

Gauging the Manifestations of Christianity among the Khasis

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Introduction:

The genesis of Christianity in India is one of the most ambiguous and yet its growth is a very interesting area in academic discourse. Numerous studies have tried to engage in chronological estimation of its arrival and dissemination in India and predominantly in India's northeast. The impact of Christianity on indigenous cultural pattern in India is another significant area of academic deliberation. However, despite such a monumental corpus of work on it, the origins of Christianity in India have been the subject of controversy among historians due to the lack of primary documentary evidence.

According to tradition and legend, Apostle Thomas went west to India and started the church in A.D. 52 and "With the emergence of subsequent recognized trade courses, he converted many to Christianity, including members of the royal family" (Mundalan 3). Setting the gates open for Christianity in India, many other foreign missionaries made their way into the 'mystical' and 'exotic' land of India. By the 16th century, Francis Xavier expanded the Christian community by evangelizing to those from the lower caste and outcastes. The Industrial Revolution in Europe, especially in Britain, by the second half of the 18th century, created "much cultural, psychological and moral trauma amongst the working class and it was within this class that the evangelical Christian movements found their most enthusiastic adherents" (Hobsbawn 23). The revival of religious movements was, in a way, the by-product of advancing industrialism, an attempt to create a new ethic for a new society. This Christian revivalism engendered among the populace, a new fervor and passionate moral solemnity coupled with a great concern for the 'unsaved' and 'neglected' sections of British society which eventually grew into an anxiety about the deliverance of the 'heathen masses' in Britain's colonies. Thus, beginning in the eighteenth century, Protestant missionaries began to work throughout India that led to the growth of Christian communities.

This resulted in the formation of many missionary societies hoping to take their faith to distant countries and if the missions did not precede the colonial movement; they did follow the heels of the colonial power, giving to history the cliché, 'The Cross follows the Crown'. The symbiotic bond that colonialism and evangelism often shared, led most

colonized people to view the colonial state as both priest and politician. However, the relationship between the colonial state and missionary organisations was not one of straightforward cooperation. The relationship between a colonial government and any mission operating in the same territory differed from country to country and mission to mission and depended on the historical situation.

Christian Missionaries and Colonial India:

The narrative of the Indian subcontinent in this context runs on a rather different trajectory as the Company's attitude towards missionary work was, for the most part, one of indifference. In contrast to Portugal and Spain where state-sponsored missionary activities were ubiquitous, the East India Company, which in itself was an independent enterprise, did not have a clear cut alignment with the Cross. When it assumed political power in 1757 in India, the Company's government was purely motivated by commercial interest and continued to view missionary activities in India with disfavor. This also led them to marginalize missionaries because of a presumed fear that missionary preaching would likely create a hostile atmosphere which could affect the stability of the Company's rule and its profits.

Christianity in Meghalaya:

The emergence and rooting of Christianity in Meghalaya dates back to as early as 1813. The first missionary to reach Pandua, an important trading centre for the Khasis and Bengalis which lay in the foothills of Khasi Kingdom of Cherrapunji, was Krishna Chandra Pal. Pal himself was baptized by William Carey of the Serampore Baptist Mission on 28th December 1800. His efforts of preaching the Gospel were not in vain. He wrote:

The Judge wishes me to visit the country of the Khasis, and gave me introductory letters to the Jamadar, and a native Sepoy for my protection. The Jamadar entertained me very kindly. I had many opportunities of making known the Gospel there; and I have great hopes that four sepoys, two natives of Khasia and one Assam were brought to believe in the Lord Jesus. A few days after, Mr. Smith and the other two gentlemen of the Station arrived there, and having called the seven individuals, enquired whether they believed in the death of Christ, and that he suffered for sinners and were willing to be baptized in His name. On their replying to all these questions in the affirmative, they desired me to give them Christian baptism. We went down to the Dlebolisshore River. There were present eight native Chiefs and about 600 natives of Khasia. I read and expounded a chapter of Scripture and after prayer, baptized the seven candidates. (Morris 42)

In another source, it was reported that the names of the two Khasi converts were U Duwan and U Anna. Pal was surprised by the presence of 600 Khasis and their Chiefs at the

ceremony. He continued to stay at Pandua for eight months but there were no records to show that other Khasis became Christian. Pal returned to Serampore and never went back. Although meagre, the start seemed promising to William Carey who by then had already set out to translate the Bible into Khasis (Khasis) language. As a result 500 copies of the Khasi Bible written using the Bengali script was published. However, the imperfect translation deemed the outcome almost unintelligible.

After the departure of Pal, a young Scotsman James Rae was entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel among the Khasis. His report of 1830 mentioned some initial progress in the form of three Khasi and nine Garo youth being interested in Christian philosophy but the work did not materialize as envisaged. Eventually Alexander Lish, another missionary, was sent to continue the work by 1833 and was stationed in Cherrapunji. He succeeded in opening three schools, one each at Sohra, Mawsmal and Mawmluh, with the help of U Laithat, a Khasi scholar. He was also known to have engaged in preaching the gospel by visiting the markets. Although the school at Sohra initially saw an attendance of thirty six, eventually the number steadily decreased. With not much of work having progressed and purpose fulfilled, the missionary work at Cherrapunji was continued for a while with personal fund of William Carey but which ultimately came to a complete halt with the departure of Lish.

