably on the subject. The colonial writings on tribal religion have come in the form of expedition accounts, census reports, and monographs. In the post-independence period, there are numerous theses and books dealing with supernatural beings, magic and witchcraft, rites of passage, conversion and syncretism, and so forth. Amid these studies revitalisation movements in tribal societies, especially politico-religious types, have generated a great deal of interest among the social scientists studying modern Indian society.

In the Indian context, the socio-cultural movements in tribal societies which Anthony F.C. Wallace (1956) call "revitalisation movements" are mostly *religious* in nature, though some have been *secular*. In the latter, strong assertions over ethnicity, language, and culture have been the driving forces for mass mobilisation. Notably, the study of revitalisation movements in tribal societies generally falls under the rubric of 'tribal movements'[2].

Generally, researchers and scholars studying revitalisation movements in tribal societies have located them within the theoretical and methodological framework of identity struggle, cultural loss, and socio-economic deprivation. In the grand scheme of things, mysticism arguably appears to be the least researched dimension of revitalisation movements in India, much less a study of revelations. As observed, revelations form the basis of most revitalisation movements in tribal societies. There are notable works on revitalisation movements that focus mostly on the millenarian leaders and the socio-political implications of the movements (Fuchs 1965; Hardiman 1987; Singh 1983), but hitherto a theory of revelation has not received its due attention.

The ethnographic literature on tribal communities reveals a plethora of supernatural interventions and mystical experiences (*see* for instance Boal 1982; Boding 1940; Ghosh 2006; Hutton 1921 and Roy 1928), and owing to varieties of religious beliefs and practices it is difficult to analyse every mystical experiences of individuals and communities; never-

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theless, there are socio-economic conditions and historical realities particular to the Indian sub-continent that have generated mystical experiences and divine revelations among the tribal people. An attempt has been made to delineate these external conditions that had fostered divine revelations in light of available literature.

Undeniably, there are innumerable claims of divine revelations of varying types and motivations that may be found among the various tribal groups in India (Singh 1993); and more importantly, a belief in supernatural being(s) that communicate tangibly with humans continues to be an important aspect of tribal worldview, irrespective of religious affiliations, cultural traditions, and degrees of acculturation. However, this chapter does not concern with what I call 'individualistic-oriented revelations' - which forms a large chunk of revelations in tribal societies – that are directed towards the exigencies of everyday life like death, pain, and suffering; rather the focus is on divine revelations that have fostered what Indian anthropologists call tribal movements, involving a collective mobilisation of people. The arguments deal with divine revelations revolving around a leader, prophet, or a 'messiah' figure around whom tribal communities have attempted to, in the words of A.F.C. Wallace, foster "a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture" (Wallace 1956:265).

As mentioned earlier, the typology of tribal movements in India is not well-established; hence, millenarian movements, nativistic movements, and revivalistic movements have all been painted with a broad brush. In addition, what makes the Indian social reality complex is that *divine revelations* have been a scaffolding of various types of tribal movements; thus, this chapter has attempted to dwell on the idea of revelation and its implication in the tribal movements. The writings on tribes substantiate that revelations do not take place in a vacuum, but are part and parcel of the tribal religion and worldview. Therefore, this chapter also attempts to analyse the phenomena of revelations in tribal religion, the role of revelations in revitalisation movements, and the socio-economic and political realities that foster or influence divine revelations in tribal societies.

23.1 Tribal Religion and Revelation

Researchers studying the so-called tribal religion label it as the earliest form of religion in Indian society. Nevertheless, some scholars see less or no difference between Hinduism and tribal religion (Marten 1924:110–111 and Ghurye 1959), though they recognise the acculturation of tribes into the Hindu fold. But the traditional religions of the tribes, especially those cut off from civilisational influence, had a distinct identity, origin, and novelty of their own.

Religious scholars have come up with various theories to understand the religion of tribes or indigenous people that fall outside the purview of world religions. In the anthropology of religion, mention may be made of animism, animatism, naturism, and totemism that are believed to be the earliest forms of religion. The diverse religious beliefs and practices of Indian tribes exhibit features of what the Western scholars had identified as 'primitive' religions. Notwithstanding the diverse tribal faiths, these are believed to be influenced by the immediate environment, local histories, and common experiences of the people. Unlike the monotheistic religions, tribal religions do not base their origin on divine revelation, but the *reformed* religions among tribal communities tend to show an element of revelations similar to world religions. In the Indian context, revelations play an important role in the reformed religion or religious revivalism among tribal communities.

In comparative religion an important distinction is made between 'natural' and 'revealed' religions; in this regard tribal religion and Hinduism may be classified as non-revealed or natural religion in a sense that their principle beliefs are 'discerned within the natural order', unlike the revealed religion which 'comes from a source other than that of a human recipient, usually god' (Bowker 1997:814). The development of a belief system within a 'natural order' has huge implications in the comparative study between Hinduism and tribal religion, since there are bound to be shared similarities between the two traditions; but with regard to *revelations* tribal religion is far more enterprising, since it is based on the versatility of oral tradition as compared to Hinduism, which is foundationally based on the ancient scriptures.

Arguably, the instances of revelations in Hinduism have come largely from the folk tradition, rather than the Vedic tradition. This folk tradition where the Sanskritic Hindu gods and goddess become part of the local culturescape and worldview (Srinivas 2003 and Chophy 2019a) has proven a fertile ground for divine revelations, blurring the boundary between the tribes and castes that have been in contact for generations. The ethnographic researchers show that religious innovators from the tribal communities have drawn inspiration from their Hindu neighbours to start politico-religious movements.

A less discussed dimension of tribal religion is a belief in a creator god, which is similar to monotheistic religions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Revelations in the Abrahamic religions hinge on the notion of a powerful, personal, and conscious god; similarly, religious reformation in tribal societies have emerged significantly due to the reinterpretation of a belief in a creator god, rather than the multitude of spirits that are believed to inhabit the physical world. According to Rodney Stark, "Revelations will tend to occur when (a) there exists a supportive cultural tradition of communications with the divine, and (b) the recipient of the revelation(s) has direct contact with a role model, with someone who has had such communications" (Stark 1999:289). The primacy of supernatural beings in tribal religions and cultural contact with world religions has nurtured a strong rendition for revelations in tribal societies.

There are substantial ethnographic data to show a belief in the involvement of supernatural being(s) in everyday life; in fact, the religious beliefs of tribes has to do with maintaining a balance between the human world and the world of the spirits, which gives rise to a host of rites and rituals. A communication with the spirit world is found in most tribal religion, but this existing tradition does not necessarily translate into religious revival or revitalisation movements. To echo Stark's thesis, tribal societies possess the cultural tradition of communicating with the supernatural beings, but revitalisation movements involving divine revelations do not take place in a vacuum. In the Indian context, revitalisation movements having origins in the claim of divine revelations are predicated upon the socio-economic and political factors, and contact with the world religions like Hinduism and Christianity.

23.2 Locating Revelations Within a Broad Conceptual Framework

Revelation in essence is a type of mystical experience. The element of revelation in some tribal movements differentiates them from other mass movements in tribal societies that are derived from an insight or inspiration of a leader. A salient feature in revelation is the concept of a sentient supernatural being 'capable of wishes and intentions' (Stark 2001), making it different from the so-called tribes' 'magico-religious' beliefs and practices (Goody

1961), where supernatural beings are manipulated to do the bidding of people (Malinowski 1948).

The claim of divine revelation has kindled some of the most successful revitalisation movements among the tribal people in the history of modern India. In a comprehensive work *Rebellious Prophets,* Stephen Fuchs listed some 50 religious movements that had occurred mostly in British India. He classed them 'messianic' based on 15 characteristic features common to all these religious movements (Fuchs 1965); however, a theory of revelation was conspicuously left out from the discourse. As I see it, an enquiry into revelation has been left out in the study of tribal movements. In the West, the theory of revelation occupies an important place in the sociology of religion, since the dominant faiths in the West like Christianity, Judaism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Mormonism rest on the revealed nature of the Holy Scriptures. Importantly, the conventional view is that religious figures like Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, and Joseph Smith, Jr., who are widely-accepted revelators, have been treated as psychotics or frauds. This model of analysing revelations known as psychopathology model is an overwhelming favourite in Western scholarship (Stark 1999).

Interestingly, the scholarly writings on the founders of popular revitalisation movements in tribal societies have spared the ignominy of psychopathological interpretations that consider them as charlatans, psychotics, or both. The socio-political and cultural underpinnings usually receive huge attention in the study of revivalistic movements in tribal societies, but not revelation which is a subjective phenomenon involving the 'self', and the agency of an individual has not received its due attention; for instance, K.S. Singh in a well-known work on Birsa Munda attributed the rise of revitalisation movement to the simmering challenges of 'agrarian breakdown and culture change' (Singh 1983:30). Most scholars give a social interpretation of millenarian movements in tribal societies, but, as has been argued, not on the revelations of the leaders of the movements.

Drawing their attention to religious innovations, Bainbridge and Stark (1979) had proposed three models of revelation: a) the psychopathology model, b) the entrepreneur model, and c) the sub-culture evolution model. "While, the psychopathology and entrepreneur models stress the role of the individual innovator, the subculture-evolution model emphasises group interaction process" (Bainbridge & Stark 1979:291). Hitherto, there are no studies dealing with the founders of tribal movements subscribing to these theoretical models, nor has any model been developed to explain the Indian social reality. But within the sub-field of psychological anthropology and medical anthropology (ethnopsychiatry), researchers have used the psychopathology model to explain how individuals' psychopathology finds successful social expression (mass movements). The psychopathology model does not assume whether the ideas of the revelator are false or nonsensical, but the writings on tribal religious beliefs and practices allude to a traditional psychoanalytic view that the 'magico-religious' beliefs of tribes are mere projections of neurotic wish-fulfilment or psychotic delusions (Roheim 1955 and Freud 1964).

23.3 The Concept of Causality in Revitalisation Movements

A survey of literature on revitalisation movements in tribal societies underscores the notion of social crisis or distress to understand the phenomenon. The element of social crisis is taken as a cross-cultural phenomenon in the revitalisation movements, and several ethnographic works have gone at length to prove the point. Weston LaBarre (1972) goes to the extent of arguing that every religion has originated as a 'crisis cult', thus highlighting

the dimension of social crisis in the founding of world religions. According to Wallace (1956:269), the social crisis may encounter the members of a society as "climatic, floral and faunal change; military defeat; political subordination; extreme pressure toward acculturation resulting in internal cultural conflict; economic distress; epidemics; and so on".

In the 19th century there were hundreds of tribal uprisings in various pockets of British India. Indian historians see the source of social crisis in the colonial expansionism that leads to exploitation at the hands of outsiders; notably, scholars see the rise of religious and charismatic leaders–leaders of messianic movements – as a unique characteristic of tribal uprisings. This phenomenon is usually attributed to deprivation and powerlessness among tribal communities that make them more receptive to belief in a messianic figure. In tribal societies the social conditions leading to messianic movements may be generalised, but the charismatic leaders, messiahs, prophets, and prophetesses have come in all shapes and sizes; more importantly, the revelations and divinity claims of these religious leaders show cultural variations and distinctive religious innovations.

According to Wallace, the term revitalisation movement denotes a very large class of phenomena, which may be applied in the context of understanding tribal movements in India: "nativistic movements" are characterised by a "strong emphasis on the elimination of alien persons, customs, values, and/or materiel from the mazeway"; "revivalistic movements emphasise the institution of customs, values, and even aspects of nature which are thought to have been in the mazeway[3] of previous generations but are not now present"; "millenarian movements emphasise mazeway transformation in an apocalyptic world transformation engineered by the supernatural"; and "messianic movements emphasise the participation of a divine saviour in human flesh in the mazeway transformation" (Wallace 1956:267). The caveat is that these classes of revitalisation movements are not 'mutually exclusive categories' and often overlap, but they nevertheless have behaved as conceptual guiding posts in understanding an important socio-religious phenomenon. Socio-economic conditions and social distress have contributed to the tribal uprisings, but the revitalisation movements in tribal societies are effected by a distinct worldview and cultural experiences.

23.4 A Reflection on the Agency of Leadership in the Tribal Movements

As mentioned earlier, there are mass movements in tribal societies that may be deemed 'secular' revolving around ethnicity, language, and culture; but more importantly the Weberian charismatic authority take the centre stage in such tribal movements. The tribal movements in Northeast India that take the form of ethnic nationalism are tendentious with regard to the role of a particular leader, but the role of political leaders like A.Z. Phizo in the Naga movement and Laldenga in the Mizo movement presents a case of charismatic leadership. Notwithstanding, there are tribal leaders who led successful mass movements drawing upon the sheer capacity of ethnic identity and culture to influence the masses. The distinguished Santhal leader Raghunath Murmu who developed the Ol Chiki script did not fit the typology of a Weberian charismatic leader (*see* Weber, Roth & Wittich 1978); he was not "a very articulate person, let alone being a charismatic person. He certainly [did] not fit the description of a rebellious prophet, nor that of an inspired activist leader" (Mahapatra 1982:129), yet his mellowed activities and influential writings on the Santhal identity, language, and culture garnered him mass following and made him an impressive unifying force for the Santal community.

There is a class of tribal movements wherein the leaders spearheading the movement have drawn inspiration from the religion of dominant communities, but without the agency of a divine revelation. The Seng Khasi movement began as a cultural revival movement to preserve and promote the Khasi traditional culture and religious beliefs; on one hand the movement began as a reaction to the activities of Christian missions, but on the other hand the movement found an ally in the reformed Hindu organisations like the Brahmo Samaj and Ramakrishna Mission (Mathur 1979). Besides the publication of pamphlets and books on the Khasi socio-cultural and religious life, the leaders of the movement translated Bhagwad Gita and Hindu epics into Khasi language as an alternative to the Christian evangelism and education.

Kalicharan Brahma, the founder of Brahma movement among the Bodo was influenced by Swami Shivanarayana Paramahansa (Saikia 1982). Kalicharan advocated a socio-religious reform of the Bodo society, essentially challenging the traditional customs and practices. Besides the social and educational reforms, the Brahmo movement became noted for the repudiation of Bodo traditional religion *Bathou* with several gods and goddesses. Though Kalicharan espoused the idea of an unseen supreme power, he also introduced the Vedic Sanskritic rituals that formed a vital part of Brahminism bringing the movement closer to Hinduism.

Charismatic authority remains indispensable to the popularity of revitalisation movements in tribal societies, but not all mass movements have had the luxury of charismatic leaders. Generally, prophets and messiahs possess inherent charisma that appeals to the masses, but not all revelators have been charismatic leaders, though their divine message may successfully appeal to the masses. Arguably, the brother duo Sido and Kanhu who led the Santal rebellion of 1855–1857 (Datta 1940) were not a quintessence of a Weberian charismatic leader, but their role as revelators in the midst of a deep social crisis was the determining factor. The Santal insurrection has intrigued historians and anthropologists alike, who consider the movement as a significant political awakening for the Adivasi people in modern India, but the religious nature of the movement is further elaborated here.

The revelators Sido and Kanhu claimed to have seen the vision of supreme god *Thakur,* who commissioned them to lead the people to drive out the *dikus* (outsiders) and establish the rule of the Santals. The nature of revelation differed markedly from the communication with supernatural entities in the Santal traditional religion; besides, the revelation of the brother duo also showed important characteristics of the world religions. Sido and Kanhu were not archetypal religious innovators, since they did not set off a new religious movement, but were exemplary revelators who sought to change the prevailing social order by claiming to be the messengers of god. As mentioned earlier, the revealed religions hinge on the nature of revelation of the holy scriptures; in one of a kind, the revelation of Sido and Kanhu bore similarity to the revelators of monotheistic religions. Of course, the revelation of the brothers was colourful and vivid,

> The Thakur appeared before the astonished gaze of Seedo (Sidhu) and Kanhu; he was like a white man…he held a white book, and wrote therein; the books and with it 20 pieces of papers, in five batches, four in each batch he presented to the brothers.
>
> *(cited in Datta 1940:15)*

but the Thakur revealing his purpose to the brothers in a book in five batches strongly hinted the influence of revealed religions, since by then Christian missions had made their presence felt in the Santal territory. The possibility of the revelation of Sido and Kanhu starting off a religious movement remains a matter of speculation, given the short duration of the revelators' leadership and the political nature of the Santal movement; in comparison, the movement of Birsa Munda pivoted around his role as a revelator, but given his long career the movement traversed different shades of socio-cultural and political themes.

Birsa Munda had a genius for leadership, and the social conditions of the Munda under the British rule heralded a mass uprising, but the Munda movement revolved around his role as a messenger of god. Birsa's claim of restoring the greatness of his people and creating an independent Munda kingdom rested on the divine revelation. There is little doubt that a blend of Christianity and Vaishnavism influenced Birsa's career as a miracle worker and millenarian prophet. The spirits featured prominently in the Munda ancestral religion that made phenomena like divination and witchcraft possible, but the agency of the supreme god *Singbonga* demarcated Birsa's role as a revelator. Most importantly, the revelation of Birsa repudiated the old faith with an intent to reform it, which makes him a religious innovator unlike the case of Sido and Kanhu who remained mere revelators. It was through a dream[4] that *Singbonga* revealed a divine purpose to his anointed one; as Birsa's biographer observed, the dream was "a subconscious projection of his conflicts, his confrontations with the three enemies of his race; the judge representing the authorities, the Raja, the zamindar and the bonga, the old religion" (Singh 1983:46). The revitalisation movement of Birsa Munda is as complex as the man himself; and, arguably, no other religious innovators in tribal India achieved an elevated status as Birsa, who became to be considered as divine; notwithstanding the idea of revelation common to most revitalisation movements in tribal societies, the unique claim of Birsa as the messenger of god remains at the heart of his legend and the mass movement that he launched.

23.5 Revelations, Gods, and the Moral Order

Generally, the supreme god in the tribal pantheon resembles a deistic god that rarely interferes in the daily affairs of humans; rather it is the multitude of spirits, mostly capricious, that are the focus of tribal religious beliefs and practices. In fact, mystical experiences form an important part of tribal religion: the belief in various types of spirits enable magical practices like necromancy and divination, and other forms of mystical experiences. Dreams and divinations play an important role in the selection of sacred specialists and communication with supernatural beings and ancestors. For instance, the selection of a religious headman *pahan* among the Oraon and Munda is done through divination with a winnowing basket; while the election of a priest *naek* (*naik*) among the Santals is done by the spirits, where the spirits take the possession of a new *naek* on the demise of the *naek*. The religious specialists in tribal societies are found as priests, diviners, mediums, soothsayers, and healers; the primary function of these religious specialists is communicating with the supernatural beings or entities that set them apart from the common people, but the communication of religious specialists with supernatural beings is narrow in scope and confined to everyday life of the community.

Most revitalisation movements in tribal societies have emerged against the backdrop of exploitation, deprivation, and general dissatisfaction with the old order; besides, the tribes' cognisance of the limitations of the old belief system or worldview comes close on the heels

of culture contact with the advanced societies. Researches on tribal societies strongly suggest that British colonialism with its new policies and expansion of the state machineries accelerated the cultural contact between tribes and non-tribes. In this context, most important tribal movements have taken place during the colonial period; and more importantly, the religious revival among tribes has been influenced by the religion of dominant communities. As I have mentioned, the traditional practice of divine communication in tribal religion was limited to everyday life since the dimension of the dominant 'other' did not factor in the 'mazeway', but in order to address the crisis from without the believing community have to reinterpret the moral order, view the gods as moral and conscious beings interested in the sorry state of human affairs, and make provisions within the old belief system for a new revelation akin to the world religions. Thus, revitalisation movements in tribal societies involve a novel reinterpretation of a supernatural being and the creation of a new moral community.

The ethnographic studies of tribal communities support an important proposition in religious study, that not all supernatural beings are conscious and morally-concerned beings (Tylor 1958:446) and Benedict 1938:633). In the context of Indian society, religion as a source of moral imperatives has existed only in major religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam; this does not imply that tribal communities lack moral imperatives, but noticeably morality in tribal societies (adultery, homicide and theft) are largely understood within customary and judiciary imperative (Chophy 2019b). Mary Douglas in this context has argued that "there are primitives who can be religious without being moral and moral without being religious" (Douglas 1975:77). Noticing an absence of correlation between religion and moral order among the 'primitive' groups in India, Spencer wrote that "At the present time in India, we have freebooters like the Domras, among whom a successful theft is always celebrated by a sacrifice to their chief god Gandak" (Spencer 1896:808–809). The epistemology of a moral god is closely linked with the idea of justice, fairness, and emancipation; thus, the revitalisation movements in tribal societies involve a reinvention or reinterpretation of the image of a supernatural being.

In tribal societies, the new religious movements have involved a varying degree of repudiation of the nature of old gods or spirits that are deemed unmoral if not immoral. For a movement to be successful, a reorientation of a belief in supernatural beings has been crucial, notwithstanding the ongoing social crisis ripe for the taking. For instance, in a popular movement led by Jadonang, a Rongmei Naga mystic, the millenarian leader reinterpreted the nature of the creator god *Tingkao Ragwang* emphasising the qualities "such as omnipotence, omniscience, benevolence, justice, truth and kindness, and proclaiming that he was the most important spiritual energy or force that permeates the whole world" (Thomas 2012:412–413). In the Tana Bhagat movement started by Jatra Bhagat, the revelatory claimed a revelation from the supreme god *Dharmesh* that "the Oraon should adore the supreme god alone through 'bhakti' or devotion and that they should abandon completely 'matiao' (ghost finding), the worship of 'bhuts' or minor spirits and do away with animal sacrifice" (Kumar 2008:723).

Besides, the tribal movements originating with a religious innovator have mostly required new moral imperatives for the followers. The followers of the Rajmohini Devi movement among the Gonds in Madhya Pradesh were asked to give up drinking traditional liquor and abstain from eating non-vegetarian food, and to venerate the cow (Ekka 1982); in Jadonang's religious reform, the followers called *Kamphais* were told to give up superstitious

customs and practices, and meaningless sacrifices to the spirits (Yonuo 1982); while among the Tana Bhagat, they were on 'God's command' asked to "lead an ascetic life, abstain from meat, liquor, tribal dance and songs and showy ornaments" (Kumar 2008:723).

The most potent and successful tribal movements in India have either been religious ones or divine revelation has provided a basis even when the movements are largely political in nature. In some nativistic movements, the community projects a utopian past, and therefore the objective of the movement is to bring back the past glory (Bower 1950 and Yonuo 1982); but even in such a case the community set their house in order by giving up many 'unwholesome' beliefs and practices from the traditional culture and start behaving as a new moral community to bring back the past glory. Here, the old gods get a makeover to make new revelations and supernatural interventions possible, while the various spirits in the old pantheon are discarded or get demoted to a position of lesser beings having no role in the new belief system. The ontology of supernatural beings or gods in tribal religion has a huge implication on the nature of revelations; as ethnographic studies show the religious innovators in tribal communities have had to reinterpret the nature of god(s) and reinvent the idea of revelation to lead successful religious movements. Revamping the image of traditional gods and restructuring the moral order remain key elements in most revitalisation movements in tribal societies.

23.6 Conclusion

Presently, the agency of revelation in revitalisation movements in tribal societies has declined. The tribes' struggle for social justice, political rights, and economic freedom continue to be a part of the Indian socio-political life, but amid this the phenomenon of divine revelation rendering a mass movement or the rise of larger-than-life religious innovators have waned considerably. Arguably, the fast modernisation of tribal societies appears to be at the forefront effecting this change. The modernisation of tribes is in itself a complex aspect of study, but the concept of revelation needs to be studied in tandem with the social and cultural changes confronting the tribal societies.

The people's perception of revelation has undergone significant changes, as tribal societies become increasingly exposed to various belief systems and ideologies. More importantly, the revelators who led mass movements in the past have begun to assume new symbols and meanings in the present. The revelations of revelators or divine messengers like Birsa Munda, Sido and Kanhu, and Jadonang have become important part of the tribal folklore; besides, the life story of these tribal personalities are made part of the larger narrative on Indian nationalism, and the reinterpretation of revitalisation movements have become a means of assimilating the tribes into the mainstream. The revelation of an individual becoming a part of the community's folklore makes the idea complex because it assumes multiple meanings and interpretations, as revelation becomes malleable to the multiplicity of cultural experiences; undeniably, this changes the original intent, interpretation, and narrative of a revelator. A systematic study of revelations in tribal societies is much anticipated to understand the multi-layered nature of this largely ignored religious phenomenon.

The tribal movements in India have been largely understood through the lens of socio-political or ethnic identity (*see* Shah 2004; Singh 1982a, 1982b). Though the term politico-religious movement is a common usage, the study of tribal movements has been mostly on the socio-political implications. Here concepts like mysticism, revelation, religious innovators, and supernaturalism are least studied in tribal movements. I have highlighted the

paucity of study on the theory of revelation in revitalisation movements, and argued for a case of critically examining supernatural interventions that form a basis of most revitalisation movements in tribal societies. Within a broad framework this chapter calls for a new dimension in the study of tribal religion, and also argues for a new methodological framework of analysing tribal movements in India.

Notes

1 The definition of tribal religion is much debated in the anthropological study of religion. Since, the chapter does not pertain to the definitions of tribal religion, I have used the term tribal religion as opposed to the world religions to examine the idea of revelation found among a particular type of social formation called 'tribe' in India.
2 *See* edited volumes of Singh (1982a, 1982b) and Shah (2004) which include articles on tribal movements from various regions. *Also see* Singh (1983) for Birsa movement.
3 According to Wallace (1956:266), a "mazeway is nature, society, culture, personality, and body image, as seen by one person". Comparable to the concept of worldview in anthropology, a mazeway involves the notion of the 'self' and 'other', where the other include the physical environment, and human and non-human entities. Wallace talks of the mazeway with regard to individuals' attempt to maintain a balanced mental image.
4 Birsa Munda dreamt of a grey haired old man (*Singbonga*) who gave challenge to four persons, the *bonga* or spirit, the Raja, a judge, and Birsa himself to climb up a *mahua* tree smeared with oil and butter, and bring down a valuable object on top of it. While the three persons failed, Birsa successfully brought down the valuable object which he interpreted as the supreme god anointing him as the messenger of god.

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24

SITUATING SHAMANISM IN CONTEMPORARY TRIBAL RELIGIONS OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH

A Case Study of the Idu Mishmi

Tarun Mene and Rajiv Miso

24.0 Introduction

Religious beliefs and practices are a universal trait of human society. The fear of the unknown, the human's response to it, and thereby his or her attempts to manipulate or overpower it through rituals and ceremonies can be considered as one of the foundations on which religion endures and continues to sustain across cultures. Scholars like Tylor (1958) and Bird-David (1999) argued that in the 'savage' view every man had, in addition to his body, a ghost-soul, a thin unsubstantial human image, the cause of life or thought in the individual it animates, capable of leaving the body far behind and continuing to exist and appear to men after the death of that body. Others conceived religion as a system of beliefs as well as relationships and actions concerning supernaturalism (Chaudhury 1992:3). Yet some define it as "any set of attitudes, beliefs, and practices about supernatural powers, whether that power is forces, gods, spirits, ghosts, or demons" (Bhagabati 1998:1). This relationship between human and supernatural powers is maintained and expressed through various symbols and ceremonies, both sacred and profane, with the help of religious specialists who are considered eligible to perform it (Ember & Ember 2002:439). In a tribal society, these religious specialists are often a shaman; the institution of shamanism is its religious system and a healing practice.

