

Impact of the American Missionaries on the Women of North-East India 1836-1900

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This paper makes an attempt to examine the transmission of certain specifically Christian ideas into the socio-cultural life of the women of Assam during 1836-1900 and their influence on the women of the region. Influence of Christianity began to be felt in India with the advent of the East India Company's Rule in the mid-eighteenth century. As early as 1792 Charles Grant, a former official of the East India Company, had drawn a lurid picture of Indian society and emphasized the need for the introduction of Western education and Christianity among the Indian people. This time onwards there had been a marked increase in the activities of the Christian missionaries in spite of the fact that for political reasons the East India Company's Government did not encourage missionary activities. The first missionaries to arrive in Assam were Brown and Cutter who reached Assam on 23 March 1836. In their earnest desire to spread the gospel, the missionaries brought about a vast change in the socio-cultural life of the women of the North-East. A powerful and multi-faceted sisterhood of missionary agencies had taken shape in America at the close of the Civil War. The aim of these women evangelists was stated clearly thus :

*The object of this Society is to engage the earnest, systematic generation.... of women.... in sending out and supporting unmarried female missionaries and teachers to heathen women.*¹

By the middle of the eighteenth century the American women were familiar, if not conversant, with an entire vocabulary that implied the degradation of women : Zenanas and harems, female infanticide and suttee, concubinage and polygamy, bride-sale, child-marriage and slavery. To fight against such evils the American women organisations generally chose to send out unmarried or widowed women to heathen lands calling themselves "a great uprising of Christian women on behalf of their sex".²

Amongst those missionaries who came with such a perspective and pursued women's work with vigour in Assam, mention may be made of Misses Bronson, Keeler, Brandt, the Pursell sisters and Miss Amy at Nowgong and Mrs. Scott, Miss Rankin and Miss Sweet at Gauhati. They had brought a certain social per-

spective from newly independent America which had much to do with their crusade against the degradation of women. From the beginning, the missionaries, especially the missionary wives were so interested in the condition of women that emancipation of women appeared to have been one of their main objectives. Their genuine concern for the women of Assam was expressed in their letters and reports and books and consequently they acted in various ways to improve the status of women. When unmarried women (the Missahibs !) began to arrive, there was a further concentration on women's issues. Apart from the women even the missionary men like Carey and Miles Bronson are well-known in India for their concern about the women in this country. Undoubtedly the major areas in which contributions were made to the needs of women were health and education, but there was much more to the subject than that.

Though the missionaries mention that social evils like Sati and Kulinism were conspicuous by their absence in this region, the women had a degraded position in society and social evils like widow-hood, child-marriage and polygamy appear to have been widely prevalent. "Dark stuffy zenanas with their wan, listless hidden women - that world of untold tragedy and suffering. Girl babies thrown to the crocodiles of the Brahmaputra to appease the wrath of a God. Poor stricken mothers-of-girls cursed and dwelling apart"³ - such were the words used to describe the condition of the women of the plains. For the women of the Hills, life was a long day of labour with a short night of rest. They planted the rice and pounded it to free it from the husk, they carried water from the streams and wood from the jungle, fed the household, did the spinning and weaving. As Christianity advocated a more prominent and dignified role for women, the missionaries tried to influence the life-style in this area to a great extent. Their work was mainly conducted by means of schools, evangelistic or field work and medical work - a division not altogether correct. For the teacher and the doctor is very often the evangelist who went from house to house with the message of salvation.

With devotion, and at the expense of considerable sacrifice, the missionaries pioneered women's education and co-education. Invariably their first steps while establishing new station was to start a girls' boarding school. Thus just within three months of their arrival at Sadiya, Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Cutter were teaching girls and boys. By August 1937 Mrs. Brown had a girls' school in operation at Sadiya. Although at first the prejudice against educating girls was very great, she had on an average between ten to twenty scholars.⁴ When Miles Bronson started the "Nowgong Orphan Institute" in 1843, it was the first co-educational institute in the North East. Bronson explicitly referred to the needs of the women as the reason for starting this school. Though initially the missionaries had to limit their activities only to "Bazar girls", by the middle of the century they had succeeded in bringing about a change in the minds of the educated Assamese

regarding the need for imparting education to their wives and daughters.⁵ The missionary institutions prescribed a minimum schooling for girls where they were taught general subjects like mathematics, geography and history. They were also trained in the useful arts of singing, sewing, knitting, crochet work and weaving and crochet needles and pieces of patchwork for the purpose were often imported.⁶ An important point to bear in mind was that the missionaries made the use of the native dress compulsory in these schools thereby earning considerable goodwill from the public. The natives who saw the girls on way to Church heaved a sigh of relief as they remarked, "There now, we are glad to see you have on an Assamese dress. Let the belati luk wear belati shirts but the Assamese look better in their own dress."⁷ The girls themselves were delighted about the change from skirts to *mekhela-chadars* and took great pride in keeping their *mekhelas* clean.

