

Ramke W. Momin (1833 or 34-1891) (A Search for Truth)

M. S. Sangma

Ramke was one of the most remarkable personalities among the Garos. He is well remembered by the people today for his manifold qualities of head and heart. He was born in a remote corner of Garo Hills, at a time when education had not yet penetrated into the hills and the whole tribe was still in a world of their own. They lived in constant fear of demons of their own creation and the British arms.

From his childhood Ramke developed a fear for the demons and tried to please them through sacrifices. From his early life, he was also haunted by the Garo tenet of 'Life after Death' and his search for an answer to this problem formed the main career of his life. His curiosity to get an answer to this question took him to Goalpara school where he tried to find an answer from the Hindu Sastras. Having failed to get a satisfactory answer at Goalpara he turned his face towards Gauhati where his uncle was already serving in the Police Regiment and where he continued his search with great avidity and sincerity until he found an answer in Christian religion. He felt a great urge to share his new found religion with his fellow Garos which was zealously advocated by Miles Bronson, an American Baptist Missionary stationed at Nowgong. Thus Ramke along with his uncle Omed was a pioneer in the founding of the Church in Garo Hills. Omed spread Christianity through open preaching, for he was a born preacher, while Ramke propagated through teaching, for he was a born teacher. This led him to open schools which he did at Damra. Opening of Schools necessitated the publication of reading materials. Thus Ramke became one of the great writers among the Garo literateur. He worked in close cooperation with the Missionaries in writing the Garo Primers, Readers and other Essays. He also composed about 25 hymns which are still sung today in the Church services. He also composed many small poems which are included in the Garo Readers. He also compiled a Bengali-Garo Dictionary with about forty-five thousand words within a period of five years, 1877 to 1882. He was also instrumental in the translations of many books of the Bible including the Genesis which were merely improved upon by the Missionaries. Besides he was a regular contributor to the Garo Christian monthly Journal called 'A' chikni Ripeng, or Garo's Friend and wrote his autobiography. Thus Ramke was a pioneer in preaching, teaching and

could be ranked as one of the pioneers in original writings among the tribal people of North-East India.

The following are excerpts relevant to the theme of this paper from his autobiography entitled "Kristo Bandhob" written in Bengali between 1885-'86. Though the original manuscript could not be traced the autobiography has been translated into Garo and published in ten installments in the "A'chikni Ripeng" in 1912. English translation in this paper is mine and translated as literally as possible.

My Childhood Days

"My birth place is Matchokgre. I was born in about 1833 or 1834" "The Garos offer sacrifices in order to ward off sickness, and in order to be rescued from wild animals, people of all villages under a Nokma (Clan Chief) assemble together once or twice a year and offer sacrifices of pig, goat, dog and fowls called A'song Tata. Seeing this during my childhood I also used to clear the jungles around a tree, or build a hut and offer sacrifices of rats in place of pigs, grasshoppers or lizards in place of goats and small wild birds in place of chicken. In summer it was possible to catch them from the jungle without difficulty. And if the Spirits are real lovers of the Garos then they will accept my sacrifices, and if accepted, they will be happy with me and keep me safe and sound everywhere, will definitely give me whatever asked for, there will be no other want for me and I shall be able to pass the days of my life in joy. I thought that even if I roamed about in the dense jungle alone, no wild animal will be able to do anything to me. Thus believing as stated above, I offered sacrifices of small birds. But there was no set procedure or laws for sacrifices. I used to sacrifice as many young rats and birds as could be caught. Sometimes sacrifices were offered everyday, and sometimes once after two, three or ten, fifteen days, sacrifice was offered. When summer was over, sacrifices were stopped as small birds were not available. There was nothing like a covenant between me and the blood-lover Spirits. After having thus offered sacrifices for two or three years my mind was changed; I completely stopped. I had no more fear even in the least that the blood-lover Spirits will be displeased with me and do any harm to me. In this way, my childhood days were over.

