

Theme : RELIGION AND FAMILY LIFE

Friends, I come from the state of Meghalaya which lies in the North Eastern part of India. Meghalaya means “the abode of clouds” which is the source of our heavy rain. Hence, you might be aware of a village known as Cherrapunji which is renowned for being the wettest place in the world. It is a great opportunity for me to share with you about Religion and Family Life in India, particularly in Meghalaya.

India is a secular State. We have the freedom to practice our faith and propagate it. India is therefore, the land of many religions. India is also the land of many beautiful cultures and traditions.

In the region where I live, Christianity has been a dominating faith for nearly a century now. It was first brought by the Welsh Calvinistic missionaries about the middle of the 19th century when the British colonial rule was spreading far and wide. There is also a conspicuous indigenous faith whose followers claim it to be the religion given by God since the beginning of time. Other religions like Hinduism and Islam exist too but their strengths are limited mainly to the urban settlements.

In Meghalaya, religion and family life are so intertwined like the two sides of the same coin. Religion plays a major role in shaping the life of the people and the society as a whole. For example, a person who belongs to any religion will always tend to abide by the rules and norms of his/her religion. Very few I should say, can adapt another type of living other than their own religious ideology.

The indigenous tribes of Meghalaya are all matrilineal. Each tribe is constituted by a number of clans. The kinship system among the clan members is still strong. And marrying one's clan member is still considered a great taboo that usually leads to excommunication. In this matrilineal system, the inheritance of clan title and property comes from the maternal side. It is a great tradition that the youngest daughter has to take care of the parents till their last rites and for this responsibility she is made the custodian of most of the ancestral properties of the family. The paternal uncle is usually the manager of the family in its religious matters as well as in other affairs of the family. It is of anthropological interest to see how these traditional arrangements are badly affected not only by the introduction of outside religious influences but also by the kind of global economy. For instance, an uncle of a farming clan is more traditional in his approach and function than another who has taken up an executive post away from his home and clan.

In a family, all brothers and sisters live together with their parents as long as they are not married. When they get married, they move away from their parents and live with their spouses starting new families of their own. Usually, the children follow the religion and tradition of their mother. And in many cases, the husband joins his wife and children in maintaining the matrilineal system in the family. However, it may be noted that the husband still retains his own title and clan allegiance to his own mother. In my opinion from practical examples, the children pay a great homage and tribute to their paternal

lineage, particularly to their father's mother; at times respect given to paternal relations overshadows the maternal influence. I have seen many instances where elaborate preparations were being made to receive the social visit of a paternal member. This is in line with the indigenous traditional belief that it is the paternal family/clan that causes their birth. For this reason the paternal family is called the "kha" (*kha* means one who gives/causes birth). It is a respectful practice that a family always requests the paternal relations to suggest a name for the child. In certain clans, the name of the first child bears a prefix derived from its paternal clan name.

Religion plays a great role in family life. The life of a person is attached to his/her religion through various rituals and practices. This also includes naming ceremony, betrothal and marriage ceremonies, and funeral. It is good news for the IARF to say that by and large people of various religious affiliations today have been sharing in many community celebrations of life and death together with less and less reservation. We have moved from being strictly religious to being more spiritual — enjoying our interdependence and belongingness among ourselves and with the same divine presence, a common Spirit for all beings.

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Nangroi Suting from the Khasi Hills, India, is a Unitarian and grew up in the remote village of Mawlat. He went to Shillong for higher education and has been a government primary school teacher since 1995. He is also a voluntary Church Visitor, and helps the Unitarian Union as Secretary of the UUSSC (Unitarian Union Social Service Committee). In 2002, he went to USA for training in ministry and church leadership program at Harvard University Divinity School and Meadville Lombard, under the aegis of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. On his return from the US, he married D.Barishisha Mukhim in January 2005. She also comes from an active Unitarian family.