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Negotiating Cultural Transformation In Tribal Northeast India

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Culture provides something like an all inclusive web of world view, which makes the life comprehensible to the common man/women of the society. The anthropologists have provided a set of definitions of culture as a conceptual tool for them to understand their subject and inform the readers of their significance. In fact, for a considerable segment of anthropological enterprise, culture is claimed to be the key concern. However, this concern itself is about slightly hundred years old. It so happened that Edward Butler Tylor, one of the classical anthropologists, borrowed the German term 'Kultur', associated with agriculture, and applied it to include 'the total non-biologically transmitted heritage of man' in an all comprehensive definition. And since then, culture remains the key concept for defining a community distinct from the others. And anthropologists have advanced a body of conceptual and theoretical approaches to sharpen their understanding of the phenomenon of culture.

Coming to the Northeast Indian tribal scenario, one finds early ethnographers were oblivious of Tylor's concern for the culture and rather they chose to detail on the customs, traditions, manners, rituals, and supernatural beliefs of the communities in question and presented a rounded, objectified and simple image of the 'tribes'. The colonial administration got a number of monographs written on the some of the tribal communities, not necessarily by the trained anthropologists, which turned out to be the first documents on these pre-literate peoples. That
was the hey day of the 'scientism', in which every phenomenon was to be 'objectified' for claiming to be 'scientific' and anthropology was labelled as a science. The early colonial explorer and administrators used the anthropological knowledge to justify their racial, imperial, and industrial arrogance/ prejudice to subjugate what came to be termed in course of time as the third world. And for that they took full advantage of anthropological theory of social evolution as if it was a proven fact. As a reaction to conjectural theory of evolution, Catholic Missionaries preferred an early criticism of evolutionism in the form of theory of diffusion, in which their house journal, 'Anthropos', played a significant role and made a mark on the academic horizon. However, one hastens to add that culture continues to be the key concern for a century and half to any body who would like to understand the tribal world.

This brings us back to one of the main concerns of the seminar: to draw up theoretical and methodological understanding of/on the people of the Northeast India. We propose to endeavour to understand the faster pace of conversion to Christianity in Northeast India.

Secondly, how and why the message of the 'gospel' found a fertile soil with such a positive result in the region. Thirdly, it would be interesting to chart out course and contours of the indigenous cultures of the communities, which have largely opted for the new religion, Christianity. And lastly, it will be worthwhile to uncover how the new religion helps the community to find meanings, values, symbols, and jest to live for a vigorous life and helps the people in their struggle to find an honourable place under the sun. The new generation of Christian tribal elite of the region has been able to make a mark on the Indian national scene in various fields. It is worth trying to uncover how has the emerging Christian leadership negotiated an extremely effective approach unknown to their ancestors to cope with the challenge posed in an open democratic system. It will be equally interesting to understand the process through which it has been made possible and to draw the lessons for making the process more rewarding after avoiding the pitfalls. It is an exploratory exercise and many of the conclusions may be tentative, which demand a thorough and deeper analysis, which may be undertaken by competent scholars in future.

**Concern with Culture**

Among the variety of conceptual tools, the idea of culture was the most crucial concept in the anthropological enterprise. Various defined, its most inclusive definition was provide by E B Tylor in the following words: "Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is
that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". Writing almost a hundred years after Tylor, the doyen of the American anthropologist, Margaret Mead, emphasizes its contemporaneity, when she finds anthropology "as a field science, whose members work with fresh field material, studying living speakers of living languages, excavating the earth where archelogical remains are still in situ, observing the behavior of real mothers' brothers to real sisters' sons, taking down folklore from men's lips, measuring the bodies and sampling the blood of men who live in their own lands- lands which we have to travel in order to study the people" (Mead, : 1968, 5). The basic descriptive technique is field study by observation and participation and verbal interviews of relatively small groups typically organized on tribal basis. This emphasis tends to become qualitative than quantitative. It is the study of 'other cultures', reported in third person, not necessarily for the subjects, but for others, who may try to understand subjects' culture in non-native tongues.

Colonization of the world by the European powers went side by side from 15th century onwards along with reporting on the 'exotic communities', which came to be known as the 'tribes'. Christian Missionary and anthropologists found a common meeting ground in uncovering the aspects of the tribal culture, though for different reasons. It is entirely a different matter that the colonial powers used such researches for their own purpose. However, anthropologists, missionaries and colonial administrators, all alike agreed that it was essential to understand aspects of life and lore of the peoples (tribes) for understanding the 'other cultures', spreading the gospel and an effective administrative control. Thus, 'tribe' and 'culture', howsoever defectively defined, came to be accepted as the key terms by all three collaborators for their different reasons. Coming to the Northeast Indian region, it was the missionaries, who appeared on the scene first among the three types of intruders mentioned above, followed by the colonial administrators, many of them were trained as anthropologists. Naturally, university trained professional anthropologists began researching on the region much later. We shall see below that all three shades of concerns in 'tribal cultures' in Northeast region were necessarily not in conflict with one another. In fact, there was a good and fruitful collaboration between them in the region.

