Chapter Three

CHRISTIANITY AND CONVERSION IN NORTH EAST INDIA DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD

The term ‘colonialism’ is a recent arrival in the language of the Western world, taking the place of ‘imperialism’. Frequently the two concepts are treated as synonyms. Like colonialism, imperialism also involves political and economic control over a dependent territory. Turning to the etymology of the two terms, however, provides some suggestion about how they differ. The term colony comes from the Latin word *colonus*, meaning farmer. This root reminds us that the practice of colonialism usually involved the transfer of population to a new territory, where the new arrivals lived as permanent settlers while maintaining political allegiance to their country of origin. Imperialism, on the other hand, comes from the Latin term *imperium*, meaning to command.

The term imperialism also draws attention to the way that one country exercises power over another, whether through settlement, sovereignty, or indirect mechanisms of control. The age of modern colonialism began about 1500, following the European discoveries of a sea route around Africa’s southern coast (1488) and of America (1492). With these events sea power shifted from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic and to the emerging nation-states of Portugal, Spain, the Dutch Republic, France, and England. By discovery, conquest, and settlement, these nations expanded and colonized throughout the world, spreading European institutions and culture.¹

¹ In India, the era of British colonialism began in 1600 A. D., when British East India Company was granted the charter to trade with India and other countries of Asia and Africa. In the beginning, its aim was to supply the products of India and East Indies, especially spices, cotton and silk goods, which were having a ready market in Europe, yielding rich profit. But very soon, this aim was replaced by a policy of economic plunder and territorial expansion to gain monopoly over trade.
Therefore, colonialism is a form of domination, the control by individuals or groups over the territory of other individuals or groups. It has also been seen as a form of exploitation, with emphasis on economic variables, as in the Marxist-Leninist literature, and as a culture-change process, as in anthropology. However, domination in colonialism refers to group domination and not to social relations and processes among sets of individuals. Therefore, colonialism is used almost exclusively as a term of reproach, implying that the only aim of colonial rule has been the exploitation and impoverishment of weaker and defenseless peoples, and that its only results have been the destruction of what was good in ancient civilizations and the multiplication of measureless evils.² But it is not just a generic term meaning alienation and domination. The expression stands for the oppressive rule of the colonial powers psychologically, economically and culturally over the people around the globe.

Imperialism, colonialism and Christian proselytization were the main aspects of the British occupation in many parts of the world. The beginning of the 19th century was a landmark in the history of the colonial expedition in the North East region as the Burmese imperialist forces and the British were spreading their tentacles over the Eastern Valleys and mountains after having established themselves firmly in the plains of Hindustan. A confrontation was imminent and it came in the form of the First Anglo-Burmese War during the reign of Lord Amherst in India. It was after the collapse of the Burmese military might and political influence throughout Assam and Manipur that the British brought various hill peoples surrounding the plains of Assam and Manipur into their dominion. Though the region is geographically isolated from the mainland of India with its sparse population, it became an important part of the British colonial rule because of its strategic location for the British administration in the sub-continent.

The arrival of Christian missionaries and the spread of Christianity in tribal areas during the later part of the nineteenth century not only introduced organized religion, but brought about changes in the social life of the people through the church programmes, particularly in education and health. It was also due to the work of the Christian missionaries that linguistic consciousness emerged particularly in the tribal areas. However, the most significant development during this period was the emergence of educated modernized elite.3

The British Conquest of North East India: The Case of Zeliangrong Nagas

The British administration that came in North East India much before the advent of Christian missions was primarily the agency of change among the people in the region. With the British conquest of the region, a new administration began where the North East region came under the British rule and control. In order to strengthen their presence and administration, the British introduced laws and jurisprudence in the region. Various laws were enacted for efficient administration which in turn had an impact on the indigenous social and political structures.

The British had some contact with North Cachar Hills of Assam by 1832, but it was only in 1854 that an administrative sub-divisional headquarters became operational. The British presence in North Cachar Hills was largely a strategic entry point to the region; Christian missionary movements also started making their presence felt. The British annexation of North Cachar was disastrous for the Zeliangrong population. The British encouraged the Kuki immigration and conducted the settlement of the Kukis. The immigrants showed a lot of enthusiasm to develop their new home

and many Kuki colonies emerged, the tract adjoining the Angami hills being thoroughly colonized by them.

The Kukis were provided with firearms for self-defense and to form a buffer between the Cacharis and the Angamis. The alienation of their treasured land, unwillingly though it was, set the Zeliangrong against the administration from the start. The more the government tried, as it thought, to hold a just balance between the tribes, the more it seemed to the Zeliangrong to be tilted unfairly against them, and the more it seemed to the government that the Zeliangrong were difficult and intransigent.

In Manipur, McCulloch had adduced the oppressive rule of Manipur Kingdom being responsible for the desertion of the villages once inhabited by the Zeliangrong. Another acute reason was the immigration of the Kukis into Manipur especially the southern and western hills occupied by the Zeliangrong and the feuds between the Kukis and the Zeliangrong. The boundary between Manipur and Naga Hills was settled in 1872 after a protracted on-the-spot survey of Thangal Menjor and R. Brown. The demarcation of the boundary along the Dzuko River put many of the Zeliangrong villages south of it in Manipur and North of it in Naga Hills.

The first contact of the Nagas with the British came in January, 1932 when Captain Jenkins and Lt. Pemberton escorted by 700 Manipuri troops and 800 coolies forced a passage through Angami territory on their way to the Assam plain from Manipur. Although the main object of the mission was connecting to Manipur through the Naga Hills, it was also motivated by a policy to counteract the aggression of the Nagas into the company’s dominion. During the expedition, they met with continuous and nonchalant resistance from the Nagas. In the following year Raja Gambhir Singh of

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Manipur, accompanied by Lt. Gordon, marched through the hills by the route to the east of the route taken by Captain Jenkins and Lt. Pemberton. Several Naga villages joined together to oppose the advance, and as such the party encountered strong opposition. On this occasion the expedition advanced as far as Kohima.\textsuperscript{5} However, the British troops and its company were badly defeated, that forced them to retreat. Even though the initial intension of the British was to leave the Nagas alone, the continual raids by the Nagas on the British subjects, and the subsequent retaliation of the British, led to numerous punitive expeditions into the Naga country by the British.

Later, Mr. Grange, Sub-Assistant to the Commissioner at Nowgong, led a second expedition from Dimapur into the hills and marched to Togwema via Chumukedima and Khonoma and then across the Japfu range marched further on towards Manipur. The Nagas offered a good deal of opposition. He however, succeeded in overcoming them by vigorous and at the same time cautious action. He was strongly opposed at Pungwa, where several sepoys lost their lives, and again at Lekwera with severe casualty. With more reinforcement, he led expeditions against the Angami villages of Piphema, Sezephema, Jotsoma and Mezoma which opposed him and took eleven prisoners. The village of Jakhama was burnt down. The effect of these measures seems to have stopped raids of the Nagas of the southern range for some time. Against any further trouble from them, Grange advocated the establishment of a permanent military post at Chumukedima, a gateway to the Angami and Zeliangrong Nagas.\textsuperscript{6}

On 28 November 1845 an expedition led by Captain Butler, Principal Assistant of Nowgong with a detachment of 100 men commanded by Lt. Campbell and a survey officer, Thorton visited the Angami village-states and the Northern Cachar. Conciliating

\textsuperscript{5} ibid., p.31.
\textsuperscript{6} ibid.
the Nagas and mapping the topography of the Naga’s states and surveying the route which hitherto had not been properly mapped and followed, they made a peaceful march through the states. Everywhere they were accorded big welcome with presents of ivory, clothes and spears. This successful expedition rendered inevitably the accurate map and knowledge of the Naga states, was considered to be of a great importance to the future.7

This was followed by a policy of ‘non-interference’. The policy of non-interference in internal matters served the dual purpose of keeping the Nagas free to govern themselves in their traditional ways and at the same time reducing the responsibility of the government from the detailed and costly affairs of administration. But the paradox of colonial policy expressed itself in several ways. In the words of U. A. Shimray,

“The policy of non-interference was followed by area expeditions that were resorted to in order to quell opposition of the hill communities to the colonial extension of commercial activities in and through their land. Eventually the hill communities were brought under different territorial administrative authorities and hence the concept of territorial politics was thus introduced, hitherto unknown to the hill communities. The so-called ‘administrative convenience’, made some of the ethnic groups fall under one or another political unit. For instance, the Naga areas were brought under four administrative units; Assam, Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. The contiguous Zeliangrong Nagas were divided among the states of Assam (North Cachar

Hill district), Nagaland and Manipur. Such whimsical administrative divisions and introduction of territorial politics shattered all ethnic aspirations.”

