



## ABORIGINAL CULTURE IN TRIPURA: SPECIAL VIEWS ON RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS OF KOK BOROK SPEAKING ABORIGINES

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### ABSTRACT

Tripura is a habitat of several aborigines' community. There are nineteen aborigines or tribal communities residing in this land. Their art, music, dance, custom, folklore, religious rites and rituals are more or less different to each other. Sanskritisation or Hinduization and Westernization are affecting their original culture. Globalization and even so-called various developmental program or scheme of government also changes their method of thinking, style of living and way of believing. Slowly they are losing their originality. In the name of development they are coming into mainstream and losing their original stream. Although it is come into view that the government and some educated, conscious people belonging to aborigine community, and other community's people also trying to preserve and extend their tradition side by side adopting the demand of present era. They are also trying to show their ancient culture and make aware to the masses by wearing traditional dresses and ornaments in the various festival and programs. The government also gives financial assistance to organize such kind of festival viz. food festival, celebration of Kok borok day etc.

Religious traditions are the one of the most important key to understand the culture of any community. Culture is closely related to religion especially when we say about aborigines' culture. The culture is expressed by the art, music, dance, literature, folklores, rites and rituals of the religion. Culture is the sum total of all these.

This is the observational study on the Kokborok speaking people's (some are called Borok people) religious traditions, how their religious rites, rituals, livelihood and way of worshiping are changes, what are the reasons for changes, whether these changes culturally developed them, or severed from their originality, can they fit in themselves in present situation or they are adrift in the flow of time. These are the main concern of this paper.

**KEYWORDS:** Aborigines, Sanskritization, Hinduization, Mainstream, Borok, Culture etc.

### INTRODUCTION

The Kokborok speaking tribes or aborigines are the title having the Debbarma, the Jamatia, the Reang, the Noatia, the Rupini, the Murasingh, the Ochoi, the Tripura and the Kalai. Like other aborigines religion their religious belief is also Animism, the term is derived from Latin 'anima' which means breathe, spirit and life. The religious belief that the material object, plants, places, natural phenomena and all the creatures has possess a distinct spiritual power and essence.<sup>1</sup> The Kokborok speaking tribal or aboriginal people are Animist. They belief in a supernatural power, belief in natural phenomenon, belief in spirits, belief in spirits of ancestors that is why they worship the dead ancestors by meal and homemade wine, the

<sup>1</sup> <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animism>. retrieved on 16-09-2018

name of worshiping is called Mai khwai. They feel pride to worship their ancestors because they think that, after death their ancestors become a god. F.B. Jevons comments that "... the worshipper's pride is that his ancestor was a god and no mere mortal."<sup>2</sup>

The Debbarmas are believed that the souls are continued to exist even after death and the soul is remain contact with the intimate relatives. One preventive action they practice after the cremation, while they come back after the cremation each and every person who participate in cremation tie up any object like rope, little branch of trees, darnel etc. on the road. After bathing on the river or road side pond, they are coming at house but before entering in the house they received heat of fire. At evening every householder burns something in front of their main gate. They think that if they perform these activities the malevolent soul could not enter in the person, in the house and in the village. Similar thing is done by the Todas of Nilgiri hills and the Hos of Chhotanagpur, while returning they scatter thorns so that the malevolent souls may not enter their village.<sup>3</sup>

They (The Kokborok speaking people) are belief in supernatural power of river. So they worship Twima mwtai (deity of river), belief in supernatural power of mountain. So they worship Sangram mwtai, the deity of wealth and prosperity. Here it is noteworthy that if any person is suffering illness then the Sangram mwtai is worshipped to overcome the illness. However it is decided by the Ochai (priest) whether Sangram mwtai is necessary or not.

#### CLASSIFICATION OF DEITIES:

We can divide the Kokborok speaking aborigines' deities into two major kinds, the Mwtai kaham (the benevolent deities) and the Mwtai hamya (the malevolent deities). The benevolent deities are:

Mwtai Kotor: the supreme god.

Mailooma: the goddess of rice and prosperity.

Khuluma: the goddess of cotton and weaving and knowledge.

Garia: the protector, fulfiller of one's good wishes, who provides wealth, health and strength.

The malevolent deities are:

Burasa: a god who generate illness, diseases and suffering to the people.

Haichukma: the mate of Burasa, ruled over the forest and animals.

