
NEGOTIATING WITH THE SPIRIT WORLD: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ENQUIRY OF THE BELIEF SYSTEM OF THE INPUI TRIBE, MANIPUR

Rangya Gachui*

*Assistant Professor,

Ph.D

Dept. of Anthropology,

Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan,

West Bengal, INDIA

Email id: rangyagachui@yahoo.co.in

DOI: 10.5958/2249-7137.2025.00034.1

ABSTRACT

Being religious is usually taken to mean living in spontaneous awareness of, an encounter with, acknowledgment of, and obedience to the active reality of the presence of a Supreme Being. Thus, religion permeates all aspects of life. In the traditional tribal society, there were no irreligious people. Tribal belief systems are based on the oral and expressed in everyday language – both verbally and in their lived every day. Tribal rituals are often performed collectively and are intended to address everyday problems. The study is concentrated on the Inpui tribe of Manipur, India. According to the 2011 census, the Inpui tribe has a population of 4762, of which 2398 are male and 2364 female. This paper studies the belief system and practice of the Inpui tribe with special reference to the controlling of the spirit and the spirit world. They worship gods for prosperity and release from sickness, disease, and suffering.

KEYWORDS: *Supernatural Power, Rituals, Religious Belief, Suffering, And Prosperity.*

INTRODUCTION

Religion is defined as a set of organic beliefs, practices, and systems that are most often related to the belief and worship of a controlling force. The sociologist, Emile Durkheim defined religion as a “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things.” Edward Burnett Tylor gave the minimum definition of religion as “the belief in Spiritual Beings.” He used the term animism to refer to belief in the soul. Johnstone (1975) defines religion as “a system of beliefs and practices by which a group of people interprets and responds to what they feel is supernatural and sacred.” As one of the basic social institutions, Srivastava (1997) defined religion as a system of beliefs usually involving worshipping supernatural forces or beings. Religious beliefs provide shape and meaning to one’s perception of the universe.

Religion is an all-pervading supernatural phenomenon in human life. For this reason, it may have been considered universal. Of all things in the world, religion has exercised the most profound influence over human thought and behaviour from times beyond human recollection. Among the tribal people, religion becomes all the more important, for it is interwoven in their entire social life and shapes most of their social behavior. The supernatural becomes the motivator and custodian of all deeds, tries to discover and rule over new places of human dwelling, and inspires a noble character. It’s philosophy is often intelligible and straightforward and inspires noble

thought. Although it may appear to assume much orthodoxy, it is seldom devoid of logic and coherence (Sinha, 1977).

Although there are no written dogmas, their idea of God and faith in the Supreme Being is well expressed in tribal traditional songs, myths, and folk tales (Longchar, 2000). No daily sacrifice is required to be offered to the Supreme Being because he is considered a benevolent God and does not require propitiation, except during natural calamities and other important occasions. He is worshiped, and offerings are offered to him as a sign of thanksgiving for blessings including bumper harvests or success in the hunt. Prayers are not offered to him as frequently as to the malevolent spirits. When everything else fails, the Supreme Being is appealed to. He may be approached by anyone, even without a priest or intermediary, and can be approached with empty hands. The tribal people believe that he is present in all places and, thus, can worship him at any time and any place (Ibid, 2000).

Before the advent of Christianity in northeast India, the tribes had a particular concept of religion; they believed in some spirit or powerful being that had its abode in natural objects like stones, rivers, trees, mountain peaks, etc. Many spirits were benevolent and evil, and these spirits influenced the life of man (Nembiakkim, 2008). The conversion is rooted so firmly that people do not intend to return to their traditional religion. Besides teaching the Bible, the Church also acts as an instrument to make people conscious of their social obligations. Their belief and commitment never run dry, and they pray almost everywhere. The people's worldview now comes from the Christian faith, where love, peace, and a helping hand are the core values of the people. The impact of religion is so strong that worship and commitment continue, although there is a change in who they worship, from polytheism to monotheism. People look at everything in such a positive frame of mind because Christianity provided an ideology that helped the tribal people to maintain their identity in the face of severe erosion of their traditional religious, social, and political institutions (Downs, 1983).

Keeping this in view, the present study highlights the belief in supernatural power and its relation with religious life among the Inpui Naga tribe of Manipur. The main objective of the study is understanding Inpui's belief in supernatural power and its relation to their religious life, and by extension it's different manifestation in their everyday.

