

## Religious Aspects of Adibasi Life in Bangladesh

Eva Sadia Saad\*

**Abstract.** This essay gives a brief introduction to the religious life more or less typical of thirty or more small ethnic groups, preferably called 'Adibasi' rather than tribal, living mostly in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of southeastern Bangladesh but also in the northern and northwestern edge of the country. The strong influence of group solidarity and economic life on the character of Adibasi religion and culture is stressed and also the tendency of Adibasis to retain much of the religio-cultural features of their traditional way of life even when converted to Christian or Buddhist traditions of religious faith. The disinclination of Hindus and Muslims to seek conversion of Adivasis is noted. During colonial British rule traditional Adivasi way of life was little disturbed, but with the coming of Pakistani independence in 1947 political and economic pressures and intrusion of non-Adibasis into their traditional forested localities have upset much of traditional Adivasi life, including religion based on *jhum* ('slash and burn') cultivation.

The Bengali term 'Adibasi' is a respectable term to denote the communities which were known as tribes or *upajatis* in our country, Bangladesh. 'Adibasi' literally means the original or ancient inhabitants rather than ethnic minorities or groups (although some Adibasi groups entered the Bengal region only a few centuries ago). This term is used as to avoid degradation of these communities, who in reality are depressed or deprived as compared with the vast majority of the Bengali people. But at the same time it must be noted that some of these Adibasis, particularly the Garos and Chakmas, are in many respects better off than some non-Adibasi Bangladeshis.<sup>1</sup> For example, literacy among these two groups is much higher than the national average! So it is, difficult to define Adibasi in a straightforward manner. It denotes primarily any small ethnic group usually living in a specific area (although nomadic ethnic groups are not uncommon in Bangladesh), having strong cultural identity which its members seek to preserve as their precious heritage. The members of these ethnic groups are marked by endogamy (marriage within the community) but more importantly they typically share a common economic life with very little social differentiation or inequality.

Regarding religious beliefs and practices, sociologists and anthropologists place most of

---

\*Assistant Professor and former Chairperson, World Religions and Culture, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh  
E-mail: [anai\\_ess@hotmail.com](mailto:anai_ess@hotmail.com)

<sup>1</sup> One Chakma émigré, Dr. Amit Chakma, recently became president of the University of Western Ontario (Canada).

their emphases on Adibasis' cultural identities. These are mostly marked by animistic beliefs and practices. However, a closer scrutiny of these traditions reveals that each Adibasi group has its own customs and traditions which defy any typical classificatory system.<sup>2</sup> According to the Bangladesh census report of 1991, the total number of Adibasis in Bangladesh was ca. 1,200,000, but in reality it is possibly twice that number. The ethnic composition of the Adibasis, unlike that of the population of the mainland Bengalis, is not mixed. Rather they have their origin in two main racial groups, Mongoloid and Australoid. Very little Aryan blood is traceable among the Adibasis. In terms of language and dialects they may be classified as Sino-Tibetan and Austro-Asiatic.

According to Abdus Satter in his book *Aranya Janapadey* (1966) there are twenty-nine ethnic groups traceable in Bangladesh, while Sagata Chakma lists more than thirty and the Bangladesh Adibasis Forum lists more than forty-five Adibasi groups. The habitat of most of the Adibasis is in the south-eastern part of the country, particularly in the hilly areas of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). About sixteen to twenty such tribes may be identified there. In northern and northwestern parts of Bangladesh also there are quite a large number of Adibasi ethnic groups. In Sylhet and in the northeast also are found some very old settlements of Adibasis. Some of these Adibasis are living in Bangladesh from time immemorial. Their settlements are sometimes mentioned in recorded history and sometimes in oral tradition. The historical circumstances through which these settlements took place are significant for analyzing and interpreting the religious beliefs and practices of the Adibasis.

The Adibasis have their own religious beliefs and practices, which are very colorful and interesting in the sense that they enter into elaborate collective observance of rites and rituals which are different from the religious practices of the Hindus and Muslims in the Bangladesh mainland. The main influence that pervades their religious practices is their economic life. Every ritual that they perform is directly or indirectly related to their main occupation. Thus *jhum* cultivation ('slash and burn'), which still is the traditional economic activity of the Chittagong Hill Tracts people, dominates their religious practices and rituals. Similarly, the hunting groups also perform rituals which are very much related to their occupation. It is significant to note that, in the cases of those who have converted, their Buddhist, Hindu or Christian faith need not conflict with their pre-existing ritualistic practices. On the contrary, in Christian-dominated areas there is a happy blending of their erstwhile practices with their newly accepted religious faith and practices. The

<sup>2</sup> Eva-Sadia Saad, "Upajati Dharma: Akti Tatik Samikha," *Dhaka Bishyabiddalay Patrika*, No. 79 (June 2004), 147.

Hindu and Buddhist cultures have been so subtly enmeshed in their life-styles that these are hardly distinguishable as different identities. This may not, perhaps, be characterized as syncretism as Asim Roy has defined the term (which may have a pejorative connotation), but certainly it is akin to Bengali folk or popular religion.

