

Proselytization in India An Ethnographic Account of the tribes in North-East India

Rimai Joy*

Abstract: Religion as one of the basic institution is a system of beliefs usually involving the worship of supernatural forces or beings which continues to have major influence upon the human society and especially to those individuals or communities who lives a religious life. This paper is an attempt to explain the proselytization in India basing on hill tribes in North-East India. The people had a traditional religion which was a belief in the spirits but during the reign of British in India, Christianity swept over the entire region and these tribal communities has since then embraced Christianity. Christianity is now strongly rooted among these tribal communities. The paper is an outcome of my research to establish the coming of Christianity and the process of conversion among the tribal communities.

Key Words: Proselytization, spirit, animism, polytheism, monotheism, church,

Introduction

Religion as one of the basic institution (Srivastava 1997) is a system of beliefs usually involving the worship of supernatural forces or beings. Religious beliefs provide shape and meaning to one's perception of the universe. In other words, it is the religion that people lean on to, when inexplicable things happen which is beyond their control. For most religious people, their beliefs about the supernatural are at the very core of their worldview. Thus religion is a set of beliefs and practices generally held by an individual or community involving adherence to codified beliefs and rituals. Religion is both personal and communal faith stemming from shared conviction. Therefore, religion can be said codified as an abstract set of ideas, values or experiences developed as a part of cultural matrix.

Manipur is a State in north-east India where the valley is occupied by a community called Meitei surrounded by hills who are tribals and not just one tribe but many tribes constituting 90 percent of geographical area but only 38.46 percentage of the total population. It is these tribals who had their own religion but are now living a converted Christian life and this article is an outcome of research among these hill tribal communities.

* Assistant Professor Amity Institute of Anthropology (AIA) Amity University Noida Sec 125, Uttar Pradesh, India.
Email: rimaijoy@gmail.com/rjoy@amity.edu

Theoretical Framework

Religion has been discussed by different scholars from different perspective and some of the relevant one's are discussed as follows. E.B Tylor defined religion as "the belief in spiritual beings" and argued that these beliefs exist in all known societies. According to him, religion originated as they belief in soul which is also designated by the term animism (anima means soul). Therefore, animism was the ancient form of religion. Thus, according to E.B. Tylor, evolution of religion has passed through the development processes of animism to polytheism and finally to monotheism (Tylor 1929:424).

Weber (1922) on the other hand said it is not possible to define religion. Definition can be attempted, if at all, only at the conclusion of the study. The "essence" of religion is not even our concern, as we make it our task to study the conditions and effects of a particular type of social action. The external courses of religious behaviour are so diverse that an understanding of this behaviour can only be achieved from the viewpoint of the subjective experiences, notion, and purposes of the individuals concerned-in short, from the viewpoint of the religious behaviour

Sir James Frazer (1932) said, there is probably no subject in the world about which opinions differ so much as the nature of religion, and to frame a definition of it which would satisfy everyone must obviously be impossible. All that a writer can do first is to say clearly what he meant by religion and after wards to employ the word consistently in that sense throughout his work. By religion, then, I understand a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct or control the course of nature of human life" (Frazer 1932:222).

According to Sinha (1977), an Indian scholar who had worked among the north-eastern part of India, religion is a subject of great concern even in an advanced society of today where futility of science has often compelled man to search for God, or a supernatural power so that his faith in the order of things is not absolutely lost. Religion is based on simple faith imbued with a sense of supernaturalism. Religion in preliterate societies exercises a more profound influence over man's thoughts and behaviour who ultimately surrender all their actions to him (Sinha1977:11).

Materials and Method

The current research article is an outcome of intensive ethnographic fieldwork for a period of six months. The researcher literally lived with the people for the mentioned periods collecting various data about the religion by using different methodology. The data those collected is a first hand primary fieldwork data. Special acknowledgment and gratitude to Delhi University, India for granting University Teaching Assistantship which helped me learn about teaching, research and the financial assistance. My special gratitude to the tribals in the hill districts of manipur who were more than ready to help me. The people had a traditional religion and having no written script of their own, transmission of such norms were passed down from one generation to another through oral tradition. Therefore oral history plays an important part of such data collection. Since their traditional religion had been abolished, people seems to care less thus leaving little written record of such an

important institution even after the coming of script. There were people who had lived a traditional life but are now living a converted life so recollecting those days the researcher had to sit down with such knowledgeable persons to collect enormous data about the traditional religion. Interview also plays an important role followed by observing the present religious settings. It was through focus group discussion that lot many data were generated about the process of change, the coming of missionaries, abolishment of their traditional religion and the elders remembering the coming of Christianity in many varied forms.

