

**The Impact of Christian Missions and Colonization in
Northeast India and Its Role in the Tribal
Nation-Building Movement**

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APPROVAL SHEET

**THE IMPACT OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONS AND COLONIZATION IN NORTHEAST
INDIA AND ITS ROLE IN THE TRIBAL
NATION-BUILDING MOVEMENT**

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Dedicated to my wife, Bano and daughter Amy, who have encouraged and stood by me throughout my studies. Also, to my professors at SWBTS and the brothers and sisters in Christ at FCBC.

Abstract

The Impact of Christian Missions and Colonization in Northeast India and Its Role in the Tribal Nation-Building Movement

Christian missions had a huge impact in the Northeastern region of India. This impact, combined with western (British) colonization, produced a synergy that changed the entire landscape of the Northeast.

This dissertation focuses on the social and political aspects of that change. The primary catalyst was the translation of the Bible into local languages, and a highly successful education program that every mission and denomination implemented from the very beginning. That brought about an awakening and renewal of societies across the Northeast. The greatest change occurred within the tribal societies. It gave rise to a national identity movement, which continues to this day. This was aided by a stable British colonial administration, which provided the basic structure and framework for new tribal political states that would emerge decades later. New problems and challenges came with these changes. Foremost among them was the question of political sovereignty. Some tribal groups rose in rebellion against the national government of India and fought violent insurgent wars at various times. Some of those wars have come to a peaceful end, while others remain unresolved.

The study also deals with the impact of Hindu religion and colonization in Northeast India, a process that was occurring long before Christian missions and western

colonization made their appearance. This Hindu religious and cultural influence (called Sanskritization) had a serious negative impact upon certain tribal cultures, especially those in the Assam plains. It prevented growth and progress in their economy, education, social freedom, and political aspirations. In contrast, the Christian tribal societies have made impressive progress in all these areas. The Sanskritic-Hindu influence is still a potent force to deal with in the region. It is increasing under the current political climate in India. The Christians of the Northeast, particularly tribal Christians, need to be aware of the dangers confronting them and prepare themselves to face the new challenge by having a clearer understanding of the mission work in their homeland.

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Introduction

The opening phrase, “the impact of missions,” can be somewhat of a cliché that keeps recurring in the study of missions. Wherever missionaries went and established their mission a significant impact occurred. However, every location or situation is unique, and so every case deserves to be seriously studied and evaluated. Societies and cultures were transformed, often dramatically, in the spiritual realm as well as in almost every aspect of society. It was bound to be so because the Bible itself uses the contrasting imagery of light piercing the darkness of the world to describe the change that occurs when the Gospel is preached. (cf. 2 Cor 4:6).

Colonization/colonialism is also a familiar topic in mission history, though often unpopular. It is usually perceived negatively as a dark chapter of history that somehow got entangled with missionary activities. Some missionaries and writers may tend to shy away from it and move on to more acceptable, perhaps politically correct, topics of conversation. However, colonization did not always lead to sad and unfortunate results. This dissertation will point out some of the surprisingly positive aspects of the narrative.

This dissertation research deals primarily with the impact of missions on the socio-political dynamics of the Northeast region of India. It is not an attempt to provide a detailed account of evangelization and the growth of Christianity in the Northeast. Such a study would be too vast for this dissertation research. Rather, it will highlight the fact that missions in Northeast India accomplished much more than just evangelization and the

establishment of Christianity. Together with western colonization it set in motion forces that brought about very significant social and political changes that shaped the identities and distinctive characteristics of the tribal ethnic groups. Not surprisingly, it also caused much social upheaval in the region, some of which continues to this day. An interesting factor is that neither missionaries nor administrative officials had any clue of the long-term consequences of their policies and actions. They acted purely out of their immediate need and context. The missionaries only wanted to spread the Gospel, and the British officials only wanted to protect their colonial interests. However, their actions combined in a unique manner that changed the history and destiny of the diverse ethnic communities of the Northeast.

To someone who does not belong to the Northeast region, or someone unfamiliar with its history and peoples, this study may be difficult to understand and may not arouse much interest. At times, it may present itself as a complicated picture of strange names and places that one has never heard before. A helpful illustration would be somewhat like what a game of cricket would look like to Americans who have never seen it before. It would make no sense to them. However, for many millions of Indians, cricket is their favorite sport (thanks to colonization). They know and watch every detail of it passionately. Cricket to Indians is what baseball is to Americans. In a similar manner, the events and issues discussed in this study are of tremendous importance and relevance to the people of the Northeast, but to an outside observer, it may not generate much enthusiasm. This dissertation aims at demonstrating the relevance of the study to a broader understanding of the impact of the Gospel on cultural identity wherever the Gospel has taken root.

The Northeast is a unique region of India that is unlike any other part of the country. The seven states of this region, nicknamed “the Seven Sisters,” differ from mainland India in many ways. A large segment of the indigenous people belongs to the Mongoloid race. Ethnically and culturally they have more in common with their neighboring Asian nations of Burma (modern-day Myanmar) and Tibet, than with the rest of India. Geographically it is almost totally separated from the rest of India except by a small narrow strip of land just over twelve miles wide (see map in appendix). It has the highest percentage of Christians in India, although in terms of actual numbers, southern India has more Christians. Christianity has grown phenomenally among the highland tribes who are now predominantly Christian. Out of the seven states of this region three of them (Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland) have a Christian majority population. Of the remaining four states, one state Manipur, is about half Christian and another state, Arunachal Pradesh, is rapidly becoming Christianized today. One of the most successful mission stories in the world is that of Northeast India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It has received little attention, and many Christians in the world are unaware of the story of Christianity in Northeast India. Things have begun to change in recent decades. A growing number of Christian scholars and missiologists are doing research in this particular field, and a few of them have written books and dissertations.

The writer was born and raised in Northeast India and has a special interest in doing this study. It is his desire and goal that this dissertation will be able to contribute toward a better understanding of the growth of Christianity in this oft-ignored corner of the world.

Thesis Statement

The main theme of this dissertation is that missions and colonization played a vital role in Northeast India in halting the spread of Hindu religious and cultural expansion among the hill tribes. Consequently, the tribal societies were evangelized, educated, and enlightened to face the modern world. The research will highlight the impact of Christian missions and British colonization in the nineteenth century. It will focus primarily on the socio-political effects that these two forces accomplished in the region. The dissertation will seek to establish the fact that missions and colonialism gave to the people of Northeast India in general, and the tribal people in particular, a revitalized identity and cultural dynamic that enabled them to withstand the Hindu religious and cultural pressures from mainland India. Missions and colonization energized and modernized the indigenous tribal societies.

The dissertation examines the early Christian mission history of Northeast India and its resulting impact on its diverse cultures. The cultures that were impacted the most were the tribal cultures of Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya, which presently are the only Christian majority states in India. Its focus will be on how missions and colonization contributed to the advancement and development of the indigenous cultures. Missions played a vital role in saving the local cultures from being dominated by the mainland Hindu culture.

Significance of Study

The writer believes that such a study is very significant and relevant especially in the light of recent political events that have occurred in India. Today, there is a renewed threat to Christians by radical Hindus who want to impose Hinduism by promoting Hindu

culture in the name of national unity, part of an official policy named *Hindutva*. Extremist Hindus have launched attacks on Christians at various locations. Some churches were burned down in the last few years, and some Christians lost their lives. The Northeast too has been affected by this ideology.

This aggressive Hindu resurgence can be explained by the fact that in the Northeast, there have been two competing mission movements: an older “Hindu mission” and the newer Christian mission. Not only that, there was also the accompanying colonization forces behind both the Hindu and Christian mission movements. This thesis will show how a clash occurred between the two, particularly among the tribal peoples, and how eventually Christian missions saved their cultures from Hindu supremacy by bringing about spiritual transformation and cultural progress. Westerners were not the only colonizers and missionaries. Long before the advent of the British, Hindu kings of northern India colonized the region. The process had been going on for centuries by the time the British and missionaries arrived on the scene. If the British had not stepped in, Hindus would have colonized the entire population of the Northeast (a process also known as Sanskritization). The result would have been a loss of the distinct cultures and identities of the people, particularly of the tribal people. The writer would argue that western colonization and Christian missions did not destroy the local cultures. Instead it empowered and reinvigorated them to flourish in the modern world.

Indian Christians of all denominations need to be strong and stand up for their right to practice their faith freely without fear of punishment from the government authorities. The Northeast is considered a haven for Christians because of a large number of tribal Christians, and also because the only three Christian states of India are in the

Northeast. Hopefully, this dissertation will help the Christians of the Northeast to understand their roots better and appreciate the work and sacrifice of the missionaries. Also, one hopes that the non-Christians in other parts of India will understand and appreciate the remarkable overall progress that the tribal people of the Northeast have achieved primarily because of accepting the Gospel conveyed to them by Christian missionaries.

Northeast Christians need to be warned that they should be strong in their faith and be always vigilant. They also need to be reminded that in the past it was the missionaries and Christian government officials who saved their cultures from being overrun by Hinduism. Such a legacy ought to be preserved for stability in the present situation and direction for the future.

Literature Review

The topic of the writer's research is something that is very close to his heart and deeply embedded in his cultural identity. The geographical area of the research is Northeast India, a remote and isolated region of India. Not very much literature has been produced concerning this region and its inhabitants. A few books have been written, most of them by secular writers and historians. Many of them deal with government work and political/administrative issues. Some books written by Christian writers have described evangelism and the growth of churches in the Northeast. Some others have focused on the cultural changes resulting from becoming Christian. As far as the writer knows, very few of them have combined both missions and colonialism as a subject of research. Thus, he believes this research will provide a fresh perspective.

For a study of the historical background of Northeast India the best source so far

is Edward Gait's book, *A History of Assam*.¹ He was a British historian who lived and wrote during the colonial period. His observations are detailed and accurate and his information is well documented. It is a standard book referred to by almost everybody writing on the history of the Northeast. Another book written by an Indian historian, H. K. Barpujari, *The American Missionaries and North-East India*, is an excellent resource for the study of mission history in the Northeast. It is a compilation of the reports and letters of the missionaries; the author only wrote the introductory chapter.² Likewise, the other book entitled, *The Assam Mission of the American Baptist Missionary Union*, is a collection of papers and reports that were presented at the Golden Jubilee conference in 1886.³ They are good primary source materials that provide actual information written by the missionaries themselves.

The book by Chakravorty, *British Relations with the Hill Tribes of Assam*, deals exclusively with the government policies and administration. It is a useful source of study about the colonial government.⁴ The author portrays the beginning and development of relations between the indigenous tribes and the expanding British government in Northeast India. The books by L. Pachuau, O. L. Snaitang, and Longchar represent the

¹ Edward Gait, *A History of Assam* (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 2011).

² H. K. Barpujari, *The American Baptist Missionaries and North-East India* (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 1986).

³ American Baptist Mission, *The Assam Mission of the American Baptist Missionary Union* (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 1992).

⁴ Birendra Chakravorty, *British Relations with the Hill Tribes of Assam* (Calcutta: Firma Mukhopadhyay, 1964).

views of indigenous Christian writers and their unique perspectives.⁵ Coming from a tribal background, their comments are valuable in understanding the Christian impact upon their communities. A British historian wrote a recent book, *Welsh Missionaries and British Imperialism*, but from a secular viewpoint.⁶ He focuses on the lives of the Presbyterian missionaries in the Khasi hills and his understanding from an alternate perspective.

Plan of Study

Chapter 1 describes the geographical location and historical background of Northeast India. Geography explains why the Northeast remained isolated and cut off for so long, and as a result, formed its distinct characteristics that set it apart from the rest of India. A basic knowledge of history is essential to understand the circumstances that led to western colonization, which subsequently opened the Northeast for mission work.

Chapter 2 shows the beginning and growth of mission work. The three denominations that established most of the mission work were, in chronological order, Baptist, Presbyterian, and Roman Catholic. All these three missions saw their greatest success among the tribal people. In chapter 3, the main theme, the impact of mission and colonization, is analyzed. A very significant impact was the fact that missions and colonization halted the spread of Hindu influence among the tribal people of the hills.

⁵ 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 Publishing, 2002); O. L. Snaitang, *Christianity and Social Change in Northeast India* (Shillong: Vendrame Institute Firma KLM Private, 1993); and W. Longchar, ed., *Encounter Between Gospel and Tribal Culture* (Jorhat, Assam: Tribal Study Center, 1999).

⁶ Andrew May, *Welsh Missionaries and British Imperialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

This enabled them to assert their identity and set them on the path of nation building.

The focus then begins to shift from the Northeast people in general to the tribal people in particular. Thus, chapters 4 and 5 are devoted entirely to the tribal population. In chapter 4, the writer makes the argument that the Northeast has a fundamental tribal character and ethos because the tribal people were the original inhabitants and dominant political rulers. However, with the coming of Aryan Hindu settlers from northern India, the balance of power shifted and the tribal people became a suppressed minority. Chapter 5 deals with the future of the tribals. Just as Christianity rescued the tribal population in the past, the tribal people can be assured that in the future, Christianity can protect their identity, status, and freedom. The Gospel brought by the missionaries will continue to impact the people of the Northeast, especially the tribals, in a big way in the future.

Chapter 1

Geography and Historical Background of the Northeast

Major Geographical Features

The geographical area that covers the modern states of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bhutan has some unique and fascinating features. These countries share many common cultural, linguistic, and religious ties. Today this area is referred to as South Asia. However, in the older documents, it is also known as the Indian Subcontinent. To understand this concept, one must look closely at a physical map of this region (see the appendix section). A wall of impenetrable mountains and hills surrounds the entire northern half. At the extreme northern end lies the great Himalayan chain of mountains, which are flanked on the West and East by lower mountain ranges: the Hindu Kush, Sulaiman, and Makran mountains on the West, and the Patkai, Barrail, and Arakan on the East. This long chain of mountains encircles the entire northern portion of the Indian Subcontinent all the way from the Arabian Sea coast to the Bay of Bengal thus forming a natural “great wall” of India. The southern half of the land mass is surrounded by the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, and the Indian Ocean.

All these physical barriers separate South Asia from the rest of the world, rendering it almost like a continent. Hence the term, Indian Subcontinent. However, the analogy can be stretched further as the entire region strongly resembles a natural

“fortress.” High mountainous walls enclose it where it connects with the Asian landmass, and the southern portion is protected by the open sea. These natural barriers allowed for the growth of the profound Indian civilization. However, every fortress needs to have an entrance and exit to engage with the outside world. This Indian sub-continental “fortress” has only two land gateways. The gateway at the western frontier is known as the Khyber Pass, and it lies in today’s Pakistan. The eastern gateway is in the Patkai mountains in Northeast India, and for convenience sake can be called the “Patkai Pass.” Through these openings at the walls of this formidable “fortress,” soldiers, traders, adventurers, scholars, religious men, and various other kinds of individuals have passed through for centuries.

Because these are the only two passes through which large groups of people can move through the mountain barriers, they are of great strategic importance. The most prominent is the Khyber Pass through which came the ancient Aryans, Persians under Darius, Greeks under Alexander the Great, Muslim conquerors, and the Moghuls. Their influence and effect on the Subcontinent have been enormous. The eastern gateway in the Patkai Range has also played a significant role, though on a much smaller scale in comparison to the Khyber. However, in the context of the Northeast, it has been huge. Through this gateway came the Ahom invaders, the Burmese armies, and of course, the numerous Mongoloid tribal migrations from eastern Asia. Some historians, like L. W. Shakespear, hold the opinion that a traffic in the reverse direction occurred as well. He believes that Indian influence and culture spread to Southeast Asia, such as Thailand and Cambodia, through travelers who went through the Patkai Pass.¹

¹L. W. Shakespear, *History of Upper Assam, Upper Burmah and North-Eastern Frontier* (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 2004), 8.

The Patkai Pass is significant for another reason, especially in reference to early Baptist missionary work in the Northeast. Baptists were the first Christian missionaries in the region. They did not originally come with the intention of working in the Northeast. The aim of their mission was to reach China through Northeast India. In the early nineteenth century, China was opening up, and western missionaries were diligently looking for ways to enter the vast country and evangelize. However, the Chinese authorities were strongly opposed to Christian work and suspicious of all westerners.

Only a few cities on the coast were open to westerners for trade. Nobody was allowed beyond these cities into the interior provinces for any kind of work or purpose. Therefore, missionaries were looking for alternative means of entry into China. The American Baptists had established their mission in Burma since the early days of Adoniram Judson. They were interested in reaching the Shan people with the Gospel. The Shan was a large group of closely related tribes who lived in northern Burma and parts of China and Thailand. It was possible to enter China through northern Burma, but the Burmese king prohibited such activities. In the meantime, the missionaries had discovered that a branch of the Shan people had long ago travelled through the Patkai Pass and settled down in the northern part of Assam in Northeast India. The Baptist Mission decided to start a new mission work among the Shan tribal people that had migrated to the Northeast, and through them the missionaries would search for a possible route into China.² Such was the plan that eventually brought the American Baptist missionaries to Northeast India.

² Barpujari, *American Baptist Missionaries*, 14.

Most people are unaware of Northeast India, or at best have only a vague knowledge of it. In their minds, India is limited to the territory marked by four major cities in the four directions: Delhi in the North, Bombay in the West, Madras in the South, and Calcutta in the East. Typically, they see India as the land that exists between these four cities. While it could be argued that this is the heartland of India, one should not forget that India extends both politically and culturally beyond these four cities.

Northeast India lies far beyond the city of Calcutta in the East. In between Calcutta and the Northeast lies the country of Bangladesh. This fact often adds to the confusion for people who are not familiar with India. It also adds to the sense of remoteness or isolation among the people of the Northeast. Bangladesh is like a barrier that blocks the relationship between the Northeast and mainland India. The Northeast can be likened to a political island surrounded by four foreign nations—China, Burma, Bangladesh, and Bhutan – and joined to mainland India by a narrow strip of territory jocularly called “the chicken’s neck.” It has been observed that 99 percent of the boundaries of the Northeast are with these foreign countries and only 1 percent with mainland India.³ Given this geographical separation, it is not surprising to see that the Northeast developed in ways that were very different from the rest of India.

The Northeast constitutes a long river valley called the Brahmaputra River Valley, a smaller river valley (Surma) in the South, and the surrounding hills and mountains. The Brahmaputra valley is a long and fertile plain that can sustain abundant crops and a great

³ NEZCC, *North East India, Land People and Culture* (Dimapur: North East Zone Cultural Centre, 2011), 2.

variety of tropical fruits and vegetation. It is about 450 miles long and has an average breadth of 60 miles.⁴ The entire valley lies within the state of Assam, which is the largest and most populous state in the Northeast. The other states are all located in the surrounding highlands. There is a total of seven states in the Northeast and nicknamed, “the seven sisters.” Directly in the North are the Himalayas, which form a natural boundary with Tibet-China. In the East, running from North to South, are a group of lower mountain ranges called the Patkai, Barail, and Arakan that stretch all the way to the sea. These form the eastern border of India with Burma (or Myanmar).

Three states, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram, are on this frontier land. In the West is the plateau region of Meghalaya, which separates the Northeast from Bangladesh. The Northeast is a land of immense natural beauty and resources. There is abundant rainfall everywhere thanks to the vigorous Monsoon season. This rain has created a fertile land with abundant natural vegetation and plentiful crops. Most of the people live in rural areas where farming is the primary occupation. The climate in the plains is hot and humid, but in the mountains, it is cool and pleasant. It is also a land that is prone to natural disasters like earthquakes and floods. Though economically underdeveloped because of its remoteness, it is a land of rich and vibrant cultures.

Migration of People Groups to the Northeast Region

The Northeast region was a frontier land that lay between the ancient Indian world and the Oriental world that included part of Southeast Asia (Burma and Thailand).

⁴ Anil Chandra Banerjee, *The Eastern Frontier of British India* (Calcutta: Mukherjee & Co., 1964), 6.

It was a meeting ground of three cultures of Asia—Indian, Tibetan-Chinese, and Southeast Asian. It was open to ideas, influences, and human migrations from various directions.⁵ This factor played a central role in shaping the identity and culture of the region. Also, it has led to some confusion in the minds of the inhabitants as to where they belong. Ethnically, most of the people groups occupying the region are more closely related to East Asian nations, while the dominant cultural and religious influences have come from mainland India. This confusion is not only a problem for the local population, but it also extends far beyond. When Northeasterners visit mainland India, they are often regarded as foreigners. On the other hand, Asians (Chinese, Filipinos, Vietnamese, etc.) sometimes mistake them for their countrymen. Thus, one must launch into a lengthy explanation of why they do not look like “real Indians” but they are from India.

The primary reason behind this racial ambiguity can be traced back to the mass migrations of peoples in the past. The Northeast has been a destination for many human migrations since ancient times. This movement typically occurred in two general directions: East to West and West to East. The people of Asian/Mongoloid origins moved into the Northeast from the East, while Indian people of Aryan origin moved from the West.⁶ Those from the West settled in the broad fertile valley of the river Brahmaputra and established a Hindu society, while the eastern Asian immigrants settled mainly in the surrounding hills and mountainous region. They then organized themselves into clans and tribal communities, fiercely maintaining their independence and aggressive temperament.

⁵ Sayeeda Saikia, *In the Meadows of Gold: Telling Tales of the Swargadeos at the Crossroads of Assam* (Guwahati-Delhi: Spectrum Publications, 1997), 171.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 173.

The descendants of these tribes demonstrated the greatest receptivity to the Gospel when missionaries in the nineteenth century evangelized the Northeast. They will be the focus of this dissertation research.

The early historical period of the Northeast does lack in concrete, written records. There is little historical evidence about the early Hindu kingdoms of Assam. The hill tribes had no written script of their own and, therefore, no written historical records. They mainly relied on orally transmitted stories, poetry, and songs. Many of these oral accounts make references to that particular tribe having migrated from the East. Though they can never be as reliable as a written history, each story has elements of truth buried under layers of myths and legends. Most scholars are of the opinion that the Mongoloid population migrated from the region of southern China and made their way through the Southeastern lands of Burma and Thailand.⁷ It seems that the early centuries were a time of flux and instability until the rise of the Ahom kingdom.

