

Impact of Christianity and Western Education in the Colonial Naga Hills: Historical Reorganization of Naga Tribal Society

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Abstract:

This paper examines the overwhelming changes the Naga tribes underwent in the late 19th and early 20th centuries spurred by the tenets of colonialism. British colonialism paved the way for American Christian missionaries and Western education to take root which eventually led to a reorganization of the socio-economic, political, and cultural life of the Naga tribes. The motives of the British in introducing Christianity and Western education were not purely altruistic; it was aimed at garnering political control over the tribes and consequently protecting their economic interests. Despite this underlying motive, Christianity spread rapidly along with Western education disseminated in the schools run by the missionaries. The advent of Christianity in the Naga Hills completely altered traditional institutions, giving a new sense of spirituality and discarding diabolical customs. However, in this hegemonic change, many good traditions were destroyed.

1. Introduction: Brief Historical background

The onset of colonialism in the 19th century disrupted the whole equilibrium of isolation and autarky of the Naga Hills. Concomitant to British colonialism was the religious movement started by American Christian missionaries and their quest to spread Western education. Before the advent of these imperialistic forces, the Nagas were practicing animism and living in isolated villages, barricaded from all other external forces including other Naga villages. The villages were independent military republics, governing and administering themselves without any external pressure or coercion. This status quo was perpetuated by the practice of headhunting that warranted the necessity to limit social interaction with the rest of the world. The Nagas also practiced a subsistence economy and were self-sufficient, needing to trade and barter only a few items with the people in the plains.

The year 1832 marks the beginning of the British military conquest of the Naga Hills led by Captain Jenkins and Pemberton aided by 700 Manipuri troops and 800 coolies (Mackenzie, 1884). By 1840 the British had successfully established tea estates in Assam after the formation of the Bengal Tea Association in 1838 (Saikia, 2001). It was in the economic interest of the colonizers to protect these lands which were exposed to raids by the Naga tribesman. When the British marched into the hills, the Nagas acclimated to the harsh terrain and thick jungles put a stiff resistance against these incursions culminating in the loss of many lives and resources altogether. Despite the futility of this military expedition, it continued till 1850 totaling ten expeditions led by different British subjects. After the 10th expedition, the British realized the inefficacious nature of this expedition and implemented a non-

interference policy from 1851 lasting till 1866. Though there were attempts in the 1840s, with continued contestations and conflicts, the formal entry of Christianity in the Naga Hills began only in the 1870s.

The missionaries who came to the Naga Hills established their mission work by building schools and effectively created a platform for not only education but also teaching ways of Christianity to the tribes. One of the first missionaries to set foot in the Naga Hills was Rev. Miles Bronson who opened a school in 1840. However, initial efforts were futile and Rev Miles Bronson had to leave the region due to illness, misfortunes, and the death of his sister (Yonuo, 1974). The warring tribes continued their feuds and rebelled against all types of foreign ideologies and institutions in the following years.

In the year 1869, Rev. Dr. E.W. Clark arrived at Sibsagar in Assam where he came into contact with an Ao Naga by the name of Supongmeren from Molungkimong village (also called Dekha Haimong by the Assamese) (Yonuo, 1974). He persuaded Godhula, an Assamese Christian to learn Ao (Chungli) language from Supongmeren and eventually sent them to preach the gospel in Molung village (Yonuo, 1974). The result of this first mission was deemed successful when nine Nagas were baptized in Sibsagar by Clark. Consequently, despite the imminent danger, Dr. Clark took it upon himself to traverse into the Naga Hills to spread the Gospel and arrived at Molung on 18th December 1872 (Yonuo, 1974). Dr Clark and his family established their mission in 1872 at Molung village among the Ao nagas and Mary Mead Clark started a girls' school as part of the mission (Ao, A., 2004). It is recorded that the mission schools gave free clothing, books, and stipends to students, and in return, the students did manual work in the compound. All these were partly funded by the government's grant-in-aid for mission schools (Ao, A., 2004). In the year 1894, the mission centre at Molung was shifted to Impur (*Baptist Missionary Magazine*, 1888).

