

Indigenism, Hinduism and Christianity - A Glimpse of Religious Transformation of the North East Indian Tribes of Tripura



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ABSTRACT: The article is a brief report of transformation of the indigenous religion of the autochthonous tribal people of the North East Indian State of Tripura who were inhabited in the state since the primitive age. In course of time thousands of non tribe people from the neighboring districts of the then East Pakistan or today's Bangladesh migrated and settle in Tripura. As a result, this migration made a bold effort on the religious life of the tribes of Tripura and the process of religious transformation had taken part seriously. Within a century that is 20th century the tribes of Tripura religiously converted from indigenous practice to Hinduism or Christianity as a whole. It is unfortunate that scholar's attention has not been focused on this aspect. The present study aims at bring about the real fact by examining authentic sources and materials.

The North East Indian State Tripura is a land of tradition, culture and heritage. Once an imperial or monarchical state, Tripura has undergone and witnessed many significant historical events. Passing through these events it has boldly faced many blows and accepted the reality of destruction and reconstruction. A large population of the state is constituted of Hindu Bengalis, where as the tribes are the autochthonous people of the state. They inhabited Tripura since the primitive age. For a long span of time tribes of Tripura were confined among themselves, so their traditional history remained undiscovered. Meanwhile, during the 19th century when the whole world was being enlightened by various scientific inventions & discoveries, the hill tribes of this state was far away from the modernization and remained confined limited within their dark and traditional ancient civilization.

In course of time for fostering education, trade and commerce in the state the Royal family of the then Tripura invited administrative personals of various sort and expert farmers from Bengal of Indian Sub-Continent. On the other hand incidents like partition of the country, communal disturbances and the Indo-Pak war of 1971 forced thousands of non tribe people from the neighboring districts of the then East Pakistan or today's Bangladesh to migrate and settle in Tripura. As a result of very close contact between the Hindu Bengalis and the different tribes of Tripura a new dimension in the society of Tripura incepted. Especially this migration made a bold effort on the religious life of the tribes of Tripura and the process of religious transformation had taken part seriously on the socio-religious life of the indigenous tribes of Tripura.

It is unfortunate that scholar's attention has not been focused on this aspect. Since very few academic discussions are available about the fact under discussion, there is a paucity of literature to deal with this aspect. Gayatri Bhattacharjee has discussed extensively on the "Refugee Rehabilitation and its Impact on the Economy of Tripura" during the post-independence era. She is of the view that the influx of Bengali migration helped greatly in boosting the state's economy which is largely true. But she does not discuss the historical dimension of the religious impact of Bengali migration starting from mid-19th century. J. Gon Choudhuri (1979), H.K., Sur (1986), R.M., Sharma (1987) have dealt in the political history of Tripura. We don't find any elaborate description of migration processes and its effects on the religious transformation on the tribes of Tripura in their works. We get some related information's in the works of W.W.Hunter (1876), Vol-VI, K.D.Menon edited District Gazetteers of Tripura (1975) and *Census Biharani-1931* by Thakur Somendra Chandra have also mentioned several aspects on migration and its impact in the societies of Tripura. There is a scope for exploring the archival sources, newspaper and journals in vernacular languages to illustrate the fact under discussion. The present study aims at bring about the real nature of migration processes and its effect on the traditional religious life of the tribal people of Tripura by examining authentic sources and materials.

Let us cast a glance on the indigenous religious practices of the tribes of Tripura. W. W. Hunter has shown in his report that in the nineteenth century all the sects of the tribes of the hills of Tripura followed almost the same sorts of religious practises¹. However the characteristics of the religious practices followed by the tribal at that time is described below-