The narrative on Christianity in Meghalaya continued with the arrival of the Welsh Presbyterian Mission (WPM). Thomas Jones and his wife, representatives of the WPM, reached Cherrapunji on 22 June 1841. Carrying the 'white burden' among the Khasis, the first impression of Jones could be seen in his first letter:

A more pitiful, lamentable and at the same time a more inviting field for the Christian cannot be found. Here are multitudes upon multitudes of untutored, heathen, naturally lazy and sluggish, living in filth and rags, afraid to wash a rag, lest it should wear out the sooner: depriving themselves of proper clothing: niggardly hoarding every pie (farthing) they can get and if asked the reason why, they answer, that they may have something to sacrifice when they or their friends are ill. (Morris 64)

Problematic as this view on the Khasis, their appearance, practices and customs is, the work of the missionaries still continued among them without much trouble. Jones got the assistance of two young Khasi men – U Duwan and U Jungkha and was able to learn the language in about under a year. Following the same trajectory of using education and standardization of literature and language, Jones proceeded with evangelization by establishing and operating schools and instructing both young and adults in the knowledge of Gospel doctrine and was convinced that the only way to reach the Khasis with the Gospel was

through Christian education. By the end of 1841, he had also prepared *Ka Kot Pule Banyngkong*, a Khasi translation of the Welsh catechism 'Rodd Mam'.

Continuing on the path of furnishing and 'polishing' the language of the Khasis, Jones also adopted the Roman script to write the Cherra dialect of the Khasi language making it officially the standardized and predominant version. N. Natarajan had thus observed:

Jones decided to adopt the Roman alphabet to Khasi ... A new script was thus born by the labours of Jones assisted by two Khasi men, U Duwan Rai and U Jungkha earlier students of Lish to a language which, hither-to was only spoken. Thus in a gentle and steady manner, new windows to the vistas of knowledge in the world around were opened to the Khasis. This landmark in the evolution of Khasi society had an impact on the future, the like of which was never known. Jones thus became the father of Khasi literature. The Cherra dialect forms to this day the pan-Khasi dialect for literature. (Natarajan 63)

Within five years of their arrival, on 8th March 1846, the Khasi Jaintia Presbyterian Church (KJPC) was established. Many Khasis such as U Amor, U Rujon, Ka Nabon, Ka Bir, Ka Phuh and many more slowly despite much opposition started identifying themselves with Christianity. By 1850 the first Christian marriage among the KJPC was conducted between U Luh and Ka Phuh and towards the close of the century by 1891, KJPC had grown to a total membership of 6862 scattered in over 189 churches. One significant tremor came to the growth of Christianity in Khasi hills in the form of a devastating earthquake in 1897, which led to the destruction of numerous built fabrics in the region and even death of many Khasi people.

With the turn of the century, the native churches of the KJPC took the responsibility of reaching the unreached Khasis and others with the gospel. The villages situated on both sides of the Umngot River were specifically selected as the field for the operation of the 'Home Mission'. As a result the number of people who newly associated themselves to Christianity under the aegis of the 'Home Mission' reached upto 1343 and 1195 in the Khasis and Jaintia Hills respectively by 1940. With the centenary celebration of KJPC in 1941, at present the Presbyterian Church in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills have a membership of over four hundred thousand in its fold.

Apart from the Presbyterian Mission, the Roman Catholic missionaries were also very prominent in the region. Although there were Roman Catholic missionaries in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam as early as 1626, their work in the Khasi Jaintia Hills had not started until 1890 and by the next year Khasis were received into their church after an

intensive course of instruction. Despite the calamities brought by the earthquake of 1897, the Catholic missionaries continued their work of evangelization through the development of the region in the forms of establishment of cathedrals, schools and colleges such as the Loreto Convent in 1905, St. Edmunds's schools and college by the Irish Missions and even the Salesians of Don Bosco from France, Italy and Spain's St. Anthony's school and college. The venture into print capitalism by the Catholics also contributed to the process of standardization of the Khasi language and literature. One of the first productions was the "*Ka Ing Khristan*" or The Christian Home on 1st September 1907. Similarly their work in the areas of running training institutes for agriculture, handicraft, sericulture and home science played a major part in making Christianity prominent in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills.

Manifestations of Christianity among Khasis and their Oral Culture:

Myths, cultural norms, and ceremonial acts are all part of Khasi religion's past. Khasi religion experienced an internal crisis of uncertainty and confusion throughout time as it came into contact with neighbouring religions such as Hinduism, Islam, and others, the impact of which may be seen in various elements of Khasi religion rituals. However, due of fundamental disparities in theological conceptions and social and cultural customs, the majority of Khasis did not respond favourably to what they saw as alien doctrines. On the other hand, due of its underlying parallels to Christian beliefs and teaching, the Khasi religion easily adapted to the coming of Christianity. In fact, Christianity came to be viewed as a reinterpreter of Khasi creation, humanity's distance from God, and hope beliefs, notably in regards to God's understanding, salvation, and a variety of social and cultural qualities. The Christian Gospel, on the other hand, opposed some Khasi beliefs and customs.

