

**The Growth of
BAPTIST CHURCHES
IN
MEGHALAYA**



**BY
Rev. K. I. Aier**

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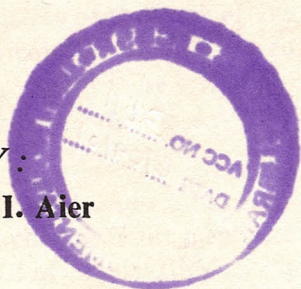
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Published by:
CHRISTIAN LITERATURE CENTRE
Kohbar, Gauhati,
ASSAM.

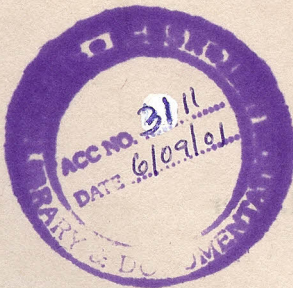
Printed at Meghna Press, Gauhati-781011.

First Edition 1978 (2000 copies)



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Published by :
CHRISTIAN LITERATURE CENTRE
Panbazar, Gauhati.
ASSAM.

Printed at Sreeguru Press, Gauhati-781011.

FOREWORD

The process by which the Garo Hills in the State of Meghalaya has become substantially Christian is well described in this important book by Imotemjen Aier. He systematically presents the structures of the six Garo tribes, their customs, pre-Christian religion, leadership patterns and agricultural processes. He then sets forth their relationships to the outside world—the British Government in days past and the Government of India today. Two chapters give an accurate history of the work of one of the most successful missions ever to come to India. Two more describe the growth of the Church among these lovely hills. Two concluding chapters critically evaluate the present Church and its future prospects.

The volume is specially valuable because it has been written by an outstanding Indian churchman. Imotemjen Aier is the General Secretary of the Council of Baptist Churches in North East India. He administers the work of five States Baptist Conventions which together number nearly a million souls. He has travelled widely, attending many world-wide Baptist conventions. He looks at Church Growth in the Garo Hills as one of the great Christian leaders of India. He is a tribes man (Ao Naga) himself and spent his earliest years in a remote village. He knows the Tribals intuitively. Baptist Convention in the Garo Hills is one of his fields as General Secretary of the Council. He writes from first hand knowledge.

In the decades which lie ahead, segment after segment of the population of the world will become Christian. I am just back from five weeks in Zaire which in the last seventy years has become substantially Christian. Practically all its citizens claim to be either Roman Catholic or Protestant. Very few indeed

admit to being animist. In India the same process is at work. The Gospel is spreading faster in some of the states and slower in others - but spreading.

The process of the people movement to Christian Faith (whereby tribes and castes become Christian without social dislocation, while retaining many of the beautiful and valuable components of their culture and maintaining a cordial relationship to their relatives and families) is what Mr. Aier is describing. He tells us in illuminating detail how the six 'A' chik tribes have moved to Christian Faith and how about half the population has yet to be won. He describes the humble beginnings and points out how today the Church can discern and use social structure to advance the Gospel.

His book should be read all across India. Castes are not tribes, and a people movement in a caste will not follow exactly the pattern which it traces in a tribe. Nevertheless, the account of how a tribe became Christian has great value for those evangelizing a caste. The goal is the same : namely, that the social organism (the caste), while remaining thoroughly India, maintaining its network of relationships, and continuing its practice of endogamy, comes naturally and as a result of its own free choice to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour and to accept His Word, the Bible, as the only rule of faith and practice. Many methods are the same. Creating leaders out of the people being disciplined is equally important in tribe and caste.

As Bible Schools and Theological Seminaries in India study more and more *Indian* church history and *Indian* church growth this book and others like it will become required reading. In India, church history must cease to be a study of how the churches grew and did not grow, believed and did not believe in far off Europe. Church history must become the study of how a hundred thousand here and a million there, two thousand here and twenty thousand there have *in India* facing *Indian* conditions, maintaining *Indian* social structure and *Indian* cultures, become devout and obedient disciples of Jesus Christ the Lord,

Imotemjen Aier's great book is a splendid model of future monographs on the many other segments of the church in India. Accounts of how this segment of society came to Christ and how that group "turned from idols to serve the true and living God" are the essential stuff of a church history germane to the multiplying churches of India. If we would know what God is about to do in India, let us study most carefully what He has done.

