



Changes and Continuities in the Religious Landscape of Northeast India Changements et continuités dans le paysage religieux du Nord-Est de l'Inde

Coordinated by Emilie Crémin – Doctor in Geography, affiliated to the Centre for Himalayan Studies UPR299 CNRS

emilie.cremin@gmail.com

Language: English

Topics: religion, politics, history, social changes

Panel presentation:

This panel explores the changing religious landscape of Northeast India, an area of ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity faced with recurrent inter-religious tension and inter-communal conflicts.

We will first examine new forms of indigenous religious expressions and will study how belief systems are being restructured and institutionalized to bring about new indigenous "religions" that are based both on "traditional" beliefs and on religious frameworks as a result of mainstream faiths (Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam).

Secondly, we will try to understand how vernacular myths and legends as well as ritual and cultural practices developed by local populations (indigenous or tribal) have influenced ritual daily practices. We are particularly interested in local forms of faith to understand how perceptions of the world adapt and are transformed under the influence of mainstream religions.

This panel aims to understand the motivations hidden behind religious conversions and their effects on practitioners' daily lives. We hope to discover how political and religious elites use the religious phenomenon and to understand the consequences of these changes in the religious sphere on the definition of tribal communities' identity.

Various indigenous movements are presented as examples of what may be called a "religious restructuring", to show how they adapt their practices to globalization and conversion initiatives. Tribalised forms of Hinduism are to be found in the States of Tripura, Manipur and Assam, there are examples of local versions of Buddhism in Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, whereas tribalised forms of Christianity exist nearly everywhere in the hills of Northeast India. For a better understanding of the processes involved in these emerging movements, each presentation will examine the structures these reforms have taken, the new symbols and meanings they have created, and the policy that defines these revivals.

Keywords: faith; conversions; ethnicity; tribes; Northeast India



Résumé du panel :

Ce panel explore l'évolution du paysage religieux du Nord-Est de l'Inde, un espace de diversité ethnique, culturelle et religieuse où les tensions inter-religieuses et les conflits intercommunautaires sont fréquents.

Nous examinerons de nouvelles formes d'expressions religieuses autochtones et nous verrons comment les systèmes de croyance se restructurent et s'institutionnalisent pour faire émerger de nouvelles «religions» autochtones qui se fondent simultanément sur des croyances «traditionnelles» et des cadres religieux issues de religions dominantes (christianisme, hindouisme, bouddhisme et islam).

Nous essayerons de comprendre comment les mythes et les légendes vernaculaires, ainsi que les pratiques rituelles et culturelles construites par les populations locales (autochtones ou tribales) ont influencé les pratiques rituelles du quotidien. Nous nous intéresserons en particulier aux formes locales de foi pour comprendre comment les perceptions du monde s'adaptent et se transforment sous l'influence des religions dominantes.

Ce panel vise à comprendre les motivations se cachant derrière les efforts de conversion et leurs effets sur la vie quotidienne des pratiquants. On pourra découvrir comment les élites politiques et religieuses utilisent le phénomène religieux, et comprendre les conséquences de ces évolutions de la sphère religieuse sur la définition de l'identité des communautés tribales.

Divers mouvements indigènes seront présentés comme des exemples de ce qui peut-être appelé une «restructuration religieuse», pour montrer comment ils adaptent leurs pratiques à la mondialisation et aux initiatives de conversion. Des formes tribalisées de l'hindouisme sont rencontrées dans les Etats du Tripura, du Manipur, de l'Assam, des exemples de versions locales du bouddhisme apparaissent en Arunachal Pradesh et au Sikkim, tandis que des formes tribalisées de christianisme se trouvent presque partout dans les collines du Nord-Est. Afin de mieux comprendre les processus impliqués dans ces mouvements émergents, chacune des présentations examinera les structures que ces réformes ont prises, les nouveaux symboles et les significations qu'ils ont créés, et la politique qui définit ces revivalisme.

