

ISSN 2349-753X

PROCEEDINGS OF  
**NORTH EAST INDIA  
HISTORY ASSOCIATION**



**37<sup>th</sup>** **SIKKIM GOVERNMENT COLLEGE**  
SESSION **TADONG, GANGTOK**  
**2016**



## A Brief History of the Assembly Church of Jesus Christ in Meghalaya

T. Marbaniang

### Introduction

It was the Presbyterian missionaries from Wales who first laid the foundation of Christian activities in the Khasi Hills since the early 1840s. As a result of the transfer of the provincial capital from Guwahati to Shillong in 1874, the area witnessed a concentration of more Christian missions and missionary activities. Shillong (in the Khasi Hills District), as the capital of the erstwhile undivided state of Assam and the current capital of the state of Meghalaya, became the epicenter of the growth and development of a maximum number of churches that have emerged than the two other districts - Jaintia and the Garo Hills districts combined together. The strategic location and significant geographical features of Meghalaya have also contributed and influenced the emergence of new churches over a period of time.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, new and vibrant native churches emerged in the Khasi Hills, a trend or phenomena not limited only in the Khasi Hills, but which is a global trend taking place all over the world- particularly in Asia and Africa, in South as well as Central America.<sup>1</sup> Khasi Christian leaders played a major role in providing guidance, inspiration and destiny for these newly formed Indigenous Churches. The emergence of indigenous Christian leaders in the Khasi Hills began since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century itself, but became more noticeable in the post-independent period (1947), after the British rule in India ended. Gradually, the mantle of leadership and responsibility fell on the shoulders of the native Christians, to take charge, after most of the foreign missionaries and church leaders left the country. They also assumed full responsibility to propagate the Christian faith in a way that they could never have done when they were still under the yoke of their European masters. Faced with the challenge of political, economic, social and cultural changes and new developments within their own society and the world at large, the Indigenous Churches of the Khasi Hills have over the 20<sup>th</sup> century made a determined and conscious effort

to handle the change. The Church of God (set up in 1902) became the first locally born Indigenous Church to have been established in the Khasi Hills in particular and North East India as a whole.

### Formation of the Assembly Church of Jesus Christ (Henceforth ACOJC)

The ACOJC was also one among the earliest Indigenous Churches to have been set up in the North Eastern region. It was first established at Kynshi, West Khasi Hills District in 1930, under the leadership of Rev. Joseph Dkhar (who was originally a native of Cherrapunji) formerly a pastor of the Presbyterian Church with active support from the five former local Presbyterian churches under his care. These 5 churches were Kynshi, Rikhen, Myriaw, Nongriat and Nongthyllep which also became the pioneering local churches of the ACOJC.<sup>2</sup>

Rev. Joseph who was earlier the pastor of the Presbyterian Church was outspoken against the social evils and complacencies of his own parent (Presbyterian) Church, since according to his observations, Christian life and character at that time had plunged to an all-time low. He observed that most people at that time were content with just going to Church on Sunday, performed certain important rituals and all the other external formalities, rather than exemplifying the good examples as Christians. Incidentally, during this time of restlessness and dissatisfaction with what he perceived as the lukewarmness and moral corruption prevalent in his Church, Joseph Dkhar came across Andrew Murray's books and the Holiness Movement which had deeply influenced his thoughts and spiritual quest. He was dearly loved by the people and had quite a considerable following within the Presbyterian Church. But after he was excommunicated from his parent Church (during the tenure of E.H. William as the Moderator of the Khasi-Jaintia Presbyterian Synod in the early 1930s), he soon started his own independent mission and immediately attracted a substantial numbers of adherents in a short span of time.

### Transitional Period of Development

The Church was first of all formed in 1930 after a special committee met from 5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> April at Myriaw in West Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya. Consequently, the Committee comprising of representatives from the 5 local churches mentioned above - Kynshi, Rikhen, Myriaw, Nongriat and Nongthyllep took a collective decision



to float a new church organization of its own which at that time became officially known as the Church of Jesus Christ (COJC).<sup>3</sup> In the year 1931, a Christian Church meeting where hundreds of new enthusiastic members met together for the first time was conducted at Kynshi. In 1932, the first ever Annual Assembly of the new Church was held at the Church of Rikhen. The vision of Rev. Joseph Dkhar when the Church was first founded was that, service to and worship of God should be in line with the Biblical Scripture. But before the vision of the founder could be fulfilled, Joseph Dkhar passed away on April, 1933. The period from 1935-1950 witnessed little activity of the Church. These years was considered as the period of recession and inner introspection.<sup>4</sup> But inwardly, the Church was conceiving and being stirred with new plan and vision for the future.

