CHAPTER VI

IMPACT OF CHRISTIANITY AMONG THE HMARS
IMPACT OF CHRISTIANITY AMONG THE HMAR PEOPLE

6. INTRODUCTION

It may first of all be noted that Christianity and modern education goes hand in hand among the Hmar people. As such, when dealing with the 'Impact of Christianity', it directly also means the 'Impact of Modern Education'. The coming of Christianity and the introduction of modern education among the Hmar people had its own and positive and negative impact. As such they will deal in separate headings. In the meantime, it will not be out of place again to have a brief introduction of Christianity and modern education among the Hmar people before its impact is dealt with.

There is no doubt that the Christian missionaries had contributed for the development and growth of modern education in the whole country. It is sometimes stated that the modern system of education was started in India by the schools established by the missionaries. With the full back-up and co-operation of the British government education has made a rapid progress among the tribals of these regions.¹ Here, a question often arises that if the foreign missionaries had the idea of spreading their religion, then why did they take up the cause of education and established so many educational institutions in different places. Mr. Allen, clarifying the point, has put forward two reasons - First, they could make Indians understand their religious theory and principles better if they got their education and educated on the western lines and the second aim was to gain contact with Indian through their institutions.²

¹ History of Indian Education and its contemporary problems, Dolba House, Delhi, 1995, p. 48
² Rai BC, History of Indian Education, Prakashan Kendra, Lucknow, 1992, p. 92
The East India Company, on their part also made education as a means of the publicity of religion but due to political and administrative reasons, it had to give up. Thus, they usually adopted a policy of secularism. There are also time when propagation of religious principles was stopped by the East India Company, but it could not completely ban the activities of the missionaries from England.3

It is also not surprising that many pioneer foreign missionaries had played a dual role of a christian missionaries as well as an unofficial British Political Agent. For instance, the first permanent missionaries in the then Lushai Hills FW Swidg and JH Lorraine were given the permission to be official agent for the sale of salt, one of the most important items the tribals did not possess by themselves. Edwin Rolands who followed them closely was even given the official status of Honorary Inspector of Schools in the entire Lushai Hills. Rolands held this post from 1903 till his retirement in 1907. Besides, the entire government schools in the area was handed over to the christian mission from 1904 till 1952 with adequate sum of money made available to them.4 William Pettigrew, the first English missionary to have set foot in Manipur also had a very cordial relations with the British government officials stationed at Manipur even though they sometimes has a clash of ideas and opinions on matter of religion and Christianity and its propagation.

3 Erak, p.94
However, it may be noted here that the interest of colonial officials in
mission's educational programmes was not necessarily religious. It was both
external and imperialistic. They understood that the education imparted by
missionaries was effective not only in 'civilizing' the natives, but also in making
them 'peaceful and loyal subjects'. Closely intermingling with the main currents
of colonial expansion, western education tended to make colonial occupation
appear as a beneficial in the eyes of the subject people. The position of the
government was thus compromised by the delegation of all educational and other
philanthropic works to the Christian missions because the latter could undertake
such works more cheaply and efficiently than the government could. In the
process, the missionaries were placed almost in the position of official
educationists. They of course, control as might be needed to satisfy the
government that its money was properly spent.

Government, on the other hand, explicitly abstained from all interference
with religious instruction. Certainly the government realised that the most effective
influence on the subject people must be one that was exercised by such unofficial
bodies to which both the spiritual and the educational works were entrusted. Their
strategy was thus to secure the co-operation of the missionaries in implementing
any measure which they would wish to apply. Inevitably, there would be changes
but these changes were to be carefully regulated to suit the interest of government
thereby directly or indirectly stabilizing their control over the subject people. Thus,
while the officials looked at the introduction of western education as a legitimizing
process of colonial rule, the missionaries used it as a vehicle for communicating the
Christian message to the subject people.

