



**PROCEEDINGS OF  
NORTH EAST INDIA  
HISTORY ASSOCIATION**

**SEVENTH SESSION**

**PASIGHAT : 1986**

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NORTH EAST INDIA  
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## PREFACE

It gives us great joy to find that the Association has been growing in strength over the years as the premier research organisation in North East India. Our strategies of grass-root research, inter-disciplinary approach, and group orientation for an objective understanding of the nature of socio-economic developments and social formations at different points of time have started to yield the cherished results. The membership of the organisation has been steadily increasing. Our more than three hundred members today are the researchers from the Surveys and research departments and the teachers in the Universities, Colleges and Schools spread over all the seven States in the North-East, besides a few from outside the region. Our members are not from History but also almost all the Social Sciences and Humanities streams, and this is because of our faith in the study of history as a science for socio-economic development. Our annual sessions are major academic gatherings in the region, attended on an average by hundred and fifty delegates from all over the region. A large number of research papers are presented and discussed in the annual session each one of which is a substantial addition to the existing literature. Our proceedings volumes are acclaimed as major references on North East India. We get requests for copies of current as well as back volumes from all over the country and even abroad.

We have also been able to create some enthusiasm about research in the history of the region. The researches in the history of North East India are going on in all the Universities in the region. A large number of M. Phil. and Ph. D. candidates are working in regional history. There are on-going individual research projects by teachers and professional researchers. The seminars are occasionally organised in various institutions. A fair number of research publications have come out in recent years and many more must be in the pipe lines. The under-graduate and post-graduate level courses in the history of North East India are offered in the Universities in the region. Some of the State departments are planning to introduce the study of the history of the concerned State in the schools, and some of our members are cooperating with the SCERTs in preparing the text books. The emerging important functions of this Association are to coordinate the on-going researches, to design a perspective for research, to develop appropriate tools and methodologies, and

to create literature in the history of the region so that it may be possible to prepare a Comprehensive History of North East India in the next few years.

The present volume is the Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Session of the North East India History Association held at the Jawaharlal Nehru College, Pasighat on November 11-13, 1986. Professor J. B. Ganguly, Director, Calcutta University Post-graduate Centre, Agartala presided over the Session which was inaugurated by Shri Khapriso Krong, Minister of Education, Government of Arunachal Pradesh. Shri B. K. Kakoty, Principal, and Dr. S. Dutta, Head, Department of History, Jawaharlal Nehru College, Pasighat did us great honour as Chairman of the Reception Committee and Local Secretary of the Session respectively. Besides its high academic contents, the delegates shall cherish the fond memory of the session for warmth of the reception extended by the organisers and the colourful entertainment programme. Our thanks are due to the authorities of the Jawaharlal Nehru Colleges Pasighat and the Government of Arunachal Pradesh.

I am personally thankful to my colleagues Dr J. P. Singh, Dr. O. P. Kejariwal, Dr. Milton S. Sangma, Dr. D. R. Syiemlieh and Mr. Abhijit Choudhury for the help in editing and publishing this volume. We are also thankful to the Indian Council of Historical Research and the North Eastern Council for financial assistance.

Shillong

The 25 September 1987.

(J. B. Bhattacharjee)

General Secretary,

North East India History Association.

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## Evangelisation of the Konyak Nagas : Role of Reverend Longri Ao

