Religion and Society

Study of religious behaviour has been accepted as an important dimension of sociology and social anthropology. Such studies can be classified under two broad categories, interpretive and descriptive; some studies show a combination of both the aspects.

In descriptive studies of the earlier periods religion was treated as an entity without any reference to the society in which it is practised. With the growth of functionalism and structural-functionalism more and more stress has been laid on the aspect of interpretation, i.e., the interrelationship between religion and society. The characteristics of religion is given by Manas (1957: 14-15) as an inner urge in every man; to look up to something tangible and material, or to something which is invisible, spiritual and divine which is above him, above his physical powers and above his mental and spiritual faculties, for his inspiration, protection and guidance in life. Religion is an inner feeling in the heart of every man by which his relationship to the original source
of all life is asserted, and the path indicated for his union in consciousness with this One Cause of Being whence he originally came. As regards the origin of the word 'religion', he says "The word 'religion' comes from the Latin word 'religio'. The word 'religio' means to tie, to fasten behind, to bind the people by law of dogma into a group for a certain purpose. The subsidiary meaning is respect for all that is Sacred-a state of consciousness. Religions are divided into two main groups. Those of the aborigines, and the religions of the civilized peoples".

It is true that religion cannot exist apart from society. But in the interlinkage between religion and society some or at least similar in case of all societies. As stated by Max Weber (1963), religion and society are closely related in the social and economic life of man. Max Weber maintains that, the road to salvation that will seem appealing varies among groups who have had different training, who have different kinds of work, who have different places in the total social system.

The kind of experience of rebirth that is sought after as a supreme value by a religion has obviously and necessarily varied according to the character of the stratum which was foremost adopting it. The chivalrous warrior class, peasants, business classes and intellectuals have naturally
pursued different religious tendencies. The contrast between warrior and peasant classes, the intellectual and business classes, is of special importance. The intellectuals have always been the exponents of a rationalism which in their case has been relatively theoretical. The business classes (merchants and artisans) have been at least possible exponents of rationalism of a more practical sort. He further says that, conception of the idea of redemption, as such, is very old. If one understands by it a liberation from distress, hunger, drought, sickness and ultimately from suffering and death ... one could wish to be saved from political servitude and lifted into a messianic realm in the future of this world: or one could wish to be saved from being defiled by ritual impurity and hope for the beauty of psychic and bodily existence and so on.

The general result, he further holds that of the modern form of thoroughly rationalising the conception of the world and of the way of life, theoretically and practically in the purposive manner, has been that religion has been shifted into the realm of the irrational.
Theories on Religion

It will be worthwhile here to discuss about some of the theories on religion. The evolutionary doctrine of Morgan lead us to some thinking about religion. Religion, said Morgan, is just too irrational to be understood by scientific means.

"The growth of religions ideas is environed with such intrinsic difficulties that it may never receive a perfectly satisfactory exposition. Religion deals so largely with the imaginative and emotional nature, and consequently with such uncertain elements of knowledge, that all primitive religions are grotesque and to some extent unintelligible" (Morgan 1877 : 5).

Another scholar of the evolutionary period Bachofen (1861 : XIV) believes religion to be the only efficient labour of all civilizations. According to him all aspects of human life begins with religion (Bachofen 1861 : XIV). It is to be noted that though Bacnofen told about the importance of religion he did not try to find out the origin as he did about descent system. Tylor, who is considered to be the father of modern anthropology gave much importance to religion in his book Primitive Culture where he tried to trace out the evolution
of the concept of animism. He tried to give a minimum definition of religion which led him to think about the origin of religion. In dreams people see beings without any material existence "a thin unsubstantial human image in its nature a sort of vapour, film or shallow" (Tylor 1958: II; 12 Original 1871). In this way Taylor was the first scholar of the evolutionary school to give serious thought. But his theory has been criticized by Harris in the following words:

"If Ancient Society suffers from any neglect of ideology, Primitive Culture suffers even more from its neglect of social organisation and economics. Once we have grown accustomed to the proposition that the doctrine of contemporary Christianity had their origin in the lower animism of savagery there is little else of theoretical significance to be gained from the piling of additional case upon case even as a treatment, Primitive Culture had its glaring limitation since it is devoted almost exclusively to cognitive as distinct from the institutional component of religion" (Harris 1968: 200-203).

Here we must mention about Frazer whose book the Golden Bought is considered to be a monument in the study of religion. It is interesting to note that he did not give any interpretation besides that of Tylor. His most significant
contribution is to emphasize on the difference between religion and magic. According to him magic is pseudo science and religion is a higher achievement. So, according to Frazer magic evolved into religion.