Shamans are considered as mediators between the individuals and supernatural beings. They possess special characteristics, personality, and training, by virtue of which they are proficient in making contact with or propitiating and influencing the supernatural world. In the available literature, a shaman is defined as, "a person in some religions and societies who is believed to be able to contact good and evil spirits and cure people of illness" (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* 2000:1176)[1]. He is a

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1) practitioner who has developed the mastery of accessing altered states of consciousness, controlling themselves while moving in those states, and returning to an ordinary state of consciousness at will;
2) mediating between the needs of the spirit world and those of the physical world in a way that can be understood by the community, and whose mastery of the above is used; and
3) serving the needs of the community that cannot be met by practitioners of other disciplines such as physicians, psychiatrists, priests, and leaders.

(Pratt 2007:xxii)

Shamanism can be defined as a religious belief system in which the shaman is the specialist in traditional knowledge. The shaman knows the supernatural world "and human soul through 'ecstasy', the power of an altered state of consciousness, or trance, which is used to make a connection to the world of the spirits in order to bring about benefits to the community" (Walter & Fridman 2004:xi). A shaman is a medicine man, a magician, a psychopomp, a priest, mystic, or poet; and shamanism is a religious phenomenon (Eliade 1964:4). Thus, shamanism can be understood as power possessed by some persons who mediate, control, and manipulate supernatural or spiritual forces for human ends and such a phenomenon is core to the religious belief and practices of the community concerned. They are indispensably associated with the social life of the people from birth to death and beyond. The shaman, along with the institution of shamanism, not only defines the problems of humankind with the universe but also develops some sort of adjustment with his universe, provides a feeling of security in crisis, and acts as an agent of social control by maintaining a moral order as well as peaceful coexistence which on the other hand add to the cohesiveness of group solidarity (Durkheim 1964:47 and Dash & Mohanty 1992:3).

However, religion as a set of beliefs and practices and its representative characters are not eternal or static; rather they change within the ambit of the cyclical time-space. In this regard, Andre Beteille remarked,

> Religious beliefs and practices vary and change, and this has to be examined in relation to variation and change in the structure of society. No religion operates independently of specific social arrangements … Maintaining the reciprocity, religious practices and social structure are changed concurrently. Even when the intrinsic structure of a given society is changed with the effect of globalisation, education, emerging socio-political orderings or other economical reasons, it equally effects existing religious beliefs and practices. The society is either affected by the adjacent religious faiths or prevailing faiths have undergone crucial changes.
>
> *(Béteille 2006:39)*

There are ample numbers of empirical studies suggesting the case variously described as 'absorption', 'assimilation' (Bose 1953 and Ghurye 1943), 'acculturation' (Vidyarthi & Rai 1976 and Beteille 1969), and 'sanskritisation' (Srinivas 1952). Such religious transformation, especially of the tribal people not only eroded their collective religious identity but also helped in terminating many of its constituent parts, including the institution of shamanism.

In Northeast India, transformation of tribal belief system is seen on account of unsurpassed contact with institutionalised religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity (*see* Singh 1982 and Sengupta 2019). In the pre-colonial era, the Northeast experienced the

slow bonding of the Mongoloid (Kirata), Hindu, and Buddhist cultures. In the beginning small numbers of tribal population have adopted the growing religious and culture identities in the region (*see* Das 2006; Majumdar 1968 and Pal 2019). In the case of Khasis of Meghalaya, a massive religious conversion to Christianity exemplified in the second half of the 20th century (*see* Robinson & Sathinathan 2003 and Down 1983). And as a result of these phenomena, to check the unbridled proselytisation, a series of cultural revivalism movements have been noticed in the region (*see* Natarajan 1997 and Rongmei 2019).

Of late, tribal societies in Arunachal Pradesh were known to be homogenous groups, living a communal life with little dividing lines concerning various aspects of social life, including their religious belief systems. However, these are changing owing to many factors like post-colonial administrative setups, education, exposure, and interaction of tribal people with neighbouring peoples, development activities, among many others. Tribal religions remained unaffected until recently, though a few tribesmen had come to be affected by Buddhism as early as in the eighth century (Sarkar 2006). During and after the colonial phase, religious conversion had taken place among several tribes and many of them entered the fold of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity and yet many continue to profess their indigenous belief systems and practices. As a result of the conversion processes, many organisations, unions, and community based organisations are formed for the preservation of culture and religious practices (Das 2006). Despite enforcement of various anti-conversion laws in the state, Christianity has now become one of the major dominant forces leading to the massive conversion of tribes in Arunachal Pradesh.

The process and mechanism of change are also varied and its effects and consequences can be perceived in the overall outlook of the tribal people. A close examination reveals ideological and philosophical contradictions and opposing axioms in respect to various issues within the members of a given society. With such a changing situation, the social relation is drastically changing, giving rise to many new reformative social movements relating to the revitalisation and incorporation of new and old traditions, etc. The conversion processes and profession of Christian and Hindu religion by the tribal people in Arunachal Pradesh is nothing but the incorporation of new faith by withdrawing the traditional one. Whereas the emerging trend of institutionalisation process of tribal religion such as Donyipoloism, Rangfraism, Nani Innitayaism, and similar others may be looked at as a revitalisation movement of old traditional beliefs and practices. In this regard Blackburn remarked,

> Perhaps the most fundamental change is that animistic beliefs and rituals are undergoing formalisation into a 'religion' with new visual images, places of worship, and a formal theology. This systematisation worship of Donyi-Polo (Sun-Moon) places it alongside the other religions known in the area: Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Ritual practitioners have also formed a state wide association of shamans. These changes are fast-paced and largely undocumented.
>
> *(Blackburn 2002:22)*

Within this process of religious transformations and various movements of religious revitalisation and reformation initiatives, many of the core elements of the tribal religion have been abandoned or else transformed. The institution of shamanism is one such area which raises many questions for its survival and function in the context of changing tribal world today. What will happen to the institution of shamanism once the concerned group of people converts to another religion? What is the role and status of the shaman in the insti-

tutionalised tribal religion? What are the factors responsible for changing tribal religion and the institution of the shamanism? What are the processes of religious transformations? These are some of the core areas that this chapter attempts to address with the Idu Mishmi tribe as a case study.

24.1 Tribal Religion and the Institution of Igu – the Shaman

Among the Idu Mishmi, the Igu is a person and also an institution. As noted by Joseph (2012), tribal religious system consist of three essential elements. Firstly, they believe in the existence of a supernatural world. Secondly, they form a divine relationship with the supernatural world which reflects their value system. Thirdly, they practise various rites and rituals for establishing the relationship that apply to their action system and ritual language. This is true to tribal religions of Arunachal Pradesh. Tribal religions do not emerge as an independent phenomenon; rather it is deeply associated with various aspects of social structure and everyday life activities of the tribal people. Tribal societies are comparatively smaller and they possess morality, values, customs, and unique social settings, including the institution of religion which is often based on the institution of shamanism of the concerned society. The institution of shamanism is important socio-religious institution and plays a significant role and has influenced upon and conditioned every aspect of human life such as economic endeavours, political and social movements, property dealings, educational tasks, ideological fervours, scientific inventions, and artistic developments, etc. It may be considered that the institutions of shamanism are the structures on which all the other superstructures survive and have been adding new dimensions to tribal life and their development.

In the case of Arunachal Pradesh, this sacred specialist or shaman is known by different names. Among the tribes like the Nyishi, the Apatani, the Tagin, and the Galo, both the institution of shamanism and the person are called Nyibu; among the Adi tribe Miri, among the Miji tribe Kawee; the Taroan Mishmi call them Goak, and the Kaman Mishmi Kambreng. They play a significant role in the religious life of the people and their advice is sought on almost every important occasion. It is generally believed that only the shamans have knowledge of divination, and, therefore, they are summoned in case of sickness, temporal distress, death of a person, marriage; for divination before building houses, before undertaking a long journey, hunting expedition, selection of sites for settlement or cultivation, sowing in the field, and so on. They are representatives of the people to communicate their sufferings and grievances to the supernatural forces and to seek redress. In other words, they are the intermediary between the supernatural and the mortal world. They are considered a medicine specialist, healer, traditional philosopher, oral historian; and the methods employed are unique to them. They specialise in the trance state and go out of their body to the sky or the land of the netherworld. It is believed that they control the tutorial spirits, thereby making them their instrument to meet the desired purpose and help them to identify the truant forces responsible for human distress. They hold a privileged status in society. A shaman is also a custodian of belief systems and customs. He does this without the help of scriptures; and under such circumstances the responsibility to keep the tradition going is vested on them.

In the Idu Mishmi society, a shaman is called Igu. The literal meaning of Igu is ‘shield’ – the one which protects from the rain, heat, calamities, diseases, etc. In a strict sense, they are full-time religious practitioners, though in free time they may engage themselves in other day-to-day activities such as agricultural work. In this society, none can become a shaman despite one’s intelligence unless one is destined to be one. A prospective shaman would have

an inherent inclination towards the profession and he would act as attendant to a shaman and would take part in all the shamanic activities. It is believed that a mother comes to know whether her child would become an Igu or not. If a child is born with an umbilical cord around the neck, then it is a positive sign. The birth of a child in this fashion resembles the Igu wearing an *Amrala* (Igu's costume) for dance. If a pregnant woman sees in dreams the cactus tree in which the child is hung in a basket, then her child is bound to become an Igu. So does a woman, who dreams of the bird *praerru* making its nest on the roof of the house (Barua 1960:74). Dreams in most cases encourage a person to opt for Igu[2]. Having all these signs and thus acting for a few years as an apprentice of the senior shaman, one graduates himself to a full-fledged shaman. For their work, they collect fees, the nature and amount of which depends on the type of sacrifice made. They are the mouthpiece of the people to communicate their grievances and sufferings to the supernatural forces and to request them for redress – Igu is a sort of intermediary between the human and supernatural world. They can identify which unseen forces are responsible and the rituals to be performed. They do it by a form of divination.

As stated earlier, the Idu Mishmi worldview and their day-to-day activities are often influenced and marked by the presence of a number of unseen forces. These forces inflict illness on human beings and to appease them they sacrifice animals and birds (pigs, bovine, fowl) on the advice of the Igu, the shaman. The wrath of the spirits can only be removed with the help of the Igus. The Igu prescribes taboo to restrain movement and food habit of an ill person for days together. He utters hymns which are not understood by the common man. The more capable and distinguished Igu are known over wide areas and people summon them quite often. In the festivals, animals and birds are sacrificed under the supervision and direction of an Igu. He alone determines the powers that are to be represented in the altar and the mode of sacrifice that has to be performed. Therefore, in the religious realm of the Idu Mishmis, the Igu holds the highest authority. They have a distinctive and dignified position as caretakers of the physical, spiritual, and ecological well-being of the tribe. They enter a trance state and being possessed, they communicate with the spiritual beings. They wear shamanic costumes while performing rituals for treatments or healing. These costumes are the same for the male and female Igus. The dress and ornaments items are *Aweto*, a headgear made of leather, around which small sea shells are woven and a yak tail (*keya kembo kimi*) is attached at the back; *ripung*, a small drum; *Amrala* is worn around the shoulder. It is a chain tied with tiger teeth, bones, and a jaw and some medium-sized brass bells (*khondo*) and gongs are tied on the bottom, giving a musical sound while making ritual dance; *eto-ti* is a jacket with many linear designs; *athu-mabra* is a skirt with many loops worn around the waist; *aa-ambo* is a bigger drum than ripung and is cylindrical in shape; *ajuru* is a bugle made of buffalo horn; *ahu-Kochi* is a long sling bag made of bear-skin; *ambrepa* and *iruta* are two types of knives; and *to-thobra*, bamboo twigs. Shamanic chanting along with music and sometimes shamanic dance[3] and animal sacrifices are part of these rituals. They are divinely ordained with indicating signs as they grow. Every shaman has a guiding spirit (*dron*) as well as ancestral spirits who act as source of knowledge, power, and skills.

The role of the shaman is eminent and spans from the birth of a child to death with innumerable rituals. Their chants and narratives deal in interactions with supernatural powers; origin myths of the universe, of the earth, nature and human; evolution of animals, man-spirit relations; souls and their abodes (*mabra*); survival stories; beginnings of agriculture; migration; history; etc. Their role and advices are sought in almost every aspect of com-

munity life, across the institutional boundaries. Thus, an Igu represents the centrality of religious beliefs and practices in the Idu Mishmi society. Almost every aspect of life revolves around the Igu and its importance is reflected even beyond the sacred boundary since they are involved in profane activities[4]. For them, the key concept of unseen forces (*khinyu*) rules the world of the unknown, which may be benevolent or malevolent, while nourishing the concept of a Supreme Creator, known as *Inni* (Chaudhuri 2008:85).

No doubt that the functional aspects of the Idu Mishmi religious world is based upon the Igu, the shaman, but beyond this religious aspect, an Igu has a stronghold over the healing and curing of diseases, economic activities, and socio-political roles as well. Any kind of sickness befallen on one is attributed to khinyu, the spirits, as a causative factor, and as a curative measure, spirits are propitiated with offerings by conducting rituals, magico-religious acts, and performances involving an Igu dance. Any misconduct may evoke these spirits which in turn cause serious illness upon the person; and his illness could be cured only after engaging an Igu as a mediator or negotiator between the patient and spirits. This [P]atient-[S]haman-[S]pirit relationship is so strong that it is hard to find one independent of the other two on almost all occasions. This PSS relationship may be looked at as one of the most important functional aspects of the Idu Mishmi religion. As stated earlier, Idu Mishmis are essentially believers of spirits that any ailment befallen on them is attributed to spirits and this human-spirit relation is mediated only by the shaman. Of course, there are herbs and varieties of animal products known to Idu Mishmis for curing diseases, but such knowledge is not profound and as such, the concept of the medicine specialist is not popular among them. In any case, an Igu is immediately consulted and called upon as a healer to negotiate between human and spirits.

The role of Igu as a mediator between the Idu Mishmis and their world of the unknown does not last only during one's life span. Their importance and involvement are felt even before birth and after the death of a person. From the very moment of conception of a child both mother and father may undergo various rituals such as *kali-wu, arey-bi,* etc. as precautionary measures; whereas, *ah tayeh, yu arwu* rituals are performed after the childbirth as a protective measure from the spirits. During the lifetime of a person, one may observe various rituals for different purposes, such as *amra-sey, aren-bi, kali-wu, machi-wu* etc. related to ailments and protection against evils. At death, *yah* is performed (within which various rituals such as *anja, amra-sey, andomo-rowtoh, ashanjih, aluthru,* etc. are performed) for the wellbeing of the departed soul, and living family members, and for those participants of the funeral. It is followed by a memorial service or a death anniversary ritual (*bro-phri*) generally conducted at an interval of a year. All these rituals are possible only by involving a shaman and these rituals are not only meant for the departed souls and well-being of the living members but also for the prosperity, good harvest, good luck for hunting and fishing, and well-being of the clansmen, and of the whole village. These rituals may last for a few hours to one to five days and its related taboos, applicable to concerned people including the Igu, restrict them from various activities such as agricultural activities, hunting, fishing, attending funeral ceremonies, inter-village movement, eating of wild animal meat, ginger, chili, garlic, etc. These taboos may last for two to three days to months or even a year depending upon the occasion and type of ritual conducted.

In the sphere of socio-political aspects, no doubt that their social status is highly respectable, however, they are not different in their daily life from the roles played by a common Idu Mishmi individual. Their everyday routine is around agriculture, fishing, hunting, etc.,

and even some are involved in business, Government jobs. He/she may be a member of a collective effort such as in the construction of the house, cleaning of the forest for agriculture, collective fishing, and hunting, etc. but their need is immediately felt when any religious activity has to be performed concerning death, illness and diseases, epidemics, family issues, festivities, etc.

In the political arena, their involvement is extremely prerequisite when a situation arises where two disputing parties fail to reach a common consensus. In such a situation, an Igu is employed to conduct various oaths and ordeals for final justification and verdict. These oaths and ordeals include *aseye, ikuta, ata,* etc., which are conducted concerning cases of theft, quarrel, disputes, infringement of a taboo, adultery, etc. Though there exists a mechanism of mediation called *Abbelah*[5] which is arbitration in nature but the intervention of Igu is felt necessary to conduct various oaths and ordeals when people fail to arrive at a consensus[6]. In terms of economic privileges, Chaudhuri (2008) remarked,

> An *Igu* does not enjoy any special privilege in terms of economic activities, as he or she has to struggle like rest of the Idus. They need to cultivate their own land, jhum (shifting hill cultivation) or plain, and also join in some other related economic activities, viz., hunting, gathering, trapping, etc., just like any other Idus. So they are basically agriculturist having land of their own. This has been reflected in to their (*Igus*) day to day life styles as well as forms of their traditional house structure. However, with the penetration of modernity and exposure to wider economic opportunities, a few *Igus* (numbering four only) under Dibang Valley (undivided district) are working as peons in government jobs. Rests of the *Igus* are involved in traditional mode of economic activities only.

Thus, it may be said that the role and responsibility of an Igu is not only confined to religious activity but binding to all other socio-political and economic institutions of society and thereby help building a collective life of the Idu Mishmi.

24.2 Situating the Igu in the Nani Initaya Religious Movement of the Idu Mishmis

With the advent of various elements of the outside world such as post-colonial administration, the process of modernisation, education, etc. the religious institution of most of the tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh is undergoing change. The coming of greater religions, such as Christianity and Hinduism at the local level have not only influenced some sections of people to adopt this religion but also facilitated people to reconsider and revitalise their traditional beliefs and practices by carrying out various religious institutionalisation movements[7]. One such movement is Nani Innitayaism among the Idu Mishmi where an effort has been made to create images of *Innitaya* or *Maselo Zenu,* whom they consider Supreme Being. Similar movement is observed among other tribes of Arunachal Pradesh like the Adi, the Nyishi, the Apatani, the Tangsa, etc[8].

The Nani Innitaya movement has been initiated in the Idu Mishmi inhabiting region since the mid-1990s by various organisations such as the Idu Mishmi Cultural & Literary Society (IMCLS), All Idu Mishmi Students Union (AIMSU), with the involvement of Arunachal

Vikas Parisad, a unit of Bharat Vikas Parisad, eminent local leaders, etc[9]. This movement aims at preserving the indigenous belief system, and has gradually given birth to the image of Supreme Creator *Inni,* which embodies the highest ethical conception reached by the Idu Mishmi with the conceptualisation of new terminology of Nani Innitaya[10] and which is used to designate the Idu Mishmi religion. It adopts a similar pattern of Hindu form of religious attributions, such as propitiating the invented image of *Inni*, prayers with incense sticks, adoration of images with flowers, lighting of candles and *diyas,* etc. Today one may find an image of Nani Innitaya hung in Idu Mishmi houses which suggest the impact of the movement, though not at a large scale. Serious effort is not reflected in Innitayaism of the Idu Mishmis in comparison to other movements like Donyipoloism among the Tani tribes such as the Adi, the Apatani, the Nyishi, etc. However, the quest of the institutionalisation of the Idu Mishmi religion is a serious concern for them and such movement is obscurely still active and is in the everyday discussion of the Idu Mishmi individuals, among groups, NGOs, Associations, etc.

Such movements are also well reflected in many writings. It is interesting to note how Hindu legends are linked up with the Idu Mishmi culture. Singh (1995:16), highlighting the Rukmini legend, informs that "The Idu Mishmis bear the mark of punishment inflected on them by Krishna himself because they had opposed his marriage with Rukmini. The story suggests that the Idu Mishmis followed the Bhishmak tradition through centuries". This narrative suggests Rukmini as a descendant of the Idu Mishmi tribe to whom Lord Krishna married. However, it is hard to find mention of Rukmini or Krishna in any form in the oral narratives of the tribe. If there had been any linkage, then there should have been some ritualistic attribution, folklore or folktale, myth, etc, in the chanting of shaman relating to such linkage. But such elements are completely absent in the Idu Mishmi culture. This is precisely the way through which Hinduised ideas are linked with the Idu Mishmi; it is also evident through the invented images of Nani Innitaya.

Locating the Igu's position in the institutionalisation form of Idu Mishmi religion, it reveals many conundrums and ambiguity. This movement does not undertake any consideration for the institution of the shaman. The Igu takes a position in between the human and supernatural world as a mediator and negotiator and there is no possible way of direct contact between human and supernatural forces, but only through an Igu. For example, if someone falls sick, Igu detects the cause and relates it to some unseen forces or spirits. To cure the disease, he seeks blessings and power from the Supreme Being *Inni* and his tutelary spirit *dron* for self and the patient. He then propitiates the supernatural forces which are supposedly the reason behind the disease of the patient. In the process, he sacrifices fowls and animals to appease the supernatural forces. If we frame this set of relationships i.e., [P]atient-[S]haman-[S]pirit relationship, as the base for the functional role of the Idu Mishmi religion, in the institutionalised form of Idu Mishmi religion i.e. Innitayaism, we do not find any arrangements and role of the Igus. This institutionalised form of tribal religion draws on establishing a direct contact and relationship between humans and the Supreme Being Inni without the involvement of an Igu. For example, in tradition the Supreme Being Inni is formless and gender neutral. This has been altered now with the created image of the Supreme Being Inni attesting a feminine character. This image of the Supreme Being Inni is now propitiated by the common man, given floral tributes, lighting candles, and insane sticks, in an attempt to create a direct communication between human and supernatural forces. The traditional institution of the Idu Mishmi religion on the one hand and the insti-

tution of shaman (Igu) on the other hand cannot be looked at as two sets of independent institutions; rather they are dependent and interwoven in a single institution called religion. The institution of the shaman and their role is found absent in the institutionalised form of the Idu Mishmi religion. Of course, the role of Igu in the institutionalised form of religion cannot be projected similar to the role played by a priest or a *pandit* in the greater Hindu religion, but for the continuity of the Idu Mishmi religion in any form, the continuity of the institution of shaman is important.

The quest to preserve and to continue the shamanic practice in the Idu Mishmi society has now become a core agenda of the Idu Mishmi Cultural and Literary Society (IMCLS). Recently, they formed a committee called the Identification, Preservation and Documentation of Igu (IPD-Igu). This committee is entrusted to create a database of the practising shamans, and audio-video documentation of the oral traditions. The committee also looks after shamanic schools by enrolling students to learn shamanic practices under the guidance of a senior shaman of the community and both the students and the guide are provided some fellowship. Though this initiative is unconventional in nature and the practice may equate with neo-shamanic movement, this shaman school project is an effort to support younger Idu Mishmi to take up Igu as means of spiritual and economic livelihood and to create broad interest of the community in the institution of shaman. In this shamanic school two respected Igus act as mentor to prepare two fellows (*Tamro*) respectively as students for a period of two years. The fellows learn full time by staying with an Igu mentor and follow them whenever summoned for rituals. Hence, it is a practice based programme. In the end the accommodated fellows would be initiated as Igu. The IPD-Igu also works to make audio-visual documentation of all the rituals which would be transcripted, translated, and published for actual popular usage. It would be like any religious practitioners reciting from a scripted source. Logistics of the committee include provisions for shamanic costumes to the junior Igus apprentice, necessities, and aid in forming their associations.

24.3 Conclusion

Change is certain and in such a situation, a community like the Idu Mishmi which hardly stands at about 15,000 souls in total is visibly negotiating with contemporary realities. With the flooding of greater religions in Arunachal Pradesh in general and in the Idu Mishmi inhabiting region in particular, many Idu Mishmi have converted either to Christianity or Hinduism and yet some sections are engaged in the process of revitalisation of traditional beliefs and practices. These conversion and renewal movements of tribal people, basically in response to various outside elements, accommodate many new socio-religious transformations vis-à-vis new social formations. In the context of Arunachal Pradesh, the formation of All Arunachal Pradesh Abotani Nyibu (priest) Welfare Association (AAPANWA) is an example which is in response to negotiating with the new contemporary social realities relating to priests or shamans. In a similar way, the formation of the Idu Mishmi Cultural and Literary Society (ICLS) paved the way for many Idu Mishmi to deal with the new social challenges concerning the society. The institutionalised Donyi-Polo movement in the entire Siang belt is another example engaged in the process to revitalise the traditional belief system by incorporating various elements from greater religions such as Hindu and Christianity. Though such organised action is to encounter the conversion process and to preserve the tribal culture, it has added another essence of ideological ambiguity within the

members of the concerned religious group. The formalisation of traditional Idu religion with Nani Innitayaism has also reflected a similar syndrome concerning the role played by an Igu.

Without any doubt, it can be maintained that Igus are the prime component of the Idu Mishmi religion and therefore their continuity is important for the existence of the Idu Mishmi religion itself. There are various on-going movements happening now and then but still, such movements have to consider people's psychic adjustment and avoid elements of imposition in the transitional social situation. Igus are indispensable both for the socio-political and religious aspects and for this reason they have the larger authority to establish a better and prosperous social environment. Their role is so intrinsic that no religious activity can be thought of without their involvement and guidance.

With the process of conversion, there are evidences where an Igu abandoned his traditional role after adopting Christian religion[11]. With the advent of education, the Idu Mishmi are more open towards modern opportunities and there is a change in the attitude of educated Idu Mishmi leaving a tough challenge for the institution of Igu to co-exist with the preferred modern elements. The present Idu Mishmi generation are completely absorbed in the modern elements, especially in the urban area; few elders are negotiating in between traditional and modern elements and yet in the rural and remote region, people are comfortably living in the traditional system.

However, many Idu Mishmi intellectuals and reformists involved in community based organisations like IMCLS, AIMSU, NGOs, Associations, and many individuals, now and then, are restless in the quest to make a breakthrough for the preservation and continuity of the institution of the Idu Mishmi religion. Of course, the attempt at institutionalisation of Idu Mishmi religion could help bring a collective sense of the Idu Mishmi so that they may collectively represent as a single entity against any odds in the near future, but such efforts need a serious rethinking as discussed previously. As stated by Chaudhuri (2008:108), it seems that as long as village life exists, shamanism will continue to survive, though it is bound to introduce some modifications keeping in tune with emerging new socio-political transformations in Arunachal Pradesh which may lead to a 'third order reality' where one can find a combination of old and new elements of culture[12].

Notes

1 https://www.encyclopedia.com/science/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/tribal-religions.

2 Lt. Loda Meto, 60 years old, male, had such a dream. He was an *Igu* from Mayu village, Roing. He migrated from Mihundo village to the Desali village and later to Mayu Vilage at Roing. In his younger days, he dreamt of planting *kali* (herb carried by Igu for healing) and *egambo* (cactus) in front of his house. The dream would repeat again and again. At the same time, unusual things began to happen with him. His nails would come off easily and new nails would reappear within two or three days. He fell ill for 7–8 months. Thereafter, he became an Igu. Another Igu, Lt. Pachu Dele, 55 years old, male of Abali village, saw an *egambo* tree and became inspired.

3 Shamanic dances (*Igu Naya)* are performed in a team of five members in some selective rituals like *Amrase, Yah, Brocha*, etc. TheIgu dance takes formation of circular or round, procession and linear in a swaying manner.

