

EASTERN



Understanding Religion

A Panoramic View

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Emergence and Growth of the Indigenous Churches in the Khasi Hills (1902-2002) - An Overview

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All over the world, a distinct, independent and undeniable tide of dynamic Christian movement is steadily rising encompassing every tribe and tongue, ethnic as well as social groups. It is a people's movement, a movement of the indigenous people to find meaning, acceptance and recognition and a proper place in history, a struggle to be treated at par with other superior cultures and societies of the world. Their voices can no longer be silenced or underestimated anymore nor can they be treated as an inferior people incapable of carving out a destiny for themselves and their own people.

Western power in the form of European colonialism in the nineteenth century and American hegemony in the twentieth century extended western culture throughout much of the contemporary world. But after the erosion of the Western culture, an indigenous, historically rooted mores, languages, beliefs and institutions reassert themselves.¹ The Indigenous movement was basically a worldwide movement of the indigenous people seeking to reassert their own identity². Indigenization and the revival of religion are global phenomena.³ The growing power of non-Western societies produced by modernization are generating the revival of non-Western cultures throughout the world.⁴ They have been most evident however, in the cultural assertiveness and challenges to the West as well as reasserting their superiority over their former colonial masters. The process of indigenization was further enhanced by the democratic paradox: adoption by non-Western societies of Western democratic institutions encourages

and gives access of power to nativist and anti-Western political movements. With the dawn of the 20th century, indigenization has been the order of the day throughout much of the non-Western societies in the Third World countries in their various aspects- political, socio-cultural, economic and even in the religious and spiritual realms. In modern times, as the success of the West fades relatively, a resurgence of the lost glory, prestige and confidence of the people in the Third World countries is now gradually taking place. The revival in the area of religion provided one of the most striking features in the process of the resurgence of non-Western societies.

Contextually, people in the 'Third World' countries till today viewed and interpreted Christianity as a 'Foreign Religion' or a 'White man's religion'. Justifying their claims, they pointed out that the essential features of Christian Churches itself bore all the marks of a western institution.⁵ Ideologically, it is a fact that Christianity is usually identified with western nations and associated with western culture and lifestyle. However, these popular assumptions may have to undergo a complete re-examination in the light of the broad historical context. It was on this context that the studies of the Churches of Indigenous origins become a relevant and highly significant subject. Normally, the history of Christianity is written from the standpoint of the 'Western Church' which can be termed as the 'non- Indigenous Church'.⁶ It is the story of Western Christianity whereas the history of Christianity in the East is neglected and not well known. In fact, the richly diverse Church history of the 'other half of the world' has been largely ignored, and seldom outlined in any complete form. However, unlike in other parts of the world, a non-western form of Christianity is much older in the Indian context.⁷ The locally borne Indigenous Churches⁸ are an important segment of Christianity in the world today and it is also a relatively new and largely unexplored field for academic research in South Asia including India in which the study of the Indigenous Churches is quite a recent development. However, in order to understand the nature and true picture of the history of Indian Christianity as a whole, the study of Indigenous Churches in North-East India in general and Meghalaya in particular becomes a relevant subject for deliberation and discussion in academic field.

Similarly, looking closer within the local context of Meghalaya itself, the primary focus of most of the writings on the history of Christianity in the state has been mainly on the non-Indigenous Churches.⁹ The available materials on the Indigenous Churches in the Khasi Hills have thus been totally inadequate. In contrast to non-Indigenous Churches and ecclesiastical institutions which were basically the product of foreign missionary efforts, Indigenous Churches in Meghalaya have their own structures and cultural expressions which are frequently outside the orbit of the traditionally non-Indigenous Churches. Ironically, a majority of the Indigenous Churches in the Khasi Hills still remain

outside the orbit of academic and historical research. Suffice it to say, the study of Indigenous Churches is timely and promising and can lend valuable contribution for a better understanding of the culture and religious traditions of the people of the Khasi Hills and those of Meghalaya as a whole.