S. K. Barpujari

The Konyaks are one of the major tribes of Nagaland with a population of 97,545 according to 1981 census.<sup>1</sup> They live in the extreme north-east corner of Nagaland which is now the Mon district of that state. A few Konyak villages are also located in the Tuensang district along the international boundary with Burma. Originally both Mon and Tuensang districts formed division of North East Frontier Agency. Although Tamlu which together with the whole tract of country west of the Dikhow was taken under British administration as early as 1889 most of the Konyak villages remained outside the administered region known as the Naga Hills District.<sup>2</sup> Even as late as 1925-6 there were only fourteen Konyak villages in the Naga Hills District. But according to 1971 census Konyaks were located in as many as eighty seven villages with a total population of 72,319.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the fact that the Konyaks living in the border of the plains were known to the people of Assam and had social and commercial relations long before the advent of the British into this region, the foreign rulers by enacting the Inner Line Regulations (1873) prohibited traders and even Christian Missionaries from entering their hills. Till the independence of our country the British made no attempt to develop the area and improve the condition of the people. Except the ban on head-hunting and inter-village feuds, the traditional village administration, social customs and communal institutions were allowed to remain unaltered. F. S. Downs rightly says that the British Government

left the people pretty much alone, only taking punitive action when they violated the understanding that they were not to take heads from among peoples inhabiting the administered areas. Christian evangelistic activity of any kind, by either missionaries or Nagas, was strictly prohibited in that region.

The government wanted to avoid any kind of disturbance that might make it necessary to annex and administer the area.<sup>4</sup>

Evidently, the Konyaks remained very backward and were shut off from all outside modernising influences. Christianity also could not make a dent into the Konyak area till the thirties of the present century. It may, however, be noted that Miles Bronson of the American Baptist Mission was the first missionary to establish a mission as early as 1839-40 at the village of the Namsangia Nagas

who may have belonged to the Konyak tribe.<sup>5</sup> Although the Nagas were suspicious of the "White-men" in the beginning, before long Bronson was hospitably received by the Nagas who provided him with a house where he could live as well as teach. Hardly had he settled at Namsang, misfortunes one after another befall on Bronson's family. In October 1841, after a sojourn of eight months Bronson was compelled to "put up stakes and leave" the hills. From the closure of the Bronson's project, Naga mission was "moribund" for three decades until Godhula, an Assamese associate of Rev. E. W. Clark established the first church at Haimong among the Ao Nagas in 1872.<sup>6</sup> However, the first Naga to receive baptism at Sibsagar in 1847 was Hubi, a Konyak. Subsequent to this, in 1855 two other Konyaks were baptised, but they could not exercise any influence in extending Christianity amongst their fellow tribesmen.

Rev. E. W. Clark who had himself begun a "fruitful ministry" in 1878 at the Ao village of Molongyimsen (near Deka Haimong) endeavoured to evangelise the various tribes bordering on the Ao Nagas who were then beyond the administered area.<sup>7</sup> The Konyak Nagas who were adjacent to the Aos engaged his utmost attention. His first attempt in this direction met with failure. When Clark and his party arrived Tamlu, the villagers attacked the party by throwing spears at them. Fortunately Clark escaped with his life receiving only a minor injury in his toe.<sup>8</sup> The hostile attitude of the Konyaks could not deter Clark from taking the cause of these Nagas. He always considered the tribes in the unadministered areas as a very inviting field for missionary work. In his triennial Report (1890-2) writing on the 'Gospel Destitution about Assam' Clark urged the deputation of one missionary near Makum apparently for the Nagas left unattended since the closure of the Bronson's mission in 1841. Clark was confident that Bronson's preliminary books prepared in the Namsangea dialect would be very much serviceable to the missionaries in relation to these Nagas.<sup>9</sup> Since 1894 Impur (11 miles north of Mokochung) under the supervision of Clark has become the nerve-centre of Christian work for the Naga tribes bordering the Ao areas. In fact, the Ao Christian leaders and workers have been looking after the work of evangelising these tribes.<sup>10</sup>

"The beginnings of Christianity among members of new tribes", says F. S. Downs, "were almost always due to the work of members of other tribes rather than of foreign missionaries". "The Assamese were the first evangelists among the Ao Nagas and played an im-

portant role in the establishment of christianity among the Angamis ; Ao and Angami evangelists in their turn preaching to members of neighbouring tribes with whom they had previously fought."<sup>11</sup> Thus from the very beginning, the faithful Ao Christians extended their help and support in evangelising the Konyaks. Men and money were provided by the Ao churches. What was more, Ao language was commonly used for communication. The Ao Women's Association also gave financial help to young Konyaks to study at Jorhat Bible School.