However, the efforts proved short-lived as the Nagas found it difficult to keep the agreements. According to Mackenzie the policy of non-interference was too thoroughly English to be appreciated by the ignorant Nagas. Undoubtedly, it resulted in serious in-fighting among the British officers and criticism against this policy mounted. For instance, Lieutenant Gregory sounded an ultimatum (sort) to the Government and reported that unless he was allowed to adopt more rigorous measures than were permitted to his predecessors, he could not guarantee the safety of his subdivision (North Cachar).

The Lieutenant-Governor Sir George Campbell came to the conclusion that the only satisfactory way to deal with the Nagas was to gradually establish political control and influence over them without any assertion of actual government. This forward policy as it was then known according to Lt. Governor of Bengal was aimed at asserting their authority over the Nagas. In pursuance of the above decision, a Naga Hill District in the western part of the Naga state was formed with its headquarters at Samaguting (now Chumukedima) in 1866, whose administrative jurisdiction covered the Angami villages. A school and a dispensary were opened at the place. A road leading to the plains were constructed. Trade was encouraged. In spite of these, the Nagas continued raiding British subjects and many lives were taken including of some important British officers.

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10 ibid.
11 ibid, p.37.
In 1866, due to the constant raids of the Nagas on British subjects on the frontier plains of Assam, the British abandoned their policy of non-interference and set up an out-post to take over the Naga territory. This resulted in the gradual expansion of the British Empire into the Naga territory. In November 1878, Kohima was occupied by the British, and by the time sixteen Naga villages had tendered their submission. The British occupation of Kohima was a landmark in the history of the British colonization of Naga Hills. It gradually brought about certain changes in the administration of the Nagas while leaving them to administer their villages according to their respective customs and traditions.

The Government was satisfied with the maintenance of law and order, collection of annual house tax and guiding of the general administration of the district at the supervisory level thus leaving the responsibility of the day-to-day administration to the Gaonburas.\(^\text{12}\) The techniques of control and administration remained informal. This technique of administration served the dual purpose of keeping the Nagas free to govern themselves in their traditional ways and at the same time immensely reduced the responsibility of Government from the detailed and costly affairs of administration. Thus till 1880, the British adopted the system of native administration which would suit local tastes and at the same time be conducive to the maintenance of law and order among the Nagas.

From the assumption of active administration in 1881 to the transfer of power in 1947, the British administered the Naga Hills as a frontier district of Assam. The British colonial administration in the Naga Hills district was founded not on a defined territorial boundary once for all, but on a growing process of extension throughout the period, 1881-1947. During this intervening period of seven decades, British

\(^{12}\) Neitvetso Venuh, British Colonisation and Restructuring of Naga Polity, op.cit, p.42.
administration concentrated on the maintenance of law and order in this border district. The British directed their policies primarily towards practical and pressing problems such as the establishment of law and order, the foundation of administrative system and the dispensing of justice, and, not the least, the raising of the revenue necessary for the discharge of the function of the government.

Nevertheless, the successful penetration of the British forces on the western Naga region, gave the vantage ground for administrative units on the Naga Hills. Despite its constant efforts to win over the Nagas, it met with miserable defeats due to unfavorable trudges and the calamities unknown thickets of the jungle to the colonial forces. Thus, more than halves a share of the Naga areas were left un-administered. From the meagre advantage gained by the colonial British, however, its administration made no significant conscious efforts to introduce Western culture in Naga Hills. As a matter of fact, government intermediated to the people only at the administrative convenience without disturbing the cultural currents of the Nagas. Primarily, the interest of the colonial forces to the Naga areas lies in a colonial project of connecting the administrative units of Assam to the administrative units of Burma.

Besides administrative changes, the British tried to protect the tribesmen from exploitation by crafty plainsmen. In 1973, the Inner line Regulation was enacted, the aim of which was to ensure that no encroachments were made into the tribal areas and to enforce strict travel regulations in those areas. It also made rules for travel aimed at protecting the rights, privileges, customs, traditions, and ways of life of the tribesmen. The enforcement of such regulations which required a person to be in possession of a permit before he/she could step into the tribal area should not, in any way, be taken as a political move on the part of the British to isolate the hills from the plains.
The British conquest of the Zeliangrong people was the result of the British policy of colonial expansion towards North-East India after their conquest of Assam in 1826. The British did not have a separate policy towards the Zeliangrong people, but their general policy greatly affected them as the Zeliangrong people constituted major segments of the territory and population of North Cachar, Naga Hills and Manipur. The British conquest of the Zeliangrong people was completed with their annexation of North Cachar in 1854, the establishment of Naga Hills District in 1866 and the conquest of Manipur in 1891.

**British Administration in North East Frontier Agency (NEFA)**

The Ahom chronicles of the 16th century throw some light on the recorded history of the people of Arunachal Pradesh. Besides, Monpa and Sherdukpen-the tribal, had kept past evidences of the existence of local chiefdoms. As stated by the records, the northwestern parts were swayed by the Monpa kingdom of Monyul that prospered between 500 B.C. and 600 A.D. Later, the northern part of region came partially under the control of Tibet and Bhutan. The Ahom and the Assamese got the control over remaining parts of the state, particularly the ones adjoining Myanmar. They ruled until India was annexed by the British in 1858. Therefore, prior to the advent of the British in North East Frontier Agency, the Ahom kings exercised some amount of political control over the frontier tribes, but their lands were not absorbed within the Ahom kingdom. The tribes were ruled by their respective village authorities with at least or no interference from the Ahom rulers.

The relationship between the Ahom kings and the tribes were less cordial. The Ahom kings were willing to grant the tribes some economic advantage or rights over their own subjects provided the tribes were not pressing it beyond certain limits. The
tribes on their part were also willing to help the Ahom kings and not to disturb the nearby areas of Ahom kingdom so long they could enjoy certain rights and economic advantages from the neighbouring plain people. However, the collapse of the Ahom rule by the middle of the 18th century gave impetus to many frontier tribes to perpetrate plundering and murders and raids on the plain areas, which finally paved the way for the British advent in the hill areas of the North Eastern Frontier.

The Ahom kings adopted a policy of conciliation towards the tribes, supporting it by display of force when it could be effectively employed. Throughout the period of their rule their main concern was to contain the tribal people in their own hills and forests and to protect the gentle and unwarlike people of the plains, only sending out expeditions when there were raids of unusual audacity.\textsuperscript{13}

The British occupation of the North East Frontier began after the British had consolidated their authority in Assam. This was followed by a peace treaty negotiated with Burma on February 24, 1826 at Yandaboo\textsuperscript{14}, whereby Burma withdrew all claims upon the principality of Assam and its dependences and the East India Company came into the power with David Scott as the Governor General’s Agent on North East Frontier. The British adopted an administrative policy which was limited and loose. It was intended to serve their imperialistic purpose. The main reason for their restrictive administration in North East Frontier tract was guided by their policy of isolation which aimed at keeping away the hill area from any inflow of political ideas from outside, and thus keeping them away from national awakening. In pursuance of it the North East Frontier areas were kept beyond the purview of normal laws of the country and administered in a different way by passing regulations and framing procedures from

\textsuperscript{13} Verrier Elwin, \textit{A Philosophy For NEFA} (Director of research, Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh: Itanagar), 2006, p.2.

time to time. For instance, the tribal areas of Sadiya and Muttuck were taken over from the hands of tribal chiefs on the pretext of misrule and merged into Lakhimpur district of Assam in 1842, specifying them as Non-Regulated Tract.

In 1877 the hills of North East Frontier was declared as a Scheduled District and the Chief Commissioner of Assam was invested with special power in regard to administration. In 1914 the North East Frontier Tract was brought under Chief Commissioner of Assam and the hills were administered with the help of political officers. Therefore, the British rule was not deep rooted in North East Frontier Tract, as the administration was carried on by passing Acts and rules from time to time, and the village administration was left to tribal councils. In 1913-14, during the Shimla Conference, McMahon Line of 890 km was created as the border linking British India and Tibet. However, the line was not accepted by the Chinese; it was shown as official boundary only in 1937. In 1938, Tawang was shown as a part of Tibet on the map published by the Survey of India. From Dirang Dzong in the west to Walong in the east, the British set their feet in the region in 1944. However, Tibet changed its position on the McMahon Line in 1947 subsequent to the note claiming Tibetan districts to be lying to the south of McMahon line.

