

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 An Anthropological Appraisal of Religion

In anthropology, if any topic could be said, to have drawn the attention of maximum number of internationally acclaimed anthropologists in the world, ever since the inception of the discipline, and has covered the maximum number of pages in anthropological literature, it is, with little doubt, the subject matter of Religion. To quote Paul Bohannan (1963) 'there is probably no single subject with which anthropology concerns itself today on which the literature is larger than that on religion, specially, the Tribal Religion'. It is also the only anthropological topic, on which, there have been dozens of monumentally original minds at work, such as, that of Edward Burnett Tylor, Sir James Frazer, R.R. Marret, R.H. Codrington, Max Muller, Father Wilhelm Schmidt, Bronislaw Kasper Malinowski, Levy-Bruhl, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Robert Redfield, Mckim Marriot, M.N. Srinivas, L.P. Vidyarthi, and many more.

Religion, as a social phenomenon, is difficult to define. Being aware of this, Max Weber wrote in the very first paragraph of *The Sociology of Religion* that a definition of religion 'can be attempted, if at all, only at the conclusion of the study' (1964: 1). While other major sociologists

and social anthropologists have given definitions, they too have drawn attention to the problematic character of the task (Nadel 1954; Pritchard 1965). Sapir (1949) put it succinctly: 'religion is precisely one of those words which belong to the more intuitive portions of our vocabulary'. Many historians of religion have similarly expressed unease with the word religion because of its ambiguity or associations (Smith 1962; Cox 1965).

Belief in the existence of supernatural powers is almost universal. People realize these forces superior to them and they have established a relationship between them and these powers by offering obeisance to them. According to Herskovits (1974: 233), 'religion may best be defined as belief in and identification with a greater force or power. A belief may also pervade attitude and action as rarely to enter the stream of conscious thought...that man feels that it will not fail him when his own resources are insufficient'. The real purpose of religion, according to Durkheim is to express people's beliefs about the universe, because religion structures the universe, puts things in order, and relates what is unknown to what is known.

The relationship between religion and society has been a chief concern of anthropology from the beginning. The most influential work in this field is Emile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1965), which attempts to demonstrate how religion arises from a community's social experience and constitutes the basis of its social organization. The essence of religion is the sense of the sacred which is common to all religions. In order to uncover the meaning of the sacred, Durkheim turned his attention to the most rudimentary form of religion, totemism of the Australian Arunta tribes. However, Durkheim argued that the totem could not have been considered sacred because of its intrinsic quality and which were not capable of arousing awe and respect, but because religion is, the system of symbols by which society becomes conscious of its collective existence.

Early theorists of religion such as Malinowski, Durkheim and Weber were interested in understanding religion as an integral part of culture and society. So anyone who studies religion will necessarily have to have a base in anthropological approaches too; and understandings of, religion, more so an appreciation for the ways in which religion is connected to other parts of the social world. This means religion should not and can not be looked at in isolation. Religious

belief is ultimately private and personal, yet many of its manifestations and enactments are communitarian and public. Whether through shamanic trances or the celebration of saint's days, religion involves public performance. Religious practices and symbols often provide an idiom for the expression of other beliefs and claims to power and legitimacy.

The anthropological appraisal of religion is central to debates about cultural identities, post-colonialism, modernity and tradition in the age of globalization, gender roles, values, public discourse in multi-cultural milieus, media practices, and modes of representing the sacred and the secular. Despite modernist predictions for gradual privatization or inevitable secularization of religion, or even gradual diminishing of its importance in society, religions either have never abandoned public space in many areas of the world or, at present, are forcefully reoccupying them. The notion of privatized religion in categorical opposition to a secular public - as it emerged in modern Europe - is not universally shared across contemporary religious cultures. At the same time, all religions today engage secular values to some degree and are embedded in multiple religious and cultural milieus. Indeed, religion turns out to play a significant role in public life and is often located in dynamic tension with political ideologies.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1991) has argued that 'none of the supposed founders of the world's religions had begun with any such intention of creating a code as we call it religion. Referring to Islam he says that the word *din*, customarily translated as religion, is not in fact religion as understood in the European concept. For him preachers of any faith did not come to regard what they did as religion until they developed a kind of 'cultural self-regard', causing them to see their collective spiritual practices and beliefs as in some way significantly *different* from the *other*. We see in Hinduism the term *dharma*, too does not carry the meaning as we understand it. In the case of Emperor Asoka, his *dhamma*, for that matter was not a religion as such. In Hinduism we see a large set of observances, beliefs, rituals, worship patterns, philosophical ideas – shaped into a form in a historical process that continued late as the colonial times. Religion therefore, is more than an object of study. It has been described as a core concern, as expressing and addressing the sacred, or as disclosing a transcendent focus linked to ultimate value. Religion has not only been the matrix of cultures and civilizations, but it

structures reality, including that of gender and encompasses the deepest level of what it means to be human (Ursula 2005: 4).