Tamlu which opposed Clark was the first Konyak village to accept Christ and organise a church as early as 1932-33. A Konyak youth named Logna was persuaded by an Ao Christian to join Impur school to study and there he was baptised. Back to his village, he encouraged six other Konyaks to accept the new faith. In 1933, when Rev. Supong Wati and his young son in-law Longri visited Tamlu, they were all baptised.<sup>12</sup> Another important village Wanching was baptised through the efforts of a government interpreter named Pongyong. Pongyong was considered as a man of importance in his village. After his conversion several other villagers of Wanching confessed Christ. In 1946, a second church was established at Wanching under the leadership of Ongthai, a product of Impur school.<sup>13</sup> The establishment of the two churches and success in conversions unnerved the Konyak Angs (chiefs) who feared that Christianity would rob them of their powers and privileges and hence they opposed the works of the Christian workers. Notwithstanding their opposition, due to ceaseless works of the Ao Christians, they succeeded in making Wanching an important evangelic centre. Two young Konyaks - Mingkham and Thanglong, both products of the Jorhat Bible School were appointed local evangelists for active Christian work.<sup>14</sup>

In 1947 churches were established at Ponkong and Wakching, two other Konyak villages. In the later village, Manving, the assistant *gaonbura* was the first man to become Christian and within a month many others followed his example. Between 1947 and 1949, village after village accepted to follow Christ. In 1949, Kongan, another important village next to Wakching became christian. In this village also the *gaonbura* took the initiative for starting a primary school and two years later he became a Christian. Mingkham and Thanglong baptised about 69 village leaders. Within a year, in several other neighbouring villages Churches were established.<sup>15</sup>

P. T. Philip describes the conversions in the Konyak villages

as "an instance of real 'Wild fire' catching on in a corner of the world". Here the pattern of conversion was almost like a "village movement". If a prominent person of high social status accepted to become a Christian, the people loyal to him followed him without any second consideration.<sup>16</sup> This was typical of Konyak society. Sometimes evangelists belonging to other tribes, sent from Impur found it difficult to organise churches in the Konyak villages due to local feeling. "If you supervise from Impur, no body will become Christian", the elders of Wanching and Wakching told the foreign missionary Anderson in a meeting at Impure. "If we are supervised from Wakching, we will all become Christians. We will give land and all our help", they were reported to have said.<sup>17</sup>

February 1950 has been rightly described as a "landmark for the American Mission Work in Assam". The year is also a "turning point in the history of the Konyak Church". At the Golaghat Conference of the Council of the Baptist Churches in Assam, a "momentous decision" was taken to nationalise the entire programme of the American Baptist Mission.<sup>18</sup> Longri Ao, who was himself present in this conference and was engaged in drafting a constitution for the Council of the Baptist Churches in Assam urged his fellow delegates to take up the work of the mission so long freely given by the foreign missionaries for over a century in this part of the sub-continent. In this conference, the Council of the Baptist Churches in Assam took up the Konyak field as a missionary project of its own and Longri was commissioned as a missionary to the Konyaks with effect from November 1, 1950. About the needs of the Konyak people, he himself said :

A whole tribe is waiting for the light of the Gospel. It is a difficult field. After all these years there is only a handful of Christians. If this council will send us, my family and I am ready to go to the Konyaks as missionaries.<sup>19</sup>

In fact in Longri's own estimation the Konyaks "need Christ and love." But before embarking upon this new mission Longri had to acquaint himself with the basic needs of the people there. After a visit to the Konyak villages and also gathering information from a group of Ao Naga students Longri described the pitiable condition of the Konyaks in his letter to his wife Subokyimla :