Speakers:

1. Dr Meenaxi Barkataki-Ruscheweyh (Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam)
meenaxib@googlemail.com

Title of paper: Religious reform as a strategy for ethnic consolidation: the case of the Tangsa in Northeast India

For many small ethnic communities living in Northeast India, the need to remain “tribal” in order to be able to benefit from government policies have forced them to develop new strategies of ethnic consolidation. At the same time they need to look and remain different from the mainstream (mainly Hindu-caste) population. Institutionalising their traditional belief systems in the form of a new distinct religion, which restructures their ancient mythology and beliefs while incorporating new attractive elements from other world religions, is a strategy that has been repeatedly



used by indigenous communities in the Northeast. In the Tangsa case, their new religion – Rangfraism – not only lends a new dimension to their ethnic identity but also serves as a common rallying point for the diverse “tribal” populations that form this group. This paper explores these issues based on data collected during recent fieldwork.

2. Dr Margaret Lyngdoh (University of Tartu, Estonia) ninilyngdoh@gmail.com

Christianity alongside indigenous beliefs among the Khasis of Northeast India: conflict or conformity?

Khasi communities — which include Khyntiam, Jaintia, Bhoi, War, and Lyngngam — comprise a group of indigenous peoples in Northeast India and make up the majority of the ethnic population of Meghalaya. The Khasis had no script of their own until the arrival of Welsh Calvinistic Missionaries (today more commonly known as Presbyterians) in 1843. I hope to show in this presentation that religious transformation among the Khasis is an ongoing process, as manifested through folklore that people recount/perform/believe in their day-to-day lives: how Khasis sort through their experiences and make conscious choices, or adopt unconscious strategies to derive meaning from institutional religion and find ways to reconcile themselves with older beliefs in the realm of the vernacular. On a more significant level, transformation occurs in the realm of religious beliefs of Khasi communities and is manifested through the conflicts and tension that exist between the various denominations of Khasi Christianity, the followers of traditional Seng Khasi and the actual vernacular religion practised by the community.

3. Kikee Doma Bhutia (University of Tartu)

The way out: guardian deities turned demons in Sikkimese attics

Sikkim was a Buddhist monarchy from 1642 to 1975, and before that the Lepchas (the original inhabitants) of Sikkim considered themselves to be “nature worshipers”. Sikkim was a repository of *ters ma* (hidden treasures) which were found by many knowledgeable saints and patrons over different periods of time. This is still the case today. The *land of bliss and abundance* is full of mystery and stories of magic. This land of guardian deities has always shaped the daily lives of the Sikkimese people who belong to different communities.

In this paper I focus on how the advent of Christianity in Sikkim has resulted in people believing that guardian deities are demons and devils that have to be driven away by prayers. I analyse the reasons for converting to Christianity, not only in terms of religious faith but as a way of coping with various social obligations. People hope for a better life not only in terms of spiritual rewards but also of financial and social benefits. This research is based on people's narrative of belief. It analyses how rituals and hundreds of years of believing in guardian deities have been replaced by concepts of the Revelation and the “end of the world is nigh”.

Keywords: patronage, advent of Christianity, narrative of local beliefs, deities and demons



4. Baburam Saikia (University of Tartu)

Continuity and change in the *Vaishnava* Religion: a study on an institutionalized religious community in Assam

The *Vaishnava* religion is a major branch of Hinduism. The *Vaishnava* movement in Assam had strong links with the *Vaishnava* revival that swept through India between the 12th and 15th centuries. Sankaradeva (1449-1568), the great Assamese social reformer, led the neo-*Vaishnavite* movement throughout Northeast India. Within a period of three hundred years the movement firmly established the *Vaishnava* faith as the supreme religious order in the Brahmaputra Valley. The movement also developed a new institutional structure known as *Sattrā*, a sociocultural and religious institute, which introduced a celibate lifestyle for followers, along with dance, drama and music as a medium for worshipping God. The religious and cultural tradition of this particular community is deeply rooted in the core dedication of its practitioners. Senior practitioners, unencumbered by the material, consumerist culture of modern society, continue to observe traditional rules whereas, for young practitioners, to respect these conventional notions has become a real challenge. Many changes have taken place in recent years within the *Sattrā* community. My study aims to discuss the continuity and change in the *Vaishnava* religious tradition which includes the life struggle of practitioners and their current situation.

