

Zoram Baptist Mission in Tripura

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Tripura had attracted the attention of the missionaries from the early times. Christianity in fact entered Tripura much earlier than any of the North Eastern States.¹ However the early Christians did not have the missionary seal. It is also mentioned that the Christians at one particular point of time were no better than Hindus.² The large population being Hindus and the Maharaja himself being Hindu did not allow any missionary work. This very restriction of the Maharaja made the missionaries more determined to live and work in Tripura.

Various missions tried to enter Tripura but mention may be made of Rev. J.H. Lorrain, a Baptist missionary and one of the first missionaries of the Arthington Aborigin Mission who tried to enter in 1890 but was not allowed.³ In 1891 Rev. J. H. Lorrain along with his close associate E.W. Savidge tried again to enter Tripura but it was in vain.⁴ Later both of them left for South Lushai Hills (Mizoram) via Chittagang. They become the pioneer in the missionary activities in Lushai hills (Mizoram). Today the entire population of Mizos are Christians. The zeal to carry out the missionary activities in Tripura by Rev. J.H. Lorrain can be seen from his writings in 1919." When I first came out to India 29 years ago it was with the intension of taking the Gospel to the people of hill Tipperah.⁵ In spite of all obstacles the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society entered Tripura in 1938 and began the missionary activities in a systematic manner.

A major change took place in the late 1960's and early 1970's. North East India had become a politically sensitive area because of clashes with the Central Government particularly in Assam.⁶ The attitude of the Government clearly indicated that no new missionaries would be allowed and those who were already within the state had to leave once visas expired. Ultimately all the New Zealand Missionaries left Tripura by December, 1973.

As the New Zealand Missionaries were leaving the State, the Tripura Baptist Union felt the need of a partner to carry but the

missionary work. It was at that time that the Zoram Baptist Mission came forward to work in Tripura. The reason for their coming may be that knowing the zeal of the founding father of Christianity in Mizoram, the Mizos wanted to fulfil the dream of Rev. J.H. Lorrian and came up with a proposal to work in Tripura in 1971. A memorandum of understanding was reached between the Tripura Baptist Christian Union and the Zoram Baptist Mission and on 25th May 1971 Tripura Baptist Christian Union executive committee passed the resolution for receiving worker from Lushai Hills (Mizoram).

The first Missionary to reach Agartala on 17th June 1971 were Pu Darkhama, P. R. Lalrimawai, Tv Vanlalsiama, Tv. R. Thumsari and F. Lawnzuala and except Tv. Thumsari who is a Riang, all were Mizos. As time passed by the need for more missionaries were realised and in 1972 Pu F. Ngunkara, Pu. L.H. Sangliana, PuR. Zaichhuana, F. Vanlalarmi, Tv. Z.D. Dothanga and Lalrinthangi (nurse) came to work in Tripura.⁸ All of them were located in the Molsom area except Vanlalringthangi (nurse) who knew Kok Borak the language of the Tripura was to work among the Deb Barmas a Tripuri tribe. At present the missionaries are working among the various tribes and are also having native workers to help in the missionary work. Now there are 82 missionaries working for the Zoram Baptist Mission in various capacities.⁹

The entire life style of the people changed to a great extent after the coming Christianity. Earlier the Kuki, Halam group of specially the Molsom of Gongrai were illiterate, animists, fatalists and superstitions and lived in very unhygienic condition. In fact many of them died due to the unhygienic living condition. For example there was no separate arrangement made for the pigs and fowls and lived in the same house. But today, that very village can boast of being the most clean village and serves as a model for other Kuki-Halam village. Earlier drinking was very common and infact no religious ceremony takes place without wine but today the same wine is seen as forbidden. It is interesting to mention here that it is not only the Christians who considered wine as evil but also the non-Christians.

The most important contribution made by the Zoram Baptist Mission is in the field of education. Like other Missionaries they also took education as the basis for understanding the truth of the Gospel. On 9th March 1980 they opened a Junior High School named as St.

James High School at Gongrai (Molsom) village in west Tripura district. Miss Changthanpari took over as the Head Mistress and initially started with 13 (thirteen) students only. The motto of the School being "Faith and Service". The School was upgraded to a full fledged High School in 1983. The students are prepared for the madhyamik examination (Matric) under the Tripura Board of Secondary Education. So far 40 (forty) students have passed Madhyamik Examination from this School. The enrolment increased as years passed by and today there are 250 students. The School also have boarding house facility and are acomodating 100 boys and 90 girls.¹⁰ Apart from the high school there are 20 primary school in different parts of the state. The medium of instruction for the high school is English wher as for the Primary it is Mizo (Lushai). Mizo (Lushai) as a medium of instruction is well accepted by the Kuki-Halam group as their dialect is not developed and no literature are available. In fact there is a similarity between the Mizo (Lushai) language and the language of the Kuki-Halam¹¹ English Medium students are required to take Major Indian language in the Matric Examination. Kuki-Halam students find it more convenient to offer Mizø (Lushai) as the M.I.L. than any other language.

The missionaries also felt the need of imparting theological education apart from secular system. Sunday schools are opened in every village where even there is a church. The sunday school also served as a centre for adult education, where the basic are taught for reading, writing and understanding the Bible. It is pertinent to mention here that the Kuki-Halam group use the Mizo Bible and Hymn Book as they are not available in their own dialect.

In the field of community development the Zoram Baptist Mission is working hand in hand with the WorldVision of India. In fact World Vision of India is accepted as the partner agent of the Zoram Baptist Mission.¹² Many community Development projects such as training programme for carpentry, tailoring and knitting centres have been opened in many of the Kuki - Halam villages.

Thus, we find that the gap left by the New Zealand Baptist Missionaries are filled in by the presence of the Zoram Baptist Misionaries as can be seen in their activities with the more planned and programmes as envisaged in the working plan.¹³ They will be able to help in the overall development of the Kuki-Halam group in

particular and people of Tripura in general. In all their activities they have lived up to as the real partner of the Tripura Baptist Christian Union in the missionary activities.

Notes & References

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11. Personal interview with Mr. Chandra Kanta Molsom, working with World Vision of India, Gongrai, on 15-6.96.
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13. Rules and regulation of the Zoram Baptist Mission and working plan up to 2000 A.D. Serkawn.