



## Sociological Briefing

# Ambiguities as 'Hindu' in Assam, India

The comprehension of how identities are socially and institutionally recognized is relevant to eradicating racial discrimination and strengthening cultural diversity. In this arena, the impact of colonialism plays a crucial role and its inclusion in sociological contributions contributes to better analyzing ethnicity in particular societies and contexts, such as the case of the Assam valley districts (India).

Assam is an Indian state and region with a long tradition of interfaith transmission and cultural exchanges. Nevertheless, this tradition has not been properly considered in academia or by the governments. In the case of 'Hindus' living in Assam, there are historical processes influencing their visibility that require to be unveiled.

The author of "Becoming Hindu: The cultural politics of writing religion in colonial Assam" published in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* argues that colonial practices were imbricated in producing the 'Hindu' in a way that was transformative of quotidian relations and processes of exchange characterizing the region. Madhumita Sengupta explains how the single label of the 'Hindu' was developed by assimilating various tribal faiths and how different authors contributed to this simplification. In the author's words, the article "demonstrates how such loose definitions of the 'Hindu' directly fed into administrative and conceptual categories to officially embed a superbly flexible notion of Hinduism, capable of

encompassing all kinds of incongruities in the name of religious praxis."

### Definition of Hinduism and becoming Hindu

The author revises diverse portrays of Hinduism, particularly since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. There are several works referenced and explained in the article approaching Hinduism, for instance, the contribution by Abbe Dubois entitled "Hindu manners, Customs and Ceremonies" or the "Asiatic Studies, Religions and Social" by Lyall in 1884. In this vein, Lyall's contribution is one of the most important works in the field, based on the idea that Hinduism was expanded by absorbing the indigenous communities. This view of Hinduism influenced later works but authors such as Risely or Dalton developed different approaches. The ethnographers are at the core of the review done by Sengupta, including also observations and correspondences of Missionaries' accounts. To sum up, the author reviews the historical grassroots to understand how Hinduism has been conceptualized. Furthermore, it occurs the same regarding the ways of becoming Hindu. In this vein, the colonial census initially separated the 'Hindus' and 'Muslims', minimizing the possibility to report other realities and including a flexible definition of 'Hinduism'.

## Re-inscribing the past

While the previous sections focus on the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, this one focuses on the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The article reviews the authors and contributions addressing the understanding of Hinduism, such as Gait or Bhattacharya, among many others. The divergences and discordant ideas have influenced the way Hindu history has been explained and studied, sometimes trying to think “objectively” about the Hindu reality. There are many elements included in this section that demonstrate the complexity of the analysis, for instance referring to the ritual practice of human sacrifice and the existence of artifacts discovered in the region. It is also mentioned the existence of The Journal of the Assam Research Society which published articles about the Hindu devotional worship in the

region between 1933 and 1940. All these works show commonalities and divergences of Hinduism, which enriches the current contributions in the field.

The article provides evidence of the relevance of deeply analyzing the historical dimension of cultural diversity, religions, ethnicity, colonialism... and its influence on the way Hinduism has been conceptualized. In the author's words “Becoming a Hindu was easier now that the definition of Hinduism as a loosely bound corpus of ritually coded behavior enabled a wide array of practices to be labeled as ‘Hindu’”. The sociological works addressing issues linked to culture and ethnicity can be enriched by other disciplines, as shown in this work.