

## The Influence of Religion on Entrepreneurship: A Study on Tribal Christian Entrepreneurs in Assam

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**ABSTRACT::** Researchers have long established a relationship between religion and entrepreneurship, but the influences of religion on entrepreneurial activities have not been clearly discussed. The study aims to understand how religion influences entrepreneurs. The study is based on semi structured interview with 12 tribal Christian entrepreneurs in Assam. The findings suggest that for entrepreneurs, religion is highly individualized but maintains the notion that religion does matters and influences entrepreneurship. Moreover, entrepreneurs display highly the religious ethical values in their work. Further more, religious organizations and structures provides a supportive environment to enhance the spirit of entrepreneurship among the sample respondents.

**KEYWORDS:** Religion, Entrepreneurship, Ethical, Religious, Belief.

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Date of Submission: 08-05-2019

Date of acceptance: 25-05-2019

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### I. INTRODUCTION:

Religion is an important social institution that have strong norms and religious teachings that sets behaviour expectations, which strongly influences the member of a society. Religious beliefs intrude in daily lives of people irrespective of religious or non religious environment. According to Weber (cited in Thomas & Muller, 2000), at society level, differences in entrepreneurial activity can be explained by cultural and religious factors. Religion is also perceived to influence the ways in which economic activities are pursued (Naka, 2008). Studies have shown diverse religious responses to economic change. For instance, Dodd and Seaman (1998), studied the relationship between the individual religion and enterprise and points that religion affects believer's entrepreneurial activity and contact network as well as influence the decision to become an entrepreneur and manage an enterprise. Contradictory to it, the study also suggests that religion may not be a significant factor for entrepreneurship. Religion has depicted both positive and negative responses that have been influencing the relationship between religion and entrepreneurship.

The study aims to explore the influence of religion on entrepreneurship. It basically addresses how entrepreneurs perceive religion and in what ways the entrepreneurs relate religion with their activities.

The article is organized as follows. The first part refers to the existing literature that discusses the religious factors influencing entrepreneurship; secondly, the methodological specifications; thirdly, the analysis of the data and finally the conclusion.

### II. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Researchers have long established a relationship between Religion and Entrepreneurship. Religious beliefs and practices significantly influence many different areas of a person's life and especially the economic behaviour of different societies. Though there exist a link between religion and economic behaviour, but the influence of religious factors on entrepreneurship is poorly understood because of its indirect and complex relationship. In fact, the influence of religion on entrepreneurship is very intrinsic compared to other social and environmental factors.

#### Religion and entrepreneurship:

The literature on the influence of religion on entrepreneurship is largely dominated by the Max Weber's thesis (1905) on the role of Protestant ethic in the rise of capitalism particularly in Europe. Weber's thesis is generally considered to be the base with regard to the relationship between religion and entrepreneurship. The thesis generally describes certain critical elements such as a Protestant ethic, rationality and secularization that explained modernization in Europe and much of his work still continue to intrude the discussion in literature.

In Indian scenario, among the socio-cultural values in Hinduism, the caste system plays a significant role in entrepreneurship. Caste system in India was a scheme of social stratification and division of labour. With each caste came a traditionally ascribed profession ( Medhora, 1965; Tripathi, 1971; Nandy, 1973). This is exactly what Weber's own studies of Asian religion and many of his followers illustrated ( Singer, 1966). Asian religion in fact, lacked certain critical elements which were present in European case and the absence of those elements explained the backward economic development. Kapp, 1963 (cited in Singer, 1966), follows Weber in conceptualizing Hinduism as a particular set of beliefs and values with a particular set of social institutions (the caste system, the joint family and the village). According to Kapp, the beliefs and values of Hinduism include a belief in rebirth, law of karma, linking actions of past life to present rewards and present actions to future life, these tends to increase the feeling of helplessness, reliance on magic and astrology which denies that history, social reform and economic development depend on human will and social action, and thus stands in the way of the emergence of one basic prerequisite of economic development basically the strong belief that " man does make his own history". Supporting partially to Kapp's study, Audretsch, Boente and Tamvada (2007), examined the influence of religion on the decision to become an entrepreneur, based on ninety thousand workers in India. The study suggests that, Islam and Christianity are conducive to entrepreneurship while Hinduism inhibits entrepreneurship (Audretsch & Meyer, 2009) as the lingering caste system seems to engender a focus on casual labour for individuals and influence the supply of entrepreneurs and the survival of entrepreneurs in difficult situations (Srivastava, 2008). Thus, emphasizing that religion shapes the entrepreneurial decision.

