

REGNUM EDINBURGH CENTENARY SERIES
Volume 31

Witnessing to Christ in North-East India

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The centenary of the World Missionary Conference of 1910, held in Edinburgh, was a suggestive moment for many people seeking direction for Christian mission in the 21st century. Several different constituencies within world Christianity held significant events around 2010. From 2005, an international group worked collaboratively to develop an intercontinental and multi-denominational project, known as Edinburgh 2010, based at New College, University of Edinburgh. This initiative brought together representatives of twenty different global Christian bodies, representing all major Christian denominations and confessions, and many different strands of mission and church life, to mark the centenary.

Essential to the work of the Edinburgh 1910 Conference, and of abiding value, were the findings of the eight think-tanks or ‘commissions’. These inspired the idea of a new round of collaborative reflection on Christian mission – but now focused on nine themes identified as being key to mission in the 21st century. The study process was polycentric, open-ended, and as inclusive as possible of the different genders, regions of the world, and theological and confessional perspectives in today’s church. It was overseen by the Study Process Monitoring Group: Miss Maria Aranzazu Aguado (Spain, The Vatican), Dr Daryl Balia (South Africa, Edinburgh 2010), Mrs Rosemary Dowsett (UK, World Evangelical Alliance), Dr Knud Jørgensen (Norway, Areopagos), Rev John Kafwanka (Zambia, Anglican Communion), Rev Dr Jooseop Keum (Korea, World Council of Churches), Dr Wonsuk Ma (Korea, Oxford Centre for Mission Studies), Rev Dr Kenneth R. Ross (UK, Church of Scotland), Dr Petros Vassiliadis (Greece, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki), and co-ordinated by Dr Kirsteen Kim (UK, Edinburgh 2010).

These publications reflect the ethos of Edinburgh 2010 and will make a significant contribution to ongoing studies in mission. It should be clear that material published in this series will inevitably reflect a diverse range of views and positions. These will not necessarily represent those of the series’ editors or of the Edinburgh 2010 General Council, but in publishing them the leadership of Edinburgh 2010 hopes to encourage conversation between Christians and collaboration in mission. All the series’ volumes are commended for study and reflection in both church and academy.

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**Witnessing to Christ
In North-East India**

Edited by
Marina Ngursangzeli
and Michael Biehl

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Front cover – a painting of the traditional Mizo ‘cheraw’ or bamboo dance, a dance of celebration performed on festive occasions, by the Mizo artist Tlangrokhuma. Used with permission.

Back cover photo shows a scene from the Edinburgh 2010 conference.

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PREFACE

The Edinburgh 2010 Common Call emerged from the Edinburgh 2010 study process and conference marking the centenary of the World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910. The Common Call, cited below, was affirmed in the Church of Scotland Assembly Hall in Edinburgh on 6 June 2010, by representatives of world Christianity, including Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical, Pentecostal, and other major Protestant churches.

As we gather for the centenary of the World Missionary Conference of Edinburgh 1910, we believe the church, as a sign and symbol of the reign of God, is called to witness to Christ today by sharing in God's mission of love through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

1. Trusting in the Triune God and with a renewed sense of urgency, we are called to incarnate and proclaim the good news of salvation, of forgiveness of sin, of life in abundance, and of liberation for all poor and oppressed. We are challenged to witness and evangelism in such a way that we are a living demonstration of the love, righteousness and justice that God intends for the whole world.

2. Remembering Christ's sacrifice on the Cross and his resurrection for the world's salvation, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we are called to authentic dialogue, respectful engagement and humble witness among people of other faiths – and no faith – to the uniqueness of Christ. Our approach is marked with bold confidence in the gospel message; it builds friendship, seeks reconciliation and practises hospitality.

3. Knowing the Holy Spirit who blows over the world at will, reconnecting creation and bringing authentic life, we are called to become communities of compassion and healing, where young people are actively participating in mission, and women and men share power and responsibilities fairly, where there is a new zeal for justice, peace and the protection of the environment, and renewed liturgy reflecting the beauties of the Creator and creation.

4. Disturbed by the asymmetries and imbalances of power that divide and trouble us in church and world, we are called to repentance, to critical reflection on systems of power, and to accountable use of power structures. We are called to find practical ways to live as members of One Body in full awareness that God resists the proud, Christ welcomes and empowers the poor and afflicted, and the power of the Holy Spirit is manifested in our vulnerability.

5. Affirming the importance of the biblical foundations of our missional engagement and valuing the witness of the Apostles and martyrs, we are called to rejoice in the expressions of the gospel in many nations all over the world. We celebrate the renewal experienced through movements of

migration and mission in all directions, the way all are equipped for mission by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and God's continual calling of children and young people to further the gospel.

6. *Recognising the need to shape a new generation of leaders with authenticity for mission in a world of diversities in the twenty-first century, we are called to work together in new forms of theological education. Because we are all made in the image of God, these will draw on one another's unique charisms, challenge each other to grow in faith and understanding, share resources equitably worldwide, involve the entire human being and the whole family of God, and respect the wisdom of our elders while also fostering the participation of children.*

7. *Hearing the call of Jesus to make disciples of all people – poor, wealthy, marginalised, ignored, powerful, living with disability, young, and old – we are called as communities of faith to mission from everywhere to everywhere. In joy we hear the call to receive from one another in our witness by word and action, in streets, fields, offices, homes, and schools, offering reconciliation, showing love, demonstrating grace and speaking out truth.*

8. *Recalling Christ, the host at the banquet, and committed to that unity for which he lived and prayed, we are called to ongoing co-operation, to deal with controversial issues and to work towards a common vision. We are challenged to welcome one another in our diversity, affirm our membership through baptism in the One Body of Christ, and recognise our need for mutuality, partnership, collaboration and networking in mission, so that the world might believe.*

9. *Remembering Jesus' way of witness and service, we believe we are called by God to follow this way joyfully, inspired, anointed, sent and empowered by the Holy Spirit, and nurtured by Christian disciplines in community. As we look to Christ's coming in glory and judgment, we experience his presence with us in the Holy Spirit, and we invite all to join with us as we participate in God's transforming and reconciling mission of love to the whole creation.*

Themes Explored

The 2010 conference was shaped around the following nine study themes:

1. Foundations for mission
2. Christian mission among other faiths
3. Mission and post-modernities
4. Mission and power
5. Forms of missionary engagement
6. Theological education and formation
7. Christian communities in contemporary contexts
8. Mission and unity – ecclesiology and mission
9. Mission spirituality and authentic discipleship

The Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series to Date

Against this background a series of books was commissioned, with the intention of making a significant contribution to ongoing studies of mission. This series currently includes:¹

Edinburgh 2010: Mission Then and Now, David A. Kerr and Kenneth R. Ross (eds).

Edinburgh 2010 Volume II: Witnessing to Christ Today, Daryl Balia and Kirsteen Kim (eds).

Mission Continues: Global Impulses for the 21st Century, Claudia Wahrish-Oblau and Fidon Mwombeki (eds).

Holistic Mission: God's Plan for God's People, Brian Woolnough and Wonsuk Ma (eds).

Mission Today and Tomorrow, Kirsteen Kim and Andrew Anderson (eds).

The Church Going Local: Mission and Globalization, Tormod Engelsviken, Erling Lundebj and Dagfinn Solheim (eds).

Evangelical and Frontier Mission: Perspectives on the Global Progress of the Gospel, A. Scott Moreau and Beth Snodderly (eds).

Interfaith Relations after One Hundred Years: Christian Mission among Other Faiths, Marina Ngursangzeli Behera (ed).

Witnessing to Christ in a Pluralistic Age: Christian Mission among Other Faiths, Lalsangkima Pachuau and Knud Jørgensen (eds).

Mission and Post Modernities, Rolv Olsen (ed).

A Learning Missional Church: Reflections from Young Missiologists, Beate Fagerli, Knud Jørgensen, Rolv Olsen, Kari Storstein Haug and Knut Tveitereid (eds).

Life-Widening Mission: Global Anglican Perspectives, Cathy Ross (ed).

Foundations for Mission, Emma Wild-Wood and Peniel Rajkumar (eds).

Mission Spirituality and Authentic Discipleship, Wonsuk Ma and Kenneth R. Ross (eds).

A Century of Catholic Missions, Stephen Bevans (ed).

Mission as Ministry of Reconciliation, Robert Schreiter and Knud Jørgensen (eds).

Orthodox Perspectives on Mission, Petros Vassiliadis (ed).

Bible in Mission, Pauline Hoggarth, Fergus Macdonald, Knud Jørgensen and Bill Mitchell (eds).

Pentecostal Mission and Global Christianity, Wonsuk Ma, Veli-Matti Karkkainen and J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu (eds).

Engaging the World: Christian Communities in Contemporary Global Society, Afe Adogame, Janice McLean and Anderson Jeremiah (eds).

Mission At and From the Margins: Patterns, Protagonists and Perspectives, Peniel Rajkumar, Joseph Dayam, I.P. Asheervadham (eds).

The Lausanne Movement: A Range of Perspectives, Margunn Serigstad Dahle, Lars Dahle and Knud Jørgensen (eds).

¹ For an up-to-date list and full publication details, see www.ocms.ac.uk/regnum/

- Global Diasporas and Mission*, Chandler H Im & Amos Yong (eds).
- Theology, Mission and Child: Global Perspectives*, B Prevette, K White, CR Velloso Ewell & DJ Konz (eds).
- Called to Unity for the Sake of Mission*, John Gibaut and Knud Jørgensen (eds).
- Korean Church, God's Mission, Global Christianity*, Wonsuk Ma and Kyo Seong Ahn (eds).
- Reflecting on and Equipping for Christian Mission*, Stephen Bevans, Teresa Chai, J. Nelson Jennings, Knud Jørgensen and Dietrich Werner (eds).
- Freedom of Belief and Christian Mission*, Hans Aage Gravaas, Christof Sauer, Tormod Engelsviken, Maqsood Kamil and Knud Jørgensen (eds).
- Creation Care in Christian Mission*, Kapya J Kaoma (ed).
- The Reshaping of Mission in Latin America*, Miguel Alvarez (ed).
- Witnessing to Christ in North East India*, Marina Ngursangzeli and Michael Biehl (eds).
- Evangelism and Diakonia in Context*, R Dowsett, I Phiri, D Birdsall, DO Terfassa, H Yung and K Jørgensen (eds).
- Mission and Power: History, Relevance and Perils*, Atola Longkumer, Michael Biehl and Jorgen Skov-Sorenson (eds).
- Mission in Central and Eastern Europe: Realities, Perspectives, Trends*, Corneliu Constantineanu, Marcel V. Măcelaru, Anne-Marie Kool and Mihai Hincinschi (eds).

FOREWORD

People “from every nation under heaven,” heard the Gospel “each in their own tongue” (Acts 2: 5-6). This biblical description of the Day of Pentecost still holds canonical authority. Yet Christian faith has occupied no permanent or sacred abiding place on earth: no Jerusalem, no Mecca, no Varanasi. Only Christ and Christ alone remain at its centre. Gospel faith has always been migratory, ever finding new expression within temporal specificities of yet another local culture and language. Its messengers, as vehicles of the Gospel seeking to carry out the injunction to “make disciples of all nations,” have continually done so in one or more than one place at a time, sometimes among one or more cultures. Even then, expressions of Gospel faith have also been transitory, moving on from one people or one place to another, and from one culture and language, to another. Where Augustine once preached now retain no semblance of the lively faith that once flourished at Carthage and Hippo.

The earliest Christian community was exclusively Jewish. Yet, within decades, the faith had moved beyond its original Aramaic and Greek moorings. During centuries that followed, it found expression among peoples increasingly far from Jerusalem – in widening circles to the west and east, as well as north and south. We too often forget that at the time Islam took over original Christian heartlands, most Christians were located to the East. The Gospel had not only already been appropriated by Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopian, and Persian peoples, but had long since reached peoples of India and China. Indeed, at the advent of Islam, Gospel faith was only just reaching beyond the Latin world to take root among Celtic, Germanic, Nordic, and Slavic peoples. Moving eastward beyond the Euphrates and Babylon, beyond the Arabian Sea, beyond Zoroastrian domains of Persia, and even beyond the Turko-Mongol steppes, the faith had become established in Kodungallur, Kerala and in Guangzhou, China.¹ Long before becoming the official religion of Rome, Christendom had become established in Armenia. For the Church of the East, Syriac rather than Greek long served as the vehicle of the faith; and Christian learning had focused attention as much upon cosmic struggles between Darkness and Light as upon categories of philosophy and theology.²

¹ See H. J. W. Drijvers, *East of Antioch: Studies in early Syriac Christianity* (London: 1984); Robin E. Waterfield, *Christians in Persia: Assyrians, Armenians, Roman Catholics and Protestants* (London: 1973); and Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia – and How it Died* (New York, &c: Harper, 2008).

² For more on this perspective, see Andrew F. Walls, “Eusebius Tries Again, Reconceiving the Study of Christian History,” *International Bulletin of Missionary*

Each encounter of Gospel faith within a different local culture and language led to new challenges. Each new wave of appropriation altered the nature of the Gospel itself. Verities of faith were moulded and remoulded in the light of what each people was able to appreciate and comprehend. Each people held its own perceptions of primal verity. Elemental impulses within human experience – each in a time or place – reflected underlying primal essentials of Eternal Truth, of a High God far above fearful local demons. Each local people struggled with its own religious understandings, doing so despite attempted superimpositions of more dominant and powerful prevailing, state-imposed religious institutions.³ Whatever “was turned”, or “converted” and “transformed” upon the occasion of each encounter with the Gospel found roots that sank deeper and deeper into local cultural soil, each with its own heritage. Each encounter with the Gospel, occurring at one specific time and place on earth, brought specific responses, either of acceptance, rejection, or resistance. Each could also give rise to amazing new manifestations of the Gospel truth. Each could generate distinctively new local ceremonials, creeds and doctrines, institutions and ideals, as well as qualities and styles of life. New appropriations reflected fresh forms of Gospel faith as Christian truth found reincarnation within each specific locality at a specific time. While some such occurrences in ancient times are now quite beyond historical recovery, many such cultural transformations have yet to ever be fully studied or understood. It is exciting, therefore, to see how more recent appropriations of emergent faith are now being discovered, explored, and interpreted within the many new studies of Christianity in North East India that are found within this volume.

In light of the promise of so many new perspectives, new generations of scholars have arisen from among peoples dwelling along the escarped mountain frontiers of larger dominant political cultures to which such frontier peoples had never submitted. These now promise to provide us with deeper and more sophisticated understandings of how the Gospel reached and influenced their own peoples than ever before. Such exciting developments can only be applauded, extolled and welcomed.

Each essay within this volume has been produced by a scholar who is quite uniquely equipped and qualified to make a fresh contribution. Each gives us a distinctive angle of vision, some new perspective, that enhances our understandings of how it was that peoples who less than two centuries ago had never heard of the Gospel not only appropriated its essentials but also adapted and modified these essentials so as to enhance an appreciation of the unique features of vitality never before known. Each essay adds fresh

Research [IBMR], 24:3 (July 2000),105-11; and his “Converts or Proselytes: The Crisis over Conversion in the Early Church,” *IBMR*, 28:1 (January 2004), 14-19.

³ For elaboration, see Andrew Walls, “Primal Religious Traditions in Today’s World,” *The Missionary Movement in History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1996), 121-129.

colour and texture to the whole; and that whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In comparative terms, these studies also communicate with new movements of World Christianity, especially those that have been emerging within Africa, China, India, and Latin America during the last fifty years.

No longer are the old Eurocentric perspectives enough. No longer are biases of Western Christianity sufficient. As Lamin Sanneh has reminded us, Christian faith has again and again “transcend[ed] ethnic, national, and cultural barriers.” No longer do “patterns developed in Europe” suffice as guides. No more can understandings be bounded, or restricted, by patterns or prejudices of any single culture, however dominant this once have been. Indeed, no single language has ever been sufficient to serve as the sole vehicle for fully conveying the Gospel. Neither Aramaic, Greek, nor Latin; and certainly not classical Arabic of Islam or classical Sanskrit of Brahmanical lore, much less classical Chinese of Confucian tradition is inherently sacred. Yet, within all languages, within every single mother tongue, lies the capacity and potential for a gradual if partial emergence of the most sacred elements of Gospel faith and truth.

As with the concept of World Christianity, Christianity in India is a huge abstraction, an umbrella concept under which a multitude of more concrete and discrete realities reside. While some Indian Christians are nationalistic – and many Christians in India are truly patriotic nationalists – there is no such thing as a distinctly “Indian Christian” per se, no more than there is a distinctively “European Christian” or “American Christian”. All Christians in India are, by nature, confined to, and constrained by, a particular local culture and language. They are Tamil Christians or Telugu Christians, Marathi Christians or Punjabi Christians or Bengali Christians, and so on. More than that, beyond their linguistic boundaries, there are Madiga Christians, or Nadar Christians, as well as broadly Brahman Christians or Dalit Christians. Some in India, whatever their local moorings, are also almost exclusively English (or, to be more precise, “Indish”) speaking and English worshipping Christians. In other words, each Christian community is a product of its own distinct local history. Some trace themselves to ancient times. Others originated so recently that, as Christians, they can clearly recall, and even explore their own pre-Christian roots. And all such varieties can be distinguished without even beginning to look at denominational, ecclesiastical, or liturgical peculiarities. Truly the intrinsic characteristics of so many multifarious forms of Christianity in India constitute a vast and complex mosaic that has yet to be fully or comprehensively understood.

The oldest Christian communities of India are Thomas Christians. They claim the Apostle Thomas as their founder, holding that he brought the faith to Kodungallur, Kerala, in 52 AD/CE. Many of these Christians looked to Edessa and Nisibis in Mesopotamia for instruction and leadership. From Uruhu new Babylon, in the year 345, Thomas of Kināyi, a merchant warrior, brought a community of four hundred Hebrew Christian

families to Kerala as refugees. Later known as Malankara Nazaranis, these aristocratic people settled rich lands granted them by the Perumal. Hindu in culture, Christian in faith, and Syrian in doctrine, liturgy and ecclesiology, they have preserved their own distinctiveness to this day, despite dwelling in the midst of many other Syrian Christian communities of Kerala.

Portuguese Catholics – under the dominion of their Padroado – disturbed older Christian communities in India. The Edict of Udayamperur (aka Diamper) in 1599, Catholic Goa imposed a European dominion upon Thomas Christians. This imposition was incessantly resisted and undermined. With their Oath of Koonen Cross, sworn on the 3rd January 1653, twelve priests (*katthanars*) repudiated the edict and threw off Catholic hegemony. Meanwhile, fisherfolk along the shorelines of Malabar and Mannar, such as Mukkavars and Paravars, responded to rudimentary forms of the Gospel conveyed by Thomas Christian disciples of Francis Xavier who was protection from predatory pirates and princes. In Madurai, Roberto de Nobili and Constanzo Biuseppe mastered Sanskrit and Tamil learning in order to converse with high caste Brahmans and Vellalars. From small beginnings, local Catholic communities proliferated and spread throughout India. In the late 19th century, as Catholic educational systems spread, a trained local priesthood emerged along with an All-India Catholic ecclesiastical hierarchy. Catholics, in manifold communities, now outnumber all other Christians in India.

Pietist Christians, representing a distinctive form of Protestantism, came to India in 1707. Stressing a personal, heart to heart relationship between God and each individual soul, they strove to make the Gospel available to every person on earth – in each “mother tongue.” To that end, they laid down infrastructures of literacy, translation, printing presses, and schools for leadership training. The scientific Enlightenment also brought to India by Pietists was never a “top-down” imposition. After forty years of incubation within Tamil culture, an explosion of local appropriations occurred. Tamil Christian leaders arose who spread the Gospel, first among upper caste people of their own communities and then among lower caste peoples. Mass movements of conversion began to break out in 1799. Communities of converts, after suffering persecution, established sanctuary settlements (“villages of refuge”). These, with their schools and welfare societies, provided training grounds of later generations of leaders. Notable among pionerr Tamil Christian leaders were Rajanayakan, Sathiyathan Pillai, Rasa Clarinda, Chinnamuthu Sundanandan, Nelliam Vedanayagam Sastriar, H. A. Krishna Pillai and many more. These enabled a vibrant Tamil Christian culture to arise that not only influenced surrounding Hindu societies, but also brought about a renaissance of modern Tamil literature – as manifested in brilliant poetry and prose, hymnology and drama. During the next two centuries, similarly viable local societies of Christians gradually emerged throughout settled regions of the subcontinent – among Kannada, Malayalam, Telugu, Marathi, Punjabi, and Hindi speaking

peoples. Fierce tribal peoples dwelling along the rugged escarpments of mountain systems who had hitherto successfully resisted encroachments from peoples of the plains and valleys were also reached. These, when confronted with the Gospel in their own mother tongues – along with vehicles of literacy and numeracy, also appropriated the new faith. In varying degrees and forms, and with varying interpretations, what was appropriated serves as grist for articles in this book.

The wide and complex variety of separate Christian movements that arose within twentieth century India led, in turn, to fissiparous movements, culminating in different forms of Pentecostalism. Hundreds of Christian leaders in India, many of them charismatic, have themselves become missionaries to unreached peoples. Organized within their own local Christian communities and congregations are at least three hundred separate Indian missionary societies that are now actively carrying the Gospel into every corner of the continent. Beyond relationships between Christians in North East India and Christians in India, as well as relationships with Christians in the world beyond India, are relationships between Christians in India and non-Christians in India, especially with “Hindu” India.

There have always been underlying tensions between peoples of North East India and peoples of Assam. Epitomized in the nineteenth century by policies of the Government of India, as also by centuries of frictions with the rulers of Assam, these have been fraught. Indeed, along the escarped frontiers lying between India proper and lands of Southeast Asia, especially of Burma (aka Myanmar) and Tibet, such tensions have had a long history. The spread of the Indian Empire and its penetration into North East India by the early nineteenth century occurred within contexts of already long-standing hostile relationships between tribal peoples of the hills and peoples of the plains. Faced with frequently violent encounters, usually attacks on the plains from the hills, agents of the empire eventually made arrangements so as to establish order and security. Local autonomy and self-government was conceded to frontier peoples in exchange for the cessation of attacks upon the plains. Often these were reinforced financial inducements, or subsidies, to tribal chiefs. Sometimes war would break out, and punitive “police actions” would penetrate tribal strongholds in the hills. In light of “settlements” or “treaties”, peoples on the North East frontiers never felt themselves to be part of the Indian Empire, much less of the Indian Republic that arose in its place after Independence in 1947. Nehru and other nationalists of India blamed foreign missionaries for assertions of local autonomy and separatism by peoples in North East India. Such assertions were made without sufficient attempts to “discover” exactly how much truth there might be in such charges. An incident occurred in Kohima that became famous: Nehru’s “scolding” of Naga peoples assembled at the stadium for failing to submit to India, an event that resulted in Naga peoples turning their backs and walking away. This insult was never forgotten. Years of violent conflict followed, with insurgents receiving

arms from outside India to carry on their struggle. Only decades later, with the formation of separate states such as Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya, was a semblance of “autonomy”, self-government, and partial peace restored for peoples of the region. A compromise resulted that, in many ways, resembled arrangements that had previously prevailed under the Indian Empire. Only within the formerly princely state of Manipur have such possible arrangements apparently not worked out as well for tribal peoples along India’s frontiers.

Exacerbating relationships, in recent decades, have been continual efforts by champions of Hindutva, and its constituent elements (known as the Sangh Parivar), to envelop, assimilate and totally absorb all *adivasi* cultures and peoples into a Sankritic India. With the rise of this kind of threat to local autonomy, politically and culturally imperialistic, if not colonialistic forces of Hindu fundamentalism, as embodied in aggravated Hindutva antipathies of the BJP, RSS, and VHP (if not also Bajrang Dal) against movements of conversion to Christianity, have challenged the peoples of North East India, as also elsewhere in India. Of course, expressions of this kind of antipathy against Christianity in India, with assertions that Christianity is inherently “alien”, are not new, but have merely continued to gradually grow stronger since the nineteenth century. The very fact that vernacular languages and literatures of North East India have been transcribed into Roman (Latin) script, have further aggravated tensions. Ironically, command of this same script, and of the later learning in English, has given peoples of North East India an enormous advantage, not only within India as a whole but within the entire world. The fact that India is the second largest English-speaking (reading & writing) country in the world, with modern writers commanding highest rungs of literary distinction and honour, has put peoples of North East India into positions of advantage where they themselves achieve recognition. This, in turn, has led a growing diaspora of peoples from North East India into world cultures beyond India.

Underlying historical issues relating to Christians in North East India is the question intentionality, especially as related to unintended or unanticipated consequences. Some have held that what happened was the result of a deeply laid colonialistic scheme or strategy: a collaborative conspiracy between American missionaries and British rulers to prevent “primitive” peoples in the frontiers of North East India from becoming Hindu or Indian by turning them into Christians whose vernacular language scripts and texts, by being Roman rather than in Sanskritic Devanagari, would bring about sub-nationalisms quite distinct from Indian nationalism. Others have held that what occurred, especially in the creation of sub-nationalisms, however much this actually happened, was one among a

number of unintended consequences of social mobilizations⁴ that came about in the wake of literacy. Increasing literacy, coming in the wake of increasing conversion, brought about a process of linguistic amalgamation; and schools produced gifted and energetic local leaders who held positions as teachers, pastors, and government administrators within the towns and villages of North East India. Contentious discussions, sometimes abstract theories using impenetrable jargon of “discourse analysis” that have served to cloak ideological presuppositions continue to fuel arguments surrounding this fraught question. Too often, in such discussions, much empirical evidence is ignored and broader historical contexts are overlooked. Evidence may well show that few actual conversions were brought about by missionaries themselves and that most appropriations of Christian faith were inspired by local leaders among peoples of North East India. In short, too much credit is given to “aliens” and “foreigners” and too little to the energetic attempts of hitherto fearful but fiercely independent frontier peoples striving to escape prior circumstances and to improve their own material and spiritual situations. Readers of essays within this volume will be rewarded by many fresh findings and incisive insights relating to such questions.

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⁴ *Nationalism and social communication; an inquiry into the foundations of nationality* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1966 2nd edition of 1953 work). By Karl W. Deutsch, Karl W. (Karl Wolfgang), 1912-1992).

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INTRODUCTION

The history and culture of India's north-eastern peoples, as well as that of the church in north-east India, is very different from that of other parts of India – and their history, and their uniqueness and contribution to Indian Christian life, has yet to be acknowledged and appropriately marked.

The way the church in India has been portrayed nationally and also globally does not really hold true in many senses for the church in North-East India. There is also now the dangerous trend (or is it being merely politically correct?) to try to find a connection or seek solidarity between tribals and *dalits*, clubbing them together as both being oppressed groups. It is true that one of the major debates with regard to oppression is casteism but this is absent among the north-eastern tribals. Hence, the experience of oppression might be seen as similar though the causes would be quite different. But the very term 'oppression' needs further debate and discussion. There is a need to understand what both groups actually mean by oppression and the kinds of oppression they suffer from.

The north-eastern tribals are proud of who they are, that they own land, belong to stable social set-ups, are educated and have a self-sufficient church. This again points to the danger of clubbing all tribals in India into one homogeneous group. The tribals of North-East India are markedly different from tribals (also called the *adivasis* or *vanvasis* – i.e. forest-dwellers) in the rest of the country in very many ways. The issues that Indian society at large faces in terms of poverty, the caste system and discrimination against *dalits*, etc. – as serious as these are – have also meant that the issues faced by the societies and churches in North-East India have not been considered as important enough to merit discussion at national or international fora. The discrimination and oppression that the north-eastern tribals suffer from are mainly political. Their very exclusion when describing and addressing the Indian Church can also be understood as political discrimination.

This political discrimination also finds an echo in the manner in which the contributions and concerns of the church in North-East India have not been acknowledged or have been ignored at the ecclesial level, both nationally as well as internationally.

The churches of North-East India did not have a voice in the Christian Missionary Conference of 1910, though the Rev. Thankan Sangma from present-day Meghalaya attended the conference that took place at Edinburgh. Even the centenary celebration in 2010 was like a new venture for them, while ecumenism is poorly understood and perceived among many churches in the region, often being viewed with suspicion and seen as compromising one's denominational loyalties and even at times one's Christian faith. However, the region bears testimony to the fact that it is

here that the efforts of missionaries have been one of the most successful of any in the globe, and most certainly in India. Following the legacy of the missionaries who evangelized and planted churches in the region, the churches here are very mission-minded and set the task of evangelization as one of their priorities.

It was consequently felt that there ought to be a response to Edinburgh 2010 from the church in north-east India, and a conference was organized at Aizawl Theological College in Aizawl, Mizoram, 28th-30th September 2011 under the auspices of the Synod Mission Board of the Presbyterian Church of India, Mizoram Synod. The logical outcome of the conference was this volume.

While consisting mainly of papers presented at the Post Edinburgh 2010 Mission Consultation at Aizawl, Mizoram, in September 2011, papers by scholars from the region who did not participate in the Consultation, as well as by those from outside India who were well acquainted with the region, are also included.

The distinctive feature of this book is the breadth of scholarship that engages with the nine study themes of Edinburgh 2010, spanning the ethnic and denominational contributors from the different north-eastern states and denominations found there. Though it was not possible to invite contributions from each tribe in each state, the book makes the effort to be as inclusive as possible.

Consequently, this volume can be considered a significant study of, and insight into, the life of churches which are vibrant, socially, ethnically and denominationally diverse, and largely ignored or unknown even in wider Christian circles because they share little with the churches of the rest of India. It is intended for theologians, missiologists, scholars and church leaders who have thus far had access to very little or no material on how the churches of North-East India have responded to or have been part of the Edinburgh 2010 celebrations. Additionally, the volume brings to the wider world the faith journeys and growth prospects, as well as the challenges the churches of North-East India face in their particular and diverse local contexts. It is also hoped that the volume will serve as resource material for Christians in North-East India to help gain a better understanding of the political, social and ecumenical milieu that the church in the region is placed.

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The book's contents deal with the nine study themes of Edinburgh 2010:

1. Foundations for Mission
2. Christian Mission among Other Faiths
3. Mission and Post-Modernities
4. Mission and Power
5. Forms of Missionary Engagement
6. Theological Education and Formation
7. Christian Communities in Contemporary Contexts
8. Mission and Unity – Ecclesiology and Mission

9. Mission Spirituality and Authentic Discipleship

The first two papers, written by **Fanai Hrangkhuma** and **Frederick S. Downs**, introduce the North-East India region and Christian mission. Hrangkhuma's paper on 'Christianity in North-East India' sets the tone of the book. He gives a brief description of the geographical location of the region and its peoples before moving on to discuss the coming of Christianity with the arrival of western missionaries from various denominations in the area. He looks at their activities and spheres of influence, the process of Christianization, the interplay between Christianity and tribal culture and Christianity's influence or contributions to tribal life.

In his conclusion, Hrangkhuma points out that the church in North-East India is faced with socio-political challenges that must force it to rethink Christian mission, not just in terms of an other-worldly spirituality or of only saving souls. These are challenges that the other contributors take up to varying degrees.

Downs's paper resonates with the rationale behind the organization of the post-2010 Edinburgh Conference in Aizawl, Mizoram, and this volume: that the vibrant church in North-East India has a close connection (much closer than the vast majority in the region or the rest of India would realize, with his revelation that a Garo, Thankan Sangma, was one of the delegates at the 1910 conference) with the Edinburgh Conferences. As a result, the church in North-East India has a right – even a duty – to respond to Edinburgh 2010 as well as to claim its space in the larger contexts of Indian and World Christianity.

Downs's paper succinctly points out the two major reasons why Christian North-East India is 'an inconvenient corner' of the country. On the one hand, there is a denial of an authentic Indian identity, particularly among the hill peoples of North-East India because of their ethnicity, cultural traditions and languages. This is seen on two levels – first, on the socio-political and economic level and, secondly, on the religious level where, in accordance with the Hindutva vision of India, anyone not Hindu or Indo-Aryan is marginalized and not considered an authentic Indian. What is equally disturbing is that Christians in the rest of India share this view because Christians in North-East India are not from the St Thomas tradition nor do they have a Hindu (mainly but not exclusively *dalit*) background.

On the other hand, Downs's paper points out that the problem is further aggravated by north-easterners themselves who primarily identify themselves with the tribes they belong to and not the region they are from. This is expressed in the very small measure, or even the complete lack, of a sense of national identity that would go beyond merely making common cause with Christians from other parts of India into forging a common identity with them.

For such an identity to emerge, Christians of the St Thomas tradition, those who come from a Hindu or Muslim cultural ethos, and north-eastern Christians with their primal cultural backgrounds, must all start with a non-judgemental acceptance of each other and the cultural diversity each brings to the table.

Under the section, 'Foundations for Mission', **Lawmsanga** examines the theology of mission of the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram, tracing first the history of the Church, secondly, looking at its mission strategies and methods, and thirdly, looking at mission challenges for the worldwide church in general and for the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram in particular.

Interestingly, some of these challenges include those that western missionaries in the region have in turn been accused of: a superior attitude and little effort in contextualizing the gospel message among those that Mizo missionaries work with. Lawmsanga also points out that, just as the traditional Mizo worldview viewed the human body and soul as a single entity, such an attitude must also be seen in the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram's missionary activities where an existing dichotomy between salvation of souls without addressing socio-economic and political realities will not lead to a holistic sense or understanding of the gospel message.

Enolyne Lyngdoh looks at the idea of mission in the Old Testament, particularly with reference to women, and uses Old Testament attitudes towards women in mission to critique the attitude of the Khasi-Jaintia Presbyterian Church in Meghalaya towards women who are or wish to be involved in the Church's mission activities. Old Testament women such as Miriam, Shiprah and Puah, Deborah and Huldah, and Naaman's slave girl are looked at and their mission contributions examined. In doing so, this paper makes it clear that the difficult social contexts and prejudices these women faced are not dissimilar to social attitudes and ecclesiastical hurdles that Khasi women continue to face even today. The paper pleads for a more open and holistic attitude towards mission that equally involves and trains both men and women for a fuller experience of the values of the Kingdom of God.

Samuel G. Ngaihte ponders the understanding of 'contextualization' with its connotation of a non-negotiable mission imperative against the idea of a 'dialogue' between cultures and traditions in which an affirmation of the other's identity done in a respectful manner is a guiding feature. He wonders if, in the face of such a contradiction, a relationship between the two is possible. As part of this exploration, he traces the history of the term 'contextualisation' as a concept in missiology, pointing out two predominant attitudes – one which gives primary authority to the Bible, and the other which emphasizes the differences between cultures. He feels both miss the point of true contextualization and dialogue as both are caught up in their own biases.

Ngaihte then traces the history of the Paites, both as a race as well as a Christian community, to illustrate this lack in the understanding of these

terms before pleading his case for a genuine contextualization as well as true dialogue where there is true reciprocity, where both sides experience a transformation and understand themselves better.

Under the section, 'Christian Mission among Other Faiths', **Bolinkar Sokhlet** puts forward the case for Christian mission to be carried out in the company of – perhaps even in partnership with – the traditional religion of the Khasi Pnars. As part of his argument, he gives a brief overview of the Khasi Pnar religion, some of its central beliefs, the attitude of western missionaries in the Khasi Jaintia Hills as well as of the Christians there towards the primal faith, and puts forward a few proposals that he believes will make Christian mission more effective in addressing some societal needs in dialogue with practitioners of the Khasi Pnar religion.

Sokhlet points out how the church in the region, as a legacy of the missionary disregard for the local religion, continues to ignore the theological significances in the primal religion, and in doing so, misses out several points of convergence between the two faiths. This has led to a widening gap between them and a resulting mutual mistrust and suspicion that has led to their ineffectiveness in addressing the socio-political needs in society that both, together, could perhaps effectively address. Thus mission, he points out, cannot be only emphasizing eternal life and eternal damnation. He challenges the church to rethink its understanding and practice of mission, and to view itself as a partner with other faiths like the Khasi Pnar religion, and to be able to come to a better understanding of the values of the Kingdom of God.

Under the section 'Mission and Post-Modernities', **K. Lallawmzuala** looks at Christian mission beyond what it is traditionally considered in a post-modern world and asks that we consider how the tribal worldview of those from North-East India is relevant in today's world. He points out that post-modernism, in its reaction to modernism, allows us to focus on the lesser-known and smaller narratives from around the world and the values therein. Consequently, we become aware of the tribal way of life and how this becomes increasingly relevant in a world that believes capitalism is the ultimate answer, while ignoring the humanitarian and economic exploitation and the environmental degradation that it has resulted in. He concentrates on three facets of tribal life generally found in societies in North-East India that can effectively serve as guidelines for more effective Christian mission – the concern for the well-being of the whole community, the practice of the judicious sharing of resources to the benefit of all, and the return to simplicity in a lifestyle that is also sustainable.

Hminga Pachuau points out the need for the church to give its youth not just the space but also the opportunities to express themselves as well as participate more fully and meaningfully in its various activities. In doing so, he points out that this requires a break from a traditional mindset that usually views youth as a group that is to be ministered to, to one that includes and counts on them as partners in its mission activities.

The paper briefly examines some of the problems youth face today which, while evident among the youth of Mizoram are also those faced by youth anywhere, and asks for creativity and openness on the part of the church to help them in addressing such problems. This becomes even more urgent considering that quite a few of these problems are the direct result of technology, modern electronic devices and exposure to different forms of social media.

The paper also puts forward the argument that an inclusive holistic approach to youth must begin with a change in attitude that recognizes space for the Holy Spirit to work and perhaps even lead in a different direction just as it led Peter to understand the inclusiveness of God's mission and truth as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Under the section 'Mission and Power' we have four papers. The main thrust of **M. Thonghosei Haokip's** paper is how, in the interplay between mission and power, the latter was misused in mission work among the Kuki tribe in Manipur. He traces this to the British policy in Manipur of allowing only one mission agency to work in the region, and how the American Baptist Mission's William Pettigrew (himself a former Anglican) used this position to make it difficult for independent missionaries such as Watkin Roberts to work among the Kukis. Haokip makes the link between Pettigrew's privileged position and his efforts at repaying this debt to the government by playing a major role in recruiting Naga and Kuki tribals to the Labour Corps for work in France during World War I. It was the Kuki chief's refusal to join the Labour Corps that directly led to the Anglo-Kuki conflict of 1917-1919 which was to have devastating consequences politically and socially for the Kukis. Haokip also points out the misuse in power in the lack of effort on the part of the missionaries to understand Kuki culture and contextualize the gospel message, resulting in the loss of the community's sense of history and tradition, effects of which are felt in the community even today.

In her paper, **Lalnghakthuami** examines the relationship between the colonial British administration and the missionaries in Mizoram and how the equation between the two influenced the dynamics of administration as well as of mission work. While there were occasions where the two conflicted, notably in the case of Dr Peter Frazer, the medical missionary who took up the cause of the abolition of slavery – known as *bawi* – in Mizoram, the colonial power saw mission work as a vital means of extending and consolidating their rule through the missionaries' use of education and western medicine, while the missionaries realised that the spread of the gospel was more effective through educated Mizos relying less on traditional medical practices.

The paper points out that such activities were to have far-reaching socio-cultural and religious ramifications for the Mizos where Christianity would, on the one hand, consolidate their identity while, on the other, it would reorient converts' attitudes to their traditional ways of life. It also very

briefly wonders what it was about the new religion that made these new converts agree to the demands of the missionaries that they almost entirely forsake all religious and social participation in their traditional way of life.

Lalnghakthuami points out that, because of a growing realization of what mission means today, there is a growing need for a more inclusive understanding of traditional aspects of worship that goes against all that is considered paternalistic or simply dismissed.

Songram Basumatary looks at the dynamics in the relationship between the British and missionaries in North-East India and how this influenced their attitudes towards each other, and to the Assamese and Boro communities in Assam, as well as how these two communities in turn viewed them. Such attitudes played a vital role in determining why the missionaries were largely unsuccessful among these two communities in contrast with their successes among the hill tribes in other parts of the north-east. He points out that the Boros and the Assamese were not just highly Sanskritized which was a major stumbling-block, but the missionaries themselves can share the blame for the poor response to the gospel as they were more interested in using Assam as a staging-post for missionary efforts to China, Tibet and Burma.

Jangkhoham Haokip traces the origins of Christianity among the Kukis in Manipur with the arrival of the Welsh missionary Watkin Roberts from neighbouring Mizoram. It points out how Roberts came to the Kukis in defiance of restrictions placed by the British administration, as well as the arrangement whereby a missionary was permitted a certain area of work by the government.

Haokip gives an overview of the history of the Kuki people and their turbulent relationship with the colonial power while at the same time responding positively to Christianity. This tension finally culminated in the conflict of 1917-1919 with the immediate cause being the attempt to recruit the Kukis for the Labour Corps in France for World War I. The paper points out that this conflict was to have implications for inter-tribal relationships in Manipur that found resonance in the Naga-Kuki conflicts of the 1990s, though the defeat of the Kuki chiefs by the British did not hinder or discourage the Kukis from accepting Christianity in larger numbers in the post-conflict years.

The paper suggests an approach to mission inspired by Watkin Roberts' own reasons for becoming a missionary and for coming to the Kukis despite the obstacles placed in his way, as well as considering the Kuki concept of *Khankho* (a worldview wherein not sharing what one has with the family and the wider community is considered individualistic and selfish) in mission today and thereby giving space to those Christian communities worldwide whose stories have yet to be properly heard.

In dealing with 'Forms of Missionary Engagement', **O.L. Snaitang** gives a brief overview of the church in North-East India's response to Edinburgh 2010, which he points out is influenced by missionary

involvement in the region which in turn was an outcome of various historical events in World Christianity. He thus gives the historical background of missionary movements in the West among the Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox churches, and how these affected missionary activities and attitudes in India, and particularly in North-East India.

The paper reminds us that any discussion on the church in North-East India cannot forget or ignore these outside influences and that the mission work of the different denominations and groups in the region cannot be viewed or critiqued in isolation.

The paper thus looks at issues such as surveying the global missionary vision and engagement, how these affected models of missionary engagement in India, a brief history of Christian missions in North-East India, mission methods and attitudes of missionaries in the region, and an examination of its churches' response to Edinburgh 1910 and 2010, as well as to changing mission paradigms in worldwide mission.

The paper also points out the need for mission in North-East India to engage in social action, especially in a context where there is the danger of ethnic groups becoming extinct in the face of their dwindling populations, and calls us to ponder how Christian mission can meet challenges such as these.

Melvil Pereira's paper takes a brief look at the strategies, tensions and challenges that Roman Catholic missions in North-East India face. The paper is divided into four parts: the first part briefly summarizes the history of Roman Catholic missions in north-east India; the second looks at some of the mission methods adopted by Catholic missionaries to start and consolidate various missions; the third looks at some of the tensions faced by missionaries; and the fourth considers some of the challenges faced by Catholic missionaries in the region. Some of these challenges include how market forces and consumerism are pressurising tribal communities to change their traditional attitudes towards their natural resources and forests, how modernization along with its benefits has also caused social differences to surface in hitherto egalitarian tribal societies, as well as challenging the status of women owing to a surge in patriarchal beliefs and practices, and the use of ethnicity and nationality to assert one society's or tribe's claim or superiority over another.

In his paper, **Vanlalrova Khiangte** gives a brief overview of the history of attitudes of the Mizos to mission from the time of their conversion. He points out how the four revivals in Mizoram (1906, 1913, 1919, 1935) as well as the traditional Mizo ethos of *tlawmngaihna* spurred on the early converts to share the gospel message with their immediate family, then with their relatives, their village, and then spreading out to neighbouring tribes and areas.

It is this mission-minded legacy that continues in the mission activities of the various denominations that make up the church in Mizoram today. This attitude finds expression in the generosity of church members who

give gladly and generously for mission work, and in the systematic manner in which the various denominations have approached mission work through the proper training of missionaries as well as identifying the needs of those among whom Mizo missionaries work, and undertaking projects to encourage employment and self-sufficiency in the people of their various mission fields.

The paper points out how each denomination plants churches with a view to making these identical to the worship practices and general outlook of the mother church back in Mizoram. What is remarkable is the self-sufficiency of the church in Mizoram and how its missionaries across denominational lines encourage this self-sufficiency in the people among whom they work and the churches they establish. The generosity of the people in Mizoram which makes this possible is an encouragement as well as a challenge for churches worldwide.

Chujang Longchar examines the role western missionaries played in introducing modern – as well as western – education to the Naga people. He points out that education for the missionaries was a tool for the spread of the gospel, since they felt that it was after learning to read and write that the Nagas would respond better to the gospel and in turn be effective preachers and teachers among the other Nagas. At the same time, the British encouraged the missionaries' efforts as they felt that education could be an effective tool to subdue and control the Nagas, thereby increasing the boundaries of their Indian territories. Longchar briefly looks at traditional Naga education before the arrival of the missionaries and also points out the need for education at this stage to have been practical in order for the members of a tribe to contribute effectively to its overall well-being.

While appreciative of the significant spiritual and social changes in society the missionaries were responsible for, the paper also points out that the contextualization of the gospel message and education was largely ignored by the missionaries – issues that raise questions about their attitudes towards the Nagas and their culture and history. In this regard, the paper critiques not just this attitude of the missionaries but also of the Nagas who themselves were so grateful that it took time before they realized the need to use their new faith and education to understand the gospel in their own contexts and preserve in writing their oral traditions and histories that were an inseparable part of their identity.

Joy Kachappily's paper (previously published and printed here by permission), though not originally part of the Post-Edinburgh 2010 Mission Consultation, September 2011, at Aizawl, Mizoram, nor written specifically for this volume, has been included as it looks at the Hindu concept of the ashram as a mission method especially for an area like North-East India where the socio-religious setting is very different from that of the rest of India.

He first looks at the concept of the ashram in Hinduism and how it is placed as the central aim of human life in the pursuit of *moksha* – or the effort towards liberation. While traditionally located far from human habitation and a place of contemplation that centres on a guru, the ashram was not other-worldly but played a formative role in society's socio-political life.

Catholic missions too have adopted the ashram way of living, and beginning with de Nobili, have established ashrams as places to encounter God, engage in dialogue with proponents of other faiths, and directly proclaim the gospel message, as well as becoming the nuclei around which social activities such as the opening of schools and medical facilities are centred.

Such an outlook has found expression in the founding of the Muktidata Ashram in Tikrikilla in the West Garo Hills of Meghalaya that serves members of non-Garo communities such as the Rabha and the Bodo. From its humble beginnings, this Ashram today is a centre of prayer and distributes Christian literature, while its members visit nearby areas to spread the gospel message; it has also built a school that looks after the educational needs of the largest Rabha village.

This model of mission that involves inculturation challenges the other denominations in the region, which are mission-minded and have missionaries in other parts of India and abroad, to consider mission methods, which though different from the cultures of North-East India, might be more acceptable to the local populations among which those missionaries work.

Jayeta Sharma's paper (previously published and printed here with permission), though not originally part of the 2011 Edinburgh Conference at Aizawl nor written specifically for this volume, has also been included as it gives an insight into missionary engagement in Assam through the publication by the American Baptist Mission of *Orunodoi*, 'A Monthly Paper, devoted to Religion, Science and General Knowledge' in Assamese that would serve as a means of informing the local population about Christianity, usefully interspersed with contemporary general knowledge and news of events.

Interestingly, included and inseparable from the narrative are the missionaries' initial attitudes towards the 'pre-literate "tribal" people' inhabiting the hills adjoining the Assam plains, and their assessment that work among the Assamese in the plains would be more successful since they were 'in great measure a civilized people'. Their subsequent work and interaction among the Assamese is the twofold focus of this paper – first, in that the missionaries were to change their attitudes towards both the plains people as well as the tribals in the hills, and secondly, in how the intention with which *Orunodoi* was published differed from its reception by its targeted readership: the high-caste Assamese gentry who deliberately and selectively used its contents by ignoring its religious components in favour

of more general knowledge, and indirectly encouraging a regeneration of indigenous cultural and social mores.

Written from a non-Christian or non-theological perspective, Sharma's paper gives a valuable 'outsider' input and a critique of missionary attitudes and methods of mission engagement, and helps put into perspective some of the historical reasons why missionaries were less successful among the Assamese people in contrast with their success among the hill tribal communities.

Under the section 'Theological Education and Formation', **Marina Ngursangzeli** looks at how theological education specifically in North-East India fulfils its role in preparing mission practitioners for mission engagement in the ongoing exploration of the meaning of faith. While it is an accepted fact that the interrelatedness between church, Christian mission and theological education is necessary as well as a continuous process, there are challenges in North-East India that the church in the region needs to address in order to maintain this close relationship and the ongoing learning process between the three.

The paper attempts to touch briefly on some of these challenges that Christian communities in North-East India face. In the process, it first looks at what is understood by theological education and formation in the region, and points out that even today it is understood that when one goes to a theological college for theological education, such a person is doing so in order to become a pastor.

Despite a growing awareness that theological education is for every Christian, and especially at a time when there are a growing number of theologically educated women, church practices of not ordaining women, and requiring one to have a theological degree before being considered for ordination, continue to place restrictions based on gender as well as emphasizing a traditional understanding of theological education.

In the light of this, Ngursangzeli's paper points out challenges such as (a) the continuing exclusivity of the ordained ministry that excludes women on one hand, and creates a hierarchical divide between the ordained and the laity on the other; (b) a gap between what is taught in the seminary and what the congregation understands and how it practises theology which has implications for mission; (c) a proliferation of theological institutions in the region which do not promote ecumenism, or follow accepted levels of scholarship, or have healthy relationships with local churches; (d) the need to contextualise theological education in order to address the social, cultural, economic, political and spiritual needs and challenges of the various contexts in North-East India; and (e) an increasingly divided church in North-East India that gives more importance to a denomination or a tribe.

Ngursangzeli points out that if these challenges are not recognized and addressed, there is the real danger that Christianity in the region may be

distorted by a few, with grave implications for interdenominational and inter-faith relationships.

Wati Longchar's paper looks at the development of theological education in North-East India and traces its roots to the founding of Serampore College in 1818 and the establishment of the Senate of Serampore College, in order to affiliate theological colleges to the Senate in line with the College's original charter and its right to award degrees that was revived at this time. Over a period of time, seminaries in India have also chosen to affiliate to the evangelical Asian Theological Association, while some have also been accredited to the Senate of the Indian Institute of Missiology.

The paper looks more at theological education in some of the colleges affiliated to the Senate and the courses they offer. Though this is not an exhaustive list, the information and the reflections that follow show that churches in North-East India have challenges to address if theological education is to be relevant and effective. Among these are the competition each denomination has become involved in by establishing its own theological college, as well as efforts in establishing a unified centre for higher theological education and research, the absence of contextual theologies that deal with the north-east situation, and the patriarchal attitude towards women theologians who continue to be excluded or given very little opportunity in the pastoral as well as the administrative life of the church in the region. The paper is a reminder that, for theological education to be effective in North-East India, there is a great need for a church that is ecumenical and inclusive in its outlook.

Four papers look at 'Christian Communities in Contemporary Contexts'. **Razouselie Lasetso** posits the Christian community in North-East India as a continuing legacy of the early Christian community, as indeed is the church worldwide. But to be a part of this legacy, he also points out that the church in the region must be willing to address some of the pressing issues present there, and not doing so would make it and the gospel message contextually irrelevant. In looking at the contemporary North-East Indian context, he points out that challenges such as pluralism in the region, the ecological crisis, issues faced by youth as well as inequality in church ministry-related opportunities between men and women, poverty, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, armed conflicts and the relevance of theological education, are all challenges the church has thus far been reluctant to address but must do so urgently since these have social, religious, economic and cultural consequences if ignored.

For mission to remain contemporary, the paper reminds us that mission concepts must be revisited and mission methods critiqued so as to truly understand what God's mission is. Only then will the church in North-East India continue the legacy of the early Christian community in being a vibrant, relevant and useful community while at the same time being called out to lead in a different direction.

Chongpongmeren Jamir sees in the departure of foreign missionaries the opportunity as well as the beneficial consequences of the Naga churches standing on their own feet, independently as well as with new-found confidence gaining a better understanding of mission more suited to their contexts than would have been the case had the missionaries left later or not at all. While he traces the reason for this departure to one of the Indian government's responses to the armed conflict in the state, he also points out that this forced the churches to finish incomplete projects as well as taking on themselves the initiative for mission work. This, along with revival, made the Naga churches mission-conscious, resulting in mission work within Nagaland and leading to almost all the Nagas becoming Christians, as well as to cross-cultural mission activities with Naga missionaries going to different parts of India and even abroad.

The paper also traces the development of the understanding of mission as addressing the political, social and economic aspects of society and how the Naga church has become increasingly active as mediators in the armed conflict (mentioned below), raising concerns about narcotics, HIV/AIDS, prostitution and human trafficking in Naga society, as well as networking with government and NGOs to create business and employment opportunities.

The paper also points out some of the challenges the Naga church faces as it tries to understand what holistic mission is, how there is the need for a change in the mindset of Naga society so that boundaries between 'being set apart' are being broken down, and the need to embrace ecumenism in a largely Christian context.

Linus Neli's paper (previously published and printed here by permission) concentrates on the complicated issue of peace and justice in the context of North-East India and what it would mean to build up a community on peace and justice in the region. He points out that – while the missionaries contributed much in terms of the development of the local languages, the introduction of the Roman alphabet to help codify these languages, and the sense of identity and togetherness different tribal communities began to feel – they also passed on to their converts the legacy of denominationalism and rivalry that continues today in various forms.

Added to this is the danger of development in the name of progress which has the very real potential of displacing communities when ancestral and communal property is bought up by developers from outside the region. People's self-assertion is too often viewed as anti-national, resulting in human rights violations by both government security forces as well as local armed groups.

The faith responses of the people to such situations has, on the one hand, made them more aware of their rights and historical legacies, while at the same time it has made them suspicious and intolerant of non-tribals as well as those from other tribes.

Neli points out that there are many obstacles to be overcome if this region, rich in its plurality and diversity, is to find its true identity, and communities here must necessarily look inward to take corrective measures if real peace and justice are to be had. Implicit in the vision for a new north-east community is the challenge to the church to go beyond being merely mission-minded in seeking out souls to save, and to actively address the causes of disunity and conflict prevalent in the region.

John Parratt's paper (previously published and printed here by permission) is also one that was not a direct outcome of the Post-Edinburgh 2010 Conference in Aizawl nor written specifically for this volume. It has been included because it looks at an uncomfortable reality faced in areas of North-East India and mentioned by other contributors elsewhere in the volume: that of armed violence between ethnic groups, between such groups and governmental forces, the imposition of the AFSPA (Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act), and the reasons as well as consequences of all these actions.

Looking specifically at Manipur, the paper comments on a volatile socio-political situation where issues have become blurred and protracted, and there is no easy way out. In a situation where institutional violence contributes to a vicious cycle of conflict where the main victims are an unarmed populace, leading to further human rights abuses, the paper suggests that viewing this as anti-Christian repression is simplistic, considering that even non-Christians such as the Meiteis have also suffered abuses – but also that all this could point to a wider ethnic issue involving the contempt felt by 'mainland' Indians for the Mongoloid north-east as a whole.

Understated and yet urgent in the narrative is the challenge for an appropriate theological analysis and response by the church in North-East India. The paper points out that this challenge must also factor in the reality that the church in North-East India is largely ignored by the wider Indian church in the same way and perhaps even for the same prejudices held against the region in the socio-economic and political spheres. Therefore, while both *dalits* and tribals can find common cause because of oppression and discrimination, the paper calls for a coherent and valid tribal theology, one that will not be subsumed under *dalit* theology, but one that will address its own cultural and political contexts relevantly and effectively. The church in North-East India will sooner or later have to come up with a theological response that will recognise ground realities because, in the final analysis, institutional or structural violence is primarily a theological issue.

In 'Mission and Unity – Ecclesiology and Mission', **L.H. Nimreila Siang's** paper examines some theological perspectives for the unity of churches in Manipur particularly in a context where, because of the state having been declared a 'Disturbed Area', the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) is in operation, giving government forces enormous

powers, and armed groups fight government forces and each other. The resulting violence and human rights abuses have been borne by unarmed, often innocent, civilians also suffering under frequent economic blockades called by different armed groups.

The paper briefly traces the history of Christian mission in Manipur before concentrating on the mission activities of the Manipur Baptist Convention (MBC), of which the author's church affiliation, the Tangkhul Baptist Church Association (TBCA), is a member.

While churches in the MBC are mission-minded, the paper suggests that there is a need for revisiting the traditional pietistic understanding of mission inherited from western missionaries to one that will enable churches to address and contribute to the people's aspirations for socio-political peace and improved economic conditions.

But for this to happen, there is an urgent need for ecumenism and a recognition of a common Christian identity among the different denominations in the state – denominations that continue to view themselves according to their denominational and tribal identities.

H. Lalrinthanga focuses on some of the causes of church disunity among the different denominations in Mizoram. These causes are not unique to the church there and are a reminder of the western legacy that local congregations worldwide continue to carry today. Some of his points of focus are the need for the Mizo church to rediscover its common Christian heritage, particularly with those denominations with a Protestant background; the need to recognize each other, especially at a time when the once-cordial relationship between the Presbyterians and the Baptists have been in a downward spiral for reasons not impossible to address; the recognition of and a general awareness regarding the administrative and ecclesiastical structures of different churches; a mutual recognition of baptismal practices as well as Eucharistic traditions – two issues that continue to be divisive among churches in the region; the need to be appreciative of each other's ministries and to partner in mutually acceptable areas in mission.

The paper points out that, while the need for unity and ecumenism has long been felt among the churches in Mizoram, regular dialogues over a period of time have yielded little or no progress. It reminds us that, because Mizoram is a Christian-majority population with the church playing a major role in the socio-political lives of the people as well, disunity among the different denominations is bound to have adverse repercussions on efforts to address various social, economic and political challenges present in Mizo society.

Bendangtemjen traces the origins of the efforts at church unity in the churches of north-east India, and looks at some of the reasons why these efforts that had begun in earnest in the 1960s petered out a decade later. Among these are non-theological reasons related to the socio-political milieu of the region, along with theological ones such as differences over

hierarchical organization and sacraments. Despite these differences, he believes there is scope and a need for church unity, and proposes that churches begin working together on commonly agreed ministries and programmes as starting points.

Under the section ‘Mission Spirituality and Authentic Discipleship’, **Thejano Kithan** seeks to locate the meaning and understanding of the term ‘spirituality’ within the context of Christianity and Christian mission among the Nagas, and specifically among the Kyong Naga tribe to which she belongs.

Her paper gives a brief overview of the introduction of Christianity among the Nagas as well as pre-Christian spiritual beliefs and practices, particularly among the Kyong Nagas. It also looks at the spread and growth of Christianity in Nagaland and how, over the course of time and with the impetus of the revivals between the 1940s and the 1980s, the churches in Nagaland are more mission-conscious, sending missionaries to other parts of India and abroad, as well as having dedicated mission activities and projects.

The paper also shows that Naga churches must not – ironically – be limited by these same mission-related activities if they are to fully understand the true meaning of spirituality in mission, and it calls for a holistic and divinely inspired mission attitude that looks beyond success in church planting or conversion, or involvement and sponsorship of a variety of mission-related projects.

Atula Ao (Tsüdir), herself from the Ao Naga tribe, explores the possibility of a feminist eco-centred spirituality. She studies how the confinement of women in the Naga villages to family life and housekeeping has been continued in the growing church. Women have, in addition, been separated from their rich tradition of communal dances and songs, and could express their faith publicly only in prayer and testimonies. Atula proposes to widen the understanding of spirituality beyond the realm of prayer and meditation, to a life encompassing attitude which centres round relationships including relationships with the cosmos, nature and creation. She pleads that women, grounded in faith, discover their indigenous heritage, liberate themselves by faith and by being re-grounded in the web of life from the confinement to the traditional role of women, and thus help to develop a holistic approach to faith and life which includes participation in struggles for greater justice and ecological relatedness. She finds resources for this in the indigenous understanding of communal life in harmony with, and an interrelatedness in, creation.

Fanai Hrangkhuma’s paper is more a personal reflection in what he has observed and understood by the term ‘spirituality’ and how this applies to and is a response from the Mizo community. Though not an ‘academic paper’ in the strictest sense of the term, it is one borne out of personal experience in his own context, and a good example of how the divide

between experiential opinions and academia must be deliberately blurred, thereby influencing each other.

The paper briefly looks at traditional Mizo spirituality before the coming of Christianity, followed by what he understands ‘spirituality’ to be, i.e. a three-dimensional relationship involving a deep devotion to God, a love for neighbour, and a concern and care for the environment. All three are parts of each other in a symbiotic relationship supplementing, supporting and enriching the other.

The paper then gives a historical perspective of Mizo spirituality, tracing how the different revivals have played a major influence in shaping the Mizo understanding of spirituality, and puts forward seven characteristics of Mizo spirituality.

Finally, the paper wonders whether the communitarian spirituality of the Mizos could also be a point of weakness, coming as it might have done at the cost of individual perseverance in daily Bible study and prayer because of a greater emphasis and enjoyment in participating in spiritual activities as a community. It points out the need for a practical expression of this vibrant spirituality individually, in family, at work, in politics, and in public life generally.

John C.B. Webster’s paper does not strictly fit into any of the above themes and is an attempt to see if there is a link between history and missiology, and if so, perhaps what is understood as ‘identity’ could be the link between the two. To find out, he first looks at a few examples of the recent history of Christianity in Mizoram to get an idea of how these portray the Mizo identity. He then looks at five missiological essays presented at the Post-Edinburgh Conference in Aizawl in 2011, included in this volume to see how the Mizo identity is expressed in them.

He points out that, while history looks back in an attempt to reveal the social and cultural identity of a people, missiology uses both history and theology to guide churches in the present and into the future. In the case of Mizoram – based on the understanding of ‘identity’ from what historians and missiologists say – the two disciplines do not converge neatly or conveniently. He also suggests that perhaps one way of addressing such divergences is to make an honest assessment of the past so as to give a reliable pointer to present and future mission.

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thoughts and insights, have underlined the importance of North-East India in World Christianity.

Marina Ngursangzeli and Michael Biehl
August 2015

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INTRODUCTION TO NORTH-EAST INDIA AND CHRISTIAN MISSION

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CHRISTIANITY IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

Fanai Hrangkhuma

North-East India consists of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura states.¹ All this area lies to the north and east of Bangladesh, between approximately Latitude N. 20 to 29 degrees and Longitude 90 to 98 degrees. It is also bordered by Myanmar in the east and south, and by Bhutan, Tibet and China in the north-west and north respectively. It is connected with the rest of India through the state of West Bengal by a width of just twelve kilometres of land. The entire area covers 245,993 square kilometres.

The ethno-linguistic composition of North-East India is extremely complex. About one quarter of the region is made up of the four plains of the Brahmaputra valley and the Surma valley of Assam, the Tripura plains and the Manipur plateau. Three quarters are hilly areas. According to the 2001 census, a little over 69% of the region's population live in the plains of Assam, about 14.4% in Manipur and Tripura, and a little over 16% in the four hilly states of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland. According to the 1991 census, about 12.82% of the plains population in Assam are plains tribals, forming about 33% of the entire tribal population in North-East India. Most of the North-East Indian peoples, including the plains people, are classified as the Tibeto-Burman, Mon-Khmer and Siamese Chinese families.² The majority of the plains people speak the Sanskritized languages of Assamese and Bengali, whereas the tribes, both in the plains and the hills, speak the numerous Tibeto-Mongolian and Mon-Khmer languages. Religiously, we may regard the region a microcosm of India, in which are represented the major religions such as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Arunachal Pradesh is largely populated by the followers of their own primal religion.

The People

The people of North-East India may best be classified into those who were Sanskritized before the advent of the British administration and the coming of the missionaries, and those who were not. Of those dwelling in the plains of Assam and Tripura, and on the plateau of Manipur, both the tribals and

¹ Sikkim was added in 1975. However, the present study excludes the new state.

² B.B. Goswami in *Tribal Situations*, Singh (ed), 271-72, cited by F.S. Downs, *Christianity in North East India: Historical Perspectives* (Delhi: ISPCK, and Guwahati: CLC, 1983), 6.

the non-tribals have been Sanskritized to some extent. They include the plains tribes such as the Kachari groups (the Boros, Meches, Dimasas, Sonawals, Tengals, etc.), the Rabha groups (the Pati, Rangdania, Kocho, and Maitori Rabha), the Iris, Lalungs, Karbi (Mikirs) and Garos in the plains, the Deuris, Khamtis, Singphos, Akas, Daflas, Abors, Mishmis, Hojais, Morans, Matakas, the Mishing of Assam, and the Tripuri tribes of Tripura (Deb Burma, Jamatia, Riang, Noatia, etc.). The non-tribals in Assam are the Assamese and Bengalis, while those of Tripura and the Cachar Surma valley of Assam are mostly Bengali, and the Meitei are on the plateau of Manipur. Most of the hill tribes have not been Sanskritized. They include the Arunachalis in Arunachal, the Khasis and Garos in Meghalaya,³ the Naga⁴ and the Mizo⁵ groups.

The Coming of Christianity⁶

To understand the interaction of Christianity with North-East India, it is necessary to consider multiple perspectives. The Christian movement in the region, especially among the tribes, have been intricately intertwined with the larger context. F.S. Downs writes, 'The history of Christian movements in North-East India can only be understood as an integral part of a larger process of change – political, social, economic, cultural and religious change.'⁷ For the first time in its history, the North-East India region came to be linked with the rest of India politically as a result of the Treaty of Yandabo, concluded between the British East India Company and the Kingdom of Burma on 24th February 1826. Gradually the British extended their administration to the entire region in the course of the entire

³ The Khasi and Garo populations are concentrated in the state of Meghalaya, but quite a few of them live in Bangladesh, Assam and Tripura.

⁴ There are fourteen major Naga sub-groups, speaking as many languages. P.T. Philip, *The Growth of Baptist Churches in Nagaland*, 2nd edition (Guwahati: CLC, 1983), 7. Groups of Nagas are also found in Assam, Manipur and Myanmar.

⁵ Mizo 'is a generic term describing all the tribes living in the Indian states of Assam, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura, as well as Bangladesh and Myanmar, who claim to have originated from a mythical place called Chhinlung; they speak very closely related dialects of the Tibeto-Burman family of languages and have almost identical cultures. Such tribes include, among others, the Bawm of Bangladesh, the Halam groups of Tripura and Assam, the Kuki-thado (sic) groups in Manipur and Assam; the Lusei, Lai and Mara groups in Mizoram, and the Chin or Zomi groups in Myanmar', F. Hrangkhuma, 'Mizo', in *Dictionary of South Asian Christianity*, Scott W. Sunquist (ed), (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 557-58.

⁶ Henceforth, only the tribes in Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Manipur will be discussed in this paper. The plains tribes such as the Bodo, Rabhas, and some of the Karbi Anglong and Tripura tribals have been evangelized. The substantial impact of Christianity in Arunachal Pradesh is recent, while the interaction of the Arunachalis with Christianity has yet to be documented.

⁷ Downs, *Christianity in North East India: Historical Perspectives*, 3.

nineteenth century and part of the twentieth century. This is the context in which Christianity came to the region.⁸

The major denominational missions that came into North-East India were, first, the Serampore Baptist Mission, followed at various times by the American Baptist Mission and the Welsh Presbyterian Mission, the English Baptist Mission, the Anglican, the Lutheran – following the migration of their people from Bihar, the Seventh Day Adventist and Roman Catholic missions. The first Christians who made contact with the North-East Indian communities were Roman Catholic missionaries in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. There was a large Christian community associated with the Moghul garrison at Rangamati, and it was this community the Roman Catholic missionaries visited. For some unknown reason, the Christian community there had disappeared.⁹

The first three contacts with the Khasis were made by the Serampore Mission at Sylhet (Bengal) in 1813, in Guwahati, in 1829, and at Cherrapunji in 1832. No substantial results have been recorded although a few Khasis were baptized. The substantial interaction of the Khasis with Christianity began with the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists, later known as Welsh Presbyterian Mission, in 1841. The first church among the tribes of North-East India was established at Nongsawlia, composed of Khasis in Meghalaya in 1846. The growth of Christianity had been slow but steady since then. The Khasis recorded several 'firsts' among the hill tribes. Already in 1866, 65 schools with 2,000 pupils were established in every *shyiemship* except one Anormal (Teacher Training) school was established in Nongsawlia in 1867. The Khasi Christians were organized into Presbytery in 1867, and the Cherra Theological College was established in Cherrapunji in 1887.¹⁰ A dispensary was established by Dr Griffith in Mawphlang in 1878. The turn of the century saw the Khasi Christians growing steadily. The 1905 revival among them had accelerated their numerical growth.

More substantial work in North-East India by the Roman Catholics began in 1889 when the Prefecture Apostolic of Assam, Bhutan and Manipur was created. The Roman Catholics entered the Khasi Hills in

⁸ For a fuller discussion on political developments during the British period and British policy on Christian mission in the region, see Downs, *Christianity in North East India: Historical Perspectives*, 11-85, and Lal Dena, *Christian Missions and Colonialism* (Shillong: Vendrame Institute, 1988); Shibankinkar K. Chaube, *Hill Politics in North-East India* (Mumbai: Orient Longman, 1973).

⁹ F.S. Downs, 'Christianity in North East India', in *An Introduction to Indian Church History*, by C.B. Firth (Delhi: ISPCK, 2001), 267. For more information, see F.S. Downs, *History of Christianity in India, Vol. V, Part 5: North East India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 1992).

¹⁰ This college is now in Shillong and its name changed to John Roberts Theological Seminary.

1892. The two World Wars disrupted Roman Catholic work more than that of any other mission body. However, after World War II, the Roman Catholic mission picked up where it had left off, and made an outstanding contribution, especially in the areas of education and medical work. It has gained numerous adherents among the Khasis. It has enlarged its area of work to all the states of North-East India. An independent Church of God was established in 1902 by the Revs. Wolley M. Roy, J.J.M. Nichols Ray, Jobin Roy Khain, Dhorum and others among the Khasis. It has become the third largest denomination among the Khasis.¹¹ The largest denomination among the Khasis is the Roman Catholic Church.

Substantial missions began among the Garos of Meghalaya through two Garos, Omed Watre Momin and Ramkhe Watre Momin, who were baptized on 8th February 1863 at Guwahati.¹² The two returned to the Garo Hills to evangelize their own people in 1864. The American Baptist Mission established its station in Tura in 1877. The Garo Baptist Association was established in 1875. By the turn of the century, there were about 10,000 Garo Christians. The Roman Catholic Missions (1931), the Church of England (1935) and the Seventh Day Adventists (1950) also entered into the fray. According to K.C. Marak, these three missions worked among the Garo Baptists and not among the non-Christian Garos.¹³

Missionary work began in Nagaland, among the Aos, with the American Baptists in the 1870s in the persons of Godhula Brown, an Assamese evangelist employed by the American Baptists, and E.W. Clark. The first baptism on Naga soil took place on 23rd December 1872. Due to the diversity of the Naga tribes in language and culture, the progress of Christianity in Nagaland in the first few decades was slow. Except for members of the Ao tribe, large numbers of Nagas did not turn to Christianity until the third and fourth decades of the twentieth century. An interesting element in the Christianization of Nagaland is that several Naga tribes, such as the Konyak, the Sangtam and the Chang were not administered by the British, and the government did not allow missionary work among them. However, beginning in the 1930s, evangelization among these 'unadministered' tribes began and after Indian Independence, they experienced faster growth. Now the Nagas claim to be 100% Christian, both in Nagaland and Manipur.

Missionary work begun in Mizoram in the last decade of the nineteenth century, first by J.H. Lorrain and F.W. Savidge of the Arthington Aborigines Mission (1894), replaced by D.E. Jones of the Welsh Presbyterians in 1897. In Manipur, mission was started in 1894 by William

¹¹ O.L. Snaitang, 'Christianity Among the Khasis: A Protestant Perspective', in *Christianity in India: Search for Liberation and Identity*, F. Hrangkhuma (ed), (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998), 239.

¹² K.C. Marak, 'Christianity Among the Garos', in *Christianity in India: Search for Liberation and Identity*, 162.

¹³ Marak, 'Christianity Among the Garos', 178.

Pettigrew of the Arthington Aborigines Mission, he later joining the American Baptists. In 1903 English Baptists (of the Baptist Missionary Society started by William Carey) began work in the southern part of Mizoram, when the former pioneer missionaries Lorrain and Savidge had made their base in Serkawn, near Lunglei. In 1907, R.A. Lorrain, the brother of J.H. Lorrain, established an independent mission agency, called the Lakher Pioneer Mission, among the Maras of the southernmost part of Mizoram. By the end of the twentieth century, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland were predominantly Christian, as were almost all the hill tribes of Manipur.

In 1991, the percentage of Christians in Meghalaya was 64.58 (Garo 66.86%, and Khasis 60%);¹⁴ Mizoram 85.73; Nagaland 87.47, and Manipur 34.11. Non-Christians in Mizoram and Nagaland are mostly non-Mizo and non-Naga respectively. The non-Christian Garos are mostly poorly educated or uneducated people. There are also a substantial number of educated Khasis who remain non-Christian.

The first substantial mission work in Assam began when the American Baptist Mission turned its full attention to Assam in 1841, shifting from a station they had opened in Sadya in Upper Assam. In the next twenty years, its work was centred on the Brahmaputra Valley. By 1845, three churches were organized at Guwahati in Lower Assam, Nagaon in Central Assam and at Sibsagar in Upper Assam. Their ministry was exclusively among the Assamese and membership is small even today.¹⁵

The Bodos of Assam received the gospel in the middle of the nineteenth century. Apinta embraced Christianity in 1849 at Guwahati while studying in the Baptist Boarding School founded by Mr Baker, to become the first Bodo Christian. The Anglicans took over a small mission station at Tezpur in 1847-48. When Sydney Endle arrived in Assam in 1864, there had already been some Bodo converts at Tezpur.¹⁶

The Lutheran Mission began its work in western Assam bordering West Bengal, based in a colony in Mornai where some Santhal migrants worked in a tea estate during the 1870s. L.O. Skefsrud and Hans Boerresen began to concentrate their work in the neighbouring areas, and in the process one Teklo Bodo became a Christian on the 7th January 1887. The outcome of

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¹⁴ Marak claims that Garo Christians now form 82.50% of the Garo population in Meghalaya. See Marak, 'Christianity Among the Garos', 168. According to Joseph Puthenpurakal, during the decade ending in 1995, the Presbyterians and the Roman Catholics added new Khasi converts averaging 6,000 and 12,000 respectively every year. See Joseph Puthenpurakal, 'Christianity and Mass Movement Among the Khasis', in *Christianity in India: Search for Liberation and Identity*, F. Hrangkhuma (ed), 206.

¹⁵ F.S. Downs, 'Christianity in North East India', in C.B. Firth, 267-68.

¹⁶ Ipendra Borgooary, 'Christian Contribution to Boro Society', in *Souvenir: The Golden Jubilee Celebration of the Boro Christian Board*, Prodeep Kumar Daimari (ed), (Udalguri: BCB, 2005), 3.

this mission was the Northern Evangelical Lutheran Church with a membership of 25,000 with 180 congregations and a 100,000-strong Christian population in 2008.¹⁷ In 1927, the American Baptist missionaries established a mission station in Tukhraj, which was taken over by the Australian Baptist Missionary Society.¹⁸ The Galpara Bodo Baptist Christian Association has grown into a church with a membership of 10,000, and the Association is 22,000-strong with 155 congregations in 2005.¹⁹ In the 1960s, the Roman Catholics began to work among the Bodos from a mission station at Bengto, now in Chirang District. The Bodo Baptist Convention, formed as the Mongoldoi Baptist Christian Association in 1914, had 25,086 members in 268 congregations in 2005.²⁰ Most of the Protestant Bodo churches joined the Bodo Baptist Board in 1955. The aim of the Bodo Baptist Convention is 'Translation and revision of the Bodo Bible, development of the Bodo Literatures, particularly Christian Literatures.'²¹

The Karbi of Assam received the gospel in 1859 through the American Baptist missionaries. The growth of Christianity among them was extremely slow during the nineteenth century. The first church was organized in Eastern Karbi Anglong at Chekso in 1905. At present, there are eight associations under the Karbi Anglong Baptist Association. The KABA is one of the constituents of the Council of Baptist Churches in North East India (CBCNEI).²² The Roman Catholics and the Presbyterians (1980) also began work among the Karbis in 1914 and 1980 respectively.²³

The tribes in Tripura received the gospel mostly in the twentieth century. The Mizos in Tripura were evangelized by the Mizoram Mizo Christians. They in turn evangelised their related tribes of Darlong and some other Halam groups of people. The New Zealand Baptists worked in Tripura, mostly among the Garo and the Mizo groups in 1938. The Zoram Baptist Mission has been working among the Halam groups of people since 1971, and more recently among the Tripuri groups, such as the Jamatia, Noatia, Debbarma and Rieng. There are now several Indian indigenous missions working in Tripura, some in co-operation with the Tripura Baptist Christian Union.

Christianity began among the Rabha of Assam in 1939 with the baptism of Konoram Rabha. As a result of his witness, 25 Rabha became Christians.

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¹⁷ N. Borgoary, 'A Gist Report of the Bongaigaon Diocese, NELC', in *Souvenir: The Golden Jubilee*, 48.

¹⁸ Borgoary, 'Christian Contributions to Boro Society', in *ibid.*, 3-4.

¹⁹ Borgoary, 'A Gist Report of the Bongaigaon Diocese, NELC', in *ibid.*, 46.

²⁰ Pranay Dimary, 'A Report on Boro Baptist Convention', in *ibid.*, 58.

²¹ Amal Kumar Moshahary, 'A Brief Report of the Boro Christian Board', in *ibid.*, 62.

²² Davidson Ingti, *Christianity Among the Karbis and Its Impact* (Diphu: 1998), 23-24.

²³ Ingti, *Christianity Among the Karbis and Its Impact*.

However, since they could not find any church to join, 23 of them reverted back to their Rabha religion. One was driven out from his society because he married a Garo, forbidden by the Rabha. The last of them became a cook for the Australian Baptist missionaries. He requested them to extend their ministry to the Rabha. They began work among them in 1954, and eventually the Rev. Glasby came to Debitola and established a mission station there in 1957. The ABVMS could not work there for long. In 1970 they requested the Baptist Church of Mizoram to take over their mission. The first Mizo Baptist missionaries, the Rev. Rokhama and his wife were sent in the same year.²⁴ Now the Rabha Baptist Union has become a self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating church, growing towards maturity.

The Arunachalis of Arunachal Pradesh received Christianity in the nineteenth century, but sustained missionary work has been forbidden both by the British colonial government and the Republic of India. In spite of present restrictions, God has opened Arunachal Pradesh to the gospel in the last few decades. Several Christian groups from Mizoram and Nagaland have been evangelizing the Arunachalis, and a substantial number of churches have been planted among the Adi, Nishi, Adi-Galong, Apatani and other tribes in the last three decades.

Most of the Protestant churches, except for some indigenous churches, have joined the North East India Christian Council (NEICC).

The Processes of Conversion

Contrary to the supposition by some scholars, the process of tribal conversion in North-East India to Christianity was by no means through mass or group conversion. What K.C. Marak writes about the Garos is definitely true of other North-East Indian tribals. He says, 'The acceptance of the missionaries was not sudden, nor did it result in mass conversion... The conversion (of the Garos) was of individuals.'²⁵ Similarly, O.L. Snaitang writes about the Khasi conversion movement: 'Conversion among the Khasis was a gradual process and there has been rare case of communal decision among them for changing their faith except in a decision of single family.'²⁶ The movement of the North-East Indian tribes towards Christianity may be summed up as 'a movement of people belonging to the same culture towards Christianity in significant numbers over a fairly short period of time, where the converts are allowed to remain in the group, but

²⁴ F. Hrangkhuma, *A Historical Study of Mizo Indigenous Missions Among Members of Other Tribes* (MTh thesis, United Theological College, Bangalore, 1976), 86-89.

²⁵ Marak, 'Christianity Among the Garos', 136.

²⁶ O.L. Snaitang, 'Christianity Among the Khasis: A Protestant Perspective', 241-42.

without drastically disturbing their former socio-cultural integration.²⁷ It was a conversion without crossing cultural boundaries in the sense of adapting to live separately from their people. The converts, with extremely few exceptions, remained with their families in their society. Everywhere, without exception, conversions were slow during the first years after the arrival of Christianity. Most of the first converts suffered persecution from their own people. After several years of hardships and difficulties, conversion movements picked up and moved on steadily until whole tribes, or most of them, became Christians within a few decades.

What are the reasons for Christian missions being so successful among the hill tribes of North-East India? What made the tribes embrace Christianity in such large numbers? Theoretically, any successful missionary enterprise should combine, among other things: (1) a sound and practical missionary strategy, (2) effective methods of communication, (3) a conducive contextual condition; that is, a condition favourable to innovation, (4) a worldview, belief system and a basis of social ethics in the recipient that is largely in agreement with Christianity, (5) the dynamics of the gospel and the power of the work of the Holy Spirit, (6) an openness on the part of the recipient to Christianity made possible by changes in political, cultural and sociological conditioning.

The aim of missions was to convert people and establish churches to be self-supporting, self-propagating and self-governing. To achieve, preaching (evangelism), education, medical and some philanthropic ministry were adopted. It was, to some extent, a holistic missionary approach. For the first time in their history, the North-East Indian hill tribes heard the good news that Jesus Christ was the Saviour of all, who could save them from the numerous malevolent spirits that troubled them endlessly all through their lives, and that everyone, including women and children, could go to heaven if they simply trusted in Jesus Christ. Such a presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ would have been easy to accept in a troubled world, affected also by political developments. For the first time in their history, the alphabet was introduced, their languages were reduced to written form, and literature was developed. For the first time in their history, they discovered that medicine could cure their many sicknesses. Also for the first time in their history, many tribal languages began to be unified and developed, and to see and experience the establishment and working of the Christian church in their midst. A more peaceful and progressive lifestyle began to emerge in their midst as a result of the teaching of the missionaries and the education introduced by them. The loving service rendered by the missionaries, with their clear and definite aims and multi-pronged services, undoubtedly contributed to the rapid spread of Christianity among the North-East Indian hill tribes.

²⁷ Snaitang, 'Christianity Among the Khasis', Introduction, xx.

It is also obvious that the communication of the gospel has been effective among the tribes in North-East Indian hill areas. For communication to be effective, the recipient must first see the message as relevant to them and as meeting their felt needs. The gospel would have to 'scratch where they itched'. In most cases, Jesus Christ was presented as more powerful than the malevolent spirits, and as the one who could transport them to the coveted heaven when they died and escape the dreary village of the dead, presented by the missionaries as hell. In some places, Jesus was also presented as the healer. These concepts definitely met the felt needs of the people. To a large measure, the missionaries found the frame of reference of the people in their communication.

The evangelization of the tribes was done by the converts themselves which clearly shows that their conversion was not passive, but active. What J.H. Lorrain said about Mizo evangelists could well be applied to others: 'Their addresses are full of parables and illustrations drawn from domestic life and from nature... Some of those, who can read the gospel for themselves, get such glimpses of Divine Truth that it is a positive pleasure for even the missionaries to sit at their feet as learner.'²⁸ Here, the principle of 'discovery communication' seems to be in operation. The gospel was contextualized by the converts in their own situations, using contextualized illustrations and stories. Moreover, the gospel communicators, the white missionaries, were highly esteemed by the people. They were respected, trusted and loved. It is obvious from all available sources that the most important communication principles as proposed by Charles H. Kraft,²⁹ namely, the principles of the message's credibility, the communicator's credibility, the discovery and the frame of reference, were effectively made use of by the gospel communicators, both foreign missionaries and native evangelists.

However, these alone could not have been very effective had there not been other factors operating in the region. Political developments may perhaps be regarded as the most generic changes taking place in North-East India. The conversion movements among the North-East Indian hill tribes however, could not be the direct response to political changes as Downs seems to project,³⁰ though he points out that the advent of British

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²⁸ Annual Report of the Baptist Missionary Society in South Lushai Hills for 1907 (London, BMS Archive).

²⁹ *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (New York: Orbis Books, 1979), 147-55, 156-64.

³⁰ He says, 'The conversion movements can best be understood as part of the hills tribal response to precisely these (political) developments', F.S. Downs, 'Christian Conversion Movements among the Hills Tribes of North-East India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', in *Religion in South Asia: Religious Conversion and Revival Movements in South Asia in Medieval and Modern Times*, G.A. Oddie (ed), (New Delhi: Manohar, 1991), 158.

administration and subsequent political developments precipitated the cultural crises that created conditions favourable to these movements.³¹

In spite of the British administrative policy of minimal interference in the customs and daily lives people for fear of offending them, the political and allied changes imposed on the North-East Indian hill tribes caused tremendous changes. F.S. Downs listed the followings changes:

- (a) The subjection of tribes to an external political authority for the first time in their history;
- (b) The introduction of alien administrative and judicial systems that undermined the authority of traditional systems, and imposed entirely new principles of authority and jurisprudence;
- (c) The introduction of a money economy to replace barter, and consumer items such as mill cloth and kerosene lanterns, that gradually altered the previously largely self-sufficient economies of the hill tribal areas and created new concepts of wealth;
- (d) The establishment of modern communications, including a postal system, roads and new forms of transport;
- (e) The introduction of a number of outsiders – administrators, clerks, soldiers, merchants, technicians and missionaries – who provided new lifestyle models, particularly in the urban areas that grew up around the administrative centres (thus introducing urbanisation as well);
- (f) The imposition of laws that seriously affected traditional institutions.³²

In addition to the inevitably forceful introduction of new elements, certain central core practices of tribal culture such as inter-village wars, raids on the neighbouring plains people, and head-hunting raids, infanticide, etc. were prohibited. Such prohibitions further affected important related ceremonies such as celebrations of successful raids and the like. The possession of guns was restricted. Since, in tribal society, a clear demarcation between religion, politics, and the social and economic spheres could not be strictly maintained, the British imposition of its administration and prohibition of certain central core practices of the tribes' way of life brought major disruption to society. The clearest example of such prohibitions that affected religious, social and economic life were the prohibitions on head-hunting and armed raids. What Hrangkhuma writes about the Mizos could equally be applied to all other hill tribes.

Raids and warfare had both religious and social meanings for the Mizo. The ritual killing of enemies meant a brave man would assure himself of having

³¹ Downs, 'Christian Conversion Movements among the Hills Tribes of North-East India. See also F. Hrangkhuma, *Mizoram Transformational Change: A Study of the Nature and Processes of Mizo Culture Change and the Factors that Contributed to the Change* (PhD thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, PA, 1989), especially 70-99.

³² Downs, 'Christian Conversion Movements among the Hills Tribes of North-East India', 159.

slaves in the life after... the two main reasons for head-hunting: to kill enemies who would accompany the chief into *mithi khua* (village of the dead), and to prove their bravery to the village maidens... Another purpose of raids was to take slaves and loot. Slaves were workers... and exchanged for other commodities, particularly for guns which were highly valued among the Mizo for raids and for hunting...³³

The most exciting ceremonies connected with head-hunting expeditions and the hunting of wild animals were gone. The importance of one of the most important social institutions among them, the institution of the bachelors' dormitory, where young men learned to protect the village from wild animals and human enemies, and to prevent or tackle fire breaking out in the village, and through which informal education about their culture and customs was shared, was drastically reduced. The reasons for the existence of the dormitory were not banished by force. Its importance was reduced by the introduction of peace, formal education and other changes affected by both administrators and missionaries. The dormitory eventually became extinct. In short, the British administration had shaken the foundations of tribal society, drastically affecting their worldview, and turning their world upside down. As a result, they were at first confused and angry. There were some futile efforts to resist the new order. Such included the Khasi War of 1829-33, the Jaintia Rebellion of 1860-62, the Khonoma Uprising of 1878, the Kuki Rebellion of 1917-19, and the Jadanong Cult Rebellion ten years later.³⁴ The whole configuration of their culture was disturbed. What McCall writes about the Mizos could be applied equally to others when he says:

Against these varying contacts the Lushai (Mizo) had no equipment on which to fall back for strength, except the traditions and the stories of their grandfathers. But the pillars of their strength had tumbled down with shame and humiliation before these new and irresistible British invaders.³⁵

During this period of confusion, there were only a few scattered converts. After the people had more or less settled down into the new situation, converts steadily began to increase. This political development with its resulting cultural disturbance prepared the people to be more receptive to the gospel and Christianity. Shibani Kinkar Chaube sums up the effects of political development when he says:

The contribution of Administration may be summed up under the following categories: establishment of law and order, improvement in communication, introduction of money economy in the remote areas and as will be seen, the

³³ Hrangkhuma, *Mizoram Transformational Change: A Study of the Nature and Processes of Mizo Culture Change and the Factors that Contributed to the Change*, 82.

³⁴ Downs, 'Christian Conversion Movements among the Hills Tribes of North-East India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', 160.

³⁵ A.G. McCall, *Lushai Chrysalis*, reprint 1977 (Aizawl: Tribal Research Institute, 1949), 197.

creation of vested interests. The task of acculturation on the subjective level, was almost entirely left to the Church of various denominations.³⁶

The tribes' experience during the two World Wars enlarged their horizons. Their narrow tribal worldview and value systems were significantly affected. This indirectly influenced them in favour of Christianity. Before India's Independence, there was not much room for opting to choose another religion. Even after Independence, the North-East Indian tribals still chose Christianity rather than Hinduism. After a careful study of why the Khasis became Christian, especially in more recent times, Joseph Puthenpurakal is convinced that, 'Nothing in the world will convince them to be thrown into one of the last rungs of the Hindu caste hierarchy when they know that Christianity stands for equality of every person, since all human beings are children of God and created in his image.'³⁷ This was true even in earlier times among those who came into contact with Hinduism. Omed's reply to Ramke's question as to which religion – Hindus, Mohammedans or 'the *sahib's*' – make this very clear when he said, 'We do not know the Mohammedan religion; the Hindus observe caste, and if we take their religion we must forsake our people; the *sahibs* do not observe caste, therefore to receive their religion is good in every respect.'³⁸ Since animism could not withstand the enlarged modern worldview especially, after the independence of India and their experience of two World Wars, the North-East Indian tribals were more convinced that Christianity provided better options for them than the multiple religions of India.

In addition, the hill peoples' animism had not been disturbed in any significant way by the processes of Sanskritization. History reveals that people having worldviews and religious beliefs similar with those of Christians have normally been more receptive to Christianity than those with completely different worldviews and religious beliefs. Except detailed differences, the worldviews and religious beliefs of the hill tribes of North-East India were similar. Missionaries and local evangelists made ample use of the similarities of Christian worldview and religious beliefs with those of the North-East Indian tribes. All the tribes under study believed in a benevolent supreme God who created the world, who blesses people. The extent of the high God's involvement in the everyday life of the people was a bit hazy. Nevertheless, the people always invoked the blessing and protection of this high God. They believed in the existence of both benevolent and malevolent spirits who lived in every nook and cranny of their world. They sacrificed to the malevolent spirits to avert their anger.

³⁶ Chaube, *Hills Politics in North East India*, 42.

³⁷ Puthenpurakal, 'Christianity and Mass Movement Among the Khasis', note no. 45, 216.

³⁸ Downs, 'Christian Conversion Movements among the Hills Tribes of North-East India', 171.

They believed in life after death, and the two places where the departed souls would go when they died. Life here on earth in some ways determined which place they would go to. The Christian message as a whole was not too strange to these tribes. It would not have been too difficult for them to modify their traditional worldviews and beliefs according to the message of the Christian missionaries.

There are other elements that prepared the North-East Indian tribes for their steady acceptance of Christianity. One such is 'The Tradition of the Lost Book', common to all the tribes in varying detail.³⁹ There is also a close affinity not only between their worldviews and religious beliefs, but also in their valued virtues. The tribes of North-East India valued such qualities as honesty, sincerity, simplicity, hard work, hospitality, respect for elders and authority, co-operation, love of communal celebration, democratic orientation, absence of caste hierarchy, and the spirit of freedom. Therefore, to embrace Christianity largely resulted in a sense of fulfilment.

The mighty outpouring of revivals of the Holy Spirit contributed to the rapid conversion of the North-East Indian tribes to Christianity. It also improved the quality of the Christian character and 'earthed' Christianity as it contributed to the early indigenization of the church. Outpourings of the Holy Spirit took place in 1905-07 among the Khasis and the Mizos. The Khasis experienced another revival in the 1950s, and it contributed significantly to the conversion of large numbers of the Khasis. The Mizo experienced countrywide revivals in 1913-14, 1919-25, 1935 onwards, and in the 1960s. The fire of revival has never completely died down in Mizoram since 1907. The evangelization of Mizoram was completed by the 1950s. The Nagas experienced some revivals in 1948-52, and the revival in the 1970s completed the Christianization of Nagaland. The Garos' experience of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit has been not as remarkable as elsewhere. Nevertheless, during the last decade of the twentieth century, a general awakening of Christians resulted in membership increasing from 66.86% in 1991 to 82.50% towards the end of the twentieth century. Thus, we see that a combination of several factors worked together helping the North-East Indian hill people to steadily embrace Christianity as their religion.⁴⁰

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³⁹ All the tribes under study had such a tradition. There were others elements that helped the people to be more receptive to the gospel. See, for Mizoram, C.L. Hminga, *The Life and Witness of the Church in Mizoram* (Serkawn: Baptist Church of Mizoram, 1987), 42-45; Hrangkhuma, *Mizoram Transformational Change: A Study of the Nature and Processes of Mizo Culture Change and the Factors that Contributed to the Change*, 144-47; Mangkhosat Kipgen, *Christianity and Mizo Culture* (Aizawl: Mizo Theological Conference, 1997), 188-91.

⁴⁰ For additional information on Mizoram on this subject, see Hrangkhuma, *Mizoram Transformational Change: A Study of the Nature and Processes of Mizo Culture Change and the Factors that Contributed to the Change*, 147-55.

The immediate cause of the conversion of the tribes was that Christianity and its gospel was seen as meeting their felt needs. C.L. Hminga, in his extensive research on the first message the Mizos had heard, says:

The Rev. Zathanga, 95 years old, who became a Christian in 1902, said that he first heard the Gospel from missionary D.E. Jones when he visited his village Lungmawi in 1899. The message he remembered was, 'Believe on "Pathian" Jehovah and worship Him, then you don't need to sacrifice to the demons any more. Even when you die, you shall go to Pialral (heaven).'⁴¹

He goes on to say that many people said that they became Christians because of their fear of hell, and because they would like to go to heaven when they die. Others said that they became Christians because they would no longer need to sacrifice to the demons for healing.⁴²

Contribution of Christianity to the Tribals of North-East India

The interaction between Christianity and the hill peoples in North-East India has been complex. Several political, social, economic and religious forces have contributed to the development of society as it is now. Isolated dealings with the hill tribes' interaction with Christianity alone may therefore be ignored. So, in our discussion on the subject, we need to keep in mind wider issues of interaction.⁴³

The major contribution of Christian missions is their gift of the gospel of Jesus Christ and all that it implies. Paul's testimony in Philippians 3:8 and 10 and Romans 14:18 have been rehearsed among numerous tribals of North-East India. We could cite numerous examples of such individuals who wholeheartedly embraced Jesus Christ as their God and Saviour: Rai Bhajur, a Khasi Presbyterian, resigned from a lucrative job as Sub-Inspector of Schools to work at the simple, low-salaried job of evangelist to pioneer the evangelizing work in Mizoram, assisting D.E. Jones. Another Khasi, U Borsing, lost his chieftainship, his land and his property for the sake of Christ. When asked to forsake Christ, he answered, 'I can throw off my cloak or turban; but the covenant I have made with God I can in no way

⁴¹ Hminga, *The Life and Witness of the Church in Mizoram*, 62.

⁴² *The Life and Ministry of the Churches in Mizoram*.

⁴³ Excellent discussions on the subject may be found in Downs, *Christianity in North East India: Historical Perspectives*, Downs discussed the subject under political, ecclesiastical and sociological perspectives for the entire North-East India hills region. O.L. Snaitang, *Christianity and Social Change in Northeast India* (Shillong: Vendrame Institute, 1993). Snaitang deals with the Khasi situation. F. Hrangkhuma, *Mizoram Transformational Change: A Study of the Nature and Processes of Mizo Culture Change and the Factors that Contributed to the Change*, deals with the Mizo. He made a helpful attempt to discuss the effects of each of the following: the British administration, the two World Wars, the Independence of India and Christian Missions, and on particular elements of Mizo culture in his attempt to effect overall transformational change in Mizo society.

cast away.’ On another occasion he said, ‘If I am stripped naked, what difference will it make? I have the Lord Jesus as my portion.’⁴⁴ No amount of persecution or hardships could quench the joy of numerous converts among the Mizos, the Khasis, the Garos and the Nagas, and their passion to spread the good news that liberated them. It was mostly the people themselves who were responsible for spreading the good news in their own communities, and today to others outside their own states and in foreign countries. The good news that came to them through the western missionaries was really good news to them. They saw it as meeting their spiritual needs. The new religion created a new and powerful organization, the church, which gave them a religious identity, through which they could identify themselves with peoples having the same religion around the world.

Along with the gospel came education, medicine and philanthropic services. The entire education of the tribes was in the hands of the missions, with monetary help from the British administration. It was Christianity, through the missionaries, that gave them the alphabet, literature, healthcare and many other benefits. The combination of the communication of the gospel, education, literature, medicine and philanthropic services played an acculturative role – in the sense that they helped the tribals to adjust to the new situation created by political developments. Missions also helped in the enlarging, stabilizing, unifying and clarifying of tribal identities by enlarging, clarifying and strengthening the tribes’ worldviews. This was helpful especially in contemporary political and social developments. The British unified each tribe under their administration. This lost each village their independence – villages which had often warred against each other – and the complete isolation of the tribes in their own narrow worlds. It also opened a door for tribals not only to view the world outside, but to participate in the mainstream of national and international political, social and economic developments. Tribal Christians in the hills of North-East India saw Christianity not as something harmful and alien, but as an important element in their contemporary struggle for political, social and economic development. They saw it as a religion that had come to stay and assume a central role in their societies.

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Christianity and Tribal Culture

It is often assumed by non-Christian social scientists that Christianity destroyed tribal cultures in North-East India. Missionaries did not attempt to destroy culture. J.H. Lorrain probably represented well other missionaries when he wrote in 1904:

⁴⁴ Cited in Joseph Puthenpurakal, ‘Christianity and Mass Movement Among the Khasis’, 214.

It seems a great pity that those most interesting links with the past should be lost, as we hold that the Christians should be the Lushais of the Lushais (now Mizo), we are trying to get them to be foremost in reviving these innocent and picturesque customs. We are anxious that the heathen should know that, in seeking to Christianise them, we are not doing so with the intention of denationalizing them.⁴⁵

Later in 1913, Lorrain again wrote, 'Worship, to be acceptable to God, must surely be natural and the spontaneous outgoing of the heart to Him and one's own temperament, guided by the Holy Spirit.'⁴⁶ In effect, missionaries did not generally interfere with legal customs. However, all that they considered religious or having religious implications, they did not hesitate to forbid, sometimes resulting in a great loss of important ceremonies, festivals and lyrics. It is also true that the missionaries exercised some degree of cultural imposition, perhaps due to a failure to distinguish between culture and gospel. Today, many of the elite and educated tribals of North-East India lament the loss of their important festivals and poetic and lyrical riches due to the introduction of Christianity. Some traditional festivals have been revived, albeit in different forms and having different meanings. In line with this, some tribal theologians of North-East India today are trying to contextualize Christian theology, by making use of traditional worldviews, stories or ideas to articulate Christian faith and theology.⁴⁷

Conclusion

Christianity has become a part of the life and identity of the North-East Indian hill people. It has provided a good measure of unity and friendship among the heretofore separated tribes. With better communications and a growing ecumenical spirit among them, there will be more fellowship and co-operation between the different denominational churches in the region. The people themselves are now responsible for the life, development of leadership and ministry of the church in the region. The people see themselves as fortunate to have become Christian, and there is no regret on

⁴⁵ J.H. Lorrain, 'Annual Gathering of the Lushai Converts', in *Missionary Herald* (London: BMS, 1904), 164.

⁴⁶ BMS Annual Report, 1913, 7.

⁴⁷ Some examples are Wati Aier, *Future Nagaland: A Socio-politico-Theological Vision for the Nagas* (Mokokchung, 1988); O. Alem, *Tsungremology, Ao Naga Christian Theology* (Mokokchung: Clark Theological College, 1994); Renthly Keitzar (ed), *Good News for North East India* (Guwahati: CLC, 1995); K. Thanzauva (ed), *Towards a Tribal Theology: The Mizo Perspective* (Aizawl: Mizo Theological Conference, 1989); A. Wati Longchar, *The Traditional Tribal World View and Theology of Community: Tribal Theology in the Making* (Jorhat: Limala, 1995); K. Thanzauva, *Theology of Community: Tribal Theology in the Making* (Aizawl: Mizo Theological Conference, 1997).

their part that the missionaries have brought Christianity, education, medicine and a new lifestyle to them.⁴⁸

The churches of North-East India are faced with certainly important challenges. The challenge to spread the gospel, love and peace in the area is ever-urgent. So is the challenge of making peace in the midst of rivalries and insurgencies. The challenge of economic and social development, and of environmental degradation, should be taken up more seriously. The challenge of unemployment and the increase in social ills and evils must be taken seriously. Probably the greatest challenge is to manifest the values of the Kingdom of God as the salt of the earth and the light of the world, thus influencing people in the right way.

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⁴⁸ See, for example, M.M. Thomas and Richard W. Taylor (eds), *Tribal Awakening* (Bangalore: CISRS, 1983), and J. Puthenpurekal (ed), *Impact of Christianity on North East India* (Shillong: Vendrame Institute, 1996).

EDINBURGH 1910 AND AN INCONVENIENT CORNER OF INDIA

Frederick S. Downs

Three years before the 1910 World Missionary Conference was held in Edinburgh, Mary Mead Clark, a pioneer missionary among the Naga peoples of what is today known as North-East India,¹ wrote a book about Christian beginnings in that area which she entitled *A Corner of India*.² She wrote it to inform (and entertain) young people in America about the little-known portion of India in which she and her husband had worked. It might just as well have been written for a general Indian audience. Most Indians then, probably like most today, did not regard what was then the province of Assam and the three princely states of Manipur, Sikkim and Tripura as more than an asterisk to the mainstream of Indian history and culture. This was not a point of view limited to Indians: I was born and grew up in what was then Assam, now the Garo Hills of Meghalaya. My childhood memories include encounters with the children of missionaries working in other parts of the country who assured me that Assam was not really India.

At one level, this denial of an authentic Indian identity to the peoples of the North East is understandable. With their various admixtures of Mongolian racial heritages, they look different. Though the majority of the peoples living in the North East are Hindu, they have come to that tradition relatively recently – beginning in the late medieval period – and the forms it takes, especially in Assam where most live, are unique. The cultures of the peoples inhabiting the mountains and part of the plains have little in common with the major cultural traditions of the rest of the country, including those of the large tribes that live in other parts of the sub-continent.

At another level, this denial of 'real' Indian identity to the peoples of the North East is a denial of the multicultural nature of the modern Indian state. It is an acceptance of the Hindutva vision of a nation that is fundamentally Hindu – and Indo-Aryan. Everyone living in the country not of this religion and ethnicity is marginalized, and not considered an authentic Indian. What

¹ North-East India consists of the eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. This grouping of states was given an official identity with the creation of the North Eastern Council by act of Parliament in 1971.

² Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1907. Reprinted in 1978 by the Christian Literature Society, Guwahati, Assam.

is surprising is that Christians elsewhere in the country should share the view that their fellow-religionists in the North East are not ‘really’ representative of the church in India. For that, one must be either of the St Thomas tradition or have a Hindu (mainly but not exclusively *dalit*) background. Christians from the largely hinduized tribes outside the North East are included in this generalized understanding of the constitution of the Christian community. They are at best an asterisk, an exceptional, atypical, part of the Indian church occupying an inconvenient corner of the country.

As indicated above, this marginalization of north-eastern Christians was not exclusively Indian. The mostly foreign writers of the histories that have shaped the perspectives of theological students since before the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910 until the late twentieth century have not given much attention to developments in the north-east.

J. Richter in his *A History of Missions in India* (1908), the main text prescribed by Serampore University up until the 1960s, is a case in point. In the words of John C.B. Webster:

Richter includes the north-east in his description of the land of India but not of its peoples. Religion and culture are described in terms of Hinduism and caste. North East tribes are mentioned with reference to animistic religion in the section on Religious Problems of Indian Missions as well as the literacy work portion of the section on Missionary Organization, where translations and other literature are mentioned.³

In his *Christian Mass Movements in India* (1933), J.W. Pickett devotes one paragraph on one page and a sentence on another to mass movements in Assam – and in the process makes it clear that he really hasn’t studied the Christian movements there. He virtually ignores the major movement to Christianity among the Mizo peoples that was in full swing at the time he wrote. Of course, if he had, many of the conclusions he drew about mass movements would have had to be modified.

The widely prescribed book edited by Catholic scholars H.C. Perumalil and E.R. Hambye published in 1972, *Christianity in India: A History in Ecumenical Perspective*, has one section on the Adivasi Catholics who migrated to Assam as tea garden workers and a paragraph on Catholic missions in the Khasi and Garo Hills of Meghalaya.

C.B. Firth’s *An Introduction to Indian Church History* has been the standard text read by Protestant and Orthodox theological students since it was first published in 1960. Until the third edition was brought out in 1976, less than one page was devoted to Christianity in the North East. The main reason why a twenty-six page appendix on Christianity in North-East India was added to that edition was because I had by then been appointed

³ From notes dated 11th September 2014. Dr Webster is author of *Historiography of Christianity in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012).

General Editor of the Senate of Serampore's The Christian Students' Library series in which it was published.

The 'inconvenience' of the North East is nowhere more evident than in the most recent general history of Christianity in India, Robert Frykenberg's⁴ *Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present*.⁵ The blurb about it in Amazon describes it as a book that 'explores and enhances historical understandings of Christian communities, cultures, and institutions within the Indian world from their beginnings down to the present... it seeks to uncover various complexities in the proliferation of Christianity in its many forms and to examine processes by which Christian elements intermingled with indigenous cultures and which resulted in multiple identities, and also left imprints upon various cultures of India.' The problem arises in its identification of those cultural traditions: 'It has focused upon those trans-cultural interactions within Hindu and Muslim environments which have made Christians in that part of the world distinctive.' Within this framework, the North East is certainly an inconvenient corner of India – it doesn't fit. In the book, some attention is given to the Christian movement among several communities in both the plains and hills of the region, but it does not include many of the major Christian communities, and even those included do not easily find a place in the author's main framework of discourse.

In 1910, the failure to take note of the Christian movement in the north-eastern corner of India is not surprising. The province of Assam was not easily accessible nor was it on the way to anywhere. While it had developed economic value because of its timber resources and tea industries, the significance of the oil fields beginning to be exploited there was not yet apparent. Though one of the Indian delegates to the Edinburgh conference was from the North East (the Rev. Thankan Sangma, a Garo from what is today Meghalaya), the Christian movement in that part of the country was in its infancy. While a promising movement had begun among the Garo and Khasi-Jaintia peoples of what is today Meghalaya, and there were several thousand Christians among the tea garden workers who had been imported mainly from Chotanagpur, what were to become the large-scale movements among the Nagas and Mizos had only just begun. The Christians in the North East constituted only 1.23% of the all-India Christian population in the 1901 Census of India. Only one out of every 100 Indian Christians was from that region.

The failure to give serious attention to the Christian movement in the North East in 2010 is not so easy to explain. Since Indian Independence in

⁴ It is interesting to note that it is mainly foreigners who have attempted to write general histories of Christianity in India as a whole in the modern period.

⁵ Oxford History of the Christian Church, 2008.

1947, it has been the most rapidly growing segment of the Indian church.⁶ The 2001 census indicated that Christians in that region then constituted 25.8% of the all-India total. While I do not have the 2015 figures, a well educated guess based on growth patterns since the middle of the twentieth century would place the number today at no less than 30% and probably closer to 35%. That means that currently almost one out of every three Christians living in India is a north-easterner. At the Pune convocation of the Senate of Serampore University in 2004, roughly 47% of the students from theological colleges all over India being given degrees were north-easterners. They had done their theological studies all over the country, not just in the large theological colleges in their region. Well over half of those being awarded post-graduate degrees (MTh and DTh) were from the North East.⁷ Certainly, at leadership level, it is no longer possible to argue that the marginalization of north-eastern Christians is due to ignorance – especially since north-easterners have often held prominent positions in all-India Christian organizations like the National Council of Churches and the Evangelical Fellowship.

Part of the problem is the north-easterners themselves. Very few, if any, would identify themselves as I have done. Their primary identity is with their tribe, not their region – let alone India. Most educated Indian Christians know who V.S. Azariah was and at least the theologically educated would know that he played an important role at Edinburgh 1910. I would guess that virtually no non-Garo from the North East would know who Thankan Sangma was, even though he was a pioneer in the promotion of ‘foreign’ missions in that region. While these missions of the Garo churches were short-lived, Thankan’s enthusiastic efforts had been responsible for sending Garo missionaries to what are today Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland. It was because of this that the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society had chosen him to represent them and their partner churches in North-East India at Edinburgh.

For all Indians, not only Christians, there is a tension between a sense of national identity – a relatively new phenomenon – and the traditionally defining identities associated with family, caste, language and hundreds of different histories. But for the minority Christian community, it is essential that they also have a sense of national identity. Not only its well-being but its very survival in parts of the country may depend on it. At the political level, making common cause nationally brings the resources of those areas where Christians have considerable influence to the assistance of those who lack it. Here the old American saying applies: ‘We either hang together or

⁶ For partial statistical analysis, see F.S. Downs, *Christianity in North East India: Historical Perspectives* (Delhi: ISPCK, and Guwahati: CLC, 1983), footnotes 4 and 5 on pages 3 and 4.

⁷ I participated in this convocation. These statistics are based upon the names of degree recipients printed in the programme.

we hang separately,' 'Hanging together' requires a conceptual framework that has been lacking.

Part of the problem lies with those of us who have been involved in studying the history of Christianity in India over the past thirty years, especially those associated with the Church History Association of India's (CHAI) 'New Perspectives'.⁸ Those perspectives were developed as guidelines to authors in the projected six-volume *History of Christianity in India*. The essential genre of this project was social history. The opening sentence of the first 'ingredient' of the new perspective sums it up:

The history of Christianity in India is viewed as an integral part of the socio-cultural history of the Indian people rather than as separate from it.

Following from this, the second of the four 'ingredients' says:

The socio-cultural approach commits us largely to using regions or even smaller areas as our basic working units because of regional, or even local, social and cultural diversities in India.

This history would be organized in such a way that it emphasized regional rather than national contexts – especially for treatment of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The assumption was that, for instance, Catholic history in North-East India is more closely related to Baptist history in North-East India than to Catholic history in Tamil Nadu. After the regional histories have been written, a sixth volume is planned to deal with 'All-India Developments' during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While it was there on paper, the Editorial Board has never been able to determine exactly how this could be written within the scope of the new perspectives.

The social history perspective led to a number of specialized studies that emphasized differentiation and distinctive identity. These include my own research and writing about the Christian movements among the peoples of North-East India. Doing history from this perspective was even more obvious in the work done by post-graduate students under my guidance. My book in the CHAI history covered the whole of North-East India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁹ However, as CHAI's new perspectives noted, even a region like the North East was too large an area for history rooted in socio-cultural contexts. Each of the hundreds of ethnic communities of that region has its own quite distinct language and culture.

⁸ The new perspectives were laid out in a document entitled 'A Scheme for a Comprehensive History of Christianity in India' produced by the CHAI Editorial Board at a meeting held at the Andhra Christian Theological College, Hyderabad, in February 1974. The members of the Editorial Board at that time were: D.V. Singh (editor-in-chief), A.M. Mundadan, T.V. Philip, E.R. Hambye, H. Grafe and J.C.B. Webster.

⁹ *History of Christianity in India, Vol. V, Part 5: North East India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, 1992 reprint (Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 2003).

For that reason, as a devotee of CHAI's new socio-cultural perspective, I encouraged my students to work at that level. While several of them wrote excellent histories that have contributed significantly to the advancement of our understanding of the Christian movement in the North East, none of them replicated my own interest in the history of the region as a whole – let alone all of India. It can be argued that CHAI's new perspective has supported preoccupation with socio-cultural distinctives at the expense of a wider regional or national point of view – at least in the volumes dealing with nineteenth and twentieth-century developments.¹⁰

Actually, CHAI's new perspectives as originally conceived are more comprehensive than many of its disciples, myself included, have made out. It speaks of the importance of placing the history of Christianity in India in a national and ecumenical context. 'Not only will the common features among regional histories... be explored but also all-India developments will be described so that regional diversities will not obscure national unities,' is the third ingredient of the new perspective. The problem is that, while it knows how to go about writing history from a socio-cultural perspective, it lacks similar clarity when talking about the need for national and ecumenical perspectives.

