

THE AMERICAN BAPTIST MISSION AND THE NAGAS

Abstract

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A B S T R A C T

The double object of this Thesis is firstly an attempt to furnish a critical account of the American Baptist Mission in Nagaland taking into consideration their objects, their contributions, their policies, and their attitude towards the Nagas. Secondly it is an attempt to write the history of Christianity in the context of Naga History. As such the history of Christianity in Nagaland is viewed as an integral part of the social cultural history of the Nagas, rather than as separate from it. The study therefore focuses attention upon the christians in Nagaland, upon whom 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 Naga culture and society of which they themselves were a part.

These objects unfolds itself into a series of interrogations which this study tries to answer: What are the circumstances which led the Baptists of America to launch into foreign mission work, and how did they reach the Naga Hills? How did the first attempt to evangelise the Nagas

made by Miles Bronson in 1838 suddenly come to an end? What were the circumstances which induced E.W. Clark to resume the Naga Mission in the 1870's? How did the work start first among the Aos, than among the Angamis, the Lothas, and the Semas etc.? What were the methods used by the missionaries? Why was their attitude to the Naga cultural expressions unsympathetic? What were the factors which influenced their work?

The thesis further seeks to answer various other questions in the context of the Naga work. How best can one account for the quite demonstrable religious changes that have taken place in Nagaland in the past hundred years? How can one explain the uneven pace of conversion through time and space. Why were certain Naga groups attracted to Christianity more than others? And if conversion to christianity involved a repudiation of so much of Naga culture, why did it occur at all.

In trying to answer the above mentioned questions, chapter one after a brief look at the geographical and historical setting of Nagaland, focus attention upon the traditional religion and culture of the people.

The whole of chapter two and three are devoted to the study of the background, beginning, growth and spread of Baptist evangelization in the Naga Hills upto to the

year 1955. The ways and means which the missionaries made use of for spreading christianity is also seen against the background of a number of factors, which influenced the work as a whole. Some of them were positive and hence helped the growth of the Mission, whereas the others are negative, and therefore may have retarded it.

As regards the roots of the American Baptist works in India, it is shown that they can be traced back to Mr. and Mrs. Judson a young congregationalist missionary couple from America who on landing in Calcutta towards the end of 1812, gave up their congregationalist allegiance, and opted to be Baptist at the hands of the British Baptist than working there, thus becoming the first two American Baptists in India. After several vicissitudes the Judsons founded a new home at Rangoon in Burma. Eventually Burma became the first foreign mission field, and the Judsons the first missionary couple of the Baptist of America. It was from Burma that the first group of American Baptist missionaries came to Assam, and in the course of time, Baptist missionaries reached also the Naga Hills.

The first contact with the Nagas was made in 1838 by Dr. Miles Bronson, who started a school at the Konyak village of Namsang, near the British outpost of Jaipur. The Naga mission started by Bronson at Namsang was an extension

of the Assam Mission began in 1836 at Sadiya. The work was eventually abandoned till the arrival of E.W. Clark to the Sibsagar Mission in 1871. From March 1876, the date on which Clark took up his residence in the Naga village of Molungyimsen upto March 1955, the date on which R.F. Delano, the last of the American Baptist missionaries left the Naga Hills, a total of 46 Baptist Missionaries and several hundreds of native evangelists served among the Nagas.

In 1894 a new mission station was founded at a new village named Impur about forty miles from Molung, and ten miles from the town of Mokokchung. The Kohima mission had already been established in 1878 by C.D. King, in the heart of the Angami country, some eighty-five miles south-west of Impur. Throughout the entire period of American Baptist evangelisation in the Naga Hills, Impur and Kohima remained the two centres from which American missionaries operated to the entire Naga Hills. Till the end of the 19th century, except the Aos and the Angamis other tribes of Nagas were without well organised churches. In the course of a century however, nearly the whole of Nagaland has come under the influence of christianity.