There is so much sickness. They have no education. They are always afraid, even of each other, because of head-hunting raids. Their chiefs are cruel, demanding tribute from all the villagers. Above all, they live in constant dread of their priests. Many of the villagers are completely naked; they suffer from

cold and hunger.<sup>20</sup>

Even a century earlier Miles Bronson, the father of the Naga Mission before retiring from the Naga field appealed to the Home Board for deputing a missionary to these "perishing people" who needed Christ. Writing about the calibre required of such a missionary, he said—

We want the choicest the church has to consecrate ; men well disciplined in mind - well versed in the study of human nature of unflinching patience possessing a zeal that difficulties only will enkindle, man who can press onward to the accomplishment of an object for years amid every sacrifice and not faint ; not self-willed, not high minded, but ready to make any place appointed to them in the providence of God above all men of deep piety.<sup>21</sup>

Longri was convinced that the Konyaks "need a missionary who will share their sufferings and bring them a new life." He sincerely believed that God wanted him to be that man to take the responsibility of these unfortunate people.<sup>22</sup>

Accompanied by his wife and two young children, Longri left Jorhat for the land of the Konyaks on 10th February 1951. He occupied a thatched-bamboo house built for the family at the Konyak township of Wakching which had then a handful of Christian population. Though the small Christian community greeted the arrival of Longri and the Church assistants, the non-Christian villagers put all sorts of obstructions and hostile demonstrations. The village authorities threatened the Christian villagers with dire consequences, if they did not return to their traditional faith.<sup>23</sup> Longri asked his fellow Christians to love them as true Christians. He described them as "God's people" who besides the Gospel "need food and clothing" as most of them were almost naked. In every village visited by him "he sat with them, sharing their meagre fare, listening to their problems and learning about their woes." Longri's friendly concern and interest in them "earned him acceptance by the people". They in their turn developed utmost love and respect for him. The very group which opposed him on his first entry to Wakching not only accepted Christ but built 'my house already, although on a temporary basis, free of charge, providing free labour and materials.'<sup>24</sup>

From his first-hand knowledge of the Konyak villages he had realised that besides preaching and teaching, he would have to solve a few of their "most urgent needs". To add to the general poverty, he saw constant sickness and mortality all around. While address-

ing the gatherings, he had noticed that most of the people were "ravaged by small pox, reaked by the coughing tuberculosis, bent and crippled by untreated or wrongly treated diseases of many sorts. And the children, some had open sores on their bodies, or eyes festering with blindness-causing infections ; their bellies were distended from malnutrition ; often their noses were red and streaming from cold."<sup>25</sup> Doctoring the sick was considered by Longri a sacred task. He usually carried some stock of medicines on his visits to the villages and rendered medical help to the sick. Longri was shocked by another vice of the Konyaks-- their addiction to opium which was considered a matter of pride in their society. For the eradication of this evil, he particularly appealed to his workers and youths.<sup>26</sup>

Longri laid particular emphasis, on the opening of schools. "Wherever we had schools, there we won souls", he said. Side by side with the opening of schools, Longri started his programme of translation of the scriptures. Translation of St. John and St. Mathew were completed and by 1967, the four Gospels and the Book of Acts in one volume saw the light of the day. The Konyak hymnals and a few other books such as *The way to Salvation*, *The Daily strength* etc., were in use.<sup>27</sup> The literacy campaign launched by the Konyak Mission earned high approbation of the Government of Assam and the NEFA administration. Longri took interest in gardening and poultry farming. He introduced new vegetables like carrots, cabbages etc., and to get more meat and larger eggs encouraged rearing of Rhode Island Reds.<sup>28</sup> Mrs. Longri besides gardening encouraged weaving and cloth-making. About her other services, Longri says :

My wife often worked among the Konyak women teaching them to weave cloth, giving bath to the children, visiting homes in times of sickness and also teaching Gospel songs to the converts.<sup>29</sup>

