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Christianity and Politics in Tribal India; Baptist Missionaries and Naga Nationalism by G Kanato Chophy



G Kanato Chophy disputes the conventional understanding that missionaries who came to India's northeast highlands worked in tandem with the colonial powers to convert gullible tribal people with an exotic belief-system and the white man's halo. The truth was far more complicated with the relationship between the American Baptist missionaries and the British administrators being more confrontational than cordial

In the conventional historiography of the colonial period in India, the Christian missionaries were hardly accorded a place of pride. They were portrayed as handmaidens of the colonial masters who did their "soul-saving" works riding on the coat tails of the colonial power. Not surprisingly, the average Indian perceives missionaries as duplicitous zealots who preyed on and ensnared gullible tribal folk with an exotic belief system and the white man's halo. That missionaries tricked, induced and bribed is what we have heard *ad nauseam*.

Chophy disputes the conventional understanding that missionaries who came to the northeast highlands worked in tandem with the colonial powers or, under their protection. In fact, the relationship between the two was more often confrontational than cordial. The colonial power was British while the missionaries who reached the wild Naga country in the late 19th century were American. The colonial administrators, some of whom were anthropologist-scholars, were keen that the "exotic" lives of the tribal people be preserved. The missionaries, who often started off by learning the tribal dialects, creating a script for the natives and then starting schools, often ended up changing not just the tribals' religious faith, but their entire way of life. This was resented by the administrators who regarded it as a loss of valuable culture.

These missionaries, mainly under the American Baptist Mission, first set up their tents in the Assam plains in the early half of the 19th century. However, they found these fertile plains barren in terms of soul harvesting. At the fag end of the century, an exasperated missionary complained, "Must it not be admitted that the Assamese have been offered the Gospel and have not received it... Can it be believed, that Paul or other New Testament evangelists would have spent so long a time on such a field and not tried hard to find a heathen people more favourable to Christianity than the Assamese." The missionaries blamed their problems in Assam on the "old iron-clad institutions and traditions" governing social life which they found hard to penetrate.

The missionaries then shifted their gaze up to the hill ranges flanking the Assam plains and found a receptive audience in the headhunting tribes. These tribes didn't have a common print or a literary culture. Theirs was an oral tradition. That, in the author's opinion, made it easy for the missionaries.

The missionaries began by learning the village dialects. It could not have been easy. They waylaid villagers who were off to work in their fields and picked up new words and sounds from them by gesturing and pointing at common objects. From there, they created a script to cater to the tribal tongue and then translated the Bible and gospel literature into that new language. Then, they opened schools. This took time and resources, but it worked.

As to the link between Christianity and Naga nationalism, the takeaway from the book is that there indeed was a correlation between the two. But it is doubtful if the missionaries can be blamed for it. They didn't preach nationalism or secession. Their aim was entirely other worldly. The motto was to "rescue the perishing souls." Yet, by introducing a common script and print culture, they unwittingly helped consolidate amorphous identities into solid ones. By educating the tribals and exposing them to the ideas and political winds around them, they helped engender self-respect, ethnic pride and ultimately, a recalcitrant nationalism.

In the book's telling, "During British times, political agents had expressed displeasure at the new religion for irrevocably changing traditional ways of life; in the post-independence period, many political leaders of the new Indian state saw it as a rabble-rousing faith, and thus an impediment to national integration." It didn't help that the two most serious movements for independence in the northeast after Indian independence were in the two most Christianized states - Nagaland and Mizoram. By the mid-1950s, foreign missionaries were thrown out of Nagaland, and the same happened in Mizoram in the 1970s.

But as the book shows, most Nagas have no regret over their acceptance and adoption of the Baptist faith. It is an identity, a badge they wear with pride. The book argues that there is now a kind of hierarchy within the tribes with those that accepted the faith first feeling superior to those that followed later.

Something similar also happened in southern Manipur from where I am. It is common there to hear people talk of how villages and chiefs that welcomed the missionaries grew more prosperous over time than those that rejected or persecuted them. Curiously, the book privileges political boundaries over social and cultural ones and focuses only on the tribes of the state of Nagaland. Thus, the exploits of William Pettigrew amongst the Tangkhul Nagas and of Watkin Roberts amongst the Zo tribes in Mizoram and south Manipur, among others, remain untold.

The book also touches on the internal fractures within the Naga Baptist world, the BJP's attempt to co-opt traditional figures like Jadonang and Rani Gaidinliu, the waning influence of traditional institutions, and the encounter between communist ideology and the Naga movement.

This is an ambitious work on a neglected area of research. It helps the reader unlearn much received wisdom. However, the book lacks thematic coherence and the chronology is hard to follow. At close to 500 pages, it looks daunting from the outside. Nevertheless, it is sure to become essential reading for anyone interested in the social history of the tribes of the northeast.