India is the home of many religions and followers of all world religions are present among her peoples. Hinduism is more than 3,000 years old though some of the tribal religions may be older than that being the inheritors of prehistoric cultures. Jainism and Buddhism took birth around the same time, almost 2,500 years ago. Documentary evidence of the presence of Christianity in India goes back to the sixth century and Islam followed two centuries later. A distinctive feature of the overall religious ethos of India is that religion here influences all aspects of society. For example, religion is evident in daily life, agriculture, hunting, health measures, art and crafts and so on.

The present endeavour by the scholar is not an in-depth study of a particular religion, but it is indeed a study of religion at work in a tribal community as brought to light through various life cycle ceremonies and festivals like *Baikho* in the Rangdani Rabha society and its various ramifications in the all encompassing life of the community under study.

II

Assam, one of the North Eastern States of India, lies between latitude 28° 18' and 24° N and longitude 89° 46' and 97° 4' E. Its boundaries on the north is Sub-Himalayan ranges of Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh; on the east by the Patkai range and the Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh; on the south-east by Nagaland, Burma and Manipur; on the south by Mizoram; on the south-west by Tripura and Bangladesh and on the west by Meghalaya and West Bengal. According to the 2011 Census, Assam has a total population of 3, 11, 69,272 and a geographical area of 78,523 sq. kms. The density of population is recorded as 397 persons per sq. km. The soil is very fertile and the landscape is green and scenically beautiful.

Assam is the home of 23 tribal communities which constitute 12.82 per cent of the total population of the state. The tribes of Assam may broadly be divided into two categories: plain tribes and hill tribes. The plain tribes mainly inhabit the plain areas of the state and the hill tribes are mainly concentrated in the hilly areas, now comprise the two hills districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills. The state of Assam is divided into 27 districts. The present study is

based on one of the districts namely, Goalpara. The study envisaged by the present writer is on a tribal community in Assam, the Rangdani Rabha, one of the sub-tribes of the Rabha, keeping in view the study of religion among the people and its various dynamics and processes, considering the presence of other neighboring communities of various religious and cultural affiliations as well.

The major portion of the total population in Assam (88.8 per cent) is living in rural areas and their means of livelihood is from agriculture sector. As per 1991 census, 64 per cent of the total workers in Assam are agricultural workers. Out of the total geographical area of 7,852 thousand hectares, net area sown in Assam up to 1981-82 was to the extent of 2,706 thousand hectares and area sown more than once was 754 thousand hectares making the total cropped area in the state to 3, 460 thousand hectares. The main food crops in Assam include rice, wheat, pulses, potato, maize, etc. The principal cash crops are tea, jute, oil seeds, tobacco, sugar cane, etc. Tea is one of the most important cash crops and the total area under tea plantation in Assam was 233 thousand hectares with a production of 396 million kg of tea in 1991. Average number of workers engaged daily in the tea gardens was 554 thousand in 1991. Thus a huge number of people are earning their livelihood from these tea gardens.

Though agriculture is the mainstay of the economy of Assam it is solely depending on vagaries of monsoons, which sometimes creates unexpected havoc on the agricultural production of the state. The climate of Assam is depicted by its extreme humidity. Its most distinguishing feature is the abundant rainfall between March and May. By climate wise the year in Assam can be divided into the cold season and the rainy. The cold weather lasts from October to February and the rest of the year is rainy.

The district of Goalpara, located 134 kilometers west of Guwahati, is home of a number of ethnic groups in the state including the Rabha who are one of the most numerous ones. This district is one of the most backward districts of the state, if not of the country as a whole. It is adjoining Meghalaya in the south, Kamrup in east, Dhubri and Bongaigaon in the west. This district was carved out of the erstwhile Goalpara. The total area of district is 1,832 sq. km. The important towns in this district are Goalpara town, Lakhipur, Krishnai, Dudhnai and Dhupdhara. The basic amenities available in this district are 8 Colleges, 1 Polytechnic College, 33 bank

branches, and 99 post offices. The main festivals observed in this district are *Bihu*, *Baishagu*, *Baikho*, and *Wangala*.

The Rabha, Bodo, Garo, and the Koch Rajbongsi are the main tribal groups who inhabit the district. Rice, Wheat, Maize and Jute are the main cultivations in the district. In 2011, Goalpara returned a population of 10, 08, 959 of which 5, 14, 162 are males and 4, 94, 797 are females respectively. The rural population is 7, 55, 133. Rongjuli, Dudhnoi, Matia, Balijana and Lakhipur are administrative Circles; and Rongjuli, Kuchdhowa, Matia, Krishnai, Balijana, Kharmuja, Lakhipur and Jaleswar are Development Blocks of Goalpara District.