Result and Discussion

Coming of Christianity

It was in the year of 1896 when an American missionary named William Pettigrew sets his foot in this semi-isolated head hunting tribal community only to bring a sea of change. A change so drastic that missionaries often called 'darkness to dawn'. (Imchen 2002). Settling down among this tribe he scribbles in his diary as "Ukhrul, a large village situated in the centre of the Tangkhul hill tribe were being left much to their ignorant wills and ways. No census had ever been taken of this tribe. There was no written language, almost every village has its own dialect, and not a soul in the whole tribe knew anything of even the rudiments of education. An old piece of paper was grabbed and look upon as a curiosity. The majority of the people have never left their mountain in fastnesses, even to visit another tribe or the people of the valley. They were completely ignorant of the outside world. The villagers were independent and democratic. Clannishness, the fear of evil spirits, a blind belief in the efficacy of monthly and annual feasts, ignorance, gross superstition, sin- all these held people in thrall" (Solo 2010: 83).

With the coming of British in India came education system along with a new religion for these hilly terrain tribals who were left to their own freedom. Pettigrew was just another young man among the other thirteen missionaries under Arthington Aborigines Mission (ABM) who was commissioned to go to India to spread the word of Christian God. Based in Kolkata, Bengal by the end of 1890 he made several attempts to enter into Manipur but each attempt was denied by Major Maxwell the then political Agent of the State. Fortunate for Pettigrew, Maj. Maxwell went on furlough and Mr. A. Porteous became the acting Political Agent of Manipur. Knowing the change in the leadership Pettigrew sought permission again which was granted. Grabbing the opportunity Pettigrew arrived at Imphal, the capital city of Manipur on February 6, 1894. He started a school in Imphal with four boys. He then started translating books and writing in Manipuri languages. In the midst of School he also started teaching gospel of Christianity to the Hindu Manipuri people and this alarmed the Hindu Meiteis as a deliberate impose of government's religion, a religion form outside upon the people.

When Major Maxwell returned from furlough he found Hindu Meiteis alarmed by Pettigrew's work so Maxwell immediately asked Pettigrew to leave Imphal. After six months of hard labour he had to leave Imphal but Maxwell suggested that he could work in the hills of Manipur at his own risk, apparently Pettigrew accepted this suggestion.

During his desperate search for the field area, Arthington Mission who was financially sponsoring Pettigrew

expressed that they can no longer support his work as they no longer plan to work in Manipur, this situation put Pettigrew in a tight spot but having visited almost every part of Manipur including valley and hill areas, he did not want to give up his work so he ask for sponsorship to American Baptist Mission working in Sivsagar, Assam who readily agreed to sponsor him (Zeliang 2005:23). Rev. Pettigrew who sowed the first seed of Christianity in Manipur left the field in 1933 due to sickness of his wife and could never return as he wished to. Dr. Werelius looked after the entire Manipur field with the help of Mr. J.E Tanquist from Kohima Nagaland (then called Naga Hills) form 1934-1939.

The first thing that Pettigrew did after reaching this hilly terrain tribal area which is 83 km away from the valley capital was establish a school by introducing roman script for 20 boys in February 1897. Simultaneously Christian ministry was carried out teaching the people about Jesus as there was no objection to truth being taught and the books they study aim to inculcate Christina truth. The school is open daily with singing and prayer. On the Lords day (Sunday), they came together for singing and to listen to the gospel story (Solo; 2010)

Establishment of Church

The Pettigrew enthusiastically carried on the ministry but there was no quick response in terms of conversion to Christianity. This was basically the consequence of mutual suspicion between the missionaries and the people. Thus Pettigrew reported in 1899 saying “the missionary’s arrival at Ukhrul caused no little excitement and what was to be expected, a great deal of suspicion”. The missionary himself was cautious to trust the people. This is evident from the same report when he wrote “the missionary found a people anything but truthful or reliable.” However, with the passing days and years mutual trust was build between Pettigrew and the people. Though the first few years appeared to be unrewarding as there was no conversion, it was not to be forever. It was in the sixth year of their untiring labour that 12 of their students “all boys” resembling the 12 disciple of Jesus got converted and Pettigrew baptised them on September 29-1901. This was the first ever baptismal sacrament administered in Manipur. In the following February i.e 1902, the missionary and the converts formally organise the Ukhrul Church “Phungyo Baptist Church” which became the first church and the only church in Manipur until 1916 (Solo 2010: 28).

The Ukhrul church continues to grow steadily and by 1907 there were 35 members, unfortunately most of the members could not maintained the standard of Christian life. Serious problem arose over some of the member having participated in the feast of thisam (death ritual) though some Christian considered it to be harmless; on thorough investigation Pettigrew discovered the involvement of “offering of sacrifice to evil spirits”. On March 1908, Pettigrew drew out a list of rules for Christian to observe including prohibition of future participant in such feast. The reforming action engendered the breaking up of the six year old church. Sadly, only seven of the 35 church members’ accepted the new rules and remained with the missionary.

