

Religious History of Arunachal Pradesh



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RELIGIOUS HISTORY OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH

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Religious History of the Noctes

Ajay Kr. Mishra

Introduction

Arunachal Pradesh bounded by Tibet and China in the North, Assam in the South, Myanmar in the East, and Bhutan in the West; provides today the best example of a cultural continuity that has survived a long and diversified history in which changes have occurred, old images of life have been altered, and new elements and influences have been absorbed and amalgamated, enriching and variegating the cultural strands, without mutilating them; because it lies at the tri-junction of Indo-Chinese, Indo-Myanmar and the Indian Sub-regions. It is in this perspective that the religious history of the Noctes and the area has been attempted here. It is based up on my library researches and field studies of the area.

The idea of super-natural emerged from the inability of the pre-historic society to comprehend the phenomenon of nature. When they could not understand the vagaries of nature they attributed them with Godly manifestations and from this, over a period of subsequent centuries, the institution of organized religion emerged into a reality. A religion, as we have been practicing during the course of our civilization process, is a comprehensive and fairly rigid system of tenets, dictates and do's and don'ts about a particular way of life. The *Longman Encyclopaedia* defines religion as "A system

of thought, feeling and action shared by a group that gives members an object of devotion; a code of ethics governing personal and social conduct; and frame of reference relating individuals to their group and the universe." It is important to mention that not only the people of Arunachal Pradesh, but also still a considerable number of people of the North-Eastern region follow tribal religion or the animism which is a sort of primitive religion to be found anywhere in the tribal societies. "The characteristics of primitive religion," as Will Durant has observed, "are an animistic fear and worship of spirits lurking anywhere, a poetic reverence for the impressive forms and reproductive powers of earth, and awed adoration of a heaven whose energizing sunlight and fertilizing rains are parts of the sky.¹ This definition of animism is corroborated by E.O. James who writes: "The doctrine of animism represents a complex attempt to interpret the material and spiritual aspects of the phenomenal world by revolving the universe into a fundamental dualism of Body and Soul."² Further, religion is also an acknowledgement of extraordinary, the mysterious and the super-natural. It is in this perspective, I have discussed upon the aspects of religion in form of various beliefs and practices and changes therein in the paper.

Prelude

In almost of the tribal areas, there is a great divergence of ideas, especially in the realm of folklore; mythology and religion, stories and the names of Gods vary from place to place. This is inevitable in a region where there is no fixed deposit of doctrine, no sacred books to carry traditions from one generation to another, and where the repositories of knowledge are human beings exposed to the inspiration of their dreams and fancies. To understand the tribal way of thinking about supernatural aspects of Nature, it is necessary to stretch one's imagination. The various faiths of tribal people are the result of their uncommon circumstances. The tribesmen attributed the rain to a god of thunder and fire to a lord of fire. When pests and rains destroy their agricultural fields, they feel some supernatural power is punishing them and they must appease it and offer sacrifices. Almost all the tribal people believe in the existence of spirits that move nature and guide human action.

Arunachal Pradesh is beholden by the presence of various ethnic and cultural tribal entities, which are at once amazing.

Particularly, it is a land of various forms of religious beliefs, since time immemorial. It can also be said that regional resourcefulness, certain climatological conditions, and other mythological factors played a vital role in shaping and framing various norms and conventions, which are gradually legitimatised.

The symbolic pluralism of heterogeneity of Arunachalee society was evident in the multiplicity of traditions out of which its own cultural traditions crystallized- The Dony-Poloism, Buddhism and various other conventional ones. The multiplicity of symbolic orientations became connected with a very special type of structural-pluralism.

The case of the Noctes in general is not an exception to the phenomenon described above. The role of the chiefs, the structural-pluralism (from the Lowangdong to various Lowangs (chiefs), Hondique, Nokbi, Haah) has significantly shaped the religious history of the area and vice-versa. To be honest, the Socio-Economic changes have significantly influenced the religion of the people and the area during the British period and even after independence. However, we are confining ourselves in this article up to pre-colonial period. Subsequent studies, taking clues and data from various census reports and activities of the NGOs would be certainly fascinating for religious history, not only for the Noctes, but also for all other areas of Arunachal Pradesh because of dynamism and assimilation of Socio-Cultural elements.

Arunachal Pradesh is beholden by the presence of various ethnic and cultural tribal entities, which are at once amazing. Particularly, it is a land of various forms of religious beliefs, since time immemorial. It can also be said that regional resourcefulness, certain climatological conditions, and other mythological factors played a vital role in shaping and framing various norms and conventions, which are gradually legitimatised.