The Growth of Hindu Civilization in Ancient Assam

Compared to mainland India, Hinduism was introduced rather late into the Northeast. It was probably the last region of India to be Hinduized or Sanskritised. The earliest recorded history of Assam begins from the fifth century A.D. Before that period, the only available information comes from Hindu mythology that is hard to verify historically. The Hindu epics refer to Assam by the ancient name of Kamarupa, and its

⁷ Verrier Elwin, ed., *India's North-East Frontier in the Nineteenth Century* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015), 27.

capital was called Pragjyotishpur.

A prominent Hindu king, Bhagadatta, is described in the Hindu epic Mahabharata, as being a strong ruler in the East.⁸ His kingdom was attacked by Krishna, the great Hindu hero and god. Behind this legend may be the historical invasion of Assam by an Aryan king from the West (represented by Krishna) when a non-Aryan king governed Assam. After entering India from the Northwest, the Aryans spread out across the country. Being a more vigorous race with superior military power, they quickly gained control over the Subcontinent. Only in the extreme South they met with stiff resistance from the Dravidians. The capital city, Pragjyotishpur, was the ancient name of the modern city of Guwahati. It literally means the City of Eastern Astrology.⁹

Located in the extreme East, which was an unexplored land, Assam was regarded as a land of mystery and magic. Despite this unpleasant reputation, groups of Aryans made their way to this eastern corner, and several kingdoms arose in the Brahmaputra valley. It was a province that was known to the Hindu emperor, Chandragupta Maurya, around the second century B.C. He erected a pillar in the city of Allahabad which mentioned that Kamarupa was a state lying East of Nepal and “into which king Chandragupta’s fame had penetrated.” A copper plate inscription records an invasion by Vikramaditya, king of Ujjain, around 57 B.C.¹⁰ Two other prominent kingdoms were Sonitpur in central Assam under a king, called Ban, and Arimatta at the western end of

⁸ Gait, *History of Assam*, 14-15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁰ Shakespear, *History of Upper Assam*, 7.

Assam. The primary source of information is found in the religious literature and stories of the Assamese people.

The overall picture of this ancient period is that Assam was a largely unknown, unexplored territory to the people of northern India. However, it was already in the process of being colonized by Indo-Aryan settlers who had established small kingdoms. Along with them the Hindu religion was gaining a foothold and would eventually displace many of the native religions. The Hinduism of Assam developed into a different form, which was not strictly in accordance with orthodox religious beliefs of the Hindu-Aryan heartland.

A clearer recorded history exists from the seventh century A.D. onward. Ironically, it was not an Indian historian, but rather a Chinese scholar who first gave an accurate record of the people of Assam.

The first authentic information regarding ancient Kamarupa is furnished by the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsiang who visited India in the first half of the seventh century of our era, and on his return to China wrote an account of his travels and gave a fairly comprehensive description of the various kingdoms which he visited. Hiuen Tsiang was studying “the profound law of Buddha” at the Nalanda monastery in Magadha, or south Bihar, when Kumar Bhaskara Varman, the king of Kamarupa, sent messengers to invite him to his capital.¹¹

The account left behind by this foreign traveler is of great importance. He was a Buddhist monk-scholar from China. His intention for visiting India was to study at the great Buddhist centers of learning in India and copy the Buddhist scriptures into the Chinese language. He visited various places and kingdoms in India and left accurate descriptions of what he saw. In his account of his visit to Kamarupa we learn that

¹¹ Gait, *History of Assam*, 22-23.

Buddhism had not been established in Assam. The kings had converted to Hinduism and had taken on Hindu titles of royalty. The current king, Bhaskara Varman, belonged to the Brahmin caste and was a kind and hospitable person. Though he did not identify as a Buddhist, he showed much interest in learning more about Buddha and his teaching. Likewise, most of the ordinary people were non-Buddhist and Mongolian in race. The land was fertile and productive. Interestingly, he comments on the tribal residents living in the eastern hills as being related to the “barbarians of the south-west of China,” and sharing similarities in their customs.

Hiuen Tsiang’s visit coincided with the reign of one of the greatest Hindu kings of India, Emperor Harsha Vardhana who ruled from AD 606-648. Harsha was much attracted to the learned discourses of the Chinese pilgrim. Bhaskara Varman was also a friend and ally of Harsha Vardhana. While Hiuen Tsiang was visiting Kamarupa, king Harsha convened a great religious assembly in the city of Kannauj to propagate the teaching of the scholar from China. As Bhaskara too was invited, the two of them went together to attend the assembly where they were welcomed with high honor. This event indicates that Assam at that time had close links with the Hindu kingdoms of mainland India. Though the religions of the common people must have been diverse, the religion of the kings and the royal courts of Northeast India was clearly Hinduism. Brahmin priests from northern India played a key role in leading the royal families and nobles to convert to Hinduism. One of the means they used was to make up false genealogies of the royal family that connected them with the great Hindu kings and gods of Aryan India.¹² This

¹² Ibid., 31.

enabled the king to claim royal authority and power over his rivals.

After establishing their influence and spiritual authority over the ruling class, the Brahmins proceeded to propagate their Hindu religion over the rest of society. They alone possessed the skills of reading and writing Sanskrit and the knowledge of the sacred writings. It was not difficult for them to overawe the common people with their superior knowledge. Among all the races in India, the Aryans were the most advanced in learning, technology, and military power. Therefore, in the old kingdoms of Northeast India, the Aryan influence and religion (Hindu) spread very rapidly. The connection with Aryan Hindu culture opened the door to become modern, powerful, and wealthy. From this perspective, it is not too difficult to understand why the indigenous communities of Northeast India converted to Hinduism.

The Kachari and Koch are two major tribes of the Northeast that welcomed Hinduism many centuries ago, or at least came under strong Hindu influence that changed their cultures. These races were Mongoloid in origin, and they had migrated from eastern or Southeast Asia. They had their distinct cultures and religions that were very different from the Aryans. Historians believe that the Kacharis and Koches were part of the aboriginal population of the Northeast, the original inhabitants. However, after contact with the Aryan settlers from the West, a gradual process of change was set in motion. In the course of time, they began to establish their kingdoms under a *rāja*/king, modelled after the Aryan kingdoms. Remarkably, the Koches established a powerful kingdom whose borders extended beyond Northeast India. They were the most dominant force in the Northeast for some time.

The Kacharis (also called Bodos) were probably the earliest ethnic group to arrive

in the region. Their original homeland may have been in Tibet from where they migrated to the Brahmaputra valley. One group might have entered from the West and founded the kingdom of Kamarupa, while the other group came into eastern Assam.¹³ A tribe called Chutias, a branch of the Kacharis, is found in this eastern section around the town of Sadiya. They are the only people, besides the Aryans, who had a written script.

Unfortunately, they did not record their history in writing. The Kachari people gradually spread out over a vast area namely, the Kopili and Dhansiri river valleys and the hills of Cachar. They made their capital at Dimapur in the Dhansiri valley. They learned the art of making bricks and constructing strong, sturdy buildings with bricks and stones while their contemporaries were still using wood and bamboo. The ruins of the old fort and some carved pillars at Dimapur still survive to this day.

In the fifteenth century, the Kacharis clashed with the rising power of the Ahoms who had migrated from upper Burma and settled in Assam. Initially, the Kacharis were victorious. They successfully resisted the expansion of the Ahom kingdom from the East. They pushed back the Ahom army to the Dikhoo River, which became the new boundary. However, gradually the power of the Kacharis began to wane. During the early sixteenth century, there was another major war between the Ahom and Kachari armies. This time the Kacharis were unable to stop the advance of the Ahom army. The capital city Dimapur was captured, and the king fled to safety. The Ahoms installed a new king named Detsing under their control. Five years later he quarreled with the Ahom king, Sukmungung, who attacked the Kachari kingdom once again with a massive force. The

¹³ Shakespear, *History of Upper Assam*, 12.

Kacharis after a desperate defense were defeated. Their capital was sacked and destroyed. The remaining population of the Kachari people retreated further south to the hills of Cachar where they established a new capital at Maibong.¹⁴ They never rose again to become a strong power. However, they were the first in the Northeast to build a powerful indigenous kingdom.

Further to the West, the Koch people were also rising in military power during the early sixteenth century. The Koch people are known as Rajbansi today, and they live in an area just above Bangladesh in northern Bengal. They are believed to have been the descendants of Mongolian and Dravidian intermarriage.¹⁵ One of the early Koch kings, Bisva Singh, established the Koch kingdom. He converted to Hinduism under the influence of Brahmin priests and became a staunch follower. He helped much to spread Hinduism in his kingdom. He built a large temple called Kamakhya, which today is the most important Hindu shrine in the Northeast. He imported many Brahmin priests and scholars from northern India to propagate Hinduism and the knowledge of Sanskrit.

After the death of Bisva Singh, his two sons took over the reins of the kingdom. In a most unusual and rare manner, these two brothers did not compete for royal power. Instead, they chose to reign together in a remarkable partnership that made the Koch kingdom the strongest power in the Northeast. The older son, Nar Narayan, ascended the throne, while his younger brother, Sukladvaj, became the Commander-in-chief. He

¹⁴ Ibid., 16.

¹⁵ Gait, *History of Assam*, 46.

proved to be a brilliant and efficient military leader. Due to his sudden attacks and quick movements in the battlefield, he was nicknamed *Chilarai* meaning “the kite king.”¹⁶

Under Chilarai’s command, the Koch army was victorious everywhere. The kingdom expanded in all directions. The Koch army defeated the powerful Ahom forces in the East and made a peace treaty with them. The Muslim armies in the West, and the Kachari and Jaintia forces toward the South and East were also defeated. The Koches had become so powerful that by 1576 the Moghul emperor of Delhi requested their help in his campaign against his rival kingdoms.

The Ahom Conquest and Reign

Despite the quick successes of the Koch kingdom, it was ultimately the Ahom kingdom that dominated the political and cultural life of the Northeast. The Ahoms ruled from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries and made a strong and permanent impact on the people of Assam and even neighboring kingdoms.

The Ahoms were a Mongoloid race of people whose original home was in northern Burma and the Shan region of Thailand. They were a warlike people that had attained a relatively high degree of civilization. They possessed a written script and wrote detailed historical accounts called Buranjis. It is from the Buranjis that historians have constructed a fairly accurate history of Assam. Of all the historical sources of the Northeast, the Buranjis are considered the most reliable. The Ahoms entered Assam through the mountains passes of the Patkai Range bordering the farthest corner of the Northeast. Initially, the Ahom soldiers met with resistance from the Naga tribes living in

¹⁶ Ibid., 51.

the vicinity, but it was quickly crushed. After entering the Brahmaputra valley, they settled in the northern end of Assam. Their first king and commander was Sukapha. The power of the Ahoms grew rapidly after a series of battles with the neighboring tribes and kingdoms. They were noted for their brutal tactics, which spread awe and terror around them. Their enemies were tortured cruelly before being killed. One of the most dreaded forms was to roast captives alive and compel their family and relatives to eat the flesh.¹⁷

The Ahom armies achieved great success in the numerous battles they fought. They were sometimes defeated, but eventually their power became paramount all over the Northeast. The Kachari kingdom, which had dominated a large part of Assam earlier, fell before the Ahoms. The Koch, Sylhet, Manipur and Jaintia kingdoms too were subdued. The Ahoms successfully resisted the invasion of Muslim armies that repeatedly attempted to conquer the Northeast, which is very significant given the fact that the Muslim power, especially under the Mughal emperors, overran the entire land of India. It could also be true that the geographical isolation and the difficult terrain of Assam helped to keep out invaders from the Northeast.

The Ahoms had their distinct religion with their own gods. Human sacrifices were sometimes involved. Their priests were called Deodhais, and they often worshipped under trees. Their religion was very close to the worship of natural forces and the people were very superstitious. As the Ahom people settled down in Assam, they began to be influenced by Hinduism. It was a slow and gradual process but finally, they adopted Hindu customs and became integrated into the Hindu society. As it had happened earlier,

¹⁷ Ibid., 77.

the Brahmin priests were again quick to take advantage of the situation. They influenced and converted the royal family and the nobles as well. In due course, the common people too accepted the new religion. The Brahmin priests were the earliest missionaries in the Northeast. They brought the Hindu religion and culture to the people of the Northeast.

The Hinduism that developed here took on a different form than that of mainland India. It became mingled with black magic, human sacrifices, and a fertility cult. It was, in fact, a corrupted and dark form of Hinduism known as Tantric Hinduism. People lived in perpetual fear and dread. However, a reformer named Shanker Dev arose during the early sixteenth century who preached a more positive version of Hinduism. It was based on prayer and devotion, not gory sacrifices, and was called Vaishnava Hinduism.¹⁸

Buddhism did not take a firm root in Assam even though it arrived at an early period in its history.

The era of Ahom rule lasted for six centuries. It left a permanent and indelible mark upon Assam. The name Assam or Asom itself is a corrupted form of the word Ahom. In the Assamese language, the 's' and 'h' sounds are often interchangeable. The political power and influence of the Ahoms dominated the entire Northeast. However, their culture could not exert the same degree of dominance over the people they conquered. Although the Ahom people were originally a foreign race speaking a different language and belonging to the Mongoloid race, they eventually adopted Indian (Hindu) culture and religion, and spoke the Assamese language, which is derived from Sanskrit. It may be that after they crossed over the mountain ranges separating their original

¹⁸ Shakespear, *History of Upper Assam*, 76.

homeland and entered Indian territory, they got cut off permanently. Their only option was to adapt to the local Hindu culture of their new homeland. Another interesting explanation offered is that when the Ahom army invaded Assam, they brought no women with them (except for a small group who were members of the royal family and the nobility). As the Ahom warriors settled down, they married the women from the local Hindu population.¹⁹ As a result, a mingled society and culture emerged. The Aryan Brahmins from mainland India also exerted a strong influence that caused the Ahom population to turn to Hinduism.

With the passage of time the power and society of the Ahom Empire began to deteriorate. Internal fighting and rebellion broke out. Corruption and moral decay set in as wealth and prosperity increased. As the Ahom people settled down into a comfortable and easy lifestyle, they began losing their fighting abilities and became weak and vulnerable to their enemies.

From the middle of the eighteenth century the Ahom monarchy was on the decline. The throne was occupied by a number of weak but unscrupulous rulers whose only ambition was the preservation of their own lives and power regardless of the interests of the State. The court became the hot-bed of intrigue and conspiracies, and this was followed by political assassinations and insurrections. The Moamaria rebellion which broke out in 1769 as a protest against religious intolerance of the royal family soon developed into a scramble for power.²⁰

A particular group of people in the eastern end of the empire, called the Moamarias, rose in rebellion against the royal authority. The king's army put down their rebellion but were unable to stamp it out completely. As the king's power and authority

¹⁹ Meena Barkataki, *British Administration in North East India* (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 2011), 6.

²⁰ H. K. Barpujari, *Problem of the Hill Tribes North-East Frontier*, vol. 1 (Guwahati: North Eastern Hill University, 1998), 18.

began to wane further, the Moamarias managed to establish an independent state of their own. Furthermore, from the West attacks from the Muslim kingdoms were becoming stronger and more frequent. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, it was becoming clear that the long Ahom imperial reign was drawing to a close.

The Burmese Intervention

The political situation in Assam deteriorated rapidly because the later Ahom kings were too weak and unable to hold the kingdom together. In the East, the Moamarias grew so powerful that they even took control of the Ahom capital, Rangpur, and subsequently the Ahom king had to move his capital further West to Jorhat. Within the royal family, there was a constant struggle for power among the candidates for the throne. Foreign mercenary soldiers from the neighboring province of Bengal were called in to help resolve this internal conflict, but the situation only grew worse.

By this time in the late eighteenth century, the kingdom of Bengal had become a province of the British Empire with its headquarters in Calcutta. Therefore, the Ahom king appealed to the British East India Company to help drive out the foreign soldiers (who were actually British subjects of Bengal) from Assam. The British Governor General did send a force into Assam and successfully defeated the invaders, but the army was quickly withdrawn as it was the British government's policy at this time not to interfere in the internal affairs of a foreign kingdom. Peace did not return to the Ahom kingdom. The weak king had placed all the governing authority in the hands of his officials, which right away caused them to fight among themselves in their quest for greater power. One of them, named Badan, became involved in an assassination attempt. When the government tried to arrest him, he managed to flee to Calcutta where he

appealed to the British authorities and sought to convince them that his cause was right. The British with their non-interference policy was unable to help him. Badan then turned to the Agent of the Burmese Government stationed at Calcutta. He was taken to Burma and met with the Burmese king.

The king of Burma became convinced by Badan's explanation of events. The result was that a Burmese army was sent to invade Assam in 1816. The Ahom army was defeated, and the Ahom king fled from his capital and sought refuge in Guwahati. The Burmese, after installing a new puppet king on the throne, withdrew to their country. However, the turmoil continued in Assam. Shortly afterward, Badan, (who was obviously the main power behind the throne), was assassinated and the power struggle resumed. The Burmese were again called in for assistance. This time the Burmese king decided to occupy Assam, and add it to his kingdom.

The second Burmese invasion took place in 1819. The weak Ahom army was easily defeated, and the Burmese quickly took control of the entire kingdom. The people of Assam then woke up to the reality that the Burmese had come with ulterior motives. Ahom-Assam entered its most brutal period (1819-1824) under a foreign power. By now the former Burmese king had died, and the new king had no desire to maintain friendly relations with the neighboring country. The Assamese leaders turned once more to the British to deliver Assam from the Burmese and promised to become loyal subjects of the British under their rule. The British Government's non-intervention policy once again prevented it from doing anything. Five years later circumstances had changed, and the British did intervene in Northeast India.

Intense cruelty and oppression marked the Burmese occupation of Assam. Fresh

reinforcements of soldiers entered Assam again in a third invasion. The Ahom king and his officials fled to the British territory of Bengal seeking political asylum. The Burmese unleashed a reign of terror upon the people of Assam. Everywhere they went, they left a trail of destruction, ransacking, and committing unspeakable atrocities. As people fled for their lives, entire districts became depopulated and covered by thick forests.

Some they flayed alive, others they burnt in oil, and others again they drove in crowds into the village namghars, or prayer houses, which they then set on fire. The terror with which they inspired the people was so great that many thousands fled into the hills and jungles to the south, where large numbers died of disease or starvation; and only a small remnant, after enduring unspeakable hardships, managed to reach the plains of the Surma valley.²¹

Fortunately for the Assamese people, the Burmese reign did not last very long. Political events all around were changing rapidly, and the balance of power in the region was about to undergo another change.

The Era of British Colonial Rule

Emboldened by their easy successes in Assam, the Burmese soldiers began to attack the neighboring provinces. Most of these provinces lay within the British territory of Bengal. The British government was now compelled to retaliate in self-defense. The Burmese soldiers proceeded to ransack the areas of Goalpara, Sylhet, and Chittagong, which lay just West and South of Assam. A formal British protest went unheeded by the Burmese king, so the British declared war on the Burmese in 1824.

A British force rapidly arrived in Assam and occupied the city of Guwahati. At the same time, another force attacked Burma from the south and advanced toward the

²¹ Gait, *History of Assam*, 283.

capital, Rangoon. The Burmese army in Assam was quickly overpowered, and it retreated from western Assam. In a year's time, Burma surrendered the entire province of Assam to the British. The war continued until the Burmese declared their defeat in 1826, and the peace treaty of Yandaboo was signed. Under this agreement, the British gained Assam, Tenasserim and Arakan from Burmese control and added them to the Empire.²² The Northeast then entered a new era.

Though the British had gotten rid of the Burmese, the old Ahom royal family remained. It was evident that the monarchy was too weak and divided to rule the province. Thus, a plan was devised to separate Assam into two halves—lower and upper Assam. The lower or western portion would be directly administered by the British with its center in Guwahati. The upper or eastern part was nominally restored to the Ahom royal family but would be under the supervision of the British. The first British governor of the entire Northeast was David Scott.²³

Thus began the British colonial occupation of Assam. After the terrible oppression under Burmese control, the people of the Northeast, especially Assam, welcomed the British under whom the region was to change drastically. Law and order were restored and a peaceful atmosphere extended everywhere, although in a few places there were occasional disturbances. Around this same period, two very notable developments occurred that would bring about great changes in the entire province.

²² Banerjee, *Eastern Frontier of British India*, 20.

²³ *Ibid.*, 20.

The first was the introduction of the tea industry. Initially, the British were not much interested in the Northeast. It had always been a remote, backwater region with a reputation for danger, violence, and wild tribes. No great Indian ruler had risen from there. The British did not want to get directly involved with the Ahom kings nor with the Burmese. However, the Anglo-Burmese war forced the British to take over the region.

In 1823, a British official named Robert Bruce discovered that a particular type of tea leaf was being grown by the native people in the hills of eastern Assam.²⁴ He and his brother submitted some specimens to the Botanical Gardens in Calcutta for examination. The results declared that it was a genuine tea although a little different from the tea grown in China. For the next several years no substantial progress was made. It was only around 1832 that the government decided to promote the growth of tea in Assam. The government acquired large portions of land and started tea plantations. Most people still doubted the commercial viability of the indigenous tea, so tea plants from China were imported and planted. However, due to the different climatic conditions and soil, these did not do well. After much experimentation, it was determined that a hybrid species of the two kinds of tea was most suitable for cultivation in Assam.²⁵ Following this discovery, the tea industry then grew rapidly and soon became the biggest product of the Northeast.

The tea industry was responsible for another significant aspect of life in Assam. Apart from the notable economic changes it brought to the region, it also brought about a

²⁴ Priyam Goswami, *Assam in the Nineteenth Century: Industrialization and Colonial Penetration* (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 1999), 19.

²⁵ Gait, *History of Assam*, 354.

change in the population. It brought in a large group of immigrant labor from outside. Historians have observed that due to the widespread killings and loss of lives during the Burmese occupation, the population of Assam had dwindled considerably and there were not enough able men and women to work in the tea plantations. The government decided to import a labor force from Chota Nagpur, another province in central India. The descendants of these tea plantation laborers have become a significant segment of the population of Assam today. Another interesting fact is that this group of people has been very receptive to the Gospel. Many of them converted to Christianity while most of the native Assamese have resisted the Gospel. In the whole of the Northeast, the most receptive groups of people to Christianity have been the hill tribal people and these tea plantation workers.

