

Struggle for Identity in North-east India



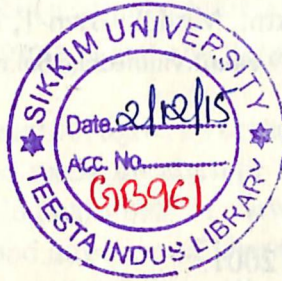
A theological response

V.K.Nuh

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PREFACE

This book is written with the conviction that the prevailing situation of turmoils in North East India (NEI) will not be resolved unless the interests, aspirations and needs of the people are taken into consideration by people who matter or are deemed so. The situation of the NEI is not a matter of each isolated state concerned about itself but a complex issue which makes one support the other state for a common self identity struggle.

Many people may not agree on certain points of my analysis over the issue. I have made an attempt to focus on the entire situation from a theological point of view. To participate in an ever changing shape and direction of liberation process, theology must be open to infinite variety of ways through which God works to free humanity. The thesis of the work is that the manifest failures of the church in our times in large measure are due to failure to work on freedom that comes from God - freedom that is unique and can be given Him alone.

It is observed that throughout the ages, theological formulations interpreting the revelation of God have arisen in the contexts of cultural and historical realities. A living theology is always addresses issues of human society in the right perspective and relevance.

However, there have also been times when the message of the church became ineffective and non-prophetic as an outcome of theological distortions. Nevertheless, the sharp cutting edge or corrective theology is always present at the frontiers. Theology in the real sense must liberate people from all kinds of sins, social evils, exploitation, oppression, corruption and other dehumanising forces or structures.

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European theology cannot be considered as the theology of the 'universal church'. The Liberation Theology of Latin America has been a great challenge to the conscience of so many Christians. The Latin American theologians have articulated their theology from the perspective of suffering and oppressed people. It is one of the best weapons to address the contemporary oppressive society.

Today, the great challenge before North East India churches is to develop a relevant theology in order to actively participate in the suffering struggle of the people. The North East India people have been undergoing through untold sufferings and human rights violations due to their struggle for political freedom for the last more than fifty years. Furthermore, the society has been plagued with all kind of corruption and injustices, leading to class conflicts between the 'haves' and 'have-nots'.

The Church cannot be neutral. It must clearly demarcate between what is truth and what is false. This book is a call to the North East India churches, particularly the North East India theologians, to formulate a theology, which can save and liberate the people from political bondage, economic exploitation and religious apostasy.

While writing this book, I decided to refer to the people of North East India in the third person though I myself am from among them. The degree of success of my goal is open to any reader's comment, but the sole intention is to make my observation as impartial and objective as possible.

No one to my knowledge has ever written a book without receiving help from other people. I shall be failing badly unless I thank various authors and scholars whose books gave me many

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new insights, and their struggles and successes which inspired me while writing this book. Some of their words quoted or paraphrased herein contributed to making this work possible.

I am grateful to Mr. Renilo Nuh for typing the manuscript. My special thanks also are due to Mr. Wetskhrolo Lasuh for the careful final editing of the manuscript and preparing the layout of the book.

I thank all my staff in the Council of Naga Baptist Churches (CNBC) office for the unceasing support throughout this venture. Also I do offer my most sincere thanks to M/s Spectrum Publications for publishing this book.

V. K. Nuh

INTRODUCTION

I believe that in the post-independent era of India no society has been as much disturbed as the people of India's North-east region. Due to their peculiar geo-political position the people of this region have been alienated from the mainline India politically, economically and culturally. They have been suffering from all kinds of prejudice, discrimination, exploitation and oppression for a long time. Yet, so far, churches in North East India have not been able to formulate a theological stance or play their due role in ameliorating the sufferings of the people and their struggle for self-identity.

It has been witnessed that in the second half of the twentieth century socio-political structures of Latin America and Eastern Europe underwent much change. We had also seen the transformation of South Africa, the breaking down of apartheid. If we observe closely, these changes were made possible mostly through the influence of the Christian doctrines.

The first century Christians were branded as dissenters and radicals as they boldly confronted the Roman power structure with a simple declaration, "Caesar is not Lord, Jesus is Lord." On the contrary, today, millions of "good" Christians are not willing to say no to evil. They tend to compromise with the false, who say, "Blessed are the arrogant for they shall prosper." To much shame, churches in the region have failed to produce moral men and women. It would have been a different story had a firm stand in faith been taken against evil. In a time like this, the people of the region must join with Martin Luther King, Jr., who said, "I have a dream of the day when the options are once again clear as to

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who is the Lord! Caesar or Jesus Christ?" Yes, Christians are called to distinguish between what are purely secular and what are of universal value, worth pursuing as believers.

