

# HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ISSUES IN THE STUDY OF THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY IN NORTH EAST INDIA

Frederick S. Downs

## New Perspectives on the Study of the History of Christianity in India

When, in 1973, the Church History Association of India formed an Editorial board to be responsible for producing a six volume History of Christianity in India (the first two volumes have been brought out) it was decided that this work should be undertaken in line with new thinking on how the history of Christianity should be studied that had been taking place in India during the previous decade. Accordingly, the Editorial Board brought out a statement of the perspectives from which the history would be written. Since I have been involved in the Editorial Board from an early stage, and since my own writing for the past ten years has been done in light of these perspectives, I would like to begin these comments by quoting portions of the statement on the new perspectives adopted by the Church History Association of India, Editorial Board. It represents both a critique of how historical writing on the history of Christianity in India has previously been done as well as a positive statement of the perspectives from which the church history would be written.

The History of Christianity in India has hitherto often been treated as an eastward extension of western ecclesiastical history. Stress has been laid upon either its internal history or upon its "foreign mission" dimension so that the Church is viewed as a relatively self-contained unit which acted upon and was acted upon by the society outside. In recent years a number of studies have shown that this perspective is in serious need of revision. It is now intended to write the history of Christianity in the context of Indian history.

The history of Christianity in India is viewed as an integral part of the socio-cultural history of the Indian people rather than as separate from it. The history will therefore focus attention upon the Christian people in India; upon who they were and how they understood themselves; upon their social, religious, cultural and political encounters; upon the changes which these encounters have produced in them and in their appropriation of the Christian gospel as well as in the Indian culture and society of which they themselves were a part.

Christianity rather than any one section of the Christian Church will form the other basic framework for study. Denominational diversities will not be ignored or played down, here too both common features of different denominational experiences in each period and region will be explored, and the growth of the ecumenical movement in India described so that their basic unity may be seen along with the diversities.

The main thrust of this new perspective is upon Christianity as a part of the socio-cultural history of India. The fact that it was initially brought by persons from other countries does not define the nature of Christianity in India. In this country it has an authentic existence of its own, and should be studied from that perspective if it is to be understood. While this perspective is an attractive and persuasive one, it creates a number of problems for the historian attempting to write along these lines. In the remainder of the time I would like to comment upon some of the problems I have encountered in attempting to research and write on the history of Christianity in North East India. I will deal first with the kinds of questions the new perspective leads the historian of Christianity in this region to ask, then discuss the problem of sources and, finally, the use of other disciplines.

## Questions

In the past the tendency has been to ask basically institutional questions. Who were the first missionaries? What was the nature of the denominations they represented? When and where did they first arrive? When was the first church established? When and where were churches, schools, hospitals established? How did the larger church structures develop? This type of question provides the basic chronology and framework of historical study but cannot go much beyond that. It provides some of the tools, but that is all, for the historian wishing to penetrate further into an understanding of the dynamic and meaning of the Christian movement among the peoples of North East India. The institutional/chronological approach (what might be called the jubilee souvenir approach) lacks the analytical dimension necessary to make a significant contribution to an understanding of the subject viewed from the new perspective.

The perspective which lays emphasis upon the dynamic interaction of Christianity and the Christian people within their cultural, social, political and economic contexts suggests many interesting questions on which almost no study at any level has been done by historians. Some examples of questions I have investigated in my recent research and writing may give an indication both of the scope and the significance the new perspective gives to historical study of Christianity in the North East.

1. Why did American Baptist missionaries who saw themselves primarily as evangelists get involved in the nineteenth century language agitation in Assam? My hypothesis is that they did so because they were convinced that the imposition of Bengali favored the elite and put the masses at a disadvantage. Since the elite included the Brahmins who were perceived to be the main

obstacles to their evangelistic purposes. This is, of course, a study of missionaries, but the focus is upon the interrelationship between the missionaries and the local socio-political situation the purpose of which is to understand motivation in terms of not only what the missionaries brought with them but also what they found here.

2. Why did the members of certain hill tribes respond positively to Christianity in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries? I have concluded that one cannot explain this apart from the threat to the traditional cultures posed by the imposition of British administration. Christianity served an acculturative role in helping the people adjust to the new situation when the old cultures could no longer serve that purpose.
3. Is there a relationship between the extensive involvement of Mizo Christians in missionary work outside their own area and the political objective of creating a larger Kuki-Chin-Mizo state? I supervised a Mizo student whose M.Th. thesis advanced the argument convincingly that there was a connection.
4. What influences have the traditional cultures had upon the historical development of Christianity among the peoples of North East India? It is clear from my studies, and those of my students that external appearances to the contrary, one cannot understand the development of Christianity in the region except within the context of the traditional cultures. I have done some work on the question of why Christianity grew more rapidly among the Mizos than any other tribe in the North East. I have developed a tentative hypothesis that it was because the revivals that have characterized the Christian history

in that area became instruments of indigenization. Consequently Christianity became more truly Mizo more rapidly than happened among other tribes.