The second major development in the Northeast after its takeover by the British was the commencement of evangelization and missionary work. Just about the same time as the beginning of the tea industry, the Northeast opened to Christian missionary work. The first permanent mission of the American Baptists was started in 1836 in the small town of Sadiya. Before this, there had been early attempts by the British Baptists of the Serampore Mission in Bengal to evangelize in the Northeast. The first Bengali convert, Krishna Pal, was assigned to preach the Gospel in Assam. By 1813, he had baptized several people and, in 1829, a mission had been set up at Gauhati. The Serampore missionaries could not continue their work for very long and eventually handed over their Assam Mission to the American Baptists. It was the American Baptist Mission that was destined to have the biggest impact out of all the mission agencies in Northeast India.

Under the new colonial government, the entire Northeast began to open to the rest

of India and the world beyond. The Northeast entered the modern age. New laws were enacted to serve the welfare of the citizens better. Communications were improved. In earlier times roads were almost nonexistent, and rivers were the only means of travelling from place to place. The government built roads and made many improvements in river transportation. Two railway lines were constructed to transport goods, especially tea, to seaports like Calcutta and Dacca. The result of all this was that trade and communications improved vastly. The government began recruiting more men into the army to provide better security to the public and formed new military units. Gradually, the British administration was extended into the hills and mountain territories that surrounded Assam such as the Khasi hills, Lushai hills, and Naga hills. Education was made available to all, whether rich or poor, by the opening of new schools, and colleges in later years. In this, the missionaries helped the government to a large extent. Social reforms such as the abolition of slavery, once a widespread practice, were implemented.

In the upper half of Assam, the Ahom king's administration proved to be a complete failure. Due to rampant corruption and mismanagement, the state was unable to fulfill its obligations to the British, particularly in paying revenues and taxes. The people were tired of the inefficient and corrupt king. As a result, in 1838, Purandar Singh—the last Ahom king, was removed from his office by the British and retired with a regular pension. Thus, the last Ahom territory came under the direct administration of the British. Their takeover of the Northeast was completed.

Commenting on this significant event, an eminent historian of Assam, H. K. Barpujari has this to say about the British annexation, “But for the timely arrival of the British as its savior, perhaps the valley of the Brahmaputra would have been converted

into a Burmese province or parcelled out amongst the hillmen of the north and south.”²⁶

²⁶Barpujari, *Problem of the Hill Tribes*, vol. 1, 20.

Chapter 2

An Overview of Mission Work in the Northeast

Mission work in the Northeast began relatively late. Only in the early decades of the nineteenth century was the Gospel first introduced to the people of the Northeast. This chapter will give only a brief summary of the mission work since this dissertation's purpose is not to present a detailed history of mission. A basic knowledge of mission history is essential to understand the impact of missions in the Northeast. The earliest missionaries were Baptists. They were followed by Presbyterians, then Catholics, and much later by other denominations.

The Pioneering Baptists

Baptists missionaries were the first proclaimers of the Gospel in the Northeast. They travelled a difficult road with many obstacles and, like the mountain roads of the Northeast, marked by many twists and turns. It is a story of trials and perseverance. The Baptist mission work consists of two phases. The Serampore missionaries initiated the first phase led by William Carey in Bengal. These missionaries belonged to the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) of England. The earliest evangelistic work in the Northeast was carried out by Krishna Pal, a Bengali Indian and the first Indian convert of Carey's ministry. He is said to have baptized a small group of about seven believers and started an evangelistic work among the Khasi people, but apparently, it did not endure, and not

much information is available. The official work of the BMS began in 1829 with the establishment of its first center in Gauhati (modern-day Guwahati), Assam.¹

James Rae, a former official of the East India Company, was sent as a missionary and was instrumental in starting a school for young children where twelve boys were enrolled. Some years later he baptized six people and started a church. Being a man of deep zeal for the Gospel, James Rae travelled to many villages and towns preaching the Gospel message. He made it his aim to place a copy of the New Testament in every Hindu temple that he visited. He was joined by another missionary family from England and the mission work spread out wider. Despite the early success of the mission and a promising future, the Northeast mission of the BMS was destined for failure. Due to a change in circumstances, the two missionaries could not continue for long and had to leave the field. The Serampore Mission was already overstretched in India and could not give enough attention and care to its new mission. As a result, it decided to shut down its operations in Assam and hand over the field to the American Baptists.

The American Baptists (ABFMS) were the ones who eventually made the breakthrough and firmly established Christianity in Northeast India. This is the second phase of Baptist missions in the Northeast. It involves a remarkable story that reflects God's sovereign plan and purpose in Christian ministry. The American Baptist Mission arrived in the Northeast by "accident." Its original plan was not to evangelize Northeast India but to find a way into China and evangelize there.² China was closed to the Gospel,

¹ Frederick Downs, *The Mighty Works of God* (Gauhati: Christian Literature Center, 1969), 11.

² P. H. Moore, "General View of Assam," in *The Assam Mission of the American Baptist*

and its government was strongly opposed to Christianity. The Baptist missionaries were hoping to enter China through a backdoor. Since they were well established in Burma, they hoped to make it into China through northern Burma. However, the king of Burma would not allow that, so they were looking for an alternative route.

Related to this was another exciting discovery. A large ethnic group called the Shan had spread out over a wide geographical area that included parts of Burma, southern China, and a corner of Northeast India. A small group of the Shan people penetrated the Northeast through the strategic Patkai Pass and settled around that area. Some of the Burma missionaries attempted to evangelize the Shan people for some time and had acquired a knowledge of their language. The Baptist Mission was happy to learn of the possibility of working among the Shan people of Northeast India, which had recently come under the control of the British. The missionaries would have more freedom under the British than they would in Burma. Furthermore, through these Northeast tribesmen it would not be too difficult to connect with their counterparts in China, and thus the door would open! Such an opportunity sparked a new vision, and the Northeast mission was born.

Nathan Brown and Oliver Cutter were the first missionaries appointed by the Mission Board to travel to Assam and begin their work. The Mission had decided that a little town, called Sadiya, close to the Chinese border, would become the new center for their mission work. It was closely located near the Khampti and Singpho tribal people who were the target group. They were the Shan tribal people that had migrated from

Burma. The missionaries hoped that these tribals would eventually lead them into China.

After a long ocean voyage from America, the two missionaries with their families reached Calcutta where they halted for a brief rest and supplies. Then they continued their journey by river until finally they reached their destination, Sadiya, on March 23, 1836. During their long voyage, they had been studying the Shan language of northern Burma, assuming the tribes on the Indian side also understood and spoke the same language. However, to their deep disappointment, they soon discovered that the Shan language of Burma was a foreign tongue to these natives. Most had severed their links with Burma and China long ago and had developed their separate language and culture. The tribes in the Northeast lived isolated from each other, mainly due to the rugged mountainous terrain they inhabited, and also to the constant state of warfare in which they were engaged. All this made communications very difficult among the tribes. As a result, many of the languages and dialects are incomprehensible among the many tribal communities till this day.

Undaunted, the two missionaries began their language studies all over again to learn the local languages around them. They were joined by a third missionary, Miles Bronson. Sadly, his fellow companion, Jacob Thomas, drowned in an accident in the river Brahmaputra before he could even step ashore. The missionaries quickly learned the Khampti and Singpho languages. They did basic Bible translation work and produced simple books in the tribal languages. Additionally, they started a school for the tribal children. They began visits to the surrounding villages and preached wherever they could.

However, their emphasis began to shift to the majority Assamese population. They were more numerous than the tribal people and were much more accessible as

opposed to the tribes who lived up in the hills. They learned the official language, Assamese, and began translation of the Gospels. In the course of time, their dream of reaching China faded away as they became increasingly involved with the local people of Assam. The missionaries had taken a new turn in the road.

The final step of abandoning the original vision was due to circumstances beyond the missionaries' control and which, apparently, they understood as God's guidance.³ In January 1839 the town of Sadiya was attacked by a large group of Khampti warriors. Their target was the British army camp, and in the ensuing battle, the missionary families were forced to flee to a safer location. They headed for another town, called Jaipur, further to the South and set up their new mission center there. This move separated them from the Khampti and Singpho tribal people, and it was no longer practical to try and reach them. It brought them closer to another large tribe, the Nagas, who were to play a significant role in subsequent Baptist history.

Miles Bronson, the third and most recent missionary, rose to the occasion. He had a conviction that the "new mission" of Baptist work in the Northeast depended on the progress of Christianity among the hill tribes rather than the plains people of Assam, which was the prevailing view of the earlier missionaries.⁴ His interest was drawn to the tribal people who lived in the hills above the town of Jaipur. He began making contacts with Naga tribesmen from a village called Namsang. Being an expert linguist, Bronson soon acquired a working knowledge of the tribal dialect and began writing a few simple

³ Downs, *Mighty Works of God*, 21.

⁴ Barpujari, *American Baptist Missionaries*, 252.

books in it. Next, he decided to make a visit to the village despite the clear dangers.

Even though they were highly suspicious, the Naga villagers welcomed him and allowed him to stay and begin his work among them. Subsequently, in 1840, Bronson was able to bring his family up from the plains and start a little school. The new mission station made remarkable progress from the very start. The Nagas were friendlier than the Khamptis and Singphos whom the mission had tried to reach earlier. The Namsang villagers built a house for the missionary family, and their children started to attend the school. Bronson's sister, Rhoda, came over from America to work at the school. Bronson began translating the Scripture into the local language, even as the Naga villagers became more interested in the Gospel, but a major setback was looming.

The area where the Bronson family struggled the most was health.⁵ They frequently became ill due to the unsuitable climate. Rhoda Bronson was afflicted the most and became the first victim. Some months after her arrival she passed away. Her death was a deep shock, and it signaled the end of the first mission to the Nagas. The missionary leaders in Assam advised Bronson not to continue living in Namsang, and so reluctantly he and his family returned to the plains. Another promising field was shut down, and the Mission turned its attention to the plains people.⁶ The work among the Nagas was abruptly halted and was not taken up again until decades later. It was another unexpected turn in the road that the Baptist Mission was following.

With their new policy of focusing on the plains rather than the hills, the

⁵ Ibid., 265.

⁶ A. K. Gurney, "History of the Sibsagar Field," in *The Assam Mission of the American Baptist Missionary Union* (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 1992), 21.

missionaries set about establishing new centers in the Brahmaputra valley—Nowgong, Sibsagar, Jorhat, and Gauhati. In all these towns, Christian schools, orphanages, and churches were organized. The Mission moved its headquarters once again, this time to Sibsagar, the old capital of the Ahom kingdom. Perhaps, it was symbolic of the new Mission strategy of concentrating its efforts on the Hindu population of Assam. By now the original purpose of coming to Assam to find a route to China had been given up entirely. Neither was the Mission focused primarily on the hill tribes as the key to its success. Moreover, when compared to the hardships of living in the hills (as was clearly evident in the Bronson family's experience in Namsang village), it was much more reasonable to live in the plains with better communication, medical facilities, and security under the British *Raj* (rule).

One can hardly blame the missionaries for this decision, given the dangers and uncertain conditions in this remote outpost of British India. Not only did they fear the wild tribes in the hills, but there was also a real threat of another Burmese invasion to repossess the Northeast. In fact, this was a major component of the British policy of controlling the Northeastern frontier.⁷ The British hoped that the Northeast, particularly the hill areas, would act as a buffer zone between the British provinces and Burma.

Though the missionaries put their best efforts into the task of evangelizing the Assamese people, they met with little success. As was the case in other parts of India with an overwhelming Hindu population, the resistance from the Hindu religious leaders was formidable. They strongly opposed the preaching of the Gospel and other Christian

⁷ Francis Jenkins, *Report on the North-East Frontier of India* (Delhi: Spectrum Publications, 1995), 13.

ministries. However, the light did dawn upon some individuals here and there, and they believed. The first convert in the entire Northeast was an Assamese young man, Nidhiram, from the Hindu community. The missionaries' main success was not in the growth of churches but in their educational program. Although the Hindus resented the evangelistic work of the missionaries, they did not hesitate to send their children to Christian schools. The Hindus invited the missionaries to open schools at various places. It was in the schools and orphanages that children were taught the Bible along with other subjects. Some of these students became Christians, and in their adult lives, they took up the leadership of churches.

The high-caste elite of Assamese Hindu society highly valued education. They could observe with their own eyes the enormous social transformation taking place in India with the advent of British rule and western education. They too wanted to be a part of this social upward mobility. The schools run by the missionaries and the British government in Assam were the gateway to the modern world. Some mention has been made in the Introduction about the publication of the first magazine in the Northeast from the Baptist press. This periodical, *Orunodoi* (meaning "the dawn"), was essentially a news magazine to provide news about the outside world and knowledge of western science and education. It became very successful and popular all across Assam.

Around this time (the 1850s and 1860s) the Baptist Mission went through its darkest phase. The main causes included a controversy within the Mission, financial difficulties, the effects of the Sepoy Mutiny and the American Civil War. The controversy was a major problem, which is not uncommon in missions. It was over the issue of administration and who should make the important decisions, the missionaries or

the Mission back in America? The Assam missionaries rightly felt they were more qualified to make the decisions because they understood the people and their culture. However, the authority of the Mission board prevailed with all its ecclesiastical and financial powers. This outcome brought much discouragement to the missionaries and dampened their fervor and zeal.

The Sepoy Mutiny was an uprising in the British colonies in India. Many Indian soldiers rebelled against the British authorities leading to bloodshed, instability, and grave danger to Europeans. Assam being in the periphery of British India did not experience much disturbance, but the fear and alarm spread everywhere. Some missionaries were withdrawn from their posts and a few of them had to depart from India for their safety. The third unfortunate factor was that, due to the effect of the Civil War in America, the funding for the Mission dropped considerably and had an adverse impact on the progress of the mission work. Many of the schools and a very prominent orphanage in Nowgong had to shut down due to lack of funds. The few Assamese churches suffered when the native pastors could not receive their salaries. Church attendance declined, and there was discouragement all around. It was indeed a severe trial period for the Baptist Mission. But many of the missionaries and Assamese Christians remained steadfast in their faith. God responded by guiding them to a new harvest field—another turn, but a very significant one, in the road.

The missionaries once again came to the realization that they needed to look “unto the hills” for their Mission to expand. The tribal people had been ignored for some time while the Mission was concentrating its efforts in the Brahmaputra valley. But further down the valley, God was preparing the people of the Garo tribe for a “great

awakening.” By the year 1865, a church had been started in the Garo hills, not by a foreign missionary, but by two tribal Christian men, Omed and Ramkhe. They came to the faith through the preaching of a faithful Assamese pastor in Gauhati. After returning to their native village, the two men began preaching the Gospel, and soon the entire village became Christian. From there the revival spread across the Garo hills, and village after village embraced the Gospel truth.

The effects of the success among the Garos were dramatic both in the Northeast and America. Hearing the good news of this positive development, the American churches increased their financial support, and new missionary recruits came forth. The missionaries in Assam decided to venture out into new tribal areas such as the Mikir Hills and the Chota Nagpur tribals of upper Assam.⁸ The response was especially good among the latter group, and many churches sprang up. The Assamese churches were also revitalized and saw some progress, though not as outstanding as the hill churches.

The next big success story occurred in the Naga hills. After the initial mission school venture in Namsang ended unsuccessfully, the Nagas, along with other hill tribes, had been removed from the focus. Now after several decades they were again in the forefront. A new missionary, Edward Clark, had been assigned to the Sibsagar field close to the Naga hills. Having encountered the tribesmen visiting the bazaars (markets), his interest/curiosity in them was aroused. He felt convicted to take the Gospel up to the hills. With the valuable help of an Assamese evangelist, Godhula, Clark made his way up to the hills and established the first church in the winter of 1872. Like his predecessor,

⁸ Frederick Downs, *Essays on Christianity in North-East India* (New Delhi: Indus Publishing Co., 1994), 54.

Bronson, he took along his wife and made their home in the village of Molung. The initial response of the Nagas was not as positive as the Garos. It took a while for the Nagas to overcome their hostility and fully embrace the new faith. Once they did, the progress of Christianity was rapid. Entire villages and tribes welcomed the Gospel in quick succession. The Naga hills became the second bastion of Baptist Christianity after the Garo hills and is still going strong to this day.

After the Nagas, the tribal people of Manipur were the next to be reached with the Gospel. The situation there was slightly different regarding the government and politics. Manipur was an independent kingdom ruled by a Hindu raja (king). It was not a part of Assam under British colonial rule. As in the neighboring hill regions, the people were tribals. In the eighteenth century, the largest people group called the Meiteis, living in the large, fertile central valley, had come under the influence of Hinduism from Bengal. Consequently, the Meiteis adopted the Hindu religion and became more advanced than their neighboring tribes. They organized themselves into a political kingdom with a royal family and a king. The British did gain control of Manipur but allowed the king to keep his throne. Out of respect for the Hindu king, the British government did not allow any Christian missionaries to work in Manipur.

William Pettigrew was a young missionary from England who wanted to serve among the people of Manipur. He was an Anglican and belonged to an independent mission society called Arthington Mission. Later he became a Baptist and joined the American Baptist Mission. He was allowed to start a school in the capital town, Imphal, but prohibited to preach due to the government restriction on evangelism. Nevertheless, he was permitted to do his evangelistic work in the hills mainly among the Tangkhul

tribal people where he had a long and fruitful ministry. Because of his labors, the hill people of Manipur today are predominantly Christian while the Meitei people continue to remain Hindu. Pettigrew, an English Anglican missionary, was the first evangelist to open up the kingdom of Manipur to the Gospel.

A similar development occurred further down South in the Mizo hills. The Baptists missionaries there were from the Baptist Mission Society (BMS) of Britain. In a remarkable partnership that was to endure for many years, two men, J. H. Lorrain and F. W. Savidge, began working among the Lushai (old name of the Mizos) tribal people in 1894. Initially, they too belonged to the Arthington Mission. The origin of this mission is part of an amazing story of how God opened the door for the peoples of Mizoram and Manipur.⁹ Years ago a band of fierce Lushai warriors made a surprise attack on a tea plantation in the plains and killed the English manager. They kidnapped his eleven-year old daughter, Mary Winchester, and returned to the hills.

This tragic incident caused an uproar among the people back in Britain. The Parliament decided that stern action should be taken against those responsible, and all efforts should be made to rescue the captive girl. Reading this story in the newspaper, one man's heart was touched, and he responded with love, not hatred. He decided to form a mission society to carry the Christian message to the Lushai tribal people. His name was Arthington, and he was also a millionaire. Another man whose heart was touched by the newspaper report was James Lorrain, a young man working in the London Postal Department. He and his friend, Frederick Savidge, decided to become missionaries to the

⁹ O. M. Rao, *Among the Churches of the Hills and Valleys of North East India* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2005), 178.

Lushai people. Thus, they quit their jobs, joined the new mission, and then set out for the Lushai hills with the financial support of Arthington. Meanwhile, a British force rescued the girl, Mary, and she returned to England. She had been living unharmed among the Lushais and had quite happily adapted to their way of life.¹⁰

After reaching the Lushai hills, Lorrain and Savidge learned the local language, translated portions of the New Testament, and prepared a dictionary.¹¹ They were unable to remain for long. The local authorities ordered them to leave. So, they went back to England, and after a brief stay returned to Assam to work among the Abor and Miri tribals up in the North. Through all their hardships the duo had not forgotten their first love for the Mizo people, and they eventually returned to the Mizo hills in 1903. This time they came not under the Arthington Mission, but rather under the BMS. During their absence, the Presbyterians had moved into the northern part of the territory, and so the Baptist church was established in the southern Mizo hills with its headquarters at Lungleh.

¹⁰ In the above cited book, the author narrates a fascinating sequel to the kidnap story of Mary Winchester. Many years later, Frederick Savidge returned to England on furlough with a Lushai man named Challiana whom he had adopted as a young boy. On one occasion, Challiana was asked to speak at a church where he shared the story of how the Gospel came to his homeland as a result of the kidnapping of Mary. After the service, an elderly lady walked up to him and introduced herself as that same Mary. She was so happy to meet a Lushai again. She told him that her name in Lushai was *Zoluti* and she was now a sixty-year-old grandmother. She invited Challiana to her house where she showed him her old Lushai dress, ear rings, and a (tobacco) pipe!

¹¹ Lalrimawia, *Mizoram-History and Cultural Identity (1890-1947)* (Guwahati: United Publishers, 1995), 113.

The Presbyterian Advance

The Presbyterians followed closely on the heels of the Baptists into the Northeast. Their work was the second wave of Christianity that swept the region. They firmly established themselves in the Khasi and Jaintia country, and in the northern Mizo hills. Their story too is an inspiring story of heroic men and women of faith who followed the Lord's call to the mission field.

It all began in the rural country of Wales in Britain. The Calvinistic Methodist Church of Wales decided to form its mission agency that came to be known as the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Foreign Mission Society. This Calvinistic Methodist Church was a Methodist church with a Presbyterian polity and Calvinistic theology. As a result, it developed closer ties with Presbyterian churches rather than with Methodists. Eventually, it changed its name to the Welsh Presbyterian Church.¹²

This mission made a momentous decision to send missionaries to the land of the Khasi people in Northeast India. The story behind this is no less remarkable. The Mission was faced with the option of choosing from three different locations in India—Gujarat in western India, Malour in central India, or the Khasi hills/Manipur in the Northeast.¹³ The Khasi hills were finally chosen simply for one reason: it was the least expensive choice! The missionaries were offered free passage if they sailed to Calcutta, and since the Khasi hills were closer to Calcutta than all the other places, they would have to spend the least amount of money for the journey. It was simply a matter of economics for the cash-

¹² Snaitang, *Christianity and Social Change*, 68.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 70.

strapped young mission organization! But today no one can seriously deny that God directed the missionaries to the right place at the right time.

The first two missionaries, Thomas Jones and his wife, arrived in the Khasi hills in June 1841 and began their work in the town of Cherrapunji. This town was the place of the British administrative headquarters, and the missionary couple was warmly received by the officials. Cherrapunji was no stranger to missionaries. It was here that the earlier Serampore Mission had done some work before its withdrawal from the Northeast. Thus, it was perhaps appropriate that the next generation of missionaries would resume the work from the same location. An initial opposition from the local populace occurred as expected. It was especially difficult for the few Khasis who accepted the new religion, as it meant the loss of their social status, privileges, and protection from the local chieftain. The Khasi people slowly opened their hearts to the Gospel message. The Mission expanded to more areas, not only among the Khasis but the Jaintias as well, who were their immediate neighbors. The first permanent Khasi church was founded in 1846.

