

The New Zealand Baptist Mission and the Beginning of Christian Missionary Activities in Tripura

Mahadev Chakravarti

According to 1981 Census, the Hindus constitute more than 89%, the Muslims 6.75%, the Buddhists 2.67% and the Christians are fourth in number constituting only 1.21% of the total population of Tripura. Out of 24,872 Christians, 22,664 are Scheduled Tribes and the rest 2,208 only are non-tribals. It will be evident from Table 2 the rate of growth of Christian population in Tripura over the decades from 1901 to 1981. Table 3 shows the conversion among the Scheduled Tribes of Tripura. The Lushais and the Kukis are predominantly Christians.

The Tables 1-4 show the growth of Christian Community in Tripura in different periods of history. At present the following Christian organisations are working in Tripura : (1) Tripura Baptist Christian Union (TBCU), (ii) Zoram Baptist Mission of Mizoram, (iii) United Pentecostal Church of North-East India, (iv) Roman Catholic Church, and (v) Evangelical Free Church of India. Excepting the Roman Catholic Church, other organisations are run by tribal Christian missionaries of Tripura, Manipur and Mizoram. As in Assam and Manipur, the Roman Catholics constitute a small proportion of the Christian population in Tripura. Among the mission organisations, the Tripura Baptist Christian Union (TBCU), a non-Roman organisation, plays a dominant role.

From 138 at the beginning of the century, the Christian Population in Tripura has gone upto 24,872 in 1981. The figures of the years 1901 and 1911 suggest that there was no conversion activity during the period (Table No. 2). The increases thereafter and the decrease in 1941 were abrupt. Although the reason for the sudden decrease of the number of Christians in 1941 does not appear anywhere, it is perhaps due to the fact that the practice of classification of tribal population by religion continued upto 1931 Census. In 1941 Census it was replaced by a classification by communities which affected the figures of tribal communities according to religion; although in 1951 Census the old classification of population by religion was introduced again. ¹

The main religious communities (arranged in alphabetical order) in Tripura in 1981

TABLE No. 1

Religious Community	Persons	Males	Females	Percentage to total population	Decadal growth rate percentage (1971-1981)
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(6)	(7)
Buddhists	54,806	28,307	26,499	2.67	+29.61
Christians	24,872	12,950	11,922	1.21	+58.28
Hindus	18,34,218	9,41,722	8,92,496	89.34	+ 31.61
Jains	297	186	111	0.02	-20.80
Muslims	1,38,529	71,428	67,101	6.75	+33.25
Sikhs	285	223	62	0.01	-10.38

Source : Census of India 1981, Series 21 Tripura, Paper 1 of 1985, p. 3.

TABLE No. 2

Statement showing the variation of Christian Population in Tripura over the decades from 1901 to 1981

Census Year	No. of Christian (2)	No. of Increase (3)	% of Increase (4)	Total Tribal Population (5)	Total Population (6)	Variatio (7)
1901	138	..	..	Not Available	1,73,325	(+ 56,288)
1911	138	..	..	1,11,308	2,29,613	(+ 74,824)
1921	1,860	1,722	1,247.83	1,71,610	3,04,437	(+ 78,013)
1931	2,596	736	39.57	1,92,249	38,2,450	(+ 1,30,560)
1941	316	(-) 2,280	(-) 87.83	2,56,991	5,13,010	(+ 1,26,019)
1951	5,266	4,950	1,566.46	2,37,953	6,39,029	(+ 5,02,976)
1961	10,039	4,773	90.64	3,60,070	11,42,005	(+ 4,14,337)
1971	15,713	5,674	56.51	4,50,544	15,56,342	(+ 4,96,716)
1981	24,872	9,159	58.28	5,83,920	20,53,058	

- i) Somendra Chandra Deb Barman, *Census Bibarani* (in Bengali) 1343 Tripurabda Agartala, pp. 26, 31 ;
(ii) *Census of India* 1961, Vol. XXVI, Tripura, Part I (i), General Report, pp. 376-403 ;
(iii) B. K. Roy Burman, *Demographic and Socio-Economic Profiles of the Hill Areas of North-East India*,
Census of India 1961, Appendix X, pp. xxx-xxxiii ;
(iv) *Census of India* 1971, Series 20 - Tripura, Part II - A ;
(v) *Census of India* 1981, Series - 21 - Tripura, Part IX, Special Tables for S. C. & S. T.