Two of Tylor's contemporaries W.R. Smith and Herbert Spencer were the first scholars to take a broader view of religion - to treat religion as a part of the social system. Smith's theory about religion is embodied in his book The Religion of the Semites (1889) in which he attempted to find out the social function of feasting, ritual communion and sacrifice. It is very interesting to note that Durkheim's theory of social solidarity was foreshadowed in Smith's writings. On the other hand Spencer stresses the function of religion as bringing about "Cohesion" and "Social Continuity".

Therefore, we may generally say that ecclesiasticism is the principle of social continuity. It is the agency which conduced to cohesion, not only between the co-existing parts of a group, but also between generations. This way it helps to maintain the integrity of the society. In another point of view, we may say that ecclesiasticism, embodying in its primitive form the rule of the dead cover the living and sanctifying in its more advanced forms of authority of the past over the present, has for its function to preserve in force the organised product of earlier experiences. Evidently,
this organised product of past experiences is not without credentials. The life of the society has up to the time being, been maintained under it, and have a perennial reason for resistance to deviation (Spencer 1896: II: 773).

By maintaining a common propiation of a deceased ruler's spirit, and by implication checking the tendencies to internal warfare, priesthoods have furthered social growth and development and also by fostering the spirit of conservatism which maintains continuity in social arrangements, and by forming a supplementary regulative system which cooperates with the political one, by insisting on obedience, primarily to gods and accordingly to kings, by countenancing the coercion under which has been cultivated the power of application, and by strengthening of self-restraint (Spencer 1896: 317) the priesthoods have the principle of Cohesion.

Among all the evolutionary scholars, Lubbock was one who gave an evolutionary scheme on religion in his book the Origin of Civilization (1870). According to Lubbock the most primitive savages lack anything which could be called religion. He also displays an infuriating certainty concerning the doctrinal superiority of his own brand of superstition. According to him, atheism and materialism are inferior conditions of belief; man only gradually acquires higher spiritual concepts. He proclaims that, if there is "one fact more certain
than another", it is "the gradual diffusion of religious light, and of nobler conceptions as to the nature of God" (1970: 349). Lubbock call the first stage of religion 'Atheism'. His scheme is as follows:

**Atheism**: understanding by this term not a denial of existence of a Deity, but an absence of any definite ideas on the subject.

**Petichism**: the stage in which man supposes he can force the Deity to comply with his desires.

**Nature worship or Totemism**: in which natural objects, trees, lakes, stones, animals, etc. are worshipped.

**Shamanism**: in which the superior deities are far more powerful than man, and of a different nature. Thus place of abode also is far away, and accessible only to shamans.

**Idolatry**: or Anthropomorphism; in which the gods take still more completely the nature of man, being, however more powerful. They are still amenable to persuasion. they are a part of nature, and not creator. They are represented by images or idols.

In the next stage the Deity is regarded as the author, not merely a part, of nature. He becomes for the first time a really supernatural being.
The last stage to which Lubbock refer is that in which morality is associated with religion (1870: 119). Lubbock noted that, "the increasing power of chiefs and priests" and the stage of edolatry "with its sacrifices, temples, priests, etc. is the only functional connection between religion and social structure.

Boas's theory is marked by its negativism, he rejects geographical determinism, he rejects cultural determinism, he rejects economic determinism. About religion he remarked (Boas 1948: 256 Original 1932) that it could not be derived from economic forces. There we can say that Boas did not advance any theory on religion.

Other scholars of the functional school like Malinowski and Radcliffe Brown spoke very little on religion. According to Radcliffe Brown the individual perception of what is dangerous is guided at every point by the community (Radcliffe Brown: 1959: 149). According to Malinowski the most dangerous and uncertain occasion were filled with magic that is to say what the human being could not do with the physical power was achieved through magic. It is curious to note that the French Structuralist led by Levi-Strauss who have done so much work on the structure of kinship as a part of a grand structure comprehending even the linguistic structure have done practically no work on religion, Even in
Levi-strauss has practically nothing to say about religion.

**Some Studies in Religion**

There are numerous studies on the religions of primitive people all over the world. All monographic studies on different primitive tribes invariably contain some space for description of religion. If we attempt to write about them it will not be possible to do so within the space of this dissertation. So, it will be worthwhile to discuss about some important studies of religion in India.

S. C. Ray's study of Orcon religion is a landmark in this respect and Henry H. Presler's work on the primitive religions is an invaluable contribution in the study of primitive religions in India.

Srinivas's study on the religion and society among the Coorg of South India is another achievement in the study of religion in the social setting. In India Srinivas's study was followed by similar other studies but those studies relate mostly to the major religions. Micro level studies in small or more or less self contained religious communities present a good field for finding the
precise relationship. North East India is an ideal region for such micro level studies as this region presents numerous cultural situations.