In their efforts to promote women's education the missionaries often came face to face with an environment, turned hostile - an evidence of the local inhabitants' inability to find any meaning in this new idea. Though the girls' susceptibility to "cultivating influence" was abundant, the need for girls to help in household work and the lack of interest on the part of parents regarding education of their daughters, made progress in this line very slow. Education of girls in the plains was considered more dangerous than the Burmese invasion itself.⁸ This was most probably the result of a feeling that educated girls will not be subservient to the will of the father or the husband or their whetted appetite for jobs outside the house would considerably increase the household expenditure. Missionaries faced considerable hardship in collecting girls for their schools. Miriam E. Burdette writing from the Garo Hills reported that she travelled from village to village for several nights but found no prospect of getting scholars. "The people were cordial and friendly, but when the school was mentioned they were silent. The girls were anxious to go but their friends opposed them."⁹ Even as late as 1887, Miss O. Keeler met with opposition in her attempt to educate girls in the Mikir Hills where she was told that it was "not their custom to have the girls know anything except to cook, weave and work in the rice-fields."¹⁰ An attempt to send a Khasi girl to Calcutta for medical education did not succeed because of opposition from all her people.¹¹

As the number of schools increased they became something much more than just a place where a mere number of girls learnt to read and write. Being hemmed in by missionary influence while in school, the girls sought to assert themselves as individuals when back to the degrading influences of their own society. Miles Bronson talking of the Nowgong school clearly stated that his effort was "to shut these children out from heathen influence from early life"¹² These schools provided shelter to orphans, especially girls, whose only other place most probably would have been in a prostitute's house. Here many girls found an escape to early marriage and some instances prove that girls from these schools

were married to educated native Christians and had much better homes than they could otherwise dream of. Talking of their achievement in this regard, Mr. Pitt, while addressing the closing ceremony of a Girls' Boarding School at Nowgong in 1910 commented, "The aim of our school is the enlightenment of the women of Assam. When we came here in January 1880 there were only three girls in the Boarding Department and the school was held for a couple of hours in the early morning. There are now eighty pupils in the school' including fifty boarders, ten lady missionaries have been here in the last thirty years, and they have all helped to increase the usefulness of the School, which now has a Kindergarten, Lower Primary, Upper Primary, and Middle Vernacular Department".¹³ In spite of meagre numbers in higher education, the mission schools could boast of taking the lead in female education in the state. Miss Keeler's school in Nowgong saw the first girl pass the Government Examination and in 1886 four girls passed this examination from amongst whom one of the girls was sent to Calcutta to take a medical course of study under the Lady Dufferin Fund. This was also the first step taken towards educating women as physicians.¹⁴ In the Nowgong Station School there were two girls studying for the Teachership Examination for females. The appended tables show the attendance and results of the Government examination for the Nowgong Mission Girls' School for the year 1898-1900.

Table showing attendance at the Nowgong Mission School

Year	Total pupils on the roll, 31 March	Average on the rolls for the year	Average daily attendance	Amount of Government's Grant-in-Aid
1898-99	32	32.5	25	Rs. 120/-
1899-1900	32	31.8	27.34	Rs. 120/-

Table Showing attendance at Nogong Station School¹⁵

Examination & year	No. who appeared at the examination	No. who passed the examination
Upper primary		
1898-99	1	1
1899-1900	2	1
Lower primary		
1898-99	3	3
1-1900	-	-

Even in a place like the Mikir Hills by 1901-1902 out of fifty-nine students on the roll in the school there fifty six were boys and three were girls.¹⁶