In 1919, the Central and Eastern section was renamed as the Sadiya Frontier Tract and the Western section as the Balipara Frontier Tract. But there was no change in the name of Lakhimpur Frontier Tract. This was done to bring these areas under direct control of Deputy Commissioners stationed at Sadiya and North-Lakhimpur for administrative conveniences. The British policy towards the tribals was one of loose political control, having as its object the minimum of interference compatible with the necessity of protecting the tribals from unprovoked aggression, and of preventing them from violating either British territory or Chinese territory and while endeavouring to
leave tribes as much as possible to themselves, to obtain from any line of action, or inaction which may tend to inculcate in their minds any undue sense of independence.

In 1942, the Tirap Frontier Tract was carved out of the Sadiya Frontier Tract, and in 1946 the Balipara Frontier Tract was divided into the Se-La Sub-Agency and the Subansiri area. In 1948, the remaining portion of the Sadiya Frontier Tract was divided into two divisions, the Abor Hills and the Mishmi Hills. The Naga Tribal Area was at first administered by the Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills, but in 1951 it was formed into a separate Division, Tuensang, within NEFA.

In 1951, the plains portions of the Balipara Frontier Tract, Tirap Frontier Tract, Abor Hills District and Mishmi Hills District were transferred to the administrative jurisdiction of the Government of Assam. In 1957, the Tuensang Frontier Division was excluded in the newly-constituted Naga Hills Tuensang Area which to the present day is in Nagaland. Till 1937, the Frontier Tracts though forming a part of the province of Assam as Excluded Areas and directly under the provincial Government were kept out of the purview of the scheme of the constitutional reform in the form of provincial autonomy introduced by the Government of India Act, 1935. The actual administration of the Frontier Tract was carried out since 1937 by the Governor of Assam acting in his discretion independently of his cabinet. The secretariat for this purpose was called the Governor’s Secretariat which was established in the year 1937.

In 1943, the British Government felt the necessity to speed up direct administrative control over the tribal hills on the Frontier and therefore the office of the advisor to the Governor was first established, which was directly created by

15 Verrier Elwin, *A Philosophy For NEFA*, op.cit, p.3.
Government of India. The advisor to the Governor was charged with the administration of North East Frontier Tracts and development of the hill areas of North East Frontier under the nominal authority of the Governor who had many pre-occupation and had very little time to devote to the tribal affairs. The essentiality of these arrangements was felt by the British Government due to the outbreak of Second World War, when Japanese made an attempt to penetrate into India through Manipur and the Naga Hills and China was cut off from the world through the sea. In 1945, special provision, known as the Assam Frontier (Administration of Justice) regulation was introduced to ensure that a vast majority of disputes and cases, both civil criminal could be adjudicated in accordance with the prevailing traditional codes of the tribal communities.

The British rule brought changes in the socio-political life in North East Frontier. In the early days, the indigenous political institutions played an important role. Though the British did not disturb the working of traditional institutions, yet in the later period of their rule, through the Government of India Act 1935, assumed exclusive administrative authority over the area through the political officers. In the matter of social, economic and civil matters village authority was left with their power to transact business themselves, but in police and criminal matters they were made to function within the frame work of Assam Frontier (Administration justice) Regulation of 1945 which authorizes political officers to deal with such matter.

The British administration in NEFA was that of isolation which aimed at keeping the tribal area unaffected by the inflow of any external political ideas. Though the British Government did not directly interfere with village administration but indirectly dictated the general rules for administration through political officers stationed at various villages. The tribals had no share of authority baring some
administrative powers at the village level. They had to remain satisfied with what the British officers thought good for them. Due to the severe restrictions imposed on free movement between hills and plains, the hill people were cut off from the mainstream of Indian life and thus a cultural rift developed between tribals and non-tribals. The development of the area was not their concern. The only interest was the security and control of the frontiers, which the British achieved through persuasive as well as coercive measures.

With effect from 26\textsuperscript{th} January 1950, the constitution of India brought about changes in the administrative set up of the excluded areas. For administrative development of these areas, the government of Assam was relieved of their responsibility for the administration of NEFA and the discretionary powers were reinvested in the Governor of Assam, as the agent of the president. Under the provision 18 of the Sixth Schedule of the constitution, these areas were included in table B under paragraph 20 of the Sixth Schedule which provided for the tribal areas within the states of Assam\textsuperscript{17}. However, the tribal people of North East Frontier area were not in favour of such administrative arrangement. Most tribes demanded for their own political distinct entity. They demanded tribal councils of their own, something analogous to autonomous tribal council under Sixth Schedule. Some of the tribes such as Galongs, Minyongs, Paddams and Cacharis of Sadiya Frontier Tract claimed their representation in the Assam Legislative Assembly. The Khamptis even demanded separate state.

In the middle of 1954 the Administration was reorganized on a ‘Single Line’\textsuperscript{18} system, which has greatly increased the efficiency of its work and the spirit of cooperation between its officers. In Shillong the Heads of Departments are integrated with

\textsuperscript{18} Verrier Elwin, \textit{A Philosophy For NEFA}, op.cit, p.4.
the Secretariat, with the result that schemes can be examined and implemented expeditiously, the duplication of files is avoided, and any kind of narrow departmentalism eliminated. In this Division, the political Officer is assisted by the representatives of the technical departments who act as his advisors and frame plans in consultation with him, and he thus becomes the leader of a team who is responsible for their implementation and co-ordination. The functions of circle officers and extra assistant commissioners embraced a multi-purpose list in that they acted as local heads for all subjects affecting their jurisdiction such as development work, maintenance of law and order, revenue work, community development schemes, socio-cultural affairs of the people and the exercise of authority over the various installations and schemes of various technical departments such as schools, hospitals, roads, and agriculture.

This ‘Single Line’ system enables the executive functionaries to maintain an overall integrated outlook in their jurisdictions in various spheres. It also suits the convenience of the people in that they can appeal to a single authority on any subject. This pattern has been in existence for a number of years and it has proved suitable both for the people and the administration. It enables the people to take their complaints and difficulties to the highest authority in their area in an attitude of trust and inner certitude that they would be heard. In the administration, the overall head provide a single authority to help resolve inter-departmental plans for the area and generally to develop an overall integrated approach in each administrative jurisdiction.

By the end of the colonial rule, neither trade routes nor government control of tribes had been established. Nevertheless, although the problem of their integration into the political order remained unsolved, an adhoc arrangement had been achieved. The area that would become Arunachal Pradesh was included nominally within political boundaries yet maintained as a separate administrative unit, with different governance
and laws. This allowed the rulers of Assam valley to assert maximum political control and military power but without actually integrating the people into the political or cultural mainstream.

The administration, under the Government of India made efforts to encourage development in various aspects; however it never came in the way of the traditional mode of functioning of the villages. In May 1964, Daying Ering Committee was appointed by the Governor of Assam with the aim to bring change in the political structure and to introduce democratic working in the field of judiciary, and local development administration. The recommendation of Ering Committee was accepted by the Government and was incorporated in the NEFA Panchayat Raj Regulation, 1967 with certain modifications.

After the independence of India, the Governor was divested of his discretionary powers in respect of the North-East Frontier Tracts. The administrative jurisdiction was passed on to the Government of Assam by virtue of the provisions of the Indian Independence Act, 1947. The Government of Assam continued to have administrative jurisdiction over the areas until 25th January 1950. The administration, however, continued to be carried out by the Governor on the advice of the Chief Minister, who was then called Prime Minister of Assam. The agent’s functions hitherto vested in the Governor of Assam were also passed to the Government of Assam under the orders of the Government of India19.

After the NEFA years, Arunachal Pradesh became a union territory and then a fully-fledged state in 1987. Despite these developments, the integration of the people of Arunachal Pradesh into the nation remains a goal rather than a reality. The anxiety over

19 P. N. Luthra, Constitutional And Administrative Growth Of The Arunachal Pradesh, op.cit, p.16.
security, a modern expression of the fears of foreign influence that have guided governmental policy in the region since the advent of colonial rule, is based not only on the unpredictable designs of Chinese. The rulers of Assam have never been confident of the loyalties of the tribes in the Eastern Himalayas.