The Presbyterian missionaries from the very beginning set high standards for the church members. In accordance with their Calvinistic views, they desired only genuine believers (the elect) to form the church. That meant completely giving up their old religious practices and rituals, faithfully attending church, observing the Sabbath by not working on the Lord's Day, and a change in lifestyle according to biblical teaching. Additionally, the new Christians were required to be able to read and write, with the exception of the elderly and disabled persons. Because of this, the Mission laid great emphasis on opening schools and promoting education. From the very beginning, the Mission did encourage the indigenous Christians to assume the leadership of the churches

and not be suppressed by the foreign missionaries. According to O. L. Snaitang, this was the reason Christianity was so successful and grew rapidly among the Khasi and Jaintia people.¹⁴

A vital factor in the growth of the Presbyterian Church was the impact of the Welsh Revival of 1904. It brought a new life and zeal into the churches. Much time was devoted to praying and worshipping with true sincerity. Many people were converted, and there was a rapid growth of church membership. It also impacted the growth of the Presbyterian Mission in the neighboring Lushai/Mizo Hills.

Christianity was introduced rather late in the Mizo Hills. The first missionary, Rev. Williams, was a Welsh Presbyterian missionary serving in the Khasi and Jaintia hills. He felt a divine call to go to the land of the Lushais and present Christianity to them. Thus, in 1891, he arrived in Aizawl, the main center of the Lushai people. However, before he could establish his work, he died of illness a few months later. Then the Mission sent D. E. Jones and Edwin Rowlands to take up the unfinished work. Despite their best efforts to promote the Gospel, the response of the local people was very slow. They remained indifferent and resistant for a long time. Finally, two Mizo men, Khuma and Khara, believed and were baptized in 1899.¹⁵

Notwithstanding this late and slow beginning of the Church in the Mizo Hills, the state of Mizoram is one of the most vibrant Christian areas in India today. This could be largely due to the impact of the Welsh Revival. Its fire had spread around the world, and

¹⁴ Ibid., 75.

¹⁵ Lalrimawia, *Mizoram-History and Cultural Identity*, 114.

the Khasi Church was no exception. From there it was carried to the Mizo Hills. Here is a moving account of it in the words of a modern Mizo writer:

When the Mizo Christians heard of the revival in the Khasi Hills, they decided to go and share the experience. After attending the Christian meeting at Shella in Cherrapunji, they came back disappointed. Reaching the outskirts of Aizawl, now named as Bethel in Chaltlang, they decided to rest their weary limbs and have a prayer. Something happened to them. The Holy Spirit had been at work, and when the prayer was over they were changed men. They were filled with happiness. This had taken place on 4 April 1906. To hear an account of their journey a meeting of Christians was organized that night. On that very night the whole congregation felt Pentecostal fire descending upon them.¹⁶

This incident marked a new phase in the spread of the Gospel in Mizoram. The whole country was soon covered by the revival wave.¹⁷

The Mizos were indeed blessed by this great revival movement in the Presbyterian Church. Due to its rapid spread, the Presbyterians came to occupy a larger territory than the Baptists in the South, and this could have led to a strained relationship. However, the two denominations have always enjoyed a friendly and harmonious relationship. The Mizo example of Christian unity and cooperation is a great lesson for all the churches in the Northeast.

The Roman Catholic Mission

The Roman Catholic Church was the third major player in the history of Northeast missions. Compared to their extensive work in India that began very early, the Catholics made a late entrance in the Northeast. In reality, Catholics were the first

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Christians in Northeast India. In the late-seventeenth century, there were two Catholic communities existing at Rangamati and Bondashill, both located in Assam.¹⁸ Historians believe these Christians were the descendants of Portuguese soldiers in the Mughal army that intermarried with Indian women. The real mission work of the Catholic Church began only in the 1890s. With the help of their highly efficient ecclesiastical machinery, they made rapid progress, deep inroads into Protestant territories, and they continue to be a growing force. The Catholic Church is a very significant and powerful component of the Christian presence in the Northeast.

Once again, the Khasi hills became the cradle for the birth and growth of the Catholic mission in the Northeast. All the three major denominations and their missions began in the Khasi Hills: The early (Serampore) Baptists, the Presbyterians and finally the Catholics. This writer is convinced that the city of Shillong (modern capital of Meghalaya and main center of Khasis), can certainly claim to be the religious and cultural center of the Christian Northeast.

In 1890, two priests and two lay brothers, the first Catholic missionaries, reached Shillong and took up residence. Their leader was Fr. Otto Hopfenmueller and they belonged to a new German order called Societas Catholica Instructiva, also called Salvatorians.¹⁹ They quickly learned the Khasi language and began translating their literature. The following year saw the first baptisms. They ventured out into the country

¹⁸ George Maliekal, *History of the Catholic Church Among the Khasis* (Shillong: Don Bosco, 2005), 72-73.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

and opened new centers and schools. Like other early missions the Catholic Mission also experienced its share of griefs and trials, especially in the unexpected early death of its leader, Fr. Otto. After his death, the next leader to take his place was Fr. Christopher Becker under whose leadership the Mission made significant strides.

The emphasis was on education and establishing quality educational institutions especially in Shillong, in which they were highly successful. This writer believes that in the field of education the Catholic achievements have far surpassed the older Presbyterian Church. To this day the Catholic schools and colleges of Shillong are renowned among the best institutions of the Northeast: St. Edmund's (writer's alma mater), Loreto Convent, St. Mary's, Pine Mount. "By the late thirties of the present century Shillong had become the biggest center of higher education in Assam and of the missionary activities not only in the Khasi Hills but in the whole of the North-East Frontier India."²⁰

A serious setback occurred for the Catholic Mission when the First World War broke out in 1914. Unlike the Baptists and Presbyterians who came from Britain and America, the Catholic missionaries were from Germany. Germany fought against Britain and America in the two World Wars. As a result, all German nationals (which included the Catholic priests) were deported by the British government and the Mission suddenly found itself without leaders. To fill the gap, Jesuits were called in but they could not supply enough personnel. The Mission was compelled to shut down some of its schools and other institutions. The work was seriously hampered during this period. After the

²⁰ P. G. Mathur, *Khasi of Meghalaya: A Study in Tribalism and Religion* (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1979), 20.

War, the Mission began its recovery with the arrival of the Salesians of Don Bosco in 1922 from Italy (the German missionaries were not permitted to return).²¹ Under the leadership of zealous Italian and Spanish clerics, the Catholic Mission flourished in the Khasi Hills and Assam. It expanded widely and made much progress, particularly in its educational work and service to the poor.

The Second World War did have another negative impact with the internment of the Italian priests, but it was not as severe as the first one. One might say that the Catholic Church was well prepared this time. Since then the growth of the Catholic Church in the Northeast has been very robust and impressive.

This brief look at the history of Northeast India missions gives one an idea of the churches that were established and where they are located in the Northeast. Most of the conversions took place among the hill tribal people, and so the hills became the new home of Christianity. That is where most of the churches are found today. The hills are also the place where the strongest impact of missions occurred.

²¹ Maliekal, *History of the Catholic Church*, 151.

Chapter 3

The Impact of Missions and Colonization

The early nineteenth century saw the arrival of westerners in the Northeast for the first time in history. They were basically of two categories: British colonizers and Christian missionaries. Together they produced a massive impact on the entire region. The Northeast went through a tremendous transformation as it entered the modern era. This chapter is very crucial because it deals with the central theme of the dissertation. It will explain the specific ways in which missions and colonization impacted the people and environment of the Northeast. The biggest impact was on the hills tribal people because it motivated them to unify themselves into a national identity that enabled them to resist the expansionism of mainland India.

The Northeast Became a Part of India

The Northeast did not have close links with mainland India. Rather, it was an isolated region, largely unknown and mysterious to many Indians. Indian influence was felt mainly in Assam and did not extend much beyond it. Assam itself remained independent of India for much of its history. The Ahoms who ruled Assam for about six centuries were originally from Burma and Thailand. Though culturally related to Indian civilization, Assam was politically an independent Southeast Asian kingdom during much of that period. The British eventually sealed the political marriage of Assam (and

the rest of the Northeast) to India.¹ Had the Northeast not been joined to India under British rule, it might have either become a part of Burma, or continued as an independent state, more or less like Nepal. Nepal was never colonized by the British, and so it retained its independent status. However, it maintains close cultural and religious links with India.

The direct cause of the British annexation of the Northeast was the Burmese invasion. The Burmese king of Ava decided to take advantage of the disunity and political instability that prevailed within Assam as the Ahom kingdom disintegrated in the 1820s. The Ahom-Assamese ruling class had become so fragmented that one of their factions invited the Burmese king to invade the country. The Burmese invaded not with the intention of restoring order and peace but primarily to ransack the Northeast.² Their soldiers committed horrible atrocities and brought about great destruction in its wake. The British were watching closely from their Indian territories. Their interest turned to alarm with the realization that the Burmese power was a growing threat to their interests in India.³ Once again the Assamese appealed for outside help, this time directed to the British. The British government promptly sent its forces into Assam, and in a short period, the Burmese were pushed back from the Northeast. However, if the British withdrew from the Northeast, that would have created a political vacuum since the Ahom power had ended, and the Burmese would be only too happy to reoccupy the land. Thus,

¹ Lalsangkima Pachuau, "The Socio-Political Realities of Tribal Christians in Northeast India," in *In Search of Identity and Tribal Theology: A Tribute to Dr. Renty Keitzar*, ed. Wati Longchar (Jorhat: Tribal Study Center, 2001), 34.

² Alexander Mackenzie, *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 7.

³ Banerjee, *Eastern Frontier of British India*, 19.

compelled by political circumstances, the British annexed Assam and the Northeast and added it to its Indian empire. The Northeast became known as the Northeast Frontier Province.

Growth of Tea Industry and Economic Development of the Northeast

Tea played a paramount role in the colonizing process. It has been said that the main reason and the biggest incentive for the British to occupy the Northeast was tea.⁴ They were interested in Assam and the Northeast mainly because they saw the prospects of a profitable tea trade after losing their monopoly of the tea business in China.⁵ From a very humble beginning, the Assam tea business developed into a lucrative industry, which opened the region for further economic progress. The tea from Assam was exported all around the world and attained international fame.

The tea industry required good means of transportation. Thus, railroads were constructed to transport the tea to seaports like Calcutta and Chittagong. This helped other businesses to grow and flourish. Another very significant development was the discovery of oil in northern Assam, which gave a further boost to the economic growth of the Northeast. The tea industry also drew in many people to Assam from other parts of India. The indigenous Assamese people were not willing to work in the tea plantations that were managed by European businessmen. The authorities had no choice but to import workers from outside the Northeast region. Foremost among them were the Chota

⁴ Goswami, *Assam in the Nineteenth Century*, 64.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

Nagpur tribal people from central India. They eventually became a large minority group within Assamese society. Of all the people groups in the Assam plains, it was among this group that the Gospel had the most effective impact.⁶ Many of these so called “tea garden laborers” accepted Christianity without much hesitation. Other groups like Nepalis and Bengalis were also drawn to the Northeast by the economic prospects in Assam. In recent years, Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh have entered in large numbers.

Tea was responsible for bringing the first American missionaries to Assam. The man who founded the tea industry in Assam, C.A. Bruce, was a committed English Christian who was working near Sadiya in Assam. He and his wife began a Christian school and were keen on starting evangelism. They requested the British Baptists if they could send a missionary, but it did not work out. As seen earlier, the British Baptist Mission was unable to manage their new field in the Northeast, and had to eventually shut down their work. Bruce and his wife then approached the American Mission board (with help from the government), and the response was positive. Thus, the first American mission was established in Sadiya, and the work spread out from there.⁷

Assamese Language and Culture Rescued from Bengal Hegemony

Bengal had always been a powerful neighbor of Assam and continued to be so into the modern age. It is much larger both in terms of area and population. The Bengal that existed during the British colonial era was comprised of today’s Bangladesh and the

⁶ Downs, *Mighty Works of God*, 83.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

Indian state of West Bengal. The people of Assam and Bengal are closely related through ties of language, culture, and religion. Some people regard Assam as a cultural extension of Bengal, and in the past, the Assamese language was considered a dialect of the Bengali language. This was certainly the view of the British administrators when they established their government in Assam.

They regarded the new province of Assam as a continuation of Bengal with minor differences.⁸ The results of this policy were serious indeed. The Bengali language was imposed as the official language upon the indigenous population. It became the language of governance, the legal courts and education. Jobs in the government and schools would be available to only those who could speak and write Bengali fluently. Since a large pool of well-trained and experienced Bengali government workers already resided in Calcutta, the British brought many of them to settle in Assam. The best government jobs were given to this group. This policy would benefit the British government immensely because it would not need to spend a large sum of money and effort on training Assamese people for government jobs. Why start from nothing when it could easily use its citizens from neighboring Bengal? With this large influx of bureaucrats and workers from Bengal, Assam was suddenly in grave danger of being overwhelmed and dominated by Bengalis.⁹ The people of Assam could not stop the imperial power of the British government, except for one tiny group of individuals—the missionaries.

⁸ Barpujari, *American Baptist Missionaries*, 147.

⁹ A. K. Barua and Susmita Sengupta, eds., *Social Forces and Politics in North East India* (Guwahati: DVS Publishers, 2013), 40.

The Baptist missionaries became well-aware of the situation and decided to tackle the problem head on. They did not remain aloof, content with only the spiritual aspect of their work. Realizing that they ought to do something to rescue the language and culture of the Assamese people, they began a vigorous campaign to oppose the British government policy. Being American citizens was a plus. British missionaries would have most likely felt compelled to support the government. However, American missionaries held a unique position. They did not always have to support the government position and, as missionaries, they enjoyed the respect of the government authorities.

The missionaries insisted that the language and culture of the Assamese were different from the Bengali though similar. After studying Assamese thoroughly and comparing with Bengali, they drew the conclusion that Assamese was derived independently from Sanskrit and not through Bengali.¹⁰ Therefore, it is not a dialect of Bengali (bear in mind that the two earliest Baptist missionaries, Nathan Brown and Miles Bronson were expert linguists who translated the Bible into Assamese and other native languages). They wrote numerous articles on the debate with the government and published them in their periodical, *Orunodoi*, that helped to spread the campaign to far distances as the popular magazine was read by all the educated people of Assam. The battle with the government was a hard and arduous task that dragged on for years. At times, the cause seemed to be lost as the government employed its full force against the missionaries. But eventually, Assamese was made the official language. The missionaries and the Assamese speakers emerged victorious and the people of Assam became liberated

¹⁰Downs, *Essays on Christianity*, 82-85.

from the cultural hegemony of their powerful neighboring province.

Evangelism and Education in Tribal Communities

Undoubtedly, evangelism was the main priority of the missionaries. The only reason they came to the Northeast was to preach and spread the Gospel. As soon as they entered a new area, the missionaries started learning the language of the ordinary people to communicate the truth of Jesus to them. The preaching of the early missionaries and all their teachings were solidly grounded in the Scripture. After the initial stage of evangelism, the next step was to translate the Scriptures into the common language so that the new Christians would be able to understand the Bible in their native language. The third step was to teach them how to read the Scripture. Evangelism led to education, which has always been the pattern of Protestant mission work all around the world.

As noted earlier, in the Northeast the most successful evangelism occurred among the tribal people of the hills and mountains even though missionaries preached with equal sincerity among both tribal and non-tribal people. The largest and strongest Christian communities of today are found among the highland tribal people. The impact of the Gospel on the tribal population is summed up in the following words of a Hindu scholar of Assam.

Profound was also the influence of evangelization on the life and thought of the tribesmen. The Baptists established churches, started schools, and opened hospitals. They taught the warring communities the value of peace, toleration, and peaceful coexistence. The process of acculturation was accelerated by the spread of the gospel, expansion of education, introduction of Roman script, translation and publication of the Bible and literary works. Christian ideas of brotherhood

and western education widened their mental horizon.¹¹

To understand why the hill tribes responded more positively to evangelism is not difficult. In India, the Hindu people have been very resistant to Christianity, especially so with high-caste Hindus. The plains people of the Northeast were predominantly Hindus, and the hill people were the least influenced by Hinduism. They had their own religions based on animism and spiritism. It is generally believed that these latter religions were primitive and unsophisticated while Hinduism is highly developed and deeply philosophical. The people of the plains were proud of Hinduism with its high and profound thinking and didn't feel the need for a foreign religion.¹² The tribal people, on the other hand, found it easier to give up their simple, primitive religions. This is probably what many Hindu apologists would say.

The writer thinks this is likely to be an inaccurate assessment. The biggest problem with Hinduism is its caste system, which is almost impossible to eradicate. It is a form of social bondage sanctioned by religious authority. The caste system makes it very difficult for a Hindu to leave his society into which he was born. To do so would cause him to lose his life-long social status and become a despised outcast for the rest of his life. It is a very serious issue especially for those belonging to the upper castes because they would lose all their privileges and high positions in society. For those at the bottom of the caste ladder, however, it is not a big loss. They do not have much to lose by converting to another faith, and in many cases their gains could be much more. This is the

¹¹ Barpujari, *American Baptist Missionaries*, 54.

¹² Rao, *Among the Churches of the Hills and Valleys*, 4.

reason most converts from Hinduism to Christianity have come from the lower castes. These people may have had a high esteem for Hindu philosophy, but because of its unjust and oppressive caste system, they chose to leave.

In the case of the hill tribes, there is no such caste system or a rigid social hierarchy.¹³ Therefore, it is relatively easier to come out of their religious and social background. Such a view may be a sociological rationale for Christian conversions. One must not forget, though, that true conversions are based on spiritual repentance and faith, and it is the work of God rather than a mere human choice to seek a better social environment.

Development of Tribal Languages and Literatures

Christian mission was the primary catalyst, and often the direct cause, for the growth of tribal language and literature.¹⁴ Before the coming of Christianity, the tribal languages of the hills were all spoken and not written down (with a very few exceptions). With the advent of Christian missionaries, languages were written down with the goal of translating the Scripture into those languages, and this set into motion a chain of events. Schools had to be opened so new Christians could learn to read. Basic textbooks had to be made available. They had to be written and printed. Hymn books in the tribal language were also produced. Eventually a new body of literature emerged along with the Bible. In all the tribal societies of the Northeast, all this amounted to the first literature in any

¹³ T. K. Oomen, "Culture Change among the Tribes of Northeast India," in *Christianity and Change in Northeast India*, eds. T. B. Subba, Joseph Puykunnel Shaji, and J. P. Purakal (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Co., 2009), 12.

¹⁴ Downs, *Essays on Christianity*, 192.

given tribal language. The missionaries were the first writers and educationists. Besides translating the Bible (or portions of it) and hymns, they often wrote the grammar and dictionary of that language after analyzing it, which was a very significant contribution to the development of the language.

In most of the tribal communities, the missionaries found a variety of dialects being spoken within a particular tribe. Some of these dialects were understood by a wide section of people, but others were unintelligible to their neighbors.¹⁵ The missionaries chose a particular dialect, which they thought was the most widely spoken, or in some cases they simply learned the dialect of the village/location where they first landed. They worked on that dialect, translated the Bible, and produced its first literature. In the process, they inadvertently gave that tribe the biggest gift next to the Bible—a *standard language* that unified the tribe with a common language and religion (Christianity). This hugely significant development led the way toward a sense of unity and distinct tribal identity.

The first way in which Christianity contributed towards a sense of tribal consciousness was through the creation of a standard language. This happened when the missionaries created a written form of the language. The written form of the language adopted by the missionaries was in turn accepted by the government, thus becoming not only the language of education throughout the area inhabited by a tribe but also the language of administration. With the spread of education and administration, the standard language gradually displaced the other dialects, especially among the literate.¹⁶

This writer will offer three examples of the above phenomena: (1) In the Khasi hills the missionaries chose the Cherrapunji dialect, among various dialects, which

¹⁵ Ibid., 195.

¹⁶ Ibid., 33.

became the official standard Khasi. (2) The modern official language of Mizoram was in fact the dialect of the Lushai tribe, one of the several tribes that inhabited the region. (3) Among the Ao-Naga tribe, the Chongli dialect emerged as the standard language of the tribe. It was one of three dialects spoken within the tribe. The translation of the Bible into tribal languages has made a truly very significant contribution to the unity and identity of tribal communities.

Down in the plains of Assam the situation was different within the relatively more advanced Assamese society. The Assamese language was an old Sanskrit-derived language with its written literature, but many people could not read it because the knowledge of reading and writing was limited to a small, privileged minority—mostly the priests and the wealthy upper class. The missionaries set about to change that situation. They opened schools in the towns and villages where people of all backgrounds—rich or poor, high or low caste—were welcome. These mission schools were enthusiastically welcomed by the Assamese. The missionaries were invited to open schools wherever they went. They could not keep up with the high demand.¹⁷ Undoubtedly, the missionaries were greatly responsible in spreading education in Assam, particularly among the poor and disadvantaged people.

A Sense of Tribal Identity: Ethnic Consciousness and Nationalism

The mission and colonial impact went far beyond the religious and spiritual life of the tribal people. It brought about great changes in the social and political spheres. In

¹⁷ Barpujari, *American Baptist Missionaries*, 106.

summary, it ushered in the modern age to the peoples of the Northeast. This resulted in changes that totally and irreversibly revolutionized life in the entire region.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the political scenario of the Northeast looked as follows. The Ahom kingdom was the largest power, both in size and military might, but it was rapidly declining. Around it there were several smaller kingdoms. The Manipur kingdom lay on the Southeast bordering Burma. It was a secure territory due to its geographical isolation behind the Patkai mountain range. Toward the Southwest was the Jaintia kingdom, and further to the South lay the Cachar and Tripura kingdoms. All these kingdoms were ruled by Hindu kings and most of the population had adopted the Hindu religion. That had helped them to encounter the Hindu civilization of mainland India from which they had gained significant benefits. Along with the good came the bad aspects of civilization: wars and battles for political supremacy, instability, power struggles and plots in the royal courts, the rich and powerful oppressing the poor. These kingdoms were constantly at war with each other and plotted to bring down the mighty Ahom kingdom.

