

Indigenous Religious and Cultural Reforms in North East India

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Abstract: *The concept of indigenous is complex, and it is rather a highly contested concept in the domain of politics. The first nation theory which has been established in Australia or North America could not be applied in India as the historical evidence of the chronology of settlement and migration in India is fluid. However, the non-political dimension of the concept and applicability of 'indigenous' has been increasingly explored. The emergence of indigenous religious reform movement such as the Donyi-Polo and Heraka in North East India, and their attempt to construct their cultural identity conceive the idea of indigenous in the religious and cultural space.*

Keyword: *Indigenous, First Nation, Hindutva, Donyi-Polo, Heraka*

I. Introduction

In North East India, there is a growing interest and effort from the intellectuals and elites of the tribal people for revisiting of their history by enquiring into their indigenous religious and cultural identities. The attempt and search for such pristine religious and cultural identities has been manifested in their religious reform movement. The tribal leaders, elites and intellectuals who still practice their indigenous faiths propagated that their religious and cultural identities need to be preserved, protected and promoted as there has been an increasing Christian proselytization and tendency of assimilation from Hinduism. Despite the fact that indigenous peoples tend to demand political autonomy in the form of right to self-determination in order to control their natural resources, territory and politics; asserting a space for the protection of indigenous religious and cultural identity constituted an essential characteristic of the religious reform movement in North East India. Therefore, the religious and cultural reforms is also an attempt at recovering and rewriting the past indigenous culture, traditions and history.

II. Concept of Indigenous in India

The concept of indigenous is highly challenging in India both at the governmental level and in the circle of social scientists as it is not possible, and also not desirable to single out any such category of peoples in the country as there is a fear that it would create further divisions and separatism (Karlsson 2003: 402). The argument of Indian anthropologists such as Andre Beteille and B.K. Roy Burman are that the term indigenous is a Western concept imposed on India, and popularized by the Western scholars and human rights activists (Karlsson 2003: 405). In the Western context, the first nation theory is largely applicable in most societies, and therefore there are clear demarcation between the indigenous populations and the non-indigenous populations. However, in the Indian context, the tribal populations and the non-tribal populations have been living together in close proximity for many generations, and therefore many tribal populations have been assimilated into the Hindu society. There are indications that tribal populations in some instances have been preceded by the non-tribal populations in their present habitat.

Therefore, the term 'indigenous' is limited in its conception and application as prescribed by the first nation theory as the history and chronology of settlement and migration could not be clearly established in India. The history of cultural exchange in India, therefore, made it difficult for considering the *adivasis* as indigenous people. Despite the fact that tribal population in India could not be considered as indigenous population, in countries such as Australia, the aborigines or the tribal people are also the indigenous population, and are undoubtedly supported by historical evidence (Beteille 1998). Virginius Xaxa maintained that the term indigenous is applicable and accepted for description and for categorizing certain group of people so long as it does not bring in the political connotation. The acceptance of the term indigenous in India by the tribal people is also reactive as the tribal people has been deprived of their territorial rights and privileges by the local dominant communities in their inhabited territories (Xaxa 1999: 3594).

The first nation theory therefore is not applicable in India. However, in the liberal democratic framework, certain cultural autonomy has been granted to the tribals and marginalized populations in order to preserve and promote their cultural identity. The liberal democratic state of India accommodated cultural autonomy to the tribal people on the condition of their cultural authenticity, however, such cultural autonomy is not to be used as means for redressing the political and economic inequalities (Sonntag; cited in Karlsson & Subba 2006: 188). Non-cultural definitions, such as indigeneness suggesting first inhabitants or the first nation theory, are fraught with imprecision (Beteille 1998:187-191). Therefore, cultural dimension of projecting indigenous is an operative political defense. In India, the mainstream politics claimed that the concept of 'indigenous people' is not appropriate in its usage for the people of the country and officially the use of the term has been rejected. Despite the fact that the Indian state recognized the presence of linguistic and religious minorities, it failed to recognize the presence of 'indigenous people' descended from any ancient indigenous peoples.

III. Indigenous Religious and Cultural Reforms

Religious reform movement based on the indigenous faith and practices in North East India is an attempt by the tribal populations to represent their authentic religious and cultural identity. Despite the fact that the movement attempted to reform some of the religious practices with the changing times, the movement also is an attempt in the search for a pristine tribal religious and cultural identity. The Donyi-Polo movement is one such religious reform movement in Arunachal Pradesh. The Donyi-Polo movement has been largely the work of the tribal elites and religious leaders of those who practiced their indigenous faith. There are various factors that have been responsible for the development of the religious reform movement. The increase of Christian proselytization among the people of the Tani groups and the inadvertently successive destruction of their indigenous tradition, and cultural practices by the people is responsible for initiation of the reform movement.