1.2 The Research Problem

Religion in the contemporary society is a very sensitive subject. It has been the root cause of many wars and has also been part of many hidden political agendas. There are many ways to perceive religion and many arguments that go along with the different perceptions. In one way religion is looked upon is in its most common image of worship. Many people in today's society look at religion as a group of people who follow particular beliefs and worship a particular god – be it in whichever faith. This is the easy way to get around the whole question of faith but, not all people who have a particular faith are devout followers – they may believe but choose not to attend the respective events and gatherings that go along with that faith.

It is very intriguing to note that in the mid-twentieth century there was a wide-spread interest in religion at a time when there was also extensive agreement that religious tenets are sidelined by the members of modern societies. This is easily understandable in so far as much public interest in religious matters relates precisely to the efforts of religious people to modify and adapt religious beliefs and institutions in the light of changes occurring in contemporary societies. Moreover, in the second half of the nineteenth century it was propagated by anthropologists and sociologists that religion was not a prime concern of the people as they progressed industrially. It was also believed that religion would vanish completely from the societies as they advance with special reference to their economic arena (Fuchs 1975: 13). Does it happen in the socio-cultural context of our enquiry, if yes, up to what extent?

However, taking all this into account, there is a general agreement that people would not choose to study religion to get a better understanding of the whole 'worshipping' issue. It is perfectly clear how the worshipping comes in to the equation of religion and this has been going on for centuries so, this argument is, not one of the principal reasons for studying religion. On the other hand, one of the primary reasons for studying religion is to do with politics. There has been a lot of civil unrest and many wars in the past and even still going on today, due to religion. There were the conflicts between the Christians and the Jews, Muslims and Christians, Protestants and Catholics, Hindus and Muslims and so on.

The present researcher does believe that the most compelling reason for studying religion today is to reach a better understanding of contemporary society. Without the study of religion, ignorance in this subject would create more global conflicts and prejudices. There is still a great need for a detailed study going deep into religion as there is still a lot of ignorance in the subject and in today's society, with the amount of different religions/faiths; understanding is the key to a cultured social well being. There are still too many racial and religious prejudices in the world through lack of vital knowledge in this subject.

To summarize, in India a number of animist belief systems as well as the great religious traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity, Islam, and Sikhism have impacted and are still at work in the lives of Indians. Certainly religions in the present form are faced with a number of challenges to be relevant and thus they are undergoing a number of changes. All the religions in the future will have to survive in a multi-cultural, multi-religious society. Ethnic communities which lived almost in the closed doors of aloofness and security are exposed to the currents of modernization and globalization. What are their ways and means to be relevant today?

1.3 Review of Literature

All students of human culture admit that religion is one of the most important factors in culture. Not only it is found in every known human society, but also it significantly interacts with other cultural institutions. It finds expression in material culture, in human behaviour, and in value systems, morals and ethics. It interacts with systems of family and clan organizations, marriage, law and politics; it enters into the realm of medicine, science and technology; and it has inspired rebellions and wars as well as sublime works of art. Perhaps no other cultural institution presents so vast a range of expression and implication.

India is home to hundreds of different traditions and virtually all the religions of the contemporary world. On the one hand the interaction and dialogue among them has produced highly creative cultural forms and ways of living together yet, increasingly, scholars have begun to feel that the current knowledge about the Indian culture and its traditions is unsatisfactory at best or erroneous at worst. In the current theoretical paradigm, Indian traditions are conceived of in terms of their respective beliefs, doctrines, holy texts, religious strife, etc. This does not appear to allow for an adequate understanding of the Indian traditions. Not only does this framework determine our understanding of the religions in India, but it has also consequences for the Indians, experiencing their own traditions.

It is observed from the several studies made by eminent ethnographers, sociologists, anthropologists and others as quoted by Vidyarthi (1976: 238-239) [Baines 1891; Enthoven 1901; Gait 1911; Marten 1921; Tallents 1921; Hutton 1931; Elwin 1942; Majumdar 1961; Iyer and Ratnam 1961; Ghurye 1963; Bose 1971] that there is a very strong relationship between tribal religions and Hinduism in India. This wholistic picture can be drawn in the framework of *The Sacred Complex in Hindu Gaya* (Vidyarthi 1961) of which their sacred beliefs, types of spirits, sacred geography, sacred specialists and sacred performance are the five components.

Before anthropology was formally taught in the universities in India, study on religion had very insignificant momentum. At that period the initial study on religion was mainly made by the travelers, missionaries, and freelance scholars who either made textual analysis, or discussed the diverse religious beliefs and practices, and peculiar customs on the basis of their empirical data (Dubois 1928). Gradually elaborate ethnographic study of a particular community

or a religion was undertaken on specific communities (Roy 1912, 1928; Elwin 1955). There were also some attempts to correlate the religious beliefs and practices and social life (Bodding 1925, 1927, 1940). Bose (1927), Das (1927), Chattopadhyay (1935), and Hutton (1945) are some of the eminent scholars who studied the impact of religion and its indispensable relation with the society from different perspectives. Roy's (1928) study on *Changing Oraon Religion* depicting acculturation may be mentioned as a pioneering work on religion by an Indian scholar. Decades later Majumdar (1950) studied the *Ho* tribe and emphasized on the concept of *Bongaism*.