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6.1 POSITIVE IMPACT OF CHRISTIANITY AMONG THE HMARS

Given below are some of the important positive impact of Christianity among the Hmars. However, it may be noted that these heads and points are inter-related with each other and as such, they sometimes overlapped each other. No hard and fast line can also be drawn between the different heads and points.

6.1.1 Education

The spread of Christianity by the missionaries is always synonymous with the introduction and spread of modern education. The Hmars did not have their own script and literature before the coming of Christianity on their land. As such, alphabet based on the local dialect and using the Roman script was developed by the Missionaries. This has greatly enhanced the development and growth of the people in literature and knowledge.

Although there was hesitation on the part of the parents to send their children to schools when the Christian missionaries introduced the modern school, the new generation has learnt that education was their only means of survival, growth and development. The Missionaries set up primary vernacular schools where the local people could get education in their own dialect. English which is the most common language in the world was learnt by the people in a better way through these vernacular schools.
Jayaseelan remarks that,

*People have begun to appreciate the intrinsic value of education and their response today is tremendous. The tribal potential for learning has been fully exploited. They have risen to great academic excellence and they have highly qualified persons in every department or profession.*

Along with the growth of education and the rate of literacy the literature of the Hmar people also made a rapid progress. The first ever written literature in Hmar dialect was the translation of St. Mark of the New Testament done by Rev. F.J. Sandy with the help of Thangkhup and Thanga (Rasi) in the year 1917. In 1919 a Hmar vernacular text book called Buhmasa (Primer) prepared by Rev. Edwin Rolands came into being, and by 1922 they had their own book of Hymns compiled and printed under the initiative of H.K. Dohnuna. R. Sankey’s Hymns were also translated into Hmar dialect and made in the form of a book in 1926.

Although the exact numbers of books written in Hmar dialect cannot be obtained, it is believed that it will run into thousands. It was also recognised by the government to be used as a medium of instruction upto the stage of middle school. Moreover, the Hmar dialect has been permitted by the government of Manipur to be offered as MIL upto the level of Class XII in Manipur.

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Quoting Jayaseelan again,

*Literacy contribution of the Missionaries has been great. Beginning from the translation works of the Bible, every tribal dialect has developed enormous literature. Particularly the Kuki-Chin-Mizo languages*¹ (of Churachandpur district) has been outstanding. The development has been so rapid that a day is not far off when like the Meitei community, agitations may be on the anvil for a demand of their inclusion in the Eighth Scheduled of the Indian Constitution.⁸

Besides, the coming of Christianity and the introduction of education by the missionaries helps to develop the over-all socio-economic condition of the Hmar-tribal society by providing employment opportunities. With the education received from the mission schools, they are not only firm in their belief and faith to their new found religion, the people were also qualified for certain jobs. They got employment in mission fields as well as, in the different government departments and public sectors etc.

¹ Ibid
6.1.2 Better Management of Religious Affairs

The Hmars, as mentioned before seems to be a deeply religious tribes. Even though they have no specific laws and orders on the socio-religious affairs, they do follow those unwritten laws and practices which were handed down from generation to generation. They believed that, in order to let their soul rest in peace after their death they have to kill certain animals or offers a series of costly feast. They offered food, meat and others to the dead to propitiate their spirits. The dead of a village chief or 'Thangsuos' are more mourned than the commoners.

Almost all these believes and practices are no longer in vogue. Physicians and Medical practitioners are consulted when they have health problems and take medicines on their advice. Deaths and ceremonies are usually taken over by the church. Sundays are observed in a christian manner by attending sunday schools where there are usually Bible study.

The coming of Christianity thus turned the whole religious beliefs of their pre-christian life upside down. The sacrificial act and element in the ancient Hmar religion was replaced by self-sacrificing act of Jesus in the place of man and indeed, to the Hmar converts, this is the greatest relief that the new religion has offered to them.⁹

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6.1.3 Political Consciousness

Political consciousness was born through education. The pioneer missionaries have sown the seed for the idea of self-government in the church. They taught the people the idea of self-management with self-sufficiency. The education they imparted also develops a sense of administrative efficiency, honesty and skill in business management, political maturity, devotions and dedication in the minds of the scholars and teachers for building a better society.