Arunachal Pradesh has always attracted historians and other social scientists, politicians and administrators whether they were the Britishers or the Indians for their studies on land and people. Moreover, the history of Arunachal Pradesh is occupied by a number of tribes and sub-tribes whose way of life and mode of behaviours are more heterogeneous. They differ not only in their religious faiths but also in social and customary beliefs with the result that the problem of social dissent and nation building in Arunachal Pradesh

is a vital issue. Like other tribes and sub-tribes of the North Eastern region the tribesmen of Arunachal Pradesh which possess heterogeneous beliefs, dissimilar legendary and mythological tales, divergent dialects and customary practices, are not responsive to the call of social unification and political integration.⁷

Discussion

The Noctes are one of the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh occupying the central region of the Tirap district. Their habitat is most undulating with hills ranging from 2500ft rising to 6000ft in altitude towards the Laju area, which is adjacent to Mayanmar. The Nocte land is fortunate enough to have some brine wells and saline springs from which salts are produced. Noctes are also known as Naga. Since known historical times, the Noctes have been known as *Namsangia*, *Borduria*, *Paniduria* and *Kolagongia* Nagas among the neighbouring Assamese people of the plains. These tribesmen have had long close connection with the plain people especially for the purpose of trade transaction. Items like salt, ivory and metal articles formed the chief goods for transactions since the early days of Ahom rule.

The religious philosophy of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, be it Buddhist or Hindu or Animist is based on a strong sense of history, a pride in the descent of race from a great ancestor and a belief in the value of sacrifice for the common good. This is again founded on five cardinal tenents. First, the tribes believe in a supreme God who is just, benevolent and good. Their religion emphasizes the spiritual realities behind the daily life. The tribes have faith in kind tutelary spirits and emphasis the spiritual cause of tragedy. Religion in Arunachal Pradesh as elsewhere is closely associated with social ethics that unites the tribe in its discipline and promotes virtues like generosity, hospitality, truth, kindness and devotion to work. Finally, their religion gives them the power to reconcile themselves to the frequent emergencies of life.

Arunachal Pradesh is one of the few remaining places on the earth where indigenous faiths are still a living system. In most other places, tribal religions have either been drastically modified or abandoned all together owing to conversion to other faiths. In many such places, the people are only now trying to rediscover the inner essence of traditional religion. In Arunachal Pradesh

traditional faiths are not curiosities of a bygone era. Traditional customs and rituals constitute vibrant system here and attempts should be made by the people to preserve and propagate the unique elements of culture and belief system.

The Noctes have developed a supernatural world to brighten the stark realities of life. They believe in a world of good and evil spirits hovering in the air about them and on the earth below and long to appease annuity or enlist the aid of these secret powers by sacrifice. It is pertinent to refer the European officers on whose reports we have to depend mainly for our information on the northeast frontier during the British regime have not left any favourable account of the religious practices of the tribal people. Verrier Elwin also observes "in no field are our old records more imperfect in than that of religion".⁶ The general attitude of the European writers towards the tribal religion is that the tribes did not have any religion at all, or it was a mixture of all the various idolatries and superstitions. However, an in-depth and careful study at the grass root level of the religious practices of the tribal people show that in building the spiritual world the people of Arunachal Pradesh have been influenced by the religious practices of their neighbours and have adapted some of their practices or beliefs to their requirements.

All religions whether primitive or modern are based on certain beliefs and rituals. Similarly, the Nocte religion is also based on certain beliefs and rituals. They believe in the existence of a higher supernatural being, whom they call *Jauban*, *Jongban* or *Tesong*. He dwells in the earth, and is the cause of all happenings in their life. He has dual character, both good and bad. The first form brings happiness and prosperity and the other brings sorrow and miseries. These two aspects are known as *Kat Jauban* and *Wang Jauban*. A variation of this idea is found in some villages of Tirap district, where they say, that there are two *Jaubans*, one that dwells in the sky, called *Rang Jauban* and the other who lives in the earth – *Ha Jauban* or *Jongbandong*⁷ who protects the village.

In Nocte society the spiritual beliefs and practices dominate the entire lifestyle of the people. The Noctes of this region realises that there is a superior power, which dominates the society, which is beyond the control of man to direct human life and the course of nature. The overall such beliefs, faiths, uses and practice are

relating to and emanating from the superior power constitutes the structure of Noctes belief system. Thus, the Noctes being basically accustomed the nature worshipping and leading animistic spiritual life, lived in age-old isolation in the northeastern most corner the country till around the end of the 19th century.

The Noctes of Tirap believe in *Rangsom* literary meaning of *Rang* is sky and *Som* means pray or worship of *Rang* -the God. In Nocte society it is believed that there is a supreme power –*Rang – Jouban* (God) in the sky. The power of *Rang – Jouban* is manifested in the form of good or bad, which affects the human being. The *Rang – Jouban* is watching all the activities of any person constantly. Happiness and prosperity could only be achieved with the blessing of *Rang – Jouban* and misfortune may occur owing to the curse of the *Rang* these are the beliefs of the Noctes. Therefore, all should try to attain the blessings of the *Rang*. All the rituals and ceremonies are therefore, performed in the name of the *Rang*, which is also called as *Rangsom*. It can also be said that *Rangsom* is the faith and culture of the Noctes living in Tirap, Arunachal Pradesh. The following are generally uttered while performing the *Rangsom*: -

*"Rang O' Kathakrang
Bangkang Nocte, Lakhe midurak, apangba
Remin, ahang ba remin,
Rinron-basa, khopa-pasa dang thukmin, toufok
Shafok santhukmin".*

*Substance
(O' Rang, the almighty,
Protect the ignorance, the Nocte, do inspire,
And bless for a long happy, prosperous life.)*

Unlike, the Aryan system of elaborate celebrations the Nocte in their conventional belief system has simplistic rituals to observe. Most of the rituals are performed with articles of daily use. Needless to mention the rice beer (*Khams*), beating of log drums and youth dormitory (*Pang*), are the essential and important features of life and beliefs of the Noctes.