Table No. 3

Christian Population among the Scheduled Tribes of Tripura

Sl. No.	Name of the S. T.	1961 Census		1981 Census	
		Persons	Christians	Persons	Christians
1.	Bhil	69	1	838	3
2.	Bhutia	7	..	22	..
3.	Chaimal	50	..	18	1
4.	Chakma	22,386	5	34,797	16
5.	Garoo	5,484	1,698	7,298	3,883
6.	Halam	16,298	253	28,970	3,001
7.	Jamatia	24,359	—	44,501	484
8.	Khasia	349	216	457	355
9.	Kuki (including Sub-Tribes)	5,531	2,345	5,502	4358
10.	Lepcha	7	..	106	9
11.	Lushai	2,988	2,950	3,734	3,637
12.	Mag	10,524	6	18,230	3
13.	Munda, Kaur	4,409	73	7,993	129
14.	Noatia	16,010	5	7,182	83
15.	Orang	2,875	24	5,217	37
16.	Riang	56,597	1,705	84,004	4,039
17.	Santal	1,562	2	2,726	23
18.	Tripuri	1,89,799	54	3,30,872	959
19.	Uchai	766	254	1,306	744
	Unclassified	..	..	147	—
Total Number		: 3,60,070	9,591	5,83,920	22,664

Table No. 4.

Growth of Christian community (District-wise) Showing percentage to total population

State/District	Total Population from 1961 to '81	Christian Population	Percentage to total Population
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Tripura	1981 : 2,053,058	1981 : 24,872	1.21
	1971 : 1,556,342	1971 : 15,713	1.01
	1961 : 1,442,005	1961 : 10,039	0.88
West Tripura District	1981 : 976,252	1981 : 3,143	0.32
	1971 : 751,605	1971 : 1,336	0.18
	1961 : 573,993	1961 : 1,390	0.24
North Tripura District	1981 : 541,248	1981 : 15,642	2.89
	1971 : 405,009	1971 : 11,500	2.84
	1961 : 293,349	1961 : 7,098	2.42
South Tripura District	1981 : 535,558	1981 : 6,087	1.14
	1971 : 399,728	1971 : 2,847	0.71
	1961 : 274,663	1961 : 1,551	0.56

Source : Census of India 1981, Series 21, Tripura, Part IX, pp. 671-77.

Cunville thinks that this "sudden drop of the number of Christians in 1941 may have been due to wrong enumeration—mistaking the newly Christianized Tribals for Unconverted tribals, and thus entering them as Hindus or as Animists. It may also be that the large number of Christians, who spoke Mizo, migrated out of Tripura to the growing Christian region in the Mizo Hills."²

The sharp rise in percentage of Christian population in Tripura since 1961 is probably attributable either to new conversion or to the migration to Tripura of large number of tribal people from Chittagong Hill Tracts or other sides of the border. The TBCU had built a number of Churches in the interior of Tripura. The missionaries at first confined their work among the Lushais, Kukis and Darlongs, who mostly resided in the Jampui and Sakhon Hills of Tripura. In 1873 W. F. Badgley in his Report to H. L. Thuillier, the Surveyer General of India, quoted Chennell's description³ of the places he visited which lay between the Jampui and Atharamura ranges of Tripura :

"The whole of the area is quite uninhabited and densely covered with high forest and bamboo jungle, with entanglements of thorny scrub, canes, creepers, and nettle, through which it is impossible to force a passage without much cutting and clearing, excepting along the regularly used tracks of wild elephants, which are numerous and offer great facilities for moving about the country, which otherwise would be almost impenetrable."