#### **Major Pentecostal Influence**

In course of time, the ACOJC emerged as the first well-established Indigenous Church of Pentecostal origin in North East India<sup>5</sup> and one of the pioneering churches in the growth and development of the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement in this region.<sup>6</sup> In the 1940s, the Pentecostal trend was noticeably present in the ACOJC but still in its nascent stage. The year 1955-56 saw the time of spiritual renewal in the Church, where the twin doctrines of salvation and Holy Spirit baptism took centre stage, and was claimed to have been experienced by many. In the year 1958, the first headquarter of the Church was set up at Rikhen. However, it was only from the 1960s onwards that the Pentecostal Movement in its fullest form was to manifest itself in the Church and transformed its whole image and character. In course of time, the main centre of the ACOJC was shifted to Umlyngka, and finally to the present location at Mawkhar, Shillong as the permanent headquarter since 1963. Soon, the nascent Church was to endure one of the greatest trials since its formation. This came in 1958-59, after Brother H.R. Sammadar, a Christian minister and founder of the All-One in Christ Fellowship from Calcutta (Bengal) visited the Khasi Hills (Meghalaya). First of all, he began to preach in local churches of the ACOJC in Shillong, and then he was unexpectedly invited to Kynshi and many other places. His teachings which caused much controversy, confusion and major split in the ACOJC, were his claims that he was "the only end-time apostle under whose power everybody should come"<sup>7</sup> and that those people who welcomed him into their midst were divinely chosen to become members of his

end-time Church. After the split, almost all the local churches came under Sammadar's control except the local churches of Umlyngka, Mawreng, Ngunraw, Lawmei, Shillong and some churches in Jaintia Hills<sup>8</sup> which remained loyal to the founding leaders. However, this time of severe testing indirectly benefited the Church. It was a learning experience especially for the Church and its leaders, although the good relationship that the ACOJC had with Sammadar was severed. Significantly, in the midst of this dark hour which the Church experienced, attempts were made to endure the hardship and continue moving ahead. The early years of the 1960s saw the believers spending more time in personal introspection and self-reflection. But it was not until the 1970s that B.G. Mawnai took the lead to bring unity to the scattered congregation. By 1974-76, most of the splinter churches had returned back to the parent Church body.

In 1963, the Mission of the Church was created at the Assembly of Umlyngka under the capable leadership of Rev. R.J. Skinner<sup>9</sup> who gradually became the most prominent leader of the Church from this time onwards. 1966 was an extremely significant period because it was in this year that, the Church for the first time started opening up itself to the Charismatic Movement.<sup>10</sup> After this event, the ACOJC became actively involved in foreign missions. It started to established network with foreign churches and mission agencies from overseas. Through these experiences, the Church became part of the larger Pentecostal and Charismatic movement.<sup>11</sup> It was the ACOJC which pioneered the spread of the Pentecostal Movement within Meghalaya.<sup>12</sup> The Church laid a special emphasis on the ministry of the youth and women. Their other marked features is vibrant worship and sufficient room given to all members of the Church, young and old alike to freely express themselves, and use their gifts and talents for the edification of the congregation as a whole.

#### **Membership Growth and Mission Outreach**

The ACOJC has been experiencing consistent growth ever since its emergence. In 1990, O.L. Snaitang, one of the prominent historians of Christian history in North East India reported, that the membership of the Church in the entire Khasi-Jaintia hills was more than 6500. However, the latest conservative estimate of the overall total membership affiliation of the Church in the whole of India and beyond is approximately over 30,000.<sup>13</sup> In the Khasi,



Jaintia and Garo hills of Meghalaya, there are 77 plus full-fledged churches. Apart from Meghalaya, the ACOJC has churches in Assam, Manipur, Mizoram and some other states directly under the supervision of the parent Church.<sup>14</sup> Over all, there are at present, approximately 110 to 120 full-fledged churches and local congregations of the ACOJC in certain parts of India.<sup>15</sup>

### **Espousing the Right of Women**

Since the beginning of its emergence, the Church did not hesitate to take a bold initiative in espousing the rights of women in the society, by giving them due recognition in the ministry of the Church, at a time when women in a conservative and caste ridden society like India were generally treated as inferior and more or less dependable on their male counterparts. The ACOJC took a noble step in 1952, when Mrs. Gratissimo Ryntathiang was appointed into the highest office of the Church as an ordained minister.<sup>16</sup> Leadership of the ACOJC claimed that they always recognize the gifts and talents of individual members, without any discrimination or impartial treatment either on caste, creed or gender lines, and always try to give them a platform and space where they could freely utilize their in-born gifts and unique talents. Today, there are around 14 women pastors, 50 deaconesses besides 23 other full-time Christian ministers, appointed by the Church within the state of Meghalaya and outside.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the ACOJC was among the first to recognize the important role and contribution of women in the Church and society.

