

THE ROLE OF ANIMISM WITHIN CERTAIN INDIGENOUS TRIBES OF NORTH-EAST INDIA: A STUDY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE RABHAS OF ASSAM.

Abstract

The term 'Animism' was first propounded by anthropologist E.B. Taylor. Animism is the belief which regards that every entity of this world possesses a spiritual essence. This doctrine believes that everything on this planet such as plants, animals, rivers, stones, etc. are animated and alive. Most of the tribal communities of North East India are primitive and animistic in their outlook. For instance, the tribes of North East India such as Misings, Bodos, Garos, etc. believe that the whole world is endowed with spirits. Similarly, the Rabha tribe which is one of the most significant tribes of North East India also possesses an animistic perspective which can be discovered in their indigenous beliefs and practices. This paper attempts to highlight the animistic notion prevalent within the different indigenous beliefs of certain tribes of North East India with special reference to the Rabhas of Assam.

Keywords: animism, north-east India, indigenous beliefs, Rabha tribe.

Author

Nihar Bordoloi
Research Scholar
Department of Philosophy
Cotton University
Guwahati, Assam, India.

I. INTRODUCTION

The term 'Animism' as stated earlier was coined by anthropologist, E.B. Taylor. It is the belief which states that every object of the universe possesses a spirit within itself. Sir Edward Taylor in his famous book 'Primitive Culture', developed this idea of animism. In this book, he even describes the apparent progress of religion from animism to monotheism (mythology.net). The attitude of attributing life to every object of nature which includes both animate and inanimate objects is prevalent from time immemorial. In the ancient Indian context, we find that from the Vedic ages, different trees and animals were regarded as sacred believing them to be inhabited by various deities. For instance, the Atharvaveda is regarded as the Veda of the masses because of its close relationship with human beings and the environment in which they live. Ancient people treated trees to be their parents as well as brothers and sisters and regarded cutting plants as a sin (Sharma). This animistic attitude is also prevalent among the different indigenous tribes of North East India. For instance, the various tribes of Tripura such as the Kukis and the Jipras possess a belief that some kind of spirit is present in different stones and pebbles. According to them, these stones are sacred and thus they worship the stones following their indigenous practices (Bhattacharjee). Again, the Hmars of Mizoram venerates various conscious and unconscious entities of nature. They believe that every object in the universe possesses a spirit. Some of them are harmless, while, others are harmful (N. Rabha). Similarly, the Bodo tribe of Assam is also animistic in its outlook. They worship the siju tree (*euphorbia splendens*) as a symbol of their supreme deity 'Bathou'. The indigenous beliefs and practices of the Rabhas of Assam are also to a certain extent animistic and primitive which can be discovered through their beliefs in sacred forests called Bai-dam as well as sacred hills and rivers known as Hachu-chika. The Rabhas possess a sacred forest in each of their villages known as 'Bai-dam'. This is the place of worship of the Rabhas. They believe that different deities reside in the trees, hills, animals, mountains, and rivers of the 'Bai-dam'. So they never try to harm them. They work for their preservation. Rabhas also believe in the notion of sacred hills and rivers which they term as Hachu-chika. They perform a ritual as a reverence towards the river which is known as Sagar Pooja. It is a part of the Baikho festival of the Rabhas (N. Rabha).

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study, a qualitative method has been adopted mostly with the help of secondary sources. The secondary sources of the study include the data that is collected from various libraries, books, theses, journals, websites, etc.

III. ANIMISM

Throughout history, most philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas, Aristotle, etc. regarded the prospect that spirits exist in plants, animals, and various entities of nature. However, the most accepted definition of animism was put forward in the 19th century by E.B. Taylor. According to Taylor, animism is the doctrine that believes in the spiritedness of all nature. It is a spiritual and phenomenological outlook that is common to most of the indigenous cultures around the world. Animism in some form or another has been the authoritative religious practice from remote ages. It was most prevalent among the indigenous communities and thought to be an ancient form of religion. However, animism later developed into recent systematic religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity,

etc. (mythology.net). In many animistic faiths, human beings are often regarded as equal to that of other animals, trees, and different objects of nature. Therefore, it is ethically crucial to consider these agents with a sense of reverence. In this ideology, humans are regarded as a part of nature, rather than assuming them to be superior or apart from it. This paper will focus on the animistic notion of the different tribal communities of North East India with a special focus on the Rabhas of Assam. It will analyze how the indigenous practices of the various tribes of North East India show a man-in-nature perspective bearing special attention to the Rabha tribe of Assam.