In India anthropologists undertook the study of religion by comparing different religious concepts among various communities of the country. Srinivas (1952) in his book entitled *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* developed the concept of Sanskritization. Like Srinivas, Harper (1957, 1964), Mathur (1964), and Nicholas (1969), also investigated on various rituals and practices in different communities of India as integral components of respective social structure.

Harper (1964) and Vidyarthi (1962) edited two books on religion, which have great anthropological value. In Harper's book entitled *Religion in South Asia*, various approaches to the study of religion from anthropological point of view have been discussed. *Aspects of Religion in Indian Society*, which is edited by Vidyarthi, includes articles on various aspects of tribal and peasant religion of different communities of India. Singer (1959) has edited a book entitled *Traditional India: Structure and Change*, includes a few articles having relevance to the study of religion. In the study of villages in Uttar Pradesh, Marriot's (1955) ideas on 'Social Organization of tradition' and 'little and great tradition' had helped immensely in the study of religion. In the same study Marriott also developed the concept of 'universalisation' and 'parochialization'.

To the study of religion Vidyarthi (1961) has made notable contribution through the study of Hindu temples of Gaya as a sacred complex. In the study of Gaya, Vidyarthi treated its changes through history as one of the vital dimensions of Indian civilization and has highlighted the contribution of the Gayawals in the making of the civilization. Jha (1971, 1973, 1974), Chakraborty (1974), Mahapatra (1974), Narayan (1974), Sahay (1974), and others made studies on sacred complexes in different prominent religious centres of India. Though some of the

archeologists have studied the structural and architectural aspects of a few temples of India, they have very little anthropological significance. Bose, Patnaik and Roy (1958), Bhowmick (1960), Saraswati (1963), Morab and Goswami (1970, 1974), Freeman (1971) and others have made important anthropological studies.

It is noteworthy to observe that there are some pertinent studies on various aspects of religion which were done by scholars belonging to different disciplines, but in some others their thrust areas exclude religion. However, in course of their treatment of other subjects of a particular community they have elaborately discussed about religion. We can observe that while evaluating various aspects of the society, especially in the monographs, they have dealt with the realm of religion meticulously and at great length. For example, in Pritchard's monograph, *The Nuer* (1940), the author has studied religion as one of the most indispensable components of the Nuer life. *Religion and Society* of the acclaimed philosopher Radhakrishnan (1959) is the compilation of a few of his most acclaimed lectures on Hinduism which are textual discussion on Hindu religion, for example, need of religion, women in Hindu society, etc. In 1906 Rivers systematically studied the Todas, a polyandrous tribe of Nilgiri hills, India, where he also explored their religious life in the larger context of the society as a whole.

Roy (1912) made vital contribution while he studied historical and geographical environments of the Mundas in the book entitled *The Mundas and their Country*. In 1915 he studied the Oraon tribe of Chotanagpur, and in 1928 he made an evaluation of the religious universe of the Oraons. Mandelbaum's article *Culture Change among the Nilgiri Tribes* (1941) has unveiled much information integral to religion of the tribe of Nilgiri hills; Furer-Haimendorf's book *The Chenchus: Jungle Folk of the Deccan* (1943) is another very important contribution. Mukherjee's (1965) study on the Santals is certainly a path breaking and valuable contribution, while it is an addition to our knowledge on Santals and their religion.

Bouquet's book *Oraon Religion and Customs* (1966) has contributed considerably towards the study of religion in India. Today scholars refer to that the British policy of tribal administration and about the administration scholars were the pioneers in writing about tribal life and anthropological knowledge that opened the gate for our entry into world-anthropology. It is

through their publications that some of our tribal groups were known to anthropologists outside our country. Inspired by them some local scholars also delineated about the society and culture of different populations, particularly about the tribal groups of North East India.

Dube's *Tribal Heritages of India: Vol. I* (1977) is one of the prominent works where he elaborately described the life ways of a few tribes wherein he includes notes on their religion as well. Man (1983) studied the Andaman Islanders evaluating their socio-religious life in a very lucid style. Hazra observes in *The Kolam of Yeotmal* (1983) that the Kolams of Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh have a number of gods and goddesses, ghosts and malevolent spirits. Raha and Mahato (1985) probe into the changes taking place in the Kinnaurese religion especially because of the contact of Kinnaurese with the administrators, teachers, businessmen, traders, labourers and contractors. Mahapatra (2000) brings to light the changing religion and worldview of some Indian tribes.

