



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

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Panel presentation :

This panel explores the changing religious landscape of Northeast India, an area of ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity, with a high incidence of inter-communal conflicts and growing inter-religious tensions.

This exploration will first examine new forms of indigenous religious expressions in Northeast India, studying how older belief systems are being restructured and institutionalised to give rise to new indigenous 'religions' that often use 'traditional' beliefs as a base but utilise standard religious frameworks from more 'mainstream' faiths. Secondly, we wish to understand how vernacular myths and legends as well as ritual and cultural practices drawn from indigenous populations have influenced the forms of everyday practice and ritual processes of mainstream religions, such as Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism. We wish to look in particular at local forms of faith to understand the ways in which vernacular worldviews are accommodated, adapted, and naturalised by mainstream denominations.

This panel aims at understanding the motivations behind such efforts and their effects on practitioners' daily lives, to discover the linkages and correlations among these movements as well as between the political and religious elites, and to analyse the impact these changes have on the new identity formulations of these ethnic communities.

Various indigenous movements stand as examples of what might be called 'religious restructuring', as they adapt their practices to increasing globalization and conversion initiatives. Indigenised forms of Hinduism are encountered in the states of Tripura, Manipur and Assam while western Arunachal and Sikkim offer examples of local versions of Buddhism. Indigenised Christianity is met almost everywhere in the hills of the Northeast. In order to understand the processes involved in these emerging movements, each presentation will examine the structures that these reformations have taken, the new symbols and meanings they have created, and the politics that define these revivals.

Résumé du panel :

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

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



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

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

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

Participants :

1. **Dr Meenaxi Barkataki-Ruscheweyh (Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam)**
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Communication's title : Religious reform as a strategy for ethnic consolidation: the case of the Tangsa in northeast India

For many small ethnic communities living in northeast India, the need to remain “tribal” in order to be able to benefit from government policies have forced them to develop new strategies of ethnic consolidation. At the same time they need to look and remain different from the mainstream (mainly caste Hindu) population around them. Institutionalising their traditional belief systems in the form of a new and distinct religion, which recasts their older mythology and beliefs even while incorporating new attractive elements from other world religions, is a strategy that has been used repeatedly by indigenous communities in the Northeast. In the Tangsa case, their new religion – Rangfraism – not only gives a new dimension to their ethnic identity but also serves as a common rallying point for the diverse “tribal” groups clubbed together as Tangsa. This paper will explore these issues based on data collected during recent fieldwork.

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

Christianity alongside Indigenous Belief among the Khasis of North Eastern India: Conflict or Conformity?

The Khasi communities — which include the Khyntiam, Jaintia, Bhoi, War, and Lyngngam — comprise a group of indigenous peoples in Northeastern India and they



make up the majority of the ethnic population of Meghalaya. The Khasis had no script of their own until the arrival of the Welsh Calvinistic Missionaries (more popularly known as the Presbyterians today) in 1843. I hope to show in this presentation that religious transformation among the Khasis is an ongoing process, as it is manifested through the folklore that people tell/perform/believe in their day-to-day lives: how Khasis sort through experience and make conscious choices, or have unconscious strategies to derive meaning from institutional religion and find ways to reconcile with the older beliefs in the realm of the vernacular. On a more significant level, transformation occurs in the realm of religious beliefs of the Khasi communities and is manifested through the conflicts and tensions that exist between the various denominations of Khasi Christianity, the followers of the traditional Seng Khasi and the actual vernacular religion practised by the community.

3. Kikee Doma Bhutia (University of Tartu)

The way out: Guardian Deities turned Demons in the Sikkimese attics

Sikkim has been a Buddhist monarchy from 1642 till 1975 and before that as Lepchas (the original inhabitants) of Sikkim consider themselves as the “nature worshiper”. Sikkim has been a storehouse of *ters ma* (hidden treasures), which were found by many knowledgeable saints and patrons in different period of time and still continues. The *land of bliss and abundance* is covered of mystery and stories of magic. This land of Guardian deities has always shaped the everyday life of the people of Sikkim, belonging to different communities.

In this paper, I focus on how the advent of Christianity in Sikkim, has converted the belief in Guardian deities into demons and devil to be chased out by prayers. I analyse the reasons behind conversions as not only religious faith but as ways of coping with various social obligations of the society. The hope for a better life is not only spiritual but also financial and social. This research is based upon the belief narrative of people. It analyse how the rituals and hundreds of years of belief in the Guardian deities have been replaced by the concepts of the Revelation and the “approaching end of the world”.