I commend **THE GROWTH OF THE GARO BAPTIST CHURCHES IN MEGHALAYA** to my fellow Christians in India. Study it. Learn from it. Praise God for the great work He has done, described in it.

September first, 1977

Donald McGavran
Fuller Theological Seminary
Pasadena, California

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INTRODUCTION.

The Garos are one of the largest hill tribes in North East India. Under the providence of God, they played a unique role in turning the Baptist Mission towards a greater and fuller involvement in its venture of faith. It was the Garo tribe that saved the Assam Mission as Downs puts it :

The success among the Garos changed the attitudes of the Home Board towards Assam field and it began to get at least its share of the available resources something that had not been the case earlier (1971 : 56).

Omed and Ramke, the first two converts were of remarkable personalities. With them, the other three namely, Rangkhru, Ramsing and the father of Rudram were all ex-servicemen of the police department. Thus the first five Garo evangelists were dedicated Christians, well disciplined and dedicated to their assignments. No wonder the Church in Garo Hills grew fast during its early period. It is here that we can see the Lord had prepared this tribe in a very significant way in order to change the course of human actions for the redemption of the people of North East India.

The first two missionaries namely, E.G. Phillips and M. C. Mason who lived and laboured in the Garo Hills all their lives were a "remarkable pair." They were classmates, roommates and their wives were sisters. What a wonderful combination for the purpose of planting His Church among a tribe, the success of which was to determine the future missionary involvement in the task of discipling the whole of North East India.

Membership grew from 40 in 1867 to 54,188 in 1972. To many, the growth looks so natural that it makes very little impression in their lives. This increase is the result of many dedicated missionaries and nationals, who gave themselves generously.

Many missionaries gave their lives in the field and many returned home with broken health from which they never re-

covered. E. G. Phillips, M. C. Mason, and E. S. Downs with their families were among the Garo missionaries who served in the field longest ; each serving more than forty years.

Among many of the national leaders were Omed Momin, Ramke Momin and Thangkan Sangma to whom the Garo churches owe much for their dedication, determination, faith and courage. They fought fearlessly against age-long traditional superstitions, prestigious headhunting, and non-literacy. All three were ordained ministers of the church. As we face today's unaccomplished task and untapped opportunities, let us not cease to draw inspirations and strength from those men of faith.

In the course of my study at the School of World Mission and Institute of Church Growth, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, I have discovered that what seemed to be growing in the case of Garo churches has not been really growing. I have discussed that point elsewhere in this thesis.

I do not intend to bring out a systematic events of the churches in the Garo Hills through the years, instead I have attempted to interpret those sequences of events in the light of the church growth principles. For example, not who did what, when and how, but how far a particular programme on projects has helped or hindered church growth in the Garo Hills. In true sense, therefore, it is not a history of the Garo churches but an interpretation of significant events.

The Methodology.

Personal observation and experience.

By virtue of my responsibility as the General Secretary of the Council of Baptist Churches in North East India (CBCNEI) (beginning in 1967 as Associate General Secretary)— I have been in constant contact with the Garo Baptist churches. The Garo Baptist Convention is one of the constituent bodies of the CBCNEI. This gives me opportunity to work with the leaders of the churches in the Garo Hills. From time to time, I make

trips to their sub-centres to observe their programmes and projects, participate in their annual meetings, and speak at their conferences.

The most extensive tour of the Garo Convention that I made was in 1970 when I visited the centres of all the eight *Krimas* except the one which I had already visited earlier. That trip gave me the widest perspectives about the members and works of the churches in the interior. At each *Krima* centre, I had the privilege of meeting with the leaders of the churches. We discussed together their problems and ongoing projects. Together we evaluated their successes and failures. I collected the latest available data and gained from them immense insights about the Garos.

During my study at Fuller, I must confess that I was handicapped to a certain extent in my search for more data and materials connected with my thesis due to difficulties in communication with North East India. Absence of relevant information has shortened my thesis. However, on the whole the field has been fairly well covered.

Sources.