4 For example, Ipu-wu is a ritual for administering justice and this is undertaken through an elaborate ordeal system. They have a strong belief in the existence of supernatural forces that help in divulging the truth and separating the untruth. The decision making process of Igu associated with the ordeal system is called Ipu-wu, where the presence of an Igu is required for justification

and settlement of incongruity between the aggrieved and the accused. The ordeal system is opted for when the property of an individual has been stolen and he suspects a person, then the second person prefers to prove his point through Ipu-wu. The case may be the other way round like adultery and the spread of false statements or rumour (Etho). The Igu is needed to bring out the truth. There are four types of ordeal:

1. holding the molten lead in the palm
2. holding the hot axe (or iron)
3. dipping the hands in the boiling water
4. eating the meat of the wild animal

The Igu curses and casts spells to divulge the truth and if the accused is innocent, then he comes out unharmed. In the case of eating wild meat, the Igus cast spells on the accused and curse him to death, if he is guilty. The accused is fed the wild meat. If the accused is guilty then he has to die after four days of consumption of the meat. The ordeal can be performed by someone else on behalf of the accused or aggrieved as in the case of Naputi Misu of Hunli village. A brief case study is presented here:

Naputi Misu of Hunli village, faced ordeal on behalf of accused Anjo Misu. Ange Misu (aggrieved) accused her sister of stealing Rs.200/-, so to prove her point Anjo Misu called upon Igu Songe Mega, to perform Ipu-wu. She chose Naputi Misu to dip his hands in boiling water on her behalf. Later he came out unharmed. Ange Misu had to pay compensation of Rs.500/- to Anjo Misu and Nputi Misu. The chant of the Igu continues for an hour. There is no use of costumes or sacrifice. The person summoning Igu pays in kind, a fowl or a dao.

(Informant: Buke Miso, Male, 60 years old, of Hunli village. Date of interview: 22.12.2020)

5 This *Abbelah* may consist of two to three persons who are well versed in traditional knowledge and specialised in settling disputes through negotiation and mediation.

6 The role of Igu sometimes goes beyond the cultural boundaries. Late Gula Linggi (shaman) of Iduli village, Roing circle, was popular among the Nepalese and Assamese people of the region. He was often called upon for the performance of healing rituals, oaths and ordeals in relation to theft, disputes, etc.

7 With the conversion of people to other religions such as Christianity and Hinduism, construction of a church and temple has started in many Idu Mishmi villages like Mayu, Cheta, Koronu, Anini, Rukmo, Emuli, etc.

8 For example, the Adi, under the umbrella of *Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang,* a voluntary organisation of the Adi, started professing *Donyi-Polo* (Sun and Moon) cult in an organised manner at *Gangging* similar toa place like temple, church, or monastery considering it as a central place for worship with written texts with numbers of sacred songs. They have maintained regular prayer days on Saturday and Sunday every week and textualised their oral tradition to popularise such belief system. Almost in all the villages in the Siang belt, this formalised practice of Donyipoloism is observable. Incorporation of such ideas is primarily aimed to protect and preserve the traditional belief and practices. Such initiative and ideas do not spring out of nowhere, rather it is in response to encounter the process of conversion activities of tribal people by the missionaries and other similar agents. Such shielding efforts of the locals have again brought a new philosophical contradiction within the locals themselves. While working among the Adi Tangams of Tuting, Jedo, and Kugging villages of the Upper Siang District, the researcher witnessed the coming of Donyipoloism and Christianity entering maximum families but on the contrary, there are families who claimed that they are neither follower of *Donyipolo* cult nor Christianity. Interestingly for this section of people the ultimate Supreme Being remained *Donyi* and *Polo* (Sun and Moon) but not the institutionalised form of *Donyipoloism* based on a systematic pattern of propitiation. Such attitude of the people simply reflects the ideological contradictions within the followers of Donyipolo cult. Such is clearly visible even between the Christian and non-Christian followers in a given community.

9 In one occasion in 1997–1998 the first author himself witnessed a programme where some eminent personality of the Idu Mishmi community offered Hindu form/pattern of puja to the image of Nani Innitaya in the Rekho, the community hall, at Cheta Village, Roing, the District Headquarters of Lower Dibang Valley District.

10 The concept of Nani Innitaya is coined from the term Innitaya *or* Maselo Zenu (the sun) whom the Idu Mishmis regard as supreme god. This Sun god among the Idu mishmi is gender neutral, if we consider the views of shamans. However, in the process of institutionalisation of the Idu Mishmi religion, the prefix Nani meaning Mother is added to it, thus to give a feminine gender identity.
11 Andro Elapra of village Ashali, Roing Circle, abandoned his Iguship after conversion to Christian in the year 1998.
12 This was used by A.C. Bhagabati (2002:47–50) in order to explain emerging Arunachalee societies where one can find a combination of old and new elements of culture.

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PART 7

Politics and Tribal Religion

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25
TAMIL FOLK RELIGION
Contemporary Dynamics

Lipika Ravichandran

25.0 Introduction

In August 2019, I participated in a *Keda Vettu Virundu*[1] ritual dedicated to folk god Agarathiappan, the *kaval deivam* (guardian) of the Keelavari village in the Upper Palani Hills of the southern Western Ghats of Tamil Nadu. For appeasement of Agarathiappan, the sacrificial ritual was organised by a Kallar[2] clan. An elder member of the clan narrated the story behind the ritual:

> My father and all his seven siblings faced a premature death. A few days before their death, most of them dreamt of a fearsome man chasing them for their lives. We could not comprehend the reason behind their dreams. Recently, we found out from one of the elder Chakkiliyars[3] of Keelavarai village that our grandfather, the then *maniyam* (village headman), gave an unjust verdict to an innocent Chakkiliyar woman at the village *panchayathu*.[4] She performed *adichuviluthal*[5] at the Agarathiappan shrine and committed suicide. The innocent woman's curse is upon our clan, and Agarathiappan is taking the lives of our clan's male members prematurely.

The *kodangi* (shaman) of the Agarathiappan temple interrupted Kodiveeran and narrated Agarathiappan in a frightening manner:

> The suggested interpretation of the name Agarathiappan is 'the angry deity'. Agarathiappan – omnipotent, absolute, and all-pervasive – is beyond fear and finite existence and is therefore, believed to protect his devotees against fear and give them eternal peace. Every night Agarathiappan rides around the village to protect it from ghostly dangers. We regard him as a good and benevolent protector. He guards our fields, crops, and herds, and drives away our enemies. Agarathiappan is also a malignant spirit who haunts his betrayers and enemies by bringing calamities to the individuals. Agarathiappan's worshippers purportedly appease him in the past with human sacrifice; today, we appease him by offerings of the blood of swine, goat, sheep, cock,

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> and other animals or by cooked food and strong liquor. He is worshipped regularly or periodically, or when he shows signs of anger through premature deaths.

An elder Chakkiliyar woman continued the narration of Agarathiappan:

> Apart from humans, he protects other animate and inanimate objects within the Keelavari's sacred geography which is his abode. He is the protector of Sholas[6] which is our *kovil kadugal* (sacred grove). We are forbidden from tree felling, cattle grazing and hunting of animals, and deadwood collection. Agarathiappan punishes those who violate these rules and I have witnessed many violators are punished by instant death of individuals or their cattle. Our panchayathu also punishes them with fines ranging from money for the village to a feast for the villagers.

The elder Kallar continued his narration:

> As per the *kodangi's* request, we are organising keda vettu virundhu to appease Agarathiappan and the Chakkiliyar community members. I pray to the fearsome Agarathiappan to take away the curse upon my clan and shower blessings to us and our progenies.

In the folk ritual, I witnessed through deterrence a virtue of environmentalism; communal harmony in the form of brotherhood prevails amongst the people of Keelavari village. Besides, the working of the panchayathu is based on the folk deities. Their impartial judgments result in the amicable settlement of disputes and differences, leading to harmonious living. Apart from this, various myths of folk deities relating to the establishment of justice enhance the belief of the people that these deities punish wrongdoers and come to their rescue when needed.

The transactionality of the folk religion deals with the transactions between the villagers and the folk deities. The devotees' prayers for being cured of their diseases, their protection and protection of their cattle against infections, and fulfillment their wishes, and their subsequent offerings as a thanksgiving to the deities and various kinds of offerings are important in the traditions of folk worship. Undoubtedly, there is an unbreakable bond between the villagers and their deities, adding an essential dimension to the folk religion, namely transactionality. What the villagers give (different kinds of offerings) to the deities and what they get from them (protection, communal harmony, and so on) constitute transactionality of the folk religion. The syncretism of major religions with the folk religion results in peaceful coexistence of people with various faiths and helps in maintaining the communal harmony.

The transactionality has an interactive space and all the major religions are found accommodating folk practices. It is evident in Roman Catholicism and Islam with the Tamil folk religion (Bayly & Kolff 2012:59). The folk ritual practices of animal sacrifice, tonsuring, and spirit possession dance are common occurrences in a Catholic church and a Sufi *dargah*. The Lady of Health shrine at Velankanni, in Tamil Nadu is an important Catholic pilgrimage centre. Apart from Christians, a large number of Tamil Hindus flock to this Catholic church to be cured from their illness. The 'Virgin Mary' (Lady of Health) is revered as 'Mari' (Mariamman, a Tamil female folk goddess believed to possess healing power) by the Tamil Hindus. It is also believed by the worshippers that the present day Catholic shrine was built over an Amman Kovil (folk temple). In St. Antony's Shrine at Tuticorin animals

are sacrificed as a reverence to the Catholic saint. Similarly, at Nagore Dargah, the tomb of sufi saint Shahul Hameedd Nagoori, the Tamil Hindus throng for their wellbeing. Muslim priests are known for curing evil spirit possesseing humans, wherein they would pray and tie a *thayathu*[7] around their neck, and it is believed that people are energised with positivity and the evil spirit is warded off. The syncretic tradition of the folk and the Brhamanic Hinduism has a long history. But in recent years, a trend has been noticed where efforts are directed to return to folk tradition from the Brahmanised version.

25.1 Religious Environmentalism

In Tamil Nadu, the subaltern mass includes Other Backward Classes (69%), Scheduled Castes (19%), and Scheduled Tribes (1.10%), who follow a religious tradition that is deviant from the popular Brahmanical Hinduism which incorporates various tribal religious elements like polytheism, ancestor worship, animism, demonolatry, totem worship, etc. These religious practices constitute the Tamil folk religion. Folk religious rituals are all-pervasive in a Tamil's life. Tamil folk tradition goes back to prehistoric times, where the customs and traditions revolve around the people's emotions. Folk religious tradition is mainly animistic in the form of nature and ancestor worship, accompanied by bloody animal sacrifice and a follow-on feast (Chellaperumal 2004:136). The culture is of the folk, different from the Vedic Brahmanism, which is concerned with the worship of the *puranic* and text-based Hindu gods like Siva, Vishnu, and Brahma and goddesses like Parvati, Lakshmi, Sarasvati, and Durga. To understand the forms and features of folk traditions, it is important to distinguish folk religious practices from that of the Vedic Brahmanism.

Folk religion refers to religious complexes of peasant and rural societies and differs from mainstream religious traditions (Eliade 1987:277–278). As far as the Indian sub-continent is concerned, its religion can broadly be divided into the Classical Hinduism (or) Vedic Brahmanism and the folk religion. The latter is very much regional, complex, and fluid in nature. In recent years, researchers have considered the folk tradition and the classical tradition as opposed to each other. They hold that the folk culture is a counter-culture (Muthiah 1998:3).

The people of each village, particularly people belonging to a particular community/tribe, consider themselves as a separate entity having their own god/goddess and perform their own religious activities. Thus, to the folk religion, the social group is more important than the religion (Blackburn 1985:64). Coordination and religious activities take place based on particular social groups. Thus, it is the people's groups that administer the folk religious activities. In the Vedic Brahmanism, there is more uniformity due to textual controls. In the folk religion, there is no text to control or establish a fixed pattern (Whitehead 1921:61). In other words, the folk religion is continued by oral tradition and the prevailing changes in the relationships among the different communities.

Like the pan-Indian myths, the folk religion, too, has its tales. Whereas the former myths relate to the origin of the world and the cosmic order, the folk tales are associated with mundane matters and the lives of the folk people (Whitehead 1921:64). The former is textual, and the latter is oral. The Vedic Brahmanism has prominent temples built according to the Agama texts[8]. The dwelling places of folk deities are a rough, shadowy ground, the bottom of a tree or a hilltop. As the representation of their guardian position, most deities have their shrines on the periphery or outskirts of the village. Hence, the villagers refer to

them as 'peripheral folk deities' or 'guardian deities. But the gods of the Vedic Brahmanism are found at the centre of the village (Masilamani-Meyer 2004:85).

Brahmanical temples are concerned more with the life hereafter and the life of human on the Earth. But, the folk deities are concerned only with life here and never with the life hereafter. Folk deities' shrines have no uniformity. They live in sacred groves, under a tree or in a small brick building of various shapes and sizes, with a rough figure inside (Whitehead 1921:67). In the folk religion, images of the deities are not carved out in stones, but are mostly made of terracotta. The *pusari* (priest) of the folk temple is always a person other than a Brahman. Apart from *pusari*, a *kodangi* has also to be there, through whom the folk deity converses with the people. The folk gods are generally fond of non-vegetarian food, and so animal sacrifices are offered to the folk deities. But the deities of the Vedic Brahmanism are fond of vegetarian food only (Balasubramanian 1990:45). Moreover, animism, in its broad sense of spirit worship, is the cornerstone of the Tamil folk religion, where ancestors, water bodies, and forests are worshipped.

Forests occupy a crucial place in the Tamil folk religion. Forests, ranging from subtropical thorn forest to tropical montane evergreen forest, of Tamil Nadu, are worshipped as *kovil kadugal* (sacred groves). Sacred groves are small patches of forest left untouched by the inhabitants. They are preserved in adherence to religious and cultural traditions. The traditional practices of protecting these sacred groves owe their origin to the hunting-gathering stage of the society (Gadgil & Vartak 1974). The people of this stage realising their dependence on nature and natural resources began to worship nature as god. When the felling of trees increased, they felt the need of managing the forests judiciously. Hence, they circumscribed patches of the original vegetation, treated them as sacred, and protected them reverentially. In India, sacred groves and trees continue to be important in religion, culture, and resource use systems. In all of India, there are 13,270 sacred groves: of these groves, 448 are in Tamil Nadu (Swamy, Kumar & Sundarapandian 2003:54).

In Tamil country, the villagers, both tribes and non-tribes from time immemorial, have a tradition that these sacred groves are protected by specific folk deities, who are ferocious by themselves or assisted by one or more ferocious deities. This fear of gods has played a vital role in the conservation of species diversity (Gadgil & Vartak 1974). Today ecologists say that these sacred groves are the remnants of the native vegetation of a particular region. They probably indicate the heroic efforts made by local tribal communities to protect and preserve their natural forest tracks against the attempts of more advanced settlers to clean the forests for cultivation and settlements (Swamy, Kumar & Sundarapandian 2003:53–55).

The sacred groves of Tamil Nadu are small in size, ranging from half hectares to 20 hectares in dry places and ranging from 200 to 400 hectares in areas where they are a part of the Western Ghat chains. These groves, the home of the local flora and fauna, represent many biosphere reserves, making them an essential part of the conservative process. The rich plant life helps to retain the sub-soil water and, during the summer months, the sacred pond in the grove is often the only source of drinking water. These groves are a unique form of biodiversity conservation and are living examples of the Indian tradition of conserving the ecology of natural heritage (*see* Krishna & Prabhakaran 2005). There is a decline of sacred groves due to various factors, mainly people's non-observance of religious tradition in preserving them. State control/ownership of sacred groves through the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 and numerous state legislations like Tamil Nadu Forest Act of 1882 have deeply undermined the traditional rights of the communities. In many

cases, as per the scientific management of forests, the local communities have been alienated from their traditional folk rituals linked to sacred groves. This has diminished the environmentalism instilled by the religion and has led to increased human activities such as deadwood collection, biomass gathering, lopping of tender branches, and green leaves for goats, creation of footpaths, cattle grazing, quarrying of sand and clay for brick-making, collection of wild fruits and vegetables, and also collection of plant parts for medicinal uses; all these are affecting the ecology of the sacred groves. In addition, invasion of exotic weeds has become a serious problem in the ecology of some sacred groves. Moreover, owing to modernisation and urbanisation, the sacred groves become cities and towns. For example, *Katampavanam* or the grove of kadampa trees has become the present Madurai city[9].

The guardian deities of sacred groves are made up of clay, and people honour these deities with votive offerings of terracotta horses, bulls, or elephants to fulfil their vows. These terracotta horses are arranged in rows under the shade of trees. The guardian deity is believed to be patrolling the grove and the surroundings every night mounted on a ghostly steed. Every year, figures of these deities must be renewed. These figures are made of clay, representing the earth, symbolising the birth of new plants, animals, and human offspring. This shows the cyclic role of the clay. The votive offerings – the horses, bulls and elephants – are always made of clay and left in the open to return to the clay/mud where they came from in course of time (Amirthalingam 1998:40). The making of terracotta is a matter of great significance, and the dedication of the horse is a major event involving the whole village irrespective of tribe and non-tribe households. The horses range in height from 12 inches to 20 feet, depending on the financial condition of the devotees (Amirthalingam 1998:47).

Another dimension of the folk religious environmentalism is water conservation through *kovil kammai* (sacred tanks) in the drought prone plains of Tamil Nadu (Krishna & Prabhakaran 2005). Tamil Nadu is predominantly drought prone lying in the rain shadow region of the Western Ghats. The erratic nature of rainfall is the causative factor of drought. Owing to the lack of major river systems and insufficient rainfall, people of this region of India often face scarcity of water not only for their cultivation, but also for their domestic use. In spite of these difficulties, people cultivate their lands with the help of water from the irrigation tanks that are stored by way of rain harvesting and the rain fed rivers (*see* Krishna & Prabhakaran 2005).

The people of this region have come out with a judicious water management system based on the folk religion to avoid disputes and quarrels over sharing of water for irrigation. On the banks of almost all irrigation tanks, there is a guardian deity who brings rain to the village and increases the agricultural yield, and guards the irrigation tanks and agricultural fields (Masilamani-Meyer 2004:5). This is a common scenario in tribal, non-tribal, or mixed villages. Besides, people believe that if anybody does the wrong of drawing more water than what is due, for his fields, he will be punished with a very meagre yield and with some hardships. It is found that most of the villages have a good water management system based on Ayyanar cult[10]. This wonderful water management system has helped the people to engage in agricultural activities peacefully and also share the water in a just manner[11]. The land owners appoint a man called *neerpichi* or *paravai* for each sluice to regulate the flow of water to the needy fields in an impartial manner. This man is afraid of the Ayyanar

of the irrigational tanks and so he does not favour any landowner with more water than is necessary.

To avoid wastage of rainwater, water from the catchment areas through canals is brought to the irrigation tanks. In this way, all the tanks are connected, and so the surplus water is never wasted. The tradition of letting almost all the tanks filled with water is based on the folk religious faith that Ayyanar is a god of justice, ensuring equal distribution of water. So, the tradition is being observed even today. During the rainy season, the tanks are full of water. Thus, the water is saved for the needs of the temple and it is also used as potable water by the villagers. Owing to the fear of deities, people dare not to misuse or pollute the water in the sacred tanks. From the beginning of March with the onset of summer season, water starts depleting in the sacred tanks. In the Tamil month of *Panguni* (March15-April 15), the sacred tanks become almost dry. Folk festivals begin in the Tamil month of *Masi* (February-March). The religious festivals serve the social purpose of maintaining the sacred tanks to harvest rainwater during the summer and rainy seasons[12]. Desilting of the sacred tanks is associated with religious ceremonies during these festival times. So, when the sacred tanks are dry, it is easier to desilt them and keep them ready to preserve rainwater. During the festivals, *senkaivettu* (desiltation of the sacred tank) is a part of the celebrations on a particular festival day. This clearly shows the religious fervour and their devotion to the gods with which they carry out the work of desilting as a service to the temple and the village. Thus, desilting of sacred tanks as a religious ceremony testifies that the folk religion's role is indispensable in the maintenance and preservation of water resources for drinking purposes.

25.2 Hinduisation and Revivalism

Tamil Nadu since prehistoric times is considered to be secular and the non-Brahmans dominated the religious sphere; folk worship played an important role in their everyday life. The Hinduisation of Tamil folk religion is a historical process. The process of Hinduisation in society with regard to south India came into effect only after the Pallavas' rule. Then it continued during Cholas, Pandyas, and the rule of chieftains. They gave preference to the Brahmanical Vedic community who influenced all the spheres such as social, economic, political, and cultural life. They slowly influenced religion too and emerged as a priestly class to the non-Brahman temples (Xavier 2009:34). The thing to be remembered is that they never allowed lower castes and subalterns to become priests in traditional temples.

One such example of the earliest Hinduisation is that the deity Murukan worshipped on a broader level was previously a folk deity. He demanded blood sacrifices from his devotees. Valli was his wife. He was first assimilated with the Vedic religion. He got names such as Shanmugha, Karthikeyan, Subramaniyan, and also was made the son of Lord Siva. Deivayanai, the daughter of Indra was made the wife of Murukan. His original wife belonging to the Kuravar community was made his second wife. Now, Lord Murukan has been represented within the pantheon of the Hindu gods, especially under the Saiva tradition. Hence, Murukan is the first victim in the cultural battle between the Vedic and Tamil folk people.

The present and on-going process of Hinduisation involves the systemic conversion/equalisation of a multitude of guardian folk deities as Vedic gods. Even in this, not all the folk deities are Hinduised. Only the popular male and female deities such as Ayyanar, Madurai Veeran, Mariamman, and Ankallamman are Hinduised and the unpopular deities

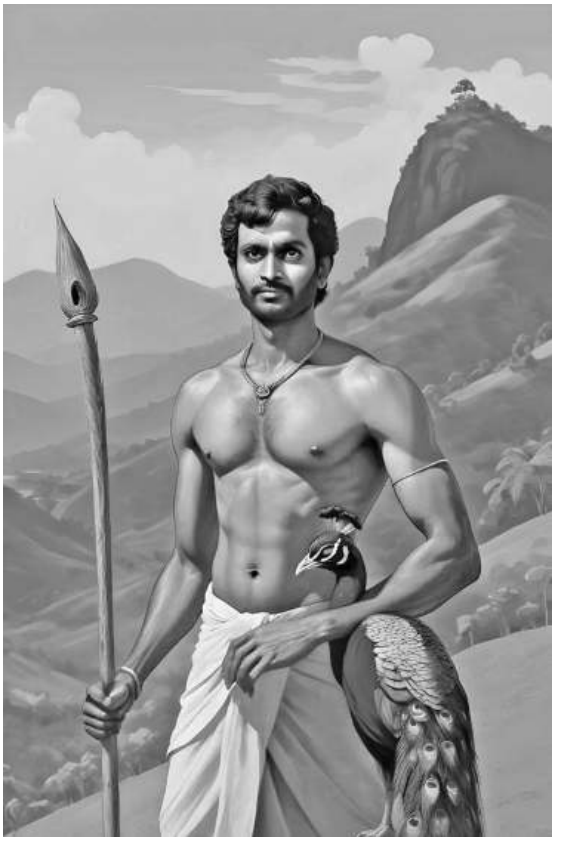

Figure 25.1 NTK's Illustration of Lord Murukan
Source: NTK's official website

like Agarathiappan of Upper Palani hills are out of its purview. The process of Hinduisation of folk deities is non-linear across the Tamil geography; through cross examination we can delineate various methods of this process. Some of the prominent methods of the process are installation of Vedic deities in the temples of folk deities, creation, and restructuring of Vedic *sthalapuranas*[13] which emphasise the relation between the folk gods and goddesses with any one of the gods and goddess of Vedic religious tradition, performance of rituals and worships by Vedic priests in folk temples, creating aversion over the blood sacrifices, attempts at giving a benign look to ferocious folk deities, popularisation of *agamic* forms of worship, and extensive temple building activities (Xavier 2014:38).

Apart from Hinduisation, the modernisation and associated economic prosperity have resulted in people's attitudinal change[14]. When a village or town is expanded due to new settlements, the folk temple in the boundary is drawn inside the village or town. This change in the temple's position makes it adopt some of the features of the Vedic Hinduism by incorporating the Hindu deities like Vinayakar, Hanuman, and Navakiragam, expanding the temple, performing *kumbhabhishekam*[15] and so on. Until then, the icons were considered mere stone statues. Only after the *kumbhabhishekam*, it is believed that the gods and

goddesses gain power and life. Appointment of Brahmans as *pusaris* and chanting Sanskrit mantras are the other aspects of Hinduisation of the Tamil folk religion.

Another type of upward mobility found in the folk religion is the augmentation of festival days. Generally, folk festivals are conducted only for a shorter period. But in the Vedic tradition, celebrations are performed for more than ten days, called *Brahmotsavam*. This feature of the Vedic Brahmanism is now absorbed in the folk religion[16]. The above describes how the roots of Hinduisation have been heavily entrenched into the waters of the folk religious rituals. The water has been completely absorbed by the roots and has given way to a full-grown tree of the Brahmanical Hinduism.

Predominance of the Hindutva ideology in governance since 2014 has catalysed the Hinduisation or the pan-India Hindu homogenisation process, which is also associated with many counter reactionary sentiment movements. Radical right-wing Tamil outfits like *Naam Tamizhar Katchi* (NTK) (We Tamils Party) wanted to grab a political space by utilising the anti-Hindutva sentiment of Tamils. NTK wants to glorify Tamil culture by reviving its rich ancient history. It claims that the Tamils have lost their prestige due to medieval Brahmanical-Aryanisation and modern Dravidian politics. NTK, in its endeavour to bring back Tamil's lost glory, wants to de-Aryanise Murukan and redefine Murukan as *moopatan* (forefathers) by citing the Sangam Murukan (நாம் தமிழர் கட்சி – *Naam Thamizhar Katchi* 2018).

We can better understand Tamil culture through the interpretations of Lord Murukan as 'Sangam Murukan' and 'Puranic Murukan'. The interpretation of Lord Murukan as the forefather of Tamil people can be traced to the ancient Sangam literary works. The various Sangam poems vividly describe the valour, youthfulness, and warring skills of Murukan, who lived in the early Sangam period, and how he protected his people from enemies. Tamil literary works such as the Tholkappiam, Pattuppattu, and Ettuttokkai establish that the socio-cultural and religious life of the ancient Tamil people revolved around the Murukan. The Tholkappiam, the most ancient and authoritative Tamil grammatical literature, describes Murukan as the head of Kurinji Nilam (hill areas) and worshipped by various tribes like Kuravar, and at present, we can locate Murukan temples at numerous hillocks across Tamil land. Various Sangam literary works describe Murukan as a ruler who ruled a part of the lost Kumari Kandam/Lemuria and he was revered by the Tamil people for his valour. Ancient Tamil people venerated Murukan's valor through *nadugal* (hero stone) worship. ***Nadugal*** worship is a precursor to the contemporary Kula Deiva Valipadu (tutelary/tribe deity worship), a folk religious tradition ubiquitous in Tamil culture. Sangam literature, the Kurunthogai, reveals that Murugan was venerated through the practice of animal (goat and fowl) sacrifice and the follow-on community feast by the worshippers.