In undivided Assam, studies of different aspects of the society and culture of the different colourful people started by the British administration and the Christian missionaries. It is a known fact that the Britishers knew the value of anthropology in administration. Therefore, they made it mandatory for those persons who had to do work among the various communities of isolated areas to go through a condensed course in anthropology in the Cambridge and Oxford universities.

Stack and Lyall (1908) studied different aspects of the Mikir (Karbi) society. Playfair (1909) was the first to study the matrilineal Garo tribe of Meghalaya (then in Assam). Endle evaluated the Kachari life in *The Kacharis* (1911). Hodson's *Naga of Manipur* (1911) is one of the remarkable anthropological documentations of this remote part of India. Shakespeare (1912), and Gordon (1914) studied the Lushai-Kuki Clan of Lushai Hills (now Mizoram), the Khasi of Khasi and Jaintia Hills (now Meghalaya), and the Abors (Adis) of NEFA (now Arunachal Pradesh), respectively. Invariably all these studies deal with various ways of offering sacrifices to appease the spirits who are often malevolent.

Hutton painstakingly explored the turbulent Angami Nagas (1921) and the Sema Nagas (1921), Mills' *The Ao Nagas* (1926) is a milestone in initial evaluation of the tribal communities of North East India. Das' pioneering work on *The Purums* (1945) of Manipur has broadened our knowledge about the tribal population of North East India. Furer-Haimendorf's *Ethnographic Notes on the Tribes of Subansiri Region* (1974) is one of the important works which brought into light the ideas on the tribal life of this region. His other mentionable books are *The Apatanis and their neighbours* (1962), *Return of the Naked Nagas* (1976), and *Highlanders of Arunachal Pradesh* (1982). Barua (1960), Sharma (1961), Singh (1962) and Srivastava (1962) examined the Idu Mishmi, Sherdukpen, Aka and the Gallong society of Arunachal Pradesh respectively.

The renowned anthropologist Verrier Elwin devoted a chapter (1964: 209-222) in his book *A Philosophy for NEFA* titled 'Religious Aims in NEFA', where he elaborately describes the nature and content of religion of the various tribal groups of the region. *All Assam Yuva Chatra Parishad* (1975) had examined the socio-religious life of the Dimasa, Hill Miri, Deori-Chutia, Karbi and the Tiwa of North East India.

The scientific study of religion in Assam is of very recent origin. Through a brief survey Hamilton (1940) has done a study of religious life in Assam. Local scholars like Kakati (1948), has done studies on the Mother Goddess Kamakhya and Barua (1950; 1960) wrote on the *Cultural History of Assam* and *Sankardeva: Vaishnava Saint of Assam* respectively, both of them have immense value in the study of local culture and socio-religious spectrum. Neog's (1965) work on the life and works of Sankaradeva, the great Vaishnava Saint of Assam is also noteworthy. He also wrote on the religion of the North East (1984). Medhi (1984) studied the religious mosaic of the Phake tribe and also the rituals connected with birth among the Karbi (1988) of Assam.

It is also known fact that a good number of tribes of North East India are not yet studied systematically. The Rabha of Assam is such a tribe, about whom only sporadic information is available. Systematic reports on the Rabha were initiated by some of the British administrators (Gait 1892; Allen 1903, 1905), in different census publications and District Gazetteers of

undivided Assam. Waddell in the article *The Tribes of Brahmaputra Valley* (1901) discusses on the somatic characteristics of the Rabha along with their affinity.

Some of the British administrators conducted elaborate studies on a few tribes of this part of India, amongst which mention may be made on Playfair's monograph *The Garos* (1909), where vital information about the origin, history, affinity, language, etc. of the Pati Rabha is incorporated. In the monograph *The Kacharis* (1990) Endle opined on the origin and some other socio-cultural traits of the Rabha. Das' book *Ethnic Affinities of Rabha* (1960) is a noteworthy study on the Rabha. In two other articles Das has described about the different aspects of the Rabha tribe. He has written an ethnographic note on the Rabha (1962: 162-172), and a note on the races of Assam (1967) where he has included the Rabha.

Another monograph titled *Albizuri among the Lyngams* (Karotemprel 1985) gives vivid exploration on the animistic religious beliefs, practices and forms of ancestral worship. Mann in *The Ladakhi: A study in Ethnography and Change* (1986) observes that the Lamaism as a form of religion is much important as it is seen that every family, village and region has its own worship place. Parthasarathy in his ethnographic study on *The Yerukula* (1988) describes the religious life of the tribe as 'polytheistic'. They are seen to be animists who have a strong belief in malevolent spirits who influence their destiny.