Unforesseen incidents that came over me

At the age of five or six, one day leaning on a boulder with a dao in my hand, I was cutting a bamboo. While cutting, as the bamboo was breaking it swiped against me, and as I unmindfully forgot to pull out the dao, it got stuck in the bamboo, then I was lifted along with the dao and were thrown up, and when the dao flew off the bamboo, I along with the dao fell down into the cavern about four or five times length of the hand below the boulder. Then I was not able to breathe for about one or two minutes. Later on, when I was able to breathe, I began to feel a terrible pain in my

abdomen and as it was unbearable I cried loudly. Neither my parents nor any other could hear me cry, and no one even knew that such an incident happened to me, and I too did not tell anyone.

Once when I was seven or eight years old, I climbed up a tree alone some distance away from the village. About eleven or twelve hand-length high up, the tree had a branch. So when I climbed up to that branch, the tree being small, could not bear my weight and moved this and that side, and as the wind blew over it, it shook more and more. As I saw the tree breaking, I held on to the branches more firmly. As the tree dropped down and the top branch touched the ground, my two legs went up and my head turned upside down on the ground. While the tree was breaking, I was terribly afraid, but I did not receive any injury.

When I was nine years old I fell down from a tree about seven or eight hand-length high. As I fell down on a hard ground and hit my abdomen, I felt so terribly painful that I could not breathe for about two minutes. I could not even get up by myself, and the pain subsided because others lifted me and fomented my abdomen by warming the leaf of a tree or a creeper on the fire. But I could not get up and walk about for two or three days. Once when I was fourteen years old, I went along with my father, maternal uncle and others to the Jhum field in order to cut down the trees of the new jhum field. On reaching the jhum field when everybody began to cut down the bamboos and the trees, I also climbed up a tree about thirty or forty hand-length high through a creeper. That tree was completely covered with creepers. Therefore, climbing up to the top of the tree, I thought that unless the top branches are cut down first, other branches will fall down on the ground and so when I cut down the top branch, the branch broke off but the creeper of the branch happened to fasten around my neck. Although I held on to the branch of the tree with both my hands with all my strength, I fell down on the ground as I could not bear the weight of the branch. I was the first to fall on the ground, then the dao, and then the branch, each falling on me one after the other. As the dao hit I felt severe pain in my right leg, and as the branch hit, the bone of my left arm and shoulder was fractured by about four fingers wide. Since the left palm was also hit forcefully, both the two small fingers were contracted. As I tumbled down, my tongue came out, and as my body was injured all blood from my body oozed out. I did not know anything as I lay unconscious. Those who saw me in this condition never thought that I would survive. Of course, I was in a state of coma for one day and one night. Therefore, my mother was very upset, and did not eat or drink anything until there was a visible sign of my revival. When I came to my senses in the morning, I came to know that my left arm was fractured, and thought that I will be invalid throughout my whole life. Thinking all these, the sadness of my mind became unbearable, cried very bitterly, and thinking that there will be no happiness in living, I felt like dying without any food.

After this incident, I simply remained in bed for three months. In my life, these four incidents were more memorable than any other, and out of these four, the last one was more terrifying and tragic.²

My Education

One year before the last tragic event my uncle Omed by name took me along with him and walked to and from about three or four miles distance for one month in order to learn reading and writing from the village Accountants, that is, from the Account Keepers of the revenues of the Zamindars. Seeing this, my good father was so angry that my mother could not serve me food openly. Being greatly upset at this, I totally gave it up. Having found it difficult to walk to and fro alone my uncle also gave it up later on. We were beginning to be able to decipher some of the alphabet when we stopped. After a year had passed in this way, the East India Company opened a school at the Goalpara town designating it as a Garo school, and some officers came to look for Garo children. As soon as it was heard that some men were looking for some Garo children to admit them in the Garo school, my uncle took three boys along with him and got themselves admitted into the school. In the meantime, my arm was fractured, otherwise I too would have gone then. Only among the Garos living under other's control, that is, under the jurisdiction of the zamindars, one or two learnt about reading, but none among the Garos living in the hills had read under them. My uncle was the pioneer as if he was awakened from slumber. One or two months after my uncle left for Goalpara and got himself admitted into the school, I was able to get up from bed and sit down with great difficulty. And feeling completely alright after six months, I went to Goalpara to seek admission into the school. But all my hope dashed to the ground as the teacher did not want to admit me as I was not yet completely alright. As my uncle wanted very much to get me admitted in the school, he pleaded for me very strongly, but teacher promised that I will be admitted if the higher authority agrees. Then I went to Gauhati and showed my arm to the higher officer and since he agreed the teacher admitted me in the school.