With the adoption of the modern system of governance and the practice of Universal Adult Franchise in a democratic form of government set up, the tribals of Churachandpur district are not just a silent spectator to all the political activities in their land. They participated in every political movement within their reach, enroll themselves in the national and state level politics, contest election and some of them lead a very successful career in this field. With the modern education they received, the people are also in the position to evaluate the politicians, issues and give their support accordingly.

Although the churches in the present days avoid direct involvement in political affairs, they through their prayers, entreaties and pulpit-preachings have contributed to the ethnical and political consciousness of the people. However, one cannot deny the fact that church and church leaders are very influential in elections and many political parties and individual politicians always seeks their blessing and support during these elections.
b.1.4 Organised Social Life

The coming of Christianity has greatly changed the social structure of the Hmar people. Hunting of heads and animals and collection of their skulls, which are glorious things of the past and a passage to heaven was completely abandoned. Today, the people are more worried about the attainment of certain degrees in education, a secured job and money to enjoy life to the maximum. Zu (wine), which was a part and parcel of any religious and social activities, was prohibited by the early missionaries. Although, its consumption has not been completely given up it has decreased to a great extent. Tea is made as a good substitution for it especially with those activities and ceremonies such as, 'pu zu', (serving of wine on the day of condolence by the maternal uncles of the deceased), 'mo biek' (marriage proposal by the boy's family to the girls') where it is compulsory.

The missionaries, knowing very well that the early christian converts needs to fully engage themselves into christian activities so that they did not return to their old ways of wine and dances. As such, they allotted each of the nights of the week for church programme thereby giving less free time to the native christians for non-christian activities. They also made them responsible for their own spiritual growth and development by making them read the Bible by themselves and sing the hymn of praises and also preached in the churches, the practice which they themselves hardly followed in their country. These proper utilisation of their time on christian activities and self-study of the religious books and literature made them self confident in Bible knowledge and religious discourses.
6.1.5 Expanded World View

By giving both secular and moral educations in the mission schools, the status of the people were lifted up considerably. Character formation and love for one another were taught from the works and teaching of the missionaries. The modern education creates flexibility of the mind to accept new ideas, to experiment and improve. It also contributes towards the social-reconstruction of the tribals and broadens their outlook.

Every area of Hmar life has been influenced by the new found religion. Before the advent of christianity in the Hmar area, the Hmar tribal world view was limited to a clan, village or at the most to a particular area or areas. Christianity has brought a new world view to the people not only by exposing the to the Indian nation but also to the international community. Exposure to a new world with its economic systems and structure, its political phylosophies and forms of government, its educational and social structures in general totally different from those of the Hmars living in isolated geographical and cultural pockets was bound to alter after the "world view" of the Hmar people.10

The Hmar churches also fostered unity among the tribes. They have contributed immensely for easing of tension that existed in and outside the tribe. They also encourage contacts and interraction outside the community thereby making the members accept the oneness of humanity through their faith and religion.

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10. Ibid, p.94
6.1.6 Modernisation

Missionary enterprises had introduced the people to the fruits of modernisation and civilisation. The Missionaries are responsible for the early introduction of modern electronic gadgets. Better transport and communication facilities have also been initiated by them. The quality and standard of life has improved a lot. with the Missionary influence, people began to discard their old way of dressing and began to adopt the western way of dressing. Man began to cut their hairs, wear trousers and shirts. The indigenous cotton fabrics are relegated to the background. Women wear blouses, shirts, frocks and petticoats. They even wear trousers like their male counterparts.

