

HISTORY  
OF THE  
CATHOLIC CHURCH  
AMONG  
THE KHASIS

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Dr. GEORGE MALIEKAL SDB

**HISTORY  
OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH  
AMONG THE KHASIS**

**A Multi-dimensional Study  
of the Khasi Tribe of Northeast India  
in its Response to the Catholic Missionary Activities  
during the period 1890-1959**

**DR. GEORGE MALIEKAL, SDB**



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## PREFACE

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Jesus Christ, the full revelation of the Father, made it imperative on his disciples to make the Good News of Salvation known to "all nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Lk 24:47). He inaugurated the new phase of divine-human collaboration for the complete realization of the Kingdom of God on this earth by commissioning men to be his Good News bearers: "Go out to the whole world; proclaim the gospel to all creation ..." (Mk 16:15). The past, nearly 2000 years of the existence of the Church, has been the carrying out of this mission of Jesus. The evangelizing mission has been at the heart of the Church. In fact, the life of the Church has been a continuous saga of living and preaching the Good News of Jesus in all the vicissitudes of human existence. This mission crosses the limits of oceans and mountains, and embraces all the races and cultures of the world.

It can be said that the recording of the missionary activities of the Church constitutes the 'biography' of the Church. In the words of Pope Paul VI (1963-1978), "It is Christ who operates in time and who writes, He Himself, His story through our papers which are echoes and traces of this passage of the Church, of the passage of the Lord Jesus in this world. Thus, having veneration for these papers, documents, archives, means having veneration for Christ, having a sense of the Church; it means giving to ourselves and those who will come after us the history of the passage of this phase of "*transitus Domini* in the world"<sup>1</sup>.

In this work, I have made an attempt to trace the *transitus Domini* among a group of people called the Khasis, in Northeast India. The Catholic missionaries arrived among the Khasis in

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Paul VI in his Allocution to the Ecclesiastical Archivists in Rome, 26 September 1963.

1890. The first missionaries were all from Germany, belonging to the *Societas Divini Salvatoris* (Society of Divine Savior). In 1915 the SDS missionaries were expelled from India due to World War I. As an interim arrangement the Santa Sede entrusted the missions of the Assam Prefecture to the care of the Belgian Jesuits of Calcutta. After a laborious search for missionaries, the Propaganda Fide requested the *Societas S. Francisci Salesii* (Salesians of Don Bosco) to take care of the Assam Mission. The first group of Salesians of Don Bosco reached Shillong in 1922. With the arrival of the Salesians in the region, the missionary activities among the Khasis and other tribes of Northeast India received a great boost and the Catholic Church began to experience a phenomenal growth.

This work is meant to be a source book for the knowledge of the Catholic mission history of the Khasis. As the sub-title indicates, it is 'a multidimensional study of the Khasi Tribe of Northeast India in its response to the missionary activities of the Salvatorians and the Salesians of Don Bosco during the period 1890-1959'. The writing of this book has been a laborious and painstaking process. It is more a result of the lived missionary experience of the author in the region. The lived experience is transcribed onto the pages of this book in a scientific way, using the narrative, analytical method of historiography. In this process, I depended greatly on the relevant source materials found in the various archives, ecclesiastical and civil, in India and abroad, especially in Italy and Germany. The lack of organized and specific statistics related to the Church among the Khasis made the research and the writing of the book all the more difficult.

I owe a great deal of gratitude to several persons for having been able to complete this work. I believe it has been the grace of God and His boundless blessings that sustained me in my study and research. I experienced God's blessings through many persons, who assisted me in various ways in accomplishing this work. My sincere thanks are due to the moderator of my doctoral thesis, Rev. Fr. López-Gay Jesús SJ, a renowned scholar of the

Mission History of the Church and a long serving Professor at the Faculty of Missiology of the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome. He also lectures at the Sophia University, Tokyo, and many other International Universities and Institutes. He renders his service as a member of the Advisory Commission to the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. His knowledge of the mission history and his love for the missions helped me greatly in my research and the writing of the thesis. His suggestions were apt and corrections fraternal.