While I have here talked about the failure of historians to provide a conceptual framework for a Christian national identity, in North-East India at least, currently fashionable contextual theology has similarly failed. Numerous post-graduate dissertations by north-eastern students have sought to contextualize theology. All of them have done so on the basis of the cultural traditions of the tribe to which they belong. The Tribal Research Centre at Eastern Theological College in Jorhat has sponsored numerous conferences to promote contextual theology.¹¹ None have been successful in identifying a context common to all Christians in the region on which such a theology could be constructed.

Without questioning the value of the socio-cultural perspective in historical studies, the warning of the framers of CHAI's new perspective must be taken seriously. That is, the focus on the socio-cultural pluralities of Indian reality 'should not obscure national unities'. In the real world, what unifies Indian Christians? Their common faith? That is not specifically Indian. In North-East India, Baptists are more enthusiastic about their involvement in the Baptist World Alliance than they are about relations with Baptist churches elsewhere in India. Similarly, the Presbyterians of Meghalaya and Mizoram are more interested in relations with the World Communion of Reformed Churches than with churches that

¹⁰ Volumes IV and V, which are further sub-divided into regions. Vol. IV on South India, is divided into four parts, each of which will constitute the subject matter of a separate book; Vol. V on North India is divided into five parts. Vol. VI which is supposed to deal with all-India developments during that period.

¹¹ The reports of these conferences and related material may be found in the *Journal of Tribal Studies*, published by Eastern Theological College, Jorhat.

grew out of the Presbyterian tradition in other parts of India. Whereas Christians have certain common interests in India, e.g. the protection of minority rights and the preservation of the secularity of the constitution, those are pragmatic. They promote common interests, not common identity. Identities cannot be theoretically created. They arise out of an experience of affirmation and acceptance. When Christians of the ancient St Thomas tradition, and Christians who come from a Hindu (mainly but not exclusively *dalit*) or Muslim cultural ethos, and the younger Christian communities of the North East with their primal cultural backgrounds, truly accept and respect each other as sisters and brothers in Christ – then a meaningful Indian Christian identity may emerge. This must start with the non-judgemental acceptance – indeed a celebration – of the cultural diversity that exists within their faith community.

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SECTION ONE

FOUNDATIONS FOR MISSION

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THEOLOGY OF MISSION: THE MIZO PERSPECTIVE

Lawmsanga

Introduction

Mission has been integral to Christianity from its beginning. Stephen Neill rightly says that, 'Mission, the extension of the church beyond its existing frontiers, has been characteristic of the Christian fellowship from its earliest beginning'.¹ More than one hundred years have been passed since the Edinburgh 1910 Conference and many pre-Edinburgh 2010 and post-Edinburgh consultations and seminars on mission are being organized in various parts of the world. But the understanding and practice of Christian mission faces new challenges as Christians today constantly face different contexts of poverty and injustice among many other issues both inside and outside the church. This paper is an attempt to reformulate the theology of mission in the Mizo context so that the church may be challenged and inspired to critically evaluate her traditional understanding of mission and accordingly redefine Christian mission in the present context. To begin with, let us briefly survey the history of the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram.

A Brief History of the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram

Mizoram (previously known as the Lushai Hills) is one of the states of India and shares a boundary with Myanmar in the south-east and Bangladesh in the west. More than 98% of Mizoram is hilly and mountainous. It has a pleasant moderate climate ranging from 20 to 32 degrees Celsius. The word *Mizo* literally means 'Highlander' (*mi* for 'people' and *zo* for 'highland'), an apt term to describe the short, stocky, muscular people, who with great physical vigour easily climb the steep hills.² Mizoram therefore simply means the land of the Mizo people. The Mizos have been known as *Lushai*, *Lushei* or *Lusei* but this is a misnomer. The Mizos have been Mizos since time immemorial but all the colonial and missionary records and reports up to the 1960s represented Mizos as

¹ Stephen Neill, 'Christian Mission', in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. IX, Charles J. Adams (ed), (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 573.

² J.V. Hluna, *Education and Missionaries in Mizoram* (Guwahati: Spectrum, 1992), 2.

Lushais. The most prominent ruling clan at the time of the colonial regime was the *Lusei* which was incorrectly referred to as *Lushai*. It was the time when the *Lusei* rulers had extended their influence over the whole of present-day Mizoram. Their prominence perhaps led British officials to misrepresent the whole nation as *Lushai*.

Christianity was first preached among the Mizos in 1891 by a Welsh missionary named William Williams against the background of primitive animism, shrouded in superstitions and fear. William could not stay for long in Mizoram, but his appeal to the Presbyterian Church of Wales resulted in the adoption of the Lushai Hills as one of its mission fields. The first Welsh missionary, D.E. Jones, arrived on 31st August 1897 in Mizoram and was joined by Edwin Rowlands in 1898. The two missionaries worked with unsparing fervour and soon won over a handful of Mizo converts. As the number of Christians increased, it was found necessary to organize them into regular congregations, and the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram was established in 1910. The Presbyterian Church of Mizoram is currently the oldest and biggest church in the state of Mizoram containing 52% of the total membership of all the churches in Mizoram.³ Sporadic revival movements that took place in Mizoram had exerted much influence on Mizo Christians and their mission. All believers, including new converts, were enthusiastic about sharing their new-found faith and experiences. Mizos then became well aware of the evangelized people in their neighbouring states. The Presbyterian Church then formed the Synod Mission Board (SMB) which was responsible for promoting its missionary activities. The Synod Mission Board has four mission policies to help it achieve its aim: church planting, direct evangelism, a medical or health ministry, and an educational ministry. Some of the mission strategies adopted by Mizo missionaries are as described below.

Mission Strategies and Mission Board

The Synod Mission Board has used different methods in communicating and establishing the gospel among the various communities. The following methods are extensively used in mission work.

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Knowing the people and being with them

Before choosing a place or people, the Mission Board assesses their geographical location, language, culture, political and economic life, and religious beliefs. Most Mizo missionaries would go directly to the people and stay with them and learn their language and customs. They would start by making contact with and interacting with the people. They would try to

³ *Statistical Handbook Mizoram 2010* (Aizawl: Directorates of Economics & Statistics, 2010), 132.

win the acceptance and confidence of the people. Apart from sharing a new faith, the missionaries would also serve the people in many ways. They would teach the people various skills for industrial work, carpentry, tailoring and improved agriculture methods. For example, Mizo missionaries in Assam, India, have been teaching better methods of agriculture and gardening with new and improved seeds.

Establishing mission compounds

Like the western missionaries, Mizo missionaries would usually develop mission compounds wherever they went. They would choose a place where they could build their headquarters. Making their base in such centres, they would reach out to the people around them. These compounds would also serve as centres for new activities such as opening a school, a meeting or chapel hall, and teaching vocational skills such as carpentry, tailoring and weaving. Gradually the local population would be attracted, some out of curiosity, others out of an interest for change and a new life. Soon a church building would be erected and regular worship services conducted. Over time, locals who became Christians would be trained as evangelists besides teaching the new converts about Christian life and conduct.

Modern missiologists criticize this 'mission compound' approach as unrealistic, taking people away from their actual environment, transmitting a kind of colonial church organization where missionaries are looked upon as leaders, owners and actors in everything. There is some truth in these accusations: mission compounds can create a feeling of division and artificiality. But one should not fail to notice that there are other things which call for this approach. Two reasons that support a 'mission compound' approach are the continuation of the biblical pattern, and organizational and administrative necessity.

In the Old Testament, God's people had their particular centres or places from where national activities, festivals or worship sessions were conducted. Even their judges, prophets, priests and kings had certain prominent places. Thus Shiloh, Bethel, Jerusalem were places of importance in the OT. In the New Testament, the early churches were associated with cities while most of them evolved as house churches. Thus, we have the Jerusalem church, the Antioch church, the Corinthian church, etc. Many people criticized the missionaries when they adopted a 'mission compound' approach to strengthen mission work which needed to be permanent and located in a convenient place. If they were scattered in different places, their personnel would have to be dispersed and their efforts would be weakened. Therefore, the 'mission compound' approach can be regarded as a continuation of the biblical pattern.⁴

⁴ Krickwin C. Marak, 'Reflections on the Missiological Approaches to the Tribals of North East India', in *Missiological Approaches in India: Retrospect and*

Church planting

The church planting approach is based on the teaching of the Bible, especially the New Testament. It is based on God's mission for the world (Gen. 3:15; Gal. 4:4-6; John 20:21). It is based on the promise of Jesus Christ (Matt. 16:18). Church planting is also based on the Lord's Great Commission in Matthew 28: 19 – and this clearly shows that church planting is the ultimate goal of Christian mission. The growth pattern of the New Testament churches gives us a model to follow (Acts 2:41, 42; 4:4; 5:14; 6:1, 7). Therefore, church planting is biblical and fulfils the goal of Christian mission in establishing the Kingdom of God.

The main goal of the Mizo mission has been establishing and planting churches. Churches were planted where people were converted, and this was followed by preaching, teaching and instruction of the word of God, all of which took place in those churches. When a number of churches had been planted, the congregations were taught to have a link through regular interactions and visits with one another. This has also been done through annual gatherings and conferences which has helped to strengthen the solidarity and identity of newly established churches.

The churches planted by Mizo missionaries in different parts of India are architecturally very foreign and very different from the architecture of most worship places in India. While their churches are very beautiful and important for Christians, non-Christians look at them with suspicion and contempt as if Christians are traitors and agents of foreign countries. People such as Devi Lal, former Deputy Prime Minister of India, urged Christians to go to Rome or America.⁵ The whole country was angered by such a comment but I personally feel that there is a lot of truth in this statement. The church in India is a church with a misleading identity. For a non-Christian it is extremely difficult to understand what Indian Christianity is all about. Look at the some of the names of the churches and missions in India – Roman Catholic, Syrian Orthodox, American Baptist and Irish Presbyterian. It is very important to establish and plant churches which have an Indian identity.

Partnership in mission

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Partnership in mission is in accord with the teachings of the Bible. We see how partnership worked in the lives of Adam and Eve. Adam alone was not complete and unable to fulfil the work God had entrusted to him without Eve, his partner. The Triune God – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit

Prospect, Joseph Mattam and Krickwin C. Marak (eds), (Mumbai: St Paul's, 1999), 182-83.

⁵ P. Moses Manohar, 'Political Challenges and Mission Perspective', in *Mission Paradigm in a New Millennium*, W.S. Milton Jeganathan (ed), (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), 312.

– constitutes the principle of partnership in mission today, united in purpose and mission, yet maintaining individuality in existence. John 15:1 speaks of the Father as the vine-dresser, Jesus as the true vine and all the believers as ‘branches’.

Mission partnership can be within cultures or beyond one’s cultural or geographical location. When two or more partnering bodies agree to work together for their common interests or goals, partnership exists. In the present situation where government policies do not encourage foreign missionaries to come to work in India, Christians can carry out mission work through partnership. The Presbyterian Church of Mizoram has laid special emphasis on partnership in mission with other churches, and international and national mission organizations, to facilitate a wider scope of mission service. The Presbyterian Church of Mizoram is currently working in collaboration with Council for World Mission (CWM), United Mission to Nepal, Christian Reformed World Mission, Operation Mobilization (OM), Interserve, Indian Mission Association, Presbyterian Church of Wales, Presbyterian Church of Taiwan, Emmanuel Hospital Association, Church Mission Society, to name a few.

Challenges for Churches Today: Moving beyond Edinburgh 1910

The old missionary movement in the West had a history which ran almost parallel with the history of western colonization. This came to an end at the same time as the colonial period, and former colonies became independent, one after another, when they then had an opportunity to think for the first time of their own history – and the churches also became independently responsible for their own mission and evangelism. The Presbyterian Church of Mizoram also took up its mission work seriously and sent missionaries to different parts of India. It is indeed good to see the church aware of its missionary obligation, while it continues to increase its efforts in mission and evangelistic work, having started from a small corner in Mizoram and spreading out to several parts of north and central India as well as to other parts of the world. Beginning with a few hundred rupees, mission funds have grown to several million rupees, which is indeed a big leap for the Presbyterian Church. Moreover, the work of mission and evangelism creates an atmosphere of unity among church members. However, the Presbyterian Church still works with the traditional understanding of mission, and reveals little or nothing of what has been taking place in the ecumenical movement since the New Delhi Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1961. The main aim is to make converts, produce numerical growth of church members, and to plant churches, as F. Hrangkhuma has pointed out. It is not the intention of the church to speak out against economic or political injustice in society. He further comments that, though the Mizos often say that their mission is the extension of the

Kingdom of God, it is always limited to saving souls and church planting.⁶ There is a call for serious thought and careful analysis if one closely looks at the mission and evangelism of the Presbyterian Church in Mizoram.

First, the missionary mandate given to Christians is, 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.'⁷ Obedience to the Great Commission demands a willingness to enter into the different cultures of the world and communicate the gospel meaningfully. Therefore, the church has been called to bear witness to God's love by proclaiming Jesus Christ as the life of the world. Since Jesus Christ is good news for the whole world, the gospel message must have a great impact on society, transforming it. But in reality, most of the time Christian mission focuses on proclamation alone and neglects the practical aspect. Mizo missionaries also fail to recognize that proclamation and participation are two sides of the same coin of the gospel message.

It is true that, throughout the history of the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram, the main goal of mission has been the proclamation of the gospel and the making of disciples. In so doing, the *modus operandi* has been exclusive, triumphalistic and of a dominant nature. Pluralism – whether religious, cultural or ethnic – is revealed as part of God's purpose in the biblical vision of healing, wholeness and reconciliation, but the church worldwide has not been obedient to this biblical vision. It is a fact that most of the Christian mission songs and stories still continue to stress this religious 'superiority complex' and arrogance, perpetuating religious fundamentalism and reducing the vision inherent in the gospel to a narrow parochialism.

If we look at the history and mission strategies of the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram, it can be seen that her mission aimed first and foremost at the saving of souls from eternal damnation. The idea of saving souls is backed by a concept inspired by the evolutionary theory that views the 'cultured' western Christian race to be highly superior to the 'uncultured heathen' elsewhere. Mizo missionaries were sent, therefore, not only to save the souls of the heathen from damnation, but also to civilize them. Mission therefore, was primarily aimed at the conversion of the heathen into the Christian race through which it expanded Christendom by inculcating its values among the heathen. The driving force at the heart of this mission was the spirit of 'crusade' backed by colonial expansionism. Various strategies were devised to achieve the goal of conversion and the expansion of Christendom. This understanding of mission continues to

⁶ F. Hrangkhuma, 'Mission lama Zofate hmasawwna tur', in *Chhuahltlang*, Vanlalmuankima, K. Lalrammawia (eds), (Serampore: Serampore Mizo Fellowship, 1994-95), 70.

⁷ Matt. 28: 19-20 (NRSV).

dominate a large number of 'mission-minded' churches including the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram and individual members of it today.

Secondly, there seems to be a one-sided emphasis on one aspect of the Great Commission, and that is baptism. A Christian recognizes the place of baptism as a sacrament signifying our unity with Jesus Christ. In a significant passage about baptism, Paul says, 'Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death? We were buried with him by baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.'⁸ But the same Paul in another context says, 'Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel.'⁹ Most commentators say that Paul had to say this in a situation where divisions were developing in the Corinthian church over the issue of baptism. The context makes it sound quite likely.

Undoubtedly we have accepted baptism as a sacrament celebrated ever since the founding of the church. Additionally, a verse like, 'He who believed and is baptized will be saved' (Mark 16: 16) makes it appear to be a condition for salvation. Quite apart from the possibility that this particular text may not have been in the original gospel, the question is, how are we to understand this text? Did Jesus place baptism as a condition for being saved on a par with faith? All through the pre-resurrection ministry of Jesus we find him ascribing great value to faith, but he says not a word about baptism by way of prescribing it as a sacrament to be administered. He sends out his disciples to proclaim the gospel of the Kingdom of God, but he does not ask them to baptize.

It is in the light of this understanding of faith and baptism that the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram perhaps needs to review the whole question of baptism, which has been raised at different stages in the history of the church worldwide. Should baptism determine the boundary of the church? There are at least two notable examples of the rejection of baptism as a necessary sacrament, namely, by the Salvation Army and the Society of Friends (Quakers).

The issue is not to be confused with any fear of persecution from Hindu fundamentalists or religious fanatics. It is only an honest way of facing the seriousness of costly discipleship. Do we not find Christians who believe that, since they are baptized and have become part of the body of Christ, they have now arrived in the safety zone of salvation? They feel content that they are part of the community destined for salvation and that, whatever the quality of their life, they have a claim on God. If baptism has lost its original meaning and value, is there any point continuing with it? Or do we still believe we can regain its value as an appropriate sign of one's becoming a member of the body of Christ in the true sense of the term? Is it

⁸ Rom. 6:3-4 (NRSV).

⁹ 1 Cor. 1:17 (NRSV).

humanly possible to determine where the saving influence of the love of Christ stops? It is Christ who draws people of different cultural and social backgrounds to himself. Should the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram then not be open to the possibility of developing fellowships of believers beyond the circle of the baptized community, whose centre is still the Lord Jesus Christ?

Thirdly, Mizo missionaries firmly believe that revelation in Jesus Christ is once and for all. This implies that outside the institutional church there is no revelation of God, and that there is no revelation in other religions. It is therefore not correct to say that God is present among other peoples or religions, or that he works among them. It is therefore the duty of a Mizo Christian to proclaim the gospel and bring people to faith in Jesus Christ. For Mizo Christians, revelation through Jesus Christ is supreme and crucial. This fact can be highlighted in the reports of the Missionary Annual Convention, where the reports are replete with statements such as, 'souls being added to the church', 'winning non-Christians and bringing them into the Christian fold', and 'there being more land to be possessed and more souls to be won for the Lord'. Thus, proclaiming salvation in Jesus and adding people to the church constitutes the mission of the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram.

It is rather unfortunate that Jesus' call to people to enter the Kingdom of God has been misconstrued as entering the gates of the church. Much serious thought needs to be given to the missionary mandate of Jesus recorded in Matthew 28:18-20. Did the Commission imply the formation of a separate religious community with its creed, code and labelled as Christian? Mission indeed is praying and working for the Kingdom of God on earth.¹⁰ It is important that the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram broaden its concept of mission, in which the Kingdom of God comes into individual and corporate life, through words and deeds.

Moreover, the Mizo concept of spirituality and its theological orientation is other-worldly and not down-to-earth in character. This idea seems to be contrary to the very nature of Christian mission. As Hans Küng has pointed out, the church exists for the world by being linked to the world. Of course, it must not simply conform to the world. But knowing as it does about the mercy of the one true God, who so loved the world that he gave his only Son for it, the church has from the first been deeply linked with the world. The church cannot shut itself off from the world in a ghetto and live a life of its own in splendid isolation. It must rather face up to the challenge of the world, accept it, share in its hopes and anxieties, its venture and its failures.¹¹ As the mission of Jesus is meant for the world, so also is the

¹⁰ Roger Gaikwad, 'Contextualization of Theological Education and Mission in North East India'. Paper presented at a seminar in Aizawl Theological College, Aizawl, 1994, 8.

¹¹ Hans Küng, *The Church* (London: Burns & Oates, 1969), 485-86.

mission of the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram. It should never be limited to within the four walls of the church.

Fourthly, one of the characteristics of the Mizo concept of mission is the saved and the lost, or a sender-and-receiver relationship. The sender possesses the full truth and has the inescapable commission from God to bring this truth to the receiver. The receiver is represented by the heathen, who still walk in darkness and have no knowledge of the truth. Their religion is the way of darkness. If they do not receive the truth, they will die in sin and forfeit eternal life. Hence, there is an urgency of mission and evangelism.

As a Mizo Christian, I have often felt that we have made it too easy for ourselves to preach about salvation to people of other faiths saying, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.' We presume that we possess the kind of faith whereby we are already saved whereas they are all doomed to hell. When Mizo Christians take up the task of evangelism and approach other people with such an attitude, are they not really being guided by the notion that what really saves them is the fact of being 'Christians' – and what leads others to judgement is the fact that they are 'non-Christians'? Here saving faith becomes confused with religious identity. There could also be a kind of hidden arrogance in the very use of the term 'Christian' and 'non-Christian' when used in the context of mission. When we approach people of other religions, we generally go with the idea that, since we belong to the Christian community, we have already passed the 'test' of salvation and have been 'qualified' for eternal life. Those who still remain outside the baptized community of Christians are liable for eternal punishment. Is it possible to think of salvation and judgement in terms of religious identity?

In any case, who are those people for whom the Mizo Christians are so concerned, and for whom they feel a burden for their salvation? Are they not the ones who had never heard about Jesus Christ? That is certainly not the case, because a large number of Hindus, Muslims and others know much more about Jesus Christ than many Christians. Are they then the ones who have not come to a real commitment to Christ and have no real faith? This again is not a legitimate reason for crossing the religious boundary between Christians and others as though that boundary were the boundary between salvation and judgement, for how many of the Christians have such a real commitment and faith? In that case, can we look upon them as unbelievers ready to be eternally damned unless they are baptized and join the church? Surely the more educated and enlightened among the people of other faiths would only laugh at the idea of Christians being saved. We need to take note of Lesslie Newbigin when he says that we must refuse to engage in speculation about the ultimate salvation of other people. The question of eternal salvation and judgement is not for speculation about the

fate of other people; it is an infinitely more serious practical question addressed to the individual.¹²

Fifthly, one of the most troubling features of the mission or the evangelistic witness of the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram is the sense of threat that is experienced by those to whom the message is brought. On the one hand, Mizo missionaries announce that the motive of mission is the announcement of the gracious love of God that has been made available to all humankind. They claim that in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, they have a God who is a loving and forgiving God, who brings healing and wholeness to the lives of the people, irrespective of who they are or their situation in life, spiritual and material. They also proclaim that in and through his life and death, Jesus revealed to them that the challenge of participation in this love involves a radical realignment of their lives, not only in relation to God but also in relation to their neighbours. This is both good and challenging news and we are aware that, from the very beginning, while many have responded to the message, some have opted to become part of a community that became the bearers of, witnesses to, this good news in word and in life.

However, on the other hand, people of other faiths do not experience Christian mission as an activity that concentrates on healing and wholeness of life, but as one that creates a rival community, by offering a salvation to those who would come into it, which is claimed to be superior and which is not available elsewhere. Thus, people of other faiths perceive the motive of Christian mission as Stanley Samartha has aptly put it, 'The extension of the church and the extinction of other faiths.'¹³

The Christian preoccupation in the understanding of mission with the expansion of the church, the numbers of converts, and the open attitude of measuring the success of mission in terms of the numbers who have been won for Christ, has been one of the major problems of the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram. In much of Christian mission, this approach of counting is seen as both desirable and necessary, and could be considered a problem that Mizo Christians face in their practice of mission.

Finally, ever since the emphasis in mission moved away from the task of the healing of the nations, from disciplining them under the reign of God, and teaching them everything that Jesus had taught about what leads to life and what does not, and moved instead towards the creation of a community, Christian mission has fallen into the trap of creating yet another religion. There is of course nothing wrong with being a religion. But then we must accept that this is what we are. In Matthew's account of the Sermon on the

¹² Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret, An Introduction to Theology of Mission* (London: SPCK, 1991), 88.

¹³ S. Wesley Ariarajah, 'Mission in the Context of Religions and Cultures', in Lalsangkima Pachuau (ed), *Ecumenical Missiology: Contemporary Trends, Issues and Themes*, Lalsangkima Pachuau (ed), (Bangalore: United Theological College, 2002), 193.

Mount, what fascinates me on the teaching on giving alms, praying or fasting so that 'others may see' is Jesus' comment that, 'They have received their reward.' Of course, one could give alms or pray or fast so that others might see, and others would indeed be impressed, but he insists that the matter ends there.

Our understanding of mission also needs to make choices. If the creation of a religious community is our primary goal of mission, we have 'had our reward'. And that reward, since Christianity is not a reform movement within any existing religions in India, but is brought from outside, can come only by breaking up an existing community and not by transforming it. Thus, Christian mission as we understand and practise it today is experienced by other religious communities as that which disrupts communities, that which breaks up communities, and that which sets up a rival community.¹⁴ The lack of success among Christian missions during the colonial period points to a silent resistance against mission work. This is how the powerless deal with the powerful. Today, despite changes in power, resistance is still organized and, unsurprisingly, Christians continue to face resistance.

The traditional missionary approach adopted by the Mizo missionaries is seen by others as one which exhibits an attitude of intolerance and arrogance. Therefore, Mizo Christian missionaries are accused of engaging in proselytization. Missionary activity among the poor, the outcasts and the tribals in India, under the pretext of rendering social service and development, are regarded with suspicion and are strictly forbidden in areas like Bihar, and Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh. The old 'holier than thou attitude' towards people of other faiths, the one-way traffic in mission and proclamation as a monologue, are no longer appreciated in India. A rethinking of the mission approach becomes indispensable and urgent for the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram today.

In this context, the mission of the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram needs reorientation and should not be understood only in terms of pastoral care. The mission of the Church in Mizoram and worldwide must be understood in terms of witness to the world. The church is called to render loving service to humankind, irrespective of culture or race, rich or poor, man or woman. Mission therefore, is the sharing of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news of the wholesomeness of life in its individual, social and cosmic dimensions. Again, the mission of the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram must be concerned with all humanity, not only with its own members. Just as the mission of the church is to go out and get involved in the struggle for human dignity, freedom from various kinds of oppression and exploitation, the mission of the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram must be conceived as being on the side of the oppressed, being involved in their

¹⁴ Ariarajah, 'Mission in the Context of Religions and Cultures', 194.

struggle for justice, and being identified with the poor in the light of the gospel.

I am also convinced that the most urgent need in the mission of the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram today is contextualization. Contextualization broadens the understanding of culture to include social, political and economic questions. In this way, culture is understood in a more dynamic and flexible way, and is seen not as closed and self-contained, but as open and capable of being enriched by an encounter with other cultures and movements. Unless the church presents the gospel locally in ways that connect with people's language, culture and worldview, the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram will not succeed in her missionary endeavours.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this analytical study of the Mizo theology of mission points to the existing Mizo theology of mission that interprets salvation in terms of 'salvation of souls'. In fact, this dichotomized or dualistic view of salvation separates human beings – as though they had bodies and souls separately. According to traditional the Mizo concept, humans possess soul and body. The soul and the body are interdependent and inseparable. If they were to be separated, the person would feel sick, fall ill or even die. The traditional Mizo view integrates body and soul and, in the light of this, the existing Mizo theology of mission about salvation must be corrected. It must interpret salvation not only in terms of the salvation of souls, but with the body and with all of creation. This is in line with the theme of the Edinburgh 2010 Conference 'Witnessing to Christ Today' where Christian mission should be directed towards the healing of society, bringing new life and wholeness to each individual, community and the whole of creation. This is also in agreement with the biblical concept of salvation which will bring about social transformation in society.

Biblical salvation, therefore, is not for souls but for persons, for the natural world (Rom. 8:19-23), and the universe. The blessings of salvation encompass everything that gives life, including but not limited to, divine life, sanctifying grace and beatific vision. It is not narrowly limited to the private sphere of the individual but also has to do with the social, political, economic and other dimensions of life.¹⁵

¹⁵ Carlos H. Abesamis, 'Salvation', in Virginia Fabella and R.S. Sugirtharajah (eds), *The SCM Dictionary of Third World Theologies* (London: SCM, 2003), 181-82.

WOMEN AND MISSION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT: A QUEST FROM AN INDIGENOUS KHASI PERSPECTIVE

Enolyne Lyngdoh

Introduction

Women's involvement in mission has broadened its perspective and speaks volumes to our society and churches today. Scripture in general and the Old Testament texts in particular do not clearly mention women's involvement in mission. This is due to the fact that the concept of mission in the Old Testament is obscure and appears to be confined to the function of the prophet and with Israel as a nation. The motive of mission in the Old Testament is unambiguous and, in fact, Israel as the chosen people of God, were collectively called to be a witness to Yahweh's redemptive acts to other nations. In the Old Testament, mission originated out of God's love and compassion in the Exodus experience. Israel was called to bear testimony to God's love and to be a blessing to the nations. Interestingly, women were not much visible in the Old Testament but, in a few instances, women do get involved in fulfilling God's mission, even though in such cases they were mostly behind the scenes.

With regard to women and mission, the fourth statement of the *Edinburgh 2010 Common Call* states that, 'Disturbed by the asymmetries and imbalances of power that divide and trouble us in church and world, we are called to repentance, to critical reflection on systems of power, and to accountable use of power structures.'¹ The statement goes on to say that, 'We are called to find practical ways to live as members of One Body in full awareness that God resists the proud, Christ welcomes and empowers the poor and afflicted, and the power of the Holy Spirit is manifested in our vulnerability.'² Graeme Munding on this same theme, 'Mission and Power', turns our attention to the power of indigenous voices and stated that, 'As indigenous Christians, we look to our Churches to walk with us as we throw off those things that oppress us.'³ The questions and key issues highlighted in this theme are power structures within the church, such as its hierarchies, its traditions, its access to resources, and its support and control

¹ Kirsteen Kim and Andrew Anderson (eds), *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Today and Tomorrow* (Oxford: Regnum, 2011), 1.

² Kim and Anderson, *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Today and Tomorrow*.

³ Kim and Anderson, *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Today and Tomorrow*, 145.

of mission.⁴ Furthermore, questions have been raised on how to ensure the empowerment of women both in the church and society and how a missiology that is both inclusive and gender-sensitive would have to look like. ‘What would a missiology that is inclusive and gender-sensitive look like?’⁵ This paper will examine the activities of women engaged in mission from selected passages of the Old Testament texts and the involvement of the indigenous Khasi women of North-East India in mission, keeping in mind the limited information available. The study will also focus on the challenges faced by women in their involvement in mission.

Women and Mission in the Old Testament

Women’s involvement in mission in the Old Testament is invisible. But in many instances women of the Old Testament were active supporters of the faith of the patriarch. One of the elements of tension in the Old Testament is to be found in the ambivalence of the concept ‘Israel’.⁶ God’s call to Israel includes both men and women to be involved in God’s mission. Israel as God’s people, were an ethnic and political entity, and they struggle for existence as a small nation surrounded by powerful empires.⁷ From a humanitarian point of view, Israel found it difficult to impart a message of love and generosity to the surrounding nations.⁸ For Israel, evangelism began in the home and in implementing God’s commandments in their way of life. Deuteronomy 6:7 states, ‘And you shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk to them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.’ Perhaps women played a great role, especially in the exilic period, teaching their children this way of life. Mission activities would perhaps be more successful if women had a sound knowledge of the scriptures.

Mission cannot be limited only to the activities of the proclamation of the gospel and evangelism. For Bosch, ‘Evangelism should therefore not be equated with mission.’ Evangelism is mission but mission is not merely evangelism.⁹ Evangelism is not proselytism and authentic evangelism is always contextual.¹⁰ Furthermore, evangelism cannot be separated from preaching and practising justice because evangelism is not only verbal proclamation.¹¹ Mission in the Old Testament can be understood in the

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⁴ Kim and Anderson, *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Today and Tomorrow*, 146.

⁵ Kim and Anderson, *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Today and Tomorrow*.

⁶ David J. Bosch, *Witness to the World: The Christian Mission in Theological Perspectives* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1980), 62.

⁷ Bosch, *Witness to the World*.

⁸ Bosch, *Witness to the World*.

⁹ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1991), 411-12.

¹⁰ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 414.

¹¹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 418, 420.

context of witnessing Yahweh's deliverance from the bondage of slavery, and Israel's testimony about Yahweh's deeds. Furthermore, the eighth-century prophetic mission can be observed as an act of executing righteousness and justice for the poor and the marginalized in society. Mission covers a broad spectrum of activities of which evangelism is but one of the factors, but it relates very specifically to the context of the society for which mission is focus.

*The mission of Miriam and the midwives
(Puah and Shiphrah) in Exodus 1:15-21*

For some scholars, mission and prophecy are familiar terms and both are used in various contexts with particular meanings but prophecy as a term may not be adequate to understand the wider meaning of mission.¹² Prophecy is commonly used when someone foretells what is going to happen and the person is the bearer of God's word.¹³ However, the wider concept of prophecy can be understood as proclaiming the message of God by confronting oppressive social and religious structures and a call for repentance. The pre-exilic prophets called people to conversion and foretold the coming destruction, but the post-exilic prophets offer an eschatological message of hope based on God's promises.¹⁴ Christ was a prophet and his message and preaching challenged the whole oppressive social and religious structure.¹⁵ Similarly, the church (both men and women) has a prophetic role to play so that the Kingdom of God will be experienced by all people through the activities of the church.

Miriam, the elder sister of Aaron, was a prophetess in the Old Testament. She began her mission by saving her brother Moses. In Exodus 2 she was the one who approached Pharaoh's daughter and arranged for Moses' natural mother to be paid for nursing her own son.¹⁶ The Exodus tradition considered her a prophetess (Ex. 15:20) but there was no hint as to the nature of Miriam's prophetic activity.¹⁷ One of the reasons could be that women have no place in the Old Testament tradition. Miriam's proclamation of God's mighty acts was full of the inspiration of God and she was regarded as a leader and pattern for the women of Israel. Prophets

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¹² Michael Amaladoss, 'Mission as Prophecy', in *New Directions in Mission & Evangelization 2*, James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans (eds), (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 64-72.

¹³ Amaladoss, 'Mission as Prophecy', 66.

¹⁴ Amaladoss, 'Mission as Prophecy', 66.

¹⁵ Amaladoss, 'Mission as Prophecy', 67.

¹⁶ R.G. Branch, 'Miriam', in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (eds), (Secunderabad: OM Authentic Books, 2003), 568-70.

¹⁷ Athalya Brenner, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1985), 61.

and prophetesses are those inspired by God to proclaim the will and purpose of God. It is at the Red Sea that we see Miriam standing out so prominently, proclaiming and singing the power and faithfulness of God. Miriam, along with Moses and Aaron, led the Israelites to the Promise Land. Behind Moses, there were three women who actively supported him: Miriam his sister, Jochebed his mother and Pharaoh's daughter. These women were silent resisters against inhuman practices. In spite of their limitations in a particular social structure, they played a significant role in fulfilling God's mission in the history of Israel. Therefore, we cannot overlook the role of women in social and religious transformation. Though it might appear to be insignificant, some of them (despite the limited information we have about them) have made an effort to stand and sacrifice in difficult circumstances.

Furthermore, we cannot ignore the fact that women took part in shaping the history of ancient Israel. The Exodus narrative informs us that in the midst of threat, violence and genocide of the male child, Shiphrah and Puah stood against the existing social structure of communal violence. At great risk they resist genocide; and in doing so, they bear witness to the mission of God whose will for life overrides the killing.¹⁸ The dynamism of this story is seen in these women risking their lives to save male children from genocide and therefore participating in the mission of God. God's mission took place in the midst of social conflict. The Exodus experience is an example of God's mission in relation to the deliverance of the weaker sections of people from physical struggle in society. Mission in this context can be seen as a confrontation against the prevailing oppressive social structure. Mission in the Exodus experience runs from liberation to conversion and a call to worship Yahweh.

The mission of Deborah and Huldah

Deborah was a prophetess and a local judge, and in a modern sense Deborah would be a politician and a military leader (Jdg 4:4-5).¹⁹ Deborah was the initiator, the brain, the inspiration to Barak, the second-in-command of the army.²⁰ Deborah's prophetic powers are borne out by the fact that she received a divine oracle from God and passes this on to the indicated person, Barak.²¹ She guided and proclaimed God's message to the people of Israel in a turbulent time. It is interesting to note that Deborah was the voice of the voiceless in a culture where women had no role to play. In the book of Judges we find that Deborah, a wife of Lappidoth, challenged the social structures of her own time. The Hebrew word for

¹⁸ Walter Brueggemann, 'The Book of Exodus', in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. I (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 697 [677-981].

¹⁹ Brenner, *The Israelite Woman*, 62.

²⁰ Brenner, *The Israelite Woman*.

²¹ Brenner, *The Israelite Woman*, 63.

'judge' connotes either ruler or military commander. Deborah delivers an oracle from the Lord to Barak, commanding him to fight against the Canaanites, but Barak seeks the reassurance of Deborah's presence with him.²² It is unusual in this context for a man to acknowledge a woman's power and guidance but Barak did so because he identified Deborah's courage and skill to lead the people (Jdg 4:8). While we cannot justify war as an activity for mission in our context, Deborah's model of leadership is to be appreciated.

According to the historical books, Huldah was the last prophet before the destruction of Jerusalem, which she foretells in an oracle addressed to Josiah (2 Kgs 22:14-20; 2 Chr. 34:22-28).²³ Huldah was a prophetess during the period when Jeremiah and Zephaniah were prophetically active.²⁴ Huldah prophesied and confirmed Josiah's fear, pronouncing judgement upon Jerusalem and its inhabitants because they have been disloyal to God and had served idols (2 Kgs 22:15-17).²⁵ She predicted that the anger of the Lord would be kindled against Jerusalem and its inhabitants (the city of Judah).²⁶ Through her message, the king gathered all the people of Judah and Jerusalem and made a covenant before the Lord to walk after the Lord and to keep his commandments and statutes (2 Kgs 23:1-3). Huldah's mission was to confront the people who had forsaken God and to bring them back to him.

The mission of the Israelite maid of Naaman's wife (2 Kings 5:1-4)

The Second Vatican Council termed 'mission' as the task on which the missionary is sent and to the territory where he/she was sent.²⁷ In 2 Kings 5:2-3 we find a little maid from the land of Israel who served Naaman's wife and witnessed about the God of Israel. She says to her mistress, 'If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy' (2 Kgs 5:3). Naaman's wife informs her husband and Naaman believes what the maiden from the land of Israel says and eventually visits the prophet Elisha. After Naaman's flesh is restored, he returns to Elisha and says, 'Now I know that there is no God in the entire world except in Israel...' (2 Kgs 5:15). This little maid or slave girl sympathised with her enemy and could not remain silent but told Naaman

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²² Dennis T. Olson, 'The Book of Judges', in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. II (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 779-80 [723-888].

²³ K. Moller, 'Prophets and Prophecy', in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Historical Books*, Bill T. Arnold and H.G.M. Williamson (eds), (Leicester, UK: IVP, 2005), 828 [825-29].

²⁴ Brenner, *The Israelite Woman*, 59.

²⁵ Choon-Leong Seow, 'The First and Second Books of Kings', in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 282 [3-295].

²⁶ Seow, 'The First and Second Books of Kings'.

²⁷ Amaladoss, 'Mission as Prophecy', 65.

about the existence of the prophet of God who could heal him of his leprosy.

An Israelite maid, who was a victim of war and separated from her family, was forced to live with her captors, witnessed about the God of Israel. Living as a slave girl would not have been an easy situation to witness in, but this little girl witnessed to the power of the God of Israel. As a young girl in a patriarchal structure, her suggestion and her knowledge of God would have been underestimated by society, but her voice was taken seriously by Naaman. This might have been due to Naaman's helplessness. While this may be used by critics to dismiss the little girl's vision and courage, it would do us well to remember that the vision and commitment women have for mission can contribute immensely in serving the church and in shaping values in family and society.

Mission from an Indigenous Khasi Perspective

The term *Khasis* refers to the indigenous people of Khasi-Jaintia residing in the state of Meghalaya in North-East India. The Khasi traditional religion known as 'Niam Khasi' held the existence of the Supreme Being and myriads of spirits both good and evil.²⁸ The first contact of the Khasis with Christianity was in 1813 through Krishna Pal, the first Bengali convert of the Serampore Mission.²⁹ A mission field was established in the Khasi Hills in 1832 but had to close down in 1838.³⁰ However, the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists' Foreign Mission (WCMFM), an agency of the Welsh Methodist Calvinistic Church or the Presbyterian Church of Wales, established a permanent mission station in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills in 1841.³¹ Conversion among the Khasis was not easy in the early stages, and many of the converts in the nineteenth century suffered persecution in one form or another.³² They were excommunicated from society and lost their right to inheritance.³³ The first woman convert was Ka Nabon Sawian, who later became the first woman primary school teacher among the Khasis, and her conversion was marked by violent opposition from her relatives.³⁴ For the indigenous Khasi women, mission initially centred on teaching in mission schools and in Sunday School. However, with the emergence of women's movements in North-East India, separate women's organizations were

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²⁸ B.L. Nongbri, 'Religious Transformation in North East India: A Study of the Conversion Movement among the Khasis during the Nineteenth Century', in O.L. Snaitang and George Menachery (eds), *India's Christian Heritage*, (Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 2011, 2012), 468 [468-85].

²⁹ Nongbri, 'Religious Transformation in North East India', 469.

³⁰ Nongbri, 'Religious Transformation in North East India'.

³¹ Nongbri, 'Religious Transformation in North East India'.

³² Nongbri, 'Religious Transformation in North East India', 470.

³³ Nongbri, 'Religious Transformation in North East India'.

³⁴ Nongbri, 'Religious Transformation in North East India'.

established in the churches. In the course of time, these organizations provided women with their first experience of leadership outside the domestic sphere, providing them with experience in public administration and decision-making that had always been traditionally denied to them in their societies.

Women's organizations of different churches opened up avenues for women to share the gospel with other women and, as a result, witnessing has taken place mostly from women to women. Visiting neighbouring areas where the gospel had not yet been communicated to people was another form of mission activity among these women. Indigenous Khasi women were enthusiastic in doing mission work despite the many challenges they had to face.

Women's involvement as missionary teachers

Teaching in mission schools was one of the mission activities that indigenous Khasi women were involved in both at home and outside the state. Education was seen both as a tool to improve the standard of living of the people as well as an opportunity to share the Christian faith with others. The mission of the Khasi-Jaintia Presbyterian Church was to open mission schools in rural areas and educate people of other faiths as well as share about Christianity. In the year 2000, as part of the centenary celebration of the women's work in the Presbyterian Church, it was envisioned that women would be involved in cross-cultural mission activities in the remote areas of Assam. Consequently, two women missionaries were commissioned and their work led to the establishment of a school, a hostel, a church building and homes for the mission workers. Many have also accepted the Christian faith. Since then, more women missionaries have been commissioned and today are actively involved in church activities as well as in witnessing to their faith. Since then also, more women missionaries have been commissioned and today women have ventured not only to other parts of the country but also abroad. Some of them are supported by the church and some by other mission agencies. Education continues to play a great role among the marginalized and weaker sections of people in the Khasi community and outside.

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Women medical personnel

Currently, a few Khasi women serve as doctors and nurses in different parts of the country and some of them serve as full-time missionaries. Serving in mission hospitals in the villages among the poor is another way of women are involved in mission. Women's fellowships from different churches in the Khasi-Jaintia Presbyterian Church have concentrated on tackling social problems among youth by being involved in programmes to address and

eradicate alcoholism, drug addiction and HIV/AIDS through awareness programmes.

Challenges Faced by Indigenous Khasi Women in their Involvement in Mission

Women's involvement in mission is not fully recognized by the church

The concept of mission becomes narrow and incomplete when we confine women's involvement in mission and reduce them to passive workers when they are not given the due recognition they deserve. Women, as created beings in the image of God, have the potentiality and ability to serve other human beings. We cannot underestimate their calling and service in mission. Mission is entrusted to the church, and the church is a corporate body of men and women, and therefore both are called to do mission because mission is part of their faith and calling.³⁵ However, in the history of mission in India in general and among the Khasis in particular, very little is reported about the contribution of women in the field of mission.³⁶ The Church as the body of Christ must propagate a culture of equality, humanity and shared responsibility in the quest for the Kingdom of God.³⁷ Women's involvement in mission among the indigenous Khasis have been restricted because of lack of support from the church. The challenges that indigenous Khasi women encounter is that their participation in mission has not been fully acknowledged by the church. To an extent, women's organizations from different churches have made an effort to encourage women to be involved in the field of mission. Gender discrimination is another stumbling-block in doing mission. Women's involvement in mission is therefore concentrated on social work, especially in health and education. Mission can be more holistic and comprehensive if both men and women are actively involved in the mission field. Further, in order to serve the church and society, both men and women need to be trained to tackle issues faced by a complex society. Traditions have denied women any involvement in church and society, and women have been left in ignorance about their role in fulfilling God's mission. In traditional Jewish culture, women were excluded from reading the Torah because only the male child at the age of 12 or 13 needed to be educated about the Torah. We also observe that, when right teaching is not imparted to women, they become vulnerable to strange teachings and doctrines. This can have wider implications for the family, church and society. If Christian homes collapse, the church suffers and society suffers. In Luke 10:41-42 (the story

³⁵ Aswathy John, 'Witnessing to Christ Today in India: Women's Perspective', in *Edinburgh 2010: Witnessing to Christ today in India*, 186 [182-96].

³⁶ John, 'Witnessing to Christ Today in India: Women's Perspective'.

³⁷ John, 'Witnessing to Christ Today in India: Women's Perspective', 190.

about Mary and Martha) Jesus recognizes and affirms women's right to learn the word of God, contrary to the Jewish social setting and tradition of the time. Women in the Khasi-Jaintia context have an immense desire to know more about God and therefore they need proper direction. They also have a desire to serve the church and society. Only a few women mission workers among the Khasis have had access to basic theological training. This has resulted in women being viewed negatively because of a lack of theological education. There is a need to review women's involvement in mission, and also to acknowledge the effectiveness of their ministry to other women, to youth and children.

*Religious tradition and church structure
undermine women's involvement in mission*

Traditions, religious canons, public opinion, ranging all the way from exclusion to isolation, have sought to crush the spirit of women from the perspectives of equality, freedom of speech and expression, and privileges. The issue that most hinders Khasi women's involvement in mission today is that, religious tradition and the church structures of the indigenous Khasi do not support women's preaching in public meetings. They are denied equal opportunity with men. The concept of human beings as created in the image of God is being challenged and needs to be revisited or allowed to be heard by the changing sensibilities of the existing generation. It is important to understand that the closer we move to the heart of God, the more human we become (but not superhuman) as we find in the mission of Jesus and the prophets of the Old Testament. Humanity longs for freedom from every kind of oppressive structure and desires dignity of life. Mission and evangelism is about liberating people from oppressive social structures, confronting immoral practices, and spreading the good news of love and forgiveness. Therefore, when we are in tune to the heart of God, we will know true love and the true essence of mission.

O.L. Snaitang states that, even though Khasi women play an important role in the structure of Khasi matrilineal society, they are not necessarily highly regarded or permitted freedom of action.³⁸ A traditional Khasi saying that, 'If a hen crows, the world is over', undoubtedly has its roots in this attitude towards women.³⁹ Such an attitude now applied in the church against a woman who wants to preach.⁴⁰ Women's opinions are not always

³⁸ R.L. Hnuni, *Vision for Women in India: Perspectives from the Bible, Church and Society* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2009), 144. Cf O.L. Snaitang, *Christianity and the Social Structure of Khasi in North-East India*, 1993 (Shillong: Vendrame Institute; Kolkata: Firma KLM, 1993), 153.

³⁹ Hnuni, *Vision for Women in India: Perspectives from the Bible, Church and Society*, 144.

⁴⁰ Hnuni, *Vision for Women in India: Perspectives from the Bible, Church and Society*.

accepted in the church. With the advancement of education, we can find today many educated Khasi women in the secular field but less than a hundred are theologically trained, while the majority of those who are have no scope or opportunity to serve in the church or be involved in mission. On the other hand, there are many educated lay women who are actively involved in church activities and a few of them are also missionaries. The quest for the Kingdom of God and the desire to know more about God is greater among Khasi-Jaintia womenfolk, and, in fact, most churches in urban and rural areas, women comprise more than 70% of the congregation at any Sunday service.

Conclusion

Women today have aspirations, not just in the overall socio-cultural context but also in church. Their religious motivation and participation differ from men's, both in perspective and in interpretation. Within the boundaries of social structures, women have contributed their part in mission. In the Old Testament, women's roles could not be seen in public but they played significant roles in making and shaping ancient Israel's society. A key relationship in any understanding of a theology of mission rests upon the emphasis of God's mission in relation to the church and the Kingdom of God.⁴¹ The central foundation for mission is the witness to Jesus Christ in the Scriptures which provides a framework through which authentic Christian mission is discerned.⁴² We need to examine ourselves in relation to our commitment and our understanding of God's mission. The reign of God and the Kingdom of God will only be experienced by those who believe that it is the call to live together in harmony and dignity, accepting each other as people created in the image of God. As men and women called by God, we need to know the purpose of God and live according to what we are called to.

Female missionaries of the past have struggled for acceptance and the recognition of their involvement in mission, even when they have risked their lives to reach out to the local population. As a result, late nineteenth and early twentieth-century mission thinking emphasized the need for social work along with evangelization, by providing health facilities and education to the recipients of the gospel. In such a shift in mission activity, the contribution of women has been remarkable. We cannot ignore prominent Christian women in India like Pandita Ramabai, Amy Carmichael and Mother Teresa among many other women missionaries whose names have not been mentioned in the history of the church. Until the early nineteenth century, there was no conscious awareness or acknowledgement of women's experiences, and most mission work was

⁴¹ Kim and Anderson (eds), *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Today and Tomorrow*, 121.

⁴² Kim and Anderson (eds), *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Today and Tomorrow*.

done from patriarchal perspectives with women just part of a male story.⁴³ We cannot undervalue their contribution towards mission because when a male missionary is involved in mission, his wife also plays her part in fulfilling God's call to serve in it. Women in ancient Israel and women today play an important role in mission, and failing to consider their experiences in passages from biblical history will be only partial information. Therefore, it is important to examine biblical texts and teaching about the positive involvement of women in mission, and to encourage women's involvement in it.

Indigenous Khasi women urgently need to be involved in mission so that the Kingdom of God may be more fully experienced on earth. We cannot ignore the call of women to serve humankind, and as human beings created in the image of God, they have with them gifts and talents to offer to the church and society. It is also necessary in Khasi society to equip women with theological education because this is the foundation of Christian knowledge where students are encouraged to contemplate and critically evaluate life situations and the experiences of people, and to relate the relevance of the Bible to these contextually. This may be realised if the church supports, identifies and appreciates their gifts and talent. The reign of God or the Kingdom of God is made complete and meaningful if both men and women work hand-in-hand. This demands both social and cultural transformation, and the challenge can only be taken up in a sustained manner by a community of people who identify the potential of women in relation to the communication of the gospel of hope. Mission is the quest for the Kingdom of God and it is therefore necessary to equip both men and women not to be superhuman but simply to be more human in order to serve the needs of people who struggle under different types of oppression. The church needs to be sensitive to the need of the hour, and to be encouraged to provide opportunity and support for women to be involved in mission, especially in the context of indigenous Khasi society.

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⁴³ Barbara Brown Zikmund, 'Feminist Consciousness in Historical Perspective', in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, Letty M. Russell (ed), (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 1985), 21-22.

DIALOGUING CONTEXTS: A HERMENEUTICAL ENQUIRY INTO THE MISSIONARY ENCOUNTER AMONG THE PAITE COMMUNITY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEXTUALIZATION

Samuel G. Ngaihte

Introduction

One of the more disputed themes relating to the church includes discussion over the question of the 'mission' of the church, and while the contested areas vary, this paper seeks to explore the recurring theme of 'contextualization' in the light of the great diversity and incommensurability of cultural contexts, and the unfolding importance of dialogue. On the one hand, the theme of contextualization, when taken in its relation to cross-cultural ministries and worldwide church planting, often comes with the attendant notion of a non-negotiable missional imperative that it spearheads as its guiding characteristic goal, while on the other hand, dialogue as communication between cultures and traditions, seek not only to highlight but to affirm the reality of pluralities and the importance of engaging one another respectfully. Are these two themes then even related to each other? Can the underlying issues of contextualization be discussed in the light of the more encompassing theme of dialogue? What *is* dialogue as understood in the light of the problematic area of contextualization, and *who* dialogues?

Within Christian scholarship, the theme of contextualization, in raising the question of the notions of evangelism and mission in the contemporary climate, brings with it and opens up, even if reluctantly, the varied debates on the *matter* of the text,¹ while the theme of dialogue is often understood as the preliminary *means* for contextualization, and often surfaces as one of its ways forward. The notion of dialogue is often *carelessly* subsumed, and thereby distorted and concealed under contextualization, and both these themes are taken together and reduced to an exploration of the tension between the traditional formulations of scriptural authority and the contemporary applicability of that authority within the ever-growing and asserting plethora of varied cultures.

¹ 'Matter' particularly in terms of the engagement of the possibilities of its interpretation, as well as its reception as an authoritative text within particular communities.

The continual reiteration of contextualization in the light of this tension is problematic in two ways: one, the theme of contextualization, appears to presuppose, particularly in relation to the historical development of what is taken to be an ‘emerging’ ‘third world’, that the history of ‘missions’ and the formulation of scriptural authority is a singular linear development, a grand narrative of theorizing with a past that refers to the ‘western missions’ and a future where the diversity and plurality of traditions and cultures calls for an engagement with them on terms already established, for the reconfirmation of the validity and authority of these set terms. Two, the nature of the engagement with the ‘other’, while often packaged loosely in the notion of ‘dialogue’, often presupposes that the next stage in this linear development is the assimilation of the ‘challenges’, ‘problems’ and ‘issues’ of the ‘third world’ to substantiate these grand narratives. The underlying presupposition being that the ‘other’ voices are finally accorded a space to ‘participate’ in the discourse in a display of the multi-fold expressions of the universal church.

The aim of this paper is to explore and interrogate these presuppositions in an attempt to explicate and understand the phenomenon of contextualization in all its complexity, particularly in the light of the role of these ‘other’ voices, and to explicate its deeper conceptual ties with dialogue inspired by their seemingly divergent orientations.

To enable me to explore and interrogate these key presuppositions on the theme of contextualization, I aim to bring forth three guiding concerns, the explication of which will thereby be divided into the three main sections of this chapter. The first section will concern itself with the question – what is the underlying problem of mission practice that has instigated and necessitated the discussion on contextualization? This will be explored through the detour of a brief overview of the history of the term and its contemporary discussions primarily within Christian scholarship. The second section will concern itself with an investigation into the formation of Paite self-hood in front of the ‘other’, by briefly highlighting the series of non-dialogue and mis-encounters, with the intention of drawing insights about the openness of the ‘who’ in dialogue. The third section, as a way of concluding reflections, will concern itself with a brief summary on dialogue, with the intention of proposing the importance of *dialogue-as-meeting* as the way forward. It will seek to argue that, if in contextualization the concern is towards the ushering of genuine dialogue, then contextualization in mission must be understood as a continuous *questing together* and exploring of the mysteries of the good news in a *relation* between contexts.

Contextualization in Context

History of the term: a brief sketch

While the idea of contextualization is not a new phenomenon, the term 'contextualization' as a concept in missiology is a recent one that has emerged out of the backdrop of the changing geographical scope of Christianity that arose as a consequence of political independence as well as the assertion of cultural identities in the emerging 'third worlds'. Combined with the influence of the Enlightenment,² the Industrial Revolution, and the social, economic, political and religious transformations that these effected in the long run, Christianity had to adjust to these changes in diverse ways, which gave way, by the year 1914, to the possibility of speaking about 'World Christianities'.³ One of the consequences of these new possibilities was the resulting tension regarding partnerships between what was known as 'mother churches' and 'younger churches', which was one of the lingering concerns addressed in the Whitby conference in 1947.

Engle mentions that it was Shoki Coe, the General Director of the Theological Education Fund (a World Council of Churches agency), who gave birth to the term 'contextualization' in his conversations with Aharon Sapsezian.⁴ According to them, their intention in the discussions of the terms 'contextuality' and 'contextualization' – which was an extension of their discussion about 'contextual criticism' in the study of texts – was meant primarily to go beyond the older notion of 'indigenization' and take into account aspects of culture that were previously neglected, such as social, political and economic concerns. This was not an isolated understanding of the term. Carson also notes that while the term 'contextualization' was a slippery one that was indeed at one point 'indistinguishable from experimental theology', he also mentions that it soon became the term that commonly superseded 'indigenization'.⁵ While Buswell has cautioned against the discarding of the term 'indigenization',

² Bosch was insightful when he argued that the Enlightenment period was one of the 'paradigm shifts' in the history of mission, and when he claimed that 'the entire modern missionary enterprise is, to a very real extent, a child of the Enlightenment'. See I.J. Shaw, *Churches, Revolutions & Empires (1978-1914)*, (Tain, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2012), 123.

³ See I.J. Shaw, *Churches, Revolutions & Empires (1978-1914)*, Preface: ix.

⁴ R.W. Engle, 'Contextualization in Missions: A Biblical and Theological Appraisal', in *Grace Theological Journal*, 4/1(1983), 87.

⁵ D.A. Carson, 'Church and Mission: Reflections on Contextualization and the Third Horizon', in *The Church in the Bible and the World: An International Study* (Exeter, UK: World Evangelical Fellowship, 1987). Indigenization was more commonly summarized under the three 'selves' in relation to the church – (a) self-supporting, (b) self-governing, and (c) self-propagating.

he does see value in the new term, which he acknowledges as important.⁶ Kato states: 'This is a new term imported into theology to express a deeper concept than indigenization ever does. We understand the term to mean making concepts or ideals relevant in a given situation. In references to Christian practices, it is an effort to express the never-changing word of God in ever-changing modes of relevance. Since the gospel message is inspired but the mode of its expression is not, contextualization of the modes of expression is not only right but necessary.'⁷

The term, therefore, was introduced as an attempt to shift the understanding of mission away from what was seen as the 'theological imperialism' of the West towards the provision of a platform for the establishment and sustaining of indigenous churches rooted in their own cultures without the 'parochial vestige of past imperialism'.⁸

Contextualizing what? – the problematic of mission practice

As the vision of implementing the concept of contextualization in planting and establishing new churches grew, the *how* of contextualization in mission continued to be explored in varying degrees throughout church history, and the term 'contextualization' continued to be defined differently by different groups, including the liberals, neo-liberals and evangelicals.⁹ Broadly speaking then, contextualization can be identified in terms of two fundamental attitudes that are taken with regard to the place of authority (and ultimately rationality) in mission practice.

The first attitude assigns primary and final authority to the Word of God (Scripture) and values the idea of contextualization only insofar as the closed and established 'truth' of the Bible is made relevant, and the particular interpretation of mission is implemented in the chosen context (necessarily Third World) without being problematized. Shoki Coe believes that 'contextualization has to do with how we access the peculiarity of Third World contexts... [and] takes into account the process of secularity, technology and the struggle for human justice...'¹⁰ De Santa Ana stresses that 'contextualization of theological reflection means opting for a particular social context, that which is low, at the base of the social pyramid'.¹¹ The idea assumes that God is doing something redemptive in the contexts and cultures that missionaries have 'targeted', and that they are

⁶ Engle, 'Contextualization in Missions: A Biblical and Theological Appraisal', 100.

⁷ B.H. Kato, 'The Gospel, Cultural Context and Religious Syncretism', in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice: Official Reference Volumes, Papers and Responses*, J. D. Douglas (ed), (Minneapolis, MN: World Wide Publications), 1217.

⁸ See Engle, 'Contextualization in Missions: A Biblical and Theological Appraisal'.

⁹ Engle, 'Contextualization in Missions: A Biblical and Theological Appraisal'.

¹⁰ Engle, 'Contextualization in Missions: A Biblical and Theological Appraisal', 88.

¹¹ Engle, 'Contextualization in Missions: A Biblical and Theological Appraisal', 89.

called to the responsibility of entering a culture, seeking God on behalf of the communities identified, and working with God to bring about deliverance from bondage in which Third World communities find themselves.

The second attitude, in their acknowledgement and over-emphasis on the differences between cultures and the unique particularity of each culture, assigns authority to the particular context where praxis serves as a determining feature for establishing the meaning of the Bible, and stresses the importance of developing multiple theologies based on the peculiarity of the contexts. They stress the uniqueness of the local culture as the authority for developing new understandings of mission, and the particularity of the culture as the platform for the continuation of God's unending mission in ever newer directions. Von Allman, in discussing the importance of 'doing theology' in the particularity of one's own context and discussing the 'African' context as an example, claims that no one has the right to provide Africans with any theology, and that African Christians must be left alone to establish their own church in their own way, from which an African theology will emerge by itself.¹² Kraft, following the argument of Kollman, further states that the Bible can be fragmented into parts where different cultures can choose different segments that speak to their culture most clearly, out of which a diversity of theologies may arise. He states: 'We need to ask which varieties of theologies branded 'heretical' were genuinely out of bounds (measured by scriptural standards), and which varieties were a valid contextualization of scriptural truth within varieties of cultures or sub-cultures that the party in power refused to take seriously.'¹³ Kraft would assumingly agree that *dalit* post-colonial theologies or African indigenized theologies are clear examples of expressions of multiple theologies.

While on the one hand, the first position stresses the importance of the authority of the never-changing Word of God, and therefore takes the diversity of cultures as something that needs to be redeemed; the second position stresses the importance of cultures in determining the meanings of the Word of God for each context and attends to the *dynamic* of each cultural context. Therefore, while the burden of responsibility rests firmly and solely on the missionary in the first position – and contextualization primarily became an extreme paternalistic concern about how the missionary seeks to establish authority in his encounter with the 'pagan' 'other', thereby leading to the non-involvement and subsequently the objectifying of the 'other', even in its most well-intentioned reaching out – the burden of responsibility in the second position rests entirely on the context, and contextualization became an extreme insular concern about

¹² Carson, 'Church and Mission: Reflections on Contextualization and the Third Horizon', 228.

¹³ Carson, 'Church and Mission: Reflections on Contextualization and the Third Horizon', 228, 243.

one's own liberation and empowerment, to the extent that the missionary becomes the 'tool' for the emerging 'subjects' of mission to use, as the creator of 'conditions'¹⁴ as and when necessary.

Both these positions, in their privileging of the 'subject', highlights the inability of either position to understand the call of contextualization as a *questing together*, and does not offer us any insight on genuine encounter or dialogue with the 'other' in any substantive manner. They were therefore unable to imagine a way beyond the biases of their own 'objectivist' and 'relativist' positions that lay at the heart of their understanding of mission and practice.

However, this problem of the relationship between 'subject' and 'object' is not unique to the study of missions but is a central problem within the humanities as a whole that the western intellectual tradition has been grappling with till now. To move beyond this a-historical universality and insular relativists' dichotomy is not only to concede the 'epistemological crisis' (to borrow a MacIntyrean phrase) of one's own position but, more importantly, to seek to recover the 'hermeneutical dimension'¹⁵ of a real encounter that is grounded in the 'I-Thou' 'relationship' in the Buberian sense. But before we move to a discussion about the conceptual structure of how a real encounter between the self and the 'other' might be understood, let us turn our attention to the complications of the particularity of contexts by looking at the example of the formation of Paite self-hood.

The Paites: Negotiating Mis-Encounters

Epistemic displacement: anthropologizing native worlds

In the context of the north-east¹⁶ of India, and in particular with clusters of smaller ethnic communities such as the Paites,¹⁷ it is vitally important to

¹⁴ See the introduction of P.J.R. Rajkumar, J.P. Dayam and I.P. Asheervadham (eds), *Mission At and From the Margins: Patterns, Protagonists and Perspectives*, Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series, Vol. XIX (Oxford: Regnum, 2014), 4.

¹⁵ Bernstein discusses this 'recovery of the hermeneutical dimension' in the light of the contribution of 'philosophic hermeneutics' to the 'movement beyond objectivism and relativism'. See R.J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), xiii-xiv.

¹⁶ The North East, which was a term formalized through the British colonial administration as a 'frontier region', is linked with the Indian mainland narrowly through what is commonly called the 'chicken neck' (the 21km-wide Siliguri Corridor) created by the Radcliff line – the boundary drawn by the British colonial administration before they left India in 1947. This geographical terrain initially consisted of the seven sister states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura, after which the North Eastern Council also embraced the state of Sikkim in subsequent years. The North East shares its

trace the construction of their self-hood and the understanding of their identities primarily as a *struggle* and *negotiation* to survive (through a cycle of appropriation and counter-appropriation), and remake their *village world* on their own terms. It is in line with this understanding that the detached 'construction' of the ethnic identity of the Paites as the 'objects' of subjugation by the British colonizers is initially traced here, particularly with respect to the ethnographic textual representation and narrativization of these hill communities.

The perception of the cluster of 'tribes'¹⁸ in the hills of what now belongs to the geographico-political state of Manipur, which was marked out as 'Excluded' and 'Partially Excluded Areas' under British rule, was as 'irreclaimable savages'¹⁹ and 'wild hill tribes' that were acknowledged only through a policy of non-interference.²⁰ To the British, they were the invisible savages who were non-existent, and the first encounter that was recorded was the non-encounter of armed suppression.²¹ However, with the

borders with four main countries, namely, China and Bhutan to the north; Myanmar to the east; and Bangladesh to the south and west.

¹⁷ Identified by and subsumed under different names through different historical contexts, the Paites are ethnic communities that are part of the larger and more predominant *Zo* community. The official recognition of their existence as a distinct tribe by the Government of India was attained only in 1957 when the category 'Paite' was included in the Scheduled Tribes list of Manipur. With claims of national identities posited vehemently against the Indian national identity by a considerable number of ethnic communities, there has always been an indecisiveness and hesitancy in identifying and settling *specific* ethnic and cultural identities, particularly ones that are interpreted to defy the dominant notion of identity, to be included as distinct Scheduled Tribes (Article 342) under the Indian Constitution.

¹⁸ While the word 'tribe' is conceptually problematic as a term of representation, it is used in the Indian constitution in conformity with the 'scheduled list', which accords listed tribes *protective discrimination* with the intention of recognizing and affirming the particular tribe's cultural traditions even as they are assimilated into the larger nationhood of India.

¹⁹ M.J. Lloyd, *On Every Hill* (Aizawl: The Synod Publication Board, 1986), 17.

²⁰ The British introduced the *Inner Line Regulation* (the restriction of the entry of outsiders) and created 'excluded' and 'partially excluded' areas in various regions of the North East.

²¹ Luaichingthang, in his thesis, recounts that on 23rd January 1871, the manager of a tea garden named James Winchester was killed by 'headhunters', and his six-year old daughter was kidnapped; the British responded by sending its first major military force to suppress headhunting altogether in the surrounding hill areas, establishing 'law and order' in the area. This encounter resulted in the destruction of twenty villages, with sixty other surrounding villages submitting to British military might, and fifteen chiefs succumbing to a promise of 'lasting friendship'. See Luaichingthang, *A History of the Evangelical Baptist Convention Among the Paite Tribe in Northeast India* (dissertation submitted to Reformed Theological Seminary, 2000), 89-90.

possible threat of Burmese and Japanese intrusion, the location of the hills as frontiers and borders came to be looked upon as a terrain of strategic military importance for British rule, making the exploration of this once inaccessible terrain and its inclusion into the British empire necessary, and so they sought to gather sufficient knowledge of these savage communities.²² According to the analysis of Biswas and Suklabaidya, 'The British perceived them to be wild, savage and disobedient communities that needed to be penalized and disciplined. The will to dominate them emanated from the perceived superiority of the British and their assumption of authority to rule over the natives... the knowledge about such people became an inseparable part of the will to rule them'.²³ They further noted that 'the encounter of the British with these smaller communities was initiated through their insubordination and resistance against the former's presence, which always gave the latter an alibi to lead a military expedition and bring them under their control'.²⁴ Therefore, the colonial ethnographers were tasked with the responsibility of making 'official' reports and evolving a field knowledge-based representation of these 'savages' for 'efficient' 'administrative operations'.²⁵ This resulted in the production of *gazetteers, reports and documents*, with the intent not only of 'recording' but also of informing and legitimizing the territorial jurisdictions of these areas by the British empire.

These expeditions undertaken by the colonial ethnographers empowered the authors with free reign to imagine and redraw the entire landscape of the North East as these terrains acquired validity and visibility in their documented texts, and formed what Biswas and Suklabaidya called 'a landscape of colonization'.²⁶ The redrawing of these landscapes not only represented imagined boundaries but also served as the justification for the rearrangement of 'cultures' and 'identities' under new and imposed categories. The classification of the plethora of ethnic communities²⁷ in the surrounding hills of the Manipur valley under blanket categories such as *Chin, Kuki and Naga* was a clear misrepresentation that have haunted

²² P. Biswas and C. Suklabaidya (eds), *Ethnic Life-Worlds in North-East India: An Analysis* (New Delhi: Sage, 2008), 54.

²³ Biswas and Suklabaidya, *Ethnic Life-Worlds in North-East India: An Analysis*, 53-54.

²⁴ Biswas and Suklabaidya, *Ethnic Life-Worlds in North-East India: An Analysis*, 53.

²⁵ The expeditions for gathering this field knowledge was anthropological and ethnographical rather than military in implementation, as the challenges that the hills of the North East posed were unique (at least, with respect to other parts of India), in that the area was uncharted terrain inhabited by people groups who were historically never under any external subjugation.

²⁶ Biswas and Suklabaidya, *Ethnic Life-Worlds in North-East India: An Analysis*, 54.

²⁷ In the state of Manipur itself, there are 33 recognized scheduled tribes, along with seven scheduled castes.

serious scholars even till now. Kamkhenthang notes that ‘the tribes of Manipur are often unacceptably classified either into (a) Naga and non-Naga, (b) Naga and Kuki, or (c) Naga and Chin-Kuki-Mizo tribes... the generic terms like Naga, Chin, Kuki were given by outsiders for their own easy reference’.²⁸ These classificatory categories were clearly problematic, not only in that they sought to subsume distinct and particular communities under larger and more general groupings,²⁹ but also in the assertive and authoritative manner with which they sought to privilege their texts, and uphold and validate the biases of the individual ethnographers. These biases and naïve categorisations of the ethnic communities was followed by the common British strategy (particularly with regard to the hill communities of the North East) of pitting one tribe against another where the British became the ever-available peacemaker who protected the weaker and suppressed the offenders.

This semiotic reconstruction of the physical terrain and rearrangement of ethnic identities was to serve as a justification (including moral) for the military overpowering of the communities in the hills under the pretext of establishing ‘law and order’ which ultimately resulted in the beginning of the production of subjugated labour under the supervision of the superior British rule.³⁰ Biswas and Suklabaidya note that this subjugation of the

²⁸ H. Kamkhenthang, ‘Identity Crisis Among the Tribes of Manipur’, in *Nationality, Ethnicity and Cultural Identity*, B. Paken (ed), (Guwahati: Omson, 1990), 275.

²⁹ For instance, Horatio Bickerstaffe Rowney, writing on the ‘wild’ tribes of India, notes that the origin of the term ‘Kuki’ is unknown and is understood by different names across the hills. The same term Kuki, which is applied to various people groups in Manipur, is also applied to the tribes found in present Mizoram and the Chin state of Burma. It even accommodated some of the tribes who would classify themselves as Nagas as belonging to the Old Kuki grouping. In the current political climate however, it is mostly the Thadou speakers who would continue to accept Kuki as their name as a matter of convention. The Paites, along with the Vaiphei, the Hmars, the Zous and the Gangtes, while being tossed about in either the Chin, Kuki or Mizo groupings, have sought to assert their distinctiveness, and have fought for their recognition of the protection and promotion of their own identities and cultural practices. While this is not to say that there are not only common grounds but often even overlapping practices on a cultural and social basis between these diverse ethnic groups – some of whom share close linguistic affinities, thus making the drawing of strict boundaries both impossible and unwise – nevertheless, the particularity and specificity of each group is clearly distinct, both in terms of how they perceive themselves and how they go about their collective communal praxis. For an extensive survey on the multi-ethnic setting of the hill communities in Manipur, see R.K. Ranjit Singh, ‘Ethnic Movements of the Small Tribes in Manipur: A preliminary Survey’, in C.J. Thomas, R. Gopalakrishnan and R.K. Ranjan Singh, *Constraints in Development in Manipur* (New Delhi: Regency, 2001).

³⁰ Interestingly, the word used to designate a white man (even today) in the Paite language is *sapte*, which literally means, ‘the one who is over you’ or ‘the one who lords it over you’. The recounting of the ‘days of labouring for the white men’ by

‘defeated communities’ was so strategic that it left enough room ‘for the natives to think of themselves as sovereign unto themselves as well as being useful to their masters’.³¹ The whole context of the expeditions therefore included an assertion of their ‘civilizing mission’ and ‘enlightened thinking’ that resulted in the reduction of the natives into ‘objects’ of ‘exploratory’ studies and eventual subjugation.

It is within this context that the constant reconfiguration of ethnic identities, marked most prominently by its continual claims and counter-claims over contested terrains with weighty cultural overtones, that the politico-cultural consciousness and aspirations of the Paites as a *distinct* group and their struggle for a respectable identification and self-determination in the presence of the ‘other’ must be located, and particularly their *openness* to the influence of the alternative mission schools in general and local evangelism in particular.

The mission alternative: growth of native evangelists

Alongside the expeditions of the colonial ethnographers³² who were evolving new knowledge-based representation for the empire, came the missionaries who were often encouraged by a sense of a higher calling from the wave of revival in Europe at that time.³³ The introduction of the handful of missionaries generated a new hermeneutical space of contestation that shifted the horizons of the self-location of the Paite community and generated the most curious amalgamation of local Christians infused with a counter-appropriation of *sapte* culture.

the elders were quite horrific in terms of their treatment, but it also curiously assured them of a sense of accomplishment as their hard work and toil resulted in pay that took care of their daily needs, and even an opportunity for supporting their children’s education.

³¹ Biswas and Suklabaidya, *Ethnic Life-Worlds in North-East India: An Analysis*, 60.

³² While the general perception is that the colonial ethnographers and missionaries worked hand-in-hand, and that they were both instruments for the ‘civilizing’ mission of the British empire, this simplistic reduction does not always apply in the case of Manipur, where the colonial ethnographers and administrators were often quite wary of the missionaries penetrating into these areas, and were moreover often at odds with each other, even resulting in denial of permission for entry into these areas.

³³ For example, the Welsh Revival of 1904-06 swept the churches with a fresh realization and commitment towards missionary responsibility, while the Keswick Convention gave the impetus and direction for the Manipur mission, where the Convention greatly emphasized the need to evangelize the ‘irreclaimable savages’ in North-East India. See G. Sowards, E. Sowards and M. Shwe Wa (eds), *Burma Baptist Chronicles* (Rangoon: Board of Publications, Burma Baptist Convention, 1963), 9.

The 'savage' village world of the colonial 'writings' that the missionaries entered was organized around a cosmology where the 'social' and the 'spirit' worlds were elaborately ordered and ritualistically followed. Access to the spirit (*dawi*) world – which was understood to pervade and intertwine with the lived world³⁴ – was primarily one of appeasement carried out by the village priest through the performance of a complex set of costly sacrificial offerings. 'The evil spirits were supposed to be very wicked and the source of suffering and affliction on earth. They cause illness and are greatly feared... People do not worship them in a true sense of adoration. But they are coaxed, appeased and they make sacrifice only to get away from their wrath.'³⁵ Other ideas of *misi khua* (land of the dead), *pial gal* (beyond earthly dangers, crossing over) and *van gam* (abode in heaven) suggests that the ideas of life after death, and the continued existence of the soul were amongst their beliefs. The significance of the role of the spirit is connected primarily with illness and death, and is understood to be dependent on the favour of the spirits. Social life was strictly organized around a village setting, which was overseen by the *Hausa Pu* (select chief) along with his *Upas* (council of elders), the *Siksu* (village blacksmith), the *Siampu* (village priest-doctor) and the *tangsam* or *tangkou* (village crier-dispenser and announcer of news through shouting walks). Jayasselan captures the nature of a village setting quite succinctly when he describes: 'Every traditional Paite village was a little republic or monarchy, independent of any outside control. Every village was self-ruled. Some smaller villages were subordinated to bigger villages. The chief was the head, and under him the councillors called 'Upas' carried out the administration smoothly. The councilors were advisers in reality and the final decisions were taken by the chief himself. In judicial matters he was the fountain of justice. He decided cases according to the customs of the land with the help of his councilors. The chief appointed his councilors and

³⁴ This interconnection of the social-spirit world is clearly identifiable in cases such as the selection of a place for a village site. For example, hilltops were often chosen as sites to reside to avoid evil spirits as well as to stay away from malarial fever that was so frequent. The very term *dawi* which, while being used as a term of address for 'the spirit', is closer semantically to the notion of 'magic' in the sense of wonder. For example, the term for the medicines that the missionaries brought with them is called *dam-dawi* – where *dam* can be literally translated as good health or recovery back to health, and *dawi* as the 'magic' or 'potion' that brings about that recovery.

³⁵ H. Kamkhenthang, 'A Note On The Religious Belief of The Northern Chin (Zomi)', in *The Tribes of Northeast India*, S. Karotemprel (ed), (Shillong: Vendrame Institute, 1984), 116. The notion of 'evil' spirits is however contentious as there are mentions of cases where the spirits are propitiated for protection from sickness and dangers, and also thanked for the prosperous yield of crops and the prosperity of the village. Therefore, it could be argued that the notion of 'evil' spirits was a back-reading of Christian beliefs into old practices and beliefs.

the blacksmith of the village.³⁶ In the context of this village setting, the missionary gospel with its selective yet over-arching theme of *sin*, *salvation* and *heaven*, generated a new discourse that was significant, not only for its ability to theorize indigenous beliefs within a plausible meaning – a laden interpretative framework that helped situate their current plight and sufferings (arising out of their immediate situations) – but significant also precisely in its more comprehensive language of salvation through conversion³⁷ that offered the promise of a *new* and better world.

The missionary work of setting up mission schools where medicines (*dam-dawi*) were distributed for healing physical ailments and where the English alphabet was taught (with basic reading and writing skills) was pivotal in the immediate attestation of the perceived superiority of the missionaries' understanding of the ways of nature and of God.³⁸ It is this interest in mission schools that aroused the curiosity of a village chief named Kamkholun in the southern part of Manipur, and urged him to invite the Welsh missionary to Aizawl (capital of present-day Mizoram) to his village. The story is recounted even till now, both by scholars and elders (of the community) alike, of how Roberts received a gift of five pounds from an unrelated and unknown Miss Emily Davies while he was stationed in Aizawl,³⁹ and how he used that sum to purchase one hundred and forty copies of the Gospel of John translated into the Lushai language, out of which a copy reached a chief named Kamkholun of Senvon village in Southern Manipur, and how the chief returned the book with a note inviting Robert to come and engage the book for them. Robert, seeing it as a 'Macedonian call', requested two of his students, named Thangkai and Lungpau Vaiphei⁴⁰ from Manipur, to lead him in the journey. Pakhuongte recounts the event of their arrival and meeting with the chief and the village people – 'Roberts witnessed to the chief on the very night they arrived in

³⁶ L. Jayasselan, *Impact of the Missionary Movement in Manipur* (New Delhi: Scholars, 1996), 43.

³⁷ It is interesting to note that much of this conversion was a verbal confession which was then legalized through the collection of signatures.

³⁸ It is well worth noting that the gospel was not an imposition from outside that changed the communities by force of conversion, but was a gradual process, based primarily on the gradual acceptance of the limits of their own understanding and practices on the part of the communities themselves.

³⁹ This gift, which was understood to be for Roberts' personal use, is still talked about today rather fondly by church leaders as one of the main factors enabling the evangelization of the whole of southern Manipur.

⁴⁰ These two travellers from Manipur, who had visited Sinzawl village near the Manipur-Mizoram border to gather government-distributed rice in the year 1907 because of a famine in southern Manipur, were amazed by the ability of the natives to read and write names as they were distributing the rice, and were determined to learn it themselves which eventually brought them to Watkin Roberts. It was their studentship under Roberts that made them decide to discard their old practices and accept Watkin's Jesus as their Saviour.

the village. On the following day, the public came to hear him. He preached the gospel of Jesus Christ to the people in the open air, he showed Bible pictures to them, and he sang Gospel songs accompanied by accordion music.⁴¹ The chief was primarily interested in Roberts starting a school but his request for Robert to permanently stay in his village had to be turned down as Roberts had to leave the village after ten days, possibly due to the inability to attain a permit to stay longer. However, his visit to Senvon village impressed upon him the need to raise native evangelists who would share the gospel with the communities there, and he found three zealous Mizos called Savawma, Vanzika and Thangchingpuia (Taitea) to accept that 'calling'. This was the beginning of the growth of native evangelists in the villages in southern Manipur.⁴²

This new discourse of salvation through conversion, which made an attempt to take into account the meanings available within the native culture, while problematic in many ways, was nonetheless comparably different from the colonial politics of representation that reduced these cultures to a mere object of study, and served as the medium for the reassertion and reclaiming of their ethnic identities, albeit within the gospel framework. This gospel framework (that led to not only a reclaiming but also a reinterpretation of identities) was not without its problems, and two major points are particularly important: first, the gospel message of Roberts was overtly simplistic – if one does not turn to Jesus and rid oneself of the sacrifices to the spirits, they will go to hell after their death where the spirits of the dead never sleep; but if they turn to Jesus, they will go to heaven. And one of the primary ways to turn from their sins and receive Jesus was to do away with the sins of drinking and offering animal sacrifices.⁴³ Second, it was close to three full years before the Bible was available to the zealous local evangelists who were tasked with spreading the gospel in southern Manipur. Though the evangelists lacked biblical knowledge, they visited the people in their homes and invited them to

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⁴¹ R. Pakhuongte, *The Power of the Gospel among the Hmar Tribe* (Shillong: The Evangelical Centre, 1983), 30, cited in Luaichingthang, *A History of the Evangelical Baptist Convention Among the Paite Tribe in Northeast India* – see footnote 139.

⁴² For a more detailed description of the growth of native evangelists and the growth of Christianity in southern Manipur in general, the thesis of Luaichingthang (cited immediately above) is one of the most informative accounts.

⁴³ H.L. Sela, *Manipur a Mission leh Kohran Chanchin* (Churachandpur: Ch. Sela Press, 1984), 25, quoted in Luaichingthang.

accept Jesus as their saviour.’⁴⁴ ‘People have the zeal. Every night someone would be preaching in the streets. Others would be preaching at dawn.’⁴⁵

This three-themed abstracted gospel that lacked the necessary grounding and foundation in the biblical text, combined with a fiery assurance of the leading of the Holy Spirit introduced an *impasse* in mission practice that has plagued the churches in southern Manipur (and most of the North East) even till now. While the zeal and genuineness of the new evangelists was unquestionable, and the excitement and wave that this new ‘habitus’ engendered was credible, the *uncritical receiving* and *ungrounded reproduction* of Robert’s ‘immaterial gospel’ and his non-participative practice of long-distance relating with the evangelising mission was clearly problematic. In the absence of even a preliminary introduction to the hermeneutic tools and skills necessary to enable them to understand the Bible in all its complexity and mystery, the reception of the gospel story by communities clamouring for newer avenues of self-assertion meant that the relevancy of the story would last only until newer avenues were identified.⁴⁶ The attempt to imitate⁴⁷ the *sapte* culture, understood as the route towards social upward mobility, was one of the consequences of the inability of the gospel story to genuinely secure a material base and pervade the village world in its daily life.

The Transitioning Community: Understanding Self-Hood Dialogically

Despite the absence of a genuine ‘encounter’ and ‘engagement’ between the Paite community and their colonial subjugators or their missionary counterpart – which was to continue for the majority of the hill communities in the North East of India⁴⁸ – their mis-encounters nonetheless

⁴⁴ D. Ruolngul, *Chanchintha Kalchawi: Part I, Manipur Simthlang Rama Chanchintha Lutdan Le Independent Kohran Chanchin* (Sielmat: ICI Press, 1982), 15, quoted in Luaichingthang, *A History of the Evangelical Baptist Convention Among the Paite Tribe in Northeast India*.

⁴⁵ Luaizakham, *Nidanglai Hinkhua leh Tuni 1989* (Churachandpur: Lamka Printing Press, 1991), 111.

⁴⁶ This is becoming more evident in the post-modern era where, while much of the church in North-East India – and particularly amongst the hill tribes – statistically remains an impressive majority as a Christian community, much of the population are more genuinely secularists and modernists in outlook and practice, with Christianity merely serving as a cultural identification and a marker that they were born into.

⁴⁷ This was not an imitation that arose out of a loss of ‘self-esteem’ whose psyche has been deconstructed in the Fanonian sense, but is an imitation that is firmly grounded on the belief that imitation is one of the ways to negotiate the onslaught of incoming external influences.

⁴⁸ One of the main policy orientations towards the North-East India was to leave the tribes to adapt to the emergent order without any interference by the state. While

offer us a prolific site for insights into the gritty struggle and negotiation for the continual reclaiming, reinterpreting and remaking of their world in their dialogical engagement and integration of the 'other' which situates them quite uniquely in light of our discussions on contextualization and compels us to go beyond our common binaries of subject-object categories.⁴⁹ This uniqueness is captured most succinctly by the very notion of *Paite* and how they situate and understand their own historicity in terms of a 'finitude' and a 'belonging-to'⁵⁰ (to borrow Ricoeurian terminology) in an ongoing and living negotiation of their historically situated roots and the immediate world that confronts it.

The term *Paite*, which is already translated by scholars such as M.C. Goswami and Kamkhenthang as referring to 'people moving towards different places', is a compounded word of both *Pai* and *Te* where *Te* serves as a suffix to signify the third person plural.⁵¹ The first historical document to mention the term is the *Linguistic Survey of India*, where Grierson explains the meaning in a similar way: 'the word *Pai* means to go, and *Te* is a suffix signifying the plural number. Thus the meaning of *Paite*, is those who went.'⁵² *Pai*, which literally translated can encompass meanings such as 'go, move, walk, travel, proceed' and even 'come', when pronounced together as *Paite*, according to me, captures the sense of *those journeying onwards* more poetically. This journeying may be best described as a *rooted world-making* in that while the community has always been assertive of their firm grounding in the uniqueness of their own practices and beliefs, they are also continually negotiating and reformulating it in the light of emerging *representations* and *gaze* from the 'other' in their struggle for a 'space of difference'⁵³ within a bountiful multi-ethnic environment.

their recognition as scheduled tribes, with the attendant political and economic rights dispensed through the form of 'positive discrimination' has made them part of the larger nation, it has not been able to imagine a way to provide them with a sense of *belonging* and *participation*.

⁴⁹ 'Unique', not in the sense of 'something completely different and distinct', but unique in that it has not been realized for its potentiality of going beyond these binaries. This is precisely why I would argue that there is some '*Paite*-ness' latent in each of the hill communities.

⁵⁰ Ricoeur discusses how we are always limited by our historicity and how we *belong* only as finite creative participants in an ongoing tradition. See P. Ricoeur, 'Phenomenology and Hermeneutics', in K. Blamey and J.B. Thompson (trans.), *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II* (London: Continuum, 2008), 26-28.

⁵¹ H. Kamkhenthang, *The Paite: A Transborder Tribe of India and Burma* (New Delhi: Mittal, 1988).

⁵² G.A. Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol. III, Part Three (Kolkata: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1903-1922), 81.

⁵³ Biswas and Suklabaidya, *Ethnic Life-Worlds in North-East India: An Analysis*, 11.

This continual negotiation of their self-hood in the thick of their acknowledgment and appropriation of the 'other', places the Paite as a transitioning community that is essentially *dialogic* in its being, and is able to offer us a voice that introduces us to a glimmer of the *who* of genuine dialogue. It is primarily this understanding of self-hood in *relation* to the 'other' that ushers and actualizes dialogue-as-meeting. It is this positioning that transcends the debates over 'traditional authority' and 'contemporary application' in that it does not see 'self-hood' or 'otherness' as completely separate from each other, but seeks to bring their horizons together in light of its sameness and differences. This allows us to articulate an understanding of 'truth' or 'authority' as a continual and historically situated rooted-exploration, where to explore is to understand our participation in an ongoing tradition as *significant finite participants*. The Paite contribution as the 'marginal' voice, in this light, is then, not primarily an elaboration of their 'problems' or 'challenges', but their positioning and understanding of the dialogical character of their self-hood that *enables* the 'other' to *realize* their own dialogical make-up and the need to 'cultivate dialogical communities'.⁵⁴

Conclusion: Dialogue: The Long March Ahead

While dialogue as a form of philosophical discourse has always been a venerated 'method' of debate and discussion, and has been on a long march since the early days of the academy when Socrates first defined *dialectics* and the dialogical method of argumentation⁵⁵ and the Greek philosophers explored the varieties of *friendship*, in this section I draw brief insights primarily from Buber's understanding of the 'I-Thou' 'relationship' as essential for the understanding of contextualization as a journey of *questing together*.

Buber begins his discussion by asserting that 'to man the world is twofold, in accordance with his twofold attitude',⁵⁶ and establishes his premise that man engages the world in two distinct ways. The first of these is what he calls the 'I-It' 'experience' where man views the 'objects' of his experience as a thing to be studied, analyzed and used, thus establishing the 'world of It'. The other is an 'It', where the 'I' as a distant observer who is not a participant in the It's life, treats it as a 'thing'. The other method of engaging the world is what he calls the 'I-Thou' 'relationship' where we encounter the other in a 'relationship' in which both the I and the Thou are

⁵⁴ Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis*, xv.

⁵⁵ It must be pointed out that the notion of 'dialogue' is not unique to the western intellectual tradition and has been the bedrock of much of Indic philosophical and religious traditions.

⁵⁶ M. Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. R.G. Smith (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1937 (1942)), 3.

not only *transformed* but *realized*, thus creating the ‘world of Thou’ and building a relating and whole community.

Buber’s explication of the ‘I-It’ ‘experience’ and his criticism of contemporary modern society’s way of viewing the world as a world of ‘things’ can be argued to be quite similar to the Enlightenment influencing objectivists’ enquiry which forefronts a detached and ‘neutral’ observer who ‘brackets’ his bias and prejudices and overlooks the particularity of the contexts in his endeavour to represent his ‘objects’ of ‘study’ in an universally transferable ‘pure’ and ‘accurate’ manner. While the reaction to this imposition of a universal rationality is an argument for the viability of a ‘multiplicity of perspectives’ and the rejection of a shared notion of ‘truth’, and therefore a celebration of the differences and the condition of being ‘separate individuals with irreducible subjective interests’,⁵⁷ Buber’s proposal is quite similar to the ‘task of hermeneutics’ that Ricoeur discusses, and similar to what was developed in Bernstein’s work, which is to move beyond this standard dichotomy to an understanding of hermeneutics, not as a ‘mode of knowing’ but as a ‘way of being’,⁵⁸ ‘a movement beyond objectivism and relativism’,⁵⁹ a ‘characteristic situation’ which is ‘one of meeting: I *meet* the Other’.⁶⁰

This shift in discourse not only helps us locate our debates about contextualization in the light of the standard objectivist-relativists’ dichotomy and equip us to challenge the presuppositions that these positions were premised upon, but it also ushers us into the dialogical way forward. Genuine contextualization, then, is an encounter infused with moments of reciprocity in which the engagement takes place and the transformation happens *between* the two participants at their *point of meeting*, in their calling out towards a ‘Thou’ in expectation of a response. This notion of encounter or dialogue-as-meeting, which is absent in our contemporary ‘models’ of contextualization in mission, can only be ushered by a self that understands self-hood dialogically.

The whole discussion on contextualization – which was introduced either as an effort to claim (impose) the validity of the gospel – truth in all contexts, or a discussion about the plurality and diversity of contexts and their potentiality of determining the interpretation of that truth itself – when shifted out of the confines of debates about authority and rationality in mission practice to a concern and an openness towards the exploring of the

⁵⁷ Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis*, 223. For a detailed discussion of this encyclopaedic universalist position and the counter-position of the genealogists (relativists), see A. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy and Tradition* (Paris: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

⁵⁸ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, 62.

⁵⁹ Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), xiv.

⁶⁰ Buber, *I and Thou*, vii.

mysteries of the gospel *together* in dialogue, it necessitates the realization of one's own unique position as a position in *relationship* with the 'other'.

Following Gadamer, we can then claim that what is most distinctive about us (participants in contextualization) then is that we are 'dialogical beings',⁶¹ and while we must be attentive to the systematic features of our contemporary society (such as the lack of shared understanding and the absence of a sense of affinity and solidarity) that Habermas alludes to as inhibiting and preventing this precise encounter of the 'I-Thou' or dialogue from being embodied in our everyday practices, we must not readily discount the *potentiality* and strength of 'dialogical communities' to confront these barriers in a quest towards genuine encounter, for as Bernstein most vitally pointed out, 'What is characteristic of our contemporary situation is not just the playing out of powerful forces that are always beyond our control, or the spread of disciplinary techniques that always elude our grasp, but a paradoxical situation where power creates counter-power (resistance) and reveals the vulnerability of power, where the very forces that undermine and inhibit communal life also create new, and frequently unpredictable, forms of solidarity'⁶². It is the intention of this chapter to highlight that the Paite story of mis-encounters is one such example.

⁶¹ Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis*, 224.

⁶² Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis*, 228.

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SECTION TWO

CHRISTIAN MISSION AMONG OTHER FAITHS

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CHRISTIAN MISSION IN THE COMPANY OF PRIMAL FAITH IN THE CONTEXT OF KHASI PNAR SOCIETY

Bolinkar Sohkhlet

Introduction

It is worthwhile to say at the outset, that the 2010 Centenary celebrations of the Edinburgh 1910 World Missionary Conference would facilitate, among the different churches around the globe, better understanding and further consideration of mission. The particular topic 'Christian Mission among Other Faiths', reflecting on which has developed thinking on 'Witnessing to Christ in the Company of Other Faiths', opens the door for bringing in essential elements found in other faiths that may be useful for a healthy enrichment of mission in the contemporary world. Undertaking mission by articulating such elements of other faiths is an endeavour that would surely generate a more meaningful and successful mission operation without a negative attitude towards other faiths, a trend that is globally needed today. It is quite evident that, concerning other faiths, the central mission enterprise of the 1910 Edinburgh Conference was basically understood in terms of planting and organizing the Christian church among people of other faiths, along with which some other probably unwanted concerns were adopted; for instance, it was arrogantly felt that colonial powers and strategies were, *inter alia*, factors that could help the church conquer people of other faiths, the mission understanding and ideology of the churches at that time.¹ As it was pointed out in the 2010 Centenary celebrations, such an attitude is no longer acknowledged or given place in the understanding of mission and for the missionary processes of the church today. Rather, there is more consideration of the necessity of inter-faith relationships and dialogue.²

Accordingly, this paper discusses Christian mission in the context of the primal faith of the Khasi Pnar. It begins with a short introduction on the land and the people (the Khasi Pnars), and briefly highlights Christian mission, analyzing its condition and weaknesses – in which a critique is made regarding the church's attitude towards this primal religion and its

¹ Daryl Balia's keynote address in the Pre-Edinburgh Centenary Celebrations Consultation at the United Theological College, Bangalore, 17th-19th July 2009.

² Daryl Balia and Kirsten Kim (eds), *Edinburgh 2010: Witnessing to Christ Today, Vol. II* (Oxford: Regnum, 2010), 34ff; Kenneth R. Ross, *Edinburgh 2010: New Directions for Church in Mission* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey International University Press, 2010), 49ff.

position in connection with inter-faith relations (i.e. specifically between Christianity and primal religion), marking the church's failure to perceive the theological significance and values of the indigenous religion, and thus ignoring theological reflection on and interpretation of these, consequently causing hindrances to inter-religious relations and disturbing any integrative endeavours to counteract developing problems and challenges (social and religious). The paper also describes traditional religion before the coming of Christianity; in so doing, it highlights the essential features of the Khasi Pnar primal religion/faith in which traditional moral-ethical values were embedded. Finally, the paper puts forward some proposals needed for the church of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills in particular which may be generally applied to those of other places as well, to take into consideration and start constructing a more meaningful and successful mission in the contemporary era.

The Khasi Pnars

The Khasi Pnars are the original inhabitants of the present four Districts (West and East Khasi Hills, Ri Bhoi and Jaintia Hills) of Meghalaya in North-East India. There is no consensus among scholars regarding their origin, even though many researchers are of the view that they migrated from East or south-east Asia. The most common scholarly argument asserts that they belong to the Austro-Asiatic and Mon-Khmer race. There is also a mythical cosmogony referring to them as the original settlers of the land. According to the Indian constitution, they, along with many backward groups, are classed under the category of Scheduled Tribes (even though they may not call themselves 'tribes').³ One of the socio-cultural structures that they observe, and one seldom followed by other communities, is the matrilineal system. Concerning religion, the majority has embraced Christianity, although a good number (albeit a minority) adhere to their traditional religion.⁴ For certain reasons, it can be asserted that the religious attitude between the followers of the two religions is poor. This inhibits inter-religious relationships which, to some extent, disturbs social cohesiveness among members of the community.

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³ See A. Wati Longchar, 'Tribal Theology – Issues, Methods and Perspective', in *In Search of Identity and Tribal Theology*, A. Wati Longchar (ed), (Jorhat: Tribal Study Center, 2001), 45.

⁴ It should be noted that the terms 'indigenous' and 'traditional' (religion) which are frequently used in this paper are not considered different from the term 'primal' (religion).

Christian Mission among the Khasi Pnars

Christian mission, as understood from an academic point of view, may be multi-dimensional in character, indicating that the church is required to enter into a careful and comprehensive understanding in facilitating mission. For that, a theological understanding of mission has to be properly taken care of, for the church has to be engaged in interaction with other faiths; hence, faith or religious matter is to be recognized as part-and-parcel of the process of mission. Thus, as L. Pachuau rightly asserted, 'In essence a theology of mission is also a theology of religions.'⁵ Here, the use of appropriate methods, though some may feel these to be unnecessary, is urgently required for the relevant and satisfactory success of mission, especially in connection with inter-faith relations. On the basis of this concept, then, we need to critically analyze the process of Christian mission in the Khasi-Jaintia context.

With regard to the church's mission among the Khasi Pnars one cannot do so without considering the historical context. The coming of Christianity or Christian mission among the Khasi Pnars⁶ started in the nineteenth century AD when the Serampore Mission attempted to start its mission work in 1813 in the South Khasi Hills, but without much success. It was only until Thomas Jones arrived from Wales in 1821 and settled at Sohra (Cherrapunji) to set up his mission that Christianity started to take root. Thomas Jones and his successors launched a Christian mission at Cherrapunji and its surrounding areas where they established preliminary educational centres and institutions, in which members of the community, especially the children, were educated. This missionary venture in terms of education has contributed greatly to the people at large, as many schools and other types of institution were subsequently founded. However, this chapter's focus of discussion is on mission and inter-faith relations, an issue that the missionaries and the church seemed to have been less concerned with. Alongside education, Christian teachings and principles were taught to the native people, as a result of which some villagers were converted to Christianity. The process of religious conversion thus continued. Nevertheless, in striving to win the people to Christianity, the missionaries were mostly working against the traditional/indigenous faith and inculcated the same mindset in the converts, an objective that remains true even today. It is on the basis of such an attitude, that a discussion on the re-evaluation, reformulation and renovation of the condition and task of

⁵ See L. Pachuau, 'Trends and Issues in Missiological Methodology', in *Methodological Issues in Theological Disciplines*, S. Prabhakar (ed), (Bangalore: SATHRI, 2002), 104.

⁶ For detailed information on the coming and development of Christianity and its mission among the Khasi Pnars, see O.L. Snaitang, *Christianity and Social Change in Northeast India* (Shillong: Vendrame Institute; Kolkata: Firma KLM, 1993); see also Nalini Natarajan, *The Missionary Among the Khasis* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1977).

Christian mission in connection with inter-faith relationships is taken up here.

It can be said with certainty that the missionaries undertook mission on the basis of normative theology that seemed to have been in line with western imperialistic orientation, thereby upholding and developing an exclusive attitude towards the traditional/indigenous faith/religion.⁷ With such an outlook, the missionaries with their exclusive theological perspectives, considered the traditional religious faith of the Khasi Pnars as false, superstitious, irrational, contaminating, etc. The god in whom they believed was not the true God and most of their religious sets and practices were false and sinful. Thus, it was felt there was no need for a proper study or analysis of the indigenous faith, nor was any concept or practice related to traditional faith incorporated to enable the locals to understand Christianity better for it was feared that the Christians would be 'contaminated'.⁸ For the Khasi Pnars to attain salvation, they would have had to completely abandon their religious beliefs and practices, even renounce their traditional value principles, and embrace Christianity.⁹ Such a negative understanding and endeavour, if analyzed from the viewpoint of a theology of religions, seems to render a different theological paradigm, in which God was conceived more as a person (living in heaven) who was concerned about the salvation of individual human beings. God then seemed to be a conservative divine being who rejected the significant and valuable elements of all other faiths except those of conservative Christian theology. It was such a theological perspective, while effective though erroneous, that distorted and denigrated the nature of the primal faith, alienating its values from people's consciousness. This is a factor contributing to a rift in religious relations between Christians and the adherents of the indigenous faith. Thus, divisions among members of the community was widened also in terms of religious faith.

Traditionally, among the Khasi Pnars, religion permeates other aspects of life. Therefore, different aspects of life are linked with religious faith. Hence, as in other tribal societies, a dichotomy between body and spirit,

⁷ Though some pro-missionary scholars defended the missionaries as being free from the directions of the British government (cf O.L. Snaitang, *Christianity and Social Change in Northeast India*, 50), some other writers claim that the missionaries were not free from the spirit of imperialism while they undertook their mission for the purpose of religious transformation (cf P. Tariang, *The Inter Faith Dialogue Between Christianity and Khasi Indigenous Religion* (Shillong: Banshai & Badapbiang, 2003), 3.

⁸ Even today, a majority of Protestant Christians maintain a similar attitude. In comparison, the Catholics have changed since Vatican II and now have become more lenient in relations with the traditional religion.

⁹ See Shobhan Lamare, *Resistant Movements in North East India: The Jaintias of Meghalaya 1860-1863* (New Delhi: Regency, 2001), 50.

spiritual and material, etc. is hardly possible.¹⁰ Therefore, valued principles and social and cultural practices are associated with religious faith, and are thus considered as sacred duties not to be taken lightly or irresponsibly. Various aspects of life, whether individual or social, are to be observed in accordance with directions based on religious faith and its principles.¹¹ This is the reason that made the adherents of traditional religion to be more honest, in some cases, than Christian converts. Thus, once the issue of religion was ignored, or at least not emphasized, those religious principles and values set forth for various aspects of life were less adhered to. In addition, in contrast with traditional/primal understanding and belief, normative and conservative Christian theological and philosophical principles appear to have been influenced by some western philosophical notions that emphasize the division and dichotomization of the soul and the body, the spiritual and the material etc which the Christians being influenced by some western philosophical notions seemed to have emphasized more. In this, the converts were led to be more consciously careful and inclined towards the soul or the spiritual aspect without too much concern for what would be required in connection with other physical or material aspects. Such a confrontation between western-based theological principles and traditional beliefs and practices resulted in confusion towards moral-ethical principles among the Khasi Pnars. As a result of this confusion, people were unable to face many of the problems and challenges arising in society as time went by. Some of these problems were – a threat to identity; social, cultural, political and economic oppressions, injustices and evils; corruption, poverty, degradation of nature, etc. – in other words, problems and issues that have endangered the life of the community, of society and of nature as well.¹² Today, when people are passively attentive to and concerned with their so-called ‘spiritual life’, on the one hand, they neglect their duties and responsibilities in other aspects of life on the other. This continues to affect the quality of life as a whole, subverting the stability of moral-ethical values in society and also in relation to nature.

By ignoring valuable theological concepts in the primal faith, the mission undertaken by the missionaries and the subsequently established churches have ignored the significance of traditional religious principles

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¹⁰ See S. Miri, ‘Holism in Khasi Religion’, in *The Tribes of North East India*, S. Karotemprel (ed), (Kolkata: Firma KLM, 1984), 346; See also A. Wati Longchar, *The Traditional Tribal Worldview and Modernity* (Jorhat: ETC, 1995), 6, 27.

¹¹ P.R.T. Gurdon, *The Khasis*, reproduced (New Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1993), 119. Gurdon observes that, in their traditional life, the Khasi Pnars started each job with a religious observance. It thus signifies that their religious faith permeated their different spheres of life.

¹² B. Sohkhlet, ‘A Phenomenological Study of the Understanding of God as Emerging from Selected Myths and Rituals in the traditional Religion of the Khasi Pnars’ (DTh thesis, Senate of Serampore, 2008), 225ff.

worth preserving for the sustenance of moral-ethical values needed for a better quality of life in its entirety. This led to the church becoming less concerned with the rise of socio-cultural and moral-ethical problems faced by the community.¹³ It was in the wake of such a trend that revivalist organizations like the Seng Khasi, Seinraij, etc. were founded by the adherents of the primal religion with the objective of preserving the traditional religion and culture. Through the activities of these organizations, members are taught to revive their traditional beliefs and practices in reaction to the teachings of the missionaries and the Christian churches. In the several regular programmes established by these organizations, traditional beliefs and practices are lauded while Christian teachings and the churches are downplayed.¹⁴ This worsens inter-faith relationships. Additionally, co-operation with the Hindu Sangh or other similar organizations merely adds to existing tensions.

If one then considers Christian mission from the perspective of the Khasi Pnar religion, it can be argued that the western missionaries and the church initiated a process of mission that did not emphasize establishing the Kingdom of God here and now in which society was to be influenced by its values in the same way that the values of the Khasi Pnar religion permeated traditional society.

General Overview of the Religious Beliefs and Practices of the Khasi Pnars

Some views of traditional religion

The term 'religion' in the Khasi Pnar language is *Niam*. The etymology of this term is controversial. H. Lyngdoh doubts whether it is an original Khasi term; he considers it to be taken from Hinduism where the term *Niom* signifies a practice or custom.¹⁵ Others claim that the term *Niam* is a combination of the two Khasi words, *Nia* (reason or argument) and *Im* (living); hence, *Niam* derives from *Nia-im* literally meaning 'living

¹³ It is difficult to discuss all these problems and challenges in this article. It can be mentioned, however, that while the church has focused on conversion as its main agenda for mission, it does not bother too much with the increase in malpractices such as corruption, questionable political motives in the different departmental functions of the government, etc. Even more, the church is not keen on taking the initiative to address other burning issues such as the problem of ecology, threats to identity, the economic rights of the indigenous people, etc. What it stresses more is that the way to heaven is assumed to be the eternal home for everyone which an individual is urged to strive for by means of spiritual living in which a concern for other aspects of life is less emphasized.

¹⁴ See H.K. Synrem, *Revivalism in Khasi Society* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1992), 44ff.

¹⁵ H. Lyngdoh, *Ka Niam Khasi* (Shillong: H. Lyngdoh, 1927), 1.

word/argument and reason'.¹⁶ This view is significant to some extent since the Khasi Pnars, in some cases, base their religious beliefs on reason or word. However, there are some practical problems with this interpretation, because the Khasi Pnars believe that God cannot be perceived only through the intellect. Moreover, terminologically, the two Khasi words have their own meanings, which are different; hence, to combine them into one for connoting a religion is debatable.¹⁷

Other arguments point out that the meaning of *Ka niam* with its roots in the concept of *Ka niam kaJutang* (Reason/Word and Covenant),¹⁸ is theologically more significant. It points to the idea that the Khasi Pnar traditional religion is founded in and expressed through words or reason in accordance with God's command leading to the making of a covenant, ensuring a continuous relationship between human beings and God. In view of religion being established through God's commandment and with God's agreement expressed through the spoken word (or reasonable articulation), and the covenant between God and humans, the traditional religion is also called *ka niam ka rukom*, signifying religion being articulated with and consisting of many rites and rituals, symbols and sets of beliefs.¹⁹ Based on the same notion, some writers have also called it *ka niam shat niam khein* (religion expressed through careful observation and practice).²⁰ In other words, the Khasi Pnar view and way of life is articulated through religious beliefs and practices including words and actions which establish the covenant between God and human beings. Through the covenant, the ongoing relationship between humans and God is reaffirmed, and religious beliefs and practices are further strengthened.

Similarly, other traditional Khasi writers opine that their religion is *Ka niam tip briew tip blei*, literally meaning 'the religion of knowing God and humans'.²¹ This expression implies that religion is established for humans to gain a true knowledge and understanding of God and to live a life in relationship with him. This relationship with God also includes appropriate relationships with fellow human beings and the rest of creation. In other

¹⁶ Disparsingh B. Rani, *Phuit Byrthuh Byrthen ka Tynneng* (Shillong: Khasi Heritage Observers Union, 2000), 12.

¹⁷ Cf W.R. Laitphlang, 'Ka Niam ha U Khasi', in *U Khasi ha la ka Niam ka Rukom*, a compilation of lectures, essays and articles, by Ka Seng Khasi (Shillong: n.p., 1976), 17ff.

¹⁸ R.T. Rymbai, 'Some Aspects of the Religion of the Khasi Pnar', in *Khasi Heritage*, H.R. Kharshiang (ed), (Shillong: Seng Khasi, 1979), 110ff.

¹⁹ H.O. Mawrie, *Ka Pyrkhath U Khasi* (Shillong: Lyngwiar Press, 1994), 10.

²⁰ Rabon Singh Kharsuka, *Ka Kitab Niam Khein ki Khasi* (Shillong: Fair Beaulah Lyngdoh, n.d.), 1.

²¹ Sib Charan Roy Jaiddkhar, *Ka Niam Ki Khasi ka niam Tiplei Tipbriew*, reprint (Shillong: Ri Khasi Press, 1993), 1.

words, every aspect of life is centred on God. Therefore, Sib Charan Roy Jaitdkhar calls this religion *Ka niam blei* or 'God-centred religion'.²²

Thus we see that different indigenous interpretations are given to the Khasi understanding of the term religion: *ka nia ka jutang*, *ka niam ka rukom*, *ka niam shat niam khein*, *ka niam tipbriew tipblei*, *ka niam blei*, etc. In general, all these notions imply that the Khasi Pnar religion and all its elements are established, observed and practised on the basis of the God-human relationship and with God's consent and agreement. This religion facilitates the continuous relationship between God and humans so that the latter can live responsible, constructive and godly lives.²³ In other words, in and through religion, humans are enabled to live a life of understanding, of principles and of behaviour that promotes socio-cultural and moral-ethical values, not only in their relationship with God but with fellow humans and all of creation. Khasi Pnar beliefs and practices revolve around this consideration, and a relationship with God is the essential core of religion.

The Khasi Pnar religion with its numerous elements, observed and practised within families, clans, villages and chiefdoms (*hima*) respectively,²⁴ can hardly be understood or explained except if explored in-depth from the perspective of the theology, phenomenology and other methodological disciplines of religious study. Otherwise, merely looking at peripheral phenomena would lead to misunderstanding or misrepresentation of the true theological nature and significance of the primal faith. It would make matters worse if one were to attempt to explain it prejudicially and judgementally as was the case with the missionaries and many early writers on the Khasi Pnar Primal religion.²⁵ As a consequence of contact with religions coming from the outside, such as Hinduism and Christianity, leading to interaction and also counteraction, the traditional religion was, to some extent, reformation and transformation. Hence, looking at this tradition today, one may presume that it has become a somewhat different phenomenon. However, it should not be misunderstood (so as to be misrepresented) that the traditional religion has totally lost its traditional character or nature due to these interactions and changes. An analytical exploration of the nature and picture of the traditional faith today would show us its main features.

Since an in-depth understanding of this religion has not been done, people have tended to label it incorrectly. Some have called it an animistic

²² Sib Charan Roy Jaitdkhar, *Ka Jingiapyini Ka Kmie bad ki Khun* (Shillong: S.C. Roy, n.d.), 59.

²³ Cf J.K. Tariang, 'Ka Bynta jong ka Seng Khasi ha ka Jaitbynriew', in *Seng Khasi, Shispah Snem, Ka Thup Buh Jingkynmaw* (Seng Khasi Centenary Celebration 1989-1999, souvenir), 7.

²⁴ It is on the basis of such observations that many writers have wrongly asserted that the Khasi Pnar primal religion/faith is limited to certain groups or areas.

²⁵ Cf J.D. Hooker, as quoted in J.N. Choudhury, *The Khasi Canvas* (Shillong: Smt. Jaya Choudhury, 1998), 183.

religion,²⁶ being influenced by the anthropological perspective of E.B. Tylor.²⁷ Others have described it as being a ‘high god’ religion which deteriorated into animism.²⁸ However, such theories distort the nature and history of the religion of the Khasi Pnars. Some others, being influenced by western rationalistic thought which considers tribal religions as primitive, pre-logical, etc.²⁹ do not consider it to be a religion at all but label it as a superstitious culture.³⁰ Some scholars also include it within the heterogeneous family of Hinduism, because several names of Hindu deities like *Mahadev*, *Biskorom* (Biswakarma), *Durga*, *Thakuri*, etc. are occasionally mentioned honorifically in religious performances.³¹ However, it may not be correct to consider the traditional religion of the Khasi Pnars as being an integral part of Hinduism.³²

In order to perceive and understand which elements and characteristics of this primal religion are useful and valuable for mission, discerning some important concepts and features is necessary: (a) *God – the Core of the Primal/Indigenous Faith*: Theologically, the core of the Khasi Pnar faith is the concept or experience of God (the *Theos*) known as *Blei*.³³ While perhaps God was seldom mentioned by name in earlier days, the concept and understanding of God exists as the core of the primal faith and is articulated in the traditional speeches/stories, practices (rituals) and

²⁶ See Gurdon, *The Khasis*; H. Bareh, *The History and Culture of the Khasi People* (Guwahati: Spectrum, 2001), 322.