In this context, it may be pertinent to mention here that as early as mid-seventeenth century Portuguese Jesuits, Cascella and Cabral, visited Bhutan on way to Tibet. There were other such missionary pioneers, who
sacrificed their lives while crossing to China and Tibet from India soon after. Again, as soon as the British got settled politically in India by mid. 18th century, missionaries turned their attention to Northeast region. And ‘there was extensive support for missionary work among government officials, particularly during the first 35 years of British rule’ in the region (Downs, 1992). David Scott and Francis Jenkins, two British Commissioners of Northeast India, who dominated administration between 1826 and 1861, were evangelical Christians and encouraged mission work in the region. They saw conversion to Christianity and as well as educational work as serving the British cause in the hill areas and for that they felt educational work would be most effective. They made arrangements at official and private levels to arrange for fund to support the missionary educational work in the hills. Inspired by them and at their personal initiatives, many of the early tea planters got interested in sponsoring mission activities in region, especially among the hill tribes. This was also the time that the Serampore missionaries were active from Calcutta, who provided first written literature in many of the tribal languages of the region.

Colonial Administration and Science of Anthropology

Coming to the Indian situation, when the British established their hold on India, the early encounter was not necessarily unpleasant. A number of the army, trading and governing personnel had intimate relations with a variety of Indians at various levels. Similarly, their interests also varied from making money and extending frontiers of the Empire to learning art, craft, language and lore of the Indian society. At least some of the Englishmen had a streak of proselytization to Christianity. They tried to convert the high caste Hindus and Ashraf Muslims and did not meet with the desired results. Then they turned to the communities on the social margin of the Indian society and found many of them away from the great traditions of the Hindus and the Muslims. Needless to say that the British administration issued license to the Christian missionaries to concentrate on the communities on the frontier communities as a strategy for evangelical activities. The 'Sepoy Mutiny' of 1857 appeared to be a turning point in the Indian administrative history in more than one way. By then, travelers, adventurers, missionaries, explorers, traders and administrators had joined the ethnographers on 'reporting on queer, exotic, barbarian and savage tribes' spread across the globe within the British Empire.

Ethnographic investigation proved to be a boon to the colonial administrators for collecting data on life and lore of the colonized peoples so that they could rule over them more effectively. Asad, in his book on
the subject argues how the link between anthropology and colonialism is blown out of proportion by social scientists and gives numerous examples of how anthropologists fought/wrote against colonialism in Asia, Africa and America.