My Troubled Mind

As stated before this, recollection about Death and Rebirth produced many kinds of thoughts in my mind from time to time. If a man dies and is born again, then how will we know as to how many times one died and was reborn. I myself knew nothing, and perhaps nobody knows anything about this. Now I was born in a particular tribe and in a particular village, but before this, in which region of this particular tribe was I born?

Is there no Spirit among those Spirits mightier and more kind hearted? If there exists no such kind, powerful and redeemer Spirit then it is very bad. Having all these thoughts, my mind

was much troubled. What is the way out, and how can we be saved? There is no hope anywhere, and is surrounded by darkness. This is the result of having engrossed in thoughts about Death and Rebirth.³

A search for Seeker after Eternal Good

All who have read my account could know how troubles were developed in my mind. One day, after studies of school lessons were over, some of my school friends were playing some were talking and laughing, some were lying down in bed and listening to talks and some were already asleep, for it was already 8 or 9 P.M. Meanwhile, I went out towards the street some distance away from the Boarding house. Due to moon-lit night, it was looking very beautiful. I was passing time over a boulder, the stars appearing in the east, west, north, south and above beautified the sky, and I was enjoying looking at them. Meanwhile my mind became restless, and I felt as if I was going to tell someone about my sad state of mind and other things, and as I have forgotten about it, as if someone was reminding me that your mind is being troubled at the thought of death and rebirth, and if you wish to be saved from it, pray. Thus being called by my inner spirit I laid prostrate on the grass near the boulder to pray. But I could not decide as to which spirit I should address, for although I had heard the name of God then, I did not know about His greatness. Therefore, without mentioning the name of any diety, I prayed that there is someone in this universe, the greatest, all-knowing and the most powerful of all in whom I believe. So I am sending forth to the presence of the most powerful and all-knowing, the state of my mental agony, so that I will not die and be born again and again in future, thus grant me. And my parents, brothers, sisters and friends will have to die once; therefore grant such knowledge and power so that we will recognise one another after death. And I believe that you have the power to do all good things. Therefore by grace save me from sickness, shame, fear and deathlessness and enable me to derive manifold blessings. In this way, I prayed alone for about three or four nights. Nothing happened on the first night of prayer. Next night there appeared as if someone was just looking by standing some distance away from the place of my prayer. And he seemed to have left without a word after just looking around. On the third and fourth night, there appeared as if a tall and dignified man, some distance away from the place of my prayer has heard my prayer, and having heard, seemed to have said in a deep voice, 'your prayer has been heard' and hope dawned on my mind.

Brahman and Ram

Just as the water of the stream flows out endlessly, likewise, the year, month and days passed by, with days and nights ceaselessly Similarly my school years have also passed four years. Now I could write my own name. After finishing all the Primers

I have read a book called "Gianodoi"..... After finishing sums of addition, I have been doing multiplication, division and subtraction. Along with learning Bengali and Assamese languages, for it was useless unless we could converse with the pandit and student friends in Bengali and Assamese. We read a lot about the greatness of Narayan and Brahma in the book "Sisubodok"..... About 20 or 30 Slokas of Chanakya were memorised. Then after two years, we also read Ramanaya and Mahabharata. From the study of these two books, we learnt many more about Brahma and Ram..... If a certain Brahman student paid a visit to our boarding, he was greatly respected. And if a Brahman beggar comes, he was given rice and money with great reverence. After having received required alms from us, they departed saying 'Be well with you'. After hearing the word 'Be well with you' from the mouth of the Brahman, I had so much faith in them that I thought there is nothing more to be afraid of any harm.