Scattered all around these kingdoms were the hill tribes living in relative freedom and isolation. The geographical nature of the terrain was largely responsible for this state of affairs. The rugged hills and mountains made it extremely difficult to communicate among themselves and have contacts with each other. People living on one mountain range could be completely cut off from people living on the next range. That is the reason the tribes spoke numerous languages and dialects. Even within one tribe, many dialectical differences are present in the speech. The thick forests with wild animals also added to the difficulty of travel from one settlement to another. The only means of travel was by

foot. The isolation and inaccessibility of the hills was also a security factor for the tribes. It prevented invasions and attacks by the plains kingdoms. Thus, they were mostly left alone to follow their way of life except on those occasions when the hill people came down to the plains for trade.

The hill tribes could not form centralized, political kingdoms like the people of the plains. Their isolation from each other prevented them from uniting together into one nation. To be sure, some forms of political entity or alliance did develop among some communities, for example, the Khasi durbar system.¹⁸ However, no truly unified, centralized, political structure existed among the tribes. Together with the mountainous environment, this fact ensured that the tribes lived in isolation from the socio-political mainstream of India. Adding to this was the fact that the tribal people were constantly fighting one another. Battles were often fought between one village and another village, or between a group of allied villages with another allied group. Peace was a rare commodity in the hills of the Northeast. The view of certain scholars, like Frederick Downs, is that the tribal communities were actually “village states.”¹⁹ The village was the world for most tribals and their lives revolved around it. To be sure, they did have a concept (sometimes a vague idea) of the larger tribe outside of the village, but because of the circumstances under which they lived, they were unable to experience that fully with people of other villages.

The arrival of western colonialism and Christianity changed the entire world of

¹⁸ Snaitang, *Christianity and Social Change*, 16.

¹⁹ Downs, *Essays on Christianity*, 200.

the tribal peoples. Christianity gave them a standard tribal language with which they could communicate among themselves. Both Christianity and colonial rule brought about peace and an end to the constant feuds and battles that had plagued their lives. They no longer had to live in fear, tension, and insecurity. They could venture out of their villages, travel freely, and interact with people of other villages and even other tribes. The education they received from the missionaries opened their minds to modern knowledge and the outside world. Their experience of British colonial rule was also a revelation. They understood what a modern government was like and particularly the ideas of parliamentary democracy, elections and a central government made a big impression on the educated sections of the tribal people.

With this new sense of enlightenment, the tribal people proceeded to implement their knowledge and ideas within their respective societies. They began efforts to unify their tribes with a new sense of ethnic identity and pride. The people began to realize that they belonged to a larger community beyond their traditional village or group of villages. Thus, for the first time, various tribal ethnic groups began to emerge that were truly unified: the Garos, Khasis, Semas, Angamis, Aos, Lushais, and Kukis. A tribal nationalistic movement had begun. The British administration played a very significant role in this development of tribal ethnic identity and solidarity.

In the Pre-British period, most of the tribes were not conscious of their ethno-tribal identities and their world was confined to their family, clan, “khel” and village. Terms like Naga, Kuki, Abora, Lushai, Garo were given to them by the non-tribal plains people . . . even the major tribal groups in Nagaland—such as the Ao, Angami, Lotha and Konyak—got their names from other tribes.²⁰

²⁰ S. M. Dubey, “Inter-Ethnic Alliance, Tribal Movements and Integration in North East India,” in

British administration established district headquarters in the tribal territories. The Garos had their center at Tura town, the Khasis at Shillong, Lushais at Aizawl, Angamis at Kohima, Aos at Mokokchung, and so forth. This gave a further boost to the process of tribal solidarity. These little towns became not just administrative centers, but cultural hubs where the tribe could coalesce together.

The movement went on to give rise to nation states. The diverse tribes of the Naga hills, such as Angami, Ao, Lotha, Sema, Chang, Konyak, came together for the first time to form one national entity called Nagas, and eventually to possess their own political territory called Nagaland. The Mizo people in their pre-modern history were comprised of various smaller tribal groups like Lushai, Kuki, Mara, Pawi, Lakher, and Chin.²¹ They too became unified to form the modern Mizo nation and established their own territory called Mizoram. The Khasi-Jaintia people reflected a similar reality. Prior to Christianity, smaller groups existed that spoke different languages like Ri Bhoi, Ri War, Maram, Synteng, and Lyngngam.²² Under Christianity, they all came together to form one homogenous Khasi-Jaintia society. These newly unified tribal peoples eventually became full-fledged Indian states during the 1960s and 1970s.

Here again, credit must be given to the colonial administrators who not only classified the tribes and gave them their modern names, but also grouped them together and demarcated their territories in the interest of better administration. In doing so, they

Tribal Movements in India, ed. K. S. Singh (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1972), 4.

²¹ Sangkima, *Essays on the History of the Mizos* (Delhi: Spectrum Publications, 2004), 28.

²² Snaitang, *Christianity and Social Change*, 104-05.

produced the first tribal nation states, which had never existed in their history: the Naga Hills district, the Lushai/Mizo Hills district, the Khasi-Jaintia Hills district, the Garo Hills district. The renowned scholar, Dr. Frederick Downs, a highly regarded authority on the mission history of Northeast India and himself the son of missionary parents who served in the Northeast, has this to say concerning this issue:

Even as it is apparently true that in the pre-British period, “tribe” was not a primary reference point for identity among the hills peoples of the North-East, it is equally evident that during the British period it became increasingly so. The need to classify and name the people with whom they came in contact and eventually governed was almost a compulsion with the British bureaucrats. They were responsible for naming, often using names given by neighboring peoples, the various tribes. The identification of tribes was closely related to the organization of British administration. Districts were established that were either predominantly made up of members of one tribal group, e.g., Garo Hills District, Khasi-Jaintia Hills District, Lushai Hills District, or groupings of tribes that had been classified as related by the British, e.g., the Naga Hills District. British administration contributed to the development of tribal identities in two ways. First, through the very structure and operation of administration and, second, by stimulating responsive solidarity movements.²³

The initial solidarity movement began within the Church, subsequently paving the way for other movements that followed. The national movement really began with the Christians because they were the first to be educated. The church was at the forefront of the unity movement. The standard language of a tribe became a reality only when the Bible was first read and preached in the churches. From there it made its way into the society and everybody began using it. The earliest organizations were church organizations. These set the tone for social and secular organizations that would follow. Among the Presbyterians of the Khasi Hills the earliest church organization, the

²³ Downs, *Essays on Christianity*, 203-04.

Presbytery, was formed in 1867.²⁴ The first Baptist church organization in the hills, the Garo Baptist Association, was formed in 1875.²⁵ The first Baptist church association among the Nagas was formed in 1897.²⁶

At this point, one must also address the issue of political independence, a controversial and sensitive subject in Northeast history. It can be considered as the hardline variety of the tribal people's quest for identity. Its proponents wanted to be entirely separated from India and establish their own independent country. To achieve this, they took up arms and became involved in a violent war against India. It claimed many lives and caused much pain and sorrow. This happened mostly among the Nagas and Mizos.

After many years of conflict, their objective failed to materialize. In recent times, it has either faded away or got sidetracked by other interests. A few people still cling to it and refuse to let the dream die. Such people should not feel dismayed nor defeated. In the writer's view, the natural and legitimate desire for nationality has already been achieved to a large extent. The tribal people of the Northeast have come a long way. From a primitive way of life that was in the past mostly confined to the village ("village state"), they unified and developed their societies and eventually formed their own national states

²⁴ Snaitang, *Christianity and Social Change*, 110.

²⁵ Downs, *Mighty Works of God*, 54.

²⁶ P. T. Philip, *The Growth of Baptist Churches in Nagaland* (Guwahati: Christian Literature Center, 1983), 67.

within India. Indeed, this is a great accomplishment within a short span of time (less than 150 years). Most moderate tribal people are happy with it.²⁷

The nationalist movement of the Northeast tribals can be viewed as having two forms, particularly in the case of the Nagas.²⁸ Among all the Northeast tribals, this issue has been most prominent among the Nagas. One is the moderate form that desires a distinct tribal identity and a separate homeland within India. This has been largely fulfilled by getting statehood and being placed alongside other Indian states. The other is the hardline form which desires complete separation from India and total independence. This has caused a long period of insurgency and militancy in the region, which, to date, has not been fully resolved.

To these two forms of nationalism may be added a third one found among the plains tribes of Assam (e.g. Boros). They desire to identify themselves with the mainstream Hindu culture and society and become integrated into it, a process known as “Sanskritization,” upon which the following chapters will further elaborate. They want to be a part of the larger Hindu society without having to give up totally their individual tribal identity, language, and culture. All these three forms of tribal identity and nationalism are legitimate expressions of their desire to establish their entity in the modern world. Every group is entitled to hold its ideological stand that it has chosen.

²⁷ O. L. Snaitang, “Christianity and Change Among the Hill Tribes of Northeast India,” in *Christianity and Change in Northeast India*, 153.

²⁸ Julian Jacobs, *Hill Peoples of Northeast India: The Nagas* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), 151.

Missions and Colonial Rule Stemmed the Tide of Hindu Cultural Expansionism

As described earlier, Assam had links with mainland India since early times. That opened a channel for religious and cultural influences to flow into the Northeast region. Hindu mythology regarded Assam as the easternmost extension of Hindu civilization and referred to it as *Pragjyotisha*, “the Light of the East.” The process of Hindu cultural assimilation is also called “Sanskritization” because the major languages of India are derived from classical Sanskrit, and it is also the language of the Hindu scriptures. From henceforth this term will be used to describe the phenomenon of being assimilated or integrated into Hindu culture and society. Sanskritization was indeed a strong force in the Northeast as elsewhere in the country. The powerful Ahom kingdom of Assam, which began around the late-thirteenth century became entirely Sanskritized by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.²⁹ Today, very little resemblance exists between Assamese culture and the Thai culture of Thailand from where the Ahom people originated. The original Thai-Ahom conquerors were strong militarily but were eventually conquered by Sanskritic Indian culture, much like the Romans who were conquered by Greek culture.

The valley of the Brahmaputra River became the new home for Sanskritic culture. From there it began spreading out in all directions. The first to be affected were the tribal people of the plains. As the immediate neighbors to the much larger Assamese and Bengali populations, these tribals were much dependent on the larger community for their livelihood and prosperity. Thus, gradually the plains tribal people inevitably became

²⁹ Banerjee, *Eastern Frontier of British India*, 17.

Sanskritized. The prominent Sanskritized tribes are the Boro, Kachari, Dimasa, Miri, Lalung, Rabha, Mising, and several others. They soon became part of the larger Assamese society.³⁰ They are very familiar with Assamese or Bengali culture and can speak those languages quite comfortably, at the same time retaining their native language and culture. Most of them identify themselves as Hindus and respect the authority of the Brahmin priesthood. Further examples can be pointed out with the Manipur and Jaintia kingdoms. They too were Sanskritized to a large extent through contact with Bengali culture. They organized themselves into monarchies and successfully built up their political power. All this is the legacy of a long period of Sanskritization with the dominant Assamese or Bengali communities.

Next in line were the tribal people inhabiting the foothill areas. They were neither fully in the hills nor fully in the plains. They can be considered as semi- Sanskritized tribals. The best examples are the Karbi people (formerly called Mikir), the Khamptis, some Jaintias, Tripuris and a section of the Garos. They too were influenced to a large extent by Assamese/Bengali culture, language, and religion. They practiced both their traditional religions and Hinduism as well. The Sanskritized and semi-Sanskritized tribals looked upon the Assamese/Bengalis as their guardians and benefactors, though one cannot say for certain if they really liked them.

The independent tribal peoples inhabiting the high hills and mountains were the last remaining people to resist the wave of Sanskritization. From their hilltop villages, they could observe the rapid spread of Sanskritic influence in the plains. This caused

³⁰Downs, *Essays on Christianity*, 176.

them to be highly suspicious of the Assamese and Bengali plains people. They were wary of being exploited by the plainsmen.³¹ They did not want their cultural heritage to be lost to the plains culture. However, they could not hold out forever because they were dependent on trade with the plains.³² Their economy depended on trading their produce, such as cotton, salt, timber, herbal items, honey, and other forest products with the plains merchants. Periodically, they came down from the hills to barter goods at the village markets. Every time they descended to the plains they were exposed to the more complex life of the plains people. With increasingly more such contacts, it was unavoidable that some tribals would be attracted to life in the plains.

Small groups of people began migrating from the hills to settle down in the plains. Over time, these former hill tribals had established their villages in the plains. This is the reason among the Garos there were two basic categories—the hill Garos and plains Garos.³³ Even among the Jaintias and Nagas there were some who had settled in the plains and became included in the population of Assam. Furthermore, the Ahom kings had granted some portions of lowland territory to certain Naga chieftains to build good relationships and military alliances.³⁴ A few tribals went further to inter-marry with the Assamese and integrated into their society. It is not true that the hill tribal people were

³¹ Niru Hazarika, *Ethnic Autonomy Questions in N.E. India* (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 2005), 12.

³² *Ibid.*, 2.

³³ Alexander Mackenzie, *Memorandum on the North-East Frontier of Bengal* (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 2003), 37.

³⁴ A. Bendangyabang, *History of Christianity in Nagaland, Social Change* (Bangalore: Shalom Ministry Publication, 2004), 64.

completely independent and self-sufficient, having nothing to do with plains people. They were engaged in a good deal of communication and exchanges. The two groups were connected through trade, commerce, and even military alliances in a kind of love-hate relationship.

Considerable benefits were to be gained when one settled in the plains. The soil was very fertile, and farming was easier and more productive. There were roads and rivers with convenient means of transport: carts and boats. Most important of all, there was a market economy in the plains where one could make money and become rich. In short, it was an easier and more comfortable life than life in the hills. To assume that the hills tribal people would have slowly and gradually yielded to the strong influence of the plains and become Hindus is not unreasonable.³⁵ They were on their way to Sanskritization just like the plains tribes before them. This was the only available way forward towards progress. No other option existed except to remain isolated from the world, but no society can exist isolated forever. It was only a matter of time before all the tribal population of the Northeast became Sanskritized.

The possibility of this can be illustrated when one looks at the neighboring country of China. The southwestern part of China (not very far from India's Northeast) is a land of diverse tribal communities, particularly in the province of Yunnan. There is a close resemblance between these tribes and the tribal peoples of northern Burma and Northeast India. These indigenous hill people are not part of the majority Han Chinese race. However, over a lengthy period, they had been living under the mighty influence of

³⁵Moore, "General View of Assam," in *The Assam Mission*, 16.

Chinese civilization and culture. As a result, they have all adapted to the mainstream Han Chinese culture and speak Chinese fluently in addition to their native tongues. A very similar fate might have occurred in the Northeast but for the arrival of another foreign power.

The advent of British colonization in the Northeast introduced a paradigm shift, which may be called modernization (and not necessarily “westernization” as many Indian writers have stated). It opened the region to the outside modern world for the first time. The British rule ushered Northeast India into the modern world. This is true of the whole of India, not just the Northeast. In the Northeast, the process of Sanskritization was suddenly interrupted when the British annexed the province.³⁶ It was the help for which the hill tribals had been longing. Now they did not have to bow down to the forces of Sanskritic-Hindu culture. There was a new power to challenge it. The tribals now had a choice to progress without having to adopt Sanskritization and live under the Hindu caste hierarchy. Along with colonization, the Northeast was also exposed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the first time. The province was opened up for evangelization and mission. Almost all the hill tribal people gladly accepted the message of Christ.

The writer does not intend to give the impression that colonization was all good and nothing bad. There were certainly cases of misrule and mistreatment of people. The British government launched many attacks on the hill people in which many lives were lost. Most of these attacks were “punitive expeditions” to punish the tribals for their raids

³⁶ Snaitang, *Christianity and Social Change*, 40.

on the Assam plains, which frequently resulted in terrible bloodshed and destruction of property. The only reason the British became involved with the hill tribal people was to protect their interests in the plains, which was primarily their tea plantations.³⁷

Initially, the government adopted a policy of “non-interference” toward the hill tribes and left them alone. However, due to increasing violence between the tribals and the plains folk, the government at last decided to bring the hills under its jurisdiction. Sometimes the government response was legitimate, but at other times it was guided by a cruel and aggressive policy designed to instill fear among the hill people. It also employed its infamous “divide and rule” policy that split communities by sowing seeds of mistrust and enmity. One must not glamorize British colonial rule nor justify its wrong actions.

On the other hand, British colonial rule brought immense benefit to the hill tribes of the Northeast. It awakened the tribal people to a new world of ethnic consciousness and nationalism. As discussed earlier, British rule brought together the diverse, isolated tribal communities into one administrative unit and gave them new collective names like Naga and Mizo. This fostered a new sense of ethnic unity and solidarity. To protect and preserve tribal interests and identity, the government introduced the “Inner Line” system.³⁸ This law prohibited any outsider without government permission from visiting the tribal territories that lay inside the inner line (or border). This greatly helped to prevent the hill tribals from being exploited by the plains people.

³⁷ Sinha, “Culture Change Among the Tribes of Northeast India,” in *Christianity and Change in Northeast India*, 23.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Some of the government officials developed a genuine interest in the history and culture of the tribals and wrote well researched ethnological books. These works were the first in-depth research studies on the life and culture of the hill tribal peoples. Despite their references to the tribals as “savages,” “barbarians,” “wild hordes,” and so forth, the officials seemed to have a liking for the hill people. Many of them had a genuine interest in bringing education and progress to the hill tribes. At least this was true of the early government officials such as David Scott, the first governor of the Northeast, and his successor Francis Jenkins. They often lent their support to the missionaries in their work among the tribals and sometimes gave financial assistance as well. Frederick Downs has this comment about Jenkins who came after Scott, “Jenkins was a warm and exceedingly generous friend of the Mission throughout the 36 years he lived in Assam. Indeed, without his support it would not have survived the early years.”³⁹

Some of the later administrators who did not share the views of Scott and Jenkins opposed the missionaries and their work. They accused the missionaries of destroying the indigenous tribal cultures by converting them to Christianity.⁴⁰ Rather than a realization that the tribal world had changed forever and no amount of effort could retrieve the old way of life, perhaps a romanticized view of tribal life led these modern administrators, or perhaps they were fearful of what could happen if all the tribal people became educated and how it could undermine their colonial authority. As for the missionaries who were at

³⁹ Downs, *Mighty Works of God*, 4.

⁴⁰ Jacobs, *Hill Peoples of Northeast India*, 153.

the very center of the educational process, there was no such fear. Far from destroying tribal cultures, the missionaries empowered and equipped the tribal peoples to face life in the modern world.⁴¹

Sanskritization is not an entirely bad thing either. It has many good qualities, which have enriched the diverse cultures of the Northeast. It brought Indian civilization and knowledge, which promoted an artistic and cultural renaissance in areas such as literature, music, fine arts, and architecture, to name a few. For example, in Manipur a beautiful dance form (the Manipuri) was developed by the Hindu Meitei people, which today is included in the repertoire of Indian classical dances. By harnessing the advanced knowledge of Sanskritic culture, the tribal kingdoms of Kachari, Manipur and Jaintia grew into strong political powers, able to challenge the power of the Ahom-Assamese kingdom. Hindu philosophy brought enlightenment and a peace-loving lifestyle. It introduced the philosophy of non-violence to the aggressive and often cruel Ahom people and transformed them to live peacefully. In the modern era, this emphasis continues through Gandhian principles that are being propagated by various philanthropic organizations. All these are good results of Sanskritization.

The most serious problem with Sanskritization, however, is the caste-system. It is an unjust social structure that oppresses the poor and lowly. It destroys society and prevents it from going forward. Had the hill tribal people of the Northeast accepted Sanskritization, they would have been assigned to some of the lowest positions in the

⁴¹ Downs, in *Essays on Christianity*, 174.

caste hierarchy.⁴² They would have remained perpetually uneducated, poor and at a great disadvantage, stripped of their dignity and pride.⁴³ They would have become victims of a religious and social bondage at the hands of Brahmins. Spiritually, they would be lost in idolatry and superstition. The unfortunate story of the plains tribals, particularly the Boros, is proof that this is a true consequence. The next chapter will discuss the recent history of the plains tribal people who are indeed now waking up to realize the dark side of Sanskritization and its destructive power.

One last observation is the fact that missions and colonialism prepared and enabled the tribal Christian communities to survive in independent India after the end of British rule. Through their remarkable services to the tribal people, mainly in terms of spiritual guidance, education, and administrative structures, the missionaries and administrators helped the tribal people to stand up for themselves and their rights in a diverse and densely populated country like India. Otherwise, they could have easily been lost among the teeming millions of people in modern India. They would have ended up as just one of the numerous small minority groups of India with minimum status and recognition. But thanks to the legacy of Christian mentors, all the Christian tribal areas were given the status of a state: Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram. As a result, their Christian faith, language, and culture are well-protected under the Indian Constitution.⁴⁴ As citizens of the world's largest democracy, they have freedom to exercise their rights

⁴² Pachuau, "Socio-Political Realities," 38.

⁴³ Wati Longchar, *An Emerging Asian Theology: Tribal Theology* (Jorhat: ETC, 2000), 10.

⁴⁴ Verrier Elwin, *Nagaland* (Delhi: Spectrum Publications, 1997), 47.

and to choose their way of life. Though small in area and population, these three Christian states have equal legal status with all the other Indian states, some of which, like Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra, vastly outnumber the Northeast states by huge margins. In contrast, the Sanskritized tribals have experienced neglect and poor treatment. This is the reason a strong movement now exists among them to break away from the larger society and they are now making demands for their own autonomy.

Chapter 4

The Tribal Heritage of Northeast India

The Northeast is very different from the rest of the Indian subcontinent. It is a region where the indigenous people were predominantly Mongoloid tribal people in their ethnicity and languages. It displays more similarity with Southeast Asia than with India. That has been especially true in the past. The earliest indigenous inhabitants were tribal peoples who in later periods became outnumbered by the influx of Indo-Aryans from northern India.¹ Despite the apparent dominance of the Hindu-Sanskritic culture, it is hard to deny the deep legacy of the Mongoloid tribal civilization and cultures.