Local wine (*Kham*) prepared by the Noctes is invariably used for *Rangsom* rituals by the Noctes. It is taken as a pure and essential element apart from using the same as a drink. The rice wine (*jumin*)

is also used for *Rangtam*, a traditional custom of dropping a few drops of drink on the surface, uttering the words of blessing or remembering the Almighty *Rang*. Particularly the elder members of Nocte family never used to take the drinks without doing the *Rangtam*. Using the *Jumin* or *Kham* is must for all types of the socio-religious functions in the Nocte society. However, excessive drinking or to be alcoholic is considered unethical and bad in the society. Apart from the *kham* or *jumin* fowl, pig or goat may be sacrificed in *Rangsom* or *Joubansom*, on that occasion a feast is also arranged. This is important to mention here that the animal has religious significance and has intimate relation with socio-cultural life of the people. A community *Joubansom* is performed by the villagers in a particular place, earmarked, towards the east or west of the village, called *Rangsomthin* or *Joubansomthin*, every year. The village priest, *Nongwa*, performs the ritual or by an elder selected through '*Tansok*', traditional method of deciding religious matters. On the day of performing a village *Rangsom* or *Joubansom*, a day of taboo is observed in the village. The villagers remain confined in the village and no outsider is allowed to enter in the village till the next day or until the period of taboo is over. The *Joubansom* is performed to get rid of the evils and to invoke the God for peace and happiness in the society or in the village. The method of observing ritual may vary from village to village, but the entire Noctes of Tirap district performs the *Rangsom* invariably.

Apart from the *Joubansom*, particularly the people of Namsang and few others have the system of performing ritual called, *Kanhuan*. It is a family ritual being performed annually at the dawn of the monsoon season, to remember the forefathers and seek the blessing of the Almighty God for the well being of the family. A few elders in odd number i.e. 3, 5, 7, 9 etc. are invited on the occasion. The male head of the family would place some coins, betel nut in a *ko-patta* (local big leaf) in front of the elders and kneels down with folded hands. The priest called, *Hattula* would then utter the words of invoking God, *Rang*, for blessing and well being of the family; other members too can join with the priest in blessing the family. The invoking is repeated thrice. The coins and betel-nut are then removed and given to the priest who would deposit the coins in the *Rangsom Hum* (worship place of the Noctes). At the end of the ritual, the elders are served with rice, meat and (*Kham*) local wine.

The Noctes settled in this area had good living contact with Myanmar on the one side and Assam on the other. The close connection, which the Noctes had with the people of the plains from the ancient days, has also been reflected in one of their myths recorded by Verrier Elwin: "The Noctes and the Assamese were born of the same parents, but as time went by they forgot this."¹⁰

In the hills Noctes have had their trade relation with the people of Assam and Myanmar because they used to prepare salt and it has already proved from the records of 1841 in which it appears that the Noctes living near Namsang, Borduria, Paniduria, Pullong, Khela etc. dependent chiefly by manufacturing salt which they retained to the people of the plains and neighbouring villages of Noctes and Wanchos. In the hills there were salt springs. One day three Noctes were collecting salt near a river and they filled a boat with it. They had no oars and when the boat was full they let it drift down the river to the plains. There the people drew it to the bank and the Noctes gave them salt which they were very glad to have. In return they gave the Noctes red, blue and yellow cloth and they became friends. The Assamese asked the Noctes to come to the plains whenever they needed anything. But as a result of the Noctes giving salt to the people of the plains, the latter gained possessions of all the salt in the area, and now the Noctes, whom it once belonged, have to go and buy it from them.

The above myth throws light on the process of mythmaking as it goes in the mind of a simple people. Incidentally, it can be mentioned that extraction of salt from several springs located in the Nocte areas used to be an indigenous industry with them. It has also been proved through sincere observance of the fact that the Noctes settled in this area had good living contact with Assam on the one side and Myanmar on the other. The exposure through trade resulted into religious, cultural and political link of the Noctes with Assam and Myanmar. However, some of the origin myths of the Noctes suggest their common origin with Myanmar. The salt wells of the Noctes and its paucity in the region have kept the Noctes at the driving seat so far as their trade dominance in the region was concerned.¹¹

The common origin myths of the Assamese and the Noctes and a living and long trade contact between the two have gradually

resulted into the socio-cultural and religious bond too. Here the indigenous faith of the people of Tirap owes its origin to animistic beliefs that is in perfect harmony with the Vaishnavite philosophy and overall nature worship. This made the job of the missionaries easy in the area to influence the Noctes. Though, the Noctes became the followers of Vaishnavism, while the Wanchos of Tirap follow their own tribal religion.¹² But now a days most of the Wanchos have adopted Christianity. The people who have been influenced by the religion of their neighbours have also built temples or sanctuaries like their neighbours. Hence, various Namghars can easily be found in Namsang, Mopaya and some other villages of Tirap district. It is also imperative to mention that some tribal people of Deomali Sub-Division are also worshipping the Lord Shiva for his blessings. This is evident from the fact that some Noctes of Deomali used to go to Lord Shiva temple at Deomali and the people of Mopaya village also the followers of Hinduism because they are worshipping Lord Shiva in their village and for that purpose a temple is constructed which is decorated with the image of Lord Shiva.¹³