Now the question is, "Do churches realise the theological basis of Christian faith and practice?" If the love for God and of fellow men and women are absent in one's life, no other gift or talent can replace the same to fulfill the will of God. Christianity by its principle and purpose must be practical. The urgent challenge for the North East Indian churches, today, is to realize the Christian responsibility towards the given context. The mere calling of oneself a Christian by anyone does not make any sense to the non-Christian. Christian festivals and celebrations alone will not prove the vitality of Christian faith. The Christian values such as integrity, God-fearing, truthfulness and honesty are replaced with cheating, bribery, robbery, and so forth. The people of the region have lost conscience. Perhaps, it is time for them to explore the reason why this is so and critically analyse the problem. It may be noted that God never commanded his prophets to sing birthday songs of the strong and the oppressing!

I think that Christians of the NEI region are now at what may be compared with Israel at Mt. Carmel in the times of Elijah who asked the people of Israel, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him." (1 Kings 18:21). Queen Jezebel, the wife of king Ahab, tried to impose her religion on the people of Israel and force them to worship Baal. Eventually, she reaped destruction.

Today, the power of secularism has burned down the firmament of the spirituality of the people in North East India. Though outwardly elaborate religious festivals and rituals are observed, the spiritual life is empty and the ethics is devoid of true value content. They have become sickly in every sphere of their spiritual lives.

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However, God always keeps on working even when people think that it is too late. He sends His servants to deliver His people when they plead for mercy. This has been proved through the history of the Israelites.

The recent history of the Korean Church reminds us of a spiritual awakening which had occurred during the great crisis of national life. A missionary to Korea, Blair, accounted as follows:

...how pitiable it was to see them (Koreans) grieve, to see strong men weep over national loss. The Korean Christians came to us (the missionaries) and said, 'Is there any country so poor, so unfortunate as ours?' But this meant that their eyes were opened, formerly they were proud and arrogant, wretched and miserable, poor and blind, and naked; but they knew that sorrow had entered their soul. Their spirits were broken, and they sat in the dust mourning not only for their present misfortunes but their past sins. God stretched out his hand and blessed this stricken nation. And He prepared Korea for the Gospel.

If God could use a broken and wounded nation like Korea to be a blessing to others, He can surely use the North-East Indian people in the same way for His glory.

The purpose of this book is to focus on religious identity in the secular world and the critical role Christianity can play in the community life of the North East Indian people. Over the last three decades I have been involved not only with my local Christian community, but also have had the fortune to participate in national and international inter-denominational as well as secular forums. Thanks to all these involvements and experiences I have learnt a great deal to see more clearly the picture of the prevailing North East Indian situation. My meeting people of different disciplines and backgrounds, such as freedom fighters, scholars, thinkers, politicians, bureaucrats and community leaders, have helped me to have a better understanding of the suffering people crying for

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This book is an attempt to theologically address the present context of the North East India socio-political situation. I have made an attempt to point out the Church's failure in its prophetic ministry to bring about liberation to the suffering people of the region. The main contention is that the North East Indian people are yet to get the social justice they deserve.

I believe that the central point of God's revelation in human history is to liberate the poor and oppressed. In His *Nazareth Manifesto* Jesus clearly read out the outline of His mission on this earth as follows:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me,
because He has chosen me to bring
Good News to the poor.
He has sent Me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind;
to set free the oppressed
and announce that the time has come
when the Lord will save His people.
(Luke 4:18-19 GNB)

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**BEGINNING WITH WOODEN GUNS, NSCN (IM) CADRES.
UNDERGOING TRAINING**



**NSCN (IM) REVIVAL MEETING
COUNCIL HEADQUARTERS CHURCH**



**NAGA FEDERAL ARMY
BACK FROM CHINA (1972)**



ULFA BASED AT MYANMAR, 1995



UNLF TRAINING BASE IN MYANMAR 1995



PREEPAK CADRES AT TRAINING CAMP, MYANMAR



**NORTH EAST INDIA GUERRILLA LEADERS MEET
WITH AUTHOR (IN WHITE JACKET, CUP IN HAND) IN MYANMAR**



WOMEN CADRES OF NSCN (K) POSE FOR PHOTOGRAPH

PART 1

NATIONALISM

We live in a time when civilization in human history is shifting to a major turning point, in which society structures are being analysed and sharply changed. After World War II, colonialism and imperialism were overthrown. Within the last half century, many new nations were born.