²⁷ For a better understanding of animistic theory, see Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, Vol. I (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 83ff.

²⁸ Cf K.L. Bhowmik, *Tribal India, A Profile of Indian Ethnology* (Kolkata: World Press, 1986), 44.

²⁹ Cf J.H. Thumra, ‘The Primal Religious Tradition’, in *Religious Traditions of India*, P.S. Daniel, D.C. Scott and G.R. Singh (eds), (Serampore: Indian Theological Library, 1988), 45-46.

³⁰ Gurdon, *The Khasis*, 114ff. Many Christian missionaries hold the same view; they understand traditional religion as false – see O.L. Snaitang, *Christianity and Social Change in Northeast India*, 123-24.

³¹ Lyngdoh, *Ka Niam Khasi*, 26.

³² Bareh, *The History and Culture of the Khasi People*, 51-52. During the course of his empirical study, the writer had the opportunity of visiting Nartiang village in the Jaintia Hills, a place in which indigenous settlers are thought to have been largely influenced by Hinduism since they celebrate *Durga Puja* regularly. A phenomenological examination of the faith of the people was undertaken. It was found, however, that the Khasi Pnars who are settled there strongly and unhesitatingly adhere to traditional religion. It is true that they join hands with the Brahmin families settled there for many years in the worship of *Durga*. It is also undeniable that in the Jaintia Hills people perform ceremonies in honour of a few Hindu deities. However, this is done in a superficial manner. While so doing, people do not abandon their traditional religious beliefs and practices but observe them faithfully and regularly.

³³ Sohkhlet, ‘A Phenomenological Study of the Understanding of God’.

experiences of the people. God, according to Khasi Pnar primal faith, can be both personal and impersonal, but at the same time is supernatural.³⁴ Similarly, God is beyond human gender but is also occasionally attributed to both the sexes as God is the be-all and end-all. God is understood as the Creator (*Nongthaw*), the Dispenser (*Nongbuh*) and the Designer (*Nongpynlong*); God is all-powerful or omnipotent and omniscient (*balah-bai*); as God is the Creator, so all creation belongs to God, and for that reason, God is also called *Blei trai kynrad* (literally ‘God the Lord and Master’). Moreover, God rules over all and has his/her role in every human activity. Thus, God is addressed by many names to signify his/her attributes in relation to different human acts; for instance, God is called *Bleilongspah* in relation to his/her role in the people’s economy, *Blei synshar* for his/her role in polity, etc. The attributes of God are also expressed in various Khasi Pnar religious features such as in myths, rituals and symbols, symbolizing the pervading role of religion in different aspect of life. So, in fact, primal religious elements such as myths, rituals, symbols, etc. are the traditional expressive data conveying the insight of the experience, understanding or concept of God, and on this theology of the Khasi Pnar primal faith rests its basic tenet.

(b) *The breakdown of the God-Human Relationship*: The Khasi Pnar religion has the concept of the breakdown of the God-human relationship being expressed in the form of a myth. As in the mythic narrative, the exact cause of the breakdown is not clear but it was a human being which was the root cause.³⁵ The version of the myth says that in the beginning God, who created everything including human beings of sixteen huts (families), made heaven their (human) home and the earth their working field. They moved between heaven and earth using the golden ladder that joined heaven and earth through the hill called *lumsohpētneng* (hill of the navel of heaven). Everything was excellent, as all things were under God’s control and God’s blessing. So the relationship was a unique and an undisturbed one. This age was known as the Golden Age. Once it happened that when seven of the sixteen families tilled the earth, the ladder was removed or fell down. The seven huts since then were made to settle for ever on earth and the relationship with God was thus affected. Yet God did not forsake the seven huts (humans) but continued to help them whenever they approached him/her. But the unique relationship was no more restored.³⁶ Ever since, God could not be contacted directly but only through nature and other parts

³⁴ ‘A Phenomenological Study of the Understanding of God’, 93 (the point is based on the research finding).

³⁵ There has been an expression and interpretation of the myth related to the breakdown of the relationship pointing to *u thlen* (comparable with Satan in Christian belief) as the root cause. However, it appears to be a kind of a later transposed version so as to suit the Christian understanding of original sin.

³⁶ Sohkhlet, ‘A Phenomenological Study of the Understanding of God’, 142ff.

of creation. So also God would continue to reveal or manifest his/her act of response to humans.

(c) *Religious Acts as a Means of Approaching God*: As time went on, human life was often tested and so was affected by several calamities. Evil forces continued to endanger and attack humans from time to time. So also human nature and behaviour deteriorated. Another oral tradition (myth) says that, once at a big festival, different creatures were invited and they performed dances. Among many others were a sister and brother – the sun and the moon. They performed a dance that looked peculiar to the other creatures, especially to humans who ridiculed and mocked them. The sun felt embarrassed and let down by such mockery. She went away and hid herself in the cave located inside the thick bushes (*ka krem lamet latang*). The whole world was then covered in darkness and all creation was in a state of chaos. As they tried to find the reason, they at last realized their own mischief. Humans then tried to search for someone who could plead for the sun's forgiveness but no one dared to take responsibility as they all felt guilty. Amidst the despondency, one bird came forward and expressed his willingness for the task. However, when he arrived where the sun was, he was arrogant and proud, an act that angered the sun. The sun chased him away. At last, there was only one creature who never came out of his dwelling-place as he was too poor even to afford a cover over his body. This was the cock living in the bushes in a sacred grove. He had always been submissive and obeyed whatever was asked by the Creator God. As he learned about the commotion, he decided to come out in a spirit of humility and expressed his willingness to approach the sun, and requested human beings they in turn they gave him only a cover for his body. The human beings then agreed and thus the cock went to the sun. With humility and modesty, he prayed before the sun, requesting her forgiveness and was successful in convincing her to change her mind. Forgiving the guilt of the humans and the other creatures, the sun came out of her hiding-place to give light to the world once again and so the problem was solved.³⁷

As humans beings approached God to thank him/her and the sun, God explained to them their weak human capability. God also showed his/her concern for the problems they would continuously face. So humans prayed to God, requesting God's mercy. In response, God instituted the religion by which humans could live their lives as well as approach God, with the cock or hen, besides other animals, as the main instrument of sacrificial acts. However, as stated earlier, humans could never contact God directly but only through nature; hence nature and creation became the channels through which humans could communicate with God. It was also in and through nature that the signs of God's responses could be observed. Therefore, different sets of rituals and symbols became the other features of religious expressions through which people could relate to God.

³⁷ Sohkhlet, 'A Phenomenological Study of the Understanding of God', 145ff.

Characteristics other than a direct relationship with God

As already indicated, according to the Khasi Pnars, their original religion was considered as ordained by God and so their beliefs and practices are in agreement with God's will and command. Thus, a very strong bond between God and humans is a unique characteristic of their religion. An essential expression of this bond is the relationship human beings experience and which they are called to nurture, along with the rest of God's creation. The entire gamut of relationships has *U/Ka Blei* (God) at the centre. In addition to the centrality of God and its implications for human life and relationships, the traditional religion of the Khasi Pnars has other important characteristics which may be discerned from religious observance, beliefs and practices. For example, there is its communitarian holistic character, signified by concepts lying behind various sets of beliefs and practices facilitated in different areas.³⁸ All aspects of life and work were to be dedicated to God, and so the people performed religious acts before commencing any work.³⁹ It is also founded and continues to function on the spiritual experiences of the people.⁴⁰ It is also a religion laying emphasis on oral traditions and rituals.⁴¹ Moreover, it has its basis, expressions and beliefs in some divine natural and supernatural powers such as *ki blei ki dken*, *ki phan ki kyrpad*, *ki ryngkew ki basa, mana*, etc. which symbolize the relationship between God and nature being circumscribed in the religious facilitation performed by humans.

Related principles

Together with religion, three major moral-ethical principles are juxtaposed.⁴² These are: (1) *Tip brierw-tip blei* (literally, 'knowing humans and knowing God'), (2) *Tipkur-tipkha* ('knowing maternal and paternal kin'), and (3) *Kamai ia ka hok* ('earn in and for righteousness'). In every part of life, these principles had to be kept in mind and followed, or various disasters would follow. In case of an accidental violation, humans were to approach God for forgiveness and to be shown the way by means of religious rites. Moreover, God should be approached for blessings and help in different spheres of life; for this, rituals should be performed with a

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³⁸ Laitphlang, 'Ka Niam ha U Khasi', 25-26.

³⁹ P. Lyngdoh, 'U Khasi kum ka Jaitbynriew ha la ka Niam', in *Seng Khasi, Shispah Snem*, 71; cf T. Rodborne, *Ka Niam jong U Khasi Pnar* (Shillong: Mrs H. Rodborne, 1984), Introduction.

⁴⁰ Sohkhlet, 'A Phenomenological Study of the Understanding of God', 53; cf Rymbai, 'Some Aspects of the Religion of the Khasi Pnar', 113.

⁴¹ Sohkhlet, 'A Phenomenological Study of the Understanding of God'.

⁴² H.O. Mawrie, *U Khasi bad la ka Niam* (Shillong: H.O. Mawrie, 1973), 12. There are some traditional believers who hold that these principles were formulated later. Nevertheless, they did not deny the existence of their concepts as told to the author during his DTh research.

cock, hen or an egg as the main sacrificial elements – though other animals can be used. Additionally, praises and thanksgivings are also needed as a mark of expressing gratitude to God for the blessings that he/she bestows, by the performance of related rituals.⁴³

It is therefore clear that all sets of religious beliefs, observances and practices were based on people's experiences and understanding of and a relationship with God. Nature and other creatures are part and parcel of such a relationship, signifying their sacredness. The said principles are also intended to promote right conduct in every aspect of day-to-day life, be it individually or socially. The following brief elaboration of each of them would throw some light on their meaning:

(a) *Tipbriew-Tipblei*: The expression *tipbriew* denotes commitment to social concerns. It involves the use of benevolent words and the performance of beneficial actions towards other fellow humans for constructing a just, liberal, humanitarian and communitarian society. The expression is linked with the word *tipblei* which implies a relational and cognitive understanding of God whom one experiences as one involves oneself in social concerns. While *tipbriew* focuses on social commitment, *tipblei* emphasizes the knowledge of God. Therefore, the compound *tipbriew-tipblei* underlines the view that social commitment is a godly concern. Social involvement leads to a deeper knowledge of God. So also the understanding of God leads to social commitment.⁴⁴

(b) *Tipkur-Tipkha*: The word *tipkur* literally means 'knowing one's clan'. In fact, it denotes the acknowledgement of the existence of a maternal relationship between members of the same clan, expressed through mutual respect. The word *tipkha*, on the other hand, signifies the acknowledgement of the existence of a relationship with the clan of one's paternal kin, expressed once again through mutual respect. In other words, according to the *tipkha* principle, the father or the husband and his family are respected by the mother or wife and her family, and vice versa. So, when the two terms *tipkur-tipkha* are linked together, the phrase articulates a principle of respectful mutual relationships among the different clans of Khasi Pnar society. In other words, it emphasizes the importance of communitarian respect and togetherness.⁴⁵

(c) *Kamai ia ka hok*: The principle means 'for righteous earning'. It implies that one must be sincere and righteous in one's work. It also means that one must not harbour selfish or greedy motives in performing any task or job, so as to cause danger to others in society. In such labour, there is no place for stealing, deception, corruption, etc.⁴⁶

⁴³ Rymbai, 'Some Aspects of the Religion of the Khasi Pnar', 112ff.

⁴⁴ Rymbai, 'Some Aspects of the Religion of the Khasi Pnar', 110ff.

⁴⁵ S. Sawian, 'Shaphang ka Shongkha Shongman', lecture at the meeting of *Seng Khasi* (women's wing) in Shillong on 18th October 1995.

⁴⁶ H.K. Synrem, 'Religion of the Khasis', in *Seng Khasi Shispah Snem, 1899-1999, Ka Thup buh Jingkynmaw*, 109-10.

So far we have attempted to highlight the basic features of the primal/indigenous religion of the Khasi Pnars. It can be seen that the central core of religion is God – i.e. the experience and understanding of and relationship with God. Therefore, as stated earlier, various religious elements are based on this experience, understanding and relationship. Moreover, religion permeates the different aspects of life as life also belongs to God. Even a relationship with other parts of creation has its significance in the primal faith and belief in the sense that all are created by God and also are the channel through which humans can contact God and in which God manifests his/her acts of response to humans. Thus the theology of the Khasi Pnar religion is holistic in nature.

The Need for Taking the Company of Primal Faith – The New Course of Mission Facilitation

In today's context in Meghalaya, if Christians and the church aim to improve their mission, they need to do away with a conservative and negative attitude towards the primal faith and start thinking of mission afresh. For the church in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills to facilitate its mission, it has to initiate and carry out a number of new ideas, thought forms and activities. Some of the many primary tasks of mission that are needed today can be, first, helping people to safeguard the identity of the community which may have been endangered due to a lack of awareness and a neglect of the issue.⁴⁷ Perhaps this has to be undertaken carefully from the right perspectives and within the framework of the Indian constitution. Secondly, the effort to wipe out social and political injustices and many such evils from society. Thirdly, mission service has to be pragmatic in order to help enhance economic enterprises; this requires proclamation as well as action against corruption and bribery. Fourthly, the task is also to conscientize the people regarding the preservation of nature. It entails creating a sense of awareness of the danger to life if nature is continuously destroyed.

The effort for such a mission would require the company of the primal faith. Therefore, inter-faith relationships must be prioritized. There needs to be an awareness that inter-faith relationships is the meeting place of both the Christian and primal faiths from which a theological-spiritual

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⁴⁷ In one of the sessions of the Pre-Edinburgh Centenary Celebration Consultation held at UTC Bangalore (17th-19th July 2009), a unanimous understanding was that the tribals, *dalits*, *adivasis* or the so-called subaltern groups are people struggling to affirm their identity. In the case of the Khasi Pnar community, the issue is more of safeguarding the identity and unifying the community. Nevertheless, this does not appear to be a part of mission of the church insofar as the church has not made this one of its concerns. Part of it appears only in one or two theological seminars (see, for instance, J.F. Jyrwa, 'Theological Education in North East India: Challenges and Prospects', in *Theological Education in North East India, Problems and Prospects*, B.L. Nongbri (ed), (Shillong: JRTS, 2008), 14-16.

renovation would come about. Inter-faith relationships can ensure the re-establishment of unity among members of the community, so as to be able to reciprocally, unanimously and wisely safeguard a community's identity. Moreover, justice and prosperity in society can be built up as the primal faith is based on the experiences of and relationship with God; these are contained in the socio-cultural and moral-ethical values needed for constructing such a just and peaceful society where new things can happen and where God's reign may find expression.

The churches in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills have never taken inter-faith relationships into consideration. The issue has never been a concern of the church. So far, if one talks about inter-faith relationships as an issue for discussion, it is seen as unwanted. The main reason is the understanding that Christianity is always the super-incomparable religion set forth to conquer over others. Moreover, there is a fear that inter-religious relationships may lead to syncretism, misunderstanding and a decline of evangelism.⁴⁸

So if the church or Christians in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills are to take up the issue of inter-faith relationships as a step for more effective mission, they should first re-examine their attitude in relation to primal religious beliefs, practices and principles. They may also need to review their exclusive claims on behalf of Christ.⁴⁹ While living in a society where people of other faiths are our neighbours, it is necessary for the church to recognize their rights of belief, and then reconstruct a mission theology which has as its base an understanding of how God, through and in Jesus Christ, relates him/herself to the world which is different from God's distinctive divine nature. Only then can inter-religious relations be made progressive so as to draw other faiths into the task of mission. In the Khasi Jaintia context, it does not necessarily mean that adherents of the primal religion should externally or physically involve themselves in service for mission; it means rather that they share common religious insights, issues and agendas relevant for expanding mission.

Making inter-faith relationships effective in drawing other faiths into the tasks of mission would require inter-faith dialogue, for it is through dialogue that differences can be resolved by peaceful means.⁵⁰ It is also in and through dialogue that the sharing of the faith experience and faith values is possible. Dialogue is the relevant factor that can build up mutual

⁴⁸ Cf Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, 'Dialogue with Other Religions – A Evangelical View', in *The Bible and Theology in Asian Contexts – An Evangelical Perspective on Asian Theology*, Bong Rin Ro and Ruth Eshenaur (eds), (Bangalore: ATA, 1984), 276-81.

⁴⁹ Cf S.J. Samartha, 'The Cross and the Rainbow: Christ in a Multi-Religious Culture', in *Christian Faith and Multiform Culture in India*, Somen Das (ed), (Bangalore: United Theological College, 1987), 15.

⁵⁰ Srinivas Rao, 'Preface', in *Interfaith Dialogue and World Community*, Srinivas Rao (ed), (Chennai: CLS, 1991), iii.

understanding where the realization of one's weakness and one's problems can be highlighted and a solution brought about.⁵¹ It is also in and through dialogue that religious issues and the insights of different traditions applicable for developing a just and peace society can be discerned, discussed and put into practice together. In fact, 'dialogue' has been the subject that has enchanted contemporary religious leaders into building inter-faith relationships and progressing together in operating integral mission. One can note the declaration of the World Council of Churches on dialogue which states: 'We feel able with integrity to assure our partners in dialogue that we come not as manipulators but as genuine fellow pilgrims, to speak with them of what we believe God to have done in Jesus Christ who has gone before us, but whom we seek to meet anew in dialogue.'⁵² For the church, dialogue can also lead to an increased understanding of the universality of Christ by understanding his activity in other religions.⁵³ The imperatives of dialogue that should be realized in the Khasi Jaintia context may include: (1) understanding our neighbours and to know what and why they believe, (2) enlarging and enlivening our own faith, to bring new dimensions and meaning to it as we search to understand new ways of speaking about truth and relating to reality, (3) helping us in mutual correction, and breaking down the dividing walls of hostility by addressing all that leads to misunderstanding and suspicions, and consequently (4) helping enhance moral-ethical values in society, enabling different groups to identify and discuss issues, problems and challenges together, and to come to possible solutions and reciprocal readiness, helping people to become aware of the main concerns and to ensure the stability of the community's identity.⁵⁴

To proceed in inter-religious dialogue, some of the religious concepts of primal faith that have been mentioned and which are similar to Christian teachings can be taken as a common insight. For instance, the view of one God who is the Creator, the All-Powerful, the Omniscient, the Helper, etc. is not different from the Christian theological concept of God. Many other different given titles of God connoting God's attributes are authentic if taken as common theological agenda in dialogue for the purposes of mission. So also is the understanding of the breakdown of the God-human relationship which appears similar to the Christian concept of the human fall, though slight differences may be found. The moral-ethical principles are also appropriate points for dialogue. The three principles mentioned above of *Tipbriew-tipblei*, *Tipkur-tipkha* and *kamai ia ka hok* can be

⁵¹ Ross, *Edinburgh 2010, New Directions for Church in Mission*, 49ff.

⁵² WCC Guidelines on Dialogue (Geneva: WCC, 1979), 11.

⁵³ Samuel and Chris Sugden, 'Dialogue with Other Religions – An Evangelical View', 285.

⁵⁴ Cf S.W. Ariarajah, 'The Understanding and Practice of Dialogue, Its Nature, Purpose and Variation', in *Faith in the Midst of Faith*, S.J. Samartha (ed), (Geneva: WCC, 1977), 56.

considered as divine commandments for a good social structure of the Khasi Pnar indigenous faith, relevant for constructing a peaceful and just society. The principles point to an integral relationship between God, humans and even with other creatures; they address the knowledge of one's own life and family which should be just and righteous; hence, they signify the holistic vision of human life and affirm the positive relationship between God, humanity and even nature. Moreover, the importance of observing and following God's will and God's directions as in the understanding in the primal faith serves for correcting ways of living individually and socially as members of community. The significance of the sacredness of nature evidenced in the belief in divine powers manifested in natural features is another important facet entrenched in the primal faith worth integrating for missionary venture. This would enhance the moral value in connection with caring for the environment. As stated earlier, a vital relationship is that shared with nature which stands as a connection and as a relationship between God and humans.⁵⁵ Such a precious religious insight should be made known and conscientized to the community as a whole so as to reduce the continuous degradation and exploitation of nature.

In conclusion, it is well to be reminded that the Khasi Pnar context is that where religious negation between one (religious) tradition and another exists psychologically and socially. It is a phenomenon, as simple as it seems to be (which, in fact it is not), posing as a blockade to the development of a reciprocal understanding among members of the Khasi Pnar community, thus hindering the progress of mission. If Christianity is, as claimed by many Christians, the sole religion which can bring unity to the Khasi community and which promises justice, peace and harmony, some of the questions that the church and Christians are to ask themselves time and again are, whether or not Christianity is aware of the rise of such conflicts caused by its intolerance of and negative attitudes towards indigenous/primal religious beliefs? Is it ready to come forward with an inclusive stance and share in dialogue for creating opportunities for mutual understanding and a new relationship with followers of the primal religion? Is it willing to include and make use of the valuable religious principles of the primal faith resources? And is it ready to venture in its mission challenging the issues facing people today and enhancing moral-ethical values so as to restore God's own kingdom in the company of other faiths?

⁵⁵ . Cf Wati Longchar, *The Tribal Religious Traditions in North East India*, 6. (Though Wati Longchar's assertion is generally meant for the religious tradition of all the tribes, it is rightly suited with the characteristics of the Khasi Pnar Primal religion too. See also B. Sohkhlet, 'A Phenomenological Study of the Understanding of God', 52-56, 109-19.

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SECTION THREE

**MISSION AND
POST-MODERNITIES**

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MISSION IN POST-MODERNITY: A TRIBAL PERSPECTIVE

K. Lallawmzuala

This paper is an attempt at a perspective of the tribal peoples in North-East India towards reshaping Christian mission in the post-modern context. Mission in the past century was inseparable from Enlightenment philosophy, modernity and colonialism. We will first briefly introduce what post-modernism is and then discuss the kind of mission the Christian community should carry out in the present context in the light of insights derived from tribal socio-cultural and religious resources.

What is Post-Modernism?

Post-modernism is difficult to define as doing so would violate the post-modernist's principle that no definite terms, boundaries or absolute truth exist. The term post-modernism literally means 'after the modernist movement'. However, the literal meaning of the term does not make much sense because of the multifaceted aspects that post-modernism displays. As a critical theory, post-modernism was originally a reaction to or a critique of modernism. Without any idea about modernism, it is difficult to grasp its meaning. Perhaps the easiest way to understand it is to think about modernism, the movement from which post-modernism appears to emerge.

Modernity is inseparably associated with the European Enlightenment, which begins roughly in the middle of the eighteenth century (1750). As the Enlightenment refers to the awakening of the minds and thoughts of people by reason and a scientific way of thinking, modernism is certainly a process of the rationalization of life. It defines human nature and essence in terms of rationality. Reason and science are regarded as supreme, and all aspects of life are brought under their domain. Modernism categorizes and segregates everything into centre and periphery, superior and inferior. In fact, modernity is fundamentally about order: about rationality and rationalization, creating order out of chaos. The assumption is that creating more rationality is conducive to creating more order, and the more ordered a society is, the better it will function. Anything that cannot be a given rational explanation and one that is against a scientific worldview is considered to represent disorder or chaos. Thus anything, non-scientific – or in some cases non-white or non-western – becomes part of 'disorder' and has to be eliminated or abandoned. Modernism worked towards totalizing or universalizing theories which are called meta-narratives or

grand narratives.¹ These meta-narratives or universal worldviews created by modernists have become the norm and have readily marginalized any other worldviews that did not conform to them.

Post-modernism, however, is the critique of meta-narratives and any other absolute truth or supremacy claimed by modernism, whereas it favours ‘mini-narratives’, stories that explain small practices and local events, rather than large-scale universal or global concepts. Post-modern ‘mini-narratives’ are always contextual, provisional, contingent and temporary, making no claim to universality, truth, reason or stability. Iyadurai identifies the contrasting features of modernity and post-modernity: self and community, modern and post-modern hermeneutics, reason and experience, absolute truth and plurality of truths, meta-narratives and particularities, and centre and periphery.² Post-modernism upholds the people who had once been voiceless and suppressed by modernism, to raise their voices to be heard more and more clearly. These voices may include people from previously colonized countries and people at the periphery, namely, women, racial and ethnic minorities, and any other marginalized groups of people from around the world. Post-modernism has broken the centre-periphery relationship and has brought the marginalized and those who were in periphery to the centre.

Christian Mission in the Tribal Society in North-East India

From the middle of the nineteenth century, western missionaries began introducing Christianity among the tribal peoples, and the majority of the hill tribes in North-East India have now become Christian. The tribal peoples in North-East India received the Christian mission when the process of modernization was at its height. In fact, the Christian mission that was brought to the tribal peoples can largely be seen as a vehicle to spread modernization since the whole concept of mission in Europe was reshaped and remodelled in the Enlightenment period. Longchar observes, ‘The Christian missionaries brought about the greatest revolution in the tribal society.’³ The process of modernization was greatly accelerated by western missionary activities that affected almost every aspect of tribal socio-cultural life. Some of the components of modernity that came along with Christian mission were science and technology, urbanization, industrialization, rapid means of communication, new education, new

¹ Joshua Iyadurai, ‘Mission in Postmodernity: An Asian Perspective’, 2: www.edinburgh2010.org/fr/le-processus-detudes/principaux-themes-missionnaires/la-mission-et-les-postmodernites/theme-3-papers.html. This paper has also been published in *Dharma Deepika: A South Asian Journal of Missiological Research* 32 (July-December 2010).

² Iyadurai, ‘Mission in Postmodernity: An Asian Perspective’.

³ A. Wati Longchar, *The Tribal Religious Traditions in North East India* (Jorhat: Easter Theological College, 2000), 141.

political processes, economic systems, etc.⁴ This process promoted western democratic values, as well as capitalism, individualism, rationalism and enlightened ideology for social transformation, whereas it sidelined tribal traditions, lifestyles, values, beliefs, worldviews and perspectives as irrelevant or demonic.

There is no doubt that the Christian missionaries made many positive contributions to the lives of the tribal peoples in North-East India. However, Christianity, along with western culture and modern social values, has also had a negative impact on their traditional values. For instance, the tribal Christian converts were the first among the tribal peoples to abandon their traditional songs, dances, festivals, dresses and practices that had a strong connection with their traditional values and ways of life. They began to view western religion and culture as superior to their own. This change brought about in the people a negative attitude towards their traditional customs and practices.⁵ People also have conflicting opinions about their culture as to whether they should discard their traditional practices and beliefs. Even today, many tribal Christians hold the view that the traditional tribal culture and value-system is something outdated and old-fashioned, sometimes opposed to Christian values and beliefs, and which should therefore be abandoned altogether.⁶ Christianity has thus also contributed to the alienation of the tribals from their cultural roots and traditional values. Anything that is associated with tribal culture and way of life is now regarded as a threat to modernity or something useless in the modern world, whereas anything that has come in the form of western Christianity is given an important place.

Tlawmngaihna and Consumerism

Post-modernism strongly challenges the claims of modernism and encourages people who had once been suppressed by modernism to come out and raise their voices in order to show the multi-faceted aspects of Christian mission. Post-modernism does not treat the colonial and modern form of Christian mission as something absolute, but as one among many. The hermeneutical advantage of post-modernism can be seen in terms of its role in raising the voice of the voiceless tribals. In the world of modernity, the term 'tribal' has a strong derogatory sense, and peoples known as 'tribals' are often considered simple, uncivilized, primitive, barbaric, and

⁴ Felix Wilfred, *Sunset in the East?* (Chennai: University of Chennai, 1991), 150, cited by Longchar, *The Tribal Religious Traditions in North East India*, 24.

⁵ Darchhawna considers the western form of Christianity as the main factor that has brought about this negative attitude towards tribal culture and practices. See Darchhawna, 'Mizo Culture awmzia leh a lo danglam zel dan', 186.

⁶ The debate over this issue is still going on even today. See C. Vanlallawma, 'Eng Hla nge kan sak ang?', in *Vanglaini Daily Newspaper*. <http://vanglaini.net/article.html> (19th September 2005).

even savages, who have nothing good to offer others. However, post-modernism proves that this is not the full picture. Rather, post-modernism shatters the meta-narratives of modernism and upholds mini-narratives of voiceless people such as the tribals in North-East India, in order that they may also have many positive things to share with their fellow Christians and fellow human beings in doing Christian mission. In fact, the fundamental values of the tribals are in no way inferior to modern values and worldview, and are in many ways comparable with the core values and principles of the Bible. There is no doubt that the tribal peoples have something significant to contribute to illuminating the truth of the Bible, which may be useful for reshaping Christian mission today. For instance, one of the significant principles of the Old Testament prophets that can be clearly seen in the light of the tribal, and specifically the Mizo, concept of *tlawmngaihna* is that they give more importance to the value of human relationships than to material gain. We can see that the eighth-century prophets were propelled by people-oriented value-systems as they challenged greedy oppressors who ignored such values and beliefs. They fought for the well-being of the whole of their society in a context where a few materially-driven rich people ruined the lives of their fellow Israelites. The first priority of the prophets was to maintain healthy social relationships and to uphold solidarity and cohesion in society, while emphasizing that material resources were intended for safeguarding the well-being of Israelite society. This fundamental principle of the prophets can have significant implications in the present context where economic materialism dominates the minds and thoughts of many peoples.

This socio-ethical principle of *tlawmngaihna* can be taken as a mission paradigm in a context when the value and significance of almost everything is now measured materially. We live in a world where people in extreme poverty are often denied their fundamental rights, while the affluent are given honour, respect and all sorts of privileges. Money and material possessions greatly determine our concept of good or bad, right or wrong, etc. Christian values in the modern world are also increasingly dominated and influenced by economic materialism. The churches may still claim that they do not encourage the love of mammon, but this claim is no longer reflected in the lifestyles of many Christians. Hallman convincingly points out that people can articulate what they believe to be their value-systems, but their behaviour may show that they actually subscribe to a different set of values. He criticizes western society:

The values that we profess are not the values by which we live. We may talk about justice, peace and ecological sustainability, but our individual lifestyles and the economic realities of our Western societies seem to be based on a quite different set of values: consumerism, economic globalization, violence.⁷

⁷ David G. Hallman, *Spiritual Values for Earth Community* (Geneva: WCC, 2000), 7, 18.

As economic globalization spreads, the hunger for wealth drives the global economy at full speed. While a few rich nations can exploit this opportunity, the poor in developing countries do not have much to gain; rather, many of them are being oppressed and increasingly afflicted by homelessness, bankruptcy and alienation. We are now witnessing economic and social polarization beyond any previous period in human history. Globalization promotes the idea that you are what you eat, wear and possess, rather than what you do and sacrifice for the well-being of fellow human beings. The accumulation of financial assets is now the absolute, immutable yardstick for all economic, social and political decisions, whereas social service and the economic well-being of people are largely neglected. In modernity, people tend to treat one another as commodities, and those who lack money and possessions are often treated as people without any value or importance. This money-driven value-system emerges triumphant in the present world order of modernity. In this situation, what alternative values should we provide as Christians? It is important to cultivate a people-oriented value-system instead of a materially-oriented one, an others-centred worldview rather than one which is self-centred. The values of human relationships, social service, and solidarity with fellow human beings – especially for those who are weak and neglected – should be strongly held up and propagated by the church in the present global context. *Tlawngaihna* boldly challenges those who value wealth and possessions more than their fellow human beings, and it offers people-oriented values, such as selfless service, generosity, hospitality, communitarian relationships and a love for others.

The Tribal Concept of Sharing as a Mission Concept

Another fundamental value of the tribals that may be significant for enhancing Christian mission in the context of current global consumerist culture is the value of sharing. Tribal people fundamentally believe in the principle of sharing. In fact, the clearest and simplest way of describing the essence of tribal socio-economic culture may be ‘the culture of sharing’. They share with each other not only their valuable materials and possessions, but also all the resources they have, including agricultural tools, hunting weapons, agricultural products, land, food, power, service and time. They even participate in each other’s sorrow and joy. In the traditional tribal community, wealth was not measured in terms of how much one saved material possessions, but in terms of how much one shared or spent one’s possessions for the well-being of the community.

Since the accumulation of wealth is an essential base for consumerism, there is fertile ground for the consumerist culture to grow in the process of modernization which now takes the form of globalization. The culture of getting, spending and enjoying is spreading at an alarming rate. People in the global North countries are setting examples for poorer countries as they

become addicted to ever-greater consumption and the accumulation of wealth. Indeed, the addictive habits of consumerism seemingly dictate the foreign policies of wealthy countries. Peoples in different parts of the world are now striving for ‘more’ – more income, more assets, more pleasure – seemingly without limit. Patterns of consumption and pleasure-seeking have been continuous ever since, with each generation outdoing its predecessor. The urge to spend is sanctioned, reinforced and exaggerated by the media and the advertising industry. Children from early ages are increasingly targeted by the advertising industries to inculcate the values of consumerism. The markets are enormous and there are many products and foods geared towards children. As a result of this, many children are brought up in the situation where they can easily learn how to consume a variety of resources and products. The ideology of consumerism has now been strongly established and has become one of the strongest driving forces of economic activity even in developing countries. A huge amount of the world’s resources is being wasted in trying to maintain consumerist lifestyles. The worrying thing is that the present global economic system is designed and functions mainly in the interests of the consumers, rather than serving the interests of the poor. This means that a huge amount of the world’s resources will continue to be wasted on the luxuries of the rich instead of essentials for the weak and poor. Kinsler and Kinsler mention that ‘the richest 20% of the world’s population enjoys 82.7% of the world’s annual income, which is more than four times the total income of the 80% of the world’s population’.⁸ In other words, ‘The wealthiest 20% of the world’s population was actually receiving annually 150 times as much as the poorest 20%’.⁹ The truth is that, while a few rich people can senselessly consume a hugely excessive amount of the world’s resources to support their extravagant lifestyles, the large majority of the world’s population are dependent on the small remainder of resources for their survival. The issue is not merely that the rich nations enjoy their own wealth without caring for the plight of poorer nations, but rather that they maintain their luxurious lifestyles by draining capital and resources from the poorer countries.¹⁰ This

⁸ Ross Kinsler and Gloria Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee and the Struggle for Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 2.

⁹ Kinsler and Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee and the Struggle for Life*, 3.

¹⁰ ‘The free flow of loans to Third World countries has created an enormous debt crisis that now ensures a massive flow of capital from the poor countries of the south to the rich countries of the north. Because of their absolute dependence on funding from the north, especially through the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, these poor countries must submit to the economic policies dictated by these international monetary organizations. These organizations are ruled by the wealthy countries, whose overall concern is to continue extracting profits through interest payments... Between 1982 and 1988 the poor countries paid the rich countries \$236.2 billion net, but the debtor nations still owed \$1,500 billion... The United Nations estimates that the total transfers, south to north, due to debts plus unfavorable trade arrangements, comes closer to \$500 billion per year in

has not happened accidentally; it is a systematic exploitation. Those who benefit from the existing socio-economic system will probably do everything they can to protect their advantages even if it means employing violence. This issue exists not only between the rich nations and the poor nations, but even between the rich and poor within most countries. The rich often employ violence and power to protect their interests even to the detriment of the helpless poor.¹¹

In this situation, what kind of mission should the Christian community offer to the world? It is vital to raise our voices loudly and express our values and concerns clearly. Is it fair to have such an unhealthy socio-economic system, considering especially the miserable condition of the victims of its injustice? Is it sensible to maintain lavish lifestyles in a context where a large number of people are starving and struggling for their daily bread? Is it not shameful to waste senselessly the world's resources when many people are dying due to lack of resources? What values should we as Christians uphold in this context? Is it not time to promote the value of sharing that can be clearly seen in the traditional, tribal and communitarian ways of living? What was completely unacceptable for the tribals was the self-indulgence of the affluent while many people were starving in their midst. It is vital to think seriously about how to fairly distribute all the world's resources. Unless and until the value of equal sharing is profoundly incorporated and strictly observed in international trade and the global socio-economic system, it is quite difficult to foresee a bright future for the majority of the poor. However, if our planet's wealth is shared equitably and used responsibly for the sake of the larger global community, it might be possible to maintain the well-being and dignity of peoples all over the world. This is not simply a concern for the poor, but a concern for the affluent as well. The symptoms of the negative impact of the unequal distribution of wealth can be seen even in wealthy countries in the forms of obesity, diabetes and other food-related diseases, as well as various social and psychological problems, while a large number of people are being killed by hunger, malnutrition, contaminated water, and various treatable diseases in the poorer countries. It is a concern for the well-being of those who have too little as well as those who have too much.

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what has been called 'reverse development' or subsidies for the rich nations by the poor peoples of the world.' See Kinsler and Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee and the Struggle for Life*, 5.

¹¹ For example, twelve tribal people of Kalinga Nagar, Orissa, India, were gunned down as they opposed the encroachment of their land for the construction of a boundary wall for the proposed steel plant for Tata Steel, the giant steel company in India. The police, government authorities and the economic power of the Tata Group combined to confront helpless tribals who wanted to protect their land as they had nothing else. See the picture and report in Prafulla Das, 'Resistance and Tragedy', in *Frontline*, 23.1. 2006: www.frontline.in/static/html/fl2301/stories/20060127002404100.htm. (25th July 2007).

Mission in Simplicity

Traditional tribal lifestyles and spiritual respect and care for nature may also be illuminative for Christian mission in the context of the current ecological crises we now face globally. While tribal simplicity has been equated for a long time with ignorance and backwardness in modernity, the post-modern worldview now acknowledges the significance of this simplicity in the context when modern energy-hungry lifestyles ravage the global eco-system. There have been debates over whether global warming is a natural process or a man-made disaster; there has been speculation that the wasteful lifestyle of consumerist societies is responsible for the present ecological crisis. Recently, it has been categorically confirmed by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) that climate change is 'unequivocal', and humankind's emissions of greenhouse gases are more than 90% likely to be the main cause.¹² The UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, clearly stated as he officially launched the text of the IPCC in Valencia: 'Climate change is real, and we humans are its chief cause. Yet even now, few people fully understand the gravity of the threat, or its immediacy. Now I believe we are on the verge of a catastrophe if we do not act.'¹³ It is now clear that this issue is urgent, and it cannot be denied that an energy-hungry lifestyle is not sustainable as it makes a large contribution to the emission of greenhouse gases that cause global warming and ecological crises. It is worrying to see that the most populated countries, namely China and India, are now gearing up for a global industrial competition in order to attain the kind of power and comfortable luxurious lifestyles that have been enjoyed for a long time by the industrial nations. They are now already included among the world's greatest polluters. In addition, many other smaller developing countries in Asia and other continents are also doing everything they can to move forward industrially. It appears that no one wants reverse gears. If climate change accelerates, according to the IPCC report, it may have an 'abrupt and irreversible'¹⁴ impact on the environment, on society, and on individuals. The IPCC estimates that the poorest peoples in Africa, Asia and other parts of the southern hemisphere, who have contributed comparatively little to greenhouse gases, are going to be their first victims and the hardest hit by global warming, whereas the rich countries of the North that have contributed most will not be as hard hit in the initial stages. Poor peoples in coastal areas and small islands are already suffering the consequences of

¹² 'Experts warn of 'abrupt' warming', in *BBC News* (17th December 2007):

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/7098902.stm> (17th November 2007).

¹³ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/7098902.stm> – see also 'Valencia, Spain, 17th November 2007 – Secretary-General's Address to the IPCC upon the release of the Fourth Assessment Synthesis Report', in *Latest Statements*, 17th November 2007: www.un.org/sg/statements/?nid=2870 (23rd November 2007).

¹⁴ These are the adjectives used by the IPCC in connection with the impacts of climate change.

climate change.¹⁵ They are being forced out from their ancestral lands by rising sea levels and floods. The numbers of ecological refugees are increasing day by day.¹⁶ As they are uprooted from their lands, their ways of life, and the customs, values and ethos attached to their lands are being wiped out. Many of them have become unwelcome guests in foreign lands, as they have nowhere else to go.

As a Christian community, it is high time to engage seriously with these current ecological issues. What we can do may be very little, but we must assume responsibility and commit ourselves to do our part. The argument that Christian values derived from the Bible are the roots of the present ecological crisis may not be so convincing for some,¹⁷ but we cannot deny the fact that countries largely viewed as Christian are among the worst polluters in terms of the emission of greenhouse gases. If we are part of the problem, we should also be part of the solution. If the present consumerist way of life is unsustainable, the question that needs an urgent answer is whether it can be stopped. Is there any alternative way of organizing human society? It is important to set limits to our lifestyles personally and collectively at every level. The simple tribal lifestyle should no longer be considered as inferior or one of ignorance; it should rather be seen as highly enlightened, contributing to the common survival of all human beings and the global community. The greed-based economy of modernity, by which an individual can accumulate unlimited wealth and excessive economic surplus at the expense of his or her fellow human beings and the environment, should rather be seen as great ignorance, the dangerous opium of modern culture. The relevance of the traditional simplicity of tribal lifestyle can no longer be ignored if the church is to make mission contextual and effective.

Conclusion

The process of modernization promised a utopian world with scientific advances. But modernism has caused havoc in the world: colonialism, two World Wars in the twentieth century, the Holocaust, exploitation in the

¹⁵ Alex Kirby, 'West warned on climate refugees', in *BBC News*, 24th January 2000:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/613075.stm>. (21/10/2006).

¹⁶ 'IPCC Fourth Assessment Report – Working Group II Report, 'Impact, Adaptation and Vulnerability', in *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*: www.ipcc.ch/ipccreports/ar4-wg2.htm

¹⁷ Many modern environmentalists have been convinced by Lynn White's article that Christianity is primarily responsible for the attitudes and beliefs which have resulted in the environmental crisis. According to White, 'Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen... it has insisted that it is God's will that humans exploit nature for their proper ends'. See Lynn White, 'The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis', in *Science* 155 (1967), 1203-207.

name of exploration, consumerism and ecological crises, to name but a few. These tragedies awakened the post-modern thinkers into taking a critical look at modernism. The reactionary movement against these tragedies became an intellectual movement in the late 1960s and 70s and came to be called post-modernism. Post-modernism challenges the various claims of modernism and dislodges it from its entrenched position. In fact, post-modernism is a celebration of pluralism. It opens up creative forces that can unleash fresh ideas, and ways and means to handle life without the fear of being irrational. However, it has opened the floodgates of interpretation on a reality which cannot be regulated by any normative philosophy. The idea of the normative or the universal does not fit in with the thought pattern of post-modernism. However, over the centuries, the mission of God continues in spite of cultural and philosophical changes. In post-modernity, as the people of God, our responsibility lies with us in presenting the truth – Jesus Christ – as a relevant option to the present generation. Mission, in post-modernity, needs to shed its modern clothing and wear the clothes of different cultures. The focus of mission is to bring the communities at the periphery to the centre.¹⁸ As a result, the tribal peoples who have been silenced for a long time can now come out and raise their voices in reshaping the Christian concept of mission in post-modernity.

The church must be willing to use post-modernist thinking to look beyond traditional methods or ideas of what it considers mission to be. In a time when uncontrolled consumerism and a blind emphasis on capitalism has led to economic selfishness, greedy exploitation of natural and human resources, and an unwillingness to sacrifice or alter lifestyles for the greater good of humanity, traditional tribal values of those indigenous to North-East India that emphasize community welfare, and the equal and dignified sharing of resources and simplicity in living, are of greater relevance as we consider what Christian mission today involves.

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¹⁸ Iyadurai, 'Mission in Postmodernity: An Asian Perspective', 11-12.

BRIDGING THE DIVIDE: THE NEED FOR A POST-MODERN UNDERSTANDING OF ‘YOUTH’

Hminga Pachuau

Introduction

By the time I was ten, my aim in life was to become a taxi-driver. Everyone found it incredibly entertaining, and it was clear that no one took a ‘child-year-old’ seriously. After a couple of years, my ambition changed from wanting to be a taxi-driver to becoming a missionary. I decided to dedicate my life to serve God. When I told people about my conviction, it was hard not to notice the lack of seriousness given to a twelve-year-old, a ‘child’. Today, I stand here because of the zeal and passion I had found when I was considered ‘too young’, a ‘child’. The need to give equal importance and focus to all age-groups while, at the same time, witness together and work towards the universal church – made up of one body, irrespective of denominations, nationalities, ages, or any other human-made barriers for that matter – can no longer be sidelined. My aim in this paper is not to formulate a new understanding of ‘youth’, let alone come up with a final solution to problems regarding the youth. I would instead stress the need for a post-modern understanding of youth so as to establish meaningful communication and interaction with young people for a more productive mission towards the youth and among the youth.

‘Youth’

The need for a clearer definition

In order for us to come to a true understanding of the term ‘youth’, it is important we first deal with the definitions already present. ‘Youth’ is defined by the Encarta Dictionary as ‘The period of human life between childhood and maturity; the state of being young; an early stage of something’.¹ According to Vineeth Koshy, ‘Youth is a state of life and

¹ Microsoft Student with Encarta Premium DVD, 2008. Other dictionaries such as the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 3rd edition, the New Oxford Dictionary of English, ed. Judy Pearsall, 1998, though refraining from the usage of the word ‘maturity’ still use words such as ‘fully grown’ or ‘adult age’, in which case the following argument still stands.

mind when there is quality of thinking, predominance of courage and appetite for adventure'.²

Let us briefly examine these definitions in the hope that we will equip ourselves with a better understanding of youth. If we are to abide by the first definition, i.e. to say that it is a period between childhood and maturity, we first have to make inquiry as to who decides the 'state of maturity' so that the period of 'youth' may be defined. Whether the 'maturity' of a person depends on his/her biological status or psychological development is another matter of concern. Father Vineeth Koshy's definition would be welcomed voluntarily and without any hesitation whatsoever had we a preconceived notion of the meaning or implication of 'youth'. Otherwise, the inevitable question that would follow is to ask whether it is possible for someone to remain in a state of youth 'indefinitely'. If one's 'youthfulness' is independent of age, and is considered merely as a state (most likely dependent on one's experience), then a clear-cut distinction between 'who is' and 'who no longer is' a youth would be impossible to make – not only because of the non-existence of a satisfying definition, but rather because it is necessary in order to make a meaningful approach. A clear-cut definition of 'youth' needs to be formulated.

Generation gap within a generation

When dealing with a community, be it Christian or otherwise, religious or secular, it is important to note that it is the majority's view within that community, whether that community belongs to a minority or not, that is being addressed or prioritized. Evidence can be drawn even from a Christian community, where the men's problems and concerns overshadowed the women's, the values of the rich over the poor, the decisions of the elder over the younger. When addressing youth, it is crucial to observe and be aware of the fact that a generation gap exists among those we term as 'youth'. Take, for instance, the context of Mizoram where the members of the *Kristian Thalai Pawl*³ and the *Thalai Kristian Pawl*⁴ vary between the ages of 14 and 40. It is unfair to incorporate the experience and problems of the late teenagers (between the ages of 16-19) with those of the early thirties. It is not that the church is inactive or taking no measures in order to understand youth, but what it accomplishes is incomplete. It is usually the views and reflections of the 'representatives' or 'leaders' that are considered in order to form an

² Vineeth Koshy, 'Youth Envisioning Ecumenical Mission: Shifting Ecumenical Paradigms for Witnessing Christ Today', in *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Today and Tomorrow*, Kirsteen Kim and Andrew Anderson (eds), (Oxford: Regnum, 2011), 265.

³ The youth wing of the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram.

⁴ The youth wing of the Baptist Church of Mizoram.

understanding of youth. In that case, we need to be provoked in order to be critical and ask whether everyone is well represented, or whether it is even possible to effectively and meaningfully mirror the experience of each section of youth. The urgency in the need to divide these 'youth' into smaller groups in our definition and understanding has to be acknowledged. One positive outcome that can be expected by this 'division' would be that, by a narrower definition and narrower age-division, the problems faced by those in that age-group can be focused and dealt with more efficiently. For instance, when people in their early twenties are about to enter the competitive world, they need to be prepared and trained so that they know how to deal with pressure and how to handle difficulties or challenges that are unavoidable. But when the audience consists of such a wide range in terms of age, it then forbids special attention being given to those who need it most. A more effective mission towards youth will be made possible only by specifying and specializing the problems and issues faced by the group concerned.

The Need for a Post-Modern Understanding

'The radical change in the way of thinking and of looking at life represented by post-modernity cannot but influence theological reflection and education'⁵ This statement is an indication of the vast possibilities opened to us by taking new, radical and meaningful steps in trying to understand youth through the lens of post-modernity.

The church's focus and concern should not be limited to 'active'⁶ youth, or 'Christian' youth either, for that matter. The concentration on youth should begin by understanding youth in general, and their problems should not be understood merely as a 'Christian-youth' problem, but rather as the problem faced by youth in general, and should therefore be dealt with in that light. Only when youth are convinced that the church is genuinely interested in what they are going through will they take it seriously, and this I believe, is the only way we can address the 'exiting'⁷ of youth members from the church.

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⁵ 'Theme 3: Mission and Postmodernities', in *Edinburgh 2010: Witnessing to Christ Today, Volume II*, Daryl Balia and Kirsteen Kim (eds), (Oxford: Regnum, 2010), 80.

⁶ 'Active' in this sense talks not about being physically active, but active in participation in the church's activities and other youth programmes.

⁷ Koshy in his article mentions that 'the alarming feature of today's youth participation and leadership in the church is that the younger generation is in the 'exit-phase' and there may be various reasons for justifying this exit': 'Youth Envisioning Ecumenical Mission', 265. The problem faced by today's church is not just with youth who choose to 'exit' or leave the church, but even with those who choose not to 'enter' in the first place.

The post-modern approach has within it many limitations and it is therefore not surprising that it is often accused of lacking hope or optimism.⁸ Be that as it may, I still believe the post-modern approach is the best fit in order to have a better understanding of youth today. For the very fact that an individual's point of view is taken seriously, for the very reason that everybody has a voice in post-modernity, on the very grounds that judgemental views and destructive conservative criticism have no place, for reasons such as these and more, the post-modern approach, in order to give us a better understanding of youth, is rather appealing for our context. While pre-modernity turned to authority and tradition, and modernity campaigned with reason and objectivity and scientific truths, post-modernity gives enough space for subjective emotions and experiences. I strongly feel that the youth, though not necessarily abused or oppressed, are being marginalized, and too often unknowingly and perhaps unintentionally. An example from the worship context might help us understand this better. In the main Sunday worship service,⁹ the role of youth is very limited. Once in a blue moon, a member of the youth group is assigned to the Bible reading and prayer section of the service. Even in such cases, that particular member will happen to be one holding a position in the youth group. Youth members are expected to take care of the work 'behind-the-scenes'. But the two main tasks during worship, i.e. preaching and leading worship, are hardly ever given to them. I am not saying that giving space in the main worship service would liberate the youth and therefore would make them feel less marginalized. My point is that young members, due to the age factor, are usually looked at differently. For youth need to 'develop inner freedom, where they are no longer pressurized by the conditions and expectations of society and are able to decide freely on crucial issues that affect choice of life, of family and human love',¹⁰ I feel this approach is most apt.

Specific Issues and the Need to Specialize

We are now living in a world where for some, the headphones of the MP3 player reaches the heart faster than sermons preached from the pulpit, and the fingers are more familiar with the keypads of mobile phones than the pages of the Bible. In such a context, it is no longer enough to simply tell the youth to not 'conform' to this world (Rom. 12:1-2) without attempting to explain in its entirety what this 'world' means, and what it is truly

⁸ 'Theme 3: Mission and Postmodernities', 135.

⁹ According to the practice of the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram, worship services for youth are held on Monday evenings, the women's fellowship meet on Tuesdays, and in some churches, men's fellowship meet on Friday evenings. These services are but exclusive. The 'main' service usually takes place on Sunday evenings.

¹⁰ Vineeth Koshy, 'Youth Envisioning Ecumenical Mission', 272.

capable of. It is also equally important not just to say *what* should be done, but also show *how* it should be done. The use of the word ‘therefore’ in the first verse of Romans 12 indicates that this section is a consequence of the previous chapters where Paul has redrawn the boundaries of the people of God, and in redefining the people of God, the need for formulating the role of life is given birth. Paul then turns to the practical application of all he has said in the previous chapters, and in doing so, paints a way of living. In order for us not to conform to this world, it is important to know what ‘this world’ is, and be acquainted and familiar with its ways. It is essential to know the enemy in order to defeat the enemy. Even in a world where the hope of not conforming to this world has a remote chance of winning, it is followed by the command to be transformed by the renewal of the mind. Transformation by renewal of the mind would suggest undergoing a complete change which, under the power of God, will find expression in one’s character and conduct. The goal of this transformation is to grow more and more into the image of Christ, to be Christlike. This transformation which takes place while journeying with Christ is imparted by the power of God. However, the total responsibility does not fall on God alone, for it demands the co-operation of the ‘self’ as well. In that sense, it is fair to say that a person has to be willing to let God work in the self, and it is the self that is responsible its working out in one’s life.

It is no longer enough to address and deal with the negative influences of globalization and modernization. The time has come for the church to address and deal with the influenced, and to concentrate not just on the ‘what’, but also the ‘who’. It is also very important that we are careful when criticizing the West’s negative influence not to fall into the trap of blaming all our problems on the West. We need to grow up and accept that most of our problems, if not all, are developed from our very own ‘polluted’ contexts, and are therefore ours to be dealt with since it is our people who are involved. The problems faced by youth are non-denominational, and more often than not, considered non-theological. The question remains: How then these can be addressed theologically?

Isolation and seclusion

One of the noticeable side-effects of technological development and modernization that needs to be addressed is the fact that young people are spending more and more time tucked away in their rooms, away from other people.¹¹ The amount of time invested in ‘non-virtual interaction’ has decreased tremendously. This ‘alone time’ has built a wall around these young individuals and has made them highly inaccessible. Lack of interaction and limited physical human contact often means that their

¹¹ I should mention that this used to be uncommon in a less individualistic, more communitarian, lifestyle.

personal problems are left untended. It has been said that youth today is going through a, 'It's my life' phase – a stage in their life where a person wishes, or rather believes, that he/she should be left alone to do as they please, for whatever reason, and that others should mind their own business and not interfere. But I believe the youth are no longer in this phase. I think of them to be in a place which I would like to call the 'So What?' stage, or the 'Whatever...' stage – a state where they no longer care to what happens or who else is affected, and the future is of little concern. In the urban North-East Indian context, youth no longer face the 'no work, no food' policy. Whether they work or not, get paid or not, they are no longer intimidated by threats of starvation, homelessness, etc. Parents too are not willing to 'let go'. Many young people are now living a life where, even if they are not the 'fittest', they still survive, thus contradicting the rule of the survival of the fittest.¹² When the church is filled with young people going through such experiences, we can no longer wait for young people to make the first move, and approach the church. We need to be conscious of the reality and come to terms with the fact that our efforts to attract youth to the church by means of 'interesting' youth activities and programmes have only frustrating results. A change of strategy is therefore called for, where the focus should no longer be in trying to attract young people, but moving out and 'reaching' them wherever they are.

Addiction to the 'world'

There was a time when addiction to drugs was more lethal and more fatal than cancer. However, today it is the addiction to this 'world' that is causing a greater worry. Today, this 'world' offers so much more, and many are determined to enjoy life to the fullest, and are no longer willing to succumb to an early death, whether by drug overdose or other means. These 'world addicts' are not confined to youth. Let the truth be told: even 'parents' are vulnerable to the temptations of all that glitters. The effects can be felt in our everyday life, especially with the evidence of numerous broken families, where a house can no longer be considered a home. Such cases lead to depression and cause teenagers to look for ways to escape reality as they know it.¹³ When today's context spells out such situations, it

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¹² I am aware of the danger of being accused of generalizing about youth, and making a blanket statement as if I were ignoring those who do not have enough to feed their family if they do not work. But what I am doing here is focusing more on those who can afford not to work, who comprise the majority in the urban scenario.

¹³ Many young people long to have loving parents, a family to which they feel they belong, people who treat them with respect, an identity to call their own, etc. Since all these are an unattainable fantasy for a large number of them due to various reasons, some turn to substance abuse or other forms of entertainment, not just for the sake of 'fun', but so that they can distract themselves and not be reminded of the

is time the church saw the problems of youth as not just belonging to them or originating from them, but as involving members of the wider community.

Building trust: a willingness to be open¹⁴

When our conservative stubbornness gets the better of us, there is a great danger of interpreting reality the way we choose to understand it. It pains me to witness that many of the problems that are very relevant today do not receive the attention they deserve. With regard to the issue of homosexuality, many churches plainly reject the very idea of it, which I believe they cannot afford to. Before outrightly and stubbornly sentencing them to hell, the church should take care so as not to make homosexuals victims of uninformed decisions.¹⁵ Ways in which that can be accomplished is for the church to be willing to be more open in dealing with the issue, and look into the possibilities of having open discussions and dialogue with those concerned. We could conduct debates regarding this topic so that the very marginalized and oppressed homosexually-oriented community would be given a chance to speak up and have an opportunity to voice their true feelings and experiences openly. When the church portrays genuine concern and interest, the response it will receive from youth will be that of trust, amongst many other things. It is with hope and understanding that the post-modern approach guarantees a larger openness for spiritual matters, allowing greater understanding for religion and spirituality in the public arena,¹⁶ so that relevant issues such as homosexuality can be dealt with more openly and creatively.

unfortunate world that surrounds them, even if the effect of these ‘escapes’ are only temporary.

¹⁴ I have taken up the issue of homosexuality as an example of the many issues young people face and will be continuing to face. These burning issues for the younger generation need to be addressed with more sincerity and openness. *Note:* Churches in Mizoram are not open to homosexuality.

¹⁵ Many people, including scientists, dispute that ‘we are born with a sexual orientation’. Scientific understanding of orientation is not crystal-clear or definitive. But few people dispute that at puberty ‘we awaken to our particular sexual orientation’ without having consciously chosen it. Personally, I think that orientation comes from some undeterminable biological predisposition at birth and is therefore not a ‘choice’. If so, this would mean that they are willed by God. In which case, in judging them, we are judging God’s creation and limiting God’s love – an attitude which I feel needs to be re-examined.

¹⁶ ‘Theme 3: Mission and Postmodernities’, 77.

Space for the Holy Spirit

Ronald K. Orchard defines mission as follows: 'Mission is nothing else than this: to speak, to act, to live so as to cause his glory to be praised.'¹⁷ As appreciative as I am of this truly relevant definition, I do want to highlight the danger in an unchallenged acceptance of the same. In doing mission, speaking, acting and living, it is important we give space for the Holy Spirit and are willing to be led by him so as to 'cause his glory to be praised' according to his will and not ours. I would like to draw our attention to Acts chapters 10 and 11, which deal with the Gentile Pentecost and Peter's confrontation with the Jerusalem church.

Out of Peter's encounter with God, the Gentiles and the Jerusalem church, we can derive a few important questions: who determines 'what' or 'who' is 'clean' or 'unclean'? To what standards, stereotypes, tradition or culture do we base our judgements of right and wrong, clean and unclean? Though Acts 10:15 clearly affirms that authority lies in the hands of God, trying to apply this in real life can turn out to be more complicated than what it sounds like in theory. For instance, questions such as these can arise: Who then plays God? Who interprets what God has made clean? Upon whose interpretation of God's word, or upon which laws are we supposed to rearrange our priorities? These doubts and questions might seem a little far-fetched to some, and may seem to reek of heresy, but it is with these sorts of attitudes, questions and approaches that we will be met and received by the younger generation who, like it or not, tend to be more critical of the church than the older generation. In order to portray the need for the work of the Holy Spirit, which is evident in Peter's experience, we can allow ourselves to ask why God all of a sudden called the 'unclean' (as in the Old Testament), 'clean' (as in the New Testament). It is highly improbable that it was because God's intentions were misunderstood all that time and God, being fed up with all the wrong interpretations and useless sacrifices, finally decided to clear things up with Peter. It would also be implausible to assume that the 'unchanging God, who is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow', in trying to keep up with modernization and globalization, suddenly had a change of mind and attitude. What this passage tends to highlight is the role of the Holy Spirit in leading Peter to a different understanding. Peter is told to let go of his preconceived ideas, values and reservations which were born as a result of his cultural-socio-historical background. It was only after the Holy Spirit had led Peter to a new understanding that he no longer hesitated to call what and who he considered to be 'unclean' as 'clean'. It took the work of the Holy Spirit for Peter to realize and see with new eyes that the Jews, just like the Gentiles, were sinners too; that they, the Jews, also needed salvation just as much as the Gentiles; that in the eyes of God, they were all the same. It was in Peter's conversion that the work of the Holy Spirit was revealed. In our

¹⁷ 'Theme 3: Mission and Postmodernities', 64.

passion, zeal and excitement in doing mission for God and with God, we need to give space for the Holy Spirit, and be willing to listen and follow what he teaches us, even if it means coming to a new understanding.

Conclusion

In the effort to include and attract young people, many steps have been taken by the church. Allotting time during worship, forming youth groups and organizing activities for young people are all very meaningful efforts taken up by the church to concentrate on and look after youth. However, there are many unexplored fields which can be considered. Mission towards youth will be a true success only when youth are understood properly, not just for what they are, but for who they are, not just from the 'outside', but from *within*. Only then will it be possible to effectively address the burning issues and problems faced by youth 'in' the church, 'by' the church. The time has come where we can no longer test the loyalty of youth, for in doing so, we only succeed in testing their patience. To view youth as unmoulded clay – where the church plays the potter so as to impose ideas, concepts and beliefs onto them without a prior and thorough understanding of their way of thinking and envisioning – could prove to be rather futile. Youth should not be dealt with in isolation and exclusion, but as those who are part of the one body of Christ, just like any other, where the younger generation get as much attention as the older generation. In the one body of Christ there are no distinctions. Everyone who has clothed themselves with Christ should be able to be free from making distinctions between Jews and Gentiles, slave and free, male and female, and young and old – for we are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:27-28).

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SECTION FOUR

MISSION AND POWER

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THE IMPACT OF CHRISTIAN MISSION AND BRITISH COLONIALISM AMONG THE KUKI PEOPLE IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

M. Thongkhosei Haokip

Introduction

One of the most quoted and perhaps defining speeches during the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh 1910 was made by the South Indian priest V.S. Azariah. In his concluding statement he pleaded: 'Through all the ages to come, the Indian church will rise up in gratitude to attest the heroism and self-denying labours of the missionary body. You have given your goods to feed the poor. You have given your bodies to be burned. We also ask for love. Give us friends!'¹ A century later, Edinburgh 2010 concluded with a Common Call which pointed out that: 'Transforming the meaning of mission means that... God's mission calls all people to work together for healing and justice in partnerships of mutuality and respect.'

The above statement echoes the predicament of the Kukis of Manipur in North-East India who had been evangelized by western missionaries in the early nineteenth century. While deeply grateful to the missionaries, a time has also come to assess critically the impact of the combined relationship of Christian mission and colonial power on the nineteenth-century Kukis. The purpose of this paper is to show how mission and power were used and misused by both missionaries and colonialists to the detriment of the Kuki community in Manipur. This misuse would find expression in the armed conflict of the 1990s between the Kukis and the Nagas, the two groups that were Christianized and colonized by the West.

A Brief Historical Background of the Kukis

The state of Manipur in North-East India is home to three main communities, the Kukis, the Nagas and the Meiteis. The Meitei people live in the Manipur valley, while the Kukis and the Nagas live in the surrounding hills. Manipur was formerly a princely state with a Meitei king whose influence prevailed in the plains. The Kukis are one of the earliest settlers in India. Based on accounts of the *Pooyas*, the traditional literature

¹ *World Missionary Conference 1910: The History and Records of the Conference* (Edinburgh and London: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier; New York, Chicago and Toronto: Fleming H. Revell, NY), 315.

of the Meitei people of Manipur, 'Two Kuki Chiefs named Kuki Ahongba and Kuki Achouba were allies to Nongba Lairen Pakhangba, the first historically recorded king of the Meithis [Meiteis], in the latter's mobilisation for the throne in AD 33'.² Accounts of historians such as Majumdar and Bhattasali suggest that the Kukis were the earliest people known to have lived in prehistoric India, preceding the 'Dravidians' who now live in South India.³ However, the Kukis are one of the tribes that may have been most affected by the interplay of mission and power that resulted in their disorganization and disintegration. Following the colonial flag, Christianity came to Manipur in the latter part of the nineteenth century. It was brought to the Kuki people of Manipur by two separate missions, the Arthington Aborigines Mission,⁴ later succeeded by the American Baptist Mission (ABM) through William Pettigrew⁵ in the north in 1896, and the independent Welsh Mission called the Thadou-Kuki Pioneer Mission (TKPM), later the North East India General Mission (NEIGM), and now the Evangelical Congregational Church of India (ECCI), through Watkin R.

² N.P. Rakung, Reader, in *The Telegraph*, 17th January 1994, Letter to the Editor, Imphal, Manipur.

³ R.C. Majumdar and N. Bhattasali, *History of India*, 5th revised edition (Dhaka: Shyam Chandra Dutta, 1930), 6-7.

⁴ The Arthington Aborigines Mission, named after Robert Arthington, a millionaire from Leeds in northern England and an English gentleman of the missions, was always promoting pioneer work, with instructions that only two workers go to a place, learn the language, give the gospel to the people, then move on to another field, not staying to consolidate their work. See K.M. Singh, *History of Christian Mission in Manipur and Other Neighbouring States* (New Delhi: Mittal, 1991). According to Gangmumei Kamei, Arthington's interest towards Assam was aroused by a missionary named John Dalmas who was a missionary there. The Arthington Mission Society appointed young William Pettigrew to work in Manipur among the Meiteis: <http://kanglaonline.com/2011/08/colonial-policy-and-practice-in-manipur>. Arthington was influenced by the second coming, preaching to convert people and not using literature or translated works: <http://etheses.bham.ac.uk/767/1/Lawmsanga10PhD.pdf>

⁵ The Rev. William Pettigrew was born in Edinburgh, on 5th January 1869 to an English family. He received his higher education at Livingstone College, London. He belonged to the Church of England but later felt his infant baptism to be inadequate and so received believer's (adult) baptism while working as a missionary in Dhaka under the Arthington Aborigines Mission. However, he remained an Anglican and a missionary under the same mission till he was forced to resign and join the Baptist Church at Sibsagar, in Assam, in 1896. He was ordained to the ministry in 1897 and was married to Alice Gorehome of Brighton, England, on 13th November that year. See F.S. Downs, *The Mighty Works of God: A Brief History of the Council of Baptist Churches in North East India: The Mission Period, 1836-1950* (Guwahati: CLC, 1971), 75; Elungkiebe Zeliang, *Pioneer Missionaries of North East India: Selected Missionaries*, Vol. I (Jorhat: Eastern Theological College, 2003), 111.

Roberts⁶ in the southern part of Manipur in 1910. Churches and Christian communities were established and associations and conventions formed as a result of their mission work.

Mission(ary) Attitudes

The founding of the TKPM was a fulfilment of Watkin R. Roberts' long-cherished dream. It was also the beginning of trouble for him and for mission work in Manipur, when in 1910, for the first time in its history, there began a long-drawn conflict between the American Baptist Mission in the north and the newly-founded independent pioneer mission in the south. Though Pettigrew himself was a victim of the colonial power in the beginning, he later collaborated with them for his survival. The Baptist Mission had considered the entire state as exclusively theirs and was not pleased with the newly established TKPM. Additionally, Pettigrew, an Englishman, was also a former member of the Church of England which was recognized by the state. Taking advantage of his rights and privileges, Pettigrew put pressure on the British administration, leading to the Political Agent refusing permission to Roberts, who was Welsh, to open another mission.⁷ There was the fear that the presence of another mission centre besides the Baptist one would antagonize the native Rajah and his *darbar* (court), and that no mission should 'rock the boat'. Thongkhohal Haokip observes that the British in India were responsible for governing Manipur until the minor king came of age, on the understanding that no propagation of Christianity among his Hindu subjects was to be allowed. The Meiteis succeeded in persuading the Political Agent to discontinue Roberts' work.⁸ It is probable that the Political Agent in turn ordered Roberts to leave the village of Senvon and issued a warning to its chief. However, he resisted and refused to leave.⁹

⁶ Watkin R. Roberts was born in 1886 at Caernarfon in North Wales. Having been converted by R.A. Torrey's sermons, he continued his work as a quarryman. The 1904 revival made a still deeper impression on him and he decided to serve overseas. He was a close friend of Dr Peter Fraser who was his senior by some years. Roberts apparently came to Mizoram at Fraser's expense and with the intention of helping him in his work. He was a Presbyterian and organized the churches he later established on Presbyterian principles but without any denominational attachment. See J. Meirion Lloyd, *History of the Church in Mizoram: Harvest in the Hills* (Aizawl: Synod Publication Board, 1991), 157-58.

⁷ M. Thongkhohal Haokip, 'A Study of the Attempts for Church Unity Among the Kuki-Chin People of Manipur Since the Inception of Christianity to the Present' (MTh thesis, Senate of Serampore College (University), 2002), 127ff.

⁸ Thongkhohal Haokip, 'Kuki Churches Unification Movements', in *Journal of North East India Studies* 2/1 (July-December 2012), 33-48. Also available at: www.freewebs.com/roberthaokip/articles/Kuki_churches.pdf

⁹ L. Jayeseelan, *The Impact of the Missionary Movement in Manipur* (New Delhi: Scholars, 1996), 85.

From time to time, the problem was further compounded by the resettlement of villagers from Mizoram to the southern district of Manipur. In 1911, some fifty households of Letzakai village moved to Tuithaphai (Khuga Valley, Manipur) where three Christian families converted by the Welsh Mission joined the Thadou-Kuki Pioneer Mission. Another group from Mizoram, consisting of nearly 150 families, came and settled near Saikot in Manipur and named their hamlet Khopibung.¹⁰ This village invited Roberts who built a chapel and a school here. The number of Christians increased and Christianity spread to villages such as Hlanbung, Gelmol, Singkangphai (Thingkangphai), Bualtang, Maite, etc.¹¹

When these developments came to the notice of the Rev. Pettigrew, he tried to put a stop to this mission. He therefore put pressure on the government by recalling the agreement reached with the Rajah of Manipur where no one but the ABM could preach the Christian faith in the state. Accordingly, during the Annual Conference of the presbytery held in 1914, an order was issued by the President of the Manipur state *darbar* and handed over to Roberts asking him to quit Manipur. But when Roberts did not comply with the order, the Political Agent in Manipur, Colonel Cole, issued another order in 1915 to Roberts' associate the Rev. H. Dala not to work in the state but to leave it.¹² Following a series of arguments, Dala reluctantly agreed to the order in principle but not in practice. With the expansion of Christianity in the surrounding villages, an order was issued in 1924 by the state government, driving Christians out from their villages and also dismantling their houses. The Christian villagers fled to the TKPM headquarters at Tingsuongkhua. When the news of persecution against Christians reached the Governor of Assam, he ordered a stop to it. The government ordered an inquiry as the incidents were viewed seriously by the British government in England which had granted religious liberty to its entire people.¹³

After extended and not very friendly discussions between the two missions, a sort of gentleman's agreement was forced upon them by Colonel Cole in which a boundary between the ABM and the TKPM was drawn along the Manipur-Cachar road.¹⁴ Notwithstanding, evangelists from the TKPM were said to trespass on many occasions to the Moirang and

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¹⁰ Lal Dena, *Christian Missions and colonialism: A Study of Missionary Movement in North East India with Particular Reference to Manipur and Lushai Hills, 1894-1947* (Shillong: Vendrame Institute, 1988), 51. He quotes the reports of A.G. McCall, Superintendent of North Lushai Hills to the Welsh Mission, Aizawl, 20th February 1937.

¹¹ D. Khaizalian, *Thang Thupha Kalchawi* (The Gospel's Onward Movement), (Churachandpur: D. Khaizalian, 1982), 87.

¹² Khaizalian, *Thang Thupha Kalchawi*, 88.

¹³ Khaizalian, *Thang Thupha Kalchawi*, 87-89.

¹⁴ Downs, *The Mighty Works of God*, 167.

Mombi areas. A revised boundary was drawn to this effect.¹⁵ But this too became ineffective with the rise of other missions. Moreover, Pettigrew prevailed on the Political Agent to prohibit Roberts from entering the state or carrying on his work. Thus Roberts had to rely on native workers. Pettigrew made a hasty trip to the south and even offered the TKPM workers double the wages but did not have any takers.¹⁶

Mission(aries) and the Empire

Pettigrew was made Superintendent of Schools for the whole of Manipur. Downs noted that his services to the government also gave him some influence which stood the mission in good stead as his continued residence in Manipur depended upon the goodwill of the government.¹⁷ He was also appointed as superintendent of the first real census of the hill tribes (1910-1911) due to the fact that usually, the only one who knew the language of the hill tribes was the missionary. He and his school teachers, along with some senior students, successfully carried out the census. This exercise enabled him and his colleagues to explore more of the areas he had not visited earlier. However, his closeness to the government made people think he was a salaried government servant (and not a poor missionary independent of the colonial government).¹⁸

During World War I, efforts were made by the British to enlist tribals from Manipur for the Labour Corps in France. H.J. Higgins, the president of the Manipur State *Durbar* was entrusted with organizing a contingent for this. However, when Higgins failed in his mission, the Political Agent asked Pettigrew, who was supervising mission work from Guwahati in Assam, to help. He raised a strong contingent of 2,000 men, of whom 1,200 were Tangkhul Nagas.¹⁹ The Christian Kukis had not only sided with the government but also influenced some of the non-Christian Kukis to join in the war effort. About 500 non-Christian Kukis joined the contingent owing to the efforts of Ngulhao Kuki, a native evangelist.²⁰ Six Christian workers and students including Ngulhao Kuki served as interpreters under Pettigrew who was appointed as a commissioned officer in the British army in India. Pettigrew was later awarded the Kaiser-i-Hind silver medal and a war medal in recognition of his 'distinguished public and military service during the war'.²¹

¹⁵ Singh, *History of the Christian Mission in Manipur and Other Neighbouring States*, 188.

¹⁶ Dena, *Christian Missions and Colonialism*, 50-51.

¹⁷ Downs, *The Mighty Works of God*, 79-80.

¹⁸ Dena, *Christian Missions and Colonialism*, 39.

¹⁹ Dena, *Christian Missions and Colonialism*, 39.

²⁰ Downs, *The Mighty Works of God*, 170.

²¹ Dena, *Christian Missions and Colonialism*, 39.

Soon after the war in France, the colonial government turned its attention to the Kukis for their defiance of the government's diktat to enlist in the Labour Corps. In this respect, Dr Crozier, a medical missionary of the American Baptist Mission Society, volunteered himself as medical officer in the Kuki Punitive Measures from June 1918-1919. His purpose was, according to Lal Dena, to win the favour and confidence of the state *darbar* that had already refused him entry as more than two missionaries were not allowed to work in the state at the same time.²²

The active participation of missionaries in the government's scheme bore fruit for the mission. Until World War I the mission station was in Ukhrul. But the increase in converts and the establishment of more churches called for a more central location for the mission for ease of communication and speedy supervision. Though the state *darbar* had strongly opposed the extension of the mission, yet, by virtue of the services of Pettigrew during the war, and of Dr Crozier who had served as government medical officer during the so-called 'Kuki Rebellion', the mission was given permission to purchase land at Kangpokpi on the Imphal-Dimapur road, and was also given financial support of Rs 2,000 to be granted annually for mission work.²³

Mission(aries) and the Local Culture and Traditions

As has happened in many societies, interaction between the Kukis and the colonialists as well as the missionaries deeply affected the community. Politically, it brought a wider nation-state political dimension which might be considered to have contributed to the erosion of traditional customary laws and norms.

From a socio-cultural aspect, it can be argued that the spread of the gospel resulted in a certain unhealthy individualism that to a certain extent desensitized people to the principle of *tomngaina* expressed through social concern and justice. While Christianity helped the Kukis cope with the process of modernization, it could be argued that it was one of the factors responsible for the alienation of Kukis from their culture.²⁴ Since Kuki culture still had its roots in the customs and practices of marriage, inheritance and land ownership,²⁵ with the process of Christianization and westernization, a significant shift took place in the Kukis' perception of their culture. It caused them to hold their own religion in contempt and to look westwards to an alien culture. People no longer sang traditional songs

²² Dena, *Christian Missions and Colonialism*, 40.

²³ Downs, *The Mighty Works of God*, 160.

²⁴ See K. Thanzauva, *Theology of Community: Tribal Theology in the Making* (Aizawl: Mizo Theological Conference, 1997), 85.

²⁵ M. Thongkhosei Haokip, 'Gospel and Kuki Culture: An Attempt Towards Rediscovery of Traditional Values' (BD thesis, Senate of Serampore College (University), 1997), 66.

or performed traditional dances since these were considered primitive and belonging to an uncultured way of life.²⁶ These changes also affected other areas such as dress, food, technology, healthcare, etc. As such, it has destroyed the people's spirit of independence as they always have to look for support from the West or elsewhere to sustain their new-found culture in every respect, and thus suffer from economic exploitation and decline.

There is little or no evidence to show that the missionaries or mission societies attempted to understand Kuki institutions, learn Kuki customs or sympathetically deal with the religious and cultural sentiments of the people. Missionaries believed that the introduction of western science and Christianity alone would redeem the Kukis from their cultural and religious predicament.

They did this through their other-worldly theological perspectives. The missionaries' strong insistence on personal conversion unduly enhanced the value of humanity above creation. They perceived the salvation of the human being as the central theme of Christian mission and theology. Missionaries emphasized God's revelation only in the word of God and not in the total creation of God. This theology undermined the land-centred traditional Kuki religion, culture and ethics. Also, the salvific work of Christ was viewed from an anthropocentric perspective. It was because God loved his people more than the world, that he was incarnated in Jesus Christ to save and give power to the helpless. It also directly promoted a dualism between the spiritual and the material, heaven and earth, giving so little importance to the material world, even regarding it as evil. Additionally, the belief that this world is not our home but that it is perishable, gradually alienated the Kukis from their soil-centred worldview.²⁷ There was introduced the strong belief that God was self-sufficient and transcendent from the physical world, causing them to perceive a God apart from the earth as well as a belief in the second coming of Christ through which this world would be destroyed and only those who believed in Christ would be saved.²⁸

The missionaries also brought with them an ethnocentric outlook that prevented them from completely understanding the Kuki culture and identity. The doctrine of the monopoly of truth and revelation as claimed by the missionaries were alien to the Kukis. Acceptance of new faith was understood as rejection of their traditional festivals, songs, dances and sacrifices – and this resulted in abandonment of many valid traditional values.

²⁶ 'Gospel and Tribal Culture: Naga Perspective', in *Good News for North East India: A Theological Reader*, Renty Keitzer (ed), (Guwahati: CLC, 1995), 164.

²⁷ Haokip, 'Gospel and Kuki Culture: An Attempt for Rediscovery of Traditional Values', 67.

²⁸ Haokip, 'Gospel and Kuki Culture: An Attempt for Rediscovery of Traditional Values', 68.

Mission and Conflict

The British came to Manipur and started their occupation of Kuki territory in the mid-nineteenth century. The first clash between the British and the Kukis in Assam and the Chittagong Hill Tracts (now Bangladesh) took place in 1850 and was recorded by Colonel E.B. Elly in 'The Great Kuki Invasion of 1860s'.²⁹ The British effort to occupy the land continued into the following decades. It was firmly resisted by the Kukis and climaxed in the First War of Independence of the Kukis (1917-19) during World War I. This has been called the 'Kuki Rebellion' by the British, 'Thadou-Gaal' by the Thadous, 'Zou Gaal' by the Zous, 'Khongzai Laal' ('War of the Hill Tribes in Meitei') by the Meiteis, the 'Anglo-Kuki War' by others, etc. It began when the British wanted to send tribals from North-East India as part of the Labour Corps to France during World War I. In Manipur they sought the permission of the Maharajah for this recruitment. Subsequently, a meeting of the tribal chiefs was convened where all, except for a handful of Kuki Christians, Nagas from Manipur, and the Kuki tribes, agreed to this demand. The argument given by the Kukis was that this was not their war and that they (the Kukis) had no intention of co-operating with an administration that had treated them unjustly. Moreover, it was not their custom to provide young people to serve a government that had not conquered them in battle.³⁰

Scholars have different opinions on the causes of this war. According to Lal Dena, the recruitment issue served as an excuse rather than the cause of the uprising. This was similarly expressed by Bhadra Gautam when he noted that the recruitment to the Labour Corps, which was said to be the ostensible cause for the uprising, did have an important role, insofar as it ignited all the accumulated grievances of the Kukis. Other causes have also been cited. For Z.Z. Lien, the recruitment issue ignited the resentment felt by the Kuki chiefs against the heavy taxation, forced labour, etc. already enforced by the government.³¹ Khaikhotinthang Kipgen, a Thadou writer, adds that the laws of the colonial power created in the minds of the Thadous (a clan among the Kukis) the impression that the British were exploiters and so they reacted violently against them in 1917.³² According to Paokhohang Haokip, the cause of the rebellion was, 'Love of freedom, possession of arms, efficient organization, bold leadership, and patriotism.'³³ Downs sum it up in the following words:

²⁹ E.B. Elly, *Military Report on the Chin Lushai Country* (Aizawl: Tribal Research Institute, 1978), 34.

³⁰ Downs, *The Mighty Works of God*, 169.

³¹ Z.Z. Lien, *The U-Now People* (Churachandpur: L & R Printing Press, 1981), 37.

³² Khaikhotinthang Kipgen, *The Thadou Kukis* (Imphal: Swaraj, 1982), 49.

³³ Paokhohang Haokip, 'Causes of the Kuki Rebellion 1917-20 Freedom Loving Kukis Sentinel of Manipur', in *Souvenir: 85th Anniversary Day Celebration of the Kuki Rebellion 2002* (Imphal: Kuki Inpi Manipur), 14-16.

The discontent that finally erupted in the Kuki Rebellion (or War of Independence)... (when) some 1,195 guns were collected from (them. This)... therefore worked severe hardships on the people-and wounded their pride. A house tax, the imposition of British law, alleged discrimination in the matter of government jobs were also deeply resented. However, the immediate cause of the rebellion was the effort made by the Rajah to enlist – by force if necessary – Kukis for the labour Corps that was being raised in aid of the war effort.³⁴

The war lasted for about three years but in the end the ill-equipped Kukis were overpowered by the British with their superior arms and an unending flow of war materials and armed personnel. Downs points out that the rebels (or freedom fighters) were finally defeated but not easily. It took more than 5,000 armed British personnel and two years to suppress them.³⁵ Despite being an agrarian community, under the circumstances the Kukis were unable to engage in cultivation, and this made it increasingly difficult to sustain the war effort. Therefore, in 1919, the chiefs decided to conclude the war in what they believed was an honourable fashion: they voluntarily courted imprisonment and served out their respective terms with dignity. The people were scattered in temporary camps.³⁶ To make matters worse, their land was divided into two between British India and British Burma.

Mission work came to a standstill during the conflict. In fact, the war became a war of religions between Christianity and the old tribal religion. So, the defeat of the Kukis was also seen as the defeat of their old way of life.³⁷ Their defeat also accelerated the spread of the new religion and western education, reducing the power of the chiefs who would otherwise have not allowed or at least have hampered the growth of Christianity and/or humanitarian services among the Kukis.³⁸ Earlier, the Kukis had asserted that they would not serve a government which had not conquered them in battle. It was therefore logical that, with their defeat, they began to be influenced by the culture and religion of their conquerors which resulted also in mass conversions to Christianity. In a sense, this could be regarded as a victory for the Kuki converts including Pu Ngulhao who had mobilized as many as 500 non-Christian Kukis for the Labour Corps, where he himself was an interpreter.

During World War II, the Kukis' hopes of recovering their lands and lost prestige were briefly revived when Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and the

³⁴ Downs, *The Mighty Works of God*, 168.

³⁵ Downs, *The Mighty Works of God*, 169.

³⁶ T. Kipgen, 'Impact of the Kuki Rebellion on the Manipur Administration', in *The Thadou Kukis*, Khaikhotinthang Haokip (ed), (Imphal: Swaraj, 1982), 19.

³⁷ S.P. Vaiphei, *Church Growth Among the Hill Tribes of Manipur North East India* (Imphal: Goodwill Press, 1986), 56.

³⁸ Haokip, 'A Study of the Attempts for Church Unity Among the Kuki-Chin People of Manipur Since the Inception of Christianity to the Present', 135

Indian National Army (INA), along with the Japanese advance, reached Manipur. The Kukis took an active part in helping Bose, and the more than 150 surviving Kuki INA pensioners today bear testimony to their efforts to defeat the British. The Kuki Inn (House) at Imphal, constructed with funds from the Government of India, is itself a commemoration of and a monument to the struggle for freedom against British imperialism. However, with the defeat of the Axis powers, the Kukis had again to face the wrath of the British. One of the consequences was that the Kukis were scattered and placed under various administrations.

Moreover, the partition of Bengal into East Bengal, later East Pakistan and present-day Bangladesh, has further divided the Kuki people politically into the three different countries such of India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. In India, the fate of their land was left to the Manipur Raja even after the British left India which did not augur well for the Kukis. For F.S. Downs, the rapid growth of Christianity was not due either to a great effort of the missionaries, or the application of unique missionary methods, or even to the British government's patronage of Christian missions. It was, however, the crisis faced by the people following the British annexation of the hill areas in which their traditional world order became impotent to cope with the new situation.³⁹ They found that Christianity met their needs and turned to it in large numbers.

Like their fellow tribals in other parts of the North East, the Kukis have now become more politically conscious and socially sensitive. The constitution of India has special provisions to safeguard the interest of weaker sections such as the Tribals and Other Backward Classes. Thus, in accordance with the notification of the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, published in the Extra-Ordinary Gazette of India, there are 29 recognized tribes in Manipur. But there is no group designated as 'Kuki' listed in the notification. Nor is the nomenclature 'Kuki' recognized for any practical purposes.⁴⁰

The main factors leading to this non-recognition, according to T.S. Gangte, are both political and social. Politically, because the Kukis and their political organizations were so independent of each other, that they were obsessed with the idea of inter-clan rivalries, especially after Independence. As a consequence, despite their being one and the same, clan rivalries for supremacy over each other strained their relationships. Socially, the cultural and traditional system of the Kukis was so segmentary that every individual was made conscious that he or she belonged to a particular clan or sub-clan.⁴¹ These led to discontent, competition, jealousy,

³⁹ F.S. Downs, *Christianity in North East India: Historical Perspectives* (Delhi: ISPCK, and Guwahati: CLC, 1983), 101-103.

⁴⁰ T.S. Gangte, *The Kukis of Manipur: A Historical Analysis* (New Delhi: Gyan, 2003), 25.

⁴¹ Gangte, *The Kukis of Manipur: A Historical Analysis*, 26.

hatred, factionalism, etc. which was reflected in their exclusion from the list of the Scheduled Tribes in Manipur.

Another external factor that contributed to disunity and disintegration among the various Kuki tribes was the fruit of mission work among the so-called 'Old Kukis' such as the Anal, the Moyon, the Monsang, the Lamkang, the Maring, etc. by fellow tribal Christians. However, while making these communities Christian, the missionaries belonging to other tribes also baptized the said communities into their ethno-political movements.⁴²

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to highlight the misuse of power that accompanied the Christianizing efforts of missionaries as they worked among the Kukis in North-East India. This was seen in the policy of the British in allowing only one mission organization to work in the state, thereby encouraging an exclusivist attitude on the part of William Pettigrew of the American Baptist Mission, the government-recognized mission agency. Such an attitude found expression in the objections that Pettigrew put forward against the mission work of Watkin Roberts and his missionary work among the Kukis, and the subsequent persecution of Christians in the area by the British Political Agent at the behest of Pettigrew. It has also been pointed out that the missionaries and the government were closely aligned, especially when it came to recruiting Naga and Kuki tribals for the Labour Corps for work in France during World War I. The Kukis' refusal to enlist would lead to the 1917-1919 conflict with devastating consequences for the tribe. Mission work among the Kukis was not contextual, with missionaries making little or no effort to understand the people culturally, socially, politically, or even with regard to their traditional beliefs. This continues to have implications for the community which has by and large lost its connections with its traditions, songs, dances and ways of life. Post-World War II and Indian Independence, the Kukis now find themselves, on the one hand, politically separated as their traditional territory has been carved up between India, Bangladesh and Myanmar, and on the other, not fully recognized since the Kuki tribe finds no mention in the notification by the Government of India that recognizes 29 tribes in Manipur.

While it is tempting to equate mission with power, and to interpret or accuse one of acting in partnership or collusion with the other, the fact that the Kukis are now in a position to look back on missionary work among

⁴² Therefore, it is said that, culturally, these communities belong to the Kuki fold while politically they are Nagas. See D. Letkhojam Haokip, 'Understanding the Historical Background of the Kuki and Naga Relations', in *The Orient Vision*, VI/1 & 2 (2009), 22-28.

them objectively, perhaps even critically, must be seen as an encouraging step forward where now, logically, efforts of Kuki academics must also critique the Kuki response to the Christian message and to colonial rule, and whether different situations and crises could have been better handled to avert the current socio-political situation the Kukis find themselves in.

Along with this, efforts are now being made, research carried out and awareness being raised about how Kukis can reclaim traditional values and ways of life to better understand themselves and their Christian faith. This will be an uncomfortable journey because any historical journey to rediscover one's roots must be objective and open to considering all perspectives and sides.

While this paper has focused on the largely negative impact that colonialism and Christianization have had on the Kuki people, implicit also is the acknowledgement of the social, political and spiritual advances made by the community because of the gospel message, and the hope that this is a first step towards a willingness to listen to other perspectives present in the history of the Kuki people.

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MISSION AND POWER WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MIZORAM

Lalnghakthuami

Introduction

Like most places around the world, conversion to Christianity occurred in Mizoram in the context of the colonial encounter. This has led to studies concentrating on the nexus between colonial power and mission, the implications often being that each contributed substantially to the perpetuation of the other. When we look at the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries of the colonial period of western Europe, the period that was known as the 'age of discovery and expansion', the history of colonialism and Christian mission went hand-in-hand. Richard P. Dunn states, 'During this age of discovery, the church sent forth missionaries steeped in European culture that was Christian and a Christianity that was intimately bound to European culture'.¹ As David J. Bosch affirms, the propagation of the faith and colonial policies became so intertwined that it was often hard to distinguish the one from the other.²

Jean and John Comaroff point out the more imperceptible ways in which missionaries, by being participants (though often unconsciously) of the modernistic enterprise, were in fact aiding the colonizing process. Their main argument is that while the missions, in their case among the Tswans in South Africa, may not have directly involved themselves in the politics of colonialism, their influence ... in such things as aesthetics and religion, built form and bodily presentation, medical knowledge and the mundane habits of everyday life' led to a 'subtle colonization... of indigenous modes of perception and practice', which in turn contributed to the building of the colonial infrastructure, and incorporating them to the capitalist world economy.³ In India, it was official policy not to aid the propagation of Christianity, yet in the specific case of the Lushai Hills, it was clear that the district authorities did not discourage it. There were instances when the missionaries complained that the administrative officer could have been more lenient and there were times when the missionaries directly opposed

¹ Quoted by Yangkahao Vashum, 'Colonialism, Missionaries and Indigenous: A Critical Appraisal' in *Journal of Tribal Studies*, XII/2 (July-December, 2007), 3.

² Vashum, 'Colonialism, Missionaries and Indigenous: A Critical Appraisal'.

³ Joy Lalkrawspari Pachuau, 'Conversion to Christianity among the Mizos: A Review of the Sociological and Historical Circumstances', in *Mizoram Theological Journal*, VI/2 (July-December, 2006), 35.

the colonial authorities. But, more often than not, it was the political administrator's sympathy towards the missionary endeavour that they reported. Colonial officers would also sometimes interfere in spiritual matters when it was felt that the peace in the district was affected especially in times of revival.⁴

Colonialism and Christian Mission in Mizoram

In 1909 Dr Peter Frazer, a medical missionary, arrived in Mizoram, and took up the cause for the abolition of slavery in Mizoram. Initially the British government refused to take slavery seriously for two main reasons. It considered the Mizo *bawi* system as a rather helpful custom, on the one hand, and on the other, it feared that the abolition of the system would do more harm than good to the chiefs who would realize the gap that had been made in their system of social security. The then superintendent, H.W.G. Cole on 19th July 1911 ordered Fraser to confine himself entirely to the work of a medical missionary and to accept the decision of the superintendent as final, and in the event of any violation of this undertaking, to leave Mizoram within one month. As Fraser rejected the superintendent's position, the government compelled him to withdraw from Mizoram. But Fraser appealed to His Majesty which thereafter resulted in the transfer of Cole in the latter part of 1911.⁵ The officials attempted to argue that Fraser did not represent the position of the Christian mission or the general public. But the Mizos, especially the commoners, understood that he was representing the mission since he claimed a divine sanction to fight for the abolition of the *bawi* system in Mizoram. This was one example where we see colonial officials and the mission taking different positions.

Nevertheless, there was a working relationship between the British colonial power and Christian missions in North-East India. According to Yangkahao Vashum, the British in India offered two reasons to justify their involvement in religious activities, particularly their support of the missionaries. First, the British administration justified their encouragement and funding of Christian missions on the grounds that the hill people did not have any religion. Secondly, they argued that the Christian mission schools were providing 'secular' services rather than religious instruction.⁶ It was obvious that the missionaries were using education for the advancement of the Christian gospel and for the building of a Christian community.⁷

⁴ Pachau, 'Conversion to Christianity among the Mizos, 36.

⁵ Vanlalchhuanawma, *Mission and Tribal Identity: A Historical Analysis of the Mizo Synod Board From a Tribal Perspective 1953-1981* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2010), 62.

⁶ Vashum, 'Colonialism, Missionaries and Indigenous: A Critical Appraisal', 6.

⁷ Vashum, 'Colonialism, Missionaries and Indigenous: A Critical Appraisal', 7.

Missions and colonialism interacted in different forms and at different levels in North-East India. As Lal Dena remarks, 'The degree and extent of the interactions and conflicts between missions and colonialism largely depended on the particular mission and issues involved as well as the nature of the colonial situation'.⁸

According to Vanlalchhuanawma, by 1890 Mizoram fell into the hands of the British and consequently was officially annexed to British rule.⁹ He continues that it was the British administration that opened the way for Christian mission. Thus in 1891, William Williams, a Welsh Presbyterian missionary to the Khasis, came to Mizoram, along with the British reinforcement troops. At his persuasion, the Welsh Mission formally adopted Mizoram as its field in 1892.¹⁰ In fact, because of the influence of the two powers, as observed by Vanlalchhuanawma, the administration and the mission worked in many ways to supplement each other, though some conflicts did arise. The conflicts were mostly due to the administration's fear of losing control of the Mizos when radical changes were wrought by the mission.¹¹ In some cases, the missionary movement was seen as the most effective force of colonization, because not only did it not use force, but especially since it penetrated more deeply into the life of the people.¹² We can generally assume that 'there was a working relation between the British colonial powers and the Christian missions in North-East India'.¹³

The mission and colonial powers were the agents of political, socio-economic and religio-cultural change among the people. One of the goals of the missions, apart from converting them to Christianity, was to 'civilize' the people and thus to indirectly spread western cultural ideas and ideals through western education. According to Jacob S. Dharmaraj, 'There was a strong belief that western religion and culture had all the ingredients to uplift any lowly, primitive culture'.¹⁴ As Lal Dena observes, 'The involvement of missionaries in educational programmes was to be viewed as supplementary to the primary task of communicating the "spiritual" message to the people. The interest of colonial officials was both paternalistic and imperialistic. They understood that the education imparted by the missionaries was effective not only in "civilizing" the natives, but

⁸ Lal Dena, *Christian Missions and Colonialism: A Study of Missionary Movement in North East India with Particular Reference to Manipur and Lushai Hills 1894-1947* (Shillong: Vendrame Institute, 1988), 1.

⁹ Vanlalchhuanawma, *Mission and Tribal Identity: A Historical Analysis of the Mizo Synod Mission Board From a Tribal Perspective 1953-1981* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2010), 56.

¹⁰ Vanlalchhuanawma, *Mission and Tribal Identity*, 91.

¹¹ Vanlalchhuanawma, *Mission and Tribal Identity*, 92.

¹² Dena, *Christian Missions and Colonialism*, 8.

¹³ Vashum 'Colonialism, Missionaries and Indigenous: A Critical Appraisal', 6.

¹⁴ Jacob S. Dharmaraj, *Colonialism and Christian Mission: Postcolonial Reflection* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1993), 66.

also in making them “peaceful and loyal subjects”.¹⁵ John Stuart Mill as quoted by Dhamaraj points out that a person acquainted with European knowledge will become a disciplined, moral and a successful person because of the reflection and observation that this knowledge encourages.¹⁶ Under the influence of the British administration and Christianity, Vanlalchhuanawma also observes that ‘modernism started to take root in the land.’¹⁷ Both missionaries and the colonial power can thus be held responsible for contributing to reorienting the Mizo convert’s attitudes towards their religio-cultural traditions and social practices. A case in point would be my grandmother, a first-generation Mizo Christian from a remote village in Mizoram who recalls her first contact with Christianity when a certain preacher went to her village and invited the people to write down their names. Many people after listening to him wrote down their names. She too approached the preacher to have her name included. The preacher wrote down her name with the condition that she should not live any more like the other Mizos. That meant that, as a Christian, she should not join the others in their gatherings such as when the whole village caught fish together in a particular river (*sangha tlang vuak*), an occasion when the villagers would have a good time along with their chiefs and elders. Secondly, she should not participate in the village merrymaking in dancing and singing at the chief’s house where people would drink rice beer (*zu*). Thirdly, she was not to participate in the cultural festivals such as *Chapchar kut*, *Mimkut* and *Pawlkut*. She agreed to these conditions and the missionary wrote her name down. The preacher with his group then rang the bell and sang,

Van dar vaw ring rawh u, Vawiinah kan lawm ang

(Let the heavenly bells be rung loudly, so that we will be happy today)

The Understanding of Mission in North-East India

One can thus deduce that becoming Christian meant abandoning one’s native traditional practices. Accepting a new faith also meant separating oneself from the rest of society. The rejection of social and cultural practices marked a new identity, which was understood as being Christian. There is something disturbing, on the one hand, about missionaries demanding of their new converts a rejection of their whole socio-cultural and religious life or alternatively for these to be dusted, disinfected and injected with western Christian elements and attitudes, and on the other hand, for the new converts to almost unquestioningly accept these demands and understand these as part of the requirements of the new religion. As

¹⁵ Dena, *Christian Missions and Colonialism*, 90.

¹⁶ Quoted by Dhamaraj, *Colonialism and Christian Mission*, 66.

¹⁷ Vanlalchhuanawma, *Mission and Tribal Identity*, 56.

Dharmaraj states, 'This rationalization of social institutions was seen as a precondition for the introduction of Christianity.'¹⁸

It is in this context that we need to reconsider the very term 'mission' in the light of the contemporary understanding of mission. As David J. Bosch states, 'The origins of the term "mission" were thus intimately bound up with the colonial expansion of the West. Like colonization, it implied travelling to distant countries and "subjugating" pagans to the one and only true religion.'¹⁹ Such an understanding of mission has been applied to North-East India. Therefore, mission is almost understood as a human enterprise by ignoring the rootedness of mission in the nature of God. A new understanding of mission is to be sought out in the light of the contemporary understanding of mission in today's context. As Scherer states, 'The mission is our participation in the work of God which takes place between the coming of Jesus Christ to inaugurate God's kingdom and His coming again in glory to bring that Kingdom to its consummation.'²⁰ Thus mission is God's mission (*missio Dei*), and not the church's mission. This affirmation would enable us 'to recognize the depth of God's mystery and our human limitations to discern the whole meaning of God's mission'.²¹ God's mission should be given priority by the church, forgetting her own agenda so that we may acknowledge a wider aspect of God's mission that includes proclamation of the gospel and 'the duty to respect and protect the rights and dignity of our fellow human beings.'²² This duty must then necessarily include the recognition and acknowledgement of people's socio-cultural traditions and practices.

As G. Thompson Brown clearly states, the verb 'send' is the clue to our understanding of God's mission in the world. Behind the English word 'mission' is the Latin *mittere*- to send. The original meaning is preserved in the word 'missile'. The church in mission is God's missile or projectile which is hurled into the world. Behind the Latin word *missio* is the idea of the apostles (Greek *apostoloi*) who were the 'sent ones'- sent out by Jesus into the world even as he had been sent by God. He continues to say that

¹⁸ Dharmaraj, *Colonialism and Christian Mission: Postcolonial Reflection*, xvi.

¹⁹ David J. Bosch, 'Reflections on Biblical Models of Mission', in *Towards the 21st Century in Christian Mission*, James M. Phillips and Robert T. Coote (eds), (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 176.

²⁰ James A. Scherer, 'Mission Theology' in *Towards the 21st Century in Christian Mission*, 200.

²¹ Lalsangkima Pachuau, 'Ecumenical Missiology: Three Decades of Historical and Theological Development (1952-1982)', in *Ecumenical Missiology: Contemporary Trends, Issues and Themes*, Lalsangkima Pachuau (ed), (Bangalore: United Theological College, 2002), 46.

²² Pachuau, 'Ecumenical Missiology: Three Decades of Historical and Theological Development'.

‘mission’ is the church in motion, the activity of the church as it is sent into the world.²³

However, the churches of North-East India have inherited the practices and traditions of the mother churches that motivated people to expand their own denominations and ignore the main motif of God’s own mission. Generally speaking, the sole aim of mission as understood by the churches, at least in Mizoram, is ‘saving souls from eternal damnation’. The Mizoram Presbyterian churches in their early phase also took up the task of not only undertaking to save the ‘heathen’ people’s souls from damnation, but also to civilize them and to elevate ‘uncultured’ people to be like the ‘cultured’ Christians. As Lalsangkima observes, ‘The driving force at the heart of the movement was the spirit of crusade backed by colonial expansionism.’²⁴ Various strategies were adopted by the churches in order to achieve the goal of conversion, and the crusading notion of mission strongly dominated the mission understanding of churches and individuals in Mizoram. Today, deep-seated changes in the concept of mission and the promotion of secular values have had a significant impact on mission thinking in Mizoram. Mission has to be done with an ecumenical mindset and vision since we are participating in God’s own mission. As Hope Antone said, ‘The Church has generally understood mission as the reason for the life of the Church, it is something that emanates or comes from Godself, hence we say *Missio Dei*.’ We also need to maintain the paradigm shift of mission agenda, as Hope Antone continues:

Shift –

From competition to co-operation of denominations,
 From condemnation to dialogue with other faiths,
 From isolation to collaboration with civil society,
 From disintegration to integrity of creation.²⁵

Evaluation of Colonial Power and Mission in North-East India

As Vanlalchhuanawma rightly comments, ‘The activities of western mission with the imperial patronage promoted tribal solidarity and identity consciousness on the one hand. On the other hand, the arbitrary demarcation of geographical boundaries and segregation of tribal units by imperial machinery badly distorted tribal land, identity and culture in North-East India.’²⁶ Along with this observation, Lalsangkima Pachuau

²³ G. Thompson Brown, *Presbyterian in World Mission* (Louisville, KY: CTS Press, 1988), 5.

²⁴ Lalsangkima Pachuau, ‘Mission and Missiology Today: Problems and Prospects’, in *Mizoram Theological Journal*, II (January-June 2000, No. 1), 13.

²⁵ Quoted by T. Vanlaltlani, ‘Working in Multi-Faith Context’, in *Mizoram Theological Journal*, X/2 (April-June, 2005), 50.

²⁶ Vanlalchhuanawma, *Mission and Tribal Identity*, 220.

also considers Christianity as playing a major role in the process of forming the identity of the Mizo people. He says:

On the one hand, Christianity modernized the Mizo society in a significant manner. The role of the mission agencies in providing formal education to the society was particularly consequential with regard to modernization. On the other hand, Christianity helped the Mizo society to maintain a sense of identity in its transitional life. The spontaneous inculturation of the Gospel through the revival movement helped the people to maintain their selfhood in the face of modernity's onslaught. Hence, Christianity not only smoothes out the transition, but also integrates the people's tradition with modernity.²⁷

Therefore, Christianity is seen as a powerful force that organized the Mizos to such an extent that it became a primary agent in the formation of their identity.

While appreciating Christianity's role in becoming a rallying point around which the various tribes in North-East India were to rediscover or reinforce their communitarian and communal identities, the education introduced by the missionaries has had a profound impact on the people of the region, an aspect that has only recently been critiqued and examined.

The modern educational system was introduced by the missionaries with the conviction that western education would bring a religious transformation and a cultural revolution into Mizo society and thus prepare the way for evangelization. Stanley rightly summarizes the mood of the missionaries:

The content of their (the missionaries') hope was not merely a conglomerate of individual conversions but a comprehensive revolution in 'heathen' society in which every aspect of that society would be prised from the grip of satanic dominion and submitted to the liberating lordship of Christ.²⁸

Educational programmes and evangelism were interlinked and, for the colonial officials, education was seen as both paternalistic and imperialistic. While the officials looked at the introduction of western education as a legitimizing process of colonial rule, the missionaries used it as a vehicle for communicating the Christian message to the subject people.²⁹ However, as Yangkahao Vashum has rightly pointed out, modern education, with all the wonders it brought to native people's culture and ways of knowing, in many cases it has even brought about their demise.³⁰ Education was one of the best tools or weapons used by officials for indigenous cultural invasion. Indigenous epistemologies, histories, values and stories were deposed by western education. As a result, even today, educated people in the region

²⁷ Lalsangkima Pachuau, *Ethnic Identity and Christianity: A Socio-Historical and Missiological Study of Christianity in Northeast India with Special Reference to Mizoram* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang: 2002), 173.

²⁸ Quoted in Dharmaraj, *Colonialism and Christian Mission: Post-colonial Reflections*, 58.

²⁹ Dena, *Christian Mission and Colonialism*, 91.

³⁰ Vashum, 'Colonialism, Missionaries and Indigenous: A Critical Appraisal', 17.

are hardly aware of their own indigenous folklore and tales that had been handed down orally from generation to generation.

The introduction of modern medicine by the missionaries was a desire to help those in need of it. This was the rationale of missionary involvement in medical work. When western medicine was first introduced in Mizoram, according to Lalsangkima Pachuau, 'it challenged the efficacy of sacrifices and paved the way for a meaningful communication of the gospel.'³¹ However, as Lal Dena observes, medical work was one of the most effective means of destroying the traditional worldview and belief system which was essentially super-naturalistic.³² This medical ministry helped the missionary 'to facilitate the process of Christianization'.³³ It 'became a powerful mode of control'³⁴ and hegemony over the indigenous people. The value of traditional medicines was degraded since this new medicine was more effective. Therefore, herbal medicines were displaced because these had failed to be effective remedies for the people.

R. Upadhyay correctly observes that, in converting the tribes from their indigenous religions to Christianity, the Christian missionaries robbed them of their traditional identity and imposed on them a new socio-religious identity based on Christian traditions. Such socio-religious transformation, though contrary to their respective ethnic traditions, was, over the years accepted by the converted tribes as their generic identity. Christianization and basic education helped some of them to get middle to lower-level jobs in the church and in British administration which gave birth to the middle class – a new social phenomenon in tribal society.³⁵ As a whole, the tribal masses accepted many imposed changes, which were against their self-governing character and the heterogeneous system of their own institutions.

We can say that the colonial power and Christian mission, even if they had had a different spirit and motive, operated simultaneously in transforming the whole societal and religious outlook in Mizoram. They were responsible for constructing a western form of Christianity and theology that rejected people's cultural values and ideas.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to comment briefly on the relationship between the British administrative and Christian mission, particularly with regard to Mizoram. While there have been points of conflict between the two, by and large there was mutuality and co-operation between them. While the British administration considered the missionary involvement in Mizo society –

³¹ Pachuau, *Ethnic Identity and Christianity*, 99.

³² Dena, *Christian Missions and Colonialism*, 105.

³³ Dena, *Christian Missions and Colonialism*, 106.

³⁴ Vashum, 'Colonialism, Missionaries and Indigenism: A Critical Appraisal', 21.

³⁵ R. Upadhyay, 'Northeast Violence – An Overall View': www.southasiaanalysis.org

through education and medicine, for example – as a legitimising process of colonial rule, the missionaries viewed these two aspects as effective means of spreading Christianity. In the long run, colonialism and missionary activities would result in political, socio-economic and religio-cultural changes in Mizo society.

These changes have come at a certain cost. Along with the Mizos, tribal societies in North-East India have now begun to understand the meaning of mission as God's mission, and how previously-held notions of mission as saving and civilising the heathen have resulted in the loss of traditional socio-cultural roots. It is time that Christians in North-East India view the gospel message through the lens of their own histories and traditions to make Christianity and Christian mission relevant and effective.

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MISSION OF POWER AND POWER OF MISSION: MISSION AMONG THE ASSAMESE AND THE BOROS

Songram Basumatary

Introduction

It has been famously joked that the missionaries to North-East India chose the soft ground of the hills over the hard ground of the plains because they were asked to remove their sandals. Reluctant to remove them, they decided that it was better to go to the hills instead! As a result, the plains of Assam continue to be a ground for the barefoot and largely Hindu population.

The joke however points to the fact that the missionaries found the communities in the plains unresponsive and where the gospel message did not bring about the spiritual response they had hoped for. While they are gratefully remembered even today for their social and linguistic contribution, their spiritual efforts continue to be viewed with suspicion and disdain.

One then has to ask – why? This paper will attempt to examine some of the reasons why mission work among the Assamese and the Boros of Assam was a comparative failure in contrast to the response of the hill tribes of the region. It will examine if the relationship between the British administration and the missionaries, how they viewed each other and the local population, and how in turn the way the Assamese and the Boros viewed them influenced the dynamics of mission – if, in the final analysis, the ‘power of mission’ was weaker than the ‘mission of power’ in the plains.

The Power of Mission and the Mission of Power in North-East India

The coming of Christianity and its growth in North-East India has to be understood from the perspective of the dynamics of the relationship between the British administration and Christian mission in a broader sense, the Church-State relationship in British India. The dynamics, in fact, have been viewed from different perspectives depending on one’s standpoint. On the one hand, it has been held that Christianity entered the region, particularly the hills, under the shadow of the British administration. It was the British administration that first entered the

difficult terrain for political and economic reasons.¹ According to Barpujari, 'The Cross not unoften followed the British flag.'² Missionaries went to the hills under the umbrella of the Raj. When the administration had smoothed the surface, the missionaries sowed the seeds of Christianity. On the other hand, the missionaries were considered agents of the colonial powers. According to Brahmabandhav Upadhaya, 'First comes the Missionary, then comes the Resident, lastly comes the Regiment.'³ K.M. Pannikar points to such collaboration when he says, 'The diplomatic pressure, extra-territoriality and sometimes support of gunboats have been resorted to in the interests of the foreign missionaries.'⁴ It was stated by S.P. Singh in a national conference on the 'Tribal Situation in India' that 'Christian missionaries are there not for advocating a faith but for keeping imperialism alive.'⁵

Countering such allegations, historians such as F.S. Downs⁶ and Milton Sangma⁷ argue that the missionaries and the British administration had their distinct agendas and objectives. In this, mutual co-operation was a necessity, particularly in humanitarian services such as education and healthcare. Missionaries co-operated with such work, not as agents of the colonial power to advance the colonial agenda, but for their own mission objectives. However, it has been observed that, in their different capacities, both the British administration and the missionaries mutually contributed towards the objective of development among the various tribes. According to Downs, 'Christian missions and government were there for their own

¹ See R.A. David Syiemlieh, *Brief History of the Catholic Church in Nagaland* (Shillong: Vendrame Institute, 1990), 34.

² H.K. Barpujari, *Assam in the Days of the Company 1826-1858* (Guwahati: Spectrum, 1980), 300.

³ Brahmabandhav Upadhaya, cited by Kaj Baago in book review of Stephen Neill, *Colonialism and Christian Missions* (1966), in *ICHR* 1/2 (1967), 163.

⁴ K.M. Pannikar, *Asia and Western Dominance: A Survey of the Vasco Da Gama Epoch of Asian History 1498-1945* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1953), 297.

⁵ 'Tenth Business Session (Discussion): Integration and Understanding in the North-east', in *The Tribal Situation in India*, K.S. Singh (ed), (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1972), 620.