In Bangladesh almost all Adibasi groups follow their own customs and traditions relating to birth, marriage and death. Though there are some common practices among these groups, by and large they tend to develop their own customs, which have been practiced from time immemorial. To enumerate some of these rites and rituals would take more space than we have here. But, for the purpose of research in the religious history of Bangladesh, it will be necessary to investigate these practices in detail and to compare them with the practices among the Bengali population as a whole. It may be worthwhile to mention here that Garos, who have been largely converted to Christianity of different denominations, are today still following practices akin to animism. The supernatural according to their beliefs is known as '*mite*.' *Mite* denotes both gods and goddesses as well as spirits. Garos believe that *Mite* can be kind, helpful and friendly, but that bad *mite* can be cruel and harmful to humans. With the Garos we also find strong belief in their own myths and mythologies, which have been handed down to them from generation to generation. This veneration of ancient myths has been so easily assimilated by them that their rituals of church-going and animistic practices go hand in hand. Similar practices are also found among all other Adibasi groups without any qualms, so much so that it may appear as one single system of religious belief and practice. Interestingly, another group, the Chakmas, one of the most advanced enlightened groups, like many other indigenous peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, profess Buddhism. But in reality many of them worship gods and goddesses such as Ganga and Lakshmi. Their life, it appears, is full of festivals; singing and dancing are highly valued parts of their religious customs and rituals.

Like Adibasi groups the world over, Bangladeshi Adibasis also have subgroups and clans. Their subgroups and clans have influence on their religious life. For example, Chakmas are divided into three groups. In every group there are several clans. These are called '*guthis*' in Chakma terminology; the *guthi* gets prominence in matters of birth, marriage and death. Interestingly, different *guthis* follow different taboos in their religious practices. Religious practices are also closely related to the patterns of family structure. Some of the Adibasi groups follow patriarchy while matriarchy is not uncommon among others. Interestingly, in some of the clans of Tripuras in the Chittagong Hill Tracts bilineal heritage is still prevailing.

An aspect of Adibasi Manipuris' culture that is worth noting is its curious combination of popular Vaishnavism and orthodox Hinduism. Despite this, it is still possible to see glimpses of ancient cult and tradition that prevailed in pre-Hindu Manipuri society. It is interesting to note that nowadays some followers of Muslim religion are found among the Manipuris, though their number is insignificant. In spite of the fact that in Bangladesh by far the majority of people are Muslims, very few Muslims are found among the Adibasis. While Christian missionaries have been successful in converting large numbers of different Adibasi groups, Muslims did not make much headway in this regard.

Most ethnic Adibasi groups of Bangladesh do not have any written scripts. But those groups that are influenced by Hindu, Buddhist and Christian religion are deferential towards the books of their respective religious traditions, namely, the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Veda*, *Puranas*, *Tripitaka* and *Bible*. But the Chakmas are found to possess, besides the *Tripitaka*, a few religious scriptures of their own in which they have strong faith: the *Agar Tara*, *Sigalmogal Tara* etc.

Changes in the lifestyle of the Adibasis in Bangladesh are comparatively recent. Changes in dialect, language and literature have been taking place since the inception of British rule. But the process was extremely slow as the colonial powers did not try to disturb their lifestyle except in a peripheral manner through the missionaries. By and large the British did not disturb the prevailing traditions of religions faith, such as Hindu or Muslim, throughout the subcontinent. The colonial rulers also did not try to interfere with the economic life of the Adibasis, as a result of which the religious and cultural activities of these people remained unadulterated. But, beginning with independence in 1947, sporadic settlements of non-Adibasi Bengalis in different parts of the Chittagong Hill Tracts and other Adibasi areas have brought major transformations of the economic and cultural life of these people with consequent change in their religious rites and rituals.

In conclusion we may observe that the religious beliefs and practices of the Adibasis typically are much more pervasive and penetrating in the lives of the persons concerned than are those of the non-Adibasi Bengalis. Several reasons for this may be pointed out. First, the religious customs that they follow are based on their community life, which is very much marked by cohesiveness and group solidarity. Second, the rituals are mostly connected with their economic life and hence they become part and parcel of their daily life. Finally the bond of clans and subgroups is fostered by strong allegiance to their rulers or headmen, who combine in themselves both political and religious authority.

## Works Cited and Recommended

Baldwin, C.D. 1933. *God and the Garo*. Sydney.

*Banglapedia: The National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh*. 2003. Sirajul Islam, General Editor. Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh. See entries: 'Tribal Culture' (Ali Nawaz), 'The Manipuri' (A.K. Sheram), 'The Chakma' (Willem Van Schendel), 'The Santals' (Ahmad Rafiq), 'The Oraon' (Ahmad Rafiq), 'The Garo' (Ali Nawaz), 'The Khasia' (Ali Nawaz), 'The Magh'.

Bessaiget, Pierre. 1960. *Tribes of the Northern Borders of Eastern Bengal: Social Research in East Pakistan*. Dhaka.

Gomes, S.G. 1988. *The Paharias: A Glimpse of Tribal Life in Northeastern Bangladesh*. Dhaka: Caritas Bangladesh.

Quereshi, Mahmud Shah, ed. 1984. *Tribal Cultures in Bangladesh*. Rajshahi: Institute for Bangladesh Studies, University of Rajshahi.

Roy, Asim. 1983. *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*. Princeton: Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Saad, Eva-Sadia. 2004 June. "Upajati Dharma: Akti Tatik Samikha." *Dhaka Bishyabiddalay Patrika*, No. 79 , 147.

Sattar, Abdus. 1966. *Aranya Janapadey*. Dhaka.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1971. *In the Sylvan Shadows*. Dhaka: Saquib Brothers.

Singh, Bhupender, ed. 1980. *The Tribal World and Its Transformations*. New Delhi.

Teichmann, G.O. 1984. *Early Days in the Chittagong Hill Tracts*. Dhaka.

Yamada Ryuji. 1970. *Cultural Formations of the Munda*. Tokyo: Takai University Press