Notion of the Indigenous Church

Before venturing further in an explorative study of the Indigenous Churches in the local milieu of the Khasi Hills, it is necessary to trace the origin of the meaning and concept of the term, 'Indigenous Churches' in the global context. The word 'indigenous' according to the Oxford Dictionary means 'native' or belonging naturally to a place; so Indigenous Churches are those churches that are native to a people, belonging naturally to the soil as contrasted with churches originating abroad or in an alien culture.¹⁰ At the outset, a clear distinction has to be made between the 'Indigenous Church' and the 'Indigenized Church'. While the 'Indigenous Church' is a church native to the soil and formed by local Christian converts right from the beginning of its emergence, the 'Indigenized Church' on the other hand, is a non-Indigenous Church trying to adapt itself within the local environment and setting through the process of 'indigenization' to become an Indigenized Church. While the former is an inward natural expression and independent response of the native converts to the advent of western Christianity, the latter is an artificial and outward process to achieve the goal of indigenization.¹¹

The term 'Indigenous Church' was first coined and advocated by Henry Venn, Rufus Anderson and Roland Allen in the middle of the 18th and the early 19th century. The 'Indigenous Churches' principles as formulated by them were primarily based on the three self ideals- namely self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating ideologies.¹² They assumed that an Indigenous Church is to be the goal of modern missions and argued that "indigeneity was indispensable to the growth of the Church in maturity and in mission." The Indigenous Church mission theory was developed in response to the extreme paternalism exercised by western missionaries of the early 19th century, particularly in Asia and Africa. The three-self theory acquired wide acceptance as time went on. Subsequently however, the original concept of an Indigenous Church as formulated and defined by these western missionaries has been widened and redefined to incorporate some equally more distinctive features. All these three basic criteria's may be present in a local church, but an Indigenous Church has a wider connotation. Smalley defined an Indigenous Church as a "group of converts who live out their life including their socialized Christian activity in the patterns of the local society." Other characteristic features of an Indigenous Church are its 'self-theologizing' ideology, missionary zeal and self-caring attitude. Through self-theology, a distinct form of indigenous tribal theology which may be referred to as a contextualization of theology in line with the tribal culture develops.

Rise and Growth of the Indigenous Churches in the Khasi Hills

The 19th and 20th has witnessed the emergence of a large number of Indigenous Churches in different parts of the world which also simultaneously coincided with the rise and growth of the spirit of nationalism and patriotism in almost every continents of the globe during the same period. Their emergence is not just a localize movement confine to a limited area but a global phenomenon where the indigenous people attempted to formulate their own ideology about how a church should be administered in such a way that it can be suited with the local cultures, situations and environments as distinct from the perceptive ideology of the western church establishments.

For almost sixty years (from 1840-1900) after their advent into the Khasi Hills, the Presbyterian Church was the only ecclesiastical organization dominating the Khasi-Jaintia area. Therefore, it was no wonder that after the emergence of the Seng Khasi, a socio-cultural organization seeking to protect the indigenous culture and religion from the onslaught of Christianity, some of the prominent Christian leaders displayed a hostile and arrogant attitude towards its emergence. Even the Catholic priests and missionaries who sought to enter the Khasi Hills found it very difficult to start their mission works or construct their mission stations in the Khasi hinterland since in the initial stage; the British government itself deliberately restricted its entry into this territory. However, with the dawn of the 20th century, the political and religious conditions became less restricted and more tolerable for other churches and denominations which had been hitherto unable to carry on with their works in the face of open discrimination by government authorities. Subsequently, it paved the way for the rise and growth of a powerful Indigenous Christian movement entirely under the leadership and management of native Christians who begun to directly challenge the exclusive monopolistic domination of the church by westerners.

However, this paper focuses on the study of the rise and growth of the Indigenous Churches¹³ in the Khasi Hills from the first decade of the 20th century till the dawn of the 21th century. A total of about thirty Indigenous Churches emerged in the Khasi Hills during the period of one hundred years (1902-2002). Six of them were established during 1902-1939, and the majority of these churches, twenty four in all came into existence only recently between 1974 and 2002. Since the 1970s, there has been a significant increase in the number of Indigenous Churches in the Khasi Hills.

The first Indigenous Church in the Khasi Hills emerged among the Protestant groups when in 1902, the Church of God¹⁴ was established by Rev. Wooley Mohan Roy, J.J.M. Nichols Roy along with some other members as a self-supporting, self-administering and self-propagating church. It was considered to be the first and one of the largest Indigenous Churches even in the whole of

India. The leaders were initially ardent members of the Presbyterian Church but their radical idea and independent thinking could not be tolerated by the conservative and well established church organization which finally compelled them to move out and set up their own church. In course of time, other Indigenous Churches were formed in different parts of the Khasi Hills.