In the beginning of its formation, the ACOJC had to face opposition and criticism from the Western Mission Church like the Presbyterians, Catholics and some other churches. Opposition was mostly verbal and limited. However, today the situation has changed drastically. Western Mission Churches have become more open, liberal-minded and understandable about the importance of mutual respect and co-operation.

### **Mentoring and Leadership**

The primary focus of the ACOJC is to get itself involved in community service. The Church laid special emphasis on leadership training and in raising up a new breed of young and dynamic leaders. It also believes that in order to avoid leadership crisis and to establish a healthy and vibrant Church, there is a need to identify and give practical experience to potentially gifted individuals right

from their early stage. At the same time, it was felt that openness and transparency in Church management and administration is the need of the hour. Above all, the Church puts mission as its top most priority. The maturity of the Church can be summarized from the fact, that it does not only concentrated its energy and resources in nurturing or feeding its own flocks, but even devoted a considerable amount of time to nurture and guide other young Christian adherents who have the vision and zeal to do something good in their Christian life. Thus, directly or indirectly the Church helped the rise and growth of new churches and Christian ministries. To achieve its objectives, the Church believes in making efforts and taking actions such as by conducting seminars and workshops, and by co-coordinating with Christian ministers overseas. The impact of this noble initiative can be gauged from the fact that from the 1970s onwards, new churches and ministries have sprang up in different parts of the state of Meghalaya and beyond with their own originality in vision, mission and area of activities. The ACOJC was constantly channeling and marshalling its resources in giving guidance and mentoring to these newly emerging churches and prospective Christian leaders.

The ACOJC has attracted new members into its fold by updating and changing its concepts and approaches with the rapidly changing circumstances of our contemporary society. It is reaching out to people through radical outreach programmes and new strategies adopted from time to time. It has been able to venture into new horizons and areas where the Western Mission Churches have hitherto failed to make any significant inroads such as in enlisting young people into the ministry of the Church and encouraging more community participation (especially of the lower sections in the society) in its various programmes and activities. It is this sensitivity and adaptability to the fast ongoing changes around it that has attracted Khasis and non-Khasis alike to its folds and enabled it to reach out to other communities living within and outside the Khasi Hills.

### **Attempts to Formulate New Theological Standpoint**

The ACOJC is seeking to formulate its own theology in line with its own local environment and tribal setting- for examples, in certain areas of Church life and activity such as in formulating its own viewpoint on how the Christian Church should be adminis-



tered, in marriage and in doctrine of faith and baptism. Thus, the ACOJC has directly refused to submit itself to the conservative and all-surpassing Western theology and doctrinal framework. Theological colonialism continues to be very much alive and the colonial mindsets still dominate much of the 'Christian World'<sup>18</sup> including those in the Third World countries. It is in this context that the ACOJC has attempted to develop its own viewpoint, wrest for self-rule and insisted that Christians in non-Western countries too has every right to interpret the Holy Scriptures for themselves and for their own people.

It has become more sensitive in its approach, especially in its dealings with people belonging to different religious communities and social backgrounds. Realizing that India itself is a pluralistic society, the ACOJC have also realized the importance of mutual co-existence, establishing rapport with people and building intercultural relationships within its own geographical area. In general, it has been progressive and liberal in its character and approach. Youth and women are given special focus in the Church through the establishment of separate and independent youth and women ministries. In these ministries, young people and women themselves are exclusively in-charge. Once or twice a year, special youth and women meetings are organized under the direct supervision of their own leaders. The ACOJC has also been focusing its attention to reach out to the poor, the marginalized, the rural folks and the non-church goers. It has also made their adherents aware about the importance of self-discipline, cleanliness, exemplary moral lifestyle and good character as important tools or strategies to be able to reach out to its own community and neighbourhood. On this matter, leaders of the ACOJC have been unsparingly outspoken in exhorting their congregations from time to time about the need to develop a simple lifestyle in conformity with the traditional way of life. According to their point of view, adjusting within one's own local environment and native setting is much more desirable and compatible with the Biblical standard or true Christian living. The Biblical scriptures itself was contextualized and interpreted in such a way so as to suit with the local setting and natural environment. For example, in some Indigenous Churches like the ACOJC, marriages could be solemnized in a much simpler and inexpensive manner without the need for excessive decorations, festive activities or grand functions or parties.

To sum up, the ACOJC has contributed towards giving more opportunity for ordinary church goers, women and youth's participation in the Church and society and in enhancing their dignity and confidence. Through the establishment of educational institutions, Bible schools and Christian literatures, it has also contributed in influencing and moulding peoples' views and opinions on relevant social and moral issues affecting the Church and society at large. The main focus of its works and activities at the grass root level has helped in addressing the needs and problems faced by ordinary people especially those living in far-flung areas. It has also played a part in improving the level of understanding and cooperation among people belonging to different communities and wide-ranging sections within the society as a whole.