Religion has been argued to affect entrepreneurship in various ways. It is not only a cultural causal antecedent, but has been playing a prominent role in shaping ethical preferences. With regards to religiosity, Emani and Nazari (2012), examined the ethical attitudes between entrepreneurs who described themselves as more religious and those who considered themselves as less religious with the possible effects of religious orthodoxy on the ethical attitudes. Their findings indicate that entrepreneurs with high religious interest as well as entrepreneurs, who were highly orthodox in their faith, expressed more sensitive ethical judgments compared to the less religious entrepreneurs.

Eisenstadt (1968) highlights the importance of the trans-formative potential of a religion for economic motives and activities. Trans-formative potential of a religion refers to going beyond the range of usual perception of a religion which is free from all constraints. According to him, higher the trans-formative potential of a religion, greater is the degree of social openness among the individuals of the religious groups which facilitates the entrepreneurial behaviour and conversely, low trans-formative potential may inhibit entrepreneurship. Even in the study of five world religion by Helble (2006), it was found that religiously open societies boost trade and better integrate into the world economy which encourages more inter cultural interactions between the trading partners.

Drawing our attention to the culture of individualism, literature suggests having a strong relationship between religion and individualism. An individual is free to choose those beliefs that satisfy them and exhibits a good life ( Bellah et al., 1985). Religion influences individualism that exerts on individual choice ( Madsen, 2009), leading to more individualized religion. In terms of relationship between religion and entrepreneurship, Weaver and Agle (2002), claims that religion influences ethical behavior in business. Griebel, Park and Neubert, 2014, tried to explore the relationship between religion and entrepreneurial behaviour, based on Christian entrepreneurs in Colorado. Their findings suggest that religion does influence the entrepreneurial activity as the entrepreneurs are able to align their faith and their work by creating new working environments based upon family, good character and helping others, which displayed their faith in the form of individualized nature of religion.

In terms of religiosity, Azzi and Ehrenberg (1975), finds that an increase in real wage rates reduces religious participation. They viewed that time devoted to formal services and personal prayer will be high among persons with low value of time such as woman not in the labour force and retired persons. Moreover, older people tend to spend more time on religion if the probability of salvation depends on cumulative religious activities over one's life. This is in consistent with Barro and McCleary (2003), study on the impact of adherence to religious beliefs on economic performance which was based on the international survey data on religiosity. The findings indicated that the increase in church attendance actually reduce economic growth which is again in line with Radmard (2012). He explains that contributing to religious services involves opportunity cost. Instead of going to church or spending resources on religious activities, individuals can participate in productive economic tasks. Perhaps, this is well explained in the theories of religion especially the Secularization Model where religious beliefs are viewed as the reflection of fear and ignorance. And thus, it is presumed that religion would decline with the advancement in education and science. Further more, it indicates that, economic development reduces individual participation in formal religious services and personal prayer, decreases religious beliefs and diminishes the influence of organized religion on politics and governance, which is even reflected in Weber's work. According to Karl Marx, decline in religion is one manifestation of modernization (McCleary & Barro, 2006). In the same line, Helble (2006), also states globalization as a threat to

cultural identity. In the words of Radmard (2012), while examining the level of entrepreneurship across U.S. counties, with the help of religiosity and religious diversity, states that, religious counties have lower potential for entrepreneurship because the religious teachings, set of rules and framework impacts the economic behaviour of individuals. Being religious, promotes the spirit of conservatism which value hard and good work within the established framework rather than a revolutionary or radical change. For example risk taking is not promoted by religious teachings.

Perhaps, different religion and religious institutions have a significantly different impact on the tendency to become an entrepreneur (Dana, 2009; Zelekha, Avnimelech & Sharabi, 2013). Moreover, the relationship between religion and entrepreneurship is highly context specific and is expected to vary over time and social settings (Dodd & Gotsis, 2007). Not every religion significantly impact entrepreneurship equally, one religion that has been viewed to be positively influencing entrepreneurship is Christianity. Christian environment plays an important role for entrepreneurial career irrespective of individual characteristics (Naka, 2008; Parboteeah, Walter & Block, 2015). Therefore, the focus of our study is Christian entrepreneurs. Further more, since the majority of people belonging to Christianity in Assam are tribal thus, to understand the influence of religion in entrepreneurship, number of Christian tribal entrepreneurs belonging to different districts in Assam were interviewed. Through the interaction with the sample respondents we tried to understand the entrepreneurs' perception on religion and how they related it with their work.