Although there has been a number of studies on religion in other parts of India, such studies in North East India particularly the studies of religions of tribal communities is scanty. However, in the monographs of different tribes some aspects of religion of the respective tribes are invariably presented. But, since the monographs deal with all the aspects of tribal life and culture in broad outline, it can seldom devote its full attention to one particular aspect of human life. Moreover, such monographs are often found to be guided by hasty interpretation of facts and some writings are found to have many misconceived ideas. In recent years, no doubt, some scholars of North East India have tried to write on the religion of different tribes of the region some of which are yet to be published.

So, under the existing state, it is found that, no single or partial attempt would help the scholars to have a full knowledge about the religion of any particular tribe. Thus, it is also observed that no analytical study on religion of any tribe has yet been done so far in this region.
So far the traditional religion of the Garos of Meghalaya is concerned, Major Playfair (1909), Tarun Chandra Sinha (1966) and Robbins Burling (1963) made cursory study of the traditional religion of the Garos, but, they have not been able to deal with the subject in a more comprehensive way due to obvious reasons. The present study is an attempt to analyse the Traditional Garo religion in the matrix of Garo society and to examine the impact of modern society on it besides examining its correlation with Hinduism.

Undoubtedly, those earlier writers made sincere attempts to study the religions of different tribes of the region, but, irony of fate is that the number of tribes and sub-tribes are so great in North East India that it still requires many more explorations with regard to the religions of the different tribes living in North Eastern region of India, if at all we want to know their true nature, custom and finally their mind. Religion is one of the strongest cohesive forces for maintaining the integrity and solidarity of the nation and as such, it is observed that by studying the religion of a particular tribe, we can have a clear idea about their social life, behaviour and their present needs. Hence, the present study, is an attempt towards that objective.
As discussed earlier, so far the studies of religions of different tribes of North East India the following works on the subject can be mentioned. Miri's and Myroniang's 'Rituals and War Jaintia' (1978); Miri's and Myroniang's 'Taboo in Traditional Khasi Society' (1978); Miri's 'Religion and Society of North East India (1980- Edt.); Saikia's 'Dafila Social and Religious life' (1964); Kabui's 'Kabui Rituals' (1971); Mukherjee's 'Magico-Religious Ceremony in Connection with the Disease of a Garo' (1956); Bareh's 'Meghalaya Religious Belief and Ritual' (1968); Miri's 'Status of Women in Religious Ceremony' (1976); Kar's 'Religion in a Tea Garden in Assam' (1979); Anjea's 'The Role of Religious Belief in North Eastern India' (1981); Sangma's 'History and Culture of the Garos' (1984); Ray's 'The Dominating Motives in Jaintia Religious Life' (1984); Doley's 'The Religious Beliefs and Practices Among the Mishing of Assam' (1984); Majumdar's 'Study of Religious Practices Among the Song Koch of Garo Hills' (1968) and Majumdar's 'An Account of Magico-Religious Rites and Beliefs of Rongdani Rabna' (1968).
Present Study

The Garo matrilineal tribe of Meghalaya has its own linguistic socio-cultural and religious heritage quite different from those of other tribes of North Eastern India. While a number of studies were undertaken in respect of the various socio-cultural aspects of this tribe and the few of them occasionally touched the historical outlines of the different Christian missions that followed the British domination into the Garo Hills, no specific studies are found to be made with regard to the traditional religion of the Garos, much less on its analytical aspects and the defensive-offensive relation between Christianity and the traditional Garo society.

Garoos have their own concept of religion which involves not only their concept of divinities and the manifestation of their various forces, creative or destructive, but centering round supernatural entities. At times, it appears that the 'traditional divinities' have their resemblances with the gods and goddesses of the Greeks and the Hindus. Besides, the idea of reincarnation of the spirit in human form is not only cherished quite fondly by the Garos but also expressed in all their mortuary rituals in order that the 'spirit' may be helped in taking rebirth.
Traditional religious practices are oriented towards establishing an ideal harmony with the supernatural. They aim in invoking the aids of the divinities for material wealth, happiness and the security against natural calamities and health hazards. All stages of shifting cultivation (the only source of livelihood in the traditional society) are preceded by appropriate rituals. Every ritual wherever meant for an individual benefit invariably turns into an occasion for social participation.

But the successive entries of different denominations of the Christian faith, the American Baptist, Anglican, Roman Catholic, Australian Baptist and the Seventh Day Adventist, brought with them not only education and establishment of new order a veritable contact with outside but also eroded in the process the traditional religious faith among the everincreasing converts. The divergent visions of these denominations also set in a conscious era of mutual competition and selective cooperation with an eye on the traditional Garos.