Besides, following their traditional beliefs and practices the Noctes have not adopted Vaishnavism in the classical form of Shrimata Shankar Dev, who was the father of this movement had introduced this cult to the people of Assam but in the later part of the Ahom period his cult suffered setback as it could not take common masses into its fold. The Vaishnavism, which influenced the Noctes of Arunachal Pradesh, was affiliated to the *Shree Shree Chaliha Bareghar Satra* (Vaishnavite monastery) of Nazira,¹⁴ in Sibsagar district of Assam. The Nocte chief Khunbao, also known as Lotha Khunbao, the ancestor of the present chief's families of Namsang, Borduria and Laptang, was the first to adopt this religion, when Shri Ram Dev Ata was the *Adhikar* (Abbot) of the Satra. The Satra at that time was at a place called Merbil (near by Tirap) some eight miles east of Naharkatiya in the Dibrugarh district of Assam. Khunbao came to be known as *Naga Narottam* (best among men) after adopting Vaishnavism. Initially Khunbao was followed by large number of his tribesmen. Subsequently, the people of other villages also became the disciples of the Satra.

After 1953 a representative of the Satra called Mahanta, has started visiting the Nocte villages regularly to maintain close contact

between the disciples and the Satra. It is also said that after adoption of Vaishnavism the Noctes started cropping their hair in *Satriya style*, as a sign of adoption of Vaishnavism since the days of *Naga Narottam*.

It is also said that Norottam was a very learned man and had great faith on his *Guru*. He used to visit the Satra very frequently with his subject and had religious discourses with Shri Ram Dev. He helped his Guru in spreading the religion among another Noctes on whose name Narottam Nagar where the Ramakrishna Mission School, Narottam Cooperative Industries and Narottam Play wood factory etc. can easily be found in Deomali. Here came the role of several indigenous socio-cultural organizations like the Ram Krishna Mission Ashram, Swami Vivekananda Kendra, Ram Krishna Sarda Mission, Shankar Mission, Don Bosco Mission etc. that spread the cult of Vedanta, Vaishnavism, or Christianity in the region. Arunachal Pradesh is one of the few remaining places on the earth where indigenous faiths are still a living system.

The transition in the socio-cultural perspective of life during these days, migration of the people and subsequent cultural isolation within and outside the community, exposure and response syndrome and the external forces are also influencing not only the religious history in general but also social history in particular. During pre-1996 period, when forest-based industries were functioning well, large number of labourers, technicians and officers from all over India were working in this region. Their long stay and consequent assimilations with the people of the region has also greatly influenced the religious history of the Noctes. The growing horticulture and tea-plantation activities are also attracting large number of labourers from outside. Here comes into analysis the aspect of the history of the marginal in the society. Though not a professional historian but being a social scientist it is also my prime duty to describe their life and condition, religious history is also part of the same.

The above discussion throws light on the fact that the notions of time are believed to influence both values and beliefs of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Religious beliefs, culture and values are important components of the cognitive and evaluative orientations of a tribe. These significantly contribute to the making of the views

of the tribes. But the religious diversity is a notable problem of Arunachal Pradesh. The tribal custom, beliefs and faiths are playing important role in the socio-cultural development of the tribes. Some of them are used to mark the separate identity of a tribe or sub-tribe. Here, in the study of the religious beliefs of the Noctes we also came across the fact that they have many religious groups and there are various other factors of social norms under current and time bound circumstances, which affect the religious continuity of the people and even some of their traditions.

Conclusion

The people of Tirap have visualized the ominous portents that owing to rapid upsurge of non-indigenous faiths, beliefs and ways of life, they might eventually be turned into a hot bad of internecine strife and conflict. However, the State after its long isolation does not seem to have been adequately considered in these regards. It will be futile to deny that recent tranquility is partly the result of the fact that the people of this region have been left to themselves to endure their fate in silence. The Noctes' age-old religious beliefs and practices well fitted into their life patterns, while outlandish religious behaviours stand in contrast with the age-old traditions. The people of Tirap now have come to realize the importance of their own religious ways and behavioural patterns that could well sustain their life and thinking process. Conversion is rampant among the people besides the growing awareness for indigenous faith and culture among the elites and intelligentsia. Moreover, the indigenous religion in Tirap brings inspiration, hope and courage to the people in socio-cultural and religious life.