5. I am currently doing research on what I hope will be a book studying the contribution Christianity has made to the development of positive inter-tribal, intra-tribal and extra-tribal relationships. Social anthropologists have shown some interest in the question of tribal solidarity movements recently, but they have not taken the role of Christianity seriously in the sense that they have not used Christian sources nor have they approached the subject historically.

The questions to be investigated from this new perspective are almost unlimited - and in my opinion far more interesting than the traditional institutional historical studies. They also make a more important contribution to the understanding of the significance of the Christian movement in the region.

### **The Problem of Sources**

One of the reasons why the more traditional institutional/mission histories are popular is because most of the documentary sources in common use provide direct evidence for that kind of study. The two main documentary sources are various kinds of mission/missionary materials and government materials. Even these are seldom used together. When "secular" historians touch upon the role of Christianity in the region (S. Chaube's *Hill Politics in North-East India*, is a case in point) they tend to use government sources (except for one or two secondary works, including my own books in recent years); when "church historians" write on Christianity they, in turn, use ecclesiastical (usually mission) sources almost exclusively and ignore the government

sources which for the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries contain much useful material. They don't even use the census reports. While it would certainly improve the quality of writing to utilize both these sources, this still will give materials produced from a western perspective.

The problem of getting local sources for the early history of Christianity in the North East is related to the fact that Christianity was introduced in pre-literature cultures. It takes time to develop the necessary skills to communicate through the written word with the result that local Christians produced very little documentation. Even what we do have was usually filtered through mission editors. There are nevertheless some valuable local church sources, naturally in the language of the people involved, that have hardly been touched by scholars - the preference being for English language books. One reason for this is that the churches themselves have often been indifferent to the preservation of such material. One could do an interesting study on why some tribes, like the Aos and Mizos for instance, are interested in preserving historical materials and others are not. An example of the disregard for the preservation of historically valuable material is provided by the discovery some years ago that workers in the Garo Baptist Convention Office in Tura were using old copies of the 'Achikni Ripeng' to wrap parcels! The 'Achikni Ripeng' is, I believe, the oldest periodical in a tribal language of the North East in continual publication - and, indeed, one of the oldest Christian periodicals in India. White ants and dampness and insurgencies and just plain indifference to its importance have destroyed local historical sources throughout the region. Nevertheless there is much material remaining that should not be overlooked by historians. One of the problems we face, of course, is the multiplicity of the languages in which such sources have been written. That is where a group of scholars like

those collected at NEHU can make an important contribution because collectively you have knowledge of many of the languages.

Another possible source is the personal papers of some of the early Christian leaders preserved by their families. Sometimes individuals also have copies of official church records, minutes and the like, that have not been preserved elsewhere. Another source is oral history. There is urgency in developing this source because it means getting accounts from those who were involved in important historical developments while they are still with us. This is an important source for us because in many areas of the North East Christianity is barely a generation old. Oral accounts are subject to the vicissitudes in the memory of the elderly, but when corroborated they can be of considerable value particularly to the extent that they are suggestive of further avenues of investigation.

When all of the above have been utilized, there is still relatively little material that helps us do history from a socio-cultural perspective. For this purpose we must, I am convinced, turn to other disciplines to provide us both with methodology and insights.

### **The Use of Other Disciplines by Historians**

A generation or so academic historians engaged in a heated debate as to whether they could properly use other disciplines in their work, or whether they should remain limited to the traditional, direct evidence provided by documentary sources. Some of the traditionalists would in grudging concede the limited value of oral history but that was all. Though among academic historians in India the traditionalist position has by and large been abandoned, historians of Christianity have tended to be more conservative in this respect. They by and large rely

simply on documentary sources, and usually documentary sources of ecclesiastical origin. If this limitation is accepted (even if government documentary sources are added) it will not be possible to do much more than institutional studies in the North East. Granted non-institutional questions can be asked of the mission and government sources, but that in itself is not enough.

If this position is taken then the historian misses important insights provided by the social sciences - particularly anthropology, social anthropology, sociology, political science and economics. When dealing with primal societies like those out of which the great majority of Christians in this region came, anthropology is especially helpful, particularly social anthropology. Combined with the insights and methodology of sociology, political science and economics the historian can receive much help. Studies of social movements are particularly valuable, insofar as the historical development of Christianity in the North East is most certainly one.

Of course, the social sciences mainly provide generalizations based on current observation and therefore constitute only circumstantial historical evidence. But when dealing with pre-literate societies that have not produced documentary sources of their own, such generalizations are often all that we have to go on. They may not provide hard data, but they do provide suggestive insights and new questions the historians may ask of the material. They must be tested with historical evidence, of course. One of their chief values is guiding us in the matter of what evidence we should be looking for.

Another way of corroborating historical hypotheses based upon the generalizations of the social sciences supported with available historical data is to submit it to the peoples themselves. The purpose of historical studies is to bring self-understanding. Do people see themselves reflected in the hypotheses the historian develops?