IV. ANIMISM WITHIN THE TRIBES OF NORTH EAST INDIA

The unique feature of tribal culture is the belief in animism which is customary among almost all the indigenous communities of North-East India. They believe that every object, whether it be animate or inanimate is inhabited by spirits. For instance, the Kuki tribe of Tripura believes in the sacredness of different stones and pebbles. During Jhum cultivation, the Kukis use to worship these stones and pebbles following their indigenous practices (Bhattacharjee). Again, throughout history, the Jipra community of Tripura used to perform a ritual known as 'Randhak Pooja' for the welfare of the house. In this ritual certain stones are placed upon two earthen pots filled up with rice and the pots are carefully kept in the house for one year. These stones are believed to be inhabited by spirits. The Jipras believe that with time the number of stones in the pot increases and the increase in the number of stones leads to the well-being of the house (Bhattacharjee). Again, the Bodo tribe which is one of the most significant tribes of Assam is also animistic in their outlook since they believe that different objects such as animals, trees, rivers, etc. are inhabited by spirits which they usually term as 'modai' meaning everything possess power and potentiality. The animistic attitude of the Bodos can also be discovered from the fact that they worship the Sijou tree (*Euphorbia splendens*) as a symbol of their supreme deity 'Bathou'. Even the Bodos believe in the sacredness of certain forests as well as hills and rivers believing them to be inhabited by deities. For instance two of the significant sacred forests of the Bodos are 'Sikhnajar' under Ultapani Reserve forest and Holtugaon forest division. Certain hills are also believed by the Bodos to be sacred, for instance, the Baukhungri Hill. It is believed by them to be the dwelling place of their supreme deity 'Shibrai' or 'Bwrai Bathou' and many other deities. Likewise, the sacredness of rivers also plays a significant role in the Bodo traditional religion. According to them before the emergence of life on this planet, there was water everywhere. So, rivers, lakes, streams, etc. are worshipped by the Bodos. 'Burlungbuthur' which is the mighty Brahmaputra is regarded by the Bodos to be their chief river deity. Among the different tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, there lies a distinctive religion known as 'Donyi Polo' which means "Sun and Moon" in their regional language. According to this belief, different forces of nature are treated with a sense of reverence as they are believed to be inhabited by various deities, especially the Sun and the Moon. The Philosophy behind this belief system is the euphony between human beings, nature, and the seraphic (the north-east travelblog.com). The supporters of this belief system believe in the existence of several benevolent deities within the different objects of nature such as hills, rivers, plants, animals, etc. highlighting the animistic perspective within the distinctive religion of 'Donyi Polo'. This close relationship with the natural environment prevalent in this ideology indirectly paves the way for environmental preservation and sustainability. 'Donyi Polo' is observed through different rites, rituals, and ceremonies such as offerings, prayers, etc. Besides the religious facet, 'Donyi Polo' also possesses a moral or ethical aspect since it

emphasizes the significance of leading a righteous life and maintaining a harmonious association with nature (the north-east travelblog.com). The indigenous beliefs of the Meitei's of Manipur are also animistic. They possess a belief in forest deities or spirits which they term 'Umanglais'. 'Umang' means forest and 'lai' means 'spirit or god'. There are approximately four hundred and forty-six Umanglais. The Meitei's used to worship them in one of their largest religious festival known as 'Umang-lai-haroba' (Varghese). Similarly, the 'Khasis' of Meghalaya also have a belief in certain sacred groves or forests which is known as 'Lawblei' or 'Lawkyntang'. According to them, different deities reside in the different objects of the sacred groves such as animals, plants, birds, etc. So, it is considered taboo to the destruction of anything inside the sacred groves which indirectly paves the way for the preservation of the natural environment (Varghese).