With the increase in numbers, a gradual attitudinal change towards women's education could also be perceived. "Formerly a large number of girls came to school either to be supported or to find a husband, and it was difficult to keep them in school more than two or three years. Now they look forward to finishing the course at school. . . . Formerly marriage was the all engrossing thought. Now a feeling of comradeship exists between boys and girls in school relations, and a healthy interest in school pursuits."¹⁷ Girls were often the brightest in the class. Dobaki, niece of Ramse, availing herself of all the school privileges provided in those days, became an assistant teacher until her marriage, when she and her husband Bakal, kept house in an almost European style. They had a bathroom, bedstead, comfortable bedding, a fair supply of dishes, numerous books on shelves, boxes for clothing and all kept in good order. Left a widow, Dobaki even looked after her husband's business and supported her family by teaching in a girls' school. In 1902 she became the matron of a girls' boarding school at Tura and occasionally wrote beautiful articles for the *Achikni Repeng* and associational gatherings. Mr. Mason says of her 'She was a marvel in ability to manage and teach a school when boys were never supposed to yield to the control of a woman. She taught a large primary school, mostly boys, many of whom were older than herself, and yet I never know of a single case of insubordination even of showing disrespect.'¹⁸

In their attempt to educate girls, the missionaries were supported whole-heartedly by the British Government and a report to the Baptist Foreign Mission Society reads, "In Assam we have an unusual opportunity in that the British Government has become keenly alive to the importance of educating girls, and in joining with us in providing school buildings and equipments. If women in America knew what a stir their girls' mission schools at Nowgong and Gauhati are making among the English officials they would be proud, and would quickly embrace the opportunity now before them, I know of no place in the World where women's work for women and girls gives such promise."¹⁹

Yet the task before the missionaries was stupendous and the women and girls would need two hundred years to get into schools at the rate of two thousand a day.²⁰ If one considered educational activities to be one of the chief ways for promoting education of girls, we find the result not too encouraging as far as the numbers were concerned. From the General Report on Public Instruction in Assam for 1904-05, we find that the percentage of girls attending schools to all those of school going age was only 1.41 %, while only one out of four thousand was reading above the Lower Primary level.²¹ The missionaries themselves felt that 'the measure of success in this field was not at all impressive and . . . nothing but the sunny side has been presented in our communications home until the church was all deceived about this missions.'²² The magnetic element at the core of all attraction to these schools appeared to have been the possibility of finding a good educated husband. Often the missionaries have admitted that, 'We have failed to

appreciate the longing of the girls in our schools to get married they care very little to whom so may they marry - only be married."²³ Consequently a very few flourished beyond the initial expectation to increase the prestige of the schools. It was difficult to keep the girls long enough to give them more than the merest rudiments of education, as they were mostly quite well grown when they come and either they or their parents soon began to be anxious that they should marry.²⁴ The girls sent to such an asylum were subjected to a frightening confinement. "They never go to the Bazar or off from the Mission premises without a safe and trustworthy attendant, not out of their rooms after ten o'clock in the evening."²⁵ Official missionary reports stating that "girls have been successfully married off," often reer to elopment cases as proved by their private correspondence. There are numerous instances of girls eloping from such schools and becoming a liability which compelled the missionaries to cry in desperation, "If you catch me having anything more to do with girls boarding Schools. Our lives are constantly vexed by those girls. ²⁶ perhaps such wre the reasons why at the jubilee Session of the Baptist Mission Conference held at Nowgong in 1886, Mr. Jones strongly opposed the opening of boarding-schools for girls even in the Hill areas, though he admitted that a firm treatment would avoid the danger in the hills, though there would be more difficulty in the plains."²⁷

The sore spot about the Missionary Schools was that the Girls were drawn into these institutions to be brought up by aliens and taught alien ways by teachers of an alien religion. This spread a hostile influence which undermined the utility of these schools. While working to start a new kindergarden and a boarding school at Gauhati in 1920 Ella Marie Holmes was harshly criticized. The old Indian boarding-schools were decried as denationalizing institutions where the students were usually housed in a single dormitory with cement floors, they slept on iron cots, their food was prepared in one portion for the whole school and their clothing was sent out to be laundered. Many of the Christian boys and teachers preferred to marry uneducated girls rather than take a wife whose training in such a boarding school unfitted her for a happy, helpful living in the typical Indian home — a little house of mud walls and floors, beds of bamboo and a rounded ground for a stove. The old boarding school girl did not know how to keep the mud floor beautiful with the smear of thin mud ; after having slept some years on a woven spring mattress she was not easily reconciled to the hard bamboo bed ; neither did she know how to cook in the small family portions, nor how to keep the clothing of her household clean.²⁸