The Major Political Powers in Northeast History were Tribal

In the modern era, particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the status of the tribal population declined considerably, and many tribal people became marginalized, especially in Assam. The word “tribal” was an undignified term denoting low social standing and general backwardness. Tribals suffered from a social stigma. Fortunately, with increasing education and modernization, the tribal people are on the rise again. Though at present the Northeast tribals are an oppressed and ignored minority, they were the rulers and empire builders in the past. Before the modern era began, three

¹ Matthias Hermanns, *The Indo-Tibetans: The Indo-Tibetan and Mongoloid Problem in the Southern Himalaya and North-Northeast India* (Bombay: K. L. Fernandes, 1954), 133.

major political kingdoms existed in the Northeast. These were the Koch, the Kachari and the Ahom kingdoms. All three were Mongoloid tribal nations. We shall take a brief look at all these three powers.

The Koch kingdom arose in the western extremity of the Northeast around the early-sixteenth century.² This region today is known as Goalpara and northern Bengal. The Koch people were a Mongoloid race that had migrated to this area at an early period.³ They are considered a part of the largest tribal family in the Northeast known as the Bodo or Boro. The Boro race had spread out across the Northeast and dominated the Assam plains before the rise of the Ahom kingdom. The most western group of the Bodo nation was the Koch. Being at the extreme western end of the Northeast meant that the influence from mainland India was more powerful upon the Koch people than on the rest of the Northeast people. Consequently, it did not take long for the Koch nation to convert to Hinduism and adopt Sanskrit culture.

In this religious-cultural shift, the general population was led by their kings who sought to follow the example of the powerful and splendid Hindu kings of India. The founder of the Koch power was a king named Bisu who quickly converted to Hinduism and changed his name to Bisva Singh. He became “a great patron of Hinduism.”⁴ He proceeded to build Hindu temples and brought in many Brahmin priests from the

² Gait, *History of Assam*, 48.

³ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

mainland to teach the Hindu religion to his people. He built a fine capital city and named it Cooch Behar, which exists to this day.

The most successful Koch king was Nar Narayan, a son of Bisva Singh. His original name was Malla Deb but changed it when he ascended the throne. He appointed his younger brother, Sukladvaj, as the Chief of the military. Together, in an amazing partnership and loyalty rarely seen in history, they built up the kingdom into a formidable political power, defeating all the neighboring kingdoms—Kachari, Jaintia, Manipur, Sylhet, and Ahom. Sukhladvaj, the military general was nicknamed *Chilarai*, meaning the “Kite king” because of his quick movements on the battlefield.

After having subdued all the kingdoms in the East, the two brothers turned their attention to the western horizon. By this time, the Moghul Empire had extended its sovereignty to the Bengal kingdoms. The first battle in the West was against the Muslim kingdom of Gaur. However, the Koch army was no match for the stronger foe and was soundly defeated. Several years later, a second opportunity presented itself. Gaur was again under attack, but this time by the Moghul army from the West. The Koch army under Chilarai attacked from the East in an alliance with the Moghuls. This time the Gaur army was utterly defeated, and the conquered kingdom was divided between the Mughal emperor Akbar and Nar Narayan, thereby adding more territory to the Koch kingdom.⁵ The Koch Empire reached an unrivalled position in the Northeast.

Tragically, soon after these events, Chilarai was attacked by a fatal disease and died. After his death, the Koch army did not engage in any more wars. The Koch nation

⁵ Ibid., 55.

enjoyed peace and prosperity during the long reign of Nar Narayan. The king became a zealous Hindu who actively promoted Hindu religion and culture. Gradually, the Koch people discarded their tribal way of life and embraced Hindu culture. Many of them intermarried with the local people and became assimilated into Hindu society. Today, their mixed descendants are called *Rajbansis*, and their original Koch language has become extinct.⁶

Toward the end of his reign, the king divided the Koch kingdom into two parts. The western portion, called Cooch (or Koch) Behar was given to his son. The eastern portion, called Cooch Hajo, was given to the son of Chilarai, the king's brother, perhaps in honor of his name and legacy.⁷ After the death of Nar Narayan in 1584, the Koch kingdom rapidly declined in power. Eventually, the western kingdom became a part of the Moghul Empire while the eastern part went over to the Ahom kingdom.

The Kachari kingdom was a very early kingdom that existed in the Brahmaputra valley. The inhabitants of this kingdom were the Dimasa people who were also a branch of the great Bodo race, and therefore were related to the Koch people. Historians believe that the Mongoloid Bodos were the earliest people that colonized and dominated the Northeast plains.⁸ They predated the migration of Indo-Aryans into the Northeast. The Bodo people were already living in the land by the time the Aryans began migrating from

⁶ Banerjee, *Eastern Frontier of British India*, 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁸ Hira Moni Deka, *Politics of Identity and the Bodo Movement in Assam* (New Delhi: Scholars World, 2014), 17.

northern India. In ancient Sanskrit literature, they were referred to as the indigenous people who lived outside the fold of the Aryans. They were called *Kiratas or Mlechchas*.⁹ These names suggest they were a foreign race because of their Mongoloid origins and were considered as aliens and outcasts by Aryans.

By the thirteenth century A.D., the Kacharis had built up a strong kingdom south of the Brahmaputra with their capital in Dimapur. It extended from the Dikhu River in the East to the Kallang River in the West. It was a strong, flourishing kingdom whose civilization was superior to that of the Ahoms, the new growing power in the East.¹⁰ Inevitably, war broke out between the two kingdoms. After a brave fight, the Kachari army was defeated by the larger Ahom army. Dimapur, the capital, fell in 1536 and was destroyed by the enemy. The Kachari people fled to the South and established a new capital at Maibong in the North Cachar hills. They could not remain very long there because the Ahoms kept advancing farther. Thus, they moved further South and finally settled around Khaspur. They remained there as an isolated little kingdom until political events in the 1800s caused the British to add it to their empire.

The Ahom kingdom has already been described in a previous chapter, and so there is no need to repeat the details. The Ahom people originated from northern Thailand and upper Burma. They were a part of a large tribal ethnic community called Shan, also known as Tai. Racially they were Mongoloid, and were fierce and ruthless warriors. They appeared at the eastern frontier of the Northeast during the early-thirteenth

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Banerjee, *Eastern Frontier of British India*, 22.

century. Their leader and military general was Sukapha who led them on to the conquest of the Brahmaputra valley. Sukapha laid the foundation of the Ahom kingdom and began a royal dynasty that lasted for many centuries.¹¹ After much wandering and exploration of the land, the Ahoms finally erected their first capital city at Charaideo. The Ahom army subdued the neighboring tribes that resisted them such as the Morans, Borahis, Chutiyas, and Kacharis. They established their political supremacy in the valley.

In the West, they faced a new challenge as the imperial Mughal army advanced toward the East. A new phase of wars with Muslim kingdoms began. In 1662, the Ahom capital, Garhgaon, fell to a Muslim invasion under the general Mir Jumla. Twenty years later, the Ahoms under King Gadadhar Singh regained their independence, and pushed back the Moghuls from the Northeast. The Ahom power reached its highest point during the reign of Rudra Singh (1695-1714).¹² From then on, the Ahom power declined rapidly. Internal conflicts, disunity and corruption caused its downfall. Rebellions broke out in various places. The most severe was the Moamaria rebellion which overthrew the king (Gaurinath Singh) and seized power temporarily until the British intervened and restored the king to his throne. The kingdom continued its rapid decline. It finally collapsed with the Burmese invasion in 1817.¹³ The Ahom power had reigned supreme in the Northeast for six centuries.

The character of the Northeast is essentially tribal. Tribal people are the

¹¹ Gait, *History of Assam*, 77.

¹² Goswami, *Assam in the Nineteenth Century*, 10.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 11.

indigenous people who have been living there since the earliest days. Today, a minority is present in terms of population largely due to a massive influx of people from mainland India, but the underlying ethos is still tribal. Out of the seven states that comprise the Northeast, five are tribal in which tribal people form the majority population. Only the remaining two states, Assam and Tripura, are non-tribal. Even in these two, large numbers of tribal people exist. Tripura was a tribal state until the 1950s when large numbers of immigrants from the plains moved in. Eventually, the tribal people became outnumbered by these immigrants from Bangladesh.¹⁴

The Bodos had been inhabiting the Northeast long before other groups arrived. All the three political powers discussed above were built up and established by Mongoloid tribal people who in the end accepted the culture and religion of the Indo-Aryans of northern India. It benefitted them in numerous ways and there were many advantages to gain. Aryan-Hindu influence enabled the Koch and Bodos to advance well ahead of other tribes such as Khasi, Mizo, or Naga. The Sanskritized tribes built beautiful cities and enjoyed the fruits of civilization from the mainland. They grew wealthy and prosperous and advanced in intellectual and artistic pursuits.

At the same time, one cannot ignore the negative results. The most severe was the loss of their original identity. All the gains, whether social, economic, religious, came at a high price. One might call it the loss of the soul. By adopting Sanskrit culture, these nations sacrificed their tribal identity to become a part of a larger pan-Aryan nation. No clearer example exists than that of the Koch people. Led by their kings, the Koches

¹⁴Pachuau, *Ethnic Identity and Christianity*, 54-55.

quickly adopted the Hindu religion and way of life. Many of them intermarried with their non-tribal neighbors. No problem occurred while the Koch kingdom/empire was powerful and rich. However, as the kingdom ended years later, the Koch people began to sink into obscurity. Today, their descendants, called Rajbansis, live in poverty and neglect by the government.

The Ahom people of northern Assam have also suffered a loss of respect and recognition in modern times. They too lost their identity after the fall of their great empire. Even if they did hold on to their identity, it has been greatly diminished under the predominant Hindu-Assamese influence. After many centuries of intermingling with the Aryan Assamese, they are almost indistinguishable from them, except perhaps by their surname. As seen earlier, the Ahom society underwent a slow transformation from a tribal society to an Aryanized society, a process that took several centuries. This is reflected in the names of the Ahom kings. The earlier kings all had Tai/Ahom names such as Sukapha, Suhungmung, and Sukhangpha. The later Ahom kings took on Sanskrit names like Gadadhar Singh, Rajeswar Singh, Purander Singh. The eminent British historian, Edward Gait, believes that it was this shift from a tribal society and culture to a Sanskritized culture that caused the Ahoms to lose their vibrant and militant spirit which finally led to their downfall.¹⁵

The Bodo experience has been a repeat of what happened to the Koches and Ahoms, but their current situation is a little different. Ever since the fall of the Kachari kingdom, the Bodos had been overshadowed by the Assamese and Bengali people with

¹⁵ Gait, *History of Assam*, 185.

whom they sought to identify themselves. However, instead of a fair treatment, they endured exploitation and discrimination for many years. Much of their agricultural land was snatched away, and they have been denied access to education and employment, especially for government jobs. In recent decades, however, the Bodo people have experienced a cultural revival. They are reasserting their identity and claiming their rights.

The Rise and Decline of a Great Nation

The writer will now briefly examine the major events in the history of the Bodo nation. It is plausible that the Bodos were the earliest race to settle in the Northeast.¹⁶ Before the migration of Indo-Aryans from the West, the Bodo nation was already well established in the valley of the Brahmaputra. They were not confined to one corner but spread out throughout the land. Some anthropologists believe that the Bodo people originated from south-eastern Tibet, and they migrated into the Northeast via northern Burma.¹⁷

The Bodos encountered Aryan settlers moving in from northern India. The latter referred to them as “Kirata” or “Mlechha.” These terms were probably used to denote “barbarian tribes” that inhabited the fringes of the Aryan territory.¹⁸ Because of this contact between the two races, some legends or stories developed and entered Hindu

¹⁶ Moniram Mochari, “The Racial Name of the Bodos,” in *The Bodos: Children of Bhullumbutter*, ed. Thomas Pullopilil and Jacob Aluckal (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 1997), 10.

¹⁷ Ajoy Roy, *The Boro Imbroglia* (Guwahati, Delhi: Spectrum Publications, 1995), 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

mythology. It is said that there are references to the Kiratas in the Mahabharata and the Ramayana.¹⁹ However, no concrete historical evidence exists to support these stories.

A key argument for the Bodo being the earliest race to settle in the Northeast is that most of the major rivers have Bodo names. A most prominent feature of the Assam plains is the existence of many rivers since this region receives some of the heaviest amounts of rain in the world. Thus, to see many rivers and the important roles they fulfill in people's lives is no surprise. Most of the rivers begin with the prefix "di" or "doi" which in the Bodo language means water.²⁰ Some examples: Dihang, Dikhoo/Dikhu, Digaru, Doimukh, or Doifang. The Bodos were the first people to give names to the rivers, and their names have continued unchanged to this day.

The Bodos had trade links with Tibet and China.²¹ Merchants travelled through the mountain passes of Bhutan. The most popular route was the Lhasa-Tawang-Udalguri route. The Bodo town of Udalguri was a major trading center. Here, goods from China—silk cloth, ponies, musk wax, rubber, and gold dust—were traded for rice, cotton yarn and cloth, silk yarn, and dried fish.²² Barter was the primary form of transaction.

In the thirteenth century, the Bodos had established a strong kingdom called the Kachari kingdom that stretched from the Dikhoo River in the East to the Kallang in the West. Its capital was the city of Dimapur in the Dhansiri valley. This flourishing city was

¹⁹Deka, *Politics of Identity*, 17.

²⁰Roy, *Boro Imbrogio*, 15.

²¹Deka, *Politics of Identity*, 21.

²²Roy, *Boro Imbrogio*, 22.

known for its high degree of civilization above their neighbors. While the other kingdoms constructed their buildings with wood and bamboo, the Kacharis of Dimapur built permanent structures with brick and mortar.²³ The ruins of some of these buildings still exist to this day. The Kachari power prevailed in Assam until centuries later when the Ahoms invaded the Northeast and challenged its position. Initially, the Kacharis had the upper hand and won several small battles. As their military power increased, the Ahoms under king Suhungmung launched a full-scale attack on the Kachari capital. The Kacharis bravely defended their city, but it fell to the enemy. It was ransacked, destroyed, and abandoned to the forest. That was the end of the Dimapur-Kachari kingdom.²⁴ It also finally ended the political supremacy of the Bodo race in the Northeast.

A few Kachari survivors who fled South and established a new kingdom at Maibong in today's North Cachar Hills. The Ahom army continued to pursue them, and the Kacharis fled further South to Khaspur where they existed as a small minority. Finally, the British annexed this last surviving Kachari territory. There was another Bodo kingdom, called Tripura, established by another branch of the Bodos called Tripuri. Though small and not very powerful, it enjoyed an independent existence for over four centuries until it merged with independent India in 1947.²⁵

Since the loss of their power and influence in the sixteenth century, the Bodo nation began its downhill slide. Having lost the protection of their kings, they became an

²³ Shakespear, *History of Upper Assam*, 13.

²⁴ Roy, *Boro Imbroglia*, 11.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

increasingly vulnerable target in a society dominated by Assamese and Bengalis. The Bodo people had spread themselves across the Northeast, and because of this, it became very difficult for them to come together and form a united, cohesive society. Instead, they lived in various pockets where they became a weak minority. Also because of this, the Bodos were heavily influenced by their non-tribal neighbors who were predominantly Hindu. The Bodos abandoned their traditional religion called *Bathou* and converted to Hinduism, but unfortunately, they were not well received within the Hindu fold and were assigned to a low caste status in the Hindu social hierarchy. This is well expressed in the words of a modern Bodo writer:

Those Bodo people (tribals) who were initiated into Hinduism were placed on the lowest rung of the caste hierarchy. Similarly, the Koches, the Rajbanshis and the Meches who constituted parts of the great Bodo race, on being Hinduised have disclaimed all their connections with the parent tribe and have given up their original language and culture and have embraced those of the Assamese. However, where is their pride in calling themselves “Assamese” when they are labelled as *neech jaat* (low caste) in the Assamese dictionaries?²⁶

That was probably the first step in the loss of their distinct tribal identity. By converting to Hinduism, they forfeited their freedom and ethnic pride to become a lowly and depressed class within the rigid Hindu caste system. Other results followed such as a break with traditional culture, and giving up of one’s native language, as pointed out in the above quote. In place of it, many Bodos “embraced” the Assamese culture and language. Surrounded by the Assamese, the Bodos began increasingly identifying themselves with the Assamese society. That was really the only way forward once they

²⁶R. N. Mosahary, “The Plains Tribals’ Autonomy: The Boro Experience,” in *Society and Culture in North-East India, A Christian Perspective*, ed. Saral K. Chatterji (Delhi: ISPCK, 1996), 80.

decided to become a part of the wider society. The educated and wealthy Bodos looked increasingly toward the elite Assamese class as their role model, while turning their backs on their own history and culture. All this led to the loss of their identity as the first dominant Northeast kingdom and a great tribal nation.²⁷

A second major area where the Bodo people suffered great loss was in the form of economic exploitation and the loss of their ancestral lands. After placing the converted Bodos at the lowest strata of society, the Assamese and Bengali gentry subjected them to ruthless exploitation. Merchants and money lenders flooded the Bodo homelands looking for every opportunity to make a profit. Most of the Bodo people were farmers who sold their crops to the merchants who easily manipulated the illiterate and uneducated farmers with the lure of money. The crafty merchants loaned large sums of money to the farmers with their land as mortgage, then made them sign documents that they could not read. When the poor farmers failed to repay the loan, as it often happened, their lands were seized.²⁸ In this manner, the Bodos lost the ownership of their lands in many instances, and ended up as landless peasants working for those very merchants who defrauded them. Others went about wandering from place to place, looking for a place where they could earn a living. This caused further fragmentation of the Bodo population rendering them more vulnerable to exploitation by their neighbors.

Years later during the British colonial time, a much larger crisis confronted the Bodos. It involved a massive exodus of people from Bengal into the Northeast. It

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

²⁸ Roy, *Boro Imbroglia*, 26.

impacted not only the Bodos but the Assamese people as well. The British administrators encouraged people from Bengal to come and settle in Assam because Assam was a very sparsely populated province and there was a lot of uncultivated lands available. That caused a major demographic problem in the entire Northeast, particularly after India's independence in 1947. It resulted in ethnic tensions and cleansing, violence, and enmity between the local Hindus and the immigrants who were largely Muslims.

The Bodo people were caught right in the middle of this social storm. Geographically they were in the bordering regions of Assam and Bengal, and so they were the ones who were the worst affected victims. The Bengali immigrants moved into their lands and, more often than not, occupied them permanently. Once again, the Bodos were pushed out from their homeland and were driven northward toward the forests of the Himalayan foothills.²⁹ They survived by eking out a poor living from the edge of the forests. However, here too they faced resistance from Nepali immigrants who had come earlier. The Bodo people found themselves at their lowest ebb.

Faced with the reality of their worsening situation, certain educated and enlightened Bodos came forward to redeem and revitalize their society. In the year 1919, the Boro Students Association was formed in the town of Dhubri.³⁰ Its goal was to promote education among Bodos and revive the Bodo language and culture. In 1952, an organization called *Bodo Sahitya Sabha* (Bodo literary association) was formed with a similar aim of developing literature in the Bodo languages.

²⁹ Ibid., 33.

³⁰ Ibid., 41.

Socio-political organizations were also founded to secure social and political rights for the Bodos. The prominent ones were the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) and the Bodo People's Action Committee (BPAC). Besides these, other organizations sprang up to deal with the alarming deterioration of the Bodo people. A very pro-active group was the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU). All these groups worked very hard to raise the educational and living standards of the Bodos. Additionally, they negotiated with the state and federal governments to bring about new laws and treaties that would benefit the Bodo people. All their efforts finally bore fruit in 1993 when the central and state governments of India signed a historic deal known as the Bodo Accord. "The objective of the Bodo Accord was to provide maximum autonomy within the framework of the Constitution of India to the Bodos for social, economic, educational, ethnic and cultural advancement through the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC)."³¹

As a result of this accord, the Bodos have made significant strides in their development and progress. They are rising once again from centuries of decline and oppression. Their regional governing body (BAC) has been fostering security, economic growth, and education for the people. Many Bodos who had turned their backs on their culture and society are returning to affirm their ethnic identity. However, because the Bodo loss has been so enormous and there is so much more to be recovered, many Bodos are demanding a separate state. They feel that only by attaining statehood, the Bodos will

³¹ Hazarika, *Ethnic Autonomy Question*, 66.

find genuine and lasting solutions to their deep-rooted problems.³² This issue is being debated vigorously with the Indian federal government.

Reclaim and Renew the Northeast

The Northeast has an undeniable and unmistakable tribal character. Throughout India today, the indigenous tribal people have been marginalized and exploited by mainstream society. In the Northeast, it is not as bad as in the mainland. However, there is still much disparity and unfair treatment of which the tribal people are often the victims. It is also true that in recent times tribal people are just as guilty as anyone else.

The Northeast is the realm of tribal people. Tribal people were the original inhabitants and standard bearers.³³ The three major Northeast empires, Kachary, Koch, and Ahom were built up by tribal people. With the passage of time, Aryan colonizers from the mainland (Aryavarta) flooded the Northeast and outnumbered the tribal inhabitants. A Hindu-Aryan culture was introduced and firmly established. The caste-system became the final arbiter of a person's identity and self-worth. Tribal people were assigned to the lowest ranks of this new and foreign social hierarchy. The Aryan Hindus having placed themselves at the top of the social ladder, made it almost impossible for anyone below to challenge their position. As Hindu culture spread out rapidly, the tribal people retreated further into remote and inaccessible corners. Tribals were considered inferior by the majority Aryan community. During the colonial period, the British

³² Ibid., 74-75.

³³ Shakespear, *History of Upper Assam*, 9.

administrators did further damage by their high-handed and disdainful treatment of tribals often referring to them as “savages.”³⁴ Most of them perceived the tribals only as trouble makers and outlaws who raided their territories and disrupted people’s lives in the plains. By the end of such a long colonizing process at the hands of Aryan Hindus and British, the tribal world of the Northeast could not have looked dimmer and more dismal.

The missionaries intervened during this darkest hour of the tribal people. Through their acceptance of the Gospel, the tribal people experienced spiritual salvation, forgiveness, reconciliation, and unity. Through the benefits of an excellent education ministry, the tribal people found their self-confidence and empowerment that gave them a new vision for the future. A knowledge of the English language was their passport to the modern world. Christianity enabled the tribal people to leave behind their old life dominated by incessant warfare, bloodshed (even head-hunting among some tribes like Nagas), inter-tribal hatred, and instead live in peace and unity. That further enabled them to extend the peace to all their former enemies, allowing them to eventually unify as one tribe following the same religion and speaking a common language.

