

Advent Of Christianity In Nagaland

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ABSTRACT

The advent of Christianity in Nagaland is a pivotal and transformative event in the history of Nagaland. This paper delves into the arrival of Christian Missionaries in Nagaland which marked a significant shift in the religious and cultural landscape of the Naga people. Through the Christian education brought by the American Baptist Missionaries, Nagaland is now, called as “Nagaland for Christ”. Christianity in Nagaland developed from two phases. The first phase began in the year 1842, through Rev. Miles Bronson and the second phase began in the year 1872, through Rev. E.W. Clark. This paper also examines the challenges and opportunities that have arisen as a result of the Integration of Christianity into Naga Society.

Keywords – Nagaland, Christianity, American Baptist Missionaries, Impur, Church.

Introduction

The arrival of Christianity in Nagaland marked a significant turning point in the history and cultural landscape of the state. Nagaland had long stood as a testament to the vibrant heritage of its various Naga tribes. However, the advent of Christianity brought a profound transformation to the social political and spiritual dynamics of the region. In many ways, the coming of Christianity to Nagaland heralded an era of profound change, as Naga people encountered a new faith that would deeply impact their way of life, their understanding of the world, and their relationships with one another. From their initial interactions with the Christian missionaries to the eventual embrace of Christianity by a significant portion of the population, the journey of this faith into Nagaland is a story of adaptation, resistance, and ultimately, a redefinition of cultural identity.

The spread of Christianity in Nagaland was not without its complexities and nuances. It encountered initial resistance from those who sought to preserve their traditions and beliefs of their ancestors, while also finding fertile ground among those who were drawn to the new teachings and promises offered by the Christian faith. The interplay between these contrasting forces gave rise to a dynamic and often contentious period in Nagaland's history. As the Naga people grappled with the implications of this momentous shift in religious and cultural paradigms.

The Word Naga

The word NAGA had never been known to the Nagas in their pre historic times. Therefore its root meaning was not known to the Nagas themselves until the Ahoms and Burmese addressed them so. The name comes from two Burmese words, ‘Na’ as ‘ear’ and ‘Ka’ as ‘holes,’ meaning, ‘people with pierced earlobes’. This was commonly accepted because before the arrival of British and the Christianity, piercing of earlobes for wearing various sizes and designs was widespread customary practise among the Naga tribes. As such the name Naga might have been given by the Burmese according to their terminology. There has been much debates and arguments on the origin of the word Naga. Some argue that the word Naga has been given by the Ahoms, meaning, ‘people from hill’, or ‘hill people’. There are many more meanings out forth by different people in the world. Yet, it still remains a mystery.

Animism

Animism is the belief in the existence of spiritual beings inhabiting the natural world. Nagas were purely Animistic in nature before the coming of Christianity in Nagaland. They believed the existence of a Supreme Being who is

the creatorⁱ. They worshipped different spirit according to their different activities. They worshipped the spirit of stones, the spirit of trees, the spirit of animals, etc. All the Nagas know of three types of Gods and spirits; a high, creator God, the spirits living in the sky, and the earth spirits. But Gods and spirits usually interfere only indirectly in Human affairs, through influencing positively or negatively the natural cycle flow of fertilityⁱⁱ. Their whole lives were gripped by the authority of the nature of the superstitious and animistic worshipⁱⁱⁱ. The Nagas also believed in the existence of evil spirit whom they attempt to reconcile by offering sacrifices. In those era stones are an important object of worship. Some spirits are believed to reside in them and most villages have the spirit of stone^{iv}. However in times of prayers the Nagas addressed in supreme God the creator of heaven and earth^v. An important element in their traditional religion was the observance of genna (taboo) days. The practice varied from tribe to tribe. But generally certain days were considered to be sacred and were thus observed by them to avert calamities caused by the spirits^{vi}.

Christianity in Nagaland

Christianity was introduced to the Nagas by the American Baptist Foreign Missionaries. The earliest pioneer was the American Baptist Missionary, Rev. Miles Bronson. He worked among the Nagas from 1842 to 1852, which was known as the first phase of Christianity in Nagaland. He taught them about the religion of Christianity and not only that but he also contributed in teaching them about the art of cultivating tea. Then he opened a school at Namsang, in the Konyak area in the border of Assam. His wife and his sister Rodha Bronson helped him and wrote a Naga Vocabulary book, a catechism, and a book called 'Natahema Heran Kabanva Nyapran', (Konyak Naga language) which is the first book to be written in Naga language^{vii}. However plagued with unfortunate illness, Bronson had to leave Naga Hills and he never returned. Therefore, the work among the Nagas ceased. Though the work among the Nagas did not continue, a few Nagas were converted to Christianity from time to time in Assam. The first Naga to be converted into Christianity was Hubi Konyak, on 12th September, 1847, who was baptized by Nathan Brown at Sibsagar. Unfortunately he died the following October. The second Naga to receive Christianity was Longjang Lepzuk, an Ao Naga from Merankong Village. He was baptized by S.W Whiting in 1851.

Rev. Dr. E.W. Clark's work among the Nagas

Another missionary named Rev. E.W Clark arrived in Nagaland in 1872, which is known as the second phase of Christianity in Nagaland.

Initially he was entrusted to look after the work of the printing press in Sibsagar by the America Baptist Missionary Union. During those times, the Nagas use to go down to the plains of Assam for trading purposes. Clark was curious and interested in these tribesmen with Mongolian features and developed his vision to evangelize the Nagas. He was also attracted by their friendliness and hospitality. Dr. Clark made friends with these hills men. Gendhela Barua (after conversion, Godhula Rufus Brown^{viii}) an Assamese Evangelist was working in the printing press with Dr. Clark at Sibsagar. He made a strong relationship with an Ao Naga called Supongmeren from Dekhahaimong, (Molungyimchen) Ao Naga Village who was one of the Naga people who went down to Assam plains for trading purpose. Supongmeren was baptized in early 1871 by Dr. Clark at Sibsagar. He became the first contact person who paved the way for further evangelization of the Nagas.