**Colonialism and Christian Missions**

The contact experience between the colonial powers and the indigenous populations are mostly conditioned by spiritual considerations. Colonial powers, particularly Christian nations, buttressed their plans for political and economic incorporation with commitments to proselytize the indigenous populations. The major missionary expansion occurred in league with the grandiose Spanish and Portuguese explorations of the fifteenth century, where the Catholic priests accompanied all campaigns of exploration, discovery and conquest, working in league with the official representations of the Spanish or Portuguese authorities. The sixteenth century witnessed the rapid expansion of missionary effort and the establishment of the churches as a major influence in both colonial affairs and the indigenous populations. By the early part of the nineteenth century, the missionary enterprise had enveloped much of the globe and brought Christian values, traditions, assumptions, and teachings to many indigenous populations.

Broadly, missionary encounter with indigenous spirituality can be divided into two categories. The first being a larger societies like the Mughals in India, the Aztecs in Central America, the Hans in China or the Japanese. These societies were large, complex and sedentary. The spiritual formulations in these societies were typically codified, with substantial organizational structures, written codes and elaborate rituals. They were dismissed out of hand as inferior to Christianity, derided as superstitious, but
were nonetheless accorded a measure of grudging respect due to their complexity and hold on the population. In contrast, smaller societies elicited a much less favourable response. Since their spiritual concepts were deeply embedded in their relationship with the physical world, they lack the structures and forms that outsiders expected. This made it difficult for the missionaries to learn and understand those indigenous populations, who were generally without permanent base or proper settlement.

**Christian Missionaries’ Approach in North East India**

Colonial texts interiorized the indigenous people by way of their appropriation by the colonial cultural influence, manifested through the encounter with the West through the early influence of Christianity in the region. Christianity with its hermeneutical approach was a useful tool for the missionaries to reinterpret the histories of the world to the indigenous people. Such hermeneutical approaches became an all encompassing affair for the early mission to develop an acceptable interpretation of indigenous religions and institutionalize it under the church. This had generated a discourse of conversion in the Christian language of love, compassion and revelation that evolved a more acceptable and plausible understanding of the life-world.20

Depending on theological positions and political, social, economic situations among the people of North East India, the missionaries began their work by adopting certain suitable approaches which are relevant, effective and necessary. Before choosing field, missionaries look for a particular group of people, assessing their geographical location, language, cultures, approximate population, political and economic life and religious beliefs. Some of this primary information is gathered from the census records and other sources. Most missionaries often go directly to the people

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and stay with them. By learning the local dialect and customs, they began to have close contact and interaction with the people. After winning the confidence and learning the dialect and culture of the people, missionaries began witnessing through casual talk or dialogue with the village elders and leaders. They allowed the people to ask questions, clear their doubts, and even express their views in order to establish a better communication. This took place while visiting homes, in the medical centres, class rooms, Sunday schools, church services or prayer meetings and field visits.

The missionaries also developed mission compounds wherever they went. Making their base in such centres, they reached out to the people around them. These compounds served as centre of new activities, opening schools, meeting or chapel halls, teaching vocational skills such as carpentry, industry, tailoring, and weaving. Missionaries also established important institutions like ecclesiastical, educational, medical, training schools, colleges and theological seminaries. Each denomination has its own church structures and policies. For an instance, the American Baptist missionaries established their churches among the converts adopting the autonomy of the local church.

To understand the advent and role of the Christian missionaries, one has to debunk the myth of their close co-operation with the colonialist. Not keen in getting involved in the North-Eastern region, the British colonialists allotted the area to the American Baptists and Methodists while the British Presbyterians, Anglicans and Methodists were allowed into the mainland\textsuperscript{21} of India. But when the administrators faced opposition from the Nagas, and they also knew that no good taxes could accrue, they decided that some independent bodies like the missionary societies could be given

a hand to win the Nagas and to carry out social work without the liability to the
Government. The British administrator, could not but agree the missionary to penetrate
the Naga territory beyond their occupied Naga Hills.

This policy was applied to the entire North-Eastern areas. David Scott, the first
Commissioner of Assam was of the opinion that “rude tribes were more likely to profit
by the teachings of the Gospel.” The then Commissioner of Assam, Major Francis
Jenkins also held the same opinion that “tribes on the Assam frontier should be brought
within the scope of missionary activities as early as possible as the influence of persons
skilled in the languages of these tribes, devoting all their time and attention to humanize
these rude races could not fail of being useful to us and to them.”

There were number of missionary societies which applied for permission but British policy did not allow a
single missionary society to take charge of the entire North-East. Thus, the Welsh
Mission, and the Church of England, for example, were given charge of Khasi and
Jaintia Hills, the Methodist Missions were allowed to go to Lushai Hills and the
American Baptists were allowed to go to Naga Hills, Garo Hills and the Assam Valley.

Christianity in North East India

The first presence of Christian Missionaries in the North East region may be
dated back in 1626, where two Jesuit Missionaries, Stephen Cacella and John Cabral
arrived Pandu, near Gawahati in Assam, probably on their way to Tibet and China.
There are also references to the visit of a Feringhi and four Europeans in the Ahom
kingdom in 1635 and 1739. However, the details of the visits of these missionaries are
not available. Proper accounts on the activities of Christian missionaries are available
from the colonial ethnographers and administrators.

23 ibid.
The foundation of Serampore Mission in 1793 by the Baptist Missionary Society of England was the beginning of missionary activities in North East India. Following the Charter Act of 1813, which stipulated that the British administration must take more responsibility for the religious and moral improvement of the people of India, William Carey sent Krishna Chandra Pal to work among the Khasis of Sylhet on the invitation of the British magistrate of Sylhet. William Carey, who was closely associated with the Serampore Mission, founded the Serampore College in 1818, and soon it became a nodal centre for academic as well as missionary works. With the initiation of William Carey and David Scott, the Serampore Mission opened a mission centre at Gawahati in 1829.

Missionaries like F. W. Clark, started his mission work from Assam in 1871 to penetrate the Ao Naga region. Subsequently, due to the interest in missions providing a humanitarian resource for the administrators, primarily in the field of education, the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society (ABFMS) was invited from Burma. They set up their office in Manipur in 1894, but failed to convert due to the opposition from the local government, who had made Vaishnavite Hinduism the main religion by a royal edict in 1705. This was followed by an autonomous mission society called Arthington Aboriginese Mission Society (AAMS), and William Pettigrew was its first official missionary. Pettigrew’s intention was to penetrate the largely Vaishnavite Manipuri population, but the Manipuri people saw his intention as imperialistic and connected with the British government policy. Therefore, Pettigrew shifted his focus to the hill people of Nagas and Kukis. The presence of the Christian missions in Assam and the Naga Hills slowly started yielding converts. Medical facilities and education became focal points of attraction.
The Anglican Church or Church of England came in North East India as early as 1876. Though its mission objective was to provide spiritual service to the resident British officers in North East India, its presence in the region was significant. Its ministry among the neglected sweepers in Shillong through school education and pastoral ministry were noteworthy. Following the creation of the Church of North India in Nagpur, the Church of England became part of it and was made a separate diocese for the entire region under the overseeing supervision of one bishop.

The Roman Catholic Mission started its work in India since fifteenth century. But till nineteenth century, the Catholic Mission had only occasional contact with the North East region. Initially, the North East region was placed under the Diocese of Mylapore which extended from Tamil Nadu to the Burma border. In 1834, Pope Gregory XVI divided the Mylapore Diocese by creating the Vicariate Apostolic of East Bengal and North East India was brought within the newly bifurcated Vicariate Apostolic of Lhasa. But within twenty years it was brought back under Bengal in 1856. There was no remarkable expansion of missionary works prior to 1890. The official establishment of the Catholic Mission in North East India started with the arrival of the Savatorian Fathers in 1890. The missionary activities gained momentum with the formal conversion of a first Khasi to the Catholicism in 1891. Subsequently, the mission centres were established at Shillong in 1890, Raling in 1892, Shella in 1893, Cherrapunji in 1897. Besides, numbers of schools were also established.

The mission gained momentum with the help of Edmund Becker in 1906. He took keen interest in opening schools for the poor local people. However, the missionary activities were seriously disrupted during the First World War as Germany was actively involved in the war. But it gained the momentum again with the arrival of eleven missionaries in January 1922 at Shillong. Since then the Catholic missions
entered into a period of stability and expanded its activities throughout the region. Subsequently Silesians also arrived and began their significant educational and medical services for the people.