⁶ F.S. Downs, 'Christianity as a Tribal Response to Change in Northeast India', in *Missiology: An International Review* VIII (October 1980), 407-16; 'Identity: The Integrative Principle', in *Asian Journal of Theology* 6 (1992), 238-49; 'Tribal Ecumenism in Northeast India: The Christian Role in Solidarity Movements', in Renty Keitzar (ed), *Good News for North East India: A Theological Reader* (Guwahati: Christian Literature Centre, 1995), 8-21.

⁷ Milton S. Sangma, *History of American Baptist Mission in North East India (1836-1950)*, Vol. I (New Delhi: Mittal, 1987), v; cf Lal Dena, *Christian Missions and Colonialism: A Study of Missionary Movement in Northeast India with Particular reference to Manipur and Lushai Hills 1894-1947* (Shillong: Vendrame Institute, 1988).

purposes; each found the other useful'⁸ and, 'the missionaries did not see their primary purpose as being agents of the colonial powers: their primary purpose was the propagation of the gospel'.⁹ In such a situation the government was perhaps more helpful to Christian mission than mission was to the government.¹⁰ According to Chaube, 'The government contribution to the material culture of the hill peoples was almost nil... Consequently, the hill people got only half-educated. The task of acculturation, on the subjective level, was almost entirely left to the Church of various denominations.'¹¹ In a way, what the administration lacked was filled in by the missionaries. Though both had their own interests, in certain areas they complemented each other. Further, in Downs's words, 'Government found the missions useful, or so they hoped, in pacifying the hill tribes and providing education at minimal cost to itself; the missions found the government useful in underwriting, in many cases, their educational work and in providing security for both themselves and their converts.'¹²

It has generally been perceived that, however good their intentions might have been, the Christian missionaries were part of the colonial establishment and, consciously or unconsciously, their mission was directed towards upholding and strengthening that establishment.¹³ On the mission-colonial dynamics, a contemporary theologian from North-East India also states that 'there were close relations between colonial powers and missionaries, and that however good their intentions might have been, the missionaries contributed in the colonial projects'.¹⁴ The arrival of missionaries in the hill areas was controlled by the British administration, particularly through the Inner Line Regulation, 1873,¹⁵ by which entry of outsiders into the hill frontiers was restricted. In accordance with the general rule of the government, only one mission was allowed to work in each hill district. The government always kept a watchful eye on

⁸ F.S. Downs, *Christianity in North East India: Historical Perspectives* (Delhi: ISPCK, and Guwahati: CLC, 1983), 51.

⁹ Downs, *Christianity in North East India: Historical Perspectives*, 50.

¹⁰ Downs, *Christianity in North East India: Historical Perspectives*, 82.

¹¹ Shibanikinkar K. Chaube, *Hills Politics in North East India* (Kolkata: Orient Longman, 1973), 42.

¹² F.S. Downs, *History of Christianity in India, Vol. V, Part 5: Northeast India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 1992), 30.

¹³ Niharranjan Ray, 'Introductory Address', in Singh, *The Tribal Situation in India*, 19.

¹⁴ Yangkahao Vashum, 'Colonialism, Christian Mission, and Indigenes: An Examination from Asian Indigenes': http://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/jcta/07-03_vashum.pdf

¹⁵ Detailed study on the background and implications of the Inner Line Regulation can be found in Barpujari, *Problem of the Hill Tribes: North-East Frontier 1873-1962* (Guwahati: Spectrum, 1981), 1-27.

missionary activity and their permission had first to be sought before evangelization work was begun. Thus the mission agencies had generally agreed ‘not to encroach upon each other’s fields’.¹⁶

This policy consequently worked in favour of the older Protestant missions – the Baptist Missions and the Welsh Presbyterians.¹⁷ The American Baptists were allotted the Naga Hills, the Brahmaputra valley and the Garo Hills; the Welsh Presbyterians were entrenched in the Khasi Hills and the North Lushai Hills, and the Roman Catholics missionaries were permitted only to work in the hill areas of present-day Meghalaya. It is surprising to note that ‘the Catholics were, however, in the British days, confined mainly to Shillong, and could enter deeper into the hills only after independence’. Interestingly, even ‘the London Baptist Mission somehow lost Government patronage in Assam, and could enter only the South Lushai Hills which had been with Bengal at the beginning of administration’.¹⁸ Further, as regards such control over the field of mission work, ‘it appears that Government both of British India and of Independent India have followed a discreet licensing policy in respect of the Church’.¹⁹ Consequently, North-East India was exposed to six different streams of Christian mission during the nineteenth century – Serampore, American Baptist, Welsh Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Anglican and Lutheran. All these missions entered into the region in the backdrop, not necessarily of ‘The power of Mission’, but of ‘The mission of Power’.

The Mission of Power and the Power of Mission among the Assamese

While reading the history of Christianity in North-East India, an obvious question one may ask is: Why is there such a small Christian presence in Assam compared with the rest of the region? There are multiple factors behind this, but historically it has become obvious that the Assam Mission was not a ‘Mission Assam’ but a ‘bypass mission’. For instance, the American Baptist Mission in Sadiya, Assam, was not a mission station for Assam, but a corridor to or, at best, a transit station for ‘Mission Tibet’ and ‘Mission China’. The missionaries were there on their way to Tibet as there were only two ways to go to Lhasa in those days.²⁰ The hearts and minds of the missionaries were not in Assam or the people of the land, but occupied

¹⁶ *Indian Statutory Commission*, Vol. XIV, 106-107, cited in Syiemlieh, A Brief History of the Catholic Church in Nagaland, 35.

¹⁷ Downs, *History of Christianity in India, Vol. V, Part 5*, 21-22.

¹⁸ Chaube, *Hills Politics in North East India*, 42.

¹⁹ Chaube, *Hills Politics in North East India*.

²⁰ Mathew Muttumana, *Christianity in Assam and Inter-Faith Dialogue: A Study on the Modern Religious Movements in North East India* (Indore: Satprakashan Sanchar Kendra, 1984), 8-13.

with strategies and programmes of onward mission towards Tibet and China.

Secondly, the primary target of the Serampore Mission was not necessarily the Assamese people or even the hill tribes, but was finding a way for 'Mission Burma'. When this mission failed due to opposition from the Burmese authorities, only then did the work in Assam begin with the support of David Scott, a powerful and influential political agent in the region. Yet the target of this mission was not the Assamese of the plains, but the hill tribes. For instance, the twelve students of a school started by James Rae at Gauhati in 1829 were from the hill tribes (three Khasis and nine Garos) from the Khasi and Garo Hills of present-day Meghalaya who were probably the children of labourers or tea garden workers. Though Rae did his best with his evangelistic zeal of winning souls through preaching the gospel of 'salvation in no other name' in the streets, the spirit died when he did not receive any response from the native Assamese. Consequently, due to personal reasons and lack of funds, the mission was abandoned by the British Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) and handed over to the American Baptists in 1938.

In fact, the mission stations at Gauhati (present-day Guwahati) and Nowgong (present-day Nagoan) were intended for the Garos and Assamese respectively.²¹ However, the main objective of the station originally intended for the Assamese was not the Assamese, but the Burmese and the Chinese – by converting the strong tribes, the Khamtis and Shans. Due to political reasons and more especially because of the poor response from the Assamese, the Nowgong mission was also diverted to the more receptive Nagas of the neighbourhood. Thus, Mission Assam was abandoned! In all probability, such failure stories of failure of the Serampore Mission as well as the American Baptist Mission prompted other mission agencies such as the Presbyterians, Lutherans, Anglicans and Catholics to shift their missions to the hill tribes, other plain tribes and tea garden workers of Assam with the help of the British administration.

So what really went wrong with the mission in the plains? Perhaps one of the problems was the theological approach and method of evangelization. For instance, in his lecture tour among the Assamese Hindus in 1844, the American Baptist missionary, Nathan Brown, without a proper knowledge of the religio-cultural and philosophical system, criticized the moral weaknesses of the people – such as worship of sex, human sacrifice, temple virgins, night gatherings on the temple premises, etc. – and admonished the people to feel sorry for such sacrilegious and abominable deeds, and appealed to people to become Christian.²²

²¹ Brown's Letter, Sadiya, 21st September 1836 and 13th January 1837. As referred to in Muttumana, *Christianity in Assam and Inter-Faith Dialogue*, 26.

²² Muttumana, *Christianity in Assam and Inter-Faith Dialogue*, 41.

Of course, the religio-cultural encounter between the American missionaries and the Assamese Hindus never took on a confrontationist colour. The reason was that the natives in general were satisfied with the religion they had, for they felt that the *Bhakti* faith of Vaishnavism of Srimant Sankardeva had given them was beautiful enough to satisfy their aesthetic needs, had enough content to occupy the intellect, satisfy the hearts, and was manly and robust enough to resist the challenge of any formidable protagonist.²³ In fact, Christianity could not supersede the native religiosity and spirituality offered by Sankardeva.

In addition, there had never been a policy of proselytization by the British Government or help to the missionaries in their activities of preaching the gospel in Assam. The missionaries never received any help from the British officials except because of personal equations in some cases. As the mission of the British administration was primarily and purely for political and economic gain, the administrative officials had no interest in matters related to mission. In fact, they did not want any disturbance in Assam on account of religion by which their key objectives would be hindered. The government found it profitable to use the missionaries only to educate the so-called 'wild subjects' in order to create a suitable atmosphere in which to rule. In this, they appeared to be guardians of Christian principles and the protector of Christianity. They donated land to missions and gave quite generous contributions. With such help, the pioneering missionaries first started the education process, printed primers as textbooks and began developmental work – not necessarily to spread the gospel, but to help the administration. Even the goal of establishing a praying community on the foundation of the Christian faith was only to meet the objective of making the natives humble, obedient and submissive so that nothing would stand against the administration.

Indeed, the administration succeeded in its objective of providing livelihoods, and at the same time of making the best of their economic gains. The dynamics of 'moral political admonishment' and 'moral and pastoral admonishment' perhaps worked well in suiting the political objective. The British and American Baptist missionaries, in their efforts to establish a Christian-based education, emphasized a 'pious clause' – enjoining 'loyalty, submission, obedience, quietness, peace, patience and cheerfulness'. It was imagined by Jenkins that evangelists would limit themselves to teaching the Assamese self-supporting enterprises that would contribute to the economic development of Assam. Major Jenkin's wish was that a Christian mission which, on the plan of the Moravians, would take up lands, carry on farming operations and improve the providence by civilization and elevating the character of the people through various schemes and plans – from agri-dyeing, calico-printing and the introduction

²³ Maheswar Neog, 'Introduction', in *The Orunodoi 1846-1854* (Assam: Publication Board, 1983), 62.

of mechanical arts.²⁴ Today, the Assamese are proud of tea cultivation as a major source of income and are grateful to the British administration for getting them started politically and economically. Yet they cannot forget how the British, for a greater economic exploitation, brought into Assam migrants from Bengal and Chotanagpur, causing religio-cultural disharmony, ethno-cultural complexities and political tensions.

One of the first impacts of Christian mission in this process was promoting community organisational processes through education and literature projects – a fact all today accept without question along with its fruits that all enjoy. The Assamese are proud of their language and rich literature and are indeed grateful to the missionaries for safeguarding it through various literary works and education from the hegemonic influence and dominance of the Bengalis. In 1819, for the first time in the history of Assamese literature, portions of the Bible were translated into Assamese by the BMS Serampore mission, followed by the entire Bible being published in Assamese by 1837. The historic first Assamese newspaper – *Orunodoi*, that played a vital role in the development of the modern Assamese language – was started in 1846. The Assamese-English Dictionary was published in 1867. It was the missionaries who introduced the Assamese language as a medium of instruction in schools. Thus, they safeguarded it from being replaced by the Bengali language in the courts and schools. On such contributions, Maheswar Neog, a prominent Assamese intellectual says, ‘The people [of Assam] in general are grateful to the Baptist leaders for keeping up the struggle for the revival of the language for so many years, succeeding at long last in resuscitating it in administration and education, and for culturing the language along modern lines, endowing it with a grammar, a dictionary and a large mass of writings in a modern prose.’²⁵ This gratitude is also expressed by Benudhor Sharma when he writes, ‘So long as Assamese language flows like waters of the Brahmaputra, the Assamese race... will bow in gratitude to the pioneering American Baptist missionaries.’²⁶ Indeed, the missionaries opened the door to the West and brought about a renaissance in Assamese literature.²⁷

However, apart from such achievements, the native Assamese did not find the missionaries a help with respect to Assamese literature and education for the very reason that they did want to educate and produce an elite class who in turn would question their presence and their rule in the region. Though the British administration entrusted the missionaries with education, the missionaries were perhaps not *encouraged* to do that. The

²⁴ H.K. Barpujari, *American Missionaries and North East India (1836-1900): A Documentary Study* (Delhi, Guwahati: Spectrum, 1986), 93.

²⁵ Neog, ‘Introduction’, 65.

²⁶ Benudhor Sharma, *Doorbin* (Telescope), 2nd edition (Assam: Bani Prakash, n.d.), 108.

²⁷ See H.K. Barpujari, *The Comprehensive History of Assam* (Guwahati: Publication Board, 1990), 219.

key objectives of education for them were the education of the ordinary common people to read Christian literature and become preachers and teachers.

Therefore, despite their positive contribution, the missionaries were unable to convert a sizable part of the Assamese population. One of the significant factors for the poor response from the Assamese was that they saw Christianity in the region as a religion of foreigners, migrants, of the lower caste, and of people of a lower status such as orphans, the homeless, labourers, tribals, etc. The Assamese felt that Christianity disturbed their religion and culture. Men especially felt threatened since their patriarchal privileges could be challenged in society as Christian women enjoyed equal status and privilege, with access to the Bible and church and religious services. Therefore, one of the greatest impact Christian missions in Assam would have been the liberation of women from the patriarchal teachings that every male was an incarnation of a deity, that man was woman's spiritual guide, and the idea of adoration and obedience to one's husband as *gohain* (god, *swami*). In keeping with Hindu tradition, Assamese society also considered women necessarily evil, created to take care of a man's house, and to bear children. They had no place in religion or in the house of worship. The words of scripture were not even to be read in a woman's presence. Women were considered devoid of a soul or a brain capable of training. Consequently, Christ and Christianity were seen as a threat to such existing social norms in Assamese society. Christianity perhaps posed a threat to a patriarchal Assamese society whereby Assamese women would fulfil their dream of identity and dignity in Christ and find a status as daughters of Brahma!²⁸

In sum, the mission of social change was not effective in Assam as has been seen in the hills. The civilizing efforts of the British administration and the gospel of the missionaries neither attracted the Assamese nor convinced them that they were inferior and needed upward social mobility. Instead, both Power and Mission were seen as a threat to Assamese nationality and identity. Perhaps, the mission of Power was more successful in Assam than the power of Mission as the British administration achieved their key political and economic objectives.

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The Mission of Power and the Power of Mission among the Boros

Historically, the Kiratas/Bodo-Kacharis are among the earliest known inhabitants of North-East India. According to some scholars, the Bodos or Bodo-Kacharis, the early migrants of Mongoloid stock from China, could

²⁸ See E. Elizabeth Vickland, *Daughter of Brahma: A Tale of the Brahmaputra Valley and With Christ in Assam*, edited and introduced by Liza Das (Guwahati: Anwesha, 2005).

be the original inhabitants of Assam.²⁹ The Bodo tribes occupying the plains gradually built up a distinct culture of their own.³⁰ It was the Bodo-Kachari tribals who created the first culture and civilisation, and in a real sense they are the first natives of the valley.³¹

Christianity came to the Boros³² of Assam through five major streams of missions, i.e. the Baptist Mission, the Anglicans, the Lutherans, the Scottish Presbyterians and the Roman Catholics. The Baptist Mission among the Boros can be traced back to the baptism of Apintha in 1849, one of the pupils of the boarding school at Guwahati established by the American Baptist Mission in 1846. Secondly, the Anglican mission began with the arrival of Sidney Endle at Tezpur, Assam, in 1864 as a tea garden chaplain. One of the most remarkable works of this mission was the translation of the New Testament into the Kachari language and the production of a major anthropological study by Endle.³³ Thirdly, the history of Lutheran mission among the Boros began with the baptism of Tekhla Boro on 7th January 1888.³⁴ Though Lutheran Christians were present among the migrant Adivasi tea garden workers, Lutherans who belonged to the Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church (GELC) of Chotanagpur and the Northern Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Santhal Parganas since the late 1860s, the Lutheran Mission among the Boros did not have much impact until the beginning of the twentieth century. The Scandinavian

²⁹ Edward Gait, *A History of Assam* (Guwahati: LBS Publications, 1983 [1926]), 236; Monirul Hussain, 'Tribal Question in Assam', in *Economic and Political Weekly* XXVII/20 & 21 (16th May 1992), 1047.

³⁰ Kanaklal Barua, 'Pre-historic Culture in Assam', in Kanaklal Barua, *Studies in the Early History of Assam: A Collection of Papers Published in Research Journals on Aspects of the History and Culture of Assam*, M. Neog (ed), (Guwahati/Jorhat: Assam Sahitya Sabha, 1973), 218-20.

³¹ Hussain, 'Tribal Question in Assam', 1047.

³² The terms 'Bodo' and 'Boro' are often used without distinction in various documents and literature. In most government documents and literature, the term 'Bodo' is used. Yet 'Boro' is also used in various writings. As in the nineteenth-century colonial ethnography and other anthropological studies, the term 'Bodo' is a generic name which denotes a broad linguistic family belonging to the 'Tibeto-Burman sub-family of the Tibeto-Chinese family of languages'. 'Bodo' as an overarching term which includes tribes such as the Boro Kachari, Dimasa Kachari, Sonowal Kachari, Mech Kachari, Rabha Kachari, Hajong-Kachari, Thengal Kachari, Tiwa (Lalaung), Koch, Sarania, Moran-Motok, Twipras/Tipperah (Tiprasa/Devburman, Reangs, Jamatia, Noatia, Uchai, Mogh), Deori, Chutia, etc. who have their own particular traditions, languages, cultures and historical identities. But 'Boro' is used in this paper to refer to the 'Boro Kachari' community, the largest plains tribe of Assam. See G.A. Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol. III (Tibeto-Burman Family), Part Two (Delhi: LSI, 1967), 1.

³³ See Sidney Endle, *The Kacharis (Bodo)*, (New Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1990).

³⁴ N. Borgooary, *Souvenir, First Centenary Jubilee* (n.p., Bongaigaon Diocese, 1988), 70.

missionaries established mission stations at Gaurang and Bongaigaon in Goalpara District and Parkijuli in Kamrup District between the late 1920s and the early 1930s, particularly for a mission to the Boros. Their main areas of concentration in the stations were schools, hospitals and literary works. Along with various literary works, one of the major ones was the publication of 'Gødan Rodai' (the New Testament) in 1938 by A. Kristiansen into a proper Boro language spoken in the Goalpara District of those days. Despite the hard work of the missionaries and of a few first-generation native pastors and evangelists, the growth of the Lutheran Church was slow. After more than a century and a half of Christianity, there were less than ten percent of Christians among more than three million Boros in Assam.

Here arises a missiological question as to why missionaries did not successfully convert the Boros as they did in the case of the other hill tribes. There were numerous factors behind this.

First, the Boros are one of the most Sanskritized tribes in the Assam plains because of which the missionaries faced almost the same obstacles as they did in the case of the Assamese. Their resistance to Christianity was in a great proportion due to the influence of Hinduism upon the Boros and their consciousness of political, religious and cultural superiority as they were politically natives of the land and religiously indigenous and culturally, very local.

Secondly, alcoholism and superstitious beliefs stood in the way of their becoming Christians even though they were inclined towards the new faith and its teaching.³⁵ Culturally, one of the most frowned-upon social practices, perhaps with religious sanction, was the brewing and consumption of *zouor zumai* (rice beer) and even the offering of it to the deities during worship, and the rearing of poultry birds and pigs.³⁶ Besides, there existed also polytheism, polygamy, forced marriage, witchcraft, superstitious practices, the excessive use of toxicants, etc. Added to these were the evils of Aryan casteism that threatened the Boros. They were looked down upon as 'uncivilized' and 'ill-mannered' by the dominant Assamese and Bengalis, and were even derogatorily referred to as *Mes/Mech* or *Mles/Mlech*, meaning 'untouchables'. They were barred from associating with the higher castes, as well as being deprived of political participation.³⁷ In such a situation, it is hardly surprising that the Boros felt themselves to be socially inferior.

This led many Boros to convert to Hinduism to escape social depravity in the hope of rising on the ladder of caste hierarchy. They became *Sarania*

³⁵ Muttumana, *Christianity in Assam and Inter-Faith Dialogue*, 51.

³⁶ R.N. Mosahary, 'Brahma Religion and Social Change among the Bodos', in *The Bodos: Children of Bhullumbuter*, Thomas Pullopillil and Jacob Aluckal (eds), (Guwahati, Delhi: Spectrum, 1997), 38-39.

³⁷ Asom Sahitya Sabha, *Gurudev Baba Kalicharan Brahma* (n.p., 1983), The Introductory Part.

(Hinduised) by accepting Hinduism and assuming the titles of the Assamese and Bengali people.³⁸ The Census report of 1961 shows the conversion of the Boros and their rise in the caste hierarchy.³⁹ Many Boros, particularly in the Dhubri Sub-division of the Goalpara District, converted to Islam as well.

In the process, Christianity was the latest 'messiah' promising to deliver them from both external and internal threats. The best attractions were education and healthcare. In fact, the prospect for missionary momentum was on the rise on the one hand due to the step-motherly treatment meted out by the high-caste Assamese to the Sanskritized Boros and on the other, the socially inferior feelings among the followers of the indigenous 'Bathou' religion in the face of Hinduism in general. The Lutheran Mission was steadily making inroads in Goalpara District, as were the American Baptist and Anglican missions in Kamrup and Darrang Districts. The contribution of missionaries in the fields of language, literature and education were acknowledged and appreciated by all Boros. Though Christian mission had little impact among the Boros, their identity wrought by intellectuals in recent times is perhaps the by-product of mission schools. The Boro language is alive today because of missionaries. As in the case of Assamese, where it was resistance to the threat of assimilation with Bengali, there was a similar threat of the Boro language being taken over by Assamese. Yet, even so, the missionaries' efforts did not have a significant impact on the socio-religious life of the Boros.

Thirdly, the missionaries might have reaped a greater harvest had there not been a timely intervention by Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma.⁴⁰

³⁸ R.N. Mosahary, 'Aryanisation and Hinduisation of the Bodos', in *Proceedings of the North East India History Association, Tenth Session*, 165-79 (Shillong: NEIHA, 1989).

³⁹ Census of India, 1961, Vol. III, Assam, part V-A, report of the Caste and Tribes of Assam from Chapter VI of the report of the Census of Assam, 8-30.

⁴⁰ 'Brahma' was the title given to him as the replacement of his original title *Mes* by the profounder of Brahmaism, Sivnarayan Paramahansa. He was born in 1862 at Kajigaon village under the Dhubri sub-division of Goalpara District, Assam. He studied only up to class IV due to the early death of his father. Though he could not study further, he could read and write in both Bengali and Hindi very well. He learned Hindi from a timber contractor Baladev Singh from Bihar. His concern for the growth and development of the Boro community developed through his interaction with Bengali timber business friends who were ardent followers of the Brahma religion in Bengal. He obtained a copy of the *Sarnitya Kriya* – a book of rites and rituals of Brahma Dharma, a collection of advice of Srimat Param Hangsa Sibnarayan Swami, the initiator of Brahma Dharma in Bengal. Kalicharan studied all the teachings of Brahma Dharma and started teaching among the Boros by performing a *Yajnahuti* (purification ceremony by burning incense with fire) in the village of Banyaguri in 1906. Kameswar Brahma, *A Study of Socio-Religious Beliefs, Practices and Ceremonies of the Bodos* (Kolkata: Punthi Pustak, 1992), 193-97.

Kalicharan's socio-religious reform movement brought a halt to possible missionary momentum. Realising the implications of the missionaries' work, he launched a counter-reform movement using the western ideas of rationalism and human values. He was convinced that the spread of western education with western ideas of science and rationalism alone could reform and protect Boro society from the onslaught of external political, economic and religious forces. Kalicharan not only launched a crusade against the evil practices embedded in Boro society, but also against the socio-political discriminations meted out to the Boros by dominant Assamese and Bengali people. Similar to what missionaries had done elsewhere in the region, he too identified and tried to find ways to eradicate a number of socio-religious evil practices. For this, he turned to Paramahansa Sivnarayan, whose religious Brahmaisn preached monotheism, human love and dignity in contrast to the caste discrimination of Hinduism.⁴¹

Kalicharan opened schools and made education compulsory for Boro children.⁴² He started hostels called 'Brahma Boarding' that in latter times became centres for intellectual activity of the Boros and produced a good number of progressive Boro intellectuals who dedicated themselves to the reform and uplift of Boro society through literature – as the primary objective of their literature was socio-economic and political uplift.⁴³ The major theme of early literary works was the exposure of the backwardness of the Boro community as well as the eradication of the social evils prevailing in Boro society, together with the inculcation of self-consciousness by highlighting the ancient glory of their race.⁴⁴

He initiated new strategies to meet his goals which the missionaries never considered in their mission agendas. He established the 'Bodo Club' that became the *Bodo Sahitya Sabha* (Bodo Literary Society) on 16th November 1952. Through this he instilled a spirit of Boro national consciousness that led to the formation of the *Boro Chatra Sanmela*n (Boro Students' Association) and later to the formation of the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) in the 1970s.⁴⁵ He also organized a convention called the *Boro Maha Sanmela*n (All Boro Convention) as a major platform for progressive Boro intellectuals for the reformation and regeneration of Boro society. The *Sanmela*n further established primary schools in every Boro village, worked for the prohibition of intoxicating drinks, rearing pigs,

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⁴¹ See Asom Sahitya Sabha, *Gurudev Baba Kalicharan Brahma*; Kameswar Brahma, *A Study of Socio-Religious Beliefs, Practices and Ceremonies of the Bodos* (Kolkata: Punthi Pustak, 1992), 193ff; Mosahary, 'Brahma Religion and Social Change among the Bodos', 41-42.

⁴² Even guardians who failed to send their children to schools were punished with fines. Asom Sahitya Sabha, *Gurudev Baba Kalicharan Brahma*, 20-21.

⁴³ This included the publication of *Bibar* (Flower), the first Boro journal and the work of Boro students who had converted to Brahmaisn.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

restricting expenditure in marriages and social ceremonies, etc. Kalicharan himself, together with his associates, prepared a social code of conduct for Boro society. In the economic sphere, he inculcated the idea of self-reliance by opening weaving and carpentry schools to train Boro youths for self-employment and entrepreneurship. Towards the end of the 1920s, he enlarged the mission from socio-economic reformation to politics which the missionaries had never encouraged and which the church had considered as worldly. Under the leadership of Brahma and Jadav Khaklari, a memorandum was submitted to Simon Common in 1929, urging the government to grant a separate electorate for the Boro-Kachari community, both in the Assembly and in the local board elections, as well as to provide compulsory free primary education to the children of this community.⁴⁶

Kalicharan's Brahma Dharma⁴⁷ was largely a blessing to the Boro community and great a stumbling-block to the missionaries because he propagated the Brahma religion not only to reform Boro society and counter the process of Sanskritization, but also to counter the missionaries and their mission of converting the Boros to Christianity.⁴⁸ The missionaries and the church of those times could neither present the prospect of development and growth as Kalicharan did, nor counter the forces standing against their mission momentum.

Fourthly, Christians were looked down upon as they were almost all tea garden labourers whom the Boros considered as outsiders, uncivilized and of a lower caste. The moral life and social standing of migrant Christians did not appeal to the Boros as they were haunted by the threat of moral degradation. The enlightened Boros could not expect anything good from such people as far as their national aspirations were concerned. To convert to Christianity was considered as below their dignity and as a step down to the lower rungs of the social ladder among the Vaishnavite Assamese and the Sanskritized Boros. They could not foresee any prospect of upward mobility in the social hierarchy by becoming beef-eating Christians.

Finally, both the missionaries and the British administration were seen as a threat to the political, economic, cultural and religious life of the Boros. Both were suspected by the Boros of taking away their land as well as other natural resources from them and destroying their culture and religion. The landed Boros not only felt threatened that the British and the

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⁴⁶ *Plains Tribals before the Simon Commission*, Binai Khungur Basumatari (ed), (n.p., n.d.), 1-2.

⁴⁷ The Brahma Dharma among the Boros was a movement against the Boros becoming either Christians or Hindus and sought to bring about a cultural and social reform in early 20th century Boro society. It was founded by Kalicharan Mech after he joined the Brahma faith in 1906

⁴⁸ This was because he could stop many Boro villages of both Assam and in the Jalpaiguri District of Bengal from converting to Christianity through his preaching and the teaching of Brahma Dharma. See Kameswar Brahma, *A Study of Socio-Religious Beliefs, Practices and Ceremonies of the Bodos*, 198.

missionaries would take away their lands for tea plantations and mission stations, but also viewed migrant Christians as an immediate economic and distant political threat. While Kalicharan was fighting for land, and the economic and political rights of the Boros along with social reforms, they felt the missionaries were likely to be preaching: 'Give us the land and the labourers and we will give you the gospel!'

Conclusion

The 'mission of Power' was more successful than the 'power of Mission' in the Assam plains, whereas the 'power of Mission' was more successful in the hills than the 'mission of Power'. Mission paved the way for Power in the plains whereas Power paved the way for Mission in the hills as the target of Power in the plains was wealth and economic gain, whereas the target of Mission in the hills was people. Mission gave the people of the hills Power to rise in identity and then self-governance, as independent political units within the Indian state, whereas Power left the people of Assam largely untouched and unaffected by Mission.

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THE KUKI MISSION 1910: TOWARDS A RE-READING OF WATKIN ROBERTS' 'THE INTRUDER' AND HIS MESSAGE FOR 21ST-CENTURY CHRISTIAN WITNESS IN THE CONTEXT OF EMERGING WORLD CHRISTIANITY

Jangkholam Haokip

Introduction

In 1910, the year in which the World Missionary Conference was held in Edinburgh, the Kuki Mission was started in Southern Manipur in North-East India by an independent missionary, Watkin Roberts. This event was not recorded in the documents of the conference, and we may wonder whether, even if the launching of the new mission were known, would a traditional mission structure allow its recognition? In other words, did the mission structure of that time allow room for alternative ways of doing mission? The beginning of the end of the western missionary movement marked by Edinburgh 1910 was also the beginning of Christianity among the Kuki communities in South Asia, but the story remained untold, possibly, as the Kuki Mission was an independent mission. Thankfully, the emergence of what can be considered 'World Christianity' created space for all group, including the so-called 'unauthorized' missions like the 1910 Kuki Mission, allowing them to share and enrich Christianity by adding their stories. In this paper, we shall re-read the work of Watkin Roberts from an insider's viewpoint and point out some important lessons for Christians in the 21st century.¹

The Kuki People

A brief description of the Kuki people is appropriate here. The Kukis are an indigenous people living in the region now called north-east India, north-western Burma and the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. The first people to put Kuki history into a written form were the late nineteenth and the early twentieth-century colonial officials and missionaries, and for them

¹ This paper has been developed from part of my PhD thesis, 'A Theological Study of Identity Among the Tribal People of North-East India with a Special Reference to the Kukis of Manipur' (University of Aberdeen, UK, 2010). I am grateful to Dr David Smith (UK) and Dr Ben Wiebe (Canada) for their valuable comments.

the term 'Kuki' referred to a homogeneous people group now known by different names.² In the Chin Hills, Myanmar, they employed the term 'Chin' for the same people. Evidence of the cultural affinity of these peoples includes a common myth regarding their origins which says that the Kuki people emerged from a cave called *Khul*. The myth is told differently depending on the clan and the region to which a person belongs. The same *Khul* tradition is preserved by all the clans in the three regions-North-East India, western Burma and the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The myth indicates the affinity of the people and is a living tradition that has been passed down from one generation to another, thus emphasizing the common origin of the people and their ethnic homogeneity.³ In the post-colonial era, in the 1990s, Indian anthropologists and sociologists began to take an interest in writing about the Kukis. However, a study of the people's history and culture written from the 'inside' has yet to be developed.

In Manipur, North-East India, the focus of this study, the Kukis were the dominant group in the hills before the colonial period. A colonial officer William Shaw observes this when he writes:

The Thadou Kukis live in a large area of hilly country bounded by the Angami Nagas of the Naga Hills District in the north, the Province of Burma in the east, the Chin Hills and Lushai Hills in the south, and the District of Cachar in the west. Mainly, it may be said, they occupy the hills of the State of Manipur on all sides of the Imphal valley.⁴

Similarly, an eminent Kuki scholar, T.S. Gangte, describes the power and influence of the Kukis in the hills surrounding the Imphal valley of Manipur;⁵ the evidence which supports his description is to be found in the Anglo-Kuki war map of the colonial administration called 'Area of Operations' which covers all the present hill areas of Manipur. The vastness of the territory was reported to have caused problems for the colonial British as a document from this period indicates: 'The ultimate cause of the trouble lay in the fact that, owing to the vastness and inaccessibility of the country which they inhabit, the Kukis in the Manipur State were out of touch with the Administration and almost uncontrolled.'⁶

² One good example of this is Colonel J Shakespear, *Lushei-Kuki Clans* (London: Macmillan, 1912)

³ Vanlalchhuanawma, *Christianity and Subaltern Culture: Revival Movement as a Cultural Response to Westernization in Mizoram* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2007), 16.

⁴ William Shaw, 'Notes on the Thadou Kukis', in *The Journal and Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, New Series, XXIV/1 (1928), published by the Asiatic Society of Bengal on behalf of the Government of Assam (Kolkata: Baptist Mission Press, 1929), 11.

⁵ T.S. Gangte, *The Kukis of Manipur: A Historical Analysis* (New Delhi: Gyan, 1993), 8.

⁶ Document included in IOR L/P, S/10/724. This file includes 358 pages of documents of the Political and Secret Department, including the Minute Papers,

Similar to their territorial dominance, the first missionary William Pettigrew talks about the popularity of their language in the hills. He writes:

The extraordinary thing that strikes one is the predominance of the Thado [Thadou-Kuki] language among all these many and varied branches. Even the Kabui Nagas who occupy a good number of the villages to the north and south of the Cachar road, and whose population is estimated at about 6000, used the Thado language in intercourse with village and village. Thado is no doubt the lingua franca for all these branches of Kukis and Lushai who occupy this region, and there is no doubt that whenever mission work is established in these sections, Thado should be the medium of instruction for all. Whoever reduces the language to writing, and produces literature, will not only reach the Thado clan, but the many and varied clans that cover the southern and western hills of Manipur.⁷

The 1910 Kuki Mission as Mission through a Back Door: Was it a Bad Thing?

As one of the major agents of change, Christianity came to Manipur in 1894 through William Pettigrew of the Arthington Aborigines Mission who later joined and represented the American Baptist Union because his sending mission did not allow him to remain in the same place more than three years. As the first missionary, Pettigrew was the lone missionary recognized by the colonial authority and no other missionary was allowed to enter Manipur. The British Indian policy on religious affairs for the princely state of Manipur was 'non-interference' or 'strict neutrality'.⁸ Manipur had been Sanskritized and Hinduism was officially declared as the state religion in 1705. In accordance with his original vision,⁹ Pettigrew worked among the valley Hindu Meiteis but, sensing the risk of his work for their administration, the colonial administrators asked him to leave the Manipur valley which paved the way for him to work in the northern part of Manipur in 1896. With the understanding of, and later in occasional co-operation with, the colonial administration, Pettigrew established his mission station at Ukhrul and made a lasting impact on the Tangkhul people. There were initially three reasons why Pettigrew started the work in Ukhrul: first, the tribe itself was unevangelized; secondly, to hold the ground in the state until such time that he might be allowed to resume his

Resolution on the Kuki Rising, Plans of Operation against the Kuki Rebels, Composition of the Column, Warrants, and Telegraph messages until 1918.

⁷ William Pettigrew, 'Ukhrul Field Report for 1913', 58-59, in *ABMC of the ABFMS Report of the Twelfth Biennial Session, 1913*, 58.

⁸ L. Jeyaseelan, *Impact of Missionary Movement in Manipur* (New Delhi: Scholars, 1996), 52.

⁹ William Pettigrew, 'My Twenty-Five Years 1897-1922 at Ukhrul Mission School', in *Rev. William Pettigrew (a pioneer missionary of Manipur)*, (Imphal: Fraternal Green Cross, 1996), Appendix – 1, i.

work among the valley Hindu Meiteis; and thirdly, it was a step towards occupying the ground between Assam and Burma.¹⁰ Pettigrew's vision was mainly for the valley Hindu Meiteis and later, by default, for the Tangkhul people of the northern part of Manipur. There was no Christian work among the Kukis and at the same time no missionary was allowed to enter Manipur except Pettigrew.

It was in such a situation that Christianity came to the Kukis through a back door, as it were. While the official missionary Pettigrew concentrated his work among a particular community in the North and none besides him was allowed into the state, an independent missionary, Watkin Roberts, brought the Christian message to the Kukis into southern Manipur in 1910 without permission. Although, as it appears, there was no complaint against him at the start of his mission, the official missionary soon opposed his work with the support of the colonial authority. If in some respects 'Edinburgh 1910' was the climax of world evangelization, for the Kuki people it was the beginning of Christianity and cross-cultural evangelization.

Born in 1886 at Caernarfon, North Wales, Roberts was a successful quarryman. Like many others, he was greatly impacted by the 1904-1906 revival in Wales, and later in 1907 at the Keswick Convention, he dedicated his life for missionary work among the tribal peoples of what was then Assam, now called Mizoram.¹¹ Sensing the urgency of the work, Roberts refused to undergo any sort of missionary training for want of time, and followed Peter Fraser, a medical doctor and missionary of the Welsh Missionary Society in Mizoram who at the Keswick Convention had impressed on him the need for work among the tribal peoples. At the initial stage, Roberts assisted Fraser's work in Mizoram as an independent missionary¹² but was never on the staff of the Welsh Presbyterian Mission nor of the Baptist Mission. He acted as a self-appointed, unpaid, unordained and untrained missionary, factors which gave him freedom to do other things including fighting for the abolition of *Bawi*, a local slave system which was permitted by the colonial administration at that time. This aspect of local culture involved chiefs keeping poor people as slaves and the colonial administration adopted a policy of non-interference with

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¹⁰ E.G. Phillips 'Missionary Conference in Assam', in *Baptist Missionary Magazine* LXXVI/12 (1896), 72-75.

¹¹ Jeyaseelan, *Impact of Missionary Movement*, 84. See also Lal Dena, *In Search of Identity: Hmars of North-East India* (New Delhi: Akansha, 2008), 46.

¹² Jeyaseelan, *Impact of Missionary Movement*, 84.

the practice. Roberts and Fraser fought against the system, and thus opposed both the colonial administration and the mission agencies, until it was finally abolished. The rationales for their opposition to this included the issue of justice, the abolition of slavery in Britain, and the Indian anti-slavery law, all of which were an integral part of their understanding of Christ's work for salvation.¹³

Roberts, as the product of the Welsh Revival and subsequently the Keswick Convention was committed to both the spread of Christianity and the cause of justice in mission. He learned the Lusei dialect and evangelized while he assisted Fraser in the clinic. They distributed medicines in a small box made of bamboo called a *go-bong* on which different Bible verses were written by way of sharing his faith. It was during this time that he received a gift of £5 through a minister in Wales with which he bought some copies of John's Gospel that he distributed to the chiefs in the surrounding area. As a result, he received an invitation from Mr Kamkhulun Singson, a Kuki chief of Senvon village in the southern part of Manipur, to come and explain the message of the book, an event which Roberts considered a 'Macedonian call'. The message read: 'Sir, come yourself, and tells us about this book and your God.'¹⁴

At this point, Roberts knew that Manipur was the official territory of Pettigrew and no other missionaries were allowed to work there. He also knew that both the American Baptist Mission, represented by Pettigrew, and the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Mission in Mizoram had abandoned earlier plans to work among the Thado Kukis,¹⁵ leaving the Kukis without any missionary. However, after some struggles, he managed to respond to the call of Kamkhulun Singson by visiting him at his village in 1910. Having made some local converts there, he formed an independent mission called, the 'Thado-Kuki Pioneer Mission', which was renamed the Kuki Mission 1910¹⁶ – to include all the Kuki groups across the region who came to Christianity through his mission.

The main purpose of the Mission was to evangelize those who did not yet have a missionary, namely, the non-Naga groups in the hill areas of Manipur and beyond. The print on the official letterhead of the Mission reads: 'The Thado-Kookie Pioneer Mission: A thoroughly Evangelical Mission, formed with the express desire of preaching the gospel among the

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¹³ Sources include a 72-page document file called 'Doctor Fraser's Case' in the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, UK.

¹⁴ S.T. Henpu, 'Kum 50 Jubilee Thu Belh (The Jubilee Year)', 9-11, *Rest: Christian magazine* issued by the Association of N.E.I.G. Mission Christian Workers, published quarterly, March 1960, 9.

¹⁵ An official letter from Watkin Roberts to the Rev. Lloyd Jones in England dated 2nd June 1912, preserved in the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth, UK.

¹⁶ Jangkhoham Haokip, 'Implications of Having an Independent Missionary: A Review of the 1910 Kuki Mission', in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 38/2 (April 2014), 90-94.

Thado-Kookies in the State of Manipur, India.¹⁷ The Christian message was spread through all the hill regions in the south of Manipur and soon went beyond the region even to those areas now parts of Burma and Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts wherever the Kuki people lived. A local ordained minister, Thimkhup Buiting, from the Chittagong Hill Tracts writes, 'Thus Christianity was spread among the Bâwm people and today the Bâwm are 100% Christian. The first adopted denomination Evangelical Christian Church continues its mission till today.'¹⁸

Although the Kuki Mission spread across the region, the connections among the people became difficult to maintain as the result of Independence in 1947 which divided the people through the creation of the present international boundaries. In addition, being an independent missionary, Roberts was considered an 'intruder' by both the official mission and the colonial administrators, and was later deported leaving his mission to gradually disintegrate without a leader. While Roberts and his mission suffered because it was viewed as unauthorized, from an insider's viewpoint it was because of such a mission that the people received the opportunity to hear and embrace the Christian message even though the administration had worked against them. Mission through a back door was better than no mission at all.

The Bible and the Flag: A Struggle to Salute Both

While discussing the relationship between the nineteenth and twentieth-century Protestant missionaries and the British colonial administration in his book 'The Bible and the Flag',¹⁹ Brian Stanley acknowledges some mistakes on the part of the missionaries. He argues that their main purpose was to spread Christianity and not to establish the British empire. In the context of the Kukis, the issue is complex. The people wanted to respond positively to Christianity but at the same time they struggled to differentiate the Bible from the flag which they resisted. The resistance at last led to full-scale conflict against the colonial administration which was supported by the missionaries from 1917-1919, and was labelled by the administration, the 'Kuki Rebellion'.²⁰

The immediate context of the conflict and the suppression of the Kuki administration in the hills of Manipur had to do with the recruitment of local people for the Labour Corps in France during World War I. The

¹⁷ An official letter from Watkin Roberts to Rev. Lloyd Jones in England dated 2nd June 1912.

¹⁸ Thimkhup Buiting, 'The Advent of Christianity Among the Bawms': <http://bawm.info/bawmchristianity.htm> (accessed 8th April 2010).

¹⁹ Brian Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag: Protestant missions and British Imperialism in the nineteenth centuries*, (Trowbridge, UK: Apollos, 1990).

²⁰ Official records in the British Library, London: File IOR L/P, S/10/724. See footnote 400 above.

administration variously described this as a 'Kuki Rising' or 'Kuki Revolt/Rebellion',²¹ while the missionaries interpreted events as simply a local problem between the Kukis and the Nagas.²² But for Kuki historians the event was an occasion²³ for the Kukis to raise their voices against the colonizing power. Hence, they called it the War of Independence.²⁴ Understood from a theological perspective, it may be seen as a struggle to distinguish the Bible from the flag.

A telegram from the Viceroy of India to the Secretary of State in London on the 10th December 1917 refers to the internal situation in India and reads: 'Temporary disturbances occurred among Kuki tribes, Manipur State, in connection with recruitment for the Labour Corps in France. Recruitment being held in abeyance until Political Agent is satisfied that it is not likely to provoke opposition.'²⁵

In the following telegram for the half-month ending 15th December 1917 which was sent on 22nd December 1917 there was a tougher warning against the Kuki. The Kuki chiefs were summoned and were informed that recruits would be required to enrol for the Labour Corps to serve in France and that 'immediate attendance and submission of Chiefs will save them from drastic punishment. If summons is disobey(ed), Political Agent with escort of 150 rifles will visit villages and burn them, provided this will not interfere with co-operation from Lushai Hills in connection with Chin rising reported separately.'²⁶

Having failed to bring the Kukis to submission through political means, and also due to the ineffectiveness of Pettigrew in convincing them to join the Labour Corps as he was not working among them, the colonial administration resorted to the use of force to suppress the Kukis in Manipur, although they were concerned that none of the Kuki brethren in the Lushai Hills and the Chin hills were provoked by their action – a clear case of the policy of 'divide and rule'.

While the ultimate purpose of the missionaries was a religious one – to change the religion of the Kuki people – the colonial administration used language indicating their desire to 'crush' their morale or 'break their spirit' as a people and rule their country. This is clearly stated by Lieutenant-

²¹ Hudson, 'Introduction', in Shaw, 'Notes on the Thadou Kukis', 4.

²² William Pettigrew's pamphlet, 'Twentyfive Years, 1897-1922', Ukhrul Mission School (1922), 12. Quoted in Lal Dena, *Christian Missions and Colonialism: A Study of Missionary Movement in North East India with Particular Reference to Manipur and Lushai Hills 1894-1947* (Shillong: Vendrame Institute, 1988), 39.

²³ Dena, *Christian Missions and Colonialism*, 39.

²⁴ From a Kuki perspective, this historical event was called a 'Kuki War of Independence'. See T.S. Gangte, *Anglo-Kuki Relation from 1849-1937* (Churachandpur: T.S. Gangte, 1980), 12 and 18; P.S. Haokip, *Zale'n-gam: The Land of the Kukis*, 1st edition (n.p., Kuki National Organization, 1995), 4.

²⁵ Indian Bulletin, No.20, National Archive in London, UK.

²⁶ Indian Bulletin, No.21, National Archive in London, UK.

General Sir Henry Keary, the General Officer Commanding, Burma Division. By the end of the war in 1919, Keary wrote to the Chief of the General Staff, Army Headquarters in Simla, India, in June 1919 about the war. He mentioned the reasons why, in his opinion then, the Kukis should be punished:

I considered that in view of (1) the acceptance by both local Governments of the need for subduing the Kukis; (2) the heavy responsibility which we had towards the Maharajah of Manipur; (3) the fact that we were not asking the Army for any men; and (4) the opportunity which had now arisen of pacifying the Kukis once and for all, that the operations for the punishment and disarmament of the rebel Kuki tribes should be undertaken without delay.

His plan, he continues, was to:

... put an end to the Kuki revolt by force of arms, break the Kuki spirit, disarm the Kukis, exact reparation and pave the way for an effective administration of their country. To do this, my plan was to divide the hostile Kuki country into suitable areas, to enclose these areas by a chain of posts, and by movable columns and active patrols so [to] harass the enemy, as to crush his 'morale' and force him to submission.²⁷

It was according to this plan that Longja village, or Mombi as it was called, which was a centre of opposition, was destroyed in 1917 and thus began the war. In the war against the Kuki tribes, as it was called, the British appeared to have underestimated the Kukis' strength in that it took more than 500 armed men and three years to suppress the Kukis who were under the traditional leadership of their chiefs. A.W. Botham, the Chief Commissioner of Assam, in his post-conflict report, entitled 'Resolution of the late Kuki Rising', 16th September 1920, has a full account. He divided the Kuki Rising into five periods: (1) April to December 1917, during which trouble was brewing, (2) December 1917 to mid-April 1918, during which the first attempt at the suppression of the rebellion was made, (3) April to October 1918, during which the Kukis raided and harried loyal tribesmen and interrupted traffic, (4) November 1918 to April 1919, when operations under military direction were in progress and the rebels were systematically attacked and disarmed, and (5) The stage of punishment and reconstruction.²⁸

The magnitude of the clash is reflected in Sir Robert Reid's comment that it was the most serious event in the history of Manipur.²⁹ Similarly,

²⁷ File No. 4895 Field Operations: 'Despatch on the Operations Against the Kuki Tribes of Assam and Burma. November 1917-1919', British Library, London (IOR L/MIL/17/19/42).

²⁸ IOR L/P,S/10/724. For troops employed, number of casualties, their achievements, including the arrest of the Kuki chiefs, see Appendix No. 7, 'Operation Against Kuki Tribes'; IOR L/MIL/7/16899 includes Area of Operation, including map.

²⁹ Reid, quoted in 'The Kuki People and Their Country' (Washington, DC: Kuki Movement for Human Rights, 2005), 11.

Botham in his report referring to the above, wrote: 'The Kuki rising of 1917-1919, which is the most formidable with which Assam has been faced for at least a generation, was confined almost entirely to the Thado Kukis, who with few exceptions were implicated, and to the Manhlun and Mangvung.'³⁰

As the result of the war, all the able chiefs were taken captive to the Andaman Islands in 1919, while more than sixteen British officers were honoured with various awards.³¹ The Kuki territory was divided and put under different administrative divisions: 'After an uprising of the Kuki hill tribes in 1917, a new system of government was adopted; the region was divided into three sub-divisions, each headed by an officer from the neighbouring government of Assam.'³² In his post-conflict report in September 1920 referred to earlier, Botham triumphantly stated:

On the 15th November the operations were commenced by the Assam Force; owing to delay, due to epidemics of influenza and *surra* which broke out, the Burma Force was not able to co-operate in the southern areas until the beginning of December. Nevertheless, by the 31st March I had achieved all my objects more effectually than I had ever hoped for.³³

Botham's claim of success needs to be understood in the light of the purpose for which the 'punitive measures' were carried out, namely, to 'crush' the morale of the Kukis or to 'break the Kuki spirit', as noted earlier.

Understandably, post-war life was a sudden and drastic change for the Kukis as their traditional administrative power was snatched away and they found themselves directly under alien rulers. Further, in order to prevent a similar Kuki uprising in the future, the government strategically divided the Kuki country, setting up sub-headquarters with movable columns as planned by Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Keary. As Kuki rule gradually weakened and Manipur fully merged with India in 1949, that administrative arrangement was ended but the division of the territory remained unchanged and later became the District Headquarters, continuing the legacy of the colonial domination of the people. According to Gangte, 'The most permanent and lasting effect of this war of Independence by the Kukis was not only the suppression of the Kukis, but marking of permanent boundaries of Manipur, which still exists till today.'³⁴ The Anglo-Kuki war was a major setback for the Kukis with regard to their sense of identity as a

³⁰ IOR L/P,S/10/724.

³¹ 1 CIE, 1 OBE, 14 IDSMS, 1 King's Police Medal, etc., quoted in P.S. Haokip, *Zale'n Gam: The Kuki Nation* (n.p., Kuki National Organization, 1988), 166-67.

³² *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. XXI, 15th edition (Chicago, IL: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 1992), 138.

³³ Operation Against Kuki Tribes, IOR L/P,S/10/724.

³⁴ Gangte, *The Kukis*, 9-10.

people. At the same time, to the missionaries, it was a defeat of the old way of life, the dawn of the gospel light.³⁵

For the local people, what was even more difficult to understand was not only the relationship between the Bible and the flag but also the way in which the relationship was expressed. This is seen in how Pettigrew, the official missionary, worked hand-in-hand with the colonial administration, particularly during the World Wars; all this would have implications for later interactions among the tribal communities in Manipur. We have seen how the colonial administration paved the way for Pettigrew to enter the Manipur valley and later enabled him to move into the northern part of the state. During 1910-11, Pettigrew was also appointed as superintendent of the first-ever census conducted in Manipur. During World War I, following the failure of the then president of the Manipur state *durbar*, J. Higgins, to recruit local people to support the British war in France, Pettigrew was asked to persuade the local communities to join the Labour Corps. He successfully recruited two thousand local people, of whom 1,200 were his own converts from the northern part of Manipur.³⁶ Referring to his success in the task, Pettigrew writes, 'The writer feels certain in his own mind that if such a scheme had been put up to them in 1897 instead of 1917, no one would have been willing to go.'³⁷ A locally renowned historian, Lal Dena, observes how this recruitment was perceived:

The missionary took it as a hopeful sign pointing to the unity and solidarity of Christians, as if the war were for the defence of Christian faith. In the process, the native Christians were also made to feel that the prestige of Christians was raised and the confidence of the government was greatly enhanced.³⁸

Pettigrew wrote about the benefit of the war service in France for the advancement of the Christianization of Manipur:

Another element in helping to bring many to decision for the Christian religion was the large company of young men who had been to France and had come back with new ideas and new aspirations, and the rigid belief in a [traditional] ceremony of this kind did not appeal to them any more, and they were ready to give it up, and many other things besides.³⁹

To make matters more complex, on their return from France at the local level, the same converts were employed in the suppression of the Kukis – and this is observed by Dena when he writes, 'On return from the war, the Tangkhul Nagas were again enlisted in the coolie sections of the Kuki

³⁵ F.S. Downs, *The Mighty Works of God: A Brief History of the Council of Baptist Churches in North East India; The Mission Period 1836-1950* (Guwahati: CLC, 1971), 169-70.

³⁶ Dena, *Christian Missions and Colonialism*, 39.

³⁷ Pettigrew, 'My Twenty-Five Years', Appendix – 1, ix.

³⁸ Dena, *Christian Missions and Colonialism*, 39.

³⁹ William Pettigrew, 'My Twenty-Five Years', Appendix – 1, xix.

Punitive Measures which was unleashed for the sole purpose of suppressing the Kuki uprising⁴⁰ from 1917 to 1919. Except for a few Christian converts who had connections with Pettigrew, the Kuki people as a whole resisted the imposition of the colonial administration to fight for them in the war in France because, for the Kukis, fighting someone who had never harmed them was not justifiable according to their cultural worldview. On the other hand, for Christian converts, joining their missionary in his endeavour was part of their loyalty and a new responsibility, and hence widened the gap between them and other communities. For this reason, it is possible to suggest that the work of Pettigrew played a key role leading to the existing distant relationships between communities including the recent 'conflict' in the 1990s. Pettigrew's uncritical co-operation with the colonial structure was his limitation in mission as much as it was for the Rev. William Ashmore who writes, 'We must evangelize other countries in order to save our own country.'⁴¹ The administration, the missionary and his converts can be regarded as having blurred the message of Christ to other communities.

Here, it is interesting to remember that the Kukis were the latecomers to Christianity except for a few in the Northern part of Manipur. Some areas were even termed as 'Haokip Gamthim' or the dark lands of the Haokip clans in the southern part of Manipur. It was true that the missionary worked mainly in the northern part of Manipur, but at the same time, having made the above observations, it is logical to suggest that some people would have found it difficult to embrace Christianity because of the way in which the Bible and the flag were related and uncritically expressed. However, despite all this, the post-'Kuki Rebellion' witnessed the conversion of the Kuki people to Christianity in large numbers, which suggests that the local people were attracted to Christianity but were against the colonial administration.

Listening to the Suppressed Voices in Mission

The Uncontrollable God: What becomes clear is that God's mission cannot be controlled by structures. In fact, in this case, structure in many ways hindered the work of God. We can see this in two cases. First, the Comity Arrangement, by which one missionary was allocated for each area, restricting other missionaries from working in Manipur. This left communities like the Kukis disadvantaged without a missionary. Pettigrew alone was the 'authorized' missionary in the state and besides him, no other missionaries were allowed. However, due to the limitations of the same rule, the Christian message was brought to the people through an unrecognized missionary, Roberts, and that provided the people with an

⁴⁰ Dena, *Christian Missions and Colonialism*, 39.

⁴¹ William Ashmore, 'Evangelizing the Heathen in order to save America', in *Baptist Missionary Magazine* LXXVI/12 (1896), 567-68.

opportunity to respond to the Christian message. God's mission is not confined only to authorized mission or mission done by so-called 'mainline' or state churches. Second, the uncritical relationship between the colonial administration and Christianity, and the ways in which the relationship was expressed, made the Christian message even harder to be understood by the local people. In this case, turning to Christ was turning against one's own dignity, culture and identity as a people. Conversion to Christianity was not only changing one's own allegiance from the local identity [not Hinduism] to Christ but also to the colonial administration. However, despite the structures, God's work was extended through the back door and made available for other peoples to respond. The post-Kuki uprising witnessed the turning of the Kukis to Christianity in a big way and the work of evangelization was done by the Kukis themselves.

Thinking of mission 'outside the box': Roberts was able to bring the Christian message to the Kukis because he was able to think of mission outside the box. Here, it is important to remember that Roberts was a Welshman and there were aspects of his own cultural history and experience in late-nineteenth century Wales which gave him an empathy with the tribal peoples in Manipur. It is also important to note that the only mission agency which did not come to India with a colonial link was the Welsh Presbyterian Mission. Although Roberts did not come through an established mission agency, he shared the same experiences of 'suppression of cultural identity' that his fellow Welshmen experienced. For that reason, the individuals associated with new faith missions were more appealing to many people rather than those from structured and well-established mission agencies which were linked with the state. It was from such a background, prompted by his understanding of God's mission, that Roberts was able to cross the multi-layers of boundaries and bring the Christian message to the Kuki people.

Love and Justice as the cause for mission: Roberts came to what was then called Assam, and which is now Mizoram, prompted by his love for Christ, and from there to Manipur in 1910 on the basis of his understanding of justice. It should be noted that Roberts, along with Fraser, fought against and removed *Bawih/Soh*, a local form of slavery in Mizoram before he came to Manipur. Besides witnessing for Christ, the issue of justice was equally important for him when he came to Manipur. For him, it was not right that, when other tribes were provided with a missionary, the Kukis should remain without a missionary because of the rules set by the administration. Love and justice were the cause for Roberts' coming into Manipur, and he accordingly emphasized the importance of rebirth, prayer, and literature⁴² based on and guided by his understanding of justice. The emphasis on 'rebirth' was about the need for conversion to Christ, 'prayer'

⁴² 'Sunrise in Manipur', in *Yr Efengyglydd* (The Evangelist)', National Library of Wales, unclassified, Aberystwyth, UK.

indicated his emphasis on the total dependency on God for everything in the Christian life, and 'literature' reflected his uncompromising emphasis on Christian witness.

Mission is practising *Khankho*: Unlike the situation in central India, Roberts did not have to remain for long in order to evangelize the people in North-East India. The work of evangelization was done by the local people themselves. Once anyone became a Christian, their first task was to share it with others in the family, and when the whole family became Christian, they then moved to the wider community. In this way, the Kuki Mission moved to those areas which are now part of the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh and Burma within a short space of time. The main reason behind this was the concept of *Khankho*, a communitarian worldview, whereby a person finds it difficult to imagine going to heaven alone without his family members joining him/her. The communitarian lifestyle of the people or *Khankho* is expressed well in a traditional story of Lendou and his brother. At one point, the orphan siblings Lendou and his brother found themselves starving in the jungle while pursuing their mother who had eloped with her lover. Lendou found a tiny seed called Job's Ear and he cut it into two halves and shared it with his brother. Having something without sharing it was unthinkable in Kuki communitarian culture. The concept of *Khankho* which upheld community life played an important role in the spread of Christianity among the Kuki people. In other words, to have claimed or found Christianity without sharing Christ with the other members of the family was considered individualistic and against *Khankho*.

Conclusion

Without ignoring its limitations, the Kuki Mission 1910 reminds us of the importance of making room for all mission work, including so-called 'unrecognized' or 'unofficial' private missions in the community God is creating, the issue of justice in mission for all people, total dependence on God for mission, and the courage to reach all communities, particularly disadvantaged groups of people with the love of Christ. What has been called the shift of Christianity's centre of gravity to the global South is not a decline of Christianity. Rather, it is about providing an opportunity for all the peoples of the world to take part in what God is doing globally. At present, the baton is in the hands of those in the southern hemisphere including Christians in India. For the Christians of North-East India in particular, it is a time to keep in perspective our challenge as North-Easterners to be ready with our brushes and paints and start colouring World Christianity.

SECTION FIVE

**FORMS OF MISSIONARY
ENGAGEMENT**

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NORTH-EAST INDIA'S DISCUSSION AND RESPONSE TO THE EDINBURGH CENTENARY JUBILEE CELEBRATION (1910-2010)

O.L. Snaitang

Introduction

The World Missionary Conference Edinburgh 1910¹ was a historic event in world Christianity and played a great part in contributing to the evolution and growth of the modern ecumenical movement. While many studies, consultations and seminars have been conducted worldwide to mark its centenary, it is rather significant that a reflection on Edinburgh 2010 is being taken up even in North-East India. Given the importance of several themes for the occasion, I deem it an honour to have been asked to write on 'Forms of Missionary Engagement'. In order to give it a special attention and focus, it is right and appropriate to add to it the sub-title 'North-East India's Discussion and Response to the Edinburgh Centenary Jubilee Celebration'. The objective of this topic is to examine the forms of missionary engagement from a North-East Indian Christian's eyes.

Missionary Vision and Engagement in Global and National Ecclesiastical Histories

Given the connectivity and relational nature of Christianity, it will not be out of place to trace the missionary vision and engagement in Biblical and historical contexts so that one will find the connection in its proper perspective. This section will survey the missionary vision in the global scenario and give examples of missiological developments in India.

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¹ For more information, see K.S. Latourette, 'Ecumenical Bearings of the Missionary Movement and the International Missionary Council', in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948*, R. Rouse and S.C. Neil (eds), (London: Westminster Press, 1954), 355-402; cf T.V. Philip, *Edinburgh to Salvador Twentieth Century Ecumenical Missiology: A Historical Study of the Ecumenical Discussions on Mission* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1994), 26-29.

A survey of global missionary vision and engagement

The God of the Bible is primarily a missionary God.² Whereas the Old Testament period appeared to have shown a God whose concern was exclusive to the people of the covenant, the development that was demonstrated in Jesus Christ was universal and evangelistically missiological.³ It was Jesus Christ who commissioned the disciples to go out into the world for the good news of salvation (Mark 16:15; Matt. 28:19). The Apostles carried the message in letter and spirit and braved themselves for Jesus Christ even at the expense of sacrificial martyrdom. One of them was the most revered St Thomas who was believed to have come and laboured in India and died a martyr at Mylapore, Chennai, in the second half of the first century.

The early Church Fathers continued implementing the Great Commission and broke new ground in world mission and evangelism. They pioneered evangelizing western Europe and planted churches in several countries such as Italy, Spain, England, Ireland and elsewhere.⁴ While missionaries of the Western Church concentrated on reaching out with the gospel to the West, those of the Eastern Church like the Nestorians were look-East missionaries. Their missionary involvement resulted in the planting of churches in China and other countries in south-east and south Asia. Though most churches of the Nestorian tradition in Asia have been mentioned in a few records, it was only in Kerala that the surviving communities appeared in some way to flourish.⁵ Therefore, although the difference between the Eastern and the Western Churches was great, they had much in common in their evangelization.

In the midst of the growing rise of secularization, following the promulgation of the Edict of Milan, in AD 313, there emerged monastic movements that aimed at strengthening Christian spirituality on the one hand and giving orientation to the missionary vision and work overseas on the other.⁷ In other words, mission as reaching out to the non-Christian world was there in the monastic movements as a priority.

² R.E. Hedlund, *A Biblical Theology: The Mission of the Church in the World*, 1985 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1994).

³ Cf David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission*, 1991, Part I: New Testament Models of Mission (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 15-178.

⁴ See Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement: Earliest Christianity to 1453*, Vol. I (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 160-254.

⁵ Read Mar Aprem, *Nestorian Missions* (Trichur: Mar Narsai Press, 1976).

⁶ Cf Mar Yohannan Mamdhana Church Reconstruction & Consecration Souvenir (2007).

⁷ See Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 99-136.

Sixteenth-century Europe witnessed two major developments.⁸ First was the Protestant reformation that led to the emergence of the Lutheran, Zwinglian-Calvinistic, English and the radical traditions. Secondly, while churches of the Protestant traditions were engaged in their own struggles for correct doctrines and national identities, the Catholic Church in one of its responses to the Protestant reformation, was engaged in world mission and evangelization.

But for the rise and influence of the Pietistic movement in Germany in the seventeenth century,⁹ the Protestant world would have remained confined to western Europe alone. One of its results was the emergence of the Danish Royal Mission in the eighteenth century that witnessed the beginning of the Lutheran Tranquebar Mission on 9th July 1706.

The rise of revivalism, evangelicalism and awakening in Europe and North America bolstered the rise of the modern missionary movement in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Renowned ecclesiastical historian K.S. Latourette is convinced one should call the nineteenth century the 'Great Century'.¹⁰

Models of missionary activities in Indian history

A treatment of forms of missionary engagement in other parts of the world is no doubt important but this will be beyond the scope of this presentation. In giving a bird's eye view of missionary vision in the global scenario, it will be proper and appropriate to devote some examples of missiological engagement in India. India is a mission field of numerous Christian missions and it was believed that Christian missionary work had started here right from the first century itself. Here, we will make a historical survey of the forms of missionary engagement in India.

St Thomas was believed to have been the first missionary to India in the first century. He brought the new faith in Jesus Christ as early as the year AD 52.¹¹ His work resulted in the conversion of four Brahmin families. Though one finds it difficult to be convinced that Brahmins could have changed their faith there and then, miraculous experiences that had taken place in their midst could have been probable factors for such an unexpectedly immediate response. As his objective was to plant churches in the region, St Thomas was successful in establishing seven churches and

⁸ For more information, see Albert Henry Newman, *A Manual of Church History*, Vol. II (Philadelphia, PA: The American Baptist Publication Society, 1953), 40-389.

⁹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 252-55.

¹⁰ K.S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity: The Great Century*, Vols. 4 & 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971).

¹¹ For an in-depth scholarly study on St Thomas Christianity, see A.M. Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, Vol. I (Bangalore: Church History association of India, 1989).

ordaining priests from among the Brahmin converts. His mission was winning people for Christ, planting congregations and ordaining priests. The universal Gospel of the Indian apostolate that was immersed in the womb of Brahminism remained confined to the exclusive social consciousness and in due course lost its missionary interest and commitment outside its fold.

Francis Xavier (1506-1552) was a renowned Jesuit missionary whose mission, though appearing in the form of a flying missionary and ministry,¹² was another missiological model of converting people of low origins and world Christianization. My reflection may suggest that his hurried flying missionary adventure could have been conceived in the understanding of immediately spreading the gospel to the ends of the world so that Jesus Christ could come back again.

In Alexis de Menezes, one saw a different type of missionary model and form of missionary engagement. Archbishop Alexis de Menezes of Goa unleashed a missiological model of Latinizing the Syrian Christians in central Kerala.¹³ Taking advantage of the colonial power in Goa and Cochin, the Archbishop applied several means of achieving these desired objectives by starting an elementary school for Syrian Christian boys at Cranganore (Kodungaluru) in 1541. Realizing the slow impact of the school, he converted it into a theological seminary and established it at Vaipicotta. In order to speed up his Christian proselytization, the Archbishop looked to the synod as the highest deciding authority and so convened the Synod of Diamper in 1599 and saw his missionary vision achieved.

The Church of England too in the early nineteenth century¹⁴ carried out mission work in almost the same way as that of the Archbishop of Goa. Pretending to teach 'pure' biblical theology, the Anglican missionaries carried out their missionary programme by deputing missionaries to evangelize the Syrian Church, sending financial help in building a seminary at Kottayam. Besides these, they were actively engaged in translating the Book of Common Prayer into Malayalam and in the revision of the Syrian order of service or liturgy. The mission of converting the Syrian Christians led to revolts, schisms and social differences.

Earlier Catholic missions appeared to be interested not just in reaching out with the gospel to the downtrodden and Latinizing the Syrian Christians but also in a mission of adapting Hindu religious patterns. Fr Robert de Nobili of the Madura Jesuit Mission in the seventeenth century carried out

¹² See C.B. Firth, *An Introduction to Indian Church History*, 1961, revised and reprinted (Chennai: CLS, 1983), 55-68.

¹³ Read Jonas Thaliath, *The Synod of Diamper*, 1958, reprinted (Bangalore: Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, 1999); also cf K.J. John, *The Road to Diamper: An Exhaustive Study of the Synod of Diamper and the Emergence of Roman Catholics in Kerala* (Cochin: n.p., 1999).

¹⁴ Firth, *An Introduction to Indian Church History*, 74-98

his adaptive Hinduistic missionary engagement. His model represented Hinduization rather than inculturation or contextualization.¹⁵ In order to reach the high-caste Brahmins, de Nobili approved the caste system in a Christian community. Following the decision of Vatican II, the Catholic Church appeared to have modified de Nobili's method by making it inclusive and pragmatic.¹⁶

Dialogue was applied in de Nobili's method of adaptation or accommodation. What had been applied in the process was a positive attitude of listening to people of other faiths, mutual discussion and the opening up of one's theological and ethical issues, affirming religious pluralism, envisioning a common humanity and co-operating in building up communal harmony. In an almost similar intention, Paul D. Devanandan too looked up to dialogue as a viable model of mission¹⁷ in contemporary India. In this respect, Christianity should no longer be perceived as something superior to others but as one that participates in God's mission or *missio Dei*.

Most Protestant missionaries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries appeared to have devoted much energy to socially transforming mission and to church planting.¹⁸ These missionaries belonged to the Lutheran Tranquebar Mission (1706); Serampore Mission (1800); the Church Missionary Society (CMS), London Missionary Society (LMS), American Board, Church of Scotland, American or British Baptist Mission and other missions. Their attitude towards the people and cultures was in most cases similar, and also that any other religious component was never tolerated in a Christian church. Their theology was basically exclusive and saw validity only in the supreme authority of the Scriptures. Their missionary engagement became evident in church planting, the translation of the Bible, the establishment of schools and colleges, orphanages, health and medical care, social reforms like fighting against *suttee*, female infanticide, the caste system, and showing greater concerns for girls' education. Though there were other areas of missionary involvement among the people of India,

¹⁵ For a recent study, cf Ines G. Zupanov, *Disputed Mission: Jesuit Experiments and Brahmanical Knowledge in Seventeenth Century India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁶ The National Biblical Catechetical and Liturgical Centre, Bangalore, initiated by Fr. (L) Amalorpavadas is a model of Post-Vatican II mission as inculturation.

¹⁷ Cf P.D. Devanandan, *Preparation for Dialogue* (Bangalore: CISRS, 1964).

¹⁸ For more information about Protestant missionary agencies, see M.E. Gibbs, *The Anglican Church in India 1600-1970* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1972); J.T.K. Daniel and R.E. Hedlund (eds), *Carey's Obligation & India's Renaissance* (Serampore: Serampore College, 1993); F.S. Downs, *History of Christianity in India: North East India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, Vol. V, Part 5, Northeast India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 1992), and others.

most of their activities overlapped and chief among them was proclaiming the gospel of God's salvation.

By the twentieth century, both Catholic and Protestant missions had registered their presence in the sub-continent with greater degrees of recognition. Though their differences and suspicious perceptions of each other have brought damage to the integrity of Jesus' High Priestly prayer, the change following Vatican II witnessed significant involvement and the exchange of ideas and persons between the Catholic and Protestant institutions, structures and local churches. Co-operation between the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) and the CBCI (Catholic Bishops Conference of India) was encouraging and had significant influence on Christian thinking in the country.

Christian mission and missionary engagement in North-East India however were in many ways not greatly different from what had been seen elsewhere in the country, but given the cultural differences and ethnicity, this needs attention for any serious academic perception.

Christian Missions and Their Engagement in North-East India

Brief historical sketch of Christian missions

Long before the arrival of permanent missions in the nineteenth century, there had been sporadic Christian contact with the region. Catholic missionaries had passed through Assam in 1627 but did not initiate any Christian service because their objective was to go to Lhasa, Tibet. Significant Indo-Portuguese Catholic communities were spotted at Rangamati-Hossumpur, Bondashil-Baniyachong, Mariamnagar and Kashipur, but since their presence in the region was as mercenaries under local rajahs or kings, they did not start any missionary work.¹⁹ Another mission that had started missionary activities in North-East India but subsequently withdrew was the Serampore Mission. The Mission sent Krishna Chandra Pal as a missionary to the Khasi Hills in 1813 as part of its response to the invitation from British officers at Sylhet. Judging by progress in their activities, the Mission could secure the trust and confidence of the local Khasis in Cherrapunji, but following the taking over of the Serampore Mission by its parent body, the Baptist Missionary Society, its mission in North-East India came to a complete halt in 1838.²⁰

The nineteenth century witnessed the entry of several western Protestant and Catholic missions in North-East India. This was also the time when the British had begun annexing and controlling the region. The imposition of the new administration on the people of North-East India unleashed a kind

¹⁹ For detailed information, see O.L. Snaitang, 'Christianity and National Integration in Northeast India' (unpublished ICHR Project, 2009), 54-61.

²⁰ Snaitang, 'Christianity and National Integration in Northeast India', 61-69.

of cultural crisis because of their inability to function under the new administrative set-up.

After the takeover of the Serampore Mission, the American Baptist Mission²¹ came in and started its missionary work in Upper Assam as early as 1836. Though people's response in Assam was slow and largely negative, the Mission's exploration in Nagaland among the Nagas was more productive. It secured a strong foothold among the Aos and other Naga tribal groups. As the work progressed in Nagaland, the Mission began expanding its evangelistic mission, and in due course its mission work spread to Manipur, the Garo Hills in Meghalaya, the plain areas of Assam, and among different groups in Arunachal Pradesh. The unity of churches of the American Baptist traditions is now well demonstrated by the establishment of a comprehensive and inclusive confessional body, the Council of Baptist Churches in North East India (CBCNEI).

While the American Baptist Mission concentrated mostly on Upper Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and the Garo Hills in Meghalaya, the Welsh Presbyterian Mission worked mostly among the Khasi-Jaintia people of East Meghalaya,²² the Mizos in Mizoram²³ and people of Zo origin in Manipur and elsewhere. It was in 1841 that the first Welsh Presbyterian missionaries landed in Cherrapunji in the Khasi Hills, and began their organized, stable and permanent missionary activities. As a result, the Welsh Presbyterian Mission witnessed a significant presence in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya, northern Mizoram, the Sylhet plain areas, the hill areas of Manipur, the Cachar hill tribes and other tribes in the North Cachar Hills, and in Karbi Anglong of Assam. The Presbyterian Church of India is the highest administrative confessional body that brings members from different ethnic groups to a common sense of unity and identity.

The Anglican Church or the Church of England entered North-East India in 1876.²⁴ Though the objective of their presence in the region was mainly to look after the spiritual needs of British officials and their families, through their educational and pastoral ministry they were also involved in evangelization and ministry among the neglected sweeper community with

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²¹ See Joseph Puthenpurakal, *Baptist Missions in Nagaland* (Shillong: Vendrame Institute, 1984); Also cf P.T. Philip, *The Growth of Baptist Churches in Nagaland*, 1976, reprint (Guwahati: CLC, 1983).

²² See the first major book on the Welsh Mission in the region, John Hughes Morris, *The History of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists Foreign Mission to the End of the Year 1904, 1910* (New Delhi: Indus, 1996).

²³ Vanlalchhuanawma, *Christianity and Subaltern Culture: Revival Movement as a Cultural Response to Westernization in Mizoram* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2007).

²⁴ For information about the Anglican Church in North-East India, see Bishop P. Lyngdoh, 'The Diocese of North East India of the Church of North India', in *Souvenir: The Church History Association of India* (2009), 13-17.

Punjabi roots residing in Shillong. This church is now an integral part of the Church of North India.

The region witnessed the arrival of the Catholic Mission in the Khasi Hills in 1890.²⁵ Though Catholic communities were traced at Bondashil, Mariamnagar and Rangamati, because their presence did not have a mission objective, the Catholic Church had to start its missionary operations anew. The Catholic Mission involved itself in the introduction of quality educational institutions, dispensaries and hospitals, institutions for self-employment, rural resource centres, publications, libraries and documentation centres, a museum for the preservation of tribal cultures, mercy homes for the aged, orphanages and rural development programmes.

The Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) entered South Mizoram in continuation of the Arthington Aborigenes Mission that had started in 1894.²⁶ Earlier missionaries were able to make the Duhlian dialect the standard Mizo language and introduced the Roman alphabet. They were also able to bring out translations of portions of the Bible, along with publication of a Lushai grammar and dictionary.

The German Gossner Lutheran Mission was also another major western Protestant mission that worked among the Bodos and the Adivasis in the tea gardens of Assam. Other western missions that have carried their mission activities to North-East India were the Seventh Day Adventists, the Salvation Army, the United Pentecostal Mission and the New Zealand Baptist Mission.

The twentieth century witnessed the rise of Christian indigenous movements such as the Church of God, the Church of Jesus Christ, Isua Krista Kohhran, Nagaland Christian Revival Church, to name a few. These indigenous groups however were also different but were successfully involved in missionary participation among people in several segments of society.

Understanding and co-operation between Catholics and Protestants in North-East India was slow even after Vatican II. However, gradual efforts through theological institutions like the Sacred Heart Theological College, Shillong, Eastern Theological College, Jorhat, and other institutions saw co-operation in studying and teaching, especially at post-graduate levels. Christian understanding is now deeper than misunderstanding.

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Forms of missionary engagement in North-East India

i. *Christian Attitudes towards Tribal Culture:* With the exception of the Catholics, most missionaries adopted a mixed attitude towards people's

²⁵ George Kottuppallil, *History of the Catholic Missions in Central Bengal 1855-1886* (Shillong: Vendrame Institute, 1988); S. Karotemprel (ed), *The Catholic Church in Northeast India 1890-1990* (Shillong: Vendrame Institute, 1993).

²⁶ Cf *B.C.M. Compendium: In Honour of BMS Mission in Mizoram 1903-2003* (Lunglei: Baptist Church of Mizoram, 2003).

cultures in the region. Culture was understood as a movement that remained inclusive, integrative and dynamic – and that which involved polity, society, economy, language and literature, religion and other components. While approving of most of the components of people's cultures, Protestant missionaries rejected the religious ones. Any element that had a relationship with traditional religion was disapproved of.

ii. *The Missionary Method of Replacement*: The religious components that the Protestant missionaries rejected included belief in gods or goddesses, rites of sacrifices, prayers, traditional priestly functions, archery, dances and festivals, including cremation of the dead. While these elements were set aside in a Christian community, the missionaries replaced them with faith in the Trinity, sacraments, liturgies or orders of service for prayers and the conducting of services, the institution of priests based on calling and training, congregational meetings through local churches, districts, presbyteries, synods or assemblies, and the burial of the dead in cemeteries.

iii. *Forms of Missionary Engagement*: First, Universalization of a Dialect and Introduction of a Written Culture.²⁷ The problem that missionaries faced with most hill people in North-East India was the presence of diverse and unintelligible dialects in each homogeneous group, and the absence of any written literature. Missionaries adopted the local dialect spoken at the mission centre and universalized it for the entire homogeneous community. There was no literary judgement or sub-ethnic inclination, bias or prejudice in the adoption and universalization of a particular dialect. Though the universalizing process was difficult in the initial stages, it gradually became popular because people began to feel as though they belonged to one community.

The conversion of a dialect into a standard language for the entire community was supplemented with the teaching of the Roman alphabet. There was no colonial influence in the policy of introducing this. Given the importance of the Bengali language and alphabet in markets, British officers were actually in favour of imposing them on the hill people. While the missionaries could have done so, they did not know anything about the Bengali alphabet or language, and so found it difficult to carry out their work in a language they did not know.

The process of missionary engagement was further broadened in a way that led to the publication of Biblical material, primers, grammars, translations and other literary productions. The initial initiative also witnessed the publication of journals, book services and the establishment of publishing houses. Though these engagements were carried out with missiological objectives, their impact resulted in the creation of a new tribal identity.

²⁷ O.L. Snaitang, 'Christianity and Tribal Solidarity in Meghalaya', in *Indian Church History Review* (June 1994), 22-36.

Secondly, Educational Mission.²⁸ The other area of significant missionary engagement was in the introduction of a western pattern of education and boarding homes or hostels. Christian missionaries were able to establish primary schools in several places and villages in the region. Again, their primary objective was evangelization and church planting but, insofar as people's response to these institutions was positive, the subsequent influence was on society as a whole.

Given the strong Biblical and evangelistic influence, the missionaries gave special importance to the study and learning of the Bible and Christian doctrines in schools. Besides these, they also introduced other academic subjects such as elementary arithmetic, English primers, history and some primary elementary science. The setting up of school buildings and hostels has the effect of bringing to the people a sense of unity. They also replaced the traditional *morung* institutions and provided employment opportunities in government offices and other institutions. (*Morung* is a bachelor dormitory system which was once an essential part of Naga life and culture. Here boys from the age of 6 would learn their traditional folktales and songs, where decisions of war and peace were taken, and they would leave only at the time of their wedding.) The coming of Christianity to the hill tribal areas of North-East India had at the same time contributed to the creation of literate communities and groups of intellectuals.

Thirdly, Health and Medical Services.²⁹ Missionaries saw the healing ministry through clinics, dispensaries and hospitals as an integral part of their missionary engagement among the isolated hill people of the region. There was an inclusive attitude in the service of medical mission, and patients were treated without discrimination, irrespective of class, religious affiliation or linguistic backgrounds.

Fourthly, Introduction of a Christian Theology.³⁰ Tribal communities in the region had strong religious belief systems and rituals but remained exclusive, static and limited to certain groups of people. As already mentioned, while Christian missionaries approved most of the people's cultural components, they were intolerant of tribal religious elements. This rejection however did not leave a void in the cultural structure but replaced it with a new faith in the triune God – the God of the entire tribe and of the whole world alike – the word of God, the church for congregational gatherings, the burying of the dead instead of cremation, and the institution of priests based on divine calling and commitment, and a missionary spirit.

Fifthly, A New System of Administration. Another significant missionary engagement in the region was the development of a new set of

²⁸ Cf S. Karotemprel, 'The Catholic School and a Growing Church', in *Indian Missiological Review* (July 1980), 241ff.

²⁹ See A.R. Hughes, 'Ka Mission Jinglynkiah', in *Ki Khubor Jong Ki Jinglynkiah Jubili 1841-1966* (1967).

³⁰ See Wati Longchar and Larry E. Davis (eds), *Doing Theology with Tribal Resources* (Jorhat: Tribal Study Center, 1999).

administrative structures among converts. Though tribal people had the reputation of maintaining democratic institutions in running the affairs at village and state level, given their limitations of confining their jurisdiction among sections of the people and not on the entire community, the imposition of ecclesiastical structures appeared to have become more inclusive in the sense that they transcended the traditional clan-based administrative channels.

The American Baptist Mission and the Welsh Presbyterian Mission laid down a well-organized democratic administration. Baptist churches were connected from the level of a local church, convention, regional association and well up to the highest composite body through elected representation, which has encouraged the creation of a homogeneous ethnic convention or association in a given region.

Both ran the administration of local churches through proper ecclesiastical structural committees, right from the level of a village church to a district or convention, presbytery or association, and up to the highest level of a synod, assembly or council. They also believed in the process of people's voting through the respective recognized level of committees. These structural channels provided opportunities for members from different sub-ethnic groups and created a new cultural synthesis.

The Response to Changing Missiological Paradigms in a World Missionary Context

The twentieth century witnessed the emergence of the ecumenical movement on a large scale. It might well be called the 'ecumenical century'. It grew first out of the perception that Christian missions should unite in order to carry out a united missionary work in a non-Christian world. Later, it developed into worldwide human and non-human affairs for continued existence, survival and sustainability. These efforts were not in vain as they resulted in the formation of the World Council of Churches in 1948. Here, attention will be given to changing missiological perceptions against the background of the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference 1910.

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Changing missiological perceptions since Edinburgh 1910

The World Missionary Conference that met 14th-23rd June 1910 was significant because, among other reasons, it was an officially recognized Conference.³¹ Given the influence of the missionary movement, Edinburgh

³¹ William Richey Hogg, *Ecumenical Foundations: A History of the International Missionary Conference and Its 19th Century Background* (New York: Harper & Bros, 1952). This is at least a comprehensive book on the origin and growth of the International Missionary Council.

1910 devoted itself mainly to the question of the evangelization of the world in this generation – the task of fulfilling Christ's Great Commission.³² Hitherto, there was unanimity on the supremacy of the Bible, salvation through Jesus Christ, the urgency of evangelization, and a commitment to take the gospel to the unreached and the unevangelized world. Based on the urgency of the task, what could be achieved was only through ecumenical and interdenominational co-operation even in the midst of theological divergences.

Whereas Edinburgh 1910 looked to world evangelization as its priority, Lake Mohonk 1921 began to concentrate on structure or office. There was an 'ecumenical shift from a movement of mission societies to an organization of church leaders'. This process of institutionalization came about so that the implementation of unity for mission and evangelism could be carried out in a faster manner.

No sooner had the IMC concentrated on unity for world mission than a reaction from Jerusalem IMC 1928 turned the traditional understanding of mission upside down. The Jerusalem IMC viewed the Edinburgh vision as something immature, unnecessary and one-sided. For one thing, the Jerusalem IMC looked at the Euro-centricity of mission as nothing less than imperialism. Representatives from Asia, such as Cheng Ching-Yi of China, Bishop V.S. Azariah of India and others, echoed the policy of ecclesiastical disparity between the western church and the younger Asian churches in the mission fields. They sought equality and partnership in mission in addition to mutual respect and relationship.

Another development was that the Jerusalem IMC looked up to Europe and North America as the real mission fields in which missionaries needed to overcome the growing rise of worldly culture. Because of the Jerusalem IMC, Christian mission received a jolt from its traditional 'look-east' mission policy to a 'look-west' mission. Unity of world religions was conceived as a necessity so that they could fight and overcome the menace of materialism, communism, capitalism and the non-religious lifestyle of the West. Given that the Jerusalem Council no longer saw syncretism as a threat to Christian mission, Christian mission now looked at the social problems that were rampant in western societies, such as the uncontrolled consumption of narcotics, and the problems of migrant labourers and child labour in factories and workplaces in European and North American cities.

The Tambaram Conference 1938, while laying stress on Barthian revealed Biblical theology, questioned western-imposed missiology and patterns of worship. While Christianity should grow indigenously, it should also adopt a native spirituality. In other words, the task of indigenizing the gospel should go hand-in-hand with a positive attitude towards people of other faiths.

³² For an Indian Christian response to the IMC, see T.V. Philip, *Edinburgh to Salvador: 20th Century Ecumenical Missiology* (Delhi: CSS and ISPCK, 1999).

The Willingen International Missionary Council 1952 dropped another missiological bombshell that ripped apart the traditional understanding of Christian mission and evangelism. The Council brought into focus the concept of *missio Dei* and interpreted it in such a way that Christianity could no longer claim superiority in the context of the mission of God (or *missio Dei*) because God does not deal with the church first in dealing with the world but because he deals directly with it. The church is only a privileged instrument of 'God's mission of redemption and the recreation of humanity and the cosmos'. The implication of this rediscovery and reinterpretation of *missio Dei* is that traditional Christian missionary vision and work is no longer required because exclusiveness, dominating and imperialistic judgement have been abandoned.

It was mainly following this understanding that the International Missionary Council merged with the World Council of Churches at the New Delhi Assembly in 1961 and became just a department of the World Council of Churches, (WCC) known as the Division of World Mission and Evangelism.

The ecumenical twentieth century also witnessed the changing attitude of the Catholic Church. Its position and status, well before the historic Vatican II in 1961, was sternly negative to any negotiation with Protestant groups. In other words, they looked at others as separated, heretical and as those who had gone astray; any discussion of unity was possible only on one condition and that was that they returned to the Catholic Church. Though there could have been some element of justification in their stand, given the reality and integrity of human freedom in a modern democratic world, their stand was impossible and incompatible. The outcome of Vatican II was a breakthrough in the history of Christianity. It was a revolution in that it reversed the traditional pre-Vatican II stand. The positive result was such that both Catholics and Protestants could now engage in dialogue, discussion and co-operation in the larger interests of humankind.

The North-East Indian Christian response

The rise of the ecumenical movement and the WCC into a powerful organization and institution is a fact of history. However, incidents in the past have tended to give the impression that this powerful world ecumenical body respects mostly the powerful. Even most ecumenical leaders from the Third World who have been inducted into the ecumenical hierarchy have been identified as being mostly from among the powerful and, as a result, a contradictory situation has come about in which the spirit of being ecumenical remains realistic only at the higher levels and not in more local contexts.

One of the areas that modern ecumenism after Edinburgh 1910 had taken up with serious commitment has been the question of human rights.

Given its fight against racism, sexism and classism, the WCC has become almost a pioneer in the areas of social reforms and liberation in World Christianity, at least. Though there is validity in tackling this problem, the world ecumenical body should be aware that there are still some people groups in tribal India and in other parts of the Third World, who could well be called 'humans without rights'. Groups like the Terao, Monsang, Bru and others in North-East India, the Cholanayaks in the South, and many ethnic groups in Arunachal Pradesh, are among the vulnerable groups who could well be identified as endangered. Their population, like the Terao in Manipur or the Cholanayak in Kerala, is alarmingly low and needs serious ecumenical attention.

Some groups of the Jarwa family in the Andaman and Nicobar islands, who are the only surviving humans of the ancient past, are now on the verge of extinction. This group of people now receives the best material facilities in terms of food, medicine, clothing and other resources. Given the protection and the kind of service that is available to the Jarwas, one may observe that this investment is rather late to meet the Jarwas' needs whose survival is now at stake, so this might well be a case where there are 'rights but without humans' – because they get sufficient and classified benefits only when their survival and continued existence is at its bleakest and is gravely alarming!

Conclusion

A study on forms of missionary vision and engagement in North-East India is a vast subject, and this attempt is by no means adequate or complete because the areas that have been treated tended to have a bearing on ecclesiastical histories, global and regional missiology, and interdenominational and local ecumenical discussions. An examination of North-East India's discussion and response to the Edinburgh centenary jubilee celebration (1910-2010) is however limited in terms of the region, but the areas this paper has analyzed and discussed are broad-based. We have examined the history of Christianity on global and national backgrounds first, because this would enable the readers to understand the subject in its correct perspective. In other words, a study of ecumenical developments in North-East India is never a study in isolation. It is not a disconnected subject but an integral part of the history of Christianity worldwide – and also of the world's ecumenical movement. Each section has tried to examine its historical development by touching, not just on several Protestant missions, but on the Catholics as well. The issues that have been discussed include both the social and the human, especially an attention to the vulnerable groups whose continued existence is endangered. This study therefore attempts to give a human face and spirit to the issues raised.

ROMAN CATHOLIC MISSIONS IN NORTH-EAST INDIA: STRATEGIES, TENSIONS AND CHALLENGES

Melvil Pereira

North-East India is the region consisting of the eight states of the Indian Union in the extreme north-eastern part of the country. The region has some unique features: largely mountainous terrain, great biodiversity, and above all, incomparable racial and ethnic diversity. There are a sizeable number of people in the plains of Assam who trace their origin to mainland India. But the vast majority of the people, especially in the hilly and mountainous areas, belong to about 400 ethnic groups or sub-groups, usually identified as tribes (D'Souza 1999). They belong to the Indo-Mongoloid racial group and speak languages of the Sino-Tibetan family. Each of these ethnic groups has its distinct territory and culture, including language. Some of these tribal communities continue to follow their traditional religions. Some have been Buddhists for centuries. In modern times, many have embraced different denominations of Christianity. At present, the major Christian denominations among the tribals are the Baptist, Presbyterian and Catholic churches.

The first part of this paper briefly summarizes the history of Catholic missions in North-East India. Part two deals with the strategies adopted by Catholic missionaries while starting and consolidating various missions. Part three reflects on the tensions faced by missionaries, and finally, part four looks at some of the challenges faced by Catholic missionaries in an ever-evolving mission territory.

A Brief History of the Roman Catholic Presence in North-East India

The first visit by Catholic missionaries to the North East was in 1626 when two Portuguese Jesuits passed through the region on their way to Tibet and China (Wessels 1924: 119-163; Paviotti 1987). The second group, belonging to the Paris Foreign Missionaries (PEM), began working in Assam in the 1850s when the territory of Assam was separated from the Vicariate of Bengal and united with the Vicariate of Lhasa (Becker 1989: 105). The PEM missionaries stayed in Guwahati and learnt the Assamese language. However, their ultimate intention was to go to Tibet to continue the evangelization work initiated by the Franciscan missionaries in the seventeenth century.

In 1854 Fr Nicholas Michael Krick and Fr Bourry tried to go to Tibet through the Mishmi Hills in Arunachal Pradesh. But during their travel in the Mishmi Hills they were murdered by the local people. Becker (1989: 145-172) mentions this episode which resulted in the abrupt closure of the missionary work of the PEM in North-East India in 1857. From 1857 to 1870 there were no Catholic missionaries working in North-East India. The next group of Catholic missionaries who came to North-East India in 1870 belonged to the Milan Foreign Missions, popularly known as PIME. The missionary works of Fr Jacopo Broy, PIME, in Assam is worthy of consideration (Becker 1989: 188-203).

The Salvatorian Fathers took over from PIME in 1890 and worked in the region until 1915. These were Germans living in a British colony. As enemy aliens, they consequently had to leave Assam on the outbreak of World War I (Becker 1980). For a brief period of seven years (1915-1922), the Jesuits from Kolkata looked after the North-East mission (Mathew 1993: 129). In 1922, the Jesuits made way for the Salesians of Don Bosco. 'With the Salesians' arrival, a new chapter was opened in the mission annals of the North East. Missiologists and church historians trace various missionary features and contributing factors that have facilitated the work of evangelization, which is unparalleled compared to many other regions in the country' (Pooyathumkudy 2015).

From the brief summary above of the history of Catholic missions in North-East India, it can be noted that their beginnings were humble and peripheral. From the unsteady beginnings made by MEP and PIME fathers during the latter half of the nineteenth century, Catholic missions have expanded to cover the length and breadth of North-East India. Catholic missionaries have succeeded in spreading the good news of the gospel and have been actively involved in the educational and health sectors.

Some Effective Strategies used by the Roman Catholic Church

In the following section, an effort will be made to enumerate some strategies used by the Catholic Church in North-East India in establishing and running various centres, parishes and institutions so as to better serve the needs of the tribal communities.

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Parish, school and boarding: the traditional model

The approach of the Roman Catholic Church to evangelization was primarily centred on the establishment of parishes. A typical parish embraced a number of villages. But the parish centre was located at a central place which could be a town or a large village. The parish centre consisted of the parish house and church. But it invariably had a school and a boarding house or hostel for students. Children, both boys and girls, were brought from the villages to study in the school. They stayed at the

boarding house. The schedule at the boarding house was heavy: supervised and guided studies, organized games and activities, and faith formation and prayers. Seminarians or suitable young men looked after the boys' boarding house, while Religious Sisters looked after the girls' boarding house.

While there was a large school at the parish centre, there were smaller schools offering primary or early education in the villages. They were under the direction of the parish priests. The village schools were known as feeder schools because children who wanted to continue their studies were taken to the parish centre. Besides, the parish priest would regularly visit the villages and offer Sunday services.

The parish centre also offered basic medical facilities to people of the area. Where possible, there was a trained nurse or at least an experienced person to provide essential care.

The basic consideration in establishing a parish centre was the willingness of the local community to provide various types of support. This included adequate land and a readiness to come to the aid of the missionaries when they faced local problems. Such support was readily given by the people if there were some Christians among them and if more of them wanted become Christian. This approach made the parish centre and the school an integral part of the local community.

A network of schools in a particular area

One of the strategies used by the Catholic Church in North-East India was the setting up of a network of schools in a particular area rather than starting schools in isolated places. For example, the Jesuits began a network of schools in the Southern Angami area in Nagaland and moved on to the Chakhesang area. Later, they followed the same approach among the Dimasa in Assam and the Aka in Arunachal Pradesh. This approach gradually resulted in the establishment of Catholic parish centres and schools in almost all towns and large villages.

A concentration of schools in a particular geographical locality inhabited by a tribal community had multiple benefits. Such efforts have borne a rich harvest in empowering communities as a whole in the field of education, which has later translated into their economic and political empowerment. There was also the phenomenon of the 'multiplier effect'. Studies in southern Kerala, Ajmer, Mumbai, Mangalore and Kolkata indicate that when a school was opened in an area that did not have one, many more schools were established in imitation of or in competition with the first school. That explains the high level of education in these regions and in Kerala (Pereira 2014). One can ask whether something similar took place in North-East India. The author, who is familiar with the Southern Angami Region of Kohima district in Nagaland, can vouch for a similar phenomenon. From one high school established in 1970, there are today over a dozen high schools and two colleges in this small area.

The use of existing tribal social structures

The parish church has remained the heart of the mission centres. The parish structures were organized keeping in mind tribal social organization. In such a system, the parish priest becomes a facilitator and the major responsibilities rested on the shoulders of a chief catechist. The catechist virtually performed the duties of an assistant parish priest or of a deacon except for the ministerial duties of the priest.

Another helpful practice was the use of touring catechists to undertake evangelization work. Given the limited number of priests, the large number of villages in a parish, and the rugged, hostile and hilly terrain, it was best that local resources be used to spread the good news. The best means for this was the training of local catechists and using their services to cater to the needs of various villages. This practice came in handy and was also helpful in starting new centres.

It is important to note that the church in North-East India is predominantly a people's movement. There is a distinct grassroots flavour to the north-eastern churches. The traditional forums of celebrations woven around agricultural cycles were Christianized to celebrate the word of God (Poovathumkudy 2015). Unlike in non-tribal contexts, the missionaries found it easy to gather people to hold conventions, *sobhas* (annual meetings to parishes) and retreats. These meetings and gatherings served as occasions to catechize the faithful and even to administer the sacraments.

The missionaries made the best use of singing as a means to evangelize. Singing comes naturally to the tribal people in North-East India. Singing is an integral part of agricultural activity and other community celebrations. The missionaries made use of this cultural and communal tool in liturgy and worship. Numerous hymns and gospel songs were composed with the lilt and rhythm of tribal music.

A missionary spirit

Catholic missionaries, both from other parts of India and beyond, came from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Their diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds served as a blessing in taking the gospel message to the furthest corners of North-East India. Most missionaries volunteered to work in the North-East with the clear objective of daring to go to difficult terrain and ready to put up with a frugal lifestyle. Like most other missionaries, their commitment was characterized by availability, daring to accept challenges and a willingness to put up with hardships.

Their pioneering spirit, venturing into uncharted territories, was another hallmark of their missionary zeal. This pioneering spirit was guided by a readiness to go where the need was greatest, especially to backward and rural areas of the region (Coelho 1984: 9).

It must be mentioned here that Catholic missionaries coming into North-East India, like their Baptist and Presbyterian counterparts, made the effort

to identify with the people in various ways. One such instance was their study of local and tribal languages. Hopefully in the future, scholars will take the trouble to document the contributions of some of the missionaries belonging to all denominations in the preservation and development of tribal languages.

While each context suggests specific strategies, it is important that persons entrusted with the responsibility of starting a mission listen to the Spirit already at work in a particular place and discern him before putting into action plans and projects for a centre. Not listening to the Spirit and turning a blind eye to the concrete circumstances might lead to repeating the methods used in a previous mission station. This might lead to the rigidity that emerges from sticking to pre-planned projects, thus rejecting the flexible approach that promotes a church that is more indigenized, more sensitive to native cultures, and more responsive to local contexts.

Tensions as Symptoms of Creativity and Dynamism

The plans and strategies that the churches envisaged were varied and at times they clashed because men and women came from different backgrounds. Moments of tension and uncertainty were part of the process of evangelization. However, varied and sometimes conflicting strategies were also signs of creativity and dynamism. A glance at the history of the Catholic Church among the tribal communities, reveals the following tensions:

Evangelization: the narrow and the broad approach

An area of tension that keeps recurring in Catholic missions is the approach to evangelization. There is no doubt that the ultimate aim of all work and intervention by missionaries is evangelization or sharing the good news, but there are differences of opinion as to how this sharing of the good news should take place. While some missionaries emphasize that the church should be aggressive in the mission of proselytizing, others stress that there are alternative approaches to evangelization. These approaches refer to building human communities based on values of love, service, fellowship, justice, peace and equity. It also means making efforts to build societies where one respects the faith, culture and worldview of others. In a region which is home to hundreds of tribal and non-tribal communities based on diversities of culture, ethnicity and language, it is of tremendous importance to respect and learn to live with each other. They hold that the broad approach to evangelization has a significant role to play in North-East India in the context of increasing ethnic conflicts and interdenominational rivalries.

The tension between the narrow and broad approaches to evangelization sharpened after Vatican II which recognized that the seed of the gospel is

present in other religions. In practical terms, this tension comes into play when a decision has to be taken to start a school. There are some who insist that there should be Catholic families in a place before starting a school, while others downplay such a requirement.

Rural and remote centres versus schools in urban areas

The hallmark of a missionary church is its presence and work in distant and backward areas. Such was the history of Catholic missions in North-East India. They moved to rural areas, catering to the spread of primary education. Some felt that it was a prophetic move not to get stuck in elite educational institutions in urban areas which would have hindered the mobility of missionaries to go to frontier areas.

However, this approach is being revisited. Some feel that, while starting schools in remote places is praiseworthy, that should not stop one from starting some in urban areas. In fact, as Catholic missions expanded, they also set up schools and colleges in towns and cities. Educational institutions in urban areas can consolidate the involvement of Catholic missions in the field of education when the general trend in the country is towards development of skills, professional education and specialised higher education.

Primary education versus higher education

When Catholic missions began in North-East India, the basic need was to provide students in tribal communities with primary and high school education. Higher education was not the need of the hour. Thus, wherever the Catholic missionaries worked, they first started primary schools and later developed these into high schools.

Such an approach is contested today, especially by the younger generation of missionaries. They believe that times have changed and the need now is for higher educational institutions. They point to the migration of North-East Indian students to 'mainland' India in search of good higher educational institutions.

To conclude this section, it is worth remembering that creative tensions are healthy and they contribute to the growth of a mission or an institution. According to Barry and Doherty (2010), Christian spirituality is packaged with in-built tensions. If these tensions do not show themselves, then one can be sure that the mission has in some way gone astray from the heart of the Christian tradition.

Challenges that Need Attention

The following section articulates challenges that need attention in the immediate future. It is desired that the Catholic missions, in planning their responses, explore the possibilities of responding to these challenges.

Scope for inculturation

The scope for inculturation in North-East India is enormous, and perhaps overwhelming. While there is a genuine love for culture, customs and language, this has not always manifested itself concretely in introducing tribal and local rituals in the liturgy. There are meaningful tribal rites of passage or other religious practices which might have sacramental value. Without elevating them to sacramental status, Catholic missionaries could have found ways of integrating local traditions into liturgies and pastoral practices.

Secondly, North-East India is a witness to a multicultural, multi-religious and multi-ethnic reality. While this diversity is an asset, it has also led to conflicts. Could inter-religious, inter-faith, inter-ethnic dialogue be a solution?

One of the accusations against Christian missionaries by scholars is about their role in destroying the cultural riches of the tribal communities of North-East India. There is a grain of truth in this accusation. During the initial phases of evangelization, missionaries across denominations have indulged in consigning the rich cultural practices of local communities to the dustbin of history. A tribal practice was suspect in the 'light in the darkness' model of evangelization practised by the missionaries. Thus, many meaningful rituals and communal practices have been wiped out and irreparable damage has been done to the rich cultural heritage of local communities.

In the recent past, some tribal people who still hold on to their traditional faiths have distanced themselves from Christian tribals. They have even asserted that they alone are the legitimate carriers of tribal culture rather than the Christian tribals. There is an urgent need to address this concern of appreciating the tribal cultures, and steps have to be taken towards retrieving lost practices and encouraging an appreciation for beautiful and humane aspects of tribal cultures.

Endangered languages

Countless studies have revealed that language is the repository of the culture, values and worldviews of society. Loss of a language means the loss of almost the entire culture carried by the language, including songs, poems, legends, myths, stories, history, customs and the worldview of a particular people (Sengupta 2003: 12).

According to the Linguistic Survey of India, there are over 400 dialects spoken in North-East India. Given the size of the population living there, less than fifty million, the number of languages spoken is staggering. While dialects spoken by a larger number of people or a majority group gets state patronage, dialects spoken by smaller groups of people are neglected. In India, and especially in North-East India, most local languages are in various stages of attrition (ibid). What has been the response of Catholic missionaries to the reality of endangered languages?

Although few missionaries are trained linguists, many of them have learnt the language of native people. Some of them have translated the Bible into a native tongue. There are others who have published grammar primers of native languages. They have even composed songs in the local dialects. One has to remember the laudable work done by Baptist and Presbyterian missionaries especially in developing scripts for more than fifty tribal languages (Downs 1993: 91). It is noted that when Assamese as a language was almost on the verge of extinction, it was the Baptist missionaries who halted the invasion of the dominant Bengali language by printing and publishing the first-ever Assamese magazine *Arunodaya*. This contribution by Baptist missionaries is fondly remembered by the Assamese intelligentsia. The most sizeable Catholic contribution in this respect has been to Khasi literature (Jala & Shangpliang 475).

While there are areas to be proud of, there is also scope for much engagement in addressing the issue of endangered languages. The dominant language of the state is used to impart education, and this adversely affects the dialects of smaller communities. This gradually results in their extinction. For instance, the younger generation of the Rabha community in Assam can barely speak their mother tongue. It is a similar situation for many dialects, especially in Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh. More persons could be set aside to get training in linguistics to address this concern.

Conservation of biodiversity

North-East India, with its wide-ranging altitudinal variation, diverse climatic conditions and varied conservation practices, is a rich biodiversity zone in the world. Shifting cultivation and upland agricultural practices, with lengthy recovery cycles, sustain an astounding variety of flora and fauna. This region is considered by many botanists and nature lovers as the cradle of flowering plants.

However, in past decades, this biodiversity-rich zone has faced wanton destruction of its natural resources. The availability of mineral resources, timber, oil and the potential for hydro-electricity has pushed it towards the brink of ecological suicide (Karlsson 2011). It was well known that these same forests are the home of tribal communities who had traditionally used them sustainably, keeping in mind intra-generational and inter-generational responsibilities. The entry of market forces and the introduction of neo-

liberal policies have pressurized the tribal communities to change their traditional attitudes towards their natural resources and forest lands.

It is in this context of environmental degradation that study and research is needed to propose an alternative model of development that suggests a sustainable use of natural resources. In the past we had Jesuits in India who were renowned botanists. Perhaps the Catholic missionaries of North-East India should think of training their young men and women in subjects like botany and environmental science.

Class formation and hardening of patriarchy

The introduction of modern inputs in the form of education, religion, monetization of the economy, and exposure to other cultures has brought about irreversible changes in the tribal societies of North-East India. While there have been the obvious benefits of modernization, studies have also identified the early stages of class formation in tribal societies which have had an egalitarian ethos guiding their societies. Simultaneously, there are also challenges posed to the status of women who have enjoyed a relatively better status compared with their counterparts in non-tribal societies. With the gradual disappearance of shifting cultivation, which had contributed to their improved status, women seem to be losing out.

In this context of irretrievable transformation of tribal societies, studies and research are needed to take stock of the changes. The North Eastern Social Research Centre, Guwahati, has done some work in this area but much more needs to be done.

Ethnicity and citizenship

Almost all tribal groups in North-East India have started articulating their identity in terms of nation and national identity. Theoretically speaking, ethnic identity is the symbolic use of certain markers of culture by a community to differentiate itself from other groups and communities. It involves claims to a higher status as a group in relation to others (Karna 2008). The use of ethnic identity for pursuing group interest is ethnicity which is initially used for people's mobilization. Subsequently, the same identity turns into an instrument to seek political and economic advantage. Many ethnic groups in North-East India have astutely defined their identity so as to gain maximum advantage at the cost of other groups. This has led to violent conflict in practically all the states of North-East India.

The Government of India has attempted to address these concerns through counter-insurgency measures and through provisions for autonomy at various levels, an ethnic homeland being one of the primary solutions (Misra 2014). But this cannot be a permanent solution, given the new demands by emerging small nationalities demanding ethnic homelands. The challenge lies in working out an arrangement where the rights of individual

citizens would not be compromised in the name of protecting ethnic rights. A political package that respects both individual and indigenous rights needs to be worked out. Study and research in defining citizenship, not on ethnic lines but by some other criterion, is the only alternative.

Conclusion

This paper has made an effort to look at Catholic missions and their involvement in the tribal communities of North-East India. It has briefly summarized a few activities of Catholic missions, especially in the educational and pastoral field, and has made an audit of their contributions. It has taken note of the emerging tensions faced by the missionaries and potential challenges that beckon them to respond proactively in the vineyard of the Lord.

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FORMS OF MISSIONARY ENGAGEMENT AMONG MIZO CHRISTIANS

Vanlalrova Khiangte

Introduction

Missionaries came to Mizoram in 1894, which was a little late in comparison with their arrival in the other states of North-East India. Nevertheless, their missionary work was very remarkable. The revivals in Mizoram which motivated new Christians to share their new faith and experiences helped to spread the gospel. Within almost half a century, all the Mizos had become Christian.

There are three main missions or churches which were planted by foreign missionaries: Presbyterian in the north, Baptist in the south, and the Independent Pioneer Lakher (Mara) mission in the south. Besides these, there are other denominational churches as well as para-churches. These have made remarkable contributions in mission both within and outside Mizoram.

Early Missionaries Among the Mizos

Within two decades of Christian missionaries coming to Mizoram, Mizo Christians were going to the neighbouring regions to preach the gospel as well as to help foreign missionaries. American missionary Watkin Roberts, who worked in Manipur among different tribes, requested new Mizo converts Vanzika, Savawma and Taitea to preach the gospel in Manipur in 1910, and all their expenses were met by collections from America.¹ In 1911, Hrangvunga also travelled to the western parts and entered modern Tripura, and in 1913, R. Dala, a church elder from Aizawl was also sent to Manipur. In 1913, Mr Thianga (later the Rev. Thianga) migrated to Haflong, Assam, for the sake of the gospel.² In 1923, Welsh Mission Commission member, the Rev. T.W. Reese, pointed out: 'Throughout the years, the church in Lushai (Mizo) has been noted as a missionary-minded church... They now feel eager to carry out missionary work beyond the

¹ Saiaithanga, *Mizo Kohran Chanchin (History of the Mizo Church)*, (Aizawl: Regional Theological Literature Committee, 1969), 97. Saiaithanga is a first-generation Christian leader, theologian #historian, and an active pastor.

² S. Nengzakhup, *Amazing Mizo Mission* (Bangalore: SAIACS Press, 1999), 5.

confines of their own land – in a word, to form a foreign mission.³ The zeal to share their new faith compelled the Mizos to preach the gospel to other people, particularly to their relatives, and then move on to their neighbours, then to the adjoining villages, and later to their neighbouring states.

From Individual to Church Activities

The zeal to spread the gospel by individuals influenced the community and the church. The newly instituted church initiated a special project called *Beihruah* (United Effort) in 1917-18 in which every year, the second half of September would be a month for mission work. Within this period, the Mizo Christians would try to convert all their fellow villagers. It was very successful and still continues today as a month for strengthening the Christian faith as well as a time to discuss mission work. In 1926, the Mizoram Presbyterian Church Synod (Assembly) resolved to have their own mission field and adopted to send a missionary among the Homelin in Burma.⁴ This growing missionary work compelled the church to form a separate mission committee and, as a result, in 1953 the Synod Mission Committee was formed. Because of the rapid growth of mission-related activities, the Synod Mission Committee became the Synod Mission Board in 1961 with a full-time secretary in 1966.⁵ The attitude towards mission was also the same in the Baptist Church of Mizoram: in 1939, its Assembly resolved to send evangelists among the Bru and Chakmas, (neighbouring tribes who lived in western Mizoram and parts of Bangladesh), and in 1966 a fully-fledged mission committee was formed, called the Zoram Baptist Mission (ZBM).⁶ Similarly, in 1966, the ECM (Evangelical Church of Mizoram) sent a missionary to the Khumi Tribe in Myanmar, and enlarged their mission field to include different parts of India as well.⁷ Thus, mission activities included all denominational churches in and outside Mizoram.

At present, the Presbyterian Church has the largest number of mission fields in India and Nepal – 14 in all – and the Church has overseas missionaries sent through various mission agencies such as CWM, LMS, etc. The Baptist Church carries out mission work in North-East and Central India and in Nepal. They also send missionaries in collaboration with different mission agencies. The ECM also has five mission fields in Myanmar and five in India, and they have missionaries in Africa as well.

³ J. Meirion Lloyd, *History of the Church in Mizoram: Harvest in the Hills* (Aizawl: Synod Publication Board, 1991), 350.

⁴ Lloyd, *History of the Church in Mizoram*.