Thus, on the basis of the above discussion, it is important to mention that the religious life of the Noctes has assimilated new elements to it. The roles of political power and influencing forces have also been quite significant in this regard too. Sometimes strong bond has also been witnessed between the religious life and the polity formations in the society. Though, social scientists of India have not paid much of their attention in the researches towards a dominant mode of social formation: - the concept of the "Theatre-State" widely current in South-East Asia. The religious history of the Noctes has some elements and features, which suggest further probe in this direction. Finally, I would like to make the point that,

while the creation myths of Arunachal tribes have a ring of universality and are comparable to other less developed and comparatively advanced people, the ritualistic pattern of their religion is directly connected with the ethnography of their socio-economic and ecological situation. It is also important to point out here that new Nocte elites are now-a-days fascinated to preserve the traditional rites and rituals of their religion which is a very encouraging aspect for researchers who want to reconstruct the past without any prejudices.

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Impact of Shrimanta Sankardeva's Neo-vaishnavite Movement on the Tribes of North-East India: A Case Study of the East Arunachal Pradesh

Narayan Singh Rao

Tirap and Changlang districts of Arunachal Pradesh, the abode of Tangsa, Tutsa, Singpho, Khamti, Ncote, Wancho, Lisu and a host of other tribal communities, are located at the easternmost corner of India. This area is situated in an arch like south-eastern and south-western tract of Arunachal Pradesh. It is bounded on the north by plains of Assam and Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh, on the south and east by Myanmar (Burma) and on the west by Sibsagar and Dibrugarh districts of Assam and Mon district of Nagaland. The entire tract is on the south of Brahmaputra situated between the latitude 27°40'N and longitude 95°11'E and 97°10'E.¹

The area of these two districts is referred in Pauranic literature as part of the Lohitya Pradesh, ruled by Raja Bhagadutta of Pragiyotishpur.² This part of Arunachal has been also referred by Tai-shan chronicles as Sri Lohit and Mong-Kula whereas some scholars consider it as a part of Kirata Pradesh ruled over by Kirata Kshatriyas.³

The district is largely in the great Patkai mountain range with an altitude of 200-2000 metres (from msl.). Annual rainfall is above 2000 mm and temperature varies between 8-6°C to 31°C. The water shade of Patkai hills demarcates international boundary between India and Myanmar.⁴ Numerous passes (*duars*) and strategic highways are located in this region. This has considerably enhanced the geo-political and strategic importance of the area. Patkai pass also referred as Pangsao Pass (which links India⁵ and Burma) and other *duars* have contributed significantly towards expansion of Indian culture and civilization in Southeast Asia and Hindu, Buddhist, Jaina Monks and Missionaries travelled in eastern world through these passes (*duars*). These *duars* also helped in promotion of trade and commerce between India and Southeast Asia.⁶ It is said that the civilizations of Aztec, Mayan, Inca etc. in North and south America were developed by Indians who moved to east, and reached upto Siberia, Australia, Japan, Mexico, South America and North America.⁷ In medieval period Tai-shans referred as Tai-phake, Tai-Ahom, Tai-Turong, Khamti, Singpho, migrated to India via Patkai Pass.⁸ The Tangsa, **Nocte**, Tutsa, and several other groups who are now inhabitants of Tirap and changlang districts also came to India from east via Patkai hills.⁹ Scholars are of the opinion that Kiratas i.e., Bodos, Chutiyas, Kacharies, Chins, Cinas, Maha-Cinas and other categories of Kshatriyas also came to India via Patkai hills.¹⁰ Ahom Prince Hso-Ka-Hpa, who laid foundation of Ahom Kingdom in 1228, originally belonged to Burma. He entered India via Patkai Pass and lived for several months in Tirap valley and Patkai hills. Tirap valley is the junction of three great civilizations of the world, flourished on the banks of Brahmaputra of India, Irrawaddy river valley of Burma, Yang-tse-Kiang and Howang-Ho or Yellow rivers of China.¹¹ Hinduism, Buddhism Tantricism flourished in this area in olden times. The Kamrupa rulers who controlled the area from Bengal to south China, exercised a kind of loose political control over the area. Ahoms and Britishers also followed the same policy and local chiefs were allowed to remain autonomous as far as internal affairs were concerned. Thus the area of present East Arunachal Pradesh played a vital role in the history of North Eastern India. This area also remained a part and parcel of Indian socio-cultural and political mainstream. The Political, socio-cultural and religious upheavals

domain. To him a *Chandala* who remembered God Vishnu with heart and soul is superior to a Brahmin observing religious vows. He enlisted followers from all walks of life. To stabilize the new system he introduced the institution of *namghar* (Congregational Prayer hall) where community prayers, discourses of Lord Vishnu, and *Kirtana* were held on regular basis. The religious and philosophical ideas of Sankardeva came to be known as *Mahapurushiya Dharma* or *ek saran-nama-dharma*. Sankardeva and his disciples preached and practised monotheism, though he also recognized the existence of lesser gods/goddesses, but he considered them as offshoots or partial manifestation of Supreme God Narayana who incarnated himself as Gopala, Krishna in all his glory.¹⁵