In the southern border of the Naga Hills, the pioneer missionary was Rev. C.D. King who arrived at Kohima in 1881 and continued his mission till 1887 (Allen, 1905). Rev Dr S.W. Rivenberg then took over the mission in Kohima in 1887 and took it upon himself to formulate a written script for the Angamis to translate the Bible (Ao, A., 2004). The schools in the Naga hills were mostly run by the missionaries and initial government policy was to leave education to the Christian missionaries by supporting them with an annual pecuniary aid (Sema, 1980). Later on, there was a change in policy and the government started taking over the mission schools (Sema, 1980). Despite their differing ideologies and ambitions, the American missionaries and British colonials found common ground in educating the Nagas. The government at the onset saw the 'civilizing' potential of the mission schools to pacify the warring hill tribes by educating them and conversely, the missionaries found not only the much-needed aid to run the schools but also security against attacks from the Nagas. The mutual effort of these two different but similarly ambitious entities led to the gradual formation of a new section of converted Christians and educated class in the Naga Hills. Though this sect among the Nagas was insignificant in the 19th century, they laid the foundation for further education and mission works in the region and for the first time moved labor from the agrarian sector to the service sector.

From the beginning of the military expeditions of the British in the 1830s to the end of the colonial era in 1947, the Nagas had undergone overwhelming changes. Sanjoy Hazarika (2008) one of the prominent writers from Assam captures this transition in his book *Writing on the Wall*,

Some years ago, I used the phrase 'One thousand years in a lifetime' to express the breakneck speed at which political, economic, and social developments have swamped the North-east of India and its people in the past half a century. I am reminded of this during visits, especially to Nagaland, where people speak of the terrific pace of events and feel despair at not being able to control them.

The rhetoric and semantics of colonialism can envelope a multitude of events, however if we can factor out two forces which have contributed the most to this rapid societal transition, it is probably through the works of Christianity and Western education.

2. Impact of Christianity and Western Education:

The impact of Christianity and Western Education on the Naga society was enormous and to a considerable degree resonated in many progressive aspects of the lives of the Nagas. The ubiquitous nature of these new Western philosophies was so potent and effective in making significant changes in the society that it rechanneled the whole course of Naga history. Despite the multiple ripple effects caused by Christianity and Western education, this paper examines two particular themes — it analyzes the nexus between colonialism, Christianity, and Western education and how they have worked in tangent to perpetuate one another, and discusses the many social reforms that Christianity and Western education brought into the region and as a consequence, led to a wave of proselytization and the destruction of essential tribal institutions.

2.1. Christianity and Western Education: Colonial tool for achieving economic and political ambition.

The nature of British imperialism in the 18th and 19th centuries followed an institutionally designed path of civilization through Christian mission and education to ultimately achieve economic and political ambitions. This type of institutionalization through the medium of Christianity was popular in many of the British colonies in Africa and Asia. It greatly helped the British acquire colonies and became the most effective agency to subdue and conquer. This is evidenced in a letter written in 1897 by Babington Smith to Richmond Richie elucidating the contribution of Christianity towards colonialism: "...in many places, they (Christian missionaries) are the most effective agency for doing what is wanted..."

For the colonials, Christianity was key to subduing the "wild" tribes and propagating their territory, but for Christianity to be successful it needed the foundation of an institutionalized form of education. Thus, the ambition of the American missionaries became the interest of the British colonials with supposedly different objectives.

The colonialism of the Nagas also followed a similar path; for the British, the Nagas were "primitive" and "savage" and of no use for their imperialistic ambitions without being "civilized". Based on this premise, the British colonials set forward a gradual approach to civilizing the "uncivilized". Initial attempts to civilize were evident when the administration not only encouraged but also funded the establishment of mission schools. Rev Miles Bronson who was an early pioneer of Christianity in the Naga Hills opened up a school in 1840 among the Namsang Nagas and received Rs. 100 a month towards his Naga schools (Barpujari, 1986). This fund was categorically channeled "for objects of practical utility connected with the improvement of the Naga country, and spent with the view of leading its population into habits of industry" (Mackenzie, 1884). This motive of the British is further supported by the letter written to T.H. Maddock, Secretary to the Government of India, by the colonial agent Captain Francis Jenkins, about Bronson's plan and requested a small amount for the cultivation:

I conceive that by a proper cooperation with that gentleman (Bronson) and the encouragement of the Nagas to cultivate the products of their hills and tea in particular, we may hope ere long to see civilization greatly advanced among these Nagas, and our supremacy gradually extend over the hills, without which, and the consequent suppression of the constant feuds amongst the tribes, there seem to be

little hope of effecting any great change in the habits of the people, or of our being able to avail ourselves of the great natural resources of the fine tract of mountainous country (Barpujari, 1986).