But, though outwardly it looked "Uninhabited", the Lushais, Kukis, Riangs and other tribal people built their 'tang-ghars' in that dense jungle and the Christian missionaries braved all the eventualities to reach in that deep jungle and through medical aid and other welfare activities won the heart of the disadvantaged at the beginning of the present century. That the Tripura Durbar was alert of the activities of the missionaries would be evident from the following letter⁴ of Maharaja B. K. Manikya to Sir William Marris, the then Governor of Assam, in July 1922 :

"...Raja Daikoma and Sardar Hrang Bhunga, were originally residents of the Lushai Hills District and came to settle on the Jampui Hills, to the west of the Langai with all their followers, most of whom are Christians. I am told that the Christian Missionaries objected to the transfer on the allegation that Christian Mission work is not allowed in this territory. I may be permitted to state that Christian Missionaries are stationed even at Agartala and the neighbourhood and that no less than 1,680 of

my subjects are Christians and they are in peaceful enjoyment and exercise of their religious rights and privileges without any interference. Christian agencies are at work on the Jampui and Sakhan Hills where the Lushais have settled, under the direction of a Missionary body in Calcutta. As a Hindu, their activities may not be pleasing to me personally, but, as representing a civilised Government claiming allegiance of people professing different faiths, I cannot object to Christian activities within reasonable limits. You are perhaps aware that over-zeal on the part of the Missionaries created a trouble in the Lushai Hills District not long ago and the Civil Administration had to intervene between the Lushais and the Missionaries in that District. Every Government have to guide and control even Missionary activities among excitable hill people."

Although the nature of working and functioning of some Churches of Tripura were questioned not only by Maharaja Birendra Kishore Manikya in the twenties of the present century, but even by some political parties just before and after the merger of princely Tripura with the Indian Union in 1949, still the onward march of the missionary activities in the tribal belt were no less evident.

Beginnings of Missionary Activities

In January 1909 the Officer-in-charge, Revenue & Political Departments of Tripura, permitted the authorities of the New-Zealand Baptist Mission (NZBM) House, with headquarters at Brahmanbaria (now in the Comilla District of Bangladesh) in British Bengal, that "you may send your Babus here for selling religious books. But it is not desirable that they should go into the hills lest the ignorant hill-people should molest them."⁵

Later on, a complex situation arose out of the above letter of the Revenue & Political Depts. of Tripura. By the term "Babus" the Bengalee agents of the Church were perhaps meant. In 1913 the Durbar refused to grant permission to the missionaries to carry on regular "Mission Work" in Tripura. B. K. Sen, the Dewan of Tripura, informed Rev. John Takle of Brahmanbaria that "the Durbar will have no objection to your leasing land at Agartala for your men to put up at, if available, but after giving your request about regular Mission work in the State a most earnest consideration, they are sorry that for various reasons they cannot yet grant the permission asked for."⁶

In March 1914 Rev. Takle, on behalf of the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society, sought

*“Permission to erect Katcha houses on the site which we have acquired at the corner of the Akhaura and trenching ground roads, also permission to excavate a hole for the purpose of taking earth from it for making the plinth etc.”*⁷

The Agartala Municipality permitted the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society to erect “Katcha houses on the site” which the society had acquired.⁸ When the Society started “Building Operations”, the Durbar stood in the way of the former to go ahead with their programmes of construction of a mission-house in a ‘taluk’ under the existing land system. The Superintendent, New Zealand Baptist Mission, mildly complained to the Minister of Tripura on 30 June 1914 :

“When my colleague, Dr. Pettit, conversed with you concerning the stopping of our building operations in Agartala you promised him to let us know your decision regarding acquiring the land within fourteen days. That is nearly six weeks ago and I have heard nothing.

“...I would point out that our Mission in this country is in no sense a commercial enterprise, but a philanthropic and religious institution for helping the people and therefore any monetary losses come very hard upon us.