In the pre-Christian Hmar society, the uneconomic way of coping the sick was offering of sacrifices to the evil spirits through the village priest. They believe that these evil spirits caused pains, sickness and deaths and that it is necessary to pleased these spirits by offering sacrifices. The health conditions of the people were miserable and pathetic. Malaria was of course prevalent everywhere. There were also dropsy, internal parasites, hookworm, dysentery, tuberculosis and other dreaded diseases. Parents had large families but more than 50 percent of the children died before reaching adolescence. Many mothers died at childbirth due to lack of care and superstition.11

11. Loyds J.M. On Every High Hill, p.41 by see also Sanate Crossthang, Ibid.,p.103
6.1.7 Better Health Care

The early Christian missionaries successfully used medicines to attract the native tribals towards their religion. It may be noted here that, Watkin Roberts on his maiden visit and public interaction with the people of Sermon, distributed medicines and biblical pictures and posters after his short speech. The native missionaries who were usually given a brief training on primary health care also taught the people that sickness was due to biological, psychological and physiological reasons and not by evil spirits. They also used to distribute medicines free of cost to the people. In such a way, child mortality has been reduced and life expectancy increased to a very great extent.

Acknowledging the importance of physical and mental health care of the people, a 25 bedded hospital with state-of-the earth equipment and machines called Sielmat Christian Hospital was established at Sielmat, Churachandpur by the Partnership Mission Society in 1964. In 1989, the Independent Church of India also established the Muolvaiphei Rural Health and Research Centre at Muolvaiphei, Churachandpur. A Nursing School, affiliated under the Assam School of Nursing, known as Bethesda School of Nursing was also started in 1995 under this Hospital which gives General and Midwifery Course. Since its inception MRHRC has succeeded in creating mass awareness on the evils of drug abuse, providing free health camp in remote areas, maternity and child care and eye care facilities.
0.1.8 Status of Women

With the influence of the missionaries' works in the area there was social upliftment particularly on the status of women. It also makes their participation effective in the development process of the state and their society. In the present day Hmar society, particularly in religious affairs, women play a great role in the programmes and policy of the churches. Every local churches and denominations will have its own section of women known as 'Nuhmeipawl' who will have their own committees and leaders, meetings (usually Friday night), funds and Conferences and Assemblies where issues concerning women will be discussed, resolved and implemented for their better welfare.

A Non-Government Organisation known as Rural Woman Upliftment Society under the banner of the Independent Church of India also functions actively with funding from abroad as well as central government of India. Various development as well as welfare activities concerning women are taken care by this organisation. There is also an organisation known as Hmar Woman Association based in Churachandpur which caters to the need and welfare of Hmar women. A quarterly magazine known as 'Nuhmei' is also published regularly from the last 2 years. Few Hmar women educated led by Mrs. Zosangkim Pudaite, a government college lecturer constitutes the editorial team of this magazine.

In this way, Christianity brought about positive changes in the socio-political, economic, cultural and religious life of the Hmars. Although some of these changes might not be very encouraging, they as a whole are more in the positive side.
6.2 NEGATIVE IMPACT OF CHRISTIANITY AMONG THE HMARS

The coming of the Christian missionaries and the introduction of western education among the Hmar people of Churachandpur district no doubt bring about certain positive changes in the socio-economic, education and political life of the people. However, all things have their own negative side. Christianity too, in spite of its many positive aspects had its own share of defects on the life of the Hmar people. Though some of them seems to be ‘minor’ some of them do really had its deep impact and is being discussed and deliberate in many platforms and occasion even by the people who are affected. Some of these negative impact of Christianity among the Hmar people are described below.