In that surcharged atmosphere of post-1857 phase of the Indian history, it was Alfred Loyal, who initiated a debate on the nature of the Indian society (Owen, 1973: 223-243). And it was agreed as a policy to show India as a divided entity between castes, tribes, races, regions, religions, languages, food habits, dresses and what not and it was made loud and clear that India was just a geographical entity held together by the British might. Moreover, it was presumed that it was in their colonial interest to show India divided in various ways enumerated above. The census operations, district gazetteers, 'castes and tribes' on various provinces, 'peoples of India' series of publications and tribal monographs were used to show the variety within India with ethnographic support and purposefully collated write-ups were touted as scientific treatises. It may be remembered that all through nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, British scholars did not distinguish between 'tribes' and 'castes' in Indian social situation. So much so that while what came to be known as the tribes were invariably termed as savage, barbarian, primitive, wild, etc. And there were references such as Brahmin tribes, Rajput tribes, Jat Tribes, Muslim Tribes, etc. indicating that there was hardly any difference between castes and the tribes in those days. Events of 1857 led to a racial polarization, in which the British went all the way to establish White man's racial superiority. Incidentally, this also marked the beginning of ethnological investigation all over the world. Darwin's Origin of Species was published in 1858 followed by his Origin of Man and Morgan's Ancient Society in 1871. The age of geographical discoveries, scientific explorations, and a number of technological inventions preceded this. Australia, Latin America, Africa, and bulk of Asia were already divided among the European Imperial powers. Science was the key word of the age; 'progress' was the mantra of the period; and White man of Anglo-Saxon extraction was taken to represent the apex of human civilization. African and Asian tribesmen were considered as 'the White man's burden, who were, deemed 'half devil and half child' (Kipling, 1977). 'That was also the heyday of the museums. Science teaching was focused around show cases exhibiting specimens classified by types - fossils, rocks, insects, stuffed birds, caged animals in zoo - fixed entities, changeless, everlasting' (Hugh-Jones and Laidlaw, 2000: 84). There was also a new movement led by botanist, Linnaeus, for establishing botanical gardens all over the world, which did not only have
scientific motives, but also commercial ones. Morgan’s evolutionary formulations with its three-fold sub-divisions in lower, middle and upper savagery, barbarism and civilization were taken to be as if it were the final truth. Human beings were ‘objectified’; they were scientifically measured and photographed as specimens representing a type; their indices were to be established so that generalizations (principles) could be made. Dalton reports in his ‘Descriptive Ethnography of Bengal’ how a grand design of ethnographic mapping of India for the sake of scientific understanding was proposed in 1868. It was proposed that two specimens of every Indian community (as their nominated representatives) were to be sent to Jubbulpore, at the centre of India, to be measured and photographed with a view to developing an understanding of the Indian peoples. Unfortunately for the sake of the British science, the Chief Commissioner of Assam spoiled the game. He informed his superiors in Calcutta that he would not risk a rebellion on hand, as his specimens might die on their way to or from Jubbulpore because of the hot climatic conditions between his domain and the place of proposed ethnographic fair in Central India. The Imperial government could not dare to risk such an adventure and the ethnographic fair could not be held on time. However, Dalton was asked to complete the Descriptive Ethnography on the basis of his own data, reports from administrators, missionaries, explorers, travelers and, in fact, any body, who could volunteer to report and photograph the subjects. And that is how Dalton’s famous Descriptive Ethnography was compiled, which became a model for the future Peoples of India volumes (Dalton: 1872).

In course of time, such volumes were published on United Provinces, Punjab, Bombay Presidency, Madras Presidency, Central Provinces and Berar, and Rajputana. The first population census of India was conducted in 1872, for which British ethnographers’ help was sought in formulating the questions to be asked to the respondents. Since then, India is one of the few countries of the world, which has regularly conducted census operations every ten years. From the beginning, anthropologists were associated with its operations. Risley was the Census Commissioner for 1901, who in course of time published Castes and Tribes of Bengal and Peoples of India. Hutton was the Census Commissioner of 1931 operation and his data on castes and communities are still considered as the most authentic and are used by governments and political activists. It was Hutton, who used the term, 'scheduled castes' for the communities known as such today and identified seven attributes for a caste to be so listed. The volumes on different 'provinces' were written for British administrators in a rounded manner; locations from where the data were collected not
mentioned; differences in practice were ignored within a community and efforts were made to show the distinctions between the communities. Administrators, missionaries, explorers, adventurers and petty government officials provided the data for these volumes. It is interesting to note that data on origin, food habits, religious beliefs, social practices such as marriage, dress, ornaments, industry, tools and implements and even hair-do of the communities were described to show them different from 'others'. Similarly, the photographs of the community specimens were taken from front and sides, besides sex-wise indices. Politics, conflict, inter-relations and Indian linguistic roots were under played.

From the volumes on the 'provinces', the British descended to the level of districts by writing district gazetteers. Apart from ethnographic details on the communities, the gazetteers included place names, distance from one place to another, roads and communications, even location of the dak bungalows, and night shelters for officials on tours. It is apparent that these volumes were compiled as handy information books for the convenience of the travelling administrators, who were transferred frequently. Coming to the Northeast Frontier India, then known as Assam, communities were turbulent, hostile, and prone to raiding settled habitation and tea plantations. Such communities were labelled as head-hunters. Like Northeast Frontier Agency (NEFA), it was also considered to be difficult to be administered. For that they had evolved a two pronged strategy: conversion to Christianity and an indirect but effective administration under 'political officers'. The 'political officers' were invariably drawn either from armed forces or police service. The Governor of Assam, Bampfyde Fuller, ordered in 1903 a series of publications known as Ethnography of Assam to be written by competent administrators and missionaries with long exposure to the tribes and such volumes were first edited by Gordon and then by Hutton. These monographs had a common pattern: general description, domestic life, laws and customs, religion, folklore, miscellaneous, language and appendices. Over a dozen monographs written by the scholar-administrators and missionaries were published on the important tribes, beginning with Gordon's *The Khasis* in 1904 and ending with Mills' *The Lotha Nagas* in 1937. In this way, Khasi, Garo, Lakher, Lushai, Angami, Sema, Rengma, Ao, Mikir, Cachari, Lotha Nagas, etc. were covered by these monographs. In fact, these monographs became the most authoritative sources of information on these communities, as these were invariably the first written documents on institutions, practices and customs of the respective communities. Even today, these monographs continue to serve as the most authentic references on the
communities of the region.