I am grateful to my Professors at the Faculty of Church History of the Pontifical Gregorian University for the knowledge that they have imparted to me and the interest that they have generated in me to pursue research in the field of Church History. I would like to express my thanks in a special way to Rev. Fr. Benítez Josep M. SJ, the previous Dean of the Church History Faculty (1997-2003) and to Rev. Fr. Ingot Marek SJ, the present Dean of the Faculty (2003-).

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I owe a great debt of gratitude to several other persons who helped me at the various archives in the course of my research. I place on record those persons in charge of the Archivium de Propaganda Fide (Rome), the Archivium Generale Salvatorianum and the Archivium Postulationis Salvatorianum (Rome), the Archiv

Salvatorkollegs (Bad Wurzach, Germany), the Archivium Romanum Societatis Iesu, Rome, the Archivio Salesiano Centrale (Rome), the Salesian Provincial Archive (Guwahati, India), the Salesian Provincial Archive (Calcutta, India), the Catholic Archdiocesan Archive of Shillong (India), the Parish Archives of Raliang, Jowai, Cherrapunjee, Nongstoin and several others. I am grateful to George Plathottam SDB, my companion and friend, who made available to me several research materials from India.

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I dedicate this work as a grateful homage to all the courageous persons, priests, brothers, sisters, and lay catechists, who, challenged by the Gospel Message, dared to be missionaries in Northeast India, especially among the Khasis. I wish this work to be a lasting testimony to the missionary heroes of yester years and a source of inspiration for the present and future generations in Northeast India.

## ABBREVIATIONS

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AAS	Acta Apostolicae Sedis
ACS	Atti del Capitolo Superiore (della Pia Società Salesiana)
AGS	Archivium Generale Salvatorianum
AK	Apostelkalendar
ALG	Apostolische Lehrgesellschaft
APF	Archivium de Propaganda Fide
APS	Archivium Postulationis Salvatorianum, Roma.
ARSI	Archivium Romanum Societatis Iesu
ASC	Archivio Salesiano Centrale, Roma
ASS	Acta Sanctae Sedis, Roma 1865-1908
BM	Biographical Memoirs of St. John Bosco
BS	Bollettino Salesiano, 1878 ss.
CFC	Congregatio Fratrum Christianorum
CHAI	Church History Association of India
CIC	Codex Iuris Canonici, Roma 1917; 1983
CLC	Christian Literature Center
DBCIC	Don Bosco Center for Indigenous Culture (Shillong)
DM	Der Missionar
DSS	Documenta et Studia Salvatoriana
GM	Gioventù Missionaria
IBVM	Institute of Blessed Virgin Mary (Loreto Sisters)
IMR	Indian Missiological Review
ISPCK	Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
ISS	Istituto Storico Salesiano
KLG	Katholische Lehrgesellschaft
LAS	Libreria Ateneo Salesiano
LDC	Libreria Dottrina Cristiana

MA I	Mission Assam - Band I
MA II	Mission Assam - Band II
MB	Memorie biografiche di San Giovanni Bosco, 19vol.
MEP	Societas Parisienis missionum ad exterar gentes (Missioni Estere di Parigi)
MO	Memorie dell'Oratorio (di S.Francesco di Sales)
MSMHC	Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians
MT	Mission Today
NEFA	North East Frontier Agency
OC	Ordo Charitatis
OSB	Ordo Sancti Benedicti
OSFC	Ordinis Sancti Francisci Capuccini
PF	Propaganda Fide
PIME	Pontificium Institutum pro Missionibus Esteris
RNDM	Religieuses de Notre Dame des Missions
SAI	Societas Catholica Instructiva
SC	Scritture riferite nei Congressi (di SCPF)
SCOG	Scritture riferite nelle Congregazioni Generali (di SCPF)
SCPF	Sacra Congregazione de Propaganda Fide
SDB	Societas S. Francisci Salesii (Salesians of Don Bosco)
SDS	Societas Divini Salvatoris
SGG	Die Salvatorianer in Geshichte und Gegenwart (1881-1981)
SEI	Società Editrice Internazionale
SJ	Societas Jesu
SM	Salvatorianische Mitteilungen
SVD	Societas Divini Verbi