No change can take place as long as the attitude of the people remains the same as before. The younger leadership must effectively change attitude. It was nationalism and patriotism which enabled the colonial people in different countries to discover their destiny,- they fought for their independence and finally realized their nationhood.

A patriot sees the flaws of his country,- acknowledges them, weeps for them, but remains faithful to the core. Mazzinni, the founder of the Italian nation said, "Without a country you have neither name nor token of voice nor right. In the same way you will not find neither faith nor protection, none will be sureties of love for you."

A country or a village is the place where one can rest with the possession of a field to sustain a home, to survive on one's father's land. Because one has to live by the heritage of one's father who demarcated the territory of one's homeland and society. If one forgets the pride of the village that was passed down through history by one's forefathers, I say the person has lost the virtue of his birthright.

Patriotism does not necessarily mean having to be natural leaders, or be elected members only. We should not wait in silence till we are elected to the legislative or to some executive or administrative post. There are many opportunities in every day life to live as patriotic citizens. It is very unfortunate that many so-called leaders become ineffective

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when they are not in high position. I cannot but simply admire John F.Kennedy who said, "Do not ask what your country can do for you, but ask what you can do for your country."

These words can be uttered from the mouth of only a patriotic man. I wonder how many politicians can have integrity like that of Abraham Lincoln. When he was elected President of U.S.A., he started choosing men from here and there for his Cabinet Secretariatship. Can you imagine Mr. Lincoln selected one of his opponents called Stanton? Immediately one of his advisors said, "Mr. President, you are making a mistake, he will seek to sabotage your program, - he is your enemy. Have you thought this through?" Mr. Lincoln answered, "I know Mr. Stanton, I am aware of all the terrible things he said about me. But looking to the interest of the nation, I say he is the best man for the job." So Stanton became War Secretary and he rendered his valuable service for his nation and his President.

Do our politicians and leaders follow the example of Mr. Lincoln who thought so much for the welfare of his country? A country without having a genuine patriotic leader can never usher in prosperity for the country.

According to John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith:

Nationalism is a state of mind. The process of history can be analyzed as a succession of changes in communal psychology in the attitude of man toward all manifestations of individual and social life and such factors as language, territory, tradition and such sentiments as attachments to the native soul.

Nationalism is an idea of force which fills man's heart and brain with new thoughts and new sentiments and drives him to translate his conscience into deeds of organized action.

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Nationalism is a state of mind corresponding to a political fact or striving to correspond to a political fact. This definition reflects the genesis of nationalism and of modern nationality, which was born in the fusion of a certain state of mind with a given political form.

A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of common language, territory, economic life and psychological make up manifested in a common culture.

Nations may have had a long history before they finally reach their destination. Nations are God's given way of classifying men as an inheritance though long delayed, and sometimes take on a pre-existing culture.

David Ben Gurion believed that a nation is not given or got as a gift: It is not acquired by privilege or political contracts, it is not bought with gold or held by force. No, it is made with the sweat of the brow: It is the historic creation and collective enterprise of a people. The fruit of its labour, bodily, spiritually and morally, covers a span of generations.

Sometimes when extreme nationalism gets embedded in the mind, God becomes secondary and materialism gets primary importance, and subsequently amounts to getting de-spiritualized. Kruma, an African nationalist leader who challenged the people said, "Seek first the kingdom, then all others shall be added unto you". This seemed to be false.

We must understand that the Gospel bridges the gulf of nationalism of two extremes. The Saviour and Redeemer of all nations and races bridges the gap between temporal and eternal values.

INDIAN NATIONALISM

The British Imperial power ruled over Indian sub-continent that consisted of 562 princely states. During the heyday of colonialism the political unity of India was a far fetched dream. In fact, in the earlier centuries great efforts made by the Mauryan Dynasty and Mughal India to unify proved to be unsuccessful.

India is multi-racial, multi religious and multi-lingual in character and in a sense multi-national. We must realize that India is not a nation. There is a general disinclination to debate this issue seriously. It is often forgotten that this land of continental dimensions is inhabited by people professing all the major religions in the world, speaking different languages and dialects, comprised of hundreds of castes, sub-castes, tribes and peoples. There is no Indian climate of race. There is no uniformity. As Jaya Prakash Narayan put it, "The Indian nationalism grew up as a reaction to aggressive British nationalism. After the advent of British rule, both the Muslims and the Hindus were compelled out of policy to forget the racial hatred and thus acrimony of the bitter enmity was forgotten."

