CHAPTER VI

THE TRIBAL RELIGIONS

A. Introduction

In this chapter we shall make an attempt to give a socio-religious aspects of the tribal groups inhabiting the area under our study. Within a broad framework all these groups have been identified as Mongoloids. Linguistically they belong to the Tibeto-Burman family. The major groups in this category are the Bodo-Kacharis, the Rabhas, the Garos, the Hajangs and the Tiwas while there are some minor groups living in isolated pockets. We are giving a chart of total population of schedule tribes living within our periphery.¹

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara (old)</td>
<td>1,56,257</td>
<td>1,52,030</td>
<td>30,82,87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup (old)</td>
<td>1,51,264</td>
<td>1,46,826</td>
<td>29,80,90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mangaldai (old)</td>
<td>64,887</td>
<td>63,607</td>
<td>12,84,94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among the tribes of our area, the Bodo-Kachari occupy the

¹ The above chart is prepared from Statistical Hand Book, Assam, 1978.
first place, the Rabhas comes second, the Hajangs, the Garos, the Karbis accounting for very small proportions of the population. These groups, though they belong to the same ethnic composition, they have their own traditional religion and dialects which have given them self identity.

Scholars like George Grierson, Sir Edward Gait, Risely, K.L. Baruah etc. have expressed their views as regards to the original homeland of the Mongoloids. According to these scholars the ancestors of these groups had migrated from the Hoang-ho and Yang-tse-Kiang areas of China at different times and in different directions. Dr. S.K. Chatterjee opines that the Mongoloids had lived in the Tsetar plateau for about one thousand years and later on spread towards the Ganga Brahmaputra plains. "It seems quite probable that long before 1000 B.C. some of these early Tabato-Burmans had penetrated within the frontiers of India, either along the southern slopes of the Himalayas, through Assam and established themselves in the Sub Himalayan tracts as far west as Garhwal and Kumaon or by way of Tibet, going up the Tsangpo or Brahmaputra and then crossing the Himalayan barrier into Nepal and Garhwal-Kumaon." ² It is supposed that the Mongoloids had

inhabited the Brahmaputra Valley prior to the Aryan migration to this region. The Mongoloids were known as 'Kiratas' in the *rājānyāya, Atharva Yeda, Mahābhārata* and other Hindu scriptures. They had a distinctive culture and their contribution to the cultural heritage of India is great.

However, these Indo-Mongoloid tribes have not remained isolated and cut off from the rest of the society. In fact, large proportions of them have been physically absorbed into the Assamese Hindu fold while the others have moved towards Assamese Hindu norms through various ways. In the process again the local Hinduism itself has taken many elements that are basically of tribal affiliation.

Anthropologists and sociologists have given stress on the tribe-caste continuum in the process of Hinduisation. So, it would be proper to have a look at the concepts connected with the terms 'tribe' and 'caste' and also to assess their roles *vis-à-vis* the process of making Hindu society in India as a whole and its counterpart Assam in particular.

B. Tribe, caste and the Hindu Society

(i) Tribe

The term 'tribe' was first used by the foreign writers to designate certain people of India who were living in
comparatively primitive conditions. The Oxford Dictionary meaning of the term 'Tribe' is "a race of people, now applied especially to a primary aggregate of people in a primitive or barbarous condition under a headman or chief". The western scholars had used the term in their own context without studying Indian context. Sri M.R. Roy has discussed the term thoroughly and suggested that the equivalent term for tribe in Indian context should be 'jana'. 'Jana therefore seems to have been to my mind, the term for what we have been taught to know as 'tribe' and 'jati' the socio-religious cum economic organisation that was supposed to sustain the jana and keep the given community of people together. Now the combined word "jansjati" is used in many Indian languages including Assamese to identify the so-called tribal people. We shall use the term 'tribe' here to mean those people follow their traditional religious beliefs and customs and who have not formally entered the fold of any of the major organised religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam.

(ii) Caste

The term caste is derived from the Latin 'castus' meaning pure, unpolluted. The European writers on India saw

some similarity in some social organisations of India with those of their own and used the term 'caste' indiscriminately. The Indian term for 'caste' is 'jati'. 'Varna' is also a term which was used in hieratic literature to identify some functional occupation. But the sociologists are of the opinion that the term 'Varna' is not equivalent to what we call 'jati'. 'Jati' is a better term of concept than either Varna or caste and it can explain better in Indian situation. However, the term caste is used as an equivalent of 'jati' for all practical purposes. T.B. Bollomore, a sociologist defines 'jati' as follows. "The jati is the endogenous group and the principal reference group of the individual embodying a distinctive way of life and maintaining it by the exercise of customary and, in earlier times juridical sanctions". Now for our practical purposes we shall use the term caste to recognise those people who were and are Hinduised or Aryanised. We know it well that caste system is a much discussed subject. Both European and Indian writers have advocated for and against the system. Stratification and religious innovation are some of the factors responsible for traditional caste system.