Written in 1840 during the initial expedition into the Naga Hills, the above excerpt is an interesting illustration of the colonial perception of ultimately achieving political control (supremacy). Significantly, the designated agent for change is a Christian missionary through which the colonial officers proposed to encourage a new mode of production in tea cultivation for the tribal Nagas in the hope that seeking economic profit would be a deterrent to the constant feuds. From its dawn, the colonials realized that the ‘warrior’ customs of the Naga people posed a threat to their aspiration of controlling the Naga Hills and extracting natural resources. The colonizers had realized that they needed to dominate the tribes using other mechanisms after a series of failed military expeditions in the 1830s and 1840s.

Christianity and Western education in due course, became the two agencies that greatly transformed the socio-economic life of the Nagas. Under the protection of the colonial government, Christianity and education functioned simultaneously as part of the same mechanism to aid imperialism. The economic impacts of this complementary relationship between the British government and American missionaries were significant. In many instances, the establishment of civil administration and military stations paved the way for the establishment of mission centers as was in the case of Kohima in 1880 and Wokha in 1885 (Sema, 1980). While in the Mokokchung district, Rev. E.W. Clark entered the Naga Hills beyond the British territory during a contentious time and made it more feasible for the colonial administration to extend their administration in that area (Clark, M., 1907). Given this mutual relationship, the British government was more than willing to assist and establish mission schools in the Naga Hills. For instance, in 1882, C. A. Elliot, Chief Commissioner of Assam announced his intentions to assist any missionary efforts and help build schools for this purpose (*Foreign Department Political-A*, January 1882, *National Archives of India, New Delhi*). Similarly, in 1886, Rev. S.W. Rivenburg while in Kohima giving a mission field report stated: “The presence of a regiment of infantry and five hundred armed police indicated that the day of peace was at hand and of all points among the Nagas this appeared the most favorable for missionary labor” (*Baptist Missionary Magazine*, 1868). The immediate economic impact based on this collaborative policy was the sanction of grant-in-aid for school construction and sustenance. By 1904, the Naga Hills district had six lower primary schools established and maintained by the government and sixteen mission schools received the government’s grant-in-aid (*Gazetteers of Naga Hills and Manipur*, 1905).

Studying the impact of the American missionaries on the Naga society is not complete without contemplating the kind of isolated and self-sustained agrarian society the Nagas were in, before their entry. Any economic influence from outside was meant to inevitably disrupt the traditional mode of production and corresponding social classes. This is in line with Marxist theory of the transformation of petty commodity production to capitalistic mode of production; how market forces can alter the nature of exchange, giving birth to a cash economy driven by profit and the emergence of class division (Marx, 1987). Economically, the nexus of Christianity, education, and the colonial state can be analyzed in varied ways. As a shift from barter economy, the first flow of currency into the region was through the process of building infrastructure and roads when the Naga laborers were paid in cash. The second flow of cash was through the institution of education where a new salaried social class deviating from the traditional agrarian-based society emerged. The pupils who first received education later became teachers and received a salary. In many cases, these teachers being products of the mission schools

served as pastors in the village church and received different forms of remuneration from the respective villages. For example, as per the S.D.O.'s Diary (D.R.O, Mokokchung) in May 1913, the Santong's mission school teacher was paid an amount of Rs. 6 per month from the mission headquarters at Impur, at the same time the village also paid him a regular salary of Rs. 2 and 10 Imchi (basket) of paddy for his services as village pastor (S.D.O.'s Diary, 1913). The flow of currency in the education sector is significant, based on the annual administrative report of 1908, the total expenditure on education for the three years 1902-05 was Rs. 17,235 which was a huge amount then while the revenue generated during the said period was only Rs. 721 (Foreign Department Extl-A, July 1908, *National Archives New Delhi*). Thus, the establishment of education was not a profit-driven enterprise but for the American missionaries to evangelize the tribal population which was supported by the colonial administration as it made the Naga tribes more amicable and easy to govern.