Fieldwork was conducted in fourteen Inpui villages of Manipur. The study is purely qualitative, employing both primary and secondary sources of data collection. The primary sources of the study are mainly gathered from oral narratives. Formal interviews were conducted with select Inpui village elders to gather data on supernatural power and its relation with religious life and overall pictures of each village's past and present situation. The secondary source material includes relevant published or unpublished written material. Both sources are amalgamated in the process of constructing this paper.

The Inpui Nagas inhabit mainly in fourteen villages in Manipur and scattered in different places in Nagaland and Assam. In the present state of Manipur, they are scattered throughout the districts of Tamenglong, Senapati and Imphal West District. The significant villages of the Inpui tribe in Manipur are Haochong, Ijeirong, Pungmon, Nungtek, Puichi/Oktan, Bakuwa, Kabui Khullen, New Kabui Khullen, Makuilongdi, Inthan, Changangei, Yurembam, Tamphagei and Kabui Inpui.

The Inpui people are traditionally polytheistic in their religious beliefs. They too have a multitude of gods and goddesses of high and low ranks, whose help or blessings they invariably invoke in times of danger and distress. They propitiate the guardian deities in their traditional way to protect them from epidemics, diseases, and disasters. The Inpui believe that there is one Supreme Being, who they refer to as, '*Risangri*'. They also believe in the existence of the devils or the evil spirits. They are malevolent spirits who cause sickness, disease, and suffering to human beings. The malevolent spirits are propitiated with sacrifices and offerings. Such propitiations are done to appease them, so as to not to cause trouble for human beings. The Inpui perform rituals and rites at feasts, festivals, and various occasions connected with seed sowing, harvest, construction of a house, birth, marriage, death, and so on.

The almighty god *Risangri* is believed to be the Supreme in for the Inpui pantheon. His abode is believed to be in heaven, where eternal peace prevails. He is regarded as the creator and the protector of all living beings on earth. *Risangri* is worshiped twice a year, first by killing a goat and the second by killing a pig. On the second worship, on killing a pig, a white flag is placed on the house of the God *Risangri*. On the white flag, cotton is placed at the end of the long bamboo. The upper part of the bamboo leaves is not taken out. It is left as it is, but the lower side of the leaves is taken out. The animal killed for this God should be without shedding blood by pressing with two woods. The meat is eaten by the village elders in the village *Thampe* house. Whoever comes to worship this God should put either *Sangkurei* or *Riangrei* leaf on the ear.

Furthermore, buffed rice and sugarcane will be distributed. On the last day, a hen is also killed, and the priest places the hen along with buffed rice, saying this is for god *Risangri*. While the hen eats buffed rice, the boys kill it by throwing stones. If the hen runs away, the boys will chase the hen and kill. When sick, they also worship to heal by giving hens, vegetables, fruits, or whatever the family wishes. Moreover, the evil spirit is given rice beer mixed with ash and is sacrificed. After performing the rituals for *Risangri*, the *Thampe* will sacrifice rice on the three stones of fire making. These three stones are placed before reaching the *Risangri* place of worship. In this place of worship, there is a slap of stone where people are not allowed to sit as it is believed that it is for God.

Takenri

Sickness god is called *takenri*; sickness like swollen stomach, itches, and scabies are believed to be caused by *takenri*. If people get sick with the above-mentioned sickness, the priest is called and will tell them where the person got the sickness; for example, by taking a bath at the log and so on. The priest will then tell to sacrifice pigs or hens in that log where the person took a bath and got the sickness. The sick family will make sacrifices in that log by killing in that place; then cooking and eating there. However, if the *takenri* wants it raw, it will be offered without killing.

Inthweiri

The *Inthweiri* is believed to be living between the rocks. In the place where *Inthweiri* lives, people cannot throw stones, cut trees, pluck banana leaves, etc. If a person does the cutting or throwing stones, then he/she gets a stomach ache. Suppose the person cuts due to an order given by someone; the person who gives the order will get sick. Ginger spit with saliva is placed on that rock. If a person does not heal by this, the banana leaf, buffed rice, flowers, and fruits will be sacrificed. If the person is not healed with this second sacrifice, the third is by sacrificing a hen or pig; in this, the person gets healed. In such cases, death does not occur; the person gets healed

either by the first, the second, or the third. If the person is healed with the first, he/she need not perform the second or the third.

Riswang

Protector god of the Village is a story narrated by Haochong villagers when they return at night, passing through a narrow road, and if a stone is dropped or thrown at them, they will say that they are Haochong people, then the dropping or stone stops. The Inpui believed *Riswang* to be the protector of the village.

Lungkapopri

Lungkapopri is a god who lives in a cave. If a person gets a swollen hand or leg, then the village priest will examine and say this is caused by *lungkapopri*. Then, the sick family sacrifices banana leaves, buffed rice, flowers, and fruit.