Endle in his monograph on *The Kacharis* (1990) deals with the 'animistic' type of religion which is almost invariably inclined to use their powers for malignant and malevolent, rather than benevolent purposes. This makes them revere a number of household and village deities as well. Madan's important book *Religion in India* (1991) is knit around the idea of the 'sacred' in five thematic parts, viz. sacred knowledge, sacred space, sacred time, sacred persona, and changing orientations to the sacred. This voluminous book covers all the major religious traditions of India, mostly based on the field work and is rich in observed data. Most of the readings in this book represent current perspectives and styles in the sociological and social anthropological study of religion.

In *The Barela* (Sarkar *et al.* 1995) through the chapter on religious beliefs and practices of the tribe the author explains the ways in which a number of benevolent and malevolent gods and goddesses are worshipped by Barela population. *The People of the Himalayas* (Raha 1995: 86) has a chapter devoted to the study on the society and religion in Kinnaur district where people are divided into believers of three religions namely, Hindus, Buddhists and a curious combination of both. In *Migration and Social Change* (Coomar 1997) reiterate that Bhantus express their religious belief through various religious rites and ceremonies. They worship different gods, goddesses and spirits for the welfare of the individual and community. In *Religion and Indian Society: A Sociological Perspective*, Venugopal (1998) discusses various facets of religion in Indian society. He reiterates that recent developments in Indian society such as the march of secularism, growth in science and technology and modernization of economic and political spheres have not marginalized the religion.

In *Tribal Religion of Tripura* (2003) Bhowmick studies in detail the traditional religion of Tripura including the modern developments, metaphysical and spiritual tradition, rites and customs, priesthood, sacred places and images. The author also has included the study of symbolism and the ethical teachings of the religion as well. In *Understanding Tribal Religion* (Mibang *et al.* 2004) a first time effort is made to textualise various elements of religious beliefs of Arunachal Pradesh. It amalgamates both *etic* and *emic* perceptions about the complex cultural phenomenon known as religion.

In *Readings in Cultures of North East India*, Vol. 1 (Kuruvachira *et al.* 2007) deals on various ethnic communities of north east India and their complex religious affiliations. In the *Cultural Heritage of Tribal Societies* (Nath 2005), we see religion lived out in everyday life of a person following the Buddhist traditions of propitiating the deities without animal sacrifices. Rikam in his *Emerging Religious Identities of Arunachal Pradesh: A Study of Nyishi Tribe* (2005) explores the various religious transformations taking place in the state for the last five decades.

In *Cultural Heritage of Arunachal Pradesh* (Nagaraju *et al.* 2006) an attempt is made by the authors, among other things, to focus on the way changes are taking place on some of the

Arunachal tribes and their spiritual belief systems and world-views. Their contact with neo-Vaishnavism, Buddhism, their response to change religious beliefs on the one side, and their attempts to preserve their indigenous faith in the face of sweeping changes and interventions are noteworthy. In *The Faith Tradition of the Kunrukhar* (Uraons) (2007) after having studied the source texts and other relevant materials Pereira undertakes an elaborate and comprehensive study on the belief system of the Uraons. Raychaudhuri (2007), in his book *The Rabhas of North Bengal* explores Rabha religion as belief in a number of malevolent and benevolent deities and spirits.

Christianity and Change in North East India (Subba *et al.* 2009) brings to light the role that Christianity played in the life of North eastern region of India from a regional and cross-cultural perspective. The changes that have taken place in the material culture, cultural beliefs and practices are discussed encouraging a dialogue between the missionaries and social scientists. *Tribes of North East India: Issues and Challenges* (Medhi *et al.* 2009) have included a couple of research papers pertaining to religious affiliations of the population under study.

The Land of Fourteen Gods (Bera 2010) is an ethno-cultural profile of Tripura and its religious synthesis amidst the state's continuity and change most especially in the realm of religious affiliations. *Ethnography of a Denotified Tribe* (Burman 2010) studies on the Laman Banjara wherein ancestor, clan totem, Shiva, hanuman, Shakti, goddess Mariamma and tree worship are dealt with. *Focus on the Rabhas: Language, literature and Culture* (Hakacham 2010) is an original contribution by the author, wherein he has a number of essays written on the various aspects of religion pertaining to the Rabha of North East India. *Social Unrest and Peace Initiatives: Perspectives from North East India* (Bera *et al.* 2011) has a couple of papers dealing with religions and their role in promoting peace among the people. In the *Religion and Society in North East India* (Nath 2011) brings to light some major aspects of religion in various communities of North East India. This book is based on the symposium organized by Shri Aniruddhadeva Chair, Department of History, Dibrugarh University, Assam.

Concept of God and Religion: Traditional Thought and Contemporary Society (Kuzhikkattuthazhe, J. *et al.* 2012) deals elaborately on the theme of religion and its various

nuances in contemporary society. A recent publication by Bera (2012) titled *Religion and Society in Sovereign Tripura* highlights an important dimension of religious study in one of the frontier states of north east India. One of the latest books by Kuzhikkattuthazhe (2013) titled *Understanding North East India: Contemporary Cultural Perspectives* has some chapters pertaining to religion and the sense of the sacred.

