

Unveiling the past: Exploring Social and religious practices of early North-Eastern India and their interactions with Vedic Religion

Sima Baruah

Assistant Professor

Department of Philosophy, Cotton University, Guwahati

ABSTRACT

North-East India is noted for its diverse tribal cultures, which possess a rich tapestry of animistic traditions firmly based on the worship of nature and ancestral spirits. These Indigenous practices were adaptable and distinct, demonstrating syncretism in their interaction with Vedic religion, which began to influence the region in the early medieval period. It also gives insights into the historical backdrop of North-East India, demonstrating how religious and social traditions have changed over time. It contributes to a better understanding of how different societies interacted and influenced one another in ancient times. The paper focuses on the diversity of religious practices in ancient India. Studies indicate that Vedic religion was not uniform throughout the subcontinent but rather varied in response to local contexts and interactions with indigenous cultures. The findings of the studies on social and religious practices in early North-Eastern India in comparison to Vedic religion indicate that the essence of numerous religious practices in the North-Eastern states, including the worship of nature spirits, ancestral spirits, and sacred animals, shares similarities to the essence of Vedic rituals, but the rituals of the Vedas contain a deeper meaning.

Keywords: Northeast India, Religious Practices, Social Practices, Seven Sisters, Vedic Religion

INTRODUCTION

North-Eastern India, nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas, presents a unique case study of the development of early societies. Separated from the Gangetic plains by geographical barriers, the region witnessed a distinct cultural trajectory compared to the rest of the Indian subcontinent. North-East comprises eight states- Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim. These states are together known as eight siblings and referred to as 'eight sisters' or 'seven sisters and one brother'. The states have distinct cultures and multiple ethnic groups and are a fine example of unity in diversity. The variety of ethnic groups, languages, and religions reflect the multi-cultural character of the states. The region houses over 200 of the 635 tribal groups (Uppal, 2017) in the country. Tribals predominantly inhabit states like Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland with a certain degree of diversity among the tribes. States such as Assam, Manipur, Tripura, and Sikkim are inhabited by people of various religious denominations like Hindus, Christians, and Muslims, as well as a combination of local tribes and communities each having their own social and religious practices.

Social and religious practices constitute foundational elements of human culture, shaping identities, communities, and belief systems across civilizations. Ancient civilizations developed intricate systems of belief and ritual to organize communal life. These rituals often involve symbolic acts that reinforce religious

doctrines and connect individuals to transcendent realities. Cultural practices such as festivals, rites of passage, and communal gatherings reinforce social bonds and solidarity within communities, fostering a sense of belonging and shared purpose. They provide explanations for existential questions and moral guidelines for ethical behaviour within social frameworks.

Vedas are the storehouse of all social and religious practices to be followed by man. Vedic religion, rooted in the ancient scriptures known as the Vedas, represents a foundational aspect of early Indian civilization and religious thought. Vedic religion emerged in the North-western region of the Indian subcontinent during the second millennium BCE. It evolved from the religious practices of Indo-Aryan tribes who migrated into the region. Vedic rituals, prominently featuring sacrificial offerings (*yajna*), were central to religious practice. These rituals were conducted to maintain cosmic order (*ṛta*), propitiate deities, and ensure the well-being of the community. Alongside ritualistic practices, Vedic texts contain philosophical speculations and ethical teachings. The Upanishads, texts that emerged later in the Vedic period, explore concepts such as Brahman (the ultimate reality), Atman (the individual soul), and the pursuit of knowledge (*jnana*) as paths to spiritual liberation (*moksha*).

The cultural and religious landscape of early North-Eastern India presents a rich tapestry of indigenous traditions that interacted with and adapted to influences from Vedic religion during ancient times. However, it is often observed that there is a general lack of awareness about these states of North-East India among those living in other parts of the country. This hinders the inclusion of the people of the region in the mainstream of India and integration with the country. The North Eastern states deserve to be recognized for their historical and cultural uniqueness.