Chapter four is an elaborate discussion of the missionary contribution in the field of education, literature and health care. No doubt these were some of the

methods adopted to achieve their one object, the conversion of the Nagas to christianity, but the missionary contribution in these fields cannot be underestimated. They were the pioneers in the field of education and contributed immensely to its growth and development in the Naga Hills. Spread of secular education as desired by the administration was not the primary object of the American Baptists. They wanted a workable literacy among the hillmen and with this end in view the missionaries established primary schools and a few training schools for teachers. Despite such limitations, the mission schools remained the chief agencies for imparting education to the Nagas. The missionaries also contributed immensely to the development of Naga literature. In fact most of the written Naga dialects owe their origin and development to the Christian agencies. Eager to get vernacular translations of the New Testament into circulation as quickly as possible, the missionaries at Impur and Kohima reduced the various Naga dialects to written forms and built up a body of vernacular literature which represented the first literature the Naga had ever possessed. Worthy of special mention are Clark, Rivenburg, Perrine, Tanquist, Longwell and Hunter in this regard.

Another sphere of missionary's activity brought hope and new life to the Nagas hitherto steeped in superstitions and ignorance, and that was medical service. This appeared

to be one of the important adjuncts to the evangelistic programmes of the missionaries from the beginning. It was seen as the necessary embodiment of the spirit of christianity whose founder was Himself a great Healer. The missionaries established hospitals, dispensaries, and other kinds of health centres. Through the dispensaries the mission could serve the Nagas even in the remotest areas. The service of Rivenburg, Loops, and Bailey as well as the non-professional contributions made by Clark and others dispensed medicine for ordinary ailments did help to project the figure of a compassionate missionary "who became more acceptable to the people. It also contributed a great deal to the material progress of the Naga Hills. Chapter five deals with conversion and attempts to explain it in the historical context. Clearly it can be seen that christian conversion among the Nagas cannot be explained in terms of the number of distribution of foreign missionaries, as this line of reasoning is contradicted by the lack of consistent correlation between the incidence of conversion and the presence of foreign missionaries. Shifting the focus from the missionaries to the converts, one might interpret the latter as motivated by political, social, or other forms of self-interest. But this confuses the consequence of conversion for its cause. Religious change in Nagaland in other words, cannot be explained in strictly non-religious terms. The key of these changes is to be found in the particular forms of interaction between

the Naga religious cosmology and their social relations, each of which influenced the other. The traditional Naga cosmology may be characterised as a two-tiered scheme, consisting at the upper tier of a supreme deity who underpinned the universe. This supreme deity though benoalent was but vaguely understood and seldom approached because of his remoteness from the everyday concerns of Naga communities. The lower tier consisted of a host of minor spirits who were more sharply perceived because they underpinned the immediate reality which Nagas experienced, and therefore needed constand appeasement to keep them from bringing havoc upon individuals, or whole villages. Within this framework one finds a good deal of room for variation and elabroation from one Naga group to another. Secondly Naga religions were not static but dynamic, as we find that particular deities of one Naga group were occasionally incorporated into the cosmology of other groups. An awareness of the variations among Naga religion and of their dynamic fluid quality helps to suggest how christian conversion took place in the Naga Hills. In using this approach one finds that in fact christianity was not presented uniformly among Naga groups, that the christian cosmology was fitted into the Ao religious system very differently then it was into the Sema, Lotha or Angami system. Secondly one finds that the various Naga communities experienced different sorts of social changes before and during their exposure to Christi an influence, and

that this affected their different responses to that influence.

Despite all their denunciation against the social dimension of Naga religion, prohibiting this, denying that, some missionaries were not at all reluctant to rely very heavily on its cosmological dimension. Thus we see them tinkering with Naga cosmologies, trying to fit their own system into the Nagas, but doing so in a somewhat inconsistent way. In the long run it appears that those missionaries who found the most success were those who allowed the Nagas to identify the christian conception of God within their own religious system. However as long as the Nagas experience of reality remained confined to their immediate locality, the upper tier of their cosmology occupied by their supreme deity who underpinned the entire universe, was accordingly given only slight attention. This was why the early missionary efforts met with relatively little success. The missionaries had been elaborating the upper tier of the Naga cosmology at a time when the Nagas pre-occupied with a concern with more immediate spirits, were paying little attention to that tier. But world events like the integration of the Naga Hills with British India and World War II confronted Nagas with a larger reality than their lower tier of local spirits could be seen as controlling. When this occurred, Nagas responded by paying greater attention to the supreme deity who underpinned the entire universe and who appeared more clearly incharge of

things. Amidst this breakdown and ultimately capitalising on it, were the missionaries who claimed to be tapping a source of power the one God 'Tsunngrem' or 'Alhon', far greater in magnitude and far more actively involved with the entire macrocosm than any of the former spirits of Naga cosmology. The acceptance of this christian conception of God seem to have been facilitated by (a) his ability to deliver men from fear of their malevolent spirits (b) his identification with new solutions to old problems in the area of physical afflictions, and (c) His infinite power rendered both timeless and challengeable by his being enshrined in a written text, the christian scriptures.