The state of Khasi religious beliefs and rituals at the time of Christianity's arrival was twisted and weak. The various polluted ceremonies perplexed people, and the fear of demonic spirits that pervaded every person and family group had grown oppressive. Khasi religion was regarded as animistic, a rudimentary kind of demonology, and a religion of despair by those who studied it at the time. Khasi monotheistic had become tainted by animistic notions, according to Dr. H. Bareh, a Khasi author. The dismay and uncertainty expressed by Khasi priests in their religious rituals, the contamination of religious beliefs by the acceptance of certain Hindu gods, and the discontent expressed by early Christian converts all point to a situation of deviation, confusion, and disillusionment that contributed to a religious crisis of confidence among many Khasis at the time. There appeared to be little possibility of escape the grasp of the evil powers, and terror of demons, evil spirits, and deities handmade. When the Christian Gospel arrived, the Khasis believed that God had once again taken mercy on them and sent Jesus Christ to rescue them from their perplexity and despair.

The Khasis did not become Christians until they were very certain that it was God's will for them to do so and "They initially reacted angrily to Christian conversions, claiming

that religion should be linked to ritual ossuary cairns and sacred groves, and that God could not abide a people who did not do any rites to justify his mercy” (Mawblei 69). People gradually grew captivated as they started to comprehend their own cultural and religious backgrounds through the lens of Christian doctrine. Christian instruction became greater and more successful as a result of education and the training of native teachers, preachers, evangelists, and ministers. The local employees, having witnessed and experienced the Niam’s elaborate ritual, were able to connect the Christian faith to their own deeply held religious beliefs and customs. As a result, people recognized the importance of Christian teaching and responded to it. People’s religious and cultural lives were altered as a result of the conflict between the two faiths. Some Khasi beliefs and traditions were discarded, while others were reaffirmed, modified, or reinterpreted. The Khasis believe in a single God who created heaven and earth. God offered ‘Ka Niam’ and its rites to humans because of their alienation. God is addressed as Creator in the incantations and prayers; He is loving and does not punish humans, even when they fail to execute the prescribed rituals. He is always touched by pity when he sees human suffering.

This is also why God restores broken connections created by human sin over and time again. The Khasi believe that God will bring up the prophetic songster bird ‘U SimpahSimkaro’, who will reveal and interpret the original Niam instructions to the Khasis, allowing them to re-join the House of God's company. God is ‘U ba la lehei’- He who has treated graciously, or felt pity and offered mercy in his dealings with the Khasi people, in times of turmoil and deprivation. Among Khasi Christians, the core Khasi belief in God remained almost untouched. In addition, new notions for explaining the Christian conception of God were developed. God is addressed as ‘Father’ in the Bible and in Christian prayer. Because this concept is not contained in Khasi ritual incantations, it had to be explained to the Khasis. When God is referred to as ‘our Father’, it does not imply that he has a wife or that human beings are his offspring. Inasmuch as he created and sustains the entire globe, the Khasi belief in God as the Creator might also be viewed as his fatherhood. Furthermore, the Khasis refer to God as Ka Blei - She God, despite the fact that humans are not born to her. The people’s matrilineal social structure may explain why they address God as She, mother. The presence of God in the Niam is also referred to as Ka Blei. God’s motherhood (Ka Blei) expresses God's maternal love for his creation, a concept that is completely consistent with scriptural and Christian theology. As a result, Ka Blei and U Blei allude to different facets of the same God. This is comparable to the belief that God's image comprises both male and female in the Creation tale, stating “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27).

According to the Genesis account, God created Adam and then Eve so that they might be together. According to the Khasi story of creation, God created human beings in pairs from the beginning. Heaven and earth, as well as everything on them, were created at God's

command, according to the Bible. Regardless of the distinctions, human beings are seen as having been gifted with exceptional dignity and place in compared to the rest of creation in both creation tales. God has given them authority to look after the celestial and terrestrial creation. The separation and fall of man from God are caused by God's concern for humanity who were confused and by the bad behaviour of one person in both the Khasi and Bible creation accounts. The Khasis feel that their lack of knowledge stems from their detachment from the initiative to re-establish broken communication by offering them 'Ka Niam'. God is the one who restores the rites of every broken communication created by the sin of the people. In the event of a breakdown in communication, the relationship is re-established by using divination rites to provide guidance. According to the Bible, the human fall resulted in retribution, the snake was cursed, and Adam and Eve were exile.

Conclusion

It is unavoidable that the Khasi text be westernized because the Khasis do not have their own script. It is also doubtful that the influence could have occurred due to the use of Roman letters and the exertion of Christianity. The lack of records casts doubts on the texts and narratives' veracity. However, one cannot dismiss the Khasis' original thoughts and ideology because moral ideals around the world are similar in many ways. But due of its underlying parallels to Christian faith and teaching, the Khasi religion was able to accommodate Christianity without trouble.

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