Puranic Murukan is associated with various names of Skanda/Kandha, Subhramainya, Karthikeya, and Saravana Bhava, which are Sanskrit in origin. The Skandapuranam, a medieval literary work, has put Murukan in the pantheon of Aryan Gods through its puranic stories. Accordingly, Murukan is considered the second son of Lord Shiva and Parvathi. Agnihotram Ramanujam Tathachariaar, a renowned Vedic scholar, in his book Indhu Madham Engay Pogirathu (*Where is the Hindu Religion Heading Towards* (2014)) have elaborately described how Brahmanical-Aryans hijacked the ancient Tamil cultural elements, including Murukan. He has interpreted various slogans of the Skandapuranam and defined the obscenity associated with multiple Sanskrit names of Murugan. The medieval Tamil Bhakti literary works are based on the veneration of the pantheon of Aryan gods,

Figure 25.2 Raja Ravi Verma's Painting of Lord Murukan
Source: Wikipedia

including Murukan. Though contemporary worship of Lord Murukan by Tamils is through the Brahmanical Vedic rituals, it is equally dominated by various folk practices. It includes *pathaiyathirai*[17], *kavadi* tradition[18], tonsuring, and offering of goats and fowl to the temple (though not sacrificed). The folk practice of Murukan worship is an integral part of the popular Tamil sentiment.

In its endeavour to de-Aryanise Murukan, NTK has released a new portrait of Lord Murukan, which differs from Raja Ravi Verma's portrait having been inspired by Sanskrit epics Puranic texts and containing Aryan elements (Figure 25.2). NTK's portrait of Murukan as a dark-skinned muscular man with a fiery moustache connects well with the Tamils and reinforces the popular Tamil folk sentiment[19] (Figure 25.1). By reviving the popular Tamil folk sentiment, NTK has emerged as the third largest political party in Tamil Nadu in the recently concluded 2021 assembly elections with a vote share of around 7%[20], which has increased from 1% in 2016 assembly elections.

25.3 HR&CE (Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department) and Traditional Community Rights over Folk Temple

The Dravidian movement's social justice began by striking the religious sphere of Tamil society and thereby bringing equality of opportunities and accessibility. The formation of the South Indian Liberal Federation (Justice Party) in 1916 is the starting point of the Dravidian movement. Under the 1919 Montagu-Chelmsford reform of diarchal administration, the Justice Party took part in the presidential governance through the direct election and formed ministry during 1920–1926 and 1930–1934. The Justice party championed the social justice of non-Brahman Tamils in colonial India. One of its pioneering reforms was the state control of the temple and its properties, thereby putting an end to Brahmanical hegemony in the religious sphere. In 1923, the Madras Hindu Religious Endowments Act was passed by Madras Presidency and subsequently, the Government constituted 'The Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments (HR&CE) Board'. The creation of the board was an antecedent move towards the de-Brahmanisation/de-Sanskritisation of Tamil temples. In independent India, the board was modified as a department in 1960 and it controls more than 44,000 temples, including *thiru kovilgal*[21], *grama kovilgal* (village/folk temple), and religious mutts. In 1970, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam government amended the HR&CE Act to abolish the tradition of appointment of priests on a hereditary basis. For the first time, the priesthood at Tamil Hindu temples was made open to non-Brahmans. Though this law ran into legal hurdles, it provided the belief to men from all castes that they too could enter the sanctum sanctorum. Ultimately, the 2006 law passed by a subsequent DMK government completed the reform process. Though the HR&CE department strives for social justice in the religious sphere, its takeover of folk temples undermines the traditional rights of folk communities.

While consolidating the multicultural Indian sub-continent as a modern state, the Britishers, with the aid of Indian elites, as 'social engineering', classified the Indian population into imagined objective identities of religion, caste, and language, which do not reflect the actual social realities (Mann 2015:169). Through the periodic censuses, the Britishers confronted the problem of Indian social orders by the imagined and constructed identities of castes. And the current caste-based tensions prevailing in Tamil Nadu can be attributed to the constructed political identity of castes. The recent takeover of Pekkaman Karuppasamy temple by HR&CE department due to the prevailing tension between the Paraiyars[22] and Piramalai Kallars illustrates how the constructed caste/community identities operated in contemporary social reality. In the 19th century, the British raj identified the Paraiyars and Piramalai Kallars and classified them as an untouchable caste and criminal tribe respectively. In independent India, these two communities are officially being classified as scheduled castes and denotified communities respectively. Being Dalit and placed in the lower status, Paraiyars are constantly ridiculed and asserted by the Piramalai Kallars. But the history has another story to tell, wherein the Paraiyars and Piramalai Kallars harmoniously maintained and worshipped the Pekkaman Karuppasamy. To date, the priest of the temple is a male member from the Paraiyar community.

The present animosity between the communities and the location of the Pekkaman Karuppasamy temple in a *porambokku* (non-private) land coupled with a series of litigations has led to state control of the temple. Many folk temples located in the *porambokku* land end up being controlled by the state by which the communities are losing their traditional rights.

The HR&CE department classifies the temple under its control based on their annual incomes[23]. Persons from all communities can become pusaris/pujaris. The pusaris are appointed as hereditary trustees of the temple along with the government authorities. Non-hereditary trustees are appointed according to the classification of the temples, which should include an SC or ST and a woman member. The funds generated by the temple can be utilised for any other welfare purposes as deemed by the department. The rightful devotees have to pay fees for accessing the services of their community temple.

25.4 Conclusion

The folk religious rituals are deeply entrenched in Tamil society and expressed in its popular sentiment. In 2003, the then CM Jayalalithaa strictly implemented the Tamil Nadu Animals and Birds Prevention of Sacrifice Act which widely hurt the popular Tamil sentiment and it backfired on her; she lost all 39 seats in the 2004 Parliamentary elections; and, subsequently led to the repeal of the act in 2004. As we have discussed, the folk religion instils an ethical virtue of brotherhood through deterrence in the contemporary polarised society. This extra-legal nature of the Tamil folk religion holds the key to preservation and promotion of communal harmony. The animistic Tamil folk religion overlaps with the monistic traditions of Hinduism and Islam, especially the *Siddhar* tradition and Sufism respectively as they focus on the spirit, the metaphysical aspect of human existence. These monistic traditions emphasise self-discipline of an individual through ascetic practices to realise the spirit/soul (god) imbued on all sentient and non-sentient beings, and in turn within oneself. Siddhars and Sufi saints are highly regarded by Tamil subalterns; and visitations of the former *samadhis* and latter *dargahs* by both Hindus and Muslims is a common occurrence. The Tamil folk religious environmental practices of kovil kadugal and kovil kammai question our ontological binaries of nature versus culture. Our scientific environmental conservation schemes regard humans as a threat to our natural environment as most of the contemporary environmental disasters are anthropogenic. We are in a critical juncture where we have to incorporate our ancient traditional wisdom in our environmental conservation practices; we humans should be part of the solution to the problems created by us.

Notes

1 Tamil words *Keda*, *Vettu*, and *Virundhu* mean young-buck/bull, sacrifice, and feast respectively.
2 One of the Denotified Communities and ex-Criminal Tribes of Tamil Nadu.
3 One of the Scheduled Castes, erstwhile 'untouchables' of Tamil Nadu.
4 Tamil word meaning 'informal village council'.
5 Prostration with beating the chest by hands. When the people fail to get justice through pañcāyattu or any other means against the wrongdoer, they resort to this method of justice.
6 Unique tropical montane evergreen forests of the southern Western Ghats.
7 Tamil word, meaning: energised talisman, predominantly cylindrical in shape.
8 Agamas revolve around the tradition of temple rituals. The word Agama means tradition. The agamas are the body of ancient texts which deal with rituals and ceremonies to be observed in the temples. The agamas deal with rules as to how each iconic representation of divinity is to be conceived, constructed, and worshipped.
9 Observed by the author.
10 The chief male deity among the Tamil folk deities is Aiyan or Ayyanar. Ayyanar is represented by a human form in a sitting posture, with red skin, a crown on his head and pearls in his locks. On his forehead, he wears the sacred ashes, pearls on his ears and neck, and a sort of ribbon on his breast. The arms, hands, feet, and the whole body are full of jewels and ornaments. In his right

hand he holds a sceptre, to indicate that he is the chief among village gods. Accordingly, outside every village in southern India, one may see the shrine of *Ayyanar*, surrounded with rude clay or terra-cotta figures of horses and other animals often of life size on which he is supposed to ride when keeping guard. His image is roughly carved, sometimes in a sitting posture and other times on horseback.

11 Observed by the author.
12 Interview with Kodiveeran, on 29August 2019.
13 Sthala purana is the Sanskrit word where 'Sthala' means any place or region; and 'Purana' means story. The text is associated with the story of any place, or historical significance of the temple; or sacredness of the site.
14 Observed by the author.
15 Tamil word which means consecration ceremony of Hindu temples.
16 Interview with Chokalingam on 29 August 2019.
17 Tamil word, meaning: pilgrimage on foot, undertaken in fulfilment of a vow.
18 Kavadi is one of the offerings made to Lord Muruga by his pious devotees. In Kavadi the devotee carries his offerings to the lord Muruka which weighs up to 30 KGs.
19 *See* Figures 25.1 and 25.2 for comparison. NTK's illustration (Figure 25.1) of Lord Murukan downloaded from https://www.naamtamilar.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/naam-tamilar-katchi-veeratamilar-munnani-seeman-tamil-murugan-painting-drawing-hd-wallpaper-scaled.jpg

Raja Ravi Verma's painting of Lord Muruga(Murugan in folk name) (Figure 25.2) downloaded from https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/81/Murugan_by_Raja_Ravi_Varma.jpg

Ravi Verma has used the name Muruga for Murukan.

20 Election Commission of India. https://eci.gov.in/files/file/13680-tamil-nadu-general-legislative-election-2021/
21 Tamil words, meaning: historical and ancient monumental temples, which are mostly constructed during the medieval period empires.
22 A social group of Tamil Nadu. At present, they are included under the Scheduled Castes category.
23 (i) Less than Rs. 10,000 as annual income, (ii) between Rs. 2 lakhs and Rs. 10 lakhs, (iii) above Rs. 10 lakhs.

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26
TRIBAL RELIGION AND IDENTITY POLITICS

Archana Rahul Khupte

26.0 Introduction

The census is the place where the State officially recognises the existence of a community and other aspects related to it. As far as Adivasis are concerned, they are recognised under the category of Scheduled Tribe, but there is no place in census records where the State recognises religious status of individual tribe or tribe as a category. They were given the option of categorisation as 'Other' in censuses, which later was removed by the government. In such a scenario, Adivasis are being forced to accommodate themselves in any other available religion (Kukreti 2020). It is important to understand Adivasi demands in relation to tribal identity politics, its implications on the meta narratives of dominant religion, and collective Hindu identity in India. To put it in perspective, the gravity of the tribal religious identity question can be gauged from a couple of things, firstly overall decline in religious plurality in country, secondly epistemic fabrications in Adivasi religious identity construction, and thirdly growing demand for denotifying scheduled areas based on a sizable proportion of tribal population. Religious identity is important because it affects states' tribal welfare activities; in addition, it affects policies and provisions that are designed for tribal people staying within the Fifth Schedule area of the constitution. As per the *panchaya*t provisions, population is considered the basis for reservations of posts for tribals at panchayat. Similarly, the criterion of the size of population of tribe decides which area to be considered as Fifth or Sixth Schedule areas. This implies that reduction in tribal population on record and resultant change in the ratio of tribal and non-tribal population will cause subsequent demand for de-notifying Fifth Schedule areas in the country (Sabrang India 2019). Census enumerations of tribal population in various categories have always been a contentious issue. As per the 2011 census tribals are the third largest group, in spite of that, such a large section of population has no religious column in the form of census of India. Not recognising tribals in the census under a separate religious category is apparently against constitutional provisions and spirits, and also a systemic design to exclude and put tribals into either other larger religious groups or as miscellaneous categories.

During the colonial period from 1871 to 1891 there was a separate column named 'aboriginals' in census records; and from 1901 to 1921, there was the column named 'animist'

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and Tribal religion in 1931, Tribes in 1941 and Others in 1951 to categorise tribal population. The British government did not consider tribals as part of Hindu social order. For them, tribes belong to either aboriginal or animist categories. But it is a case to be investigated why in the first census of independent India, the column of tribal religion was removed and what were/are its implications on Adivasi people. For instance, in the state of Rajasthan tribal population was 12 per cent in the 1941 census which was reported under tribal or animist religion category, but in the 1951 census tribal population was not recorded as there was no separate religion code to classify them. On the other hand, in the same State Hindu population which was 75 per cent in the 1941 census increased up to 90.7 per cent in the 1951 census and overall population of tribals in Jharkhand state had declined from 38.3 per cent to 26.02 per cent in 2011 since 1931. Similarly, historical mapping of Bhils in census data is interesting to study as the population of the Bhil tribal community has changed over the decades. The first census was taken in Rajasthan in 1891 where all Bhils were shown in the tribal religion category. But in the census 1901, 1911, and 1921 they were divided into two groups: Hindus and tribals. In the census of 1931 there were over 69 per cent Hindus, 30 per cent tribals and 0.15 per cent Christians (Ahuja 1965).

When words or terms are removed, eventually the idea they convey is removed from the history of civilisation as well. Terms represent philosophy, culture, tradition, language, literature, and are symbol of community. Scheduled Tribe is an administrative category, it could be abolished or scrapped, which is subject to revisions as per constitutional requirements, but terms such as Adivasi, indigenous, or aboriginals think of a community beyond merely a political entity. Scheduled tribe status usually characterises in terms of level of 'backwardness' of a community. Creating a scheduled tribe category aimed to address impoverishment that communities have faced and so to devise means and methods to empower the community. This is indeed essential considering material deprivation and exploitation faced by tribals in the country, and focused measures and efforts becomes inevitable to rectify historical injustice and damage inflicted on tribal communities in India. Although it is essential to have administrative categorisation, but it does not directly translate into symbols and identity markers that the community represents such as a philosophy, culture, and language of tribal communities. For tribals terms such as 'Indigenous' and 'Adivasi' are not just symbols of religions, but also an identification of culture, tradition, and a democratic social system which is distinct and different from any other religion and culture. The tribal problem was never a merely administrative one. The tribal question of representation and self-identification remains stuck between approaches adopted by administrator-scholars, census officers, and nationalists of time, due to which tribals received condescending and paternalistic treatment.

This raises important questions such as why the census of tribal religion did not take place in the post-independence period under a separate category, what were the reasons the tribal 'religion census' category was removed by the State post-independence, and where those 12 per cent population enumerated under tribal religion have gone (Census of India 1951)?

It is a well known fact that organised religions like Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism have impacted tribal communities. Particularly, culture contact and interaction with Hindus before the colonial period are major causes of religious impact on tribes. Ancient texts have abundant references to the interaction between tribes and Hindus. As far as epics like the Mahabharta, the Ramayan are concerned, cases of interactions between tribes and Hindus

are abundant. Lord Rama stayed with tribes on Chitrakut forest; Bhil women Sabri offered fruits to him. Historically, many tribal groups have been impacted due to dominant religions. For example, Tharu and Khasa tribes have assumed the status of *kshatriyas* and thus are in Hindu folds; Bauri tribe accepted *vaishnavism* and its members wear sacred thread. Several tribes worship Hindu gods and goddesses. The Bhagat movement, which began in the Chhota Nagpur region in 1914 among the Oraon, advocated in favour of ascetic life and abstinence from consumption of meat, liquor, etc. Influence of Vaishnava sect (Kumar 2008) is evident. So, the influence of organised religions, particularly Hinduism over tribal groups is apparent. Cultural change is a constant and natural process, but when the dominant cultural trait is imposed on weaker social groups, weaker groups may face danger of loss of cultural identity and go through existential crisis leading to acts of rebellion and resistance. Recent controversy over the demand for a separate code for tribal religion is the outcome of this resistance. It creates a discursive and contesting space for the question of Adivasi community's religious identity. But an important issue is how we approach this question. Adivasis are in themselves a heterogeneous population, who follow different religious practices, faiths; and worship their unique gods and ancestors based on community standards. The questions are why there is a violence unleashed against converted tribal Muslims and tribal Christians by Hindu nationalists? Why tribals are against converted tribals when it comes to assuming tribal religious identity? Why are organised religions aggressive to proselytisation attempts among the tribes? We have to comprehend the growing demand of Adivasis for a separate code for religion in the census and the struggle for the distinct recognition of tribal religion in the context of micro conflicts that are embedded in the process of identity struggles. Discussion on the topic of religious identity of tribals in the contexts considers the framework based on inclusion and exclusion paradigms.

There are stakeholders who have taken certain positions in case of 'tribal religion code' questions. The State denies giving a separate code for tribal religion citing administrative inconvenience, and stating that the acceptance of Sarna code[1], the religion based on nature worship, can encourage further demand for separate codes among various tribal groups practising different religious customs (Markam 2019).

26.1 Problematic Discourse

The State and non-state actors who have engaged with Adivasis, both pre- and post-independence, have done a gross injustice to them. Fault lines can be seen in the approaches adopted by them. The British government, although in the census recognised aborigines as a separate group, have done irreparable damage by depriving tribals of their land, exploiting their natural resources, and using them as a cheap labour force.

Anthropological writings and colonial and sociological accounts depicted a misrepresented and misleading image of tribal communities. Earlier construction of tribals as savage, 'primitive', etc. justified the subjugation of the population citing them antithetical to 'civilised' society. By the 1940s there was a debate between assimilationist, interactionist, protectionist, and isolationist groups; with Ghurye representing assimilation and Verrier Elwin representing first isolation and later integration. All of these approaches are marked by the absence of tribal representation, the correct understanding of their culture, the role of their religion, and their worldview in general in the formulation of perspectives on them.

The absence is attributed, by some scholars like Vivek Kumar, to the logic that the twice born mainly dominated the discourse on knowledge production, methodology, and dissemination (Kumar 2016).

The State and academic class remains paternalistic towards Adivasis. This can be evident from the fact that in 1941, on the suggestion of Verrier Elwin, who inferred similarity between religious practices of tribals and the Shaivite sect, the government was convinced that tribals should be considered Hindus (Markam 2019). So, tribes other than Christians began to be counted as Hindus. That is how intellectuals and scholars could potentially influence tribal developmental discourse and constitutional and legal provisions with the notion that tribes lack agency to understand their own ambitions and yearnings.

What the earlier intellectual class and governments failed to comprehend while constructing tribal identity is the role of cosmology, belief system of tribes, customary laws that are as relevant as any other organised religions, and institutionalised laws in modern society. In doing so they ignored the fact that tribes deserve a separate identity including in the sphere of religion as any other organised community. What Adivasis think of themselves, what their plights are and what is their history should have been given primacy in intellectual discourse. Along with that one needs to engage with the internal fissures that have developed among tribes pertaining to religious identity questions. Over the centuries, acculturation, assimilation, regionalism, and proselytisation have changed cultural dynamics of tribal communities across the nation; and thereby creating complexities in matters of tribal religious identity.

26.1.1 Adivasi Voice and Resistance

Government policy of diluting tribal religious identity has been met with resistance by tribals. Gondwana Mahasabha retaliated against the removal of tribal religion code from the census and began demanding a separate code for Koya Punem[2] religion for Adivasis. Prior to the demands of Sarna Dharma code, there was a demand for Gondi religion, which fell on the deaf ears of the State. Over 200 tribal heads from Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and Jharkhand under the banner of Akhil Adivasi Dharma Parishad (Tribal Religion Council) placed their demand before the central government to recognise their religion as Adi religion and opposed the separate religion code by the name of Sarna Dharma code. Akhil Bhartiya Adivasi Vikas Parishad (Jharkhand) also demanded Adivasi code in the census in opposition to Sarna Dharma code. Demand for separate religious identity columns is resonating from different parts of the country. National Adivasi-indigenous Religion Coordination Committee (NAIRCC) also put forward the demands of a separate Adivasi religious code column in the census. State governments that are run by tribal parties have passed resolutions that back the new Sarna code. We can see that tribal groups across regions have retaliated and have extended demand for a separate code for Adivasi religion (Dharua 2020 and Outlook 2018).

What is evident from this is that even the tribes have no unanimity for a separate 'religion code'. Different groups have different claims. Scheduled Tribes in India do not belong to a single religion. So, identifying Scheduled Tribes under any particular religion is not possible. Their customs, religious concepts, rituals, and practices differ across the country. As far as tribes are concerned, the politics of identity are highly fragmented and discordant. A few years back there was conflict among Christian and non-Christian tribes of Singpur village, Ranchi over the installation of a Mother Mary portrayal wearing white *saree* with

red border (representing goddess Sarna). This was opposed as the efforts of distortion of traditional worship practices of Sarna Dharam followers who worship nature, particularly trees. For Sarna (animist) followers it is related to their identity and so accused the Church of alluring tribals for conversion (Kumar 2014).

Non-converted tribals have mainly three arguments against converted tribals. Firstly, Christian tribals avail the benefits of minority as well as those entitled to ST category. Secondly, tribals who are converted are no longer eligible for tribal status under the ST category as they are different from a traditional religion. Finally, according to non-converted tribals, converted tribals are no longer marginalised[3]. Although these claims are debatable, they certainly imply internal fissures and fragmentation of tribal identity, and hold the potentiality for larger religious disputes and emergence of conflicting regionalism.

26.1.2 Detribalisation and Identity

Indian tribes organise themselves depending on how members of a tribal group fulfil the demands of collective life and social functions such as activities like marriage, family, maintenance of culture, and rituals. This functional perspective[4] helps us to understand about the causalities of the behaviour of tribes and interrelations with each other, but it is not capable of explaining and dealing with the social changes taking place in the society. Society is not static. Factors that affect social change can be of any kind. The time-space fabric of tribal society is being structured by the processes of social change that include traditional and modern factors such as tribalisation, detribalisation, re-tribalisation, Sanskritisation through various reform movements, urbanisation, industrialisation, modern education, democratisation, and tribal development programmes. Tribal culture and religion have not remained immune to the impact of social change. Although these generic processes are common to every society, but it becomes alarming when the religious and cultural identity of a community is being compromised in favour of another culture. In the context of tribal population, debate about proselytisation is mainly focused on tribal conversion into Christianity. With the Charter Act of 1813, India became open for missionary activities under British rule. To spread the faith, missionaries focused on lower caste groups and tribes as they considered their religion less backward and uncivilised. Many tribals and lower caste groups were converted during the period.

G.S. Ghurye initiated the debate about Hinduisation of tribal population in 1963 by describing them as backward Hindus. This was his response against missionary activities (Ghurye 1963). N.K. Bose (Bose 1975) and Sujit Singh (Singh 1959) looked at it more critically. Singh (1959) in his study pointed out that among Adivasis some groups like Bhumji protested and wanted to move away from tribal status and wanted to acquire Kshatriya status. He further concluded that the British were the ones who thought of tribes outside of the Varna-jati system (occupational Hindu social division), and further said that Indian civilisation has mutually adaptive strategies that absorb the tribes but maintain their identity and isolation.

Social change, particularly the process of detribalisation through ideological change, relates to identity alienation. The alienation happens through various means and methods. For instance, tribal schooling was/is ridden with religious involvement and political anxiety. When we see the trajectory of tribal schooling, we can notice that by the mid-19th century Christian missionary schools created elite tribal classes, with many tribes converted to Christianity. The colonial concept of tribe showcased the need for 'civilisation'.

Christian missionaries created the impression that the British were the earliest educating tribals. Colonial education did appeal to many tribals such the Oraon, the Munda, and others for opposing land lordship and seeking a better-quality life. But this in turn pushed tribal towards cultural handicap which one saw in terms of increased dropout rates and students continuing in the same class repeatedly. This depicts tribal children's aspirations for colonial education. This problem persists in the post-colonial period as well towards tribal education because the same colonial idea of 'tribe' continues in public discourse (Bara 2010). In response to that, nationalists based on the Gandhian concept began educating tribals. The first Ashram school started in 1922 at the Mirakhedi village in the Panhmahal district, Gujrat for Bhils (Deshmukh 2004) which was later acquired by Government and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's (RSS) Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram. The agenda of tribal education has always been assimilation of tribes in the so-called dominant traditions of India (Xaxa 2021). In the contemporary period aggressive Hindutva campaigns have reached tribal dominated areas through RSS's affiliates like Saraswati Shikshan Sanstha and Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram. RSS schooling upholds certain notions of citizenship and larger Hindu identity. It is RSS's agenda to absorb subaltern groups into the Hindu fold in order to establish Hindu supremacy and perpetuate existing hierarchical social order. RSS's pedagogical project is clearly a political project. As Bose said earlier, these are Hinduising methods of absorption of tribals in the Hindu fold through techniques of acculturation (Sunder 2004). Tribals are very important for the Hindutva narrative and RSS/BJP cannot afford to treat them like other minorities. A coercive approach is not suitable for their design. Therefore, propaganda education and the 'development' narrative that has Hindutva overtones are deployed to polarise tribals. This gives two-fold benefits to RSS; it helps RSS to ignore the claims of tribal groups to call themselves 'Adivasis', and secondly, by considering tribal groups as part of the larger Hindu society to inflate Hindu population. As Snigdendhu Bhattacharya concludes, this is not only an ideological victory for RSS, but also reinforcement of their larger Hindu nation narrative (Bhattacharya 2020 and Kumar & Sunny 2009).

26.2 Politics of Tribal Religious Identity

Communal polarisation among non-tribals and tribals is the result of Sangh Parivar's activities in the tribal belt. We could witness the result of that in 2008 in the Kandhamal riots. In an interview Vishva Hindu Parishad leader Swami Lakhanand vocalised Sangh Parivar's ambition to convert tribals into the Hindu fold and prevent Christian missionaries from activities of mass conversion among tribals (NDTV 2008). Association of Protection of Civil Rights, United Christian Forum, and United against Hate have reported more than 300 instances of violence against Christians in 2021 in which the vast majority of attacks have taken place against Christians belonging to dalit and tribal communities by fundamentalist Hindu groups against proselytisation activities (Pal 2021). Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Vishva Hindu Parishad also conducted a nationwide campaign to curb religious conversion in tribal dominated states. According to VHP, religious conversion is a form of violence which alienates the people from their original culture, traditions, and roots (Sampal2020). There are many such instances where churches and Christian tribals have faced clashes or attacks from non-tribal Hindu nationalists. This has created communal tensions. It is being alleged that Christian tribals retaliated and murdered the swami. Hindu nationalists accept that there is geographical distance between the tribals and caste Hindus

but considers that there is no cultural difference between the two of them and call tribals 'Vanvasi' and not Adivasi. They are of the view that tribals are an indispensable part of Hindu social order which justifies their opposition to religious conversions. Christian missionaries started off with educational activities for tribal children in various parts of the country with the intension of 'civilising' and 'modernising' the tribal population. But their activities have also resulted in the erosion of past tribal traditions and their way of life to a great extent. Success of the missionaries in terms of tribal conversions can be ascertained from the fact that 1/6 of the total Christian population in India is tribals. The Christian message of love and salvation, having special pity for disadvantaged, and special obligation to preach in new places, the Christian message has not become immune to communal controversies. Christian missionaries have been accused vandalising temples and Hindu religious properties in retaliation. Both parties have burned houses belonging to other groups. Christian fanatics along with Maoist conspired Swami Laxmananad's killings[5].

Above mentioned communal conditions prima facia appear to be a clash between fanatic Hindus versus fanatic Christian missionaries which rightfully has a significant stake in the politics of religion and the tribal identity question but most importantly it also reveals the ever growing vertical divisions among tribals that have been created over the period. Due to divisionary politics the tribal community is divided between converted Christian tribals and non-converted tribals. Apart from that it has resulted in an emergence of caste and class hierarchy and decline in traditional tribal culture among tribals (Patel 2017).