V. ANIMISM AMONG THE RABHAS OF ASSAM:

Rabha is one of the most significant indigenous communities mostly found in North-East India. They belong to the mongoloid race. They are mainly found in the Baksa, Kokrajhar, Goalpara, Udalguri, and Kamrup districts of Assam. They have their language, culture, and traditional religion, and, it helps to identify it as a different tribal community. Several sub-groups are found among the Rabha tribe which may include 'Kocha', 'Pati', 'Totola', 'Hana', 'Maitoriya', 'Dahori', 'Bitoliya' and 'Rongdaniya'. However, the most significant sub-groups are 'Pati', 'Rongdaniya', 'Kocha', and 'Maitoriya'. These groups make up the majority of their population. Among these groups, the 'Kocha', 'Rongdaniya', and 'Maitoriya' still stick to their indigenous culture and speak their traditional language. While, other groups such as 'Pati', 'Hana', 'Bitoliya', 'Dahori', and 'Totola' have mostly accepted the Assamese culture and also forgotten their authentic language (N. Rabha). Like most of the other tribal communities of North East India, the Rabha indigenous society is also animistic and primitive. Rabhas are very much conscious of their place of living and the situation nearby. They try to continue the celestial rules through the rendition of their duties towards the natural environment. They regard nature as their fellow beings. Even they believe that the natural elements are contemplation and exposition of the divine God. The love and care towards nature, as well as the animistic attitude of the Rabhas, can be traced from their social systems such as customs, rites, rituals, practices of different forms, etc. which will be an essential part of the following discussion. Moreover, their animistic perspective showing concern towards the environment is also found in their belief in sacred forests called 'Bai-Dam' as well as sacred hills and rivers called 'Hachu-Chika' which will also be discussed here (N. Rabha).

An important perspective of the animistic ideology is that humans are regarded as a part of nature, rather than assuming them to be superior or apart from it highlighting a man-in-nature attitude. This man-in-nature perspective, this feeling of treating different objects of nature as fellow beings can be discovered among the various myths, totems, taboos, omens, magic, dreams, etc. within the Rabha indigenous society. A famous folklore can be found among the Rabha community that explains the gracious behavior of a bird named 'manchalanka' which is the kingfisher. This myth narrates the story of two beautiful ladies named Niramoni and Nishimoni. Once upon a time, there were two beautiful girls, Niramoni and Nishimoni who refused to recognize their fiancées Radan and Chandan after long twelve years of separation. Even they did not accept a meeting with their fiancées. The incident was very painful for the two handsome men and led them engulf in the water. The bird,

'manchalenka' gave the news to the girls. However, it was already very late. The two girls missing their partners started to sing a sorrowful song and accomplished a funeral ceremony with a countenance of gratitude towards the bird, 'manchalenka'. Since then, the Rabhas believe the bird, the kingfisher to be their friend. They never try to forget the kindness of 'manchalenka' and always respect the bird and work for its preservation (N. Rabha). Again, certain omens are bearing an animistic notion within the Rabha traditional society. Omens are nothing, but, particular signs which are treated as indications of some event to happen. One omen believed to be a good one by the Rabhas is when a snake crosses the path of someone from the right side. Again, the vomiting of a vulture in front of a person is also regarded to be a good omen. Moreover, when a wasp or paddy builds a nest in the house of a person, it is believed to be a good omen. If one sees two mynasttogether then it indicates some blissful events. If bees form a hive in the house, it is seen as a good sign. If one encounters an elephant at the onset of their journey, it indicates a blissful day. Such omens highlight the fact that the Rabhas believe different animals as their fellow beings which is an important notion within the animistic ideology (R. Rabha).