The Catholic Mission had made an immense contribution to the people through the introduction of standard schools and colleges, medical dispensaries, clinics and hospitals, training institutions for self-employment opportunities, agricultural training centres, and museums for the preservation of tribal cultures, old-aged homes, orphanages and rural development programmes. Besides the Baptists and Catholics, there are many other Christian Churches spreading in North East India. The churches include Anglican Church, Seven Day Adventists, Revival, Pentecostal, Welsh Calvinist, and Presbyterian.

**Christianity in Naga areas: The Case of Zeliangrong**

The earliest attempt to Christianize the Nagas was made in 1838 by the American Baptist missionary Dr. Miles Bronson by starting a school and a chapel at the Konyak Naga village at Namsang (now in Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh) near the British outpost of Jaipur. Within two years of its start the project had to be closed due to the continued ill-health of Bronson and his family members. After three decades of its abandonment, Godhula Brown, an Assamese associate of Rev. E.W. Clark of the Sibsagar Mission, went to live at the village of Deka Haimong to work among the Ao Nagas in 1871.

In 1876 Clark himself began a fruitful ministry in the hills by opening a centre at Molongyimsen (near Deka Haimong). Having been joined by his wife in 1878, Clark

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pursued his work which included evangelistic works, literary and educational so vigorously, that within a decade Church membership among the Ao Nagas had risen to 79 and many other came to join the mission schools to learn more of the Christian religion. At the request of Clark, in 1878 Rev. C.D. King and his wife were deputed for work among the Angami Nagas, but due to widespread disturbances in the Angami areas, the Kings could not occupy Kohima before 1880. With the assistance of one Punaram, an Assamese associate, a school was started and in 1883 the Kohima Baptist Church was organized.

In 1885, Rev. S.W. Rivenburg and his wife came to reinforce Mr. and Mrs. Clarks, for which the latter were sent to Kohima to take the charge of that station as the Kings had left for America on grounds of health. Likewise, Rev. W. E. Witter and his wife who came to Sibsagar Mission were persuaded by Clark to move to Wokha to work among the Lothas. Before long, the Witters too, left for their home due to ill-health. With their departure all organized attempt to evangelize the Lotha came to an end. In 1894, with the arrival of two new missionary families, Clark shifted his centre from Molongyimsen to Impur (11 miles north of Mokokchung), which in the years to come remained the nerve centre of Christian work not only for the Aos, but for the Semas, Lothas, Konyaks, Changs, Phoms, Sangtams etc. Kohima which was under Rivenburg used to send workers to evangelize the Rengmas, Kukis, Zeliangrongs and other Naga communities near Manipur. However, till the end of the 19th century, except the Aos and the Angamis, other communities of Nagas were without well organized churches. The first Zeliangrong who was converted to Christianity was Heizieluing of Benreu village in Nagaland. Though the year of conversion is not certain, it is believed

\[25\text{ibid.}\]
\[26\text{ibid, p.107.}\]
that he was converted in 1897. Beginning from Benreu, Christianity was spread to the Zeliangrong villages in Nagaland.

The first missionary who came to Manipur was William Pettigrew, from the Arthington Aboriginese Mission Society, latter in 1896, who changed his faith to that of American Baptist Mission.\(^{27}\) Pettigrew entered Imphal, the capital of Manipur in 1894 to spread Christianity among the Meiteis, Nagas, and Kukis after the Manipuris had fought the British in 1890 to uphold their sovereignty; but they were overrun and ruled.\(^{28}\) However, he failed to set up his mission among the Manipuris who were already converted into Hinduism under the patronage of King Gharib Niwas (1709-1784) in the 18\(^{th}\) century.

Therefore Pettigrew went to Ukhrul, the centre of the Tangkhul Nagas and established his Christian mission and school to spread Christianity and education among the Nagas and nomadic Kukis in the hills. Carrying on with his school inspector's work and preaching of the Gospel he enthusiastically studied the Tangkhul language and reduced it into writing for a common language of the Tangkhuls although they were living in different villages, speaking different dialects of the Tibeto-Burman language. Above all, he wrote about their customs, traditions, religion, laws etc. Following this Ukhrul became the centre of Christianity. In 1905, Irangteing of Mpung village of Senapati was converted as the first Zeliangrong Christian from Manipur. Then in 1914, Namrijinpou Kamei or Maipak as popularly known was converted to Christianity. Later, Jinlakpou of Tamenglong was converted in 1923 and gradually


church was established at Sempang village. Thus, Christianity spread from Tamenglong and Sempang village to the other Zeliangrong villages in Manipur.

The Zeliangrong people of NC Hills in Assam converted to Christianity from the neighbouring tribe Baite. In 1907 the Baite established school at Kenareram village which was situated in the western part of NC Hills. As a result, in 1910 a person name Dituing converted to Christianity.²⁹ In 1912 Rev. JM Harris Rees arrived in Haflong, and in the same year he visited Melangpeuram village and opened a mission school. Gradually, Melangpeuram converted to Christianity, and by 1960 most villages in the region were converted to Christianity. By 1945, Christianity was spread in Mahur area, south eastern part of NC Hills, and grows rapidly.

As proselytization of Christianity began to progress in the Zeliangrong areas, there was a stiff opposition from the animists. The village elders complained to the British-Manipur Government against the Christianized Zeliangrongs for disregarding and destroying their essential traditional beliefs, customs, laws, and ways of life and called for their expulsion from the village.³⁰ The Sub-Divisional Officer of Tamenglong Sub-Division following the Government policy of non-interference in the animistic way of life had ordered the Christianized villagers to leave their original village without carrying any immovable property, and settle in a new village to be established of their own, and in addition they were fined some money for causing the disturbance of peace and tranquility in the area.

Rev. Pettigrew immediately intervened with the state authorities for interference in the affairs of religion, against the liberal view of freedom of religion. But he failed so

³⁰ Asoso Yuono, Nagas Struggle against the British rule under Jadonang and Rani 1925-1947, op.cit, p.28.
to plea for them to the Government. As a result, the Christian villagers were asked to come to a new established Christian village named Sempang, about a quarter of a mile distance from the old parental village. On 9th September 1923, Helkhup, the pastor of the North-West Area organized a Church at Sempang for the first time among the Zemei, Liangmei and Rongmei Nagas.\textsuperscript{31} Thus Christianity began to make inroads into the Zeliangrong Naga areas. However, by and large, the Zeliangrong areas still remained a strong hold of animism, for which the reasons were strikingly clear to point out. The animist Zeliangrong villagers did not permit the Christians to preach Christianity in many villages for fear of shattering their steadfastness and cohesive tradition and values.

Christian missions established educational institutions almost every region where they went about. While the primary purpose was to enable the converts to read the Bible in their language and participate in worship services, in singing hymns, it did not stop at that level. Along with education, development of knowledge in various fields came along, never satisfying the thirst of the converts and others. Many more schools were opened in every nook and corner with the native converts as teachers, who also acted as evangelists. The middle schools were followed by high schools and colleges for both men and women. These mission schools and colleges were meant to prepare the students for evangelism.

Since its inception, mission schools are more effective and efficient than the government institutions. Medical works through health clinic centres and hospitals opened by the missionaries have been the backbone of the mission work. The American missionaries were the pioneers in the field of education, literature, and medical services in the Naga areas. They have established churches, schools and hospitals for the moral

\textsuperscript{31}ibid, p.29.
and material welfare of the Nagas. Spread of education as desired by the administration was not the primary concern of the American Baptists. As they wanted only some amount of workable literacy among the hillmen, the American Baptists mostly established Primary schools and a few training schools for teachers. Despite such limitations, the mission schools remained till the independence of India the chief agencies for imparting education to the Nagas.

Initially, the American Baptists used the Assamese language both in teaching and preaching; the local dialects being suitably adopted afterwards reducing them to the Roman. The missionaries learnt the important Naga dialects and translated the Bible, Christian hymns and other religious works into the Naga vernaculars using the Roman script. Side by side with the encouragement given to the Naga vernaculars, the teaching of English was undertaken in the mission schools. Text books on different subjects not only for mission schools but for Government educational institutions were produced by the missionaries. With the spread of Christianity, education and the use of English, the linguistic diversity was greatly reduced and the different Naga group could come together into the same realm of thought and culture. A sense of solidarity among the diverse groups of the Naga or Nagaism emerged.

