THE CHRISTIANS IN THE NORTH EAST INDIA: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Amrit Kumar Goldsmith

An effort has been undertaken in the article below to give an account of the Christian growth, change and continuity in the region. This article does not aim at deliberation on the Christian faith. It attempts to present a historical perspective of the people connected with the faith and their mission.

1819-2004

The history of Christian mission in this region reveals stories, which appear to be incredible in retrospect. The period of the establishment of missions (churches) and the prevailing political situation under the British rule in the region had almost stabilized barring few raids by the Naga and other hill communities on the plains.

Economically tea industry was beginning to play a vital role under the leadership of Mr. C. A. Bruce and his wife. The husband and wife played an important role in the year of the first American Baptist Mission work in Assam (Brahmaputra Valley).

Historically speaking, the American Baptists were the first to establish permanent work in North East India. But they were not the first to preach from the Bible in the region. Two Portuguese Jesuits, Fr. Cacella and Bro. Cabral set foot in Assam in 1626. They were on their way to Tibet and China.

In 1845, Mr. S. M. Whiting met a very intelligent young Miri who told him that he had served for three months with Roman Catholic Missionaries in the hills among the Adi tribe (NEFA). The Roman Catholic priests seemed to have been in transit to Tibet or interior China and not to establish a mission in those hills. Before 1836 Mr. Krishna Pal belonging to Baptist Missionary Society, Serampore (WB) undertook the substantial missionary activity in the region. He was the first Indian Christian to preach from the Bible for months at Pandua at the foothills of Khasi hills. In the year 1819 the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS), Serampore, had translated and published the Bible into Assamese (Sanskritised version). By 1837 both the New Testament and Old Testament Bible were published in Assamese.

In 1829 David Scott, the Commissioner, requested the BMS to open a center at Guwahati. Mr. James Rae was the first missionary to start a permanent Christian Mission under the Baptist Church at Guwahati with an assistant from Serampore. Mr. Rae opened a school with 12 boys - 3 Khasis and 9 Garos. Mr. Rae also organized a church with 12 members. When Mr. Miles Bronson visited Guwahati in 1837 on his way to Sadiya, there were no Christians left in the church started by Mr. Rae.

The BMS donated its Guwahati property to the American Baptist Foreign Missionary Society (ABFMS) presently the Council of Baptist Churches in NEI (CBCNEI), Panbazar. In 1838, the Cherrapunji field was also offered to ABFMS by the BMS but the ABFMS could not accept the additional responsibilities and the Welsh Presbyterian Mission took over the Cherrapunji mission field.


The Christian Mission work in North East India got intensified gradually under several Protestant denominations and the Catholic Mission. The significant developments in the region, which
affected the mission work but challenged the local Christian leadership, to take over from foreign missionaries are:

Due to the Naga insurgency which began in mid 1950s and Mizo insurgency which began in mid 1960s demanding sovereign states, the Government of India as a policy asked the foreign missionaries to leave the politically sensitive NE region. Thus a situation was created for leadership change from foreign missionaries to local missionaries.

With the departure of foreign missionaries and as a policy there was demand for developing human resources and generating local resources to support the established institutions and mission work.

The period witnessed tremendous growth of Church and mission activities. Also it witnessed growth outside their home territories. By 1990s millions of rupees, all generated from indigenous sources, were being spent on this work. The Mizo Presbyterian Synod alone is said to have spent Rs.15,000,000 (1.5 crores). According to the General Secretary of Nagaland Baptist Church Council the Nagaland missionary movement had sent missionaries to Andamans, Pondicherry, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Assam, Nepal, Bhutan and Burma (Myanmar) with their own resources.

The earlier welfare assistance to groups and individuals was mere donation and distribution of materials. The approach was more on charity and relief. But there has been a qualitative change in this approach in recent times to a more people-oriented sustainable development approach.

According to North East India Christian Council report of 1991, Protestant population was 19,44,515. Catholic population was 713,937. The Christian population growth rate recorded between 1951 and 1971 is 308% in NE. In North Cachar during that period the growth rate was 326%.