The question of conversion is a very convoluted subject. Freedom of conscience and to freely profess, practise, and propagate religion is a right guaranteed by the Indian constitution, and the practising or professing of religion is a matter of personal choice. But there is no unanimity in judicial opinions on religious conversions; on one hand Article 25 of the Indian constitution contains the word 'propagate' in which any Indian citizen above the age of 18 can choose any religion; on the other hand in the 1977 judgement of *Rev. Stanislau vs the State of Madhya Pradesh* case, it is been interpreted that the right to propagate does not equal to right to convert, apart from that there are anti-conversion laws in place to deter conversion activities vis-a-vis misrepresentation, force, fraud, allurement, or marriage in many Indian states; but it is still a contested subject in the court of law and well debated in academia.

Conversion in return of favour or with coercion seems to be unethical and questionable because the condition of the tribal community is deplorable based on various social, health, developmental indicators, and missionaries consider it is their duty to uplift them by providing material support and mainly by doing conversions. In doing so and to attract tribals many a times their religious symbols are beings used, manipulated, or modified in order to keep tribals in the Christian fold. Such practices subvert the idea of conversion, which in some cases has become a means of emancipation, for instance in case of the dalits' conversion into Neo-Buddhism in the year 1956 which was emancipatory and uplifting for dalits.

Tribals have been converted to multiple religions, such as Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, etc. but conversion into Islam and Christianity has generated much tension and reactions at a national level in recent years. The reason is an aggressive campaign conducted by right-wing Hindu groups is imbedded in the doctrine of Hindu Nationalism. According to V.D. Savarkar, Hindus consider their fatherland (*Pitrubhumi*) and holy-land (*Punyabhoomi*) as one. Unlike Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism, whose forefathers belong to Vedic past, Muslims and Christians cannot be identified as Hindus as they do not consider India as a

holy-land. Arab and Palestine are holy-lands for them. Therefore, they are a threat to India's cultural unity (Sahoo 2013). Like Christianity, Islam is also a missionary religion. Globally both religions are competing for converts, especially with indigenous religions. In India, conversion into Islam is two-fold; on one hand, model of Mughal ruler who respected the indigenous Indian element, on the other hand despots like Gazni, Aurangzeb who plundered and destroyed temples and harshly imposed taxes on non-Muslims. With the advent of Muslim invaders in the 11th and 12th century Rajput rulers who did not surrender to Muslim rule moved to tribal areas replacing tribal chiefs, and during that period there is some evidence of tribals converting to Islam baring some retaining their traditional identity (Giri 2020).

Theologically speaking inviting others to Islamic faith is supposed to be a part of Muslims' religious obligation; still unlike Christians, Muslims have not seen systematic missionary activities as something that they need to pursue as individuals or support through donations to specific proselytising institutions (Hermansen 2014). But special mention of the Tabligi movement has to be made which started in the 1920s and tried to revitalise the Islamic movement in India. A major cause of concern for the movement was to address converted Muslims who upon conversion continue to hold non-Islamic values and practices and therefore it aimed to instill basic tenets and practices of Islam to tribes and caste Hindus who are converted to Islam, but not firm about their Muslim identity, Islamic norms, and practices (Ali 2003). It is a missionary offshoot of Islamic groups in response to Hindus' Shuddhi (purification) movement.

In modern times, especially in the age of nationalism and regionalism, conversions are stigmatised and considered as betrayal, collaboration with foreign conquerors and contamination to true origins. *Ghar Vapsi/Wapsi* (home-coming) or *shuddhi* (purification) movements by Hindu outfits are mainly inspired by these conversion attempts. The objective is to convert marginalised groups like dalit and tribals into the Hindu fold and integrate them into Hindu social order, preventing converting into other religions by running welfare projects such as tribal schools, hostels, and hospitals (Sud 2007).

Religious segregation of tribals was started by Christian missionaries and later on in the 20th century due to the systematisation of census operation in India, each community was prompted to count its numbers, as community's demographic weight could be reflected in politics. Until the 19th century no re-conversion procedure existed in Hinduism, but a changed electoral landscape in politics explains the growing involvement of nationalist and right-wing fundamentalist groups in anti-Christian and anti-Islamic proselytisation activities (Jaffrelot 2011).

In present tribal politics of identity, religious conversions have changed dynamics between non-converted tribals and converted tribals. There are two significant causes of these conflicts; one is conflict over practising rituals, customs, etc.; and other one is over assuming scheduled tribe status even after converting into Christianity (Kumar 2014).

The question of tribal religious identity creates a significant spatial and discursive site where radical group identities are being contested. A study conducted by Bhowmick and Jana on Santal tribal group of West Bengal gives us a clear picture of how tribal conversions into other religions has steered identity struggles among tribals. Non-converted Santals are gaining consciousness over losing traditional identity due to the imposition of Hinduisation and Christian proselytisation activities. The process of retribalisation is done with the aim of providing distinct religious identity to Santals. This has been done to mark clear distinctions among *safa-hor*, *um-hor*[6], and *Bonga-hor*. Bonga-hors are followers of Sari-dharam, that is traditional Santal gods. Another tribal community called Deswali Majhi community

who follow Hindu lifestyle in order to uplift their social status are not considered a scheduled tribe any more as they discarded the worship practices of Santals and now in order to avail of constitutional opportunities and facilities are fighting to regain their tribal status since the 1960s. Segmentation and division among tribal societies have begun with conversions; prior to that all tribes were socially equal (Bhowmick & Jana 2008). In the late 1930s, Jaipal Singh founded Adivasi Mahasabha with demand for adequate representation in government, legislature, services and separate tribal state but in the mean time Sanatan Adivasi Mahasabha, which was formed in 1939 by the non-Christian Adivasi Oraon tribe, opposed Adivasi Mahasabha's demand of a separate tribal state. The main concern of non-converted Adivasis was against dominance of Christian tribals and those who avail all the facilities that are meant for tribals (Rana 1992). Similaly, in the contemporary period, non-converted tribes are concerned over constitutional safeguards being shared among converted tribals who are accused of having used both benefits of Scheduled Tribes and minority provisions. Non-converted tribals are also apprehensive of allurements of conversion that would influence other members to adopt Christianity (Kumar 2014).

26.3 Identity vis-a-vis the Constitution

Article 25(1) of the Indian constitution provides for the rights to freedom of religion for every citizen of the country. Being an integral part of India, tribal communities practising, professing, or propagating (unless it is subject to public order, health and morality) any religion is their fundamental right. The Indian constitution does not identify scheduled tribes with any particular religion. As far as Scheduled Tribe status is concerned, it remains intact in spite of any organised religion tribal people belong to. Tribals follow different religions. This may provide a unique context in which space for negotiating identity questions can be created. It is essential to arrive at a consensus for collective Adivasi or indigenous identity, which may perform a larger political and constitutional function. Internal fissures and external socio-religious pressures in tribal politics have created situations of conflicts where distinct identity, interest, and rights of tribal communities might be compromised. For instance, recent resolution of Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) in which they have asked the central government to exclude 'tribals who converted to other religion' from the list of tribes (Sharma 2021) is a case to the point. Similarly, non-converted tribals oppose to recognise converted tribal people as tribals. The perils of such demands and its effects may affect constitutional provisions for Scheduled Tribes adversely as one of the important criteria of deciding on a Fifth Scheduled area is the preponderance of tribal population in the region.

26.4 Spiritual Perspective of Tribal Identity

Spirituality among tribal communities plays an integral role in their culture, and serves as a beacon for the way in which they live their lives. Although tribals are socially, economically, and educationally less developed, they are rich in history, folklore, and culture. For tribals, community means the living, unborn, dead, and nature as a whole. These three things are interwoven within the context of tribal spirituality. In tribal worldview, attachment with ancestral territory, closeness to natural resources, and its own socio-political institutions are of great importance. Connectedness to nature, one another, and to common destiny form the crux of the tribal worldview. Therefore, in order to understand social structure and identity question of tribals it is important to understand their religious universe.

There are a number of issues grappling tribal communities. Tribal regions have become a space for competitive faiths. Our country in recent years has witnessed an aggressive form of proselytisation and communal mobilisation of tribals by Hindutva forces against Christian missionary activities. This is done to reconvert Christian tribals and Hinduise tribal people. It has created a contesting ground for tribal religious assertions where every stakeholder has taken a firm position. Let us consider the previous example of a clash between Sarna and Christian followers. Followers of Sarna Dharam worship nature whereas followers of Christianity installed a statue of mother Mary wearing a white saree with a red border holding a child in hand. Personifying mother Mary as Sarna Mata created enormous tensions between Christian converted tribals and non-converted tribals. Similarly, the issue of conversion and non-conversion among Santals has developed feelings of superiority and insecurity. This has adversely affected their social relations. Non-converted Santals consider Sari Dharam[7] as superior to Christianity, and condemn Christian burial practices, and other customs (Census of India 1971 and Bhowmick & Jana 2008).

Here we can observe that religion has become a disintegrating force and created a schism in tribal attempts of identity assertion. As Kumar says, it is difficult to take positions where faith, belief, identity, and claim of righteousness are involved. But as far as sociology of religion is concerned, following religion in accordance with local culture and usage is legitimate from a theological standpoint. Nevertheless, entertaining the idea of heterogeneity of Adivasi religious experience can construct a ground on which plural or collective identity of tribes under the term 'Adivasi or Tribe' can be negotiated (Kumar 2014).

The question of tribal identity begins with the absence of any criteria to identify people or communities as Scheduled Tribes. Societies or communities are usually based on strict linguistic criteria or strict ideas of cultural practices. Focus on culture as a strict marker for determining a particular group identity is a very well-established phenomenon. For tribals, beliefs and cultural practices are their religion. Any distinct practice or deviation amounts to the case of detribalisation and creates segments in identity.

26.5 Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to engage with tribal identity in relation to Adivasi demand for a separate religion code in the census and highlighted a necessity for taking up the issue as a core concern on larger tribal political platforms. In the past, conventional political discourse has been related to development, national identity, and class struggle. The Adivasi question is never a central concern of mainstream political discourse. Historically tribals have been resisting for their rights, protection of environment against exploitations, and for rehabilitations, as a never-ending process. But as argued here there is a need to see tribal social movements and attempts of resistance in relation to the larger identity question and its interrelations with constitutional rights and provisions. State and various non-state actors' approach towards Adivasis is condescending and charity oriented. This has particularly hemmed Adivasis. The fundamental problem is that the state and organisations like RSS, who hail immense power in the country, oppose distinct Adivasi identity, and consider them Hindus. Invisiblisation from discourse and non-recognition of identity is basically denying self-respect and dignity that one deserves. In this sense it can be argued that morally, legally, and ethically it is a wrong done by the State for not recognising tribal religion as a separate identity.

Community gives meaning to its existence based on the fundamental communitarian identity of members. Adivasis have preserved their unique identity through the ages, but the community has remained exposed to identity erosion attempts by State and non-state actors, and through religious affiliations in recent years.

There is an urgency to address heterogeneity and inequality in Adivasi societies at the political and social front constructively. We have to see Adivasi identity questioned in terms of the continuum of religious practices in relation to other religion. In order to explain this further, the unaddressed relationship between multiplicity of religious practices among Adivasis; and their socio-religious political identity may create confusion and breeding ground for anti-Adivasi elements to intensify and deepen existing fissures by the techniques of polarisation and assimilation as we witness in case of Sarna followers. There are various dynamics of tribal identity questions; the first one is the crisis of identity taking place when projected identity fails to identify in the popular narrative; and the second one is multiple micro-identities that have created confusion and disillusionment to and in projecting coherent picture of unified tribal/Adivasi/indigenous identity. Demand for an Adivasi religious column in the census is an assertion for a separate religious identity by tribal communities. But the question of tribal religious identity cannot come to a conclusion unless we address the internal fault lines and micro-aggressions that have developed among Adivasi communities over religious lines owing to differences in customs, and in religious and cultural practices. Tribes who have converted to Christianity or other religions have, to some extent, been considered to be materially better off than their non-Christian counterparts; there are tribes who are more vocal about their demands and articulate it very well and put forth their perspectives more than tribes who are less popular or not dominant tribes like PVGT (Particularly Vulnerable Tribes) or DNTs (Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes); the latter's perspectives are either missing from the narrative or not documented at all; needless to say, such limitations are to be considered while discussing and negotiating tribal identity in general and in the sphere of religion in particular.

Social change is a dynamic process. Due to various generic processes like detribalisation, democratisation, retribalisation, revitalisation, etc. tribal society has undergone remarkable changes. This also has had an impact on tribal and other religions. Due to the influences of other religious communities residing in the vicinity, the exchange of some cultural practices is a common phenomenon; but tribals have preserved and maintained their unique religious identity. Many artisan castes who are settled among the Koya, Kondh, and Gabada tribes of South Odisha are assimilated with the tribal population and except endogamy, have adopted tribal dialect, way of life, festivals, and worship methods. Similarly, direct bearing on tribal culture has increased due to increased migration, communication, urbanisation, conversions, education, or locational proximity with other groups. Thus, cultural boundaries have always been porous and fluid. But an alarming situation arises when one culture loses its cultural and religious identity in favour of any other (dominant) religion.

These factors need to be considered while negotiating tribal religious identity and a separate religion code for tribals in the census to reinforce tribal identities in the changing context. As a way out, there needs to be consensus building through dialects among tribal groups and every actor that engages with tribal issues by keeping in mind their worldview and cultural difference. Effort towards building cultural-religious identity as a unifying force for tribals that would not only create amicable relations among tribes but also would be proved as a strategic political tool where the community would get currency to represent itself and negotiate with State for the dues that the non-tribals of the country deserves.

The main take away from the essay is to rethink the religious identity demands of Adivasis in relation to normative and ideological sense. It is important for consciousness of a kind that has the potential to change the political canvas along with people's beliefs and mind. Society does not become democratic merely by adopting a universal franchise or modern competitive electoral system; it becomes democratic when each individual and group has negotiating power and can voice their opinion and assert their claimed identity. But all together their religious concepts are intricately convoluted with ideas of ecological system, nature, and spirits which have to be given a space.

Notes

1 Sarana/Sarna is a faith, primarily based on the worship of trees, among some tribes of Jharkhand. This faith is also the name of the religion of these tribes and stands as a synonym of nature worship.
2 Motiravan Kangli freed the religious places of Gond Koitur from the occupation of Hindus and he wanted to promote Koya Punem/Ponem which means he wanted to promote Gondi philosophy and religion. So Koya Ponem is translated as Gondi religion and philosophy.
3 Bhartiya Janata Party MP asserted that tribals who lose their legacy of their ancestor will be removed from reservation (Vasava 2021).
4 Functionalism, which was at the core of Bronislaw Malinowski's writigns, seeks to discover newly formed connections in and between societies.
5 For detailed report on the killing of Swami Laxmananad refer web source: https://www.firstpost.com/long-reads/8-years-after-swami-laxmanananda-saraswatis-killing-kandhamal-is-still-a-ticking-time-bomb-2-3274766.html
6 Safa-hor are followers of a somewhat Saiva cult represented by Deswali Majhi community. And um-hors are Christian Santhals and Bonga-hor are followers of Sari Dharam religion.
7 Sari Dharam is religion of Santal Adivasis. Sarna is a religion of other adivasis like the Oraon, the Munda, the Ho, and the Santals of West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar, Assam, Odisha; also some tribals converted to Christianity and Hinduism and Islam. But only Santals follow Sari Dharam. Sari Dharam is recognised tribal religion in West Bengal. The literal meaning of Sari is honesty.

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27

‘TRIBAL RELIGION IS A REALITY’

(Furnishing of Certain Clinching Evidences from the Tribal Nilgiris)

C. Maheswaran

27.0 Introduction

The word ‘religion’ (<Gk. regalia’, meaning ‘to bind together’) implies that the very purpose of ‘it’ is to bind together the individuals in a human society. Contrary to the expectation, now-a-days, the people in a so-called civilised society become divided in the name of religion. However, fortunately, in the case of simple societies[1] as that of ‘tribal societies’, their members are observed to adopt their indigenous religious practices in one way or the other. Hence, it may be surmised that the ‘concept of religion’ remains to date a vital and quintessential domain within the culture complex of tribal communities[2].To put it in other words, it could be said firmly that the ‘tribal religion exists as a ‘reality”, despite various socio-cultural and socio-political pressures exerted over ‘it’ for centuries together in a multicultural nation like India.

In this chapter, an attempt is made to elucidate the statement that ‘tribal religion is a reality’ by highlighting certain clinching evidences from the ‘Tribal Nilgiris’. In this context, the author of this chapter wishes to reiterate that it becomes a prerequisite obligation to present the scenario of religious observances practised in Tribal India here, in support of the claim that the ‘tribal religion is a reality’.

27.1 Perspectives on Tribal Religion

The constitution of India has assured its citizens the right to practise the religion and religious belief systems of their choice as per Article 19 (2). It will not be out of context to quote the ‘Introductory Remarks’ that have been recorded by Prof. Ram Dayal Munda, the Former Vice-Chancellor of Ranchi University in the monumental work entitled, *Adi Dharam:Bhartiya Adivasion ke Dharmika Astha* (Lit. Ancient Religion: The Religious Faith of Indian Tribes) (which he co-authored with Ratan Singh Manki, the President of Sarna Tribal Association, Ranchi).

Munda (2017:5–6) states that out of 10 crores of tribal people in India, some sections have adopted Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. If that part of the tribal population which would come to nearly two crores is deducted from ten crores, then almost all the remain-

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ing eight crores have been shown as 'Hindu' by religion in the Census Report, whereas the root of religious faith of tribals in India is different from the roots of Hindu, Musalman (Muslim), Sikh, Buddhist, and Christian religions. Our constitution has categorised the tribals as a 'particular cultural community', without recognising their root of independent religious identity, the 'Sarna'[3]. Certainly, the tribal religion is not correctly perceived and articulated outside the tribal community. Ideological bias is also evident in perception. It is not a surprise when C.R. Bakshi (2018), the President of Akhil Bhartiya Adivasi Mahasaba (the 'Tribal Wing' of Communist Party of India) noted that "Tribal religion in India is almost materialistic and nearer to Marxism"[4].

Contrary to the claims of the tribes having their religion, the Government of India is alleged to have actually done a great injustice and discriminated against the huge tribal population (more than 8.6% of total population) in the country by not giving them a specific code for their religion to be marked in the Census Report.

Even to dilute the specific tribal identity in India as *Adivasi* (Lit. Ancient Inhabitants), the fundamentalist forces in our country (viz., the Hindutva*)* have given them a new call name *vanvasi*[5] (Lit. Forest Inhabitants) which is a misnomer and denies deliberately the *indigenousness* of these autochthones. To justify the imposed vanavasi identity, the Hindutva forces have opened the centres of 'Vanvasi Kalyan Ashrams' throughout the tribal areas in the country. But, interestingly, the Adivasis have renamed themselves as *moolnivasi*[6] (Lit. original inhabitants), the term that is more powerful than their earlier call names, namely, Adivasis, Vanvasis, and Vanjatis.

It should be mentioned that several international instruments recognise tribe's self-assertion. The 'International Labour Organizations' (ILO), in its convention (No.169 of June 1989) concerning the Indigenous Peoples in the world made provision at its Article 5(a) which has been observed as: "The social, cultural, religious and spiritual values and practices of these peoples shall be recognised and protected".

The 'United Nations Declaration' (dated 21 September 2007) has specifically stated in Article 12 that "The indigenous peoples have the right to manifest, practise, develop, and preach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs, and ceremonies, the right to maintain, protect, and have access in privacy to their religions and cultural sites"[7]. However, in reality, what is happening in practise is contrary to the International and National declarations and legal provisions legislated by our Parliament, in accordance with our Constitution of India regarding the tribal rights.

27.2 The Gist of Events Against Tribal Religions During the 2011 Census Operations – a Relook

- during the process of completion of Census 2011, there were many complaints of irregularities; and protest actions were carried out in many parts of Tribal India, as there was no specific 'Code' for the 'Tribal Religion' to be recorded in the Census enumerations (*see* The Hindu 2011)
- it was alleged by the tribal people and tribal activists, for example, by Hari Singh Marawi, the General Secretary of Gondwana Gantantra Party, who said that, "The tribals are still quite unaware of the procedures of Census operation; and this is being exploited by the ruling Government which plans to 'Hinduise' the tribes" (*see* The Hindu 2011)
- *The Hindu* (Delhi Edition) dated 2 March 2011 recorded such incidents that took place at Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh during the 2011 Census operations. It is alleged

that (i) the enumerator asked the Gond tribal people to register themselves as 'Hindu'; and (ii) to the contrary, the officials briefed the media that the enumerators were told to record every details as were told to them by the respondent

And consequently, during the National Executive Committee of Akhil Bhartiya Adivasi Mahasaba held at Ranchi on 29 and 30 December 2016, a massive signature campaign was mooted out among the tribes for submitting a 'Petition to the Parliament'. And thereby, it is aimed to request the Government of India to instruct the Census Commissioner (of India) for the incorporation of a new entry with regard to the code of religion, i.e. the 'Adivasi Dharma' (Lit. 'Tribal Religion') in the schedule to be administered during Census operation in the year 2021[8].

- to this, the Registrar General & Census Commissioner Mr. C. Chandramouli told 'The Hindu' that

  After receiving the complaints, we have communicated the matter to the authority concerned at Bhopal and Raipur; I have also held video-conferences with the Collectors of all districts of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh; and they have assured me that the problem is sorted out.

  *(*see *The Hindu 2011)*

- the Director of Census Operations Mr. Sachin Sinha, on the contrary said that 'These were minor issues and the Census enumeration works were carried out successfully' (*see* The Hindu 2011)
- contrary to these situations, the Gond tribes of Mandla and Jabalpur in Madhya Pradesh, and Surguja in Chhattisgarh have alleged that the enumerators recorded their 'religion' as 'Hindu' and 'language' as 'Hindi'. When we told them that we are Gonds, they retarded back telling us that 'it' is your 'caste name' while your religion is 'Hindu', and that you would not be receiving the benefits of Government schemes if you did not register yourselves as the 'Hindus', reported Govind Porte, a Gond of Chorai Village in Mandla district. Consequently, the Gond tribes, led by the 'Gondwana Gantantra Party' have submitted to the Office of Registrar General & Census Commissioner of India and also to the Director of Census Operation, Bhopal highlighting the issue as *Crucial to their Survival,* and accordingly demanded of appropriate action. But the Director of Census Operation, Bhopal informed that "There have not been any formal complaint and … we have instructed everybody in the field to record every detail exactly as it is being told" (*see* The Hindu 2011)

Put it in nutshell, we may summarise the events that happened during the Census operations, 2011 as follow:

(i) the enumerators asked the Gond tribal people to register themselves as the 'Hindus'; and
(ii) the officials, concerned on the contrary reported that 'the enumerators were told to record every detail as told'

From the above cited points, it may be highlighted that a contra-situation prevailed between the 'real happenings' and the 'reporting of the officials concerned' in connection with the Census operation, 2011.

27.3 Two Silver Linings in the Gloomy Political Horizon of Tribal India

27.3.1 The Resolution of State Assembly of Jharkhand for 'Sarna Adivasi Dharma Code' [9]

On 11 November 2020, the State Assembly of Government of Jharkhand headed by the Chief Minister Mr. Hemant Soren unanimously passed a Government-backed resolution, viz., 'Sarna Adivasi Dharma Code', which could allow the tribes in that State to identify themselves with a distinct tribal religion. As and when the centre approves this 'Sarna Code', the Census of India would provide a separate column for accommodating the 'Tribal Religion', namely, 'Sarna' as an exclusive religion for all the tribal peoples. Currently, the Indian citizens can choose from only six religions, viz., Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism. In this juncture, we have to remember that a separate column for 'tribe' as a religious identity was included in the Census from 1871 to 1951, but was subsequently dropped.

Mr. Hemant Soren, the Chief Minister of Jharkhand, while addressing the Special Session of the State Assembly, said that the 'Sarna Dharma' of tribal peoples believe in the worship of 'Mother Nature' (inclusive of its 'flora', 'fauna', 'forests', 'mountains', and 'rivers') and can teach a lot to the world which faces serious threats such as pollution, climate change, and other associated degradation (However, the environmental activists raised concerns about the usage of this term 'Sarna' and limiting 'it' to the tribal peoples alone).

The biggest demand of this proposal is that during the ensuing Census 2021, the tribes should be given the option to write a separate (and distinct) religious code in lieu of 'Hindu' in the column of religion. Interestingly, the MLAs belonging to the Bhartiya Janta Party also voted in favour of this proposal, as most of them come from tribal societies.

27.3.2 The Resolution of State Assembly of Andhra Pradesh for the Code of 'Tribal Religion'

The Jeganmohan Reddy-led Government in Andhra Pradesh has included quite recently the 'Tribal Religion' as an option, in the on-going household survey in the State of Andhra Pradesh. Broadly speaking, the State Government of Andhra Pradesh has listed the 'Tribal Religion' as the 10th option (out of the existing 12 options) in the 'Column for Religion' under the title, the 'Grama Wardu Volunteer'. Interestingly, the other options in the 'Column for Religion' include, 'refused to say', 'not known', 'atheist', and 'others' (*see* Deccan Chronicle 2020).

Madhavi Nehru, a representative of the 'National Adivasi–Indigenous Religion Co-ordination Committee' said, "The Andhra Pradesh Government, by including 'Tribal Religion' column in the household survey has respected the feelings of the Adivasis. This is a stepping stone for the restoration of 'Tribal Religion' option, in the Census 2021". Further, Madhavi Nehru said, "Andhra Pradesh is the first state to include 'Tribal Religion option' in the survey'. An appeal is made by Madhavi Nehru to the Adivasis to select the 'Tribal Religion Option' while furnishing the information in the household survey so as to protect the Adivsasi identity and legacy" (*see* Deccan Chronicle 2020).

27.4 The Voice of the Voiceless (Tribal Peoples)[10] on their Religious Identity

Recently, while the media channels were running a series of debates about the escalating tensions between India and Pakistan, the tribal representatives from around 19 states

arrived at 'Jantar Mantar' (New Delhi) and left after a day of silent protest. As always, the television channels as well as the newspapers in Delhi did not report on why they were protesting.

Although there has been a long debate about the religion that the tribal communities follow, the tribal peoples who took part in the (above cited) protest were demanding the 'right to choose tribal religion' as an option in the Census and/or any other forums.

27.4.1 Certain Noteworthy Voices of the Voiceless Peoples on 'Tribal Religion'[11]

We should bear in mind that the general voice of voiceless peoples, namely, 'The Tribes of India' on their religious identity is this: "We do not consider ourselves 'Hindus'". Let me quote certain voices of the voiceless peoples from the Tribal India in order to elucidate the above cited proclamation:

Mr. Mahendra Dhruva, a tribal activist from Bihar says,

> As the Census form has only six options under the religion column, viz., Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Jain, and Sikh, if we do not consider ourselves the followers of any of these religions … before 2011, a 7th option, 'Others' was provided and most of us used to opt for it. But, now (during 2011) even that (option) has been removed.

Mr. Dhruva added further,

> We want a separate religious code option for all the tribal peoples of our country. If you look at the statistics of all the Censuses of British Era (from 1871 to 1931), there was option for 'tribes' to choose the code 'Aboriginal' as an option[12].

But after independence, the Government removed 'it', so that the tribes are counted either as 'Hindus' or followers of other religions. Left with no choice, many (tribal) people are being found to choose other religions (as they generally do not want to be treated as the 'Hindus').

According to Mr. S. Sathyanarayan, another tribal activist from Bihar, the tribal population in the state constitutes six per cent. And he says further,

> All the tribes in the country have been following many different religions like Koya Punem, Adi, Sarna, etc. However, none of them has been recognised (by the Union Government of India). The Government should provide a separate code for the 'Tribal Religion', so that their identity can be preserved.