## INTRODUCTION

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### 1. The General Context of the Study

At the conclusion of the Jubilee Year 2000 Pope John Paul II affirmed: "Christianity is a religion rooted in history! "It was in the soil of history that God chose to establish a covenant with Israel and so prepare the birth of the Son from the womb of Mary 'in the fullness of time' (Gal 4:4). Understood in his divine and human mystery, Christ is the foundation and center of history, he is its meaning and ultimate goal. It is in fact through him, the Word and image of the Father, that 'all things were made' (Jn 1:3; cf. Col 1:15)"<sup>1</sup>. It was the final testament of Christ to permeate every culture and society with the Good News brought by him (cf. Mt 28:19-20). Thus, it became the mandate of the Church to proclaim the Gospel Message to all peoples and at all times (cf. Mk 16:15). In fact, the history of the Church is a compendium of its efforts 'to preach' and 'to live' the message of Christ in all the continents.

The Gospel Message reached the southern part of the sub-continent of India during the Apostolic Period<sup>2</sup>. But it was several centuries later that the Northeastern region of India received the Good News of Jesus Christ. In this dissertation, I have attempted to trace out in a scientific way a part of the history of the Catholic Church among a particular tribe known as the Khasis, whose habitat is the state of Meghalaya, in the Northeastern region of India.

<sup>1</sup> Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, §1.5.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed reading of the origins of Christianity in India, Cf. A.M. MUNDADAN, *History of Christianity in India, vol.1, From the Beginning up to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century*.

## 2. The Topic

The title of the book is 'History of the Catholic Church Among the Khasis'. Almost the entire habitat of the Khasi people is found in Meghalaya, one of the states of Indian Union. Meghalaya, literally meaning the 'abode of clouds' (in Sanskrit language 'Megha' means cloud and 'Alaya' means abode), was declared a state of the Indian Union on 21 January 1972. The State is home for two major tribes, the Khasis and the Garos. The title 'Khasis' is used in a broad sense to include several sub-groups, which are classified under the classical anthropological division called the Proto Austroloid Monkhmer race<sup>3</sup>. The Khasis came in contact with Christianity at the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Christian missionaries under the patronage of the Baptist Missionary Society of England were the earliest to bring the Gospel Message to the Khasi people. In 1841 the Welsh Presbyterian Missionaries began working among the Khasis.

It was in 1890 that the first Catholic Missionaries set foot in the Khasi Hills, which formed a part of the Apostolic Prefecture of Assam established in 1889. The earliest Catholic Missionaries to work among the Khasis were the members of the Societas Divini Salvatoris (Society of Divine Savior). The beginnings were filled with hardship. But, with heroic missionary zeal, they began to plant the Church among the Khasis. At the outbreak of World War I, the SDS Missionaries were removed from Assam and in 1915 they were expelled from India. The Belgian Jesuits from Calcutta assumed the temporary care of the Catholic missions in the Assam Prefecture. After the War, the SDS missionaries and

<sup>3</sup> According to Dr. B.S. Guha, the population of India is derived from six main ethnic groups. The classical division of races in India are (1) Negrito (2) Proto-Australoid or Austric (3) Mongoloid (4) Mediterranean or Dravidian (5) Western Brachycephals and (6) Nordic Aryans. Cf. K.M. MATHEW, ed., *Manorama Year Book 2002*, 542-543.

Detailed study on the anthropological and other aspects of the Khasis is included in Ch.1 of the thesis.

the Church authorities made great efforts for the return of the SDS missionaries to Assam. But all the efforts for their return failed. In 1922 the Sacra Congregazione de Propaganda Fide entrusted the Assam Prefecture to the care of the Societas Sancti Francisci Salesii (Salesians of Don Bosco).

