



Advent Of Christianity In North East India With Special Reference To Arunachal Pradesh.

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(Abstract: Christian Missionaries set their foot on the soil of Assam for the first time in early 19th century and gradually spread to the rest of the other north eastern states. The British official encouraged missionary activities in these regions to improve the backwardness of indigenous population and to spread the gospel of Christianity. However, it was in the later part of 19th century when frontier tribes of Arunachal Pradesh got connected with missionary activities. The paper will enlighten the advent of Christianity in North Eastern region of India.)

(Index Terms: Abor, Nyishi, Christianity, Kampti, Khasi, Missionary, Sadiya, Singpho.)

The members of Jesuit missionary, namely Stephen Canella and Jhon Cebral, for the first time set foot on the soil of North East India in 1627 A.D. Their visit to North East was by a chance, searching their way to China and Tibet. E. A. Gait and S. K. Bhuyan also refer about the visit of Feringhi and tour of other missionaries in the soil of Assam during Ahom rule.

The advent of the British rule brought important agents of modern civilization into North East India, namely Christianity and Education. Hence, the formal arrival of Christianity in North East took place in early 19th Century. The American Baptist Missionaries became the first missionaries to work for humanizing the tribal. David Scott, the first commissioner of Assam, encouraged missionary activities in Assam, with an opinion that the rude tribes were likely to be profited by the Christian gospels. The other British official like Capt. Jenkin, also felt that in order to improve the backwardness of the tribal, Christian missionaries should desperately carry out their activities in these areas.

The Serampur Mission established by the Baptist Missionary Society of England in 1793, did some work in Cherapunji and Gauhati in 1830s. The establishment of Serampur College in 1818 A.D, by William Carey, became a nodal Centre for academic as well as missionary works. The evangelization among the Khasis, was under taken by the Serampur Christian Converts, Krishna Chandra Pal accompanied by Gorachand in 1813. K. C. Pal continued his task for eight months at Pandua, near Cherrapunjee and succeeded baptizing four sepoys, which included two Khasis and one Assamese. However, this mission could not establish a permanent missionary centre due to non-co-operation of the local people.

The American Baptist mission was intending to establish a regular mission centre in China, for which they were engaged in searching possibility route through Burma. In the mean time, the Shan Mission of American Baptist Mission ended this new and shifted their attention towards the tribes of North East border of Assam. In 1836, the American missionary work started at Sadiya. At that time, Sadiya was considered to be the main centre for missionary work that could cover Nyishi, Hills Miris, Singphos, Mishmis, Khamtis, Abors and the plain Miris. Nathan Brown, Miles Brown and Mr. and Mrs. Becker arrived at Sadyia, but could not gain much success in evangelizing the Khamtis and the Singphos. The Sadiya centre was abandoned due to frequent raids and attacks from the Khamtis. Both

Brown and Becker shifted to Jaipur (Naharkatia). Thereafter in 1841, the Shan mission was abandoned and diverted their attention towards Assemese, to whom they considered as more congenial.

The official establishment of Roman Catholic in North East India was started by Salvadorian fathers, in 1890. It established numbers of mission centers at Shillong (1890), Raling (1892), Shell (1893), Cherrapunjee (1897) and a numbers of educational institution.¹⁰ Besides, these two denominations, the other Christian missionaries working in north East are Anglican Church, Pentecostal, Revival, Welsh Calvinist, Presbyterian, Church of God, Church of God–Ecclesia, Christ National Church, the assembly of churches of the Jesus Christ, all in Christ church fellowship and the Unitarian church etc.

The British expedition of Khamti from 1839 to 1843, subdued the Khamtis who were responsible for massacre of 1839 at Sadiya town further, they were scattered to four divisions to suppress future rebellion. The depopulation of Khamtis and migration of Singphos towards the hills compelled the American missionaries in Sadiya to abandon their Shan mission in 1841.

The Sadiya mission restarted in 1905 after 66 years of gap. The early missionary work for Khamtis and Singphos could not be traced to its renewal. In 1900, Messers Sabidge and Lorraine of the Arthington settled down at Sadiya, for evangelizing the Abors. The mission centre at Lakhimpur was established in 1893 under the independent missionary namely Rev. Jhon Firth. North Lakhimpur centre became the ideal place for spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ among neighbouring the tribes. A separate missionary, Tosin by name was deputed for Nyishi tribes in 1898 considering the prospect of missionary work.