Without going detail into the subject we shall make an attempt how the tribal and non tribal fusion was/is possible in the past and in present in India in general and Assam in particular.

C. Acculturation, Assimilation and Integration

Sociologists and anthropologists are of opinion that acculturation, integration and assimilation are the three processes responsible for tribe-caste continuum. In fact that is not an isolated phenomenon in Assam, the process of acculturation, integration and assimilation have been at work since very early times.

S. Sastri, S.K. Chatterjee, M. Roy and many other scholars have expressed their opinions in regard acculturation. They have taken into consideration that the Aryans were more cultured people than other tribes who entered India prior to the Aryans. The Aryans impose their culture either by subjugation or by preaching their religion i.e. Brahmanical religion. The term 'Sanskritization' or accultuation is used by some sociologist to recognise those tribes who adopt a better way of life and uplift to a higher social position. The following lines of M. Roy is worth mentioning. "But because of their close locational proximity and the steady
pressure of the larger and techno-economically more organised communities, they were obliged to enter into social and cultural and more importantly economic contacts, communication and exchanges with their neighbours who were socially, culturally and economically more dominant. Through this process initiated and controlled mainly by the later the 'non-jati' jans were slowly but eventually obliged to give up their identity and succumb to the pressure.

Integration means "meeting together of divergent cultures without loss of identity and individuality". To explain the above lines the following lines of G. Chottopadhyay are notable, "Let us suppose that integration of the tribals mean that they retain their language, they retain their mythes and religion, they retain some of their institution and at the same time take to urban dress, urban form of housing and get industrial jobs at various levels of hierarchy". If we study the social mobility of the tribes carefully, we find that the process of integration has been functioning since remote past. We shall discuss the point in the context of Assam later on.

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"Assimilation involves a total loss of cultural identity for the group that is being assimilated and its absorption into the dominant group on the latter's terms." Many tribes of India have been assimilated and have entered in Hindu fold and accepted Hindu customs, manners, religion etc. The case is not isolated in the context of Assam.

D. The tribe caste-continuum - the case in Assam.

Now we shall try to discuss the above peculiarities in the context of Assam or to be precise, in our area of study. Although the caste-system prevails in the Assamese Hindu society and the concept of castes is associated with much of the socio-cultural life of the society, there are certain distinctive features that mark the operation of the caste system in the Assamese society. The features are:

Caste system is not so much rigid in Assam. Even a Brahmin who occupies the highest position in the society, takes water from a low caste person. Practically there is no untouchables.

Though there are some functional castes but the function is open to all. As for example Sanarias are a caste.

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by the occupation of making ornaments. Higher castes i.e. Kalitas are not debarred from doing the same job.

Except the Brahmans no caste is identified by its surname. If we take the surname 'Dox' we find that a Kalita, a Koch, a Kalivarta even a Kochari tribe may use it.

In the Satras or Nepohara people belonging to High and low castes can sit together and perform Nam-Kirtana.

Under the above mentioned features it is not difficult for a tribe to become a caste in the Hindu society in Assam. We have already discussed how integration, acculturation and assimilation are some of the processes responsible for tribe caste continuum. Now we shall make an attempt to understand the process in the context of Assam.

Dr. D.N. Nazmoder has presented an interesting paper titled as "A study of Tribe-caste continuum and the process of Sanskritization among the Bodo speaking Tribes of Garo Hills". Though Garo hills (Present Meghalaya) is not within the jurisdiction of our study but the people are of same ethnic group. So his observations may be applied to the people belonging to the same group. He has mentioned the following reasons for Sanskritization:

(a) Abandonment of unclean non-Hindu habits such as beef eating, keeping of pigs and fowls and eating of pork and foul.
(b) Abandonment or partial abandonment of non-Hindu deities and adoption Hindu deities with tradition rites.

(c) Abandonment of all major elements of tribal social customs i.e. instead of matrilineal inheritance acceptance of patrilineal complex.

(d) Full acceptance of Hindu rites is regarded as an acumen of Sanskritization. At the final stage of Sanskritization a group abandons all traces of its pre-sanskritization birth, death and marriage customs and adopts the traditional Hindu rites performed by a professional Brahmin priest.9

If we carefully observe the above points, the point 4(b) is perhaps applicable in case of Integration. The process of integration have been playing an important role in tribe-caste continuum in Assam. The Rabhas and the Hajangs are the best examples of integration in this area. The Rabhas, particularly, the Pati Rabhas, keeping their own identity and traditions, are "on the road to Hinduism". They have no their own dialect, like the Rongdaniya or Raitorias of the same group of the tribe. They have adopted Assamese as official, educational and court language. In their day to day life they speak a peculiar dialect akin to the dialect of Goalpara.