The tribal communities of the Northeast need to reclaim the Northeast and lead the way forward. The Northeast is their home, and it is their God-given right to reclaim and possess it. This does not mean that other non-tribal peoples are unwelcome or do not belong there. All communities can live together in harmony and mutual respect, whether tribal or non-tribal, Mongoloid, Indo-Aryan, or Dravidian. However, the tribal community should take the initiative and must show the way forward, setting an example

³⁴Mackenzie, *History of the Relations of the Government*, 7.

for others to follow. Tribal leaders must once again become the torchbearers of their homeland. This responsibility is particularly relevant to the Christian states of Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya. Northeast India has long been plagued by violence, social unrest, political and economic corruption, injustice, moral decline, and various other ills. It is in dire need of a moral and social renewal. The Gospel alone can bring healing and deliverance to this troubled corner of the world. There is an urgent need for Christians to spread the Gospel and bring about change. All the tribal and non-tribal communities can work unitedly and diligently to build up a peaceful, just, and prosperous society.

Chapter 5

Christianity and the Future of Tribal Identity

Having assessed the history of the Northeast tribal peoples and that of the non-tribal people, it is now time to look to the future and ask the pertinent question, “what does the future look like?” While no one can make an accurate prediction of the future, there are indications of what it might look like. Radical Hindu ideology is increasing in India, particularly under the present government in New Delhi. Intolerance and attacks on minority religions are becoming more common. Christians have suffered persecution in various parts of the country. The Northeast too will likely see an increase of such radicalism. Christian societies and states need to be on guard. A prime target of Hindu radicals is the tribal people. The future of Northeast tribals is safe only in Christianity.

Hinduism in general is a peace-loving and tolerant religion. Hindus have always accepted people of other faiths and opposing views. However, in recent decades a radical form of Hinduism mingled with politics, called *Hindutva*, has become dominant in India. It does not show any indications of being friendly with other minority religions. In the face of this looming threat, the tribal people of the Northeast can find safety, acceptance and hope in the Christian Gospel. Here are several reasons to support such a view.

The Gospel Upholds Human Dignity and Equality

The Bible declares very clearly that God loves all human beings equally because

He created them all. He created every human being in His own image (Gen 1:27).

Mankind is a special and unique work of God that sets him apart from the animal world.

Man is the highest creation in the physical world, and he has been given the authority to have dominion over all animals and plants (Gen 1:26, Ps 8:6-8)). He is the most special creation of God, perhaps apart from the angels. He shares certain qualities and characteristics with God such as love, wisdom, mercy, justice, and compassion. Bearing God's image is probably the greatest privilege that human beings enjoy in comparison to all other creatures. It also carries with it a deep significance in God's divine plan. "All women and men are created in God's image and thus have dignity and worth, no matter how fallen or marred this image has become. Life is sacred."¹

Based on this truth of Scripture, Christian mission and missionaries seek to respect all men and women and treat them equally. Every man or woman deserves this respect no matter how poor or lowly their social status may be. Because of this, missionaries often encountered great hostility from people with a history of deep-rooted human injustice, discrimination, and oppression. The value of human life, human freedom, and human dignity were upheld by the messengers of the Gospel.

Christian mission must therefore treat all human beings with dignity, equality and respect. When we look at any other person, we do not see the label (Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, secular atheist, white, black, etc.) but the image of God. We see someone created by God, addressed by God, accountable to God, loved by God, valued and evaluated by God.²

Wherever the Gospel was proclaimed in the world, great spiritual awakening and

¹ Craig Ott and Stephen Strauss, *Encountering Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 150.

² Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 423.

social transformation followed. The Gospel brings freedom just as Jesus declared in John 8:32, “Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” When people come to Christ and put their trust in Him, they experience salvation which leads to spiritual freedom. As they live out their daily lives in obedience to God, they experience a similar freedom in the society. Galatians 3:28 succinctly sums up this new reality, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ.” The freedom in Christ enables the believer to live a life of freedom, free from social inequality or class/caste distinctions (“slave nor free”), racial discrimination, hatred or prejudice (“Jew nor Greek”), or gender domination or suppression (“male nor female”).

This change does not happen overnight; it is a life-long process. All Christians are at various stages along this road of spiritual and social transformation. It is a constant striving to establish God’s righteousness/kingdom in the world. Its scope is the entire world. A very vital part of this effort to build up God’s kingdom is the role of missions and missionaries. Wherever Christian missionaries went to proclaim the Gospel, they upheld the dignity and value of the individual. They often came to the rescue of the helpless and neglected sections of society. “Scripture calls God’s people to work for the cause of justice and compassion. Psalm 82:3-4 states, “Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; Maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”³

Mission history contains many examples of men and women who put these divine imperatives into practice, even in the face of tremendous opposition and attacks

³ Ott and Strauss, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 145.

from society. In India itself, there is the inspiring story of the work of Pandita Ramabai, a woman who worked tirelessly for the rights of women, and to rescue widows and orphans from a hopeless and wretched existence.

In 1858, Ramabai was born into a high-caste, Brahmin-Hindu family. Her father was a scholar of Sanskrit who taught his daughter to read and write. This was an unorthodox and prohibited thing to do in those days because girls were not allowed to get an education. Not only did the father teach his daughter basic education, but he also taught her Sanskrit and to recite the Hindu scriptures from memory. That was something unheard of in the community. As a result, the entire village ostracized the family, and they made their home in an isolated place. Some years later when Ramabai was just sixteen, both her parents died in a famine that swept the land. She and her brother were left alone to fend for themselves. They wandered from place to place until finally they reached Calcutta, the capital of British India.

In Calcutta, she encountered Brahmin scholars and priests who were highly impressed with her knowledge of the Sanskrit scriptures. They bestowed on her the title “Pandita,” or scholar.⁴ As Ramabai looked all around her in the teeming metropolis, she began to see and understand the plight of women and widows in particular. Most distressing of all were child brides who were married off at an early age and left helpless when their husbands died. Because society looked down upon women, and widows were considered as evil persons who were somehow responsible for their husbands’ deaths, those young widows were subjected to cruel treatment. Shocked by this reality, Pandita

⁴ “Pandita Ramabai,” Famous Indians, Iloveindia.com, accessed June 15, 2017, www.iloveindia.com/indian-heroes/pandita-ramabai.html.

Ramabai began her crusade against the mistreatment of women. Her plan was to establish a school for widows and educate them. She married a lawyer who shared her views and vision. However, before her plans could materialize, her husband died and shortly thereafter, so did her brother. She was left only with an infant daughter, and once again in a desperate situation.

Pandita Ramabai had to leave Calcutta, and she made her way to Poona near Bombay. She had now become a widow herself and a victim of society. She had to flee Calcutta because she was banished by her husband's family following the prevailing social custom. Beginning all over again in Poona, she began an organization to promote women's education that she named Arya Mahila Samaj.⁵ Its other aim was to abolish child marriage. Ramabai also started learning English and began writing books. She also started meeting Christians and became a close friend to Miss Hurford, an English missionary lady.

Later, Pandita Ramabai and Miss Hurford travelled to England together. She found employment as a teacher of Sanskrit at a women's college while continuing her higher education in English. By now Ramabai was under the influence of the Gospel and the Christian way of life in contrast to the harsh treatment of Hinduism. She became a Christian. She found strong support in England for her work in India to rescue Hindu widows. From England, she travelled to America where she found an even more enthusiastic response to her mission. She spent her time receiving further training and

⁵ Ibid.

studying the American educational system. She wrote a book about her life, titled, *High Caste Hindu Woman*.⁶ Wherever she went, a good number of Christians and influential people rallied to her cause.

After spending six years in the West, Pandita Ramabai finally returned to India in 1889. Upon arrival in India, she established a school for girls in Bombay. She translated the Bible into the Marathi language. The highlight of her ministry was the establishment of a home for widows at a large farm that she named *Mukti* (salvation) *Mission*. This place became a refuge for many widows and orphans. At one time, there were about two thousand women and young girls living at the Mukti Mission.⁷ They received education and training for various jobs. Many also were trained for evangelism and ministry among women. The mission continues to flourish to this day. For her noble work, the King of England awarded her the *Kaiser-i-Hind* award, the highest civilian honor in colonial India. At the age of sixty-four, Pandita Ramabai passed away in 1922 after ministering to Indian women and child-widows for twenty years.

Another outstanding and internationally recognized example is Mother Teresa of Calcutta, “the saint of the gutters.” She came to India as a Catholic missionary nun from Yugoslavia. Initially, she taught at Catholic schools for girls and progressed to become a headmistress. However, seeing the poverty and suffering humanity around her, she felt the call of God to reach out to them. Leaving her teaching profession and the safe environment of the convent, she started her ministry to care for the abandoned and dying

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

people on the streets and slums. She chose to help the poorest of the poor. In 1952, she started a hospice called *Nirmal Hriday* (Pure Heart) where people abandoned to die on the streets were brought in to die with dignity and loving care.

Each day, nuns would walk through the streets and bring people who were dying to Nirmal Hriday, located in a building donated by the city of Kolkata. The nuns would bathe and feed these people and then place them in a cot. These people were given the opportunity to die with dignity, with the rituals of their faith.⁸

After much struggles and hardships, the mission grew strong. The general public became aware of Mother Teresa's vision and work among the poor, and support began to come. The Mission started clinics, hospices, and orphanages. Volunteer workers from India and foreign countries came to work with her. She was granted permission to begin her own order of nuns called Missionaries of Charity.

As Mother Teresa's work continued to expand, the Missionaries of Charity set up centers in many countries. She became an internationally acclaimed figure. In 1979, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. She continued her focus on serving the poor and never allowed fame to divert her attention. She believed that every human being, no matter what race or religion, deserved respect and love. She accepted and welcomed all those rejected by society. In 1997, Mother Teresa passed away, mourned by the entire world. Pope Francis in 2015 declared,

Mother Teresa, in all aspects of her life, was a generous dispenser of divine mercy, making herself available for everyone through her welcome and defense of human life, those unborn and those abandoned and discarded. She bowed down before those who were spent, left to die on the side of the road, seeing in them

⁸ Jennifer Rosenberg, "Mother Teresa: A Biography About Mother Teresa, the Saint of the Gutters," ThoughtCo, accessed June 1, 2017, www.history1900s.about.com/od/people/a/motherteresa.htm.

their God-given dignity.⁹

The core of the Christian Gospel is that God so loved the world that He sent His only Son to save the world. Jesus showed the perfect example of loving people and died for them. His followers are commanded to go out and serve others with that same love. This love is unconditional love that is given to all people. It does not discriminate against anyone based on race, religion, economic, or socio-cultural conditions.

The missionaries who came to Northeast India displayed this kind of love and service. They treated all people with respect and dignity, whether they lived in the plains or the hills, whether high caste/class or low caste/class, tribal or non-tribal. This proved to be a special blessing to the tribal peoples. They had long been relegated to the dark corners of the Aryan-Sanskritic world. For centuries, the Aryan-Hindus had marginalized and despised them as *Adivasi* or *Vanvasi* (derogatory terms meaning aboriginals and forest dwellers).

The missionaries intervened to uplift the tribal communities out of their dire circumstances and elevated them to a position of enlightenment and opportunity. They treated the tribal people with the dignity and respect that they deserved. As a result, the Northeast tribal communities emerged out of their long night of suppression and entered the dawn of a new era. Only in Christianity the tribal people found true acceptance and equality. No other religion will do that. The tribal people's future is secure in Christianity because the Gospel upholds *tribal* dignity, freedom, and equality.

⁹“Biography Mother Teresa,” *Biography Online*, accessed June 3, 2017, www.biographyonline.net/nobelprize/mother_teresa.html.

Comparative Images of Tribal Societies

To illustrate further the impact of Christianity on the tribal population, it is a good idea to compare the present situation of the Christian tribes of the Northeast with other non-Christian tribes in India and even neighboring countries. A stark contrast often exists when one takes a closer look.

The Garos and Bodos

The story of the Bodos has been told earlier in considerable detail. The Bodo race is a large family whose members spread out all over the Northeast long ago. Each group developed its own distinct language/dialect and culture. One of them is the Garo tribe.¹⁰ The Garos are the most advanced and educated among all the Bodo tribes. They have made the most impressive progress in all aspects. The main reason for this is the fact that the Garos are a Christian tribe.¹¹ In the distant past, they too were exploited and mistreated as the Bodos were. They too lived in poor, wretched conditions. However, after they embraced Christianity, they rose rapidly to the top position. It is worth taking a brief look into the historical background of the Garos.

The Garos are the most western of the Northeast hill tribes. They are the western neighbors of the Khasi and Jaintia tribes who are also Christian. In the Northeast, a general rule is that the further West one goes, the closer one is to Indian influence, while

¹⁰ Hermanns, *Indo-Tibetans*, 137.

¹¹ The well-known hymn, "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus," was probably written and sung by a Garo Christian, according to one version of its origin. See <http://www.hymnpod.com/2009/02/12/i-have-decided-to-follow-jesus/>.

the further East one goes, the closer one is to Southeast Asian influence. Therefore, the Garos were heavily under the influence of Indian culture. The pressure of Sanskritization bore heavily upon them. They were surrounded on three sides by Hindu and Muslim plains people. Only in the East, they were linked to their tribal kinsmen. Hence, it is no great surprise that the Garos were on the verge of being swamped by plains people and their culture. What is truly astonishing is that they made an about turn and asserted their independent identity when they chose to become Christian.

The Garo people had long been engaged in trade with the people of the plains. They were an enterprising people with a good business sense. Their main product was cotton which grew abundantly on their low hills, and which was in high demand in the lowland markets. The Garos benefitted a good deal from this trade. However, their business ventures also led them to exposure to the corruption and crafty ways of the plains. In the course of time, the Garos living close to the plains came under the control of powerful feudal landlords called *zamindars*.¹² These landlords, who owned large estates and were under the protection of the Mughal kings, played a key role in subjugating the hill tribes. They had their private local armies to provide protection and safety to those that worked in their fields. The *zamindars* controlled the markets, and so the trade with the Garos was brought under their control. They manipulated the entire trade making huge profits for themselves but just a pittance for the Garos. The landlords also demanded revenue from the Garo tribals, as well as constantly harassing them at every opportunity. A contemporary British government official described the situation in

¹²J. Bhattacharjee, *The Garos and the English* (New Delhi: Radiant Publishers, 1978), 18.

the following manner: “The Garrows (sic) have no other means of disposing of their cotton, the staple produce of the country, than by carrying it to the Bengal markets, which they continue to do notwithstanding the constant succession of fraud, falsehood, and extortion which they there experience.”¹³

Such a situation led to hostile feelings between the two groups and violence sometimes broke out. The Garo tribesmen often carried out attacks on the plains and fought with the soldiers of the *zamindars* landlords. Gradually, the Garos were being drawn into the world of the plains people and becoming subordinate to them.¹⁴

Fortunately for the Garo people, the colonial administrators and missionaries stepped in. Both insisted that the Garo tribe had to be saved from losing its freedom and being swallowed up by the dominant plains people. Education was a key factor. The Garos had to be empowered by providing them with means to education. In 1826, a government school was established for educating Garo boys.¹⁵ It was one of the earliest schools in the Northeast. The British also set up an administrative officer within the Garo hills, and the Garo territory was formed into a district. Later, the American Baptist missionaries established churches, schools, and hospitals. The entire Garo community welcomed the good news of the Christian Gospel. With the help of the British government and the missionaries, the Garos could turn away from their dependence on the plains trade as their only means of survival. In this manner, the Garos were saved by

¹³ Ibid., 208.

¹⁴ Barpujari, *Problem of the Hill Tribes*, vol. 1, 22.

¹⁵ Ibid., 219.

the intervention of colonial administration and Christianity in their hills. Subsequently, they experienced much positive growth and development.

It was not so with the Bodo people. As seen earlier, the Bodos became victims of the cultural expansion of Hindu society. They chose to follow their Hindu and Muslim neighbors and came under their control. It can be stated that the Bodos did not welcome the Gospel as the Garos did. The missionaries did evangelize among the Bodos, but the results were not very successful. For a long time, the Bodos had already been strongly influenced by Hinduism, and many of them were practicing a form of Hinduism mingled with their folk religions. While the Northeast tribal communities were turning to Christianity, the Bodos chose to identify more closely with Hinduism.

A Hindu religious movement called the “Brahma Religion” launched by its founder, Gurudev Kalicharan, became very popular.¹⁶ It was essentially a reform movement having both religious and social emphases. This could be the major reason why the Bodos did not turn to Christianity as their Garo cousins did. The following quote is a clear statement by a Bodo scholar which explains the poor response to Christianity among his own people. This new religious movement stood as a strong barrier to the penetration of the Gospel among the Bodos.

Perhaps another reason for this rather inhibited progress of Christianity among the Boros was the pioneering socio-religious movement of the Brahma religion launched by Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma After coming back to Kokrajhar, Kalicharan Brahma started preaching this Sanatan Vedic religion with great zeal and achieved phenomenal success among the Boro community in lower Assam with particular concentration in Kokrajhar and Udalguri, two Boro strongholds,

¹⁶R. N. Mosahary, “Brahma Religion and Social Change among the Bodos,” in *The Bodos Children of Bhullumbutter*, 40.

where the Christian missionaries were also working.¹⁷

On the other hand, among the Bodos who did receive the Gospel and became Christian, the outlook is different. Commenting on the impact of Christianity on these Bodo Christians, a Christian Bodo writer makes the following observation.

The advent of Christianity with its universal appeal and transforming power to enrich and elevate every culture and language, was an occasion for the Bodos with an open mind to give a new lease of life to their national, cultural and linguistic identity which was being eroded by the cultural invasion of Hinduism. The Bodos had lost their political power long ago and were on the verge of losing their identity. It can be rightly said that Christianity brought new life and vitality to the Bodo people.¹⁸

Unfortunately, this did not happen for most of the Bodo people. The writer's opinion is that the Bodos missed a great historic opportunity. Had they responded to the Gospel as the Garos and Khasis did, they would have been on the path of spiritual blessing, material prosperity and social advancement. Unfortunately, their history has been a tale of suppression, poverty, injustice, and dashed hopes. This is true not only of the Bodos, but of also other non-Christianized tribes of Assam such as the Rabhas, Lalungs, Karbis, and Mishings.

Northeast Tribes and Mainland Indian Tribes

Continuing with the same thought, we will compare the Christian tribes of the Northeast with the tribes of mainland India. The main concentration of the tribal population of India is in central and southern India. The tribal people of mainland India, frequently called *Adivasis*, is far larger in numbers than the Northeast tribal population.

¹⁷ Roy, *Boro Imbrogio*, 39.

¹⁸ A. Sebastian, "Christianity among the Bodos," in *The Bodos Children of Bhullumbutter*, 48.

They are the aboriginal or indigenous people of India. There are some differences between these two blocs of Indian tribals. Racially, the tribes of mainland India and the tribes of the Northeast are different. The former are dark-skinned Australoid people, but the latter are lighter-skinned, Mongoloid people. The mainland Indian tribals are generally less educated and poorer than Northeast tribals. However, all tribal people, whether in central India or the Northeast, have suffered mistreatment, injustice, and exploitation.

The tribals are the most exploited and divided people in India. Their history is a history of defeat, suffering and oppression. They suffered discrimination, exploitation, and alienation in the hands of the Aryan invaders, the Muslim rulers, and British administrators. In many cases, their right of land and right to live as human beings were not recognized by the invaders. The tragedy is that this attitude has not disappeared even today.¹⁹

The tribal communities of mainland India are diverse and have rich, colorful cultures. They speak many languages and dialects. They are found in many states like Jharkhand, Chhatisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Maharashtra and several other states. The first two states are tribal-majority states. In addition to many smaller tribes, the main tribal groups are the Santhals, Oraons, Gonds, Bhils, and Mundas. In the earlier days, they were collectively called *Adivasis*, meaning “indigenous people.” After modern Indian independence, they are officially labeled as “scheduled tribes.”

The history of the tribal peoples of mainland India is a story of brazen exploitation and injustice. The tribal people were really the first people who settled in

¹⁹ Longchar, *Encounter Between Gospel and Tribal Culture*, 104.

India thousands of years ago. That is why they are called *Adivasi*. History corroborates this fact. When the Aryans invaded India, they easily conquered the primitive inhabitants and drove them into the forests, hills, and mountains. There they survived for centuries in isolation. Those that did interact with the conquering Aryans became gradually absorbed into their society and occupied the lowest rung of the caste ladder.²⁰ These are the “scheduled castes” of Hinduism, also known as Dalits.

During the colonial period, the tribal people suffered immensely at the hands of greedy and wicked money lenders and traders. Through their crooked manipulations, these money lenders (called *mahajans*) swindled the tribals of their lands and possessions. The tribals were uneducated and, therefore, could not read and understand the official documents. They took out large loans that they could not repay. They became destitute and beggars in their own homelands. Rampant extortion and corruption were the order of the day. This fueled the fierce anger of the tribals against the exploitative merchants and the British administration whose laws were clearly in favor of the perpetrators. Consequently, a series of violent uprisings occurred, such as the Kol mutiny of 1831 and the Santhal rebellion of 1855.²¹ Many lives were lost in these violent encounters.

Christian missionaries were working among the central Indian tribes since 1845 when the Lutheran Mission began its work. A considerable number of the tribal people

²⁰ K. Thanzauva, “Is Tribal a Redeemable Term?,” *In Search of Identity and Tribal Theology*, ed. Wati Longchar, 10.

²¹ V. Nulkar and M. K. Muthumani, *Tribal Development* (Delhi: Commonwealth Publishers, 2014), 26, 29.

converted to Christianity. It has been commented that those who became Christians found protection from the money lenders and land-grabbing traders because of the influence of the missionaries.²² A large number of Christians and churches exist till this day, but most of the tribal people identify themselves with Hinduism. Despite the dedication and sincere efforts of the missionaries, there were no large-scale conversions to Christianity like the Garos, Mizos, and Nagas of the Northeast. Hinduism is deeply entrenched in the societies of these Indian tribal people, and their lives are dominated by it.

