

## Christian Conversions and Terrorism in North-East India

North-East India is a term that usually refers to the seven states of Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. Sikkim and the Darjeeling district of West Bengal belong to it geographically but are not normally included though often associated with the North East India Christian Council. With the exception of the two princely states of Manipur and Tripura, the area was formerly known as Assam. All of these states, except Tripura are largely hilly. These states, bordering the borders of the Indian Union with Tibet, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh have witnessed an extraordinary transformation of their religious profile of their populations during the last century. An intense movement of conversion towards Christianity has taken place over the years; indeed, in several of these states, entire populations have been converted. The percentage of the Christian population in these states in 1901, 1951 (after independence) and 1991 is as follows:

State	1901	1951	1991
Arunachal Pradesh	NA *	NA *	10.29
Assam	0.4	2.00	3.32
Manipur	0.016	11.84	34.12
Meghalaya	6.16	24.66	64.58
Mizoram	0.05	90.52	85.73
Nagaland	0.59	46.05	87.47
Tripura	0.08	0.82	1.69
*Not available :051 in 1961			

It is true that Christian missionaries have brought education and civic amenities into this region. However, as in many parts of the world, Christianity has wiped out a whole way of life, erasing centuries of tradition, customs and wisdom. It has caused people to hold their own religion in contempt and look westwards to an alien culture. It has disrupted society by pitting the Christian converts against mainstream 'Hindu' India. This creation of a class-conflict has insulated the tribals from Indian society, and made them a tool in the hands of Christian missionaries. Missionaries in India have often been a divisive force, which used the tribals for advocating a breaking-up of the country. Today, Christian terrorists feel emboldened to use the gun to force Jesus down the throats of unwilling tribals. The fear of segregating Indian Christians and training and using them for the purposes of political or religious blackmail on behalf of foreign interests in moments of crisis is not without foundation. The Christian Missionaries of Chhota Nagpur offered to the British 10,000 armed converted Kols, while Dr. Mason offered a battalion of converted Karens to put down the 1857 war of Independence. Some of the methods used by the missionaries to convert and thus alienate innocent tribals and their impact are as follows:

- 1) **British connivance:** It was not the Church that entered North East India first. Rather the British administration entered first. The American Baptist Mission remained confined to the Brahmaputra valley and entered the Naga Hills only after 1872 when the Hills came under British administration. The first Christian mission to be set up in Manipur (tribal areas) was the American Baptist in 1894, three years after the Manipur administration was taken over by the British. In 1866, administration entered the Garo hills and the American Baptist followed in 1867. In the Lushai (Mizo) Hills, Christianity entered close upon the heels of administration in the 1890's. The Catholic Mission got entry into the Garo Hills in the 1930's chiefly through the patronage of the Governor Michael Keane. According to an early evangelist Kemolhu, there was forceful opposition to Christianity in those early days and the evangelists had no place to lodge in nor did they have a place to preach the gospel. The village headman (Gaon Budha) appointed by the British government gave them shelter since they belonged to the government and no one could object to their stay. In and around 1822, David Scott Esq., The Commissioner of Koch Behar first conceived the idea of Christianizing the Garo tribe of Assam. He wrote to Bayley, Secretary to the Government, "I am satisfied that nothing permanently good can be obtained by other means (than sending a missionary) and that, if we do not interfere on behalf

of the poor Garo, they will soon become Hindu or half-Hindu. Secretary Bayley sent a most encouraging letter in reply closing with the words, "I do not think the favorable opportunity for making this interesting experiment should be lost " Christian missionaries virtually held a license during British Raj to trade in human souls and to proselytize by force, fraud, inducement and deceit.