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- i) Worshipping of natural elements as Gods and Goddesses similar with the religious beliefs of the primitive men these tribes also worshipped water, river, sea, hills and mountains and Gods and Goddesses of different types². In other words these tribes followed religious practices of the people of pre-Vedic age.
- ii) The Gods and Goddesses were divided into two categories – benevolent gods and malevolent deities i.e. Gods who do good to people and those who do harm to people. That is why whenever they fell sick they worshiped different evil Gods³.
- iii) There was belief in some evil souls and spirit, they had the feeling that these evil souls and spirits resided in old trees, road crossing old ponds etc. so they worshipped these souls and spirits in places as ponds, tri-junctions or junctions of four roads⁰⁴.
- iv) There was no existence of temples for worshipping their indigenous Gods and Goddesses. They followed these worshipping under the open sky by the side of the rivers or canals, on the junction of three or four roads, in the jungles, under trees, in the play grounds etc⁵.
- v) They worshipped formless Gods and Goddesses. They did not worship any idols made of earth, metal or cloth⁶. Hunter's report in the last part of the nineteenth century mentions that the tribes worshiped piece of bamboo imagining it to be a representative of a particular deity⁷.
- vi) There were no performances of any 'oblation' in the religious activities of the indigenous tribes of Tripura⁸.
- vii) Sacrificing was a popular element. The tribal's sacrificed goat, buffalos, pigeon, pig etc. Sacrifice of one or the other animals was a must during a worship⁹.
- viii) Religious performances were conducted by the tribal priests. They strictly followed all the rules prescribed for performances. These priests were called 'Ojhai' or 'Uchai'. Their position was analogous to the lord Bishop of the state. The priest subordinate to the chantai was known as galim. However, the tribal priest did not undergo any investor ceremony sacred thread. The post of priest was not hereditary. Any young man could become a priest if he learned the mantras¹⁰.
- ix) There was a belief of one chief god among their gods and this chief was called as Matai katar. Matai means God, and katar means chief or the best¹¹.
- x) The Gods and Goddesses who were worshipped and revered by the tribes of the hills of Tripura were not made characters of any literature. This was unlike the case with Hindu Gods and Goddesses where a very rich store of literature has been built with the Gods and Goddesses as characters. Mythological stories, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and numerous stories relating to different gods and goddesses Vaishnava poems are example of such literature.
- xi) The Tribes of Tripura had not worshipped animals. In these matters the religious beliefs of the Tribes of the hills of the state was different from those of ancient Indian civilization¹².

Indigenous Gods and Goddesses of the tribes of Tripura¹³

Name of the God and Goddesses	Purpose of the God/warship
1. Matai katar.	1. Mighty God.
2. Matai Katarma.	2. Wife of the Mighty God.
3. Akhtra, Bikhatra.	3. Son of the Mighty God.
4. Tuima.	4. God of Water.
5. Sangrama.	5. God of Hill.
6. Mailooma.	6. God of Paddy and Rice.
7. Khusma.	7. God of Cotton.
8. Thomnairok & Baniroc.	8. God of death.
9. Achu Sibray & others.	9. God of Jhum.
10. Boracha .	10. God of diseases & Jhum.
11. Burirok (Seven Sisters).	11. God of Magic.
12. Garaia, Kalaia.	12. God of Agriculture.
13. Lampra.	13. God of commence.
14. Saklakmatai	14. God of homestead.
15. Bichukma	15. God of Forest.
16. Sirijamdu	16. God of evil sprit.

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There was a chequer religious environment in the Indian hilly state of Tripura throughout the ages. The religious environment of that state stood on mutual understanding tolerance and cooperation among the different sections of the people of the state¹⁴. There were no differences and conflict between Hinduism and the religious beliefs of the indigenous practice of religion by the tribes of Tripura¹⁵. The census reports of the last part of the nineteenth century show the co-existence of the Hindus, Muslims and the Buddhists in Tripura. Practice of Christianity was new in this state. Christianity entered into Tripura after the coming of the Europeans in India¹⁶. During the reign of Amar Manikya (1577-86) a few Portuguese introduced Christianity in Tripura. . After that these Portuguese and the British who came to this state as government employees had constituted the Christian population of this state. Christian missionaries came to Tripura not earlier than 1910¹⁷.

Table- 01. Religious Picture of Tripura For the year 1874 to1901.