This Jhon firth mission school of Lakhimpur became the important agent in missionary activities which included education; evangelism in the lower subansiri district. Rev. Kirby of American Baptist mission visited many Khamtis villages and preached Christianity, and everywhere they had the friendly reception. They even preached in their temple courtyard, hanging their lantern sheet to the wall of the temple. It also had provided medical treatment to numbers of patient in these Khamti villages. The evangelization among the Singpho recorded to be progressive. There were 17 member, Baptized in 1911 – 12 and it rose to 55 in 1913. However, several of the baptized ones had violated rules and were dismissed from the Christianity. Later in 1915 some progress had been made in the organization due to the personal initiative of Rev. Frisk.

The missionary work in the Abor land was completely closed after the murder of Noel Williamson in 1911. However, the door was again opened in 1912 with the victory of British in Anglo-Abor war. In 1913 the missionaries were able to carry out medical work to eradicate ulcer epidemic in Abor land. In 1914, a school was opened in one of the plain village for educating the Abors of nearby hills. The Abor village, nearby plain areas also accommodated the missionary, Jackman and his family who lived with them for considerable long period. The two Garo evangelists sent for several months. They worked among the Abors, learning the language and engaged in school and medical work.

Religion Composition in North Eastern State

Sl. No.	State	Hindus	Muslims	Christians	Sikhs	Others
1.	Assam	67.13	28.93	3.32	0.07	1.05
2.	Arunachal Pradesh	37.04	1.38	10.39	0.14	51.15
3.	Manipur	57.67	7.27	34.11	0.07	0.88
4.	Meghalaya	14.67	3.46	64.58	0.15	17.14
5.	Mizoram	5.05	0.66	85.73	0.04	8.52
6.	Nagaland	10.12	1.71	87.47	0.06	0.64
7.	Tripura	68.50	7.13	1.68	0.03	4.66

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Source: Census of India, 1991; Religion-Pape1 of 1995, XIV-XXII.

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Christian Population (in %) in North East India

Sl.No.	State	Population in lakhs & Percentage	Christian Population in lakhs & %	Tribal Population in lakhs & %
1.	Assam	198.97	3.81 (1.97%)	73.61(37%)
2.	Arunachal Pradesh	6.32	0.30 (4.3%)	5.81 (82%)
3.	Manipur	14.21	4.20 (29.7%)	4.6 (32%)
4.	Meghalaya	13.36	7.00 (52.6%)	10.82 (81%)
5.	Mizoram	4.94	4.00 (82.8%)	4.70 (95%)
6.	Nagaland	7.75	6.20 (80.2%)	6.74 (87%)
7.	Tripura	20.53	0.23 (1.21%)	5.33 (265%)
Total		266.08	25.81 (9.70%)	100.95 (41.70%)

(Source: Census of India 1981)

The influence of Roman Catholic churches in Arunachal Pradesh began with the establishment of mission centre and schools at Tezpur (1934), North Lakhimpur (1944), and Harmutty (1977). The tribal students were imparted with free education along with preaching of Christian religion and during their vacations they shared these preaching in their village. Ever since the Christianity came to the region, there has been a series of interaction and collations between Christianity and the tribal cultures, leading to the destruction of tribal cultural elements and even physical pulling down of church and other place of worship. In Arunachal Pradesh, the social transition in rapid phase was alarmed the tribes to resist it. On the contrary, Christian considers that they were subjected to series of persecution and denial of rights, and privileges.

Growth of Christian Population in Arunachal Pradesh

Sl.No.	Census Year	Total Population	Christian Population	Christians% to total Population	Growth of Christian Population in %
1.	1961	336558	1438	0.43	-
2.	1971	467511	3684	0.79	256
3.	1981	631839	27306	4.32	741
4.	1991	864558	89013	10.29	326

(Computed on basis of census reports) Source: N.T Rikam, emerging religions identities of Arunachal Pradesh. A study of Nyishi tribe, New Delhi, 2005.

The persecution of Christians in Arunachal Pradesh began in early part of 1969. The churches of Deed, Deem and Neelam of then Subansiri District were burnt down by the SSB home guards. In 1972 five converts namely Khoda Takhas, Likhe Takha, Debia Chotuns, Debia Takhe and Toko Dodum were tortured, punished and put under confinement for three months at different places. In 1974 alone it is alleged that, 40 Churches were either burnt or pulled down in various part of the state. As a result, the indigenous leader put pressure on the government to protect their beliefs and practices

from the onslaught of foreign religion. Therefore, Arunachal Pradesh legislative assembly passed “The Arunachal Pradesh Indigenous faith 1978 (Bill No. 4 1978), to prohibit the forceful conversion. The bill got its assent from the president of India in 1979 and it was promulgated as Indigenous Faith (protection) Act, 1972.

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