- 2) Theological deceit: Missionaries have spread the belief that the tribals of North East India had no religion. In fact, for most people of this region, belief in Supreme Being is a distinctive feature. He is the Creator and Sustainer of humans and the whole universe and is believed to be loving and benevolent (as against the jealous Christian God). They also believe in many secondary deities. The tribals also believe in the existence of malevolent spirits. They believe in the immortality of the soul and life after death. All religious rites are performed by functionaries like the Lyngdoh (Khasis), Putir (Ao), Puitham (Mizo), Kamal nokma (Garo) and so on. Pioneer Christian missionaries like JH Lorrain adopted the term 'Pathian' used by the Mizos for their supreme Spirit to indicate the Christian God. Jesus was presented as "Christus Victor" or Jesus Christ the Conqueror (of all evil spirits). The belief of the Ao Naga people in life after death was linked to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. To this day, missionaries use theological deceit for conversion. They have been guilty of substituting the names of Ram and Krishna in the popular baar-geets of legendary Assamese Saint Sanardeva with the name of Jesus. When the local Vaishnava Sabha reacted angrily, they had to eat crow and withdraw the offending stanzas.
- 3) Deceit by other means: 'Economic conversions' are carried out by placing "miracle boxes" in local churches. The gullible villager writes out a request – a loan, a pucca house, fees for the son's schooling. A few weeks later, the miracle happens. And the whole family converts, making others in the village follow suit.
- 4) Education: The introduction of Western education was the main missionary approach to convert the Naga into Christianity. After independence, the Roman Catholics also gained entry into Nagaland hitherto denied by the Protestant British. The key to their success was their educational policy. Father Thomas Menampambil writes: "The boarding houses in Shillong, Gauhati and Dibrugarh have played an important role in the evangelization of the region. They formed lay leaders and well-instructed religious teachers. Every year, a good number from among the senior students were baptized. It was precisely these youngsters that helped plant the church in the Garo Hills, in Nagaland, Manipur and to some extent in Mizoram. The experience of the Baptists in the Orphan school in Nowgong was to repeat itself again and again in dozens of our institutions to our own day "
- 5) Imposition of Roman script: The first thing that missionaries did when beginning work among a new tribe was to reduce its language to writing. This the missionaries did to enable people to read the Bible. At first, for the Khasi and Garo languages, the Bengali / Assamese script was used but was later given up in favor of Roman. From 1970, the Church openly championed the use of the Roman script for the language of the tribals of Tripura and Boros of Assam. This even prompted two Marxist ministers in the Tripura government, Dashrath Deb and Ranjit Deb Burman to characterize the demand of Roman script for the Kokroboak region of Tripura as "communal politics". The imposition of the Roman script has on occasion been at gunpoint. On August 21, 2000, terrorists of the Church backed National Democratic Front of Bodoland gunned down Shri Bineshwar Brahma, president of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha. His only crime was that he favored the use of Devanagari script for the Bodo language. It is significant that English is an official language in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura.
- 6) Self-alienation: The tribals after conversion to Christianity start abstaining from their indigenous festivals because now these festivals and rituals are not his. Hence we see the Christian Khasis of Meghalaya do not take part in the Sad-Suk-Mynstem festival or the Nongkrem festival. Those converted to Christianity in Arunachal Pradesh have stated distancing themselves or are made to do so, from festivals like the Solung or Mopin. The Christian Garos remain cut off from the Wangla festival dance. The phenomenon continues throughout the tribal population. They remain aloof from their traditional dances, accept western names for their children, start wearing western clothes, sing western music and so on.

- 7) Circumventing laws: Missionary activities were very marginal, or almost nil, till 1962 in Arunachal Pradesh. However, these anti-national and divisive forces, in different names and forms, have been working through various agencies in Assam–Arunachal Pradesh border. Gradually and stealthily, they gained entry into Arunachal Pradesh with the help of the few local Arunachali students who had studied in Christian Missionary schools in Assam and Meghalaya and got converted there. By 1970, almost 8% of the people along the Assam – Arunachal border had got converted to Christianity. However, they could not very actively engage in proselytizing Arunachal in a big way due to the Innerline Permit Restrictions on entry for non–Arunachalis imposed by the government. But a sizeable number of simple people of Arunachal had been lured away into Christian fold, in many cases, through material temptations including offer of money, and by threats. The Church has also engaged a number of local people as paid agents to carry on pro-Christian propaganda through various means, fair and foul.
- 8) Harassment and ostracism: Many reports have come of how Church congregations use harassment, ostracism and other forms of force to increase their flock. Non-converted portions of a family land into disputes with neo-Christian portions over funeral customs, ownership of land and other matters and this result in clashes between groups which newspapers promptly label as anti-Christian acts, whereas these are often clashes between converted and non-converted tribals.
- 9) Extortion: The National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), a terrorist organization has two main factions. Both the factions are headed by Christians and get financial support from World Council of Churches, a missionary organization. China provides arms and ammunitions to both the factions. The NSCN has its offices in New York, Geneva and Hague which display boards with legend ‘Peoples Republic of Nagaland’. It has twice raised its demand for an independent nation in the United Nations. The NSCN has its own government which collects money from the local people. One third of the salaries of the government servants is taken away as Nagaland Tax before disbursement. Most of the banks in Nagaland have closed down because of the huge sums extracted by this outfit. The letterheads and stamps of this unofficial government read ‘Nagaland for Christ’. Most of the terrorist organizations in the entire region follow this pattern. The Church in the North-East is also known to be associated with smuggling across the borders and circulation of fake currency notes. In December 1998, Bedang Tamjen, a JemiNaga missionary was arrested for making fake currency notes.
- 10) Conversion at gun–point: The Baptist Church in Tripura was set up by missionaries from New Zealand 60 years ago .It won only a few thousand converts until 1980 when a mass scale ethnic riot was engineered by the Church in which systematic ethnic cleansing of Hindu and Buddhist tribals was initiated. Thousands of women were raped and kidnapped and forced to convert to Christianity. The terrorists receive military aid from extremist Christian groups in Australia and New Zealand. They also have ongoing exchanges with Islamic terrorist and ISI who push in arms from the Bangladeshi border.