In the year 1873, the Inner Line Act was passed, by which communities residing in the hills were prohibited from crossing an imaginary line to the plains. Similarly, any non-tribal missionary, explorer, traveller, businessman, wood-cutter, hunter, and honey collector was to seek written permission from competent authorities to enter such designated areas. The British intention was to safeguard the tea plantations in the plains from tribal raids. Similarly, they intended to provide security to the non-tribal entrants to the hills from the tribes and tried to see that they did not exploit the 'simple' hill communities. The Governor of the province was to administer such areas at his discretion. Present day Arunachal Pradesh (Lakhimpur, Sadiya and Balipara Frontier Tracts), Nagaland, (Naga Hills District) and Mizoram (Lushai Hills District) came under such dispensation. The Government of India Act, 1919 declared these areas as 'Backward Tracts' and kept them away under the special powers of the governors separate from the legislative purview of the province of Assam. In the year 1935, these backward tracts of Lakhimpur, Sadiya, and Balipara frontier tracts, Naga Hills District, and Lushai Hills District were termed as 'Excluded Areas' and the Garo Hills District was clubbed among the 'partially excluded areas'. It may not be out of place to inform the readers that the Government of India appointed Mills, a bureaucrat trained in anthropology, as the first Tribal Advisor to the Governor of Assam in 1940s, followed by another bureaucrat, Nari K Rustomji. And for the last ten years, 1953-1964, it was Elwin, who advised the Governor of Assam on tribal affairs. Once the Constituent Assembly met for drafting the future Constitution of India, it made the provision for listing such excluded and partially excluded areas under the 'Sixth Schedule' of the Indian Constitution with special dispensations.

Tribal communities had attracted the attention of Indian social reformers, political activists and the Hindu ascetics from western India. On the basis of their faith, customs, institutions and living in the contiguous hilly tracts, especially in the western peninsular India, these good-doers termed the tribes as 'backward Hindus'. On the other hand, the British administrators, missionaries, and anthropologists found the tribes a different world all together and they were to be naturally treated separately. While the former charged the latter for treating the tribes as museum specimen, the latter found the tribes being brought under the discriminative caste ridden Hindu system. In this context, the acrimonious debate in 1940s between assimilative sociologist Ghurye and missionary turned
Congress activist turned ethnographer, Elwin (Elwin, 1943) is relevant. Ghurye charged Elwin for following a policy towards the tribes, which he termed 'isolationist' and maintaining them as museum species for study of the anthropologists' (Ghurye, 1943), a charge, which the latter vehemently denied while continuing to plead for a slow pace of development for the tribes; so that they could absorb the shock of change smoothly. It is to the credit of the independent India that a rational, humane and scientific tribal policy for the integration of the tribes in the larger Indian society was evolved by two great humanists, Jawaharlal Nehru and Verrier Elwin. In course of time, this policy came to be known as the 'Tribal Panchseel', five co-related aspects of tribal development and administration (Elwin, 1964).

The framers of the Indian Constitution had made a commitment that in the future democratic set up weaker segments of society such as the tribes would be accorded special dispensation to catch up with the 'others'.

Tribes were accorded special treatment along with the 'untouchable' castes in the Indian constitution by providing special measures for their representation in the policy making bodies, creating avenues for their socio-economic advancement and taking care of their over-all welfare. They were listed for such a treatment initially for a period of ten years, which was later extended indefinitely. As the resources were limited in early 1950s, welfare measures were also modest. Now, the measures for the tribal welfare have been increased in quantity and quality and, consequently, the quality of their life must have improved, though one must hasten to add that tribes continue to remain one of the least developed segments of the Indian population.

Missionaries and Tribal World

The missionaries came to tribal communities with clear objectives. Their efforts have brought about total transformation in lives of the many of the communities. It is a fact that various communities accepted Christianity as per their differential genius: while some of them have entirely converted within a relatively short span of time, pace of conversion is slow in many cases. Similarly, conversion had been much faster in the independent India than that of the colonial past. For tribals, Christianity provided a means of preserving their identities and promoting their interests in the face of powerful forces of change. These changes brought about in the hills were much more radical, posing a serious threat to the tribal traditional way of life. This threat came from two sources: one, the erosion of small-scale traditional socio-economic structures, two, increased contacts with the plains people, especially those of Assam and Bengal,
with the extension of the British administration. ‘But in the end, the hill tribes accommodated themselves to the British rule and began to see it, as well as Christianity, as a defence against the greater threat of dominance by absorption into more advanced plains community. There was, of course, no fear of absorption into a larger British or even Christian community’ (Downs, 1992).