I have read that while walking along the road if the name of Ram is remembered, Ram and Lakhsman, the two brothers, with bow and arrow in hand will accompany the traveller at the front and back and save the traveller from various troubles and dangers. In like manner, I have also read that if the name of Ram is uttered before bed and just before rising, except benefits no bad thing will come. Thinking this I was very happy, and in sitting, sleeping and always the name of Ram was uttered. Depending on Ram I was to some extent free from worries about Death and Rebirth. In this way, my liking for Brahman and Ram increased more and more in my mind. I really believed that Ram was above all. After this how I realised my mistake will be narrated later on. *

Destroyer of Objections

On a summer day at about 7 or 8 A.M. seeing a crowd of about 25 or 30 people around a boat in the Brahmaputra Ghat, I went there to see what was happening and saw a Sahib and two Bengali babus standing on a boat and distributing very nice looking new books to the people and the people receiving the books with outstretched hands..... After staring for sometime expecting a copy, I came back in despair. Had I asked they might have given me a copy free of cost or at a reduced rate. But I had no money in my hand, and I did not dare to ask shamelessly..... The pandit also did not give us even a copy immediately.

After going through the book, the Hindus spread the news to their co-Hindus that the book depicted their gods and goddesses whom they worship and follow, as ignorant and powerless and in various other ways. On hearing this, some of them burnt the book in fire, some threw it in the water, some trampled on it and some sold it to the ignorant people at a cheap price and took the money. All these books being condemned by the Hindus and the Muslims some copies have come to our hands. The pandit gave us two books free entitled History of Joseph and good teachings of Solomon.....

I got a book called "Apati Nashak" (Destroyer of Objections) by lottery..... Whatever objections the Hindus used to make, they were completely destroyed..... Now on what should I put my trust? My hopes were dashed to the ground. This Apati Nashak began to point out the falsehood of Brahman and Ram on whom I put my trust. The Destroyer (Nashak) says, the Brahmans suffer from various kinds of diseases and a slave of sin. Can a blind lead a blind? Can a sinner save a sinner? The Nashak continued, Ram is not omniscient, omnipotent and truly loving God. If he was omniscient, he would have known who has stolen his dear wife Sita; he would not have searched crying hither and thither. Ram is not omnipotent, if he were, he would not have fainted again and again while fighting against Ravan, and he would not have required the help of the wild animals like the monkeys and bears. Ram is also not a kind-hearted man, if he were, he would not have slain an innocent Bali. Therefore how could such an ignorant and powerless God save you? What should I do now, where should I go and whom should I depend on? The Nashak (Destroyer) spoke in glowing tributes to Jesus Christ, but since it condemned the Brahmans and Ram, my mind was still burning with anger and I could not love Jesus Christ. In this way, I was in despair and without any shepherd again.⁵

Which Religion to follow ?

When examination came, the Garo students somehow fared better than the Bengali and the Assamese students. and I was the first among them. At this, the Magistrate Sahib and other members of the school committee were more pleased with us, and presented more prizes to us than to the Bengali students, and appointed me as a teacher to teach in a village called Rongjuli. I taught in that village for eleven months. After that, according to the advice of a young Brahman, I left my job and joined the school and studied there very hard for one more year. Then the examination came again and as the school was closed for the vacation after the examination, I left for Gauhati. There was a Normal school at Gauhati. The house of the sub-Inspector of schools of Goalpara was also located at Gauhati. When the school was closed the sub-Inspector went to Gauhati. Meeting him there when I begged him to help me to join the Normal School, he got me admitted in the Normal school. From the letter of my student friends, I came to know that this time also I came out first in the examination.