Political changes right from the days of Garos' independence in the interior hills to the creation of the Autonomous District Council in the independent India have also been partially responsible for certain changes of the traditional practices of which the religious ones form a part. Increasing,
culture-contact consequent on improved transport and communication and unified administration helped also in changing the traditional ethos of the Garos.

While detailing analytically, the place and position of the different Garo divinities in relation to the regional divisions of the tribe and the emergence of different Christian denominations with their respective strategies it will also be an endeavour of the present study to analyse in historical perspective the mutual interaction of these two sets of ideas the traditional and the Christian, and to delineate the emergent form of Garo socio-religious beliefs and practices as are evident in the present-day society, specially in the mixed settlement of the Christian and the traditional sections of the society.

The present study is important from another angle, The progress of Christianity among the Garos has been rapid and gradually the traditional religion has been eclipsed by Christianity. The reason must lie in the changing social circumstances. While dealing with the problems, the subject is introduced with all necessary informations about the areas of the main Garo home land as it is found today and other Garo habitat outside, national characteristics of the tribe with its different sub-tribes and slight variation in dialect in different zones.
Methodology

In social sciences each study moulds its own methodology. The present study has also evolved its own methodology. In planning the study the whole work was divided into three parts, first, descriptive, that is to say, description of the Garo religion as it exists today, second, analytical and comparative, that is to say, to find out the basic elements of the Garo religion and compare with those of Hinduism, the only religion which was in close touch with the Garo religion and third, evaluatory, that is to say, how the followers of traditional religion are feeling with the advancement of modernization among the Garos. So far as the descriptive and evaluatory parts are concerned the researcher took the help of interview method (with an interview guide) combined with his longstanding experience of the less enlightened section of his own community, who have now remained as the followers of the traditional religion. This brings us to the methodological problem of studying one's own community. A special term autoethnography has been evolved in methodological literature to denote ethnography of the researchers' own community. Many instances can be cited of American Indians, Japanese, ethnologists describing their own communities. Besides, numerous studies of the caste system or aspects of the Indian Muslim society have been undertaken by Indian scholars and these have been highly
acclaimed in the world of social sciences. The most remarkable work among them is Prof. Srinivas's *Religion and Society among the Coorg* (1922). Many writers on methodology have discussed the question of losing objectivity when one studies one's own community. In this respect it is important here to relate the present researcher's experiences. Being a Garo by birth and hailing from an interior traditional village of the Garo Hills, the author had to maintain regular and close contact with a number of his relations (cosanguinal and affinal) who are found to have formed families of mix type, i.e., with converted and unconverted. Such families are found spread over number of villages in Garo Hills served by different mission centres. Initially, the author carried out a test-survey and found that both the traditional and the Christian faiths and beliefs have their respective impacts on the socio religious practices of the present day people. He is an insider also an outsider. As a Garo the people whom he studied belong to his own community but among the Garo today Christians and Songsareks from two subcultures. Modernization has come to the Christians but the songsareks are fighting a losing battle with modernity. The present researcher belongs to the Christian subculture, as all educated Garos are. Educated Garos have some sort of a humiliating attitude towards the songsareks and had the case been this with the present author it would have impaired the scientific objectivity of this study. He comes from a songsarek family and many of his relatives have still remained songsarek.
Thus, he considers the *songsareks* as his own people and they also reciprocate this feeling. This greatly facilitated the researcher to conduct investigations among the *songsareks*, who openheartedly gave him all informations. The present author's training in philosophy also helped him to study Garo religion objectively. But his success in objectivity can only be judged at the receiving end.

The comparative-analytical part of this study is based on library work. However, the elements of Hinduism which are found in Garo religion had to be sought in the religion of the hinduized communities. Literature on this aspect is very scanty. But fortunately the supervisor of this researcher's research is himself an authority on this subject, and he could enrich this study with his experience and personal observations.

Since the last four or five decades Christianity has been very rapidly showing its impact on the traditional religion. The advent of Christianity does not only mean decrease in the number of followers of the traditional religion but it has also been the cause of creating some sort of despondency in the minds of those who still follow the traditional religion. The author initially had certain constraints in making an objective assessment of this. Because, first he is an active member of the church organization which is responsible for
taking Christianity to the most backward areas of the Garo habitat and second the feeling is different in different individuals and insurmountable difficulty was experienced in making generalizations. However, to ascertain the attitude towards Christianity interviews with an interview guide was conducted on three groups of people. First or second generation converts, educated and uneducated, new converts and the hardcore of the followers of the traditional religion. The answers were found to contain much of the subjective elements of the respondents and as such were so varied that those could not be put into certain broad categories (even if it would have been done each category would have included wide variations within itself) and so we had to treat them more or less like case histories, and the author's general assessment for these were put down.