This study aims to delve into the social and religious practices of the region, examining their historical development and exploring the dynamic interactions with Vedic religious beliefs. By uncovering these interactions, this research seeks to address key questions:

1. What were the prevailing social structures, cultural practices, and religious beliefs among the indigenous peoples of early North-Eastern India before the advent of Vedic influences?
2. To what extent did indigenous traditions assimilate, adapt, or resist Vedic religious doctrines and practices?

By addressing these questions through a multidisciplinary approach encompassing historical analysis and comparative religious studies, this research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the complex interactions between social and religious practices in early North-Eastern India and their enduring significance in the broader context of Indian cultural history. It is essential to discuss key scholarly works in this regard.

Review of literature

The edited volume (Uppal, 2017) represents a significant scholarly contribution to the understanding of the sociocultural landscape of North East India. Central to the book are detailed ethnographic studies that

illuminate the diverse ethnic groups inhabiting the region. Indigenous tribes traditionally practiced animism and shamanism, worshipping natural elements and ancestral spirits. These practices were often characterized by rituals, dances, and sacrifices integral to their cultural identity (Baruah, 1999). For instance, the Naga tribes in Nagaland and the Meitei in Manipur exhibit unique cultural practices rooted in their historical context (Elwin, 1959). The Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo tribes of Meghalaya follow matrilineal systems, where lineage and inheritance are traced through women. This system has significant implications for gender roles and social organization (Gassah, 1998). Sacred groves, such as those maintained by the Khasi tribes, are preserved forest areas used for religious purposes, which convey deep ecological consciousness inherent in local religious practices (Elwin, 1959). Major festivals such as Bihu in Assam, the Hornbill Festival in Nagaland, and Losar in Sikkim serve as cultural celebrations that reinforce social cohesion and community identity. These festivals often include rituals linked to agriculture and nature (Barpujari, 1992).

The region exhibits syncretic practices where indigenous beliefs merge with major religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity. In states like Assam and Manipur, Hinduism has a significant presence, shaped by medieval migrations and the Bhakti movement. The Ahom dynasty in Assam played a pivotal role in integrating Hindu traditions with local customs (Barpujari, 1992). Tibetan Buddhism profoundly influenced Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, with monasteries like Tawang and Rumtek serving as important religious and cultural centers (Misra, 2013). British colonial rule introduced significant missionary activity, leading to widespread conversion among tribes in Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya. This shift has profoundly altered the region's religious landscape (Elwin, 1959). Post-independence, there have been numerous movements aimed at preserving indigenous identities, resulting in the establishment of autonomous councils and tribal bodies (Gassah, 1998).

Aurobindo's book (Aurobindo, 1995) stands as a seminal work in the exploration and interpretation of the ancient Vedic texts, offering profound insights into their philosophical, spiritual, and cultural significance. Aurobindo delves into the symbolic nature of Vedic hymns, interpreting them as allegories that convey profound metaphysical truths through poetic language.

Objectives

The research on North-East India and Vedic religion, however, is largely concerned with either the ritualistic practices of North-Eastern people or the religion and philosophy of the Vedas. A limited number of studies look at the influence of the Vedas on indigenous rituals and traditions. This paper is posited within that limited field to study, mainly focusing on the essence of Vedic religion and indigenous practices since there are hardly any studies that study the influence of Vedic religion in the context of North-East India.

METHODOLOGY

The primary methods are descriptive, narrative, and story-telling. As the combination of descriptive, narrative, and story-telling methodologies offers a robust framework for exploring the social and religious practices of early North-Eastern India. The methodology for the study involves a rigorous multidisciplinary

approach that integrates historical, anthropological, and textual analysis. The gap in written documents in some areas is merged by folklore. Storytelling serves as a means to convey knowledge, embracing the richness of indigenous traditions. Through these approaches, the study aims to provide a comprehensive exploration, prioritizing the perspectives embedded in the indigenous narrative tradition in the rest of the paper.

DISCUSSION

In this section, the Social and Religious Practices of Early North-Eastern India are discussed from a historical, anthropological, and textual point of view. Apart from this, its interaction with Vedic religious practices is also reported.