## 3. The Sub-Title

The sub-title of the work 'A Multi-Dimensional Study of the Khasi Tribe of Northeast India in its Response to the Catholic Missionary Activities during the Period 1890-1959' defines the scope and specifies the content of the research. With the arrival of the Salesians of Don Bosco in the region in 1922, the missionary activities among the Khasis received a great boost and the Catholic Church began to take deep roots among them. The successive decades witnessed several important phases of growth of the Catholic Church in the region. The response to the Gospel Message was more positive among the Khasis than among other groups in the region. The present thesis exposes the different phases of growth of the Catholic Church among the Khasis and analyses the multi-dimensional transformation of the Khasi society as a result of the missionary activities. The period of the research concludes with the year 1959. In 1959 the Salesian Province of North India was divided into two: the Salesian Province of North India with Calcutta as its headquarters and the Salesian Province of Gauhati, which included the region of the Khasi Hills.

## 4. Motivations for the Choice of the Topic

The growth and the influence of the Catholic Church among the Khasis, in a relatively short period, is phenomenal. It is essential to register in writing, with possible scientific accuracy, the process of this growth. There is very little done in this matter. In fact, the region of Northeast India and its people is very little known to the rest of India and to the world.

B.G. Verghese, a critic and scholar of the region, expresses this concern: "Read 'Indian history as it is taught and you will scarcely know the Northeast exists'... The Northeast has in turn remained somewhat more cocooned and insular than even its circumstances warrant..."<sup>4</sup>. Hence, it is one of the aims of the thesis to shed a little more light on the region and the people of Northeast India.

It is beyond any doubt that the Christian missionaries, both Protestant and Catholic, have done great work in the region. Their contributions, not only for the spread of Christianity but also for the overall development of the people of the region, are acknowledged. But the historiography of the work of the missionaries in the region, especially of the Catholic missionaries, is very limited. Mgr. Christoph Becker SDS, the first Prefect Apostolic of Assam, had done a laudable work in writing the *Im Stromtal des Brahmaputra*. In this work Becker tried to shed light on the people of the region and the great missionary work, which the SDS missionaries did among them. While describing the region and the people of the region, his sources were limited; he depended mainly on his own personal experiences. I have incorporated in my thesis the results of the researches on the people of the region up to the recent times. Orestes Paviotti SDB, who was a missionary in the region for more than fifty years, has written *The Work of His Hands: The Story of the Archdiocese of Shillong-Gauhati (1934-1984)*. His work contains a lot of information on the missionary activities, especially of the Salesians of Don Bosco, in the region. But it is more like a popular chronicle of the Archdiocese than a narrative history. There are several other biographies of missionaries who worked in the region, and other accounts related to the missionary achievements in Northeast India. They are all of a general nature. I have tried to focus the attention on

<sup>4</sup> B.G. VERGHESE, *India's Northeast Resurgent*, 280.

the Khasis in their response to the missionary activities of the Salesians of Don Bosco during the period 1922-1959.

There is also a personal reason in choosing this particular theme. Northeast India is the mission field where the Lord has called me to dedicate my life. I lived 12 years of my Salesian and priestly formation period in the region and dedicated the first years of my priestly life for the people of Northeast India. The first hand knowledge of the region and the people and my personal rapport and love for them motivated me to choose this theme.

## 5. The Schema of the Study

The work is divided into five chapters. The first chapter describes the Khasi tribe in the context of Northeast India. Their origin, history, language, religion and other anthropological, social and political aspects are discussed in a scientific way, with a view to make known their tribal identity to a larger number of readers. Special attention is given to the multi-dimensional changes that the Khasi society was facing at the arrival of the Christian missionaries among them. These changes had a great influence in their attitude towards Christianity, particularly, towards the Catholic Church. The second chapter describes the first contact of the people of the region, including the Khasis, with Christianity. The chapter also summarises the work of the SDS missionaries among the Khasis. The third and the fourth chapters focus on the missionary activities of the Salesians of Don Bosco among the Khasis and the growth of the Church among them till the year 1959. The fifth chapter is a critical appraisal of the Catholic mission history of the Khasis and it concludes with certain observations of new paradigms for the future of the Catholic missionary activities among the Khasis.