Impact of Vaishnavism on Arunachal Pradesh

The neo-vaishnavism of Shrimant Shankardeva attracted large number of people in the territories of Northeast Bharat. After Shankardeva's death in 1568 A.D., Madhavdeva took the responsibility of propagating *mahapurushiya dharma* in different part of the country. Madhavdeva the illustrious disciple of Shankardeva, deputed Gopaldeva of Bhawanipur to Upper Assam who established twelve Satras, six presided over by the Shudra Mahantas and six by Brahmin Mahantas. These Satras formed Kala Samhati (group of Satras). Gopaldeva preached *Mahapurushiya dharma* among tribal communities of upper Assam such as Maran, Barahi, Chutiya, Kachari, Ahom, Tangsa, Nocte, etc. he modified certain practices in view of tribal cultural, ethos and their behaviour so as to make neo-vaishnavism more humanitarian and egalitarian for accommodating tribal population in the *Mahapurushiya Dharma* fold. Due to these changes *Mahapurushiya Dharma* started spreading among the tribes of Upper Assam and its impact was also noticed in Arunachal Pradesh. Aniruddhadeva who founded *Satra* at Balikuchi and came into contact with Nyishis, a section of them accepted Vaishnava faith. Political consciousness grew among Nyishis when they established links with Aniruddhadeva, Harihar Tanti and Thophai who were engaged in spreading vaishnavism on the northern bank of Brahmaputra. Similar contribution was made by *Satra* at Nahar-Ati and Majuli. Aniruddhadeva also stayed at Tengapani on the

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bank of Buri Dihing and a satra was built by him in the area. From here he was offering initiation to the tribal people of east Arunachal Pradesh. These tribes were Tangsas, Tutsas, **Nocte**, Phakial, Singpho, Khamti, etc. The Moamaria rebel who fought against the Ahom government, organized a series of rebellions between 1769 to 1805 were also the disciples of Mayamara Satra. These rebels effected military alliances with Daflas (Nyishis), Dafla-bhatiyas, Singpho, Khamti, Mishmi and other tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Due to interaction with the Moamarias the tribal leaders and their followers might have been also influenced by the *mahapurushiya dharma* of Shankardeva.¹⁶ The establishment of Matak kingdom at Bengmara (Tinsukia) which is located in close proximity of the area held by Tangsa, Tutsa, and the **Nocte** tribes, opened avenues for interaction between neo-vaishnavite leaders and the tribes of east Arunachal Pradesh. During those days Tikhaks, Jungkuk, Longchang, Jugli, Tai-phake, Singpho and even Khamtis were living in the area of newly established Matak Rajya. Thus the people belonging to these tribes were greatly influenced by *mahapurushiya dharma*. The interactions and contacts established between the tribal communities and the Satra or Moamariya leaders contributed significantly towards the growth of political and religious consciousness among the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh.¹⁷ The concept of Rang-Nam, Rangiya, and belief in one supreme being among the Tangsas Tutsas and other tribes of Changlang testifies to the fact that they were greatly influenced by neo-vaishnavite movement and *ek-sarna-nama-dharma* of Shrimant Shandardeva.

Neo-Vaishnavism in East Arunachal Pradesh

The *Mahapurushiya dharma* and teachings of Shrimant Shankardeva did not remain confined to Assam, but also penetrated into the Patkai hills and Tirap valley in the medieval period. The Noctes who constitute a major tribe of Tirap valley got highly influenced by the religion and philosophy of Shrimant Shankardeva, and adopted Vaishnavism as their own religion. The **Nocte** chiefs of Namsang, Bordoria and Laptang and their other political leaders played a vital role in propagation of the neo-vaishnavite religion in their community. The history of the growth of neo-vaishnavism in Tirap valley can be traced from 16th and 17th century A.D. It is testified by contemporary records that Latha Khunbao, the Raja of

heaven somewhere in east, and came to Hukong valley (Burma) and again proceeded in west where they met a Brahmin at Malithan. The Brahmin (*satradhikar*) appointed elder brother as Raja in plains and younger one became Raja of hills, which are referred as Deogiri (*Patkai*) hills in the Vaishnava literature. The younger brother moved to Brangting, and next at Sajuktong. From here he filled a bamboo with salt dispatched it through water towards the plains and, it reached to Merbil. The Gosain picked it up and reciprocated by sending a bamboo tube filled with gold, towards Sajuktong through river Satjo upstream. The younger brother who was raja of hills received it. Subsequently he came down to meet Gosain at Merbil through Satjo river and became the disciple of Gosain by getting initiated into *mahapurushiya dharma*. The Satra at Merbil is the present Bureghar Satra of Nazira. The younger brother was the Nocte chief Latha Khunbao, hereafter referred as Narottama. It is said that the elder brother who was appointed as Raja of plains was the Ahom Raja. Later on younger brother got married with a girl of Longthan village. She gave birth to two sons, the elder one became Raja of Borduarua and younger one was appointed as Raja of Namsang.²¹