Though the above given review of literature is by no means exhaustive these books mentioned above deserve special consideration.

1.4 Importance of the Study

Assam is the home of 23 tribal communities which constitute 12.82 per cent of the total population of the state. The tribes of Assam may broadly be divided into two categories: plain tribes and hill tribes. The Rangdani Rabha who are one of the segments of eight Rabha groups are principally distributed in the district of Goalpara, Assam. The present study done in the rural context of the given district is important especially in the context of tribal communities who are in a process of constant change due to contact with other communities, education, economic development and over all progress of media and communication and other factors.

Anthropologists study the origin, development, and behavior of humans. They examine the ways of life, languages, archaeological remains, and physical characteristics of people in various parts of the world. They also examine the customs, values, and social patterns of different cultures, often through comparative analyses. Some anthropologists study current human concerns, such as overpopulation, warfare, and poverty, while others study the prehistory of *Homo sapiens*, including the evolution of the human brain. Anthropologists usually concentrate on one of the four subfields: socio-cultural, linguistics, biological, and physical anthropology.

The early anthropologists like Tylor, Spencer and Frazer traced the origin of religion to the 'cognitive mistake' of the primitive man; Marx reduced it to the inverted consciousness of alienated society; Freud diagnosed it as the 'universal obsessive neurosis of mankind'; Durkheim

(1965) suggested that it is nothing but the 'worship of society'; and Malinowski (1954) attributed it to anxiety arising from uncertainty. Implied in these early analyses of religion is the belief that religion is a social fiction that has outlived its utility. Despite their claims of being committed to the scientific method that emphasizes objectivity and value neutrality, these early social scientists betrayed a clear bias against religion.

The relationship between religion and society has been a chief concern of anthropology from the beginning. The most influential work in this field is Emile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1965) which attempts to demonstrate how religion arises from a community's social experience and constitutes the basis of its social organization. The essence of religion is the sense of the sacred which is common to all religions. In order to uncover the meaning of the sacred, Durkheim turned his attention to the most rudimentary form of religion, totemism of the Australian Arunta tribes. However, Durkheim argued that the totem could not have been considered sacred because of its intrinsic quality and which were not capable of arousing awe and respect, but because religion is, the system of symbols by which society becomes conscious of its collective existence.

In the tribal societies, supernatural powers play a major role in every happening in the community. Therefore, the rites and rituals performed to propitiate the spirits come under the realm of religion which is a field calls for closer examination to understand the community in its entirety. This becomes all the more important in the context of various other factors which directly or indirectly influence the indigenous religious ethos of the community under study.

1.5 Objectives of the Study

A number of years ago tribal religions in India were termed as animism or crude form of religion in various census reports and books in which magic is the predominant element. Whereas it is true that this association of tribal religions in India with animism exists, it is not the whole truth. But the point is that religion is a phenomenon which influences a culture as a whole. So as one of the dominant components of human social formations religion in a conventional

sense is perceived as a system of beliefs and practices, found in every culture, that formalizes the conceptions of relations between man and his surrounding environment.

In fact, understanding tribal religion is much difficult by the presence of variegated beliefs, ritual practices and related intricate mechanisms. However, there are multiple functional advantages which religion provide to most of the tribal social formations. Besides addressing the mysterious and uncontrollable powers, religion, as cultural system, also consolidate, political, economic, ecological and traditional dimensions of the societies. Tribal religion in India gives a colourful panorama of religious faiths and practices of Indian tribes. Contact with non-tribals or tribals with one or the other organized religious affiliations have been proved instrumental in changing the religious beliefs in many tribal groups. The relation of tribal faith to Hinduism, Islam, Christianity or other religions has made impact on their life and culture.

In order to address the above issues and taking the review of literature in to consideration, this study addressed the following objectives:

- (a) To acquire an overall knowledge about the pristine religion of the studied population;
- (b) to examine the concept of religion and understand the various aspects of the religious life of the Rangdani Rabha of the studied area;
- (c) to study the role and status of the religious experts among the Rangdani Rabha;
- (d) to evaluate the division of labour of the members of the society in ritual performances;
- (e) to examine the impinging factors percolated from the outside world in the religious universe of the Rangdani Rabha; and
- (f) to understand the transformation and change in the religious life of the Rangdani Rabha and its impact on their society.

1.6 The Area of Study

The Rangdani Rabha live in three states namely Assam, Meghalaya and West Bengal. In Assam they are mainly concentrated in the district of Goalpara, the area of our study. The title of our study is an anthropological study of religion among the Rangdani Rabha of Assam. For this micro study a complete survey of the two villages, i.e., 121 households were undertaken from two adjoining villages, namely Majerburi and Matia in Goalpara district. The chief aim of taking the above mentioned villages is that these villages are medium sized and are homogeneous in its population pattern, inhabited by the Rangdani Rabha tribe only. They are rural in its setting, although journey to the village is through a *kuccha* road it is easily approachable, and availability of Don Bosco primary school in this village wherein the investigator can get accommodation during the period of data collection also was a consideration for choosing the above mentioned villages.

