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# **Christian missions and northeast India: A historical study on proliferation of Christianity in Tribal societies**

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**Abstract**---The British colonized the India in eighteenth century and eventually control over the northeast region in the nineteenth century, the region inhabited basically by the Indigenous peoples, served to open doors to the region for the missionaries. The pioneer missionaries who came to Northeast India in the nineteenth century belonged to the American Baptist Foreign Mission and Welsh Presbyterian missions. It was a known fact that there was a working relation between the British colonial powers and Christian missions in Northeast India. Both the colonial power and missions held the "civilizing responsibility" as their shared goal. Therefore, the concern of the paper is to study the proliferation of Christianity and impact of Christian missionary activities on the people of Northeast India with special reference to the tribal society.

**Keywords**---Christianity, missionaries, education, northeast India, British Colony, American Baptist, civilization.

## **Introduction**

The Northeast is a unique region of India that is unlike any other part of the country. The eight states of this region, nicknamed "the Seven Sisters and one brother," differ from the mainland India in many ways. A large segment of the indigenous people belongs to the Mongoloid race. Ethnically and culturally, they have more in common with their neighbouring Asian nations of Burma (modern-day Myanmar) and Tibet, than with the rest of India. Geographically it is almost totally separated from the rest of India except by a small narrow strip of land just over twelve miles wide. It has the highest percentage of Christians in India, although in terms of actual numbers, southern India has more Christians. Christianity has grown phenomenally among the highland tribes who are now predominantly Christian. Out of the seven states of this region three of them Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland have a Christian majority population. Of the

remaining four states, one state Manipur, is about half Christian and another state, Arunachal Pradesh, is rapidly becoming Christianized today.

Christian missions had a huge impact in the North-eastern region of India. These missions were led by British colonisation which produced a solidarity that changed the entire landscape of Northeast India. With the advent of Christian missionaries, it brought about very significant social and political changes that shaped the identities as well as distinctive characteristics of the tribal communities in northeast India.

### **Objectives**

This paper has some objectives:

1. To highlight the coming and establishment of Christianity in the North-eastern part of India.
2. To understand the development of Christianity and its impact on hilly tribal areas.
3. To discuss the missionary activities in tribal societies.

### **Methodology**

This paper is presented in a descriptive method. The collection and analysis of data from various sources suitable to the context of emergence of Christian missionary works in northeast India has been done through secondary sources including research journal, Research Article, Books etc.

### **Discussion**

In the initial years, the British East India Company prohibited evangelising amongst the colonies. They feared it could hurt local sentiments and consequently hurt British commerce. Their stance changed with the Charter Act of 1813, which allowed missionary activities, and was enacted in response to pressure from the British public.

In 1792, prior to the Charter Act, the British missionaries William Carey and John Thomas had arrived in Calcutta and had begun their 'groundwork' while disguising themselves as indigo makers. Not permitted to evangelise in public, they set up a base in Serampore, which at the time fell under the Danish flag. They stayed on in Serampore after the new legislation was passed, which formally opened up the Indian mission field. Whereas, Mission work in the Northeast began relatively late. Only in the early decades of the nineteenth century was the Gospel first introduced to the people of the Northeast. The earliest missionaries were Baptists. They were followed by Presbyterians, then Catholics, and much later by other denominations.

### **Proliferation of Christian Missionary and Activities in North-East India**

*Baptist missionaries* were the first proclaimers of the Gospel in the Northeast. They travelled a difficult road to get their destiny. These missionaries belonged to

the *Baptist Missionary Society (BMS)* of England. The Serampore missionaries initiated the first Christian mission to the northeast and the earliest evangelistic work in the Northeast was carried out by *Krishna Pal*, the first Bengali Indian converted by Baptist *William Carey*. Another mission was carried out by James Rae, a former official of the East India Company. But, Due to a change in circumstances, the two missionaries could not continue for long and had to leave the field. The Serampore Mission was already overstretched in India and could not give enough attention and care to its new mission. As a result, it decided to shut down its operations in Assam and hand over the field to the *American Baptists*.