Social and Religious Practices of Early North-Eastern India

The social practices of the people from North-Eastern India reflect a rich tapestry of traditions, customs, and cultural norms that have evolved over centuries within diverse ethnic communities. In recent times, many diligent investigators in the fields of anthropology, history, and culture have found and gathered different facts about the religious rites, customs, activities, beliefs, sentiments, and aspirations of the people of North-East India. Dr. Galloway (Edward, 1924) divided religion into tribal, national, and universal religions. The basic features of tribal religion are that they are limited in number and small but very incorporating. Blood relationships are the main part of their social life, and we-feeling and community feeling are very strong in their social life. Their religious customs are all related to their food, sickness, birth, death, etc. By close and scientific observation of the minds and habits of the ancient people, the animistic theory was created to be the first theory of the origin of religion. Animism is a worldview where everything is seen as a person. According to them, religion means responding to the unseen power, soul, or spirits and trying to control destiny by worshipping, sacrificing, and praying. The primitive men attributed a kind of soul to every phenomenon of nature e.g., to trees, brooks, mountains, clouds, stones, stars. They thought that all these natural things also possess a life like his own. Religion arose from the animistic view of the world. People used religion as a tool or medium to establish a relationship with the spirits. Sir Herbert Risley described animism in India as "an essentially materialistic theory of things which seeks by means of magic to ward off or to forestall physical diseases, which looks no further than the world of sense and seeks to make that as tolerable as the conditions will permit" (Hodson, 1913, p. 521).

While studying the features of each of the North-Eastern states' religious traditions, we find supportive evidence for Risley's statement that animistic practices always have some end in view, which is necessary to lead a peaceful and happy life. Here we are going to discuss about such practices among various tribes of North-East India.

The tribes of Arunachal Pradesh have their traditional faith and beliefs. Animism is the most common religious practice in this land, where people worship the deities of nature and various spirits. The Akas are a major tribal category of Arunachal Pradesh. They lived in the Southeastern part of the east Kameng district of the state. The Aka society believes that gods, deities, and spirits rule over mankind. The

Aka people worship these supernatural powers and try to appease them by sacrificing mithuns, pigs, chickens, etc. Animism practices can also be seen among the Apatani tribes in marriage ceremonies. Both sides of the partner's family test the omen of chicken before the commencement of the marriage.

Traditional Naga animistic religions also believe in God, which makes them different from other animistic religions. According to Nshoga, "the traditional Naga religion or tribal belief is a multifaceted religion with the combination of theism, animism, supernaturalism, superstition, shamanism and lycanthropism." (Dey, 2018) Today, most of the Nagas are converted to Christianity. Although some beliefs are different from Christianity, but many customs of the traditional religion of the Nagas are like the Christian Nagas. To create something new, they merged with the new beliefs and traditions. Therefore, there is no such clear-cut difference between the so-called animists and the Christian Nagas. Both Christian and animist Nagas celebrate important traditional festivals, especially those connected to the agricultural cycle. (Luithui, 2001, p. 10)

Early Manipuris worshiped a supreme deity, 'Lainingthou Soralel', and followed their ancestors. 'Umang Lais', the ethnic deities, are worshipped in sacred groves. The Hindu population is concentrated in the Manipur valley. Christianity is the religion of most of the population in the hill districts, where it was introduced by the Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century. In the valley, there is also a section of Manipuri Muslims, known locally as 'Pangals' who belong to the Sunni sect.

Traditionally, like most of the tribes in India, the Mizos were animists. They believed that every big tree, hill, stone etc. were inhabited by various spirits and they were responsible for their illness, death, draughts, storms, bad crops or accidents. (Ghosh, 1994) The main objective of Mizo's traditional belief was to appease these spirits, without which they could not think of a happy and prosperous life. Thus, a priestly class was created to take care of these rituals and sacrifices. There were two types of priests, Puithiam and Sadant. Puithiam was responsible for traditional ceremonies and occupied an important position in Mizo society, without whose knowledge no religious ceremony could ever be performed. Sadant was associated with rituals and sacrifices, particularly those associated with appeasing evil spirits. Animal sacrifice was in practice among the Mizos. (Behera, 2014) Animism was practiced not only in the religious sphere but it was their way of life.