According to another tradition the three brothers were the princes of the king of Hukong valley. They went out in search of salt in the northwest, reached at Barengting which was controlled by Punthung and Sangniyak tribes, who were also referred as Mokrogia. They left Barengting after sometime and arrived at, Sajuktong, and next to Laptang, controlled by Nangyang. Later on one of them became chief of Bordoria. These three brothers are mentioned as Khunlung, Khunlai and Khunbao. The present chiefs of Namsang Borduria and Laptang are the descendents of Khunbao, who later on adopted *mahapurushiya dharma* of Shankardeva and became disciple of Shri Ram Deva Ata of Bareghar Satra. There is another story which refers that long, long ago, a prince called Khunbao came from Hukong valley. He possessed supernatural powers, and was also a magician of high caliber, capable curing all type of ailments. Thus his divine personality attracted people of Nocte village and he got elected as Raja of Bareng. His popularity grew rapidly as he taught people how to make salt. He got married to a girl of Hkun village and settled in Laptang as Raja. Subsequently he came to Ninu and again travelled to villages called

Khamua, Nianu and introduced himself as Mohongi Raja (ruler of salt producing areas). He went in the court of Ahom Raja via Banfera village. The Ahom Raja at Grahgaon recognized him as king of **Nocte** hills. He also had three sons who succeeded him as Lovang (Raja) of Borduria, Namsang, and Laptang. The *Charit Ponthi* of Shri Ramdeva of Bareghar Satra Nazira gives details of the history of the ruling houses of Bordoria, Namsang and Laptang.²²

Maheshwar Neog opines that Shri Ram Deva, and his disciple Latha Kunbao were born on the same day in Saka 1587. Shri Ramdeva lived for eighty years and became *satradhikar* in 1621 (Saka) and died in 1667 (Saka). The **Nocte** Raja Latha Khunbao adopted *mahapurushiya dharma* between 1621 to 1667 Saka. Shri Sudarshan son of Shri Ramdeva established Bali Satra at Klenduguri, two miles east of Aghunibari where at present there exists a *than* (religious structure) only. Shri Ramdeva met **Nocte** chief in this *satra*. In order to glorify the *guru* and *shishya* stories were circulated that Shri Ramdeva is the incarnation of Lord Krishna where as his disciple Latha Khunbao was Arjuna in his previous birth. One day Latha Khunbao was remained through a dream by god about his past and his relationship with Krishna. Khubbao came down from hills of Deogiri (**Nocte** hills), through Dihing river with his followers and begged *Sarna* from *Satradhikar* (shri Ramdeva). But he was told that *mahapurushiya dharma* do not enroll a Raja as it's disciple. For a king it is difficult to adhere to the path of *mahapurushiya dharma*, and even the Koch Raja Nar Narayan was denied entry into the Satra with the status of a *Shishya* by Shrimant Shandardeva.

At this Latha Khunbao got disappointed and wanted to commit suicide. However, Shri Ramadeva wanted to test the level of Latha Khunbao's devotion in his heart and mind towards him and also to Vishnu. At this time in the *Satra*, *Shishyas* were staging *Narshingha Yatra* and *Kalidaman* play. Shri Ramdeva disguised himself as drummer to hide his identity. He had put on a very dirty dress, started dancing and playing drum with seven other drummers. But **Nocte** Khunbao (Raja) easily identified him and recognized his beloved *guru* even when it was difficult to ascertain his identity. Thus **Nocte** chief qualified in this test and earned the status of the *Shishya* of Shri Ramadeva, though he continued to

and he easily collected them and returned back to *Satra*. Later on *Nocte* chief was enrolled as disciple of *Satra* along with his subject.²⁵

Nocte Khunbao (Narottama) was a highly learned and saintly person. His intellectual caliber and scholarship is testified by contemporary *Satra* literature. Narottama frequently visited *Nocte* villages, and Bareghar *Satra* of Shri Ramdeva. He also attended discourses and lectures on *mahapurushiya dharma*, delivered by Shri Ramadeva. To improve road communication between Deogiri (*Nocte*) hills and Bareghar *Satra* he got constructed a road which linked hills and the plains. Annually he used to pay visit to his preceptor at *Satra* and pay his tribute and homage to his *guru*. Narottama played a vital role in spreading the philosophy and teachings of Shankardeva among the tribes of east Arunachal Pradesh. The *Charit Pauthi* (biography) of Shri Ramdeva and *Nocte* tradition inform us that Latha and became Raja with headquarter at Sajoukting near Lapthang village. He survived for 115 years. Though there are differences of opinion about the exact date of birth of the Lord Narottama, but it is a fact of history that he was accepted as disciple by Shri Ramadeva who initiated him into *mahapurushiya dharma*. He was the first neo-vaishnavite leader among the tribes of east Arunachal Pradesh who attained to the status of a saint, and a divine personality to such an extent that his tribesmen followed him in letter and the spirit and, Vaishnavism secured a foothold in the Tirap valley. Everyday spiritual and divine thoughts and the ideas of Shri Ramadeva and Shri Bhagwan Narottama are recollected by people in *Nocte* villages. It is said that once there was drought and famine in *Nocte* hills which caused scarcity of water. Shri Ramdeva came to know about it at Joypur on his way to Sadiya. *Nocte* people who came down from Deogiri hills met their *guru* and narrated that how they were suffering from the drought, famine and scarcity of water problem Shri Ramadeva became concerned about his Shishya in the hills and decided to use his supernatural powers to solve the drinking water problem. He took out one of his silver slipper (gifted by Ahom Raja Rudra Singha) and threw it towards the Deogiri hills (*Nocte* hills). The silver slipper penetrated into the hills by creating a hole on the rocky mountain. From this hole water started pouring out and it became a permanent course of drinking water for the people. This water spring came to be known as Narottam Kund. *Noctes*,

even today believe that the slipper thrown by Shri Ramdeva is still there. One can even see it if he is a true devotee of the *mahapurushiya dharma* of Shankardeva.²⁶