Reasons for Conversion

The Zeliangrong primordial religion consists of various rituals and ceremonies. These rituals and ceremonies involved appeasing the gods with huge animal sacrifices. This made it difficult for the poor people to perform those rituals and ceremonies. This is the main reason why the Zeliangrong people for their conversion to Christianity.

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33 ibid.
entry of Christian missionaries, extending educational and medical facilities is another reason for conversion. Persuasion through education and other facilities, and not necessarily ascribing to the religion is another reason for conversion. For some, conversion is a personal choice, and does not necessarily ascribed to educational facilities or other benefits.

**Proselytization**

The motivation and the theoretical basis for the missionary endeavor, apparent both from the actual practice of the missionaries and from their writings, often demonstrates that they not only preached a new gospel, but also just as energetically imposed a new cultural model for existence on many indigenous or tribal peoples, including the people of North East India. Unwittingly no doubt, and always with the best intentions, nevertheless the missionaries were guilty of complicity in the destruction of many indigenous cultures and tribal social structures. Missionary’s culture, values, social and political structures, not to say political hegemony and control are being imposed on tribal peoples, in the name of the gospel. That is to say, the kerygmatic content of the missionary’s Christian faith became confused with the accoutrements of missionary’s cultural experience and behavior.

The missionaries were people of their own times and especially of their own cultural heritage. As a result, they came to the Naga areas with a particular frame of reference for understanding the Naga context and formed notions for solution out of their own Western cultural perception. Because of their own cultural self-understanding, the missionaries did not hesitate to impose their solutions or their culture on the Nagas. However, they surely did not intend any harm, yet their blindness to their
own inculturation of Western values and social structures meant that complicity was unavoidable.

Missionaries often had scant understanding of indigenous culture and traditions. This is no exception with most of the Christian missionaries in Naga society in the initial periods. They thought them to be totally heathenistic and undesirable and acted against them. They caused immense damage to the indigenous culture, where many institutions received death blow at their hands. The disappearance of youth dormitory or morung is due to the fact that from the very onset the missionaries frowned on these as being in their opinion dens of vice where singing, dancing, drinking and sex were the only preoccupations. Due to its disappearance, the Nagas suffered immense social, cultural and architectural loss. Naga folk-music, folk-lore, folk-dance festivals and many other social activities were considered to be part of the animistic society and purposely undermined. The missionaries lacked the capacity to differentiate between animism and culture. They lumped together animistic beliefs and aspects of culture, resulting almost in the extinction of some unique aspects of Naga culture. Therefore, significantly, with the gradual and progressive acceptance of Christianity, the shift of cultural loyalty from animism to Christianity began changing the outlook and living culture of the Naga people.

In the words of Chandrika Singh, the Missionaries carried with themselves both the light of Jesus Christ and the seed of modern education.\textsuperscript{34} The deepest impact on the Naga society was made by the Christian missionaries, because they were active and most closely in contact with the Naga population than the colonial administration. It was the American Baptist Mission which made an abiding impact on the cultural life of the Nagas. In fact, it was missionary, and not the administrator, who was the main

harbinger of change in the beliefs and ways of life of the Nagas. The spread of the gospel and the consequent conversion of the Nagas and the establishment of mission school made a major contribution to the furtherance of the gospel.

Christian schools trained the Naga youths in the rudiments of modern education; the main elements of which are reading, writing and arithmetic. The schools, which were established with the primary purpose of communication of the Christian gospel, were notably successful. In fact, the mission schools were the training institutions of Christian evangelists, pastors and school teachers. As the Christian gospel is epitomized in the message of love, peace and glory of God, the Nagas in no time of circumstances were highly influenced through the teaching of other worldly imagination. The precept of Christianity for saving one’s soul at the expense of the tribulation and tolerance to this worldly engagement became nodal point for disassociating from social responsibilities. The regressive Christianization to the Naga society soon prevailed upon the population in its rise of clergymen, piteous mysticism, and religious quests of activities.

Missionaries also printed the Bible in selected Naga dialects such as Ao, Angami and Sema and in the process gave those dialects a written form using the Roman script. This meant a simplification of the Naga linguistic landscape, for while the chosen dialects became recognized as standard, many other dialects disappeared. As literacy and education became a key to social mobility, Nagas realized the advantage of learning those standard dialects. Hundreds of young men from different areas, who were trained in the secondary schools and missionary training schools run by missionaries were able to communicate with each other. The missionaries saw the

36 Sanjib Baruah, *Durable Disorder, Understanding the Politics of Northeast India*, op.cit, p.108.
conversion as a total about turn by the converts from their old ways of life. Conversion was thus not enough. The new converts had to sever all connections with the socio-religious rites and customs relating to the so-called pagan worship. With the restrictions placed on animistic rituals and practices for the new converts.

Christianity became a distinct system with its particular form of worship, rituals, and its insistence on altering certain notions of traditional life. For an instance, when Christian converts started emerging in the Ao area, to observe a day of rest (Sunday) was highly controversial. It went against the rhythm and routine of Naga life that relied on communal participation for it to be efficacious. Similarly, among the Zeliangrong people, new converts to Christianity were ousted from their villages and property confiscated. In spite of such ill treatment, converts started to accept the Christian message that discouraged headhunting and drinking traditional rice beer. Performing older religious rituals that involved appeasing local gods was condemned as idolatry, and animal sacrifices were also largely abandoned.

The Christian missionaries interfered in the social and cultural practices of the Nagas to a far greater extent than the colonial administration did. They insisted that a convert resisted himself to one wife; and he was not permitted to eat the flesh of animals associated with sacrifices at ‘heathen festivals’. The missionaries also stopped dancing which was regarded to be a part of ancient or heathen practices. As a step to reform the church, the American missionaries, Perrine and Haggard brought total prohibition of liquor in 1894.\(^{37}\) Taboos and gennas were the common features of all the traditional religions, including that of the Nagas. For many casual converts, therefore, the bans meant nothing more than the exchange of one set of taboos for another. Earlier

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they observed *gennas* which was replaced by *sabbath*. The old food taboos, similarly, were substituted by prohibition.

However, the issue involved in this case was of wholesale rejection of a culture and therefore, a different one. Also, the discontinuance of the feast of merit, the loss of the knowledge of wood-carving as an art and means of subsistence, replacement of the rice-beer for tea were the negative developments. The old clan solidarity was weakened. For the Nagas, it is the clan and not the family that is the real binding factor in the village. It was compulsory for the individuals to obey the elders of the clan and individuals had no other way than to put up with all the curbs imposed on them by the clan elders. This accounted for the stern discipline and unity within the clan. With the growing of individualism, placing personal interests over those of the clan has resulted into disintegration and indiscipline. The spirit of sacrifice and unity at all costs had disappeared and with these are vanishing some of the noblest traits of Naga character. Frequent cases of internal division and tension were also reported soon after the inception of Christianity among the Nagas.

The process of proselytization was significantly followed by changes in the native culture. A Christian convert Nagas could no longer observe the rituals associated with the so-called ‘heathen worship’. They also had to stop the practice of folk songs, dances, sacrifices and celebrations of various kinds (those connected with cultivation, construction of houses, founding of new villages, feast of merit, and use of *morung* or bachelor’s dormitory). These were slowly removed from among the Christians. The abandoned animistic practices were replaced with new practices acceptable to Christian ethos of life. The old dormitories where the youths gathered to sing, dance and learned were considered as heathen culture, objectionable, telling of doubtful stories and engaging in indecent conversation, thus, replaced by new buildings of separate
Christian youth dormitories where songs of praises, prayer meetings and other spiritual values were encouraged. Rice beer, the most popular drink of the Nagas, was replaced with tea, Christmas feast replaced the feast of merit; and total abstinence from rice beer became a basis of church membership.

The intension of opposing the native dance, drinks, rites and other practices, which mostly often was seen largely as an act against heathenism was to reclaim religion for God and to leave secular authority intact. By fracturing the chiefship and creating a practical distinction between the political and the religious, it produced a dualistic order with competing foci of power relations. Moreover, it put the evangelists themselves in an equivocal political position, placed between a weakened ruler who courted them and a strong local congregation that was much less inclined to do so. In the meantime, the Church became a strong social and religious institution that seemed a substitute for the decaying traditional social and community life. 38 Several organizations functioning within the Church began to indigenize into the Naga social and cultural pattern. The Church probably became a centre of identity, a platform for Naga solidarity and integrity.