6.2.1 Inter-Denominational Conflicts and Rivalry

One of the most important negative impact of the coming of Christianity among the Hmar people was concerned not with any other aspect but with the conflicts and rivalry within the church itself. The first crisis that cropped up was a showdown between the reverends William Pettigrew, the official missionary license holder of Manipur state, who was at that time based in Ukhral and Watkin Roberts, the man who was responsible for bringing Christianity to the people of Churachandpur district. This crisis caused mainly due to professional rivalry between the above mentioned missionaries happens in the early stage of the coming of Christianity among the Hmar people. As the native tribals are yet to grasp the intricacies of the problem which was mostly on Christian doctrines and faith, this conflict does not have much impact on the life and growth of Christianity at that time.
The next conflict however arose within the NEIG Mission, the very mission working among the people. Mr. HH Coleman the General Secretary of the 'Home Board' based in the United States unceremoniously removed Mr. Roberts, the founding father of the said mission. The irreparable damage done because of the expulsion of Roberts, which led to the split among the native Christians still haunt the present churches and directly effect the growth and development of the Hmar people as well as education to a great extent.

Roberts, after his expulsion from the mission he established founded another mission called Indo Burma Pioneer Mission. His follower, who constituted the majority of the Hmar Christians of that time however called themselves as 'Independent Church' in order to avoid certain disturbing government laws and orders initiated by Coleman and his friends. Again, there was another deep crisis within the follower of Roberts which ultimately led to another split within the Independent Church in 1968, just one year before Roberts' death on April 20, 1969. Rochunga Pudaite, the leader of one faction after fighting for ownership of the Independent Church in government courts and office for about five years finally gave up and founded another mission known as Evangelical Free Church of India in 1973.

Furthermore, there was another split within the Indendent Church in the year 1968 which led to the formation of the Evangelical Free Church of India. Again, in the year 1989 a group within the EFCI broke away to form a separate mission known as the Wesleyan Methodist Church of North East India. On the other hand, the Evangelical Assembly Church, a Hmar dominated Assembly within the NEIG Mission suffers a further split, with the break away group forming the Reformed Presbyterian Church of East India on April 8, 1979.
Before all these conflicts and separation, two new mission known as the Assemblies of God and another one known as the United Pentecostal Church had already been formed in the 1960s. Few members of the Assemblies of God again broke away to formed a different church known as 'Lalsungkuo' (Unity Church) in the year 1983. The main reasons for all these separation except one or two of them were mainly of financial matters and on issue of leadership rather than on issue of 'doctrinal faith'. Thus at present, there are almost a dozen different denominations among the Hmar community. There are still a few other churches such as the Douglas, Four Square, Catholics, Manna Full Gospel, Local Church, etc. among the Hmar community.

There was a deep rivalry among the members of these churches and missions. Each member valued and regards his membership in the church more than anything else. A person affiliation in the church is put ahead and on the top before accrediting him on any counts. The churches, on their intention of increasing the number of their members led to 'stealing' each others members by coaxing and on the promise of giving certain benefits and status. This separations and rivalries has greatly hampered the growth and progress of the whole tribe in many fields outside Christianity. Vumson, who quotes Lalthangliana explain this critical situation writes -

_On one hand Christianity brought disunity because of the existence of differing sects. Christian stole each others membership by offering favours, and fist fights and court disputes resulted when members of one church defected to other sects but insisted on occupying the church building which they had built._

5.2.2 Cultural Degradation

For a new Hmar Christian converts, it means the abandonment of anything concern with their primitive folklore, folk songs and dances and even their ways of eating and drinking. The new converts are were strictly warned not to perform or take part any traditional ceremonies, sing even love songs. There are even instances of a new christian converts being expelled from church membership just because he happens to witness the marriage ceremony of his friend. This practice encouraged by the english missionaries is strange as they in the mean time allowed their own western culture to flourish and prosper in every possible way.