The Tiprasas are Animist. Matai katar is the supreme deity that is worshiped to secure prosperity and security. There are different kinds of rituals to be free from diseases. The Goddess of water, Toomima, is worshipped as a precautionary measure to get rid of attacks from pox, cholera, etc. As the disease is spread mostly through water, so, they worship the Goddess of the river not to contain the disease. People offer one he-goat or one buffalo as a sacrifice to worship the deity. They believed in witches and also believed that some illnesses were caused by witches, which could be cured by the worship of the Chhakal jook deity. Cooked meat of tortoise and pork is offered as an offering to the deity. The Chhakal jook is worshipped outside the village. When a child cries incessantly from severe pain or fever, the 'Burasal' deity is worshipped with two black fowls along with two eggs to cure the patient. (Das, 2019)

Meghalaya is home to three major tribes—Khasis, Pnars (Jaiñtias), and Achik (Garos). 'Khasi' is a generic term that includes Khyntiam, Pnar, Bhoi, War, Lyngngam and Diko people. 'Achik' is used for Garo people. Among the North-Eastern states of India, Meghalaya is the only state which practises matrilineal system, where the lineage is traced through the mother. Women have a privileged status, and the youngest daughter is the custodian of the ancestral property. However, the maternal uncle is the counsellor, who gives the final decision in all matters.

Before Christianity arrived in Meghalaya, most tribal peoples followed the Animist religion, with Ka niamtre and Songsarek traditions. Songsareks people are 'the ones who are obeying the deities' (mitde manigipa). (Maaker, 2007, p. 520) The Jaintia tribals believe that their religion is God-given and is not founded by man. In this respect, they resemble the believers of the Vedas who also believe that Vedas are apuruseya, which means not man-made. The Jaintia tribals believe in three cardinal principles dictated by God, which are kamai yei hok (signifying right living and practice-based right livelihood), tipbru tiplai (signifying fulfillment of duties toward fellow men to reach God), and tipkur tipkha (showing respect to the members of one's father's and mother's clans). Therefore, to attain God's realisation Niamtre stresses on equal weight to be given to fellow humans. Their philosophy also resembles the philosophy of Buddhism with respect to the right livelihood and Jainism with respect to giving equal importance to all.

Before the arrival of Tibetan immigrants, the Indigenous people of Sikkim, Lepchas, practiced 'Mun,' a shamanist/animist religion. The natural environment provides the basis for the animistic belief system of the Mun, which is a common basis for all animistic beliefs. Mount Kanchendzonga is considered a powerful guard of the state, and they offer gratitude to it through the celebration of the Phang labsol festival. Ancient Assam was a vast region that was quite bigger in size than the present Indian state of Assam. The population of Assam constitutes of a broad racial inter-mixture of people from different origins, such as Mongolian, Indo-Burmese, Indo-Iranian, and Aryan origin. The major tribes of Assam are- Bodo, Karbi, Mising, Sonowal Kacharis, Deori, Rabha, Dimasa, Tiwa, Tai-Phake, Singpho, Kuki, Khelma, Tea-Tribe. The tribes followed animism. Those tribes believed in fertility cults, headhunting, ancestor worship, magic, and worship of heavenly bodies or objects such as the sun, the moon, the rain, and the thunder. Along with the animistic practices one can observe ritual practices similar with the Vedas among the tribes of North-East India which is discussed below.

Interactions with Vedic religion

Such as the tribes of North-East India, Vedic Aryans also worshipped nature and its different manifestations as divine. However, the animistic practices are prevalent among the tribes much before the entry of Aryans and their Vedic religious beliefs. So, the animistic religion of the North-East region was not an influence of the Vedas what is today known as Hinduism.