Religion	1874-75		1891		1901	
	Person	%	Person	%	Person	%
Tribal	42345	57.03	-----	-----	-----	-----
Hindu	14224	19.15	14047	10.22	119192	68.76
Muslim	11384	15.32	38731	28.18	45323	26.14
Animist	-----	-----	84499	61.48	2673	1.54
Buddhist	-----	-----	-----	-----	5999	3.46
Other	6285	8.46	165	0.12	138	0.10

Sources:-

1. Hunter, W.W., *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol-VI, London,1876, Re-print, 1973, p.482
2. Debbarma, S., *1340 Tring Saner Tripura Rajyer Census Bibarani*, Agartala, 1931, Re-Print, 1997, p. 48.
3. Chaudhuri, A., *Cencus Report of The Independent Tripura 1901*, Agartala, pp. 10,14.

The census reports of 1874-75 shows that the tribes of Tripura constituted the majority of the population in Tripura. However it was known from different sources that Tribal had their indigenous religion which included worshipping of nature, evil spirits etc¹⁸. As a result it is seen in the census report of 1891 that the number of Hindus in Tripura was 10.28% while 61.48 were animists. But in the 1901 census, the percentage of Hindus has been shown to be 68.13%. There is mention of a few animists in Tripura in this report. This means that during this period the tribes of Tripura had embraced on Hinduism although they held on to their traditional beliefs and practice regarding religion. In this phase Islam, Hinduism, and the indigenous religious practice and belief were the main religions of this state. Buddhism was not very much in practice. Mugs and Chakma people who were followers of Buddhism came to this state much during the last part of the 19th century¹⁹.

In the topic under discussion we find that the tribal people of Tripura have been drawn in to the main stream of Hindu way of life along with their pantheon of Gods and Goddesses. The sacred scriptures, the epics, the puranas and the socio-religious system of Bengali speaking Hindus were highly accepted by the tribes of Tripura. Not only that they also converted some of their Gods and Goddesses into Hindu gods and Goddesses who were fairly honoured and adored by the Hindu Bengalis. Moreover the tribes of Tripura have contributed in building up Hinduism. On the other hand some of them received Hindu Vaishnava religion and within the first half of the twentieth century lion part of the tribal population of Tripura accustomed with Hinduism²⁰.

It is significant that accepting Hindu faith the tribes of Tripura engaged the Brahmin priests also during their main event of birth, marriage, death etc, instead of their traditional priest named 'Ochai'. The tribal people living in accessible regions of forests, hills and hill slopes had their own Ochais only and the warships as well as all religious ceremonies were performed by them following the traditional tribal belief and practices. Nevertheless it is observed in our survey that with the acceptance of Hindu faith, the tribes of Tripura used to drink all the evil conservatisms of Hindu Brahminical aspects. They were exploited in their every socio-religious programmes like marriage, birth, death rituals etc by the Brahmins of Hindus²¹. Moreover some of the hypocritical devotees also cheated the tribes of Tripura by taking advantage of their simplicity²². As a result the tribes of Tripura faced a new type of religion instead of their traditional religion. Finally some of the tribes of Tripura gave up Hindu religion and moved to the Christian religion²³.

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Table: 02. Christianity among the original tribes of Tripura 1961-1981

SL. No.	Name of the Tribes	Censes	Total population	Christians	Percentage
1.	Halam	1961	16298	253	1.55
		1981	28970	3017	10.41
2.	Jamatia	1961	24359	Nil	Nil
		1981	44501	501	1.12
3.	Kuki	1961	5531	2345	42.39
		1981	5501	4442	80.74
4.	Tripuri	1961	189799	54	0.02
		1981	3,30,872	1012	0.30
5.	Reang	1961	56597	1705	3.01
		1981	84003	4974	5.92

Source: -

1. Censes of India, 1961, Vol.-xxvi, Tripura part lx, pp. 671-77.
2. Censes of India – 1981, series 21, Tripura, part lx, pp. 671-77.

The above statement clearly indicates that the number of the conversions from Hindu to Christianity has increased among the tribes of Tripura. Side by side another statement regarding religion- wise percentage increase during 1971 to 1981 in population in Tripura more effectively shows the conversion of the tribes of Tripura in Christianity.