He further alleges that the removal of the 'Aboriginal' option is an attempt by the Union Government to make them 'religious slaves'. Unfortunately, as per the instructions issued for the Census conducted in 2001, the six religions – Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism – were given the Code one to six. If a person follows another religion, the enumerator is asked to write the name. And the Government has made it clear that the other religions will not be given a code number. A similar method was adopted in the 2011 Census as well.

Fortunately, though the tribal communities follow different religious practices and traditions, in addition to speaking different languages, they are united in their demand. According to the tribal activist Mr. Sathyanarayan,

> Our Assessment is that there are 83 religious practices among various tribes in the country. No matter which community we belong to, we will follow our beliefs, customs, deities, rituals, culture in our own way. But, we should be granted 'a specific religious identity' at the national level so that we can stand on our own and not seek refuge in another religion.

Mahendra Dhruva says,

> At present, representation from 19 states has gathered here. We have reached a consensus that despite the differences in our beliefs and cultures at the regional level, all tribal communities should have the same religious identity or code at the national level.

He adds further, "It is applicable to the Hindu religion as well, because religious practices and methods and customs of worship are not the same among all Hindus".

Rajmani Uraon, who belong to the 'Sarna Community' and hails from Jharkhand's Lohardaga, says that their forefathers have been demanding a 'religious status' for Sarna for decades. She further added "Now that all the tribes of the country have united on this issue, we should get a separate religious code before the onset of 2021 Census".

One may wonder, what are the practical problems that the tribal communities face every day, in the absence of a separate religious code? To this genuine doubt, Balaghat's tribal activist Chandresh Marawi says, "The elimination of the option 'Others' from the religious code is causing a lot of problems". He further said,

> When the Census was conducted in 2011, and there was no option for 'Others' in the religious code. I raised an objection, but was asked to choose 'Hinduism'". "When I was getting my marriage registered online I had to choose 'Hindu Religion', as there was no other suitable option under the religious code.

Speaking to the Media (*see* Markam 2019), the researcher and Founder-Editor of Adivasi Resurgence, Mr. Akash Poyam said that in the Census conducted by the British the 'tribes' were classified as 'Animists'. But, when the time came for the Census in 1941, the Anthropologist Verrier Elwin, who was the Advisor to the Government of India, suggested, "Since they (i.e., Madia tribes of Bastar) were closer to Shaivism, which is part of Hinduism, they should be considered 'Hindus'". Since then the tribes who were not Christians began to be counted as 'Hindus'. He further adds, "As a result, the tribal communities had to suffer a lot historically".

Akash Poyam holds the view that the 'Brahmanical ideology' is responsible for depriving a separate religious identity for the tribes. After independence, all those who came to power were followers of the Brahmanical ideology. That is why they viewed tribals from that perspective. The RSS calls the Adivasis as 'vanvasis' (Lit. Forest Dwellers), a label we do not approve. With this kind of hatred and discrimination, the Government will not recognise the demands, says Akash Poyam. He further adds, "Labelling the tribals as 'Hindus' swells

the Hindu population and increases their vote bank. On the other hand, unfortunately, many tribals have also started identifying themselves as 'Hindus' because that is what they have been told repeatedly since 1950". But, at the same time, he asserts firmly that when looking at their customs and traditions, the tribes have no connection at all with the Hindu religion, as evidenced from their customary practices related to the native belief systems.

The author of this chapter who met a Ulladan tribal man from Kerala during the Inaugural Function of 'Tribes India' (a Tribal Emporium) was shocked to hear his proclamation: "I am a 'Hindu' Ulladan".

27.5 The Scenario of Religious Practices Observable at the Tribal Nilgiris

The Nilgiris (which is popularly known as the 'Blue Mountains'), a district in Tamil Nadu, has been identified as an integral part of the great Deccan Plateau that occupies a significant place within the 'Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve' (NBR) and is located at the tri-juncture of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka. The district accommodates all six Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) of the State of Tamil Nadu, viz., the Toda, the Kota, the Kurumbas (inclusive of Alu Kurumbas, Betta Kurumbas, and Mullu Kurumbas) (*see* Maheswaran 2012), the Irular, the Paniyan, and the Kattunayakan within its territorial jurisdiction (in contrast to other districts which shelter at the maximum of five different tribal groups). Hence, this tribal culture area is designated aptly as the 'Tribal District of Tamil Nadu' and more precisely as the 'Tribal Nilgiris' (*see* Maheswaran 2013).

As the 'Tribal Nilgiris' provides traditional habitats to its various indigenous tribal groups cited above, the tribal communities concerned revere its unique landmarks as their 'sacred spaces', namely, 'sacred sites', 'sacred peaks', and 'sacred repositories' on the belief that they are the 'ancient abodes' of their ancestors and/or ancestral spirits. For instance:

(i) the Thalaimalai Peak located at 'Mael Seeme'[13] and the 'Malleswaran Mudi' (Lit. The Tamil word *mudi* means peak) situated at Attapadi are known respectively as 'Kotru Baoli' and 'Kwatteihn (Literally meaning cliff; cf. Tamil *kuvadu*) and revered by the Toda tribes as their 'sacred sites';
(ii) the Rangaswamy Pillar is designated as 'Kotter Vikeen' by the Kota tribes and treated by them as their 'sacred peaks';
(iii) the Catherine Falls and the Buffalo Sacrifice Site which are noted respectively as 'Uli Mande' (a sacred site) and 'Kaona Undho Bare' (an ancient ancestral boundary by the tribal Alu Kurumbas); and
(iv) the Rangaswamy Bettu is called as the Giri Bettu by the Irular tribes and is treated as their 'sacred site'

Apart from the aforementioned 'sacred spaces' the PVTGs of Tribal Nilgiris are observed to possess a unique tribal religion of their own. For example:

(i) the Toda tribes are observed to possess a buffalo-centred culture wherein the entire stock of buffaloes is dichotomised into the 'sacred buffaloes' (which are maintained by the Toda priest in the vicinity of 'sacred space') and the 'ordinary buffaloes' which are maintained by the Toda people in general. The priest associated with the Toda temple is observed to upkeep the sacred buffaloes, starting from 'pouring of salt dissolved water', 'milching the sacred buffaloes' up to 'safe keeping of associated sacred objects' such as

'bamboo vessel' for storing milk, 'earthen vessel' for storing the curd, butter, and the 'cane churning stick' for churning the curd. That is why the sacred shrine of Toda is referred to as the 'Dairy Temple' by the etic researchers (Maheswaran 2012)

(ii) the Kota tribes observe 'Kambat', the blacksmithy site, as the sacred enclosure within their traditional 'habitat', namely 'Kaokkaal', apart from their twin sacred shrines for 'Ainaor' and 'Amnaor' and utilisation of pair of a megalithic dolmens located side-by-side as the 'transit temples' during refurbishment of their sacred shrines (for 'Ainaor' and 'Amnaor') (Maheswaran 2012)

(iii) the tribes of the Alu Kurumbas believe in the existence of 'double soul' and their settling in on the river worn stones after the death of a person, and upkeeping of such spirit stones 'Dheva-Kotta-Kallu' (Lit. 'God given stone') within the enclosure of megalithic dolmen, 'Naalu Paadi' (meaning Abode of spirit) or 'Gove Mane' (place with stacked stones), and observe a secret ceremony by the name 'Kumba Dhevaru Abba' (deification of pot deities) (*see* Maheswaran 2017)

(iv) the Paniyan tribes are found to observe 'Puthari Chadangu' (Lit. Festival of New (Paddy) Sheaths, a harvest festival) wherein other PVTGS like the Toda, the Kota, the Betta Kurumba, the Mullu Kurumba, and the Irular also take part in it along with the non-tribal Mountadan Chettys (who happen to be the owner of paddy fields) (*see* Maheswaran 2016). A small portion of green paddy sheaths are harvested and offered at the 'Nambalakotta'. After the observance of this 'Puthari Chadangu', each tribal person gets a handful of harvested paddy sheaths, which he keeps in the entrance of his household (Maheswaran 2016)

(v) tribes of the Mullu Kurumbas are observed to upkeep the 'Dheyva Pere' (Lit. Deity Chamber) which is used as the 'sacred repository' to store the relics of mortal remains of deceased persons; the first offering of harvested paddy stalk is observed here. Interestingly, this sacred site is also used to conduct the nuptials for newly wedded couples

(Maheswaran 2012)

Thus, we could observe that the different tribal groups inhabiting the Nilgiris have identified certain natural landmarks such as 'peaks', 'waterfalls', 'boulders' located in and around the traditional habitats as the 'sacred spaces' of their own. Accordingly, these tribal peoples regard these sites as the significant sites that have been occupying primordial places within their indigenous religion(s).

27.6 Conclusion

A religion is not known by its preachers, or sacred texts, or places of worship; but it is known by its followers. This is very much apt to the idea and perspective on 'Tribal Religion' as well.

It is observed, generally by the Anthropologists, that the consequence of contact and weak resilience has been the present 'marginal' character of tribal religions.

Today, the 'Tribal Religion' represents the 'marginal religions', a no-man's territory between 'magic' and 'religion', between 'pseudo-science' and 'science'. However, the contention of certain anthropologists describing the 'native tradition' as the 'Little Tradition' and that of the 'alien tradition' as the 'Great Tradition' cannot be accepted.

Against this backdrop, the proposal mooted out recently by the Chief Minister of Jharkhand Mr. Hemant Soren to include 'Sarna' as the indigenous tribal religion of Central India and the resolution made by the State Assembly of Andhra Pradesh by its Chief Minister Mr. Jeganmohan Reddy to include a column for the 'Tribal Religion' within the module of Socio-economic Survey of Household at Andhra Pradesh are construed as a couple of silver linings identified in the present gloomy sky of 'Tribal Religion'.

The discussion above, that the tribes have religion; that tribes demand distinct identity for their religion, and that there is no option to mention their religion in census records; suggests that the time has come for the Government of India to consider tribal demand to include a column for the 'Tribal Religion' as and when taking up the ensuing Census operations due for the year 2021 (now when the Census of 2021 is held) so as to nurture the indigenous tribal religions and continue their existence in the long run. Otherwise, the tribal communities will have no choice except enrolling themselves in any one of the six religions provided under the column 'Religion'. In such situations, the tribal peoples are left with the option of voluntarily entering themselves under the column 'Hinduism', as they generally do not want to identify themselves in other 'Non-Hindu religions' such as Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Jainism, and Buddhism.

In this connection, the Government of India is urged upon by 'tribal representatives' drawn from 19 States to consider the fact that the tribals firmly believe in the religious practices of their respective communities which are similar to a large extent, as most of them are worshippers of Mother Nature and further they all share a similar ethics regarding their religion(s).

Despite the clear scenario presented above as the clinching evidence, it is quite shocking to see, in Tamil Nadu, the authorities of Revenue Department are in the habit of adding the attribute 'Hindu', along with the tribal name while issuing the 'Community Certificate' to the Scheduled Tribes. We should bear in mind that such 'attribution' is unwanted and unnecessary as well and should be curtailed at the earliest, for it goes against the rights of tribes as envisioned in the constitution.

Notes

1 As the societies which lack hierarchy within their social structure are construed as the 'Simple Societies', the human societies such as 'Tribal Societies' and 'Nomadic Societies' are entitled to have their place within this.
2 The other quintessential domains identified within the 'Culture complex' are 'language', 'biodiversity', 'economy', and 'polity', as observed by the Cultural Anthropologists.
3 It is noted that the Sarna is a belief system which rests exclusively with the Central Indian tribes.
4 To the author of this paper, this 'statement' appears to be an 'over claim' and it is expressed with subjectivity.
5 While the term 'adivasi' endorses the 'antiquity' to the tribal people of India, the term 'vanvasi' belittles them merely as the 'forest dwellers', pruning their autochthonous nature.
6 But, unfortunately, in Jharkhand the 'non-tribals' who were part of 'adivasi construct' have also been included under this term 'moolnivasi'.
7 And that is why, even the 'religious converts' among the tribal peoples are given the benefits of reservation earmarked for the 'Scheduled Tribes'.
8 It is the main resolution of Akhil Bhartiya Adivasi Mahasabha held at Ranchi on 29 and 30 December 2016 (Personal discussion with Mr. C.R. Bakshi, President of Akhil Bhartiya Adivasi Mahasaba). The Census of 2021, however, is deferred.
9 *See* Kukreti 2020a, 2020b and Ranjan 2020.
10 As the voice of the tribal peoples is feeble and consequently unheard by the so-called mainstream society, it is regarded that the tribal people are 'voiceless'.

11 For the opinion included in this section kindly *see* Gauri Lankesh News Desk 2020 and Markam 2019.
12 By including the option 'aboriginal', the erstwhile British Indian Government was able to carve a distinct 'niche' for the tribal peoples and thereby able to convey that these tribal peoples did not possess the religion of the so-called mainstream society and further the religion of tribal peoples is quite distinct as well.
13 The 'Mael Seeme' (Lit. Upper land territory) is one of the two traditional land divisions maintained by the Alu Kurumba at the Tribal Nilgiris, the other being the 'Keeye Seeme' (Lit. Lower land territory).

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28

DISRUPTING CLASSIFICATION

'Tribes', the Demand for Recognition of a Tribal Religion, Possessed Women, and the Case of 'Demons'

Radhika Borde

28.0 Introduction

This chapter discusses the currently on-going pan-Indian protests by Indian 'tribes' or 'tribals' for their religiosity to be classified as distinct from Hinduism, contextualising this in the various pertinent classifications that have been applied to tribes over the long durée. It also emphasises the 'disruptions' which have marked this claim for tribal beliefs and rituals to be recognised as a distinct religion, and also the 'disruptions' which this claim has so far not attempted to resolve. The chapter highlights the power of classificatory schemas and pertinent nomenclature – a power that tribals seem well aware of as they make their demands to distinguish themselves from Hindus and also from tribals that have converted to other religions, such as for example Christianity. The chapter first outlines various classifications that have been applied to Indian tribals, including the classification 'tribes'. It goes on to discuss the governance effects of such classifications via a narrowed focus on the case of the sub-classification of certain tribes as primitive (the nomenclature in regard to this classification was later changed to 'particularly vulnerable'). This provides a context for the study's examination of the demand for tribal religiosity to be classified as being distinct from Hinduism. With a focus on the Jharkhand context, the study presented in this chapter then examines how tribal religious taboos have reportedly been broken in the process of lending strength to the political demand for an officially recognised distinct tribal religion. The taboos in question are the prohibition of the presence of tribal women in sacred groves and their performance of newly instituted rituals without the involvement of a tribal priest (pahan); it describes tribal women's act of breaking these taboos as a disruptive and ultimately co-opted act. It goes on to discuss the demand for the official recognition of tribal religion in detail, emphasising the politics of pertinent nomenclature. Finally, the chapter presents the case of the beliefs and rituals of the Asur tribe, which engages with Hinduism, but via the deification of and identification with the demons of Hindu mythology. It uses this case study to make the point that tribal religiosities across India are diverse and engage with other religions in complex ways that would disrupt any narrative attempting to construct a homogenous tribal religious identity. In closing, the study argues that the politicised demand for an officially recognised tribal religion is an astute one which

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showcases an understanding of the power of classificatory schemas, also arguing that it has implications for tribals who have converted to other religions. This politicised demand is also an essentialisation, by tribals, of what tribal religion is – as long as this essentialisation is 'strategic', à la Gayatri Spivak, and non-violent, one can argue that it will prove to be empowering for the many different communities that see themselves and their religiosities as standing apart from Hinduism and the other officially recognised religions in the Indian sub-continent. The chapter is based on intermittent and long-term fieldwork conducted in the state of Jharkhand in east-central India from 2008 to 2020, and also on participant observation and interviews that were conducted at a protest event in New Delhi in 2019 that was attended by tribes from across India; some news articles have also been consulted.

28.1 Pertinent Classifications

As per the 2011 Indian Census, tribes constitute 8.6 per cent of the Indian population (Census of India 2011a). The classification of certain Indian communities as tribes and others as castes has been contested and has fuelled both scholarly debates (Bates 1995 and Ghurye 1932) and contentious politics (Middleton 2013). Since these classifications have agency via the access they grant to the affirmative action programmes that are applicable to them in independent India, they have resulted in political claims-making (*see* Corbridge 2000) (current to this day). This political claims-making also incorporates the contested assertion that tribes possess an indigenous identity (Karlsson 2003), the recognition of which would allow tribes to access the international soft laws and policies that are applicable to indigenous peoples globally (*see* Engle 2011; Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity 2004 and Yupsanis 2010).

To highlight the scholarly debates pertinent to these classifications, it can be noted that Crispin Bates has outlined the sometimes arbitrary manner in which colonial anthropologists differentiated between castes and tribes (Bates 1995); the concept of an Indian tribe-caste dichotomy has also been criticised by the Indian sociologist G.S. Ghurye (Ghurye 1932). The concept of 'Scheduled Tribes', which draws upon colonial era classifications, was propounded by the government of newly-independent India (Singh and Vyas 1989) and allows for a tribe to claim special protections and enjoy access to affirmative action programmes in the Indian state to which it is considered indigenous – it is important to note that if a tribe is displaced or rehabilitated into another state, it may lose this status (Rycroft 2014). The term 'Adivasis', which is used in some regions in contemporary Indian parlance to denote tribes, is derived from Sanskrit and literally means 'original dwellers'. It has been used since the 1930s by the peoples themselves, for the purposes of political assertion (Kela 2006) and with its strong connotations of indigeneity, it allows for an internalisation of the international indigenous peoples' movement (Rycroft 2014).

The politics of nomenclature in relation to Indian tribes continues to be fractious. Some of the words used in India for tribes – like 'vanvasi', 'vanyajati', and 'girijan' – are understood to be politicised terms that either deny the indigeneity of India's tribals or relegate them to the status of forest and mountain people (*see* Srivastava 2008). The term 'vanvasi' has been linked with the cultural-nationalist politics of the 'Sangh Parivar' – a right-wing Hindu nationalist organisation that premises its work on the Hindu majority population of India being indigenous to the sub-continent. It is used by the Sangh Parivar to refer to tribes/Adivasis, since the term vanvasi connotes a forest-based lifestyle rather than being an original inhabitant (Outlook India 2002). Given the plethora of terms used to denote

tribes and the value-laden assumptions that go with them, sociologist André Béteille has advocated, citing K. S. Singh (cited in Béteille 2000:169), the use of the term 'Samudaya', i.e., community, in place of the others that are currently in use. According to him, such a term would refer to the collective living that tribes do enjoy without restricting other groups from employing the term if they perceive that it is an adequate descriptor of their lifestyles. It can be noted however, that such a term would be de-politicising and consequently (and arguably) disempowering for those communities that claim the status of tribes in India today.

28.1.1 Governing Classifications – a Focus on the PVTG Sub-Classification

To demonstrate the power of governmental classifications as pertaining to tribes and to highlight the processes that can lead up to them, I now present a case of the sub-classification of tribes. However, as against the demand by tribals for their religiosity to be classified as a distinct one, no such demand was behind this act of sub-classification, namely, the sub-classification of some tribes as 'PVTGs'.

Currently, 75 tribal groups in India have been classified as 'Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups' or PVTGs, due to performing poorly as per various development indicators (Sahani & Nandy 2013). Echoing the controversies surrounding the creation and naming of the category of 'tribes', the PVTG sub-category is argued to be similarly arbitrary; some tribes are classified as PVTGs in one state and not in another. Moreover, this tribal sub-category was earlier termed as the 'Primitive Tribal Group' (PTG) sub-category (Sahani & Nandy 2013). Currently, the classification of a tribe as a PVTG, i.e., identified as primitive or particularly vulnerable allows its members to access special government benefits, subsidies, protections, and often jobs, all of which are targeted at improving the socio-economic condition of the tribe in question.

The Draft National Tribal Policy that was formulated in 2006 by the Indian Ministry of Tribal Affairs (Draft National Tribal Policy 2006) discusses the groups that had been then referred to as PTGs, in its Section 12. It is important to note that this policy has still not been adopted[1] (it has been reported that comments on certain recommendations that were made in regard to it are being awaited[2]). As per the Draft National Tribal Policy, the following criteria can be used for the classification of tribes as PVTGs: (1) pre-agricultural level of subsistence, (2) dwelling in isolated and remote habitations, (3) small population, (4) near-constant or declining demographics, (5) low levels of literacy, and (6) economic and social backwardness. The Draft National Tribal Policy does discuss the problem of semantics in relation to the erstwhile practice of naming such groups as primitive. It had advised that a switch from referring to Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs) as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) be made – this was subsequently followed upon.

The original PTG sub-category was created in 1973 on the basis of a recommendation of a report of the Dhebar Commission, which was the first official pan-Indian exercise in understanding the problems of tribes in independent India and in recommending what could be a viable way to ensure that their situation could be improved. The Dhebar Commission noted that it had observed four different layers amongst scheduled tribes – at the bottom it had identified a group of tribals "in an extremely underdeveloped stage and at the topmost level amongst the tribals … a layer that can very well afford to forgo any further help. We feel that this lowest layer needs the utmost consideration at the hands of the Government" (as cited by Bhuria Commission 2004:2). Initially, 52 tribal groups

were identified as belonging to this lowest layer of development and were subsequently categorised as PTGs. In 1993, an additional 23 groups were added to the PTG sub-category making up the total of 75 tribal groups that continue to constitute the sub-category today. The Bhuria Commission which was appointed in 2002 to re-examine the issues that the Dhebar Commission had studied 42 years previously, added to the discussion on PTGs by recommending that certain groups that were included in the PTG sub-category should be re-classified as 'heritage groups' (Bhuria Commission 2004:2). This recommendation of the Bhuria Commission was taken up in the Draft National Tribal Policy of 2006 – it further divided PTGs into two categories based on the relative isolation of the groups, one of these being the 'heritage group' category of PTGs. The PTGs that were classified as 'heritage groups' were described as those that are "insulated from the surrounding populations and are placed in isolated ecological environments" – examples being the Jarawa, Sentinelese, Shompen, Cholanaicken, etc. The second category included those tribes (such as the Birhor, Chenchu, Jenu Kuruba) that are "located on the fringes of 'mainstream' population and have some contact with them" (Draft National Tribal Policy 2006:15). The Draft National Tribal Policy goes on to recommend the sort of development interventions that could be differentially applied to the two groups of PTGs.

> The strategy of advancement will be group-oriented in the case of heritage groups; it will be a mix of group oriented and area-development in the case of the second category. The first approach will aim at conservation of the eco-system, life styles and traditional skills of the group, while the second approach will place equal emphasis on economic programmes. The underlying principle and approach will be to enable a PTG to move forward in its own chosen direction and at its own pace. No attempt will be made to disrupt its moorings.
>
> *(Draft National Tribal Policy 2006:15)*

A scheme of development for PVTGs has reportedly been in effect since April 2015 (Government of India 2015). It calls for state governments to prepare a 'Conservation-cum-Development (CCD) Plan' applicable to each PVTG in the state. Amongst the development-oriented measures are those aimed at enhancing livelihood, employment, healthcare, educational, housing, and other opportunities for members of PVTGs. The term Adim Janajati is commonly used as a parallel Hindi term to refer to PTGs/PVTGs. It has been criticised for reasons of being a recent neologism and for its purported connotations of a primevalness that mainstream tribes or Adivasis cannot access – it has been described as: "an attempt to articulate a notion of pristine aboriginality that can be set apart from the Adivasi" (Sen 2012:339). It should also be noted that the language used to justify the act of creating the PVTG category, emphasised a focus on supporting the tribes later classified as PVTGs in tandem with querying whether some tribes need any support at all.

28.1.2 Asking to be Classified – the Demand for an Officially Recognised Tribal Religion

From a celebrated history of protest against colonial rule (Behera & Verma 2022), to the demand for a separate tribal state within independent India (Munda & Mullick 2003), to protests against mining on tribal lands (Borde & Bluemling 2020), tribal politics can be called an integral part of the democratic fabric of India. An important new development in

relation to tribal politics has been the demand for a 'Dharam Code', i.e., a religious code. This would be a code in the census that would allow followers of tribal religions to be recognised as distinct from Hindus. No such space for recognition currently exists in the Indian census, though it did in earlier times during colonial rule. From 1871 to 1941, followers of tribal religions were counted under distinct categories that varied from one census to the next. The categories were those of Tribal Religions, Animists, or Aboriginals. However, in 1951, the government of independent India dropped the practice of counting the followers of tribal religions under a separate category (Oddie 2016). Since then, tribals who want to emphasise that they do not follow Hinduism can choose to be counted under a category known as 'Other religions and persuasions'. In the census of 2011, 7,937,734 people chose to be counted as belonging to this category (Census of India 2011b). The impetus for this demand for a distinct, officially recognised tribal religion has been described by tribal leaders at various protest events in the following way – "a community without a religion is a community without an identity" (Participant Observation 2008–2020)[3].

However, it is interesting to note that a major strand of the mobilisations aimed at gaining official recognition for a tribal religion in India, namely, what can be termed the Sarna Movement (Borde 2019), was initiated by and has involved the transgression of a taboo that is commonly found across tribal religions in India – he taboo being the prohibition of the presence of women in sacred groves/sacred natural sites, which are the loci of tribal religiosity in India (Kandari et al. 2014 and Malhotra et al. 2001). The taboo has been noted amongst the tribes of east-central India (Sinha 2006) where the Sarna Movement was centred, but is also found amongst tribal and other communities in various parts of the country (Malhotra et al. 2001)[3].

It is important to note, from the outset, that the tribal women, who began entering the sacred groves where their presence was traditionally prohibited, were not aiming to take a stance vis-à-vis the official recognition of a tribal religion in India. Their presence in these places, initially contested (and sometimes violently) (Borde 2016) can be said to have been subsequently co-opted by the movement for a 'Dharam Code' – more details in relation to this are presented subsequently.