Sir Herbert Risley said, "In Hinduism itself, there is a large amount of animism. It would be fruitless to attempt to distinguish the two streams of magical usage, the Vedic and the Animistic. The Vedas themselves are one source of the manifold Animistic practices, which may now be traced all through popular

Hinduism. Hinduism is animism more or less transformed by philosophy or magic tempered by metaphysics." (Hodson, 1913, p. 519)

However, Risley's statement cannot be accepted because, though the principal phenomena of the hymns of the Vedas are related to nature, the fact is that these sacred hymns are not mere descriptions of nature. The Brahmans claim that they are not and never have been mere sun-worshippers, fire-worshippers, or rain-worshippers, but sun, fire, and sky were only symbols to us of the Godhead, of one and the same Divine Being in His manifold manifestations. In the Brahmanas, the mantras, and likewise in the Upanisads, in the passages of the Niruktas and in other ancient works, in the Puranas, the historical legends, and in other Shastras, the idea is evident that there is a secret in the Veda. (Sastry, Rig-Bhashya Bhumika, 1952, p. 7) With the knowledge of the meaning of the symbol, what is hidden comes to light. Aurobindo also pointed out this point in his book 'Secret of the Vedas' that the natural things or animals, the names of which are uttered in the Vedas, are mere symbols of something divine. He stated that "the Vedas are replete with suggestions of secret doctrines and mystic philosophies. He looks upon the Gods of the hymns as symbols of psychological functions. Surya signifies intelligence, Agni will, and Soma feeling. When the Vedic poets addressed their hymns to the dawn, to the sun, the sky, the storm-winds, the earth, or the rain, they did not simply mean the fiery ball that rose in the morning and vanished at night or the blue sky or the soil on which they stood, or the rain that had fertilized the soil". (Aurobindo, 1995) These gross and external meanings are for the sake of common men and useful in ceremonial sacrifices performed to propitiate the Gods. Thus, the words used in the mantras have a double meaning. And this device was a necessity for preserving the secret knowledge of the Veda from the unfit. The Veda consists of both the karma and jnana kandas. (Sastry, Rig-Bhashya Bhumika, 1952, p. 52) Karma kanda describes the ritualistic performance of works, and jnana kanda describes the knowledge of the soul. From the division of topics of the Veda itself as karma kanda and jnana kanda and the jnana kanda being placed at the end of each of the Vedas and being the final object of their teachings proves that Vedas cannot be accused as ritualistic alone as it concludes with the knowledge of the soul. The concept of moksha or release is the ultimate aim of the Vedas.

The North-Eastern practices differ from the orthodoxy of Hinduism. There are no rigid divisions of caste found in the North-Eastern religious practices as they are seen in Hinduism. For example, the Manipuris are considered within caste only on their own definition of caste. The Raja, not the Brahman, is the supreme source of authority in matters of social discipline. The concept of release or moksha is not emphasised in the animistic practice of religion, though ancestor worship is mentioned. However Manipuri tradition is similar to Hinduism in the form of Vaishnavism. (Singh, 1988, p. 3) Meitei religion was the ancient religion of Manipur. They worshipped Earth God and Sun God to promote the birth, nourishment, and welfare of the people. Fire is a holy symbol and a substitute for the sun. The flame that burns upwards reminds man of his nobler nature. They emphasize being and divinity in man and other living beings as well as in inanimate objects such as stones, books, and sacred things. (Singh, 1988, p. 11)

The religion of the Meiteis is commonly regarded as tribal, animistic, polytheistic, and a mixture of nature and ancestor worship. Colonel Shakespeare states that "In Manipur, where Hinduism is a mark of respectability, it is never safe to rely on what men tell of their religion; the only test is to ascertain what they

do, and by this test, we are justified in holding them to be still animists." (Hodson, 1913, p. 519) However, the religion of Manipur cannot be termed as animistic alone as the concepts that mark the chief features of Indian philosophy, like spiritualism, the concept of soul, the concept of karma, and liberation, are found in the beliefs and practices of Meiteis. (Singh, 1988)

The Brahmanical rites and rituals entered Assam with the coming of the Aryans. The advent and systematic settlements of the Brahmins in early Assam have detribalized the religious cults of the tribes of this region. Then onwards, the antique non-Aryan beliefs and practices began to exist in Assam, simultaneously with the Brahmanical rites and rituals. Therefore, a mixture of non-Aryan and Aryan religious beliefs can still be observed in Assam.

Conclusion

The animistic practices of the tribes have their unique separate identity, which is not like any other mainstream religion. It can be said that the religious practice of animism found among the tribes of the North-East states differs from the Vedic ritualistic practices of Hinduism, which also worships nature. While the former primarily worshiped nature, the later worshiped nature in a representational manner and not as a primary object of worship.