⁵ S. Nengzakhup, *Amazing Mizo Mission*, 8.

⁶ *Compendium of the Baptist Church of Mizoram* (Lunglei: The Centenary Committee, Baptist Church of Mizoram, NY), 25-26.

⁷ Zakhu Hlychho, *Mara Ram Evangelical Kohhran leh a dintute* (Maraland Gospel Centenary Edition, 2007), 67.

The Salvation Army has missionaries in different parts of India, Nepal and Bhutan. The LIKBK (Lairam Isua Krista Baptist Kohhran) has missionaries in different parts of North-East India. Besides these, mission associations also send their own missionaries to different places in India and abroad.

Some Forms of Engagement

Churches as well as mission associations appoint their missionaries to different places, and each of them has their own strategies for their mission work. They are engaged in different ways such as in preaching or teaching, establishing schools and training centres.

Evangelism and church planting

The main objective of the Presbyterian Church Mission Board has been evangelism and church planting.⁸ It defines evangelism as preaching the gospel directly and indirectly. The main form of direct contact is by preaching. The indirect strategies include establishing schools, craft training and vocational centres, medical services to name a few. Church planting continues to mean establishing churches identical to the Presbyterian Church in Mizoram.

The Baptist Church of Mizoram also has church planting as its main aim and objective, and this is clearly mentioned in their Mission Handbook,⁹ in which planting a church could be understood as converting and organizing people to worship as is practised in Mizoram.

Most of the denominational churches have missions in Mizoram called Home Missions, and outside Mizoram or cross-cultural missions called Mission Fields. In these divisions, the main aim and objective is to convert the local population to Christianity and help them to worship as the denomination in Mizoram. These Home Mission departments have mainly focused on the Chakma, Bru (Tuikuk) tribes in the northern and western parts of Mizoram, as well as a few tribes in the southern part. After 1970, preaching the gospel to non-Mizos (called *vai*) was also started. The Presbyterian Church has some ordained pastors among them and also has full-time evangelists.

In each of their mission fields, churches from Mizoram have established their own denominational churches. The objective has been to establish the

⁸ *Synod Mission Board Manual* (Aizawl: Synod Mission Board, 2009), 7.

⁹ The Handbook of the Baptist Church of Mizoram (BCM) mission department states that their main objective is church planting which would be fulfilled in word and deed. As with other denominations, they too have established churches identical with the Baptist church in Mizoram. See *BCM Mission Department Inkaihruaina bu* (*A Handbook of BCM Missions Department*), (Serkawn: n.p., n.d.), 1.

local church using the 'Three-Self' formula.¹⁰ But almost all of them have not been wholly successful in this. The ECM has a policy of establishing a church that they will leave after 25 years but they have not been successful in this policy either.¹¹

Mission training

Before going to the mission field, mission orientation or mission training is compulsory.¹² The Presbyterian Church Mission Board has been conducting a one-year missionary training course since 1978 which was initially attached to Aizawl Theological College. Since 1996, the course is conducted on its own separate campus with increased staff.¹³ This training course was further upgraded in 2009 and is now a Bachelor of Missiology (BMiss) in what is now the Missionary Training College. The Baptist Church of Mizoram also offers mission studies in the Academy of Integrated Christian Studies (AICS), Aizawl.

Would-be missionaries are taught Biblical studies, mission history and strategies, church history, language and other mission-related studies. Besides missionary training centres, denominations also have mission awareness programmes in local churches. In addition, some mission associations also run mission training schools. Besides these, mission studies are included in adult Sunday Schools, especially in the *Nilai thupui* (Wednesday evening lesson), which give lay people information about mission work.

Missionary support

Since churches in Mizoram are self-supporting, each denomination tries to establish churches using the Three-Self formula. For supporting missionaries and their needs, church members collect finances and raise funds for special projects. Youth and women's groups also actively support mission work, and are involved every year in preparing new projects on the advice of the mission board. In the villages, congregations have regular

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¹⁰ Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson have a formula for the mission field called the Three-Self formula: self-supporting, self governing, self-propagating.

¹¹ According to ECM pastors Danny Chozah and Joseph Koma Chozah, studying at Aizawl Theological College, the ECM mission policy is different from other churches in Mizoram in that they develop local leaders for their future churches.

¹² Synod Mission Board Manual, 8, 10; Handbook of BCM Mission Department, 17.

¹³ Rev. V.L. Zaithanga, 'Aizawl Theological College leh Missionary Training Centre Inlaichinna' (the relationship between Aizawl Theological College and Missionary Training Centre), in *Kum za mel lung (A Hundred Years Milestone)*, Vanlalngahaka Ralte (ed), (Aizawl: Aizawl Theological College, 2007), 35.

mission collections such as the ‘missionary wood stick’ project and monthly missionary funds collected in envelopes.

During the financial year 2010-11, the Mizoram Presbyterian Church received Rs 31,96,28,025/-towards funds for mission (the total received was Rs 72,30,34,339/-) and spent Rs 30,63,44,977/-(total payment was Rs 63,89,17,498/-).¹⁴ This means that almost half of the total budget was spent on mission work. This is a trend that can also be seen in other denominations in the state.

Home administration

As mentioned earlier, all the denominations have their own mission boards or committees to look after their activities. These are the deciding bodies and the ones that propose projects and other programmes. Both the Presbyterian Church and the Baptist Church in Mizoram have dedicated mission offices with full-time workers, a mission secretary who is ordained, and other staff such as a mission promoter, co-ordinators, etc. Similarly, the ECM, LIKKBK, Salvation Army, etc. also have full-time mission workers. They are supported by committee members appointed from local churches and pastorates for a period of three or four years. The home administration is mainly a collection of full-time workers with members from the pastorates and local churches. Sometimes, however, such a set-up results in problems of unity among board or mission committee members.

Mission among the non-Mizos (vai) in Mizoram

From the beginning, Mizo Christians were eager to share their faith experiences with their relatives, neighbours and friends, and even with other people living among them. The effort to begin mission work among the non-Mizos living in Mizoram was started in the 1970s.

The term ‘non-Mizos’ was usually understood to mean the Hindi-speaking people. They are daily labourers, people skilled in different professions, business people and government servants. The Presbyterian Church Mission Board has called this aspect of their mission work ‘Masihi Sangati’.¹⁵ In 1990, the ‘Hindi Bible School’ was set up for the new converts, which has now become a centre for developing leadership skills

¹⁴ Report of Presbyterian Church Finance Officer, 7th June 2011. Rs. 63,89,17,498 equaled almost 14 Mil. US Dollar in 2011

¹⁵ Mission among non-Mizos (called *vai*) was started by the local church in Aizawl around 1976, and was enlarged to other places and cities. The SMB took over responsibility for this from 1977 by appointing a full-time evangelist. The Masihi Sangati organizes a big convention every year to encourage existing members as well as to convert others. See ‘Mizoram chungna hnamdang zinga rawngbawlna’, in *Synod Mission Service Manual 2009* (Aizawl: Mizoram Presbyterian Church Synod Mission Board, 2009), 161-62.

among them. There has been great progress with the opening of this school¹⁶ and, every year, mission fields send their members to this school for developing their local leadership.

Besides this, as already mentioned, missionaries are working among other tribes in Mizoram, particularly the Bru (Tuikuk), the Chakma in the west, and the Khumi and other tribes in the south. The Baptist Church is also involved in mission work among the Bru and the Chakma tribes in the south west of Mizoram.¹⁷ The Presbyterian Church has permanent workers among these tribes, and has helped in the development of local leaders, and now there are two ordained pastors from the Bru tribe and one probationary pastor from among the Chakmas.

Evaluation

The zeal to preach the gospel was mainly influenced by the spirit of revival which awakened in the new Mizo converts the need to share their faith experiences with their sister tribes. Thus, the new faith brings different sister tribes into the fold of Mizo Christianity. The Rev. Dr Vanlalhlana rightly said, 'The revival made Christianity the possession of the Mizo Christian.'¹⁸ Thus, Christianity can be said to have brought unity among sister tribes in and around Mizoram.

Secondly, *tlawmngaihna*, a Mizo cultural ethos, urged Mizos to preach the gospel. *Tlawmngaihna* is the spirit that moves one to do something good or beneficial for others, even at the cost of self and in a spirit of sacrifice for others. This spirit was embedded within Mizo culture before Christianity came to Mizoram, and it helped them to understand the Christian teaching of sacrifice for others as well as living a life for the wellbeing of others.

Besides helping others, Mizos have encouraged each other to be self-supportive economically. This ethos also helps them to be a self-sufficient church. In this regard, the pioneer missionary, J.H. Lorrain observes (in 1934),¹⁹ 'The Church in both the northern and southern hills is self-governing, self-supporting, and a number of its members may be found working... in different neighbouring tribes.' But this zeal and commitment to help others has not resulted in churches in the mission fields becoming

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¹⁶ Lalfakzuala, 'The Story of the Synod Mission Board', in *Mizoram Presbyterian Church – A History of Departments*, Vanlalchhuanawma (ed), (Aizawl: Aizawl Theological College, 2007), 32.

¹⁷ *Compendium of the Baptist Church of Mizoram* (Lunglei: Baptist Church of Mizoram, 2003), 25. The Baptist Church started missionary work among the Bru and Chakma in 1939.

¹⁸ Vanlalhlana, *The Doctrine of Grace, Augustine's Doctrine of Grace and Human Free Will and an Appraisal from a Mizo Christian Perspective* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2010), 285.

¹⁹ Vanlalhlana, *The Doctrine of Grace*, 275.

self-sufficient or self-dependent. Not all mission fields can meet their financial needs as these still depend on the denominations in Mizoram. It remains to be seen how long the denominations in Mizoram can continue with such an arrangement in the mission fields.²⁰

Quality mission work is seen to be a real challenge since many church leaders are satisfied with the increase in the number of converts from the mission field reports. On the other hand, as already mentioned, the Mizo Christian mission expanded Mizo identity among the sister tribes in and around Mizoram. Whenever Mizo missionaries preached the gospel to their neighbouring tribes, they helped create a Mizo way of understanding faith practices and formed a community which identified with Mizo culture. Even politically, some tribes supported Mizo political nationalism. Many also use the Mizo dialect in their worship as well as in their community meetings. This has resulted in the development of a Mizo tribal identity among different tribes in and around Mizoram.²¹

In the case of mission funding, there is tremendous support from within all the denominations. The following data for example, shows the growth of mission funds in the Presbyterian Church:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Amount in Indian rupees</u>
1932:	Rs. 26.
1942:	Rs. 840.
1952:	Rs. 758.
1962:	Rs. 13,896.
1972:	Rs. 1,43,203.
1982:	Rs. 20,93,891.
1992:	Rs. 3,01,65,066.
2001-02:	Rs. 11,25,19,652.
2010-11:	Rs. 31,96,28,025.

Conclusion

The Rev. Lalfakzuala comments that full-time workers in the mission department form a large proportion of workers in the Presbyterian Church in Mizoram.²² It is also true of all other churches in Mizoram. The spirit of revival urged Mizos to go to the mission field to preach the gospel. Because of this zeal, within a short time all the Mizos embraced Christianity.

The spirit of spreading the gospel led the first-generation Christians to preach their faith to their relatives, their fellow villagers, and then to those around them belonging to different tribes and cultures. As in the case of Presbyterian Church, funds for mission work were collected every year

²⁰ Lalfakzuala, 'The Story of the Synod Mission Board', 32.

²¹ Vanlalchhuanawma, *Mission and Tribal Identity* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2010), 204ff.

²² Lalfakzuala, 'The Story of the Synod Mission Board', 33.

making up almost half of the total amount given to the church. This is also true of all the other churches. This may be considered a remarkable challenge for churches outside Mizoram or even for churches in developed countries.

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MISSIONARIES, EDUCATION AND THE NAGAS

Chujang Longchar

Introduction

This paper briefly highlights the role of western missionaries who brought and portrayed Christianity in colonized India as part of an education which was to lead to the reformation and transformation of the native Nagas of present-day state of Nagaland. These missionaries, under the banner of the 'Civilizing Mission of White Men', introduced a process of modernization among the tribals of North-East India within the framework of the 'Acceptance of Imperial British Rule'.¹ This paper examines the objective of western missionaries engaged in imparting education in Nagaland. It will also attempt to assess the response of the Nagas to this new education, which has implications for the argument about Christian domination versus tribal emancipation. It also examines the impact of modern education on Naga society at large, and defines ideological responses, particularly within the post-modern discourse. The paper will put forward the argument that this education had considerable impact on the culture in which it took place, though was not always with the impact the missionaries had intended.

A Brief History of Education in Nagaland

Empowerment with education is an essential parameter of judging the standards of a civilized society. Every human society subsists on and grows up with education of some kind. Nagas were no different. In view of the fact that there was no established tribal or inter-tribal organization to deal with the requirements of the tribes as a whole, each village became exclusively accountable for its own socio-economic, political and spiritual needs. Such needs required that the young people be taught and educated within the family and village community.

Nagaland is located in the north-eastern part of India. The land is mountainous and has an area of 1615 square kilometres with a mean altitude of 1325.8 metres above sea level. Although Christianity came to India possibly in the first century after Christ, through one of the twelve

¹ Firoj High Sawar, 'Christian Missionaries and Female Education During East India Company's Rule', in *Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 4/1 (Nov-Dec 2012), 37.

Apostles of Jesus Christ, namely St Thomas,² for many centuries Indian Christians and overseas missionaries were not involved in evangelizing North-East India. It was William Carey who sent Krishna Pal to the Khasi people in the nineteenth century and initiated the Christianization of the tribes of North-East India. It was the American Baptist missionaries who began establishing various mission stations in Assam. Some of their interactions led to some Ao Nagas being baptized.³ However, until the arrival of Edward Winter Clark in 1869, no work of a permanent nature began among the Naga tribe.⁴

The Nagas were introduced to missionaries as head-hunting savages from warring villages.⁵ To such people a time came when Capt. Francis Jenkins, the then Assam Commissioner in 1834 invited missionaries to work among the Nagas.⁶ He said, '... the savage head-hunters could not be raised to the standard of civilization unless they were redeemed from their primitive way of life by spreading Christianity and education.'⁷ The early days of the missionaries were days of great social changes and rapid church growth. They, along with the indigenous converts, were regarded as missionaries, social workers, medical workers and great teachers.⁸ While transformation in Naga society was due to many factors such as colonization, the development of transport and communications, the introduction of western education, etc. it can be argued that the most effective factor was the introduction of modern education and the spread of Christianity.

Traditional Naga Education

Traditional Naga society⁹ had no formal education system as it was understood and practised in the West. Education was through oral transmission and experiential learning. It was participatory and practical, and took place in the context of the home and larger community. Priority

² A.M. Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India: From the Beginning up to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century*, Vol. I (Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 1984), 9.

³ *Merangkong Church Jubilee magazine* (Merangkong: Merangkong Church, 1980), 33-34.

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⁴ '56th Annual Report', in *Baptist missionary Magazine* (1870), 284.

⁵ Mary Mead Clark, *A Corner in India* (Guwahati: CLC, 1978), 9.

⁶ F.S. Downs, *The Mighty Works of God; A Brief History of the Council of Baptist Churches in North East India: The Mission Period, 1836-1950* (Guwahati: CLC, 1971), 16.

⁷ *Ao Naga Baptist Church Centenary, 1872-1972 Album* (Impur: ABAM, 1972), 1.

⁸ Mar Atsongchanger, *Christian Education and Social Change* (Guwahati: CLC, 1995), 1.

⁹ While the term 'Naga' is used in a general sense for the ribs and sub-tribes that makes up the Nagas, specific terms and contexts reflect the Ao Naga situation, the tribe to which the writer belongs.

and emphasis was given to formation of character over information of a body of knowledge such as ideas and ethos. As such, theory was of little use, because the purpose was to develop skills and character rather than impart a certain quantity of essentially abstract knowledge. Traditional knowledge was not concerned with abstract thoughts but with real and practical needs and experiences of the community. Intense debates and rationalization were unknown, because in a community-based society such activities were considered to be self-promoting and not conducive to harmonious existence.

The Nagas hardly taught or learnt anything that was irrelevant or immaterial because the objective of education was to make an individual fit for the societal role expected of him or her. For this reason, traditional education was inextricably integrated with the socio-economic, artistic, religious and recreational life of the community. Each person was an integral part of the community and, as such, was taught to be responsible to the family and community, thereby contributing to the cohesion and harmony of the whole. Thus, contrary to western education, traditional education was not aimed at producing change, innovation or creativity, but conformity with social norms. Change or innovation was seen as anathema, because change was regarded as bringing disruption and discontinuity to existing social norms and practices.¹⁰

If there was a Naga institution that could be considered to even remotely resemble a western school, it was the *Morung* or *Arju* (an 'institutional house' or 'dormitories'). The *Morung* (in the Ao Naga tribe) was the centre of social life as well as a training centre. These were the places where young boys and girls were trained, disciplined and given instruction. The *Morung* was an important educational institution for boys and girls in which learning took place in the context of communal living. The training of a child in a Naga *Morung* was inherently utilitarian in that children were taught the art and skills of daily living and familiarity with social norms. Education within the *Morung* was understood as sharing or 'communication of life' rather than 'communication of knowledge'. Normal activities at the *Morung* were never organized, but were spontaneous and members responded naturally. Much of the Naga culture, customs and traditions have been transmitted from generation to generation through the media of folk music and dance, folk tales and oral historical traditions. Much of this teaching-learning process took place in the men's and women's dormitories.¹¹ Family pride, personal arrogance and social

¹⁰ Tezenla Thong, 'Education for Savages: Examining the History, Objective and Problems of Westernized Education System among Nagas', in *Journal of Tribal Studies*, XV/1 (January-June, 2010), 47-49.

¹¹ Tuisem A. Shishak, 'Nagas and Education', in *Nagas' 90: All Things Become New* (Guwahati: Literature Committee, 1990), 22.

class had no place in the *Morung*, for rich and poor were equal in *Morung* society and in Naga society in general.¹²

Folk tales and oral historical traditions have been the best and most effective means of transmitting events of the past, and even today one finds by the fireside at home, an elder telling folk stories to a group of children. In the absence of any written documents, folk tales and oral historical traditions remained the sole links between the past and the present. In other words, it was an institution where the present generation was shown the direction of their future by pointing to and imparting the values of the past. Until its gradual decline and final abandonment after decades of Christianization and westernization, the institution of the *Morung* had been the most powerful influence in Naga society.¹³

It would be naive to believe that Nagas received no education before their contact with westerners. Education is itself part of the social organization of any society, whether or not that society has anything which might be recognized as a school. Naga society, though without the formal schooling of the West, regarded education as operative at all stages of human life and very much in the interests of the cohesion of village communities.

The History of Mission Education

When British military officer Francis Jenkins, who is referred to as ‘the originator of the mission’,¹⁴ invited the American Baptist missionaries to undertake the project of proselytizing the natives, he also offered financial assistance for establishing a school and purchasing a printing press. The work of missionary Miles Bronson among the Namsang Nagas in 1839-40 was enthusiastically supported by British officials. This encouraged the home board of American missions to recruit and send immediately a missionary couple and Bronson’s sister to join the effort.¹⁵ By co-operating with Bronson, Jenkins had hoped ‘to see civilization greatly advanced among the Nagas, and our supremacy gradually extended over the hills’, and believed that without such co-operative effort in the civilizing mission ‘there seem to be little hope of effecting any great change in the habits of

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¹² Jonatsungba Amer, *Biblical Principles of Christian Education Applied to Christian Schools in Nagaland* (Mokokchung: Merakiong Baptist Church, 1993), 11.

¹³ M. Alemchiba Ao, ‘Problems of Re-Adjustment to a New Situation’, in *The Tribal Situation in India*, K. Suresh Singh (ed), (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1972), 482.

¹⁴ William A.M. Gammell, *A History of American Baptist Missions in Asia, Africa, Europe and North America* (Boston: Gould Kendall and Lincoln Press, 1949), 217.

¹⁵ Milton S. Sangma, *A History of American Baptist Mission in North-East India 1836-1950*, Vol. I (Delhi: Mittal, 1987), 219.

the people, or our being able to avail... of the great natural resources of the fine tract of mountainous country'.¹⁶

Similarly, another British colonial officer, W. Robinson (1841), expressed the hope that the educational and literary efforts of the missionaries in 'the alpine tract of the Naga country could perhaps be made to support a greater population of savages'.¹⁷ This was the initial phase of educational mission. In the context of the Nagas, one can say that Christianity and education went hand-in-hand. Education was in fact, one of the most effective instruments for the spread of Christianity. With rare exceptions, a school was the forerunner of a church in a village.¹⁸ Christianity entered and was formally established on Naga soil in 1872, and very soon the missionaries saw that the ideal way to propagate the gospel was by opening schools. They also realized that without knowing how to read and write it was impossible for the local people to read the scriptures. To educate and develop local leaders for propagating the gospel was another important factor in opening schools. Therefore, during the early period, wherever a church was founded, a school was established. In most cases schools were established first.¹⁹ Thus, education was viewed as an agency through which the people would be given instruction about Christianity.

Historically, while there is evidence of trade links between the Nagas of the hills and the people of the neighbouring plains, there is no record of teaching and the learning of any script or the opening of any formal school as a result of these interactions. If education without literacy can be perceived, the Nagas had it well derived from an indigenous system to deliver the needs of those times for their survival and growth. A beginning at modern education was attempted by the Rev. Miles Bronson who prepared the first spelling book and a catechism for the Singho Nagas of Arunachal Pradesh. However, his effort was short-lived since he had to return home due to ill health.²⁰

The second stage in the development of education in Nagaland was initiated by an Assamese Christian named Godhula at the instance of the

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¹⁶ H.K. Barpujari, *The American Missionaries and North-East India 1836-1900* (n.p.: Spectrum Publishers, 1986), 256.

¹⁷ Verrier Elwin, *The Nagas in the Nineteenth Century* (Mumbai: Oxford University Press, 1969), 28.

¹⁸ O.L. Snaitang, *Christianity and Social Change in Northeast India* (Kolkata: Vendrame Institute, Shillong, 1993), 116.

¹⁹ *Molungkimong Arogo Centenary Otsu* (Mokokchung: Molungkimong Baptist Church, 1972), 70.

²⁰ Kiremwati, *Education and the Nagas* (Mokokchung: Eastern Book Agency, 1995), 11.

Rev. E.W. Clark in 1871. In October 1871, Godhula, taking along with him a teacher,²¹ came to Dekahaimong (Molungkimong) and started to teach.

The Objective of Missionary Education

In the colonial mindset, civilization was considered a prerequisite for proselytization, and it was believed that civilizing the uncivilized natives would prepare them to grasp and embrace Christianity.²² With regard to the professed primary objective of fostering education among the Nagas, one missionary report reads, 'The main objective of these schools is the proclamation of the gospel to the people of the village.' This is borne out by American missionary W.F. Dowd's report on the first mission school in the Naga Hills:

The Impur School is intended to give a primary education to as many boys and girls as possible and fit them to go out as teachers and preachers... They study arithmetic, writing, spelling, physiology, hygiene, geography and history; at the same time special attention is given to the study of the scriptures and practical Christian work. The brighter pupils are taught English as soon as they can read their own language, and thus is opened to them the way for more advanced work in secular subjects as well as for the study of the entire Bible.²³

This being the goal, most of the school teachers were also preachers. The introduction of literacy and a modern education system, while intending to civilize the Nagas, was also viewed as a means of developing an indigenous leadership in the hope that learned Nagas would become missionary agents as teachers and preachers among their own people and beyond.

The American Baptist missionaries had the strong conviction that the natives' ability to read and write would enhance and solidify the work of missions – as was reported by Clark: '... as these [Nagas] know how to read the scriptures, we have a better foundation for church membership and for preachers.'²⁴ As the Nagas expressed a growing desire for education, as reported by one missionary, English schools sprang up to meet the need, and 'nearly all of them included compulsory Bible training, which was supplied by teachers paid by the mission'.²⁵

The effort to 'civilize' the Nagas was a co-operative enterprise between the British colonizers and the American missionaries; and both believed

²¹ Milton S. Sangma, *A History of American Baptist Mission in North-East India*, Vol. II (New Delhi: Mittal, 1992), 191.

²² J. Dharmaraj, *Colonialism and Christian Mission: Postcolonial Reflections* (Delhi: Mittal, 1999), 24.

²³ W.F. Dowd, *Baptist Missionary Magazine* 85/1 (January, 1905), 19.

²⁴ E.W. Clark, *Baptist Missionary Magazine* (July, 1884), 259.

²⁵ Robert Torbet, *Venture of Faith: The Story of the Baptist Foreign Mission Society and the Woman's American Foreign Mission Society 1814-1954* (Philadelphia, PA: Judson Press, 1955), 496.

education was a means to an end. While the missionaries' goal of education was conversion, the aim for the British colonizers was pacification of the 'wild head-hunters'. While fostering western education was a joint venture, education and evangelization was overseen mostly by American missionaries who were in the forefront of introducing western education to the Nagas.²⁶ Thus it was felt that education and Christianity served as channels through which one could become civilized and progress as well. However, in the process of education and Christianization, both missionaries and coloniser imported and imposed their cultures and ideologies on the people. In fact, there was no serious effort on the part of the missionaries or mission societies to understand tribal institutions or sympathetically deal with the religious and cultural sentiments of Naga people. Mission societies believed that the Nagas were consigned to the lowest rung of civilisation because of their barbarous and superstitious tribal religion, while they assumed that the introduction of western education and Christianity alone would redeem them from their religious and cultural predicament. Additionally, local missionaries and converts were not treated on equal terms with foreign missionaries. There were even instances of missionaries vehemently opposing efforts by Naga Christian leaders to form indigenous missions.

Impacts

It must be recognized that no single approach has the answers to all-important questions. Indeed, as M.N. Srinivas points out, '... the subject of change is vast and complex, and an adequate understanding of it will require the collaboration of many years, a number of scholars in such diverse fields...' ²⁷ This paper will attempt to see the impact of Christianity on the Nagas from an educational perspective. There are many factors that led to changes in Naga society, such as the British annexation of Nagaland, the building of a network of roads, the establishment of the legal system, a new economic and political outlook, the establishment of schools and the study of western literature. However, one can assume that education and Christianity had the most impact in terms of social change than any other agent.²⁸ In modern education, it is considered important to study social change from the point of view of social progress – also because education is considered to be an agent of social change. We see that, in the principles of education, the study of social change in relation to education occupies an

²⁶ Thong, 'Education for Savages: Examining the History, Objective and Problems of Westernized Education System among Nagas', 47.

²⁷ M.N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India* (Mumbai: Allied Publishers, 1966), 1.

²⁸ Atsongchanger, *Christian Education and Social Change*, 39.

important place.²⁹ Christian missionaries introduced school education on the understanding that, unless the local people knew the basics of reading and writing, the proclamation of the gospel would not produce effective results.³⁰

The impact of Christian missions among the Nagas is worth examining. The stigma of social and economic depression and alienation that rested upon them for generations had led them to a sub-human level of existence. They had been exploited for centuries by the neighbouring Hindus. For many who converted to Christianity, this represented liberation. They benefited from the educational facilities provided by missions. Converts in the tribal groups made striking progress in their social and cultural lives. The majority of the people converted in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were tribals from North-East India. Besides general education, missions also imparted technical education to the Nagas. In the field of health and hygiene too, missions rendered substantial service by providing medical aid to women and children.³¹ The social activities of the Christian missions were directed towards bringing about moral reforms in Naga society and helped in the emancipation of individuals from their age-old superstitions and other social evils such as head-hunting. With the support of liberal Naga leaders and missionaries, the British colonial government introduced several legal measures of social reforms.³²

Education through Christianity has been a great boon to the people of Nagaland. Along with education, Christian missionaries have also given a script to many tribal groups who possessed only an oral tradition. This brought about the development of tribal literature which in turn united the people through a common language and created greater unity and solidarity among them.³³ Education was looked upon as one of the best means of evangelization. In this manner, a wide network of primary schools was started in many places in the region and some of the promising indigenous converts were commissioned to work as resident primary teachers in different villages and to work as evangelists as well.

When Nagaland was granted statehood, major changes in the educational policies were also brought about. Grant-in-aid was given to private schools initially, and after some years, the government would usually take up the

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²⁹ Sita Ram Jayaswal, *Education and Society* (Lucknow: Prakashan Kendra, 1972), 181.

³⁰ O.L. Snaitang, 'Christianity and Change among the Hill Tribes of Northeast India', in *Christianity and Change in Northeast India*, T.B. Subha, Joseph Puthenpurakal, and Shaji Joseph Puykunnel (eds), (New Delhi: Concept, 2009), 151.

³¹ P. Thomas, *Christian and Christianity in India and Pakistan* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1954), 195-200.

³² K.T. Paul, *The British Connection with India* (London: SCM, 1927), 70.

³³ S. Nag, *India and northeast India: Mind Politics and the Process of Integration 1946-1950* (New Delhi: Regency, 1998), 20.

whole responsibility of running such schools. Education, for the Nagas, was perhaps the most important aspect of progress, so higher and better education for youngsters was in great demand. It can be argued that British rule civilised the Nagas in the modern sense of the term by giving them a new political outlook, and enabled contact with the outside world which also contributed to incorporating them in the mainstream of national life. The influence of the missionaries also led to other changes in the lives of the converts. For example, they were not supposed to wear any ornaments or dresses that were associated with their former traditional beliefs. They were also advised to drink tea instead of rice beer.

With the introduction of education, a common language and a written literature were made available to the people that brought about a sense of togetherness and common understanding through the medium of language.³⁴ With a common language, they were able to come together to discuss issues of common interest, since language is always a cementing factor that brings people of the same tongue together.³⁵ Interestingly, when a school was opened in a new village, the teacher almost always came from a different tribal group. The fact that a tribal group with its own political integrity accepted the presence of a teacher from another political area was in itself an indication of the breaking down of old barriers. Gradually such contacts promoted social relationships. The introduction of education thus also contributed to a breakdown of the traditional clan and territorial identities and promoted a tribal identity. This in turn led to cultural revitalization.³⁶

Another important contribution of education to the people of Nagaland in particular and North-East India in general was to make them aware of their cultural identity. The Mizos, for example, admit that they owe their identity and solidarity to Christianity and that it is the strongest integrating force in their society.³⁷ This was also the case with the people of Nagaland. Education has been able to create a group of intelligentsia, scholars and theologians in the community who are able to motivate their people and who attempt to rewrite their stories and experiences in their own context. Female empowerment was also another significant achievement of education in Nagaland. Though women played an important role in society, they were not necessarily highly regarded or permitted freedom of action. Education provided them with opportunities for leadership in areas where they had not previously exercised it and thus elevated their status in the society.

³⁴ M. Horam, *Nagas' Old Ways and New Trends* (New Delhi: Cosmo, 1988), 87.

³⁵ Atsongchanger, *Christian Education and Social Change*, 45.

³⁶ O.L. Snaitang, *Christianity and Social Change in Northeast India*, 156.

³⁷ J.V. Hluna, 'Contribution of Christianity to Overall Development with Special Reference to Mizoram', in *Impact of Christianity on Northeast India*, J. Puthenpurakal (ed), (Shillong: Vendrame Institute, 1996), 471.

Thus, education through Christianity has been the most powerful agent in the development and well-being of the people of Nagaland. Mass education has increased the percentage of literacy and the method of conscientization through education has enabled them to become more conscious about their rights, duties and privileges, and has motivated them to commit themselves to the transformation of society. This phenomenon has led to a large scale of reaction to any act of injustice and marginalization perpetrated by the central administration³⁸ as well as by the missionaries. In fact, the missions brought with them an attitude of moral superiority and a claim in their own exclusive righteousness and the association of missionary work with aggressive imperialism. Nevertheless, keeping in mind the role of schools as evangelistic agencies and in developing a knowledgeable Christian community as well as future leaders of all aspects of society, it can be said that Christian educational activities made an important contribution to the development of the tribal identity and of solidarity³⁹ among the Nagas during the twentieth century.

The Indigenous Convert's Involvement in Education

Naga Christians did not realize until recently that they had a history of their own. The community saw itself 'as an appendage to the history of western Christian missions and the story of western missionaries', as M.M. Thomas puts it.⁴⁰ The move for contextualization made by the Theological Education Fund of the World Council of Churches, when Shoki Ko was its Director in the 1960s, inspired some of the theological educators in India to take the Indian context seriously in doing theology and in writing history as well. Praxis and involvement-oriented theological education was seen as vital for theologizing in context.⁴¹ Consequently, regional theological literature committees were formed in various parts of India and did reasonably well in producing basic books needed for theological education in regional languages.

As Downs points out, 'Every historian working in North East India especially among different tribes will express their grief for the scarcity of written documents or primary sources to support historical works.'⁴² This

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³⁸ Hluna, 'Contribution of Christianity to Overall Development with Special Reference to Mizoram', 471.

³⁹ Snaitang, *Christianity and Social Change in Northeast India*, 155-56.

⁴⁰ M.M. Thomas, in his foreword to Robin H.S. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (CLS: Chennai, 1969), v.

⁴¹ Gnana Robinson, 'Theological Writings in India: Problems and Possibilities', in *Theological Writings: Guidelines, Hints and Tips*, Samson Prabhakar (ed), (Bangalore: BTESSC/SATHRI, 2006), 3.

⁴² F.S. Downs, *History of Christianity in India: North East India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, Vol. V, Part 5, Northeast India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 1991), 10.

was also the case with Christianity in India since many of the primary documents belonging to different mission agencies were deposited in various archives and libraries in the West and many Indian scholars for various reasons could not easily access these sources. With reference to the historiography of Christianity in North-East India, mission histories were conditioned by a western perspective, written for western readers and for the purpose of promoting the cause of mission. These histories mainly discussed missionaries and their methods, their experience and sacrifices, successes and failures, and usually portrayed the experiences of the local people as simplistic.⁴³ The contributions made by local Christians in the history of education in Nagaland received no due recognition. Though Christianity and education was initiated by foreign missionaries, the education and the evangelization of the tribe was largely the work of the indigenous Naga Christian converts. In such a context, it was the local converts, who were the main instruments and agents in promoting Christianity and educational work in Nagaland and beyond. This resulted in the establishment of a number of schools, colleges and religious institutions. Indigenous Christians developed indigenous perspectives and envisaged that the history and theology of the people ought to be written in the context of the social, political and cultural background of the given people rather than as an extension of Christianity and doctrine from the West. Hence, it is vital to briefly outline and acknowledge the contributions made by Naga Christians.

As far as Naga society is concerned, the right education is the foremost need. Since it is considered that the gospel of Christ brought the light of education, good education is highly prized by every family and individual. On the other hand, the church has also realized the precarious consequences of wrong education prevailing in the current educational system.⁴⁴ Throughout the nineteenth century and the first few decades of the twentieth, the Naga literacy scene was dominated by missionaries and consisted mainly of biblical or Christian literature from the perspective of foreign missions with a few exceptions where the native language and literature were used as a means for propagating Christianity. The missionaries did not realize that language was the most important factor that characterized Naga identity, except in later decades when Naga Christians tried to explore the Naga religious thought form in their writings. It served as a platform to critique the Christian bias of the missionaries' literature as well as to correct spelling of Naga words used by the

⁴³ F.S. Downs, 'Historiographical Issues in the Study of the History of Christianity in North East India', in *Proceedings of North East India History Association*, Eighth Session, Kohima, 1987 (Shillong: NEIHA, 1988), 10.

⁴⁴ V.K. Nuh, *165 Years History of Naga Baptist Churches* (Kohima: Council of Naga Baptist Churches, 2000), 3.

missionaries.⁴⁵ The 1930s marked a turning point in the history of Naga education and literature. By the late 1920s, historical and theological literature in Nagaland witnessed dramatic changes. A close examination of western and Indian missionaries' presentation of Christ in various historical periods demonstrates that Christ is given a certain nature and identity. The real history of the people, in this case of the Nagas, did not form the necessary data for doing theology but was ignored as simplistic, nor did it establish any conformity between the Christian message and prevailing traditional concepts underlying the vitality of indigenization to enable indigenous expressions of Christianity. Naga students were also reading and learning a history and theology prepared by westerners in a western context, having little or no relevance or importance to the given context. The refusal to acknowledge native Naga cultures deprived the Gospel of the opportunity of being preached in its contextualizing nature. Consequently, Naga Christians pioneered the promotion of a consciousness of contextual and tribal theology among the Nagas in particular and North-East India in general.

The Nagas considered the enrichment of their language and literature as important to the enhancement of their cultural identity in a context where they were often scorned by their neighbours for the lack of it, since they did not possess any written records or manuscripts from the past. They considered that language was the most important, expressive and distinctive form of their identity. Unlike the missionaries' writings, the writings of Naga Christians were underlined by Naga thought forms. They gave due emphasis on the importance of traditional worldviews embodied in folklore, mythologies and folksongs. They emphasized that as a 'nation' they could not move forward unless they knew their roots and therefore felt the need to put down in writing this heritage to be passed on to their posterity. They understood that the loss of their oral literature which constituted the traditional wisdom of their ancestors was the loss of their identity.⁴⁶ Naga Christians positively acknowledged and transmitted the idea that language was one of the fundamental factors of their ethnic and cultural identity. Thus they differed from the missionary policy of producing mainly religious books and in its place endeavoured to write on all aspects of literature and so elevate the importance of Naga language and literature. Besides, Naga Christians began a far greater educational mission enterprise after the 1972 Centenary celebration.

While we cannot ignore the sacrifices of the missionaries in bringing the Gospel message and in starting educational and health and social services in Nagaland, their activities would have been more all the more

⁴⁵ B.L. Nongbri, 'Christianity, Khasis Language and Literature: An Historical Analysis of the Interaction of Christianity with Traditional Culture', in *Christianity and Change in Northeast India*, T.B. Subba, Joseph Puthenpurakal and Shaji Joseph Puykunnel (eds), (New Delhi: Concept, 2009), 183.

⁴⁶ Nongbri, 'Christianity, Khasis Language and Literature', 182.

commendable if they had acknowledged the richness of the cultures, languages and traditions in Naga society.

Conclusion

We have seen how western Christian missionaries played a significant role in contemporary Naga society and were the prime movers behind the establishment and spread of English education. However, they also believed in the transforming power of western education and the universality of literacy in English. Consequently, for them, bent as they were upon 'civilizing' the people of Nagaland, this meant Christianizing and westernizing them, which also included obliterating traditional tribal religious belief systems and replacing these with evangelistic beliefs and western cultural practices. Both the missionaries and colonial administrators believed that the introduction of western knowledge and civilization was the remedy for these traditional beliefs considered heathen and evil. Thus the history of Christianity in North-East India has been considered as the history of western ecclesiastical history, and this was particularly true for Nagaland. However, the spread of English education facilitated intellectual ferment, which produced a new class of Naga nationalists. These educated Nagas undertook a paradigm shift in writing down their history and experiences and endeavoured to contextualize the Gospel message. In doing so they intended to rewrite their history from their context and perspective, which eventually contributed to the development of a tribal identity and solidarity among the various tribes that make up the Naga people.

MUKTIDATA ASHRAM: A NOVEL METHOD OF EVANGELIZATION IN NORTH-EAST INDIA¹

Joy Kachappilly

Over the centuries of its existence, Christianity has come into contact with the different cultures and religions of the world. These acquaintances and subsequent interactions with them have yielded a wealth of spiritual resources which, in turn, have made Christianity richer in every way. This process of inculturation² is, in fact, an important element of the global concept of evangelization³ and Christian missionaries, in various parts of the world, have generously invoked it in their attempts to bring the message of Christ to the people to whom they have been sent. The missionaries who came to India, which has a veritable wealth of religion and spirituality, were also not oblivious to this important factor while disseminating the message of the gospel. Thus the history of Christianity in India is dotted with attempts at inculturation in different pockets by zealous missionaries whose only aim was to plant the church in this land. One such experiment is making use of the Hindu institution called the ‘Ashram’ and Christianizing it in order to appeal to already religiously engrossed adherents of the existing religions of India. Over the years, Christian ashrams have sprung up in different parts of the country to give witness to the person of Jesus Christ and to attract people to the Christian way of life.

North-East India too, though inhabited by different tribes whose culture is quite different from the rest of the country and resembles more the cultures of south-east Asian countries, did have this important institution. The Muktidata Ashram, set up in Tikrikilla in the Garo Hills of the North-East Indian state of Meghalaya in 1988, stands as a unique attempt in the region by the Christian missionaries at inculturation in evangelization. The

¹ This paper was previously published in *Mission Today* XVI/3 (July-September 2014), 237-52. Reprinted here with permission of the editor – all rights reserved.

² The term ‘inculturation’ means the transformative growth of one culture in the light of other cultures. It needs to be differentiated from the term ‘enculturation’, which means social upbringing and growth within one’s culture. For further reading on these two concepts, see Johnson Puthenpurackal, ‘Inculturation vs. Enculturation’, in *ACPI Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Johnson Puthenpurackal (ed), Vol. I (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2010), 669-70.

³ The other elements of the global concept of evangelization are Christian witness, explicit proclamation of the Lord Jesus, the establishment of the church and liberation. See also Paul Vadakumpadan, *Missionaries of Christ: A Basic Course in Missiology* (Shillong: Vendrame Institute, 2008), 78.

present article studies this venture and critically examines how this initiative has yielded the desired fruits in terms of evangelization. The first part of the article discusses the concept of Ashram both from the Hindu as well as the Christian perspective. After examining the genesis of Muktidata Ashram, the article goes on to study the impact it has had on the people of the area from the perspective of evangelization. Needless to say, the article is a humble attempt at making known this initiative and in highlighting how initiatives such as this can become a credible means of evangelization.

Ashram

The idea of Ashram can trace its origin to the Hindu Sacred Scriptures. The Hindu sages, in their desire to attain liberation and to lead their followers to the ultimate goal of their life, have set up ashrams since time immemorial. In fact, ashrams have become part and parcel of the religious institutions in India. In this section, we shall first examine the Hindu understanding of Ashram and then proceed to discuss how the Christian missionaries adopted it.

The Hindu Concept of Ashram

In the Hindu worldview, spirituality aims at transforming the human person from his/her egoistic way of life to an ego-less universal life. The Hindu scriptures have recorded the experiments that Hinduism has undertaken in the inner life of the human person. Accordingly, human life is based on the concept of *vanashrama dharma*.⁴ Unfortunately, over the years this institution has acquired disrepute due to its misinterpretations and subsequent abuses that have crept into it.⁵ But in its original meaning, this

⁴ The *varna* is derived from the root *vr* meaning to 'cover, envelop'. The meaning of the word as used in the *Rigveda* has the literal meaning 'outward appearance, exterior, form, figure, shape, colour' besides the figurative 'colour, race, kind, sort, character, quality, property'. In the *Rigveda*, the term can mean 'class of men, tribe, order, caste'. Traditional Hindu society is divided into four *varnas*. They are the *Brahmins* (priests and scholars), the *Kshatriyas* (kings, governors, warriors and soldiers), the *Vaishyas* (cattle herders, agriculturists, artisans and merchants), and the *Shudras* (labourers and service providers). The concept of *dharma* deals mainly with the duties of these different *varnas*. Hence the term *varnashrama dharma* means the duties enjoined according to one's *varna*.

⁵ Today, the *varnashrama dharma* institution, also called the caste system, has bound certain communities to sources of influence, power and economy while locking out others, and thus creating more affluence for communities in higher classes and severe poverty for communities in lower classes, called the *Dalits*. This is partly because the first three *varnas* are seen as 'twice-born', and they are allowed to study the Vedas. Separate and shunned by higher levels of ritual society, the *Dalits* became the 'untouchables', who had to deal with the disposal of dead bodies and similar menial tasks, and are described as dirty and polluted. In the last

concept means a way of life for the individual and society. The *ashram* is for the individual and *varna* is for society. The word *ashram* – also spelled as *ashrama* – comes from the Sanskrit root *srama*, which means ‘making an effort towards liberation’ (*moksha*),⁶ which is the central aim of human life in Hinduism. It also means total pursuit, full dedication, ‘tireless striving stretching its arms towards perfection’.⁷ The word also connotes manual work. In fact, an ashram is also considered as a place of work. From the ancient period onwards, Indians began to live in ashrams with the sole aim of attaining spiritual perfection.

An ashram is normally located far from human habitation, in forests or mountainous regions, amidst refreshing natural surroundings conducive to spiritual instruction and meditation. The residents of an ashram regularly performed spiritual and physical exercises, such as the various forms of yoga and meditation. Other sacrifices and penances, such as *yajnas*⁸ were also performed. Many ashrams also served as *Gurukuls* or residential schools for children under *Guru-shishya* tradition.⁹

In the words of the great Indian poet Tagore, ashrams were places ‘where men have gathered for the highest end of life; in the peace of nature... where they are bidden to realize man’s world as God’s Kingdom

150 years, Indian movements arose to throw off the economic and political yoke of an inherited class system that emerged over time, and replace it with what they believed to be true *varnashrama dharma* as described in the *Vedas*.

⁶ *Moksha* or ‘liberation’ is one of the four ideals or values for humans (*purusharthas*) that Hinduism prescribes for their spiritual welfare. In short, it is the ultimate goal of human life. The other three are *artha* (material values), *kama* (psychological values) and *dharma* (religious values). *Purusharthas* give the purpose and the significance of human life in itself, and also the need to direct and guide every believer to inculcate a particular value in day-to-day life so that the ultimate goal of *moksha* is attained. See also Vincent G. Furtadao, ‘*Purusharthas*’, *ACPI Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Johnson Puthenpurackal (ed), Vol. II (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2010), 1112-15.

⁷ Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali* (London: Macmillan, 1952), Poem No 35.

⁸ *Yajna* or ‘sacrifice’ constitutes the quintessence of *Vedic* tradition. It is a sacred act performed by both gods and humans. The importance and significance of sacrifice lies in the fact that all beings and the Being itself not only have their origin in sacrifice (*Rigveda* 10.121; 10.129; 10.190) but also depend on the sacrifice of their very existence, sustenance and maintenance. See also Vincent G. Furtadao, ‘*Yajna*’, *ACPI Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Johnson Puthenpurackal (ed), Vol. II (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2010), 1533-36.

⁹ In this tradition, the *guru* (‘preceptor’) adopted the *shishya* (‘pupil’) as a spiritual son. *Guru* is both the spiritual guide as well as an academic instructor. In fact, the word *guru* means ‘removal of darkness’ (*gu* = ‘darkness’ and *ru* = ‘removal’). The pupil is initiated and lived in the ashram of the preceptor for about ten years mastering the *Vedas* together with phonetics, prosody, etymology, grammar, astrology and rituals. See also Swami Vikrant, ‘*Guru-shisya*’, *ACPI Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Johnson Puthenpurackal (ed), Vol. II (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2010), 581-82.

to whose citizenship, they aspire...'¹⁰ It is 'a place of intense and sustained spiritual quest, centred around a guru... a person of deep spiritual experience. In an Ashram, primacy is given to this relentless quest... This is fostered by renunciation and detachment and an atmosphere of silence, peace and joy'.¹¹ Thus, the hallmark of an ashram is contemplation. Its heart is the God-experience of a guru, who is capable of guiding the disciples on their path of inner pilgrimage using any or all the three traditional spiritual paths or *margas*: *jnana* (knowledge), *bhakti* (devotion) and *karma* (action).¹² An ashram is characterised by its openness to everyone. Finally, ashrams are not other-worldly communities but are deeply rooted in this world and play a formative role in socio-political life. In the ashrams of old, 'princes were initiated into martial arts, kings were given political counsel, householders received instruction on their family duties, farmers got training in agricultural skills, students learned the Scriptures and methods of meditation, and young artists were initiated into music and dramatics'.¹³

In modern times, ashrams have mushroomed in different parts of India not only for spiritual motives but for other reasons as well – under the aegis of different so-called godmen and sages. Modern man, weary of material prosperity and wanton pleasures, flocks to these centres in order to learn different forms of meditation and prayer with the sole aim of gaining peace of mind, and above all, experiencing the divine. In the nineteenth century, Mahatma Gandhi too set up ashrams in order to train his followers in *Satyagraha*¹⁴ that challenged the very existence of the British empire in India and led to Indian independence.

¹⁰ As quoted by Vandana, *Gurus, Ashrams and Christians* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1978), 38-39. According to Vandana, some of the characteristics of Ashram are priority to experience of God, an atmosphere of peace, openness to all, simplicity of lifestyle, poverty, freedom and flexibility. See also Vandana, *Gurus, Ashrams and Christians*, 41-53.

¹¹ 'The Statement of the All India Consultation on Ashram, held 7th-11th June 1978', in *Word and Worship*, 11 (1978), 274-76.

¹² For further reading on the three paths and their place in the ashrams, see Helen Ralston, *Christian Ashrams: A New Religious Movement in Contemporary India* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1987), 54-108.

¹³ Sebastian Painadath, 'Ashrams: A Movement of Spiritual Integration', *Concilium*, 4 (1994), 37.

¹⁴ Literally it means 'firmness in truth'. In *Satyagraha*, truth and non-violence are organized in a powerful movement, not based merely on the goodness of the individual but on the goodness organised in order to withstand organised evil. To train his followers in the art of *Satyagraha*, Gandhi established *ashrams* called Phoenix Farm near Durban in 1904, and Tolstoy Farm near Johannesburg in 1910. In May 1915, he established the *Satyagraha Ashram* at Kochrab near Ahmedabad. He moved it to Sabarmati in 1917. In 1940, he began the Sevagram Ashram near Wardha. In his *ashrams*, training in *Satyagraha* was carried out through the practice of eleven vows: truth, non-violence, celibacy, non-stealing, non-possession, control

Christian Ashrams in India

When Christian missionaries reached India, following the example of the Hindu sages, they established ashrams, giving them a Christian touch in order to indigenise the western concept of monastic life and to give an Indian colour so that Indians could better understand the Christian religion with its rich monastic traditions. The Christian ashram movement attempts to combine the Christian faith lived in the monastic tradition with the Hindu ashram model of the *samnyasa*¹⁵ tradition. A Christian ashram can be understood as a disciplined Christian experience held in a retreat setting for the purpose of deeper spiritual growth, which makes God more real in daily living. This provides a break from the hustle and bustle of everyday life and a move towards the grace and presence of Jesus Christ.

This movement in India originated with the Italian Jesuit missionary Roberto de Nobili. He decided to overcome the cultural obstacles to his mission by adopting the various forms of Hindu monastic life. Later, Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, an Indian Brahmin, converted to Catholicism and followed de Nobili's example by founding an ashram called Kasthalic Matha, although it did not last long. His writings aired several ideas of the ashram movement, including the identification of the *Saccidananda*¹⁶ with the Christian dogma of the Holy Trinity, an identification coined by Keshub Chandra Sen in 1882.

of the palate, fearlessness, removal of untouchability, bread-labour, unity of religions, and *swadeshi*. (Bread-labour is a Gandhian philosophy wherein a person must labour enough for his or her food and clothing and a person's intellectual faculties must be exercised for the service of human kind and not for selfish reasons.) To sustain the observance of these vows, the *Satyagrahi* needs divine assistance which he/she invokes through prayer, *Ramanama*, fasting and silence. (*Ramanama* is considered a powerful chant to alleviate suffering, calm the mind and as a means of salvation.) For further reading, see M.K. Gandhi, *From Yeravda Mandir: Ashram Observances*, trans. Valji Govindji (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1932); M.K. Gandhi, 'Ashram Vows', *Hindu Dharma*, Bharatan Kumarappa (ed), (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1950), 246-56; 'The *Satyagrahashrama*', *To the Students* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1949), 33-52; C.F. Andrews, *Mahatma Gandhi's Ideas* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1929), 101-11.

¹⁵ It could mean either complete renunciation of things and beings of the world or the state of being the trustee of reality and truth. Tapasyananda of Ramakrishna Order translates it as 'monasticism'. It is also one of the traditions of the *Asrama* system that was prevalent in Hinduism: *brahmacharin* ('celibate seeker'), *grahastha* ('householder'), *vanaprastha* ('forest dweller') and *samnyasin* ('total renunciation'). See also G.P. Das, 'Samnyasa', *ACPI Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Johnson Puthenpurackal (ed), Vol. II (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2010), 1227-32.

¹⁶ Literally, it means 'existence', 'knowledge', 'bliss'. According to Ramanuja, they are the attributes of Brahman, while for Shankara they constitute the very essence of Brahman.

In 1938, the French missionary priest Jules Monchanin (who was later to adopt the name Parma Arupi Anananda) and French Benedictine monk Henri le Saux (who was later to adopt the name Abhishiktananda) founded the Saccidananda Ashram or Shantivanam at Tannirpalli in the Tiruchirappalli District of Tamil Nadu. Upadhyay had an influence on the Christian missionary Bede Griffiths, who co-founded the Kurisumala Ashram in Vagmon, Kerala, with Francis Mahieu. Later, Griffiths took over the leadership of Saccidananda Ashram after Monchanin's death and Henri le Saux's decision to leave for his hermitage.¹⁷ Today, there are over 108 Christian ashrams witnessing to the person and message of Jesus Christ to the people of India who are known for their inclination to spiritual life.¹⁸

The basic features of Christian ashrams include: God-experience in Christ, an atmosphere of peace, openness, simplicity of life. According to proponents of the ashram way of life, the ashram is not so much an exterior place as an inner space where one encounters God. It is a dynamic reality; a journey of relentless, intense and sustained spiritual quest for the Absolute. Ashram is more than an institution; it is a way of life.¹⁹ Thus, Bede Griffiths writes: 'The Ashram life as a whole will be essentially a communion in the Body of Christ, which is the distinctive mark of Christian prayer.'²⁰

The ashram way of life provides the church with an integral model of missionary praxis. Ashrams contain all the integral elements of evangelization. The ashram setting provides an ambience for Christian witness of a 'life of deep prayer, of evangelical simplicity and renunciation... in keeping with our religious and cultural tradition'.²¹ This becomes imperative as the Hindu will ultimately 'not be convinced by arguments (nor by philanthropic action), but by a life lived in closest intimacy with God'.²² The element of direct proclamation is also present in ashrams. Ashrams are not mere silent witnesses to Christ and gospel values. Through classes, seminars, lectures and other activities, the message of Christ is preached in season and out of season. The ashram way of life allows the transformation of the local cultures by purifying and filling them with the values of the gospel, thus becoming catalysts of inculturation. The contemplative method of evangelization that consists in making possible an

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¹⁷ Harold G. Coward and David J. Goa, *Mantra: Hearing the Divine in India and America*, 2nd edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 87-88.

¹⁸ For the names of these ashrams, see: <http://voiceofdharma.com/books/ca/app1.htm> (accessed 20th March 2014).

¹⁹ Swami Dhayananda, *Saccidananda Ashram: Garland of Letters* (Tiruchirappalli: Saccidananda Ashram, 1991), 1-3.

²⁰ Bede Griffiths, 'Christian Ashrams', in *Word and Worship*, 17 (1984), 151.

²¹ 'The Statement of the All India Consultation on Ashram, held 7th – 11th June 1978', in *Word and Worship*, 11 (1978), 274.

²² Bede Griffiths, *Christ in India: Essays Towards a Hindu-Christian Dialogue* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1966), 47.

encounter with Christ in the *cave of one's heart* is also found in ashrams as they give much stress on prayer and contemplation. By inculcating simplicity and poverty, the ashram way of life becomes a model of a servant community following the footsteps of the master who came 'not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Matt. 20:28).

Ashrams in North-East India

Ashrams in North-East India are found mainly in the state of Assam where the Vaishnavite sect of Hinduism under the able guidance of Shrimanta Sankardev flourished. However, he called them *satras*.²³ Elsewhere, and more especially in the hills, where the majority of the tribals of the region reside, one does not come across any such ashrams. This was because the indigenous tribal religions, especially among the hill tribes, do not have much in common with Hinduism, the main subscriber to the institution of Ashram. Hence, the Christian missionaries who came to the region over a hundred years ago too did not deem it necessary to begin ashrams for evangelization as they engaged their attention mainly among the tribals living in the hills. This makes the founding of Muktidata Ashram a unique event in the history of the Catholic Church in the region.

The Muktidata Ashram

The Muktidata Ashram²⁴ is located at Tikrikilla, a township in the West Garo Hills District of Meghalaya, India. The town is located about 100 kms north from the district headquarters, Tura, and it borders the Districts of Goalpara and Dhubri in the state of Assam. Tikrikilla is a cosmopolitan township with people belonging to different tribes such as Garo, Rabha, Boro, Hajon and Barman living side-by-side without tension or animosity.

The ashram in Tikrikilla took its origin after its founder was appointed the parish priest of non-Garo communities residing in and around

²³ The term *satra* is taken from the *Bhagavata Purana* and it means 'monastery'. It has some of the characteristics of an ashram. The Vaishnavite monks live there. See also M. Narimattam, *The Valley in Blossom: Neo-Vaishnavism and the Peoples of the Brahmaputra Valley* (Guwahati/Delhi: Spectrum, 1988), 93-117.

²⁴ The founder of Muktidata Ashram is Fr George Elavumkunnel, a priest belonging to the Catholic Diocese of Tura. Ordained in 1960, Fr George spent most of his priestly life working among the tribals of the Garo Hills. He worked in the parishes of Damra, Baghmara, Dalu, Resu and Tikrikilla in the Garo Hills. He worked 26 years for the Garos and then another 26 years for the Rabhas. It was while working in Tikrikilla for the Rabha community that he opened the ashram. I am grateful to him for giving me information about the ashram for this article. It is unfortunate that, while preparing the final draft of this chapter, on 27th April 2014, Fr George passed away after suffering for many years from heart-related diseases.

Tikrikilla. Among the different non-Garo tribes that are found in the area, attention was given mostly to the Rabha community.²⁵ At present, the ashram caters to over ten Rabha villages in Garo Hills, which are located in and around Tikrikilla. Besides these, over fifteen Rabha villages in Goalpara District in the state of Assam, though not under its jurisdiction, receive attention from the ashram.

The ashram had a humble beginning in 1988 in thatched huts with the explicit desire to win the Rabhas for Christ. It was envisaged as a Christian monastery in an Indian setting, leaving aside the normal parish set-up, in order to have better access to the people belonging to the Rabha tribe, whose traditional religion is more or less close to the Hindu way of life. The main objective of the ashram is to preach the message of Jesus Christ. In 1992, the church building and the residential quarters were constructed. Later, a hostel to house the children belonging to Rabha, and even the Boro tribes who were brought to Tikrikilla from different far-flung villages for their education, was also completed.

The very name given to the ashram is indicative of its mission and vision. *Muktidata* is the best title that can be given to Jesus, for he came to liberate humankind from the clutches of sin. His suffering and death on the Cross won for humankind the redemption that they longed for since the sin of Adam. Likewise, the mission of the Muktidata Ashram is to liberate those mainly belonging to the Rabha tribe from their sins and to bring them to the feet of Christ, who is the Saviour of the world.

The Rabha Tribe

As the ashram caters for the Rabha community, a brief description of the tribe is in order. The Rabha is a scheduled tribe found mainly in the state of Assam and in other states like West Bengal and Meghalaya. In Assam, the Rabhas primarily live in Goalpara and Kamrup Districts. In fact, the whole surroundings of the Western and Eastern Dooars²⁶ can be termed as the

²⁵ The predilection for the Rabhas can be explained from the fact that the founder of the ashram met the Rabhas and interacted with them before he could do so with any other group of people, apart of course from the Garos. In fact, his first contacts with the Rabhas took place while working for the Garos in Damra and Resu parishes. The success he had in terms of evangelization among them encouraged him to found the Muktidata Ashram at Tikrikilla in 1999 for the evangelization of the Rabhas. He considers it as the 'Promised Land' for the Rabha community. In founding this ashram, he was influenced by the experience he gained while living in some of the Christian ashrams such as Anjali Ashram in Mysore, Kurishumala Ashram in Kerala, and Saccidananda Ashram in Tamil Nadu.

²⁶ The Dooars region constitutes the plains of Darjeeling District, the whole of Jalpaiguri District and the upper region of Cooch Behar District in West Bengal and the districts of Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Barpeta, Goalpara and Bongaigaon in the State of Assam. The Eastern part is found in Assam while the Western Dooars region lies in the State of West Bengal.

heartland of the Rabhas. Most of the people, especially those who live in the Dooars region, like to identify themselves as Rabha, but there are also some who often assert themselves as belonging to the Koch tribe.

Like other tribal communities in India, the Rabha have a rich cultural heritage. They speak their own language called Rabha, which belongs to Tibeto-Burman language family. They belong to the famous Indo-Mongoloid tribal group, and they also bear similarities with all the other members of Bodo tribes like the Garo, Kachari, Mech, Koch and Hajong.

The religious world of the Rabha is pervaded by various spirits and natural objects. The main deity of the Rabhas is called *Rishi*, which is a male deity. He is also known as *Mahakal*. In addition, there are the deities *Rungtuk* and *Basek*, represented by two earthen pots of rice placed on the northern side of the store. These two deities are considered as the daughter of *Rishi* or *Mahakal*. *Rungtuk* and *Basek* are household deities and considered as the deities of wealth like the Hindu goddess Lakshmi. *Rungtuk* and *Basek* are inherited by the heiress of the family. Their traditional priest *deosi* looks for an auspicious day for installing these deities. The room where they are kept is occupied by the head of the family. The deities are not represented by any idols. A red earthen pitcher filled with rice represents the deity *Rungtuk*. An egg is kept on the neck of the pitcher. The indigenous religion of the Rabha is weaved around a number of mythologies concerning the origin of the world and all that it contains.²⁷ However, the present-day Rabha religion has incorporated many Hindu rituals and practices.

²⁷ The following is an example of Rabha mythology that explains the origin of the world and of human beings. Before anything was created, there was only Anan Gohain (Gosain) who was without shape or form. He then turned himself into four stakes. The stakes converged and took a new shape, which could stand and sit. This new shape was a man and he was able to speak. Man used the stakes as his legs, feet and chest. He then thrust his hand down and gave a slap on the ground. From the ground a girl grew up. She asked, 'My Lord, why did you give me birth?' Man answered, 'My dear, we will pass the time in companionship.' 'But my Lord, I am different from you. I am neither like you nor am I like anyone else.' Then Anan Gohain from a distance asked her to stand still. He then made a mark on her front with his nail and a passage was opened. She then said, 'My Lord, I need clothes now for I feel shame.' Man gave her clothes, one half of which he himself put on. Thus time passed and at the end of the month, a drop of blood fell from the woman. She asked, 'What should I do with this?' Anan Gohain said, 'That will be the start of the first *Manu* – the first man.' Another drop fell. From it grew trees and creepers. Still another drop fell. From it took birth the stars and the planet in the sky. The blood flow was stopped and woman cleaned herself at the end of three days. The woman said, 'My Lord! That will be enough. There is no need of further creation.' While Anan Gohain took rest, Brahma thought of ways of creating fourteen worlds. He made seven worlds on the top and seven at the bottom. He thought, 'How to create the earth?' As he did not know how to make the earth, Anan Gohain came down and, in the shape of a boar, plunged into the ocean. He

As in most tribal communities, dance and music play an important part in the lives of the Rabha. After every ritual they perform various dances to ingratiate their deities. Rabha dances, like most tribal dances, are connected with the daily agrarian activities. They have a unique dance form named *Nakchung Reni* to celebrate fishing in the forest rivulets. Rabha women of all ages take part in this dance wholeheartedly.²⁸

Present-day Activities of the Muktidata Ashram

Unlike other Christian ashrams elsewhere in India, the Muktidata Ashram is a fully-fledged parish that caters for non-Garos residing in and around the township of Tikrikilla. The founder-director of the ashram is also the parish priest. Hence, the celebration of the sacraments for the faithful is an important ministry of the ashram. It conducts regular Sunday Eucharistic services for the people who frequent the centre. Every other activity that a Catholic parish is expected to carry out is also done here.²⁹

The ashram engages in a number of activities in order to realize its sole objective of bringing members of the Rabha community to Christ. To this end, the ashram undertakes regular village visits in order to meet the people in their own setting. During these visits, efforts are made to present the person of Christ as the long-awaited Messiah of the people. People are also

went down to Eternal Navel and said, 'My Lord, there is no material to create things up above, I need some material.' Eternal Navel said, 'My dear, take whatever you need.' So Anan Gohain, in the form of the boar, took some excreta of Eternal Navel and came up. The boar came up through the ocean and gave the excreta to Brahma. The excreta was then turned into gold. Brahma asked, 'My father, what should I do?' 'My child, if you do not know what to do, I'll tell you.' He lay down on his back and a lotus grew from his navel. He said to Brahma, 'Rub the excreta on the petals.' The vast earth grew on the petals. There was only the stem under the lotus; it swayed this way and that. Brahma said, 'None can sleep; what should I do?' Anan Gohain said, 'Stiffen the stem.' 'How can I do that?' Anan Gohain then placed *udaygiri* (sunrise) mountain to the east of the navel lotus, *astagiri* (sunset) mountain to the west, the Himalayas to the north, the *Merugiri* (polar) mountain to the south. Even after placing them, the lotus shook. He turned the lotus stem into the *merudanda* or spinal cord, holding the seven worlds at the top and another seven worlds at the bottom. Human beings also possess similar spinal chords which holds their bodies together. Anan Gohain then said, 'Now create human beings.' Brahma picked up a bit of soil, rolled it and made a man and a woman. With fire from his mouth, he hardened them. But Anan Gohain came down and complained about the smoke. Brahma said, 'I am hardening them so that they will last till eternity.' This was how the first man was created. See Birendranath Datta et al, *A Hand Book of Folklore Material of North East India* (Guwahati: Anundoram Borooah Institute of Language, Art and Culture, 1994), 232-35.

²⁸ 'Rabha Tribe': <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabha> (accessed 26th April 2014).

²⁹ Canon 530 of the *Code of Canon Law* of the Catholic Church speaks about the various pastoral activities that a parish priest normally carries out in his parish.

invited to frequent the ashram so that they can learn more about the Christian faith.

The ashram is a centre of prayer, where regular prayer services and retreats are organised. Facilities are provided for those who wish to spend time in silent prayer. Besides prayer, regular catechesis is imparted to the people who have already accepted Jesus in order to deepen their faith so that their initial enthusiasm for Christ may not die out but be deepened into a lifelong commitment.

Distribution of Christian literature is another activity that the ashram undertakes. The ashram procures Christian reading materials, especially Bibles, and provides them for visitors to the Centre to read and to understand the various articles of Christian faith. More often these materials are distributed freely as the people who frequent the centre are poor or are not inclined to spend their money on them in the initial stages of their journey towards Christian faith.

The largest Rabha village that the ashram looks after is Paham which is situated about 14 kms from Tikrikilla. It has over forty Catholic families. The ashram has built a school in the village to look after the educational needs of the children there. The school has reached Class Six and there are over 190 students frequenting the school. Looking after it becomes another activity of the ashram.

The ashram is a place where people belonging to other religious traditions can come and have dialogue on religious matters. In fact, it is a house where all are welcome. The simple lifestyle of the ashram attracts ordinary people to its doors. All are accommodated under its roof with God at the centre. However, in the ashram, there is an open area specifically intended for such dialogue. It is called the 'Inspiration Point' and regular dialogue sessions with members of other religions, more especially with those who show an inclination towards Christ, take place.

There is a convent of Sisters³⁰ working in tandem with the ashram. These Sisters, besides looking after the girls recruited for their studies from the various villages, take care of the church and the ashram's surroundings. They also accompany the priests on their village visits. Till recently, the founder himself looked after the ashram but nine months ago, one more priest has joined the founder-director to help him look after the school at Paham and to assist him in the activities of the ashram.³¹

³⁰ The Sisters belong to the Sacred Heart Congregation. These Sisters engage themselves in teaching in the school and visiting the villages, besides taking care of the candidates who are aspiring to become members of their congregation.

³¹ Till 2012, the founder looked after the ashram all by himself. However, on 3rd July 2013, Fr C Leo Justin, belonging to the Society of Heralds of Good News, joined it. I am also indebted to him for giving me some information about the ashram for this article.

The Muktidata Ashram as a Means of Evangelization

During the 25 years of its existence, the ashram has seen over 600 Rabha come to Christ. It is still going strong. The process of evangelization takes place through personal contacts with some prominent members of the village such as teachers. Once they accept Christ and are baptised, they are catechised to become apostles in order to bring their friends and relatives to the faith.

Initial prejudices against Christianity have become a thing of the past. In the early stages of the founding of the ashram, some Hindu groups like the RSS placed a number of obstacles in its way. However, the recent construction of a Grotto of Our Lady on the roadside close to the ashram is a clear indication that such prejudices have already died down. In fact, today one can see both the Rabha and the Boro belonging to different religious traditions spending time at the grotto, praying to the Virgin Mary.

The hostel in the ashram has not only helped children to study in a Catholic school in Tikrikilla but it also serves as a centre for catechising them in the basic tenets of the Christian faith. When they return to their villages, these children become little apostles spreading the good news of Jesus Christ that they learnt in their boarding. Today, many of these boarding children have become Catholics and are occupying important positions in government as well as in society. Besides the boarding, the ashram also comes to the aid of the poor and the needy who knock at its doors for assistance. In these ways, the ashram bears witness to the person and message of Jesus Christ, which is an integral element of evangelization.

Rabha Catholics are not only faithful to their faith but are also proud to belong to the Catholic Church. Even when there are only a handful of Catholic families, as is the case in most of the villages, these Catholics remain fervent in their practice of religion even if some subtle forms of persecution are meted out to them by their Hindu fellow tribals. Appreciation from non-Catholic Rabhas for the manner of their living is growing and is a matter of great hope for the future of the church.

It is important to note that there are no sizeable Catholic communities among the Rajbonshi, Hajong or Koch communities as we find among the Rabha, although these tribes also co-exist with the Rabha in the Garo Hills. This is because almost all the missionaries working in the Garo Hills turned their attention to the evangelization of the Garo and not to other tribes, as was done for the Rabha. Had some missionaries with a predilection for these communities dedicated themselves for them, the history of the church in these areas would have been quite different.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it becomes quite clear that the Muktidata Ashram provides a suitable setting for direct proclamation of Jesus Christ. In a dialogue of life with a holistic model of inculturation, the ashram

follows the contemplative method of evangelization, providing an experience of God in Christ, which is the primary mission of the church. When this is combined with service to the poor, the Ashram way of life in Tikrikilla becomes an integral style for the evangelization of the Rabha. In years to come, it is hoped the ashram will play a crucial role in the growth of the Catholic Church among the non-Garo tribes, and more especially among the Rabha community of the Garo Hills.

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**MISSIONARIES AND PRINT CULTURE IN
NINETEENTH-CENTURY ASSAM:
THE *ORUNODOI* PERIODICAL OF THE AMERICAN
BAPTIST MISSION, 1846-1882¹**

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‘A monthly Paper, devoted to Religion, Science, and General Knowledge.’ That was what *Orunodoi* declared itself to be, the agency through which the American Baptist Mission would deliver these components of ‘enlightenment’ to the population of Assam, as monthly instalments of print in their own language. *Orunodoi* was the most prominent product of the first printing press established in Assam,² the American Mission Press, 1846-1884. Almost a century after its inception, a contributor to a contemporary Assamese journal remarked that local villagers were still in the habit of referring to any periodical paper that they came across by what they regarded as its generic name – as an ‘Orunodoi’.

The proposition that the American Baptists should venture into a new frontier in North-East India had initially been mooted by East India

¹ This paper was previously published in ‘Christians and Missionaries in India: Cross-cultural communication since 1500, with special reference to caste, conversion, and colonialism’, Robert Eric Frykenberg (ed), (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 256-73. Reprinted by permission of the publisher; all rights reserved.

* Note on transliteration from the Assamese language:

Words transliterated from the Assamese language have been done so using the letter ‘x’ to represent the velar fricative which is similar to the ‘ch’ sounds in German ‘acht’ and Scottish ‘loch’, instead of the conventional ‘s’ which in no way conveys the actual pronunciation. However, in deference to established usage in English, ‘Assamese’ and ‘Assam’ have been retained instead of the vernacular ‘Axomiya’ and ‘Axom’.

² ‘Assam’ here refers to the northeastern part of the Indian sub-continent, which had come under British rule from 1826 onwards and encompasses the present-day states of Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram in the Indian Union. ‘Assam Valley’ is the term commonly used in the missionary papers of the period, and refers to the Brahmaputra Valley in the present-day state of Assam. The Naga Hills district in British Assam is modern state of Nagaland.

³ Jnandabhiram Barua, *Those Bygone Days* (Awahon, 1929). (Incidentally, the writer’s father, Gunabhiram Barua, and his uncle, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, had been two of the most significant indigenous contributors to, and supporters, of *Orunodoi*.)

Company officials who, ever since its annexation in 1826, had been attempting to bring into order this region with a huge diversity of ethnic groups at different stages of technology and culture. The administrators' invitation to missionaries, initially addressed to the Serampore Baptists and passed on by them to their American counterparts, was testimony to their hope that they would buttress the efforts of the handful of colonial administrators in 'elevating the character of the people' of this new territory.⁴ The American Baptists, however, initially regarded their Assam field mainly as a foothold enabling further penetration into previously inaccessible parts of South-East and Central Asia which lay beyond the mountainous boundaries of this region. The people of the Upper Assam Hills, the Khamti and Singpho, were said to be related to the Shan of northern Burma, among whom the Americans had established their first foreign missions from 1814. Sadiya, their first base in Assam, was envisaged as the doorway to an estimated 170 million people in Asia who were believed to use variants of the same language which the missionaries had already learnt in Burma.⁵ A Shan mission, initiated on a small scale in Assam in 1836, but eventually to extend over China and Central Asia, was the grandiose target that the American Baptist Foreign Mission Board had planned.

As the discrepancies between such expectations and the reality of the new field became apparent, however, the Mission had no option but to modify these plans drastically. The unilingual Shan-speaking field that it had been hoped to find proved to be a chimera, with the geographical and cultural distance between Assam and the territories beyond its hills making the pan-Asian project an impossibility. Instead, even within the province itself, the Baptists were faced with the necessity of learning a large variety of dialects (mostly belonging to the Tibeto-Burmese language family) and transposing them from oral into written forms before any scriptural dissemination could be undertaken. As they acquired more information about the region, doubts arose about the viability of their base. Sadiya was a remote area sparsely populated by imperfectly 'pacified', pre-literate 'tribal' people. The missionaries learnt that the plains below were inhabited by a settled agriculturalist, caste Hindu population communicating in a single language with a written tradition. By 1841, it was decided to abandon all that the Mission had done there so far, for this more inviting prospect, the relatively 'civilized' territory of the Assam Valley. Nathan Brown reported to the Home Board, justifying the abandonment of their ongoing projects near Sadiya, such as Miles Bronson's work among the Namsang Nagas: 'It has long been in doubt whether... while there are so many inviting fields among the Assamese, it is the duty of any brother to

⁴ H.K. Barpujari, *The American Missionaries and Northeast India (1836-1900): A Documentary Study* (Guwahati, 1986), 93.

⁵ F.S. Downs, *The Mighty Works of God* (Guwahati, 1971), 17.

devote his life to the study of a language... spoken only by a few thousands of people.⁶ The plains, with their majority of inhabitants using the Assamese language (of the Indo-European family, like Bengali and other Indic vernaculars with Sanskritic roots) appeared to be much more promising than the many pre-literate tongues of the 'tribal' groups among whom they had struggled so far. 'The Assamese are a most encouraging and inviting field; they are in great measure a civilised people...'⁷

This chapter looks at the interaction of these American missionaries with indigenous society, in the context of colonial modernity and print culture as the entry points of a new sensibility in nineteenth-century Assam. First, one may observe the American Baptist missionaries reorienting their 'civilizing mission' as well as their views on indigenous society in the light of their experiences over the first few decades. Second, I examine the vehicle through which their message was sought to be relayed, mainly to a high-caste Assamese-speaking gentry: *Orunodoi*, a vernacular paper, and the discrepancies between its intent and its reception. Contrary to the expectations of the periodical's promoters, there was a deliberate and selective appropriation of its contents by the majority of these readers, with the religious component of the 'enlightenment' it was designed to achieve being mostly ignored in favour of more general 'knowledge' which could serve their own concerns about regenerating indigenous cultural and social mores. Third, I discuss the modalities of missionary interaction with another section of Assam's population, pre-literate 'tribal' people living in hill territories, among whom quite another response was forthcoming, with most aspects of an 'improving' agenda being adopted, and Christianity eventually becoming the predominant faith. My objective is to show how the divergent backgrounds and cultural levels of such differing groups within indigenous society brought into being very different reactions to this 'civilising' project, which in turn influenced its own assumptions and strategies.

A fundamental principle of the Baptist philosophy was that the Word should reach people in their own language. This was no easy task in a region with such diverse cultures, even after the missionaries had discarded their initial erroneous assumptions. By 1841, the American Baptists had decided to convey their message through that language which seemed to have the greatest number of adherents in the region, the mother tongue of its caste Hindu inhabitants, known as the Assamese. Their initial tours led them to conclude that though 'as many dialects are spoken... as were heard at Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost... each of the tribes has a language of its own, while the Assamese is the common medium [of trade]'.⁸ This conclusion was to set the activities of the American Baptist Mission apart

⁶ Letter from Bronson to Peck, 1841, in Downs, *The Mighty Works of God*, 251-52.

⁷ Letter from Bronson to Peck, 1841, in Barpujari, *American Missionaries*, 251-52.

⁸ Journal of Nathan Brown, 1841, in Barpujari, *American Missionaries*, 77.

from the linguistic policy that the colonial state had adopted. The erstwhile Ahom kingdom of Assam had come under British rule in 1826 after the First Burmese War, and had been incorporated into the Bengal Presidency. In 1836, the new regime ruled that administrative convenience would be best served by using Bengali as a standard language for the entire Presidency, disregarding the local languages and dialects in use throughout its huge territorial reach. In areas such as Assam, with no previous history of common administration with the other parts of the Presidency, this decision produced a considerable amount of upheaval for the local population. Proceedings in courts and schools in Assam were henceforward to be conducted in Bengali rather than in Assamese, the justification being put forward that the latter was but one of the former's many local variants. The American Baptist Mission did not follow this directive, however, neither in its educational endeavours nor in the printed literature they were introducing into the province. Even their brief experience in their new field had convinced the missionaries that Assamese was a different language, and that Bengali was totally incomprehensible to the common people. By interacting in Assamese, the American Baptists saw the advantage of stepping into the vacuum left by the British state in sponsoring a 'alien' language for use in its institutions:

I believe that so long as the courts and schools are in Bengali, there will be the greatest impediment to the education and improvement of the people. If missionaries should adopt Bengali, as the means of communicating religious truth, everyone would doubt them... [therefore] we have by every means in our power endeavoured to make ourselves acquainted with the people, and by daily familiar intercourse acquire their language, so as to be able to communicate to them in the most direct manner the blessings of science and Christianity.⁹

The lack of official support for an indigenous language and literature until after 1874, when Assam was constituted as a separate Chief Commissioner's Province, meant that until then, the products of its sole printing press, the Mission Press at Sibsagar, retained prominence as examples of a new 'literature of print' in the region's vernacular. From 1846, it was through their periodical *Orunodoi* that the missionaries sought to disseminate their new print culture of Christian devotion and modern information:

Its object is to kindle and foster a spirit of inquiry. Whenever the missionary sets up his tent, his first business is to set up that instrument to which the nations of Europe are so greatly indebted for whatever superiority they enjoy over the ancient world. Hence, even when we are not able, as in the case of the present mission, to notice a large accession of converts, we are still

⁹ Letter from Bronson to Halliday, Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, in Barpujari, *American Missionaries*, 135-41.

certain that the elements of improvement are quietly and vigorously at work.¹⁰

The periodical's masthead declared it to be 'A monthly Paper, devoted to Religion, Science, and General Knowledge'. This was clearly attuned to the evangelistic project of using 'useful knowledge' to promote 'godly society'. Reformist sentiment in the first half of the century had furthered this agenda by distributing pamphlets studded with facts, moral and religious sentiments, initially in Europe and America, and then beyond. This dissemination of printed knowledge came to be a particularly significant accompaniment of colonial rule, one that was eagerly taken advantage of by elite Indians seeking greater acquaintance with the new order. C.A. Bayly sees this as a new information movement, although one confined to the upper classes.¹¹ In regions such as Assam, on the periphery of the state's 'civilizing' efforts, it was through agencies such as missionaries, that this 'useful knowledge' made its belated appearance. 'A store of wisdom (*gyan bhandar*) – *Orunodoi* was described thus – by an upper-caste reader, in his article: 'What are the advantages for Assamese people in reading the *Orunodoi*?' in its October 1855 issue. The Baptist monopoly over the new technology of print meant that a discourse on modernization and identity among the region's nascent intelligentsia would emerge through the pages of its only discussion forum, *Orunodoi*, alongside the periodical's intended agenda of disseminating the Christian faith.

As with the general run of such missionary periodicals, *Orunodoi* carried out its 'improving' project by linking Christian literature with apparently secular and objective facts, from accounts of the working of nature to the differential progress of human societies.¹²

Such headings appear as – Turko-Russian hostilities; War in China; Revolution in Spain; Telegraph from Calcutta to Bombay... Illustrated articles on Astronomy, Geography and Natural History conveyed useful and needed instruction, while temperance, veracity, self-reliance, family government and other appropriate themes received attention. Through its columns, Christian hymns, translations of psalms, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and a brief history of the Apostles found their way into heathen homes, where Christian scriptures in their usual form could not have been admitted.¹³

Apart from such artfully scattered morsels of preaching, there were other ways of combining secular information and religious propaganda. A series

¹⁰ *Baptist Missionary Magazine* (hereafter *BMM*), September 1846, 290.

¹¹ *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870*, C.A. Bayly (Cambridge 1996), 215-16.

¹² See *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phula and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India*, Rosalind O'Hanlon (Cambridge, 1985), 50-87, for an analysis of similar missionary periodicals in Western India.

¹³ 'Annual Report Assam, 1838', in *BMM*, 1839, 145.

on astronomy was meant to take care of both. As the Mission's report stated:

The Assamese, Brahmins as well as others, think it impossible to measure the distance of an inaccessible object. [From the articles on western science] they learn, for instance, that lightning and thunder are connected as the flash of a cannon and the report of it, while, according to the shasters, the thunder only proceeds from the clouds, while the lightning is caused by the darts of Indra. From the errors of the shasters on these... points, the people will readily see that they are only the work of man.¹⁴

This strategy, introduced during the 1830s by the Orientalist Lancelot Wilkinson in the Central Provinces, of spreading accurate scientific knowledge, was continued by American missionaries in Assam, partly as a laudable end in itself, and partly to ridicule Puranic cosmology and thus its Brahmin guardians.¹⁵

As far as its most important objective of religious propaganda was concerned, a good beginning seemed to have been made by the Mission in the Assam plains, with a handful of converts coming in from the Assamese-speaking population during the 1840s. This was regarded only as a step towards more lofty objectives, as the missionaries were looking to a very different constituency from the handful of lower-caste villagers who had initially joined them. They made no secret of their hopes of eventually winning over the most influential section of the Assamese, the high-caste gentry, who had a near-monopoly of educational opportunities and formed the bulk of *Orunodoi's* reading public. This hope, encouraged perhaps by the highly publicized conversions of some young Babus from a similar social background in Bengal, had also influenced the Mission in its move from the hills near Sadiya to the small towns of Guwahati, Sibsagar and Nagaon, in the heart of the Assam Valley. This was the area where, before the British came, the Ahom kingdom had its epicentre, and many gentry families, now in administrative posts under the British, were based there. The handful of high schools and courts, dating from the first years of colonial rule, were concentrated in this area and attracted the well-born educated youths the missionaries hoped to wean away from traditional beliefs. After the remote, sparsely populated and densely forested tracts where they had spent their earliest years, such a relatively 'civilized' part of the region seemed to offer better scope for 'improvement'. 'The principal government of the district is invested in this court, which brings together the most active, learned and intelligent part of the people... the population is a reading one.'¹⁶ *Orunodoi's* initial focus on enlightenment through religious exhortations and secular truths gradually began to be

¹⁴ 'Report of the American Baptist Mission to Assam, 1845', in *BMM*, Aug. 1846, 256.

¹⁵ Richard Fox Young, *Resistant Hinduism: Sanskrit Sources of Anti-Christian Apologetics in Early Nineteenth-Century India* (Vienna, 1981), 82.

¹⁶ Journal of Barker, 1840-42, in Barpujari, *American Missionaries*, 33-6.

supplemented by contributions from its indigenous reading public, reflecting their concerns about education, language and the social regeneration of Assam. Instead of the piecemeal attacks on various 'native' superstitions by missionaries in earlier issues, there were now passionately argued polemics on social reform, mostly from the pens of the 'natives' themselves. In 1858, the Foreign Secretary of the Board was informed:

Our paper is now in its 13th year and is year and is regarded by Young Assam at least, as one of the institutions of the province... A brief sermon or exhortation, a chapter of church history, a chapter of the Life of Mohammad... of the history of Bengal... of the life of Luther, a geographical article, a chapter of Isaiah, together with the news of the month, contributions on various topics such as the marriage of widows, duties of wives, duties of parents, from Christian and other contributors, make up each monthly number.¹⁷

An active role had originally been envisaged within *Orunodoi* for a single category of 'native' contributor, the newly converted Assamese Baptists. 'We require a medium through which the talents of our converts may be called out and find development. They cannot write books, but they can write articles which will be the alternative and (be) beneficial to the native public.'¹⁸ The first convert baptised by the Americans, Nidhi Levi Farwell, seemed to epitomise the realization of these hopes. An orphan, from a low-caste background, he had lived with Nathan Brown since his childhood, and was baptised in 1841, at around 18 years of age. He was the most visible of the Assamese Christian writers, with at least two or more pieces in almost every *Orunodoi* issue. It does seem significant that the most striking characteristic of *Orunodoi's* language and orthography in its first few decades – that is, its use of a colloquial variant approximating as far as possible to the spoken vernacular of the common people – was displayed most prolifically in the writings of this individual from a non-literate background. Nidhi was far removed in terms of caste status and social position from Assam's indigenous gentry, many of whom espoused a literary style closer to a 'high' Sanskritized model and took issue with *Orunodoi* over its use of everyday idiom.¹⁹ His first signed article, in 1846, was about the discovery of printing, tracing a teleology of progress for the English nation through its use. Appropriately enough, his piece resounded with praise of this invention having²⁰ been brought to Assam by the Americans, and its positive impact there. 'Formerly, apart from the gentle folk, the ordinary people were not able to acquire reading, but now they are engaging in it, and acquiring wisdom thereby.'²⁰ A later essay attributed the

¹⁷ Letter from Whiting to Peck, 1858, in Barpujari, *American Missionaries*, 158.

¹⁸ Letter from Brown to Danforth, 1850, in Barpujari, *American Missionaries*, 157.

¹⁹ Hemchandra Barua, 'Introduction', in *Hemkoshā or An Etymological Dictionary of the Assamese Language*, P.R.T. Gurdon and Hemchandra (eds), (Goswami, 1901).

²⁰ 'Discovery of the Printing Press – N.L.', in *Orunodoi*, March 1846, 23-4.

‘wisdom’ of the American and British people in modern times to their spirit of inquiry, and appealed to ‘all the people of Assam, whether gentle or ordinary’ to promote education, which would ultimately make ‘our land Assam praiseworthy in front of others’.²¹ Apart from Nidhi’s prolific output, however, the bulk of the Assamese converts did not manage to fill the role envisaged for them as writers, attributable perhaps to the fact that, despite the Mission’s educational initiatives, these new members, mostly from unlettered backgrounds, were unable to attain the anticipated degree of competence. Instead, it was quite another class of ‘native’, with another set of concerns, which was joining Nidhi on those pages.

Any attempt to read the mentalities of the various sets of people interacting with *Orunodoi* is complicated by the fact that, while the missionaries have copiously documented their actions and motivations, there is hardly any possibility of similarly accessing the minds of the Assamese converts of the period. Despite the education that the mission schools imparted to them, the poverty and class position of the Assamese converts did not enable them to join in the nascent public sphere that *Orunodoi* was initiating. Almost their sole representative in terms of written matter is Nidhi Levi Farwell, and he too was remarkably reticent as far as personal documentation was concerned. It is possible, however, to infer from his use of a colloquial idiom and his frequently expressed wish for ‘ordinary people’ to acquire wisdom that his vision of the periodical’s audience did not altogether collude with that of its missionary sponsors. The ‘ordinary people’ whom he addressed were not the intended audience of the missionaries, who were well aware that ‘not one in a hundred of the common people’ could read the products of their press.²² The intentions behind running such a native paper were quite clear:

The *Orunodoi*... was established by a vote of the whole mission after full discussion and deliberation. [It] has been considered... as one of the most powerful instrumentalities for gaining access to the mind of the Assamese, and nothing we have ever done has created such an interest among them... We can reach a portion of the more influential part of the people in no other way. They have too great a contempt for our scriptures and religious books to read them until we can dissipate their prejudices and engender a sense of enlightenment. They will receive and read the paper and by this medicine a curiosity will be existed to know our religion.²³

Despite Nidhi’s appeal to ‘gentle as well as ordinary people’, the enlightenment that *Orunodoi* hoped to distribute was not, in the first instance, targeted towards the latter.

It was the literate, ‘influential’, ‘higher class’ of the Assamese people whom the missionaries were anxious to convert. This was, of course,

²¹ ‘Wisdom – N.L.’, in *Orunodoi*, February 1847, 14-16.

²² ‘Annual Meeting of Assam Mission, 1850’, in *BMM*, May 1852, 132-34.

²³ Letter from Brown to Danforth, 1850, in Barpujari, *American Missionaries*, 156-57.

similar to the attitudes taken by Christian missions in other parts of India with an, often expressed, profound distrust of the motivation behind the conversion of the lower classes. Various studies have drawn attention to the missionary obsession, in their first few decades of work, with converting Brahmins and their deferential attitude towards them.²⁴ The optimism engendered by even the slightest overture from a 'higher class' of native after the long years of effort expended upon *Orunodoi* make these hopes fairly clear. Mrs Bronson anticipated winning over:

... two pundits... representative men of the educated Assamese. One is an old Brahmin, deeply read in Sanskrit... He seems to be like one of old, anxious to bow in the house of his god for appearance' sake, while in his heart he worships the only living and true God. The other is a representative of young Assam. He is bound hand and foot by the chains of custom and caste, like the old man, but he seems to have a conviction that there is truth in the new religion, and that he must seek for it.

These contacts with various upper-class individuals impelled her to write that 'we have never felt more encouragement in our work than now'.²⁵

This hopefulness seems somewhat misplaced. It certainly points to a considerable gap between the type of flock the Baptist missionaries gathered and what they aspired to, at least until they entirely reorganized their priorities sometime later. In spite of their optimism for the 'educated Assamese', the few converts they had made (there were fifty Assamese Christians by 1858, after twenty-five years put in by twenty-two missionaries) were almost all from a low-caste, unlettered background. They were largely dependent upon the Mission for sustenance, as their previous occupations usually came to an end in the face of social ostracism. For instance, Kolibor, one of the early converts, was a washerman who was subsequently taken on as a preacher by the Sibsagar church. Others entered into the new faith through an education in the Orphan Institution, such as Kandura, the son of a blind beggar. The usual channels for mobility within the colonial regime seem to have been fairly restricted for such educated 'native' Christians from humble backgrounds compared with their counterparts from upper-caste gentry families, a far greater proportion of whom were appointed to government jobs. For the Assamese Christians of this period, the ultimate government job in reach seems to have been that of a clerk or school inspector. None of them managed to obtain the more coveted and lucrative revenue collectorate jobs that almost every native youth of 'good' family was taking up in these years, very often stepping into posts earlier held by family members. Dick Kooiman has pointed out the perilous job prospects for educated 'native' Christians of humble

²⁴ See *Religions in Conflict, Ideology, Cultural Contact and Conversion in Late-Colonial India*, Anthony Copley (Delhi, 1997); also *Caste and Christianity: Attitudes and Policies on Caste of Anglo-Saxon Protestant Missions in India*, D.B. Forrester (London, Curzon Press, 1980).

²⁵ Letter from Mrs Bronson, 1865, in Barpujari, *American Missionaries*, 213.

background in the princely state of Travancore,²⁶ but matters were not much better for such converts even under a British administration, given its unwillingness to upset the indigenous *status quo*. Peasant society in Assam, though lacking strong landlord-tenant ties, had a powerful substitute in the patronage links maintained by the Vaishnava *xatras* or monasteries that dotted the countryside, with their tithe-paying disciples spanning different castes. Such links with spiritual preceptors were as difficult to break for the peasants as for the gentry and, even more than the ubiquity of caste, may account for the very scanty harvest the Mission achieved among the Assamese population and the frequent complaints of ‘backsliding’ among those who did enter the mission compound.

For almost three decades most of the missionaries retained hopes of a respectable variety of converts, drawn from the class providing its reading public. From their private papers, it also seems that, in these early decades, it was only from this class that they felt sure of an intellectual acceptance of their creed, as opposed to what they regarded as the materialistic motives of the lower echelons. At the same time, a ‘filtration’ theory was often adhered to, with the supposition that higher-class converts would gradually invite emulation by their subordinates. The reality, however, was that not one of their first generation of Assamese converts was from those higher reaches of indigenous society. Indeed, this failure probably contributed to the general complaisance in which the Mission’s activities seemed to be held. Despite missionary complaints of priestly hostility, there does not seem to have been much active animus displayed by the heads, or *Gosains*, of the *xatras* against their activities. Indeed, among the names of *Orunodoi* writers and subscribers can be found a few members of the *xatras*.²⁷ Assamese society of the plains was characterised by a spiritual dominance exerted by these *Gosains*. It was only the ‘tribal’ people settled in ecologically peripheral zones such as the hills surrounding the Assam Valley who were mostly outside the ambit of this *xatra* culture. Once the first few years of the *Orunodoi* had shown that, despite its occasional fulminations against indigenous ‘superstitions’ and its Christian teachings, it was not making inroads into the religious constituencies of the *xatras*. The periodical came to be regarded with tolerance for its patronage of the Assamese language. As far as their silence on its religious message is concerned, Richard Fox Young’s contention that this was typical of many Hindus and part of their refusal to recognize other faiths, as fully accredited Dharmas in opposition to their own, has to be kept in mind.²⁸ By 1871, the most powerful indigenous religious institution in Assam, the Auniati Xatra,

²⁶ Dick Kooiman, *Conversion and Social Equality in India: The London Missionary Society in South Travancore in the Nineteenth Century* (New Delhi, 1989).

²⁷ Kinaram Dutta from the Kamalabari Xatra; List of Subscribers, in *Orunodoi*, November 1853; and Krishnakanta Adhikar Gohain, from Kamalabari Satra, in *Orunodoi*, October 1849.

²⁸ Fox Young, *Resistant Hinduism*, 141.

had set up the 'Dharma Prakash Press' and initiated periodicals of its own, such as the *Axom Bilasini* and the *Axom Tara*, dealing with religious and general questions.²⁹ This can be interpreted as a reaction to, and perhaps even an imitation of, the new kind of cultural patronage that the missionaries had provided, and monopolized, for a while. The trickle of printed Assamese books from other presses which began to make their appearance in subsequent years, were mostly versions of Vaishnava scriptures, with print culture enabling such wide dissemination of cheap copies of the teachings of Assam's Bhakti preachers for the first time.

Unlike the strong language they used during itinerant preaching, the missionaries did try to be fairly circumspect in their polemics within *Orunodoi*. 'The whole influence of the priests and the Hindu religion is to keep the people in ignorance. The most effective way of defeating the purpose of the Brahmins is not to attack them personally, but to enlighten the masses.'³⁰ However, there was an occasional skirmish when the periodical did give offence by going too far in its criticism. There is a vivid instance from 1867, when the editor reacted angrily to a rumour that the Chief Commissioner was dying due to a curse put on him by the Goxain of the Auniati Xatra. His stinging condemnation of the ignorance of a public that laid credence to such powers for their priests was accompanied by equal scorn for allegedly godly personages who encouraged such beliefs. The next issue, however, cooled matters somewhat, with a disclaimer of any such curse in a letter from the Goxain. The editor added a fairly conciliatory footnote to this, but could not resist pointing out that the Goxain had disclaimed possession of any miraculous powers, contrary to the assertions of his deluded disciples. Feelings had run high and the controversy did not end here. Subsequently, we find Nidhi Farwell defending the editor's rebukes and expressing revulsion at what he described as the 'shame-inducing' tone of the correspondence from the Goxain's followers.³¹ Such incidents do indicate that not all the *Orunodoi*'s readers were able to pass over any criticism of indigenous institutions, and that a mental gap had opened up between an individual such as Nidhi and his countrymen who regarded their spiritual preceptors as omniscient beings.

Nonetheless, it does seem that many regular readers had a very different attitude towards the only source of modern 'knowledge' in their tongue. 'It is a matter of great shame that in a land where the ranks of persons who have its welfare in mind are extremely scanty, if an attempt is made to deal with the country's problems, every obstacle is put in their way'.³² In a letter from Babu Gunabhiram Barua, we find him bemoaning that:

²⁹ H. K. Barpujari (ed), *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, five vols. (Guwahati, 1993), V, 231.

³⁰ 'Annual Meeting of Assam Mission, 1850', in *BMM*, May 1852, 132-4.

³¹ *Orunodoi*, March and April 1867.

³² *Orunodoi*, October 1855.

Our countrymen do not sufficiently appreciate the invaluable work done by the *Orunodoi*. They have never had the opportunity in the past of coming across the kind of weighty matters which it has made available now, every month... We must not miss the opportunity to thank the sahibs who have taken out this paper... O respectable people of Assam, all those who are cultured and well-off, do try to benefit from the store of wisdom contained in it.

It is interesting to compare the very different kind of audience that the humbly born Nidhi and the patrician Gunabhiram were reaching out to, with their fairly similar rhetoric. While Nidhi's hopes were for the uplift of 'ordinary people', Gunabhiram was addressing his own class, the same social elite which the missionaries wished to reach. As far as this main target of 'Young Assam' was concerned, *Orunodoi* seems to have become an indispensable part of their socialization into colonial modernity, with their assimilation into a reading, subscribing and corresponding public. From 1854 onwards, hardly an issue appeared without articles and long letters from such 'native' contributors, with themes and concerns very different from the mainly religious pieces which Nidhi and a few other converts were producing. On the whole, most of these contributions came from that section of Assamese society which clearly supported *Orunodoi* as a window into a new world of modern knowledge, while simultaneously appropriating it, through their own pieces, to further their project of revitalizing language, education and social norms.³³ The missionary project served for them as a harbinger of broad cultural change, without necessarily succeeding in its own objective of bringing about religious conversions.

The name *Orunodoi* means 'Dawn' or 'Sunrise'. Such a trope of darkness to light appears frequently in the names of vernacular periodicals, expressive of the main objective behind this genre of nineteenth-century literature. This trend started in Bengal, with *Samachar Chandrika*, *Prabhakar* and *Divakar*, found place in western India with *Jnanodoy*, and was continued in Assam, with *Orunodoi* and its successors towards the latter part of the century: *Axom Tara*, *Chandradoi* and others, all names centring around images of light. (Incidentally, the name *Arunodoy* was not only given to another Bengali Christian periodical, but also was the title of Baba Padmanji's conversion account in Marathi.)³⁴ Missionary publishers shared this vision of a civilizing enlightenment through print, with their religious input as its most significant component. What they do not seem to have anticipated, however, was an audience exercising its own agency within the process of 'reading' by selectively appropriating the contents of this literature. From the missionary's point of view, such partial dissemination of their message into their readers' conceptual world was highly unsatisfactory. A significant gap operated between what their periodicals were intended to convey and what they actually did, in

³³ *Orunodoi*, October 1855.

³⁴ O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology*, 67.

accordance with the selective and willed way in which texts seem to have been appropriated by their readers.³⁵ In the context of nineteenth-century Assam, the reading public's own agenda decreed an acceptance, as far as *Orunodoi* was concerned, of its project of general knowledge and language regeneration, but not of the religious message which its editors envisaged as its primary task. The premise of moving from darkness to light did come to be a generally held belief among the 'influential classes' who were the periodical's target audience, but not its corollary – that Christianity provided the sole entry point. These readers therefore participated enthusiastically in *Orunodoi*'s enlightening project, but recreated it within the context of their own priorities, to serve as a discussion forum for their own central concerns of cultural and social regeneration. For 'progress-minded' members of the Assamese gentry, the process of recreating themselves as a 'modern' intelligentsia expressing itself in its own language was facilitated by *Orunodoi*. It is significant that in the praises of the periodical from 'natives', there is no mention, among their eulogies of its contents, of the religious sections, which were clearly seen as irrelevant to their own project of 'civilisation'. By the 1870s, with official patronage for the Assamese language reinstated, the Mission Press ceased to be the sole purveyor of its print culture.

About the same time, some members of the Mission were attempting to move beyond the Assamese Hindu community where progress was so slow and its harvest so limited. For a new generation of missionaries in the 1870s, a shift in priorities is obvious, with *Orunodoi* being issued very irregularly, until its final demise around 1884. The barren harvest from the plains was blamed, in retrospect (in 1891), on the innately 'conservative' character of the people. 'Their history proves them to have been always... timid of innovation. When the Mohammedan faith spread like a flood over Southern Asia, it never gained a strong foothold here... This extreme conservatism has been one of the chief hindrances to the progress of missions.'³⁶ Newcomers at the Mission were now turning full circle, back to earlier attempts at claiming the pre-literate 'tribes' of the region, with Edward Clark resuming work among the Nagas in 1871-72. The Mission had brought a halt to Bronson's work among the Namsang Nagas near Sadiya in its first decade, doubting whether a few thousand 'uncivilized' people would merit the effort required to learn and reshape their 'obscure' dialect into a written language suitable for the scriptures. While the enthusiasm for enlightenment displayed by 'Young Assam' had raised expectations, the lag in actual conversions made caste ties seem an insurmountable obstacle in the plains. Condemnations of caste were perhaps to be expected at this stage, as a scapegoat for missionary failure in

³⁵ Roger Chartier, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Cambridge, 1988), 40-42.

³⁶ R.D. Grant, 'Report of the Committee on Missions in Assam', in *BMM*, 1891, 203.

gaining converts and also as an index of the hidebound attitudes they had to overcome.³⁷ Only a hundred or so Assamese Christians comprised the plains church after decades of effort. The once daunting prospect of learning new languages to reach the Naga Hills became a more attractive one holding out the prospect of being among ‘non-idolaters’ with ‘no distinctions of caste, or priesthood’.³⁸ Positive experiences with other unlettered communities such as the Kols, who had been brought into Assam as indentured plantation labour, were encouraging. Another hill people, the Garos, had come into the Baptist orbit in the 1860s, their representatives themselves seeking out the Guwahati mission and going back as ‘native’ preachers to spread the word of a new god in their villages.³⁹ The long-abandoned venture to the Nagas in the hills was restarted, when it was clear that ‘our missions seem to have been more successful among the aboriginals proper’.⁴⁰

These hills in Assam were inhabited by diverse groups of ‘aboriginal’ people who adhered to localized worship traditions and lived by hunting or shifting cultivation, not by intensive agriculture, as on the plains. The ecological situation had enabled them to retain such localized cultures outside the more homogenized traditions that had spread through more accommodating regions of the Indian sub-continent. Over the centuries, as Indo-Aryan communities had pressed outwards from the Gangetic plains, they not only cleared forest tracts and disseminated agricultural technology, but they also absorbed ‘aboriginals’ into a caste system while imparting to them the essentials of Vedic religion and culture. Later, Buddhism and Islam followed similar trajectories, operating not so much through religious conversions as through cultural reorientation, and into settled modes of life. By the time a British colonial regime had appeared, much of the previously forested regions of the sub-continent had been turned over to settled agriculture, and their inhabitants now identified themselves in terms of such religious traditions with lettered cultures.⁴¹ This continued in the case of some groups, such as the Mishing, who were still acquiring the status of *xatra* disciples well into the twentieth century.⁴² The efforts of Christian missions in such areas proved conspicuously less successful than in the peripheral regions and among groups which such acculturations had bypassed.

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³⁷ Copley, *Religions in Conflict*, 11.

³⁸ *Mission to the Assamese: Fifty-fourth Annual Report*, in *BMM*, July 1868, 254-55.

³⁹ *Mission to the Assamese: Fifty-fourth Annual Report*, in *BMM*, July 1868.

⁴⁰ M.C. Mason, ‘The People of Assam’, in *BMM*, September 1880, 327-29.

⁴¹ Richard Eaton, ‘Conversion to Christianity among the Nagas’, in *Indian Economic and Social History Review* (January-March 1984), 1-44.

⁴² *The Mishings (Miris) of Assam : development of a new lifestyle* (New Delhi : Gian Pub. House, 1993), 56-60.

One of these regions was the Naga Hills district of Assam. From the 1870s, the American Baptists gradually transferred their energies into such terrain, abandoning their earlier partiality for a 'filtration' policy of winning over the influential 'civilized' Hindu gentry of the plains. There, these missionaries had been working against indigenous lettered traditions which were able to appropriate elements from projects such as *Orunodoi*, without committing themselves to aspects seen as incompatible with their own beliefs. The plains intelligentsia engaged itself in 'regenerating' its own culture so as to successfully respond to the challenges posed by colonial modernity. Christianity did not appear as an essential clearing house in this project for them. For others, it was possible to identify with notions of reform applied to indigenous traditions, as by the Brahmo sect that Gunabhiram Barua joined. Others again were able to apply new ideas to a regional Bhakti tradition, and stay within what was depicted as a continuum of indigenous dissent and reform. As in western India, a new periodical press articulated a 'crisis in legitimacy' which brought into being a small but vocal group of social reformers, who were able to select from a wide variety of ideas in the formation of their own independent critique of Hindu society.⁴³ At this level, missionary propaganda proved successful but, contrary to expectations, it did not mean automatic acceptance of Christian tenets by readers.

By the later decades of the nineteenth century, missionary methods were being revamped to meet the needs of new targets, with the Home Board acceding to the opinions of the Baptists in the field and revising its earlier assumption that schools could only be auxiliary to preaching. Copley's instancing of conferences from 1872 onwards, where education had overtaken itinerant preaching as the preferred strategy, seems indicative of a general rethinking about missionary methodology.⁴⁴ This was gradually accompanied by an acceptance of the potential for success among low-caste and 'tribal' people in different parts of India. The Judson Centennial discussions in 1914, reviewing a century of American Baptist foreign missions, felt bound to conclude that, in almost all their fields, most converts had come from the 'poorer and thus less intelligent classes'.⁴⁵ This changed strategy was only possible, however, with the free hand given by the colonial state. Despite misgivings among certain officials, by the end of the century, British administrative policy accepted missions as intermediaries for 'indirect rule' in the hill territories of North-East India where revenue could hardly meet even bare administrative costs. Since the only viable returns would be 'souls', the missions came to enjoy a

⁴³ O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology*, 50-87.

⁴⁴ Copley, *Religions in Conflict*, 23.

⁴⁵ Howard B. Grose and Fred P. Haggard (ed.), *The Judson Centennial, 1814-1914 celebrated in Boston, Mass., June 24-25, in connection with the centenary of the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society* (Philadelphia, Boston: American Baptist Publication Society, 1914), 6.

monopoly over literacy and health facilities which had never been possible in the plains. The Baptists in Assam had long believed in 'improvement of civilization' for these tribes, as being conditional upon eroding their 'perfect independence of feeling'.⁴⁶ This was now possible, with a chance of providing a 'civilizing' infrastructure for the Nagas. Since government policy also dictated minimal contact with other agencies (through regulations such as the Inner Line System), missionaries represented the state and the accoutrements of modernity which now entered the Naga villager's autonomous world. Richard Eaton argues that this was the context within which the rapid shift from a localized oral cosmology to a universalistic religion was brought about by the missionaries through their literature and schools. While earlier beliefs, limited in time and space, came to seem increasingly irrelevant in the wider context of the present, the Nagas were able to identify some of their powerful forces of nature with the all-powerful Creator to whom they were introduced. Indigenous epithets used by the missionary scriptural translations smoothed the process of transition. In the Assam plains, though print culture had been pioneered by the mission, it developed against an existing infrastructure of a literate gentry and a written tradition, thus merely serving the interests of a modernising gentry. The situation in the hills, whether for the Welsh Presbyterians in the Khasi Hills or the American Baptists among the Garos, Nagas and Mizos, was very different. The shift to literacy was itself mediated through the missionaries and their message of Christian 'improvement'. The general information and social debates on which *Orunodoi* had concentrated were no longer in vogue. Scriptural and pedagogical texts in newly enscribed 'tribal' languages for the missionary schools came to comprise the majority of their publications. In the plains, another Assamese language periodical from a mission press, *Dipti*, ultimately succeeded *Orunodoi* but its readers were solely 'native' Christians, with its contents revolving around their 'parish' concerns.

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⁴⁶ Letter from Bronson to Jenkins, July 1840, in Barpujari, *American Missionaries*, 260.

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SECTION SIX

**THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION
AND FORMATION**

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ISSUES AND CHALLENGES OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND FORMATION IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

Marina Ngursangzeli

Introduction

The ongoing exploration of the meaning of the faith is very closely related to the mission of the church. For the sake of its relevance, theological thinking needs to be informed and challenged by mission engagement. Hence education, from the earliest days of Christianity, has been essential to the sustaining, defending and handing on of the faith.¹

At the heart of mission is the formation of the people who will be its exponents. In this, theological education has a vital role to play. Without the knowledge and the skills which effective theological education imparts, mission practitioners will lack depth and direction. Those with mission at heart therefore set high value on appropriate theological education.²

At Edinburgh 1910, great stress was laid on the importance of the theological formation of missionaries for their task. The impetus from Edinburgh 1910 was carried forward by the International Missionary Council until it established the Theological Education Fund (TEF) in 1958. This had a huge impact in resourcing theological education worldwide. Besides the theological formation of missionaries, Edinburgh 1910 also placed a major focus on the education of indigenous leadership for the emerging churches of the 'mission field' of the South.³

The plea of Edinburgh 1910 to develop contextualized forms of theological education in the Asian churches was partially answered by many indigenous models of theological education established in the twentieth century, though western patterns and concepts of theology continued to be exported throughout the global South, so that the task of Edinburgh 1910 was only gradually and incompletely fulfilled. Therefore, an urgent need remained in many places for culturally and linguistically appropriate programmes and resources of theological education.⁴

¹ Kenneth R. Ross, *Edinburgh 2010: New Directions for Church in Mission* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey International University Press, 2010), 69.

² Ross, *Edinburgh 2010: New Directions for Church in Mission*, 69.

³ Ross, *Edinburgh 2010: New Directions for Church in Mission*, 70.

⁴ 'Theological Education and formation', in *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Today and Tomorrow*, Regnum Edinburgh 2010 Series, Kirsteen Kim and Andrew Anderson (eds), (Oxford: Regnum, 2011), 158.

It is true that we in India and the global Christian community recognized the importance of developing theological education, taking into account the local context, culture and the need of the community it seeks to educate and inform. Various attempts have been made, and the efforts and struggle still continue. As Ravi Tiwari stated:

The novelty of the new curriculum as evolved is in its recognition of the importance of the context in which we live, and providing skills and tools to the students in understanding the same with a view to be an efficient minister to the people among whom he/she lives and witnesses. This recognition requires that our syllabus should be relevant to the context and it should be able to provide answers to the questions raised, and demands exerted, in such a context.⁵

Though the interrelatedness of church, Christian mission and theological education had often been highlighted by many authors and studies in the twentieth century, such concrete interrelatedness remains a constant task for all churches and institutions of theological education. The process of theological education reflects existing ecclesial and denominational realities, but should also challenge the existing ecclesial realities of both the church and the world from the perspective of the Kingdom of God and his love for all creation.⁶

This paper attempts to look at some of the common and pressing issues and challenges of theological education and formation common in most of the north-eastern states of India. In doing so, it will also try to relate these with what had been discussed at national as well as global levels with regard to theological education and formation, drawing insights from what was discussed and put forward at Edinburgh 2010.

Defining Theological Education and Formation

Dietrich Werner gives a distinctive definition of the terms ‘Christian education’, ‘theological education’, ‘ministerial formation’ and ‘lay formation’ while stating the fact that, even though several key notions sometimes seem to operate, they are not always clearly defined. There are also some overlapping areas though there are also distinctive connotations at work with each of them. He defines the different terms as follows:

– *Christian education* is certainly a general umbrella term which refers to all kinds of education endeavours and institutions trying to contribute to processes by which individuals and groups are nurtured and sustained in their being or becoming Christian. The area of Christian education thus would

⁵ The Rev. Dr Ravi Tiwari, ‘Foreword’, in *Senate of Serampore College Faculty of Theology: Regulations and Syllabus Related to the Degree of Bachelor of Divinity 2010*, 3.

⁶ ‘Theological Education and Formation’, in *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Today and Tomorrow*, 159.

reach from family-based religious education to church-owned kindergartens, and Sunday School programmes to religious education in schools.