Keywords: *Sattrā*, *Vaishnava* religion, vernacular practices, life and struggle, current situation.

5. Dr Irene Majo Garigliano (Centre d'études himalayennes, Villejuif, France) "We've seen incredible things!" The attitude of Kamakhya Temple Brahmans towards possession

A trend in scholarly literature on South Asia maintains that possession is a phenomenon mainly witnessed among people of low social status and that Brahmanical culture attributes only a marginal role to this practice, looking upon it with disdain.

The Deodhani possession dance I observed at Kamakhya Temple led me to question this generalisation. This indigenous dance, performed by non-Brahmans, is entrenched in the cult practised by Brahmans, the temple's religious and political elite.

Every August Deodhais are believed to be possessed by the mighty Goddess Kamakhya (and other minor deities), as they perform their dramatic dance for three days in front of thousands of devotees gathered for the festival. The drum-based dance is part of a major three-day puja (worship) performed by Brahmans at the temple. The Brahmans generally hold this dance in high esteem and are called upon to carry out numerous ritual tasks associated with the Deodhais. In addition, many Brahmans provide spontaneous assistance to Deodhais during critical stages in the dance.

By analysing the exchanges between Deodhais and Brahmans, this paper aims to show how an indigenous practice (widely performed in Lower Assam) has been integrated into the religious framework of one of Assam's major temples.

6. Dr Emilie Crémin (Centre d'études himalayennes UPR 299 CNRS) Settled and unsettled religious practices in the Brahmaputra flood plain: examining the Mising identity



Northeast India is made up of a wide diversity of ethnolinguistic communities, each of which has been campaigning for recognition of its special identity since Independence. Here we focus on the Misings' religious practices on Majuli Island (Assam) where this scheduled tribe lives within Assamese-*Vaishnava* society. Majuli has many Satras—*Vaisnavite* monasteries—where some Mising families work and cultivate the Satras' land. We observe through the relations between Misings and Assamese landlords how religious faith may or may not be shared. Indeed, some Misings may seek to adhere to other religious networks as a form of defiance, emancipation in their fight for territorial autonomy in the Northeast. Since colonial times Hindu and Christian missionaries have settled in Majuli in an attempt to convert Mising families. Lately the institutionalisation of the "indigenous" faith combined with the growing demand for the recognition of tribal identity has led to the emergence of so-called "revival" religions, such as Donyi-Polo. This faith has spread from the foothills of Arunachal Pradesh among the Adis to the Mising community in the Assamese flood plain. We analyse how these tribal claims are closely associated with territorial demands, contributing to the ethnicization of territories.

7. Dr Shalin Jain (University of Delhi)

Religious communities and environmental concerns in medieval India

This paper examines the role of medieval Indian religious communities in shaping their natural habitat and in organizing the nature-related actions they undertook. In the wake of broader knowledge of medieval ecosystems and of the role humans played in them, I propose to go beyond a uniform textual tradition to regard medieval religion as a dominant ideology for managing natural resources via the agency of religious rituals. Medieval religious experiences and beliefs varied from one place to another and from one community to another. In the historical context of medieval Indian history this paper scrutinizes the interactions between humans and nature which have filtered through via religious rituals. How did attitudes towards nature differ between different peoples, places and times? How did the ritual meanings that people attributed to nature inform their cultural, economic and political notions? These are some of the questions yet to be answered. The sources used in this study have largely been drawn from medieval textual customs and local hagiographical traditions. In assessing the impact of medieval religious communities on nature, it is worthwhile noting that these communities were not guided by a conscious sense of nature conservation to maintain the ecological balance since environmental degradation was not their main concern. Consideration for nature was deep-rooted in their religious virtues because in any public demonstration of piety, charitableness and religious devotion it was essential that a person show compassion towards nature and the natural habitat. In spite of sharing common rituals, the people and the elite had different notions of nature and of the natural habitat; these notions therefore need to be examined from different perspectives given the varied notions regarding the utility and management of natural resources.