### III. METHODOLOGY:

The study is based on interview method through which the primary data was generated to build a database. Entrepreneurs (individuals who have already manifested their entrepreneurial propensity by establishing an enterprise) were regarded as the source of information.

#### Population:

Only the first generation Christian entrepreneurs belonging to different tribes and having a live business establishment (manufacturing, trading or service) were taken into consideration.

**Sampling unit:** An entrepreneur whose enterprise satisfied the following two characteristics were regarded as the sampling unit.

- i. The enterprise is promoted and managed by an entrepreneur who is involved in all stages of enterprise life cycle. Inherited enterprises were thus excluded.
- ii. The enterprise is existing for a minimum period of 2 years (demonstrating some sort of success).

**Data Collection Design:** To gather data for the study, a semi structured interview was conducted with the tribal entrepreneurs and each interview lasted for more than one hour. The basic purpose of the interview was to understand the influence of religion on entrepreneurial activities. The interviews were accompanied by written notes on observation and other clues that were noticed during the interview.

**Sample design:** The sample entrepreneurs spreading across villages, towns and tea gardens of Assam were selected through snowball sampling. The research began with a known tribal Christian entrepreneur who was interviewed and at the end was asked if he could recommend any other Christian tribal entrepreneur.

#### A BRIEF PROFILE OF THE SAMPLE ENTREPRENEURS:

FIRST NAME	GENDER	AGE	JOB
Augustina	Female	30	Tailoring & Weaving Centre's owner
Anandi	Female	64	School owner
Bina	Female	29	Beauty Parlour owner
John Akash	Male	40	Banking Service Provider
Joseph	Male	42	Children's Hostel owner
Benedict	Male	27	Steel Fabrication owner
Sunil	Male	29	Garage owner
Timthius	Male	29	School owner
Prabhu	Male	35	Grocery shop owner
Sodip	Male	39	Garment shop owner
Mangal	Male	49	Grocery shop owner
Romeo	Male	27	Restaurant owner

### IV. FINDINGS:

The findings of the study have been described in various themes: firstly, the personal beliefs in religion apart from the conventional ones; secondly, shaping of personality with good traits which proves to be beneficial for the entrepreneurs and finally, religious organizations as a support to entrepreneurship development. These themes helps to better understand the link between religion and entrepreneurship.

### **Individualized Religion:**

Entrepreneurs mirror a strong influence of individualism in religion. Religion for the entrepreneurs is not the traditional ones. It is unconventional. The entrepreneurs interviewed have their own perception on religion and believe that religion is not all about clinging to the conventional practices like attending church regularly or devoting time to prayer services. They choose those aspects of religion which they feel to be best and satisfy them. The concept of religion among these entrepreneurs revolves round the ideas of good life, disciplined way of living and good relation with others. The interview lights out a different understanding of religion among entrepreneurs which is personalized and individualized in nature. This is best quoted by Sunil, a 29 year old garage owner, when asked about his perception on religion and how it is related with his work: Religion is not all about going to church only. For me work is worship. I believe, satisfying my customer is satisfying my God. I do not go to church on Sundays because it is a business day for me; but that does not mean that I am not a religious man. Going to church on Sundays does not make a man religious. It is all about following the values that are taught in the church. God has sent us to accomplish the assigned work; and if I have been merely praying and not performing my work truthfully, then I am being unjust to my faith, my family, my work and to my God (interview data).

Sunil's dialogue reflects a strong individualistic element that put forth the choice and autonomy in religion. Although the practices are unconventional yet these entrepreneurs intrinsically prefers to work within the framework of a religion. Their beliefs centers the religious values rather than the traditional activities. This reflects direct relationship of religion with behaviour. For example, the dialogue, 'Work is Worship' is very much related with the Bible. Genesis Chapter 2 of the Bible indicates that Adam worshiped God in the Garden of Eden, not by praying or reading the Bible, but by performing the duties assigned to him by God.