Table- 03. Statement of religion-wise % increased in Tripura- 1971 to 1981

Hindu	Muslim	Christian	Buddhist
31.61	33.25	58.29	29.61

Source: Directorate of census operations Tripura, *A portrait of population*, Agartala, 1988, pp.73, 74.

The statement shows that the increases in Hindus were 31.61%, Muslims 33.25% during 1971 to 1981. But the percentage increase was very much high in Christian population i.e. 58.29 % rather than others. As a result Christianity opened doors in Tripura and it was among the tribes of Tripura. During 1951 there were hardly 5000 Christians in Tripura but, in the 2001 census it showed a population 102489 and 159882 during the census of 2011.

It has been found from another statement that the percentage of Christians among the tribes of North East India is much more than in Tripura. As a result it can be said that the tribal people of Tripura were influenced by the Hindu Bengali religion. A few of them were converted from Hindu to Christian. The following statement clearly indicates the fact.

Table: 04. State wise Christians in North East India in 2011 census

State	Total Population	Total Christians	%
Arunachal Pradesh	1383727	418732	30.26
Assam	31205576	1165867	3.74
Manipur	2855794	1179043	41.29
Meghalaya	2966889	2213027	74.59
Mizoram	1097206	956331	87.16
Nagaland	1978502	1739651	87.93
Tripura	3673917	159882	4.35

Source: Census of India 2011.

The above statement clearly indicates that Christianity in North East India had rapidly scattered among the tribal states. Not only that, it has found from another statement that the first four Christian populated states of India is represented from the tribal populated states of North East India and they are Nagaland (1st 87.93%), Mizoram (2nd 87.16%), Meghalaya (3rd 74.59%), Manipur (4th 41.29%) as per Christian population of their states. But Tripura has a Christian population of 4.35% only.

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Meanwhile, the practice of indigenous religion by the tribes of Tripura had been ruined in course of time under discussion. The religious picture of Tripura for the census year of 2011 clearly indicates that fact.

Table: 5. Religious picture of Tripura 2011

Sl.No	Religion	Persons	Percentage
1.	Hindu	3063903	83.40
2.	Muslim	316042	8.60
3.	Christian	159882	4.35
4.	Buddhist	125385	3.41
5.	Sikh	1070	0.03
6.	Jain	860	0.02
7.	Others	1514	0.04
8.	Not stated	5262	0.14

The above statement of religious representation of the population of Tripura clearly indicating that autochthonous people of Tripura has transformed themselves from their traditional indigenous religion to Hinduism or Christianity as because there is nobody shown in the statement owing to practice so-called traditional indigenous religion. From our various survey it has been found that the tribes of Tripura nowadays practicing either Hindu or Christian religion. Muslims of Tripura are Bengalis and they had migrated here from British Bengal or today's Bangladesh. Sikh and Jain also migrated from other states of India for their livelihood. The Arakan originated Mog and Chakma tribes of Tripura represent Buddhism. Number of people representing others and not stated is negligible. Henceforth, it has been found that during 2011 census the tribal people of Tripura constituted 31.78%, that is 11, 66,813 out of total population 36, 71,032 of Tripura. So, its means the tribes of Tripura converted their indigenous religion either in Hinduism or Christianity. Thus the practice of indigenous religion by the tribal people became past. Although a few religious practice and festivals like Gariya puja, Ker puja are till performing as residual magnetism.

It may be concluded that, a man is a religious being by nature. Religion forms an inseparable feature of every society. The right to freedom of religion as provided in the group of Articles 25 to 28 is one of the Fundamental Rights guaranteed by the Constitution of India. Moreover Article 9 of Human Rights Act 1998 gives all individuals freedom of religion. Although as theory of evolution in course of time the tribes of Tripura forgot their practice of indigenous religion. Within a century that is twentieth century the indigenous tribes of Tripura had lapsed their traditional indigenous practice of religion. Many times in history, progress has been hurdled in the name of religion and sometimes it has degenerated in dogmatism, exploitation, violence and war like Jehads and religious crusades. Thank God, the Indian state of Tripura had never experiences such evidences at all.

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