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<th>Christians at a glance in the North East Region (As per 1991 census, Carey Research &amp; Communication Centre)</th>
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The growth among the Protestant members
1951 - Nagaland 98,068 Members
1971 - Nagaland 3,44,798 Members

Major Protestant denominations
1. Baptists - American Baptists
               Australian Baptists
               New Zealand Baptists
               British Baptists
               General Baptists
2. Presbyterians
3. Church of North India (CNI)
4. Lutherans - Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church
               Northern Evangelical Lutheran Church
               Bodo Evangelical Lutheran Church
5. The Salvation Army
6. Pentecostal Church
7. Assembly of God Church
8. Evangelical Free Church of India
There are many more denominations existing and functioning in all the states. Manipur has the maximum number of denominations.

**Catholic Church in NE India: A Short History**
(Information provided by Fr. Jacob Aluckal, Former Director, North East Diocesan Social Forum)

**Archdiocese of Shillong**

In 1889, the Prefecture Apostolic of Assam was created with headquarters at Shillong, then capital of Assam. The German Salvation Fathers were entrusted with the charge of this prefecture and they arrived in Shillong in February 1890. Fr. Gallus Schrole and Fr. Rudolph Fontaine were great Salvatorian missionaries.

With the outbreak of World War 1, in 1914, the German Salvatorian fathers were forced to return to their country and the Jesuits of Calcutta looked after Assam. In 1921, the Prefecture Apostolic of Assam was entrusted to the Salesians of Don Bosco and the first batch of Salesian missionaries arrived in Shillong in 1922. In 1934, Shillong became the first Diocese to be erected in the North East.

With the creation of new Diocese in the North East, the territory of Shillong Diocese became smaller and smaller. In 1951, the Diocese of Dibrugarh was created. In 1964, Shillong Diocese was once again bifurcated to form the diocese of Tezpur.

Shillong-Guwahati was again divided in 1973 to form the Diocese of Tura and again in 1983 to erect the Diocese of Diphu and once again in 1992 to form the Diocese of Guwahati. The general Dioceses and three Archdioceses were established to carry forward the Catholic mission in the region.

The membership growth among the Catholic Churches
1945 - 70,194 individual members
1990 - 713,837 individual members
Total Diocesan Catholic population in 1997 – 1,017,625

Manpower
Diocesan Priests - 339
Priests - 457
Brothers (hood) - 83
Sisters - 2000

**Ecumenical developments:**

NEICC/ACC: A joint conference of Churches and missions in Assam held in 1937 decided to form a church body for the region, hence the Assam Christian Council was established. After the reorganization of the region into different states, the ACC took the name of North East India Christian Council (NEICC). The NEICC is affiliated to National Christian Council of India (NCCI). This Association is the important link between the Christians in the North East and those in other parts of the country – and the world. This body is supposed to function as a coordinating forum between the Churches and their programmes. An educational project was started under NEICC known as Union Christian College (UCC) at Barapani, Shillong. This project was to involve all the churches together and function together, share responsibilities and resources.

Each denomination has its central bodies like:
Council of Baptist Churches in North East India (CBCNEI)
Assembly of Presbyterian Churches
Contributions:

Institutions (Educational & Technical): In the field of education, the Christian Missions have played a great role in providing quality education. By 1990 under the Catholic educational work there are about 6000 elementary schools, 1200 secondary schools, 114 colleges, and 80 specialized institutions. The growth of Catholic educational institutions continues to be rapid.

By 1990s, Churches affiliated with NEICC were operating 929 primary schools, 208 middle schools, 72 high schools and 3 colleges. The establishment of Theological colleges up to graduate level is significant development in leadership and human potential building. Before 1947 there was only one Theological College in Cherrapunjee in Meghalaya under the Khasi and Jaintia Presbyterian Synod. There are at present 11 Theological institutions in the region sponsored by different denominations and over 10 private Theological Colleges in Nagaland. Prior to this period there were only Bible schools of high school level. At university level, the Protestants have more Theological colleges than general colleges.

The youth mission under Catholic Church – Don Bosco Youth and Education Services (DBYES) is noteworthy contribution to leadership building.

Hospitals & Clinics: Prior to this period there were 7 hospitals worth mentioning and few clinics. In 1990 NEICC Report, under Catholics, there are 17 hospitals and 100 dispensaries, under Protestants there are 14 hospitals, 21 dispensaries. These hospitals are known for their quality service, good treatment and counselling. Some of these hospitals offer nursing and midwife training. They have also taken up Community Health programmes in the villages.