The animistic notion of the Rabhas showing concern towards the environment is also found in their belief in sacred forests called 'Bai-Dam' as well as sacred hills and rivers called 'Hachu-Chika'. The Rabhas possess a sacred forest in each of their villages. This sacred forest is called 'Bai-dam'. It is a place of worship of the Rabhas. Different socio-religious festivals of the Rabhas are performed in these sacred forests. Various objects of these forests such as plants, animals, birds, etc. are being preserved since, Rabhas believe that their different deities reside in the different objects of 'Bai-dam'. So they never try to harm anything in these sacred forests. They care for and conserve them (N. Rabha). In this way, the Rabhas contribute greatly to the conservation of wildlife. Some significant sacred groves are 'Jaagar-dam', 'Baikho-daam' etc. Some important trees that are planted and preserved inside the 'Baikho-daam' are mango, mera or vetiver grass, wood apple, tulsi or basil, etc. Sacred groves play a very significant role in water as well as soil conservation. They enhance the soil steadiness of an area. In this way, Rabhas' belief in sacred groves helps the environment to a great extent. The notion of sacred forests is also found within the different tribal communities of North East India such as the Meitei's of Manipur, the Khasis of Meghalaya, etc. which is already discussed earlier. Rabhas also possess a belief in sacred hills and rivers, which they term 'Hachu-Chika'. According to the Rabhas, certain hills and water bodies are considered sacred for each 'barai' or clan of their community (R. Rabha). The Rabhas believe that a particular hill or water body is the abode of their deity. So, they respect and work for the preservation of the different hills and rivers for the good of their community. In this way, they help in the conservation of various hills and rivers which indirectly paves the way for ecological sustainability. Following is a list of some sacred hills and rivers or 'hachu-chika' of each clan or 'barai' of the Rabhas (N. Rabha):

Barai-huri (clan-sub clan)	Hachu (Hill)	Chika (Water body)
1. Tara-hadu	Lodrang	Khangkha-chi
2. Hakasam-hakasanang	Jorang-hachu	Sona-chi
3. Hatto-haro	Baida-hachu	Rupa-chi
4. Fenag-churchung	Phedar	Rongsai-chi
5. Rungdung-nalong	Dibri hachu	Sabang-chi
6. Baida-songdu	Jangara-hachu	Tangsar-chi
7. Nukcher	Hoktopla	Damalchi

The belief in sacred hills and rivers is also prevalent among one of the most significant tribes of Assam known as the Bodo tribe. Their belief regarding the same is briefly discussed earlier.

VI. CONCLUSION

The above discussion analyses animism and the various indigenous communities of North East India bearing an animistic perspective imposing special attention to the Rabha tribes of Assam. It also discusses how the animistic ideology within the different tribes indirectly paves the way for ecological sustainability. For instance, the various tribes of North East India such as the 'Khasis' of Meghalaya, the Meitei's of Manipur, or the Rabhas of Assam believe in the notion of sacred forests. They believe that different deities reside in the various objects of the sacred forests. So they never try to destroy anything in the sacred forests which indirectly helps in the preservation of biodiversity. Moreover, sacred groves play a very significant role in water as well as soil conservation. They enhance the soil steadiness of an area. In this way, the indigenous communities of North East India greatly help towards the enhancement of the natural environment. Through this study, it can be seen that though the deliberate attempt at the preservation and conservation of nature is a recent activity because of the rapid destruction of the natural environment in recent decades, spontaneous conservation activities in indigenous societies existed long before such emergence. So, from this study, a realization can be drawn from the indigenous societies to work for the preservation of the natural environment.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bhattacharjee, Priyabrata. TRIBAL PUJAS AND FESTIVALS IN TRIPURA. Agartala: Directorate of Tripura State Tribal Cultural Research Institute and Museum, Govt. of Tripura, 1994. English.
- [2] Chakraborty, Gargee. Tribal Folktales and Women. New-Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2016. English.
- [3] Endle, S. The Kacharis. Delhi: Cosmo Publication, 1975. English.
- [4] Godwin-Austen, H.H. On the Stone Monuments of the Khasi Hill Tribes and some of the Peculiar Rites and Customs of the People. 1872.
- [5] Hakacham, Dr. Upen Rabha. Rabha Bhasa aru Sahitya. Guwahati: Tribal Research Institute, 1997. Assamese.
- [6] mythology.net. 1 February 2017. English.
- [7] Rabha, Nilpadmini. THE RABHA: A Traditional Society in Modern-day India. Ontario: Occam Academic Press, 2020. English.
- [8] Rabha, Rajen. The Rabhas. Dr. Prafulla Mahanta, 2002. English.
- [9] Sharma, Banajit. Deep Ecology of Arne Naess: A Critical Study. Guwahati, 2017. English.
- [10] The north-east travelblog.com. May 2023. English.
- [11] Varghese, Saji. Nature, Culture and Philosophy: Indigenous Ecologies of North East India. New Delhi: Lakhi Publishers & Distributors, 2014. English.