Christianity also affected the spiritual aspect of the chiefship and its foundation. In seeking to restore religious authority to God, the missionaries drove a wedge between two dimensions of power and legitimacy which, for Zелиangrong were indissoluble. For this reason, wherever the missions stayed, rulers worried about the long-term implications, notwithstanding the material benefits they might gain. The point, however, was not merely that the missions undermined the native authority. It was rather that the unraveling of native polity and its division into discrete domains of

religion and politics, chapel and chiefship, engendering a new pluralism. For whatever
the intensions of the mission, the new converts remade the political sociology of the of
the village republic. Around it they created another center, with its own leadership,
power relations, and symbolic resources. Consequently, they expressed in Christian
idiom long-standing tensions surrounding the chiefship.

The intrusion of Christianity, in other words, attacked the real basis of the
office, its exclusive domain over the political process and, with it, and every sphere of
social life. In short, where the chiefship was the epicenter of the social and symbolic
world, it now became one of the foci of authority. Nor was the church any less political
than the village court. In the words of Inato, “though Christianity under British rule
brought to an end many evil practices, it also resulted in socio-political instability in the
village administration. The Christians, in their endeavor to be faithful to the new
religion, often came into confrontation with the village administration by refusing to
pay the customary contribution of meat to their headman who had not turned Christian,
refusing to participate in ceremonies that could be related to animism, and ostracizing
each other from the community. This for a while disrupted the harmony of the
village.”39

The Christian gospel created social tensions in almost every village. Leadership
was a point of tension between the colonialist and the missionary. In the words of
Walter Fernandes, “The colonialist depended on traditional chiefs while the missionary
concentrated on education from which new leaders emerged. The chiefs opposed the
missionary because of conversion of morality he preached and the new leaders who

39 Inato Yekheto Shikhu, A Rediscovery and Rebuilding of Naga Cultural Values: An Analytical
Approach with Special Reference to Maori as a Colonized and Minority Group of People in New Zealand
were a threat to their power.40 Thus, there was an ongoing tension between the missionary and the British on the one hand; and the local chiefs and the missionary on the other. The consequence of conversion was that it also created social and cultural conflicts between the new converts and the animists. Their co-existence in the same village with parallel religious affiliation and practices could not go along smoothly.

Christian’s refusal to observe the animists observances and vice-versa created social problems in many Zeliangrong villages. Whenever the gospel was preached, some people appreciated and embraced it and yet many others strongly objected to it. This kind of scenario was created everywhere in Zeliangrong areas where in the same village, people were divided into two communities—Christians and the so-called heathen. Christians alleged their prosecution and harassment by the traditional religious sects and sought a place where they could practice their faith freely. They thus separated themselves to find new colonies.

In the process, Christianity also injected the idea of individualism to the Zeliangrong Nagas breaking some of the traditional norms. The suppression among Baptist of the ancient feast of merit in which the whole village, rich and poor alike is entertained, is not only a loss to the would-be hosts, but to the village as a whole, and not least to the poor who always get their full share of good cheer at such festivals. In fact, in the feasts of merit, religious aspect is less important than the social. It is at the feasts of merit that singing and dancing are indulged in and full dress worn. These have been entirely suppressed among the Christians. Of the material arts in Naga areas, wood-curving is significantly important. It is displayed on the houses of those who have given the great feasts of merit, on the morung posts of the Aos, Konyaks and Lothas, and on the xylophones of the Aos. This is doomed to extinction as the power of the

Christian mission increases. Feasts of merit are forbidden among Christians, and no attempt is made to induce rich Christians to decorate their houses in the old way. No Christian boy is allowed to go through his time in the morung and they are not built any more in Christian villages.

In the words of Von Furer-Haimendorf, “In Christian villages the rich, free of traditional obligations towards their neighbours and forbidden to perform Feasts of Merit, tend to hoard their rice or to sell it to the highest bidder. With the community spirit broken, individualism begins to assert itself and the Western idea of pride in the possession of goods fostered probably quite unconsciously by missionaries replaces the Ao’s traditional pride in the lavish expenditure of his wealth”.

Similarly, in the words of Elwin, “The activities of the Baptist Mission among the Nagas have demoralized the people, destroyed tribal solidarity and forbidden the joys and feasting, the decorations and romance of communal life.”

The introduction of Christianity in Naga society also resulted in socio-political instability in the village. This is no exception to the Zeliangrong. Christian gospel largely dominated the socio-religious life of the Nagas during the colonial period. The new Christian converts in their endeavour to be faithful to the new religion often came into confrontation with the village administration which was under the ancient chiefs. Christians refused to pay customary contribution of meat to their headmen, who had not turned Christian, but the government intervened and in its order they had to pay as usual. One important order of the government was that village headmen turning Christian were not to continue as headmen on the ground that the converts would not be

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able to serve the interests of the ancients on whose welfare and obedience the government put great emphasis.

In such cases, the authority of headship had to devolve to any ancient who might be in the direct line of succession. Although a *dobashi* had nothing to do with succession problem as in the case of headmen, the nature of cases to be dealt with prompted the government to prefer a non-Christian for the post. This was because ancient customs were often matters of dispute between ancients and Christians. However, government’s policy in this respect became insignificant when during the 1930’s and 1940’s a large number of village headmen and *dobashis* embraced Christianity. The government had to gradually relax the condition and laid it down in 1946.

Many indigenous peoples across the world became practicing Christian by the beginning of the 19th century. Perhaps the most significant element of indigenous conversion is the realization by many that adherence to Christianity did not require an abandonment of traditional values, beliefs and practices. Across many different cultures, syncretic patterns of spiritual beliefs emerged, with the missionaries adapting their customs and spiritual assumptions. Even in communities where the priests declared indigenous traditions to have eliminated, as in Central America, many core elements of the old belief systems remained within the communities.

The fact that Christianity offered a sacred text, a clear, systematic exposition of basic beliefs and moral lessons, also helped in approaching the indigenous peoples whose spiritual beliefs were not compiled in a single such document. However, the indigenous peoples made concerted effort to sustain that which was most central to their lives through many decades of attempted cultural transformation. There were many
revitalization movements across the indigenous world, often led by messianic leaders who blended elements of Christian thought with a strong appeal to indigenous spiritual traditions.

The perception and approach of the gospel bearers to the Nagas however, even from the beginning was contemptuous and discourteous towards Naga culture and practices. They came and scathingly branded the Nagas as a barbarous race, uncivilized, ignorant, heathen, savages, and uncultured. In the words of Shikhu, “The transformation of culture through inculturation should lead to the enhancement of indigenous culture and not its diminishment. Respect for culture is to refuse to take it seriously as a coherent and whole system of images and values. Inculturation is the transformation of culture by faith and the cultural re-expression of faith by culture. Tragically, the Nagas are left with almost nothing to re-express their Christian faith culturally. The cultural feasts and festivals which could have been the thanksgiving and celebrations to God; morung which could have been not only a social and political institution but also a meaningful worshipping place and symbol of identity; cultural ordinances which could have been a discipline and standard for new Naga faith, cultural beliefs and concept of God, gods, spirits, and angels which could have been culturally relevant explanations and concepts have vanished in the course and progression of inculturation”. 43 Therefore, there was no room to constructively encourage and integrate the Naga culture with the gospel.

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43 Inato Yekheto Shikhu, *A Re-Discovery and Re-Building of Naga Cultural Values: An Analytical approach with special reference to Maori as a colonized and minority group of people in New Zealand* op.cit, p.171. Inculturation here refers to the dynamic relationship between the Christian message and cultures, an assertion of Christian life into Naga culture, and the ongoing process of reciprocal and critical interaction between them.
Christianity in (NEFA) Arunachal Pradesh

In sharp contrast to the policy of isolation, there was also assimilation or detribalization in NEFA. Christian missionaries and social reformers are following it, sometimes on a large and enthusiastic scale. A number of people believe that the best solution of the religious question in NEFA is to admit Indian missionaries and to encourage a general Christianization of the tribes. If the form of Christianity introduced was a kind of a liberal kind and truly national in spirit, this would, they argue, bring many spiritual benefits to the people, and would save the educated from adopting an irreligious and materialist outlook.

The Christian contact with the people of Arunachal Pradesh began in Sadiya and Lakhimpur in the present state of Assam. Prior to the arrival of the American Baptist Missionaries in Sadiya, the British Baptist Mission and Serampore Mission were already preaching gospel in Lower Assam but without much success. The Roman Catholic missionaries also entered into the hills and had brief contact with the Adis (Abors) and the Mishmis in 1840 and 1854 respectively. With the establishment of the Sadiya Mission Centre, missionaries brought out a literature on dictionary of the Abor-Miri language. Schools were also established for providing education to the Abor and Miri children. But the missionaries could not make much headway primarily because these hills lie inside the inner line boundary. Nevertheless, the missionaries began its activities among the hill tribes from Sadiya as Mission Centre.