Thumnairag and Banirog: collector and the messenger of dead or ill news.

Swkal: witches

Srijumdu and Srijadu: they causes of barrenness of women.<sup>4</sup>

It is to be noted that the malevolent deities are the causes of illness and diseases but sometimes the benevolent deities also can harm the people, if they are not worship properly. All the aborigines' deities are more or less pestilent. The aboriginals are worshipping these deities to keep calm and to satisfy them, so that they can't do the harmful activities to the family members or to the community. The aboriginals are thinking that if they are keeping satisfying the deities then deities will not harm to them rather blessing them by giving health and wealth. They worshiped not for love but for awe. Fear with respect is the one of the main reason to worshipping. That's why now a day some portion of an educated person in scientific knowledge did not show much reverence and did not worship those deities. Albeit the villagers still give honor to the traditional rites and rituals and practice it as much as possible.

<sup>2</sup> See D.Miall Edwards, *The Philosophy of Religion*, Progressive Publisher, p.28

<sup>3</sup> Hasnain, N. (2016). *Indian Society and Culture*. New Delhi: Jawahar Publishers and Distributors.p.322

<sup>4</sup> Palit, P. K. (2004). *History of Religion in Tripura*. New Delhi: Kaveri Books. P.149

### **The Nature of Religious Traditions of Kokborok Speaking Aborigines:**

It has been observed that they (Borok People) worship to the deities due to awe; there is an element of love to gods or goddesses but the fear mixed with respect is more than the love. Thinking that if they are not worship the deities (Mwtai) by sacrificing animal or what the deities wants to eat (the Ochai or Priest told that), the deities will harm them or their family members. So it is clear that they worship due to fear and to satisfy the gods and goddesses. There is no such worship which is desire less, each and every worship is done due to fear and to overcome the illness, diseases and to keep calm to the deities so that they don't harm to the person, to the family members and to the community. Their religious customs and the other custom also are connected with food-getting, marriage, birth, sickness, death, initiation, nature, safeguard from evil, protection from beast, weather and conquer the war etc.<sup>5</sup> The Ochai (Priest) is the most essential person for the worship, a householder could not perform any worship without the Ochai. However now a day some householder worship by themselves offering only fruits and rice (Anna bhog) in front of the Randok (Two earthen or silver pot filled with rice kept inside in the main house) without offering animals. But to sacrificing animals Ochai is required. The religious custom of Kokborok speaking aborigines does not permit to sacrifice animals without Ochai. The Ochai or Chantai or the person who is entrusted by the Chantai is the only able and designated person of sacrificial ceremony.

There is a one puja namely Nukhung ni Samung or Bisi ni Samung (yearly work/puja), at present all the householder does not practice this worship. The worship is performed by the Ochai in the name of the householder by sacrificing animals, in this worship many deities are worshipped as Sangram, Twima, Boyer, Nakshu etc. it depend on the householder as well as the Ochai. Generally two he goats is offering in this puja, in some family whereon the Nukhung ni Samung will be held, previous night of that day two duck is offered to the deity. That is from that period the observance is started. All the gods and goddesses whom he kept in his house are worshipped on that day. At present day few householder are observe this puja and it is also come into view that some families are performing Bisi ni Samung without sacrificing animals, i.e., only by fruits and rice. This worship is conducted during the month of September to December after getting the new rice from huk (jhum/ shifting cultivation) or plain field.

Here it is noteworthy that though the householder worships the Nukhung ni Mwtai, and other Mwtai (deities) but they are unaware, unknown and unclear about the method of worship. Basically the worship is done only when any person of the family or community suffering in illness, the Ochai is requested by the family members to tracing why this illness is occurred. There after the Ochai address the deities and perform the worship accordingly. And they (Ochai) always tries to keep it secret and mysterious, they never discuss elaborately with common people on this matter. That is why the householder, the general people know little much about the method of worship, they are just follow the instruction of the Ochai and totally surrender to the Ochai. The Ochai (priest) with the help of Barua (helper) and the householder completed his preoccupations.

To please the deity, they offer animals and homemade wine, thinking that deities will propitiate, if he get those things. Since they are simple and plain their deities also like them, easy to satisfy. He will be happy and give the blessing if He received meat and wine. Without homemade wine or liquor religious rituals and practices did not complete. They instinctively projected their own experience into the object, gods and in everything.

