

Coming Of Christianity in the Naga Area of North East India

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The name Naga is generic term that refers to a group of over thirty tribes inhabiting not only in Nagaland but also some hilly region of the states of Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. Some Naga tribes are also found in the north western part of Myanmar bordering India as well. In Myanmar these Naga tribes are mostly inhabited Sagaing division and Kachin states. In Manipur Nagas are mostly inhabited in the districts of Chandel, Ukhrul, Senapati, and Tamenglong. In Nagaland there are eight districts the Naga inhabited districts are Tuensang, Mokokchung, Kohima, Dimapur, Mon, Wokha, Zunheboto and Phek. In Arunachal Pradesh Naga inhabited districts are Changlang and Tirap. Ukhrul district of Manipur is dominated by the Tangkhuls, Tamenglong district is by the Zelianrongs. Tamenglong district is also the home of Kharam Nagas. The Senapati District is dominated by the Maos, Thangals, Marams and Poumais. In Chandel and Senapati District eight Naga tribes are found. They were Anal, Chote, Chiru, Maring, Moyon, Tarao, Monsang and Lamkang. In the three District of Manipur, Bishnupur, Chandel and Senapati District, the three Naga tribes Koirengs, Chirus and Chotes are sparsely distributed in these Districts of Manipur.

The Nagas are speaking different dialects and different cultures and traditions but they were more similar to one another than the rest of the Indian people. Alastair Lamb writes in his book, *Asian Frontiers*: "The people of the Assam Himalayas (like the Abors, Mishmis, and the Apa Tanis), the people of the hills along the southern edge of the Brahmaputra valley (like the Khasis), and the Burmese frontier tracts (like the Naga and the Mizos (Lushais)-- none of these could be defined on the basis of the culture". (M. Horam: 1988:34)

Each Naga has its own language and traditional social and political institutions until the arrival of the British. Most of these communities depend on food gathering, shifting cultivation and hunting for their livelihood. Except among a few of comparatively advanced Naga tribe such as Angami, Sema and Tangkhul who practice wet rice cultivation, the institution of private property had not developed among the Nagas. Every Naga ethnic group has its specific land or territory. Each Naga tribe was a group and numbers of small groups make a number of small villages and each village occupied a well area of land of territory. The village was the highest form of organization. These people differ from group to group and from place to place. Every Naga community has their own respective culture, traditional and social practices. Though these Naga tribes speak different dialects but the way of living are almost the same. The traditional political institutions were decentralized and egalitarian, inter-tribal, and inter-village conflicts were very common practice among them. The Naga felt a potential threat to their existence along the foothills and encroached into the areas, which the Naga considered as their natural traditional territories. Clashes between the two became frequent and the British unsuccessfully tried to use the rulers of Manipur and Cachar to check the Naga raids and pitted the Kukis against the Nagas, and the British sent many punitive actions against the Nagas until 1880 to suppress the Naga rebellion. The colonial authorities introduced Inner line policy regulations in 1872-1873, seeking to stop further encroachment of tribal lands by tea planters and monitor the entry of traders and other plainmen into the wild areas inhabited by wild tribes. The Nagas have no written records so the folklore and oral traditions have been one of the important source for the reconstruction of the historical events of the Nagas. The pre-British period of the Nagas history is not available.

Most of the Naga tribes used their different names for themselves and common names were given to them by the Non – Nagas. "It is interesting, however, to note that Tavernier in the latter half of the seventeenth century refer to people in Assam, evidently Nagas, who wore pigs tusk on their caps, and very few clothes, and had great holes for earring through the lobes of their ears, fashions that survive to the present day". (B.C. Allen, E. A. Gait, C.G.H.Allen, H.F. Howard: 2010: 469) The Naga are skillful iron- workers and turn out very handsome spear. Their women weave substantial and pretty coloured clothes, and everyman knows enough of rough carpentering to enable him to build his house, and make pestles and mortars of husking rice. They make rough pottery, but without the potter's wheel. (Sir James Johnstone:2002:49)

Many scholar give different view about the origin of the Naga. The origin of the word Naga has been a source of debate by different scholars of both Naga and Non Naga. "The term 'Naga' was given to these people even before they migrated from Burma". (Hokishe Sema:1992:2) The origin of the word Naga is unknown, but it has been supposed by some to have been derived from the sanskrit word and applied in derision to the people, from the paucity of their clothing, but there seems little foundation for this etymological derivation as the term has never been known to be applied by the Bangalees to either Khasis or Garos, with whom they were far better

acquainted the Naga, and beside, the Garos specially are habitually accustomed to a greater degree of nudity than any of the Naga tribe with whom we are acquainted. (M. Horam: 1988:4)