The present Satribari Christian Hospital, Guwahati, the first maternity hospital in the region, was started in 1926.

Orphanages and destitute homes and de-addiction centers: Several orphanages and destitute homes have been established for orphans and uncared people. The Missionaries of Charity founded by Mother Teresa have particularly devoted themselves to the care and service of the poor and the needy, orphans and the destitute. There are a number of centers working with the drug addicts and HIV-AIDS patients. The Mizo Presbyterian Synod, the Catholic mission and Nagaland Baptist Church Council are carrying on the most notable work.

Hostels: The Lewis Memorial Hostel for boys and White Memorial Hostel for girls at Guwahati continue to support students from neighboring places to access the educational facilities of Guwahati University and reputed colleges of Guwahati. At the school level the Catholics have more residential educational facilities. The working women hostel run by the young Women Christian Association (Y.W.C.A) and few churches are supporting women to take up different vocations away from home.

Social Service: During this period significant involvement of the churches is being noticed in the developmental activities to make it the faith in action. The social ministry of the church is being duly recognized and has become a part of the Church agenda. Protestant voluntary organizations like CASA (Church’s Auxiliary for Social Action), World Vision of India, NEICORD (North East India Committee for Relief and Development), Bosco Reach-Out, CRS (Catholic Relief Service), CARITAS, Thangkul Theological Association (TTA) are working side by side with the churches in the social ministry. Besides these organizations, there are social fronts / committees in the church devoted to the sustainable development process. The Christian voluntary organizations are committed to serving humanity and engage themselves in income
generation, enabling formation of people's organizations. In times of calamities, these organizations are actively involved in relief and rehabilitation works.

**Gender issue:** The traditional patriarchal attitude did change, accommodating women in policy and decision-making bodies. There are a number of ordained women ministers. Still it has to go a long way to reach a desirable level.

**Sense of unity:** The greatest contribution of the early Christian missionaries was fostering a sense of unity among the people of the North East. According to Dr. F.S. Downs (The Mighty Works of God), these were men and women for whom the phrase “one in Christ” really meant something. It was not a pious phrase used occasionally in sermons or addresses in Church union – it was a living reality for them. They were conscious of belonging to a new community infinitely more important than their natural communities, a community with a single work to do”.

**Disturbing observations:**

The leadership could not arrest the growing enmity between the tribes, communities and ethnic groups. The opportunity which was opened through the “ecumenical movements” did very little to integrate the tribes and communities. The identity crisis continues to disturb human relationship. The Christian principle of “Love thy neighbor as thou own” is not visible in the lives of many Christians.

The leadership could do very little in protecting, conserving the ecology and environment. In my experience when I travelled from Jorhat to Mon (Nagaland) by bus in 1978 with the great church leader Late Rev. Kijungliuba Ao, from Tizit onward on both side of the road I was amazed to see thick forests with so many big trees. When I again travelled in 1986, I observed a full-fledged Veneer Saw mill operating and number of medium sized saw mills in that area of Tizit. Now when I travel through that road I have observed only the decaying stumps of big trees and the abandoned broken down saw mills. A senior forest official in Mon told me that there are no mother trees to provide seeds for his nurseries in Mon area. He purchases seeds from Nagaon district of Assam. Through the Church network effective conservation programme could have been launched and still can be launched if policy decisions are taken at appropriate levels.

The leadership could not help to project an ideal model of political and administrative governance system in the states where their presence is significant. The fact being that the Churches having such influence over the lives of their members could have guided them for better performance.

The governments of Nagaland and Mizoram were pressurized by the church to enforce prohibition. The youth and women wing of the Churches helped in the implementation of the prohibition. Such is the capacity and influence of the churches. One wonders why the Christians have failed in political and administrative fronts.

(Note: The author of this article, Sri Amritkumarr Goldsmith, belongs to an eminent Christian family of Assam and is working at present as the Regional Organizer of Churches’ Auxiliary of Social Action (CASA) with Regional Headquarters at Mission Compound, Stribari, Guwahati.)