### **Influences of Hindu and Christian religion on Religious traditions of Kokborok Speaking Aborigines:**

The Kokborok speaking aborigines or tribal people perform their traditional religious functions by the order of priest (Ochai). But there are some rites and rituals which they perform according to almanac. Such as birth, marriage and death ceremony, house construction, house entering ceremony etc. Instead of wathap worship (Genuflect of wathap) it is come into view that they are inviting Brahmin for the religious rituals, try to imitate Brahmin's lifestyle and increases to visit at the temples for weeding and worshipping.

<sup>5</sup> See D.Miall Edwards, *The Philosophy of Religion*, Progressive Publisher, p.66

They are polytheistic, ready to accept any god and goddess whether it is from internal community or obtained from other community. Some tribal tiprasa think that the Hindu scripture, puranas and epics are essential for their religious life along with their traditional religion the Animism. It is also observed that their traditional religious rites and rituals and belief are change and modified by Hindu and Christian religion.<sup>6</sup> Now they are worshipping Laxmi, Durga, Visvakarma puja and celebrating Christmas day and other Hindu and Christian festivals. We can assume that this is the effect of Hindu and Western influence on aborigines' religious traditions.

Some portion of Debbarma, Jamatia and Murasingh tribe practiced Vaisnavism. They are influence by Sri Chaitanya and his followers Goswamins. They perform sankirtan bear tilak, wear tulsimala which are the sign of devotion of Visnu. The uprising of bhakti cult in Hinduism is the reason behind this. In bhakti cult all the people of all section are invited to join and live the life of spirituality and devotion. In this manner the aborigines people are very much influence by Vaisnavism. Nirmal Kumar Bose said, the tribes enter into the Hindu fold not directly, not through the doorway of caste. But by the religious sects which give them an honored and somehow equal status.<sup>7</sup> The aborigines of Tripura are not fall in any one of the four caste of Hindu caste system. They are outside the caste system. They are Hindu by religion, imposed by the Hindu religious believer due to being some similarity in Hindu deities and aborigines' deities, as goddess Laxmi of Hindu and goddess Mailooma of aborigines', both are the goddess of rice and prosperity. So both are the same, this kind of attitude is vogue in society and the aborigine people are to some extent accepts it, but still their identity is tribal Hindu.

The fundamental doctrine of Hinduism is to believe that all the power is the manifestation of one supreme God or Brahman. Paul Deussen said that as the "creative principle which lies realized in the whole world". Because of this fundamental ideal Hinduism can accept to the aboriginal traditions and religion easily. The same thing is happen in Tripura also, they accepted the tribal deities by modifying the Kokborok name into the Sanskritised name of the deities. As Mailooma to Laxmi and Twima to Ganga and this change get the speed during the time of sovereigns, the deities are recognized by the Brahmanical pantheon.<sup>8</sup> Another thing is that the aboriginal method of worshipping the gods and goddesses are now influences by Brahmanical way of worship as kharchi and Tripura sundari puja. The aboriginal style of worshipping is present but the Brahmanical way of worship is entered into this method of worship. The names of god and goddess, the rites and the conceptions are change or modified through assimilation and imitation. Here it is noteworthy that not only tribal style of worshipping is change but the Hindu or Brahmanical way of worshipping is also change by this unification.

The influence of Hinduism is a remarkable on the aboriginals or tribes religion.<sup>9</sup> In Tripura the situation is also the same. But the influence of Christianity on the Kokborok speaking people is also noticeable and the acceptance of Christian religion is increasing day after day. The follower of Buddhism, Jainism and Islam are trivial or may be nil, no information I have found that a Kokborak speaking people follow Buddhism or Jainism or Islam. In addition to this we must kept in mind that though the Kokborok speaking people are accepted Hinduism and Christianity yet they follow and practices their traditional rites and rituals and faith, especially those who are so-called Hindu. As Hasnain said that, it is very difficult to make a clear distinction between aborigine religion and Hinduism, they fuse and grade into each other.<sup>10</sup>

Those who are entered into the Christian fold they are not worship their traditional gods and goddesses, not practices their traditional religious rites and rituals. They are not totally receding from their original culture and abjured their costume customs, but they modified it pursuant to western culture.