However I joined the Normal school lodging in my uncle's house. Now I had a great desire to learn English, but I was overaged and had no means of self-support and study. I heard that the Christian babus are very kind and are proficient in English. On hearing that there is a Christian babu at Gauhati, I went to him and showed my keen desire to learn English. The babu taught me little, but did not teach me as I desired, that is everyday. Therefore, not hoping much, without going to his house

aily, I went only on Sundays. On Sundays the babu used to read the Scripture as he wanted and then he taught me, and by reading a book called Jatriker Jatra (Pilgrim's Progress) he used to teach me about the acts of benevolence of the Christians, but it did not strike my mind even in the least, because there was also no attempt to that extent as to accept Christ's teaching. On Sunday when babu and his friends were bowing their heads in prayer, I was feeling shy to bow my head along with them, but thinking that the babu will not like me, I bowed my head against my will; it was not done out of love for God or fear of him. But I simply pretended to listen to the talk on religion and the sermons my real desire was to learn English. In this way, although I had come to light, I turned back to darkness, and I could not learn English either. Whatever it might be the babu presented me two books Pilgrim's progress and the Basic Principles of Christ.

In those days I wished very much to acquire education and riches, and in those days I did not receive any one of them. Then my thoughts also on repeated birth and death disappeared. In this way, days have passed by. One day as if in a dream, I called my Uncle and asked him, "We now believe that there is life after death; then we will have to get the fruit or the punishment of our good or bad deeds while living on earth. In order to be saved from them and in order to enable us to live in joy, we will have to definitely take any one religion. There might be many religions in the world but I think, Hindu, Muslim and Sahib's religion; these three religions are perhaps greater than others; out of the four religions, which religion will you choose? Which religion will you follow?" Pondering over for some time uncle said, "I know nothing about the religion of the Mussalmans, therefore I cannot favour and choose it. And if we accept the Hindu religion, we will not be able to work and eat together with our own people, kiths and kins, friends and brothers and sisters, therefore I do not wish to take the Hindu religion either. If we accept the Sahib's religion, we will be able to eat and drink together like before with our friends, our own people, and brothers and sisters, therefore if it is essential for us to take a certain religion, I would rather prefer to take the religion of the Sahibs." Thus we looked for a religion only through discussion but we did nothing to concretise it. As a matter of fact, being already appointed as Head Constable, I was leading a vicious life of many kinds. As uncle was also working as a Police, he was sleeping over the matter of religion. In this way, although we had come to the Light, we turned back to darkness.

Awake from sleep

As I had been doing my duty as the Head Police Constable, I was awakened by going through a booklet as if woke up from a long slumber. I cannot remember all the contents of the book but this much I still definitely remember that the book contained a story of a young girl. The young girl and her parents having

realised that God is the greatest of all, did glorify Him by obeying Him under all circumstances. In effect, God has become their friend. As I pondered over these, I felt greatly ashamed of and distressed over my iniquitous deeds and habits. I felt as if God was calling loudly, "O sleeping sinner, how many days more are you going to sleep? Get up from sleep, and come unto me." Then I prayed thus. "O God, I know, you are very kind, what would I do now, tell me". I rose up from my prayer and read a book called the Teachings of Christ. I read the book twice or thrice before but I did not enjoy reading it in those days, rather I found it uninteresting. This time I derived immeasurable love of God from that book. So I greatly appreciated the basic theme of the book. And I read that book again and again with prayer.

Meantime I heard from the people that uncle along with two or three police personnel have been going to Gauhati and learning about Christianity from a preacher and have been attending the Church services of Sundays. As soon as I heard that uncle and his friends were getting ready to accept Christianity, I was overjoyed.

Loving God has heard my prayer too. Then as I got an opportunity I went to Gauhati. By that time uncle had already accepted Christianity and I too showed my willingness to accept along with him. In this way, we were baptised on February 15, 1863, at Gauhati by a missionary named Bronson in the name of the Father the Son and the Holy Ghost. On the same day, uncle and I, one Assamese young man and an old man, one man and one woman belonging to a Mech tribe, six in all, have been baptised. While we were being baptised some Sahibs and Mem-sahibs and about four or five people from the village were present.