*“Through your stopping our work we are put to extra expense in that we have to pay two or three men to guard the unfinished houses. Then building material is being spoiled and we shall be obliged to replace much of it when your permission is obtained”*⁹

On 20 July 1914, the Dewan of Tripura wrote a long letter to Rev. Takle stating thereby :

“...I find two different issues have got mixed up in this matter. As a matter of fact the question of the acquisition of land you occupy comes in as a part of a long-standing scheme for the improvement of the town and is in no way connected with that of the permission granted to you....

“(i) In the first place, to avoid further misunderstanding the extent and nature of the permission granted to you by the two previous Ministers has to be accurately determined.

“(ii) Secondly, it has to be settled whether the State can allow you to retain the particular site in question in spite of the scheme sanctioned by the late Maharaja, and recommended some time ago by the town plan committee for immediate action.

“...It is a condition of all taluki settlements in the State — and the taluk inside which your land is situated has limited rights only—that no transfer to a non-State subject is valid without the express sanction of the Maharaja. This condition, as you will find, is made to keep off undesirable people and within the recent years the unfortunate political turmoil in the adjoining British territory has made a strict observance of the condition a matter of necessity. Without entering into the question as to whether the New Zealand Mission may be considered to be on the same footing as the other undersirables, the fact remains that the transfer in your case was made by a Jotedar only and was made without such express sanction....”

“As regards the question of permission I am afraid there has been some misapprehension on both sides and it is desirable that a clear understanding should be arrived at. Reading between the two letters quoted in your representation you will find that the permission granted by the two Ministers amounts to this :

“(i) Your native agents may sell books at Agartala. (ii) You may lease land and build a house for these native agents to put up at, but you cannot carry any mission work.

“From the recent discussion with Dr. Pettit as well as from an inspection of the building works you have taken up, the Minister fears that you have not fully realised the nature and extent of the permission granted to you and that you intend to have a “Mission House” as Dr. Pettit puts it, and to carry on mission work indirectly though not by actual preaching. I do not know how far this is correct but I need hardly say that this cannot be allowed. The policy of the State is based on reasons and it cannot but be adhered to.

“I would therefore request you to kindly remove this apprehension by giving clear and express undertaking to the effect :

“1. That you would not carry on any mission work either by direct or indirect method, — though you may sell books at Agartala.

“2. That you must not go outside the Municipal limits of the town to sell books.”

“3. That all that you will have at Agartala is a house for your native agents selling books, to live in, and you will not turn it into a mission house for direct or indirect preaching work.”

From above correspondences it becomes clear that a lot of misunderstanding was created between the Durbar and the Church authorities on the interpretation of the letter of the officer-in-

charge, Revenue and Political Departments of Tripura to Rev. Takle in January 1909. Again, the term "here", as used in the letter of 1909 was interpreted differently. However, after all these Rev. Takle pointed out on 24 July 1914 :

"... We never use the term 'Mission House' except in reference to a permanent building erected for the residence of a European Missionary. There can therefore be no possibility of our desiring to turn the Babus' quarters into a Mission House."

"I think that the extent of the Durbar's permission is perfectly clear. In my letter I applied for :

"(i) Permission to acquire a site for the erection of quarters for the workers of the Mission.

"(ii) Permission to the workers to carry on regular Mission work. In this request No. 2, the term 'Mission Work' was of course used by me in its ordinary significance comprising the following direct and indirect agencies :

(a) Preaching in bazaars and villages.

(b) Zenana visitation and teaching.

(c) Medical mission work.

(d) Conduct of Mission day schools for the education of boys and girls.

(e) Conduct of Bible classes.

(f) Conduct of Sunday schools.

(g) Lectures in English on moral and religious subjects.

"Any of these varied agencies would be regarded as Mission work.

"Request No (i) was granted by the Durbar."

"Request No. (ii) was refused.

