

RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND PRACTICES OF THE REANG (BRU): TRADITION AND TRANSFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

Religion has been an important aspect in the course of development regarding culture, heritage and social solidarity of any community. The religion of the Reang (Bru) community is the resultant of traditions and beliefs that have come down to them from antiquity.

The Reang (Bru) are one of the tribes residing in the states of Tripura, Mizoram, and Assam. They belonged to the Mongoloid groups and speaks the Tibeto-Burman language 'Kau Bru'. They have a religious practices and usages of their own for ages. Major rituals of the Reang (Bru) community performed by the priest include the entire rituals starting from birth to death.

The influence of Christian and Hindu religions has been a dominating force in eliminating most of these religious belief and practices. But, their influence among the Reang (Bru) community has been revitalization for the search of a new ideology, which aims at securing an efflorescence of a new identity.

This paper is an attempt to examine the indigenous tribal religion with respect to its tradition and the transformation from the indigenous point of view.

Key Words: *Aukchai, Boido, Bru, Ritual, Indigenous*

I. INTRODUCTION

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

II. THE REANG (BRU) RELIGION

The Reang (Bru) are one of the tribes residing in the states of Tripura, Mizoram, and Assam. The Reang (Bru) in terms of appearance basically belonged to the Mongoloid groups and speaks the Tibeto-Burman language. The total population of Tripura according to 2001 Census Report is 31,99,203. The total Scheduled tribes constituted 9,93,426 and out of them the Reangs (Bru) constituted 1,65,103 i.e., around 16.6 per cent of the total scheduled

tribe population in Tripura. Among the Reang (Bru) community, with regards to the religious population (2001 Census) those who are adherents to traditional belief or animists consist of 84 per cent, Christianity accounts for about 9.98 per cent, while Hindus of all sects is about 6.02 per cent.

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

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

2.1 Major Pujas/Rituals of the Reang (Bru)

Imshih Tainmo, (For health and family welfare) Soinai Rao (For family welfare), Boni Rao (To get rid of illness), Mai Khlum Mo (For sanctification of agricultural outputs), Homa Pha Khami (For women health and welfare), Norah Khemi (For household peace and prosperity), Khroak Phang ow thu nai rao/Imtai Raja (For health), Hathai Kchu Ri Mi (For Longdrai God-In a haunted place), Haa Spleh Mi (Protection against ground related illness), Hata Malai Mi (During the new season of *jhum* cultivation), Tui Kto taola ri mi (Ending an oath taken in parents' name), Tui Chao Mi (During Illness), Para Ker Mi/Para Puja (For village welfare), Mahadev Arag Bao Mo (Earlier during a death ceremony, usually the people belonging to the Reang/Bru community

would be mourning day and night without eating or indulging in any constructive works, so Mahadev, a deity after seeing such chaos in the village wanted to make the people realized that instead of wasting valuable time in mourning, they should do some constructive works that will be helpful during the death ceremony as well as for the village. So, he taught the Reang (Bru) community in preparing a local wine that really helped the people, because they could enjoy the local wine during the ceremony and also after that they could go for their daily basis of works. But the condition was that during any such ceremony the first drops of drink must be offered to the diety, i.e. Mahadev), Tao Chro Ri Mi (During high fever), Mai Nok Ma/Boisu (To appease the Goddessess of Grains), Tao Toi Taing Khao Ruh Mi (Before beginning a journey), Toi Kha Mi (For Barren Women), Bah La (For Village welfare), Asari Kamo (Thanks Giving)

III. ROLE OF THE REANG (BRU) COMMUNITY PRIEST (AUKCHAI)

The *Aukchai* (Priest) or the medicine men have a prominent role in curing the diseases by performing various rituals with regards to the illness by sacrificing domestic animals like fowl, pig, goats, etc. Infact, the *Aukchai* is highly respected in the Reang (Bru) society for his role in conducting various religious rituals. Even women can also become an *Aukchai* in the Reang (Bru) society. For instances Smt. Moiloti Reang (Kormai-Mma) is a 89 years old women from Chronpai Para, Santirbazar, South Tripura, who is a respectable *Aukchai* who is serving in and around the villages for several years. The importance of *Aukchai* (Priest) has been the social ethos among the Reang (Bru) community who performed pujas. Religious rituals and pujas are usually performed by the *Aukchai* (Priest) as and when required or called by an individual family or by the community at large.