After living a "most thrilling life" and working among the Konyaks, Longri retired from the active evangelic field to become the Executive Secretary of the Nagaland Baptist Church Council with effect from January 1967. Since then till his death on August 6, 1981, he served in different capacities, first as Executive Secretary in the aforesaid Council, then Director and President of the Nagaland Peace Council and General Secretary of the Council of the Baptist Churches of the North East India.<sup>30</sup> Till the time of his death, he retained his keen interest in the Konyaks. In his last letter written to Mankup two days before his death, Longri while

expressing his confidence in the Konyak Church leadership said that one day all Nagas will look up to the Konyaks."<sup>31</sup> While assessing the services of Longri Ao, it may be remembered that the day when he began his Konyak mission, the church membership was around one thousand one hundred organised under nine small churches. By the time he left the Konyak field in 1967 the total membership had risen to over 12,148 in sixty-two well-organised churches.<sup>32</sup> For this success Longri was never in the habit of taking the credit on himself. He always recalled with gratitude the services of his fellow workers. Longri's circular letter from Wakching in 1964 states :

For all the success that we have had this year the entire credit goes to my fellow labourers : Evangelist Mankup, my wife and especially the pastors who have been so faithful to the task entrusted to them under hard circumstances.<sup>33</sup>

Longri Ao who has become a legend in his time died on August 6, 1981 at Kohima at the age of 75. At his funeral services held at his native village Changki everyone recalled that the Konyaks discovered Christ through this illustrious son of Nagaland. When the news of the demise of this great man reached the Konyaks the whole tribe was 'plunged into deep mourning.' It was reported that while the Christians observed the mourning in their churches, the non-Christians in their *Morungs*. In the Wakching village August 9 was observed in such a solemn way that "not a single soul moved out of the village the whole day and all village activities were suspended". In many villages "the message of gloom" was proclaimed by the continuous beating of drums.<sup>34</sup>

Richard G. Beers says that "Longri was an evangelist first, last and always". He was not a politician and refused to be associated with any group or political party. O. M. Rao rightly puts that Longri was "essentially a churchman and saw every aspect of life including politics from the Christian point of view"<sup>35</sup> He had the utmost courage and conviction to espouse what was good for the Nagas. Being a Naga, he always "identified himself with his people whether in their weakness or triumphs". Longri had immense faith in the women and youths of Nagaland and urged them on different occasions to work for the creation of a new Nagaland. As a true Christian he wanted the solution of the vexed Naga problem through "love, understanding, patience, good will and brotherhood". For this people had immense faith in him and even the hard-core of the underground Nagas respected him.<sup>36</sup>

Longri Ao, unquestionably is the best example of national

leadership—a Naga missionary to the Nagas. Under his leadership the Konyak churches in particular achieved spectacular success. Longri knew to appreciate the “unique leadership pattern” of Konyak villages. Being aware of it, he profitably harnessed it to the cause of the Christian religion. It may be recalled that if a prominent person of high standing or social status elects to become a Christian, the people loyal to him follow suit. He always believed in personal preaching. He did not baptise or build a church until he could provide a pastor. “We must either go or send” was his motto. Similarly he always wanted a self-supporting, self-governing and financially stable church. The Church members are required to contribute tithes in kind to support pastors, teachers and help the poor and the needy. In every Konyak village in addition to the family granaries there were Church granaries which provided a stable financial base to the Konyak Churches.<sup>37</sup>