The establishment of mission centre at Lakhimpur was another landmark for Christian missions in Arunachal Pradesh. John Firth, being designated as first missionary of the centre toured the entire region, encountering tribe such as Daflas

(Nyshis), Miris, and Abors (Adis) who dwell along the foothills and realized that there was a prospect of missionary works among these tribes. Hence, he pleaded the authority to depute separate missionary for them to which a Garo by name Tosir was sent in 1898 to work among the Daflas and Miris. John Firth formally founded the Lakhimpur Field. To his credit for the services rendered, the Lakhimpur Mission School was later renamed as John Firth Mission School. This school had become a nerve centre for missionary activities especially in the Subansiri belt of Arunachal Pradesh.

The spread of Roman Catholic Church in Arunachal Pradesh began slowly with the foundation of mission centres and schools along the borders. With the opening of mission centre with schooling facility at Tezpur in 1934, there was a spurt in the missionary activities and it also added thrust to open and develop new mission stations in other parts. North Lakhimpur was one such venture which was opened in 1944. Despite their consistent attempt to extend their activities towards the Arunachalese, the result was not encouraging. This may be attributed to Arunachal being a closed territory, where the outsiders including the missionaries were not freely allowed to enter. But gradually their scheme of spreading Christianity gained momentum after the foundation of mission school at Harmutty near Doimukh in 1977. Many tribal boys and girls flocked into this school as it basically imparts free education. Besides teaching general subjects, the students were also taught on Christianity and when they came back to their villages they started preaching Christian religion.

**Reasons for Conversion**

For a long time, there was no proper religious belief system of the people of Arunachal Pradesh. Some leaders foresaw that unorganized society would come to extinction. The Donyi-Polo religion, unlike Christianity, Hinduism and Islam, do not
have proper religious texts or belief pattern. The people therefore, were in search of a proper religious system that would provide them with proper set of teachings, and place of worship. The coming of Christianity, therefore, provided a proper religious belief system with its teaching simple to understand and follow. This is the main reason for the tribals of Arunachal Pradesh for conversion to Christianity. As one of the advisors of Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang reiterated that ‘he would have been converted to Christianity if the Donyi-Polo religion was not reformed on time’.45

The early entry of Christianity before the reformation of the Donyi-Polo religion is therefore, the main reason for conversion to Christianity. Besides, Christian religion has proper teachings and creeds in the Bible. This makes it simple for the missionaries to preach and interpret the Christian religion, which in turn makes it simple for the people to understand and accept the Christian teachings. Curing sickness through healing is another reason for conversion to Christianity. There are instances where people are healed from their sickness through Christian missionaries. Other reasons for conversion to Christianity include extending educational facilities, and medical aids to the people by Christian missionaries. Besides, conversion for many is a personal choice, and does not necessarily ascribed to educational facilities or other benefits. For some, since the rituals and prayers of Donyi-Polo are difficult, Christianity became an alternative, where creeds and other liturgical orders are simple.46 There are others who argued that there are few cases of force conversion in the Nocte region of Tirap and Changlang by the Nagas militants, as Noctes are by their ethnicity belong to the Nagas.

Christianity came as the formidable agent that brought about transformation in the socio-cultural and political life of the people in North East India. Because of its

45 Interview with the advisor of Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang of Ngopok village in East Siang district, on 16 March, 2011.
46 Interview with a priest of Ngopok village on 16 March, 2011.
great impact in tribal societies of North East India, there are those who argued that Christianity has completely displaced the traditional culture. However, there are others who argued that tribal culture did not undergo significant change in spite of the influence of Christianity. Therefore, Christianity has not displaced or ruined the tribal identity, instead a new community emerged that a synthesis of the old and new which nevertheless maintained a distinctive tribal identity. For the Christian converts, the rejection of the religious elements in the old life did not in any way alienate or result in the loss of people’s identity because the traditional religious element had not contributed to that in the first place. In fact, it was the new forms of religious life that the tribal identity was strengthened because the practices and structures of the church operated at the ethnic rather than sub-ethnic level.

Like in the Naga areas, Christians are being charged with eroding of the cultural and religious fabric of the society in Arunachal Pradesh. The Christian converts desist themselves from associating or joining social function including the festivals. The practices which are contrary to their religion are considered abominable and denounce such practices. The Catholics are more liberal and more accommodative than the Protestants in their dealing with the socio-religious aspect of the tribal people. For an instance, the Catholic Mission School in Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh celebrated Nyokum festival with great pomp and show. Similarly, their attitude towards the indigenous food habits are quite adjustable as unlike Protestants they do not insist restriction of alcohol and sharing of sacrificed or killed animals.

The Christian missionaries are often being accused of detribalizing the tribal people in the North East. They are being accused of destroying the tribal culture, tradition, custom and practices. However, in the context of Arunachal Pradesh, it was the administration that first entered the tribal land, followed by the merchants,
shopkeepers, petty traders, contractors, and laborers from outside. The process of
detribalizing in the state had been ruining before the advent of Christianity in the state.
Therefore, there is no single agency which is responsible for detribalization in Arunachal Pradesh.

**Proselytization**

In the context of Arunachal Pradesh as a whole, the activities of Hindu religion have knowingly or unknowingly played as restraining force for mass conversion to Christianity. In the early years after independence, Christian missionaries, unlike the Hindu organizations, were denied entry in Arunachal Pradesh. Due to this discrimination, Christian missionaries came very late in Arunachal Pradesh despite its praiseworthy role of education and health care in Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya. This is because of the general understanding that Christianity completely displaced or ruined tribal culture. However, despite significant changes ushered by Christianity to the tribal populations, it also strengthens their identity. In the recent years, Christian missionaries belonging to different denominations are rendering humanitarian services to the people of Arunachal Pradesh in the field of education, medical care, relief, and rehabilitation. But, mostly it is through education that Christian proselytization was made possible to a large extent, as it is evident from the early years after independence.

The evangelization work of the missionaries proceeded with the rejection of the cultural elements of tradition like sacrifices, beliefs in spirits, cremation of dead, totemism and ancestor worship. It is replaced or rather substituted in the form of sacraments, congregational life, prayers, and burial of dead. This led to the accusation that the missionaries are responsible for uprooting the indigenous socio-cultural practices and belief system. The grand success of evangelism sows the seeds of
individual detachment from the particularities of social obligation. For an instance, a convert abstain themselves from associating or joining social function including cultural festivals. In this case, in comparison to other denomination, the Catholics are more liberal more accommodative in dealing with socio-religious aspects of the indigenous populations.

Keeping in view of the alarming growth and spread of Christianity among the people, the Pradesh Council passed a resolution on 5th October 1972, according to which a person belonging to an indigenous tribal community of Arunachal Pradesh who renounces the traditional belief or faith indigenous to the community to which he or she belongs to and takes to the other belief and faith should be deemed to have deserted the community or tribe and to have fortified all facilities, benefits, advantage considerations deriving from his or her being a member of the tribe or community. However, the government of India did not approve the resolution, as it was contrary to the spirit of the constitutional provision of freedom and equality.

The year 1974 witnessed the climax of anti-Christian activities. The plunder and burning down of about 40 churches and villages in Sagalee sub-division alone and the outrages on the Christians of other parts of Arunachal Pradesh occurred. Ironically such injustice, illegal and unconstitutional persecutions were carried out in connivance with some of the government officers and representatives. The continued plunder, torture and harassment had created an anxiety and thus feeling of insecurity mounted among the Christian converts. The situation was so tense that it forced the converts especially the Christian leaders to flee from their respective villages to safer places and many had to flee to Assam. They were given temporary shelter in mission schools at North Lakhimpur and Tezpur. The converts were forced to denounce the new religion and were asked to surrender mithun or other domestic animals in lieu of physical
harassment and material destructions. A number of *mithuns* were forcibly taken away from the converts, which were either used in feast or shared among the leaders of the persecution. The news of the persecution soon spread to outside Arunachal Pradesh and there were corresponding condemnations from all quarters. But this did not change the situation, for persecution continued unchecked, the extent and the quantum of persecution were distorted and sufferings of the people were not correctly reported.