Jayaseelan, while describing the negative outcome of the christian mission works mentioned that,

*People, who were not aware of the immense worth of their culture and tradition voluntarily discarded them and began to imitate a culture that apparently looked superior and attractive. The result has been an irrevocable damage to the native sentiment and their growth has been on shaky ground.*

6.2.3 Collapse of Traditional Authority

After the introduction of moderns system of governance brought in by the British government and the Christian faith brought in to the Hmar people by the English missionaries the power of the village chief and his council of minister including the ‘*Val-Upas*’ (youth commanders) who were once the supreme head of the tribe or village administrative system has drastically come down. The ancient unwritten laws and practices enforced by the elder members of the society are being degraded and by-bass by the youth and few educated members of the society from time to time and they are dictating terms almost on all matters. As such, the respect for elders and parents which binds the society together in the past is decreasing day by day. The youth dormitory, where young boys learnt the different tribal art and the principle of self-sacrifices have died down in the present days because of the absence of constant vigil by the elders.

6.2.4 Quality Education

The high percentage of literacy may be overwhelming at first glance, but there is much to be desired in the quality of that literacy. The missionaries were concerned purely with the spread of their mission, and in accomplishing their goals, they completely ignored the well being of the people. Their students have advanced knowledge in evangelism but lack in knowledge of how to survive in the changing world. Although there are more christians now, the economics of the people are the same as some decades before the advent of the missionaries.¹⁴

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6.2.5 Prohibition of Wine

Zu played a very important function in the Zo culture, as the importance of any celebration had been measured by the number of pots of Zu consumed. The birth of a child, a wedding or mourning were occasions when people celebrated or mourned by drinking zu. Babies were also fed with zuso that they would grow to be strong and sturdy. Zu had been one of the most nutritious elements of Zo people's diet. There is a scarcity of rich nutritous food products in Zo country, and the prohibition against drinking zu was an act of arrogance by the missionaries. They had come from countries where there is an abundance of milk, butter and other nutritious food products. In their own countries abstinence from alcohol is not even mentioned as one of the demands of becoming a Christian. In the modern society, Zu has been replaced by tea and coffee, which very often causes bowel disorders. Milk, sugar and tea have to be imported, which has resulted in economic difficulties for the people. There is evidence that since converting to Christianity the Zo youth are much smaller in stature than the Zo people of a century before. 15

The pioneer Christian missionaries fears that their new native converts would return to their normal and pre-christian way of social life. As such they prohibited them from drinking 'zu' (local rice beer) and any other occasion and festivals which involves 'zu'. This has greatly contributed in the increasing numbers of other intoxicating items such as No. 4, ganja and other harmful drugs in the present days especially among the youths.

6.2.6 Rising Inequality

With the rise in the number of educated class among the Hmar people and the availability of suitable jobs in the government in the missions, government and private companies with sufficient salaries the economic condition of the Hmar tribals who were a hundred years ago almost equal in all respect, each of them employed in jhum cultivation has been wider and wider. Whereas the salaried and business class in towns and cities already had enjoyed the lifestyle of a high and middle class groups like the plain people their own families and tribesmen are still engaged in the primitive style of agriculture with not much improvement in their economic condition.

Certain government schemes and programmes meant to benefits the poor villagers could also not reach the target people as those who are involved in the scheme of things and influential people among the tribe are the one who settled in the capital town and cities. Although there are still enough contact with each other in the platforms of church, missions and other tribe based organisations the gap between the haves and have-nots can be seen on their faces, dresses outlooks and their approach to any issues that arise.

With all the problems and hardship faced by people in the interior villages in matters of education, roads and communications, etc. are not being tackled and solve it will not be long for the whole community to be grouped and separated on the lines of their economic conditions and places of settlement.
6.2.7 Ethnic Consciousness and Rivalry

Certain ethnic violent incidents have occurred among the different tribal communities of Churachandpur district. All these unfortunate incidents have occurred due to the fact that these people have learnt to love and appreciate their own people, tribe or community. They are now more conscious with their own and the feeling of rivalry has been grown among them. All these can be attributed to the fact that they have receive the modern education and that ‘survival of the fittest’ is rising its ugly head in the wrong sense on their minds. People in such a situation tends to forget that they are all Christian and that their religion preached love of one another, even their enemies in good times and in bad times.