In retrospect under Longri's leadership Christianity spread like ‘wild fire’ upon the Konyak hills. This astounding success of Longri was not only due to his method of approach and personal qualities but to his sympathetic attitude towards “Naga way” of life. Longri being a Naga, knew the Naga's good as well as bad qualities, their tribal pride, democratic temperament and rich cultural traditions. Unlike some of the earlier missionaries he had an ‘open mind’ in regard to non-Christian form of worship. He did not regard these as heathen or pagan in conception and was prepared to adopt these to Christianity provided they were not basically inconsistent with Christian principles.<sup>38</sup> The *Morungs* or bachelor's dormitory, it may be said, are the nerve-centres of Naga community life; these are the meeting places of the men-folk, young and old. He had no inhibition like his earlier predecessors to enter them or use them for evangelisation. Rather during his preaching tours he used to persuade the village elders to allow him to address the men in the *Morungs* where he preached the new religion.<sup>39</sup> The propagation of Christianity on a familiar setting amidst Konyak symbols and customs paid high dividends. Village after village became Christians as the new religion promised them a different life and hope for a better future. In other words Longri “offered them Christ in their own cups and plates.”<sup>40</sup>

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7. S. K. Barpujari, "Christianity and its impact on the Nagas" in the *Tribes of N. E. India*, pp. 106-7, edited by S. Karotémprel.
8. Jubilee Reports of the Baptist Works in N. E. India (1836-1961), 125th Anniversary; P. T. Philip, *The growth of Baptist Churches in Assam*, 1972, pp. 151-2.
9. Triennial Report 1890-2, Gospel Destitution about Assam by Rev. E. W. Clark, pp. 223-4.
10. P. T. Philip, op. cit. pp. 152-3.
11. F. S. Downs, pp. cit., pp. 210-11.
12. F. S. Downs, *Mighty Works of God*, 1971, pp. 138-36.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. P. T. Philip, op. cit., 153-5.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. O. M. Rao, op. cit., p. 27 ; F. S. Downs, *Mighty Works of God*, pp. 184-5.
19. Beers G. Richards, *Walk the Distant Hills etc.*, 1968, pp. 40-1.
20. Ibid.
21. *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, May 1841, Vol. XXI, pp. 113-7.
22. Beers G. Richards, op. cit., pp. 50-1.
23. O. M. Rao, op. cit., pp. 33-4.
24. Ibid.
25. Beers G. Richards, op. cit., pp. 45-6.
26. P. T. Philip, op. cit., p. 155 ; O. M. Rao, op. cit., p. 47-8 ; V. Elwin, *Nagas in the 19th century*, 1969, p. 398.
27. O. M. Rao, op. cit., pp. 49-50.
28. Beer G. Richards, op. cit., pp. 47-8.
29. O. M. Rao, op. cit., p. 37.
30. Hailed as the Apostle of Peace, he continued as the President of the Peace Mission till the time of his death. On August 7, the Nagaland Council of Ministers posthumously conferred on him the title "The Man of Peace". (See News Weekly, *Platform*, Kohima, 13 August. 1981) ; B. Gohain "Rev. Longri

Ao—the Man of Peace”, *The Assam Tribune*, 3 September, 1981.

31. O. M. Rao, op. cit. p. 51. In this connection, it may be mentioned that Dr. Miles Bronson, the father of the Naga Mission retained his interest in mission work till his death. Bronson, who died on November 10, 1833 during his last illness in Eaton Rapids, Michigan, even in his delirium thought that he was in Nowgong “preparing to go in camp” (*Twenty years in Assam*, edited by Mrs. P. H. Moore 1901, p. 48).
32. P. T. Philip, op cit., p. 160.
35. O. M. Rao, op. cit., p. 49.
34. Ibid, p. 146.
35. Ibid. pp. 75-86.
36. O. M. Rao, op. cit., S. Ramabhai “Rev. Longri Ao” See Letters to the Editor, *The Assam Tribune*, 15 September 1981.
37. Ibid, p. 49.: Beers Richard, op. cit, p. 55.
38. C. V. F. Haimendorf *Naked Nagas*, 1946, p. 51 ; B. R. Choudhury, op. cit ; S. K. Barpujari, op. cit.
39. Beers G. Richard, op. cit., p. 53 ; O. M. Rao, op. cit. p. 35.