Tribal women started entering the sacred groves where their presence was prohibited, via trance states during which they would claim the goddess of the sacred grove had possessed them. Amongst the members of the Oraon tribe, the goddess is known as Sarna Mata and instances of possession were most common amongst the Oraon women, which is why the movement these women sparked off that led subsequently to the reforestation and revitalisation of sacred groves as places of worship, came to be termed the Sarna Movement (sacred groves are also known as Sarnas amongst the Oraons). Instances of spontaneous possession amongst the Oraon women began in the mid-1990s. I started conducting fieldwork at the sacred grove in the village of Boreya, Ranchi District, Jharkhand, in 2008 – by this time articulations in relation to the importance of a 'Dharam Code' for tribes were already in evidence. In relation to the Sarna Movement, these, however, were mostly made by the male politicians (also tribal) who were involved in the Sarna Movement. It can be argued that the interest of these politicians lay in the collective worship ceremonies that tribal women had begun organising in sacred groves each Thursday. To discuss these ceremonies a little more – instead of the spontaneous possession by Sarna Mata that was reported to have been occurring previously, these ceremonies, which were instituted later as the Sarna Movement gained momentum, provided a context for controlled possession states that would apparently be

triggered by hymn singing and sometimes the beating of a drum. Political interest in these ceremonies can be attributed to the fact that they constituted relatively large and regular gatherings of tribals with an expressed interest in both tribal culture and tribal land (both of these have been politicised in the various tribal political movements mentioned earlier). However, it is also important to note that the ceremonies themselves were politicised. The transformation of the spontaneous possession of tribal women into a structured ceremony can be called the result of the work of several generations of tribal politicians – their work spanning the decades from the run-up to India's independence from colonial rule to the contemporary era. One of the most prominent amongst these politicians was Kartik Oraon, the founder of the Akhil Bhartiya Adivasi Vikas Parishad, a pan-Indian tribal organisation focusing on pertinent development and socio-cultural issues. He initiated a practice of holding weekly prayer meetings called Parha Prarthana Sabhas at which Adivasis would pray, solve legal disputes, and discuss rural development issues. These prayer meetings would be held in Dumkurias, which are the traditional village dormitories for Oraon youth, and Akhras, which are the village meeting grounds. However, the practice of holding these prayer meetings died out with his death in 1981. However, the cases of women's spontaneous possession by Sarna Mata in sacred groves some years later instigated the revival of this religious institution. Young tribal leaders of the time gave the phenomenon of possession by Sarna Mata a new context. They incorporated the possession trance into the earlier Parha Prarthana Sabha structure and started what is now famous as the Sarna Prarthana Sabha, i.e., the previously described weekly Thursday ceremonies. Instead of holding the meetings in Akhras or Dumkurias, they began to hold them in Sarnas or sacred groves and the presence of women in them was allowed in the context of this structured ceremony (Borde 2016). This is not to say that there has been no backlash by traditionalists and also those opposed to assertional displays of tribal religiosity – indeed, on the contrary, the presence of women in sacred groves has been repeatedly opposed, and once violently while I was present (*see* Borde 2016, 2019). Currently however, there is a *Mahila Prakosht*, or women's cell, integrated into the management of the Sarna Movement in Jharkhand.

The Sarna Movement can be called one of the major driving forces behind the demand for a Dharam Code; and it can be argued that it has been most successful at convincing tribals that they must assert that they are not Hindus when called upon to officially declare their religion. This is evinced by the 2011 census. As previously mentioned, in it, 7,937,734 chose the option of declaring that their religion belongs to the 'Other religions and persuasions' category. There was also the option of mentioning the specific religion one might follow under this category – and 4,957,467 people chose to write 'Sarna' to express their affiliation to the beliefs and practices associated with tribal religiosity as it has been largely constructed by the Sarna Movement (Census of India 2011b). Importantly, Sarna is the only officially acknowledged version of tribal religiosity in India – it has been recently given recognition by the government of the state of Jharkhand (Singh 2021), the state which is the epicentre of the Sarna Movement. The government gave official recognition to Sarna as the religion of the tribals in the state by sending a resolution to the Union Government supporting the demand for a religious code for tribals – it stated that the tribal religion thus demanded should be called 'Sarna Adivasi Dharam' (Kukreti 2020). However, it is important to state that Sarna is not likely to be accepted as the name for the tribal religion which tribals all over India want recognition for. As a religious affiliation, Sarna is specific to the tribals of east-central India and furthermore, it claims adherents largely amongst the

members of the Oraon tribe. At a protest event at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi, which I attended and which was the official venue for protests in the national capital, a tribal man from Rajasthan had an altercation with an Oraon woman from Jharkhand who had made a speech saying that the Sarna religion should be recognised. He argued that tribes all over India did not affiliate with the religion known as Sarna; and that she should not make such speeches (Participant Observation 2019)[4]. Indeed, the question of nomenclature is again an important one here. As previously stated, there had once been a column in the Indian census that would allow followers of tribal religions to be counted as belonging to this category. Since this column was removed there have been several petitions to have it reinstated. So far these have not met with success for the expressed reason that the petitions demanding recognition for tribal religiosity have referred to it by varying names – the names reflective of the distinct beliefs and rituals of often the specific tribe making the petition. The leaders of the tribal movement for a Dharam Code (amongst whom leaders involved in the Sarna Movement are prominent), have expressed cognisance of this problem and are attempting to counter the fragmentation of the demand for the recognition of tribal religiosity, by organising seminars that bring together representatives of diverse tribal groups from different parts of the country and discussing the commonalities in their religious beliefs.

According to one such leader (Interview 2019)[5], there had been significant progress in unifying the self-understanding of tribal religiosity. He reported that the practice of diverse tribal groups self-identifying as belonging to diverse religious categories had decreased. In the census of 2001, there were more than 100 different religious groups to which people listed in the 'Other religions and persuasions' category expressed affiliation. In the census of 2011, the number of religious groups under this category that people expressed affiliation to had decreased to 83. He also reported that a consensus had been reached vis-à-vis the name under which the claim for tribal religious recognition would be made – the claimed tribal religion would be called either Prakriti Dharam, i.e., Nature Religion or Adi Dharam, i.e., Original Religion. In a subsequent interview with another such leader the following year (Interview ibid.) I heard, however, that recognition for tribal religiosity would be claimed under the name of the religion termed 'Tribal'. Nevertheless, there does seem to be some consensus on what tribal religion is and how it would be represented. Tribal leaders have been emphatic on the point that sacred natural sites and their worship are an important aspect of tribal religiosity. This has been coupled with discourses of 'ecological ethnicity' that emphasise the intimate entanglements between tribals and their natural environment (Parajuli 1998, 2002). The discourse of tribals as India's eco-saviours was also articulated by one tribal leader from Rajasthan at the protest event I attended at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi: "the day there isn't a tribal in India is the day there won't be any other Indian in the country, because it is tribals who keep the air breathable by protecting the forests" (Tribal Leader from Rajasthan 2019, Interview op cit.). Such discourses have been criticised when applied to indigenous people in the context of their romanticisation by Euro-Americans (Grande 1999) – but the use of such discourses by tribal people who claim an indigenous identity can be called another thing entirely. The use of eco-religious vocabularies by tribal movements in India can be traced back to the inception of the movement for a state for tribals within east-central India, i.e., the Jharkhand Movement (Munda & Mullick 2003). This too had placed an emphasis on the naturalistic and pantheistic elements of tribal religiosity, emphasising at the same time the significance it granted to sacred natural sites.

Ecological discourses apart, it is important to note that women are playing an increasingly important role in the leadership of the Sarna Movement and are consequently gaining prominence at the national level in the movement for a Dharam Code. At these political events, I did not hear any criticism of the fact that tribal women are transgressing a taboo by organising worship ceremonies in sacred groves. I did, however, find that some tribal leaders still believe that there is a tribal taboo against the presence of women in sacred groves, but did not condemn the fact that this taboo was being broken – their expressed attitude can be described as one of accepting that things change with modernity. They also did talk about the fact that the relationship that tribal religiosity had with Hinduism was complex and that there were points of intersection between them, emphasising nevertheless that official recognition for tribal religiosity was important (Interviews op cit.).

It can be argued in relation to the breaking of the taboo against women's presence in sacred groves, that though this transgressive act by tribal women was initially contested, it has now been co-opted by the larger movement for a Dharam Code. Women can be termed the foot soldiers of this movement in east-central India, claiming space for tribal religiosity in sacred groves every Thursday and showing that they are indeed not Hindus. It is also important to note that the participating women often bring young children to these sacred grove ceremonies, which would consequently have implications for the inter-generational transfer of religious beliefs.

28.2 Drawing on the Legacy of 'Demon' Ancestors – the Asurs, a PVTG

Following on from the previous section which describes the consensus building process amongst tribals that is leading up to the demand for a Dharam Code, as well as the deployment of eco-religious discourses in this regard, I now present a case of tribal religiosity which too is showcasing its difference from Hinduism in a highly visible way, but which would find itself at odds with the consensus that is being generated around how tribal religiosity should be defined. This is the religiosity of the Asur tribe which lives in the Indian states of Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Bihar. The Indian government has given the Asurs the status of a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG). The tribe numbers 30,452 individuals (as per the 2011 census) (Ministry of Tribal Affairs 2013). The Asurs have been described as a tribe with several smaller sub-groups, namely the Bir Asur, the Birjiya, and the Agaria.

The Asurs are mentioned in the myths and oral epics of other tribes. One of these is the 'Asur Kahani', a Munda oral epic (the Mundas are one of the largest Indian tribes) in which the Asurs are described as a race of mighty iron-smelters who were punished by the tribal Sun God, Singbonga, for the mass ecological destruction that their traditional iron-smelting craft had caused. In it, the sun god Singbonga is depicted as being troubled in heaven by the heat produced by the Asurs' iron-smelting furnaces. The animals and birds on Earth are also complaining of the heat. They try to appeal to Singbonga to intercede on their behalf with the Asurs. Singbonga makes several failed attempts to convince the Asurs to limit their production of iron. Finally, he decides to punish them. He incarnates as a young boy who is adopted by an old Munda couple. At a juncture when the Asurs believe their reserves of iron ore to have been depleted (this depletion of ore is Singbonga's doing), Singbonga leads them to believe that only by a human sacrifice will the desperate situation of the Asurs be remedied. Since none are willing to offer themselves as the victim, Singbonga as the young boy declares that he will sacrifice himself by entering the iron-smelting furnace.

This he does and emerges unscathed and laden with gold and jewels. He then tells the Asur men, that he, being merely a boy, was the recipient of this great wealth – and that they, if they chose to be sacrificed, would amass far more. The Asur men then enter the furnace and Singbonga instructs the Asur women to blow the bellows. This they do, but when the furnace is opened, all that is found is death. The Asur women then lament and bewail their situation. They clutch Singbonga (who has now assumed his true form) as he ascends to heaven and implore him to provide them with means of subsistence. Singbonga subsequently flings them onto the earth, where they are transformed into the spirits that the tribals understand to inhabit the land and forests, and instructs them to trouble the Mundas, who would then make them offerings, in order to propitiate them – by which they would be provided for (Hoffmann & Emelen 1990: 1648–1658). This can, therefore, also be called a story of the creation of some of the sacred natural sites worshipped by the Mundas and the Oraons with whom they live (see Roy 1915). Indeed, it has been reported that tribes in east-central India believe that the Asur women's spirits inhabit their land and require propitiation (Hoffmann & Emelen 1990:1658). There are in fact ruins of iron-smelting furnaces found across the fields of the villages of Jharkhand in east-central India, which are attributed by the Munda people to these very same Asurs of yore (Roy 1926:147–152). Radiocarbon dating of some of the artefacts found at these sites dates them to 20 BC and 100 AD (Ghosh 2008). Nevertheless, whatever would be their actual history, the Asuras trace their genealogical descent from the Asuras or demons of Hindu mythology – and the theme of the importance of nomenclature finds relevance here once again.

The Asurs worship the gods of the Hindu pantheon as well as Singbonga and various spirits of the local environment; they mention, in the context of their religiosity, the names of most of the deities venerated in a traditional Hindu home. This may well be a symptom of the Hinduisation/Sanskritisation process to which the tribals of central India are known to be subject (Thapar 1977:49–50). However, the Asuras are most emphatic about the fact that these are the gods of their ancestors. It is extremely interesting that the Asuras claim to worship Ravana, the famous demonic Asura king of the Indian epic, the Ramayana, whom they refer to as Dasmurhiya, as well as Mahishasur (the great buffalo-demon killed by Durga), Kumbhakaran, Danasur, and such other demonic characters mentioned in ancient Indian literature that bear the appellation Asura (Vyas 1994). As per their conceptualisations, these so-called demonic characters were mighty and powerful people of ancient times, and their ancestors. They claim to worship Ravana with the sacrifice of a bull and say that they observe mourning on the day of Dusshera, when his effigy is burnt; this is opposed to the general celebration of his death by the vast majority of the Hindu castes. They also insist that Shiva, whom they worship as Mahadeo (great god), is an Asura (Fieldwork Notes 2007)[6]. Worship of Shiva among the Asurs has been recorded by K. K. Leuva (1963), who was, according to the Asurs he interviewed, "worshipped in the past with human sacrifice, which is now represented by the effigies of human beings" (Leuva 1963:160). In their understanding, many Hindu gods were Asuras and their mythical ancestors. They mentioned among them Kali, Durga, Krishna, Parvati, and Hanuman. Verrier Elwin also depicts instances of the Agarias worshipping "tribal gods or demons, who are clearly associated with the ancient Asura, such as Lohasur (whose name does not occur in Sanskrit literature), Koelasur and Agyasur" (Elwin 1942: 2). He also describes one of their gods called Jwala Mukhi, as swallowing the sun, as Rahu, the Asura depicted in Sanskrit literature and astrology (Elwin 1942:3); this implies a possible conflation of the two deities.

In Vedic literature, the term Asura was initially one of praise and was indeed used as a generic name for various gods, such as Varuna, Agni, Savitr, and Rudra/Shiva (Banerji-Shastri 1926:123–124). In the earliest Vedic texts, Indra too is referred to as an Asuras, though in the later Vedic texts he is depicted as the king of the Devas with whom the Asuras continuously clash (Hale 1999). In the Brahmanic tradition the Asura are stated to be the elders to the Deva (Mishra 1987:233). The eternal conflict between the Asuras and the Devas is depicted in the earliest accounts, with descriptions of the Deva achieving victory by artifice, after initial defeat at the hands of the Asuras (Mishra 1987:232).

The Asurs' worship of Mahishasur (the demon killed by the Hindu Goddess Durga) is a point of clash with the politicised versions of Hinduism that are current and was even contested by the Education Minister of India (Sen 2019). Despite this and perhaps because of it, the worship of Mahishasur has become a rallying cry for dissidents and those marginalised by mainstream Hinduism, which is the ideology that the ruling party at the central level in India reflects. The Asuras have a complex relationship with Hinduism and indeed contest many of its narratives, including via an alternative epic tradition (*see* Borde 2012). For these reasons, the inclusion of their religiosity into what is being constructed as an ecological tribal religion that is distinct from Hinduism is likely to prove difficult. It would be important to guard against situations in which the previously mentioned on-going consensus building exercise aimed at gaining recognition for an Indian tribal religion, turns into an assimilatory process by which the diversity of tribal religiosities is negated in favour of a monolithic narrative that might have more political efficacy.

28.3 Clashing Classifications: Tribal Christianity and Unconverted Tribes

Tensions or divides between tribal Christians and unconverted tribals have been noted since at least 1930 when a Protestant Christian Oraon wrote of how unconverted Oraons did not accept him as a member of the same tribe. Amongst the Oraons, another pertinent case was that of the legal contestation of the tribal identity of tribal Christians, which went up to the Indian Supreme Court where the petition that engaged in this contestation was dismissed (the petitioner was Kartik Oraon) (Dasgupta 2016). In contemporary times, the rise of Hindu nationalism amongst tribals has also been noted, as have instances of how this has been directed against tribal Christians (Froerer 2006). Violence against Christian tribals by the unconverted tribals who may live alongside them has been ascribed to jealousy born of economic competition – the assistance that the Church provides to Christian tribals in the fields of education and healthcare has been argued to be a factor that has fuelled such conflicts (Bauman 2013).

Tribal Christianity can be said to have an uneasy relationship with the Sarna Movement – two cases can be mentioned that reveal this. The first is the 'Nemha Bible' incident and the second is the controversy over the depiction of Mary as a tribal woman in a red and white sari with a baby (baby Jesus) in her arms. The Nemha Bible incident occurred, when in 1995, the Bible Society of India published a Bible in Kurukh (the Oraon language) titled 'Nemha Bible'. It contained derogatory references to non-Christian tribals and Sarnas (used here in the sense of sacred natural sites). The Church had been advised to withdraw the Bible by tribal intellectuals, but it was reported that it had not taken heed of their warnings. In 2008, when violence against Christians broke out in the state of Odisha (Kanungo 2008), these derogatory references in the Nemha Bible were used by Hindu right-wing groups to instigate similar violence in Jharkhand. It organised a meeting in Dumri, in the district

of Gumla, and publicised the derogatory statements which the Nemha Bible contained. This did in fact succeed in stirring up the emotions of many non-Christian tribals and some wanted to react violently. However, the leadership of the Sarna movement decided to defuse the tension by asking the Church to express its solidarity with non-Christian tribals in a public manner. The Church agreed and a tribal Catholic cardinal (Telespore Toppo) made this public gesture. However, it was reported that this did not serve to satisfy all the leaders of the Sarna Movement (Borde 2016). The second incident occurred five years later, in 2013, when a church in the village of Singhpur, not far from Ranchi, the capital of Jharkhand, erected a statue of the Virgin Mary which depicted her as a tribal woman in a red and white sari, which is the traditional dress of several tribes in east-central India and is often worn at ceremonies in Sarnas. This was seen by the leadership of the Sarna Movement as a tool to convert more tribespeople to Christianity and it was demanded that the statue be removed. There were several protests, some of them on a mass scale – one of these involved over 3,000 tribals marching to Singhpur with the threat that they would forcibly bring the statue down[7]. Since then, inter-communal relations in the area cannot be said to be cordial. Four kilometres from Singhpur, at the village of Sithio, protests broke out roughly two years after this incident when Christian tribals reportedly tried to install a Christmas star after uprooting a Sarna flag[8].

28.4 Conclusion

The issue of claims-making by Indian tribes as to how their religion is distinct from Hinduism, is also a form of claims-making by which tribes that have not converted to other religions such as Christianity may show themselves to be tribal not only in their ethnicity, but also in their religion; and religion in India can be argued to be increasingly seen as synonymous with identity. That there is something at stake here for those tribes who have converted to other religions is clear – and the stakes may be economic as much as they are socio-cultural. As previously mentioned, in India, classificatory schemas as pertaining to tribes are linked with access to state resources via affirmative action programmes and also public distribution schemes, such as, for example, the Antyodaya card scheme that is supposed to provide free food grains to PVTG households (Drèze et al. 2018). In relation to affirmative action programmes, the case of Dalit Christians and Muslims can be called a cautionary tale, for tribal Christians, Dalits, or those belonging to 'Scheduled Castes' which were traditionally discriminated against, can avail of the government's affirmative action programmes, but lose this access if they convert to another religion such as Christianity or Islam – this translates into very large numbers of people who may continue to face discrimination within the religion they have converted into and who do not have access to government support; for example, it is estimated that in rural India the population of Dalit Christians is 1,490,000 and in urban India it is 860,000 (Doiphode 2022). Indeed, Kartik Oraon, the structure of whose Parha Prarthana Sabhas the Sarna Movement has drawn from, had unsuccessfully introduced a bill in the Indian Parliament in 1968, to de-schedule tribal Christians, i.e., to withdraw their access to the support that the Indian government makes available to tribals[9].

It can be argued that as much as the movement for a Dharam Code for tribals is a movement to distinguish followers of tribal religiosity from Hindus, it is also a movement to

distinguish unconverted tribals from those who have converted to other religions. It can be noted that the same Jharkhand government which had sent a resolution to the Union Government supporting the demand for a religious code for tribals, has instituted a law against religious conversion 'by force or allurement' in 2017; this is termed the Jharkhand Freedom of Religion Act, 2017[10]. However, whether and how this will apply to cases of re-conversion of tribals to tribal religiosity after conversion to Christianity (of which there have been reported cases) remains to be seen[11]; these reconversion ceremonies are reportedly organised by members of the 'Central Sarna Committee'. What is interesting and perhaps troubling is that it is reported that the members of a right-wing Hindu organisation (Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram) often accompany the members of the 'Central Sarna Committee' while they organise these reconversion ceremonies.

The movement by tribals for a code for their religion shows them less as subalterns (those silenced by others) and more as the astute members of 'political society' that Partha Chatterjee (2012) describes, i.e., a collective of canny political actors who know where government benefits may lie and how to access them. Can we then call them subalterns who can not only speak but who know how to make a lot of noise? Indeed, in this vein, the movement for a Dharam Code can be described as a 'call to the state', i.e., a demand to be visible to the state as an object of intervention in a specific way. A final point here relates to the essentialisations that are part of this political claims-making exercise that tribals have embarked upon. As previously mentioned, an inherent danger is the homogenisation of the diversity of religious beliefs that tribals across India can call their own. A mitigating factor would be an awareness of the strategic nature of any such essentialisations – i.e., to have power over them and to be aware of their constructed nature as Gayatri Spivak advises in her advocacy for 'strategic essentialism' (Eide 2016). For this, the disruptive act of tribal women breaking an ancient taboo would be useful. There is a general awareness that a taboo has been broken and that this has lent strength to the movement for a Dharam Code. There is also, currently, an unwillingness to enforce this taboo. It is this sort of flexibility or willingness to sit with the messiness of religious belief that I argue could bode well for the future of tribal religious politics. The presence of tribal women in sacred groves would hopefully serve as a reminder of the constructed nature of the rituals that tribal religiosity is calling its own. Other rituals, whether they be tribal, Christian, Muslim, or Hindu could then hopefully be seen as constructions in the same light, which have meaning for those who invest in them, and which pose little threat to those for whom they do not have meaning. But this is not the way political society operates, and so we can only hope for the birth of something new that will allow us the chance to develop new concepts with which to understand it.

Notes

1 https://www.culturalsurvival.org/sites/default/files/UPR%20India%202022%20-FINAL.pdf
2 https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=191701
3 Participant Observation. Observation made by the author during several field studies conducted in Jharkhand from 2008 to 2020.
4 Participant Observation and participation at the protest movement for religious code at Delhi in 2019.
5 Interviews. Interviews conducted in Delhi during protest movement in 2019.
6 Fieldwork Notes. Notes maintained y the author during fired study conducted among the Asur tribe in 2007.
7 https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/tribals-torn-apart-by-religion/article5934381.ece

8 https://indianexpress.com/article/india/under-the-faith-microscope-jharkhand-passes-an-anti-conversion-bill-but-how-will-it-parse-a-tribe-as-much-sarna-as-christian-4794210/
9 https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/tribals-torn-apart-by-religion/article5934381.ece
10 http://www.bareactslive.com/JH/jhr304.htm
11 https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/tribals-torn-apart-by-religion/article5934381.ece

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GLOSSARY

Aa	child
Aabripa	beating sword in loom
Aagun	fire
Aai	mother
Aana Kudma	ancestral soul kept in a pot at home
Aanyongo	ritual examination
Aar	potato
Aayo	mother
Abbeya	mediator
Abhi thu	hunting ritual
Abripa	a loom stick
Abuzu	maize powder
Achha, Thik Rai	okay, fine
Adapo	trap
Adda	advance loan
Adichuviluthal	prostration beating the chest by hands
Adipra	bamboo spoon
Adivasi	ancient inhabitants
Adoo Embo	cousins (maternal)
Agarathiappan	Tamil folk god
Agarbatti	incense sticks
Agni	fire
Agra	bamboo basket
Agua	go between/messenger of marriage proposal
Ahi ko	mithun
(**bos frontalis**)	habitation area
Ahimsa	non-violence
Ahir	cow herd caste
Ahu Kochi	sling bag of bear skin
Ai Khaw Kylliang	a taboo to marry the daughter of a paternal aunt

Aji/Kaji	rice beer strainer
Akakhre	silver earrings
Akhra	meeting ground for different purposes
Akhush or **suwa**	pollution
Akshara Bhagban	god of learning/letters
Akuh	the title of the priest
Akupra	a big lizard
Alo Thru	cleansing ritual
Alomo	lunatic behaviour
Amapandum	worship and offering of new mango to deities
Amavasya/Krishna Paksham	the new moon day
Ambapa	forest
Āmeoa	creator and preserver of the universe
Āmeoyan	Tangkhul traditional religion
Amm	water
Amra	tiger
Amrala	shaman's headgear
Amuni	trophies
Amus	the first festival of the year
Ana	relative
Anarya	primitive and barbaric
Andaso	the beginning of Reh in which an extra veranda is made
Andikru	star
Andu	rack
Angi	taboo observance
Ango	marriage by capture
Angrala	month of November
Angti	finger ring
Anja	dirge
Ankallamman	a Tamil folk goddess
Anrokhu	dye
Anupu	fine
Apesha	grain spirit/deity
Apey	to clean
Apfu	Angami word for mother
Apotolo	bamboo hats
Apouna/Ragwang	good spirit, the eldest son of **TingkaoRagwang**
Apro	mat
Arkhi	liquor made from **mahua** flower
Aro	**coptis teeta**
Arua	raw rice/rice from unboiled paddy
Aruku	cane and bamboo plate
Arulye	white bead necklace
Arwa/Abdhatikhil	raw rice/rice from unboiled paddy
Arya	literate and civilised
Ashoka	the window near the pigsty to let air and light in

Ashonu cane basket
Ashramshalas residential schools
Asthan a place or seat
Aswin the month of October
Ata to swear
Atho lunatic behaviour
Athrali a wild plant with itching sensation
Athumbo a fleshy shrub with sour taste
Athupopu a site near Keyala passes in Indo Tibetan border
Atige Eba paternal clan
Atobra a walking stick
Atu spirit
Au Haipou honorific address
Aweno child hauler
Aweto head band
Ayyanar a Tamil folk god
Ayyanar folk god
Azaan Islamic call to prayer
Baadi stick
Baans frog
Baba father
Bad Nazar evil eye
Badu/Khulu blankets
Baha in the past
Bainthi long curved blade fitted into a wooden foothold for cutting purpose
Bairakh flag
Bakha uncle's daughter
Bamshawali family/clan etc., genealogies
Banbuddhi a legendary malevolent beast dreaded by the Kashmiris
Bangla Gwang god of earth quake
Bango cluster of villages
Barajangar des the land of the 12 forests
Bari land the land near the house used to grow vegetables
Barzakh a state of waiting until the judgement day
Basyoda or **Shiloda** food prepared for offerings one day before
Becha close family friends
Beka water serpent/water spirit
Berumanusom five elders of Yerikula tribe of Kulapanchayat
Bhaat rice
Bhagban god
Bhagwan the God
Bhajan singing the name of god in chorus
Bhelaghar temporary huts
Bhelwa a tree (**Semicarpusanacardium**)
Bhije bhaat wet rice

Bhopa the priest in Sahariya community
Bhrashtu practice of excommunication from the territory on the breach of incest taboo
Bhuinhars the descendants of the original founder or founders of an Oraon village
Bhulas tramp or stray spirits
Bhur garden
Bhut ghosts or the mischievous spirit
Bhut parab election
Biching roof of the house
Bidai bidding farewell
Bilati tomato
Bilipfü the woman who pronounces blessing on the harvest in Angami harvest initiation ritual
Biri a local form of cigarette
Biribik water serpent with a head with horns, considered an evil in Adi lore
Birus ritual sacrifice offered to a deity
Bisnu/Bonchanu/Manchanu good spirit, second son of **TingkaoRagwang**
Bogari kayat branch of plum tree
Bohare a caste of shopkeeper or money lenders
Brahmotsavam ten day Vedic festival in temple
Bro grave
Brushav bull
BuchaMeipu the Creator of life
BudamMeipu deity who gives life to all
Buibang a long bladed knife
Burusung the god who protects the salap tree
BusinMeipu deity holding the souls of all living things
Butto maize
Chabang lhuda evil spirit of the south
Chabootre the Place of Worship in a Sahariya village
Chagamei/Pa Ra evil spirits
Chakan Gan Ngai annual ceremony to bid farewell to departed souls
Chakebou (Liangmais) annual ritual of sending off the souls of the deceased person (s)
Chakkiliyars a Scheduled Caste of Tamil Nadu
Chal mithun (**bos frontalis**)
Chala Pacho a goddess in Oraon tribe
Chaliuroubo ethical principle of selflessness
Champei goddess of birds and animals
Chandi a deity who protects from evil eye
Chang Lhakou invoking soul of the paddy
Changdon Ngai ritual meant for repairing of village road
Changlhu evil spirit
Changlhu lhudai evil spirit of the north