John Akash a 40 year old banking service provider reflects a different perspective of religion which in fact, breaks the traditional psychology of tribal behaviour. He demonstrates his views as:

Religion is not a fear for me. I pray to God every day. It gives me a positive energy to work and perform my daily task. Love, respect, generosity, honesty and hard work are certain values which were taught to me since my childhood and I still carry it in my life. You can say that it is flowing in my blood. I do not go to church. It makes no difference to me. I am religious in my own ways. I follow the values and believe that serving people is a kind of worship and I do that (interview data).

It is perceived that tribal religion and behaviour is based on the emotion of fear rather than rational thinking (Sarkar, 1965). However, John's dialogue witness the rationality in thoughts and mirrors individualism in behaviour. This is because a society always keeps on changing and it is never constant. Thus, the religious beliefs also transforms as the context of a person change. In some cases, new rituals, new elements and new practices intrude religion that triggers new thoughts that leads to individualistic behaviour. Perhaps, religion has become more individual personal beliefs rather than a ritual practice. Therefore, these entrepreneurs exerts much on the values which defines their religion and incorporate them in their daily lives.

### **Reflecting ethical values:**

Demonstrating the ethical values echoed as the most important aspect of life and work among the sample entrepreneurs. These entrepreneurs strongly perceived that the regular practice of going to church or attending catechism classes during childhood shaped their behaviour to large extent and they continue to carry those values in their work and life. This is well expressed by Joseph a 42 year old hostel owner, as he narrates: Religion has played a very important role in my life and it is still playing. Since my childhood I have been with the Christian missionaries. My life is moulded by Christian teachings of disciplined life which is the strength of my business. The way I behave with others, is reflected in my business (interview data).

This goes same with Timthius a 29 year old school owner, who believes that moral values are greatest among other values. Being disciplined, respecting, helping and demonstrating good behaviour to others, helps a person in every walk of life. He reflect this as: My school has no religion, but when education is concerned, people prefer to send their children in schools run by the christian people, particularly when the medium is English. The priority is quality education and inculcating the moral ways of life which is best taught and mirrored in Christian teachings (interview data).

It was found that religion is so deep rooted among the sample entrepreneurs that it became an essential part of their life. They practice it every day. However, it should be noted that these entrepreneurs refers to their religious upbringing. As Sodip a 39 year old garment shop owner expresses: Being a christian I feel hard to go against my ethics. I cannot charge more or cheat on products as other business men do. Being good and faithful to others is what I have been taught since my childhood. My ethics influences my business...being fair in prices draw more customers in my shop (interview data).

However, being good is a religious belief. Many of the entrepreneurs perceive that being a good person is linked to leading a life taught by Jesus Christ. Behavioural scripts like the Good Samaritan triggers an individual to behave in an ethical way. This kind of Religious scripts presents a direct relationship of Religious

beliefs and ethical behaviour. This is well reflected in the sentiments of Mangal a 49 year old grocery shop owner: It was not difficult for me to inculcate good values, for my religion started nurturing me since my childhood. Every day when I have been to church, I have been taught the ways and life of Jesus Christ (interview data).

A conversation with Romeo 27 year old a restaurant owner reveals that many of the entrepreneurs witness religion as a strength that guides and directs them through out their life. He says: God is my leader and he guides me in every walk of my life. Church teaches me how to behave with the people, how to work and how to be the strength and support my family (interview data). Praying to God is a kind of meditation which stabilizes the respondents mind and provides them with a positive energy to carry on the daily routine. The same emotion is reflected by Prabhu a 35 year old grocery shop owner who says: I go to church regularly because I find peace in God, but at the same time I make sure that my customers does not return unsatisfied. Both religion and work are priorities in my life. I need religion to guide me in my work and my life (interview data).

Again, act of love and generosity have always been the core of Christian teachings and upbringing. The sample entrepreneurs tries to display these values by linking it with their work or they create such an environment which helps them to impart those values. It also lights out that work (business) is not all about earning profits but also a means for an individual to fulfill their religious values as narrated by Anandi a 64 year old school owner: God has always showered his blessings upon me. Today, what I have is more than enough. I always had a wish to serve the society with what I have. I have seen many hapless children in my community and I wanted them to be educated and be the backbone of tomorrow. Since God has given me so much, I dedicated my life educating the poor children (interview data). This again shows that ethical behaviour is very much related to religious salvation and thus indicating that religion provides a motive for right behaviour. Furthermore, the sample entrepreneurs are found to be more into service sector and the explanation above may provide a better justification on why they are more into service sector.