The American Baptists were the ones who eventually made the progress and firmly established Christianity in Northeast India. This is the second phase of Baptist missions in the Northeast. There was also a fact that Just about the same time as the beginning of the tea industry, the Northeast opened to Christian missionary work. Captain Charles Alexander Bruce, who became the Superintendent of Tea Culture in Assam, who insisted on the need for Christian missionaries. He offered significant financial donations to promote the gospel in the Naga Hills was arguably due to his conviction that conversion would pacify the Nagas, and thus end their regular raids on his plantations, which intrude on their ancestral lands.

However, the first permanent mission of the American Baptists was started in 1836 in the small town of Sadiya. In March 1836, *Nathan Brown*, a trained linguist and *Oliver Cutter*, a printer, were located in Assam with the request of Captain Jenkins. They arrived with their families in Sadiya, in the northeast corner of Assam, along the banks of the Brahmaputra. The site was chosen for the convenience of both parties: the Company could offer them protection, and the location was thought to provide easy access to the Shan communities the missionaries hoped to evangelise. Thus, it is said that this mission was an 'accidental'. Its original plan was not to evangelise Northeast India but to find a way into China and evangelise them. Their headquarters was closely located near the Khampti and Singpho tribal people who were the targeted group. They were the Shan tribal people that had migrated from Burma. The missionaries hoped that these tribes would eventually lead them into China.

The tribes in the Northeast lived isolated from each other, mainly due to the rugged mountainous terrain they inhabited, and also to the constant state of warfare in which they were engaged. All this made communications very difficult among the tribes. Also, they have varied languages and cultures. Therefore, the two missionaries began their language studies all over again to learn the local languages around them. They were joined by a third missionary, Miles Bronson. The missionaries quickly learned the Khampti and Singpho languages. They did basic Bible translation work and produced simple books in the tribal languages. They established a school for tribal children and preached around village to village as much as they could.

But, in 1839 a large group of khamti warriors attacked the British camp in Sadiya. Along with the armies, the missionaries were also forced to flee another station known as Jaipur. This move separated them from the Khampti and

Singpho tribal people, but it brought them closer to another large tribe, *the Nagas*, who were to play a significant role in subsequent Baptist history. Miles Bronson carried a new mission on the progress of Christianity among hill tribes rather than the plains people of Assam. But after so much of his efforts the mission was not successful at all. Thus, another phase of the mission was initiated by *Edward Clark*. With the valuable help of an Assamese evangelist, *Godhula*, Clark made his way up to the Naga hills and established the first church in the winter of 1872. Gradually they started preaching their gospels around villages and it became the second bastion of Baptist Christianity after the Garo hill. However, prior to that Mikir hills, Garo hills, and the Chota Nagpur tribals of upper Assam were also baptised by missionaries of Assam.

After the Nagas, the tribal people of Manipur were the next to be reached with the Gospel. The situation there was slightly different regarding the government and politics. Manipur was an independent kingdom ruled by a Hindu raja or king. It was not a part of Assam under British colonial rule. But the British did gain control of Manipur and allowed the king to keep his throne. Out of respect for the Hindu king, the British government did not allow any Christian missionaries to work in Manipur. *William Pettigrew* was a young missionary from England, later he became a Baptist and joined the American Baptist Mission. He was allowed to start a school in the Imphal, but prohibited to preach due to the government restriction on evangelism. Nonetheless, he was permitted to do his evangelistic work in the hills mainly among the Tangkhul tribal people.

Christianity was introduced rather late in the Lushai (Mizo) hills. In a remarkable partnership that was to endure for many years, two men, *J. H. Lorrain* and *F. W. Savidge*, who belonged to Arthington Aborigines Mission, began working among the Lushai tribal people in 1894. After reaching the Lushai hills, Lorrain and Savidge learned the local language, translated portions of the New Testament, and prepared a dictionary. Due to local authorities' order, they had left their mission. But eventually they returned to the Mizo hills in 1903 as Baptist missionaries. During their absence, the Presbyterians had moved into the northern part of the territory, and so the Baptist church was established in the southern Mizo hills with its headquarters at *Lung-leh*.