There is an aspect of tribal life which is equally considered crucial for anthropologists and missionaries alike. And that is concern with the tribal culture. For anthropologists, culture is the key conceptual concern for the discipline and they built up a series of method, concepts and theories around it. Similarly, missionaries address themselves to the variety of cultural nuances of a given community once they go to the field for mission work. They have been able to evolve an elaborate conceptual tool of enculturation. These similarities do not take us very far, as objectives of the two branch of above knowledge differ and many a time they come face to face. To cite an example from nearer home, the contrasting stands taken by Mills and Smith on the impact of Christianity on Ao culture in 1926 may be referred. It goes without saying that Hutton, Mills, Furer-Haimendorf and Verrier Elwin suffered romanticism of the "noble savage" and they saw missionary intervention as a deliberate effort to deny tribes' cultural continuity. It is entirely another matter that these self-appointed good-doers to the cause of the tribal cultures refused to see the impact of the British administration on the life style of tribal folk in the region. Needless to add that the missionaries as well considered certain aspects of indigenous cultures as debased, sinful, and degrading and thus those aspects were to be discouraged for an exemplary Christian life style. Both anthropologists and missionaries have copiously used the researches of each other for a better understanding of their subject matter.

We have referred above briefly Elwin-Ghurye dialogue on desirability of a policy for independent India with reference to communities referred as the 'tribes'. Prior to adoption of the Indian Constitution, there was an intense and, at times, acrimonious debate among the Hindu social reformers, who desired to assimilate the tribes within larger Indian society and romantic British anthropologist who pleaded for keeping the tribes away in isolation from the larger Indian society to guard them against the evils of caste system. Between these extremes, there was a pragmatic and human concern for the tribal communities among the enlightened leadership of the resurgent India and thus, a policy of integration of the tribes in the larger Indian social system was advocated. As per policy of tribal
integration to the national life, tribal communities are expected to develop as per their genius and such stipulations are enshrined within the provisions of the Indian Constitution such as Vth and VIth schedules. In the light of such provisions as the fundamental rights in the Indian Constitution, every Indian and every Indian community has a right to follow, propagate and safe-guard its religious faith. And thus, Christian missionaries like any other religious faith have every right to worship as per their scripture, propagate its gospel and safe-guard its religious rights without encroaching upon others’ similar rights.

Apparently, there were two options available before the tribal societies in the 18th century and both were largely external: the process of what came to be known as Sanskritization from not very far from neighbouring plains, and another one, religion of the new colonial rulers, Christianization. And between the two, the choice was made of more pragmatic and vigorously propagated one, the latter. It was done because of the fact that the Christian missionaries ‘provided the vehicle of the new identity, a written language and literature, a means of acquiring the skills necessary to accommodate themselves to the new situation, education. They also brought an ideology that helped the tribes acculturate themselves to the process of modernization. (And in fact, the neighbouring Hindus and Muslims were also competing for acquisition of the same processes.) The fact that the Christianity rather than Hinduism was at least the nominal religion of their conquerors could also have provided an incentive for a warrior people to adopt that religion’ (Downs, 1994: 180).

It is heartening to note that democratic freedom guaranteed by political system has been well appreciated by the tribal communities in the northeast region. This becomes obvious if one looks at the figures of Christians in Northeast India from the colonial to the present days: ‘Conversion to Christianity is by no means the only significant manifestation of the social impact of the religion, but where there have been large scale conversions the impact is obviously greater...There were four areas in which Christianity came to be concentrated: Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram and the hill areas of Manipur. In 1971, 81 % of the Christians living in the Northeast were in the hills. Of these, 93 % lived in the four areas mentioned above...In 1971 Christians constituted only 9.1 % population of the region as a whole...In contrast, 86% of the inhabitants of Mizoram, 78% of those who live in the hills of Manipur, 67 % of the population of Nagaland, and 47 % of the people of Meghalaya were Christians’ (Downs, 1992).
Extents of Culture Change and Christianity in Northeast India

These statistics inform of the salutary spread of the Christianity in the region no doubt within a short span of about 150 years or so, but it has also, as if, put the entire tribal life pattern up-side down. The tribes, which were empirically small scale nature worshiping isolates in the jungles leading a sedentary life on an entirely primitive technological base, are now tagged to world wide sophisticated pantheon of an elaborately structured Church hierarchy. This has necessarily caused a massive amount of adjustment on the part of the tribal world and for that the communities have made a huge amount of sacrifice. Drawing heavily from Downs, such adjustments may briefly be assessed under three sub-headings: tribal world view, social life style and material culture:

Tribal World View

It is very difficult to reconstruct the indigenous cultural worlds of the tribal societies in view of the paucity of documentation. After more than a hundred year of exposure to the Christianity, neither the believers nor practitioners of the faith, nor the scholars interested in objectively recording the tribal traditions in case of the many of the communities are available today. In the absence of an authentic first hand documentation, what one can do is the second best to provide a conjectured ideal picture of the tribal world based on the ethnography. However, it goes without saying that the tribal world view was a very limited one. To the extent that many of the communities did not have a name for their entire community and some of the names given to the communities were given by the outsiders, in fact, many of them were derogatory. In variably, the spread of the communities was limited to the 'village settlements' and beyond that it the domains of the 'others'. It was a preliterate world of simplest possible technology responsible for a bare subsistence economy. They propitiated spirits of the natural objects more out of fear than reverence. There were no organized religions with scripture and functionaries to administer them. However, it will be naïve to claim that the preliterate man did not believe in supernatural beings. No doubt, their belief in supernatural powers were in the domain of the myths, traditions, lore's and legends mixed with superstitions, magical practices, and faith-healing mechanisms. Many of the communities had youth dormitories for training the youth in warfare, tribal lore's, music and dances and traditions of the tribes.

What could result in such a situation was a society based on elaborate clan organization; a simple economic system around hunting and collecting
in the forest and slash-and-burn-type of rotational cultivation and a polity regulating marriage and inter-clan feuds. The tribesmen invariably did not travel far way from their forest dwellings and they rarely received visitors from the outside. Age-set squads used to provide extra labour and youth of the village used to mount security guard for the habitation. The elders used to transmit legends, myths and traditions of the community orally to the next generation through word of mouth. They were afraid of natural objects, unknown upheavals, natural calamities, pestilence, sickness, and alleged malevolent spirits. Faith-healer-cum-priests and warriors were the natural leaders of the communities, as they provided skills to tackle the life crises in the community. In Redfieldian ideal typical formulation, theirs was a relatively small, simple, isolated, and exclusive world.

The White missionaries, very similar looking to the colonial intruders, came with a new style of worship to propitiate the supernatural agencies, books of prayers and skills to write and educate children the art of writing and pills against the sickness. The hill men ignored them to begin with, but they were also pragmatic enough to adopt to cloth themselves in new way, learn the alphabets, decipher their tongues, and even extend their hands for the pills during the desperately dying situations. The missionaries built their residence in a different architectural style, got the place cleaned and planted with local and exotic ornamental plants and fruit trees, they began visiting the villagers in a most soliciting manners, and slowly and slowly foot tracts were made to the plains. The village head men and warriors ignored the intruders to begin with, but unlike colonial administrators and army officers, the missionaries were soft spoken, polite, and persistent and tried to come closer to the tribe's men, which was intriguing to the latter. More over, they did not live in 'civil lines' or 'army camps', rather they preferred to live around the villages and visit the house holds as much they could do. What resulted in was, no doubt, conversion to Christianity in the long run, but to prop the religious edifice up, the mission was instrumental in introducing unprecedented institutions in the form of (i) church organization, (ii) education and training, (iii) and creation of, to begin with, sacred literature, but later, even secular literature for the tribes (Downs, 1994).

In course of time, Christian church structure, organization, its overall impact on the life of the tribal villages became so profound that old tribal village lost out its traditional structural lay-out. The church building was invariably the most imposing and strategically located structure in the village. The village church pastor and other functionaries very soon
turned out to be most influential individuals in the village, simply because of the fact that they were the ones, who travelled outside the village, interacted with state functionaries in their language and knew how to write. Once the youth dormitories were no more operational, it was the church and its schools, which turned out to be the first public building in the village. Naturally, the church became the centre of all public activities of the village. The villagers began to take interests in its affairs, organization, its finances, its personnel and over-all functioning. And no doubt, those who matter in the village began to contribute to the prosperity of the church in various forms so that once the occasion arise, such contributions may add to their increasing influence in the village. In case, one happens to visit a tribal Christian village in Northeast now, church structure is indicative of the over-all prosperity of the village.