In addition to my personal experiences and data collected on the spot, I made use of all available resources from the annual reports of the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society in America, the Council of Baptist Churches in North East India, and Newspapers, Magazines and Official Census reports.

Ethnological books written on the Garos, available at the Research Library of the University of California, Los Angeles, and books, annual reports and microfilms available at the McAlister Library at the Fuller Theological Seminary and the American Baptist Seminary of the West, Covina, California were of immense value. From the Libraries of the First Baptist Church and the Calvary Baptist Church at Pasadena, California came additional resources.

Through interlibrary loans, I was privileged also to make use of materials including microfilms from the Missionary

Research Library, N.Y., and the American Baptist Historical Society, Division of Archives and History, Rochester, New York.

My own resources as a tribal man (Naga), understanding his fellow tribal Garos must not be underestimated.

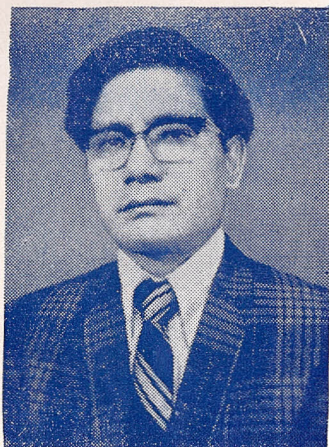
Acknowledgements.

I must express my indebtedness to the Dean, Dr. Arthur Glasser and the faculty of the School of World Mission and the Institute of Church Growth for their total involvement in the programme of my studies at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California.

To the Council of Baptist Churches in North East India for granting my study leave and my colleagues at Gauhati Office, especially Mr. L. Bizo, Actg. General Secretary and all who have taken up so willingly extra load for making it possible to be away at Fuller, I am deeply grateful. My thanks are also due to Prof. Renthly Keitzer and many of my Garo friends, to mention some - namely, Rev. Karbenson Sangma, Rev. Gilbert Marak, Prof. Arjeson Momin and Prof. Milton Sangma for their valuable information.

Officers of the Board of International Ministries, ABC, Valley Forge namely Rev. R. W. Beaver, Dr. Robert Johnson, Dr. Dean Kirkwood and others deserve my profound gratitude for not only meeting the additional financial needs but also supplying relevant data and information for my thesis. I would like to make a special mention of Dr. Donald A. McGavran, Dean Emeritus, Professor of Mission and Church Growth, who acted as my mentor for his seasoned advice, untiring supervision and priceless insights. Last but not the least, I owe thanks to my wife who stayed at home in India with three minor children.

With all honour and glory to Him, the author fervently hopes that the readers will find helpful insights which in turn might be applied to their own works.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born on May 5, 1931 at Longjang, Nagaland Mr. K. Imotemjen Aier obtained the Degree of Bachelor of Divinity in 1961 from the Serampore Theological University. In 1964 he was awarded an Ecumenical Overseas Study Scholarship by the World Council of Churches. He spent an academic year at the Colgate-Rochester Divinity School, New York during 1964-65. He went back to U.S.A. again; this time at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California where he earned an M.A. (in Missiology) in 1974.

He was ordained on March 8, 1970 at the Gauhati Baptist Church, Assam. After serving 1½ yrs as Associate General Secretary of the Council of Baptist Churches in North East India, he became the General Secretary of the Council in 1969 the position of which he still holds.

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Rev. K. I. Aier is involved in various ecumenical and denominational Christian organizations within and outside of India. He is presently, the President of the North East India Christian Council; Vice-President of the NEI Bible Society; Vice-President of the National Christian Council of India; President of the Baptist Union of India; and Vice-Chairman of the Baptist Council on World Mission.

" He (the Author) looks at the Church Growth in the Garo Hills as one of the great Christian leaders in India.... He writes from the first hand knowledge"

Donald McGovran, Pasadena

Similar books Published by CLC

1. **The Growth of Baptist Churches in Nagaland,**
P. T. Philip @ Rs. 14.90

2. **The Mighty Works of God,**
A brief History of the Baptist Churches in
North East India : The Mission Period 1836-
1950, Dr. F. S. Downs @ Rs. 8.00

3. **A Corner in India, (reprinted)**
written in 1907. By Mrs. E. W. Clark