– *Theological education* is another general term which is more concerned with Christian education for adults who are able to develop a certain sense of a reflected Christian identity and are enabled to reflect critically on the relationship between their own Christian identity, church tradition and other Christian traditions as well as its relationship with the world.

– *Ministerial formation* is a narrower concept which refers to programmes and institutions which, on a more formal basis, offer courses and training programmes for future ordained church ministers to be fully theologically, liturgically, pastorally and catechetically trained and equipped for their ministry.

– *Lay formation* is a concept which focuses on theological training for lay people, thus making it explicitly clear that theology never can be regarded as the prerequisite or exclusive property of ordained ministers.⁷

It is not an easy task to actually pinpoint specifically what theological education would mean in the north-eastern region of India. Werner's definitions themselves do not give clear-cut boundaries or acknowledge overlapping areas.

In the North-East India, when one speaks of theological education, it is traditionally understood as a programme or course intended to equip people for ordained ministry in the church. It is not unusual to hear of a person who has gone for theological education as being referred to as someone undergoing training and studying a course in order to be equipped as a pastor. This is not a strange assumption and is quite understandable because of the given requirement that one needs to have theological education in order to be an ordained minister. In the earlier days, when there were very few theologically trained persons, it was more or less taken for granted that they had gone for theological studies in order to join the ordained ministry. It was quite unusual for a person who had acquired a theological degree not to seek ordination. Perhaps it will not be wrong to say that interrelatedness and the understanding of theological education as ministerial formation had been introduced by the foreign missionaries who set up Bible schools and institutes in the North-East from as far back as 1887⁸ with the main purpose

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⁷ See Dietrich Werner, *Ecumenical Learning in Global Theological Education – Legacy and the Unfinished Tasks of Edinburgh 1910*; or: *Contextuality, Inter-Contextuality and Ecumenicity as key mandates for ecumenical theological education in the 21st century; 10 historical and systematic aspects*. 3: www.edinburgh2010.org. This definition is also found in Daryl Balia and Kirsteen Kim (eds), *Edinburgh 2010: Witnessing to Christ Today* (Oxford: Regnum, 2010), 151-52.

⁸ The first theological institute in the Northeast region, Cherrapunjee Theological Institute was founded in 1887 at Cherrapunjee in Meghalaya by John Roberts, a missionary from the UK. It was renamed as John Roberts Theological Seminary in 1928 and was affiliated to the Senate of Serampore College.

of training indigenous Christian church leaders for the rapidly increasing number of churches that were being formed, especially among the tribal communities in North-East India.

However, today, with a widening and changing worldview, as people become better informed, acquire higher levels of education, with access to theological institutions becoming easier, and as more avenues open up for becoming involved in Christian ministry, Christian mission has come to be understood in a wider sense as one in which a person does not need to be ordained after acquiring theological degrees. With the rapidly increasing number of theologically trained people from the North-East, the chances of being ordained is declining and becoming very limited.⁹ For women it is quite a different matter – earlier, it was unthinkable for women to even go for theological education since ordination was and still is not open to women in almost all the major churches in the North-East. But today, the number of women with theological education is increasing rapidly.¹⁰

Theological education is now broadly understood and recognized as ‘not the prerogative only for those becoming ordained ministers and priests but a fundamental right of each Christian adult’.¹¹ However, in spite of the

⁹ For example, in the Mizoram Presbyterian Church till about the middle of the 1990s, from among those who applied for probationary pastorship, only about one or two would not be accepted, not because of any limitation of the need or vacancies, but usually because of some personal issues that the applicants themselves had. But things start changing very drastically from the about 2000 onwards: in 2010 there were 83 applicants for probationary pastorship but only 17 of them were accepted.

¹⁰ Today, there are a few (less than ten) women who have been ordained by some Baptist churches in Nagaland. But they are not treated as equals or given the same opportunities as male pastors, especially in serving the local churches or being in charge of a church or congregations.

¹¹ The explanation given in ‘World Report on the Future of Theological Education in the 21st Century, 2009’ that states that: ‘Theological education in this broad understanding aims at developing reflective Christian identity and practice, an informed and spiritually enriched access to Biblical tradition, and empowering people for participating in the mission of God in this world. It enables people to reflect critically on the relation between their own Christian identity, their church tradition and other Christian traditions, their relation to the world, and the tasks of God’s mission today’ may very well be accepted in theory, but then again further clarifications and discussion will be needed. However, with the mushrooming of theological colleges and seminaries in the north-east Indian states offering a number of different courses and degrees, distinctions will have to be made between a theological degree that is recognized by the church as a requirement for being eligible for ordained ministry and for serving with the church in various capacities such as evangelists, missionaries, theological teachers, etc. Then there are also courses for lay people carried out through mobile theological schools and correspondence courses that can be taken for one’s own personal interest without actually any intention to work with the church or another Christian organization. For details on the ‘World Report on the Future of Theological Education in the 21st

recognition of these aspects of theological education, it is still closely connected and interlinked with ministerial formation for specific responsibility in the church or church-related ministry. In some states like Mizoram and Meghalaya, the term 'theological education' is usually linked with ministerial formation and primarily refers to ordained ministry in the church, though there is now a growing awareness and recognition of theological education to equip oneself for church-related or other forms of Christian ministry in Christian organizations or institutions, and not necessarily only for the ordained ministry. In Nagaland and Manipur there is a wider and broader understanding and acceptance of theological education as being connected with ministerial formation aiming at equipping people theologically to be involved in church-related ministry or in other Christian organizations and associations.

Issues and Challenges in Theological Education and Formation

An exclusive ministry

The predominant understanding that theological education is mainly a means of ministerial formation for ordained ministry is the opinion most commonly held by Christians in the North East. One of the main drawbacks of this understanding, very clearly put across in Allie Ernst's comment, is that this view considers 'doing theology' as the domain of a small, expert sub-set of the church. The failure to engage parts of the community in theological dialogue leads to failure to engage the rest of the community in the decision-making process and disenfranchises them, resulting in a hierarchical structure in which theological knowledge (and power) is concentrated in the hands of a select group which 'distributes' it to others. Consequently, theology (and theological education) then becomes a 'secret pastor's business' or 'secret men's business'.¹²

One of the most important challenges that theological education faces in the North-East Indian context is to promote the concept of theological education for all God's people. If theological education is considered as the domain of only a few chosen for ordained ministry, placing ordained ministers above laity and maintaining hierarchical church structures, it hinders the body of Christ working together in all its parts. This also has further implications as long as women are not eligible for ordination. The challenge for us today is to struggle together to learn what it means to be a

Century', see *Challenges and Opportunities in Theological Education in the 21st Century: Pointers for a new international debate on Theological Education*, 18: www.scribd.com/doc/27884978

¹² For more details see Allie Ernst, *The nature of theological education*: www.thefreelibrary.com/Visions+for+theological+education%3a+some+perspectives-a095527676

body of Christ, what life in the body of Christ entails, how we equip one another to effectively fulfil our Christian vocation, and how best we all work and strive together to participate in God's mission.¹³

Sometimes we may have changed our policies to give space to those who had been at the margins but often it is not enough to have the right policies because policies don't change attitudes or behaviour. Theological education must proceed from right attitudes and must inculcate these attitudes in students in order to produce a community that reflects attitudes and behaviour that are theology-promoting and inclusive. We need to engage in theological education with a lens which is sensitive to issues of gender, ethnicity and class, with a clear understanding as to what we are doing in theological education, for and with whom we are doing it and why, in order to shape theological institutions that are inclusive, relevant and prophetic.¹⁴

There is also a growing feeling among Christians in the region that theologically trained people are a separate class. This encourages a general apathy among congregations who feel that it is only such trained people who need to do all the thinking and that they merely have to follow. All church members need theological training to help them think more theologically, build bridges and enable them to articulate and express their faith more clearly. Thus, one of the challenges theological education today faces is to take the classroom to the people and vice versa – in other words, to let one influence the other.

A widening gap

Ernst points out that there is 'a large gap between the theology taught in the seminary and the theology taught in the congregation, which further isolates theologians/clergy from the rest of the congregation. This has important implications for mission, since it also widens the gap between clergy and secular world, and church and secular world'. This statement holds very true in the North-East Indian context. There is also the added expectation that theology is simply to confirm and to defend the teaching and the positions held by the church. It is also often considered that theological research and thinking is an exercise to be carried out in complete independence from the church. Thus, 'theology is exposed to two temptations. Either it confirms and solidifies the status quo and moves in narrow circles, or it develops theological insights without regard for the communion of the Church'.¹⁵

¹³ This concept was discussed by Ernst in her paper, *The nature of theological education*.

¹⁴ Ernst, *The nature of theological education*.

¹⁵ See Vischer, Lukas. 'A Reflection on the Role of Theological Schools':

The conference ‘Seeing Education Whole’ in Bergen, Norway, in 1970 highlighted some of the most critical trends and issues of that period, and among the principles it laid out were: a basic reconsideration and reformulation of the concepts of leadership-formation in the church and a reappraisal of the concept of equipping all God’s people for mission.¹⁶ This continues to be an important challenge till today in the 21st century. At the Senate of Serampore BD curriculum revision consultations that took place during 2006-2009, it was time and again emphasized that:

Theological education is not simply a matter of equipping students with information; it is also important for facilitating commitment formation and character transformation in the life of the student... for relevant theological education to be effective, yet another level has to be attained. It has to edify, continuously recommit and empower local congregations. The laity should be enabled to fulfil their role as light in the world and salt of the earth. The theological education of residential BD students and the theological education of local congregations should therefore go hand-in-hand. If they are on different wave-lengths, then the transformation and empowerment of the people for God’s purposes will not be attained.¹⁷

We in the North East too must strive towards this ideal with a commitment towards equipping the whole people for God’s mission. We must recognize and remember that ‘the role of theological education is never limited to just training Christian ministers. With all legitimate attention and emphasis on ministerial formation, the road and inclusive approach emphasizing theological education as a process of renewal and formation for all God’s people needs always to be kept in mind.’¹⁸

A proliferation of theological colleges/seminaries/ institutions and Bible schools

This is one of the pertinent challenges that the Christians in the North East face. While this may reflect a genuine desire for access to theological education, the rapid growth and commercialization of theological education has led to negative side-effects. Many of these new schools offer only light or fast food-style education lacking libraries, a developed curriculum or a consistent educational framework. Many of them do not have any

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www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/documents/p5/ete/AReflectionontheRoleofTheologicalSchools-LukasVischer.pdf

¹⁶ Cited by Dietrich Werner, *Ecumenical Learning in Global Theological Education*, 7.

¹⁷ Roger Gaikwad, *Curriculum Development in Theological Education: Urgencies and Priorities; Senate of Serampore College: Exercise in BD Curriculum Revision, 2006-2009*: www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/documents/p5/ete

¹⁸ Cited by Dietrich Werner, *Ecumenical Learning in Global Theological Education*, 9.

developed relationships with the indigenous churches which exist in their contexts or any connection with the established associations of theological schools, reflecting a lack of co-operative relationships, common standards and integration in the theological education system.¹⁹

This phenomenon challenges us to look at the concept of ecumenical theological education. The trend of each different denominational church or ethnic group to have its own theological college or seminary is an unhealthy one. It is appropriate for us in the north-eastern states to affirm and adopt for ourselves and our own contexts the recommendation of the Edinburgh 2010 study group on 'Theological Education and Formation' which states: 'We recommend that efforts should be taken to increase interdenominational co-operation, that synergies be sought between different denominational institutions of theological education, and that whenever possible, interdenominational settings of theological education be developed and strengthened.'²⁰

Edinburgh 2010 had recognized the need for new and authentic partnerships between institutions of theological education in the North and South, East and West.²¹ Translating the universal global need and zeroing into our local specific local north-eastern context, we too need to have dialogue and build up relationships with one another irrespective of our denominational, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. It will be good to have a platform such as a regional forum on theological education where dialogue on goals and common theological education could be initiated and facilitated. This will help us to avoid isolation and fragmentation in theological education and will also help and promote co-operation and common responsibility.²²

Contextualizing theological education

The contextualization of theological education and dealing with realities and challenges in our own context is a pressing issue. Often theological education imparted in theological colleges does not really prepare graduates to deal with real-life problems and situations in their own contexts. As Werner points out, 'Contextualization in theological education was and still is a cry for self-determination and self-reliance in theological education of

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¹⁹ The proliferation of theological colleges and Bible schools is a worldwide phenomenon as stated in Balia and Kim, *Edinburgh 2010: Witnessing to Christ Today*, 163.

²⁰ Balia and Kim, *Edinburgh 2010: Witnessing to Christ Today*, 170.

²¹ 'Theological Education and formation', in *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Today and Tomorrow*, Kirsteen Kim and Andrew Anderson (eds), 164.

²² The recommendations for global and regional forum on theological education were made by the study group of Edinburgh 2010 of Theme Six: Theological Education and Formation. See Balia and Kim, *Edinburgh 2010: Witnessing to Christ Today*, 166.

churches in the global South or, broadly speaking, in the churches of the marginalized which cannot view themselves as a mere prolongation of the same models and standards of theology and theological education which had been offered for so long by the churches of the West.²³ As O.V. Jathanna had rightly pointed out, while we have certainly benefited from it, we need to realize that the present-day Indian multi-religious, multi-cultural and political socio-economic context is not the same as that of the West from whom we borrowed the system.²⁴ Contextualized theological education requires that we identify the questions and concerns that need to be addressed in each place. Today, with the awareness and recognition for the need of contextualized theological education apart from the core subjects, several issues relating to the problems and challenges in the Indian context are included in the curriculum. Issues such as HIV/AIDs, poverty, caste conflicts, ecology, *dalits*, tribals and *adivasis* are given much importance. However, there is still scope for more improvement; and to make it more relevant for the people of the North East, issues directly relating to them – such as the insurgency and ethnic problems which create division among the Christian groups themselves – have not found any space in the theological curriculum. Moreover, when common issues and problems are dealt with, these are usually seen from the perspective of mainland India, even while relating it to the tribals without a clear demarcation between the tribals in the North East and other parts of India, who are very different from each other. Wati's suggestion of using indigenous traditional values that were never considered worth exploring for doing theology can provide a new paradigm for doing theology in our north-eastern contexts.²⁵

Relating theological education to the realities of particular social and cultural contexts, liberating theological education from any captivity of certain social milieus, cultural one-sidedness and spiritual blindness to religious values existing in certain indigenous traditions, has been a major emphasis of the World Council of Churches in the programme on

²³ Dietrich Werner, *Ecumenical Learning in Global Theological Education*, 9.

²⁴ O.V. Jathanna, 'The Rationale for the Curriculum Revision of the Senate of Serampore College'. Paper presented at the National Consultation on Curriculum Revision, Mumbai, October 24th-25th 2006, 305; O.V. Jathanna, 'The Curriculum Revision: Findings on the Way', Exercise in Curriculum Revision 2006-2009, Serampore: Senate of Serampore College, 2009, 76. Cited by Gaikwad in *Curriculum Development in Theological Education: Urgencies and Priorities, Senate of Serampore College: Exercise in BD Curriculum Revision, 2006-2009, A South Asian Theological Education Endeavor* . 6-7: www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/documents/p5/ete

²⁵ Wati Longchar, Edinburgh 2010: 'Continuing Challenges for Theological Education in Asia', in *Edinburgh 2010: Witnessing to Christ today in India*, James Massey and Wati Longchar (eds), (Bangalore/Kolkata: BTESSC/SATHRI/SCEPTRE, 2011), 205.

theological education (PTE) since the 1960s.²⁶ The demand for the contextualization of theological education, taking into account the specific and particular contexts in the North East, is an ongoing challenge. Recognizing the universal impact of globalization and pluralization of lifestyle, we need to give importance to and uphold our own cultural identities and unique situations and locations to deal with the pressing problems of our church and society. However, in the context of debates on the priority of text or context, Roger Gaikwad had rightly explained that, because theological education is a bond between the text and the context, there must be a closer and transformative interaction between what is studied and taught and what the needs of the people are. This basically demands faithfulness to the gospel message on the one hand and a sense of social responsibility on the other. It must be remembered that the text-context relationship is always a two-way dialogue. The understanding of the text must be influenced by the contextual, practical consequences, while practices in society must be grounded in the message of the text.²⁷

A divided church

As uncomfortable as it may sound, theological education today must deal with increasing denominationalism. When we speak of bringing the outside world into the classroom and vice versa, disturbing trends such as this cannot be ignored. This perhaps could be more prevalent in church-sponsored theological institutions directly under the control of a particular church denomination. Dietrich Werner has appropriately pointed out the problems caused by growing denominationalism worldwide which are also relevant for North-East India. He clearly states that denominationalism also gives rise to isolated and fragmented systems of theological education. To this is added the further danger of different denominations having different standpoints in the understanding of Biblical hermeneutics, the authority of Biblical tradition, or women's ordination, to name a few. Consequently,

²⁶ Dietrich Werner, *Magna Carta on Ecumenical Formation in Theological Education in the 21st century – 10 key Convictions ETE/WCC-Reference document (draft) for use in associations of theological schools and colleges, WOCATI and in the Edinburgh 2010 process*, 2. <http://search1.rediff.com/dirsrch/default.asp?src=web&MT=Magna%20Charta%20on%20Ecumenical%20Formation%20in%20Theological%20Education%20in%20the%2021st%20century%20-%2010%20key%20Convictions>

²⁷ See Roger Gaikwad, 'Towards a Revised Curriculum: Proposals about Methodology and Content', Exercise in Curriculum Revision 2006-2009, Serampore: Senate of Serampore College, 2009, 49. Cited in Roger Gaikwad, *Curriculum Development in Theological Education: Urgencies and Priorities*; see also Samson Prabhakar, 'Re-visioning the Theological Curriculum as if the Church Mattered'. Paper presented at the National Consultation on Curriculum Revision, Mumbai, October 24th-25th 2006, cited in Gaikwad, *Curriculum Development in Theological Education*, 1.

there is an absence of acceptable quality in theological education among various colleges as well as a recognition of the other's denomination and understanding of different contexts.²⁸

Developing an ecumenical perspective in theological education in such a context is an important challenge for us. Participants at the 'Asian Forum on Theological Education' meeting held at Trinity Theological College, Singapore, in June 2011, affirming 'that the Spirit of Pentecost is a symbol of courage and greater solidarity transcending boundaries of nations, denominations and cultural differences', had clearly stated the need 'for more dialogue between the different denominational and theological traditions', and 'greater solidarity between different churches transcending stereotyped views of each other as "ecumenicals", "evangelicals" or "charismatics" in witnessing to Christ in today's world'.²⁹ I believe that Christians in the North East should also consider this as an important challenge. To quote M.A. Thomas: 'The unity that exists in the Godhead is a missionary unity. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are together dedicated to a missionary task, and the unity of the Church becomes effective to the measure in which the world believes that the Father sent the Son to be its saviour, and so takes seriously the Christian message of redemption.'³⁰ If we are to participate in the unity between Father and Son, we too, must be one; we too must come together. If we can keep this one great truth and this goal in mind, it is easier for people coming from various denominational and social backgrounds to come together, learn more of each other and appreciate one another. It is disturbing when one comes across a well trained ordained minister, respected by the people, making statements such as that they had been ordained by their church to serve the church, forgetting the fact that the church exists through and for the sake of God's mission.

Conclusion

The church in North-East India must understand the importance of theological education, especially within the context of Christian mission.

²⁸ See Dietrich Werner, *Theological education in the changing context of world Christianity: An unfinished agenda Global and ecumenical perspectives from the Edinburgh 2010 process and beyond*, 12:

www.oikoumene.org/en/news/news-anagement/eng/a/article/1634/promoting-theological-edu.html

²⁹ Asian Forum on Theological Education (AFTE):

www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/education-and-ecumenical-formation/ecumenical-theological-education-ete/the-future-of-theological-education-in-asia.html

³⁰ M.A. Thomas, *Towards Wider Ecumenism* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1993), 26.

There is a need to have well equipped and trained theologians to express the church's point of view on matters and issues confronting them in their everyday life. In doing so, the North-East Indian church would look beyond itself and position itself better to address such issues in a globalized world.

This paper has attempted to show that all forms and dimensions of theological education are closely interrelated. In the North-East Indian context where those who undertake theological training are often viewed as 'a class apart', there is an urgent need to re-vision theological education as an education that is available, indeed necessary, to enable Christians in the region to reflect on, and with which to tackle various social and political problems unique to the region. At the same time there is also the need to make theological education relevant to the needs of the people without diluting, but indeed being inspired by, its core values and beliefs. Theological education must then be seen as a factor for the renewal of the church's life and mission. It is the tool whereby dialogue can be entered into with those of other faiths and societies. If the emphasis on the importance and necessity of theological education is reduced, there is always the danger of Christianity being distorted by an exclusive few which would have grave consequences for interdenominational as well as inter-faith relationships.

The North-East Indian church must then ponder, not just unshackling theological education from the narrow confines that it is in danger of being cornered into, but also how theological education must overcome denominationalism and encourage a more ecumenical north-eastern Christianity. In doing so, the North-East Indian church must rethink its policy of allocating resources in terms of personnel and materials so that it can use these to be a truly united church sure of its mission and a beacon to others both in India and in the rest of the world.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

Wati Longchar

The Senate of Serampore College

The founding of Serampore College is significant in the history of theological education in India, especially in North-East India. The Serampore missionaries William Carey and his colleagues, Joshua Marshman and William Ward founded Serampore College in 1818 for 'the instruction of Asiatic Christians and other youths in Eastern Literature and Western Sciences'. The primary aim of the college was to provide instruction in every branch of knowledge to promote the welfare of the people. The College was made accessible to all, declaring that 'no caste, colour, country shall bar anybody for admission into the college. The college was given a Danish Royal Charter by King Frederick XI of Denmark in 1872, granting it University Rights and the power to award degrees. The founding of Serampore College paved the way for higher theological education in the Indian sub-continent.

Under the Principalship of George Howells, the original charter was revived and led to the 1918 West Bengal Act providing a Council of up to 16 members and a Senate of up to 18 members to determine eligible candidates for the award of degrees.¹ This revised structure made it possible for colleges to affiliate to Serampore College, e.g. The United Theological College in 1919 and Bishop's College in 1920, etc. and today there are 57 colleges affiliated to the Senate of Serampore College (University).² It has blossomed into an ecumenical university having affiliated institutions from various traditions – Baptist, Orthodox, Mar Thoma, Church of South India, Church of North India, Presbyterian, Brethren, Methodist, Lutheran, Evangelical Church of India, and Pentecostals from India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. All of them follow the rules, regulations and curricula of the SSC.

In a period when the Indian sub-continent was under the onslaught of European colonies and their commercial enterprises, and divided into

¹ Serampore College (University) is not only the first university but also the only theological university in India. The Charter, granted by His Royal Danish Majesty in 1872, and the Serampore College Act 1918 of the Bengal Legislative Council are the legal documents in its support. They are printed, as modified from time to time, the latest one being in 1997.

² Hereafter to be referred to as SSC.

several small kingdoms under Hindu and Muslim rulers, when the caste system, the practice of *sati*, patriarchy and a kind of feudalism dominated society, and when religion was characterized by cumbersome rituals and practices, Serampore College was a beacon of light educating people in the humanities, science and theology.

Until 1978, the SSC was the only means of validating theological training in India. The Union Biblical Seminary (UBS) was constituted in 1953 as an evangelical theological college at the BTh and BD levels. It was accredited by the Board of Theological Education of the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) in 1964, which was formed in 1955 to bring together unaffiliated Bible schools and seminaries. UBS was affiliated to the SSC in 1973 at the BD level. After a series of joint consultations with SSC, the Board of Theological Education of the NCCI decided in favour of the formation of one national structure for theological education in India. When the SSC accepted the proposal, a joint structure was formed in July 1975 as the Board of Theological Education of the Senate of Serampore (BTESSC). It brought together not only theological colleges affiliated to the SSC but also a large number of organizations that were experimenting and articulating relevant models of theologizing in the Indian context. The SSC was open to affiliating evangelical colleges as well. But evangelical leaders decided to form the Association of Evangelical Theological Education in India in 1979 to provide a forum for fellowship and reflection and soon linked it with the Asia Theological Association (ATA), which was founded as an accrediting agency for evangelical theological institutions in Asia.

Christian Mission and Early Theological Education in North-East India

Christianity was introduced in North-East India in the nineteenth century, e.g. by the Baptists in 1836, the Presbyterians in 1841, and the Catholics in 1890, to mention a few. The spread of Protestant missions coincided with colonial expansion. While the goal and project of the colonial powers was political and economic, the missionary goal and project was primarily religious – converting people to the Christian faith. Christianity spread rapidly in the region after the British had brought all the tribal groups under a single administration.³ As part of their activities among the tribes, Christian missionaries started introducing elementary school education in the mother tongues of the communities they worked in. In some cases, a

³ See F.S. Downs, *Christianity in Northeast India: Historical Perspective* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1983), 6-10.

school was established even before a church.⁴ It is not surprising, therefore, that Christianity and education were synonymous terms used by many people in the recent past. Originally, the Bible School was integrated with the Middle English School programme and considerable Christian teaching was given along with other general education. In fact, the Bible was one of the compulsory subjects in the school curriculum. That was, perhaps, the beginning of theological teaching in the North-East. Church meetings or services on Sundays and occasionally during the week days were in many ways teaching sessions for members of the church and others alike on a variety of Christian subjects. The introduction of a more organized Sunday School further strengthened theological education among the people. These provided grassroots schools of theology and they laid a Bible-based foundation for the Christian community and prepared them for more advanced theological study later.⁵

The pioneer missionaries soon realized the urgent need for training native converts so that they could provide an effective ministry in the church in addition to providing continued leadership. A firm foundation for Christian ministry could only be laid when local workers were given proper biblical or theological education. Both Baptist and Presbyterian missions sought ways and means to fulfil these plans by introducing either half-yearly or quarterly Bible training classes in all their mission stations, either half, and different batches of pastors, teachers and church leaders were brought together and trained. Such training programmes led to the establishment of Bible schools. The three earliest Bible schools established by missionaries in the North East were:

1. Cherra Theological College, Cherrapunji (now John Roberts' Theological College, Shillong) was established by the Welsh Presbyterian Mission in 1887. The first Principal was John Roberts and the college was affiliated to the Senate of Serampore College (University) at LTh level in 1937.
2. The Bible School in Aizawl (now Aizawl Theological College) was also started by the Welsh Presbyterian Mission, in 1907. The school became a College in 1965 at LTh level under the Senate of Serampore College (University). The Rev. D.E. Jones served as its first Principal.
3. Jorhat Bible School (now Eastern Theological College) was established by the American Baptist Missionary Society in 1905, upgraded to College level in 1950 with J.W. Cook as its first Principal. The College was affiliated to the Senate of Serampore College (University) at LTh level in 1973.

⁴ O.L. Snaitang et al, 'Theological Education in the Twenty-First Century: Current Trends and their Relevance for Northeast India', in *Journal of Tribal Studies*, III/1 (January-June, 1999), 35.

⁵ Snaitang, 'Theological Education in the Twenty-First Century', 35.

These three theological institutions were pioneer theological training centres in North-East India. From their founding, these schools have been centres of theological education for the whole Christian community in North-East India, and have produced a number of church leaders, teachers, pastors, evangelists, missionaries, lay workers – both men and women – and even government workers over the years. In spite of criticism, the significance and contributions of these pioneering theological institutions to the churches of North-East India cannot be ignored. And they still stand out as the major theological learning centres in the region.

Development of Theological Education

We can categorize theological colleges in the North East as follows: (a) The Senate of Serampore College (University)⁶ affiliated colleges. Currently, there are eleven colleges/seminaries affiliated to the SSC – eight colleges offer the BD degree programme and three offer both BD and MTh degree programmes. (b) The Asian Theological Association (ATA)⁷ accredited colleges – there are fifteen colleges accredited or recognized by ATA, and they offer the MDiv., BTh and BMiss programmes. (c) Two colleges are accredited by the Senate of the Indian Institute of Missiology (IIM)⁸ and they offer the BMiss programme. (e) The rest are either private or under the management of individuals and offer the GTh, BTh and MDiv programmes. All the Senate of Serampore College (University) affiliated colleges are sponsored by the churches while the rest are privately sponsored colleges. As these colleges were established by different mission agencies and churches, their theological orientations, emphases and perspectives differ considerably. The following colleges became affiliated to the Senate of Serampore College (University) after the 1970s.

1. Clark Theological College, Mokokchung, was granted affiliation by the Senate of Serampore College in 1984 for the BTh degree course, and is now upgraded to MTh level. It is sponsored by the Ao Baptist Arogo Mungdang. The college is now planning to offer the doctoral programmes of the Senate.
2. Manipur Theological College, Kangpoki, was granted affiliation by the Senate of Serampore College in 1992 for the BTh degree, and is now upgraded to BD level. The college is sponsored by the Manipur Baptist Convention.

⁶ The college was given a Danish Royal Charter by King Frederick XI of Denmark in 1872, granting it University Rights and the power to award degrees.

⁷ ATA is one of the five accrediting agencies under the World Evangelical Alliance's Theological Commission. It gives a continental recognition to over a hundred colleges.

⁸ IIM caters for missionary training centres. During the 1960s and 70s, there was a mushrooming of indigenous mission societies in India and these were brought under an umbrellas structure, namely, the India Mission Association.

3. Trulock Theological College, Imphal, was granted affiliation by the Senate of Serampore College in 1995 at BTh level, and is now upgraded to BD level. The college is sponsored by the Kuki Baptist Association.
4. Trinity Theological College, Dimapur, was granted affiliation by the Senate of Serampore College in 1996 at BTh level, and is now upgraded to BD level. The college is sponsored by the Sumi Baptist Convention, Nagaland.
5. Baptist Theological College, Pfutsero, Nagaland, was granted affiliation by the Senate of Serampore College in 1998 at BTh level, and is now upgraded to BD level. The college is sponsored by the Chakhesang Baptist Association.
6. Harding Theological College, Tura, was granted affiliation by the Senate of Serampore College in 2003 at BTh level, and was upgraded to BD level from the 2012 academic year. The college is sponsored by the Garo Baptist Convention, Meghalaya.
7. The Academy of Integrated Christian Studies, Aizawl, was granted affiliation by the Senate of Serampore College in 2004 at BD level. The college is sponsored by the Baptist Church of Mizoram.
8. Witter Theological College, Wokha, was granted provisional affiliation by the Senate of Serampore College in 2012 at BD level. The college is sponsored by the Keyong Baptist Association, Nagaland.

A new development that is taking shape is the Bachelor of Missiology (BMiss) degree programme of the SSC (University) now introduced at the Missionary Training College in Aizawl. It is very likely that some colleges in North-East India will seek affiliation to this programme in the near future as the churches these colleges belong to are very mission-minded and run active mission programmes.

Unlike in the other parts of India, theological education in the North East is recognized by some state governments as well. Some theological colleges receive grants for infrastructure development. Theological students from Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya and Mizoram receive government scholarships. In Nagaland, SSC degrees are recognized for employment in state service. Nagaland University (a Central University) recognizes the MTh degree for pursuing a PhD programme.

In spite of the presence of a strong Christian community, there is no higher theological research centre in the region. Higher theological education is not satisfactory. At present, only three colleges offer postgraduate programmes of the SSC. The following courses are offered at MTh level:

Eastern Theological College,
Jorhat

Christian Theology, Christian Ministry
(Counselling and Christian Education,

Clark Theological College,
Mokokchung
Aizawl Theological College,
Aizawl

General) History of Christianity
Christian Ministry (General), Christian
Ethics, Christian Theology
New Testament, Christian Theology,
Religions, History of Christianity,
Missiology

Regarding the present postgraduate programme in North-East India, Ravi Tiwari, the Registrar of the Senate, observes that:

A postgraduate studies programme was first introduced at Eastern Theological College, Jorhat, in 1997, but its growth and continuity of the programmes have been far from satisfactory. It is somehow carrying it on, though sometimes it gives us the impression that it is only for the sake of prestige and as a showpiece. I sincerely hope that the ETC (Eastern Theological College) community will take its responsibility, as it has taken it in the past, seriously and continue to strengthen the ministry of the Church, keeping in mind the ever-growing and demanding expectation of member churches... The same may be partially true with the newly developed postgraduate centre at Clark Theological College, Mokokchung, which is struggling to sustain and introduce, higher theological studies at their centre. It should not be taken otherwise, by my friends elsewhere, if I express some kind of satisfaction in taking note of the reasonable and well thought-of development programme for higher theological education at Aizawl Theological College. This development may be a good example for others to emulate in their own regions and centres.⁹

At present, Aizawl Theological College (ATC) is the only college that offers a doctoral programme of the SSC. The other colleges in the North East have a long way to go before developing into centres of advanced theological research.

Theological Education by Extension

Since residential theological education was meant for training full-time church workers, mainly pastors, the SSC began the Bachelor of Christian Studies (BCS) for lay leaders.

The focus is on equipping the laity who are already working with churches or in the secular world with different vocations and callings. This degree programme is meant to strengthen the relationship with the people, so that those who go through such an education will be able to work not 'for' the people, but 'together with the people'. Ultimately, this means strengthening the solidarity and dialogical approaches in theological education. This paradigm shift also aims to help the whole concept of

⁹ Ravi Tiwari, 'Perspectives on Higher Theological Education in the North-East', in *A Journey of Faith in Action: In Honour of Rev. Dr Lalchungnunga*, Pratap Chandra Gine (ed), (Serampore: Council of Serampore College, 2011), 7.

theological education in filling the gap between theological education and people. The colleges which offer the BCS course are: (a) Aizwal Theological College in Mizo, (b) Eastern Theological College in English, and (c) John Roberts' Theological College – in both Khasi and English. (d) Impur Bible School has been given permission to start the Diploma in Christian Studies (Dip CS) and BCS courses in the Ao language.

Theological colleges in North-East India need to give special attention to lay formation. Very often we tend to think that the Christian faith of the community is fostered by providing it with a good catechism or Sunday School programme, and familiarizing it with the Biblical stories. These traditional means are inadequate. In today's circumstances, every Christian needs to be enabled in his or her own way to engage in Christian praxis through the interpretation of the gospel. In a situation where we are confronted with endemic poverty and oppression, the marginalization of the weak, ethnic conflicts, the effects of globalization, the suppression and exploitation of women – all these call for responses from local Christian communities. The present system of imparting theological education may not come to the aid of the Christian community in responding to these formidable challenges. Christian communities in the region, then, need to be given sound theological education. This can be done through an extension programme such as the BCS.

Problems and Challenges

The mushrooming of theological colleges

After the revival movements of the 1960s and 70s, many colleges have been established in North-East India. One major concern is the proliferation of new theological colleges. Why are there so many in a small region like the North East? It is sad to note it is flourishing like an industry. For some, establishing theological schools/colleges is a lucrative economic business. Secondly, among the churches and different tribal communities, establishing their own theological college has become a matter of prestige. Each church denomination competes with the other in establishing its own college. All these motives cause the division of resources, create 'isms', give rise to unhealthy competition among the people, produce sub-standard theological education, and finally lead to unhealthy competition between one another for survival.¹⁰ Theological colleges should not be equated with secular colleges. Theological education is a specialized and professional form of training, and it is a fallacy, or one might say a mere fancy for fanaticism, to start a cheap theological college. To maintain about sixty

¹⁰ Limatula Longkumer, 'Naga Women in Theological Education', in *Side by Side*, Limatula Longkumer and Talijungla Longkumer (eds), (Jorhat: CCA-EGY and NWFT, 2004), 24-25.

colleges in the North East, and to have them supported by the same members of the churches, is a risky enterprise. It is an abuse of Christian stewardship to maintain so many theological institutions in such a small region; in many cases, there is a tacit attempt by certain interested persons merely to solve someone else's employment problems or to promote one's parochial ideas.¹¹ Could the churches of North-East India consider pooling their resources and investing in a Union Theological College? There is a great need to come together. Such a structure is very essential, not only to bring all the institutions together, but also for the sake of future scholars. There is a serious need for the development of more effective and intentional co-operation and communication among theological colleges in the region.

Higher theological research centre

In spite of vibrant Christian communities and strong support from some of the state governments, theological colleges in the North East have not entered into the areas of advanced theological education, the higher study centre that could produce intellectuals and scholars. For this to happen, churches and colleges have to come together, pool both human and material resources, co-ordinate the courses offered by the different theological colleges, and so build an infrastructure for an advanced theological study centre for North-East India. Colleges could continue offering the lower-level degrees as the churches need them. But graduates of these colleges who are found to have academic potential could be trained at such a centre. The regional colleges could also become feeder colleges for the advanced study centre. This necessarily must be a joint programme and, while funding and human resources would not be a problem, what would be lacking is leadership and vision. A well thought out organizational structure is absolutely essential to bring together all the institutions and churches and hence the need for ecumenical unity and commitment.

Relevant theological education

One aspect of quality theological education is not only that it effectively delivers the basic biblical and theological traditions, but also that it is relevant to the specific situation in which it is found. Contextualization, indigenization and inculturation have been popular slogans for many years. But this has not been translated into reality in North-East India. It is only in recent years that a few theological seminaries have begun to offer courses on the history of Christianity in North-East India and other a courses on contextual courses. Until now, only two colleges, Eastern Theological

¹¹ Renty Keitzar, 'Theological Education in the C.B.C.N.E.I', in *Journal of Tribal Studies*, III/1 (January-June, 1999), 6.

College and Aizawl Theological College, offer a course in 'Tribal Theology'. Students of the North East know about the history of Christianity in South India, but little of their own history. They know of Hinduism and Indian philosophical thought, but little of their own culture and philosophy. They are familiar with the problems of the Third World and of Latin America in general, but do not know of their own problems, challenges and struggles.¹² Theological education in North-East India must take the tribal contexts and issues seriously. Some of these issues are the tribal identity and modernity, peace education, holistic ministry, partnership in Christian ministry, climate justice and indigenous people, to name a few.

Women in theological education

The enrolment of female students from the North East is higher in most of the leading theological colleges in India, while in North-East India female enrolment is about 40% in most of the colleges. On average, every year at least about 100-120 women graduate from SSC-affiliated colleges.¹³ However, a large number of women going for theological studies and getting higher degrees do not solve all the problems of women's issues. As the number of female theological graduates rapidly increases, the problem seems to be more acute and visible than before. Women are not as easily placed in ministry as men. Placement of theologically trained women has become one of the greatest problems in the North East because women are not given equal opportunities in pastoral ministry. This challenges us to look critically at the whole process of theological education from women's perspectives. The present system of theological education is a process of gender-biased education. Women's voices and the assertion of their rights have not been heard sufficiently in theological education. Gender discrimination is found in the theological curriculum, the structure of theological institutions, the appointment of the faculty and in the enrolment of the students. A theological study that neglects one section of the human race, namely women, cannot be considered an authentic education. The integration of women's perspectives in theological education will create awareness of discriminatory gender realities and help people to do something concrete to change this oppressive situation.

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Conclusion

This paper has attempted to give a brief idea of the present position of theological education in North-East India and particularly with regard to colleges affiliated to the Senate of Serampore College (University). While

¹² Snaitang, 'Theological Education in the Twenty-First Century: Current Trends and their Relevance for Northeast India', 36.

¹³ Longkumer, 'Naga Women in Theological Education', 22-23.

there is enthusiasm for theological education and even state support in some cases, there are challenges especially in terms of contextual, higher studies and scholarship. Churches and denominations must also see the need for an ecumenical approach to theological education, and look beyond an emphasis on only establishing their own theological colleges, and instead pool human and material resources to establish a truly ecumenical theological centre for higher studies that will properly look into the contexts of the region and articulate these contexts from the perspectives of the communities and churches in North-East India.

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SECTION SEVEN

**CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES
IN CONTEMPORARY
CONTEXTS**

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CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS FOR DOING MINISTRY IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

Razouselie Lasetso

Introduction

This paper will attempt to present the context in which the Christian community of North-East India (henceforth stated as North-East India) lives today. It will briefly present some of the major challenges and prospects for doing ministry in the region, and will attempt to highlight the situation in which the churches of North-East India are placed for carrying out their ministry. The list, however, is not exhaustive but descriptive of some of the more prominent issues the church may consider in its mission definition.

Christian Communities

The early Christian community

The earliest Christian community came into being gradually. People of different nationalities who accepted and professed the Lordship of Christ formed themselves as a sect and initially came to be known as those who belonged to The Way (Acts 9:2; 24:14). Historically, they had a fellowship where they seemed to have common cause and no one had any need. We read that their numbers grew day by day (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35). The interesting fact in this record is that they enjoyed the favour of all the people (Acts 2:47). As a new community of believers, they reached out to people in need, as seen in the sharing of goods and in the performance of miraculous signs and wonders among the people by the apostles (Acts 5:12). But the nascent community was not without problems. They faced persecutions and hardships (Acts 5:17-18). Yet, these hurdles did not slow them down or discourage them. Later, this sect known as The Way came to be called 'Christians' for the first time in Antioch (Acts 11:26). Thus, a new community was born in the midst of other communities.

Individuals from different nations (Jews and non-Jews), who came and found a new identity in Christ, formed a separate community called the Christian community. This community therefore appropriately became the *ekklesia* (the 'called-out people'). The Christian community is therefore characterized by individuals called by the grace of God to form a 'called-

out community' from within the communities of God's creation. This statement so characterized the Pauline communities which consisted of not one nation but people of all nations. This was uniquely true of the Christian movement then. The new community was not just gathered as a multitude of people living side-by-side but each member lived and was connected with the other.¹

This nascent community tried to live out its vocation in a world surrounded by hostility and problems. Its members tried to help one another out even as they tried to live their lives in the world as a witnessing community (Acts chs 2 and 4). Since then, this community continues to live as a witnessing community in the midst of communities.

Today, we often ignore those on the margins of society in our theological formulations and mission definitions. But it is precisely these margins that formed the major concern of Jesus' ministry. Any forms of oppression perpetuated on those at the margins, such as patriarchy, hierarchy, and elitism, were Jesus' area of concern. The nascent Christian community, as distinct from other communities – *called to be the light of the nations* – bore witness to Christ in its own challenging world and in times characterized by persecution. Therefore, the whole concept of *marturia* was developed or coined as bearing witness to Jesus Christ which then could involve dying for Christ. This primary meaning of witnessing has not lost its original connotation but it has also taken on further nuances.

The Christian community is not just a surviving community – it is and has been a living and vibrant community, and a witnessing community since its formation. This distinctiveness cannot be undervalued. Times have changed as compared with the context in which it was born and the dynamic ministry it then carried out, but its distinctive character lives on. The Christian meaning of witness (*mārturion*) today has taken a new turn, primarily meaning, living for Christ meaningfully and creatively.²

'Witness' today would also refer to living an exemplary life, moulded and guided by Christlike living as a distinct community called to do so. The distinctive characteristic of the Christian community has not changed over time. It is a community of forgiven saints. Without forgiveness there would be no Christian community. This is something the Christian community must not lose sight of in its ministry so that self-righteousness and a selfish attitude will not surface so as to condemn others. The church as the called-out community is to bear witness to the risen Lord without being judgemental. We are to proclaim the Good News to all. Christians have not been told to denounce others. The Samaritan model of ministry teaches us who our neighbours are and our responsibility towards them in our mission.

¹ Philip F. Esler, *New Testament Theology: Communion and Community* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 45.

² Somen Das, 'Witnessing to Christ in India: Problems and Challenges', in *Edinburgh: Witnessing to Christ Today in India*, James Massey and Wati Longchar (eds), (Bangalore/Kolkata: BTESSC/SATHRI/SCEPTRE, 2011), 16.

The Christian community today

Today, as ever before, the church is called to a witnessing ministry. Therefore, the mission engagement of the church/Christian community is vital to the self-understanding of the church as a people called out by God for his purpose. 'All Christians everywhere, whatever their cultural background or theological persuasion, must think at some time or other about relations between the church and the world.'³ Many churches today have sadly neglected the ground realities confronting people both within and outside the immediate community. While this 'otherworldliness' of the Kingdom message is an important component of Christian teaching and we must prepare people to embrace it, we must not forget that churches are to minister to the needs of the people which can be physical, mental and spiritual. As has been observed,

The present context of mission engagement takes places amidst globalization, neo-liberalism, multiculturalism, unprecedented urbanization, religious fundamentalism, widespread poverty and injustice, a growing yearning for new forms of spirituality and the 'shift of the centre of gravity' of Christianity from global North to global South. In some respects this contextual plethora does mirror the scenario of Edinburgh 1910, yet in other respects, today, the world is essentially a different place.⁴

In the past, the Christian's commitment towards society has always gone hand-in-hand with mission. 'They were the first to open hospitals, educational institutions, and orphanages, initiate literature works and initiated many social reform movements. They gave their goods to feed the poor. Their bodies were burned. Today the church is a global church. Many vibrant and growing churches in Asia, Pacific, Africa and Latin America are the fruit of their labour and lives. This contribution that made the Christian community a vibrant community cannot be ignored.'⁶

But the churches of North-East India seem to have a different problem. The attitude of Cain, which I have taken the liberty of calling 'Cainology', states, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' (Gen 4:9) – spoken to avoid responsibility – is an attitude many churches or Christian communities in the region are adopting in practice. Those who adhere to this philosophy (Cainologists), like the Priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good

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³ John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, 1st Indian edition (Mumbai: Gospel Literature Service, 1978), 11.

⁴ Daryl Balia and Kirsteen Kim (eds), 'Forms of Missionary Engagement', in *Edinburgh 2010: Witnessing to Christ Today, Vol. II* (Oxford: Regnum, 2010), 117

⁵ Wati Longchar, 'Introduction. Edinburgh 2010: Challenges for Witnessing to Christ Today in India', *Edinburgh 2010: Witnessing to Christ today in India*, Massey and Longchar, 5.

⁶ Many things went wrong as well. For example, Edinburgh 1910 uncritically viewed colonial expansion as the will of God in the furtherance of the Gospel, while it is a fact that colonial expansion at the same time ruined many rich local cultures around the world.

Samaritan (Lk 10:30-37) who refused to show their responsibility to the victim on the road, are filling the church and this attitude, left unaddressed, can pose a serious threat to the Good Samaritan model of ministry when our Lord Jesus commanded, 'Go and do likewise' (Lk 10:37). The issues within and around Christian communities today need the Samaritan model and the impetus of the Great Commission.

Even as the Great Commission is honoured, the church must also correct the omission in not observing the Great Commandment (Mk 12:31, Lk 10:27). The Great Commission and the Great Commandment must work together to bring about a meaningful spread of the gospel which is both physical and spiritual. Below, I would like to highlight some of the ground realities in which the churches of North-East India are placed today.

Contemporary North-East Indian Context

Pluralistic context

In comparison with the rest of India, North-East India is largely Christian. But on the whole it is still a pluralistic society with Christians living alongside those who are Sanskritized and those who continue to practise traditional indigenous religions. The North-East Indian church is also ecumenical in nature, adding to the pluralistic element in society. All these present their own challenges for mission work in the region. Changing attitudes towards religious differences pose a challenge to the missionary mandate of the church. This is perhaps one of the complex unresolved issues among the various groups of Christians. No one holds the absolute key to this approach. In this regard there is a clear distinction between liberals and conservatives.

So there is now this distinction between liberals and conservatives across churches in the region. While the conservatives believe that religious tolerance betrays the Great Commission and is in fact a Great Omission, there are those who point out that a different understanding of mission calls for engagement with those of other faiths by also becoming more aware of the traditions, beliefs and socio-cultural practices followed by such communities.

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Ecology and the Christian community – living the eco-responsibility

The ecological crisis of this century is not a local phenomenon of distant places but a global phenomenon needing every one's attention. The Christian community also has a part in this crisis. The earliest

interpretations of the Bible in classical books⁷ have been used by the western world to justify the plunder of natural resources leading to grave ecological problems today. The Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches in New Delhi in 1961 passed a statement which reads, 'The Christian should welcome scientific discoveries as new steps in man's dominion over nature.'⁸ However, such an attitude has also contributed to Christian involvement in ecological crises around the world. The Christian community must own up to such damage done by biased interpretations of the Scriptures. Responsible stewardship by the Christian community towards God's creation is crucial.

As a community called out from within communities to bear witness to the truth of God's sovereign rule and will for his creation, the Christian community must be a model in upholding eco-justice. The tribals of the north-eastern states who are known for their eco-friendliness have now turned into eco-foes in the rampant destruction of the forests, and their resources are indiscriminately used for the sake of easy money with few or no alternative plans for eco-sustenance. Educating tribals to rediscover their traditional eco-friendly values must be an endeavour the church must make as we promote eco-theology.

Youth and gender issues

The needs of these groups are not taken seriously either in the church or by society in North-East India. This is a complex issue which must find a place in serious theological deliberation. Young people are showcased mostly as the 'praise and worship team' whose role is primarily to lead the congregation in praise and worship songs before the service and then their job is done. Greater involvement of young people in the church and religious activities is becoming a need today. The limited opportunity for participation and involvement in the church is making the churches unpopular among youth today. Similarly, the continuing dominance of decision-making both in the church and society by men, and the lack of leadership roles for their female counterparts, is still a problem the churches in the region manifest.

When it comes to theological education, there are no hindrances for young people, either men or women, to doing theological studies. But when it comes to the induction of these young men and women into the church, a lot of restrictions are exercised. Age does not permit them to take up leadership roles and women students who fare better at their studies than their male counterparts are given second preference when it comes to opportunities to serve in the church. In the face of a rapidly changing

⁷ For example, in Harvey Cox, *The Secular City*, and Arand van Leeuwen's, *Christianity in World History*. Both these books appeared in the early 1960s.

⁸ R.L. Sarkar, *The Bible, Ecology and Environment* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), 270.

context, the Christian community in the region has not been able to address this issue relevantly. The participation and involvement of the youth and women in the life of the church and society is an area of concern that must find an urgent place in the agenda of the church.

Poverty and suffering

In North-East India a summary report prepared by the National Institute of Rural Development (NIRD) and the North Eastern Regional Centre (NERC) states that ‘as many as 7.90 million persons live below the poverty line in the NER (North East Region) (2004-2005)’.⁹ The total population according to the 2001 census places the NER at 38.85 million. This would mean that about 20% of the population live below the poverty line with an 84.34% rural population.¹⁰

Poverty in the region is evident in economic disparity, health problems, poor educational facilities, poor nutrition and the deprivation of the basic amenities to sustain life – such as the lack of safe drinking water and electricity, poor sanitation and housing problems. What has caused poverty in the region? It is interesting to note what has been said of North-East Indian states: ‘The towns are fortresses of wealth surrounded by hungry people, the victims of poverty.’¹¹ What role can the church play in such a context of poverty in which it bears witness and performs its mission? In response to such a query, one must bear in mind the solidarity Jesus showed in his ministry towards the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized and the deprived. Only then will the church be able to minister to the poor and marginalized both within and outside the community. The church must become a voice and an advocate to alleviate and eradicate poverty.

HIV/AIDS and the church

HIV/AIDS is a major health concern for the North-East Indian states. NACO (National AIDS Control Organisation) estimates of 2009 shows the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the North East as follows: Arunachal Pradesh 1,082; Assam 14,244; Manipur 26,773; Meghalaya 1,332; Mizoram 6,025;

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⁹ *Poverty Eradication/Alleviation in North East India: An Approach: Summary Report*, prepared by the National Institute of Rural Development (NIRD) and the North Eastern Regional Centre (NERC), sponsored by The North East Council, Shillong, 8.

¹⁰ P. Bhagawadi, *North East India*, NEDFI Databank: <http://databank.nedfi.com/content/north-east-india> (accessed 23rd September 2011).

¹¹ A recap of the book, ‘Population, Poverty and Environment in North East India’, B. Datta Ray, H.K. Mazhari (eds), (2000): www.vedamsbooks.in/no15241/population-poverty-environment-north-east-india-edited-by-b-datta-ray-hk-mazhari-ed (accessed 23rd September 2011).

Nagaland 13,120; Tripura 3,425; Sikkim 231.¹² Poverty as well as the lack of awareness and medical facilities has contributed to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the region. The indifferent attitude of the church in the initial stages of the epidemic can be considered as contributing to the worsening of the situation.

Today, the Christian community lives with the problem of HIV/AIDS within the community. In other words, the church in North-East India lives in the midst of HIV/AIDS. It must carry out its ministry in this context as well. The silence and stone-throwing tendencies have only delayed a much-needed mission to those with HIV/AIDS. The Church's definition of mission must include HIV/AIDS ministry as care-giving as well as healing and restoration – all a part of Jesus' total ministry. This issue is complex, characterized by economic threats and the political stability of the region. It is also characterised by the issues of lax morality, drug addiction and alcoholism. All these issues must wake the church up to the threat these issues pose to the region which can have long-term implications on the populace if not addressed now.

The gospel and culture

Many Christian missions in the past have '...stigmatized and marginalized African culture, religious, educational, social and political systems.... Christian mission in the 21st century must contribute to redressing some of these historical injustices committed in the process of evangelization.'¹³ This, by extension, is descriptive of the North-East Indian tribal world. 'The first missionaries to our land dissected social institutions and religion and they were more concerned with the individual and therefore transforming society was not on top of the agenda. This led to the perpetuation of values among the tribals of North-East India which worked towards destruction of the local culture.'¹⁴ This perhaps has been the most painful experience of the tribals in that culture has many aspects of their traditions, and cultures have been almost totally forgotten as a consequence of being ignored or dismissed.

It is true that no culture is static and we do not envisage a resurgence of the tribal culture of yesteryear. Culture is dynamic and we must understand

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¹² www.nacoonline.org/upload/HomePage/NACO%20Press%20Release%20on%20HIV%20Estimates.pdf (accessed 25th September 2011).

¹³ 'Christian Communities in Contemporary Contexts', in *Witnessing to Christ Today, Vol. II*, Edinburgh 2010 Series, Daryl Balia and Kirsteen Kim (eds), (Oxford: Regnum), 181.

¹⁴ Razouselie Lasetso, 'Introduction: Shaping a Relevant Theology for the Indigenous People of North East India', in *Tribal Christian Theology: Methods and Sources for Constructing a Relevant Theology for the Indigenous People of North East India*, Tribal Study Series No. 15, Razouselie Lasetso and Yangkahao Vashum (eds), (Jorhat: ETC Programme Coordination, 2007), 1.

this process, but a total detachment from cultural roots to embrace new/global values at the risk of losing the former is not a healthy sign of the cultural movement. Continuity must be maintained in cultural movement which is not the case for the North-East Indian tribal context. We need to learn from the mistake that views other cultures as crude and therefore to be replaced by a dominant culture. Sadly, this is an attitude being adopted by some of the dominant tribes in the region when they do mission with the other lesser-known tribes. Paul's mission attitude as stated in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 is one which the church in North-East India must emulate in defining mission to people of other cultures as well as among other tribes. The Gospel and culture must meet in critical engagement.

Peace and conflict realities

North-East India is a hotbed of tribal conflicts and unrest. Ethnic violence and insurgency movements have only added to the misery of tribals in the region. Such a situation hinders a move towards economic growth and the development of the region. Social unrest in the region is a serious concern which must find an early solution if North-East India is to develop and progress with the rest of the nation. This is a situation the church is placed in to bear witness and to carry out its mission. The church needs to be the voice of peace and justice in the region. But unfortunately conflict and violence within the confines of the Christian community and the church have prevented either from becoming instrumental in peace-building. There is an urgent need for the church in North-East India to address its own differences if it is to play a constructive and meaningful role in bringing about political healing.

The North-East Indian Christian community in the global village

Today, the whole world has shrunk into a high-tech global village. This situation brings with it a lot of challenges for the Christian community at large and also in North-East India. Traditions of the past are being questioned and viewed as obsolete and of no more or little relevance. In this context, how can the church in North-East India still hold on to and pass on the faith without prejudice to the changing context? Values are rapidly changing among the region's youth and challenge the church's stand on life, faithfulness and obedience.

The media invasion of local cultures – mobile phones, the internet, cable television, etc. – has had a huge impact on tribal culture, the family and community, raising moral and ethical issues. How can the church in North-East India address this challenging phenomenon? While teaching the populace the correct and responsible use of such facets of the media and technology, the church must also think of harnessing these facilities for its ministry.

Theological education in context

North-East India is primarily a rural society. The rural population of the north-eastern states stands at about 84%. But theological education imparted in the region has not taken the rural context and its distinctive characteristics seriously. This is something the church in North-East India must address in order to become relevant to the context in which it is placed to bear witness. Theological institutions in the North East must work towards making theological education relevant, by considering the contextual realities in their curricular formulation and so attempt to minister more effectively to the people of the region. Very few theological students or theologically trained ministers would meet the needs of ministry in the rural context and maintain the relevancy of theological education according to the present curricula and overall orientation of the students given by the colleges and seminaries in the region.

The Christian Community as a Vibrant Community in Contemporary Contexts

Living as a vibrant community in the contemporary context is in itself a challenge for the Christian community. Christian witness and mission will be tested in the manner Christian communities live out their faith. The context in which Christian communities are placed today is not to be ignored. If a relevant and effective witness and mission is to be carried out in this complex situation, the Christian community must give the lead where called on. Christian communities cannot continue to give mere lip service in addressing the realities surrounding them.

If the Christian communities do not address contemporary situations, they could lose the validity of what they profess. As Wati Longchar observes, ‘...for a long time, witnessing has been primarily in words – preaching, proclaiming, evangelizing. At this juncture, we must realize that in the Apostolic Church, there was a dynamic interface of *kerygma*, *koinonia*, and *diakonia*.’¹⁵ The time for a change in the approach to witnessing and doing mission by the churches of North-East India has come. Metaphorically, we need to re-route mission and cast our nets on the other side where the catch abounds. The churches have become too other-worldly and have become oblivious to the context and reality surrounding them. This is seen in the rapid growth of prayer centres/houses in the north-eastern states. It is a sign that all is not well with the churches and their mission today. Something is amiss for which an alternative form of ministry in the form of prayer centres are mushrooming to meet the urgent

¹⁵ Wati Longchar, ‘Introduction. Edinburgh 2010: Challenges for Witnessing to Christ Today in India’, in *Edinburgh 2010: Witnessing to Christ Today in India*, Massey and Longchar, 23.

needs of the people (especially of those from the economically poorer sections).

Conclusion

This paper has briefly touched on those aspects of society in North-East India that the church in the region, irrespective of denomination or tradition, must urgently address, perhaps even rethinking its mission so that the gospel message is relevantly and contextually understood and received. This is not an exhaustive list and, depending on the specific area or tribe, the needs will be different. Considering that the Edinburgh 2010 celebrations also admitted to the paternalistic mission outlook of Edinburgh 1910 and stressed the need to understand what mission truly means in the 21st century, the church in North-East India must also look within itself to understand that, as a mission-minded church, several issues within it need to be addressed by looking beyond conservative, exclusive and traditional attitudes and interpretations before it can look to the rest of the country. Only then will it truly carry the legacy of the early Christian community into the contemporary context.

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NAGA CHURCHES, SOCIETY AND MISSION

Chongpongmeren Jamir

The centenary celebrations of the Edinburgh movement in 2010 was a time of reflection for many Christians and churches worldwide on what it means to be involved in the mission of God. It brought together representatives of many different global bodies, representing all major Christian denominations and confessions, to seek direction for Christian mission in the 21st century. It was an evocative moment for Christians of various traditions and backgrounds to share their experiences and insights towards involvement in Christian mission. This paper will attempt to share the experiences and subsequent evolution of the mission understanding of the Naga¹ Christian community. The focus will be on the evolving understanding and practice of mission by the Naga churches as they strive to remain relevant to the challenges of society. Though this paper deals specifically with the Naga churches in India, it will hopefully encourage churches worldwide for holistic mission engagement in society.

From Naga Mission to Naga Church

Christianity tradition was introduced in Nagaland by American Baptist missionaries. The first contact was made in 1840 by the American Baptist missionary, Miles Bronson. But this endeavour was short-lived, and no converts were made. In 1872, after a gap of about thirty years, a second successful attempt was made under the initiative of Edward Winter Clark of the American Baptist Missionary Union (ABMU). The American Baptists worked in Nagaland until 1955. However, in the years following India's independence in 1947, certain political developments led to the end of the foreign missionary presence in Nagaland. As British rule in India came to an end, the Naga people expressed their desire to be independent of the Indian Union.² In spite of this, the Naga people found themselves

¹ The Naga people are a tribal group in India residing primarily in the Indian state of Nagaland. But the group has also spread to the Indian states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur, as well as in western Myanmar. The Naga people are in fact a conglomeration of about forty tribes (like the Angami, Ao, Sumi, etc.), sixteen of which live in the Indian state of Nagaland.

² Since the 1920s, the Naga representatives had been voicing their desire to be excluded from the Indian Union. The most notable expression of this was the *Memorandum on the Naga Hills*, submitted to the Simon Commission on 10th

unwillingly incorporated into it. This political struggle was to overshadow everything related to Naga society for the next sixty years, and continues to do so even today. This has ramifications even for the church in Nagaland. One of its earliest impacts on the church was the withdrawal of all foreign missionaries.

Accusing the foreign missionaries of instigating the Naga nationalists,³ the Government of India ordered the withdrawal of all foreign missionaries from Nagaland. By then, two Christian traditions were represented in the state, the Baptists and the Catholics, the latter having started work in 1952.⁴ Of the two, the Catholics were not as affected, since they could substitute their foreign missionaries with others from South India.⁵ Moreover, they had initially entered Nagaland at the invitation of the Government of India to help establish the Government Hospital at Kohima.⁶ By contrast, the Baptist missionaries were implicated as suspects. Consequently, all foreign missionaries were withdrawn. The last American Baptist missionaries, the Rev. and Mrs R.F. DeLano, left Nagaland in February 1955. The withdrawal of foreign missionaries, however, was a blessing in disguise for it was an opportunity for the Naga churches to stand on their own feet.

The Naga Churches and Mission

The immediate task of the Naga churches in the 1950s was the evangelization of all the Nagas. In 1951, only 47% of the total population of Nagaland was Christian.⁷ That meant a little over half of the total

January 1929. See Bendangangshi, *Glimpse of Naga History* (Mokokchung: Naga Patriot, 1993), 45.

³ The comment of the then Chief Minister of Assam, Shri B. Medhi, highlighted the suspicious perception of Indian political leaders against Christian missionaries: 'I cannot think of any demand for an independent sovereign Naga state raised by a few handful Naga leaders, mostly Christians. And probably this demand was raised by interested foreign missionaries to keep them isolated from the rest of India.' Quoted in Asoso Yonuo, in *The Rising Nagas* (Delhi: Vivek, 1974), 208.

⁴ Since then, a number of other protestant denominations have made their way to Nagaland: the indigenous Nagaland Christian Revival Church (NCRC), Assemblies of God, Ceylon Pentecostals and Seventh Day Adventists.

⁵ F.S. Downs, *History of Christianity in India, Vol. V, Part 5: Northeast India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 1992), 115.

⁶ David Syiemlieh, *A Brief History of the Catholic Church in Nagaland* (Shillong: Vendrame Institute, 1990), 42. The first Catholic congregation was however formed in 1952, not in Kohima, but in the Wokha area, north of Kohima, by a breakaway group from the Baptist Church (50-51). See Downs, *History of Christianity in India, Vol. V, Part 5*: 123.

⁷ According to the 1951 Indian Census, there were 98,068 Christians in Nagaland out of the total population of 205,950. See *Census of India 1951, Vol. XII, Assam*, 106-107.

population was still non-Christian. This was to change drastically within the next three decades. The Naga churches took upon themselves the responsibility of finishing the task of the evangelization of their own people. Moreover, they expanded their horizons to areas beyond their habitations, and began to be involved in cross-cultural mission. Today, Naga churches have sent missionaries across many parts of India.⁸ Naga Christian missionaries are also working in countries such as Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, Kenya, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Sudan, Thailand and Uganda.⁹ This evangelistic outburst of the Naga churches was greatly bolstered by a couple of revivals that occurred in 1952 and 1976. While the former was primarily charismatic, emphasizing the baptism and work of the Holy Spirit, the latter was basically evangelical, emphasizing the assurance of salvation. Both the revivals were, however, characterized by worship services filled with singing, preaching, *glossolalia*, prophecies and miracles.

The main theological message of the revivals in Nagaland was centred on the nearness of the second coming of Jesus Christ. A cursory look at the titles of the 'Revival' songs in Ao Naga composed by Naga revivalists attest to this: *Kodang Yisu Khrista Arudir* (When Jesus Christ will Come); *Kibur Arudar* (The Lord is Coming); *Yisu Khrista Tanaben Arudar* (Jesus Christ is coming again); *Kibur Arur Mepet Nung* (The Lord is coming in the cloud), to mention a few. The revivals, therefore, through their message of 'Christ's imminent return to earth', greatly enhanced the eschatological understanding of the Kingdom of God among Naga Christians,¹⁰ and consequently fostered an urgency for involvement in evangelistic activities. The Naga churches showed tremendous evangelistic vigour during and in the aftermath of the revival movements, and large-scale conversions took place among the Naga people. Between 1951 and 1961, the Christian population increased from 98,068 to 195,588, an increase of 97,520 within a decade.¹¹ By 1971, the Christian population has increased to 344,798.¹² But then again, the 1976 revival triggered exponential growth, with the Christian population increasing to 621,590 by 1981.¹³ Today, 90.02% of the

⁸ Naga churches have missionaries in the Andaman Islands, Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chattisgarh, Delhi, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Uttaranchal, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. See NCRCL, *Revival: Nagaland Christian Revival Church, Golden Jubilee, 1962-2012* (Dimapur: NCRCL, 2012), 26; NBCC, *One New Humanity* (Kohima, NBCC, 2012), 27-28.

⁹ NBCC, *One New Humanity*, 28.

¹⁰ Bendangjungshi, *Confessing Christ in the Naga Context: Towards a Liberating Ecclesiology* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2012), 98.

¹¹ *Census of India 1951, Vol. XII: Assam*: 106-107; *Census of India 1961, Paper 1: Religion*, 3.

¹² *Census of India 1971, Series 1, Paper 2: Religion*, 2.

¹³ *Census of India 1981, Series 1, Paper 4: Religion*, 19.

total populations are Christian.¹⁴ This internal evangelization was not the only result. Naga churches began to dream big towards world evangelization.¹⁵ Subsequently, on 15th October 1977, the premier Naga Christian mission agency, the Nagaland Mission Movement (NMM), declared its intention of sending ‘Ten Thousand Missionaries’ from Nagaland.¹⁶ This idea of sending ‘Ten Thousand Missionaries’ was a courageous call by a generation which was by then immersed in the evangelical spirit of the time and was undergoing a period of spiritual revitalization through the revival movement. The NMM remains committed to this ‘goal’ even today.¹⁷ Even though the original vigour of revivalism in Nagaland has since cooled, it still continues to inspire spirituality and an evangelistic interest in the Naga churches today.

Until the 1960s, the mission concern of the Naga churches was overwhelmingly evangelistic. But from the 1960s onwards, they began to expand their mission involvement to what can be considered as Christian ‘service’. With a growing consolidation of the Christian presence, Nagaland was increasingly becoming a predominantly Christian community. Moreover, for the Naga people, religion is more than a private set of beliefs; it plays a vital role in the way they interpret and respond to the world.¹⁸ Thus, it was only natural for Naga Christians to interpret society through a ‘Christian’ lens. This led them to engage in the affairs of society. Consequently, they began to expand their mission concerns to the socio-cultural needs of their society.

The first such venture was in the political arena. The one element that has dominated Naga history since the first half of the twentieth century has been the protracted political problem. It started in the 1920s with a group of Naga intelligentsia and tribal leaders submitting a memorandum to the Simon Commission in British India in January 1929.¹⁹ The memorandum

¹⁴ According to the 2001 Indian census, 1,790,349 out of a total population of 1,990,036 in Nagaland were Christian: see ‘Population by Religious Communities’: http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_Data_2001/Census_data_finder/C_Series/Population_by_religious_communities.htm (accessed 10th October 2014).

¹⁵ Inspired by the Lausanne Congress of World Evangelization in 1974, the Nagaland Baptist Church Council (NBCC) produced a ‘Naga Covenant’ in line with the ‘Lausanne Covenant’, in which it shared its commitment to the ‘evangelization of the world in our generation’: *nbcc.com* (accessed 9th October 2014).

¹⁶ *nbcc.com*...

¹⁷ NBCC, *One New Humanity*, 30.

¹⁸ Traditionally, for the Naga people, there was no distinction between sacred and secular. Religion was an integral part of their everyday life and activities. A good illustration of this can be found in the general term used for ‘religion’ by the Ao Naga tribe. The word is *yimsü*, which literally means ‘village shawl’ indicating that religion covered the whole village, including all its inhabitants and activities. See O. Alem Ao, *Tsungremology: Ao Naga Christian Theology* (Aoligen: CTC, 1994), 2.

¹⁹ The Simon Commission was the Indian statutory commission appointed by the British government in November 1927 to consider the question of constitutional

claimed that the Naga people ‘have no social affinities with the Hindus and Mussalmans [sic]’ of mainland India.²⁰ Therefore, they needed to be treated as a distinct community. The nationalist movement gained momentum as the British prepared to leave India, culminating in the declaration of Naga independence by the nationalists on the 14th of August 1947. But India refused to accede to their demand. Thus, an armed conflict was started and continues even till now.

Finding itself in a context of continuing conflict, the church realized that it could not stand aloof. Moreover, placed in a predominantly Christian context, the Naga churches found themselves in an unenviable position in acting as a mediator between the conflicting parties.²¹ The church therefore stepped in and acted as an agent of peace and reconciliation. In an effort to bring the warring parties to peaceful negotiations, the Nagaland Baptist Church Council (NBCC) initiated the ‘Peace Mission’ in February 1964. By September, it was able to broker a ceasefire between the Indian armed forces and the Naga armed groups and initiate a political negotiation. Although this did not result in the permanent settlement of the political problem in Nagaland, it put reconciliation as a mainstay concept in the Naga political discourse.²²

Socio-economic reform is another area where the Naga churches have expanded their mission involvement. Two factors influenced the church to take this step. First, it was one of the after-effects of the revival movement.²³ The ‘revived’ churches began to think of reforming society. The other factor was the development of tribal theology. This theology, had its inspiration in the global Liberation Theology movement, and gave ‘tremendous emphasis to liberate all kinds of oppression – whether

reform in India. It was named after its chairman Sir John Simon. See Bipan Chandra, *History of Modern India* (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2009), 302.

²⁰ Keviyekielie Linyu, *Christian Movements in Nagaland* (Kohima: Author, 2004), 77.

²¹ Kethoser Kevichusa, ‘Indian _____ Christian: Filling the Blank Theologically’, in *Indian and Christian: Changing identity in Modern India*, Cornelis Bennema and Paul Joshua Bhakiaraj (eds), (Bangalore/Oxford: SAIACS Press/Oxford House Research Ltd., 2011), 93.

²² The Indo-Naga conflict is still alive. But peace negotiations still continue. Today, the talk for reconciliation is spearheaded by the Forum for Naga Reconciliation (FNR), which in 2008 emerged from a three-day peace convention called by a Christian prayer group known as *Shisha Hoho*. See Kethoser (Aniu) Kevichusa, ‘Tribal Conflicts in India: The Case of the Forum for Naga Reconciliation’, in *Mission as Ministry of Reconciliation*, Robert Schreiter and Knud Jorgensen (eds), (Oxford: Regnum, 2013), 303.

²³ Akho Dazo, in his study of the impact of the revival among the Chakhesang Nagas, mentions regeneration of moral life, social change and an increase in Christian activities, among others, as the effects of the revival. See Akho Dazo, ‘The Impact of Revival Movement Among the Chakhesang (Nagas)’, in *Journal of Tribal Studies*, XIV/1 (January-June 2009), 74.

political, social, or economic.²⁴ These theologians vehemently advocated the need for the churches to be involved in the social transformation of society.²⁵ Both these factors helped bolster the socio-economic concerns of the church in Nagaland.

In the light of this, the church further expanded its mission concern into two areas: First, it initiated social reform measures to address social evils in society. Subjected to prolonged violence and atrocities, many social evils had crept into Naga society. In desperation, many had given in to alcoholism, narcotics addiction and prostitution, to name a few. In such a context, the church felt called to be a beacon of hope for ushering transformative change and reformation into Naga society. 'If our church cannot engage in the transformation of our society,' says V.K. Nuh, 'we are not participating in the task of ushering in the Kingdom of God.'²⁶ Perhaps the most prominent and debated social initiative of the Naga churches is the temperance movement. Since the early days of the missionaries, alcohol was prohibited in the church. But in the 1980s, the church took a major stand and advocated the prohibition of its sale. Consequently, under pressure from the church, the state assembly declared Nagaland a 'dry state' on 29th March 1990.²⁷ The pros and cons of the temperance movement is highly debated in Nagaland even today. However, in spite of its critics, the temperance movement remains the iconic symbol of the church's solidarity towards bringing about social transformation in Naga society. The Naga churches have also been involved in dealing with other social issues such as unfair elections, drug addiction, the problem of HIV and AIDS, prostitution and human trafficking.²⁸

Secondly, in the light of the expanding missional understanding of the church, it initiated economic measures to uplift the downtrodden in society. The prevailing socio-political situation made economic growth perilous. Instability and unabated taxation discouraged potential business investors from investing in the state.²⁹ This left the state government with the

²⁴ V.K. Nuh, *Struggle for Identity in North-east India: A Theological Response* (Kohima: Spectrum, 2001), 62; See also V.K. Nuh (ed), *In Search of Praxis Theology for the Nagas* (New Delhi: Regency, 2003), 99.

²⁵ Wati Longchar has pointed out four dimensions of Christ's way of mission, which are now the mission of the church: (a) the quest for identity and dignity; (b) the quest for justice; (c) a spirituality of action; and (d) building community. See A. Wati Longchar, 'Christ's Mission to the Marginalized: An Asian Perspective', in *Journal of Tribal Studies*, VIII/2 (July-Dec 2004), 46-52.

²⁶ Nuh, *Struggle for identity in North-east India*, 62.

²⁷ NBCC, *One New Humanity*, 19.

²⁸ NBCC, *One New Humanity*, 33.

²⁹ The first two decades of India's independence, noted Naga politician Deo Nukhu, 'could not create any impact on the Naga economy, and the last forty years could hardly improve the economic status of the Naga people through business'. Quoted in Oken Jeet Sandham, 'Last forty years of Nagaland statehood could hardly improve Naga economy': <http://www.e->

enormous responsibility of generating employment and capital. But the government itself was in a tight spot. The net production in the state is so low that 90% of its expenditure has to be met by grants from India's central government.³⁰ This lack of opportunity and capital crippled the economic growth of the people, with many living in a state of poverty. Thus, the Naga church felt the need to step in and stand up for the poor and needy. It defined itself as a 'servant community' that identifies with the downtrodden in society.³¹ In the light of this, the church took certain practical steps to uplift the underprivileged in society. One of its initiatives was to network with various governmental and non-governmental organizations with similar goals.³² Another church initiative was that of facilitating financial aid to help people stand on their own feet. One such example is the Nagaland Development Outreach (NDO) of the Naga Baptists.³³ A major initiative of the NDO is the Self Help Group (SHG), whereby they give credit to individuals and groups to help establish small businesses.³⁴

Thus, by the end of the twentieth century, the Naga churches were moving towards a holistic understanding and practice of mission. It continues to be involved in witness, while expanding its concern for service to society. Even in its cross-cultural mission, there has been a shift of emphasis from mere 'church planting' to a more holistic 'Tentmaking' approach.³⁵ This changing trend was succinctly captured in a declaration made by the Naga Christians on the 125th Jubilee celebration of the coming of Christianity to Nagaland in 1997:

pao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=news_section.Top_Stories.Oken_Jeet_Sandha m.Forty_years_of_Nagaland_statehood_hardly_improve_economy (accessed 1st October 2014). This blunt assessment of the first sixty years of Nagaland after 1947 is not far off the mark.

³⁰ Gautam Sen, 'Nagaland: Political and Economic Assessment' (10th June 2013), *idsa.in* (accessed 1st October 2014); cf Prakash Singh, *Nagaland* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1972), 178.

³¹ Tuisem A. Shishak, 'Liberation Theology and the Naga Church', in *In Search of Praxis Theology for the Nagas*, V.K. Nuh (ed), (New Delhi: Regency, 2003), 13.

³² Naga churches had worked in partnership with organizations and funders such as Development of Human Potential, Action Aid India, the British High Commission in New Delhi, Board of International Ministries USA, Catholic Relief Service, Baptist Union of Denmark, Danish Mission Council Development Department, National Council of Churches in India, and North East India Committee on Relief department. See NBCC, *One New Humanity*, 45.

³³ The NDO exists to 'empower the under-privileged and marginalized through awareness programs, capacity building, assimilation of information, advancing, lobbying and networking.' See NBCC, *One New Humanity*, 46.

³⁴ NBCC, *One New Humanity*, 48.

³⁵ For example, in the beginning, 'the NMM Ministry was mostly Church planting cross-culturally'. But now the emphasis is on deploying 'Tentmakers' who will be involved in holistic mission. See NBCC, *One New Humanity*, 30.

To proclaim effectively the message of love and salvation in Jesus Christ, and to participate intelligently in human development and social transformation, we resolve to actively pursue a holistic approach to Ministry and seek a new paradigm for the Churches' involvement in total development of a person in Christ.³⁶

Rethinking Christian Mission

By end of the twentieth century, the Naga churches had come a long way in their journey towards a holistic approach to mission. At the start of the new century, and there was felt a need to reassess their mission understanding in the light of new insights that had come up in the contemporary understanding of mission. The centenary celebrations of Edinburgh 2010 provided the opportune time. In line with the Edinburgh event, a regional conference was organized at Mokokchung, Nagaland, on 18th-19th March 2010. It deliberated on the theme *Witnessing to Christ Today: Rethinking Christian Mission from a Naga Perspective*. It called for the expansion of the mission engagement of the church beyond its 'traditional focus'.³⁷ This 'rethinking' of traditional mission practice in the light of contemporary mission understanding was at the heart of Edinburgh 2010. The contemporary understanding of mission rests on the insights encapsulated in the term *missio Dei*. Mission, according to this concept, 'is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God'.³⁸ Therefore, the mission of the church was to be understood as based on the nature of the triune God, and the church's relationship with him.

Understanding Christian mission as *missio Dei* has certain implications for what it means to do mission. First, it implies that mission is an integral part of being the people of God. To belong to God is to partake in his mission. It is not the activity of a specialized agency or group of people, but rather, as Kirsteen Kim lucidly notes, 'integral to Church life and a natural part of participating in Christ'.³⁹ Among the Naga Christians, 'mission' is often understood as the work of a group of people set apart, witnessing in a faraway land. The rest are simply 'believers' who do not have a call to be missionaries! This much misguided dichotomy needs to be changed. Mission is not the task of a 'set apart' breed, but the collective responsibility of the community of faith. Therefore, moving forward, what the Naga churches need to do is to nurture mission-conscious and mission-

³⁶ NBCC, *One New Humanity*, 45.

³⁷ Atola Longkumer, *Edinburgh 2010: Celebrations in the Hinterland: Mission Conference in Nagaland* (18th-19th March 2010).

³⁸ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 489.

³⁹ Kirsteen Kim, 'Mission in the Twenty-First Century', in *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Today and Tomorrow*, Kirsteen Kim and Andrew Anderson (eds), (Oxford: Regnum, 2001), 353.

engaging congregations. To do this, one aspect is to teach and train the laity for involvement in the ministry of the Church. The other is to facilitate lay involvement in mission. There are many avenues for such lay involvements. In the case of Nagaland, one area is evangelization work among the large immigrant communities from various parts of India, Bhutan and Bangladesh, residing in Nagaland. Then there is youth ministry which needs special attention, especially with the recent revelation of a large-scale falling off in church membership and involvement in satanic worship⁴⁰ among Naga youth. These are just two examples. In both of these, and in many others, lay involvement is absolutely essential.

Secondly, since God is concerned about the whole of creation, *missio Dei* implies that mission should be holistic.⁴¹ As noted above, at least at the associational level, the Naga churches had to a large extent exhibited a willingness to adopt the holistic approach to mission through its involvement in the socio-cultural concerns of Naga society. However, much is needed for these concerns to permeate to grassroots level. For many in the local congregations, mission agencies or individuals dealing with socio-cultural concerns are often considered as ‘not really involved in mission work’! In some circles, even the church’s involvement in such ‘secular’ affairs is being questioned.⁴² Therefore, much needs to be done to bring about a new understanding of the twofold aspects of Christian mission – witness and service – at grassroots level. Perhaps the way ahead is to make conscious efforts to integrate the concept of *missio Dei* in the teaching and preaching of local churches.

Finally, *missio Dei* implies that, since Christian mission is God’s own mission, there is only one mission.⁴³ If there is one area where the Naga churches have fallen far behind the spirit of the Edinburgh movement, it is in the area of ecumenism. Over the years, there have been many accusations and counter-accusations among the various Christian groups in Nagaland, of ‘sheep stealing’ and ‘heresy’.⁴⁴ As a result, much distrust

⁴⁰ In April 2013, the Rev Zotuo Kiewhuo of the Koinonia Baptist Church disclosed that there are more than 3,000 satanic worshippers in Kohima, Nagaland. The number could not be confirmed by anyone thus far, and could possibly be an exaggeration. But many agree that it is certainly a wake-up call for the Naga churches to take the needs of youth in society seriously. See ‘The Transformation Crusade: Holy Spirit Unleashed’, in *Morungexpress* (20th April 2014); ‘Satanism... Is it for real?’ in *Morungexpress* (2nd August 2014).

⁴¹ Kim, ‘Mission in the Twenty-First Century’, 353.

⁴² ‘The church workers are supposed to work in spiritual line,’ says Naga politician Shurhozelie, ‘whereas we are dealing with hard politics.’ Quoted in Oken Jeet Sandhan, ‘NPF Supremo against church involvement in Thursday’s Consultative meetings’ (12th December 2012): <http://kanglaonline.com/2012/12/npf-supremo-against-church-involvement-in-thursdays-consultative-meet/> (accessed 7th October 2014).

⁴³ Kim, ‘Mission in the Twenty-First Century’, 353.

⁴⁴ A. Bendangyapang Ao, *History of Christianity in Nagaland: Social Change*

exists among the various Christian communities of Nagaland. This has ramifications for the mission of the church. For instance, in Arunachal Pradesh, where both the Naga Baptists and the Revivalists (Nagaland Christian Revival Church) have mission fields, the denominational rivalry is reflected on the mission field, which has caused no little confusion among both converts as well as non-Christians, affecting the effectiveness of mission work. Therefore, for the sake of *missio Dei*, the Naga churches need to work together to overcome their misunderstandings and differences, and work with and towards a unity. In recent years, there has been some collaboration between different agencies of various denominations. For instance, the Nagaland Development Outreach of the Naga Baptists collaborated with the Catholic Relief Society in projects for HIV and AIDS patients.⁴⁵ But such initiatives are few and far between. There is a need for more concrete partnerships and networking among the Naga churches and with Christian organizations.⁴⁶

Conclusion

Over the years, the Naga churches have shown great dynamism in broadening their mission understanding as they engage with their contexts. They have exhibited unflinching commitment to witness both within and outside their communities. In the face of atrocious political conflicts, they have shown Naga society and India (and perhaps the world community) that peaceful negotiation and reconciliation should be the way to resolve conflicts. They have been proactive in fighting social evils and in leading the way for the reformation of society. They have also presented themselves as a channel for facilitating resources for the uplift of the poor and the needy in society. It is not that the Naga churches had a blueprint of holistic mission from the very beginning. It has evolved over time, when the church, motivated by the love of God and being attentive to the contextual needs of the community in which it is set, has sought to serve a broken society. The systematic conceptualization of the idea of holistic mission among the Naga churches also began in the 1990s. The resolution in 1997 to 'actively pursue a holistic approach to ministry' was probably the first official declaration in this direction. The celebrations of Edinburgh 2010 in Mokokchung in 2010 provided another opportunity for the Naga churches to think of mission in terms of a holistic approach. As the Naga churches continue to 'rethink', along with the world Christian community, what it means to be part of the mission of God, their experiences over the years of engaging in and with society, and the insights from contemporary

1872-1972 (Bangalore: Shalom Ministry Publication, 2004), 257, 261; N. Toshi Ao, *A Concise History of Christian Mission in North East India* (Dimapur: Missiological Research Centre, 2012), 152.

⁴⁵ NBCC, *One New Humanity*, 47.

⁴⁶ Longkumer, *Edinburgh 2010*.

mission understanding of *missio Dei*, are two vital elements that they must continue to listen to, as they continue to engage with the world.

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VISION OF A NORTH-EAST COMMUNITY BASED ON PEACE WITH JUSTICE¹

Linus Neli

Introduction

Can we think of a theological solution to build up a new community in the context of the north-east region of India, but one that is based on peace with justice? Theology is an attempt to express faith in God in human language, and to say whom we understand God to be. It is God-talk in human experience. Our God-talk is linked with our faith in Christ and it is our attempt to explore who Jesus Christ is for us, if we ever desire to establish a new community based on peace with justice. Theological language and method is as varied as human language and culture. The theology of the tribes has to be rooted in their experience and cultural milieu; there has to be a definite approach and methodology. We have to express God-talk with a tribal flavour (as Jesus did with a Jewish flavour) and make it attractive for an authentic human community.

In this article, I shall briefly elucidate a threefold experience of the people of the North East, namely, *experience* of: a) Christian Faith, b) Civilization, and c) Self-Assertion. Then I shall examine these realities under the impulse of the gospel, and raise relevant theological questions that may guide us to deeper reflection. The nature of experience, struggle and aspiration of the people of the North East will provide us with a road map towards the construction of a new community suitable for the North-East region.

A Threefold Experience of the North-Eastern Communities

The North-East region of India is basically pluralistic insofar as ethnicity, language, culture and religion are concerned. Over the years, due to the interaction with people from mainland India, the homogeneity of the predominantly tribal community has been considerably reduced. We shall focus on the threefold experience of the indigenous people of the North East.

¹ This paper was previously published in *Search for a New Society: Tribal Theology for North East India*, Yangkahao Vashum, Peter Haokip, Melvil Pereira (eds), (Guwahati: North Eastern Social Research Centre, 2012), 193-213. Reprinted by permission of the publisher; all rights reserved.

The experience of Christian faith

How does the gospel insert itself into the cultural context of the North-East region? There are many inbuilt Gospel values already prevalent within the cultural milieu of the natives, such as the abiding sense of brotherhood, equality, simplicity, hospitality, social justice, respect for others and their properties and so forth. At the same time, there is also an inherent propensity to indulge in ethnic violence, intolerance, indifference, and an over-emphasis on brotherhood of one's own clan or tribe or linguistic community.

Early missionaries were touched by what they saw of the tribes in the North-East region of India.² The tribal world was situated in thick forests or on lofty hills. Explorers and missionaries arrived with a message and a mission. They brought the gospel that proposed a new a kingdom for all – a kingdom of love and brotherhood. It would turn things upside down and inside out, having the power to turn the greatest to the least and the first to the last. It was a kingdom opened to loving strangers and enemies, and hating blood relations. This mission was oriented to a process of conversion of the heart (in Greek *metanoia*). It was called the 'Good news for the poor' (Luke 4:18-19) and the liberator was Jesus Christ, the redeemer of the world.

Engerized by the power of the gospel, the missionaries convinced the natives to end head-hunting and human sacrifices. They introduced education, healthcare and social development. They devised and improvised several methods to reduce their dialects into written languages in Roman script, bringing them gradually up to a literary academic standard. In most states of the North East, English was introduced as a medium to link the people of the North East among themselves and with the world at large.³ They introduced western music to their singing talents and enhanced social life through religious gatherings and collaborative endeavours. Being neutral agents, they played the catalyst role of reconciling hostile villages and tribes, and showed them a larger vision of unity amongst all peoples, tribes and communities. The missionaries also participated in the life of the indigenous people by way of enculturation and by involvement in their struggles and suffering; some of them even laid down their lives (for the sake of Christ). The natives thus took a giant step towards social coherence and civic governance.

² Missionaries came to the North-East region of India as early as in Assam (Catholics in 1626, Protestants in 1812); Nagaland (Baptists in 1872, Catholics in 1948); Manipur (Baptists in 1890, Catholics in 1952); Mizoram (Presbyterians in 1890, Catholics in 1952); Meghalaya (Garo Hills – Protestants in 1867, Catholics in 1933; Khasi Hills – Catholics in 1889; Anglicans came to look after the British military cantonment at Cherrapunjee); Tripura (Catholics in 1683; Baptists in 1912); and Arunachal Pradesh (Baptists in the 1940s, Catholics in the 1970s).

³ The survey made by *India Today* (September 11, 2006) reported that North-East region was ranking first in India with excellent 'primary education in English.'

Apart from the many splendid things the missionaries accomplished, there is but one legacy which they would rather not have wished to transmit to the tribal communities, namely, the seed of dissension and rivalry against each other based on race, nationality and religious organization. The missionaries themselves belonged to different races and nationalities, churches and denominations, orders and congregations. They preached the gospel of the same Lord Jesus Christ and practised the same Christian spirituality with variant doctrines, accents and charisms. But all their 'preaching' was galvanised by their own inherited social and religious prejudices and rivalries. This very legacy of the missionaries has been perpetuated by the tribal Christian communities even up to the present time.⁴ This animosity is one of the greatest obstacles we face if we have to fashion a genuine north-eastern community. For it is the principal cause of social and religious paranoia amongst the tribal communities. Tribes and communities tend to appropriate Christ and his Gospel (and church) in the same bickering tone of those missionary churches or denominations, orders or congregations. 'When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier' (John 19:23). We forget the precious value of the blood of Jesus Christ flowing on the Cross, when we begin to divide his Gospel. Jesus knew it even as he prayed for his disciples 'that they may all be one' (John 17:21). This is a lesson yet to be learnt by the north-eastern communities.

The experience of civilization

Civilization continues to flow into the North East from outside – from the mainland as well as from abroad. British imperialism had cut this region off from its traditional trading partners (Bhutan, Myanmar and Indo-China) and left behind only a War Memorial cemetery at Kohima. The region witnessed two World Wars, the Sino-Indian War (1962) and the effects of the Bangladesh War of Independence (1971). The principal agents of

⁴ For instance, since the British regime did not want religious rivalries to upset the smooth operation of political expansion in the North-East region, it apportioned territories to different denominations so that each denomination could evangelize their respective areas uninterruptedly. So the present states of Meghalaya and Mizoram were entrusted to the Presbyterians, while Assam, Nagaland and Manipur were assigned to the American Southern Baptists. This also explains the dominance of these denominations in certain states. With the prejudices originating from the United Kingdom (the Church of England or Anglicans), the Catholic Church was denied access to the region, although its missionaries – the German Salvatorian Fathers – came to the North East en route for Tibet and they passed through the present states of Assam and Meghalaya, effected some conversions, and established the first Catholic community in Assam in 1889 with its headquarters at Shillong. But they were driven out by the British authorities at the outbreak of World War I. Even today, similar hostility and resistance continue to prevail in many tribal communities.

civilization were *government* (politicians, civil officers, educationists and armed forces), *non-government* (businessmen, traders, developers, etc.) from mainland India, and *Christian missionaries*. These functionaries penetrated into the region and played significant roles in shaping the history of the North East, as is happening today with greater intensity. By default, the mainland people come from a 'caste-ridden' society and view the 'tribe-ridden' society condescendingly. The North-East region, to them, is poised to be a paradise for business or research studies; and bureaucrats, developers and missionaries assume a redemptive role in the name of the rural poor and of indigenous minorities. Soon it became a captive market for mainstream India.

Now, in the race for privatisation and globalization, highly deceitful methods are being employed in this region to take maximum advantage of the vulnerability and innocence of the marginalised population. The tribal communities own land while the government, backed by industrialists, comes with a package of *development* (a neo-gospel) with 'good news' for the poor to proclaim better roads, communications, agriculture, horticulture – indeed, almost every aspect of life. The new designation of the liberator is the '*developer*'. The '*developer*' has his kingdom in this world. With his huge purchasing power, he can buy up an entire tribal landholding overnight. Similar to the power of the Christian Gospel, *the gospel of 'development' has a high potentiality to turn things upside down and inside out; to love strangers and hate blood relations in the new kingdom of power and wealth; and to re-christen the traditional nomenclature of 'headman' into 'chairman' for the sake of village development. This neo-gospel offers a new type of community with its creed on well-being and prosperity based on 'peace' without even fairness and proportionate justice.* It must take place through the process of transformation and development of land. It will construct dams, extract minerals and build highways, and establish industries, innumerable hydro-projects, massive agricultural, horticultural projects, and so forth. All this is to the disenchantment of the indigenous people as they will be sooner or later displaced and scattered from their original habitat and social mores. They will be tempted or compelled to exchange their sacred land and culture with money, jobs and development. The developers will design strategically as to how to mesmerise the people and spin the planet into a profit-oriented direction. The natives will then live in a new 'heaven' and 'earth' – but in the gutters and slums of modern towns where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The experience of self-assertion

The North-East region of India is a home to many ethnic groups⁵ that are engaged in self-preservation. Despite the fact that India is the largest democratic country in the world, there is hardly any sense of democracy in this region.⁶ Since Independence, some communities have failed to integrate with India (politically and culturally), while others continue to experience different degrees of economic deprivation, political deceit, and the gimmicks of international politics (like China and the South Asian countries sponsoring insurgencies against each other). Some years ago, when the tribal communities were uneducated and disorganized, their efforts were limited ‘to keeping the movements and aspirations alive’. But today, when they are more alert and better organized, in some cases with the encouragement of international communities, they are up in arms to preserve their cultural identity and political autonomy.⁷ Because of the complexity of problems involved, the *peace process* has evolved into another industry for predators and an elusive path for stakeholders.⁸

⁵ Some of the ethnic communities in the North East are: Adivasi, Arunachalis, Assamese, Bishnupriya Manipuri, Bodo, Dimasa, Garo, Karbi, Khasi, Kuki-Chins, Manipuri, Mizo, Naga, Rabha, Koch Rajbongshi, Mishing, Tiwa, Tripuri, Bengali, Nepali, Purvottar, Maithili, etc.

⁶ The region is teeming with all sorts of social unrest and insurgency. Apart from militant groups, every organization is the prototype of pressure group like students’ unions, mothers’ associations, tribal and inter-tribal associations or councils which constantly exert their pressure and put demands on people or authorities to sympathize with their cause without further reasoning. To contain insurgencies, the Government of India has deployed a host of armed forces (military and paramilitary) with special powers known as the ‘Armed Forces Special Power Act 1958’ (AFSPA), which now represent a serious human rights issue owing to the excesses and brutalities of the security forces (e.g. extra-judicial killings, fake encounters, disappearances, etc.).

⁷ Among the seven states in the North-East region, there are over a dozen of revolutionary groups in each: (1) Arunachal Pradesh: LTA, NLFA, EALF (ADF), ALTAP, etc. (2) Assam: ULFA, MULFA, MULTA, NDFB, BSF, ALMA, etc. (3) Manipur: KCP, PLA, RPF, KYKL, UNLF, PREPAK, PULF, NSCN (IM), NSCN (K), KNO, UPF, etc. (4) Meghalaya: HALC, HNLC, ATON, ALMA, GNLA, etc. (5) Mizoram: MNF (the first to declare union with India), HPC(D), BNLF, etc. (6) Nagaland: NNC, FGN, NSCN (IM), NSCN (K), etc. (7) Tripura: ATTF, NLFT, TNV, TOLA, etc.

⁸ The militant outfits or insurgents (as they are popularly called in the North East) that have entered into peace parleys with the Centre so far are the Mizoram National Front (MNF), the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM); the United People’s Democratic Solidarity – Karbi tribe (UPDS); the Karbi Longri North Cachar Hills Liberation Front (KLNLF); the Kuki revolutionary groups that have signed the Suspension of Operation (altogether some twenty factions under the umbrella of KNO and UPF). Most of these outfits envisage social change and ‘emancipation from the oppressive and exploitative system of India’. They resort to violence in the attempt to further their goals, using a variety of tactics

There is an *naive myth* in the presumption that the *Indian constitution can solve all the problems prevailing in the North-East region* on the one hand; and the belief that, if a social movement of self-determination is organised, *every community can achieve a separate political identity or greater autonomy or greater territory or 'sovereignty'* on the other. The militant outfits are required to come out of their hideouts, abjure violence, surrender their weapons and get rehabilitated into the mainstream. Although many of these outfits might have surrendered their arms, they have not surrendered their cause. They refuse to yield their ideology in exchange for a paltry sum of money and the promise of comfort and well-being. As money spins in the hands of the rich and powerful, indigenous communities reel in poverty under various forms of a repressive administration.

There is a constant cry for justice in every other house of the north-eastern communities, particularly in the states declared as a 'disturbed area'. The people want nothing but 'delivery of justice'. There are distraught widows whose husbands are kidnapped and killed for ransom by militant outfits; there are innocent youths suspected of being militants and extortionists who are picked up by security forces and killed in fake encounters. Most of the families who lost their loved ones in similar incidents are awaiting the delivery of justice. Similarly, some villagers have given away their land in exchange for dam construction, railroad and other developmental projects. The most pathetic aspect of all this is the system of compensation. Since only a trivial amount is given on an instalment basis, poor farmers are unable to invest it in anything but spend it on daily subsistence;⁹ in some cases without any prospect of the compensation that is due to them.¹⁰ Several cases related to the violation of human rights have been filed in the courts in the hope of receiving justice (Samom 2010: 32-33). In short, the North-East region is acutely lacking the integral elements of peace and justice. People are still longing for peace with justice which

– mainly grenade attacks and ambushes, economic blockades, kidnappings and ransom demands – with varied degrees of success.

⁹ From a collection of reports from the discontented villagers and victims of the Nongda Dam Project, Manipur. Copyrighted Material

¹⁰ 'We have lost our arable land and our houses; we have been suffering for the last two years but our woes have remained unaddressed; we are given stepmotherly treatment as if we were viewed as ignorant villagers; we have been living as refugees... Our ancestral land, farms and streets, houses and cemetery tombs have been ravaged; mudslides are a frequent occurrence during the rainy seasons as a fallout of the excavation works.' While threatening to commence an agitation, Mr. G. Aching laments on behalf of the aggrieved group of villagers (located within the Noney area of Tamenglong District are Awangkhol, Rangkhong, Lukhambi, Nungtek and Marangching) on the Jiribam-Tupul-Imphal railroad construction site as the concerned authority had failed to give them their due compensation. Cf *Imphal Free Press*, 7th June 2011, 1.

are lifeblood of a human community, but not within the easy reach of those in the North East.

Faith Response to the Experience of Indigenous People

In what way is our God personally involved in the struggles of the people of the North East? North-easterners have experienced centuries of isolation, backwardness, discrimination, domination and militarization. The God of Israel is a God who personally takes the initiative in resolving the problems of his chosen people.

Then the Lord said, 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites (Ex. 3:7-8, RSV).

God, who takes a personal initiative in resolving people's struggles, intervened in the sufferings of the people of the North East with his steadfast love and compassionate accompaniment. His pedagogy was first and foremost to bless the people with education in a gradual process. Then, once the people had become transformed into an enlightened community, he blessed them with a higher degree of rationality, spirituality, civic sense and overall human formation. He blessed each tribe or community with an *awakened awareness* so that they might know *who they are and what they should become, on a par with the rest of the world*. We may boldly ask ourselves: what has become of the people of the North East as a result of such divine intervention? Some communities God unified with a common language by reducing a village dialect into a written language with the Roman script; some other communities he blessed with basic infrastructure and institutions to the envy of other communities; while to some communities he gave political stability, a vibrant faith and fellowship in true brotherhood. And so on! But he confused certain communities with rifts and division in the form of multi-denominational churches, multi-political parties riddled with incompatible ideologies, and groups with vested interests under the banner of social development. And so on! Nevertheless, the Christian faith has been sensitive to the struggles and aspirations of the people of the North-East region. Some communities have attained a self-understanding of what they should be, and they are now in harmony with the rest of the world, while other communities are still striving to see a good outcome of their struggles.

People's deep longing and yearning for peace and justice, amidst strife and struggles, is a serious theological concern. Every tribe and every community is trying to draw a road map for a comfort zone characterized by peace with justice, but so far they have not been able to achieve any tangible results, because the struggles of all the communities lack clarity

and synchrony to focus on a common destiny in concert with other communities. The struggles of the people of the North East against the current of exploitation, corruption, violence and self-determination must be coherent with the basic right of existing and co-existing with each other. If north-easterners do not nurture the spirit of tolerance and harmonious co-existence, they will be condemned to be in conflict with each other for ever.

In order to fashion a community of peace with justice, we require elements that attract tribal sentiments which make their thinking easy and action practical and lasting. Among many things, we have to reflect on the importance of the *patterns of tribal relationship with the Almighty God*. The tribal way of relating with the Supreme Power is through animism, which is strongly expressed in communitarian acts and beliefs. This belief system has paved the way for acceptance of Christian fellowship and worship in the tribal communities. For example, congregated in singing, praying, preaching, adoring, congress, convention, weddings, festivals and anniversaries – all these have a social bearing on communion and fellowship, both in mundane and transcendental reality, and they hold attractions for the people of the north-east.

The tribal way of *fate discernment*, in times of major decisions and great crises, is not always scientific. Nevertheless, it gives a definite direction to the people with significant meanings related to social interest. The discernment is not based purely on empirical tests, but lies in the realm of spiritual power. A faith response to the experience of indigenous people cannot simply be based on empirical concerns alone (such as land transformation for rapid development), but principally on transcendental realities because the tribal worldview is undoubtedly oriented to the life hereafter.

Today, most of the people of the North East have embraced Christianity without losing their culture. The Christian spirituality of discernment, accompanied by prayer and fasting, should have its roots in the Holy Spirit. The work of the Holy Spirit, the divine gifts of vision, prophecy, healing, etc. are often resorted to by the present generation. Some genuine holy men and women who are attuned to the voice of the Holy Spirit must listen to that voice and communicate to the community the message in all its purity and integrity, while the community must discern it with prayer and fasting, and accept the message for the good of the whole community.¹¹ It is unfortunate that the voice of faith-discerning people has been thwarted by the strange and repressive voices of militants and the developers.

Another theological concern is: How do we see a *faith-inspired social conscience* in the life of the people of the North East? If peace is to take deep root, we have first to *promote public propriety* and eradicate corruption, abjure ethnic violence, and be freed from social indifference and selfishness. Secondly, we need to create a common concern for

¹¹ Cf Acts 13:1-3.

balanced ecological harmony since our geographical and environmental realities cannot be separated from one another. Thirdly, we have to strengthen and nourish the ecumenical efforts weakened by those who underscore rivalries and intolerance. Some churches are cocooned in their own languages and cultures, incapable of accommodating other ethnic groups; while others tend to be large, amorphous and impersonal in structure, which are good as institutions but not as a ‘community’.

Hurdles to be Overcome

The North East is a region characterized by what might be called a *paranoid belt*. There are several factors that divide the region and prevent it from merging into a harmonious north-eastern community. *First*, there are innumerable border issues between states and between communities. The rough administrative division effected by the British administration still creates a certain degree of chaos and unrest amongst the tribes and state authorities. According to the policy-makers and economists of the region, the main stumbling-block to development is the region’s disadvantageous geographical location. The gospel of globalisation propagates de-territorialisation and borderless economic integration.¹² *Secondly*, ideological differences amongst the social leaders and intellectuals in regard to people’s movement towards self-determination have generated unrest and even bloodshed. *Thirdly*, the multiplicity of ethnic groups accompanied by some high-handedness on the part of some dominant tribes has created suspicion and tension between tribes. *Fourthly*, the sensitive issue of migrants coming from the mainland or neighbouring countries has become another concern of great magnitude.¹³ Earlier, small tribes could not populate their land, and for years they kept going with a subsistence economy. In the course of time, outsiders escaping from their destitution rushed to the tribal lands and became skilled professionals such as masons, carpenters, bakers, tea-stall runners, porters, contractors, etc. Because of their roles, there was a great spirit of tolerance and acceptance of their occupation. Thus, these outsiders who penetrated deeper into the tribal communities ended up as permanent settlers, in some cases even intermarrying. Now to drive ‘them’ out would be another serious human rights issue. *Fifthly*, Christian denominational rivalry has prejudiced the idea of a coherent and peaceful community. It is not only among Christian

¹² It is said that with 98% of its borders with China, Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar and Bangladesh, North-East India has better scope for development in the area of globalization: wikipedia.org/North_India (accessed 1st September 2011).

¹³ The so-called ‘outsiders’ (here meaning Nepalis, Muslims, *Deshwalis*, etc.) who had settled among the indigenous people always bring their relatives when they return to their birth-places, thus making the rate of the influx higher than the natural growth of the population of the indigenous people. This phenomenon causes alarm and unease to the indigenous communities of the North East.

denominations, but between Christians and non-Christians who cannot tolerate the beliefs and practices of each other. There is hardly any common vision of a harmonious community, but instead sharp doctrinal divisions are found among them.¹⁴ *Sixthly*, distrust by central government, and particularly the allegedly insincere commitment of its personnel (political, military, bureaucrats, business, etc), has given way to an incurable paranoia in the tribal communities.

The reality of the multiplicity of cultures and languages will be a disheartening factor in any initiative towards any greater unity of the community. Besides, each tribe or community has its own problems peculiar to itself that need to be addressed before any common venture is entertained. A corrupt democracy, such as in Indian at present, cannot check and balance the communities that are xenophobic. It only accelerates armed conflicts.

A New North-East Community

Several factors need to be considered for a new community based on peace and justice in the context of current rapid developments in the North-East region.

A land with peace and justice

A consideration on how a society should be organized and what values are most fundamental to it has a direct impact on land use decisions. Tribal land is limited and naturally defined. Today, natural boundaries or conventional definitions have become obsolete. This has created ambiguity and territorial conflict as the tribal communities begin to populate the land which was once considered to be the possession of their ancestors. Very soon tribal land will be bought up by companies and rich people in the name of development, causing acute social inequalities. From time to time, 'prophets' will regularly inveigh against leadership figures that 'pervert justice'.¹⁵ When the socially powerful pervert justice through legal channels, the 'have-nots', who are socially disadvantaged, will have no recourse other than to cry out to God for justice.

Our theory of justice, however well intentioned it may be, could still leave us locked into some mistake or other despite all best efforts. To make our offer of justice attractive to the indigenous people, we have to begin by boldly applying critical reasoning, involving respectively the pre-eminence of fairness, the nature of representation, the type of unanimity, the spirit of liberty, the requirements of procedural equality, the demands of equity

¹⁴ For instance, Sunday worship tends to divide people as the services are conducted along linguistic and denominational lines.

¹⁵ Cf Amos 5:7, 6:12; Is. 5:7.

combined with efficiency, and the courage to have no fear of being accused of indecisiveness.

Styles of leadership for the North-East

Special education and formation of leaders for the north-eastern community is a categorical task. Leaders lose their senses when elections are held and developmental schemes are shared. In the fresh endeavour for building a new north-eastern community, it is imperative that people who are morally upright, socially tolerant, and responsible for present and future generations, are elected and appointed to lead the communities of the North East which have been isolated for far too long. Another essential aspect is the path of reason and objectivity. Reasoning is a healthy source of hope and confidence in a world darkened by murky deeds, past and present. Reasoning can be concerned with the right way of seeing and treating other people, other cultures, other claims, and with examining different grounds for respect and tolerance. We can also reason about our own mistakes and try to learn not to repeat them (Oe 1995: 118-119).¹⁶ No less importantly, intellectual probing is needed to identify actions that are not intended to be injurious but which have that effect. It is disheartening to see that the intellectual resources of the North East have been sharply divided among freedom fighters, NGO leaders and government officers; the result is that the north-eastern style of leadership is often neither forthcoming nor lasting.

Faith-based human rights issues

There are several forces at play related to faith-based human rights issues in the North-East region. From within the domain of freedom of conscience and religion, men and women feel constrained to seek the truth and to worship God, on the one hand, and on the other, each religion feels it to be its bounden duty to teach and propagate the message of truth and at the same time to impose repressive measures to secure its members within the fold.¹⁷ This coercive approach to individuals and communities often causes

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¹⁶ An army officer who worked in the North East for several years said, 'Tribals make very good judgements provided it does not affect them.' Outsiders – and especially those who carried responsibility – have many things to say about the people in the North East. We must take their observations and suggestions to heart with an open mind and learn new insights and creativity for ourselves. The great Japanese writer, Kenzaburo Oe, hopes the Japanese nation will remain committed to 'the idea of democracy and the determination never to wage a war again'. See Oe, *Japan, the Ambiguous, and Myself*, 118-19). We also hope that ethnic violence and ungodly corruption will be a thing of the past.

¹⁷ For example, one of the repressive measures that violates human rights is the Christian village policy: 'One village, one religion/church'. Such a rigid law

untold suffering to individuals and communities, and can violate inter-faith human rights. This insensitivity is a great obstacle to the emergence of a north-eastern community based on peace and justice.

Forgiveness and healing

The North-East region has experienced deep wounds and loss of life and property due to ethnic violence and insurgency. We need time and persevering efforts to bring about social and spiritual healing and a reorganization of the social and political order. We north-eastern people do not have the spiritual capacity to wait for long with hope and expectation. We are restless to reap the fruits of the good seeds we have sown or to avenge the seeds of hostility inflicted on us in our own time (we even want to perpetuate hostility through our posterity). A kind of egoism infects us and others: we fail to reap the benefit from the yields of painstaking effort and a lack of understanding on the problems and aspirations of our region in an integrated whole. Today, the blood that I shed cannot be only for my own clan or tribe, but for all men and women as a family or as a community. In many lengthy tasks, one cannot expect to enjoy the fruits of one's labours in one's lifetime. Paul planted, Apollo watered, but God gave the growth (1 Cor. 3:6), and the fruits were meant for the community. It is recalled here that when East and West Germany merged in 1990 (after the Berlin Wall had fallen the previous year), the new nation marked a period of ten years to adjust itself socially, economically and politically. Even after ten years had gone by, the nation felt the need of extending the time. By shedding his blood for us, Christ gathered together a new people from every corner of the earth. By the same power of the blood of Christ, we north-easterners can gather together in a fair and harmonious community. Our prayer is that we wait with hope and expectation, even if it takes time, for the birth of a new north-eastern community.

Education for living in diversity

It is with a sense of reciprocal understanding amid diversity that we can think of a hopeful community without prejudice. Besides, it is a felt need to develop a spirituality of communion which unites the hearts and minds of people. Communities need to encourage greater participation in common aspirations for the entire north-eastern population. In the educational curriculum, it should teach how certain communities emerging from ethnic isolation should relate to other communities that may be stronger or weaker, friendly or competitive, dependent or dominant, similar or

suppresses not only the freedom of individuals and families to follow the religion of their choice, but also interferes with the right of other religions and churches to exercise their conviction to evangelize and propagate.

different, and with those belonging to other cultural or religious traditions. Education should also be very aware that poor tribals that have emerged from a subsistence economy into a money economy, that this sudden shift has caught them unaware and, further, they are undergoing a shift from traditional community to a power-pattern of authority. Another aspect is the need for guidance for young people who are torn from their cultural roots and brought into an urban situation, with remunerative employment as well as unemployment, alcoholism, drugs, HIV/AIDS and antisocial activities (Menampampil 2008: 125). Christian schools must play an active role in promoting peace, justice and social transformation. It is the younger generations that will form the new north-eastern community. Education must be oriented to their needs and embrace a definite time-frame to see the desired fruits.

The defence and promotion of human rights

In our quest for peace and justice in the North East, we need to programme a *vigorous defence and promotion of human rights*. Are north-eastern communities literate in human rights and are they able to stand for their own rights and give due respect to the rights of others? How should communities emerging from ethnic isolation relate to other communities that may be stronger or weaker, friendly or competitive, dependent or dominant, similar or different, and with those belonging to other cultural or religious traditions? How should they handle problems that have arisen from a situation in which people that lived on subsistence farming move into a money economy, an investment-economy and a globalized economy, all in one generation or two? How should they handle problems that come from a change of power patterns from traditional village and community authorities to those linked with political parties, legislatures, and district and state administration? What do they have to say when resources destined for development fall into the hands of private individuals and groups with vested interests? What are they to say when they see dependence grow among communities that valued their autonomy and self-reliance – with financial and political dependence on political bosses, higher-ups, patrons, money wizards or leaders at the centre? These questions have already been raised by thinkers on issues affecting the North East (Menampampil 2008: 125-26).

The European community as a model

In the wake of rapid development in this 21st century, one has to travel great distances and receive rapid information without geographical or communal barriers. The people of the North East should diligently and amicably learn from the European model, whereby the European countries have reached an accord among themselves with clear definitions of their

boundaries, and live a harmonious borderless life.¹⁸ In the effort to bring peace and harmony among the different tribes, a standardised type of treaty and agreement must be drawn up to interpret and settle the land and communal disputes between tribes, and to facilitate trade and business, cutting across tribal communities and territories. There should be an agreement clearly defined so that any appearance of ethnic violence or communal clashes should be resolved under such guidelines, and a *magna carta* should be the guiding principle to youth and to mobs inclined to indulge in ethnic violence. This model of a borderless ‘multiculture’ should go beyond tribal communities and churches, and usher in greater co-operation from all walks of life.

