

[Missionaries Roil Northeast India](#)

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SOCIAL CHANGE

Missionaries Roil Northeast India

A First-person report on the family and community strife following in the wake of conversions among the tribals of the "Seven Sisters" states in Bharat's remote corner

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As a child, I remember Northeastern India holding a magical pull for me. In our books, that area was referred to as Kamaroop Desh, where the great hero Arjuna fell in love with Chitrangada, the Princess of Manipur. Later, the Nobel Laureate poet Sri Rabindranath Tagore's play once again brought this love story alive for me, and once again I wanted to go there. So my trip in March of 1999 was a culmination of this long-held dream. However, what I saw was a painful experience for me, both as a Hindu and as an American. This reminiscence is my attempt to share my pain as well as bring to light what human folly is once again doing in the name of God.

For the past four years I have been involved in helping Indian rural schools become self-sufficient through tree planting and other means. In 1998 I was working with Omprakash Guptaji in my native state of Punjab. He was involved through Sewa

Bharati, an indigenous social work group that serves among the weakest members of society. Though their financial resources are small, I found their work to be excellent. Guptaji took me to many places where they were active. I happened to mention to him that my family in India would like to help their efforts. We proceeded to set up a yearly sum that my mother, father, grandmother and a cousin agreed to pay to them.

I, too, wanted to do something. Despite the fact that his own projects were struggling for funds, he told me that it would be better if I helped their northeastern sector, where more than 30 million tribal people live, as they were really hurting. So I agreed, assured that the money would be properly used. Sri Guptaji mentioned that I could even visit the area and see what was being done, if I did not mind the remoteness of the region and the discomforts I may have to endure. This summons, combined with my own childhood dreams, eventually took me deep into a land where live the Jana Jaatis, the tribal people of India.

Their lives are a window into how things were, a still-living demonstration of how one can survive with far, far less, yet never feel deprived or lonely; how one can joyously celebrate the seasons, the bounty of the harvest and blooming of the first flowers each year. As a tribal, one can dance a meaningful dance when inspired, can smell the flowers without planning a day trip to the park. A tribal can be colorfully dressed without worrying if the designers will be pleased. I wondered if we should be trying to improve their lives or instead asking them for help to improve ours? Perhaps those who think themselves as more developed should change their prejudice about "primitive people" and take a look through this rare window on

a simpler, more harmonious life that has continued to exist all this time.

But this is not what I found happening in the India's Northeast. In the name of helping these so-called poor, primitive and ignorant "tribals," very strong-willed groups of missionaries belonging to various Christian denominations are on the move. They have at their disposal seemingly unlimited wealth, the support of churches bent on sending everyone to heaven irrespective of the individual's personal preference. And they enjoy the connivance of greedy local politicians. The money comes from foreign lands where unsuspecting ordinary folks give their hard-earned money for charitable work. I know many such people in the West. They have very little idea of the impact of their contributions upon the tribal way of life. Faithfully they give, year after year, without ever knowing the truth. Like killing two birds with one stone, this is deceiving two people with one lie--the giver as to the impact of his gift, and the tribal as to the value of changing his faith.

Let me share what I found to be the methodology of the conversion process and its impact on indigenous cultures. That conversion affects all facets of the life of the individual and the group one belongs to is obvious. For tribal people, religion and everyday life are not separate. All forms are connected to celebrating the beneficence of nature. They know that nature nurtures, but also can be ferocious at times. For as far back as the group's memory goes, they have seen nature as God, a mother-like God, whence kindness as well as fury can flow. Some, like the Nishi tribes, call themselves donyo polio peoples, worshipers of the Sun and the Moon. Trees, wildlife, snakes, almost everything, can be and is worshiped.

The missionaries see all this as devil worship or primitiveness. They believe changing these beliefs will improve the tribe in this world as well as open to them the doors of heaven. There seems to be no realization that until a devil was introduced by the missionaries, none existed. Now everything the tribal holds sacred is branded devil worship.