Perhaps it was the realization of their failure to successfully promote women's education in Assrm, which considerably increased the importance of zenana or field work after 1876. From the very beginning the zenana was used to rationalise the very creation of an autonomous woman's foreign mission crusade. Women missionaries might enter these private female domain while male missionaries could not. Thus the penetration of the

they did this they drew up certain laws protecting the christian women. Girls had to assume the responsibilities and duties of a home at an early age. This robbed the girls of her opportunities of education and often also of her health making her responsible for human lives and destitutes. The missionaries were struck with genuine remorse to see the condition of these girls. Kunti, a victim of early marriage from the Sibsagar boarding School, has scarcely seen a well day".⁴¹ Talking of another young girl Roma, Mrs. Brown regretted that "..... indeed since the birth of the last child she has scarcely seen a well day..... It is quite pitiful to see such a little young puny creature with the care of two babies..... I do wish there was any way to keep our girls from being married before they came to their full growth"⁴² Therefore, as a corollary to pioneering women's education the missionaries made an earnest effort to prevent early marriages. In their eagerness to prevent child marriages the Assam Baptist Missionary Conference which held its session at Gauhati in 1920, passed a Resolution that "We as a conference recommend that our Christian Community observe sixteen years as the minimum age limit for the solemnizing of the marriage of girls and exert influence towards this end".⁴³

Women's recreations were chiefly found within the home and consisted mainly of reading folk-tales or fortune. "Very few Assamese women chafed at their imprisonment To be 'purdah' is aristocratic... and their seclusion is a mark of proper care on the part of their men"⁴⁴ Such age old reserves and customs were the Assamese women's religion. Significantly therefore, in dealing with such customs the missionaries could not afford to be abrupt lest the delicate roulets of a feasible friendship were hurt. However, on issues like polygamy, the Assam Baptist Missionary Conference which held its twenty fifth session at Golaghat, passed a Resolution that, "in the opinion of the Assam Baptist Missionary Conference, the practice generally followed in its several areas should be continued as its approved policy, viz. 1 (a) person living in a State a polygamy are not admitted to church membership".⁴⁵

Sale of girls appears to have been prevalent, specially among some tribes like the Nagas. The missionary accounts mention numerous cases where they have saved young lives. Proba and Leci, girls of five and seven respectively had lost their mother. Their father, an opium addict was negotiating to sell them to a Mohammedan for ten rupees. The latter probably would have kept the girls as house servants till they were of thirteen or fourteen years of age when he would have sold them to some fellow Mohammedan for wives, receiving between forty to sixty rupees. Brought under missionary care Proba married a christian while Leci completed her training as a nurse and served in the first women's hospital at Gauhati.⁴⁶ To prevent the occurrence of such incidents the missionaries narrated the pathetic incidents of the lives led by slave girls in their Sunday schools. Mile Bronson narrated the life of Nancy Ahugogni, a Naga slave girl in a

Sunday school meeting at Nowgong.⁴⁷

Opium and liquor consumption for purposes of intoxication was a common practice amongst the men and women of Assam. While the former was more in use in the plains, drunkenness was a tribal weakness and almost a universal habit. In some tribes the liquid was poured into the mouth of the babies as soon as they could swallow.⁴⁸ Generally during illness men and women took a dose of opium after trying all other remedies. When they felt better they were not willing to abandon the opium habit and even when missionaries offered medicines they did not wish to take help as they had no genuine desire to give up this habit.⁴⁹ The genuine sympathy of the missionaries with the misery of the people caused by opium consumption made them strong antagonists to the British Government's policy of making revenue out of the opium traffic. Ella Marie Holmes narrates how during her first year she took a little girl about two weeks old. "She had been found newly born, in the bazaar, by sweepers early one morning. Had the little waif been a boy some soulless sire would surely have adopted her as own. In 16 000 inhabitants, there is no orphanage, no Hindu or Mahammedan hospital for humans, nor do those who profess these two religions support the Government hospital, except by providing patients. Yet there is a hospital for aged, injured and sick cattle, for cows are sacred to Hindus".⁵⁰ The little discarded girl was taken to the *thana* from where the policeman took her to a prostitute. Ten days later the Superintendent of police enquired whether the missionaries would adopt her. The following morning at 10 AM the policeman came with three prostitutes one of whom produced the baby from the folds of her drapery. The child was asleep at the time and it appeared that the baby had not been cleaned since birth. After warm oil was applied the baby was wrapped up in a clean white sheet and put to sleep. When she did not wake up till 5 PM the missionaries appeared perturbed, but it was explained to them that probably before the policeman went for the baby, the women had given her opium so as not to be bothered with her crying.⁵¹ There are numerous instances of daughters of inveterate opium eaters being taken care of in the mission schools. The expenses involved to clothe and feed each child where they were also taught to read and write, amounted to about twenty five dollars a year.⁵² At a conference in Lakhimpur, the Baptist church expressed its determination to deal firmly with the opium curse by stating that no new candidate who is not free from the use of opium would be considered for baptism, and that till a man or woman gives the clearest proof of having given up the habit of opium within three months of the warning given, he or she would be excluded from the community immediately.⁵³