Conclusion

Theologizing on the construction of a new community among the tribes in the North East is not an easy task, particularly in creating a community based on peace with justice. The people of the North East have wearied of social unrest, ethnic conflict and external manipulation. Tired as they have become, they are now very open to try anything that assures them of a package of peace and respite, unmindful of the lures and dangers these might contain. With the changing models of economy, and especially of production, it is difficult for the north-eastern tribes to summon the energy to build up a new north-eastern community. For peace is not a mere absence of conflict and struggle; rather, it is a search for a new society with a redefined identity.

Centuries-old theologies of justice and charity based on the sacred Scriptures and the teachings of the church did not appear to depend on human rights. When, in the Bible, those who uttered the Psalms, for example, complained of injustice, they did not claim their rights, but rather they called for just judgement (e.g. Ps. 72:1-4). The stress is on putting things right for the ‘poor’, on objective justice, and on the duties of the rich, rather than on observing the rights of the individual. Christianity and other Biblical religions (e.g. the Jewish tradition) have traditionally expressed morality in terms of doing the will of God, which does not easily translate into a language of rights. The north-eastern tribal communities, like any other communities, must learn to respect the rights of others and stake their claim to rights with a sense of unity – that is, a new way of

¹⁸ This is not to overlook the long struggles European countries have gone through as they themselves were divided sharply due to ethnic and ideological difference. Over a lengthy period of concerted effort, and especially after the Cold War following the fall of the Communist regime in the Soviet Union, the European Community drafted the memorandum of understanding known as the *Schengen Agreement*. This historical pact inaugurated a borderless European Community. The people of the North East must have vision along with patience and endurance, with the intellect and will power to forge ahead towards a North-Eastern community.

being a north-eastern community. In other words, the phenomenal task of building a new community of the North East lies in the hands of a co-branded responsible team comprising specialists and dedicated leaders from all walks of life to do more than what is currently being done, and take on board all those who are not only optimistic but who are hopeful (in a theological sense) of constructing a new community and of making that package attractive and feasible with the reality of peace and justice in a north-eastern way.

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CHRISTIANITY, ETHNICITY AND STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE: THE NORTH-EAST INDIAN CASE¹

John Parratt

Introduction

The majority of former colonies may fairly be described as colonial constructs, in that their borders and the ethnic composition of their populations (and thus the resulting stresses of inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflict) were determined by the historical processes of colonial expansion. India, by contrast, could not unreasonably be called a *post-colonial* construct.² Negotiations for its independence involved not only partition (ostensibly on religious grounds) but also the beginnings of the incorporation into the newly independent India of the princely states and other (mostly tribal) territories that were only very loosely administered by Britain. This process was still ongoing in 1975 (with the taking over of Sikkim). Around two-fifths of present-day India was never directly part of the British empire, and only joined the Indian Union by processes of negotiation, backed up in several cases by intimidation and military action.³ This process (which came to the attention of the international community especially in the cases of Hyderabad, Kashmir and Goa) also significantly affected the North-East region of India. Of the seven states in the North East, only Assam (which then included the present Meghalaya) was fully administered by the British. The princely native states of Manipur and Tripura became independent in 1947, and the tribal areas of the Naga Hills (which became the basis of the present Nagaland), Lushai Hills (now Mizoram), and NEFA (now Arunachal Pradesh) were loosely administered but not fully integrated into British India.

The North-East region in general is sharply different from the remainder of the sub-continent. In contrast to the broadly Aryan-Dravidian peoples of

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² A point acknowledged by Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1997).

³ V.P. Menon's highly partisan and sanitized *The Integration of the Indian States* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1956) is an 'official' history that skates over the real issues of conflict. His date for the absorption of Manipur and Tripura is two years too early.

the heartlands of India, the peoples of the North East are ethnically Mongoloid, and the bulk of its peoples migrated into the region from the east. Its languages furthermore are unrelated to Sanskrit, but belong to the quite different Tibeto-Burman language group. Its cultures, despite influence from the Indian sub-continent, in many ways resemble more those of east Asia. Historically, too, the region was never part of the great empires of the sub-continent, nor was it greatly involved in the Indian Congress struggle for independence. After Indian independence in 1947, ethnic, historical, and cultural differences were reinforced by geographical isolation. With the removal of West Bengal to become East Pakistan (and subsequently Bangladesh), the North East became tenuously linked to the rest of India only by the 14-km wide Siliguri Corridor, so that now less than 1% of its borders are with the rest of India. The Congress policy of aggressive integrationism after 1947, paradoxically, reinforced this isolation. Foreign investment is practically non-existent, internal investment very limited, and all communications go through Delhi or Kolkata. Much of the region has been declared a 'restricted area'; foreigners are scarcely permitted access, international media and human rights organizations are excluded, and some areas are off-limits even to Indian nationals.

This isolation was reinforced by a form of narrow ethnocentrism which assumed that the Hindi-speaking 'Aryan' tradition represented the only valid form of Indianness. The resulting 'integrationist' policies, which lasted until comparatively recently, thus pressured a region that is ethnically and linguistically quite different to conform to what has been called the 'culture of the Hindi cow-belt'. While the distinctiveness of the 'Dravidian' south had to be recognized, the peculiarities of the Mongoloid cultures of the North East (which have an equally great cultural history) have never yet been fully acknowledged. As Verghese comments, 'The dominant Aryan bent of national thinking has accommodated the Dravidian reality but has yet to appreciate the Mongoloid feature of the Indian ethos.'⁴

The claim that India is unified by an underlying Hindu cultural tradition, often used by integrationists, is unconvincing. As far as the North East is concerned, it is only the Brahmaputra valley and the valley of Manipur that were extensively hinduized. Even in the latter, Hinduism is a comparatively recent importation, and Meiter (i.e. plains people as opposed to hill tribals) society now shows many signs of becoming post-Hindu, as political identity has become entangled with religious identity.⁵ The hills, which

⁴ B.G. Verghese, *India's Northeast Resurgent: Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governance, Development*, 2nd edition (New Delhi: Konark, 1997), 334.

⁵ As long ago as 1980, V.I.K. Sarin, *India's North East in Flames* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1980), page 116, could claim that 'of late, Meiteis are refusing to be recognized as Hindus', and the revival of the pre-Hindu Sanamahi religion continues apace; see S.N. Arambam Parratt and J. Parratt, 'Reclaiming the Gods: A

were never hinduized, are today mainly Christian, with Mizoram and Nagaland being around 80% Christian, and Meghalaya also having a large Christian population.

Indian integrationism is based on what one might call the fallacy of the concept of the 'mainstream'. Naorem Sanajaoba quotes a telling comment of Sunanda K. Datta-Ray. Speaking of the ignorance of Indians in general about the 'Mongolian' heritage of the North East, Datta-Ray writes: 'Deep in the Indian psyche lies the belief, lately encouraged by obscurantist political groups, that Bharat is really Aryavrata, or the Hindi heartland, and that outlying districts which do not conform to its manners, customs, language and religion are colonial possessions and must be ruled as such until they can be absorbed in a superior code.'⁶ The Mongoloid peoples of the North East frequently claim that in the rest of the country they are regarded as foreigners and that an attitude of misplaced racial superiority and disdain has characterized their treatment by 'mainstream' Indians. The parochialism of successive Delhi governments and widespread ignorance about the region, even on the part of educated Indians, has created a 'them and us' mentality on both sides that has been one contributory factor to civil unrest and armed conflict. As late as 1988, one of the government's own reports could speak of a 'two-way deficit of understanding with the rest of the country'. It is therefore no surprise that an area as large as the North East, separated as it is from the bulk of the sub-continent by its geography, history, ethnicity, languages, and for a majority by its religion, and which was only marginally affected by the independence struggle, should regard itself as not part of the so-called 'mainstream' as defined by the Delhi-wallah. Unfortunately, central governments have deliberately reinforced the marginalization of the region by a policy of isolation. It is the only area of India for which special permits are required.⁷ From soon after Independence, large tracts have been classified as 'disturbed areas' and subject to oppressive military occupation, without however the formal declaration of an emergency.

Neo-Traditional Protest Movement in Manipur', in *Archiv Orientalni* 67 (1999), 241-48.

⁶ 'The Genesis of Insurgency in Manipur', in Naorem Sanajaoba (ed), *Manipur Past and Present: The Heritage and Ordeals of a Civilization*, 3 vols. (New Delhi: Mittal, 1988-95), Vol. I, 262.

⁷ It is true that these restrictions (like much other oppressive legislation) are built upon colonial regulations, in this case the 'inner line'. The inner line restrictions were originally meant to preserve tribals from exploitation by Indians from the rest of the sub-continent. Its present operation certainly does not succeed in doing that, and there are justifiable complaints (especially from Manipur) that outsiders dominate the economy out of all proportion to their numbers, and flood the region with unwanted unskilled labour. The modern version of the inner line, 'restricted areas', functions simply to prevent outside access to sensitive areas and thus prevent the dissemination in the media of the true conditions in those states.

B.K. Roy Burman has pointed out that claims of neo-colonialism are justified and that there has been a sharp suppression of talk of self-determination.⁸ Resentment at political subjection, and economic and social neglect, have understandably given rise to protest, both civil and insurgent,⁹ both peaceful and violent. This in turn has resulted in the attempt by Delhi to impose its will by military force. Some political advance has been made, notably in Mizoram. But half a century of severe military repression has in the main solved nothing, but rather increased the feeling of alienation, even on the part of peace-loving civil populations. Sadly, there seems to be little political will on either side to create a climate of basic human rights that alone would make development a possibility.

Christianity in Nagaland and Manipur

Protestant Christianity in these states is dominated by the Baptists, and was largely established by the American Baptists, who traditionally have a strongly evangelical and biblicist approach. Catholicism was introduced much later, but has grown in importance, largely due to its emphasis on educational work. The removal of foreign missionaries in the 1960s affected the Baptists more than the Catholics, who relied upon a large contingent of South Indian priests, mainly Silesians.

The earliest presence of missions in the North East, both Catholic and Protestant, was almost incidental. By the early 1800s, western missions were seeking an overland route into China, as access through the eastern sea coast of China was becoming more difficult. In pursuance of this aim, the Baptists established a short-lived mission in Guwahati in 1829, and

⁸ B.K. Roy Burman, 'Insurgency: Its Dynamics and Vision for Northeast India', in B. Pakem (ed), *Insurgency in North East India* (New Delhi: Omson, 1997), 26.

⁹ The term 'insurgency' is far from satisfactory, since there is within it the implication of illegitimacy and that the insurgent is an insurrectionist. Burman, 'Insurgency', page 21, rightly points out that 'insurgency is a circuit of *reciprocal violence* (our italics), where the players are the state establishment and the challengers of the same'. Pakem, *Insurgency in North East India*, page 3, states that, in his informal meetings with leaders of these movements, they had never described themselves as 'insurgents' but rather as patriots, freedom fighters, defenders of their people, and so on. 'Insurgent' is therefore not a self-designation but a term generally applied by their opponents. A similar problem is raised by the use of the phrase 'security forces'. It is clear that sympathizers of insurgents (whether passive or active) do not regard the military, paramilitaries, and sometimes also the civil police, as contributing to their personal security, but rather as sources of institutional violence. The use of both these terms is very problematic. However, since this terminology seems to have established itself in the literature, I shall use it for the purposes of this paper. For a fuller account of the causes of insurgency, the militarization of Manipur, and the widespread abuse of civil rights, see John Parratt, *Wounded Land: Politics and Identity in Modern Manipur* (New Delhi: Mittal, 2005).

later a more permanent one further east at Sadiya. The first mission contact with the Naga tribes was in 1838, and the first Naga Christian community was established, by an Assamese evangelist, among the Ao sub-tribe in 1872. Thereafter other groups were gradually contacted, and Kohima (the present capital of Nagaland) and Wokha became important centres for Christianity among the Angami Nagas. The other main tribal grouping, the Kukis, only began to convert to Christianity in the first decade of the twentieth century.

Manipur, as an independent princely state, was closed to missionaries until after the Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891. Subsequently, very limited educational and medical mission work was permitted, and only in the hills (over which the British retained some control after the 1891 war), but was forbidden among the hinduized plains Meiteis. The first evangelism was carried out among the Tangkhul Nagas in Ukhrul, and subsequently at Kangpokpi (which became a centre for Kuki Christianity).

Despite early reluctance, Christianity spread among both tribal groups. There was a substantial increase due to the so-called 'Manipur Revival', which began in 1916. This actually started in the Chin (Lushai) Hills (the present Mizoram) and at first affected mainly the Kukis, but by the 1920s had spread to the Manipuri Nagas. In the beginning there was some persecution of Christians by the traditionalists, and mutual suspicion between the Naga sub-groups was only slowly broken down. Despite the acceptance of a common faith, the age-old antagonism between Naga and Kuki continues. While it is true, as Downs indicates,¹⁰ that Christianity has been a unifying factor, it has nonetheless been singularly unsuccessful in eradicating completely inter- and intra-tribal conflict.¹¹ The relationship between the evangelical Baptists of the Council of Baptist Churches in North-East India and the Catholics has not been smooth.¹²

While figures are difficult to assess, there can be no doubt that Christianity has become the 'official religion' (Downs) of Nagaland and Mizoram, and probably 80% of the population of these states would regard themselves as Christian. In Manipur, most of the Naga and Kuki tribals, who make up around a third of the population of some two million, may also be regarded as Christian. There is also a small, but growing, interest in Christianity among the Meiteis. This may in part be a political, as well as a religious, protest against the Indian mainstream. However, Manipur, like

¹⁰ F.S. Downs, *The History of Christianity in India, Vol. V, Part 5, Christianity in North East India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 1992), 132.

¹¹ For example, the Kuki-Naga massacres of the 1990s, and the infighting among different sub-groups in the National Socialist Council of Nagaland: see Phanjoubam Tarapot, *Bleeding Manipur* (New Delhi: Har-Anand, 2003).

¹² Indeed, D. Syiemlieh, *A Brief History of the Catholic Church in Nagaland* (Shillong: Vendrame Institute, 1990), 75, claims that a persecution of Catholic Nagas was provoked by the largely Baptist NSCN underground.

other parts of the North East, has been the recipient in recent years of a wholly counter-productive proliferation of fundamentalist splinter groups, usually financed from America, which has resulted in the emergence of a confusing (to the non-Christian) number of mini-churches.

Political Resistance

The area known as the Naga Hills (the present Nagaland minus the Tuenseng tract) was only loosely administered by the British. On the independence of India in 1947, Naga leaders made it clear that in their view the Naga people had never historically been part of India and that they did not wish to join the Indian Union. The Hydari Agreement concluded between Sir Akbar Hydari, governor of Assam, and the Naga leaders recognized their right to develop separately during a ten-year period under the general superintendence of the governor of Assam, and that the final decision regarding union or independence would be made thereafter. The Indian government interpreted this to mean that after ten years full integration would be effected. Meanwhile, in August 1947, the National Nagaland Council (NNC) declared independence for the region, and held a plebiscite that gave absolute support for this declaration. India naturally rejected the plebiscite, and the Nagas then boycotted the Indian elections. Nehru paid a flying visit to both Nagaland and Manipur in 1953, but ignored the voice of the people in both states. Integration, masterminded by Sardar Patel and V.P. Menon, was put into brutal effect. Repressive measures began in 1953. Three years later, the Indian army occupied towns and villages, some civilians were shot, and their corpses were displayed publicly as a warning to insurgents. That same year, the NNC set up its rival government. The Indian government gave some ground. The Tuenseng tract was joined to the Naga Hills in 1956 and the region given some autonomy. Nagaland became the first of the smaller North East regions to be granted statehood in 1963.

In 1972, the NNC and the 'Federal Government of Nagaland' were declared unlawful. The Indian Government negotiated the Shillong Accord with moderates in 1975, and this caused a split within the Naga elite. The National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) was formed by a group of leaders (including Muivah, a Tangkhul Naga from Ukhrul District in Manipur) and went underground as a guerrilla organization. Attacks on Indian army and paramilitary personnel increased. Infighting between the insurgent groups took place (often fuelled by ethnic sub-divisions). In 1980, Indian and Myanmar armies inflicted a severe defeat on the NSCN, but it subsequently regrouped and remains a powerful insurgent force.

Manipur, meanwhile, despite being able to trace its history as an independent kingdom back nearly two thousand years, and being the first state on the Indian sub-continent to hold full and free elections, was summarily annexed in 1949. It was to be 1972 before Mrs Gandhi bowed to

mounting pressure both within and outside Manipur to restore it to full statehood, but now within the Indian Union. Underground insurgent groups, whose origins reach back before 1947, re-emerged in the 1960s and remain a potent force. Some attempts, with varying degrees of success, have been made to bring together the chaotic mix of insurgency movements in both North-East India and Myanmar. The situation is however fraught with intra- and inter-ethnic rivalries, which have manifested themselves in periodic explosions of violence.

Abuses Committed by the Security Forces

It is not our purpose in this paper to detail the abuses of human rights that have been perpetrated under the cover of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA; see below), and in any case a full inventory of the atrocities committed by the military and paramilitary forces is not possible. Many acts go unreported, especially in rural areas and where victims have neither the education nor the political understanding to report them, and in those cases where complaints are made there is hardly ever any redress. India's 'closed door' policy towards the North East also means that foreign journalists and human rights workers are kept out, and that reports which appear in the Indian press are often heavily sanitized. The local press reports deaths, disappearances, abuses and protests on a very regular basis, but often without editorial comment. Abuses are often directed not towards suspects but at innocent civilians, including women and juveniles. Civil rights workers have frequently been targeted in order to attempt to silence them. *Meira Paibi*, the Meitei women's movement devoted to passive protest against abuses, has often been met with physical violence on the part of the paramilitaries, even against pregnant and very elderly women. Detailed accounts of the worst abuses are therefore difficult to obtain. However, I shall refer subsequently to some of the more public examples to indicate the scale of structural violence. These are only a sample of an abuse that involves a continuous and depressing catalogue of random shootings of civilians, deaths in custody, disappearances, detainings contrary even to AFSPA, rapes, arrests and torture, all of which occur regularly.¹³ What characterizes almost all cases is that they are simple acts

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¹³ Sources: for a list of 147 acts of violence committed between February and June 1973, see the Minority Rights Group (MRG) report *India and the Nagas*, 28-30; the Human Rights Forum, Manipur, paper on 'Death of Civil Liberties and Democratic Rights in Manipur', Delhi, dated 20th November 1980, gives other early cases; Phanjoubam Tarapot, *Insurgency Movement in North-Eastern India* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1993), 147-49., gives a large number of cases in the 1980s; the statement of the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) to the Working Group on Indigenous Populations, Geneva, July/August 1996 gives further cases, including ten of custodial deaths; see also Interim Report (dated 26th October 2000) of the Independent People's Inquiry Commission, Manipur, headed by H. Suresh

of revenge visited upon an unarmed and non-violent civilian population for attacks on paramilitaries by insurgency groups. One has to ask whether it has become a policy to attempt to restrain insurgency by the abuse of non-combatants. This is simply, as an Amnesty International paper put it, a pattern of violence.

As Pradip Phanjoubam points out,¹⁴ there are two levels of violence in situations such as obtain in Manipur. The higher is the disregard for basic human life on the part of those whose official role should be one of protection, in the illegal detentions, the indiscriminate retaliatory shootings and other forms of violent physical abuse. This is a structural, or institutional, violence sanctioned by AFSPA. The second level is less overt but just as real. This is the sense of unease that disrupts normal life, business and social activities, in which 'security' forces are seen as agents of an oppressive psychological intimidation and *insecurity*, which renders a truly human life all but impossible.

In 1980, following the deaths of two CRPF (Central Reserve Police Force) personnel in an insurgency attack, the CRPF conducted what the security forces euphemistically term a 'sweep' or 'combing' of villages. The inhabitants of Patsoi village, men and women of all ages, were forced to strip naked. Over fifty males (some as young as sixteen, others over sixty) were so severely beaten that a number were disfigured for life. Many were subjected to torture, causing three deaths, including one woman. All the livestock was slaughtered, and possessions were looted. Four years later, again after an attack on the CRPF, they retaliated by spraying bullets at a crowd watching a football match at Heirangthong in Imphal. Twenty-six spectators were killed.

The CRPF were involved in another massacre in January 1995. A group of insurgents fired on the CRPF in the RMC hospital in Imphal. The CRPF called in reinforcements, who arrived after the insurgents had fled. These began firing indiscriminately on hospital staff and bystanders. Of the nine who died, one was a medical student, another a cleaner, and six were auto-rickshaw drivers. These were shot in two separate incidents. A Commission of Inquiry found that none of the victims were armed, two were shot after they had raised their hands, and all six rickshaw drivers were taken behind a building and shot at close range; further, that all the shootings took place after the hostiles had fled, that non-Manipuris (i.e. Indians from outside the region) were escorted out unmolested, and that the CRPF had uttered the

(Mumbai High Court Judge); also several papers of the Committee on Human Rights (COHR), including 'Right to Life' (Imphal, Manipur State, 1997) and 'The Killings Continue' (a report on the summary execution of civilians during 1997); also its National Seminar on Human Rights (Imphal, Manipur State, 1994). More recently, *Manipur Update* has begun to fully document abuses, and the journal of the Manipur Research Centre, *Orient Vision*, gives a checklist of the main events.

¹⁴ Pradip Phanjoubam, 'And the Pattern of Abuse', in *Manipur Update* 1, No. 1 (1999), 7.

order 'Kill all the Manipuris'. The official security forces' report, as is usual, claimed the civilians were killed in crossfire.

In April 1995, there was a massacre in the Nagaland capital Kohima. Incredible as this may seem, the Rastriya (National) Rifles mistook a burst tyre in their own convoy for a bomb attack and began firing indiscriminately in the town. The Assam Rifles (another paramilitary body) and the CRPF, hearing the shooting, hastened to the scene and joined in. The firing from these security forces lasted for an hour, and resulted in the deaths of seven innocent civilians and serious injury to over twenty others. The dead included two young girls (aged three and eight); seven other children were among the injured. Even mortars were used in this attack on a non-existent enemy, though their use in civilian areas is strictly forbidden under army rules.

A more recent massacre took place at Tonsen in October 1999. This was again in retaliation for an earlier attack on the CRPF by insurgents, and once more the killings took place after the insurgents had fled the scene. CRPF forces then stopped a bus passing through the area, which contained thirty-seven polling officials for a local election (all of course unarmed). They were called out from the vehicle and shot. There were a number of deaths, and many were seriously wounded. Also killed were innocent bystanders, including women, and two men who were later dragged from a truck and shot at close range. The disturbances in Imphal as a result of the geographical extension of the ceasefire agreement with the Muivah faction of the NSCN (which was later rescinded) resulted, in June 2001, in another fifteen deaths and over two hundred injured.

The characteristic feature of all these cases (and they could be multiplied) is that they were not operations conducted against insurgents, but were waged against unarmed civilians, usually long after the insurgents had fled the scene. More seriously, these are attacks by a central security force, which (as we shall see) is unable to be brought to account for its actions.

The most infamous case, however, concerned the Assam Rifles at the Naga village of Oinam in the north Manipur Hills. This is one of very few cases in the North East to have been the subject of an Amnesty International report, based largely on the brave witness of Christian Manipuri Naga victims and human rights workers, despite extreme intimidation. Oinam is a very remote village, difficult of access especially in the monsoon season. In July 1982, there was a serious attack on a military post by the NSCN, in which some soldiers were killed and a large quantity of arms stolen. The response from the Assam Rifles was delayed. Indian official army reports called Operation Bluebird 'a highly disciplined' response under Major-General P.L. Kukrety, the commanding officer of Manipur Sector. It was in reality anything but that, as the Manipur authorities – after being denied access to a part of their own state for a period – eventually found out. In the 'sweep', fifteen civilians were

killed in cold blood, four of them being over fifty. There was no respect even for the state authorities; one MLA (member of the state parliament) was arrested, and the minister of education's house was raided without warrant. In Phuba village, twenty-six people were severely tortured, some sustaining permanent injury, and houses were demolished. At Phaibung Khullen, a similar number were tortured. Oinam itself suffered the worst. When the state medical officer was permitted to visit the village late in July, he found no one: all had been confined for several weeks either in schools or the church, or in the open air. Children, the elderly, and pregnant women were not spared; several women gave birth and lost children in these conditions. Numerous women were raped by the Assam Rifles (one young woman later committed suicide), and others were compelled to do forced labour. Many were subjected to torture to extract false confessions and to intimidate them from reporting the violence. Boys as young as fifteen were subjected to electric shock torture. Of the fifteen persons deliberately murdered, the official post mortems demonstrated that some had been shot at close range (some in the back) and others hanged. Oinam remains an appalling stain on the conscience of the world's largest democracy, but one that has consistently been denied by the military authorities, despite overwhelming evidence.

The military presence is massive. In Manipur, for example (a state of around two million), there are ten army battalions (of roughly 1,000 men each). There are in addition large numbers of paramilitary forces. Nagaland, with a population of around a million, has a comparable military presence. Of the paramilitaries, the Central Reserve Police Force is probably the most hated, and has a reputation for arrogance and lack of discipline; they have been responsible for much of the brutalizing and killing of civilians. Among their other duties, they often guard public buildings, but their inability to speak Manipuri, Nagamese or English, and their general attitude engenders mistrust on both sides. Besides these, there are the Assam Rifles and (on the border) the Border Security Force. The presence of the security forces is felt in all areas of life. Markets and urban streets are patrolled by armed gun carriers as well as foot soldiers, and there is a pervasive sense of an armed presence which, despite its official role, engenders more suspicion and insecurity than confidence. Crucially, none of these bodies have any real training to control civil unrest; retaliation rather than confidence-building is their usual response.

A Persecution of Christians?

The conflict between the Indian security forces and the insurgency groups in the North East is sometimes portrayed as a persecution of a Christian minority in a country that, though professedly secular, is largely in its mainstream dominated by Hinduized values. The high percentage of Christians in the North East, as compared with all other parts of India

except Kerala, does indeed on the surface make it look as though there are religious motives involved in the violence perpetrated on civilian populations. This view finds support in that the Delhi government has from time to time criticized the churches for being anti-Indian. Furthermore churches have often been targeted and occupied by troops and paramilitaries, and even used as places of detention, torture, rape and murder.

In reality, however, the situation is much more complex than this, and ethnicity plays as large a role in the equation as religion. In North-East India, like Myanmar, Thailand and some other south-east Asian countries, Christianity was often adopted not by the mainstream of the population but by tribal peoples. Consequently, alienation from the mainstream on the ground of ethnicity has tended to be reinforced by a second alienation on the ground of religion. At root, the suppression and violation of human rights in North-East India is ethnic – it would not be mistaken to call it racial: religious difference has merely reinforced this.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the Naga insurgency movements in India, like the comparable Chin and Karen independence movements in Myanmar, do have to a degree a Christian ideological base. From the beginning, Christianity was perceived as a cement that would bring together the various Naga sub-tribes. It was therefore a prominent element in their Naga identity in contrast to what was seen as neo-colonialism by Hindu India. It is significant that the Rev. Michael Scott, one of the members of the earlier abortive Peace Mission, was widely perceived as being the Nagas' spokesman. In the earlier period, a substantial number of pastors joined the underground. The insurgents did not fight on Sundays unless attacked.¹⁵ The slogan 'Nagaland for Christ' was a recognized rallying cry, and to some extent still is. Overtly Christian elements have appeared in official statements. The Constitution of the Federal Government of Nagaland, while it guaranteed the free profession and practice of any religion, declared that Christianity would be the religion of an independent Naga state. It was not averse to using religion as a propaganda tool either, when it claimed that the 'Hindu government' of India had adopted a policy of stopping Nagas eating meat. In the earlier days of the movement, volunteer gospel teams preached under armed guard (one might almost say 'gun in one hand, Bible in the other'), and the conduct of the jungle camps was (and to some extent remains, like those in Myanmar) ordered by Christian spiritual activities. As with the non-Christian Meitei movements, the NSCN tended towards a puritanical lifestyle, banning alcohol and drugs, and discouraging sexual immorality. Provision of social amenities, like schools and clinics, goes hand-in-hand with religious teaching. The NSCN operates not only in Nagaland itself, but recruits and has bases in neighbouring states. The northern hill areas of

¹⁵ Horam, *Naga Insurgency* (New Delhi: Cosmo, 1988), 76-77.

Manipur especially have been the locations for Naga insurgents' bases and attacks on the security forces. The Meitei insurgency movements, of course, do not share this Christian factor. Religious protest in their case, such as it is, is tied up with a broad cultural renaissance, which began in the 1930s.

In one sense, of course, the question whether this is religious persecution or not is not the central issue. The violence of the region is essentially a matter of human rights, of the violent suppression of ethnic minorities by state power. This oppression is indeed to some extent random, at the hands of undisciplined troops and paramilitaries, often under officers who either turn a blind eye or are themselves co-perpetrators of violence. The fundamental issue, however, is not just one of random violence. It is rather that violence against civilians is underpinned by institutional means.

Structural (Institutional) Violence

The situation is a result, not simply of the inherent sinfulness of individuals and groups, but because the political, legal and social structures permit violence to go unchecked – and indeed actively underpin it. Structural (or institutional) violence may be defined as a situation in which the political, social and legal structures are such as to permit, or encourage, the suppression of ethnic, social or religious minorities under the guise of keeping law and order within the state. There are at least three main aspects of structural violence in the North-East region of India today. These are: first, the massive presence of so-called 'security forces', which prevents the civilian state governments from functioning normally; second, the powerlessness of the law courts in the region to bring the security forces to account for abuses, which is exacerbated by procrastination and subservience to the political authority of the central courts; and, third, the virtual absence of any practical application of human rights agreements. The structure that underlies all these aspects is the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act.¹⁶

¹⁶ AFSPA was approved despite very strong opposition in Parliament (by members from several different regions of India) on the grounds that it violated fundamental human rights, that it gave what were, in effect, emergency powers to lower-ranking security personnel without the formal declaration of an emergency, and that it was specifically applied only in the north-eastern region of India, despite there being equally 'disturbed' areas elsewhere. One of the two Manipuri members of the Lower House, in his speech against the bill, gave examples of how the armed forces had already been guilty of rape and wanton occupation of churches. The equally draconian Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Act (TADA) was approved in 1985 and applied to a large number of states and Union territories. It was extended on four occasions, and a more severe version of the Act is currently being considered. This Act also violates several aspects of basic human rights.

The designation of Nagaland and Manipur, along with other parts of the North East, as 'disturbed areas' has effectively meant that they have been subject to an undeclared state of emergency. This circumscribes not only the liberties of individual citizens, but it also seriously limits the freedom of the state governments. Successive governors of military or police background and, even more, the military brigadiers who have overall control of security policy and personnel, have not infrequently acted against the state governments and at times accused them of inaction and even collusion with the insurgents. In effect, the state governments have had their teeth drawn and can exist only in uneasy subjection to a hostile central controlling presence. The same may be said of the due processes of law, for security personnel are not subject to normal restraints and cannot be charged under civil law for any acts, however heinous, claimed to have been carried out in the course of their duty. This situation has resulted from the application of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act to the North East. The origins of this Act go back to 1942: it was originally intended to enable the British to take action against internal subversion during World War II, and it applied throughout India. Like a number of other repressive colonial enactments, it was later used by an independent India to repress what it saw as dissent within its own borders, specifically in the North-East region. In 1958, it was declared to apply to those areas designated as 'disturbed' in all the present seven states of the North East, and at that time the Naga Hills and the Ukhrul District of Manipur were so designated. In 1970, 1975 and 1978, the designation 'disturbed areas' was progressively extended over other divisions of Manipur, and in September 1980 the whole state was declared a 'disturbed area'. The Act has remained in force throughout the states up to the present time. The 1958 Act (amended in 1972) goes much further than the 1942 British legislation. Crucially, it replaced the term 'emergency' with 'disturbed areas'. Originally, the status of 'disturbed area' could be declared only by the particular state government concerned, but in 1972 this power was given to the central government. As important, however, was the fact that, whereas the 1942 Act gave special powers under the Act only to those with the military rank of captain and above, the 1972 amendment extended this to 'any commissioned officer, warrant officer, non-commissioned officer, or any of equivalent rank' (i.e. any soldier except the lowest private). These powers are in effect powers over life and death. They include the right 'to fire upon or otherwise use force, even to the causing of death, on any person who is acting in contravention of any law'; to arrest without warrant anyone suspected of being about to commit an offence; to enter, search and destroy any premises suspected of being used for storing arms; and in each case, the soldier 'may use for that purpose force as may be necessary' (AFSPA 1972, Section 4). As we have seen, 'no prosecution, suit or other legal proceeding shall be instituted, except with the previous sanction of central government against any person in respect of anything done or purported to

be done in exercise of the powers conferred by this act' (AFSPA 1972, Section 6).

Human rights organizations have been powerless to curtail these draconian powers. In 1980, the Human Rights Forum (Manipur) was formed in Delhi and submitted to the Supreme Court (under Public Interest Litigation Process) a petition challenging the legality of AFSPA. Two years later, the Naga People's Movement for Human Rights submitted a similar petition. As is common in India, these disappeared down legal black holes, and the latter was not dealt with until November 1997. The Supreme Court ruling upheld the Act as constitutional and broadly followed the government line that the Act did not grant to the military any powers that were excessive, though it did underline the responsibilities of the security forces (especially in surrendering any suspect to the civil police within twenty-four hours), and issued a series of 'do's' and 'don'ts'. Such guidelines have little force and are usually ignored by the security personnel. The ruling failed to address the crucial issue, that what is essentially emergency legislation intended for times of war (and indeed applied throughout India during the wars with China and Pakistan) has been applied selectively to the North-East region for decades.

Christian Responses

A context of structural violence is, in Gustavo Gutiérrez's phrase, a sinful situation. As such, it demands a theological response. This response will, of course, be partially shaped by the fact that a substantial number of those who suffer under this situation are themselves Christians, and there are indications that, at the very least in some incidents, the security authorities show contempt for churches and Christian spokespersons. However, Christians do not have a monopoly of suffering and, as we have seen, the abuses are equally directed towards those, like the majority of Meiteis, who are not Christian. Overall, religious affiliation is only one factor; a much greater one is the contempt that is felt for the Mongoloid North East as a whole. The violence is therefore fundamentally ethnic or racial. But whatever the complexities of the situation, any theological response has to speak for all oppressed communities, not just the Christian ones.

While Christians as a whole might be agreed about the nature of a sinful situation, they are rarely in agreement as to what to do about it. Sadly, theological discussion in the North East has been constrained almost to the point of non-existence, and structural violence has never been clearly on the theological agenda. One might characterize the widespread attitude as retreat into pietism and a concern with a non-political cultural theology. The only substantial tribal theology to appear from the North East (and that, one has to say, fairly unoriginal) scarcely mentions the issue of

oppression.¹⁷ Even the book edited by S.K. Chatterji of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society (CISRS), which has been involved in political issues since its inception, contains only a few lines of pious hope for political education.¹⁸ There are no doubt reasons for this. Tribal theology in the North East is very undeveloped, and much of its thinking is derivative of the North American evangelical Baptist tradition.¹⁹ Theological criticism of the government and security forces may also increase the perception of the church as anti-Indian. However, the nettle will have to be grasped sooner rather than later if the church is to have any relevance. A retreat into pietism and a purely cultural theology, coupled with a tacit acceptance of the political status quo, will not do much to address a situation of structural violence that has now operated for half a century.

Those who followed the South African theological debate on the violations of basic human rights resulting from apartheid will recall that the essence of the argument of the Kairos Document was that, when a government puts in place unjust structures by legislation, backed by the law courts and the security forces, which violate basic human rights, it forfeits its legitimacy.²⁰ For basic human rights to life also have a theological underpinning, derived from the Christian doctrines of creation and redemption. In such circumstances, Christians have the right, even the duty, to resist the illegitimate structures of government. In the South African situation, the illegitimacy of government clearly applied to the whole state. In North-East India, the position is somewhat different, for the Indian constitution does in fact grant basic rights to all the population. It could then be argued that what is at stake here is not the illegitimacy of government as a whole, but of that specific legislation (i.e. AFSPA) which has created structural violence in the states of the North East.

There are, of course, those who would argue that the inclusion into India of both Nagaland (which was only loosely administered by the British) and Manipur (which was never fully administered by them) was a case of neo-colonial annexation. This position, which seems to me to be quite correct

¹⁷ Takatemjen, *Studies on Theology and Naga Culture* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998): only at the end of the book on page 140 does he suggest the political situation is the place to start.

¹⁸ S.K. Chatterji (ed), *Society and Culture in North East India* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1996).

¹⁹ However, evangelicals, even those at the more conservative end of the spectrum, are elsewhere taking a substantial role in seeking to analyze and grapple with political issues, and there is certainly nothing inherent in evangelicalism that makes it any less able than other theological stances to speak prophetically about political issues.

²⁰ *Challenge to the Church: A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa*, 5th edition (Braamfontein and London: Kairos Theologians, CIIR, BCC, 1986), known as the Kairos Document.

from a historical perspective, was the original rationale for the insurgency movements, most of which still seek complete independence. Against this must be weighed the question of whether it is not too late to turn the clock back to the pre-1947 situation, and also the practical issue of whether such an agenda is likely to succeed. While it seems to me there may be some theological justification for regarding such an armed struggle as a 'just war', there is no realistic possibility of India letting the smaller states go without appalling bloodshed (unless, of course, the Indian Union as a whole breaks up, as some more radical political scientists would argue). The most that can be expected is greater autonomy (as happened after a bloody and prolonged insurgency in Mizoram, also mainly Christian). The original vision of the NSCN of an independent Christian state of Nagaland (which, according to some, should be expanded by incorporating much of Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh where there are substantial Naga populations) certainly will not do. Despite some gains, the Naga insurgency movements have, by their actions, forfeited much of the claim they had to be regarded as Christian protest movements.

If, then, the options of an apolitical quiescence and of armed revolution are difficult to defend on the theological grounds, what is there left? Three other approaches have been tried: those of peace initiatives, of legal constitutional challenge, and of civil disobedience.

Peace initiatives go back to the very earliest period after 1947. It was Naga Baptist ministers who urged the Indian government to set up a Peace Mission in the 1960s. They initiated another Peace Council in 1974, and have from time to time made other individual and collective attempts to broker a peace. None of these have succeeded, partly because of the church's inability to carry the more extreme radicals with them, partly because some Delhi-based politicians have accused Christian leaders of being secessionist. It has been a bitter tightrope for church leaders to walk.

Legal Challenges and Civil Right Movements

Legal challenges to structural violence have been mounted with great regularity, mainly by human rights organizations (which, of course, often include Christians), but also from time to time by church bodies. We have already alluded to the challenges to the legality of AFSPA in the Delhi High Court, but cases against the security forces have also been brought for specific incidents. The biggest problem, indeed the insuperable problem, here is that AFSPA specifically prevents any case being brought against any member of the forces while in pursuance of his duties unless this is approved by the central government. Since permission from the central government has never been granted, this in effect means that the security forces are above the civil law. Technically, therefore, any charges against the security forces, whether of murder, abduction, rape or other forms of violence, can only be tried by court martial, to which civil lawyers cannot

easily gain access. This seldom happens even when evidence is overwhelming. In the rare cases when it does occur, no report is made public. The opportunities for redress against the armed forces are virtually non-existent. The most the state governments can do is to order an inquiry. This they have frequently done, though more often than not such inquiries run into the sand or the findings are not made public. In cases of detentions and disappearances, courts have been asked to order a habeas corpus. This has sometimes produced results, though more often than not the security forces simply claim the detainee was released from their custody. In the many cases where the victims are later discovered murdered, responsibility is denied. Claims for compensation do sometimes succeed in the courts. After the Oinam atrocities, for example, the Naga People's Movement for Human Rights filed petitions against the Assam Rifles in the High Court in Guwahati, and the court directed that detainees should be released and that there should be reparations. Shortly thereafter the Manipur Baptist Convention's Women's Union filed on behalf of women who had been sexually assaulted and subjected to forced labour. Sometimes Christian women have appealed directly to the source of power, as when the Kohima Women's Baptist Assembly wrote to Mrs Gandhi protesting against the rape of Naga girls by the 1st Maratha Battalion – an abuse that actually took place in a church. Other cases of a similar nature have been filed in state and High Courts. Compensation, when granted, is usually small, intimidation of witnesses is routine and often brutal, and heavy military presence in uniform at hearings is a further way to silence witnesses. It is to the credit of lawyers and civilians (many of them with little education) that such cases are sometimes won. By and large, the legal option runs up against the fact that AFSPA effectively puts the security forces outside the law, however heinous their actions might be.

It is this perceived exclusion of civilian victims from recourse to the law where the security forces are concerned that more than anything else has led to widespread alienation from things 'Indian' – for, rightly or wrongly, the security forces are identified with the central government. Thus, the spiral of violence is given another turn.

AFSPA and Human-Rights Legislation

Civil rights groups protest at great risk to their safety. In Manipur, these are mainly Meitei (therefore not predominantly Christian). Foremost among them have been the All Manipur Students' Union, Civilians Against Atrocities and, most effective of all, the *Meira Paibi*. All these groups have been subjected to the banning of peaceful demonstrations, beatings and detentions, and occasional loss of life. It must be emphasized that there are movements elsewhere in India, especially in Delhi, that have taken up the need to restore human rights in the North East.

India signed up to the UN agreement on Human Rights in 1991, and three years later stationed a Manipuri human rights representative in Imphal. However, his remit is entirely civil, since AFSPA explicitly excludes all security personnel from charges of human rights violations. India also signed the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (adopted by the 1993 Vienna World Conference on Human Rights). This committed signatories to ‘abrogate legislation leading to impunity for those responsible for grave violations of human rights ... and to prosecute such violations, thereby providing a firm basis for the rule of law’. When AFSPA has been subjected to scrutiny and severe criticism by UN committees on human rights, India has consistently claimed that AFSPA does not violate basic rights and that it is necessary for the peace of the country as a whole.

However, AFSPA does quite blatantly violate international conventions, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on Economic and Cultural Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention Against Torture, the UN Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials, the UN Body of Principles for Protection of All Persons Under Any Form of Detention, and the UN Principles on Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extra-legal and Summary Executions. Security forces have also frequently violated sections of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).²¹ It has also been pointed out that AFSPA violates sections of the Indian constitution, especially Articles 21 (on the right to life) and 22 (protection against arrest), as well as sections of the Indian Criminal Procedure Code.

A Theological Challenge

Human rights are a theological issue. As Jürgen Moltmann points out, after World War II, it has been recognized that the way a country treats its people is not a matter only for that country itself but for all.²² The excuse of ‘not interfering in internal affairs’ is no longer a valid defence. The situation today in North-East India is sadly all too common in today’s world despite the plethora of human rights agreements. This paper may not have looked very different if it had dealt with Myanmar, Sudan, or a dozen other countries where ethnic and religious human rights are being daily violated – except for the very important fact that India claims to be a democracy and has had a long tradition of protest against oppression.

Christians in North-East India have largely been left on their own in dealing with the structural violence of their region. I would suggest that this

²¹ See my discussion of AFSPA in *Wounded Land*, 146-60. The UN International Human Rights Committee (e.g. CCPR/C/79/Add.81 4th August 1997) has levelled severe criticisms at India because of AFSPA, and has repeatedly called for the security forces to be subject to civil law in cases of abuse of civilians.

²² Jürgen Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society* (London: SCM, 1999), 119.

challenge now needs to be taken up at the national level – that is, within India, and also at the wider ecumenical level.

During the 1980s, a bombshell was dropped upon the playground of the Indian theologians. The Sanskritic tradition of doing Christian theology in India, which indeed had had a long and remarkable history and had occupied some brilliant minds, found itself challenged to the point of being dismissed as irrelevant by the irruption of Dalit theology. The Sanskritic theological tradition actually poses very little threat to the underlying Hindu culture of India: it uses Hindu concepts, largely obeys Hindu philosophical categories, and is eager for dialogue. Its disadvantage is that it is elitist and largely irrelevant to the majority of Christians, around 70% of whom do not belong to the upper castes. Dalit theology sharply rejected the Sanskritic approach. In the political power game, Dalits also had been, largely against their will, incorporated into the Hindu system as a kind of fifth caste (hence were called by the Indian constitution ‘scheduled castes’). Political and religious leaders, (including Gandhi) argued strongly for keeping them within the overall socio-religious categories of Hinduism. Significantly, the Indian constitution makes a similar implicit assumption about the tribals by calling them ‘scheduled tribes’, and the fluidity between scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in some Indian states is evident from census data. However, the tribal peoples of the North East are different.²³ They have never been hinduized and have always been quite distinct from Hindu societies. Tribal theology can no more be absorbed by the Sanskritic ‘mainstream’ of Indian theology than tribals themselves can be absorbed into the hinduized cultural mainstream. Nor, despite the common lot of oppression, can tribal theology be subsumed under Dalit theology.²⁴ A second radical shift in theological thinking in India is demanded, to recognize, and indeed to celebrate, the fact that a coherent and valid tribal theology will be manifestly different from both the Sanskritic and the Dalit traditions. But it must build on the long tradition that both have of political action – from those who, like Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya at the beginning of the century, became involved in the Independence struggle, through to the Gandhian Christians, the CISRS, and now the Dalits. My own feeling, however, is that African theology, which is successfully beginning to marry the cultural with the political agenda, is a rather better mentor (though till now totally neglected) for tribal Christians than anything that has yet emerged from the sub-continent itself.

²³ This fact is recognized by Albert Minz, ‘Dalits and Tribals: A Search for Solidarity’, in V. Devasahayam (ed), *Frontiers of Dalit Theology* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997), 130-58.

²⁴ As some tribals in the Indian heartland seem to be in danger of doing: see e.g. Nirmal Minz, ‘Dalit-Tribal: A Search for a Common Ideology’, in James Massey (ed), *Indigenous People: Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1994), 134-42; also James Massey, *Minorities in a Democracy: The Indian Experience* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1999).

In the 1960s, M.M. Thomas (who towards the end of his life became governor of Nagaland) edited a book entitled *Tribal Awakening*.²⁵ Since then there has been relatively little published evidence that this agenda has been taken seriously as far as the North East is concerned, or that the debate between Christians in this region and the heartland of India has progressed very far – and this despite the large numbers of well-trained tribal Christian leaders. One has to ask whether the church in India – which shared the mainstream prejudice against Dalits – also shares the mainstream prejudice against the Mongoloid peoples of its North East.

But there is also a wider ecumenical challenge. It seems to me that there is little active involvement by the churches elsewhere or by the World Council of Churches in bringing attention to structural violence against Christian minorities, not only in North-East India but also in Myanmar, where a similar situation obtains.²⁶ Publicizing abuses is too often left to journalists and to human rights organizations, whose motives may be mixed, and who in any case hardly get direct access to the states of North-East India. The churches both locally and internationally have the greater responsibility.

The Christian faith is one of mutual sharing ('If one member suffers, all suffer with it' – 1 Cor. 12:26). Moreover, the church cannot any longer, after the Holocaust and the repeated cases of genocide in Asia and Africa since then, avoid its obligation to be, in Bonhoeffer's phrase, a 'church for others'. Structural violence is not just a political issue, it is not even just a human rights issue: it is primarily a theological issue, in that it represents the sinful mutilation of the image of God in which human beings are created.

²⁵ M.M. Thomas and R.W. Taylor (eds), *Tribal Awakening* (Bangalore: CISRS, 1965).

²⁶ I am reliably informed that, a few years ago when a delegation of tribal Christians approached one of the directors of the WCC (who was himself an Indian) about the problems of the north-eastern region, his response was dismissive.

SECTION EIGHT

**MISSION AND UNITY –
ECCLESIOLOGY
AND MISSION**

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THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES FOR THE UNITY OF CHURCHES IN MANIPUR

L.H. Nimreila Siang

Considering the socio-religious plurality of society in Manipur, this paper briefly discusses, first, the present socio-political context in the state; second, it gives an account of Christian mission so as to see how far churches in Manipur, especially those with the Manipur Baptist Convention (MBC), are involved in mission; and finally, it deals with some of the theological bases for the unity of the churches.

The Socio-Political Context

To consider first the context of any given community or society in mission studies or works is of prime importance. Manipur is one of the states in the Indian Union. The people consist of the Meiteis and the Pangal who live in the valley, and the Kukis and Nagas who live mostly in the hills. There are several tribes in these hill areas of Manipur. They are called 'scheduled tribes' and number about four dozen. The hill tribes are broadly classified into two groups known as the Nagas and the Kuki-Chins. The Naga tribes consists of the Anal, Chiru, Chothe, Kharam, Koireng, Lamkang, Maram, Mao, Maring, Monsang, Moyon, Poumai, Puimei, Purum, Thangal, Tangkhul, Zeliangrong (Zemei, Liangmei, and Rongmei). The Kuki-Chin tribes in Manipur are the Baite, Gangte, Hmar, Mizo, Paite, Simte, Thadou, Vaiphei, and Zou. Each tribe has its distinct culture, tradition and language. In the Tangkhul Naga tribe, each village has a distinct language which is not common and yet not totally alien to the other villages. Besides the Meiteis, Nagas and Kuki-Chins, many other groups of people like the Nepalis, Bengalis, Biharis, Punjabis, who came as business persons, have also settled in the state.¹ Although Manipur is one of the smallest states in India, it is a mixture of many groups of peoples, religions, cultures and identities. The total population of Manipur according to the provisional Census of 2011 is 2¾ million.²

This diversity comes with its complexities and challenges. The division of geographical settlement, such as those of the valley people and those of

¹ Elungkiebe Zeliang, *A History of the Manipur Baptist Convention* (Imphal: Manipur Baptist Convention, 2005), 13.

² www.manipur.org/news/2011 (accessed 21st September 2011).

the hill tribes, is one of the main causes of discrimination and disunity among the people of Manipur.

In the recent past, Manipur has witnessed several ethnic conflicts such as the Kuki-Naga conflict of the 1990 and the communal riots between the Meiteis and the Pangals. This has resulted in the displacement of people, economic hardship and a deepening distrust among the communities.

The emergence of so many insurgent groups in the state is another serious concern for the people in Manipur. Bomb blasts in the city of Imphal, on the highways and even in private houses, are very common today. In Imphal, people rush home before it gets dark. The situation is further worsened by the enormous power wielded by Indian Government forces through the Armed Forces Special Power Act of 1958.³ While different organizations have been formed to safeguard the rights of people, their protests against human rights violations take the form of strikes and economic blockades, only worsening matters.

Christian Mission in Manipur: An Overview

The early missionaries and the spread of Christianity

William Pettigrew, of the Arthington Aborigines Mission was the first to introduce Christianity in Manipur. He arrived at Imphal in February 1894 and started his work by opening a school. He worked for six months in Imphal but the orthodox Hindus were suspicious of him. He was not allowed to continue his work among the Meities but was asked to work in the hill areas, which were under British administration at the time. William Pettigrew and his wife Alice Graham reached Ukhrul on 27th January 1896 and commenced their work on 1st February 1896. Though he came as a missionary of the Arthington Aborigines Mission, he later joined the American Baptist Mission⁴ and established a new mission station at Ukhrul in 1896. In 1901, twelve students from the mission station school were converted and baptized and the converts founded the Ukhrul Church (the Phungyo Baptist Church). In 1919, a new station was established by G.G. Crozier at Kangpokpi, which became the mission headquarters for the Manipur field. Thus, from Ukhrul and Kangpokpi, Christianity spread to

³ In January 1958, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) was promulgated and subsequently amended as the Armed Forces Power Act 1972. The Act empowers the army to shoot or kill, to search, to arrest, to detain or remove anybody or anything without warrants.

⁴ The Assam Mission Record indicates that the American Baptist Missionary Union took over the Manipur field from the Arthington Mission in February 1896. Karam Manimohan Singh, 'The Early Days of William Pettigrew among the Tangkhuls', in *Rev. William Pettigrew Centenary Celebrations Committee Manipur* (Imphal: Fraternal Green Cross, 1996), 70.

various groups of people in the state. Over a century since Christianity was first introduced in Manipur, there were other missions that came to the state, among them the Baptist Mid-Mission (a breakaway group from the American Baptist Mission), the Seventh Day Adventists and the Roman Catholic Church.⁵ Today, with several denominations and mission agencies active in Church planting in the state, this has become a source of tension among Christians as each denomination or group claims to be the right or genuine one.

Early Christian mission theology

The Christianity brought to the Nagas by the American Baptist Mission was that of the late-nineteenth-century evangelical Christianity. According to Wati Longchar, the basic principle of evangelical theology was that of the transcendence of God from the physical world. Since God is transcendent, there is nothing sacred in the world. The emphasis was on personalism and thus, a human being's salvation became the central theme. He further points out that the other dimension of the missionaries was that of the teaching about heaven and hell. The evangelicals came with a strong emphasis on the second coming of Christ. This made people think that 'this world is not my home', and so encouraged them to separate themselves from the real world and from the people.⁶

Horam points out that Pettigrew started his work among the Tangkhul tribals, assuming that tribals were 'primitive' and 'lost souls,' and therefore should be converted into a higher religion and culture. He adds that the primary attention of the missionaries was conversion and the winning of souls for Christ. Such attitudes have been passed on to their converts.⁷ Thus, after the missionaries left, the local churches, on the initiative of the local pastors and deacons, were actively involved in evangelization. Besides this, there were voluntary Gospel teams in the church who often visited non-Christian families and villages.⁸ This mission-evangelism theology is still dominant in the Tangkhul churches today.

The Concept of Mission

Churches in Manipur give priority to mission. Believing that one of the most important duties for a Christian is to proclaim the good news of God's

⁵ Zeliang, *A History of the Manipur Baptist Convention*, 2, 3.

⁶ L.H. Nimreila, 'A Feminist Theological Response to the Condition of Women in Tangkhul Baptist Church in Manipur' (MTh thesis: Senate of Serampore College, 2006), 33.

⁷ M. Horam, 'William Pettigrew's Contribution to the Reformation of Social Practices of Tribals', in *Rev. William Pettigrew Centenary Celebrations Committee Manipur*, 45.

⁸ Nimreila, 'A Feminist Theological Response', 24.

salvation through Jesus Christ, it is an obligation for everyone to take part in mission one way or another. Following the foreign missionaries' mission strategies even today, mission work is undertaken in two ways: home mission and foreign mission.⁹ Every individual Christian and each church takes very seriously the belief that they are sent by God to do his will. Most also believe that they will be rewarded in heaven according to how many souls they have won for Christ.

From its inception, the Manipur Baptist Convention with its member associations/conventions, has, from its inception, been actively involved in mission work, particularly in evangelism within Manipur. The MBC Mission Conference of 2002, the first of its kind, was held at the MBC Centre Church, Imphal, 10th-13th October 2002 on the theme 'You are My Witnesses', where over 1,000 persons, including 515 delegates from different Baptist churches and associations, attended the conference. The second MBC Mission Conference was held at Nungtek (Karurangmuan), Tamenglong, 28th-30th November 2003 on the theme, 'Go and Bear Fruit'. In 2004, in partnership with the Youth With A Mission (YWAM), the Mission and Evangelism Department of the MBC opened a new mission field in China.¹⁰ Partnering with a non-denominational Christian organization (such as YWAM) is a landmark towards unity in mission, and can be considered one of the outcomes of these mission conferences.

The member-conventions or associations of the MBC are enthusiastically involved in evangelism. To cite few examples, the mission statement of the Kuki Baptist Convention (KBC) reads: 'It exists mainly for mission to fulfil the Great Commission of our Lord Jesus Christ in Mathew 28:19, where he says, "Go then, to all nations and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit."¹¹ Accordingly, the Rev. Demneh Doungel, the present secretary of the Mission and Evangelism department of the KBC reported that:

The evangelists (of KBC) are working with its member churches by organizing salvation camps, crusades, revival programmes, retreats, etc. However, the concern for non-believers gained momentum to reach the unreached. The Department spared no pains and strained every nerve to promote missionary work and organized mission seminars, camps, and set up Mission Committees at varying levels. Currently, KBC is supporting 55 missionaries who are working in different parts of India and abroad such as Nepal, West Bengal, Assam, Uttaranchal, Jharkhand, Manipur and Myanmar. The plan in the near future is to extend the mission field among the Muslims in Manipur and other parts of the state.¹²

⁹ Mathotmi Vasha, 'MBC Mission Activities' (20th September 2011), email to the author (21st September 2011).

¹⁰ Zeliang, *A History of the Manipur Baptist Convention*, 109.

¹¹ Demneh Doungel, 'KBC Mission Activities' (20th September 2011), email to the writer (21st September 2011).

¹² Doungel, 'KBC Mission Activities'.

Another example is the Tangkhul Baptist Churches Association (TBCA) – one of the largest and oldest associations under the MBC. The Rev. Mathotmi, the former secretary of the Mission and Evangelism Department of the TBCA, wrote to the writer that ‘TBCA is taking all possible ways and means to promote mission work. It has mission partnerships with some individuals, organizations, societies and churches (Baptist churches) to sponsor the Meitei Baptist Association’.¹³ At present, the TBCA has its mission field within the state, particularly in the Manipur plain areas and also outside the state in places such as Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, etc.’

These two examples show that the MBC and its member-associations/conventions understand mission primarily in terms of evangelism which is, in all probability perhaps, inherited from Christian missionaries. Churches in Manipur emphasize the pietistic tradition which upholds the idea of preaching and personal transformation. Its main goal of mission is ‘saving souls’ – conversion. The belief, even today, is that the message of the gospel must reach the unreached.

However, quite a few theological scholars, pastors and students have strongly felt that mission should no longer be limited to evangelism alone but should be holistic in its nature, as a reflection of the global paradigm shift of mission concepts. Therefore, in the recent past, churches in Manipur have felt the need to voice together their stand and their concerns in times of political turmoil and crisis in the state.

The first and the foremost Christian organization, the All-Manipur Christian Organization (AMCO), was formed in 1987 as an outcome and a reaction to the Oinam incident.¹⁴ According to the Rev. Prim Vaiphei, the present President of AMCO:

The purpose of AMCO is to maintain the peaceful co-existence of the people in the state and also to maintain peace and harmony among the churches in Manipur. It is an inter-denominational organization headed by a President. AMCO gets involved in various crises such as the Oinam incident, the Mao Gate incident of 2010,¹⁵ and the Naga Student Federation, Nagaland, related

¹³ Vasha, ‘MBC Mission Activities’.

¹⁴ ‘Oinam is a small village inhabited by Poumei Nagas who are mostly Christian. It is in the Senapati District of Manipur, 100 km east of the Imphal-Kohima Highway. It was on the 9th July 1987 that the Assam Rifles posted in Oinam village were attacked by a group of freedom fighters believed to belong to the National Socialist Council of Nagalim. In reaction to this, Oinam village and neighbouring villages were cordoned off by the Assam Rifles. It was one of the most difficult times for the people and the Manipur Government’. A. Wati Longchar, *Tribal Theology: Issue, Method and Perspective* (Jorhat, Assam: TSC, 2000), 21.

¹⁵ When Thuingaleng Muivah, the then Chairman of the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (I-M) planned to visit his home (Somdal, Ukhrul District), on 6th May 2010, the military imposed a curfew and carried out combing operations in which two innocent schoolboys were killed and many other men and women were injured and tortured.

incidents.¹⁶ AMCO also gets involved when there are inter-denominational misunderstandings in the state. AMCO also organizes joint fasting prayer programmes and joint fellowships in the MBC Centre Church, Imphal, and in the Roman Catholic Cathedral, Imphal. Baptists, Roman Catholics, and Seventh Day Adventists co-operate in these joint programmes. However, there is still a strong feeling of denominationalism among the churches. There are instances where the majority church tries to drive away the church members of a minority church from the village.¹⁷

AMCO has always believed in the effectiveness of a united church in Manipur in promoting peace and reconciliation in the fractured and traumatized Manipur society, and can also be regarded as the only ecumenical body in the state. Churches have played important roles in negotiating peace in society. For instance, in the Kuki-Naga conflict (1992-95), the church negotiated with both parties to stop the killings and the burning down of houses. The churches also organized a pulpit exchange service programme so that church members would forget the trauma created by the conflict. Christian organizations/associations such as AMCO, MBC and other individual churches, are deeply concerned for peace in Manipur. But ecclesial unity has yet to be fully realised. The Rev. Prim Vaiphei commented that many churches are not even ready to accept other church members.

Theological Perspectives for Ecclesial Unity

A Christo-centric theology for mission work

One of the best theological bases for Christian unity is expressed in the letter of Paul to the Ephesians (2:13-14, 21): 'But now in Jesus Christ, you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall that is the hostility between us... in him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord.' The ontological ground for Christian unity is found on the one who was crucified for us and who provides our salvation. The apostle Paul warns against division in the church and urges the churches to be united in Christ. In Galatians 3:27-28, Paul declares that in Christ all are one, with no distinction of race, social status or sex.

The New Testament points out the nature of unity as well as the nature of unity in Christ. It is in Jesus Christ that divided humans are reconciled into one body by the Cross. They have their new life in Jesus Christ as they

¹⁶ The Naga Student Federation, Nagaland, tried to burn all the vehicles bearing Manipur licence plates in Nagaland some years ago.

¹⁷ Telephone interview with the Rev. Prim Vaiphei, President of AMCO, Imphal, 26th September 2011.

are all born of the one spirit (John 3:5; Eph. 4:4). Christian unity is found first, primarily and exclusively in Jesus Christ. Christian unity based on the person and work of Jesus Christ is important and appropriate. Christian unity does not allow division but does not exclude variety as well. Unity grounded in Christ leaves scope for diversity of action and function. The church's mission and its other activities should lead to competition among the different denominations, but with the same spirit of mind, all should participate in God's mission on earth. It is time for all the churches, irrespective of their denominations, to look to Jesus Christ and be ready to submit to his Spirit's direction. Karl Barth, in his *Church Dogmatics*, points out that 'the essence of the Church is Jesus Christ as its foundation, its end and content'.¹⁸

The prayer of Jesus found in John 17 indicates this width and depth of the Christ-oriented vision of unity. This prayer is not an ordinary prayer, but a prayer filled with emotions and dreams in connection with the farewell discourse of Jesus.¹⁹ Our brief study has pointed out a strong sense of denominationalism present among churches in Manipur to the extent that, even today, there are instances where a majority church tries to drive away the church members of a minority church from the village, and where many churches find it difficult to accept or recognize members from other denominations.

Yet, despite such instances and attitudes, there have been positive developments, such as the Mission and Evangelism Department of the MBC partnering with YWAM to open a new mission field in China, joint fellowships and prayer meetings organized by AMCO to promote ecumenism, and its efforts to resolve misunderstandings and to promote co-operation and harmony among churches in Manipur.

Mission-minded churches in Manipur cannot consider their mission activities in isolation or independent of each other, and must see their way to working with each other in areas of common interest, looking beyond their own denominational or tribal points of view and identities. Not doing so can have only negative implications in the way their missionaries and the gospel message is viewed by those they are working among.

A Christocentric theology for political and social peace

God's mission is to bring reconciliation of the broken relationship between God and humans, between fellow human beings, and with the rest of creation. Today, we need repentance, forgiveness, humility and acceptance of one another despite our past history. The apostle Paul had a difference of

¹⁸ M. Stephen, *Introducing Christian Ethics* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2003), 81.

¹⁹ C.I. David Joy, 'Together on the Way of the Cross: A Biblical Appraisal on the Oikomene', in *Ecumenism: Prospects and Challenges*, Vinod Victor, Leslie Nathaniel, and P. Suryaprakash (eds), (Delhi: ISPCK, 2001), 163.

opinion with his fellow-worker Barnabas that led to ‘such a sharp disagreement that they parted company’ (Acts 15:39). But latter, as we see in references to John Mark in the letters of Paul, there is healing and reconciliation between them.

Unity, and the healing and reconciliation this brings, is a God-given reality, which is vividly seen in the biblical belief of ‘God in three persons’. It is both a gift and a calling. It is not something that is achieved once and for all, but a living, unfolding process, which is an ongoing reality. Unity is experienced only in a ‘fully committed fellowship’.²⁰ In the words of Hans Küng:

The unity of the church is a spiritual entity. It is not chiefly a unity of the members among themselves; it depends finally, not on itself but on the unity of God, which is efficacious through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. It is one and the same God who gathers the scattered from all places and all ages, and makes them into one people of God. It is one and the same Christ who through his word and his Spirit unites all together in the same bond of fellowship. It is one and the same baptism by which all are made members of the same body of Christ, one and the same Lord’s Supper, in which all are united with Christ and with one another. It is one and the same confession of faith in the Lord Jesus, the same hope of blessedness, the same love, which is one and therefore should be one.²¹

Hardly anybody will deny that the unity of the church is a given reality. The church (and hence its unity) has its foundation in the triune God who through the mission of the incarnate Logos and the Holy Spirit enables humans to participate in his life and so become a new creation. Men and women who, in the process of justification and sanctification participate in God, become and are a *koinonia*.²²

Manipur today is a state experiencing unprecedented levels of violence because of conflict between government forces and armed groups and between these armed groups themselves. Added to this are the feelings of suspicion and hostility among different ethnic groups, often resulting in armed conflicts. Caught in the cross-fire are innocent civilians who are often wounded or brutally tortured or killed. As a result, daily life in the region, and access to the essentials of life such as education and healthcare has become difficult and disrupted.

There is the urgent need for the church in Manipur to respond to this political, social and economic mess. But unless there is ecumenical unity, a

²⁰ G. Dyvasirvadam, ‘The Church’s Witness for Unity: Models for the Present and the Future’, in *Ecumenism: Prospects and Challenges*, 357.

²¹ Kevin Roy, *Baptism, Reconciliation and Unity* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1997), 66.

²² Urs Von Arx, ‘Identity, Plurality, Unity – What’s the Right Blend? Some Reflections from an Old Catholic Perspective’, in *The Unity We Have & The Unity We Seek*, Jeremy Morris and Nicholas Sagovsky (eds), (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 6.

strong sense of a common Christian identity that transcends denominational and ethnic barriers, the church will not be able to make the stand that communities in the state expect of it.

The formation of AMCO in 1987 as a response to the Oinam incident is a step in the right direction. But this interdenominational organization can only be a strong contributor to peace-building if the churches supporting it acknowledge and put into practice what it means to be reconciled and united among themselves in a biblical and theological manner. A Christ-centred theology that promotes social and political peace and reconciliation demands that churches examine themselves honestly. As long as Christian communities and churches in Manipur are divided along denominational and tribal lines, peace – political, social or economic – will be difficult.

Conclusion

The unity of believers is one of the main biblical thrusts. Since Jesus' public ministry and throughout the history of Christianity, unity among believers was taken seriously. Today's context demands and seeks church unity more ever than before. Manipur is a mixture of several ethnic and religious groups; denominationalism among Christians is a present fact; political and economic poverty is rampant, and insurgency is one of the immediate results of this; local newspapers are filled with stories of killings, extortion, moral degradation, etc. In such a context, churches cannot simply hold on to their traditional and inherited understanding of mission, limited to evangelism alone. The context demands that churches understand mission in a wider perspective, as was pointed out at the Edinburgh 2010 conference, and join hands together for the realization of the Kingdom of God.

MISSION AND UNITY IN THE CONTEXT OF MIZORAM

H. Lalrinthanga

Introduction

'Mission and unity' was one of the eight commissions selected as part of the preparations for Edinburgh 2010. This mandate of this commission was to turn afresh to the mission imperative of unity by asking what it means for the churches to seek unity today.¹ From the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, three missionary societies worked among the Mizos. The primary concern of these missions in Mizoram was not to establish a denominational church, but to establish the church of the Mizo people.² These missions were very successful in converting the local people to Christianity. After World War II, new missionary societies from different denominations entered Mizoram. When the Golden Jubilee of the coming of Christianity in Mizoram was celebrated in 1954, Mizoram was still regarded more as 'Christendom' because of the presence of only a few denominations.³ By the time the Gospel Centenary was celebrated in 1994, there were more than eighty denominations and splinter groups in the state.⁴ With the presence of different missionary societies from many denominations, the Mizo church 'has over a period of time led to ecclesiastical conflicts, enmity and sheep stealing'.⁵ With the formation of the Global Christian Forum as well as the General Council of Edinburgh 2010, there is a widespread consensus that to think mission is to think church unity in world Christianity today.⁶ This

¹ Kenneth R. Ross, *Edinburgh 2010 Springboard for Mission* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey International University Press, 2010), 47.

² B. Thangchina, 'Christian Unity in Mizoram', in *Towards A Tribal Theology: The Mizo Perspective*, K. Thanzaupa (ed), (Mizoram: Mizo Theological Conference, 1989), 112.

³ Lalhuanliana, 'Rawngbawlnaa Inpumkhatna', in *Kum Sangbi Thara Mizo Kristianna Bihchianna*, Vanlalchhuanawma (ed), (Aizawl: Mizo Theological Association, 2003), 3.

⁴ *Mizoram Gospel Centenary Bulletin* (Aizawl: Gospel Centenary Committee, 1994), 30-31.

⁵ O.L. Snaitang, 'Ecumenism and Hill People's Culture in North East India', in *National Council of Churches Review* CXVII/9 (October, 1997), 598.

⁶ Kenneth R. Ross, *Edinburgh 2010 New Directions for Church in Mission* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey International University Press, 2010), 81-82. Hereafter cited as Ross, *Edinburgh 2010*.

presentation will attempt to deal with some of the important issues for the promotion of unity among the churches in Mizoram.

A Brief Historical Background

The earliest records of Christian contact with the Mizo people can be traced back to the visit made by the Rev. William Williams, the Welsh Presbyterian missionary working at Shella in the Khasi Hills in 1871. The Arthington Mission⁷ established its mission field in the Lushai Hills in 1894. The Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Mission (later known as the Welsh Presbyterian Mission) and the Baptist Missionary Society entered the area in the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth. With the passage of time, other Christian missions from different denominations and Christian groups such as the Seventh Day Adventists, the Pentecostal Church, the Salvation Army and other indigenous churches also made their way into Mizoram during the twentieth century.

Although some missionary societies had expressed their concern regarding unity among the churches, a growing denominational consciousness led to the division of Christians into various denominational churches and indigenous or sectarian groups in Mizoram. Such a situation made some leaders of the church realize the need for developing unity among the different denominations. An effort at unity and co-operation was therefore felt from the middle of the twentieth century. This may be regarded as the result of the ongoing attempt for unity after the World Missionary Conference held at Edinburgh in 1910. At the conference, however, deeper concerns emerged about the relationship between the unity of the church and the integrity of mission. These concerns have been a major focus of discussion during the twentieth century.⁸

In Mizoram, church leaders conferences were often held from 1946 up to 1984, 'to explore the possibilities of having one united Lushai Church'.⁹ Despite those meetings and efforts, the relationship among the churches seems to have got worse. Such a situation was eventually marked by the breach comity between the Presbyterian Church and the Baptist Church in Mizoram which also affected their relationship with other churches. As a

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⁷ The founder of the Arthington Mission, Robert Arthington (1823-1900), was a wealthy person from Leeds, England. He believed in the urgent priority of pioneer evangelism, and much of his giving was conditioned upon the willingness of missionary societies to embark on new projects in virgin territory. The Arthington Aborigines Mission, established in 1889, pioneered mission work in Mizoram and laid the foundations for the extraordinary success of the Welsh Presbyterian Church and Baptist Missionary Society in this part of North-East India.

⁸ Ross, *Edinburgh 2010*, 79.

⁹ C.L. Hminga, *The Life and Witness of the Churches in Mizoram* (Serkawn: Literature Committee Baptist Church of Mizoram, 1987), 194. Hereafter cited as Hminga, *Churches in Mizoram*.

result, it can be presumed that denominational conflicts have been increasing at an alarming speed, and this dimension poses a serious challenge to the churches in this area. A critical study of this issue needs to be given priority and be taken seriously. An attempt has been made in this paper to examine important aspects of the ecumenical movement – the Christianity identity, mutual recognition of churches and partnership in mission. It is hoped that this will be helpful for the growth and development of unity among the churches in Mizoram.

Rediscovering a Common Christian Identity

Historically, the churches in Mizoram have had certain ecclesiastical identities despite denominational differences. The Mizo church needs to rediscover this Christian identity. This is an appropriate and relevant ecumenical agenda for the churches in Mizoram for the 21st century. As stated earlier, all pioneer missions, such as the Arthington Mission, the Welsh Mission, the Baptist Mission and the Laker Mission, all came from the same Protestant background. All the missionary societies who came to Mizoram were the products of the evangelical awakening in Wales and England in the nineteenth century. Therefore, it can be said that despite denominational differences, the churches in Mizoram have a common ecclesiastical identity. This ecclesiastical identity has been maintained from the very beginning of Christianity in Mizoram. Therefore, in spite of different denominational structures, the churches in Mizoram must attempt to rediscover their common Christian identity. Here, it is appropriate to quote Emilio Castro's view in search of a Christian common identity:

Our work should be the effort to discover the one tradition in our different church traditions. In God's perspective, there is only one Church, and the Holy Spirit has granted gifts to that Church. What we can see today are different expressions of that Church, but these different expressions are not yet ready to recognize all the others as being full churches. But we are not trying to build a unity that will produce something that did not exist before. Rather, we are trying to discover afresh the common tradition that is the foundation stone of all our churches.¹⁰

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Mutual Recognition of Churches

Historians agree on the mutual understanding and co-operation of the different missionaries as an important factor in the growth of the church in Mizoram in the early period of Christianity in the region. There had been mutual understanding and co-operation between the two mainline churches from the time they were established. Therefore, Mizo Christians, 'both North and South, realize that they are all one in Jesus Christ'¹¹ in the first

¹⁰ Emilio Castro, *A Passion for Unity* (Geneva: WCC, 1992), 17.

¹¹ Hminga, *Churches in Mizoram*, 343.

half of the twentieth century. This cordial relationship ended when the geographical boundary was dissolved by both the Baptist Church and the Presbyterian Church. From this time onwards, the relationship between the two denominations began to deteriorate. In addition, the arrival of other denominations and the existence of splinter groups divided people into different denominations and groups. Hence, the Mizo church 'has over a period of time led to ecclesiastical conflicts, enmity and sheep stealing'.¹² Therefore, the urgent need for the churches will be to rediscover the good relationships and co-operation they shared in the past.

Church Polity

Whenever the churches engage in unity, one of the crucial questions concerns church polity.¹³ Christians of different denominations feel very strongly about their own church polity. Barbara Brown Zikmund points out three systems of church polity.¹⁴

1. Polity may define authority as located predominantly in the clergy. The church is run by priests or ministers who are responsible for its institutional health.
2. Polity may use egalitarian and democratic processes within each local congregation or parish. The church is run by people who elect leaders and vote on important policies.
3. Polity may rely upon representational patterns within a particular community, or in broader assemblies.

In Mizoram, such churches' polities have been apparent from the time Christianity came to the region. The Protestant churches follow the second pattern of polities where the elders, presbyters and the deacons are set apart by the church. The Roman Catholic Church follows the episcopal pattern of polity where bishops take on the responsibility of running the church. Some other churches have their own patterns of polity. The question then arises as to why there are so many church polities in Mizoram. Here it is suggested that the ecumenical agenda should be the mutual recognition of each churches' polities. The World Council of Churches (WCC) has been concentrating on this issue since the New Delhi Assembly in 1961. Discussions on this have been revived in the Faith and Order Commission. The Commission reports of 1978 points out:

¹² O.L. Snaitang, 'Ecumenism and Hill People's Culture in North East India', in *National Christian Council of Churches Review* CXVII/9 (October, 1997), 598.

¹³ Lalmangaiha, 'Towards Fuller Ecumenism', in *Theology and Mission* (Aizawl: Mizo Theological Association, 2002), 11.

¹⁴ Barbara Brown Zikmund, *Discovering the Church* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1983), 75-76. Hereafter cited as Barbara, *Discovering the Church*.

Both the Episcopal and Presbyteral [sic] function of the church must be understood as a sharing in the *diakonia* that is, as costly service, to the community of the church and to the world through the proclamation and actualization of the Gospel.¹⁵

If one knows something about the church's polity of the other, one knows a great deal about that church. A church must recognize other church polities, whether Protestant or Catholic or other. It is thus important that a mutual understanding of church polities should grow among the churches in Mizoram.

Mutual recognition of baptism

The issue of baptism is one that continues to dominate discussions on church relations in Mizoram. The Mizoram Presbyterian Church practises infant baptism while the Baptist Church of Mizoram practises believer's baptism. The United Pentecostal Church does not accept any other church baptism. The UPC advocates the re-baptism of believers. Hence, there is no common practice or agreement on baptism in Mizoram. In such a scenario, is it possible to have one common practice?

The Faith and Order Commission of the WCC has discussed the issue of a mutual understanding on baptism among churches. In this regard, the Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry Document reflects on this:

In the case of history, the practice of baptism has developed into a variety of forms. Some churches baptize infants by parents or guardians who are ready, in and with, the church, to bring up the children in the Christian faith. Other churches practice exclusively the baptism of the believers who are able to make a personal confession of faith. Some of these churches encourage infants or children to be presented and blessed in a service which usually involves thanksgiving for the gift of the child and also the commitment of the mother and father to Christian parenthood.¹⁶

From the time of Christianity, churches have been divided and have split over practical issues. If there is no mutual understanding of practices and traditions, ecumenism among the churches may be absent. Therefore, the churches in Mizoram need to mutually recognize the baptismal practices of each other. Regarding the mutual recognition of the churches' practice of baptism, the Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry Document further reflects that:

Mutual recognition of baptism is acknowledged as an important sign and means of expressing the baptismal unity given in Christ. Wherever possible, mutual recognition should be expressed explicitly by the churches.

¹⁵ Choan-Seng Song (ed), *Growing Together in Unity: texts of the Faith and Order Commission on Conciliar Fellowship* (Geneva: Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches/The Christian Literature Society, 1978), 58.

¹⁶ *The BEM Document: Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No 111 (Geneva: WCC, 1982), 4.

Jesus commanded his followers to ‘Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’.¹⁷ Christian baptism should then be the concern, whether it is infant or believer’s baptism, sprinkling or immersion. The churches in Mizoram, as God’s people, needs to understand and recognize each other’s baptism. We may conclude with the words of J. Jayakiran Sebastian, who writes:

The sacrament of baptism, down the ages, has been a source of bitter controversy and dispute. As the Church in India prepares to enter the new millennium, it is high time that the rich insights, the detailed discussion, the joyful and painful experiences are all harvested, winnowed and sieved, so that a return to the sources, reaching back, can truly be the means of moving forward towards an uncertain, yet challenging, future as a church grasped by the vision of unity, in this multicultural and multi-religious land of ours.¹⁸

Mutual recognition of the eucharist

The ‘Eucharist’ or ‘Lord’s Supper’ is another area where denominational differences are regarded as hindrances to unity. Some churches in Mizoram welcome everyone to participate in the Eucharist while some churches restrict this to its communicant members. Some churches have a common cup while others use individual cups, some come forward and some remain seated. It seems that there is no agreement on the practice of the Eucharist. Barbara Zikmund believes that the ways in which the bread and wine are shared have become a reason for division in the church.¹⁹ This doctrinal difference is the reason why the Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church worldwide and in Mizoram cannot partake of the Eucharist together. This is an area where various denominational traditions need to have a new understanding of one another. Wolfhart Pannenberg summarizes the importance of mutual recognition in the practice of the Eucharist among the churches. In his book, *The Church*, he expresses the importance of a mutual recognition of the Eucharist:

It is necessary to take a deep breath and be patient in the timing process of increased mutual contacts, recognition, and relationships. But if this is possible in any area, then it is possible in the Lord’s Supper, where the One Lord of the one Church is present and binds the participants together as his community, in order that they may experience the goal of his process of the unification of Christians as being already present and active, so that the process in which the churches grow closer to each other will not stagnate.²⁰

¹⁷ Matt. 28:19.

¹⁸ J. Jayakiran Sebastian, ‘Infant versus Believers’ Baptism: Search for Ecumenical Understanding’, in *Ecumenism: Prospects and Challenges*, Vinod Victor, et. al (ed), (Delhi: ISPCK, 2001), 134.

¹⁹ Barbara, *Discovering the Church*, 80.

²⁰ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *The Church*, trans. Keith Crim (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1983), 149.

Mutual acceptance of ministry

In the early period of Christianity in Mizoram, the Welsh missionaries and the Baptist missionaries 'were obviously close to each other in their faith, in their views on the church organization and on the best method for missionary work'.²¹ This mutual co-operation between the two missionary societies had a positive effect on the life of the churches. This close relationship and acceptance of each other was noted by Zairema, a Presbyterian minister, when he says:

A Baptist or Presbyterian migrating to another area automatically became a member of the church in that area and no question arose concerning the change of denomination. A Baptist minister could baptize an infant if so demanded.²²

This acceptance of each other's ministry changed after the dissolution of the geographical boundaries between the two churches. Such a change in the recognition of each other's ministry also affected all the churches in Mizoram. There is no mutual acceptance of ministry among the churches in Mizoram today. The question may thus be raised: If we do not accept the ministry of the other churches, can we seek unity among the churches? Hence, the churches in Mizoram need to rediscover the co-operation and cordial relationships they had experienced in their early history. The Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry Document has proposed several ways to encourage mutual acceptance of ministry among different denominations in the following manner:

The mutual recognition of churches and their ministries implies decisions by the appropriate authorities and a liturgical act from which point unity would be publicly manifest. Several forms of such public acts have been proposed: a mutual laying on of the hands, Eucharistic celebrations, solemn worship without a particular rite of recognition, the reading of a text of union during the course of celebration. No one liturgical form would be absolutely required, but in any case it would be necessary to proclaim the accomplishment of mutual recognition publicly. The common celebration of the Eucharist would certainly be the best place for such acts.²³

This Document clearly acknowledges that there are many forms of ministry and many modes of participation in ministry and priesthood. The churches should accept and recognize that 'if it is true that we all in various ways have a share in ministry and priesthood, it is true that we all lack

²¹ J. Meirion Lloyd, *History of the Church in Mizoram: Harvest in the Hills* (Aizawl: Synod Publication Board, 1991), 77. Hereafter cited as Lloyd, *History of the Church*.

²² Zairema, *God's Miracle in Mizoram* (Aizawl: Synod Publication and Bookroom, 1978), 8.

²³ *The BEM Document*, 55.

something of its fullness'.²⁴ Therefore, there is a need for a visible understanding and recognition of each other's ministry.

Partnership in Mission

Mizo Christians have been enthusiastic about mission work from the early period of Christianity in Mizoram. Most of the churches have been actively involved in mission work in India and abroad. A number of independent non-denominational and interdenominational mission agencies continue to make significant contributions in mission. Today, there are two or three missionary agencies working in the same area. This has led to denominational rivalry, sheep stealing – which has occurred in many mission fields around the world.²⁵ There is, therefore, an urgent need for partnership in mission among the churches in Mizoram in the 21st century. In order to strengthen the overall mission of the church, there must be partnership among the sending churches and other missionary agencies. The report of the fifth International Consultation of the United and Uniting Churches has expressed this need for partnership in mission stating that the churches must make the effort to work together in mission while at the same time exploring new possibilities for co-operative mission by recognizing the work of other churches.²⁶

Churches also cannot afford to ignore other missionary agencies. S.D. Ponraj notes,

The churches cannot ignore these specialized agencies in the task of evangelism and church planting. Any negative criticism and any effort to avoid each other would greatly harm the cause of evangelism in India. Co-operation within the evangelistic and missionary organization is very important. Non-cooperation is the greatest hindrance for evangelization of India. And therefore, non-cooperation in terms of negative competition and unnecessary duplication should be carefully avoided.²⁷

Churches should learn to carry out mission work together. Some missiologists believe that the denominational constitutions of churches often hinder partnership and co-operation in mission. Christian unity and

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²⁴ John Macquarrie, *Christian Unity and Christian Diversity* (London: SCM, 1975), 65.

²⁵ Lloyd, *History of the Church*, 70.

²⁶ Thomas F. Best (Ed.), *Living Today Towards Visible Unity: The fifth International Consultation of the United and Uniting Churches* (Geneva: WCC, 1988), 11.

²⁷ S.D. Ponraj, 'Evangelization and Church Planting', in *The Church in India: Its Mission Tomorrow*, F. Hrangkhuma and Sebastian C.H. Kim (eds), (Delhi: CMS/ISPCK, 1999), 129.

co-operation is a must wherever possible.²⁸ We must ponder whether churches from different denominations can have any partnership in mission? Additionally, is it possible to have one centralized mission board to control all missionary agencies?

Conclusion

As Christianity plays an important role in Mizoram, not only in the socio-cultural, but also in the wider economic and political, life of the state, the ecumenical movement will therefore be highly relevant in promoting peace and harmony in this area. As the majority of the population of Mizoram is Christian, it is the responsibility of the church to promote peace and unity among the people.

Church unity has often been discussed among the churches of Mizoram since 1949. The meeting of church leaders used to end without any solution for unity. Discussion of unity has been revived among the three missionary churches such as the Mizoram Presbyterian Church, the Baptist Church of Mizoram and the Evangelical Church of Mizoram since 2003. Many consultations, discussions and meetings have taken place. Despite these meetings and all these efforts, relationships between the churches seems to have grown rather worse. For example, when the Mizoram Peoples Forum (MPF) was established in 2006, the churches still differ about how and how far it should interfere in socio-political life. When for various reasons, the Baptist Church of Mizoram withdrew itself from the MNF, there was disunity within the churches. This shows that there was no unanimous Mizo Christian voice on this issue. As a result, the churches could not stand together to fight social problems. At this juncture, a critical study of this issue has to be given a special priority and be taken seriously by all the churches in Mizoram.

This paper has posed some of the important issues with regard to unity among the churches in Mizoram. A study of common Christian identity and church polity, mutual recognition of churches' practice regarding Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, and partnership in mission, may help us to understand the task for the church in this region in the 21st century. Unity may be promoted if the churches take seriously the problem which we face today and work towards finding a solution.

²⁸ F. Hrangkhuma, 'Local Church Involvement in Mission and Evangelism', in *Doing Mission in Context*, Sunand Sumithar and F. Hrangkhuma (eds), (Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 1995), 48.

CHRISTIAN UNITY IN NORTH-EAST INDIA: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Bendangtemjen

Introduction

Modern ecumenical discourses today have been significantly impacted by the World Missionary Conference of 1910. The most prominent motive of this conference was Christian unity and evangelism. This missionary conference became an influential instrument in shaping the idea of the apostolic church. The desire for Christian unity is a divine summons to Christians to rediscover their visible unity, which they had lost in the course of history and thus to realize the prayer of our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, that 'they all may be one'. Subsequently, various Christian organizations and churches developed different models of church unity, and the spirit of Christian unity began to spread across the globe, even reaching North-East India. In the churches of the North East Christian unity was attempted among the North-East Indian churches but it is considered a failed church union movement. Therefore, this paper attempts a brief reflection on the history of the church union movement in North-East India and looks at the issues and challenges towards Christian unity faced by local churches in the region.

Christian Unity in North-East India

Historically, the process of church union discussions in North-East India began in the later part of 1926.¹ When the Bengal Christian Council (BCC) was formed, Protestant Christian missions from North-East India were invited to become its members. Gradually, members from the region found it difficult to be part of the BCC, because of complexities such as geographical and cultural differences.² Consequently, in 1937, a joint conference of churches and missions in Assam decided to form a separate body for the region. As a result, in 1937 the Assam Christian Council (ACC) was formed with the objective of encouraging Christian fellowship and co-operation. In the 1960s, two North-East Faith and Order conferences were held in which a decision was taken in favour of church

¹ O.L. Snaitang, *A History of Ecumenical Movement: An Introduction* (Bangalore: BTESSC/SATHRI, 2010), 160.

² Snaitang, *A History of Ecumenical Movement: An Introduction*, 160-61.

unity in North-East India. The Assam Christian Council was renamed the North East India Christian Council (NEICC) for a wider ecumenical vision.³

Between 1956 and the first Faith and Order Conference in 1964, the Church Union Committee had done considerable work in this direction. During the twenty-second session of the Assam Christian Council in 1959, on the recommendation of the Church Union Committee, a Faith and Order Committee was formed for consultations among the churches and polity, discussions on inter-communion, comity, church union and similar matters. Discussions for a separate church union on North-East India took place from 1963 to 1977. In the strictest sense, the real movement for union began only after the annual session at Kalimpong in 1963,⁴ and then the Church Union Committee was given the mandate to organize what was known as the first Faith and Order conference in 1964 at Barapani.⁵ The conference agreed that it was more practical to form a united Church of North-East India rather than become a part of the proposed Church on North India.

The NEICC emphasized that unity of the churches was essential in the region, and so a drafting committee was formed to produce a draft for church union. Meanwhile, the drafting committee prepared a Draft Plan for church union, and the same was revised in the light of discussions at affiliated bodies and a copy was sent to each unit for examination, suggestions and comments.⁶ The matter was discussed at the higher level of the various constituencies of the council, many of whom had accepted the second draft of the basis for union. Meanwhile, the Council of Baptist Churches in North East India (CBCNEI) responded unfavourably towards the draft plan for church union, mainly on issues of baptism, centralized church government, and the office and form of bishops, etc. As a result, it withdrew from the church union negotiations in August 1971.⁷ Owing to this, further official negotiations could not take place on church union and the Church Union Movement lost its thrust. Nevertheless, it was revived after a gap but so far no concrete results have been produced. Yet the

³ J.F. Jyrwa, 'Church Union Movement in North East India', in *Good News For North East India*, Renty Keitzer (ed), (Guwahati: CLC, 1995), 23; J.F. Jyrwa, 'Church Union Movement in North East India: A Historical Perspective', in *Church Ministry and Mission: Essay in Honour of K.I. Aier*, Renty Keitzer (ed), (Guwahati: CBCNEI, 1988), 58.

⁴ Toshi Aier, 'Church Union Movement in North East India: A Reflection', in *Perspectives: Current Issues in Theological Thinking*, Akheto Sume (ed), (Aolijen, Mokochung: Jongshinokdang Trust, CTC, 2002), 143.

⁵ Jyrwa, 'Church Union Movement in North East India: A Historical Perspective', 27.

⁶ Aier, 'Church Union Movement in North East India: A Reflection', 144; Jyrwa, 'Church Union Movement in North East India: A Historical Perspective', 27.

⁷ Jyrwa, 'Church Union Movement in North East India: A Historical Perspective', 29; Snaitang, *A History of Ecumenical Movement: An Introduction*, 165.

attempt had been a failure, as its proposed plan for church union could not be accepted by all the churches in the region.

Issues and Challenges

Unity is a God-given reality. It is both a gift and a calling. It is never lost – only obscured and broken. It must be rediscovered and renewed. Therefore, unity is a present and at the same time an eschatological reality; it must be constantly sought. Unity is not something that is achieved once and for all, but is a living, unfolding process, not a goal that is reached but rather an ongoing reality that is constantly renewed. Unity, by its very nature, is invisible because it lies at the level of the faith and the mystery of the church. Nonetheless, it must manifest itself visibly in and through a fellowship becoming a concrete reality in history.

In fact, in the ecumenical movement, and particularly in the World Council of Churches (WCC), unity has always been described as a visible reality. It always remains the ultimate goal of the ecumenical movement. The WCC, in the early period of its existence, did not define a particular understanding of unity. It became a forum for dynamic interaction between various concepts and models of unity. Even membership in the Council did not imply the eventual acceptance of any particular model of unity. The first attempt to reach a common definition of unity was made at the New Delhi assembly of 1961. It provided the framework for future study as the model of conciliar fellowship has gained considerable acceptance, but it must be noted that the WCC has never confined itself to any particular concept or model of unity. Currently, there exist many views concerning the nature and model of unity. There are many ways in which different Christian confessional groups or denominations have come together under common ecclesial structures to express Christian unity.

Some Key Issues

There are challenges to be addressed in the further discussion of church unity in North-East India. The failure of church unity there is not only because of theological but also because of non-theological reasons. From the preliminary stage of the formation of the NEICC, there were certain objections arising from theological issues which became a strong hindrance against further negotiations for church unity in the region. Generally, church disunity exists where a communion is separated from other communions on account of theological differences regarding essential doctrines of faith and order and other church disciplines. Specifically, the theological issues that led to the failure of church union were disagreement on the hierarchical structure of church union administration in the church

union plan and the practice of baptism.⁸ The non-theological factors included causes such as geographical isolation, tribalism, ethnicities, and socio-cultural and linguistic differences.⁹ The primary differences between the Christian denominations in the region appear to have been a mix of theological as well as cultural and sociological reasons. Some of the prominent issues that hampered the church union discussions in the region were as follows:

Different church polity

This was a major factor that had led to the rejection of the church union plan. Churches in North-East India have both episcopal and non-episcopal administrative structures. As already mentioned, one of the reasons why the CBCNEI¹⁰ withdrew its commitment to the already approved union was its disagreement with an episcopacy or a centrally administered organization. Most members of a particular church or organizational body were not prepared to do away with what had been introduced by western missionaries and followed thus far.¹¹ As a result, such members did not see any benefits from such a union.

Denominationalism

The missionaries who brought Christianity to North-East India hailed from different national backgrounds and denominations. These missionaries also did not all share the same cultural roots. Their different nationalities also became another volatile factor which encouraged a hard stand on any church union or similar co-operative venture.¹² Downs points out that the question of church union was not just a matter of Presbyterians and Baptists getting together; it was a matter of churches established by the British and churches established by Americans getting together. Similarly, it was not just a matter of Presbyterians and Anglicans getting together; it was also a

⁸ F.S. Downs, *Church Union: Theological and Non-Theological Factors* (Shillong: The Church Union Committee of the NEICC), 1965.

⁹ Vanlalchuanawma, 'An Appraisal of Church Union Movement in Northeast India', in *Presbyterian Review* IX/33 (January-March, 2003), 21-32; Snaitang, *A History of Ecumenical Movement: An Introduction*, 167.

¹⁰ The Council of Baptist Churches in North East India (CBCNEI) is the apex body of the Baptist churches in North-East India. The first American Baptist missionaries reached Assam in 1836 and the CBCNEI dates its beginning to that time. The Council consists of seven Baptist Associations, namely, the Assam Baptist Convention, the Arunachal Baptist Church Council, the Garo Baptist Convention, the Karbi Anglong Baptist Convention, the Manipur Baptist Convention, and the Nagaland Baptist Church Council.

¹¹ Snaitang, *A History of Ecumenical Movement: An Introduction*, 169.

¹² Snaitang, *A History of Ecumenical Movement: An Introduction*, 168

matter of churches established by Welshmen and churches established by Englishmen getting together.¹³ Attachments to these adopted western denominations are hard to change. There was a fear among the Baptist churches that the establishment of church union might lead to the loss of the distinct characteristics of that particular denomination. It became an uphill task to persuade ecclesiastically conservative Christians to participate in any church union. The trouble also lay with denominational establishments. These have become power blocs, interested almost exclusively in the preservation and growth of their own institutions. So it was not surprising to observe that the more churches in the region opened up to the ecumenical movement, the firmer these establishments adhered to their own denominational traditions.¹⁴ It is part of the reason why, even after almost one and a half centuries, churches in the region are still closer to their 'parent churches' in the West than to their neighbouring churches in the region.

The gap between the top and the grassroots levels

Since the 1930s, there have been negotiations for some form of church union in North-East India. But it has been unsuccessful because such negotiations were initiated by the different denominational leaders rather than by the local churches. There was thus a gap between the upper levels of church leadership and local church leadership on church union because the issue was confined to the former.¹⁵ It could be argued that the issue of church union was the interest of only a few leaders, and there was no interest or commitment to it by churches at grassroots level. The plans of union were not based on a careful analysis of the historical and cultural contexts of the region itself. The approach did not prove effective because it came from the top and not from the respective affiliated churches.¹⁶

Linguistic barriers

Each state in North-East India has, in the course of time, developed distinct cultures and dialects of their own. Often each village was an autonomous village-state, which tended to develop its own dialect or its own type of local language. So, due to dialectical differences, the linguistic link among tribals was weak. There are about 166 distinct tribal communities in this region and their languages and dialects total almost the same number.¹⁷ The

¹³ Downs, *Church Union: Theological and Non-Theological Factors*, 4-5.

¹⁴ Snaitang, *A History of Ecumenical Movement: An Introduction*, 168.

¹⁵ Jyrwa, *Church Union Movement in North East India: A Historical Perspective*, 30.

¹⁶ Snaitang, *A History of Ecumenical Movement*, 166.

¹⁷ Renthly Keitzar, 'Tribal Cultural Ethos and Christianity in NEI', in *ETC Journal* 1/1 (1980), 48.

language of one particular tribe was, in many cases, totally incomprehensible to those of other tribes in neighbouring areas. Each tribe had different idioms, which were neither related to the other tribes nor intelligible to other dialectical groups. There was diversity in language within even the same tribe. Linguistic barriers, even within just one major tribe, also made the speech of those from one area a hurdle to some of the dialectical groups from other areas within the tribe itself. This has happened because each tribe has generally wanted to preserve and speak its own language and had developed with a 'closed-door' worldview and a strict dialectical identity.¹⁸ This led to missionaries establishing separate mission associations and synods, while tribe members became used to the associations which they had inherited from the missionaries.¹⁹ With such a multiplicity of languages, discussions regarding the formation of a church union were limited to educated people in the congregations and that mainly among the leaders, thus limiting the exchange of views and problems essential for coming to any understanding.

A democratic tendency

A very significant facet of society in North-East India was the development of an autonomous thinking that was very obvious in the village setting. By and large, each village was virtually an autonomous unit and each had its own distinct history, which was often quite different from that of other villages. Consequently, each would have its own culture and social structure.²⁰ The type of tribal governance varies from tribe to tribe and village to village. There is no common system of government for the entire tribe. Most would have had some sort of democratic village council. This democratic set-up fitted well with the Baptist model brought in by the missionaries. A democratic system of administration was largely more familiar in the region.²¹ It was in such democratic structures that most hill peoples were nurtured. As the 'states' were independent, people were not readily willing to be under the dictates of others. Thus, a spirit of democratic tendencies had become deeply rooted in the minds of the people of every tribe. Any project creating an identifiable distinction between the leadership and the general public would antagonize the civic sentiments of the people of the region. Proposing an episcopal system with a bishop as

¹⁸ O.L. Snaitang, 'Ecumenism and Hill People's Culture in North East India', in *Journal of Tribal Studies* I/1 (January-June, 1998), 29-52.

¹⁹ Jyrwa, 'Church Union Movement in North East India: A Historical Perspective', 29.

²⁰ F.S. Downs, *Christianity in North East India: Historical Perspectives* (Delhi: ISPCK, and Guwahati: CLC, 1983), 10.

²¹ Vanlalchuanawma, *An Appraisal of Church Union Movement in Northeast India*, 29.

the supreme administrative head, or confining leadership in the plan of union appears to have caused general suspicion.²²

The concept of tribalism

North-East India consists of different tribes, which have never experienced any sense of common identity. Though they live in the same geographical milieu, they seldom interact with the outside world or even among themselves. Each community strongly maintains its own identity. There are more than 160 tribal groups in this region. Some of the major tribes or groups of the region are the Assamese, Nagas, Mizos, Manipuris, Kukis, Khasis, Bodos – to name a few. Traditional political systems, clan-based religious beliefs and practices, and social differences in each tribal group have been among the factors contributing to cultural disunity.²³ In a real sense, anybody who did not belong to a particular group was an outsider to it. To talk about unity within one cultural group of people is one thing, but to talk about unity under one structure which includes people from other cultural groups is quite another, due to deeply rooted ‘community feeling’ in them.

Even Christianity fostered, in one way or the other, the development of a sense of communalism with divisive potential.²⁴ Missionaries converted the tribals to Christianity in large numbers, yet raised another wall between the hill tribes and the plains people, and their cultures and religions. Though the missionaries were not necessarily trying to isolate the tribal people, such a separation was the inevitable outcome of their contribution to the conscience of tribalism. The identification of ethnic groups along denominational lines did not facilitate any ecumenical spirit of unity.²⁵ Each tribe had been strongly based in its own tribal values and culture, which often made the people of a particular tribe proud of their identity while hating other nationalities or tribes. An organic church union with an authoritative constitution and liturgy for all member churches might not equally satisfy such tribal feelings.²⁶ It is true that tribal division is difficult to do away with even in the Church and is one of the primary factors that is working against any efforts at church union.

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²² Vanlalchuanawma, *An Appraisal of Church Union Movement in Northeast India*, 29.

²³ Milton S. Sangma and David R. Syiemlieh, *Essays on Christianity in North East India* (New Delhi: Indus, 1994), 185.

²⁴ Downs opines that even Christianity built up a sense of tribal identity through the introduction of comprehensive tribal institutions in the form of ecclesiastical structures. See Downs, *Christianity in North East India: Historical Perspectives*, 167.

²⁵ Snaitang, *A History of Ecumenical Movement: An Introduction*, 167.

²⁶ T. Likok, *A Picture of an Organic Church Union* (Impur: ABAM, 1975), 11.

Baptism

Baptism was one of the main obstacles towards the further development of church union discussions in North-East India. Because of the Baptists' commitment to believer's baptism by immersion, CBNEI could not accept the two forms of baptism (infant and adult) proposed in the union plan.²⁷ The Drafting Committee added in the Plan of Union and Draft Constitution that the proposed Church of North-East India would allow both infant baptism and believers' baptism, but not both for the same person, and would receive as communicant members all those who had been baptized or confirmed. It assured freedom of expression for the particular convictions of different traditions.²⁸ This argument became a controversial issue in church union negotiations in the region, and a bone of contention in subsequent church union discussions.

Challenges to the Life and Witness of the Churches of North-East India

North-East India today is faced with new challenges – sociologically, economically and politically. In such a scenario, the continuation and strengthening of existing dialogue and co-operation between Christian churches in the region is an urgent duty. Disunity leads to selfishness and a sectarian understanding of the Christian gospel.²⁹ There are challenges to the life and witness of the churches in the region.

The need for conscientization

For North-East Indian Christians, the terms 'ecumenism' and 'Christian unity' have not been familiar until recently. Though churches have come together under the banner of NEICC, much needs to be done with regard to church union, especially at grassroots level. It appears that most Christians in the region are still not aware of the church union movement. Proper dissemination of information on church union can make people respond favourably to it. Local church committee members can be involved in such discussions so that all may be involved. It is only then that the local churches themselves will initiate discussions on church union. Even today, there is ignorance about other denominations among Christians in the region, giving rise to misunderstandings and division. This is because the

²⁷ *Assam Christian Council: Minutes and Proceedings*, 1947, 12.

²⁸ *NEICC, The Plan of Church Union and Draft Constitution of the Church of NEI* (Shillong: NEICC, 1970), 7.

²⁹ 'Learning to Explore Love Together: Suggestions to the churches for responding to 'A Common Word', in *Ecumenical Visions for the 21st century: A Reader for Theological Education*, Melisande Lorke and Dietrich Werner (eds), (Geneva: WCC, 2013), 353.

majority of Christians in the region blindly adhere to the denominational structures of the churches they belong to. This denominational exclusiveness prevents Christians from making any real commitment to the unity movement. Education and awareness about it could however result in acceptance, respect and mutual understanding.

Formulating a common ministry

Given that Christians in North-East India are very aware of and principally concerned with their own tribe, community or denomination, and that they give first preference to their local church programme or denominational activity, one way of encouraging greater ecumenical awareness and interaction among various denominations could be to plan common ministry at a local level. One of these ministries, for example, could be Bible translation. The Bible has not been translated into all the languages/dialects of communities in North-East India. In some cases, only portions of the Bible have been translated into certain languages/dialects. There is also the need for existing versions to be revised and updated.

Mission activities such as these could be considered as starting points for carrying out mission activities in which committees consisting of missionaries/scholars from different denominational and tribal backgrounds can work together. Activities such as these could open up the possibility of wider interdenominational activities and interactions, and these in turn could encourage the breaking down of existing barriers and also give a boost for church unity efforts in the region.

Dealing with religious diversity

Relating with people of other faiths is another area in which north-eastern Christians need to gain experience. Most churches in North-East India live in the context of tribal homogeneity and they do not have occasion to confront religious diversity. As a result, churches are complacent and inward-looking. Religious diversity is however gradually becoming a reality in the North East also. Recognizing those of other faiths as human beings and entering into dialogue with those of other faiths is an urgent need.

The challenge of a common prayer

A common prayer for Christian unity among churches of North-East India could be prepared jointly by local churches in the region. Such an effort would greatly enhance interdenominational co-operation in matters of common worship that could be a prelude to restarting efforts for wider church unity. A common prayer could be common ground among the Christians of the region that would lead to an understanding of each

denomination's concerns and points of view. This could lead to denominations seeking out and developing areas of common concern, common commitment, common co-operation, and common action.

Conclusion

To sum up, it is important for the churches and Christians in North-East India to come together in a spirit of mutual trust, which might ultimately lead to possible church union in the region. The churches of North-East India should face these new challenges with courage and determination. The challenges are an invitation to further growth and maturity in order to identify the kind of union that has been anticipated. Looking at the existing churches' traditions in the region, the unity of the churches of North-East India is a necessity. Unity provides the churches with wider opportunities to work and witness together in service. Such an effort will however demand of the different denominations a willingness to let go of past misconceptions and insecurities, and a willingness to look beyond identities shaped by ethnicity, tribe and denomination.

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SECTION NINE

**MISSION SPIRITUALITY
AND AUTHENTIC
DISCIPLESHIP**

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LOCATING SPIRITUALITY IN MISSION: A REFLECTION FROM A NAGA CONTEXT

Thejano Kithan

Introduction

The meaning of spirituality may differ according to usage and context, so how it is defined is important. When it comes to the usage of the term in the context of mission, it has to be noted that the context of mission has changed and continues to change – and this reality poses a challenge in bringing about creativity in responding to the invitation to participate in God's mission in this world.¹ This essay is an attempt to locate spirituality in mission, sharing a reflection from a Naga context. It will start with the meaning of mission spirituality, and then present the Naga² context in brief. Further, it will highlight the spirituality of the Nagas before and after the coming of Christianity there. It will look at present mission activities in an attempt to locate spirituality to show how God works in these activities through the Holy Spirit.

Mission Spirituality

Spirituality, simply put, expresses a kind of transformation in line with religious ideals and a growth in the same. Mission spirituality concerns the need for Christians to engage in mission. It is connected with the work of the Holy Spirit in the world and working in accordance with it.³ For a clearer understanding of what spirituality really means, it is helpful to elaborate on its meaning with some definitions. It is usually understood that spirituality says something about the relationship between God and human beings. In the light of mission, it starts with God who draws people in to participate in his mission, and he being the only initiator and the one who

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¹ Madge Karecki, 'Mission Spirituality in Global Perspective', in *Missiology: An International Review* XL/1 (January 2012), 23.

² Nagas cannot be thought of as one group of people since they are divided into many tribes and sub-tribes. This paper will make use of the term 'Naga' in general, but most of the views will reflect the Kyong Naga view, the tribe to which the writer belongs.

³ Kirsteen Kim and Andrew Anderson (eds), *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Today and Tomorrow* (Oxford: Regnum, 2011), 318.

makes things happen.⁴ Therefore, spirituality as a transforming experience in a human's life has two aspects which consist of God and fellow human beings.⁵

One aspect can be considered in what David Bosch asserts: 'Spirituality or devotional life seems to mean withdrawal from the world, charging my battery, and then going out into the world.'⁶ He further adds that spirituality cannot be isolated from the rest of our existence. For Bosch, to be 'spiritual means being in Christ, whether we pray or walk or work'.⁷

The other aspect is in McGinn's description of Christian spirituality as 'the lived experience of Christian belief' and 'the effort to appropriate Christ's saving works in our lives'.⁸ Because of this, Christ's saving act is shared in missional relationships that enable peoples in the Spirit to draw to Christ in mysterious ways.⁹ These two aspects emphasize the idea that spirituality relates to the devotional life and does not depart from Christian belief.

Nagaland and the Nagas

Nagaland¹⁰ has a population of around 19, 78, 502 according to the 2011 census.¹¹ It is one of the Indian states situated in the North East of India and is inhabited by various tribes and sub-tribes speaking different languages, belonging to different cultures and having their own traditional dress. The Nagas belong to the Indo-Mongoloid race.¹² While it has been noted that tribal groups all over the world have many things in common, it cannot be said that they belong to a homogeneous group. In this regard, the description of the 1962 Shillong Consultation of tribal representations is seen as irrelevant to the tribes of Nagaland, when it describes a tribe as 'an indigenous homogeneous unit, speaking a common language, claiming a common ancestry, living in a particular geographical area, backward in technology, pre-literate, loyally observing social and political customs

⁴ A. Barus, 'Spirituality', in John Corrie (ed), *Dictionary of Mission Theology* (Nottingham, UK, and Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), 371.

⁵ Barus, 'Spirituality', 372.

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⁶ David J. Bosch, *A Spirituality of the Road* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1979), 11.

⁷ Bosch, *A Spirituality of the Road*, 13.

⁸ Quoted from Karecki, 'Mission Spirituality in Global Perspective', 24.

⁹ Karecki, 'Mission Spirituality in Global Perspective', 24.

¹⁰ On 10th August 1960, the Naga Hills became the sixteenth state of the Indian union and was named Nagaland. See Joseph S. Thong, *Head-Hunters' Culture: Historic Culture of the Nagas* (New Delhi: Mittal, 2012), 155.

¹¹ Nagaland Population Census Data 2011: www.census2011.co.in/states.php30/1/2014.Nagaland-1978502 (accessed 7th February 2014).

¹² Murkot Ramunny, *The World of the Nagas* (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 1988), 3.

based on kinship'.¹³ Roger Gaikwad is right in saying that such a description is not applicable to the tribes of North-East India as they have undergone many changes in terms of education, urbanization, technological advancement and modernization because of various external influences,¹⁴ and especially after the coming of Christianity to the region. Tribals in the North East – and this is applicable to Nagaland as well – cannot even be clubbed together with the rest of the tribals in India because they differ in race and consider themselves above caste people. They are proud citizens with a specific political territory, possessing land and property, and immersed in their own cultural and religious practices.¹⁵ Specifically, the Nagas consist of seventeen major tribes and many sub-tribes. They are a distinct community and consider the village as the basic social unit around which the whole of people's lives revolve.¹⁶ Naga society is casteless. Before the arrival of western missionaries, the Nagas had had little contact with the outside world except with the Assamese, with whom they occasionally traded, and the British who made their way through Assam in 1866 and occupied the Angami area and gradually the rest of Nagaland.¹⁷ Politically, most tribes were ruled by village chiefs. Head-hunting was a part of the Naga tradition, and consequently they lived in constant fear of an attack from their enemies.

The Spirituality of the Nagas before the Arrival of Christianity in the Naga Region

Christian spirituality is always grounded in the history of the people in a particular culture and its religious worldviews. It is also to be noted that the spirituality of the Christ event is unceasingly motivating for a person or people to go beyond the boundaries of their own religious comfort zones and take part in the mission of God.¹⁸ The report prepared by the conveners of this study theme at Edinburgh 2010 states that there is a need for 'a Mission Spirituality that recognizes that God is already working, has been working within all cultures, revealing godself'.¹⁹ Thomas G. Grenham is of

¹³ Roger Gaikwad, 'Doing Theology with Tribal Resources: Cautionary Remarks', in *Doing Theology with Tribal Resources*, Wati Longchar and Larry E. Davies (eds), (Jorhat: Tribal Study Center, 1999), 130.

¹⁴ Gaikwad, 'Doing Theology with Tribal Resources: Cautionary Remarks', 130-31.

¹⁵ Ezamo Murry, 'Awakening Tribal Consciousness and Concerns in Pastoral Care', in *Journal of Tribal Studies*, II/1 (January-June 1998), 23.

¹⁶ A. Lanunungsang and Athung Ovung, *Nagaland: The Land of Festivals* (Dimapur: Authors, 2012), 2.

¹⁷ Edward Gait, *A History of Assam* (Kolkata: Thacker Spink, 1969), 367.

¹⁸ Thomas G. Grenham, 'Discovering the Universal in the Particular: A Vision for Christian Mission Spirituality', in *Missiology: An International Review* XL/1 (January 2012), 50.