They participate in different festivals of the Hindus. Saivism, Saktism and Vaishnavism have influenced on their traditional religion and a tendency to identify their gods and goddesses with the Hindu pantheon has been growing. Though they do not engage any Brahmin priest they worship Kali, Suvarani etc. in their own method. Kamakhyas is revered by all the tribes of the region with immense devotion. Bharigan, a folk theatrical performance, based on the story of the Ramayana, is enacted by the Pati Rabhas of south Goalpara. Manasa in the name of Parvani is worshipped by them in a befitting manner. They have their own traditional songs and dances which are performed in the Puja. Similar is the case with the Kacharias, the Hajangs, the Karbis etc.

The Rajbanshis, the Koches, the Ahomes, the Chutias are the best examples of assimilation. The Rajbanshis of North Bengal and Assam have totally abandoned their tribal customs and manners and have adopted Hinduism. They wear sacred threads and claim themselves to be "Shaona Kakatriyas". The Koches or the Rajbanshis were known as Kysaya in the Pauranic scriptures. In Lower Assam, it is observed that when a tribe is uplifted to a caste it has to come to the status through two stages Saraniya and Medahi or Medani. Hastings has explained this change by giving concrete example
in this way: "A Kaehari, for instance, begins by placing
himself under the protection of a gusain and taking the
oath of obedience, or Saran. He is then called a Saraniya.
At this stage he still eats pigs and fouls and continues
to drink beer and less frequently, distilled spirits. Next
he (or rather his descendants) becomes a modahi which implies
the renunciation of alcohol. By slow degrees the ancestral
yearning for unholy food and drink diminishes or disappears,
and having become a ceremonially pure Hindu, the aforetime
Kaehari is accepted as a Kamtati or Var keoh. Similar is
the case with the Rabhas and the Hajangs of our area.

The process of tribe-caste continuum has already been
stopped in other parts of India, but the process is still
continuing in Assam.

E. Tribal religion

Our study confines to the religion of the tribes who
are living in the regions. It is difficult to suggest a
concrete name for the tribal religion. However judging from
the Hindu religious point of view, the tribal religion is
akin to the Sakta faith of the Hindus. Foreign writers have

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expressed their views regarding the tribal religion. Many of them have classified their religion as 'animistic'. "The officers census of India before 1931 were emphatic about the religious distinction. They designated the tribals as 'animists' a term brought into currency by E.B. Taylor and used to indicate ghost cults in ancient and primitive societies. The implication was that tribals were animists and the non-tribals were not. The evidence provided by authorities on Indian folk religion like Baines, Risley and Crooks differed from such a conclusion; in 1931 J.H. Hutton added a note to this problem by demonstrating that tribal religions in India could be best understood as "raw material yet to be built into the temple of Hinduism". Obviously this has reference to the age old historical process in India by which the aboriginal tribes enter the universe of caste Hinduism either a formal conversion or any significant change in the cultural religious life".11

In all practical purposes the tribes are within the Hindu fold. They are not debarred from entering any Hindu shrine even if their conversion is not completed.

It is true that there are innumerable deities among the tribes whom they worship on different occasion. In our field study the following common characteristics of the tribal gods and goddesses are observed.

(i) The tribes worship rivers, mountains, stones, thunder and some other supernatural elements.

(ii) Normally it is found that there are often no specific images to identify their deities. However, in case of sculptured, an image may be placed on the altar. The image may be represented by stone trees. Pith or banana stem or straw made images.

(iii) In most cases animals such as goat, buffalos, Pigs, Cocks etc. are sacrificed.

(iv) Country liquor is offered in almost all cases.

(v) In many rituals and ceremonies Shamanastic dance is associated.

(vi) It is observed that no distinction is made between the gods and ghosts. Both benevolent and malevolent deities are propitiated.

(vii) Even, in case of adopted deities, they apply their traditional method of worship.
(viii) Generally speaking, magic plays an important role in tribal religion.

(ix) The tribes engage some devaris from their own clans to perform the puja.

Of course tribal religions have been modified in different ways. New interpretations have been given in conformity with the Hindu norms. In some places, among some tribes, the method of worship has been found changed. However, the above mentioned characteristics are the common factor of the tribal gods and goddesses. We shall try to give a description of the tribal deities falling within our jurisdiction and try to classify them as primitive or original, acculturated and integrated in the succeeding chapters on Tribal deities.