Factors for their emergence

The rise and growth of the Indigenous Churches in the Khasi Hills was an event of significant historical importance in the history of Christianity in the area. Most of these churches emerged because of certain doctrinal and theological disagreements with their parent churches primarily over the subjects of sanctification, undue stress and reliance of the non- Indigenous Churches on human constitutions and hierarchical structures of church govern ment and administration and over the question of mixing religion with politics. Beside, a close examination of some of these churches like the Church of God and the Christ National Church have revealed that there are other general factors which led to their emergence- for examples the spread of western education and learning among the native Khasis, the desire of some of the educated and more progressive local leaders to take part in the higher level of leadership and administration of the church and the imposition of the western system of church's structure and organization in the administration of the native churches. Some church leaders and adherents like those of the Church of God (who later move out and floated the Church of God, Ecclesia) suspected Rev. Nichols Roy who was then the president cum business manager of the Church of God Business Association and his wife who was the secretary cum treasurer of the same church of using his charismatic leadership and popularity to establish his dominating influence over the nascent church and by simultaneously showing favouritism to certain members in the church particularly to his American wife. To be precise, "ever since the 1890's the feeling of uneasiness had simmered in the minds of Khasi converts as to the validity of certain Biblical doctrines and teachings of the Presbyterianism."¹⁵ They were particularly dissatisfied not only with the hierarchical character of church administration but were discontented with the domination of "White" Christianity over the locals.

With the dawn of the 20th century, a period of gradual transition of responsibility, position and leadership from the British missionaries to Indigenous Church leaders had begun in the whole of Khasi-Jaintia hills.¹⁶ The tribal spirit of independence as well as their unique community based ideology can be gauged from the fact that these churches are not only involved in diverse activities like opening of schools, orphanages and theological centres but they are also known for their encouragement given to public participation in congregational worship and their espousal of the rights of women. This has paved the way even for

women to take part in the ministry of the Church.¹⁷ Till date, the bulk of the Indigenous Churches in the Khasi Hills are thriving and progressing rapidly though some of them for instance, the Christ Immanuel Church have lost their touch and relevance in the present context because of lack of leadership and direction especially after the death of their founders. Others like the Church of God and the Church of Jesus Christ have been experiencing remarkable growth and development and their membership at present has already crossed more than one lakh (1,00,000) each. It has been assumed that their vibrant growth was due partly to the significant influence and dynamic leadership of men like J.J.M.Nichols Roy and Joseph Dkhar who were the founding leaders and pastors of these two churches respectively and partly due to the practical application of the messages that they preached. Rev. Nichols Roy and Rev. Joseph Dkhar strongly emphasized the importance of exemplary and transformed character in daily Christian living and the message that they preached were practicably applied to their situations and circumstances.

Basic organizational and structural framework

In course of time especially since the last decade of the 20th century, Indigenous Churches in the Khasi Hills begun to systematically organize themselves and created a well-established ecclesiastical structure. They also started developing their distinctive principle beliefs and doctrines, rituals and liturgies as well as their constitutions, structures and forms of church governments which has become the object of intensive study and close scrutiny. The largest number of Indigenous Churches that came into existence between the 1970's and 1990's remained as independent and loosely organized fellowship groups or ministries during this period and majority of the founding leaders of these newly emerging groups did not feel the need to either register their organizations with the government or to conform it to the standard or requirement of the time. However, from the 1990's onwards, most of them underwent a process of major transition, progressively and systematically organized themselves into full-fledged ecclesiastical organizations and also managed to acquire government recognition through the office of the Registrar of Societies, Government of Meghalaya.

Beside, almost all of them have now formulated their own written constitutions like those of the non- Indigenous Churches and the constitution has become the principle guidelines of the day to day activities of these churches. Some of them for example, the Church of God and the Church of Jesus Christ have presently stressed the importance of theological and seminary training for the leaders and would be ordained ministers of the church and major decisions especially those that affect the whole church are taken by those leaders who are at the helm of the affairs of these churches. The process of institutionalization

and centralization was gradually adopted by majority of the Indigenous Churches in the Khasi Hills. Yet quite a good number of them like the Full Gospel Evangelistic Ministry still adhere to the classical type of democratic ideals as practiced by the local Khasi Dorbar or Assembly where all important and major decisions are taken not by the few selected leaders but by the church as a whole through the General Assembly.¹⁸ Some of the Indigenous Churches for examples the Church of Christ and the Full Gospel Evangelistic Ministry are content with having a largely unstructured system of church governments. For instance in the area of church's ministry, not only ordained ministers but even ordinary members can also participate in various programs of the church such as in the exposition and teaching of the Bible in the congregation, in counseling and prayers. Others like the Church of God, the Church of Jesus Christ and the Church of the Full Gospel Fellowship have established a well-organized administrative structure and a well defined constitution of their own similar in certain extent with those of the non- Indigenous Churches. However unlike the Presbyterian, Baptist or Catholic churches which basically have well organized and highly structured administrative machineries since the initial period of their establishments, some of the Indigenous Churches on the other hand were either reluctant or have not yet reached a position to establish such sophistication in ecclesiastical set up even after quite a considerable period of their emergence and existence.