Yet after seventy years of sacrifice, at the cost of immense sums of money in building schools, supporting girls' boarding houses, orphanages, widow homes in addition to the expenses incurred in maintaining the missionaries, it would be worthwhile to examine the overall results. The Christian missionaries came from an American cultural background and when they started

working amongst the people of Assam the two cultures came to a clash. As the missionaries absolutized Western culture they could not see anything really good in other cultures, especially in the primitive tribal cultures. Therefore there was a tendency to decry everything traditional. The Census Report of 1931 observes, "It is a part of the tendency to abolish old things just because they are old and substitute for the strong communal feelings which has enabled the tribes to survive for so long, an individualism which is really foreign to them. Not only is the individualism wrapped up with the strong emphasis on personal salvation, it is also the direct and natural reaction against the destruction of old things that mattered in the village life and all old expressions of artistic and social genius of the tribe".⁵⁴

As the missionaries denounced tribal music and tribal dance as devilish, those two important tractors of culture seem to have been completely discarded. The regular church music in most of the tribal areas is mostly foreign and the Khasis, Garos, Nagas or Mios prefer European music to their own traditional music. Girls were taught motion songs (or drills) with organ accompaniment which was very new to their culture.⁵⁵ The task of implanting a new type of music into the native blood was a stupendous task and sometimes the missionaries have been forced to utter in despair "when these small folk, used to the peculiar music of their people, try to sing English tunes the result is discord. Marching to music is a struggle as yet unrewarded, skipping is a queer forced stunt, our games are new and strange, and many of our occupations are bluntingly and crudely performed."⁵⁶

Though tribal Christians were allowed to retain certain social customs like habits of food or marriage customs or kinship, yet, the tribal Christians were forced to give up some external practices. Speaking of the Christian missions in the Manipur areas Elwin remarks, "In recent years the adoption of some kinds of Western dress is almost inevitable as a token of conversion as Bible reading and singing hymns. In Manipur, the missionaries insisted on their converts abandoning their traditional way of dressing hair".⁵⁷ The thick, solid, brass-wire rings, sometimes weighing nearly five pounds, was the Garo woman's pride and she would not part with them under any condition. Yet the Christian women have now discarded these rings and in most cases, where the use of these rings had deformed the ear, the women have had their earlobes cut away or reshaped.⁵⁸ Moreover, the Garo women have generally increased their wardrobe. Weaving generally occupied a great deal of time for the women of the plains and almost all household linen as well as the silken garments of the women were produced at home. But with the beginning of missionary activities among women, hand sewing machines became common and the women learnt to cut and make garments, rather than weaving. Many did embroidery work, while others crocheted lace for their petticoats and ties to hang over the chair backs and mirrors. These handicrafts were definitely foreign and were learnt from the girls at school.⁵⁹ Father Macnaughten has rightly

explained the function of the church as not to civilize aboriginals in the sense of imposing upon them a Western way of life that is alien to them. It is rather to draw out the distinctive qualities within them and help those to grow and flower.⁶⁰

In spite of all this, however, it must be admitted that christianity caused a revolution in the ideals and outlook of Indian women which was supplemented by modern education, medicine, business and Government. The missionaries symbolized hospitals, education and a larger and richer material life. The poorly-clad, low-caste urchins gradually learnt to live a communal life, to work and play together without quarrel and clashing. Some learned to speak and finding that it pays they spoke eloquently to fight for their rights. Others have begun to open their eyes wide with interest to tales of animal and plant life, to accounts of people of other lands. Yet others have started writing and using their pens vigorously.

In the wake of evangelization, came better homes and higher aims in life. The four walls of the zenanas gradually extended to a broader horizons as the girls educated in these mission schools, made much better mothers who trained their children to play fair and speak truth and have much better things to do in life than idle gossip.

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