#### **Religious organizations as a platform for supporting entrepreneurship:**

The most important motivating factor for the growth of entrepreneurs in a particular society is the social desirability, which comes with the institutions surrounding an entrepreneur, providing a positive attitude towards it. Conversely, entrepreneurship decline when the institutions attack and much of its creativity and energy is lost in aligning oneself to the social status quo. As such the religious organizations or structure plays a supporting role in enhancing entrepreneurship. Similarly, the sample entrepreneurs conveyed the immense support of the church organizations enhancing their economic status. Here the church organization refers to the church initiated organizations. In fact, the church has been playing a continuous effort to provide a better platform for skill development programs as demonstrated by Augustina a 30 year old Tailoring and Weaving center owner: I regularly go to church. I have been actively participating in church activities. Church has played an important role in shaping my life. It is through the church organization that I came to know about a development program initiated by them and I got myself trained free of cost. It provided a good platform for me to learn and develop (interview data).

Religion has long been considered to influence the economic decisions of the people. The conversations with these entrepreneurs reveal the way the church guided and motivated them from an aimless life to much meaningful life. The church helps in building a social network through which different training programs are provided that suits the individual interest. This creates trust among the members which also helps in community development programs through which financial assistance (social capital) is provided in setting up the individual enterprises. This makes it evident that religious affiliations also provide social network which helps in disseminating information on various issues. This is even reflected in Bina's conversation, a 29 year old beauty parlour owner: The church is very active in skill development programs. I came to know about such a program when I went to attend a Sunday prayer service. I was very interested in participating in such a training program which was free of cost. I got myself trained and even more, the church organization helped me financially to start up my own business (interview data).

However, churches and religious congregations requires to operate like a business in order to survive in a competitive environment as religion exists for man. Thus, it becomes obligatory for the religious affiliations to provide its members with specific advice to survive and succeed. On the other hand, people belonging to minority religious group, who are excluded from the mainstream of the society, seeks advice and services through religious networks or affiliations. Therefore, it compels the congregations to shape a conducive environment for its members where people can flourish.

Further more, Benedict a 27 year old steel fabrication owner says: My work is shaped by my religion. I am trained in fabrication by church organization (interview data). Religion plays a pivotal role in the lives of these respondents. It has been shaping, motivating, guiding and directing them in every walk of life. These entrepreneurs depicts a strong interrelationship between religion and work. In fact, work is consuming the maximum proportion of time in their lives and at the same time religion is strongly penetrating in the work life

as the entrepreneurs carry their beliefs in their work. Perhaps, the sample entrepreneurs, view a strong influence of religion in their work.

## V. CONCLUSION:

This paper explores the relationship between religion and entrepreneurship and suggest that religion does matter and influences the entrepreneurial decision. The study is based on 12 tribal Christian entrepreneurs in Assam. These entrepreneurs were religious in nature as all of them believed in God. Religion has been influencing these entrepreneurs in various ways like shaping ethical preferences, demonstrating good behaviour, a means to fulfill religious values and providing a conducive environment to support entrepreneurship. The study also emerged with a different perspective on religion. The entrepreneurs viewed religion in a very individualistic and personalized way. Their definition of religion was unconventional. Perhaps, it contradict the tradition psychology of tribal behaviour of irrationality in thoughts. Religion was not opined in formal terms of rituals, attendance to Sunday prayer services or participation in other church activities. Rather, it was perceived in terms of religious values which they chose to best fit and satisfy them. They exerted more on the values which implied to be the way of life led by Jesus Christ. They were religious in their own ways.

It was also noted that the entrepreneurs were highly ethical while dealing with people. They emphasized on the religious teaching which were taught to them when they were young. Indirectly, the indication was on the way they were brought up. Further more, the religious affiliations supported these entrepreneurs by creating a social network through which the social capital was provided in order to boost up the spirit of entrepreneurship among the sample respondents.

However, the findings of the study is limited to tribal Christian entrepreneurs only. It is not known if the conclusion holds true to other Christian entrepreneurs. Moreover, it cannot be generalized to entrepreneurs belonging to other religion. The study only helps us to better understand the linkage between religion and entrepreneurial activities. Each of the limitations of the study calls for further research which could provide a better insight in the relationship between religion and entrepreneurship.

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