To sum up, the rise and growth of the Indigenous Churches in the Khasi Hills has finally let to a major shift in the role and leadership over the Christian Church from the exclusive monopoly of 'Westerners' or of the 'White Men' to the natives who now began to increasingly assume the mantle of power and responsibility over the Church. Their appearance on the scene was a natural respond to the advent of Western Christianity from overseas and their emergence has both positive as well as negative consequences. In fact, majority of the Christian Churches in the Khasi Hills, both those of Indigenous and non-Indigenous origins are currently making an attempt to adapt themselves within the local environment and tribal setting by incorporating indigenous cultures, viewpoints and even forms of worship, and effectively using local languages and dialects as means of propagation and communication. They have revealed the flexibility of the Gospel, that it is not restricted to any one human culture.

Notes and References

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2. Interview conducted with Pastor Hunlang Chyne on the 12th February, 2010, p.31, 139.
3. Op cit, Huntington, p.102.
4. Ibid, p.91-92.

5. J.Herbert Kane, *A Concise History of the Christian World Mission*, Baker Book House, Michigan, USA, 1978, p.162
6. They may often be referred as 'Foreign Instituted Churches' or 'Mainline Churches' primarily denoting those churches like the Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Presbyterian, Baptist, etc. which are basically foreign in origin, form and structure emerging mostly from Western nations and are influenced by their parent churches overseas even till date.
7. Roger E. Hedlund, "Indigenous Christianity" in Roger E. Hedlund and Paul Joshua Bhakiaraj (eds.), *Missiology for the 21st Century: South Asian Perspectives*, ISPCK/ MIIS, Delhi, 2004, p.370.
8. Various terms are used to describe Indian Native Churches like 'Little Tradition in Indian Christianity', 'Churches of Indigenous Origin', 'Indian Instituted Churches', 'Indian Independent Churches' etc. However, the term 'Indigenous Churches' seems to communicate the concept more effectively.
9. Op.cit, Roger E. Hedlund, "Indigenous Christianity" in Roger E. Hedlund and Paul Joshua Bhakiaraj (eds.), *Missiology for the 21st Century: South Asian Perspectives*, p.370
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12. D.W. Kietzman & W.A.Smalley, "The Missionary's Role in Culture Change", in R.D.Winter and S.C.Hawthorne (eds.), *Perspectives on the World Christian Movements*, William Carey Library, California, 1981, p. C- 149.
13. Some of these Indigenous Churches in the Khasi Hills are enumerated in chronological order: The Church of God, Meghalaya & Assam, Myllem, East Khasi Hills District (1902); The Church of Christ, Mawlai Nonglum, East Khasi Hills District (1921); Christ National Church, Shillong, East Khasi Hills District (1924); Church of Jesus Christ, Kynshi, West Khasi Hills District (1930); Church of God (Ecclesia), Mawkhar, Shillong, East Khasi Hills District (1939); Full Gospel Fellowship Church, Shillong, East Khasi Hills District (1974); New Testament Restoration Church, Shillong, East Khasi Hills District (1986); Grace Covenant Church, Laban, Shillong, East Khasi Hills District (1992); Garo Christian Revival Church, Shillong, East Khasi Hills District (1992); Living Word Church, Byrnihat, Ri Bhoi District (1993); Church of God, Khasi-Jaintia, Shillong, East Khasi Hills District (March, 1999), et al.
14. O.L.Snaitang (ed.), *Churches of Indigenous Origins in North-East India*, ISPCK, Delhi, 2000, p.191.
15. Helen Giri, "The Beginning of the Church of Christ in Khasi Hills," Paper read at the 13th Session, North East India History Association, North-Eastern Hill University, 1993
16. Sharmila Das Talukdar, *Khasi Cultural Resistance to Colonialism*, Spectrum Publications, Guwahati, 2004, p.93.

17. The Church of Jesus Christ was a pioneer in this endeavour when on March 1952, Mrs. Gratissimo Ryntathiang was ordained as a Church minister at the Tynghor Church in West Khasi Hills District. O.L.Snaitang, Tylli La Ia Saphred Te, Wolley Press, Shillong, 22nd June, 2006, p.49.
18. Informations gathered through interviews conducted with the leaders of some of these churches.