Education and Christianity consequently had their contributions to the division of classes, the increase in trade activities and entry of credit in the region played a significant role not solely in class formation but also in stratifying the material prosperity between the inner and peripheral tribes. Not only did these tribes who had more contact with the missionaries and colonizers (like the Aos, Angamis, Lothas, etc.) first receive Christianity and education, but they exponentially increased their trading activities in the plains as the economy began to take shape with the establishments of the tea gardens in Assam. These changes were observed in the frequency of traders passing the foothill station 'Samaguting' established by the colonials, where a pass system was set up to assert these numbers (ASR, 1876). Accordingly, one could infer that Christianity and education disrupted the existing institutional design and had various indirect economic impacts on both the colonials and the indigenous people.

On the geopolitical end, the British wanted to set up the Naga Hills as military buffer zones against the threat from the east (Burma and Japan). So a large portion of resources was directed at setting up military outposts on the areas bordering Naga Hills which were expensive and not very effective as there were continued incursions of the tea gardens by the Nagas. For instance, the total expenditure of the Naga Hills district over five years from 1902 to 1907 was Rs. 26, 07,638 compared to revenue receipts which were only Rs. 4, 48, 865 (ASR, 1876). This amounts to a huge deficit of Rs. 21, 58,773 for this period which is a significant loss. By the late 19th century, as a result of the effective political and military control of the people, the raids of the British tea estates in Assam by the Nagas completely came to a halt (Lotha, 2007). The Naga Hills had to be governed at all costs because of the British economic and political interests. Christianity and education thus became the complimentary tools for achieving this economic and political goal: the introduction of new institutions and new concepts of morality to effectively control and secure their revenue-generating province of Assam.

2.2 Christianity and Western Education: Social Empowerment versus Invasive Proselytization.

The advent of Christianity and Western education in the Naga Hills by the end of the colonial era had completely reshaped the society. They ushered the Naga society into the modern era through education, healthcare, and as a mediator to the outside world. The work of the missionaries was not confined to conversion alone but in a time when the Western world was advancing greatly in science and technology, it was through the missionaries that the Nagas had a first glance at the developing world. Visier Sanyu (2000) in his book "*A History of Nagas and Nagaland*" writes: "if one dynamic factor were to be singled out for an overall change in the life of the Nagas, it would undoubtedly be the introduction of Christianity among them."

The efforts of the American missionaries were momentous in eradicating feuds, headhunting, immoral practices, superstitions, etc. Before the coming of the American Baptist missionaries the Nagas practiced oral tradition, which was being passed on for centuries. The Christian missionaries introduced written Roman script of the vernacular Naga languages; a contribution that has immeasurably catapulted so many other developments in the region. It was through the mission schools that produced the first educated Nagas in different fields, many of whom became the pillars of development and progress after the missionaries left the region.

The British colonials were not so concerned with the personal growth of the society in contrast to the American missionaries who rendered their service to humanity, driven by faith and Christian conviction. While the general aim of the British colonizers was political control and asserting their dominance in the region, they initially had little interest in educating the Nagas. For the most of their stay in the Naga Hills, the colonials focused on military, law and order, and civil administration. This colonial policy was consistent in neighboring Assam, as the Imperial Gazetteer of Assam (1903-04) also reports a similar trend of the British lack of effort in education (*Imperial Gazetteer of Assam*, 1906). They only interfered with the Naga society in case of an uprising or village feuds. They appointed representatives in each village called the Gaonburas (village headmen) and Dobashis (interpreter) who were designated as mediators to collect house tax and report law and order situation. Thus the British administered the Nagas indirectly through these agents from the confines of their headquarters.