Characheng literally means "God's way of life," also known as **Poupe Racheng** (Forefathers' Religion)

Charaipui deity of wealth (an assistant to **Kambupui**)

Charakilongmei good spirit for the welfare of the humankind, seventh son of **Tingkao Ragwang**

Charu a harvest festival

Charubeda the seat of the god Rav Baba

Charuidih the land of the dead

Chavang Kut post-harvest festival related to paddy/rice

Cheiraoba New Year's Day of the Meitei/Meetei

Chhim infertility in a woman

Chhuri knife

Chipee (or **chipi**) evil spirit

Chironji calumpong nut/almondette kernel

Chiuniune malum superstitions

Choli Waddar's word for jacket

Chonchai good spirit/god for prosperity, the fifth son of **TingkaoRagwang**

Chopans Bakarwal local shepherds

Chükhieo the Spirit guardian of wild life in Angami region

Chulha hearth

Chulha Khajjas oil collected from the hearth

Chulikatta/Bebejiya Assamese term for Idu Mishmis

Chum phun ban phi ancestor worship

Chung Pathen holy father above supreme being

Churail ghost of the women who died during pregnancy or child birth or within a few days of it

Clan kundi underground settlement for ancestor spirits of a particular clan near the village

Dafan burial

Dahha ritual of offering

Dahura branch of a tree

Dahura branch of a tree

Dain Kuri Bhut adopted familiar spirit for anti-social purpose

Daita tribal servitors of Lord Jagannath

Dak postal service

Dam ancestors

Dampagallhou rituals to ensure normal growth of a child and **Dampakhonmei**

Dampapu god of creation

Dampapui goddess of creation

Dand head among the farmers in the village

Danda stick

Dandakatta/BhelwaPhadi a ritual of the Oraon tribe

Danki a brass vessel having traditional value

Darha Tanr/Darha Tonka the place where sacrifice is offered to

Darha spirit
Dav Ghaukh Sawang positive energy
Dekhe disc
Devata god
Devati/Devi goddess
Devgudi village shrine
Dhangras young men
Dhangris young women
Dharmesh a god in Oraon tribe which represents the Sun
Dhartini Ma the earth mother
Dheva-Kotta-Kallu God given stone/spirit stone
Dhumkudia male dormitory of the Oraon
Dhumkuria bachelors' dormitory
Dhungia hand-made local tobacco cigar
Dhunis holy fire kept burning continuously
Dhuti a loin cloth for men
Di Tingpu Di Zangpu father and mother goddess earth
Didet/Ditung the two vertical lines representing zodiac signs
Dimitayang the lonely spirit who stirs up lake waters and clutches trespassing men in icy embrace in Adi region
Disari soothsayer and medicine man
Diwad Endna dance performed by the girls at the Diwad
Diyari festival of light (in Halbi language)
Doibom Puthul small basket, one of the components of Indoi
Doikhom ritual post
Dongatanamu Yerikula's word for stealing
Dongjao Ngai competition among village farmers organised by **Pei** (traditional village court/council)
Donyi Polo the Sun and the Moon gods
Dro/Dron tutelary spirit
Duira water god
Duma the spirit of an ancestor
Dungudunga a stringed musical instrument
Dupu cage
Egambo cactus plant
Ehiga practice
Eho rich
Ela moon
Emo epilepsy
Ena taboo
Endo poor
Epago sago palm tree
Epe winnowing tray
Epo slave
Epoto elephant grass
Erpa house
Etho defamation

Eto	fowl
Eto/peto	haversack
Etondre/Anatubu	war coats
Ettuttokkai	an ancient Tamil literature
Fard e kifaya	collective obligation in Islam
Fatiha Khwani	Bakarwal tradition of Islamic prayer by deceased person's relatives and friends for deceased's better afterlife
Gairah Bhutaha Khet	the piece of land from which expense for the sacrifices to
Gairahi Bhut	is derived
Gairahi Bhut	a particular group of village spirits
Gaondevi	goddess of the village
Gayata	associate priest of Devgudi
Geida	first sacrifice performed after an Angami marriage
Geisu ruthou	chicken sacrifice in Angami rituals
Gendi	a dance during **Amus**
Genna day	no work day
Gerundu/Zuhi	cane hats
Ghanta	brass bell
Ghantapatua	traditional male dancers, usually with a pitcher on head
Ghar Damad	a male who lives in his in-laws' house
Gharwapsi	return to the prior religious order
Ghata	pitcher
Ghusi	loin cloth worn by men
Ghusl	ceremonial cleansing
Ginki mei	household reitual seeking ancestors' blessings of prosperity and good health
Gobari/Maiend/saare	cow dung
Gokpai	omen reading by examining the spleen of a sacrificed pig
Gonlo	forest spirit
Gora/Gondali	a variety Upland rice
Gorait	a person who plays music during festival belonging to a special group
Goti	bonded labourer
Gotra	the totemic clan
Gotras	Yerikula's use of the word for clan
Gove Mane	place with staked stones
Grama kovilgal	folk temples
Guidui ngai	worshipping Goddess **Di Tingpu Di Zangpu** (father and mother earth) for the fertility of soil and good harvest
Gulim dansanmei	omen reading by using ginger
Gunam/Gunum	rituals performed to pacify the wandering spirits of the ancestors
Gurang Poi	evil spirits
Guru seva	to pay homage to the teacher by serving him
Haat	street/rural market

Hamai	the traditional name of the Zeliangrong community, which includes cognate communities, namely Inpui, Liangmai, Rongmei, and Zeme
Hangv*a*	local village council
Hanriya/hadia/handia	rice beer
Hao laa	folksong
Haomei	generic name for hill people/tribes in Manipuri
Haosa	village chief
Havan	a ritual offering of ghee and grain to the fire
He	unit of measurement
Hegaaze (Zeme's)	annual ritual of sending off the souls of the deceased person(s)
Hengdang	traditional sword
Heraka	a revival religion of Zeliangrong
Hima	a Khasi state
Hinged	scripted rules governing everyday life
Hoi	a Naga yell
Hongcha	roof of the portico in a house
Hongkho Khao	bringing goddess Lakshami home
Ho-Phi	platform constructed temporarily by bamboo sticks and thatches
Hun Ahkang Tha	sacrifice of white cock
Hun	time/seasonal ritual
Iateh Kur	clan relations
Ichi	husband
Igu	shaman
Igu gru	reward to the shaman
Iku	dog
Indoi	bundle of charms or magical formulas
Indur (Chalua, Bourdia, Khatua)	local name of different types of rat
Ini	the Sun
Ini la po	where the destruction took place
Ini la phi	the great fire of destruction
Inoosi	fruit
Inyi la phi	the great burning of earth
Ipi Su Bey	rogue/thief
Ipih	perching bird
Iruta	sword
Isvar	god
Ithrungo	chest
Ithu	corpse
Jaal	fishing net
Jagaran	singing sessions at night
Jakarura dam	all dead ones who died unnaturally
Jamah	shirt
Jamru sap	Oriental or Indian rat snake

Janshatmi	Lord Krishna's birthday
Jatra	meeting place on the occasion of a group worship
Jatra Khunta	the wooden post at the dancing meet
Jhara/Hadiya	rice beer
Jhum	shifting cultivation
Jitiaa	Hindu ritual celebrated by mothers for children's wellbeing during the first half of **Aswin** month corresponding to September
Jiu	soul
Jogani	offering of new crops to deities before self-consumption
Johar Bhenth	a ritual to greet Gayata on the Diwad festival
Joor	river; in this paper used for 'Kanshabati River'
Joupaankeimei	libation of rice beer
Jworo	water used for both drinking and household use
Ka mheek	ever wakeful eyes**,**
Ka Beh Shnong	exile from village
Ka Jingiateh Ktien	wedding engagement
Ka Khadduh	youngest daughter
Ka Niam Ing	rituals within the family
Ka Niam Kur/Hima	rituals within the clan
Ka On Kongor	assisting bridegroom to the bride's house
Ka Pyrta Shnong	summon to villagers
Ka Ring Kongor or **Ka Shaw Kongor**	tradition of receiving of bridegroom
Ka Sang Sohpet	an unpardonable sin to marry parallel cousins
Ka Sang Syngken	an unpardonable sin to marry father's sister or their grand children
Ka Shong Sang	an unpardonable sin of a marriage within the clan
Ka Shong Sang Synrai	an unpardonable sin to marry one's sister-in-law or mother-in-law
Ka Tah Umphniang	applying oil to wedded couple
Ka Tait Kur	ex-communication from the clan
Kabokathumahao (Manipuri)	local sweets, made from fried paddy and molasses
Kachim	tortoise
Kafan	shroud
Kai	devoid of
Kaiba Bhamboo	village deity in charge of the southern gate
Kaibhamei	evil spirit
Kaikulla	presiding deity of each corner formed by any two of the four cardinal directions
Kailang Ruanmei	guard of the village
Kaipi Bhamboo	village deity in charge of the northern gate
Kairao	presiding deity of the house/ancestral deity
Kairao thee	a ceremony to appease the
Kairao	for the welfare of the community
Kaj	socio-religious performance

Kallar	an ex-criminal tribe of Tamil Nadu
Kalumkai	house of worship/temple of **Tingkao Ragwang**
Kambring	priest of the Mishmi (Shaman/Miri)
Kambupui	the patron goddess of wealth
Kameo	deities
Kancha/Dhibba	coins
Kaniu kari	taboo and associated rituals
Kanto/Binthi	knife
Kapakara	evil spirits/devils
Kapenpui	evil spirit of epidemic
Kaphung Kameo	mountain spirit/deity
Kapi	winter
Karam Basi Ghee	on the second day of Karma
Karam	a festival of Oraon tribe
Karampei	presiding deity (male) of the locality
Karampou	presiding deity (female) of the locality
Karanavan	maternal uncle
Karangong	good spirit, the sixth son of **Tingkao Ragwang**
Karchhul	a large spoon
Kasā Ākhavā	supreme being; creator
Kasā Ākhavā Āvā Varivarā	god, the father and creator
KasāĀkhavāVarivarā	god, the creator
Kasotas or **dhotis**	loin cloth
Katampavanam	the grove of Kadampa trees
Katha	catechu
Kathu	summer
Kaudo	the young god residing nearby goddess Keina
Kaval deivam	guardian deity
Kazeiram	the land of dead
Kazingram	heaven
Ke	rice
Kebang	village council of the Abor (Adi)
Keda Vettu Virundu	young buck/bull sacrifice followed by community feast
Keina	water goddess
Kelchal Ki heh	curled horn of the he-goat
Kelipie	an Angami agricultural festival
Kellim	porch
Kelumki or **Kalum Kai**	temple of Heraka and TRC
Kepu	paddy
Kera aa	Idu Mishmi people
Kerütsu	the first day of field going for Angami married couple
Kerutsu	the practice of an Angami married couple going to work in the fields
Ketera	winnowing plate made up of bamboo strips
Keyum	nothingness in Adi language
Khajj Tatthi	earthen lamp

Khamba pillar or post
Khangchiu male dormitory
Khanong local healer
Khaokho/Chaovei bangle made of bamboo
Khar straw
Kharapuja/Kharihani worship of the threshing floor
Khed Norhna washing the feet in a special manner
Kheer porridge made of milk and rice
Kheer-Puri porridge and oil- fried Indian pancake
Khel lineage
Kher bee egg of fowl
Kheta bowl
Khinu spirit
Kho vangboh blessing ceremony of the village
Khoi parched rice (a food prepared by frying paddy in sand heated on oven)
Khol a type of drum
Khor rice beer
Khumpi main pillar inside traditional Kuki house
Khun spear
Khunt Bhut tutelary spirits of a particular clan
Khunt a particular clan/clan based village
Khutna circumcision
Khwan or **ayu** water
Kin khao mao eating new rice
Kirhupfumia the Angami word for a woman with lethal powers capable of crippling people and also destroying plants
Kni maternal uncle
Kodangi shaman
Kodar bant wooden handle of axe
Koila powder/Koielachind charcoal powder
Koklumei good spirit the fourth son of **TingkaoRagwang**
Kokto the god of the land of dead
Kolang Endna third day of the Diwad festival
Kong Kameo river spirit/deity
Kotwal messenger
Kovil kadugal sacred groves
Kovil Kammais sacred tanks
Koya Punem Gondi religion and philosophy
Ksha ghosts of Mishmi hills
Kshatriyas the warrior social division in Hindu **Varna** hierarchy (occupational division)
KudhaPakhna/Pathal Punji a heap of pebbles on the outskirts of an Oraon village, connected with some remarkable achievement or death of some ancient hero
Kula Dharma Yerikula's word for caste/clan duty

Kumba Dhevaru	deification of pot deities
Kumbhabhishekam	temple consecration ceremony
Kumkum	use of the word for vermilion
Kunmei	good spirit, the protector of the village
Kur	clan
Kuravar	an ex-criminal tribe of Tamil Nadu
Kurukh	language of the Oraon
Kurunthogai	ancient Tamil literature
Kwa	betel nut and betel leaf
Labon cha	salted tea
Lagan Bandhi	fixing the date of marriage
Lam la	evil spirits
Landha	rice beer
Lang bhangla	spirit dwelling under the bedsteads
Lang paimei	omen reading by using bow shaped cotton beating willow
Lanv	wealth
Laora	god of paddy field (evil spirit)
Lashü	the Angami word for death during childbirth and is a form of apotia (unnatural death)
Law manshi	baby shower
Lhakou	invoking souls of the departed
Liede Bilipfü,	Angami ritual initiation of harvest by a woman, who pronounces blessing on the harvest
Liuchiu	female dormitory
Lo Imu	white man (British)
Lohla	month of January
Lopa	Tibetan term for all hill tribes living in the south
Lorou	real or mythical spiritual gate
Lota	a round water container made of brass or copper
Lougai	hoe used for ritual purpose
Lu	bride price/gift
Luchu	female dormitory
Luha	iron made bangle
Lui Kameo	field spirit/deity
Luk	lao/**laopani** undiluted rice beer
Lyngdoh	chief in some states, priest for religious purposes
Machh	fish
Machi	water
Madurai Veeran	a Tamil folk god
Mahadania Pahan	village priest appointed to offer sacrifice to the
Mahadania	spirit
Mahadev	a god in Hindu mythology
Mahapru	great god
Mahr	the bride price in Bakarwal community
Mahto	secular headman of a particular village
Maidam	traditional burial ground of the Ahom

Maigang	fire god
Maitar bai	adopted/ritual brother
Malu	nettle plant
Manalounbo	the concept of rebirth
Mandai	a local term for **Jatra**
Mandar Salas	pyramid shaped mounds of earth on some upland outside the village
Mandia	a variety of millet
Mandodev	deity from offspring
Mangeto	a species of bamboo
Manita Bhut	spirit of a particular family
Manitbo	restrictions and abstinence
Maniyam	village headman
Mantra	incantations
Mariamman	a Tamil folk goddess
Masan	burial ground
Masi	a Tamil month corresponding to February and March
Matagudi	shrines of goddess
Matai, Amik, Broh, Khroney	spirit gods of the Mishmis
Mati	soil/the spirit doctor
Mawbah	big cinerarium of the clan
Mawshyieng	small stone cairns
Mecha	outsider
Mei	people
Meicravmeicric/meicravgaymei	giver of health
Meif*a*	**hell**
Meipui	Old Women's Shelter
Meirapmei	installation ritual of the new sacred fire in the dormitory in place of the old one
Meji	stack of firewood for religious bonfire
Mela	group worship of invited deities from different villages
Menga	host in the festival
Mepa	outsider
Meriah	human designated for sacrifice
Mi Lhakou	invoking the soul of human
Midhi	Adi term for Idu Mishmis
Midu	those inhabiting the foothills
Mim Kut	post-harvest festival related to millet
Mindri	Idus inhabiting Dri and Mathum valleys
Mithikho	village of death/abode of bliss
Mithu	Idus inhabiting the Ithun valley
Mitimili	a race of small, quiet supernatural beings
Mittom	Kurichiyan word meaning settlement
Mitushipa	guardian of animal spirit
Mong Gwang	Cloud god
Mooh	village priest
Moolnivasi	original inhabitants

Moonnaman	an elderly functionary occupying third position from among affinal relatives or from the community
Moopatan	ancestor
Moosli	a variety of turmeric
Mo-rol	form of **rangoli**-Indian art form created using different colours
Mraba	place of soul
Mudi	peak
Mudu	the land of soul
Murmakhunt	a divine post at Murma village in Ranchi
Murukan	Hinduised Tamil folk god
Muyee	Waddar's word for gift exchange
Myntri	minister
Na	leaf
Naalu Paadi	abode of spirit
Nadugal	hero stone worship of ancient Tamil people
Nam kirtan	repeated recitation of the name of the Lord Krishna followed by playing of musical instruments
Nanu ngai	community ear piercing annual festival
Nap	paddy/rice
Nap chan	the fifth day of **Chakan Gan Ngai**
Napchanmei	oblation
Napkao mei	an agricultural festival
Napsinmei	God of paddy, the third son of **TingkaoRagwang**
Navakirakam V	edic gods representing nine planets
Navratra	a Hindu festival celebrated for nine days every year in October or November
Navratri	nine day festival observed in March and October
Nawa/Nua Khani/Khai	ritual of eating new crop
Naya	dancers
Neerpichi or **paravai**	a man who regulates the flow of water
Neimei	the custom of observing a holy day collectively
Ngai dai	the second day of the **Chakan Gan Ngai**
Ngai ba	the fourth day of **Chakan Gaan Ngai**
Ngai gangmei	the first day of the **Chakan Gan Ngai**
(Nga) lung Kameo	rock/stone spirit/deity
Nia Kha	paternal aunt
Nimbo	plains land
Nirmukhi	without face
Nirmund	without head
Nitnai	day of rest
Niubo	taboo
Nizhal	spirit of the dead; literal meaning is shadow
Noimangpa	lord of the underworld region
NounaMungkhaoKalummei	a blessing ceremony for a couple
Nukang Lon	sacred room for keeping rice urns

Nulam	affinal kinship
Nungi	a long loin cloth worn on waist chiefly by men
Nuou	the Angami practice of giving meat during festivals by maternal relatives
Nyu	the forefather of the Tai Ahom
Ojha maduli	amulet provided by sorcerer
Okkaku bettedi/	Waddar's word for betrothal
	Tambulam bettedi
Oli	Waddar's word for bride price
Pa	yeast
Paachi	ant
Pach Balar	the group of ancestor spirits
Padu	spring
Pahan	priest
Pahan Khunt	the clan of the
pahanPahan/Baiga	the village priest
Pahanain	the wife of village priest
Paila	a wooden pot used to measure around one pound
Pajeimei	a traditional Kabui dance specially performed by the boys and girls by waving clothes
Paku	field
Panbhara	assistant of
pahanPanch	an elder of the clan
Panchamit	five different items such as milk, sugar, ghee, honey and banana
Panchmahals	five small princely states of Rajputs together
Panguni	a Tamil month corresponding to March and April
Panth	sect
Panty sangmei	longer life
Paraiyars	a Scheduled Caste of Tamil Nadu
Pargana	a geographical territory of a group of villages or gram panchayats
Parvati	a goddess in Hindu mythology
Patdi	ornament of Bhopa/priest made of gold or silver
Pathaiyathirai	pilgrimage on foot
Pattuppattu	an ancient Tamil literature
Patua	performer
Pei	the village court
Peikai	house/office of the village court
Peimei	the members of the village court,
Pekkaman Karuppasamy	Tamil folk god
Pendli	Waddar's word for marriage
Pensam	in betweenness in Adi language
Perma	priest
Phaimiu	shaman
Phalaya	hamlets

Phi god
Phouoibi khuramba (Manipuri) worshipping of the Goddess of paddy
Phri burn
Pimp Praru migratory birds
Pinda the ball of rice and other items immersed in the river and performance of purificatory rituals
Pira flat wooden seat
Pitha guri rice powder
Pitha cake made of pounded grain
Pitr spirits of the dead ones in Sahariya worldview
Pitrubhumi fatherland
Pittan senior most male member of a Kurichiyan clan
Pong Gwang wind god
Pooja worship
Poornima/Shukla Paksham the full moon day
Potaguti grinding stone
Potni Mati a whitish clay
Prabhat feri a mini procession in early morning
Pragat conspicuous/revelation
Prasad/prasadam sacred food-offerings
Pu Tibetan
Pugri Bhut the familiar spirits of an individual often received sacrifices secretly
Puja/pooja ritual/worship
Pujar/Panbhara/Tahalu assistant of village priest
Pujara priest who solemnises marriages
Pujari priest of the village Devgudi
Pukphat ngai eating of new crop
Pulkhi memorial stone
Pung la presiding deity of mounds, an evil spirit
Punyabhoomi holy-land
Punyaha sacred water
Puri-subji a kind of pancake and vegetable curry
Puru man
Puthul bamboo basket
Raang pat the sixth day of **Chakan Gaan Ngai**
Rambhakt followers of Lord Ram
Ranee queen
Rangbah Shnong village headman
Rantas a legendary malevolent beast dreaded by the Gujar Bakarwals
Rath Vistar an inhabitant of a forest or hilly region
Reh clan festival
Reisang Chonme supreme being; god
Rewari sweet dish made of jaggery
Rhoutho movement taboo day

Rhuotho	another
genna	(rest) day for the Angami
Ri ngai	a community festival
Rikhumlubo	revenge
Ringa	short skirt
Rong/Ruan	southern
Ruk- dang	coffin
Rukhi	bones
Runukbore	protective wall built of stone
Sa Lhakou	invoking soul of the animals
Saal pata	leaf of
Shorea robustaSaharana	separate clusters in multi-caste villages
Sahukar	money lender
Sairem ba	the ancestors of the dead
Sakhini	female witness
Sakhua/atkha/sakhuakheta	cup/bowl made of **saal** leaves
Salap	a variety of palm
Salat al Janaza	funeral prayer
Salha Kou	prayer for successful hunting
Samanata	even/plains
Samudaya	community
Sannyasi	hermit/celibate
Sant	guru/saint
Sapung	fermented juice of the palm tree
Sarna	a sacred groove and place of worship of the Oraon
Sarna sthal	sacred place for deity
Sat Bahini	seven sisters
Sat	truth/soul
Sekrenyi	Angami festival of sanctification
Selani dingo	female dormitory
Selani	woman
Senkaivettu	desiltation of the sacred tank
Sevak	servitor
Sey	to kill
Sha	mithun (**bos frontalis**)
Shahada	an Islamic pledge a component of the Azaan
Sharva	priest
Sharvawo	head priest
Shi	iron
Shim kameo	house spirit/deity
Shnong	village
Shradha	a Sahariya ritual for the spirits of the dead
Shuddhi	purificatory ritual
Shukla Paksha	rising moon
Si ye	yeast powder used to ferment rice into beer
Sian	knowledgeable and elder person of the village
Simba	broad beans

Simil/semel silk cotton tree
Sindbore a stone platform on which the village council assembles
Sineru ancestral shaman
Sip*a* **flute**
Sirha a mediator between spirit and human
Skandapuranam puranic stories of Lord Murukan
Soang collective name of both **Kaipi** and **Kaiba Bhamboo**
Sosha rabbit
Sparsha touch
Stambha pillar or post
Sthalapuranas puranic stories describing the origin of important temples in Tamil Nadu
Suan a variety of millet
Sud chain and necklace with colourful beads
Suddha pure
Sunggao all kinsmen of one's mother
Sunnah Islamic traditions and practices introduced by Prophet Muhammad
Suong loi the act of freeing a small chicken ritually as substitute of an ailing person
Suroti starting time of Diwad festival
Susari/Murgi Pakoa assistant of village priest who cooks sacrificed chickens
Syiem chief
Ta sha knowledge of chants
Taam materials for making sauce or relish
Taari toddy, liquor made from the sap of palm tree
Tadodev ancestral deity from in-laws' side
Taju story
Tal cymbal
Tali Waddar's word for **mangala sutra** (necklace tied in bride's neck to give the status of wife)
Talla a type of trumpet
Taluka a revenue division comprising a group of villages
Talukdar proprietor of the land responsible for tax collection
Tami the term given to Tibetans by the Mithu section
Tamro assistant
Taniya rituals
Tano labour exchange
Tanr upland
Tapilubo taking head of enemy in traditional warfare
Tapwan process of dropping holy water
Tarawad a descent group of a matrilineal family living in a house and owning property jointly
TaroiGang presiding deity in the land of death
Tatkha mango
Taveez amulet

Tekhukete	the Angami ritual of men striking a dead tiger with spears
Tekhumiave	weretiger in Angami
Tekhutheno-u	Angami word to refer to the person who injures a tiger during hunting
Tendu	**Diospyrosmelanoxyion**
Tengngai	eating new food
Terhase	the Angami ritual of establishing peace with the spirits
Terhünyi	Angami harvest festival
Thaen	honey
Thala	month of June
thayathu	energised talisman in cylindrical shape
Thehou	community house of the Angamis
Thekadar/Thikkedar	contractor
Thekra	the practice of earning by the Angami boys by working in the fields collectively
Thekranyi	Angami feast of the age groups performed out of their earnings
Thempu	village priest
Thena	a day when the Angamis do not do anything except working in their fields
Thenpung	an area marked for traditional games and sports
Thingphalla	forest deity
Thiru kovilgal	historical monumental temples
Thisamphanit	the festival of the departure of the soul of the dead
Tholkappiam	an ancient Tamil literature
Thumia	a circular string or metal ring around the waist of a Bonduni, to which the **ringa** (short skirt) is attached
Thupi	shelter
Tiemvükie	a pre-harvest Angami ritual
Tikhilgunda	rice powder/flour
Tilak	mark of sandal wood past, vermilion or other paste on forehead
Ting Gwag	Rain god
Tingkao Ragwang	The Supreme God of the
TRC	group
Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak	revival religion with belief in
Tingkao RagwangTingpi lam	from the north
Tingteila	one string lyre
Tingwang	supreme being in Hamai religion
Tithi	dates based on the Vedic Hindu calendar
To thro	bamboo shavings
Todu	the Idu Mishmis
Toilla	oil
Tokna	a ritual process in Dandakatta in which conversation takes places between the performer and participant
Tonlo	Tibetans/outsiders
Toon ngai	propitiating rituals for ancestors

Trishul	trident
Tubu Yang	the earth mother
Tubul	head of the
tuchasTucha	family helpers
Tuna Gaan ngai	the third day of **Chakan Gaan ngai**
Ucharal	the ritual connected with the belief of menstruating earth
Upa	genealogical head of a clan or tribe or family
Uruli/hulu huli	sound made with tongue
Usna	rice from boiled paddy
Uyus	evil spirits who make people ill
Vaishnavism	belief and practices related to Lord Vishnu/Krishna
Val name,	form, figure and qualities
Vali	sacrifice
Vanvasi	forest dwellers
Vāri vārā	birds of all kinds; related to nature
Varivarā	god
Varivarālikaphaning mi	those who believe in god
Varnashrama	structure of society based on four major occupations that gave rise to casteism
Verandah	usually a roofed place along outside of the house
Vohpi maikem/Dekon	slanted skull of female pig
Voli	Yerikula's word for **bride**
Voo	the spirit Angamis propitiate at the seed sowing ritual
Yah	funeral ritual
Yaku	wife
Yong	mother
Yu	rice beer
Yupa Kashtha	sacrificial post
Zamindar	a landlord/land owner
Zingungleng	creator and preserver of the whole universe
Zongumei	an evil spirit
Zou pan	libation of rice beer
Zu	traditional rice beer

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