IV. REANG (BRU) CEREMONIAL RITUALS

4.1 Before/After Birth of a Child

4.1.1 Tui Chao

This ritual is performed for the smooth birth of the child and also the health of the child is determined by examining the intestine of the fowl that was sacrificed.

4.1.2 Gbeing Bumo

In this ritual one pig and four fowls are sacrificed for the good health of the child and the mother.

4.1.3 Aabu Sumo

By sacrificing five fowls and placing five local rice brewed wine bottles, this ritual indicates the purification and naming of the child.

4.1.4 Bachak Kamo

After 4-5 months, for the good health of the child this ritual was performed by sacrificing five fowls and placing five to six bottles of local rice brewed wine.

4.1.5 Khong Khok Kamo

For the proper growth of the child's brain and his long life, this ritual was performed. The woman will have to wear a new cloth and sacrifice one fowl and one cock. She will also have to offer 60-70 local rice brewed wine to the priest.

4.1.6 Saja Thunairao/ Saroi Thunairao

By sacrificing two fowls and one pig, this ritual was performed for the well being of the child.

4.2 During Marriage

4.2.1 Songrongma ritual

The main ceremony that deals during the marriage where one fowl and one cock along with two local rice brewed wine are offered.

4.2.2 Kati Chamo

This ritual is performed after the bride was brought to the bridegroom house. It was usually performed both on the land and in water by sacrificing two fowls or in some case one goat. This ritual is basically for a new couple after marriage.

4.3 Rituals relating to Individual/Personal (General Welfare)

Nokkhok Ritual - Here, basically four types of ritual was performed namely:

4.3.1 *Sani* Ritual during the month of August-September with only the *samagri* (Ingredients).

4.3.2 *Baroi Tainnai* in the month of September-October with a sacrifice of two male-goats.

4.3.3 *Soi nai rao tainnai* in the month of February-March with a sacrifice of two male-goats.

4.3.4 *Hata Malai Mi* in the month of April-June with a sacrifice of two male-goats.

Nokkhok Ritual as a whole is performed by sacrificing a Buffalo. This system of ritual revolves whole year round. After this ritual comes another ritual called *Bar Yachak mo* ritual. Here there will be a procession of the village people with the owner of the house at the front followed by five priests. During the course of the ritual nobody could cross the road that was taken by the procession.

4.4 Samung Maimo (Knowing Works)

Two Pigs is usually sacrificed, one at night and the other on the next morning. But the body of the pig is kept on a small hut that will be guarded by two priests and one of their followers. Near the Pig a *Inkcham* (Rope), seven *Khuchloi* (seed of a cotton) and seven Rice grains will be placed. The ritual will end the next day, which then will be followed by a ritual called *Sema nai mo* (Observation), If there is any an increase in the number of the cotton seed and the rice grains say upto 8-9 with a teeth mark on the Pig then the ritual is a success and there will be a community feast. Thereafter another ritual is performed called *Khum bai li* where all the people will drink local rice brewed wine from the two wine pitcher that will be placed in front of everyone. Here, the owner of the house *i.e.*, the one who is performing the ritual would have to imitate the priest wearing a new cloth. The

priest would be dancing in an intoxicant manner on the tune of a godly drumbeat. The priest would shiver and throw the burnt wheat seed. The owner of the house usually received the seeds before it falls on the ground by spreading a new cloth. This festival takes place for two days and nights.

4.5 Rituals relating to Death

4.5.1 Yaphaik ow, Tao Buthaik ow-for lao tao (God i.e. Owner of the Death) and for the Death person.

4.5.2 Sampli Bahcha ow-The whole night people would be drinking and dancing by taking the dress of a *Biang goma* (puranic bird). The death body would also be dressed up.

4.5.3 Thereafter, a small hut (*Smang Nok*) would be built where the bone of the death person will be kept for atleast 3-4 months. Another small hut will be built called (*Kaa Nok*) exclusively for the older women for crying. But for the rich people like the Chowdhry of the village their bones will be kept in a special hut called *Chrai Nok*.