In terms of social development, these tribal people have not made as much progress as the Northeast Christian tribes. This is clearly discernable in the levels of literacy and education. Here is a sample of tribal literacy rates in various states from the 2015-16 statistical reports of the government of India: Andhra Pradesh (48.3%), Orissa (52.2%), Jharkhand (54.6%), Madhya Pradesh (56.9%). The figures for the Northeast Christian States are: Mizoram (96.8%), Meghalaya (94.9%), Nagaland (92.2%).²³

One can see that a significant contrast exists between the first and second groups. The Northeast states are ahead because of the strong educational foundation laid down by Christian missionaries. They placed a high priority on education which was next in importance after evangelism.

A Tale of Two Provinces

The comparison can be extended beyond the borders of modern India into

²² Ibid., 34.

²³ S. V. Rangacharyulu and Panchayati Raj, eds., "Rural Development Statistics 2015-2016," accessed July 11, 2017, http://www.nird.org.in/nird_docs/RDS/RDS2015-16/rdsindex.html.

Pakistan and Afghanistan. Surprising as it may seem, there are some striking parallels between Northeast India and Northwest Pakistan. These were the two frontier regions of India during the British colonial period, and were known as Northeast Frontier Province and Northwest Frontier Province respectively.²⁴ They were both inhabited predominantly by tribal peoples, speaking various languages, and known for their wild, rebellious ways.

Geographically, the two regions show close similarities. They are both strategically located, acting as entrances into the Indian subcontinent. In the Northwest lies the historic Khyber Pass and in the Northeast the Patkai Pass. Invaders and travelers passed through these gateways since ancient times. Each region has a large river valley surrounded by hills and mountains. The Indus River in the West and the Brahmaputra in the East are two major rivers of the world. Both these rivers have formed fertile agricultural lands that produce food to sustain large populations. The Indus valley was the cradle of an ancient civilization that developed around the cities of Mohenjo Daro and Harappa in Pakistan. Both the Indus and Brahmaputra valleys are crisscrossed by many rivers that provide a convenient means of transportation for the people.

Both regions are the homes of tribal ethnic groups. The two river valleys are encircled by mountain ranges that are inhabited by numerous tribes and clans. They are warlike and fiercely independent, and they detest being controlled by people from the plains. They are very loyal to their tribal identity, which they value as greater than loyalty to the national government. Warfare and inter-tribal feuds have been common for many centuries, and in recent history there have been insurgent movements against the national

²⁴ Chakravorty, *British Relations*, 1.

governments. In the Northwest, the predominant tribal group is the Pashtuns (also called Pathans) who dominate the rugged terrain of Pakistan and Afghanistan. They frequently fought with the British and the Pakistani armies when they tried to control them.²⁵ In recent years, the Pashtuns have been deeply involved in the conflict with radical Islamic groups like the Taliban and Al Qaeda that have influenced world-wide terror organizations like ISIS. They live on both sides of the border with Afghanistan and supply most of the recruits who join the Taliban.²⁶ That is where Osama Bin Laden hid for years and implemented his plans against the U.S. and the West. He was given refuge and protection by the Pashtun tribals who guarded him loyally.²⁷

In a similar manner, the tribes of the Northeast have engaged in warfare for many years, particularly so in the case of the Nagas, Mizos and Garos. For centuries, they had been engaged in warfare with the plains people and kingdoms, such as the Ahoms and Kacharis. The plains powers never totally subdued them. Later, with the advent of British colonization, they resisted fiercely until they were finally defeated.²⁸ Still later, the Nagas and Mizos engaged in a violent war of independence with the Indian military after India took control of the Northeast.

Both the Northeast and Northwest provinces experienced separatist movements

²⁵ Council on Foreign Relations, "Pakistan's Tribal Areas," accessed June 15, 2017, www.cfr.org/pakistan/pakistan-tribal-areas/p11973.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Frontline, "A Critical Part of the World: Pakistan's Tribal Lands," accessed June 15, 2017, www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/taliban/tribal/map.html.

²⁸ H. K. Barpujari, *Problem of the Hill Tribes, North-East Frontier 1843-1872*, vol. 2 (Shillong: NEHU Publications, 1998), 31.

after the withdrawal of British rule. The Pashtun and Baluch (southern neighbors of Pashtun) people wanted to separate from Pakistan and become independent states. In the Northeast, the Nagas and Mizos too wanted independence and separation from India. One of the causes for the discontent of the Pashtun and Baluch people was that the British drew a boundary line right across their territory with the result that one half of their lands came under Afghanistan, even extending into Iran. The same situation occurred in the Northeast. The international boundary made by the British between India and Burma runs right through the Naga hills and Mizo hills, with the result that some Nagas and some Mizos live in Burma. The war with the national government was partly due to these peoples' desire to reunite with their separated brethren. In both the regions this conflict has claimed the lives of many people.

One very significant difference does stand out. Unlike the tribes of Northwest Pakistan, the Northeast tribes embraced Christianity and eventually gave up violence in exchange for peace and reconciliation. Although a few cases of violent incidents do occur occasionally, a clear majority of the tribal population has settled down to a life of peaceful co-existence. Unfortunately, among the Northwestern tribes of Pakistan who became staunch, radical Muslims, extreme violence has become a way of life, and peace is nowhere in sight. Hatred and vengeance are their driving forces, but the Christian tribal people of the Northeast have chosen to forgive and live at peace with their neighbors. Had the Gospel not been planted and taken root in the Northeast, it could have just as easily fallen into a path of radicalism and unending violence. In fact, it did for a while. However, thanks to the impact of missions and the message of the Gospel, the Christian tribal people have chosen to renounce hate and violence.

Particularly in Mizoram, the churches played a very active role in successfully establishing peace and ending violence. Regarding this fact, L. Pachuau writes, “The first critical objection to the violence of the insurrection and counter-insurgency measures was raised by the Mizoram Presbyterian Church. It condemned the acts of terror and violence which it described as unfortunate and contradictory to the Gospel teaching.”²⁹ Moreover, he concludes by saying, “The Church was the first to condemn the violence and the first and leading instrument in bringing the peace.”³⁰

How Should the Tribal Northeast Relate with India?

A crucial question in the minds of Northeastern tribals, particularly Christians, is the question, “What is the right way to go forward?” Having been blessed by a rich outpouring of mission services, Northeastern Christians need to choose wisely the path they wish to tread. They need to be faithful to the Christian faith and the Gospel. At the same time, they need to make decisions based on the best interests of their society and culture. There is no neat and easy answer. The writer would like to put forward three options, assimilation, separation, and co-existence, and examine them briefly.

Assimilation

Assimilation has been occurring for a long time, especially among the plains tribes like the Bodos, Kacharis and Ahoms. In the past, they chose to assimilate into the larger Assamese or Bengali communities. That is not surprising, given the fact that they

²⁹ Pachuau, *Ethnic Identity and Christianity*, 163.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 167.

lived in close geographical proximity to each other. It was a natural but slow process, sometimes spanning several centuries. Those tribal people adopted the Hindu religion and found their place in the caste hierarchy, which was usually a low position for most of them. Only their nobles and royal families were assigned higher castes. It is also true that most of the converts did not become full-fledged Hindus. They carried over many elements of their indigenous religion and mingled them with Hindu practices. There were also some who stubbornly clung to their old religion and way of life.

However, most of the population became assimilated into Hindu society. They found their identity as Assamese or Bengali, and spoke those languages in addition to their native language. They were happy to be part of the larger, mainstream society and adopted many of its ways. For a long time, such assimilated tribals did enjoy the privilege of being more advanced and even educated (for the lucky ones) than other tribal people. The Bodos, though, did not entirely give up their language and culture. Due to this fact, they were successful in reviving their cultural identity in recent modern times.

The Ahoms went further and completely lost their language and culture. Therefore, they were not successful in reviving their culture in the recent past. During the 1980s and 1990s, the Ahoms attempted to dissociate themselves from Assamese society and reestablish their old, glorious Ahom culture and society.³¹ Some even wanted to be independent of India. The modern-day Ahom people called themselves Tai-Ahom to establish a closer link with Thailand, which they considered their ancestral homeland. For

³¹ Sayeeda Yasmin Saikia, *Fragmented Memories Struggling to be Tai-Ahom in India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 70.

a brief period, they gained considerable support and enthusiasm. They even attempted to resurrect the ancient Tai religion called *Phra Lung*. However, for all their hard work and ambition, the movement met with failure.³² The Ahom people had become so assimilated for too long that it was almost impossible to make a radical change of identity.

It is important to ask, why did the Bodos and Ahoms want to come out of Assamese society and recover their original identity after being assimilated for such a long period of time? Were they not happy and satisfied to be a part of the dominant community? In reality, they were unhappy because the larger community did not fully accept them. They were not given due respect and were often treated unfairly. Economically and educationally, they found themselves lagging. They lost their lands to crooked traders, and also to foreigners who settled in their territory. They experienced discrimination, especially when it came to finding jobs. That was one of the main grievances that the Bodos expressed when they launched their movement for political autonomy. The Assamese language became the only official language in Assam in 1972. All other languages, including English, were de-recognized for higher education and employment. The unfortunate consequence of this was that non-native speakers of Assamese found themselves at a huge disadvantage, and couldn't compete with the native Assamese speakers.³³ Acceptance into universities and colleges and finding jobs became so much harder. Unemployment became a huge problem. The Bodos have become the main victims of this setback.

³² Ibid., 261.

³³ Roy, *Boro Imbroglio*, 53.

That the assimilation of the Bodos and Ahoms did not have a happy conclusion is quite evidence to an outside observer. Today, the Bodos and various other plains tribes, including Tai-Ahoms, are living in discontent and frustration. They wanted to be accepted by the mainstream community as equals, but instead, they were treated as second-class citizens and denied the respect they deserved. It turned out to be a bad deal, like a marriage gone sour. It is a lesson to other tribal people that assimilation is not the right way to go forward.

Separation

Another option is separation, the opposite of assimilation. Since the lifestyles of the plains society and the tribals are so different, some people decided to distance themselves as far as they could go. The Naga and Mizo tribes are the prime examples of this position. They wanted to separate themselves not only from the plains society of Assam, but also from India. Thus, they started independence movements decades ago, after the British left and India became independent. The Nagas and Mizos demanded independent states outside India. An insurgency war began. Violent conflicts occurred between the rebel armies and the Indian military. Many people lost their lives on both sides, homes and property were destroyed, torture and other horrors of war were committed. Many innocent tribal people were caught in the conflict and suffered greatly. Neither side could claim a complete victory.

Gradually, the flames of war began to burn out, and the people longed for peace. They wanted the killing and destruction to end and to be able to return to a normal life. The churches and Christian leaders worked very hard to achieve this goal. The Church never condoned the violence, and often acted as mediators and facilitators between the

tribal armies and the Indian government. Talks were initiated to bring about a cease-fire agreement or treaty. Finally, in 1975, the Naga insurgents signed a major peace treaty called the “Shillong Accord.”³⁴ It ended the war, and Nagaland chose to remain a part of India. Since then the state has remained by and large peaceful. It did not entirely solve the political problem because certain hardline sections of the Naga militants refused to accept the treaty and continued fighting. There has been sporadic fighting since then, and the Naga hills are not yet entirely free of violence. However, talks and negotiations have been continuing and bringing better understanding between the two antagonistic parties.

The Mizo situation ended on a more positive note. Like their Naga neighbors, the Mizo people were tired of the fighting and worked to achieve a peaceful solution. Talks were held for several years, particularly after 1976 following the Naga peace treaty in Shillong. As in Nagaland, the Mizo churches also played a pivotal role in establishing peace and bringing about clearer understanding between the two sides. The Mizo churches did not hesitate to condemn the violence and brutality, while at the same time identifying with the sentiments of the people. Eventually, the Indian government decided to grant statehood to the Mizo people in exchange for their demand for independence. After several attempts, a historic “Peace Accord” was signed in 1986 with the government of India. In the following year, the Mizo territory officially became a new state called Mizoram within India.³⁵ Since then, the violence has stopped completely and peace has been established permanently. There is no lingering interest in political

³⁴ H. K. Barpujari, *Problem of the Hill Tribes, North-East Frontier 1873-1962*, vol. 3 (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 1981), 343.

³⁵ Pachuau, *Ethnic Identity and Christianity*, 94.

separation or insurgency. Mizoram has become one of the most educated states of India, and continues to make rapid progress on all fronts.

The path of separation ended in failure for those seeking political independence. It caused much bloodshed, destruction, sorrow, and hatred between one another. It failed to achieve its goal after the people paid such an enormous price. After a long period of struggle (at least seventy years) the independence movement has little to show. Instead, it has left a trail of destruction, discord, and enmity in its wake. In Nagaland, the movement splintered into various factions, all at war with each other. The way of violence and militant extremism is unacceptable to Christians who seriously want to live up to the Gospel standards. Therefore, separation is not the right path to the future.

A related issue can be brought up at this point. The Indian Government and prominent leaders and scholars of the Indian establishment have been unanimous in laying the blame on Christian missionaries for instigating the Nagas and Mizos to revolt against India. They emphasized the fact that the Naga and Mizo insurgents were all Christians, and therefore the missionaries must have something to do with it. Based on this alleged theory, all missionaries working in the Northeast were deported from India during the 1950s soon after India became independent. Christian tribals were then depicted by the government and the media as being unpatriotic and anti-nationalistic. The logic was that Christians were unpatriotic while Hindus were patriotic.

This thinking was popular for some years until people began to see that Hindus too were wanting to separate from India. The Manipuri people, who are Hindus, also started their insurgent movement and waged war against the Indian army, so did a particular group of Hindu militants in Assam, the heartland of Hinduism in the Northeast.

They called themselves the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). A prominent Hindu leader, Jananath Bora, had declared that Assam should separate from India to progress and attain its goals.³⁶ Hence, the narrative has now changed, and the current view is that separation from India is not because of religion, but other factors such as poor economic growth, unemployment, and inadequate attention given to the Northeast by the national government.

Co-existence

After considering the two opposing positions of assimilation and separation, it is the writer's view that the best option to follow is a policy of co-existence *with mutual respect*. This means each group/society has a right to exist freely without being controlled or suppressed by the other. It involves the recognition that the other party is a legitimate entity and deserves the right to develop in its own way no matter how different it may be. This freedom should be respected by both sides. It is neither complete assimilation nor separation, but the positive elements of both positions blended together. It is a formula that is bound to work if neither an attitude of dominance nor enmity is present, but rather genuine *respect* for the other side. The Northeast tribal peoples should always preserve their separate identity and their distinctive way of life. It is equally important that the mainstream Indian community recognizes and respects this right, and not insist that tribals should be assimilated or "integrated" into the national mainstream (which usually means North Indian culture). Such thinking is an attitude of dominance, which is unacceptable in the modern world. Neither should the tribal people consider the plains

³⁶ Saikia, *Fragmented Memories*, 61.

people as enemies, or a threat to their culture. Many old attitudes and prejudices formed in the past due to ignorance need to be given up.

A great deal can be learned from both sides if one is willing. A spirit of give- and- take needs to be encouraged. From one point of view, the entire exercise can be viewed as “enrichment of culture” rather than “dilution of culture” as is generally perceived. World civilizations grew through borrowing from each other. They constantly changed and adapted as new ideas and methods were imported from the outside world. Tribal people of the Northeast can benefit much from the Indian world, particularly through its socio-cultural principles (not necessarily religious). The best of such principles was distilled in the life of Mahatma Gandhi and applied in his life mission. Gandhi had a deep respect for the tribal people of the Northeast. They can reciprocate by adopting some of his principles such as: the value of self-reliance and self-sufficiency, moral courage, the power of non-violence over violence, simple living-high thinking. Moreover, mainstream Indian society can learn some valuable lessons from tribal cultures such as the absence of the caste system and the low level of social discrimination in tribal cultures. The caste system has often been viewed as the bane of Hinduism. Tribal society might have something to offer to Hindu society so that it can learn and reform itself. Other notable aspects of tribal culture are: an egalitarian society, social harmony, and a high regard for women, qualities often lacking in the mainstream Indian society. Intercultural dialogue is a wise practice to follow.

Cultural exchange events need to be encouraged. Music and folk-dance events are good examples. So are festivals, sports, entertainment, and even food. Additionally, the need exists for an exchange of knowledge and expertise in the arts, science, and

technology. Both sides should acknowledge the importance of constantly learning and updating from each other. Business and trade relations should be fostered and strengthened. No society can grow in isolation. The world today is interconnected with a constant flow of information. The Northeast people need to be connected to the people of mainland India and the rest of the global world. It is heartening to note that these exchanges are occurring increasingly.

The Khasi-Jaintias and the Garos are two positive examples of Christian tribal people who have learned to co-exist successfully with people of mainland Indian society. They have developed a balanced view of themselves and the rest of India, and are not uncomfortable interacting with people of other states. Their example is worth emulating. They are reaping the rich benefits of this relationship of co-existence, while their state, Meghalaya, enjoys a good reputation across India.

Conclusion

Christian missions and colonization have had an enormous impact on Northeast India. The very fact that there is such a place called Northeast India is an example of this impact. If the British had not established their rule here, there would be no Northeast today. The Northeast would have remained a part of Burma, and most likely, it would be in a far worse condition. If the missionaries did not help the Assamese to become free from the control of Bengal (by championing the official use of Assamese), the Northeast might probably be a part of Bangladesh today. Both these countries are notorious for their authoritarian regimes, and lack of social freedom and religious liberty. Before the advent of British colonization, the Northeast was more closely linked, geo-politically, to Southeast Asia (especially under Burmese rule) than to India. There was no guarantee it would have become a part of India if left on its own.

First, is the need to acknowledge that the missionaries to Northeast India brought the Gospel. They came primarily as evangelists. Their priority was to preach the Gospel and give the Bible, God's Word, to the people of the region. Currently, three Northeast states, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland, are Christian states, and in a fourth state, Manipur, Christians form about half of the population. Christianity is a strong and vibrant force in the Northeast, and Christians form a large component of the entire Northeast population. The Northeast is one of those few places in the world where Christian mission has had phenomenal success.

Missions established educational institutions. Every Christian had to acquire the ability to read and study the Bible in their native language. Missionaries were the first educators wherever they went, very often, long before government authorities made provision for public education. It is no wonder that today some of the oldest and best schools and colleges are Christian institutions.

The translation of the Bible into the local languages laid a solid foundation for education and literary development, and went beyond to inspire identity and national consciousness. In almost all the tribal languages the Bible was the first written book, and remained as the only piece of substantial literature for some time. It became the literary inspiration and model for all other writings that would follow. The tribal people spoke (and still do) various languages and dialects, often completely unintelligible to each other. As the Scripture was translated into different languages, it established a standard language within each tribe. The particular language in which the Bible was translated became the standardized, official language of that tribal community. That in turn led to the unification of the tribe based primarily upon a common language. Villages that had earlier been separated and isolated due to language differences could now communicate clearly and unite together while speaking a commonly accepted standard language. British administration aided the process further by forming tribal political units like the Naga Hills district, Garo Hills district, and Lushai Hills district. That gave rise to the nationalistic movement of the tribal peoples that led to the formation of modern tribal ethnic groups like the Nagas, Mizos, Khasis, and Garos.

In Assam, the early missionaries published the first newspaper cum periodical, *Orunodoi*, in the Northeast. It played a key role in the cause of Assamese nationalism.

Through this journal, the missionaries and Assamese leaders argued vigorously against the British government for establishing the Assamese language as the official language of Assam. With the help of this campaign, Assamese, rather than Bengali, was established as the legitimate, official language of Assam. Very likely this event saved Assam from becoming a part of Bengal or Bangladesh. Also, it gave an impetus to the literary development and enrichment of the Assamese culture. The contribution of Christian mission in Assam is indeed significant.

The missionaries prepared the Northeast people for their future life in the modern world with all its complexities and challenges. This is particularly true in the lives of the tribal people where Christianity made its deepest impact. The missionaries have been criticized for bringing changes to tribal cultures and disrupting their old way of living. Change is always necessary for progress and is inevitable in history. While it is true that some good aspects of tribal culture did get lost, what the tribal people gained is far greater, and the two can hardly be compared. It is significant to note that while anthropologists along with certain government officials were criticizing the work of missions,¹ the missionaries were busy equipping the tribal people for their future. The anthropologist looked back to an idealized and romanticized past, while the missionary looked forward to the future modern world and its challenges.

One of those challenges has arrived in recent years in the form of the *Hindutva* movement. It is a political ideology, espoused by extremist Hindus who believe that,

¹ Christoph Von Furer-Haimendorf, *The Naked Nagas* (Calcutta: Thacker Spink & Co, 1968), 56.

since Hinduism is the religion of the majority, India should officially declare itself a Hindu country. To be a true Indian is to be a Hindu, according to them.² This is a contradiction of the religious freedom that is granted by the Constitution of India to all religions. *Hindutva* further states that people of other religions should give the highest regard to Hinduism. Hindus alone deserve to enjoy all legal rights and privileges. *Hindutva* claims that “Hindu is a cultural identity” rather than a religious concept.³ It teaches that one may follow Hindu culture without changing one’s religion and becoming a Hindu. All this amounts to the same thing, and the result is almost the same. It will lead to the same situation that the Sanskritized tribals of Assam experienced in the past. This ideology is a threat to the democracy and secular Constitution of India. Christians and other non-Hindus must unitedly stand for their rights.

The major impact of missions was felt among the tribal communities of the Northeast. With their new faith in Christ and education, their advancement was unstoppable. The Christian tribes of the Northeast must never forget this precious legacy of Christian missions. They will continue to make great progress if they remain faithful to the Christian faith that has been given to them. If they remain steadfast, they will be able to stand against the attacks such as extreme Hindu or Muslim ideologies, liberalism, secular-humanism, radical movements, or terrorism. Christianity alone can ensure the security, well-being, and freedom of the tribal people of the Northeast.

² Saikia, *Fragmented Memories*, 49.

³ V. Naidu, “Hindu is not a Religious Concept, it’s a Cultural Identity,” *Outlook India Magazine* (Aug, 2014), accessed July 11, 2017, www.outlookindia.com/newswire/story/hindu-is-not-a-religious-concept-its-a-cultural-identity-venkaiah/856454.

Appendix 1

Maps





South Asia



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