Their migration, permanent settlement and nomenclature of their name as Naga is given to this tribe by the outsider. Thus Naga society is one of the oldest societies in the world. The origin of the Naga tribe is still obscure and poorly documented. The Ahom were the first foreign friends known to them. The Naga first started interacting with them prior to the advent of the British, who landed in the Naga territory at a later stage. The relationship between the Naga and the Ahoms of the plain areas of Assam was sometime war like and friendly relationship. (A. Lanunungsang Ao:2002:37,38)

The kind of relationship that was shared by the Nagas with the Ahom has no written record whatever evidences are there are all just oral memories which are passed on from another one generation to another. However, the oral source can play an important role in understanding further the Naga- Ahom relationship, which can be further ascertained with the input from the Buranjis. (North East India History Association: 2011:204)

Naga tribes are, as Hutton and Mills rightly observed, spread across what today are the borders of Nagaland itself and into the fringes of Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Northern Burma. There are probably between three and a half and four millions Nagas, although no one is quite sure as records in Burma have been poor and because official Indian censuses are still a bit confused on the other issue of who exactly is a Naga and who are isn't. (Jonathan Glancey: 2011:71)

Most of the Naga tribe migrated to India from Burma, therefore the name Naka or Naga was given to them even before they reached India. Moreover, it was from the Burmese that the British first came to know about the Nagas soon after their war with Burma during (1759-1826)(Hokise Sema:1992:3)

According to A.Z. Phizo, the most popular Naga leader, maintained that Burmese word 'Naka' was the origin of the word Naga. In Burmese 'Na' means ear and 'Ka' means pierced- one whose ears are pierced or those who bears earring. The Naga people in olden days used to pierce their ears for putting flowers and creepers, as they were lovers of natural beauty. Hence the term Naga is closely related to the Burmese word 'Naka'. (Chandrika Singh :2004:4) This view, in fact, appears more realistic.

Mr. P.D. Stracey found that "The biggest mystery is the origin of various tribes of the Nagas because different tribes have their own version of their origins". (Rev. Dr.V. K. Nuh:2002:2)

The introduction of western education initiated by the Christian Missionaries brought the Naga in touch with modern civilization. The educated class became a link between the ruler and the ruled. Despite the fact that there were certain defects in the government policy in education, it had, however, brought enlightenment to the Naga society. The British colonial education had revolutionized the culture ethos of the Nagas, led them to a new dimension of valued system of life. With the progress of modern education, the strictly narrow outlook significantly widened, which enabled them to accept the trend of change in their society.(Neivetso Venuh:2005:55) The advent of Christianity among the Nagas and the Kukis in North-East was due to the work done by the American Baptist Missionaries. In 1836, Serampore Missionaries who were the first to begin evangelism in the North- East offered the work to American Baptist Missionaries in Burma, which was accepted. "Rev. Nathan Brown, his wife and O.T. Cutter were the first Missionaries to enter Assam.(SR Tohring:2010:75)

The earliest pioneer was the American Baptist Missionary, the Rev Mile Bronson, who worked among the Nagas from about 1842-1852. He taught them Christianity and the art of cultivating tea. The Governor General's Agent was favourably impressed by his work and recommended that financial assistance be extended to him. Major Jenkins, the British Commissioner at Sibsagar, was permitted to make small payment to the Rev. Bronson not exceeding a monthly maximum of one hundred rupees "for objects of practical utility connected with the improvement of the Naga country, and spent with the view of leading its population into habits of industry". Bronson open a school at Namsang in the Konyak area bordering Assam. Some of the tribal chief and other villagers sent their children to the school, but the venture was not particularly successful and Bronson had to leave the area owing to ill – health.(Prakash:1995:184) Gradually, the Christian Missionaries transformed their indigenous ethnic identity into a Christianised identity. In 1901 census Christian population of Naga hill was only 579. In the year 1887 the latest Missionary advance in Assam was called the Naga Mission to distinguish 'Assam Mission' in the Brahmaputra valley and the 'Garo Mission'. By the time the Baptist Mission work had then gone on in the Assam plains for years and the church membership had been steadily growing. Then a new day of Christian Mission dawned among the Nagas. The Missionaries, then in Assam, were fully aware that the Nagas presented a most challenging and promising opportunity. Accordingly, Assam was assigned to the protestant Churches and the Nagas Hill District of Assam fell to the American Baptist Church Rev. M. Bronson, the first Missionary among the Nagas, went and worked among Hindu Vaishnavite Nocte Nagas of Namsang in Tirap District of the present Arunachal Pradesh during 1835-1840. He, however, could not succeed in his effort and had to leave the place very soon.