Early missionaries, such as William Carvey, found it difficult to convert the masses of India by simple preaching. It wasn't so much that the Hindus wouldn't accept his new God, but that we wouldn't reject our old ones. A different approach was needed. Like Carvey, the present-day missionaries of the Northeast focus on children. They build a school with a church attached. The children are brought in to study in promise of an education with a good knowledge of the English language. They are first requested and then required to attend church services.

Slowly they are weaned away from their ancestral ways and taught to accept a type of fundamentalist Christianity unacceptable even to most Christians. From well-maintained, ancient oral traditions they move to using the English Roman script. In time they lose the stories of their own lineage and know only the story of an angry, judgmental God. Eventually, they, too, become angry and judgmental, especially toward their own relatives and community members. They are told by the missionaries to stay away from all festivities held by their families, even weddings, as they now belong to a superior and elite group.

The English-language New Papers in India report on how the

Bodo tribes of Assam are fighting each other, or how the Assam Liberation Movement is again bombing someplace. No one seems to know that often the animosity has its source in this mindless conversion fever, which has pitted family against family and the converted against the unconverted. Our Bodo taxi driver informed me that their peaceful communities are being destroyed by this conflict.

In the state of Arunachal, I was privileged to meet Maya Binny Yang, chairperson of the OJU Welfare Association in Papumpare District. She is making great efforts to preserve what she can of her cultural heritage while providing jobs for young women in traditional arts. She is single-handedly striving to give health care, and jobs and protect the culture from the horrible violence caused by conversion mania. Her young daughter took me to a museum which the State and Central Governments of India have set up in an effort to keep some of the history of these people alive. In Naharlagun I met Nani Kojin, the editor of an English weekly which he publishes (without much help) to inform his community better.

In the state of Meghalaya live the Khasi Hindus. I had provided some financial support for educational work there, so I wanted to see how things were coming along. With arrangements made by my host family in Guwahati, I started out accompanied by a man of Khasi decent. This was delightful, until I was told that we could proceed only if I understood the risks involved. Ignorant of how bad the situation was, I could not see why I, an ordinary person, would have to worry. I was told that the Khasi man with me had been educated in a mission school but then decided to come back to his tribal roots and helped many others return, too. Now he was a

fugitive, hunted both by his converted former comrades and the missionaries. It seemed preposterous that I would be in danger simply by visiting the school and the children that I was attempting to help financially. Even to report this person's name would put him in danger. But without him to translate, I could not have learned as much or been able to communicate with the many villagers we visited.

Also with us was a remarkable woman from the state of Maharashtra who lived and worked with the Khasi people and was learning their language. She was in her early fifties, well educated and amazing in mental and physical strength. The slopes and ravines she can negotiate would put many a trekker to shame. She lives with the people of the area, setting up small schools and skill centers. I fondly recall spending time with her in the village of Nonkagnih, talking with the villagers, who were most hospitable. I met a group of younger girls here, who had visited my home state through the Bharat Mera Ghar program. They seemed to have picked up a bit of Hindi and knew some English, and I was able to talk with one named Mimi Dolla, a very beautiful girl. In all the work that is being done by these groups there is every effort to improve the living conditions while respecting local traditions. In fact, the opposing group had killed two young workers just a few months prior to my visit. Any attempts to preserve the old customs are seen as a threat. I had also noticed that the address of the place where the working office was now located was different from the one to which I had been sending my letters. On enquiry, I discovered that there was too much danger to the people who had provided the space.

In the east Khasi hills, we visited a dispensary run by a retired

medical doctor and his wife. It had been burnt down, but rebuilt with the help of the local people. In Jaintiya Hills I was taken to a school under construction that could not display the board with their name because of fear of violence. I saw a large piece of land, granted to Sewa Bharati for a school by the central Government, lying vacant for want of a building permit from corrupt local authorities.

In my two weeks of living in homes of local people of the Northeastern region, again and again I came across unbelievable efforts to destroy the indigenous culture. A year earlier I had seen similar efforts in areas of Bihar, where the Santhals live. These once-colorful and artistic people are now struggling to save their heritage in the face of an evangelic faith that has no room for local differences or variety. I saw what happens to ancient art without its spiritual roots--it becomes like a river without water.