Chapter Six deals with the impact of christianity on Naga culture. Culture here implies the personality of a people or a society. It includes the totality of people's traditions (what they believe) attitudes (what they desire) customs (what they do) and institutions (how they ~~desire~~ live). Christianity has struck its roots deep in the Naga soil and brought far reaching changes in every facet of Naga life and thought. For centuries the Nagas had been living in isolation, institutionalised warfare between neighbouring villages and tribes had been a way of life, the mainspring of many of the political, social and cultural institutions of the people. Now the christian emphasis upon love for neighbour and enemy alike provided an ideological basis for the new relationship among villages and tribes that British

administration and the prohibition of raiding made necessary. The new attitudes were seen in the extensive evangelistic activities undertaken by Christians of one tribe among members of other tribes who had traditionally been their enemies. Another area of culture change stimulated by missionary influence was the breaking of old barriers within and between linguistic groups. The Mission organised large associations to serve as forums for discussion on social welfare activities as well as church policy. But these Associations also served to integrate Nagas of the same language groups. With their huge annual meetings drawing thousands from distant villages, these Associations not only broke down inter village barriers but raised to a much higher level the forum of discussion on issues formerly decided only at the village level. For the Nagas christianity came as a liberator from 'spiritual and social demons'. But in the process of liberating the tribes it is not always easy to tell us the difference between the "demons" of oppression and superstition that binds the bodies and mind of the people and valuable elements in the traditional cultures that might best be preserved to enrich the christian community. Sometimes the missionaries seemed to oppose traditional activity simply because they did not fit in with their own rather solemn notions of Christian propriety. For instance, the missionaries forbade converts to participate in the Feast of Merit and boys were prohibited from attending their morungs or dormitories, since these were associated

with their former life. The Feasts of Merit discouraged by the missionaries fulfilled an important obligation of the well-to-do for the good of the community irrespective of their economic positions. This said to be the Naga way of distributing wealth which had a greater social value. Again the Morungs around which the social, political, religious, legal and military life of the Nagas revolved sank into insignificance due to missionary propaganda. Morungs were supposed to be the most "imposing and well-built" house in the Naga villages. They were also the centres of art and carving. Mills lamented that in the Christian villages Morungs were no longer built and the old Xylophones (long wooden drums) came into disuse. The disappearance of the social and communal institutions was followed in its train by the emergence of a spirit of new individualism. This in turn led to the erosion of family and clannish ties which were once very important elements of Naga Life. Education, occupational mobility and social intercourse also led to inter-tribal marriages. Marriages with non-Nagas also took place. Such inter-marriages have eroded family and community life to a great extent. The convert being thus cut off from the community and village life became a stranger in his village and began to despise his own tribe and cultural inheritance. Many of the charges against the missionaries of disrupting the Naga ways of life are not without foundation. However, the latter-day missionaries appreciating some of the valuable elements in the Naga culture switched on to a more realistic

policy and tried to preserve all that was good in the old tradition and culture of the Nagas.

In conclusion it may be said that the American Baptist Mission came out of European and American cultural backgrounds. When they entered the Naga hills and began working among them, two cultures came face to face. And when two cultural groups meet they affect one another. Usually the dynamic one makes its headway inside the weaker. On principle a certain amount of disintegration of tribal culture was unavoidable when it came in direct touch with the agent of western culture. It can be admitted frankly that the missionaries who came from America were the bearers of both the good and bad qualities of their nation. They could not strip themselves of the cultural characteristics of their country and people and this influenced to some extent their attitude to the tribal culture. But the allegation that christianity was responsible for the disintegration of the Naga culture and life are interconnected the more so in tribal life, where they tend to be undifferentiated. The missionaries made an attempt to change the core, the centre of tribal religion, but they had attempted to retain the outer framework as far as practicable. But a change of centre meant a change in world view, philosophy of life and perspective of spiritual and moreal values. Thus some kind of change or alteration was inevitable.

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