The decade 1887-1896 was one of small growth of Church membership in Nagaland ; however, the work was a good beginning as one could see the life of the church in the subsequent years. In addition to the missionary activities of the Clarks at Molung on the Ao Field and the king on the Kohima Field, W.E. Witter and his wife began their promising work among the Lothas. Witter started learning Lotha Naga language, prepared books in it and taught them along with preaching.

Clark and his wife continue their work from Molung for the Aos. Though they were seasoned Missionaries by this time their work for the Aos was not yet out of its beginning stages, nor was their keen interest in the least narrowed down to the work in that one region. They would have been overjoyed to learn of a great spiritual awakening among the Angamis, Semas, Lothas, and other Naga groups. This encouraged Dr. E.W. Clark, the Missionary at Sibsagar, to visit Molungyimchen village on 18 December, 1872. 15 persons were Baptised by him on December 23, 1872, leading to the first foundation of a Church on the soil of Naga Hill. A year later, the Christian population was separated and settled in a new village, Molungyimsen, three miles to the north of the old one, Molungyimchen (Deka Haimong). (B.B. Kumar:2005:129) In 1891 the total membership in the three Ao Churches so far now was 71. Few schools were also opened by the government in addition to Mission school.

Over in Kohima, the centre for the Angamis, where the kings had constituted themselves and helpers into an Angami Mission in 1883- though without a single Angami as local member – there had been an unstable convert or two, since two of more promise had been Baptised in 1885. It is on records that Lhousietsu was Baptised by C.D. King at Kohima on June 1885; but the second convert Lhoselie's date of Baptism cannot be ascertained, perhaps he was Baptised in the week of July 1885. The third convert was Sieliezhu who was Baptised by C.D. King on 30 August 1885. Apart from the Impur centre started by Rev. Clark, Kohima Mission Centre was started by Rev. C.D. King in 1880. The first Angami was Baptised in 1885. The work at Wokha was started in 1885 by W.E. Witter. Kohima centre looked after the work in Angami, Sema, Rengma and Chakhesang areas, and Wokha area in Lotha area. In 1913, Rev. Tanquist visited the Sema area and the Sema Association was formed in 1922.

In Manipur, Christianity arrived later than the present Nagaland state. The first missionary to reach Manipur was William Pettigrew, in 1894. He came as a Missionary of Arthington Mission but joined the American Baptists in 1896. William Pettigrew arrived in Bengal under the auspices of the Arthington Mission in 1890. He developed an interest in the Manipuris, he met in Cachar but could not enter Manipur until the acting political agent gave him permission to open a school at Imphal, the capital, in 1894. Though the school did little else but provide tuition for the children of government officials, even that was considered too much for the political agent when he returned from leave. Afraid that Pettigrew's work would disturb the Orthodox Hindu Manipuris, the agent told him that he could not continue in Imphal – but that he might work in the hill areas, which were under the direct administration of the agent. (SR Tohring:2010:78,79)

The beginning of a new Mission field at Ukhrul among the Tangkhul Naga of Manipur under the leadership of William Pettigrew. In his search for a new location for his work, Pettigrew visited Paoyi, Shiroy, Khangkhui, and Ukhrul. In January 1896 he decided to stay at Ukhrul. In January 1896 he decided to stay at Ukhrul and start his work. A small temporary building was put up and the villagers of Ukhrul were invited to learn to read. Raihao, the chief of Ukhrul, was one of the first students who attended the school. Hearing this, the chief of Hundung, Zingthan also sent 15 students. (SR Tohring:2010:79)

Meanwhile the state government appointed Pettigrew as Superintendent of the first census of the hill territory (1910 – 1911) because he was the only man who knew the language of the hill tribes. With the help of his school teacher and senior students Pettigrew undertook the work of the Census and carried it out successfully. The Census work enabled Pettigrew and his native workers to preach the Gospel in new areas. (Lal Dena: 1991:107)

The first emphasis of the Missionary work was on education because preaching the Gospel to people who had never heard about it was not an easy task. In 1896, two people got baptized in Manipur. Twelve boys attending school, both the Kukis and the Nagas were baptized in 1901. The numbers of the members increased rapidly with the arrival of Revival in Manipur. (SR Tohring: 2010:79)

The work among the Aos has been lively since the advent of the Haggards and the Perrines, and none were happier over the advance than the Clarks. But those Missionaries had to go away in U.S.A. for their due furlough, the Haggards did not return. During their absence, the Rivenburgs spent the greater part of a year at Impur looking after the work there. In Kohima in the meantime the work was practically at a standstill.