The continued interference and proselytization of the American missionaries however noble in their pursuit did create irreparable damage to some essential traditional institutions. Most notable among them is the destruction of the morung system. A system of the dormitory where every young boy or girl after their infancy stage was sent for development in different fields and lived there till they were married. The morung acted as an educational hub, court of justice, center for training and learning military warfare. Morungs also served as a platform for the few traders who traversed and communicated with the outside world to return and share their experiences and exposure to their tribe. Asoso Yonuo (1984) writes about the morung as “an important educational, political and social institution” through which the youth “learn manners, discipline, art, stories, songs, war tactics, diplomacy, religious and customary rites and ceremonies living in it”. He further elucidates that morungs acted as a school “to learn the art of livelihood, responsibility, and co-operation before the Nagas came in contact with modern education and life” (Yonuo, 1984).

In pre-colonial times, the morung was the nucleus of the Naga society and the binder of Naga tradition. The ‘Naga way of life’ began in the morung as work divisions were assigned from early childhood. Horam(1975) writes,

All sorts of tasks are allotted to the youth of the Morung by the village elders or the Chief. Indeed no social function in the village can be arranged or managed without the help of the Morung members, who have heavy or light duties and responsibilities according to the number of years they might have spent in the Morung.

It was through the morung that every generation was molded and shaped in a traditionally holistic manner.

This tribal center for organizing society was dismantled by the American missionaries, fallaciously demonized its functioning as a part of a general proselytization wave without taking into consideration and studying the pros and cons of traditional institutions. The missionaries arguably did not put in the effort to understand the complexity and functioning of the morungs, let alone their importance to the

Naga society. K. Chattopadhyaya (1978) in his book *Tribalism in India* writes, “It was inevitable that the Morung should incur the condemnation of the Baptist mission which put a ban on it as a heathen institution without trying to understand its social implication.” Consequently, dismantling the fabric that held the Naga society together and the aim of replacing the morung with the institution of the Church. However, one can argue that the institution of the Church and its functioning is limited, unlike the morung which had holistic social applications and secular underpinnings. The Church reconstituted itself as the nucleus of the Naga society but failed to compensate in totality, the functioning and practicality of the morung. Proselytization at one point went to great lengths of excommunicating people from the church for participating in traditional dance or singing folk songs and even participating in the ‘feast of merit’ organized by the rich for socio-religious and prestigious reasons (Yonuo, 1984). Verrier Elwin, one of the most prolific anthropologists who studied tribal cultures across India during the colonial era wrote, “The activities of the Baptist mission among the Nagas have demoralized the people, destroyed tribal solidarity and forbidden the joys and feasting, the decorations and romance of communal life” (Nag & Kumar, 2024).

Despite this incommensurable destruction to the tribal way of organizing society, the contribution of the American missionaries for the betterment of the Nagas is immense. They brought the message of peace, love, and tolerance to a region that was riddled with continuous warfare. In the process, they unified the region under one umbrella identity as ‘Christians’, while simultaneously indulging in a moral crusade to inspire the Nagas to a life of service to humanity. Official colonial data estimates that the number of Christians in 1881 was just 25 which grew rapidly only after 1920 with a population of 8,734 in 1921 and 22,908 in 1931 (Sema, 1980). Out of the 205,950 Naga people, 41,237 were Christians by the end of the colonial era; 20 percent of them had converted to Christianity, a percentage that rose rapidly in the years after colonization (Sema, 1980). Therefore, even in the post-colonial era, Christianity and Western education remained the two biggest emissaries of change in the Naga Hills.

Conclusion:

The British colonizers had a clear understanding of the effectiveness of Christianity and education as agents of changing conservative traditional societies. From the onset of the conquest of the Naga Hills, Christianity and education had become imperative tools for achieving political control, safeguarding economic interest, and instituting exchange. The growth of Christianity in the Naga Hills had an encompassing effect on the socio-cultural, political, and economic transition in the Naga Hills. Despite the initial strong opposition to change, the dedication of the American missionaries, and their service in education and healthcare drew more Nagas into Christianity. This burgeoning of Christianity had both positive and negative effects. On one hand, there were numerous positive social reforms, while on the other hand, it led to an unhealthy proselytization of tribal institutions. The Church eventually emerged as the focal point for the organization of Naga society, while at the same time, Western education spurred advancement in a number of areas. Considering the subject discussed above, Christianity and Western education emerged to be the drivers of initiating change and sustaining novel ways of thinking and living.

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