<sup>6</sup> Palit, P.K. (2004). *History of Religion in Tripura*, New Delhi: Kaveri Books. P.188

<sup>7</sup> Nirmal Kr. Bose Memorial lecture by Lakshman Kr. Mahapatra, pdf, published by Indira Gandhi Center for the Arts, received from ignca.nic.in

<sup>8</sup> Bera, G.K. (2012). *Religion and Society in Sovereign Tripura*, New Delhi: Abhijit Publishers. p.48

<sup>9</sup> Hasnain, N. (2016). *Indian Society and Culture*. New Delhi: Jawahar Publishers and Distributors. p.288

<sup>10</sup> Hasnain, N. (2016). *Indian Society and Culture*. New Delhi: Jawahar Publishers and Distributors. p.323

Christianity influences not only in religious traditions but also in entire life style at the aboriginal areas, it has brought the modernity and newness at rural areas. Victor D'Souza opines that 'Christianity has been one of the important factors of modernization and economic development through the social values it has legitimized.'<sup>11</sup> With the contact of other people the Kokborok speaking people or Borok people's religious customs has not totally disappeared or ruin yet it must say that the vitality and the vigor of their religion has become faded. Christianity has undoubtedly brought the richer life wider companionship and newness to the aboriginal people of Tripura. But it has been observed that due to influence of Christian religion the religious traditions of Kokborok speaking peoples have drastically changing.

The field study indicated that most of the people couldn't tell the name of benevolent and malevolent deities of their traditional religion. Moreover the young generation's knowledge is very little about their traditional yearly household work or puja (Bisi ni Samung). It is come into view that most of the householder did not worship the Bisi ni Samung or Nukhung ni Samung (Yearly puja). Another thing I have been observed that, the Kokborok speaking peoples are very much familiar with the name of Hindu deities. I have given the questionnaire to 20(twenty) numbers of Kokborok speaking peoples relating to their traditional deities, rites, rituals, methods of worshipping and whether they or their family worship or not. Out of 20(twenty) 17(seventeen) person are college students and 3(three) Government wage earner. In the questionnaire one question was to tell the name of one benevolent and malevolent deity, out of 20(twenty) only 10(ten) person answers, the name of benevolent deity, the Garia: the protector, fulfiller of one's good wishes. 7(seven) person said the name of Jesus Christ and 12(twelve) person answers the name of malevolent deity, Borasa and Swkal.

Write the name of some deities? Was the another question, in this question 12(twelve) persons are written their traditional deities name and the rest are written the name of Jesus and Hindu deities name as Durga, Kali, Laxmi and Krishna etc. In addition it is also found in the reply of questionnaire that 11(eleven) person told that their family performed Nukhung ni Samung (yearly work or Puja). So on the basis of this field study we can assume that the Kokborok speaking aborigines aren't much aware of their traditional religion, but here I have observed that the reason for ignorance of the name of their traditional deities is the social system. The Ochai (Priest) is all in all, they are totally dependent on him for worshipping. That is why they are ignorance about their deities, rites and rituals, although they are performing different kinds of religious activities. And another reason is that they are forgo their original religion and accepting the others religion viz. Hindu and Christian.

### CONCLUSION:

Finally, what is the fundamental cause to worship? What purpose it fulfill in individual and social life? Fear and for convalesce they do worship. They are afraid; think that the nature will harm them if they do not satisfy the nature by worshipping. By worshipping they want to control over their destiny, to bring in favor to the nature they worship the nature. Basically they are the dweller of the hills, forest and the nature-worshipper. In reply to the later question we can say that it brings the unity, Integrity, Fraternity and Social order in the community. It is a Platform of communication. They felt secured and they find peace and solace in their mind, e.g. Garia and Ker festival. Whosoever if told them that performing this and that activities or worship will bring happiness in their life, definitely they will do that activities. Generally they love hassles free life.

By the influence of other religious customs and with the passage of time the religious traditions of Kokborok speaking aborigines is widening, but it must say that they are losing original customs. They are getting, accepting and practicing new customs by imitation simultaneously losing their primitive customs.

At last,

The sons of hills and forest are crying  
Not for city-life

<sup>11</sup> Quotation taken from Nadeem Hasnain's 'Indian Society and Culture', p.41

But for losing their forest-life  
In the name of development,  
They are coming into mainstream  
And losing their original stream...

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