After our baptism Bronson sahib stayed on in Gauhati for one more Sunday and then departed for Nowgong. There were more Christians in Nowgong than in Gauhati. The missionary sahib came to Gauhati only once in a year and stayed only for a month and a half and then used to return.⁷

Beginning of a Garo Mission

After getting baptism I looked for a job for my living and got a petty job in the Revenue office. Uncle was continuing in the Police service. Next year Bronson sahib came again to Gauhati. Few days after his arrival, he called me and my uncle, and talking to us in a private room said, "I am very glad to hear from your sahib Authorities about your conduct and honest works. I am quite sure about your promotions in the long run, but I have decided to select you for the work of preaching the Gospel. I am confident that you will do this work diligently. Go back to your country and your own people and preach to them the good news of salvation, for they are all walking in utter darkness without God and without any hope" With these good words, the sahib released us. Then with great joy we started off to our own village in the Garo country on May 10, 1864, bringing with us the price-

less seed of Good News. Thus God has called two of us first from among the Garos.

Conflict between Light and Darkness

As we arrived at our own village from Gauhati, uncle began his mission work at his birth place Matchokgre living with relations. I went to a place called Damra about 15 or 16 miles away from there and opened a school there. As there was a weekly market there, people from the surrounding villages used to throng at every market day, and so the facility was excellent to preach the Gospel. Uncle tried his level best to teach the good tidings of Christ to the inhabitants of Matchokgre. Many of my relations living there were beginning to be led to the path of Faith by listening to his teaching. But in that process, as is used to happen to the Christians, so misfortune began to befall over my relations as well. The ignorant people charged uncle and my relatives as enemy of the Spirits and the breaker of Garo traditions. Their hostile feeling had increased to such an extent that they began to plot against them. It was resolved that those who accepted and followed the teachings of uncle, no article sold by them will be bought, as well as nothing will be sold to them. Those who sold to them or bought from them were threatened that heavy punishment will be imposed on such people, and all transactions of business were completely cut off with them. Not being satisfied with this also, those savaged people attempted to create trouble in the market place and to burn down the houses of our relatives but since our relatives came to know about it before-hand and were cautious, their evil design could not be implemented. In this way, uncle and our relatives were harassed for nearly two years or were looked upon as enemies. Thereafter, as a result of sudden occurrence of great calamity over our enemies the hostile attitude of these hostile people began to wane by degrees.

Flag of Victory - The Garo Church

We used to inform the Missionary sahib all about our sources of troubles by letters. He also used to advise us through letters to remain calm and peaceful through patience. Afterwards he visited the Garo hills in the month of April, 1867, in order to see for himself the progress of our work and the good effects of the preaching of the Gospel. On arrival he publicly proclaimed their faith in Lord Jesus by baptising 26 persons on April 14, and 10 persons on the 15th, total of 36 men and women, the fruit of his deligence at Rajasimla where uncle has settled down. In this way, the Church was first founded in the Garo Hills. The Sahib appointed uncle as the pastor of that church. Before this, the Garos were frightened and ran away at the sight of the sahibs, but now the Garos, Rabhas, Kacharis and other tribes living around there were greatly surprised to see the sahib's affection and pleasant conversations. In 1868 Bronson and one other missionary sahib toured and preached the Gospel in the villages of Rajasimla, Amjonga (My wife's birth place), Damra (where I founded a school)

and Balijana. Within a year, a total of about 76 men and women from those villages have taken refuge in Christian religion. From 1867 till date (1886) fourteen hundred persons received baptism and the Garo churches numbered nine. Out of these, excluding those who were dead and have left for some other places, there were still one thousand Christians. These were only the people living at the foot of the Garo Hills and the adjoining areas of Goalpara district. Besides these, there were nearly 300 or 400 Garo christians in and around Gauhati's'e

Notes & References

1. *A'chikni Ripeng*, January, 1912.
2. *Ibid*, April, 1912.
3. *Ibid*, May, 1912.
4. *Ibid*, June, 1912.
5. *Ibid*, July, 1912.
6. *Ibid*, August, 1912.
7. *Ibid*, September, 1912.
8. *Ibid*, October, 1912.