Latha Khunbao was also a great intellectual, poet, and writer of the age. He wrote a book entitled '*Bhakti Premavali*'. The manuscript of this is available in Chaliha Bareghar Satra under the custody of *Satradhikar*, which was procured by the Satra from chief of Namsang. Today it is an important volume in Satra library. Thus because of the contributions made by Lord Narottama, the *Mahapurushiya dharma* was accepted by the Nocte community in different villages of the area. Vaishnavism also influenced the socio-cultural and religious life of the Tangsas, Tutsas and other tribes of the area. Though Britishers created a gulf between the Satra and the Nocte people, but in 1953 age old fraternal ties were once again revived and Nocte disciples again started visiting Satra. In 1956 there was a conference of the Nocte representatives held in Bareghar satra presided over by the *Satradhikar*, to find out ways and means to strengthen the age old contacts between Satra and the Nocte people. A plot of land was donated by members of the Satra to construct a guest house for Nocte disciples so that they can visit Satra, participate in *Kirtan* and religious discourses etc. This was also aimed at organizing regular training programme for the Nocte disciples in *namkirtan* for management and running of *namghars* (prayer hall) in Nocte villages. Subsequently *namghars* were constructed in Nocte villages of Khonsa, Bordoria, Laptang and Namsang. The *Satradhikars* frequently visited Nocte villages, performed *bhawana* (play) of *Rama Vijaya*, *Kal Kunj Bodh Khotasur Bodh*, *Laba Kusar Yudha*, *Khudrakar Yudha*, *Yatra* and *Dimba Kunj bodh* on regular basis in *namghars* of Namsang, Bordoria, Khonsa, and Laptang. Nocte disciples of Shri Ramadeva of Bareghar satra are continuing the religious activities in *namghars* and *mahapurushiya dharma* is surviving among the Noctes.²⁷

Thus Bareghar satra Nazira contributed significantly towards the growth of socio-cultural and religious consciousness among the tribes of East Arunachal Pradesh. Number of disciples of the *Mayamara Satra* of Majuli also migrated to Nocte hills, mingled with tribal communities and got assimilated with the people there. Bareghar satra succeeded in creating a religious leader of high rank in person of Narottama among the Noctes. This rendered neo-

recite 'Hai Ram'. The Tutsas also recite the name of Lord Rang-Kho-Thak-Rang. The Tutsas also worship God Tongjong (Shiva) and Parvati in the form of male and female organs. Tongjong is benevolent deity and its idol is offered ceremonial prayers annually for the well-being of the Tutsas.²⁰

The tribes of Tirap valley also interacted with neo-Vaishnavite leaders during the period of Moamariya rebellion. The rebellious moamariyas entered into Tangsa, Tutsa, Nocte villages and lived there. These tribes were highly influenced by Satras of Dihing, Majuli, Tengapani and Bengmara. The disciples of these satras lived with tribes of Tirap valley by taking shelter so as to escape from Ahom army and hence they propagated their religious ideas in the hills. The Matak kingdom founded by Bharat Singha and consolidated by Sarbanda Singha in the last part of 18th century also played a vital role in spreading the teachings and philosophy of Shankardeva. During those days the Tikhak, Longchang, Jugli, Ronrang and other Tangsa clans had their villages in the territory of Matak Rajaya, comprising modern districts of Tinsukia, Dibrugarh and Sibsagar. The study on religion and culture of Tangsa, Tutsa and Nocte tribes show that their religion also contains the elements of neo-vaishnavism or *mahapurushiya dharma* of Shrimant Shankardeva. The tribes of east Arunachal Pradesh strictly adhere to the philosophy of *ek-sarna-nama-dharma* or *ekesh-warvad*. They by and large believe in a supreme being Rang-Frah, also referred as Rang-kho-thak-rang, Rangwa, Rongte, Rang-Anam etc. The Lord Rang-Frah is omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent and omni directional. Nothing prevails but will of Lord Rang-Frah, who is eternal, all pervading, all knowing, and all powerful. Thus in view of the position of Rang-Frah in the Tangsa pantheon, the Lord of Tangsas, Tutsas, Noctes etc. is synonymous to Vishnu, Hari, Nar-Narayan or Krishna. Just like the Vaishnavites, the tribes of east Arunachal Pradesh do not offer ritual worship to the supreme God Rang-Frah or Rang-Kho-Thak-Rang. They believed in mere recitation of prayer and name of god, and adhering to the path of truth righteousness and honesty with strong devotion. One can reach to god and secure liberation from the vicious cycle of birth and rebirth. Thus devotion to Lord Frah is the medium of attaining salvation and securing access to God. The tribal society in east Arunachal Pradesh is free from social