¹⁹ Kim and Anderson, *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Today and Tomorrow*, 183.

the view that ‘Christians believe that they are unconditionally loved and saved by God who resides in and permeates the deepest structures of particular cultural and religious contexts’.²⁰ Human beings need a particular cultural and religious context in order to participate in life-giving relationships with themselves, with others and with God.²¹ Pre-Christian Naga identity and lifestyle was related to the natural world and to the land. The land was in fact their sustenance and life. Every activity revolved around land. The land united and held the family, clan and tribe together.²² In the Naga context, there was – and continues to be – a spiritual relationship between the people and the land in which they live, and it occupies a central part in their lives.²³ They believed that the Supreme God in whom they believed had created heaven and earth, and that these belonged to him; this was the foundation of their faith.²⁴

Although the existence of God and the practice of a structured religion were largely not adhered to, the common people still worshipped, and had priests and people who mediated on their behalf. Their belief systems and ceremonies in some way or other related to nature.²⁵ Their myths illustrated that the land belonged to the Supreme Being, though it was also the possession of a village, clan or individual. The Ao Nagas and the Sangtam Nagas call the Supreme Being *Lijaba*, *li* meaning earth and *jaba* meaning real. It meant *Lijaba* was the real earth. He dwelt in both humans and creation.²⁶ The Kyong Nagas, like the other Naga tribes, believed in supernatural powers. They called their god *Potsow*. There was neither a set form of worship nor any place for worship. This worship was done through various ceremonies and rites which were traditionally handed down the generations.²⁷ Traditionally, the Kyong Nagas addressed their gods in different ways such as: god of the earth (*Iiko potsow*), god of the sky (*oyak potsow*). They believed in a god who sees (*ehunga evamo*), and believed that he had created the heavens and the earth.²⁸ Their daily lives revolved around taboos, superstitions and sacrifices to scores of gods. The religion

²⁰ Grenham, ‘Discovering the Universal in the Particular: A Vision for Christian Mission Spirituality’, 51.

²¹ Grenham, ‘Discovering the Universal in the Particular: A Vision for Christian Mission Spirituality’.

²² Wati Longchar, *Returning to Mother Earth: Theology, Christian Witness and Theological Education: An Indigenous Perspective* (Tainan, Taiwan: Programme for Theology and Cultures in Asia, 2013), 28-30.

²³ Longchar, *Returning to Mother Earth*, 28.

²⁴ Wati Longchar, ‘A Critique of the Christian Theology of Creation’, in *Doing Theology with Tribal Resources*, 69.

²⁵ Longchar, *Returning to Mother Earth*, 30.

²⁶ Longchar, ‘Dancing with the Land: Significance of Land for Doing Tribal Theology’, in *Doing Theology with Tribal Resources*, 118-19.

²⁷ Ezamo Murry, *The Introduction and the Growth of Christianity in Kyong (Lotha) Area of Nagaland* (Jorhat: Lireni Murry, 2003), 3.

²⁸ N.T. Ngullie, *Kyong Tathi Juli* (Kyong Culture) (Wokha: Author, 1993), 17.

includes magic practices, medicine men and women, lycanthropy,²⁹ ancestor worship and different kinds of sacrifices to spirits of many kinds.³⁰ The Kyong Nagas believed that there was a supreme creator who had created the whole of nature. They also believed that he sent rain and hailstones from his large reservoir above. When someone on earth dies, he expresses his sorrow in the form of thunder. This god is anthropomorphic in form and character.³¹ They believed in the god above, the supreme creator, and in the gods of the earth that included the lord of the crops, the wild animals and the waters.³²

The Kyong Nagas also believed in both benevolent and malevolent spirits. It was believed that the evil spirits dwelt among rocks, springs, lakes and trees – and were called *Tsungrham*. They believed that these spirits caused sicknesses by detaining people's souls and infusing in them some foreign bodies. The advice of the village priest was sought in this form of sickness. Through prayers and sacrifices, the people would try to please these spirits who troubled them. They also believed in the spirits of their dead ancestors, and this included the strong belief that the dead ancestors' souls continued to live on in the world of the dead where they went after their death. The dead were believed to have a relationship with the living, and if the living in any way misused or dishonoured the dead ancestor, he/she would inflict illnesses on the living. In such case, a dreamer or diviner who was usually a woman would arbitrate between the dead and the living.³³ Pathuvail Thomas Philip rightly says that the Nagas worshipped the supernatural such as gods, ghosts, demons and other spirits, and they were in great fear of the power of spirits.³⁴ There were also other spirits such as *Lungkumu* (the wailing fiends), *Ramon* (the spirit of the forest), *Limon* (the spirit of the field), *Yamon* (the spirit of the village), *Pvukimon* (the spirit of the rooftop), and *Khyokimon* (the spirit of the house). These spirits usually did not inflict harm but encountering them could cause sickness and sometimes even death through sudden shock.³⁵

The Kyong Nagas did not consider death as the end of the human soul. They held that the soul of those who died naturally went to the world of the

²⁹ A delusion whereby one imagines oneself to be a wolf or other animal.

³⁰ Athungo Ovung, *Social Stratification in Naga Society* (New Delhi: Mittal, 2012), 124.

³¹ Murry, *The Introduction and the Growth of Christianity in Kyong (Lotha) Area of Nagaland*, 3-4.

³² Murry, *The Introduction and the Growth of Christianity in Kyong (Lotha) Area of Nagaland*.

³³ Murry, *The Introduction and the Growth of Christianity in Kyong (Lotha) Area of Nagaland*, 5.

³⁴ Pathuvail Thomas Philip, *The Growth of the Baptist Churches in Nagaland* (Guwahati: CLC, 1976), 39.

³⁵ Murry, *The Introduction and the Growth of Christianity in Kyong (Lotha) Area of Nagaland*, 5.

dead, but those souls who died an unnatural death lingered around the world. The soul of the dead was believed to have left the body before one died and would go to the hill at Wokha called *Tiyi*.³⁶ The soul was also believed to live among one's relatives in the form of insects and animals till the send-off ceremony (*vachi*) which was observed on the sixth day for men and fifth day for women. There was no after-life reward or punishment promised but it was said that the soul went through nine series of deaths and births in different forms of creatures.³⁷ Festivals and feasts were part of community life and nobody dared miss any. Some of the festivals celebrated were war celebrations, monolith stone-pulling, marriages, and the renovation of village gates, which was followed by feasting. The biggest festival of all for the Kyong Nagas was that of *tokhu emong*³⁸ – a festival of thanksgiving to god for the harvest and its attendant blessings.³⁹

Although they were deeply rooted in and seriously practised this spirituality, one observes that even in their ignorance of Jesus Christ, they were aware that there was a God who was the owner of all creation. The people were also in fear of the evil spirits which they believed harmed humans in different ways. Thus, their faithfulness to religious observance and their belief in a supreme being and in evil spirits concurs with the understanding of God working in communities and societies even before the arrival of Christian missionaries, as mentioned earlier in this section.

The Coming of Christianity to the Area and Its Growth

Christianity came to the Nagaland area with Dr Edward Winter Clark and his wife Mary Mead Clark, from Boston, USA. They arrived in Sibsagar, Assam, on 30th March 1869.⁴⁰ Although the couple was actually designated for the Sibsagar Mission in Assam, Clark made occasional visits to the Naga Hills where Godhula Brown⁴¹ and his wife had started a mission in the Ao area.⁴² Risking his life, he began visiting places in Nagaland which were beyond British protection.⁴³ In spite of opposition from a majority of the villagers, Christianity started from the village of Dekha Haimong and

³⁶ A mountain at Wokha District in Nagaland.

³⁷ Murry, *The Introduction and the Growth of Christianity in Kyong (Lotha) Area of Nagaland*, 6.

³⁸ A festival which promotes forgiveness, reconciliation and harmonious joy.

³⁹ Lanunungsang and Athung Oving, *Nagaland: The Land of Festival*, 67.

⁴⁰ Tajen Ao, *Christianity versus Ao Naga* (Mokokchung: Tribal Gospel Mission Publisher, 1984), 49-50.

⁴¹ An Assamese missionary who was responsible for exploring the Naga Hills and started a mission before Clark's arrival.

⁴² M.M. Clark, *A Corner in India* (Guwahati: CLC, 1978), 15; Bendangyabang Ao, *History of Christianity in Nagaland*, 15.

⁴³ S.W. Rivenburg, 'The Assam Side', in *The Baptist Missionary Magazine* 82/5 (May 1902), 176.

spread around the Ao Naga area before reaching the Kyong Nagas in 1885. The Impur Mission was a parent mission to almost all the other tribes at the initial stage, including the Kyong tribe.⁴⁴ As Molungyimsen⁴⁵ was not an ideal place for wider mission, for strategic purposes, the missionaries began to search for a better centre for mission work and established it at Impur.⁴⁶ Under Clark's direction, the mission centre was shifted from Molungyimsen to Impur in 1894 with the missionary Haggard and his family moving in. Clark joined them in 1897 as he was engaged in his literature work at Molungyimsen.⁴⁷ Immediately, Perrine started the Impur Mission School which became an important educational centre for the Nagas (Rev. Samuel A. Perrine was an American Baptist missionary to Nagaland from 1892-1906).⁴⁸

The evangelisation of the whole of Nagaland is credited to the work of the western missionaries in the twentieth century. Apart from spreading the gospel and planting churches, they were pioneers in education, healthcare and the economy of the people.

The Spread of Christianity

Christianity began in Nagaland in 1872 and thereafter spread rapidly from the Ao Naga area to other parts of Nagaland. With Clark's initiative, a second mission centre was established in Kohima under the charge of the Rev. C.D. King in 1877. In 1885, Christianity came to the Kyong tribe of Wokha.

Compared with the other tribes of Nagaland, the Kyong tribe was largely left on its own for evangelization work, from 1887 up until the 1950s. This is evident in the mission reports of the churches. For example, native missionaries began to establish churches as early as 1904 and carried on until the whole area became Christianized.⁴⁹ In spite of being uneducated and unpaid, Kyong missionaries took up the responsibilities of preacher, pastor, teacher and Bible translator in the initial stages of mission work. The work was not easy. Kyong missionaries had to walk on foot from one village to another; they faced rejection from relatives and friends and were

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⁴⁴ F.S. Downs, *The Mighty Works of God: A Brief History of the Council of Baptist Churches in North East India; The Mission Period, 1836-1950* (Guwahati: CLC, 1971), 125.

⁴⁵ The first Naga mission centre in 1876, which was a new Christian village known as Molung. It is three kilometres from Molungkimong.

⁴⁶ A. Bendangyabang Ao, *History of Christianity in Nagaland: Social Change, 1872-1972* (Bangalore: Shalom Ministry Publication, 2004), 114.

⁴⁷ Downs, *The Mighty Works of God*, 116.

⁴⁸ Downs, *The Mighty Works of God*, 117.

⁴⁹ *Okotso Baptist Ekhumkho Motso (1904-2004)* (translation: Okotso Baptist Church History 1904-2004) (Okotso: Okotso Baptist Church, 2004), 1-2.

deprived of many social privileges. Yet they continued voluntarily and joyfully.⁵⁰

The Revivals and their Outcome

The revival movements that spread across Nagaland are undoubtedly one of the significant dimensions in building mission spirituality. Apart from the revivals that took place in the local churches, Nagaland witnessed two significant revival movements between 1947 and 1981. Both the movements contributed to the empowerment of the spirituality of the Nagas in general. Akumla Longkumer is of the view that these movements had helped in the steady growth in the spiritual and ethical lives of the Nagas.⁵¹ The revivals motivated the people and churches to become mission-conscious and they began sending out missionaries. From then on, evangelism began to flourish in Nagaland.⁵² The features of these revivals included prayer and singing, visions and prophecy, speaking in tongues, dancing, healings and exorcism.⁵³ Church growth and expansion in the 1950s has also been attributed to these revival movements. The post-revival movement in the 1970s led to the Nagaland Congress on World Evangelization in Dimapur in 1975. From then on, churches began to be more serious about mission and their spiritual life, and by 1980, they began to have mission projects of their own.⁵⁴

Mission Activities

Naga churches are enthusiastic about spreading the gospel and many churches run independent mission projects. The 75-year-old Nagaland Baptist Church Council (NBCC), an 'umbrella' body of churches in Nagaland, has approximately 1,500 member churches.⁵⁵ The last American missionaries left Nagaland in 1955 and thereafter the NBCC took over the general administration as well as the completion of unfinished projects. It formed a Home Mission Board under the leadership of Longri Ao in 1960. The Nagaland Missionary Movement was started in 1970.⁵⁶ The Movement was initially intended for the locals and at grassroots level. Having itself

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⁵⁰ Thejano Kithan, *The Contributions of the Native Evangelists in Christianizing the Kyong Nagas from 1887-1950* (MTh thesis, United Theological College, Bangalore, 2014), 74.

⁵¹ Akumla Longkumer, *Revival in Nagaland: Fact or Fallacy* (Mokokchung: Akumla Longkumer, 1086), 26.

⁵² Longkumer, *Revival in Nagaland: Fact or Fallacy*, 26-27.

⁵³ Longkumer, *Revival in Nagaland: Fact or Fallacy*, 43-45.

⁵⁴ Longkumer, *Revival in Nagaland: Fact or Fallacy*, 47.

⁵⁵ www.christiantoday.co.in/article/nagaland.baptist.church.council.celebrates.75.years/7226.htm (accessed 27th January 2015).

⁵⁶ Nagaland Missions Movement: Annual Report, 2008, 1.

been a mission field in the nineteenth century, by 1970 the Nagas had a well-organized mission body named the 'Nagaland Missions Movement', which was established with the purpose of 'evangelizing the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ'.⁵⁷ The nature of this evangelism was to focus on 'evangelism within', and on church planting by sending out missionaries to different places and some social welfare projects. The 'mission within' included placing pastors in different parts of the cities of India exclusively for Nagas, installing chaplains in different hospitals within Nagaland and outside, and sending out missionaries and evangelists within India and to neighbouring countries.⁵⁸ It also involved a literature ministry.⁵⁹ The churches in Nagaland continue to be actively involved in mission, and almost every church has a mission project of its own in India and even abroad. According to the Nagaland Missions Movement report of 2008, under the aegis of the Ao Baptist Arogo Mungdang (the Ao Baptist Church Association), at least 44 churches are engaged in mission in different parts of India, Bhutan and Myanmar.⁶⁰ The Angami Baptist Church Council has at least twenty churches involved in mission, extending to Australia, Yemen, Mongolia, Thailand, China, Cambodia, Nepal and Japan.⁶¹ The Kyong Baptist Ekhumkho Sanrhyutsu (the Kyong Baptist Church Council), has sixteen churches involving in mission.⁶² Similarly, the other associations under the NBCC have mission activities of their own, sponsored either by a particular church, family or even an individual. The spirituality of the Christ event continues to motivate Naga Christians to go beyond the boundaries of their own religious consciousness and participate in the larger project of God's mission (*missio Dei*).⁶³

Locating Spirituality in Mission Today: Challenges Faced by the Churches in Nagaland and the Need for Spirituality

Although the Nagas observed an indigenous spirituality of their own in their traditional belief systems, and continued that zeal even after converting to Christianity, the churches and people continue to face challenges in the process of their growth. Churches in Nagaland have the zeal for mission work but lately there has been a lack of genuine discipleship and a certain waning of the spirituality that plays a vital role in mission activities. There is a need for transformation and a spiritual

⁵⁷ Nagaland Missions Movement: Annual Report, 2008.

⁵⁸ Nagaland Missions Movement: Annual Report, 1.

⁵⁹ Nagaland Missions Movement: Annual Report, 6.

⁶⁰ Nagaland Missions Movement: Annual Report, 156-70.

⁶¹ Nagaland Missions Movement: Annual Report, 171-77.

⁶² Nagaland Missions Movement: Annual Report, 203-209.

⁶³ Grenham, 'Discovering the Universal in the Particular: A Vision for Christian Mission Spirituality', in *Missiology: An International Review* XL/1 (January 2012), 50.

awakening. Additionally, Naga churches face an identity crisis.⁶⁴ This is the outcome of the racial discrimination Nagas, along with other communities from North-East India, suffer at the hands of people in India because of their minority status, both in terms of religion and race. Hand-in-hand is their struggle for justice to address this discrimination.⁶⁵ The churches need a spirituality that can be located by the Nagas themselves. Naga churches are actively involved in mission domestically and internationally but we need to ask how far they involved themselves more fully in terms of their participation. While appreciating the mission activities that are being carried out, these activities also give some picture of the limitations of mission practices. Participating in mission does not end with having a mission board or a mission project and setting aside a large sum of money for mission. Churches are proud to include holistic ministry in their reports, but holistic ministry cannot be confined to a few social welfare programmes or relief work during times of national calamity. Mission work at present seems to focus more on how many mission fields a church has, how many are converted in a year, and how many churches have been planted. In such a context, churches in Nagaland need a new spirituality that will embrace the poor, to open up a space for ecumenism which is killing the churches, to embrace people of other faiths and one that will embrace the whole of creation. There is a need for churches to acknowledge and accept that mission belongs to God and not to them, that it is he who sends, and he who is in control of mission.⁶⁶

When one considers mission, it is important to understand that Jesus is the basic foundation of mission. In Luke 4:18, 19, we find that Jesus speaks of his anointing by the Holy Spirit declaring that the purpose of his being sent was to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. He was sure and conscious that he was sent by God, his father, for a mission that included both spiritual as well as humanitarian aspects.⁶⁷ This ethical and social aspect of mission is important because 'If mission is done in the Spirit, then the process of mission is as important as its results. It cannot be done in a ways that are unethical, unjust, underhand, aggressive or otherwise incompatible with the Spirit of Jesus Christ'.⁶⁸

Today, where it is often difficult to exactly locate the presence of spirituality in mission, the same outpouring of the Spirit recorded in Acts 2:17-47 is needed more than ever. The apostles carried on their mission

⁶⁴ Longchar, *Returning to Mother Earth*, 159.

⁶⁵ Longchar, *Returning to Mother Earth*, 160.

⁶⁶ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, 'Aspects of Mission in the Acts of the Apostles', in *Missiology: An International Review* X/4 (October 1982), 415.

⁶⁷ Peter T. O'Brien, 'Witness and the Coming of the Spirit', in *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 9 (1999), 205-206.

⁶⁸ Kim and Anderson, *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Today and Tomorrow*, 361.

with the help of the power of the Spirit.⁶⁹ The outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost empowered and enabled the disciples to preach more boldly, to participate in humble service, and break down the barriers in mission. They were in fact ‘turning the world upside down’ (Acts 17:6) as they witnessed for Christ. The Holy Spirit exhibited himself as powerful and different from any other spirit.⁷⁰ Through this same Spirit, God is working among the people in the world today, and the same motivation is needed in the churches of Nagaland.

Conclusion

Stephen Bevans points out that there is a shift taking place in mission in recent times which includes – the content of mission, the means of mission, the context of mission, and the attitude in mission.⁷¹ There is a need for Naga churches to adapt accordingly and re-envision their mission activities. The means of mission and the attitude in mission are relevant in this context. It is important to understand the ‘why’ of mission and the way we participate in it. There is an urgent need for genuine Christian discipleship in mission because ‘Mission is not a task but a Spirituality – and not any spirituality but a way of life in the Spirit of Christ’.⁷² Mission must be understood as spiritual endeavour. Mission spirituality is rooted within the love of God and goes in the way of Jesus Christ.⁷³ It is in fact a commitment and obedience to Jesus Christ and the guidance of the Holy Spirit that directs our lives in the service of God and his creation.⁷⁴ According to Bosch, ‘Mission is multifaceted ministry, in respect of witness, service, justice, healing, reconciliation, liberation, peace, evangelism, fellowship, church planting and contextualization, and much more’.⁷⁵ God, through his Spirit, continues to inspire and motivate people to participate in this multifaceted ministry. The Edinburgh 2010 Common Call says:

Remembering Jesus’ way of witness and service, we believe we are called by God to follow this way joyfully, inspired, anointed, sent and empowered by the Holy Spirit, and nurtured by Christian discipleship in community. As we look to Christ coming in glory and judgement, we experience his presence

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⁶⁹ O’Brien, ‘Witness and the Coming of the Spirit’, 213.

⁷⁰ Kim and Anderson, *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Today and Tomorrow*, 361.

⁷¹ Emma Wild-Wood and Peniel Rajkumar (eds), *Foundations for Mission* (Oxford: Regnum, 2013), 6-7.

⁷² Kim and Anderson, *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Today and Tomorrow*, 360.

⁷³ Kim and Anderson, *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Today and Tomorrow*, 356.

⁷⁴ Kim and Anderson, *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Today and Tomorrow*, 184.

⁷⁵ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 512.

with us in the Holy Spirit, and we invite all to join us as we participate in God's transforming and reconciling mission of love to the whole creation.⁷⁶

This call should serve as an urgent reminder to the Naga churches in their continuing missionary work. In the light of what the church in Nagaland would do well to keep in mind, that mission is not a task where target groups are identified or a work that can be measured in terms of success, or even qualified as goals reached, but that by *missio Dei* it is called to what is, in essence, a God-inspired spirituality. Only then will the church worldwide, and in Nagaland in particular, be able to better understand and put Bosch's words into perspective when he says, 'God is a missionary God, God's people are a missionary people.'⁷⁷

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⁷⁶ Kim and Anderson, *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Today and Tomorrow*, 189.

⁷⁷ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 119-20.

SPIRITUALITY AND DISCIPLESHIP IN THE LIVES AND EXPERIENCES OF NAGA WOMEN

Atula Ao (Tsüdir)

Introduction

Today, humanity has a profound and authentic desire for wholeness in the midst of fragmentation, for community in the face of isolation and loneliness, for liberating transcendence, for meaning in life, and for values that endure. Various tenets of spirituality have been seen through the lens of the human search for wholeness throughout the centuries. This search for fulness is also seen in the lives and experiences of women. Therefore, in this paper an attempt is made to understand the experiences of Naga women's spirituality. Every type of spirituality emerges in a context. For Naga women, it emerges from the lived faith community which for over a century has been a Christian community. In the following discourse we will see how Naga women draw their spirituality from different sources. The paper will also critique the aspect of spirituality among Naga women and suggest a few measures for holistic mission and ministry. Before going further, it is important to give some basic information to better understand the background of the Nagas and their origins from Christian mission so as to augment the spirituality of Naga women.

The Nagas: A Background

The Nagas, a Tibeto-Burman-speaking Mongoloid people, occupy a vast contiguous tract of land between India and Myanmar. Nagaland, the homeland of the Nagas, is situated in the North East of India.¹ They are typically a hill people, a characteristic that sharply distinguishes them from plains people living in Assam and other parts of India in terms of their worldview and lifestyle. They also differ sharply in physical features, cultural expressions, political history and religious beliefs from people in the rest of India.² Today, Nagas are scattered. Historically, the ancestral homeland of the Naga people are spread across the state of Nagaland, the four hill districts of Manipur, i.e. Senapati, Ukhrul, Tamenglong and

¹ The North East of India consists of eight states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim.

² Mar Imsong, *God-Land-People: An Ethnic Naga Identity* (Dimapur: Heritage Publication House, 2011), 20-21.

Chandel, Tirap and Changlang Districts in Arunachal Pradesh, and in parts of Assam, and in Sagiang and Kachin states in Myanmar. The Nagas have a rich culture and tradition.³ Before being brought under British administration, each of the sixty-two Naga tribes had their own specific territory divided into independent villages loosely bound together by a set of customary laws, traditional institutions and a structure of governance.⁴ The village was, and remains today, the primary political and social unit for the Naga people. Since time immemorial, their relationship with the land played an essential role in the maintenance of traditional ethos and norms, regulated and enforced by an unwritten customary law.

Christianity and the Nagas

The first convert in the history of the Ao Nagas was a man called Longjanglepzuk from Merangkong village. He was converted through the ministry of S.W. Whiting at Sibsagar, Assam, and was baptized in September 1851. While returning to his village two years later in search of his fiancée, he was killed in a skirmish with the Konyaks. With his death, the dream of further contact between the missionaries and the then headhunting Nagas came to a halt.

In the 1800s, land was left unexplored, and animals and wild beasts dominated the forests and ranges. There was infrequent contact from the outside world and a lack of inter-village roads as well as other forms of communication. Superstition and fear guided village life. Strangers were considered enemies, and any new religion was vehemently opposed. In such a situation, Edward Winter Clark, a white man who a few years earlier had learned the Ao language (*Chungli*), approached a village in the Ao area with the gospel in 1872. Instead of killing him, the tribals listened to his message of love and also entertained him with folk dances and the singing of folk songs. It was very unusual in Naga society to entertain a stranger in such a manner. They were delighted to host him and hear the gospel message, and so invited him to return. With Sibsagar, Assam, as his mission base, and with continuing evangelism, conversions began to occur in the Ao area in 1872. December 23rd 1872 was a historic day as this marked the beginning of Christian mission work among the Nagas. After baptising the first fifteen young warriors, Clark – along with the new believers – gathered for worship in a small thatched chapel they had built. The worship service ended with the Lord's Supper, the first on Naga soil.

³ Toshimenla Jamir, 'Gender Land Relations in Nagaland: Dilemma of Balancing Tradition and Modernity', in *International Journal of Gender and Women's Studies* 2/1 (March 2014), 123.

⁴ Chonchuirinmayo Luithui, 'The Indian Constitution, Law and the Nagas: A Case Study of Nagaland', in *India and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, C.R. Bijoy, Shankar Gopalakrishnan and Shomona Khanna (eds), (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Indigenous People's Pact, 2010), 121.

This was a fulfilment of Edward Clark's long-cherished dream of the inauguration of the Naga mission. In fact, it was the foundation day of the Naga church and the establishment of Christianity among the Nagas. The Holy Spirit effectively used early evangelists and lay pastors as they laid hands on the sick for healing, as demons obeyed them, and as miracles took place in spite of their lack of theological knowledge. Believers united together and helped one another even when they were socially excommunicated from the community. As things got worse, unity was strengthened and faith grew stronger. They became more courageous in sharing their faith with others, which played a very important role in church growth and evangelism.

Interestingly, the structure of village authority played an important role, both in opposition to the gospel as well as in contributing to the growth of churches in Naga villages. Among tribes such as the Ao, Chakhesang, Angami and Rengma, where there was a democratic system of self-government, the conversion of individuals, families and groups of friends was very common in the early years. But the monarchical form of government proved to be a hindrance to conversion during that time since conversion meant expulsion from the village by the village chief. At the same time, mass conversions occurred when the chief was converted. The chief or monarch of the village could force all the villagers to change their beliefs, something which contributed to the growth of Christianity in Naga villages.⁵

The Nagas and Spirituality

Spirituality is a deeper dimension touching the life of a community. It is a socio-ethical principle that governs life. People understand spirituality in different ways. For some it is a life of contemplation and meditation, for some self-sacrifice for the sake of the gospel, and for some a commitment to struggle for justice. While an anthropocentric spirituality is strongly emphasized in other traditions, a cosmo-centric spirituality is affirmed by indigenous peoples. Traditional Naga society, like many other primal societies, was a communitarian society sharing a common cosmic spirituality. Their everyday life and experiences depicted their spirituality in every political, social, economic and religious activity. Traditional Nagas have understood their spirituality in a cosmic worldview, emphasizing a very special relationship with their land. Land for them has not been just a habitat or a political boundary, but one that states their socio-economic, political and religious spirituality. Wati Longchar asserts that human beings are not the only part of creation that declares the glory of God but that the

⁵ Edward E. Dudek, 'Tribal Religious Beliefs of North East India with Special Emphasis on Nagaland and the Introduction and Effect of the Gospel', in *GlobeServe Journal of Missions* 2/12 (2008), 22-23.

whole of creation expresses its spiritual relationship between the land and the people.⁶ Thus, the Nagas have affirmed their spirituality as an indigenous spirituality.

The word 'spirituality' has been understood in different ways through the centuries. Yet little is said about women's spirituality, especially in the lives and experiences of Naga women. The current interest in spirituality as the path to personal and social transformation, and the search for God, is strongly reflected in the experiences of women and their quest. Spirituality is an ambiguous concept open to a wide variety of interpretations and meanings. To begin with, of the many definitions of spirituality, Sandra Schneiders provides one of the most encompassing: spirituality, she says, is 'the experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence towards the ultimate value one perceives'.⁷ For Christians, the ultimate concern is God revealed in Jesus Christ, and experienced through the gift of the Holy Spirit.⁸ Self-transcendence moves one out of compulsive, addictive and obsessive patterns of behaviour towards more healthy relationships with oneself, others and God. In short, Christian spirituality is the conscious human response to God that is both personal and ecclesial – it is life in the Spirit.⁹ Christian spirituality recognizes that God's relationship with creation is one that is energizing and nurturing.¹⁰ The focus of religious devotion involves a stance of ongoing commitment to the well-being (which is at once spiritual and material) of oneself and others. This entails concern for building social relationships of respect, equality and mutuality, thus emphasizing the virtues of solidarity and justice.¹¹

For some in the past, the pursuit of spirituality occurred in the cloister, separated from mainstream society.¹² Today, the locus of sanctification is seen in ordinary life in the world with its day-to-day relationships and responsibilities, and a new 'spirituality-of-being-in-the-world' has developed.¹³ However, a contemplative attitude is not incompatible with action, with creative work, and with dedicated love. In fact, traditionally,

⁶ Wati Longchar, *Returning to Mother Earth: Theology, Christian Witness and Theological Education: An Indigenous Perspective* (Tainan, Taiwan: Programme for Theology and Cultures in Asia, 2013), 26-27.

⁷ Sandra Schneiders, 'Spirituality in the Academy', in *Theological Studies* 50 (1989), 684.

⁸ William Thompson, 'Spirituality, Spiritual Development and Holiness', in *Review for Religious* 51/5 (1992), 648.

⁹ Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method* (London: SPCK, 1991), 37.

¹⁰ Anne Patrick, 'Ethics and Spirituality: The Social Justice Connection', in *The Way Supplement* 63 (1988), 108.

¹¹ Patrick, 'Ethics and Spirituality: The Social Justice Connection', 110.

¹² Ursula King, 'Spirituality, Society and Culture', in *The Way Supplement* 73 (1992), 20.

¹³ King, 'Spirituality, Society and Culture'.

the ideas of prayer, meditation and contemplation have been associated with a deepening of one's personal life, and this expansion has resulted in a greater capacity to understand and serve others. Contemplation of Christ and a personal encounter with neighbour, especially the poor, should be the epitome of spiritual ethics. In short, contemplation must blend with 'the Christian ideal of love in action – in engaged, compassionate, forgiving, courageous and effective care for human beings in need.'¹⁴ In other words, an integral spirituality always connects inward renewal with active service to others. In a Christian context, 'spirituality has for many decades been identified with a radical world-denying, anti-materialistic, ascetic philosophy of life. This has resulted in a polarization between the spiritual and the material'.¹⁵ Unfortunately, such a view appeared to isolate spirituality from the 'normal' person seeking to live 'well' in a secular world. Today, however, contemporary spirituality seeks to overcome this dualism and includes various dimensions: the ecological, feminist and post-patriarchal, along with cultivating a healthy body, a holistic outlook, and understanding the value of work.¹⁶

Patriarchy, Gender, and Discipleship

Spirituality, as traditionally understood, has often been cast in a dominantly patriarchal mode, where the spiritual quest was primarily the prerogative of a male intellectual, social and religious elite. The church, being a patriarchal church institution, gives less space to women to express their freedom of identity. In spite of these predominant patterns in the Naga context, the survival of the church has, to a very large extent, been made possible by the active role that women in particular have played in her life and work. Women hold to and emphasize prayer, preaching and practical concern. This is shown in their ability to raise money for the church and in activities related to church ministry. Women have been actively involved in the ministry from the beginning. They were involved in the starting of prayer groups, and indeed societies on their own, by hosting them. Women in Naga society have been instrumental in channelling the spiritual life of the church by engaging in diversified roles. With the coming of Christianity to Nagaland in the 1840s (despite its temporary fading for a short period of time), and later with the arrival of the Clarks and Godhula Brown who resumed the Naga Mission in the 1870s, women have been actively engaged in the furtherance of the Naga Mission. Despite the undeniable

¹⁴ James J. Bacik, 'Contemporary Spirituality', in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, Michael Downey (ed), (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 220.

¹⁵ C. Kourie, 'What Is Christian Spirituality?', in *Christian Spirituality in South Africa*, C. Kourie and L. Kretzschmar (eds), (Pietermaritzburg, RSA: Cluster Publications, 2000), 12.

¹⁶ Kourie, 'What Is Christian Spirituality?', 13.

progress initiated and achieved, women continue to experience exploitation, discrimination and inequality within the church; women's experiences as victims and as being marginalized remain unchallenged in many communities, and women's contribution, talents and abilities remain unrecognized and untapped.

Naga society traditionally follows a patriarchal system in which the father is the head of the family. Like women in many parts of the world, Naga women have always been an oppressed and deprived section. Naga women do not enjoy equal rights and opportunities with men. From an early age, girls are taught to be quiet, gentle and submissive, and to perform all the household chores.

Despite her restrictive role in a traditional and patriarchal society, the Naga woman is still involved in making decisions in society. Naga women have been promoters of peace at home, in society and in conflict situations. Through Naga history, Naga women have played key roles in diffusing highly charged situations and in bringing about amicable solutions.¹⁷ This is seen in the following reflection on Naga women's spirituality and their contribution towards mission.

Prayer and Devotion

For Naga women, their first experience of public speaking was public prayer and then giving public testimonies. Exhortations were not seen as preaching but rather as encouraging people to respond to the gospel, and so women were 'allowed' to participate in this. The concentration of women in service roles today may be a consequence of these exclusionary (i.e. sexist) practices which precluded women's participation in other positions of leadership within the church. However, Naga women were not able to express their spiritual convictions in tangible terms to rectify social inequities – i.e. by developing or participating in social service programmes. This latter explanation is consistent with theories which hold that women are socialized to nurture others. For Naga women, spirituality was understood in terms of prayer and devotion rather than using the fundamental principles of Christianity as the basis for offering radical challenges to oppressive and dehumanizing social conditions, even in terms of their leadership role in the church and society.

It seems almost superfluous to include a section on the role of women because anyone who knows Naga society well knows that women's spirituality and social power are strong. However, a discussion on this aspect of Naga social and cultural life also illuminates further aspects of spirituality and its endurance over time. Although there is evidence of

¹⁷ T. Ninghorla Zimik, 'Naga Women as Peace Maker in War and Conflict Situation (Yesterday and Today)', in *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities* II/1 (April, 2014), 114-15.

women's power having been diminished through coming under the domain of the patriarchal state, perhaps the greater damage has been through misconceptions and assumptions of Naga society and the role of women in it.

This was consistent for three types of participation: the level of involvement in religious activities, church attendance, and private or personal acts of religiosity. Women engage in formal religious practices, and listen to religious programmes. Prayer, and specific beliefs and cognitions about God and the meaning of life, are particularly important in Naga women's efforts to cope with difficult life events. These uses of religion and spirituality have been associated with the positive well-being of Naga women. There is no doubt that prayer and devotion is one aspect of spirituality. But it does not stop there. Christian spirituality is shaped not only through the understanding of a community, but also through its lively interaction with cultural and social contexts, and its response to human needs. Many studies agree that the main impetus for mission comes from the combination of the biblical call to serve others and the immediate needs presented by society, especially in the context of suffering. Worship, word, liturgy and prayer are critical parts of Christian spiritual discipline which sustain mission, and they are practised in a community context.¹⁸

Spirituality is a term that requires special care in its definition. It is important to recognize the difference between spirituality and religion. Spirituality can be seen as an internal connection with the universe that includes a sense of meaning or purpose in life, a cosmology or way of explaining our personal universe, and a personal moral code. Religion, on the other hand, could be defined as the specific practice and ritual that is an external expression of some people's spirituality. What is important here is that spirituality is your relationship to the universe around you. Again, it is the relationship that is important, rather than the objective form that this relationship chooses to manifest itself (that is, what religion is). My relationship with the universe is unique to myself, and it would be unrealistic to expect anyone else to share exactly the same relationship. Thus, indigenous spirituality could be defined as indigenous peoples' unique relationship with their universe.¹⁹

Spirituality no longer refers mainly to the spiritual life of a religious minority who are striving for perfection through a life of prayer and virtue beyond the 'ordinary' believer. Rather, it now focuses on the human spirit of believers and non-believers, and on their lives as a whole – that is, on the physical and emotional, the intellectual and social, the political and cultural, and the secular and religious, dimensions of their lives. In fact,

¹⁸ Kenneth R. Ross, *Edinburgh 2010: New Directions for Church in Mission* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey International University Press, 2010), 285-86.

¹⁹ S. Wilson, 'Recognising the Importance of Spirituality in Indigenous Learning', in *Australasian Corrections Education Association Conference, Creating New Learning Cultures* (Fremantle, WA: 1999), 1.

there is a growing consensus in recognizing that Christian spirituality is a sub-set of a broader category that is neither confined to nor defined by Christianity, or even by religion.

Compliance

One of the consequences of a patriarchal culture is that it not only convinces men that they are superior, but also convinces women themselves that they are inferior. It seems that Naga women are so accustomed to a socio-cultural mindset in which they are assigned an inferior position that they simply accept it as 'right' and feel 'comfortable' with it. Many women prefer to maintain the status quo, and are not willing to come forward to take up challenges as they feel that they are not 'capable' of doing so. Consequently, Naga women's contribution in the political and social life of the community is almost negligible.²⁰ With the coming of intellectual discourses on women's empowerment and the age of enlightenment, Naga women's contribution to social and political life have made a tremendous change compared with the past. However, ironically, women are still exempted from all the leadership roles in the village as well as in the political arena. With the coming of education, women are more

²⁰ A system of direct democracy was practised in almost all the tribes but in the patriarchal environment women had few decision-making powers, and even today little has changed as regards the position of women. So far, the state has elected only one woman to parliament, Ms Rano Shaiza, in 1977. There has been no one more recently. The State Legislative Assembly has never had a woman representative. At village level, the mandatory requirement of having women representatives on the village development board has remained on paper. There has been no representation of women on any local village council or board, or indeed on any other traditional body either. The role of women in political life is also restricted within the norms of the customary laws. Since the said laws do not guarantee any right for tribal women to participate in any political life in society, seldom are they consulted on socio-political matters. The recent controversy regarding the 33% reservation for women demonstrates how patriarchal we are in spite of all the developments that have been ushered in. There is gender discrimination in the North East. When it comes to politics, women's commissions in the states of the region have pressed for a 33% reservation for women in Assemblies and Parliament. 'There is gender discrimination when it comes to women in politics. We had tried our best to convince our men to allow women to take part in the electoral battle, but all in vain,' Mizoram State Women's Commission chairperson Lalnipuii said (*The Assam Tribune*, Guwahati, 9th February 2012). Nagaland State Women's Commission chairperson Sano Vamoose said, 'There is strong opposition against women taking part in electoral politics, but there is a silver lining for us after the court's order directed the Nagaland government to implement the 33% women's reservation during the municipal and town council polls.' The women's reservation bill seeking 33% reservation has been hanging fire in parliament for want of a consensus among political parties. It has been passed in the Radia Sabha but not yet in the Lok Sabha.

aware of their rights and well-being today but they still live in the ‘cocoon’ of their inferiority and submissiveness. Naga women’s spirituality is about the socio-economic-political and spiritual uplift of the people. Compliance with the oppressive structures of society does not call for spirituality. Rather, spirituality has been the means of women challenging dehumanizing social structures and in asserting their identity. Ursula King is of the opinion that ‘feminist spirituality involves the awareness of women’s own power from within, of a new empowerment which can be nurtured to effect personal, social and political changes’.²¹

A multi-dimensional approach to the study of Naga women’s religious and spiritual lives holds the promise of elucidating this link. Such an approach would allow us to shed light on the ways in which Naga women use their religious and spiritual convictions to construct subjectively meaningful understandings of gender, femininity, family and community responsibility. The use of increasingly complex approaches to the study of Naga women’s religiosity and spirituality will help us to understand and facilitate Naga women’s ongoing efforts to challenge social injustice, and to transform the political and relational landscapes of society. According to King:

Women’s new consciousness and sense of identity, their search for liberation and fulfilment, should lead to a critical re-examination of the past forms of spirituality as well as an awareness of new possibilities for their spiritual quest and for spiritual transformation. Thus, many women feel that they can no longer simply practise a spirituality handed down to them from the past, whether Christian, Jewish or other, but that they must develop their own spirituality rooted in the awareness of their own power from within, in a newly felt sense of empowerment which helps them to work for personal, social and political changes, and for changes in the Church.²²

Spirituality and Culture

Culture and ethnicity informs and influences an individual’s unique understanding, acceptance and expression of spirituality. For some cultures, spirituality is deeply important – an inextricable part of daily life and a moving force in shaping culture. For many people from these backgrounds, the spiritual and material worlds are inseparable. In many cultural and religious traditions, women have the primary responsibility for transmitting cultural and spiritual knowledge and practices, and group identity more generally, to succeeding generations. Because culture exists through, and is generated by, the lived experiences of people, the role of women in transmitting culture also confirms them as creators and custodians of

²¹ Ursula King, ‘Spirituality’, in *The A to Z of Feminist Theology*, L. Isherwood and D. McEwan (eds), (Sheffield, UK: Academic Press, 1996), 209.

²² Ursula King, ‘Women’s Contribution to Contemporary Spirituality’, in *The Way Supplement* 84 (Autumn 1995), 29.

culture. For this reason, people across a diverse range of communities view women's adherence to and promulgation of cultural norms as integral to cultural survival.

In many instances, this relationship between gender and culture is used as a basis for justifying violations of women's human rights. For example, in many cultures, religions and states, the rights of individual women are subordinated to upholding women's role as the carriers of group identity. Thus, women are often denied the right to make autonomous decisions regarding their own sexuality, childbearing and marriage, as well as their children's nationality, religion and citizenship. These violations of basic rights are rationalized as necessary to ensure cultural preservation and other collective identities, which women are thought to embody.

On the other hand, women's primary role in transmitting and creating culture can serve as a basis for protecting and enhancing women's status within their families and communities. Naga women's spirituality finds its expression from the rich tapestry woven together in their traditional cultural practices of dances, songs, rituals and dramas. Seen from a traditional view and from the viewpoint from which Christianity was introduced, such experiences were considered demonic and animistic by the missionaries. The derivations of their spirituality from these experiences were outrightly rejected by the early missionaries. Thus, Naga women's understanding of spirituality was restricted to prayer and devotion, while the rich cultural practices of songs and dances that was imbibed by their forebears is now only a memory. Women, blessed with a natural affinity to something that is our 'own', can weave the emotion-filled music and spirit-pregnant dances as an essential part of evolution from being a conglomerate and journey together (with men as well) in a quest for an original spirituality.²³

Spirituality Derived from Experience

Naga women have their own stories to tell, minds to speak out, pains and sufferings to express, feelings about God to share, and accumulated joy to pour forth.²⁴ The historical context of the life of Naga women is their struggle for survival in everyday life. It is here in the challenges of each day that they encounter God. In all this, God has been their consolation in the face of affliction, their company in solitude, their strength in combat, their support in moments of weakness, their health in times of sickness, their food in time of need. Therefore, the scriptures become an important

²³ Eyingbeni, 'Doing Theology from Naga Women Perspective', in *Side by Side: Naga Women Doing Theology in Search of Justice and Partnership*, Limatula Longkumer and Talijungla Longkumer (eds), (Kolkata: CCA-EGY & NWTF, 2012), 15.

²⁴ Eyingbeni, 'Doing Theology from Naga Women Perspective', 9.

companion for them through which they encounter God.²⁵ The struggles in which they are involved in their day-to-day lives encourage Naga women to read the Bible with the eyes that seek God who affirms them in their struggle and quest for life.

A Naga feminist theology takes the whole cosmic dimension into the economy of salvation. It sees a close affinity between humanity and the whole of creation, and resonates with the core of the Naga tribal worldview which is the affirmation of interdependence, interrelatedness and harmony among all creatures, including humanity. A rediscovery of this holistic view of life is imperative. The oppression of women and the oppression of creation are interconnected.²⁶ Spirituality is not limited to the human realm alone, but embraces the whole cosmos. It is a spirituality that celebrates life and the goodness of creation. It challenges us to rethink and redefine our understanding of spirituality. God is viewed not as an individual but as a community. Human community is an integral part of the earth community.

The experience of Naga women plays a pivotal role in the experience of oneself, the experience of divine, the experience of community, and the experience of one another and the world. From these experiences is derived their spirituality to tell their own stories, to tell their concealed experience of God, and to share these with one another. Women's experiences will help them to discover their own self and lead them to a creative re-imagining and renaming of the sacred, and a sense of the interdependence of our spiritual-human relationship with the whole earth and the cosmos, and our ethical responsibilities deriving from this important bond. According to Ursula King, 'The discovery of women's self and women's spiritual quest is a process, a journey of exploration, discovery and adventure which has been mapped by many contemporary writers whose novels explore in many imaginative ways women's new experience, questions and insights.'²⁷ These may be concerned with women's search for independence, strength and self-assurance, but also with women's intimacy and mutuality with others, revealing deep connections between embodiment, sexuality and spirituality through the use of metaphor and story, which often reveal a more powerful picture than can be conveyed through abstract academic analysis. It is argued that many spiritual resources come from women's own experience, the recognition of their inner power and strength, and their need to create rituals which address the different stages and resulting crises in women's lives. Such spirituality is necessary to provide a spiritually life-giving environment with teachings and practices,

[which] enable women, as well as men, to gain access to the liberating power of the divine that dwells within them. On the one hand, this will mean

²⁵ V. Anshely Sumi, 'Tribal Women and the Bible', in *Tribal Voice*, V. Anshely Sumi (ed), (Dimapur: Aloino Centre Publication, 2007), 67.

²⁶ Sumi, 'Tribal Women and the Bible', 69.

²⁷ King, 'Women's Contribution to Contemporary Spirituality', 29-30.

excluding traditions that foster a negative self-image, hinder the recognition and use of one's gifts, discourage personal development, undermine assertiveness, and otherwise inhibit full participation in life around them. On the other hand, it will mean encouraging the creation of new forms of religious expression that acknowledge women's experience as a primary source for 'doing theology' and for developing the notion of spirituality.²⁸

Naga Women's Spirituality and Holistic Mission

Naga women's experiences of spirituality and discipleship can be diverse if only understood from the perspective of a holistic approach. There is no denying the fact that Naga women have contributed an enormous amount of resources for the spiritual uplift of the church. However, one needs to look beyond the compartmentalized ideology of spirituality which is more than prayer, devotion and faithful giving. Our church activities, our prayers, our theological qualifications, our preaching and almsgiving, profit us nothing. Faithful participation in worship is not enough. It must be accompanied by faithful, upright living. Although we find the consideration of spirituality in relation to the spiritual life of human beings such as prayers, worship, etc., further assessment must be made of other aspects of life such as life's positive dimensions and their liberating and transforming aspects. These positive dimensions comprise all good and constructive ethical, moral and social values. It is a call for men and women to demonstrate the reality of their faith by living it out in their day-to-day lives. Such living would be accompanied by actions and an active engagement in challenging oppressive structures in church and society.

Another important ingredient of Naga women's spirituality can focus on the aspect of liberation, which means so much more than the traditional understanding of patriarchy that has silenced them. Such engagement will help them to be liberated from oppressive situations and structures, both external and internal, to be freed from rigorously prescriptive codes of behaviour, to experiment with and experience the freedom of the Spirit, which altogether can be seen as profoundly liberating and exhilarating. It is also important for Naga women to explore their own spiritual and creative potential from the resources that they possess within themselves to explore such new ways, and to draw new and different maps of spirituality. Tribal spirituality is derived from nature. Therefore, holism, the hallmark of tribal spirituality, is the guiding principle for the tribal approach to nature and the entire cosmos. The worldview of Naga women can be studied in terms of their spirituality which emanates from nature. Naga women's spirituality can be an eco-feminist spirituality, which is earth/nature-centred, inclusive and holistic.

²⁸ Judith G. Martin, 'Why Women Need a Feminist Spirituality', in *Women's Studies Quarterly* XXI/1 & 2 (Spring/Summer 1993), 115.

A holistic Naga women's spirituality has to be biblically based, culturally centred and theologically relevant. Such spirituality cannot be an over-romanticizing of the past, but a relevantly critical appreciation and appropriation of it. Culture, tradition, the Bible, theology – all have to find their relevant place in such a spirituality to be challenging and relevant to the present-day scenario. The source of such spirituality can be experience, tradition, culture, faith (Bible), the unique contribution of tribal spirituality, etc. Such spirituality has to be a critique of both the past and the present while at the same time appropriating the 'goodness' of everything that is relevant. Such spirituality is all about life, life in its fulness for all.

Naga women's spirituality is not simply a struggle *for* life but also a spirituality *of* life, whereby women are nourished and strengthened by the experience of the processes of life itself – its great energies for renewal, sustenance, new birth and further growth. By strongly trusting life, through faith and hope in the powers of the Spirit acting in and through all the experiences of their daily life, women are strengthened and grow to experience a vision of the dignity, beauty and fulness of life – a vision they can share and transmit to empower others in today's world.

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MIZO SPRITUALITY

Fanai Hrangkhuma

The purpose of this paper is to describe and analyze Mizo spirituality. This at once raises some questions: who are the Mizo and what is their spirituality? And this further raises the question of spirituality: what do we mean by it? The nature of the study is mostly personal reflection, not fresh research.

The Mizo

First, who are the Mizo? The Mizo are the Mongoloid tribe who inhabit Mizoram, one of the states of the Republic of India, sandwiched between Bangladesh in the west and Myanmar in the south and east. The population of Mizoram at present is about one million. They settled in their present habitat most probably about the seventeenth or eighteenth century, migrating from the east. Nothing much is known about their original home, or who their ancestors were. When they moved to Mizoram, they were clustered in several clans, each having its own sovereign chief, similar to the Greek city-state. They were semi-nomadic, moving at intervals of every few years – due mostly to their slash-and-burn method of cultivation. They occasionally fought against each other for various reasons. They frequently raided the neighbouring peoples in West Bengal and Assam to obtain their domestic needs such as salt, captured people for slaves, and always brought home some human heads. Because of this, they were called head-hunters. They believed that the human being they killed would be the killer's slave in *Pialral*, the good place one went to after death. Bringing home a human head also meant honour in society, and being highly regarded by all, especially by the village maidens.

In religion, Mizos were among the groups of people most often described as animistic. They believed in the high benevolent God called *Pathian*, believed to be the one who blessed and helped them in times of difficulty and hardship, and who delivered them from their adversities. However, *Pathian* was not very active in their daily struggle for survival and progress, rather like the deistic God. Almost all the misfortunes that befell them, they believed, were the activities of the numerous malicious evil spirits, dwelling in every nook and cranny of their land, easily provoked to anger and easily prone to take revenge when offended. People offered numerous varieties of sacrifices to appease the spirits' anger. That was their greatest burden. While they believed in evil spirits and the good,

great God, they also believed in the existence of good spirits, and in spirits that were neither good nor evil, but who were just nuisances. The good spirits sometimes helped those who deserved help. The neutral spirits mostly annoyed people, *hiding* something from its owners, for example.

Mizos believed in life after death: there were two places to go when a person died, one called *Pialral*, and the other the dead people's village. *Pialral* was a place of plenty where one did not need to work but enjoyed life endlessly. The other place was a life of dreary darkness where one lived a shadowy and unpleasant existence. One needed to accomplish difficult feats, either giving a series of costly feasts to the villagers, or killing several animals of different kinds in the chase and giving a feast every time an animal was killed, in order to go to *Pialral*. Very few accomplished the requirements to attain *Pialral*. The rest were without hope of reaching the coveted place.

Theirs was an oral society, without any written form of language. Since their life was simple and uncluttered, their needs were modest, their primitive slash-and-burn method of cultivation supplemented by hunting being enough to supply all their needs. Their social life was well organized with the village chief as the head, a hereditary position, assisted by a group of elders selected by the chief. It was an open, face-to-face society where no secret could be hidden for long. This was before the coming of two British groups to the land, one the administrators and the other Christian missionaries. This is a simplified summary of the Mizo at the time the British came to Mizoram.

The British administered the land from 1891 till the independence of India in 1947. The two pioneer missionaries came in 1894, reduced the language to written form, and introduced medical healthcare. The gospel they introduced was, in many respects, a modified improvement of what the Mizos were already acquainted with. The good God, albeit far removed as it were, became the immanent God, who is the creator of the universe and all there is in it. He was still the transcendent God, but now nearer and more readily available to those who prayed to him. Jesus the Saviour was far mightier than all the demons put together, and the angels far better than the best spirits called *lasi*. The *Pialral* concept was replaced by a better place called heaven, and the concept of the dead peoples' village was replaced by a place of punishment called hell, and eventually the lake of fire. Everyone could be saved and go to heaven if they only believed in Jesus Christ. The gospel the missionaries brought to Mizoram, along with education and healthcare, was definitely the gospel for the Mizo – and within fifty years almost all the Mizo in Mizoram became Christian. During the last hundred years or so, the Mizo have undergone tremendous cultural changes affected mostly by the combination of British administration, the missionaries, two World Wars, and Indian independence. Most of the churches in Mizoram today are missionary churches, sending out hundreds of missionaries to other parts of India and to quite a few foreign countries.

Spirituality

Spirituality is a relatively new term that it is not easy to define clearly. After studying fourteen scholars on the subject, I have come to the conclusion that, depending from what angle they are looking at the subject, they use different, yet similar – terms, not very different from each other in their final meaning. It may be studied at three levels, namely its meaning, its means and its outcome. However, the three are so intricately related and so connectively overlapping, it is rather incongruous to have separate sections for each. The meaning itself can at the same time be both the means and the outcome.

I attempt to define spirituality from the perspective of a three-dimensional relationship. First of all, spirituality is giving a deep devotion and commitment to God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, and loving him wholeheartedly. Secondly, spirituality is an attempt to love one's neighbour as oneself as an outcome of one's supreme love for God. Thirdly, spirituality may also be defined as an attempt to care for creation as an outcome of devotion to the creator God in accordance with the scriptures. These are the triad of spirituality and should be understood in terms of holism. The three are parts of each other in symbiotic relationship and should be understood in relationship with each other, supplementing, supporting and enriching each other. Each of them could be studied in isolation, but to understand true spirituality, the triad should always be studied as one whole truth in three very closely related dimensions. True biblical spirituality always leads to mission, loving service to others, and caring for the environment. In other words, missions, social action and service, environmental care and a life of love, integrity and holiness, are the manifestation of a true biblical spirituality. Any spirituality that does not manifest itself in a life of integrity, concern for mission, social service and ecological concern is not full spirituality. Let me attempt to briefly enlarge on each of these dimensions.

The first step of true Christian spirituality is when a person, convicted by the Holy Spirit, turns to God in repentance and submission by faith; the Holy Spirit regenerates him/her, to become a child of God, which we normally call being born again or born in the Spirit. He/she is now in Christ, a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). As we begin to grow in faith and in the knowledge of God who loves us very much, we become more and more devoted to God and make a deeper commitment to God and begin to love God supremely. We want more and more to live for the one who died for us and rose again from the dead (2 Cor. 5:14-25). We then deny ourselves and follow Jesus Christ, carrying the Cross daily (Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23). Our desire becomes the will of our Saviour, clearly written in the Bible, and we are increasingly willing to pay the cost of discipleship. The desire and willingness to do God's will leads us to a life of diligent Bible study, prayer and praise to God. Our intense desire is that the fruit of the Spirit may be more and more visible in our lives (Gal. 5:22-23). We will grow in integrity

and honesty and show an increasingly wholesome testimony, becoming the light of the world and the salt of the earth (Matt. 5:13-16). We learn daily to practise biblical instruction as how to live in such matters as denying whatever belongs to our former nature: 'sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry' (Col. 3:5). Instead, realizing that we were bought at a price, we learn to glorify God in our bodies (1 Cor. 6:20), discarding unhealthy and dirty habits, and developing healthy and useful personal ones. Following the example of Christ, we grow increasingly into the likeness of Jesus Christ (1 Cor, 11:1). We serve God with the gifts of the Holy Spirit bestowed on us. Increasingly, we seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, longing for the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth and its final culmination in the *eschaton*. This is the first dimension of spirituality and the foundation of all its other dimensions. A spiritual person is never corrupt but honest and reliable in everything, whether in money matters or sexuality, and in everything big or small. The fruit of the Spirit is increasingly manifested in our personal lives. This is the divine/vertical dimension of spirituality.

Secondly, since the love of God is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, we begin to relate to people with love. Love of others is the natural outcome of love for God. If we love God, we cannot but love other human beings (1 John 4:7-21). We begin to love our neighbours as ourselves (Matt. 22:39). This love is manifested in many ways. We want all people to be saved like us, while justice for all longs for the liberation of those who are oppressed and exploited, to help those who are in need, and promote the well-being of everyone. Love makes it impossible to be too selfish, living only for self which the truly spiritual person has already rejected. This is the social dimension of spirituality.

Thirdly, love for God is not only manifested in loving neighbours, but in the appreciation of God's beautiful creation, learning to know more of the creator through nature, and a desire to preserve, maintain, protect and develop creation according to the scriptures (Gen. 1:27-30). If one loves the creator, it is impossible not to appreciate his creation. This is the ecological dimension of spirituality.

When we truly relates to God, to others and to creation in love, we receive God's forgiveness, and his peace and love are poured into us, any fear of others is diminished because of love, and the confusion in us is more and more settled. The result is increasing peace, contentment and confidence to live and face the world and the future. We develop a tremendous burden for people who are yet to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. We exercise the gifts of the Spirit in our ministry and the fruit of the Spirit in us is increasingly obvious. This is possible only by the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit.

The means of spirituality are also the signs and the practice of spirituality. First and foremost is the reading of the Bible and daily meditation on the word of God, a daily conversation with God in prayer,

thanksgiving and praise, and worship by submitting and surrendering oneself to God afresh daily. This may be done both individually and collectively, in groups. Without the regular habit of Bible study, meditation on the word, prayer, praise, thanksgiving and worship, both individually and collectively, spirituality cannot be sustained for long. Sharing fresh insights and God's blessings with others are both the manifestation and means of spirituality. Ministry and service are also both the means and manifestation of spirituality and this should be done, as far as is practicable, according to the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Discipline of body and mind are also means of sustaining and deepening spirituality.

The Historical Perspective of Mizo Spirituality

All Mizos in Mizoram are nominally Christian, belonging to one of the many denominational churches. The Baptist Church of Mizoram, the Presbyterian Church of India (Mizoram Synod), and the Evangelical Church of Maraland are churches planted by missionaries from the UK. The Presbyterian Church is by far the largest denominational church with a membership of about 600,000, more than the combined number of all the denominational churches in Mizoram. The Baptist Church of Mizoram is the second largest with a membership of about 150,000. The Evangelical Church of Maraland is probably the third largest. These are the three churches of which the membership originally came from non-Christian backgrounds. Other denominations came to Mizoram later and their members are mostly made up of those who were already Christian. These were Roman Catholics, Seventh Day Adventists, the Salvation Army, the United Pentecostal Church, and lately the Methodists, the Assemblies of God and a few others. There may be a hundred or so different groups of Christians in Mizoram, most of which originated in Mizoram itself. The prayer of Jesus recorded in John 17 does not seem to have been taken seriously by Mizo Christians. On the other hand, the multiplication of indigenous churches indicates that the Mizo have accepted Christianity on their own terms and have interpreted Christianity according to their own contexts. They own Christianity as their religion, and not merely as an imported one.

In the midst of this myriad of small denominational churches, there is bound to be a divergent understanding of spirituality. The differences notwithstanding, since the Mizos are a single tribe, speaking the same language, having the same culture and living side-by-side in an open society, though small in number, their understanding and practice of spirituality have many common elements.

First of all, revival or renewal characterizes Mizo spirituality. Since the first wave of revivals in 1906, these have never completely died down in Mizoram. However, there have been a series of bigger waves of revival at intervals of a few years. Each revival had its unique theological emphasis.

In the first revival, the few Christians scattered in some villages experienced a deep sense of being sinful against God which was a new experience for them. In the second revival in 1913, the Cross of Jesus Christ was the dominant emphasis. Another theological truth that gripped them was the imminent return of the Lord Jesus Christ. The love of God that was manifested in the Cross of Christ was keenly felt, and the belief that the imminent second coming of the Lord moved them to urgently share the gospel with others. This resulted in the increase of a 'people who obey God', which was the title given to new Christians.

In 1919, what many people supposed to be the greatest and longest-lasting revival began in three villages at a considerable distance from each other, namely Thingsai, Zotlang (near Lunglei) and Nisapui, on the night of Sunday 26th July 1919. The characteristics also were exactly the same. The main theological emphasis was the suffering of Jesus on the Cross. This revival reached almost all Christians in Mizoram. It is debatable whether or not the next revival was a continuation of the 1919 one. The theme indicates that the 1929 revival, even if it was a continuation, had an added dimension, which was a combination of all the major themes of the previous revivals – such as a deep sense of one's sin against God, the suffering of Jesus on the Cross and the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. All these revivals contributed tremendously to an increase in believers. The difference with the 1935 revival was the manifestation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, especially the gift of tongues, along with prophecy. It became controversial and many churches refused to entertain it. However, this is no longer true. With perhaps a few exceptions, all the churches welcome the charismatic type of revival.

All these revivals were characterised by singing and dancing to traditional tunes, and there was tremendous prayer alone and in groups. Missionaries had forbidden the use of the traditional drum in church meetings, believing that it was connected with paganism. But during the third revival, the drum began to be used again, and within a short time all the churches were using drums except in the two churches where both the Baptist and the Presbyterian missionaries had worshipped. Mizo Christians began to compose hymns for worship that beautifully blended western and Mizo style of tunes, which one might say bridged the difference between western and traditional Mizo tunes. The translated hymns were also indigenised into a unique Mizo style of singing. In many ways, revivals became a very significant force for indigenising the churches of Mizoram.

The next revival involved an awakening to the word of God leading to an emphasis on the assurance of salvation in this life. This was not a completely new teaching for Mizo Christians, but from sometime in the early 1960s, this renewal became popular especially among college students in Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya. In the initial stages, there were numerous debates on the question of whether a person could definitely know if one was born again and was already saved, and how one

could know it now. A deeper and more detailed study and understanding of the Bible soon decided the matter; it was possible and desirable to experience the new birth and know it here and now. We need not wait until death to know whether one was saved or not. This has become an added dimension of Mizo spirituality ever since. Probably the most popular term among Mizo Christians is 'born again'. 'Are you born again?' has become the most asked spiritual question.

This renewal led to camps and crusades beginning in the early 1970s, and has now become the most popular means of renewal. Over a hundred evangelistic groups, most of them recognized by denominational churches, are invited by local churches to Mizoram throughout the year. A large majority of the evangelists are not theologically trained. A joke that has circulated is that 'born-again Mizo believers outnumber the population of Mizoram'. I met a young person in Mizoram in 1980 who told me he had been born again 48 times!

During the latter half of the 1980s, another means of renewal, called El Bethel and led by Lalhmingliana, became popular in many parts of Mizoram. It is similar to Bible camps in which a time and a location are set aside for renewal. The new element introduced in El Bethel was that all participants would spend some time seeking the Lord by means of loud prayer, even singing to the Lord, and meditating on the word of God by themselves. There is preaching and worship and singing together. Lalhmingliana's main emphasis was on humbling oneself before the Lord, sometimes by prostrating oneself on the ground, and even being trampled on by others as an act of humiliation and submission to God. It has been an effective means of renewal all over Mizoram for some time.

Currently, there are several local revivals, some with bizarre experiences such as behaving like babies, howling and biting like jackals, acting like alcoholics and drug addicts, laughing, behaving as if delivering a baby, somersaulting and many more. The so-called Kelkang Revival is the most popular at the moment. It began on 12th June 2013, and continues in Kelkang, a village of about 134 families but attracts thousands of people. Since June 2015, more than 160,000 people have visited Kelkang. Even today, groups from various local churches from all over Mizoram visit it to experience spiritual renewal. A family in the village would receive as many as sixty or even more guests at a time, who would stay, typically, for two or three days. The daily programme in the village is as follows: morning is individual time for seeking the Lord's blessing. At about ten o'clock, people gather at a central place assigned for that purpose. A leader would lead them to proclaim the victory of the Lord as loud as they could. This is followed by a mass prayer, prayed simultaneously and out loud by all. This is also the time when healing of physical ailments often takes place. After this, the people are assigned to various places to seek the Lord's blessings, either individually or in small groups. Just like the El Bethel experience, people seek the Lord by meditating, praying and singing, and humbling

themselves before God. This revival has no designated human leader. The revival continues even today. All the participants that I have asked say that the blessings they have received are inexpressible. What has happened to the villagers of Kelkang themselves? What becomes of those who have visited the place after they return? What is the visible fruit of this mighty revival in the churches apart from the singing and the dancing? The answers to these questions are still up in the air. It is too early to assess the impact of this revival on the churches and on society.

Summing Up

What then is Mizo spirituality? As indicated, while there appears to be a common understanding of spirituality among the Mizo, there seems to be some variety of understanding. In the following paragraphs, I will attempt discussing the Mizo understanding of spirituality.

First, the Mizo are a singing people. They love music, and singing is a part of almost every meeting or gathering. Singing hymns is both the means and sign of spirituality. Singing to the accompaniment of musical instruments, both traditional and modern or western, is now a very important part of worship. It is not simply the singing Christian hymns (both translated and indigenous) that the Mizo desire. It is singing with deep emotion as they merge into the message of the hymns. This is expressed in the raising of hands and moving to the empty space in front of the pulpit to join others in a dance, moving anti-clockwise. This is regarded by many as a sign of higher spirituality beyond routine singing without any emotional stirring or as only a duty in worship. When there is no dancing with the singing in church worship, the church is regarded as backsliding and spiritually dry.

Second, for some Mizo Christians, bodily tremors believed to be caused by the Spirit is high on their understanding of spirituality, along with spiritual gifts. The gift of prophecy, mostly understood as the ability to see the future and the gift of instant faith healing, are highly regarded by many Mizo.

Third, for some, true spirituality always results in more giving to the church, and is in itself spirituality. To my knowledge, all the churches in Mizoram are completely self-supporting. Mizo churches are among the most generous churches in the world in giving for the ministry. The amount may not be high, but in proportion to the wealth of the people and their income, Mizo church members are, by and large, among the most sacrificial givers that I know of.

Fourth, the highest form of spirituality for the majority of Mizo Christians is a full commitment to full-time Christian ministry, and cross-cultural mission is still more highly regarded than pastoral ministry. There are a growing number of Christians in Mizoram who promote the belief that every Christian is called for God's ministry and mission, and whatever

and wherever we are, we are serving the Lord in our professions, whether in government or the private sector. Mission is understood as sending representatives into cross-cultural situations for the specific purpose of preaching the gospel to non-Christians. The churches in Mizoram are among the most active missionary churches in the world. A few examples will clarify this.

The Presbyterian Synod of Mizoram is the largest with a total membership of about 600,000 supporting about 2,000 cross-cultural workers in more than eleven foreign mission fields and fifteen mission fields in India with an annual budget of over 250,000,000 Rupees. The Baptist Church of Mizoram, the second largest denominational church in Mizoram, with a total membership of about 150,000, supports about 1,000 cross-cultural missionaries in nine foreign countries and thirteen Indian fields. It spends about 40% of its total budget on mission work. Hundreds of young Mizos apply for cross-cultural ministry every year. Many of the other denominational churches, are also significantly involved in cross-cultural missionary ministry.

Fifth, as already indicated, the most effective means of spiritual awakening are the gospel or Bible camps. Every year, hundreds of local churches hold these camps, basically for those who are yet to be born again. It appears that the majority of Mizo Christians believe that a born-again experience will solve the problems of alcoholism and drug addiction, which are regarded as the greatest of sins, as well as all other social evils. It is an unspoken belief that only in the camps and crusades can people be born again. Increasingly, camps are also held especially for church leaders to deepen their spirituality.

Sixth, Mizo spirituality is a communitarian spirituality. Whether it is singing, Bible study or prayer, the Mizo enjoy these as communitarian activities. Every Sunday, each local church meets for Sunday School, and twice for worship. Almost every evening during the week, the women's, youth's, men's and children's fellowships meet for prayers in the church. Every Saturday night, the entire congregation do the same. In addition to these regular gatherings in the church, singing sessions are held in the church hall or in the homes of members on Good Friday, Christmas and other similar occasions. There they will sing and dance, repeating the verses many times. The singing can continue the whole night and for many nights on end. Most of the Bible study is done in Sunday School which is for everyone. Young and old gather together in the church every Sunday for graded Sunday School, and prizes are given to those who attend every Sunday. An annual examination is held for everyone, and prizes are given to those who do well. This communitarianism also being expressed in the ethical values of *tlawmngaihna* could well be both the strength and the weakness of Mizo Christianity.

Seventh, Mizo spirituality continues to be, for most of the people, an other-worldly spirituality. This became apparent in the second revival in the

1910s. For a long time, the most frequently selected hymns for singing had been hymns that tell about heaven, the longing for heaven, and the like. The dominant emphasis in the numerous Bible/Gospel camps have been about being born again, and this being the pathway to the Kingdom of God understood as a purely spiritual term. The social dimensions of the Kingdom of God have not been prominent because many Mizo Christians regard these as secular in the sense of them having nothing important to do with religion. It is not altogether absent, especially since living as salt and light had always been stressed, but the social, economic and political dimensions of human society had never had a big part in Mizo spirituality. Today however, the younger generation of theologians has begun to stress the importance of the social and the horizontal dimensions of spirituality, interpreting the Kingdom of God as a present reality with its emphasis on justice, equality and liberation, moving towards its culmination when Jesus comes for the second time.

The ecological dimension had been almost completely absent in Mizo spirituality due to this other-worldly emphasis. Only a few have been aware of God's creation as sacred and that it should be handled with care, while the majority, until recently, did not regard concern and care for creation as spiritual. 'Is it spiritual?' would be the first question asked just after I had preached on care for creation, the environment, the protection of species and the like, as late as 2000. The ecological dimension has only lately been taken seriously as a spiritual dimension, in particular by the Young Christian Associations of the various denominational churches.

Probably the major weakness of Mizo Christianity is its lack of individual perseverance for daily Bible study and prayer that could bear fruit in a life of integrity and holiness throughout the year. While the emotional side of singing and dancing in community is emphasized, enjoyed and encouraged, individual Bible study and prayer have been largely neglected. While the gifts of the Holy Spirit are welcomed and emphasized, the fruits of the Holy Spirit for daily living have not. Family spirituality has been talked about as important. But most families do not really practise family spirituality in the sense of a family Bible study and prayer, and discussions on spiritual matters have not been very prominent. Mizo Christianity is in many ways a very vibrant Christianity. Yet, there still needs to be an emphasis on practical spirituality as an individual, in families, in offices, in business, in politics and in public life in general.

HISTORY, IDENTITY AND MISSIOLOGY: A CASE STUDY CONCERNING MIZORAM

John C. B. Webster

History is basically a backward-looking discipline, even if rooted in and written for the present. It seeks to gain information, insight and perspective from the past which, especially in the case of modern history, might help us to understand how we got to be where we are now. Missiology is inherently a more forward-looking endeavour with both empirical and theological dimensions intended to guide the churches' mission in the present and into the future.¹ Is there any connection between the two? If so, might identity provide the vital link between them? This essay sets out to explore that possibility, first, by analyzing a sample of recent histories of Christianity in Mizoram to see what they have to say about Christian identity there. It then examines the explicit and implicit assumptions about Mizo Christian identity built into the five missiological essays Mizos have written in this book. The conclusion offers some tentative answers to the questions posed above. What follows is written from the perspective of a social historian of Christianity in India.

I

J. Meirion Lloyd's *History of the Church in Mizoram: Harvest in the Hills* (1991) is an expanded version of his earlier history, *From Every High Hill* (1957, 1984). Lloyd was a Welsh Presbyterian missionary in Mizoram from 1944 to 1964. His history, while including the Baptists from time to time, was basically a denominational history of the Mizoram Presbyterian Church from the arrival of the first missionary in 1891 to his own departure in 1964. It provides a chronological account of the work of Lloyd's Welsh Presbyterian Mission as well as of the growth and development of the Presbyterian Church in Mizoram that includes periodic assessments of the impact these made upon Mizo culture and society. The history begins with a description of Mizoram and the Mizo people before British rule in the region.

¹ I have benefited from reading the concise history and analysis of recent developments in the field of missiology by Francis Anekwe Oborji, 'Contemporary Missiology in Theological Education: Origins and New Perspectives', in *Missiology*, XXXIV:3 (July 2006), 383-97.

Lloyd portrayed Mizo society as ethnically, linguistically, culturally and socially homogeneous. Mizos shared a common code of conduct, perhaps best summed up in the phrase ‘group over self’, as well as a religious outlook that Lloyd described as an elaborate animism involving ‘holding converse with the Spirits’.² They also believed in one high God and a life after death. Organizationally, the Mizos were highly decentralized, with each village enjoying autonomy in relation to the others. Each had its own chief who administered it through the elders he selected. Some chiefs had serfs (*bawi*) who had exchanged their freedom for protection and/or a livelihood in times of distress. Each village also had a young men’s hut (*zawlbuk*) in which young men lived as they were being trained for the Mizo way of life as hunters and warriors.

The *zawlbuk* was also a structured organisation and its internal management and activities were democratic, decided by the lodgers and even the village chief and village council were not permitted to interfere in its matters. It was the centre of education, the village defence, discipline and where the young men learned their tradition and way of life. The *zawlbuk* was vital to the chief’s power and authority in a time when a village was hemmed in by enemies and he needed to organise meetings with the lodgers on security matters.

The main body of Lloyd’s history moves back and forth between the comings and goings of missionaries, mission ‘inputs’ into Mizo culture and society, as well as the growth and organizational development of the church. The church grew through a combination of individual or family conversions and periodic revivals characterized by ecstatic behaviour seen as evidence of being ‘filled with the Spirit’.³ The first of these occurred in 1906, the second in 1913, the third in 1919, and the fourth from 1933 to 1937, by which time the church had become divided into pro-revival and anti-revival groups.³ The organizational development of the church began at grassroots level with the local congregations and their elected elders. The first presbytery was formed in 1910 and the Assembly (later Synod) in 1924. At the same time, institutions were created to serve the needs both of the churches and of wider society: e.g. putting the Mizo language into written form, a printing press publishing Christian literature, schools for boys and for girls, clinics and a hospital, and training centres for clergy and church workers culminating in a theological school and college.

Lloyd used an ‘input-impact’ model to assess the ways in which this Christian presence affected Mizo culture and society. Its most obvious input was evangelistic and the impact was that over time the Mizos became Christians. Their conversion led to some profound changes in Mizo religious life. The first signs of this were that prospective converts gave up

² J. Meirion Lloyd, *History of the Church in Mizoram: Harvest in the Hills* (Aizawl: Synod Publication Board, 1991), 9.

³ Meirion Lloyd, *History of the Church in Mizoram*, 299.

both drinking *zo* (rice beer), a common practice during their religious festivals, and wearing amulets to protect themselves from evil spirits, even though belief in evil spirits continued.⁴ Mizo marriage practices were modified following conversion to Christianity. Marriage became a religious ceremony. The custom of bride price was hotly debated and became optional rather than mandatory. Divorce became more difficult, even though the Indian Christian Marriage Act did not apply to Mizoram, and serious marital conflicts were mediated through the presbytery.⁵ The Mizo language was put into writing and, thanks to the mission school system, the illiterate Mizos became in time second to Kerala in literacy.

Christianity also had an impact upon the village power structure. The chiefs generally saw Christianity as a threat, opposed it, and often discriminated against converts, but did not throw them out of the village.⁶ The village school teacher, as a symbol of change, also posed a threat to the authority of the chief, but the village schools continued.⁷ Another threat was the attack of Dr Peter Fraser, a Welsh medical missionary, upon the *bawi* system of serfdom, which he considered to be slavery and therefore unlawful. Some missionaries and the government disagreed, and Fraser was forced to leave.⁸ The institution of the *zawlbuk*, an important resource for the chief in enforcing his decisions, held up until the 1930s when it faded away, perhaps undermined by the village primary school.⁹ Yet Lloyd, even when dealing with these controversies and changes, as well as throughout his history, laid emphasis upon religious discontinuity but cultural and social continuity rather than radical change within and beyond the churches under Christian influence.

Chhange Lal Hminga's *The Life and Witness of the Churches in Mizoram* is a revised version of a doctoral dissertation, which he described as historical and missiological research,¹⁰ written for the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminar under the mentorship of Donald McGavran. It is the story of how in only sixty years the Mizos became Christians 'through sweeping people movements accelerated by waves of revival'.¹¹ Hminga provided a decade-by-decade account of church growth, comparing throughout his history the Presbyterians in northern Mizoram with the Baptists in southern Mizoram. Other denominations and sectarian groups are included more briefly as they appeared in Mizoram. The

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⁴ Meirion Lloyd, *History of the Church in Mizoram*, 53, 84, 107, 116, 210-11, 262, 348.

⁵ Meirion Lloyd, *History of the Church in Mizoram*, 158-60, 186-88.

⁶ Meirion Lloyd, *History of the Church in Mizoram*, 259.

⁷ Meirion Lloyd, *History of the Church in Mizoram*, 178.

⁸ Meirion Lloyd, *History of the Church in Mizoram*, 152-57.

⁹ Meirion Lloyd, *History of the Church in Mizoram*, 239.

¹⁰ Chhange Lal Hminga, *The Life and Witness of the Churches in Mizoram* (Serkawn: Literature Committee, Baptist Church of Mizoram, 1987), xi.

¹¹ Hminga, *The Life and Witness of the Churches in Mizoram*, xii.

chapters covering most of this history are divided into sections on numerical growth, qualitative growth, organic growth, and leadership growth. The history ends with seventeen factors responsible for church growth there, as well as with assessments of both the impact which Christianity made upon Mizoram from 1904 to 1974, and of the task ahead, both inside and beyond Mizoram. A brief chapter on the decade from 1974 to 1984 was added to the original dissertation.

Hminga's description of Mizo society before the arrival of Christianity is similar to that of Lloyd, except that he did not lump the inhabitants of Mizoram together into one homogeneous group. Instead he saw them belonging to distinct tribes, most of which were Mizo but some, such as the Chakmas and Riangs, were not.¹² They had one dominant dialect, Duhlian which, because the missionaries committed it so quickly to writing in the Roman script, became the official language of Mizoram instead of the Bengali preferred in government circles. He also considered head-hunting to be rooted in Mizo religious life; Mizos believed they would own as slaves in the afterlife those whom they had beheaded in this life.¹³

By agreement in 1902, the Welsh mission worked in the north and the Baptists in the south of Mizoram. Numerical growth in the north was more rapid because the Presbyterians baptized converts quickly, whereas the Baptists put candidates through a lengthy probationary process.¹⁴ The 1919 revival was emotionally more intense than the previous two, with continuous singing and dancing. The fourth was so undisciplined that the government registered its concern over the disorder the revival created, and the more extreme revivalists either became Pentecostals or formed new sects of their own.

While evangelism and numerical growth (measured statistically) were the primary focus of Hminga's history, he used such indicators as growth of Sunday Schools, giving, organized and individual evangelistic outreach, hymn composition and a changed attitude towards the education of girls, to measure qualitative growth. Organic growth he measured in terms of organizing churches, broader ecclesiastical bodies like presbyteries, and especially the integration of mission and church, while leadership growth included the selection, training and use of Mizo clergy and lay leadership at all levels. In each case, as with numerical growth, there were ebbs and flows, which Hminga sought to explain.

Hminga's list of the changes brought about in Mizo society through Christian 'inputs' differs somewhat from Lloyd's. What he labelled physical changes included changes in the appearance of the village as well of its inhabitants; the church rather than the *zawlbuk* became the centre of social life; and the status of women was raised through education and

¹² Hminga, *The Life and Witness of the Churches in Mizoram*, 10-19.

¹³ Hminga, *The Life and Witness of the Churches in Mizoram*, 36.

¹⁴ Hminga, *The Life and Witness of the Churches in Mizoram*, 81, 123.

employment. Education and well-placed jobs were the chief indicators of intellectual change. Spiritual change, the most important of all, included changes in religious beliefs, particularly with reference to dealing with evil spirits, as well as prayer and evangelism. The task ahead he defined mostly in terms of evangelism, including the evangelization of the next generation and the revival of nominal Christians.

Vanlalchhuanawma's *Christianity and Subaltern Culture: Revival Movement as a Cultural Response to Westernisation in Mizoram* is a socio-cultural history with two main theses. There were not four distinct revival movements in Mizoram but one, long continuous one that had its ebbs and flows. The roots of this revival movement lay in a Mizo cultural protest against the westernization promoted by the foreign missionaries and Mizo church leadership. His history therefore concentrated on the revival and covered the Presbyterians, the Baptists, and the other churches and sects that came out of the revival. This history also draws attention to the 'subaltern', as in the title, which implies that there were subalterns in Mizo society whose culture was different from that of the dominant. Vanlalchhuanawma also employed an interactive rather than 'input-impact' model to portray the changing relationships between Christianity on the one hand and Mizo society and culture on the other.

Vanlalchhuanawma's opening chapter on the social background of Christianity in Mizoram is longer and more detailed than Lloyd's or Hminga's but his conclusions generally support theirs. The Mizos, a generic term for several closely related nomadic tribes, were linguistically and culturally homogeneous, with religious beliefs and practices as already described. Where Vanlalchhuanawma departs from Lloyd and Hminga is in viewing the Mizo polity as less decentralized, and village society as less harmonious than they did. The Sailo chiefs worked together and provided some central authority, as when opposing the British, while in the villages the chiefs were in theory despots who had to keep the loyalty of their people in order to be effective. They often faced tension and even uprisings from the common people, especially over taxes.¹⁵

British rule and Christian missions, two powerful westernizing forces often working in collaboration, arrived in Mizoram almost simultaneously. The British reduced the chiefs to unpaid government agents with limited powers. The mission primary school challenged the educative role of the *zawlbuk*, while western medicine (accompanied by prayer) undermined the traditional priesthood's role in healing, the Mizos' dominant religious concern. Cultural clashes were frequent and serious. The missionaries and early converts were perceived as agents of an alien government and culture, conversion was seen as a transfer of loyalty to the aliens, and converts, drawn mostly from the lower classes, were persecuted. Yet, by the time the

¹⁵ Vanlalchhuanawma, *Christianity and Subaltern Culture: Revival Movement as a Cultural Response to Westernization in Mizoram* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2007), 48-53.

revival began in 1906, Christianity was gaining influence, especially among the youth and lower classes, even if the number of baptized converts was very small.¹⁶

The revival movement proved to be the means by which the Mizos preserved their cultural identity. During its first decade, the revival 'assumed an imported character and was wholeheartedly welcomed by the church',¹⁷ but staunchly opposed by the chiefs who were the main guardians of the traditional cultural order. The second stirring of revival, prompted by the *bawi* controversy Dr Fraser championed and a bamboo famine, proved to be more indigenous than 'imported' in inspiration and character. It incorporated dancing, shouting, swooning and symbolic actions which the mission and more westernized church leadership did not approve of but could not prevent. These indigenous elements increased in later stages of the revival to include the drum, the composition of new Mizo hymns, and praying together aloud simultaneously, all of which the church slowly accepted as well. As the revival became more extreme in the 1930s, tension increased between the church's theologically trained leaders who stressed the authority of scripture in determining orthodoxy and orthopraxy, while the more extreme revivalists emphasized the authority of the Holy Spirit. This tension caused some revivalists to join other churches and independent sects. Vanlalchhuanawma ends his history with an analysis of a book of guidelines on revivals, published by the [Presbyterian] Church Assembly in 1949. By then, Mizo Christianity had become revival Christianity.

What needs to be noted in this analysis is that the culture war was fought within the confines of the church. It was clearly won by the revivalists who infused Mizo culture into the very heart of Christianity in Mizoram. Vanlalchhuanawma depicts this as a subaltern victory over against the westernizing missionaries and church leadership. The process was gradual, covering several decades and, in the end, victory was not quite total, but Christianity had become culturally far more Mizo than western.

Lalsangkima Pachuau used the post-Independence ethno-political movements in the North East as the starting point for his *Ethnic Identity and Christianity*, the aim of which was 'to examine the place of religious conversion in the development of ethnic identity consciousness and its resulting ethno-political movements in North-East India, having Mizoram as a test case'.¹⁸ His thesis was that, internally, the 'intertwining of the [Mizo] people's natural ethnic pride with Christianity, which came mainly through various spiritual revivals, has resulted in a strong sense of Christian self-hood driven by a spirit of triumphalism'. Externally, the post-

¹⁶ Vanlalchhuanawma, *Christianity and Subaltern Culture*, 155-57.

¹⁷ Vanlalchhuanawma, *Christianity and Subaltern Culture*, 159.

¹⁸ Lalsangkima Pachuau, *Ethnic Identity and Christianity: A Socio-Historical and Missiological Study of Christianity in Northeast India with Special Reference to Mizoram* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2002), 2.

Independence autonomy movements in the North East had been motivated by a 'fear of assimilation, domination and oppression' by Sanskritic India which 'has been intensified by the mainstream's antipathy towards conversion to Christianity as well as by the rise of Hindu fundamentalist influence in the years following Indian independence'.¹⁹ Thus, as this statement indicates, post-Independence Indian politics rather than religion or culture, provides the framework for Pachuau.

Pachuau's history begins with a descriptive analysis of the movements within the North East aimed at autonomy within or even independence from India that were motivated by a 'fear of losing the power to control their destiny' to 'outsiders'.²⁰ He then describes some crucial milestones in the history of Mizoram, starting with the British occupation in 1890-91. The British ruled autocratically through local chiefs. The first Mizo political party was formed only in April 1946. When Independence came, the Mizos sought maximum autonomy but were made a district of Assam. When that government and the Government of India failed to provide help during the 1959-60 famine, the Mizo National Front was formed with independence from India as its goal. By 1966, the Front turned to insurgency which the Indian army met with violence, not only on the insurgents but also on innocent bystanders. In due course, there were long drawn-out peace talks which ultimately led to statehood for Mizoram.

Pachuau roots Mizo Christian identity consciousness in the revival movements already described. His own analysis of the revivals largely reinforces those already presented, but does depart from them at key points. For example, he did not depict early Mizo converts and church leaders as westernizers, as did Vanlalchhuanawma, but rather 'their desire to have a clear-cut (Christian) identity of their own often made early converts critical' of their 'old tradition'. Moreover, some of the missionaries were advocates of cultural continuity.²¹ Unlike Hminga, Pachuau did not consider the revivals to be people's movements because virtually all decisions to convert were individual rather than group decisions.²² The end-result of these revivals was a 'mutual internalization' of Christianity and Mizo ethnic identity consciousness which carried over into the period of the autonomy movements and insurgency.

While Nehru and others in the national 'mainstream' blamed the missionaries for separatist movements in the North East, Pachuau found that 'no strong evidence exists to support direct linkage between separatist politics and the Christian missions'.²³ Not only were the churches not officially involved in politics, but they also forbade their clergy and employees to be directly involved either. During the insurgency, the

¹⁹ Pachuau, *Ethnic Identity and Christianity*, 26.

²⁰ Pachuau, *Ethnic Identity and Christianity*, 58.

²¹ Pachuau, *Ethnic Identity and Christianity*, 119.

²² Pachuau, *Ethnic Identity and Christianity*, 142-43.

²³ Pachuau, *Ethnic Identity and Christianity*, 147.

Presbyterian Church condemned the violence on both sides and, with other churches, played a mediating role between the Government of India and the Mizo National Front. Thus, while Christianity was not responsible for Mizo separatism, existing fears, grievances and aversions were amplified, on both sides, by adding religious differences to the racial and cultural differences that already existed between the Mizos and the Indic Indians of the plains.

These four works – by Lloyd, Hminga, Vanlalchhuanawma and Pachuau – illustrate but do not exhaust the variety of perspectives from which the history of Christianity in Mizoram has already been written. There is yet to appear in English a history from a Mizo feminist perspective. Mention is made in the works already examined of the role the missions and churches played in the education of girls, of the work of Bible women, and of women in the revivals.²⁴ In his *The Churches' Impact on the Status of Women in North East India*, Frederick Downs has addressed this issue with reference to Mizoram. He stated that the status of Mizo women, while never high as far as we can tell, declined under the Sailo chiefs. Education that came with Christian missions did help to raise their status, but church structures remained patriarchal and 'the churches are now the last arena in which the movement towards an increased patriarchalization of North-East Indian tribal societies is being fought'.²⁵

II

By looking backwards, these histories of Christianity in Mizoram reveal something, but not the same thing, about Mizo Christian identity. Since identity is such a heavily overworked concept, a word about how it is understood and used here is in order. Our identity is who we are, what we have in common with each other, and what distinguishes us from others who are not 'we'. Identity is not the same as self-image, which is who we consider ourselves to be, nor is it the same as public image, which is who others consider us to be. Identity is negotiated all the time in varying contexts between us and relevant others who may not see us as we see ourselves. Consequently, identity is never fixed, but is constantly being redefined during the process of living and interacting with others. In addition and as a result, identity is a relational concept: identity is defined in relation to something or someone else. For example, the early Mizo converts to Christianity had a westernized identity when viewed in relation to other Mizos, but a very Mizo identity when viewed in relation to the missionaries. Religious identity adds an important dimension to an

²⁴ See e.g. Lloyd, *History of the Church in Mizoram: Harvest in the Hills*, 109-10, 207, 261; Hminga, *The Life and Witness of the Churches in Mizoram*, 128, 152, 171, 296; Vanlalchhuanawma, *Christianity and Subaltern Culture*, 219-22.

²⁵ F.S. Downs, *The Churches' Impact on the Status of Women in North East India* (Shillong: North-Eastern Hill University Publications, 1996), 91.

individual or group identity because in religion there is a transcendent negotiating partner whose views must be taken into account along with those of all our many human negotiating partners in defining 'who we really are'. That adds to the mixture of social identities a theologically defined identity.²⁶

In Lloyd's history, Mizo Christian identity is a church identity. It is like a living organism with its own internal structure and component parts – clergy, laity, congregations, presbyteries and other church bodies, as well as educational, medical, publishing and welfare institutions – all of which are part of the 'we' that is the church. While to some extent the church's identity has been worked out in relationship to its social, cultural and religious environment, Lloyd's narrative depicted its identity primarily in relationship to its own past in terms of continuities, innovations, changes and growth. Hminga also focused on the church as a living organism, but with an evangelistic identity. His interest was primarily in quantitative and qualitative church growth, with organic and leadership growth being more a means to evangelistic ends than ends in themselves. Thus, while Lloyd gave the church a basically institutional identity, Hminga gave it an identity which was missiologically defined and measured as to its adequacy by a series of missiologically determined indicators. Both Lloyd and Hminga emphasized the churches' continuity instead of its discontinuity with Mizo culture, although the latter saw Mizo society divided along tribal lines, whereas the former portrayed it as more homogeneous.

Vanlalchhuanawma's primary focus was on the Mizo people rather than on the church as an organism. Instead of treating Mizo society as a homogeneous whole, he portrayed it as becoming, under the impact of British government and Christian missions, deeply divided along cultural lines that were independent of class or tribal differences. His history is one of an ongoing and unresolved culture war within Mizo society between the westernizers represented by the missionaries, the early converts, and the theologically trained church leadership on the one hand, and the chiefs, the traditional priesthood, and the revivalists on the other. Christianity became increasingly the arena in which that culture war was fought out. What was at stake became the cultural identity of Mizo Christianity and the religious identity of the Mizo people. Pachuau defined Mizo Christian identity over against the Indic or Sanskritic, 'mainstream' religio-political identity of not only the plains people but also the Government of India. In that context, to

²⁶ For a discussion of Indian Christian identity, which is even more complex than Mizo Christian identity, see John C.B. Webster, 'The Identity of Indian Christians', in *Church in Context: Essays in Honour of Mathias Mundadan CMI*, Kanichikattil Francis (ed), (Bangalore: Dharmaram, 1996), 56-71; and John C.B. Webster, *Historiography of Christianity in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), 82-97. For the North East, see the chapter (22-36) by F.S. Downs, 'Identity; The Integrative Principle', in *Essays on Christianity in North-East India*, Milton S. Sangma and David R. Syiemlieh (eds), (New Delhi: Indus, 1994).

be Mizo is to be Christian; the two are inseparably linked. Pachuau traced the history of how it came to be that way and considered political divisions within Mizo society to be more strategic or tactical than identity-based. Finally, the women's perspective saw the churches as the last bastion of patriarchy within an otherwise modernizing society in Mizoram.

Of these historical Mizo Christian identities, only Hminga's is missiologically defined; the rest are not.²⁷ Lloyd's and Hminga's are institutionally defined 'church as organism' identities whereas Vanlalchhuanawma's, Pachuau's and Downs's are more 'people-centric' identities, whether cultural or religio-political. Despite these differences, all five may provide important perspectival foundations for some of the six missiological essays found elsewhere in this volume. Thus, the next section examines the assumptions about Mizo Christian identity built into those essays to see how they relate to the conclusions about Mizo Christian identity drawn in the histories analyzed above.

III

The opening portion of Lawmsanga's chapter on 'Theology of Mission: The Mizo Perspective' is based on the same organic, institutional 'church' understanding of Mizo Christian identity seen in relation to its own past that informed Lloyd's history. The Synod Mission Board of the Mizoram Presbyterian Church missionizes in other parts of India in the same ways in which Mizoram had been missionized earlier; its theological understanding and methods of mission have been inherited from its own past, uninfluenced by ecumenical conversations about mission since 1961. Unlike Lloyd, however, in the prescriptive portion of the chapter Lawmsanga views Mizo Christian identity from the perspective of the Indian people outside Mizoram among whom the Mission Board's work is being carried out. In that context, Mizo Christian identity comes across as arrogant, even colonial, exclusivist and separatist. His recommendations for changes in the Board's operative theology of mission reflect a desire to change that identity within the wider Indian mission context.

Vanlalrova Khiangte's 'Forms of Missionary Engagement Among Mizo Christians' follows quite closely the approach adopted earlier by Chhangti Lal Hminga in his history. In fact, it could be seen as an updating of that history, but with an almost exclusive emphasis upon quantitative growth among non-Mizo people, both inside and outside Mizoram. In this approach, Mizo Christian identity is both an institutionally and a missiologically defined identity. The defining institution is the church with its mission boards, training centres and support groups, while the church's mission is defined in almost exclusively evangelistic terms.

²⁷ Pachuau placed his history within the missiological paradigm of contextualization. See Pachuau, *Ethnic Identity and Christianity*, 3.

In 'Mission and Power (with Special Reference to Mizoram)', Lalnghakthuami concludes that the alliance of Christian mission and the colonial power overpowered and transformed 'the whole societal and religious outlook in Mizoram', rejecting the cultural values and ideas of the people in favour of 'a western form of Christianity and theology'.²⁸ Thus, the mission agenda for the future should be shaped not by the mission agenda of the past but by *missio Dei*, which entails very different relationships to peoples and cultures. In this reading, Mizo Christian identity is defined exclusively by the mission and the colonial power, and so becomes not only a thoroughly westernized identity but also a victim identity.

H. Lalrinthanga in 'Mission and Unity: Mizoram Context' points out that what began as a common Mizo Christian identity rooted in their history has become highly fragmented, so that in 1994 there were eighty Christian denominations and sectarian groups in Mizoram. The growing denominational consciousness and identities within Mizoram have now become stronger than a shared Mizo Christian identity. These divisions have arisen over practical issues – polity, baptism, the Eucharist, the ministry – and there is currently little understanding and recognition of the customs and traditions in other denominations. This analysis is in keeping with Vanlalchhuawma's emphasis upon the internal divisions within Mizo Christianity, but the divisions here are not based upon culture but upon practices central to the churches' life and worship. Thus, Mizo Christian identity has become a stubbornly fragmented identity.

The focus of Hminga Pachuau's essay on 'Bridging the Divide: The Need for a Postmodern Understanding of the "Youth"' is upon the generation gap rather than the denominational gap. This is also a cultural gap separating 'the church' from 'the youth'. A basically conservative, tradition-bound church led by 'non-youth' is the custodian of Mizo Christian identity. 'Youth' are either on the church's margin or outside it. To bridge this divide, the church must become more open to youth, to diversity, and to the Holy Spirit. This involves paying more attention to youth and taking their views, their subjective experiences and emotions, far more seriously than at present.

Finally, in 'Mission in Postmodernity: A Tribal Perspective', K. Lallawmzuala presents a critique of modernity, to which the missions that brought Christianity to North-East India were committed. Post-modernity not only de-legitimizes the universalizing cultural assumptions and agendas of modernity, but also, and at the same time, legitimizes the particular traditional beliefs and practices of people, like the tribals of North-East India, whom modernists looked down upon. Given this shift in emphasis, certain traditional tribal values which are consistent with Christian

²⁸ Lalnghakthuami, 'Mission and Power with Special Reference to Mizoram'. [The quote is from the final paragraph of the essay.]

teachings should become an integral part of Christian mission. These are the priority of human relationships over economic gain, sharing, and a simple life, as well as a respect and caring for nature. In Lallawmzuala's presentation, these values are at the core of tribal Christian identity.

Reflected in the diverse views of Mizo Christian identity undergirding these missiological essays are two significant commonalities. Both pose challenging questions for historians, just as the historians have offered their own challenges to the missiologists. The first commonality is that the burden of the past weighs heavily upon the present. The specific nature of that burden varies from essay to essay, but (with one possible exception) all seem agreed that faithful mission in the present requires liberation from those burdens. This challenges historians of Christianity in Mizoram to figure out how, while being faithful to the dictates of their discipline, to write histories that do help liberate Mizo Christians from their past so as to carry out the mission that God is leading them towards in the present. The other commonality in these essays is a preoccupation with culture. On the one hand, there is the juxtaposition of Mizo culture with either western culture or the Indic/Sanskritic culture of the plains. On the other, there is a questioning of Mizo culture's homogeneity, assumed in some essays, by the reality of either tribal, or generational, or denominational cultures/sub-cultures within Mizoram in other essays. It may well be that both historians and missiologists have been too simplistic and need to take a much closer look at how culture(s) evolved in Mizoram as well as what the persistent and new forms of cultural diversity there have become.

IV

The focal point of this essay has been on Mizo Christian identity. It has been approached first from the backward-looking discipline of history, and then from the more forward-looking discipline of missiology. The aim has been to discover whether and how far identity might provide an important point of convergence for the two perspectives. The underlying assumption was, on the one hand, that a history, whether intentionally designed to do so or not, reveals a lot about the identity of the society, culture and people that form its subject matter. On the other hand, a missiological agenda must be based on not only a theological but also an historically based empirical identity; in actual practice, 'who we have become' historically shapes our mission as much as 'who we believe ourselves to be' in the eyes and purposes of God.

What has become apparent in this case study from Mizoram is that the two approaches do not always converge in a neat and tidy way. The varying views of Mizo Christian identity presented by the five historians do not mesh very well with the diverse views presented by the six missiologists. Of course, in some cases there is convergence, most notably between Chhange Lal Hminga and Vanlalrova Khiangte but, taken together, the

eleven works can create enough confusion to lead either to a 'take your pick' relativism or to further research at key points of divergence.

One way to clear up some of this confusion is to distinguish between those scholars who treated Mizo society as an organic, and even culturally as well as socially harmonious, whole²⁹ and those who treat it as characterized internally more by competition between groups or categories of Mizos defined by tribe, class, gender, generation, denomination, or a combination of these, with often conflicting interests and outlooks.³⁰ In other words, viewed either from the outside or from the inside writing for outsiders, there is such a thing as Mizo Christian identity which distinguishes Mizo Christians from other Indians and other Christians.³¹ However, for an insider writing for other insiders thought that may be too simplistic a view because there are internal divisions and tensions which point to multiple Mizo Christian identities, and hence, as power struggles among Mizo Christians continue, to constantly renegotiated Mizo Christian identities that can somehow embrace this unstable diversity. The issue for historians and missiologists then becomes which type of Mizo Christian identity (single and harmonious versus multiple and competing) not only provides the most honest, realistic and helpful understanding of a past to put the complex present into perspective, but also offers a solid empirical basis for a missiology that gives reliable direction to present and future mission.

²⁹ Lloyd, Hminga (for the most part), L. Pachuau, Lawmsanga, Khiangte (for the most part), Lalnghakthuami and Lallawmzuala.

³⁰ Vanlalchhuanawma, Downs, Hminga, (to some extent), Khiangte (to some extent), Lalrinthanga and H. Pachuau.

³¹ L. Pachuau.

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CONCLUDING REMARKS

Michael Biehl

The 2010 assembly at Edinburgh to commemorate the first World Missionary Conference that took place a hundred years ago in the same city highlighted mission ‘from everywhere to everywhere’, and not as planned by the first conference ‘from the Christian to the Non-Christian World’. The overcoming of the underlying geographical understanding of mission as being sent to far-off places – e.g. far from the centres of mission in the northern hemisphere – invites us hence to focus on all localities where mission has been done and where it is happening today. Even a hundred years later, with all the archives and maps and tables that mission historians have produced and collected, there are still places where mission happened and happens, even successfully, but the stories of mission happening there did not and do not find space in our collective memory of mission.

One such region is probably North-East India. Not every mission scholar and – even less, ordinary Christians – will be able to put their finger on a map and point correctly to that region. This region, lying east of Bangladesh, south of the Himalayas, west of Myanmar and north of the Bay of Bengal, will thus be absent from most of the mental maps that most people have of the world, and even of World Christianity. How prominent the region is on such maps will depend on the particular histories written mainly by the northern mission societies and agencies which, in the case of North-East India, came almost exclusively from British and American contexts. In his introductory remarks, Frederick Downs gives some examples of such historiography which do not give due attention to this region. One factor which probably contributes to the fact as to why the history of this area is being neglected – and, more often not, is not even known – is ironically ‘the three selves’ model that the local churches and their missions practise successfully right from the beginning of their history as some of the papers in this volume underline.

In these concluding remarks, I will look briefly at the attention North-East India found in the discussions at Edinburgh in 1910 and then look at some of the insights one can draw from the papers in this volume as contributions to the global conversation on mission.

North-East India at Edinburgh 1910

‘... a great variety of tribes and peoples of the most varied degrees of civilisation, occupying Burma, Assam, and a large portion of Bengal. The most advanced of these are the Burmese, who for many centuries have, in

matters of civilisation, been under the influence of the cognate races of China. A great many tribes are, however, on a low level of civilisation, and since coming into contact with European culture have shown an astonishing inclination towards Christianity, so that great hopes are entertained of them from a missionary point of view. Such are the Karens, and the Garo, Khasi and Naga tribes.¹

This passage, from the report of Commission I to the Edinburgh conference, gives a fairly good impression of the way in which the North-East India region was present in the deliberations of the that conference. At the same time, it indicates how the characteristics of the region were blurred by being discussed separately from each other under the heading of general themes which were more in the focus of the reports and the conference. The quote speaks of great hopes for the people in North-East India of becoming Christians, and the Garo, Khasi and Naga tribes are explicitly named. On the other hand, the distinctiveness of these specifically named tribes is denied by lumping all of them together as peoples ‘on a low level of civilization’.

The report categorized the people living in the west and east of the region as more civilized – naming them specifically as the ‘Hindus’ in the west and the ‘Burmese’ in the east. According to the report, even these two groups of people owe their level of civilization ultimately to the more civilized Chinese in the north.

The Chinese, the Burmese and the Hindus are dealt with in depth in the Edinburgh reports as civilized – whereas the north-easterners are just labels given as examples in the context of more general reflections. A cursory reading of the acts of the Edinburgh conference proceedings does not give any evidence of specific interest in the North-East India region even though the prospects were estimated to be very promising. While there are some scattered mentions of Assam and the Naga tribes,² oddly, in passages where one would assume or expect to find a mention of the region – e.g. in the chapters on ‘Animistic religion’, on ‘tribes’, ‘races’ (in the terminology of Edinburgh 1910), ethnic groups, or the overwhelming multitude of languages spoken in the area – they are conspicuously absent.³ This is even more surprising because, as Downs reminds us, there was a Baptist evangelist from the Garo Hills present at Edinburgh in 1910, the Rev. Thang Khan Sangma, listed in the Edinburgh documents in the range of the

¹ *World Missionary Conference 1910. Report of Commission I: ‘Carrying the Gospel to all the Non-Christian-World’* (Edinburgh and London: n.p., n.d.), 138 – from a passage on ‘The field to be evangelised’ in the larger section on India.

² *World Missionary Conference 1910*, 40, 138-39, 159.

³ ‘II. Animistic Religion’, *World Missionary Conference 1910. Report of Commission: IV ‘The Missionary Message in Relation to the non-Christian Religions’* (Edinburgh and London: n.p., n.d.), 6-37. See, for instance, the mention of the ‘Chin of Burma’, 18.

American Baptist Foreign Mission Society.⁴ Brian Stanley writes in his study on the 21 (!) known non-western participants of Edinburgh 1910 – among 1,200 attendees – that one of them was ‘the Revd Thang Khan Sangma, a Baptist Evangelist from Tura in the remote Garo Hills of Assam in North-East India’. And here the general characterization of the tribes in the region as being on a low level of civilization is in striking contrast with the fact that Thang Kahn ‘who had studied at the Newton Theological Institution (now Andover Newton Seminary) in Massachusetts, must have been one of the very first Garos to have followed a course of higher education outside India.’⁵

If one looks into the *World Missionary Atlas* prepared for the Edinburgh conference in 1910, the impression is reinforced that the region is defined more by being different from the surrounding regions and political entities than by its own characteristics. On this map, the region already covers an area which today stretches from Tripura to Arunachal Pradesh. Manipur – then a princely state – is the only named area which is to be found on this early map, whereas present-day states like Mizoram, Nagaland or Tripura cannot be found on the map – instead one finds tribal names on it or the tribes are used as ‘name-givers’ for the hill areas: the Khasi Hills and the Garo Hills, the Naga Hills, the Naga tribes⁶ or the Lushai Hills (present-day Mizoram). This 1910 map seems to mirror the perspective of the British Raj of that time, and labelled this rather ‘empty’ region as ‘Eastern Bengal and Assam’, squeezing it in between Bengal in the west – which was of much more interest to the British and which was considered to be more ‘Indian’ by the missionaries – and Burma in the east – which had given the British rulers quite some headaches but which was considered by the missionaries as more civilized (see the quote from the report). So one can conclude that North-East India was on the map of the non-Christian world drawn for Edinburgh 1910, but had formed almost a blank spot without an identity of its own, with more attention being given to the surrounding areas and peoples than to those living in ‘Eastern Bengal and Assam’.⁷

⁴ *World Missionary Conference 1910. Records and proceedings of the Conference* (Edinburgh and London: n.p., n.d.), 52; B. Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910* (Studies in the History of Christian Missions) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 91.

⁵ Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference*, 94, 94.

⁶ H.P. Beach and C.H. Fahs (eds), *World Missionary Atlas: Containing a Directory of Missionary Societies, Classified Summaries of Statistics, Maps Showing the Location of Mission Stations Throughout the World, a Descriptive Account of the Principal Mission Lands, and Comprehensive Indices* (New York: n.p., 1921), 15, Plate 11. Compare with the 2010 edition, 145.

⁷ For more details, see for instance F.S. Downs, *Christianity in North East India: Historical Perspectives* (Delhi: ISPCK, and Guwahati: CLC, 1983).

‘Edinburgh 2010’ in North-East India

The contributions to this volume have been diligently collected by Marina Ngursangzeli after the ‘Post-Edinburgh 2010 Consultation’ that took place in Aizawl in 2011. It is an achievement to bring together theologians from different churches in the various states, and to engage together with the Edinburgh jubilee conference. They did that through their writing as they reflected on the nine conference themes – and some of the seven ‘transversals’ like Bible, youth and women’s concerns of the global Edinburgh study process – weaving their reflections on mission (history) in their localities and on the engagement of today’s churches into the global conversation on mission accompanying the preparation of the jubilee conference and its follow-up. Thus, the theologians and leaders of the churches in the region connect with the broader global discussion about the themes and look on their own situation in the light of these study themes. At the same time, they contribute through their reflections on the themes from their perspective to the global discourse of the global community studying and reflecting together on God’s mission – everywhere.

The contributions to the present volume help to draw pictures of some of the places and lend colours to this blank spot of Edinburgh 1910. They speak about the transformations by which the situation as it was in 1910 evolved into that of today. And they deal with the continuing questions and challenges which a once-remote region experiences, and which has always been affected by political, cultural and religious changes effected by powers outside its borders, and which today has become part of a globalized world.

Reading the papers from an outsider’s perspective and in the light of the Edinburgh 2010 study process, there emerge mainly the following dimensions where such an interweaving can be identified:

1. The first is theological reflection on the history of mission and the Christian faith in that corner of the world and how it intertwines with Christian theology and mission at the global level. The papers tell stories of how members of the local Christian communities try to define their identity and history in which conversion to the Christian faith played a decisive role. Many of the contributions thus shed light on the regional history of mission and give some interesting insights on how the Christian faith was preached, how people were evangelized, and why they ultimately believed accepting Christ to be the better choice according to their own understanding. In that sense, they introduce the fascinating history of that corner of the world into the broader history of the Christian faith.
2. It should be no surprise that the predominant tribal patterns of culture, life and church are taken as a springboard to cope with the challenges of the coming of modernity – a dimension or area in which the history of the Christian faith and mission has been

entangled. Some of the papers reflect on mission today with an explicit reference to these challenges and to the ways the peoples of the North-East India region try to cope with what modernity means to them and imposes on them.

3. The rich history of mission has been determined by various attempts to preach the gospel in that area, mainly to tribal and indigenous peoples. Some of the papers in this volume tell us how the coming of Christian mission, together with the colonial power, was in some periods and in some areas a reason *not* to accept the Christian faith, whereas in other areas and regions the Christian faith became the source of courage and the medium of protest against some dimension of the colonial and modern ways of dealing with matters of life, culture and politics. Some papers highlight how education and the Bible thus became valuable resources for the quest for 'life for all'. They help to gain a more differentiated picture of events on the ground and of the agency of the locals in doing mission and spreading the gospel.
4. There is in several papers a tension present between the criticisms of the early missionaries' attempts to purge the daily life and spiritual realm of the peoples from anything considered as 'animistic cults' and the rather few hints why eventually in some areas the first Christians, and later even a majority of people, embraced the Christian faith. In several papers it is, however, explained how Christian faith could connect well with the pre-Christian cultural traits and values. The continued presence of these in the ongoing formation of Christian faith is one of the discussions the authors are engaging with and the re-enactment of earlier cultural identity as a resource for Christian faith in the globalized world is a much researched area. Indirectly, the answer seems to be that – at least, for today's struggles – the contextualized Gospel and a reconstructed cultural identity are strong resources to define what is a good 'life for all', and what the mission of the churches could look like in the light of that.
5. There is some considerable reflection on spirituality and piety while discussing mission spirituality and authentic discipleship. In some papers, it is critiqued that in general the Christian faith as understood and practised in the region is very missionary-minded but, at the same time, spirituality is centred round the salvation of the believers' community and its individuals without engaging with social, political or economic realities. In that line of reflection, however, it is quite evident – as some texts explicitly state – that the cultural and tribal background lends itself more to the diversity of very localized and contextualized dialects of faith instead of becoming the basis for unity. In such a case, attempts to cope with the challenges resulting from globalization by

making use of the resources of the larger global community of Christians may help here to define ways towards more unity and a common mission.

6. What may be surprising to some is that, in some states in the region, one finds a high percentage of Christians – which ranges between 70% and 90% in Nagaland or Meghalaya, – exceeding quite a number of regions in the so-called global North. This is a surprising success story but the *Atlas of Global Christianity*⁸ which is so fond of numbers reports the – definitely too high – percentage of 93.1% for Nagaland and 76% for Meghalaya, thus pushing these states to positions 8 and 9 out of 10 because in this table the Atlas is interested in absolute numbers which, by this computation, puts Tamilnadu and Kerala into the top ranking (Kerala is reported with a percentage of 35.5 which again is definitely too high).

The point is not to dispute or correct these numbers. The point is again that North-East India is made almost invisible with its peculiarities behind the general reference to the larger India. On the contrary, the papers in this volume deal with the actual power and spirit to form and inform the daily communal and public life of the peoples and thus help to give a better impression of what is actually happening in the region.

7. The rich history of the peoples of the region has to a great extent been determined by fights against the colonial powers, e.g. formerly the British rulers and, today, India – and against the impact of neo-liberal economics. And, as some of the papers have highlighted, today's struggles with the impact of modern economy, the migration of quite a number of groups and peoples into North-East India, and the position of the region in the Indian Union, is looked upon predominantly within the perspective of a state, church or regional tribal identity.

To conclude: these papers present fascinating and informative insights into the history and present contexts of the region and how the churches in it understand and practise mission. Engaging with the Edinburgh 2010 study themes, they contribute to the broader themes and issues of the global ecumenical movement. That is the contribution of this region to World Christianity and, at the same time, marks the papers' participation in the search for Mission in Unity – a search in which there are also lessons for the churches of North-East India as is acknowledged in many of the papers in this volume.

⁸ T.M. Johnson and Kenneth R. Ross (eds), *Atlas of Global Christianity* (Edinburgh: University Press, 2009), 145.

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