Role of education and literature appears today self-explanatory, but it was not so to begin with. Pioneering missionaries believed in imparting gospel through mother tongue written in Roman script. Invariably, the first missionaries also had to write first book in the language of the tribe concerned, among whom, he/she was going to preach. This first book or the primer was on alphabets on biblical themes. The pastor-cum-teacher in the village managed the church and mission invariably together. The pupils, in mixed class of different ages and occasionally from both sexes, were trained in three 'RS' and were enabled to read scriptures. Once, they came to themselves, they turned out to be first blue coat and then white collar employees in formal organizations from the communities. Very soon, they began producing literates independent of the missionaries and many of them were the pioneers in producing secular literature in their languages. Languages like Khasi, Mizo, Teneli (Angami), and Garo from the region have matured themselves so much that they are now taught at the university level. And so far education is concerned; the achievements of some of the tribal states from the region have been so spectacular that they are ranked among the most literate states of the country. And it will be ungrateful not to acknowledge the credit, where it is most befittingly due. The credit for this singular achievement certainly goes to the Christian missionaries.

The trinity of Church polity, education and literature opened entirely new vista for tribes of the region. The Church polity immediately linked the tribes to the more than two thousand year old Christian sacred traditions, church hierarchy, myths and history of the gospel, crusades and sectarian disputations, which are spread all over the globe. The
Christians were encouraged to construct their houses in a systematic order, at a distance from one another, with ventilation, windows, separate provision for toilets and kitchen and they were specially instructed to keep their life stocks away from their sleeping space. We learn how Khasis carpenters from Shillong were invited to Naga Hills at the instance of the missionaries to construct what came to be known in the region as 'Assam type of houses' made of iron sheets, wood and mortars. Initially, these structures were made of wood, mortars and straw, all locally and easily available and iron sheets were made available, they were used first in the formal government buildings and then affluent tribe men followed the suit. For years, even up to 1960's, modest house holders in the hills used flattened kerosene tin sheets in place of more perishable straws to guard against the heavy rains.

The way various tribal communities have negotiated their cultural traditions in the light of the Christian gospel is unique in the region. Naturally, there is no single high way to the objective and the communities have done it as per their genius. However, it will be pertinent to understand as a student of tribal religion; in what ways Mizo Christianity is different from and similar to, say the Angamis', granting that both of them follow two different traditions of the Christianity. The early missionaries appear to be more enthusiastically puritanical in treatment to the converts. No doubt, there were certain practices among the tribes, which needed to be discouraged such as drug addiction, intoxication, lax sexuality, head-chopping, inter-tribal feuds, reprisal/revenge killings, un-hygienic living pattern, un-planned housing clustered around a defensive location and so on. But hunting, dancing, singing traditional songs, drinking rice beer, wood carving for decoration and feast of merit, which were discouraged by the missionaries, were not necessarily negative or irreligious practices. In their absence, the community has become culturally poorer. Possibly, these early foreign missionaries, and many of them hailed from puritanical middle class families, had a strong desire to make the Christian communities as example of 'good behaviour', entirely different from their ethnic brethren. They did give an alternative theology to the tribal communities, but it appears they were unable to transplant the indigenous practices completely. Possibly, it was neither intended, nor possible.

There are occasions, when the tribal intelligentsia feels that, in the process of acquisition of Christianity, some thing precious has been lost: 'Every thing done in connection with the tribal ceremonies and festivals was regarded as an act against Christianity. The house decorations with
animal-heads, which the Nagas value as their trophies of valour, and the
mithun horns, which were a symbol of their prosperity as well as object of
art, were all, destroyed. Even the wood carvings on the pillars of their
houses were all ordered to be burnt. The weaving with conspicuous
designs and colours and the dyeing of the clothes and dresses for religious
ceremonies were all discouraged. Their beautiful ornaments of great artistic
and human value, like cowries, ivory, scarlet hair and horn-bills, were all
burnt, as they were ornaments used for worshipping the spirits. The art of
dancing and colourful social ceremonies were all given up. The result is
that all beautiful art and culture of the Nagas nearly disappeared... The
Nagas started neglecting their own talents of weaving clothes and started
following the western culture and cultivation the western outlook. The
worst part of all these is the gradual decay and eventual neglect of their
rich cultures' (Sema, 1986).

The history of Christianity in the Northeast India is replete with
instances of disbanding the congregations on the issue of drinking home
made rice beer, a type of liquor. Of course, expulsions and revivals were
recurrent themes of the church history of the region. However, drinking
gave many a sleepless nights to the early missionaries. Once, the home
rained tribal missionaries came on the scene, expansion of church was
exponential. One of the reasons was the more pragmatic approach to the
tribal societies. Rao provides a telling example from the life of Rev. Langri
Ao (Rao, 1986). While working among the Konyak Nagas, Rev. Ao, unlike
in the past practices, would use village morangs (the youth dormitory) as
his night halt and preaching grounds in the villages. Similarly, while eating
his meals, he would as well take a mug of rice beer along with the rice and
curry, claiming that he was a Naga for whom rice beer is a part of the food,
not an intoxicant drink and morang, was not a place for un-Christian
activities, but it was the Naga public place in the village for visitors.