The first part of the Appendix contains five relevant maps, geographical and anthropological, which facilitate the reader to locate the matter in discussion. The rest of the Appendix contains,

besides some of the statistics of the missionary personnel in the region, the full texts of the Decrees and some of the important Letters regarding the Assam mission. The final section of the Appendix contains two lists of the Catholic catechetical publications in Khasi language, during the periods of SDS and SDB missionary activities.

The Bibliography is presented under single heading. It includes a number of sources dealing with Northeast India and its people in general, and the ones that deal with the Khasis in particular. It is noteworthy that a vast number of articles on the Assam Mission, published in the *Bollettino Salesiano*, the *Gioventù Missionaria* and the *Indian Missiological Review*, are included in the Bibliography.

#### 6. Sources, Method and Limitations of the Study

The search for the source materials for the work was a laborious task. The content of the work is mostly the result of findings in the various archives in Italy, Germany and India. Large number of official documents cited in the thesis regarding the establishment of the Assam Prefecture, appointment of the Prefects Apostolic, correspondence between the Santa Sede, the Propaganda Fide and the SDS and the SDB superiors are found in the Archivium de Propaganda Fide, Rome. The two sections of SDS archives in Rome, the Archivium Generale Salvatorianum and the Archivium Postulationis Salvatorianum, contain a lot of valid materials for the thesis. The *Mission Assam* (Band I and II), found in the Archiv Salvatorkollegs, Bad Wurzach (Germany), is a compilation of a number of articles and letters on the Assam mission during the SDS period (1890-1915). They were originally published in German language in *Der Missionär*, the *Salvatorianische Mitteilungen* and the *Apostelkalender*, all belonging to the SDS publications. The Archivio Salesiano Centrale, Rome, has a vast collection of source materials, which are used in the thesis. The various

regional and the local archives in India contain a number of relevant source materials.

I would like to make a special mention of the Salesian Provincial Archives in Calcutta and at Guwahati. A big collection of useful materials are found in the Catholic Church Archdiocesan Archive at Shillong. I visited a number of archives of the Parish Churches and the Mission Centers in the Khasi Hills. The Sacred Heart Theological College Archive, Shillong, the Parish Archives at Raliang (Mawkyndeng), Jowai, Cherrapunjee and Nongstoin furnished me with valuable source materials. The *Memoirs of Bro. Cid* (unpublished manuscript) and the various Chronicles of the Parishes and Institutions helped me to check the authenticity of the matter.

The method used in the work is thematic and narrative. While the approach is basically thematic, attention is paid also to the chronological aspect. Hence, there is an attempt at a harmonious blending of thematic and chronological aspects. The narrative aspect guarantees the details of events and incidents. The use of a number of expressions in the Khasi language adds originality to the Study.

The work has certain limitations too. The theme indicates that the thesis is a specific study on the Khasis in their response to the Catholic missionary activities (1890-1959). In the writing of the book, it was found essential to describe the general context of the study and the antecedents. Hence, a considerable part of the book deals with the general presentation of the Khasis as a distinct ethnic group, and the work of various Protestant missionaries. Besides, at times it was impossible to exclude descriptions of closely related events and situations other than that of the Khasis. It was also difficult to have the statistics of the Church growth exclusively among the Khasis. Most of the annual reports and statistics present the total scenario of the Assam Prefecture.

In spite of the above limitations it is my firm hope that this work makes three significant contributions: First, to make the Khasi Tribe of Northeast India better known to the rest of the world; secondly, to register in writing the contributions of Christian missionaries to the overall development of the Khasi people and their response to the Gospel Message; and finally, to inspire the present and the future generations of missionaries and people in the region with greater zeal for the full realization of 'the Kingdom of God' among them.

The past decades of Assam Mission history has been a glorious one. The beginnings were tough; difficulties were innumerable; but the hard labor of the pioneer missionaries and their successors produced a rich harvest. The annals of the past make us proud, but one can not live in the laurels of the past. The present and the future have their own challenges. The recording of the memories of the past infuses enthusiasm to face the challenges of today with adequate courage.