"The position is therefore quite clear. We have no intention whatever of transgressing the limits of the sanction granted or of evading in any way the State restriction by directly or indirectly introducing the various branches of Mission Work as the term is Universally applied and Understood. Of course in the event of a future change of State policy regarding Mission Work resulting in permission being granted we should be glad to avail ourselves of the opportunity."

The dispute over the issue was stopped for the time-being by the issue of the following letter¹² by B. K. Burman, Minister' Tipperah State, to Rev. J. Takle on 6 August 1914 :

"I am glad to learn that you do not intend to erect a 'Mission House' on the piece of land purchased and that your sole object

is to build Bibu's quarters for selling religious books. I am further glad to have the assurance that you would not carry on 'Mission Work' either by direct or indirect method, unless expressly permitted by the Durbar. I use the word 'Mission Work' in its Universally accepted sense. For various reasons, I am unable to permit you to go outside the Municipal limits of the town to sell books. The letter of the Minister's office dated the 9th January 1909, as understood by me does not authorise you to go beyond the Municipal area for the purpose, as the context of the letter very clearly shows. The word here in the letter has evidently been put for 'Agartala' and not for 'Tippera State.'

However, in 1938 the name of the New Zealand Baptist Mission had been changed into Tripura Baptist Christian Union and in the same year the Union was granted permission by the Maharaja of Tripura to live and work in Tripura.

Notes & References

1. *Census of India* 1961, Vol. XXVI, Tripura - Part- I (i), General Report, New Delhi, 1967, p. 366.
2. R. R. Cunville, 'The Tripuris of Tripura' in E. Roger, et.al., (ed.), *Church Growth in the Third World*, Bombay, 1977, p. 256.
3. Narrative Report of Hill Tipperah, No. 199, dated Shillong, 17 May 1873, from Captain W. F. Badgay, Officiating Deputy Superintendent, 3rd grade, No. 6 Topographical Party, to Colonel H. L. Thuillier, Surveyer-General of India, as published in *Foreign and Political Department Report 1874 on Eastern Boundary of Hill Tippera*, (Indian Reprint) Government Research Institute, Government of Mizoram, Aizawl, 1980, para 18.
4. Letter of Maharaja Birendrakishore Manikya addressed to Sir. William Marris Governor of Assam, dated Agartala 25 July 1922, (Record Room, Secretariat Archives, Government of Tripura, Agartala).
5. Letter of Babu Asita Ch. Chaudhuri, Officer-in-charge, Revenue and political Departments, Tippera State, addressed to Rev. John Takle, Baptist Mission House, Brahmanbaria, dated Agartala, 9 January 1909, No. 4329, 18; (Record Room, Secretariat Archives, Government of Tripura, Agartala).

6. D. O. No. 170, from the Dewan, Tippera State, to Rev. John Takle, dated 24 May 1913 ; (Record Room, Secretariat Archives, Government of Tripura, Agartala).
7. Application of Rev. J. Takle, Brahmanbaria, addressed to the Chairman, Agartala Municipality, dated Brahmanbaria, 22 March 1914 ; (Record Room, Secretariat Archives, Govt. of Tripura, Agartala).
8. *Loc. Cit.*
9. Letter from the Superintendent, New Zealand Baptist Mission, Brahmanbaria to the Minister Tippera State, on 30 June 1914 ; (Record Room, Agartala).
10. Letter of B. K. Sen, the Dewan, Tippera State, addressed to Rev. J. Takle, Brahmanbaria, D. O. No. 462, dated, Minister's Office, Agartala ; (Record Room, Agartala).
11. Letter from Rev. J. Takle, Superintendent, New Zealand Baptist Mission, Brahmanbaria, addressed to the Minister of Tripura 24 July 1914 ; (Record Room, Agartala)
12. D. O. No. 533 of the Minister, Tipperah State, to Rev. J. Takle of Brahmanbaria, at 6 August 1914 ; (Record Room, Agartala).