1.7 Research Methodology

Any research to achieve a high quality there is a need to use appropriate research methodology. This will also help the research results to be put under evaluation either by the researcher himself, by other individual scholars or by any other organization. For this study both qualitative and demographic data were collected using the methods of observation, in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, group interview, case study, survey, census records, etc. Demographic data were collected from two villages in Goalpara District, namely, Majerburi and Matia. It was done by visiting each of the households. Religious leaders of the village including the village head men and Rangdani Rabha priests (*Deuri*) were interviewed to gather ample data on the religious affiliations of the people as a whole. As there are very few published documents on Rangdani Rabhas and their religion the interview guide technique was used to collect information as people's sense of history and perception are great value for such a study.

For the purpose and collection of secondary sources all the available and relevant historical records and published books were consulted in various libraries, especially K.K. Handique Library, Gauhati University, Guwahati, Assam; Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled Castes, Guwahati, Assam; Indian Council of Social Science Research, North Eastern Regional Centre, Shillong, Meghalaya; Anthropological Survey of India, North Eastern Regional

Centre, Shillong, Meghalaya; Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh, Assam; Indian Council of Historical Research, Guwahati, Assam; North Eastern Social Research Centre, Guwahati, Assam; *Sanskriti* – North Eastern Institute of Culture and Religion, Guwahati, Assam; Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development, Guwahati, Assam; Tribal Research Institute, Agartala, Tripura; Institute of Indian Culture, Mumbai, Maharashtra and so on. Relevant information was acquired from books, documents, reports, dissertations, research journals, published and unpublished documents, news papers, etc. Since the researcher stayed within the village for a long time a close rapport with the villagers was established in a meaningful way.

It is to be mentioned that the religious places including their common worship places were visited and participant observation and interview schedule was made use of for taking note of their religious practices, and opinions on socio-religious life of the Rangdani Rabha. It will not be out of place here to mention that the present researcher is exposed to the studied group in that particular locale for over a decade. Owing to constant exposure and personal academic interest there was an academic urge to collect empirical data whenever he got an opportunity to visit and stay in the field area. There were several occasions to stay in the field for a longer period of time and collect data pertaining to Rangdani Rabha life and culture including rituals and festivities of social and religious importance. A lot of ethnographic details were collected over this longitudinal period. This was one of the major concerns for the present researcher to carry out doctoral research on the said tribe. In addition the scholar had been receiving academic impetus from his present supervisor, a friend of long standing, to carry out research in a systematic manner with methodological implications. Hence, the researcher was content with much of the ethnographic details and data pertaining to the research. After the formal registration for conducting doctoral research in the Assam Don Bosco University, the detailed field work for the present study was done intermittently from May 2012 to January 2013, and the data were updated based on the field studies during the month of April-May and September 2013. An overall verification of the contemporary data was done during the months from January to April 2014 as well to check out every detail that was supposed to be in order. There were occasions this researcher took part in the formal and informal gatherings of the people, which gave ample opportunity to perceive their life and culture in a more intimate way. To ensure a balanced

research perspective, both *emic* and *etic* views were considered. As this is a micro study, in-depth observations were given more importance than mere presentation of meticulous numerical data. The whole data collected from two villages with a total of 121 households were analyzed to find the place of religion in the life of Rangdani Rabhas.

1.8 Conclusion

The relationship between religion and society has been a chief concern of anthropology from the beginning. So anyone who studies religion will necessarily have to have a base in anthropological approaches to, and understandings of religion, more so an appreciation for the ways in which religion is connected to other parts of the social world. The anthropological appraisal of religions is central to debates about cultural identities, post-colonialism, modernity and tradition in the age of globalization, gender roles, values, public discourse in multi-cultural milieus, media practices, and modes of representing the sacred and the secular.

The present investigator does believe that the most compelling reason for studying religion today is to reach a better understanding of contemporary society as India is home to hundreds of different traditions and virtually all the religions of the world. In India the anthropologists undertook the study of religion by comparing different religious concepts among various communities of the country. The present study done in the rural context of the given district is important especially in context of tribal communities who are in a process of constant change due to contact with other communities, progress of media and communication net works and other factors.

To ensure a balanced research perspective, both *emic* and *etic* views are considered. As this is a micro study, in-depth observations are given more importance than mere presentation of meticulous numerical data. The whole data collected from two villages with a total of 121 households will be analyzed to find the place of religion in the life of Rangdani Rabhas. Now, in the chapter II we shall study on the Land and People of Assam.

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