There is also another religious reform movement known as the Heraka movement of the Zeliangrong Nagas where the reform has been derived from their traditional beliefs and practices. The movement has been organized by the Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei tribes in the 1930s, and became an organized and operative movement by the 1970s in the Zeliangrong inhabited territory of Nagaland and Assam. The reform movement of the Heraka also sought to abolish some of the obscurant customs and superstitious practices. During the colonial rule, the movement was launched in order to fight against the British, defend the Zeliangrong religious and cultural identity from the Christian proselytization and advancing of Hinduism. However, in post-independent India, the movement is confined to the socio-religious movement. The close association of the Heraka with the Hindutva protagonists has been increasingly manifested in recent years. In fact, it helped the Heraka group in sharing higher platform with the Hindus to promote their indigenous religious and cultural identity. Christianity, on the other hand, continued to be considered as threat to the indigenous religious and cultural identity of the Zeliangrong Nagas.

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) made their presence in the Zeliangrong areas in the 1970s under the Kalyan Ashram, and by 1990s they were able to make their presence in Arunachal Pradesh. The RSS projected the tribals as part of the Hindu religion and propagated cultural nationalism. Like Hinduism, for the tribals, religion and culture are inseparable and their identity is deeply rooted in their religious tradition, beliefs and practices. Generally tribal religions do not have a founder, but it has been originated from within the community. Like the ancient Greeks, the tribal gods have to be a community god. Tribal religion is also an ethnic religion as no other ethnic groups or communities embrace their religion. Therefore, it is an indigenous religion that has been evolved since time immemorial. The main contention for the Hindutva protagonists to the tribals who practice their aged old indigenous faiths and practices has been that Christianity is not an indigenous religion of India, while Hinduism is the native religion of India, and therefore shared the history, culture and tradition of indigenous religions such as the Heraka and Donyi-Polo.

The close association of Donyi-Polo and Heraka protagonists with the Hindutva protagonists has been conceived through various organizations. The Janajati Faith & Culture Forum, the Kalyan Ashram and other such organizations are responsible for the confluence of the Hindutva protagonists and the Donyi-Polo and Heraka protagonists. The Hindu organizations occasionally organized awareness programmes on the importance of preserving, protecting and promoting indigenous religious and cultural identity. Hindu organizations such as the Janajati Dharma Sanskriti Manch encouraged the tribal people to promote their indigenous religious and cultural identity as there has been increasingly alarming Christian proselytization in the tribal areas. Such massive proselytization process has been considered as threat to the tribal indigenous religious and cultural identity by the Hindus, and also by the tribal themselves. Organizations such as the Janajati Dharma Sanskriti

Manch has been serving as a platform for promoting and preserving the tribal indigenous religious and cultural identity.

Religious reform movement such as the Donyi-Polo and Heraka also pioneered in organizing the cultural festivals in order to revitalize the decaying tribal cultural identity. Therefore, such cultural festivals are being increasingly organized. Despite the fact that Christians abstain themselves from participating in the religious formalities related with such social and cultural festivals, they participate in the cultural practices which are secular in character. The festival is therefore secularized. Besides, there is an increasing involvement of student bodies organizing cultural festivals such as *Hega N'gi* and *Gaan Ngai*, biggest festivals of the Zeliangrong Nagas. Such celebration organized by the student bodies are welcome by the Christians as the celebration does not include the religious rituals and ceremonies. Organizations such as the Nyishi Culture Society, Indigenous Faith and Culture Society of Arunachal Pradesh and the Arunachal Pradesh Nyobu Welfare Association are actively involved in order to preserve, protect and promote their indigenous religious and cultural identity. These organizations also attempted for a united movement for cultural and religious revival.

Despite the fact that Hinduism influenced many tribal communities in their socio-religious and cultural aspects, it miserably failed in leaving lasting influence as Hinduism has been more conservative in its nature. (Behera 2000: 174). Many Hindu organizations such as Vivekananda Missions, Ramakrishna Mission, Vivekananda Kendra Vidyalayas and Sharda Missions has been actively working for the welfare of the tribal people in North East India. There are also other organizations working for the welfare of the tribals such as the Vishva Hindu Parishad, Bajrang Dal, and Arunachal Vikas Parishad (Rikam 2005: 138). Therefore, the Hindutva protagonists are engaged in the work of assimilation and integration of the tribals into the larger Hindu society. On the other hand, Christian missionaries were largely able to do the work of proselytization. The accomplishment of Christian missions in providing quality education to the tribal and marginalized people is also responsible for the success of Christian missions in North East India.

IV. Conclusion

The concept of indigenous appears to be acceptable in the religious and cultural space so long as it is non-political. The Hindutva protagonist's inclination towards the religious reforms such as the Donyi-Polo and Heraka is based on the larger understanding of geographical and cultural boundaries of a nation. The propagation that Hinduism and the tribal religions such as Donyi-Polo and Heraka are the indigenous religion of India, and share the ancient religious and cultural traditions has made it difficult in identifying who constitutes the indigenous identity. Despite the fact that the term indigenous is seemingly applicable in the religious and cultural approach, however, the assertion for a distinct religious and cultural identity of the tribals has been ambiguous as the Hindutva protagonists projected the tribals as part of the larger Hindu society.

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