With the help of Supongmeren, Godhula decided to go to the Naga Hills. He made several trips to the village preaching them about Christianity. In November 1872, Godhula came down to Sibsagar with nine Ao Nagas and were baptised by Rev.E.W.Clark and they became the members of the Sibsagar Church^{ix}. After that Rev. E.W Clark had decided to visit the Nagas in Naga Hills. A date was fixed in December 1872, for Rev. E.W Clark to visit Dekahaimong. His wife said that, "about 60 men came down to escort Mr. Clark and those who were not Christians were to receive Rs. 14 to pay them as a part of their trouble and expense but before he left the village they gave the money back as a donation to the mission"^x. During his visit fifteen more were baptized in the village on 23rd December 1872, and Lord Supper was celebrated in the church that has been built by the first group of believers. Thus, the first Church in Naga soil was established. For the next few years Godhula spent more time among the Nagas with occasional visits by Dr. E.W. Clark. In the year 1875, the number of Christians rose to 25 again. In March, 1876, Dr. E.W.Clark finally went along with his family to live among the Nagas in Dekahaimong village^{xi}. Rev. Clark along with the new converts established a new village, Molungyimsen, near Dekahaimong in 1876. Clark set up his mission centre in this village until it was shifted to Impur in 1894.

The decade of 1887 to 1896 saw the humble beginning of evangelism and the growth of Christianity in the Naga Hills. In addition to the missionary activities of Dr. Clark at Molung in the Ao field, other missionaries were

appointed to the other Naga tribes. On the initiative of Clark, in 1878, the American Overseas Missionary Board at Boston appointed Rev. C.D. King to reinforce Dr. Clark in the Naga Hills. He established a mission centre at Kohima in 1880. Similarly, in early 1885, the Government granted permission to the American Mission to open another centre at Wokha, a British post.

Growth of Christianity

The American Baptist Missionaries had planted the seed of Christianity among the Nagas. The Nagas responded in different manners. Some responded positively and some responded negatively. Yet, the response towards the positive side was more than the negative side. Nagas began to understand about Christianity and was spread all over the Nagas slowly. They also began to build churches. Some churches were built under trees and some gathered in individual houses for fellowships^{xii}.

Despite of their strong animistic belief system, the Christian missionaries could convince and convert the Nagas to Christianity. One reason was that, the lives of the Nagas were full of superstitious and fear and the process of propitiation of spirits was expensive. The Naga religion was rather very expensive as they used to spend over two to three months in festivity and ritual functions of a year. During such period, no productive work was performed because it was restricted to go to the fields during such occasions. The Nagas embraced Christianity by giving up their old way and significantly altered their lifestyle because they were amazed by the prestige of white men.

By the year 1950, a strong mass awakening activated to all the Naga tribes. The number of Nagas Christian population increased rapidly with high church attendance both in rural and urban areas. We can also see that many churches are reconstructed and enlarged from time to time because of spiritual revival, conferences, and so on^{xiii}.

Baptist Church

In Nagaland, majority of the Nagas are Baptist because Christianity in Nagaland came through American Baptist Missionaries. At present all the Naga Baptist Churches are under one umbrella call Nagaland Baptist Church Council (NBCC).

Roman Catholic Church

Fr. Marcellinus Molz, a German from Bondashil was the first Catholic Missionary to Nagaland. He reached Tamlu, Longleng District in the year 1908. He tried exploring the Ao tribes by staying with them for sometime in order to introduce the Catholic mission work among them. But the British didn't allow any other Christian sects during that time. It was only in the year 1948, Catholic Church began to exist in Nagaland, which was successful with the help of Sister Margarita Cifre, Sister Gaudalupe, accompanied by a Naga boy named John who did his education from Shillong. The first Catholic Church in Nagaland was established at Kohima and then Wokha. The Roman Catholics established several educational institutions which creates new philosophy, culture of the public^{xiv}. Catholics are found all over Nagaland in significant numbers.

Denominations of Christianity

There are different denominations among the Christians in Nagaland. Baptist, Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, Seven Day Adventist, Assembly of God, Revival, Independent Churches, etc. Even though they are all divided into different denominations, they are all Christians and worship the same God.

Critical Analysis

The advent of the American Baptist Missionaries to the Naga Hills has totally brought a transformation with the Nagas in every aspect of life like traditions, beliefs, lifestyles, etc. When Christianity was introduced to them, the Nagas were forced to leave their own traditions and were also forced to adopt the foreign environment. Therefore, Nagas have lost many good practises in the era of olden days.

Conclusion

The history of Christianity's contribution to the Naga society in every aspect of life has a tremendous impact. Christianity's major investment in the field of education has been so great that it outweigh by far numerical strength Christian in the region. They also played a unifying role and helped to remove tribal isolation. As the Christian Missionaries started working, their first and foremost of their works were reduced to education. Thus all the pioneer educated people were dedicated and responsible citizens, and thereby became dynamic force to transform the society^{xv}.

It is also argued that the coming of the American Baptist Missionaries have impacted in the loss of Naga culture because they failed to distinguish between the gospel and the culture. They destroyed many valuable traditions, wealth, festivals, customs and moral values of the Nagas which cannot be found anymore. On the other hand, it

was the American Baptist Missionaries who brought the positive changes in the Naga History. They converted the Nagas from darkness to light, from head hunters to soul hunters, from primitive to civilization etc.

Notes and References

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