The larger Hindu society has been blamed for neglecting the tribals, who number 230 million across all of Bharat--more than the population of most countries. Yes, there has been neglect, but at a time when the larger society was itself reduced to abject poverty. In fact, many who are tribal today are those whose ancestors long ago ran to remote parts of the country to survive the terrible onslaught of the Islamic Crusades. Now, as the Hindu society is attempting to help the tribals, there is great opposition from those who see them as a good target for religious marketing. They are especially attractive since Western educated, rational people are moving away from religions that espouse one prophet or one path only.

In the West, we are very proud of our "civilized ways." As Americans, we love to find places to travel to where there is something for us to see and write about (if not always kindly). Yet our hard-earned money is at the forefront of this unforgivable destruction of long-preserved cultures. Often I wonder how it would be if just for a few decades our human species held off on religious fanaticism? Wouldn't we become a more contented people, who have the time to enjoy that which has been given to us so graciously? I saw in Northeast India the race for heaven creating hell on Earth.

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The Northeast's Seven Sisters

The Northeastern region of India is composed of seven states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. The area's topography contains two large valleys: that of the River Brahmaputra, which cuts through Assam, and that of the River Barak in Southern Assam. In addition, there are smaller valleys in Manipur and Tripura. Apart from these valleys, the area is almost completely mountainous. To the north lie the Himalayas and to the south and east a large number of small hills rising up to 5,000 feet. More than a hundred languages and dialects are spoken.

Arunachal Pradesh is an area of 33,000 square kilometers, almost entirely mountainous. The population of 864,558 is almost completely tribal. Assam, with a population of about 22 million, is the biggest state in the Northeast. Assamese is the eastern-most Indo-European language. The native population includes the Assamese, who are mostly Hindus with a few Muslims; the Plains Tribes such as the Bodos, Mishings, Kacharis, Rabhas, Lalungs and Deorias; the Hill Tribes such as the Karbis, the Dimasas and the Kukis. In addition, the Tea Garden Laborers belong to groups such as the Santhals, Mundas and Oraons. They were brought from Central India to work in the tea plantations in the 19th century.

Manipur, one of the smallest states in India, has a population of about 1.8 million. Over the centuries it has received migratory waves of Mongolians as well as people from North and South India. The Meiteis, usually referred to as Manipuris, constitute more than 50% of the population. They are Vaishnava Hindus. The Manipuri Muslims, or the Pangans, constitute 17% of the total population of Manipur. Nagas and Kukis also live in Manipur.

Meghalaya has a population of 1.8 million, and 85% are indigenous peoples. The main tribes here

are the Hynniew Trep, a conglomerate of the Khasis and the Jayantia or Pnars, and the Achiks, or Garos.

In Nagaland, population 1.2 million, the Assamese-based Nagamese is common. The Nagas inhabit the hilly Patkai range running roughly parallel to the Brahmaputra Valley. The Nagas, who are demographically Mongolian, are divided into about forty tribes including Angami, Sema, Lotha, Ao, Tangkhul, Chasesang, Konyak, Zeliangrong, Rengma, and Mao. Each tribe and sub-tribe speaks a distinct language.

Mizoram has a diverse population of communities, totally 690,000, such as the Lushais, Chmakmas, Ralte, Paite, Baite, Pawi Dhilen, Lakher, Hmar and Piang. Most tribes are now Christian (84%). Riangs and Chakmas are Buddhists (8%). There are some Hindus and Muslims. The main languages of Mizoram are Mizo, Hmar, Chakma, Lai, Mara and Ralte.

Tripura has a land area of 10,466 square miles, 2.7 million people and shares 80% of its border with Bangladesh. The migration of hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshis has reduced the native Tripurs from 95% of the population in 1931 to a mere 31% today. The indigenous population is composed of 19 tribes, collectively known as

Boroks.

Courtesy: www.assam.org/