The new world view in the light of Christianity, literacy leading to
education, later the higher ones, and production of creative literature in
tribal languages heralded a new renaissance among the Christian tribals,
which further generated so much self confidence to them as if they would
conquer the world; and why not? But then naturally they possibly realized
that though they were the proud members of the one of the most important
religious congregations of the modern world, but where do they belong
to? The world wide Christianity is also bound in geography and history.
The recurrent question in the thought process of the searching minds
emerged which history and geography are their? This new found self-
confidence and capacity to think for themselves also gave them an incentive to look back to their own traditions, cultural moorings, innate wisdom and tribal tenacity to fight back in most adverse circumstances. In such a situation, naturally they fall back to ethnic identity, tribal distinct ethnic identity; it was theirs just to claim. But here again there are limitations. It should have been interesting to note that race, region and now a new religion, Christianity, largely binds the tribal worlds of Northeast together. With this package of beautiful heritage, they would have made difference to themselves, to the regional prosperity and enriched and positively influenced the national life of the country. But have they made a difference? If they have it, in what ways do they have?

Way back in 1971, Mission historian of the region, Frederick Downs, recorded in the context of Council of Baptist Church of Northeast India (CBCNEI), which may gainfully be used more or less for the entire Christian community of the region: ‘The greatest tragedy in our history has not been the suffering, the frequent backsliding, the lost opportunities—the greatest tragedy has been the gradual erosion of this (Christian) sense of unity. The process had already begun before 1950...As the Christian community became dominant, by virtue of education if not numbers; it increasingly came to speak for essentially tribal and regional interests rather than Christian ones. Christianity became less of a universal cause which one served for the sake of others and more of a means of improving the social and economic conditions of tribe or community’ (Downs, 1971). One wonders what would have been the impact of the Christianity on the Indian national scene had it combined and coordinated its interests with the forces of race and region.

Understanding the nuances of epoch making role of the Christianity among the Nagas more than a decade back, I compared African experience with that the tribal situation in the region (Sinha, 1993): ‘Religion helps create systems of social values, which are integrated and coherent and it also provides the constraining power that underwrites and reinforces customs. Construction of the subject in the evangelic mould requires the internalization of a set of values, an ineffable manner of seeing and being. While the colonial process often entailed material disposition, critical part of the subjection of native peoples lay in the subtle colonization of the missionary of indigenous modes of perception and practices. From the beginning, the impact of colonial powers and the pressures of their missionary activities on traditional African cultural patterns have had a strongly racist impact: the inferiority of the African 'natural man' to civilized
Europe was an established fact, which was taken for granted: the African was regarded as a creature without culture and history. However, in spite of large scale conversion to Christianity, one of the problems continues to revolve around the question how African creation myths, rites of initiation, ancestor worship, clan solidarity and so on can be adopted and integrated into the Christian doctrinal tradition... The Naga scenario (substitute it with any tribe of the region) consisting of Naga acculturation, Naga life force, Naga sense of community and Naga quest of meaning goes closer to the above African experience and demands dispassionate analysis.

Notes

1. The word 'culture' in English began as a 'noun' of process: the tending of something, basically crops or animals, agriculture, horticulture, piciculture. Later 'culture' began to be used to refer to a process of human development. In 19th century 'culture' and 'civilization' began to be used synonymously. However, J D Lewandowski identifies four models of culture:

a. Culture as a symbolic system of meaning: It is structuralist in seeking to isolate items or elements within a system and show their underlying structures and structural inter-relations. Then it attempts to characterize the general system of symbolic meaning as a coherent whole.

b. Culture as a game, a drama: It is behaviouralist, as it seeks to analyze the strategies and rules in forming social actions.

c. Culture as a model that is most wide-spread: It is performativist, as it seeks to discern cultures as a socially constructed performance, "the play's thing", where that is no underlying structure or rule governed action can be ascertained.

d. Culture as a text: It takes two forms in the logic of sexuality and deconstruction. These two forms share a fundamental methodological commitment to reading and writing or deeply evoking". Lewandowski, J D: Interpreting Culture: Rethinking on Method and Truth in Social Theory, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln & London, 2001.

References


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