Key words: Patronage, advent of Christianity, local belief narrative, Deities and Demons

4. Baburam Saikia (University of Tartu)

Continuity and Change of the *Vaishnava* Religion: A Study on Institutionalized Religious Community of Assam

The *Vaishnava* religion is a major branch of Hinduism. *Vaishnava* movement in Assam had strong connections with the current of *Vaishnava* revival that swept over India between 12th and 15th centuries. Sankaradeva (1449-1568), the great Assamese social reformer had led the neo- *Vaishnavite* movement all over North East India. Within three hundred years the movement firmly established the *Vaishnava* faith as the supreme religious order of the Brahmaputra Valley. The movement also developed a new institutional structure known as *Sattr*, a socio – cultural and religious institute, which introduced celibate lifestyle of the followers along with dance, drama and music as a medium of worshipping God. The religious and cultural tradition of this particular community has been deeply rooted by the core dedication of the practitioners. The senior practitioners continue to observe the rules of the tradition without any effect of material and consumerist culture of modern



society, but following these kind of conventional notions have become a challenge for young practitioners. Many changes have taken place in recent years within the Sattra community. My study aims to discuss continuity and change of the Vaishnava religious tradition which will also include life struggle of the practitioners and their contemporary situations.

Key Words: *Sattra*, *Vaishnava* religion, vernacular practices, life and struggle , contemporary situations.

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

A trend in the scholarly literature on South Asia maintains that possession is mainly related to people of low social status and that Brahminical culture accords only a marginal role to these practices, treating them with superior attitude.

The Deodhani possession dance I observed at the Kamakhya Temple brought me to question this generalisation. This indigenous dance, practiced by non-Brahmins, is embedded in the cult carried out by the Brahmins, the Temple religious and political élite.

Every August, Deodhais are believed to be possessed by the mighty Goddess Kamakhya (and other minor deities), while they dramatically dance during three days before thousands of devotees gathered for the festival. The drum-based dance is part of a major three-day puja (worship) performed by Brahmins in the Temple. The Brahmins generally hold such dance in high esteem and have multiple ritual tasks to discharge in connection with the Deodhais. Moreover, many Brahmins spontaneously provide assistance to Deodhais during critical stages of the dance.

Through the analysis of the exchanges between Deodhais and Brahmins, this paper aims to show how an indigenous practice (widely performed in Lower Assam) has been incorporated into the religious framework of one of the major temples of Assam.

**6. Dr. Emilie Crémin (Center for himalayan studies UPR 299 CNRS)
Settled and Unsettled religious practices in the Brahmaputra flood plain:
Examining the Mising identity**

Northeastern India is composed of a wide diversity of ethno linguistic communities, each of which is campaigning for the recognition of its particular identity since the independence of India. We focus here on the Mising's religious practices on Majuli Island (Assam), where this scheduled tribe lives within the Assamese-*Vaishnava* society. Majuli hosts many Satras, *Vaisnavite* monasteries, in which they work as peasants. We observe through the relations between the Misings and the Assamese landlords how religious faith maybe shared or not. Indeed, some of the Misings may look for other religious networks to resist, emancipate themselves and struggle for territorial autonomy in Northeast. Since the colonial time, Hindu and Christian missionaries settled in Majuli trying to convert some Mising families. Lately, the institutionalisation of "indigenous" faith combined to the growing demand for Tribal identity's recognition has led to the emergence of so called "revival" religions, such as Donyi-Polo. This faith has spread from the foothills of Arunachal Pradesh among the Adis to the Mising community in the floodplain of Assam. We will analyse how these tribal claims are tightly coupled to territorial demands, contributing to the ethnicization of territories.



7. Dr Shalin Jain (University of Delhi)

Religious communities and environmental concerns in medieval India.

This proposal intends to examine the role of religious communities in medieval India in shaping their natural habitat and organizing their actions concerning nature. In the wake of expanded knowledge of medieval ecosystems and the human role in them, I propose to move ahead of any one uniform textual tradition to see medieval religion as a dominant ideology for controlling natural resources via the agency of religious rituals. Medieval religious experiences and even beliefs varied from place to place and community to community. In the historical context of medieval Indian history the paper will scrutinize humans' interaction with nature which filtered through agency of religious rituals. How attitudes towards nature have differed among peoples, places and times? How the ritual meanings, people give to nature, inform their cultural, economic and political notions are some questions yet to be answered. The sources of study would be largely drawn from the medieval textual customs and local hagiographical traditions. While assessing the role of medieval religious communities towards nature one should be cautious that these communities were not guided by a conscious sense of conservation to maintain ecological balance as environmental deterioration was not on their agenda. Compassion towards nature was ingrained into the religious virtues because in the public demonstration of being pious, charitable and religious it was essential that one should be compassionate towards nature and habitat as well. The popular and elite notions regarding nature and habitat in spite of sharing common rituals, requires to be treated with different premises due to varied notions of utility and command over the natural resources.