The Presbyterians followed the footsteps of Baptist missionary advent into the northeast and they firmly established themselves in the Khasi, Jaintia and in the northern Mizo hills. The first permanent Khasi church was founded in 1846. *The Roman Catholic Mission* made a late entrance in the northeast. In the late-seventeenth century, there were two Catholic communities existing at Rangamati and Bondashill, both located in Assam. Notwithstanding, the Khasi hills became the cradle for the birth and growth of the Catholic mission in the Northeast. All the three major denominations and their missions began in the Khasi Hills: the early Baptists, the Presbyterians and finally the Catholics. Therefore, we can see that most of the conversions took place among the hill tribal people, and so the hills became the new home of Christianity instead of plains of Assam.

### **Impact of Christian Missions in Tribal Societies**

Undoubtedly, evangelism was the main priority of the missionaries. The only reason they came to the Northeast was to preach and spread the Gospel. The aim of missions was to convert people and establish churches to be self-supporting, self-propagating and self-governing. To achieve preaching, education, medical and some philanthropic ministry had adopted. It was, to some extent, a holistic missionary approach.

Notwithstanding, the establishment of schools was one of the principles means adopted by the missionaries for the introduction of Christianity. In addition to Preaching and Translation, protestant missionaries often elevated the Bible as the ultimate source of authority and thus creating a condition that if an individual have to worship God, he must be able to read. This is how education and evangelism were interlinked and constituted the basis for civilizing missions (Visvanathan,1993). In the context of northeast India, the missionaries played a central role with the British government who took over the complete responsibility for educating the tribal people of North-east India. Schools were established by the missionaries along with churches and these philanthropic activities were uphold under the government patronage. In initial phases, American Baptist missionaries had failed to preaching their gospels in tribal villages but, soon they adopted some humanitarian works as a method of evangelisation such as opening of schools, publication of literature, translation of religious scripts, openings of hospitals. A pioneer missionary E.G. Phillips (1886) explained about the necessity of school education as: *“In aim and plan, the great thing ever before the mission has been evangelisation. The Garos are ruined by sin. The gospel alone can restore them. But the gospel must be communicated. Almost of necessity, the written page needs follow the preached word.”* (Phillips, 1983)

However, the education imparted by missionaries had become a tool for colonial government to civilised and also making them loyal subjects in the new administration. The notable thing is that where the government failed, the missionary work often succeeded and by their activities could assist the pacification of the natives. This was only because, the missionary was the only man who knew the language of hill tribes. Thus, Christian missions were a means for lightening the task of government through the work of education. In this circumstance, both missions and colonial government had to expand beyond their available resources, thus missions needed funds and administrator needed staff and educational facilities.

Missionary conversion through social filtration rather than through proselytization is a fascinating notion. The missionaries contributed in tribal societies as agent of *social amelioration* which means to make society better. The remarkable contributions were in the area of women emancipation through education, abolition of superstitions that were hindering their development. The education of girls contradicted the stereotypical role of women that saw them as the centre of domestic life but not in participants in terms of decision-making positions. Notably the women of Garos, Khasi and Jaintias in Meghalaya have some amount of liberty and personal rights, yet it was not easy to persuade them of the advantage of female education. A traditional saying gave popular expression

that: *“A woman had no rights at all. Body, mind and spirit, she belonged from her birth to her death, to her father, her brother, and her husband.”* Thus, it was quite clear that the men did not wish any change regarding the status of women in society. Initially, school for girls was not supported by the village men, so the lessons were done in the forms of practical participation which included weaving, needle, bamboo work, gardening, household management, painting etc. In terms of women rights, one village local from Mizoram commented: *“In the pre-Christian society divorce was easy and common because women had very little right if any at all. Husband and wife relationship were not cooperative...but Christianity has transformed Mizo family life, divorce is rare, husbands are less bossy and more helpful to their wives”* (Downs,1992). Nevertheless, the western interpretation emphasised on female emancipation in North-east india through imparting education.