Tapaanthangri

When a person gets a headache, fever, or body pain, then, in banana leaf ash mixed with water and placed in the open space, a cut ginger is placed on the top middle of the ash mixed with water for *tapaanthangri*.

Khunri

The God of clay holes. When a person gets sick by putting his/her feet or hand on the hole, he/she gets swollen hands/feet. This sacrifice is done by placing kabok, flowers, fruit to *khunri*. The person gets healed.

Basaangri

There is a sudden pulling of the body, shivering, and the eye turns white. In this, a black dog is sacrificed to *basaangri* by killing and cooking outside and giving the cooked meat to all people and children. The priest sprinkles water with leaves on the sick family and sprinkles on the cooked meat. After that, the cooked meat is taken in the night and morning. If there is left over, the meat is thrown in the east direction.

Sangkouri

He is a god of good harvest and wealth. Village elders will perform the sacrifice by spreading the mat and placing a pig tied to both feet and pierced by *Nakia* (wood). One of the villages elder touch the robe tied at the pig's feet, and shouts come wealth, come good harvest, then a ritual is performed. After that, the tied robe and the wood are taken out and placed on the verandah of the house at the door. The killed pig's entrails is observed, and prediction for the family is observed by the priest. The priest will predict for the family whether it shows a good harvest or a bad harvest or sickness. If bad things happen, the priest will ask to sacrifice another pig. It is done so according to the priest's advice. The meat is given to everyone, and the leftovers are taken home.

For a good harvest, a hen is sacrificed by making a basket, placing it in the basket, and taking it to the field. The select elder of the tribe will kill the hen and place it on the paddy, which is about to ripen. Then, the basket is kept at the hut in the *jhum* field. The paddy stalk and hen are taken home and cooked. The cooked chicken liver and pealed paddy are mixed and applied on the three fire stones of the house and the cooking pot. The remaining is mixed with rice and given to the children to eat to obtain blessings.

Rituals are performed to ward off ill luck or disturbance by evil spirits, and it is generally considered that it is the spirit of dead people who disturb the living family members. The family fixes a ritual day; on the day, all family members are called to join in this ritual and kill a big dog. All the clans are called along with *Thampe*. Food is cooked, and a hole is dug near the cooking place. The priest performs the rituals by dropping rice beer, meat and food in the hole which is then considered as shared with the dead person. The place is then wiped and covered by a plate. It is covered for four days, and only after the fourth day, they remove the cover. That day, the family will hang their curry in the house, and that night, a dream is observed by the priest. In the morning, they eat the food together by taking down their meat, and the dream is heard. Today is a bad or good dream, and all the village elders drink rice beer.

CONCLUSION

The Inpui ancestors were strict adherents of their religion. The fear of incurring the gods' displeasure enslaved them, and they could not free themselves from it, which they were afraid may cause famine, sickness, or barrenness. Onerous sacrifices had to be made, superstition was rampant, and every step and moment of their lives was fettered with fear. The early decades of the twentieth century is a landmark in the history of the Inpui tribe. In such a time, Christianity was introduced, Instead of performing certain rituals to ward off the malevolent spirits. The current generation of Inpui rejects the sacrificing of animals or using blood to cure any illness or the old ways.

REFERENCES

1. Brown A.R. Radcliff. (1959). *Structure and function in primitive society*. Foreward by E.E. Evans- Pritchard and Fred Eggan. The Free Press Glencoe, Illinois.
2. Downs, F.S. (1983). *Christianity in North-East India: Historical Perspective*, Delhi: Indian society for promoting Christian knowledge.
3. Huber, J.D. (2005). *Religious belief, religious participation, and social policy attitude across countries*. Working paper, Columbia University.
4. Johnstone, R. (1975). *Religion and society: The Society of Religion*. Englewood bros. N.J. Prentice-Hall.
5. Nembiakkim Rose. (2008). *Reproductive Health awareness among the tribal women in Manipur*, New Delhi: Concept Publication Company.
6. Sinha, R. (1977). *Religion and culture of North-east India*, Abhinav Publication, New Delhi.
7. Srivastava, VK 1997, *Religious renunciation of a pastoral people*. Oxford University Press., New Delhi.
8. Wati, A Longchar, 2000. The tribal religious traditions in North East India, Eastern Theological College, Jorhat, Assam.
9. Personal Interview with Mr Bakuzinga Inka, age 61, Haochong village. 2/7/2011
10. Personal Interview with Mr Kadibangba Inka, age 85, Haochong village. 3/7/2011