It was when the people of India were under the yoke of British Empire that too many troubles arose in the country and the people indicated general unrest. Crimes and murders increased; street brawls were seen everywhere. The European thinkers feared that the British Regime was being threatened at this critical situation. For this, Allen

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Octavian Hume, an retired British I.C.S. officer, appealed to the educated Indians:

If amongst you the elite fifty cannot be found with sufficient power of self sacrifices, sufficient love and pride for their country, sufficient genuineness and unselfish heartfelt patriotism to take the initiative and if needs be devoted the rest of their life to the cause, then there is no hope for India. Her sons will remain mere humble and helpless instruments in the hands of foreign rulers. For if they would free themselves they must strike the bow.

The appealed 72 volunteers came forward from different parts of India and thus the Indian National Congress came into existence on December 30, 1885, with W.C. Banerjee, a Christian, as the body's first President. And because of this freedom struggle, thousands of people suffered and died. Mahatma Gandhi's slogan *Let my people be free* was ignored and was paid no attention by the British authorities for many years. Thus non-violent philosophy and non-resistance policy, non-co-operation and the civil disobedience movement were propagated in the struggle for freedom; yet *Swaraj* was prolonged. When we say freedom struggle, one cannot by-pass men like Subash Chandra Bose, Bhagat Singh, and many others with dauntless courage who said "Give me your blood and I will give you freedom." Perhaps there were many who sacrificed more but whose names were not written down on the pages of history. After many years of continuous struggle the All India Congress Committee met in Bombay on August 8, 1942 and adopted the resolution *Quit India* with the slogan "do or die" and it became the people's movement of national aspiration. India became free on August 15, 1947.

CHRISTIAN PARTICIPATION IN NATION BUILDING

The whole process of nation building with the establishment of the educational institutions by Christian missionaries such as William Carey, Alexander Duff, and John Wilson deserve special mention. The establishment of universities in Calcutta (*now* Kolkata), Bombay (*now* Mumbai), Madras (*now* Chennai) and Serampore imparted Western education and culture, which broadened and emancipated many minds in India.

No society or religion has done so much to change the whole structure in the country as Christianity had done. Most of the productive leaders and people of intellectual class were brought up from Christian Institutions such as Wilson College in Bombay, St. Stephen's College in Delhi, Serampore College in Calcutta, Madras Christian College in Madras, etc. Many other institutions contributed in building a new India. There is not enough space here to mention all about the Christian contribution like hospitals, schools and other social welfare activities. Suppose, Christian institutions were to be closed down today, what would be the country's response and condition?

Whatever reformation took place in India, there was no reformation without Christian influence, as evidenced by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the founder of the Brahma Samaj. It attracted many intellectuals like Rabindranath Tagore, and later Sri Rama Krishna and Swami Vivekananda. They all embraced the Christian thought and way of living whether in terms of philosophy or literature or art. Thus education evolved to foster social consciousness and the spirit of comradeship in the mind of the young India. In this way national consciousness strengthened the patriotic sentiments of many people of India. One may

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brotherhood, but every night another lamb will disappear; 'wolf is wolf', 'lamb is lamb', and they cannot live together except in a circus, but even in a circus show, the two are brought together with a ring master's whip.

India is the only country in the world where society is divided on caste and class. There is no reformation which is not against the caste system in the history of India. Ambedkar further pointed out, "You cannot have political reform, you cannot have economic reform unless you kill this monster". He meant the annihilation of the caste system. He went on to say,

If Hindu religion is to be a religion of social equality, then amendment of its code to provide out-castes entry in the temple is not enough. What is required, is to purge it of its doctrine of *Chaturvana*. He asked Gandhi, "If I accept the entry into the temple now and later agitated for abolition of *Chaturvana* and caste system, what would be his reaction. If he would be in the opposite camp, I cannot be in his camp now.

HINDUTVA MOVEMENT

It is very disturbing when we examine the actions of the RSS, Sangh Parivar, VHP, and even of the BJP. Where is the security for minorities- scheduled tribes and scheduled castes? Is there any constitutional provision for such people? How dare the Hindus try to finish tribal Christians in Gujarat, the soil where the *Father of the Nation* M.K. Gandhi was born, and kill Christian missionaries in Orissa?