### Notes and References

- 1 Daniel Jeyaraj, *Teaching World Christianity in the West*, Judson-De Freitas, Andover Newton Theological School, Newton Centre, USA, p. 210.
- 2 Prosper Rynthiang, *Ka History Lyngkot jong ka Balang U Jisu Khrist (1930-1983)*, Assembly Church of Jesus Christ (ACOJC), Shillong, 2008, p.40.
- 3 Prosper Rynthiang and Mr. Kitbok Rynthiang, "The Assembly Church of Jesus Christ (Full Gospel), India" appeared in O. L. Snaitang, *Churches of Indigenous Origins in North East India*, ISPCK, Cambridge Press, Delhi, 2000, p. 83.
- 4 Rev. Prosper Rynthiang and Mr. D. Kitbok Rynthiang in O.L.Snaitang, *Churches, op.cit.*, p. 94.
- 5 Orland Pathaw, *The Study of the Charismatic Movement and its Impact on the Mainline Churches of the Khasi Hills*, JRTS, Mawklot, 2006, p. 38.
- 6 Excerpt from an interview with Rev. Hunlang Chyne of the ACOJC, Shillong on the 12<sup>th</sup> February, 2010.
- 7 O.L. Snaitang, *Churches, op.cit.*, p. 99.
- 8 Prosper Rynthiang, *Ka History Lyngkot, op.cit.*, 2008, p. 40.
- 9 (Late) R.J. Skinner was the son of Mrs. Gratissimo Rynthiang the first woman pastor of the ACOJC and the grandson of (late) Rev. Joseph Dkhar the founder of this Church. He was a respectable leader in Charismatic circles and became the Chairman of the Pentecostal Fellowship of India (Meghalaya Chapter) in the 1990's. He passed away in 2014.
- 10 600 members of the Church who had gathered together at the Dinam Hall, Jaiaw, Shillong were believed to have received the Charismatic gifts and



supernatural empowerment, similar to the unique spiritual experience of the early Christians as narrated in the Book of Acts (one of the books of the New Testament of the Bible).

- 11 Excerpt from an interview with Rev. Hunlang Chyne of the ACOJC, Shillong, March, 2010.
- 12 R.J. Skinner, 'The Pentecostal Movement in Meghalaya,' in the Souvenir of the Fourth Biennial All-India Conference of the PFI, Shillong, May 14<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup>, 1997, p. 31. The ACOJC believes in the charismatic gifts such as healings and miracles and other spiritual manifestations.
- 13 Excerpt from an interview with Rev. Hunlang Chyne of the ACOJC, Shillong on the 22<sup>nd</sup> June, 2016. Further confirmation was received from Rev. Lumlang Ryntathiang, the General Secretary of the ACOJC.
- 14 Excerpt from an interview with Rev. Lumlang Ryntathiang of the ACOJC, Shillong, March, 2010.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Excerpt from an interview with Rev. Hunlang Chyne of the ACOJC at his residence in Shillong on 12<sup>th</sup> Feb., 2010.
- 17 Excerpts from interviews with Rev. Prosper Ryntathiang and Rev. Lumlang Ryntathiang of the ACOJC on the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Feb., 2010.
- 18 The regions, countries or part of the world which is being dominated or hold sway by Christianity can be generally described as the 'Christian World'. In these countries or regions of the world, Christians are in a majority.

## The American Baptist Medical Mission in the Garo Hills (1867-1967)

Sengchi Diamai

### Introduction

The untouched northeast region of India seems to offer a beautiful hub to the British rulers. But from the very beginning of their control in the region health became an issue for them for the climate of Assam seemed different from that of the other parts of British India.<sup>1</sup> During late 19th century the British took different precautions and measures to prevent epidemic diseases prevalent in the region. Diseases like cholera, malaria, diarrhea, Kalazar, small pox endangered the lives not only of the Europeans but for a very long time have proved disastrous to the native people. Many of the Europeans either died or left the state because of the epidemic. Every naval dispatch of the British which arrived in India would always be accompanied by the European doctors. Even the American Baptist Mission which started their mission in Assam, took precautions in selecting their residential area. They selected Sibsagar as their head quarter because it had a physician;<sup>2</sup> they also selected those places for their early settlement where at least some people had managed to acquire some elementary understanding of medicine.<sup>3</sup> Many of the missionaries on their way to India would carry books on medical and surgery and read them on their way as medical aid for their own survival. This on one hand proved useful to the people suffering from the epidemic and also at the same time acted as a tool for evangelization - as medical aid was the real need of the region.<sup>4</sup>

The American Baptist mission began their mission into the Garo hills when the British occupied the hills in 1866.<sup>5</sup> The American Baptist Missionary Union started sending missionaries to the Garo Hills immediately after the British administration was established.<sup>6</sup> This paper will study the work of the American Baptist medical mission into the Garo hills from its earlier period to the time when organized medical mission started.