Another influential participation of missionaries in tribal societies was discarded the superstitious beliefs that constricted the native into a complex classification. The superstitious beliefs of diseases in the hills of Mizoram where in cases of small-pox or cholera, they generate the matter even worse by compressing all villagers into the same house. They believed that this would leave the ‘ramhuai’ (demon) no space to enter. In that circumstance, the missionaries did not impose western medicine but they tried to gain native’s trust first and gradually explained them about cause and cure of such diseases through education.

Nonetheless, the evangelisation and civilizing process so far effected the forms and values of tribal cultures and societies. Missionary education was disseminated through western ideology where school teachers trained in western pedagogies. The educative process provided by missionary teachers challenged the framework of tribal indigenous society. Although, Christian missionaries ought to improve the society but their ideology sometimes challenged the identity of indigenous religion and cultural system. The missions threatened many of the traditional institutions by creating limitation on tribal festivals, marriages, death ceremonies, polygamy which are related to old cultural tradition.

Meanwhile, the missionary alleviated the tribal identity as well. The several tribal villages frequently engaged at war with each other. Because, they have dialectical differences, so communication among themselves was quite complex. Other hand they all have different culture, customs and social norms with tribal religions. Thus, prior to British administration, language was not a primary source for identity among the hill people of northeast India. It was only after the propagation of gospel through church and imparting education by centrally controlled school programs, a common social space was developed among tribal people. It promoted the geographical integration of societies and a creation of a tribal identity. Notwithstanding, missionary education had two consequences, firstly, as means of preaching the Christian truths and secondly as a means for recruitment. In this reason, they gave priority to study of vernacular language before entering into any hilly region for evangelisation.

However, the proliferation of Christianity among tribal people was not always smooth and most of the time the missionary had to face problems in front of their traditional beliefs. Meanwhile, the outcome was fascinating as the educated tribal

elites who became the leaders of revivalist movements and opposed both colonial rule and proselytization of missionaries. The significant example is the seng-khasi movement started in end of the nineteenth century aiming at the revival of khasi traditional customs, beliefs and forms of expression. Subsequently it enabled the local organization to negotiate with the colonial officer through the advantage of a common language. In 1918, a group of Nagas comprising of village headman, some teachers, government employee and other educated men came together and form the Naga Club. Thus, by unifying themselves in a single identity, tribal people had expressed in the political sphere.

In terms of relation, missionaries, colonial ruler and tribals had a complicated connection but most part the relationship was marked with a mutual acceptance. Mostly, village chiefs were actively participated in the work of evangelisation, bible translation, printing, health facilities and providing pastoral care for the community. The largest and strongest Christian communities of today are found among the highland tribal people. In this regard H.K Barpujari said that " The process of acculturation was accelerated by the spread of the gospel, expansion of education, introduction of Roman script, translation and publication of the Bible and literary works. Christian ideas of brotherhood and western education widened their mental horizon."

Christian missions also impacted on the Assamese society in the case of reviving and rescuing Assamese language from Bengal hegemony. While Assam was waving by *Bhasa Andolan* to protest against imposition of Bengali as official language (1832) in Assam, the two earliest Baptist missionaries, Nathan Brown and Miles Bronson played a vital role along with the other Assamese. They introduced the printing press and composed the first *Assamese grammar by Nathan Brown (1846)*, *the first Assamese-English dictionary by Miles Bronson (1863)*. They were expert linguists who translated the Bible into Assamese and other native languages. They wrote numerous articles on the debate with the government and published them in their periodical, *Orunodoi*, that helped to spread the campaign to far distances as the popular magazine had read by all the educated people of Assam.

### **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that the emergence of Christian missionaries in the north-eastern part of India as a product of colonialism has brought tremendous changes in the living culture of people in this region. This has both negative as well as positive impact as concerned by anthropologists and sociologists. Nevertheless, the whole scenario of growing demand of Christian missionary activities in the North-eastern region itself is a vast area of study. It has a very complex history of progression and resulting impact on its diverse cultures. However, it later became a tool for them to engage with colonisation either in assisting or in resisting it. The cultures that were impacted the most were the tribal cultures of Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya, which presently are the only Christian majority states in India.

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