Though the concept of moksha or release is absent in the animistic practices of the North-East tribes, they cannot be termed as materialistic. Even though they may seem and be considered backward and uncivilized by the world outside, they have another distinct identity that sets them apart from the rest of the world, the way they remain gratified and thankful to the creator for the blessings and the gift of nature to mankind. They were very particular with their moral life and proud of their ancestors and their family. Their religious practices needed the participation of all members of their community, which bind them together. Their customs are marked by noble principles of self-help and cooperation. They contribute labour for the welfare of the community. Their religious rites and rituals are the mirrors of their culture and identity that find expression through music, dance, sculptures, and crafts. Their cultural identity and religious identity go together. I believe this study has the potential to enhance knowledge and comprehension of social and religious practices among the people of India about these states.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare that no competing interests exist.

Author's contributions

The author contributed exclusively to the theoretical development, analysis, interpretation and writing of the manuscript.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

REFERENCES

Aurobindo. (1995). *The Secret of the Veda*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press.

Baruah, S. (2010). *India against itself: Assam and the politics of nationality*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

- Behera, M.N. (2014) *Mizo Beliefs and the Christian Gospel: Their Interaction with Reference to the Concepts of Health and Healing*, Studies in World Christianity, vol. 20, No. 1, <https://www.eupublishing.com/doi/full/10.3366/swc.2014.0070>
- Das, S. (2019, Vol. 4 Issue 5). A Study of Religious Beliefs and the Festivals of the Tribal's of Tripura with Special Reference to - Tripuris. *International journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, <https://ijisrt.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/IJISRT19MY91.pdf>
- Dey, K. (2018). *In Christian Nagaland, indigenous religion of pre-christian Nagas withstands test of time*. The Indian Express, epaper, <https://indianexpress.com/article/North-East-india/nagaland/in-christian-nagaland-indigenous-religion-of-pre-christian-nagas-withstand-test-of-time-5010777/>.
- Edward, D. (1924). *The Philosophy of Religion*. Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.189014/2015.189014.The-Philosophy-Of-Religion-dmiall-Edwards_djvu.txt.
- Elwin, V. (1988). *The art of the North-East frontier of India*. Itanagar: Directorate of Research, Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh.
- Gassah, L. S. (1998). *Traditional Institutions of Meghalaya: A case study of Doloï and his administration*. Daya Books.
- Ghosh, S. (1994). Elective Affinities: The Influence of Ramayana on Mizo Religion and Culture. *Indian History Congress*, 44, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44143331>.
- Hodson, T. (1913). *The Religion of Manipur*. Taylor & Francis Ltd, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1255652>.
- Luithui, S. (2001). *Naga: A people Struggling for Self-Determination*. International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, Naga Booklet-e, https://www.academia.edu/40167141/NAGA_A_PEOPLE_STRUGGLING_FOR_SELF_DETERMINATION_BY_SHIMREICHON_LUITHUI.
- Maaker, E. (2007, vol. xxx no. 3). From the Songsarek Faith to Christianity: Conversion, Religious Identity and Ritual Efficacy. *Journal of South Asian Studies*, p. 520, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856400701714104>.
- Misra, T. E. (2013). *The Oxford anthology of writings from North-East India Poetry and essay*.
- Muller, M. (1956). *The Vedas*. Calcutta: Susil Gupta (India) Limited.
- Barpujari, H. K. (1992). *The Comprehensive History of Assam*. Publication Board Assam.
- Sastry, T. (1952). *Rig-Bhashya Bhumika*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, <https://archive.org/details/RigBhashyaBhumikaTVK>.
- Singh, M. (1988). *Religion and Culture of Manipur*, Delhi: Manas Publication, https://books.google.co.in/books/about/Religion_and_Culture_of_Manipur.html?id=doQeAAAAMAAJ&redir_esc=y.
- Uppal, S. (1939). *North East India People, History and Culture*, New Delhi: National Council of Educational Research and Training.

Corresponding Author: Dr. Sima Baruah (sima.baruah@cottonuniversity.ac.in)