The day when V.P. Singh became Prime Minister, he invited the parties to fight for secularism, and for the reservation for the schedule tribes and castes, but no political party came forward. Even the Congress party refused to co-operate. This is the Indian politicians' hypocrisy. There is no guarantee of any political party to defend the minorities and backward people. There is a minority commission in Delhi, but who listens to them? Are the minorities getting any benefit from them? Where is the security for the weaker and backward sections of society? It is clear that Hindus want to rule this country as a Hindu state. It is now more definite that the ruling class cannot protect the rights of the minority. At this juncture, what will be our response for the common people? There are fundamental rights in India's constitution but more executives have increased their power and neglected the constitutional rights of common men.

In Hindu India, a person's status comes straight from birth, and a particular person born to a particular caste remains in the same caste. There is no promotion or demotion of a person's status. It is not a party nor a religion but a philosophy. He may be a Prime Minister or a millionaire but he cannot

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change his caste. This has been an Indian culture. Therefore the conversion or non-conversion question does not arise.

There may be changes in political ideologies, but there cannot be any changes in Hinduism. India will remain Hindusthan or Bharat and will continue to be ruled by Brahmins. Christians are treated as second class citizens in this country and they are also suspected for no apparent reason.

In an All Hindu Conference held at Lucknow on May 10, 1981 (*Deccan Herald*) a conclusion was arrived at, alleging that foreign missionaries are aiming at creating a feeling of hatred against Hindu religion, culture and society among the Hill Tribes, and also generating a feeling for having a separate state as a Christian homeland. They further alleged that "millions of dollars are poured in, to encourage anti-national activities threatening the unity and integrity of India."

Now the question is, who is anti-national or threatening the integrity of India? Is it Pakistan or a nuclear bomb or the American dollar or Chinese aggression? None of them. But there is a dangerous threat from within the country. Winston Churchill said, "It is better to have the world united, but it is also better to have a world divided than the world destroyed." If secularism cannot unite India, then there is a natural boundary. Politics divide people. Religions divide people and languages divide people. This natural boundary will take its own course.

Again, the way the Hindu VHP/RSS cadres demolished the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya, (U.P.), is a clear sign of Hindu rule in India. It is a shame to see how a Muslim country (Pakistan) had to warn Indian democracy on January 5, 1999. The Pakistan National Assembly unanimously adopted a resolution condemning attacks on Christians and urged the Indian Government to provide adequate security to the minorities.

Arundhati Roy rightly pointed out that, "...building demolition drive could begin with the Rashtrapati Bhavan and gradually spread from cities to the countryside, culminating in the destruction of all

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monuments (Mosques, Churches, Temples) that were built on what was once tribal or forest land.”

We are all aware that the original inhabitants of this land were not Hindus. Tribal people have a greater claim to being indigenous to the land than anybody else. They lived in their own country from time immemorial. They belong to their own motherland. They have a distinct character of life with unique geographical, historical, ethnological, linguistic and other features. They have their own habits of living, customs, rituals, and rites. They believed in a supreme being who resides above the earth, in the sky. There was no Hindu in pre-historic times when the indigenous people had their own economic, political and territorial identities. Land is the basic source of the indigenous peoples' lives. Recently, with the arrival of non-tribals, their system and color of life have been completely changed. Under the active support of the Government, the non-tribals have commercialized the village economy.

The simple lifestyle of the tribal and the egalitarian pattern of life are constantly under threat with the infiltration of the outsiders. The transition from indigenous tribal economy to non-tribal feudal economy is paving way for further colonization, exploitation, and consolidation of the Central Government over the natural resources.

Today, the country is surviving with the natural resources of the indigenous people in the land. Fifty per cent of mineral resources, most of the beautiful natural parks, most of the virgin forests in the country belong to the indigenous people; and yet the poorest of the people in the country are they. They have become miserable because they have been exploited left and right by the so called civilized people. Before they could understand this sudden change process, they found themselves already discriminated as uncivilized outcasts in their own land. Even the tribal names of places and cultural heritage were changed and came to be defined in non-tribal terms. Is it that tribal people are just museum

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pieces for the country?

Before the advent of Christianity, nobody bothered for the welfare of the people. But when the good news of Jesus Christ came to them, they accepted it as their religion. And now their faith is threatened. Faith cannot be debated in the Assembly or Parliament. The President or the Prime Minister cannot decide it. It is a Human Right given by God and existing naturally. No one has the right to stop it.

Christianity not only offers salvation of one's soul but it also makes people realize the purpose of their existence, of their social life, and brings change in the life of the people without destroying their self identity. Therefore, Christianity has great influence in the minds of people. This is particularly true of the entire Seven Sister States of North East India.