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INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Tribal Tribulations

My personal encounter with the impact of Christian conversion on Meghalaya

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I first met the Khasi people of Meghalaya in 1995. A delegation of 30 were touring the state of Maharashtra as part of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's project, Bharat Mera Ghar ("India is My Home"). Previously my concept of India's Northeastern States--Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Arunachal--was that everyone had converted to Christianity and wanted to separate from Bharat. Now I was delighted to meet this delegation of Khasi Hindus who were patriotic to India and proud of their heritage. I resolved to go to this state when the opportunity arose. By good fortune, the following year was my last in medical school and the curriculum allowed time for experience outside the US. I arranged a position at a clinic with Dr. R. S. Thangkhiew, a Khasi Hindu physician in Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya. As a medical student, I expected to learn a lot about infectious diseases and the consequences of poverty and lack of basic resources on health. I saw those problems, and to some extent could alleviate them through my work as a physician.

As a concerned Hindu, I wanted to experience this state of Bharat that so few people get to experience, learn about the unique culture of the people there and see first hand what Christian missionaries were doing. I was truly shocked by the rampant discrimination that Christians meted out to non-Christians (mostly Hindus, including Khasis, Sikhs, Assamese and Bengalis). Christian denominations control almost 100 percent of the state's educational and health care institutions and resources. Most of them give discounts to those people who identify themselves with the particular Christian sect that runs that institution. Additionally, in many hospitals if an individual cannot pay his bill at the end of his stay, the hospital will offer to waive the full amount if he converts to Christianity. Most top government jobs are given to Christians, and there are barely any non-Christian members in the state legislature.

Aprial Mon Thangkhiew, a resident of Shillong, explained how this all happened. "Missionaries got converts because of education," she told me. "Converts got admission to colleges and hostels outside the Northeast while non-Christians did not. Poor Khasis couldn't afford to go outside. Only Christians got scholarships. My cousin was a Presidency College Gold Medalist, but he didn't get a scholarship, because he was not a Christian. Conversion was the price for higher education. People converted because of educational and economic reasons initially. So, the poor, bright people converted, and then the other poor followed. If these preferences were not offered, people would not have converted."

Thangkhiew went on, "The Christians and British tried to teach us to hate our culture--song, dance, religion, everything. If we

sang a Khasi song, they would laugh at us. They called us devil worshipers. They preached in our schools and brainwashed Khasis. The converted Khasis were just like them. They laughed at us when we went to our dances. I went to the Presbyterian school. I had many good friends. However, after some of them were converted to Christianity, they told me, 'We'll go to heaven and you'll go to hell.' They didn't realize that they were dishonoring their ancestors. The British policy of sending missionaries didn't do anything for us except weaken our culture. They converted all the Syiems [local rulers] except the Syiem of Nongkrum. Then other people converted."

The 50 percent of Khasis who did not convert are one of the few communities of the Northeast that still maintains their ancient traditions. They believe in one universal God, U Blei, who is the creator of everything. They do not have a written text or scripture, and the heritage verbally passes from generation to generation. The basic principle of Khasi religion is similar to the eternal principles of other tribal faiths. It is to earn righteousness in the world. The basic precept is that to know God, one must first know, love and respect fellow human beings. Prayer, song and dance are important aspects of the culture. Throughout the year, there are community dances where villagers get together. In March and April is the most important, the Shad Suk Mynsiem, (shad means dance, suk means happiness or tranquility and mynsiem means soul or heart), a dance of joy, merriment, gratitude and thanksgiving. Khasis follow a matrilineal system. The wife keeps her mother's last name, children keep the mother's last name and the youngest daughter inherits the family property.

Attempts during British times to resist the Christianization of the people generally failed. Jrin Mon Thangkhiew recalls, "My grandfather, Babu Jeebon Roy, wanted to start a school to promote the Khasi culture and religion and strengthen ties with the rest of India. He approached the British Government in 1875 and was told to get permission from the Welsh Calvinist Mission, which had been entrusted the task of propagating education. The missionaries replied, 'We have only come to educate your people to the extent that they can read the Bible. Anyway, your people do not have enough brains for higher studies.' " Nevertheless, in 1876, the Shillong High School opened with Roy's own money. But the Christian missionaries could not tolerate it because they realized it was a threat to their control of education, a main tool for proselytization. The government was forced to give control of the school to the Presbyterian missionaries, and subsequently, education about Khasi heritage was eliminated. Christianity became the sole religion taught, and the medium of instruction was changed from Bengali to English.

I was shocked to discover that the latest method for gaining converts was simple fear. Missionaries were telling the people that the apocalypse--a time predicted in the Christian Bible when the world is destroyed and only righteous Christians are saved--will occur in the year 2000. I was asked time and again by frightened local people if it was true. "Of course not," I told them, "hardly any Christians in the world believe such a prediction." It is a version of the old "best bet" conversion argument used for centuries in the West. Dr. Sam Pamei, a Christian from Nagaland who lives in Shillong, gave me the Meghalaya version: "If I have a choice to be a Christian and face no bad outcome from the perspective of my indigenous religion, or to follow my indigenous religion and face eternal

damnation if Christianity is the true way, then the safe bet is to become a Christian." According to Sunil Deodhar, the missionaries are resorting to such extreme measures because, "Due to the work of Seng Khasi, Sein Raj and RSS, they are gaining fewer new converts and are actually losing many old converts back to the indigenous fold. This threat of eternal damnation is their last-ditch attempt to win converts."

Many organizations have been dealing with these challenges. Since 1899, Seng Khasi has been working to maintain the indigenous Khasi culture and religion and defend it against attacks from Christian missionaries. Seng Khasi and its sister group, Sein Raj, organize Khasi religious and cultural programs, hold regular prayers and meetings and publish material to educate people about the Khasi heritage. The Ramakrishna Mission has been active for decades. More recently, the RSS, Seva Bharati and Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram have assisted Seng Khasi and Sein Raj with their programs and set up many schools, student and youth hostels and medical clinics. However, all these groups encounter constant opposition from Christians.

When I left Meghalaya in 1996, I felt among Khasis a growing sense of pride in their religion, culture and heritage. Two hundred years ago Hindus may have been at a technological, economic and political disadvantage. But today Hindus have all the resources they need to support our fellow brothers and sisters. If the Northeast goes, then many other tribal communities are susceptible to severing ties with the age-old Hindu society. Today, as tribal communities are strengthening their identities, there is a need to reaffirm to them that they are an integral part of Hindu society and that Hindu society will

neither take them away from their traditional beliefs and culture, nor swallow them. Each time a Hindu community converts, their unique contribution to the religious and cultural melting pot is lost and Hinduism becomes less diverse.

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