Expansion of Mission

The expansion began after conversion, the neighbouring villager started attending schools and not just one tribe

but other tribe such as Kuki began to attend the school and they got converted into Christianity. In 1911 Pettigrew was asked by the government to collect the first census of all hill areas of Manipur so he along with his students visited as many villages as possible to collect census and to spread the word of God. This journey of Census collection bears fruit as many villagers and chiefs seeing their own people as part of the team of Pettigrew knew how to read and write asked Pettigrew to open school in their village.

This was followed by an addition of two more missionaries, Mr. and Mrs. Fox. Thus education and Christianity spread like wild fire in this hilly terrain region presently comprising five districts with different hill tribes such as Kuki, Thadou, Kom, Liangmei etc.

Besides the alarming growth of conversion there was an increasing opposition and persecution from the non Christians, the government gave an overt support to the Chiefs in persecuting the Christians. To cite one example, in 1923, when some 20 family were converted in Kaikao village, a Zaliangrong village in Tamenglong District, the village elder lodge a complaint against the Christian to the government. They had ordered the Christian to leave the village but Christian refuse to oblige to the order. The then Sub-Divisional Officer side with elders and order the Christian to leave the village within a week, forfeiting any property that they could not carry with them. Not only that they were fined rupees 400. At this juncture, Rev. Pettigrew intervenes with the state authorities and secured permission for Christians to settle on a new site (now called Sempang) nearby the old village. It was said that when Rev. Pettigrew left the field in 1933 the position of the Christians turned even worst because he had always been considerable influence on officials. Unfortunately persecution continued here and there throughout the mission period.

Even in the middle of persecution and difficulties, evangelism continued. However due to the Governmental restrictions in the plain areas of Meitei community Christianity could not be propagated yet the Church grew far and wide in all the hill areas (Luikham 1998: 34-35).

Conclusion

The hill tribes in Manipur State were spirit worshipers, not just one spirit but many spirits such as such as spirit of the house, spirit of the river, spirit of the mountain, etc which E. B. Tylor called as polytheism. They believed that human has soul but evil lives in the form of spirit. It was during the British rule in India that a young man by the name William Pettigrew sets its foot in these terrain hills to bring a drastic change. He came with Western education and Christianity, suddenly exposing the people to the outside world. The missionary somehow brought the change in a convincing manner proving that Christian was a better life in all spheres and ask the people to completely abandon their traditional religion. The result of which is seen in their new faith to Christian God. As far as religion is concerned it is Christianity that gave them peace, a new hope and Christianity is now so deeply rooted that reviving their traditional religion is not something the present generation can foresee as Ruivah mentioned in his book “Social Change among Tangkhul Naga” however try to retain the original traditional spirit of enjoying the festivals by following the traditional way minus animistic rites and rituals” (Ruivah 1993: 79).

Today the people of Tangkhul are 99 percent Christians except the elders who hold on to their memories. It

would not be long before the whole population become Christians. The changes were so drastic and wide that Robinson (2010) said ‘while converts may develop a greater sense of self esteemed, their actual lives are little altered’.

We can say that with the coming of Christianity there has been a change in almost every aspects of life including their social, political and world view with the people having more or less continuous contact with the outside world and now they are not immune from dynamic change affecting their traditional way of life.

Morris (2006) quoting the definition given by Southwold wrote that religion includes the following: rituals practices; an ethical code; a body of doctrines, beliefs. Scriptures, or oral traditions; patterns of social relations focus around a ritual congregation, church or moral community; a hierarchy of rituals specialists; a tendency to create a dichotomy between the sacred and profane; and finally, an ethos that gives scope for emotional or mystical experience (Morris 2006: 2).

For the people of these tribes, the change is in the God they worship, which is the vital force of religion but the spirit, the commitment continue to run and religion continues to have major influence among these tribal communities. The impact and the result of these western missionaries are felt even to these small terrain hills of the North-Eastern part of India. The people are infact grateful to the ones who have ushered this new religion and this gratitude is echoed in the line of Luikham (1998) who said “every earthly kingdom rises and fall but on this forsaken land which our Creator has cherished so long to glorify the world, the mighty kingdom has been established for eternity in whose honour we at the height of joy which words fail to express” (Luikham 1998: 4). The Church today, besides teaching Bible also act as an instrument to make people conscious about their social obligations in the society. The belief and commitment never run dry, worshipping in almost everything they do or in almost everywhere they go. The worship and commitment continue, though there is a change on who they worship. The people now have what Tylor called a monotheistic religion with the belief in one supreme God called *Varivara* which is the Christian faith.

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