In Tripura, the tribals constitute 30 percent of the State population, and 10 percent of this group had been converted to Christianity by 1991. These Christianized tribals are trying to convert the Hindu tribals forcibly to Christianity often getting the help of the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT), a Christian terror group founded in December 1989. About 90 percent of the top ranking NLFT cadres are Christians. NLFT has further links with the Inter Services Intelligence Agency (ISI), Pakistan’s external intelligence agency and its counter part in Bangladesh, the Directorate General of Field Intelligence (DGFI).

During 1997-98, NLFT leaders are reported to have visited Pakistan to receive training and arms from the ISI. The ISI had allegedly arranged the passport and visas for the NLFT leaders. According to Tripura Police, the NLFT has also linkages with the Nagaland-based National Socialist Council of Nagaland- Isak–Muivah (NSCN-IM), the Manipur– based Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), which is active in Assam. Since its inception the NLFT has been engaged in an armed struggle to carve out a separate Christian nation – Tripura. The forcible conversions are accompanied by murders of Hindu priests in the area, forcible bans on Hindu festivities, abductions and killings.

The backing of the Baptist church right from the beginning has enabled this organization to spread its base. Due to its terrorist activities, the organization was banned by the government in 1997 but it continued its operations from across the Bangladesh border. The priests of the Baptist church supply arms and ammunitions to these terrorist rebels.

Nagmanlal Haram, the secretary of the Noapara Baptist Church in Tripura was arrested by CRPF in April 2000 on charges of aiding insurgents and possessing a large quantity of explosives including 60 gelatin sticks, 5Kg of potassium, 2Kg of sulfur and other ingredients for making powerful bombs. Two junior members of the same church, who had been arrested earlier, tipped the police off about the explosives which were meant for terrorist organization like the NLFT. Mr. Haram confessed to buying and supplying explosives to the NLFT.

Another church official, Jatna Koloi, who was also arrested, admitted that he received training in guerrilla warfare at an NLFT base (8). It is now apparent that the pattern of forced conversions at gunpoint are irrefutably linked to the Baptist Church in Tripura. The NLFT is accused of forcing Tripura's indigenous tribes to become Christians and give up Hindu forms of worship in areas under their control.

For decades Tripura's indigenous tribal population has been dragged out of their homes and forced to convert to Christianity under threat of violence. Whenever any of the tribals organize Hindu festivals or rituals, the terrorist groups attack to desecrate and kill the participants. There have been incidents of issuing a ban on the Hindu festivals of Durga Pooja and Saraswati Pooja. The NLFT manifesto says that they want to expand what they describe as the kingdom of God and Christ in Tripura. The hill tribe 'Jamatiya' worship in the month of March their traditional god 'Gadiya', who is supposed to be an incarnation of Lord Shiva. The terrorists have issued an order that the 'Gadiya' be prayed on the Christmas day instead.

Hundreds of the RSS volunteers were attacked, threatened and blackmailed. Several of them were murdered and a number of them were kidnapped and held hostage by the Christian terrorists. In August 2000, Swami Shantikali Maharaj, the famous Hindu sage known for his social services was killed by the terrorists. In December 2000, Lavkumar Jamatiya, the priest of the 'Jamatiya' tribe was killed, two Hindu temples and one Buddhist temple were destroyed and order was issued to end all non-Christian methods of praying. In the year 2001, there were 826 terrorist attacks in Tripura in which 405 persons were killed and 481 cases of kidnapping by the rebels. The case of Jamatiya tribals provides a telling example. These tribals have strong spiritual leaders and a network of social service organizations headed by their religious leaders. These indigenous sects are neither exclusive nor expansionist. The Baptist Church has always failed miserably in its conversion efforts with regard to this well-knit community.

Hence, it is no wonder that the NLFT has made Jamatiya institutions and their religious leaders the targets of their attacks. In the August of 2000, religious leaders of the Jamatiya community like Jaulushmoni Jamatiya and Shanit Kumar Tripura were killed by the NLFT, and Jamatiya families were uprooted from their homelands and made refugees. The death threats issued by the NLFT to the inmates of these institutions have already forced the closure of 11 Jamatiya institutions like schools and orphanages, set up by the slain religious leaders in various parts of Tripura.

Shorn of its mask of love and compassion, the true color of Christianity is evident in all its nakedness in the North East. Fortunately, the tribals are realizing that their Christianization has led to loss of identity and self-alienation. They are slowly reviving their ancient traditions and customs. Our tribal brethren need our active support to overthrow the yoke of Christianity. Are we going to respond to their call?

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