V. CONCEPTUAL TRANSITION IN THE REANG (BRU) RELIGIOUS BELIEF

5.1 Hinduism

There are many tribal (Reang/Bru) traditional deities identified with the Hindu concept of gods and goddess, for example *Mailuhma*, the goddess of rice and *Khuluhma* the goddess of cotton are identified with Hindu goddess Laxmi. While *Tuibuma*, the goddess of water with Ganga. The influence of Vaishnavism and Hinduism on the traditional religious practices have infact brought a tremendous changes in the system of worship among the Reangs (Bru) community. There is also a feeling that there is a close relation between their age-old religious system with that of the Hindu gods and goddess. The Reangs (Bru) perform rituals to *Buraha (Sibrai)* and *Lampra* who is recognized, as being overall powerful is equivalent to *Mahadev* or *Shiva* of Hindu religion. With the passage of time some of the Reang (Bru) have received initiation from various Hindu religious preachers like Ramakrishna, Swarupananda, etc. and gradually assimilated these sects into their religious and cultural way of life. The worship of major Hindu deity like Vishnu, Kali, Krishna, Shiva, etc. has become a prominent form of religion to most of the Reangs (Bru).

5.2 Christianity

The wave of Christianity entered Tripura during the reign of Maharaja Amar Manikya (1577 A.D. to 1585 A.D.) whereby Jesuit Missionaries were invited to work in Tripura. Later, different Society of Christianity like British Baptist Missionary Society (1879), New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society (1890), etc. reached to the different sections of the people of Tripura. Infact, there are different denominations of Christianity like the Catholic, Baptist, Evangelical Free Church of India, Seventh Day Adventist, Presbyterian, United Pentecostal Church, Salvation Army, etc. who undertook their evangelistic works among the tribes of Tripura. Christianity reached the Reang (Bru) community after Khu Rai was baptized in 1922, thereafter more evangelistic works took place from 1926 onwards. The advent of Christianity among the Reang (Bru) has infact been a new era which ushered into the Reang (Bru) Society. Christianity provided an ideology that helped the people to maintain their

identity during the course of serious defects in the traditional sphere of life, socio-cultural and political institutions. Many evils, superstitions, burden of animal sacrifice, etc. were transformed by the teaching of Christian ideology.

VI. CONCLUSION

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

Religion is a powerful forces that influences how people think and act. One of the biggest changes is that a century ago, people were born with their parents' religion. They tended to stay with that religion for their entire lives. Now people choose their religion. They switch; they go back and forth. Human existence and history have also given a relative value. Because the transcendent God confers their ultimate purpose and destiny, human beings are free to engage in historical, sociological and psychological studies without calling upon gods for support. The influence of Christian and Hindu religion is seen in the celebration of Christian festivals like Easter, Good Friday and Christmas and Hindu festivals like Durga Puja, Laxmi Puja, etc. The Reang (Bru) communities are therefore now mostly motivated towards other religions viz., Vaisnavism, Hinduism, Christianity, etc. Such conversion has significantly affected the socio-cultural life of the Reang (Bru) community and in the process; most of the traditional religion belief and practices are either lost or intermingled with the process in the worshipped of the different sects of the Hinduism.

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- [8.] The term 'deity' can refer to a god or goddess who is regarded being divine and the 'spirit' can refer to the supernatural beings who were usually regarded as invisible but will become visible if they will. *The New Lexicon Webster's Dictionary of The English Language*, 1988.
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- [10.] Vanlaltlani, T (2007). *A Study of Religious Identity among the Bru of Mizoram* Delhi, Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (ISPCK).
- [11.] The Reangs have firm belief in dreams and divinations. The good dreams are kept secret while the bad dreams are disclosed so that they become ineffective. 'Divination' is a mystical means of knowing before hand the future of an attempt or of a marriage proposal or the cause of a danger and disease.
- [12.] 'Polytheism' is a strong belief in the existence of many spirits and deities who may be either benevolent or malevolent. They are worshipped for peace, prosperity and for curing sickness.
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