Dr. Rivenburg, who followed the Rev. King, adapted Angami to the Roman alphabet, set up the first Angami Mission school started Christian Mission work in the area. In the Lotha area, pioneering work was done by the Rev. W.E. Witter who came to Wokha in 1885. Witter studied Lotha, reduced it to writing, and prepared the first grammar and vocabulary. Mrs. Witter supplemented her husband's efforts; she took Sunday school classes in Assamese. The first Lotha Bible was released at Wokha in October 1968. The Rev. Tanquist visited the Sema area in 1913, and a Sema Association was formed in 1922, Tuensang area was the last to be influenced

by Christianity. In 1932, a Konyak was baptized in the Ao area, and in the following year the Rev. Longri Ao and the Rev. Subongwati formed the Tamlu Baptist Church. In the Sangtam area, Mission work began around 1936, the Aos playing an important part in it. The Sangtam Association was formed in 1946. The first Chang was baptized in 1941, and the first Phom in 1943. (Prakash:1995:188,189)

During the time when the Rivenburgs had been away on furlough, in 1907, H.B. Dickson and his wife looked after the work at Kohima. Dickson also took especial interest in winning the Semas to Christ, and he visited some Sema villages bordering Angami area. The Dicksons were young, enthusiastic, musical and evangelist. Through their influence a beginning of a spiritual movement was shown among the Angamis and the Semas living in this side of the country, and quite a number believed and were baptized. However, this little movement among the Semas was unfortunately not followed up, and their fervour melted away. After sometime later some Sema boys would drift into schools in Kohima and Impur, become Christians and go back to their village and they either go back to their old life or remain as secret Christians and all on a sudden, mass conversion took place and many Semas became Christians within a short time.

In 1913 – 1914, the Baptist Mission was running 14 schools in addition to an equal number handed over to the Government the previous year. The number of school in the Naga Hills had gone up to 42 and 52 in Kohima and Mokokchung sub – division respectively in 1931. By early 20th century, many dictionaries, grammars, translations and primers, confined mainly to Christian themes in English Language and Naga dialects written in Roman script, had started appearing. (V.K. Anand:1980:53)

The idea of a Nagaland Baptist Church Council was sown in the mid – thirties, the origin story can be traced back to 1935. The Missionaries, like J.E. Tanquist and others, were behind this plan of a united Naga Baptist Churches for fellowship and solidarity of witness. The minutes of the Fortieth Annual session of Ao Naga Baptist Association (generally used as Ao Mungdang) at Merankong, November 19 – 22, 1936 the presence of a delegation of five Angami Church leaders who counseled the gathering that Nagas would not join at a council with the plains people but would rather come together as one Naga group. In the following year, again, an Angami, Neisier by name, attended the Forty - first Annual Session of Ao Mungdang at Ungma, November 13 – 16, 1937 and he told the audience that Nagas would not join the proposed Council of Churches because they were under the British and it was better to remain so. His statement was welcome by the Ao Christians there.

The first Naga Hills 'Baptist convention' held in 1938 at Kohima, the Ao Mungdang deputed two delegates, namely, Mayangnokcha and L. Kijungluba. The reported back their observation in Longsa Session of the Ao Mungdang, November 23 to 26, 1939. Tanquist's statement was recorded in the minutes of Mungdang session. He pointed out the problem of culture differences and situations of the Naga people and the plains people and these made them difficult to work together, and he suggested that a separate council convention could be organized for them. However, it was not intended to break away from the Mission nor something bigger for the Nagas, but it was something like a fellowship or a Convention which could bring together the people of Naga hill and of Manipur into one body for common interest and witness because of their cultural affinity. It was believed that such a thing could bring the Naga people together for fellowship and joint effort in evangelizing the unreached people in the region and beyond. He also referred to a Naga Convention which was supposed to meet in 1938, the first ever Naga Christian Convention to be called. Finally, a proposal for deliberation in the house in session was made for the formation of the Naga Hill Committee. It much be admitted that Christianity had pushed the Nagas out of the seclusion of centuries into open ideas, ideals and civilizations of the people of the world. The Christian missionaries taught the Nagas how to live together in peace, love and tolerance. The missionaries brought about changes in Nagas thought and action and, by preaching Gospel and Church history, they were brought nearer to the political, economic, social ideas of the west. By establishing Schools, Hospitals, and Churches, the life of the Nagas were made more orderly, civilized, comfortable and cultured. It also brought about far reaching moral crusade to change the Naga personality in the direction of self – sacrifice for the entire huminity. (Neivetso Venuh:2005:56)

Eventually when the missionaries were able to gain some followers, it created rifts between converts and non- converts in the village. However, conversion to Christianity was quite slow, with only twenty percent of the population converting until 1940s. Disagreement between the Indian state and Naga Nationalist on the question of Naga Sovereignty resulted in a face – off, where the Indian state responded with military force. This period of the 1940s also saw the largest number of Nagas converting to Christianity, almost fifty percent of the population. After the Independence of India in 1947, the spread of Christianity was at faster rate than the Pre – Independence period.

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