



ESSAYS ON
CHRISTIANITY IN
NORTH-EAST INDIA

Frederick S. Downs

Edited by
Milton S. Sangma
David R. Syiemlieh



Contents

Foreword	5
Preface	7

Section I. HISTORIOGRAPHY

1. ✓ Historiographical Issues in the Study of Christianity in North-East India *HKB 2 L1* 13
2. ✓ Identity: The Integrative Principle *HKBEL 2* 22

Section II. HISTORICAL

3. ✓ Rangamati: A Christian Community in North-East India During the 17th and 18th Centuries *1 CHR 79* 39
4. An Historical Account of the Council of Baptist Churches in North-East India, 1836-1986 *1987* 52
5. Social Influences on 19th-Century Baptist Missionaries in India *ABQ 89* 66

Section III. LANGUAGE CONTROVERSY IN ASSAM

6. Missionaries and the Language Controversy in Assam *1 CHR* 81
7. New Perspectives on the Missionary Role in the 19th Century Language Agitation in Assam *1 CHR 88* 125

Section IV. CHRISTIANITY AND THE TRIBALS

8. Faith and Life-Style: How Christianity was Understood by the 19th Century Converts in North-East India *BTK 82* 145

- 10 *Essays on Christianity in North-East India*
9. Administrators, Missionaries and a World Turned
Upside Down: Christianity as a Tribal Response to
Change in North-East India 169 *CHR 81*
10. Christianity and Cultural Change in North-East India 184 *UTC '87*
11. Tribal Ecumenism in North-East India:
The Christian Role in Solidarity Movements 198 *CHR 89*
12. Christianity and Socio-Cultural Change in the
Hill Areas of North-East India 214 *HKBEL 3*

Section V. REFLECTIONS

13. Import Substitution: Reflections of the Indigenisation
of Ecclesiastical Conflict in North-East India 231 *IMR, 90*
14. Reflections on the Culture/Society Issue in
Contemporary Mission 242 *ABC '89*
15. Models of Church Unity 252 *MTA 89*
- Appendix* 269

1

Historiographical Issues in the Study of Christianity in North-East India

I will begin by both introducing my understanding of the nature and purpose of historical study in general and its relationship to the historical study of Christianity in particular. My understanding of the study of history is similar to that found in E.H. Carr's *What is History?* It is a conversation carried out between historians and the data provided by the past for the purpose of understanding the present. History is a question-asking discipline; a discipline that seeks to find out the "why" of the past in order to understand how things became as they are. Historians' analysis of the present situation will therefore influence the kinds of questions they ask of the past. Though there have been those who have regarded Church History as a discipline in its own right—a study of "sacred" history which has its own methodological rules—I do not. This is one of the reasons why Protestant theological colleges in India used the term History of Christianity rather than Church History. Christianity becomes a subject of study within the general academic historical discipline, utilising the same methodology, and subject to the same critical analysis. The historian of Christianity thus cannot have recourse to *Deus ex machina* as an explanation of difficult problems. The name History of Christianity is also intended to shift the focus of historical study of Christianity away from exclusively institutional history.

The study of the history of Christianity in India has mirrored the study of history generally. Whereas the general histories of India written during the British period were written from the perspective of British administrators, the histories of Christianity which

began to be written in the middle of the nineteenth century were written from the perspective of western missionaries. The British administrative histories were written to be read by officers of the government, and by the British public that was thus encouraged to support that government. The missionary histories, similarly, were not written from the perspective of or for the enlightenment of the Indian church, but for the supporters of missionary work in the west. Their intention was to demonstrate how great the need for missionary work was in India by exaggerating if not completely misrepresenting the alleged depravity and superstition promoted by the traditional religions; and, of course, to show how successful missionary work had been thus far in achieving this purpose—or, at least, how the signs of an imminent break-through were everywhere to be seen. The basic premise of this writing was that no matter how difficult the challenge, no matter how base the customs of the people, conditions were not so bad that they could not be changed by sending more missionaries and giving more money to support their work.

The first work of this kind, indeed the first attempt to write a comprehensive history of Christianity in India, was the five-volume work by a chaplain of the East India Company named James Hough entitled *The History of Christianity in India from the Commencement of the Christian Era*. The first volume was published in 1839 and the last, posthumously, in 1860. This substantial though poorly documented study begins with the tradition of the coming to India of the Apostle Thomas in the first century and continues until the author's own times. His purpose was not only to gain support for missionary work in India, but to gain support for Protestant as distinct from Roman Catholic missionary work. He attributed the failures of Christianity to make more headway up until his time to the "superstitions" both of the St. Thomas and Roman Catholic Christians. Now that the Protestants were on the scene, he attempted to establish, things were going to be different. The work, needless to say, was not infused with an ecumenical spirit.

The second history of this kind was Sir John Kaye's *Christianity in India: An Historical Narrative*, written just after the rebellion of 1857 (1859) which had the double purpose of defending Christian missions against the charge of having been primarily respon-

sible for that uprising, and to encourage even greater efforts on the part of Protestants to undertake missionary work. He also argues that while the government's policy of religious neutrality was sound, it was nevertheless in the government's interests to encourage missionary work.

In addition to general histories of Christianity in India,¹ a number of histories of particular missions began to be written from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards. Sometimes these were histories of the missionary work being done by a particular society throughout the world, such as Edmund F. Merriam's *The American Baptist Missionary Union and Its Missions* published in 1897 and the last of the genre as far as American Baptists are concerned, Robert G. Torbet's *Venture of Faith: The Story of the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society and the Women's American Baptist Foreign Mission Society 1814-1954* published in 1955. Sometimes they were histories of a particular "field" in which that mission was working, such as John Huges Morris' *The History of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists' Foreign Mission, to the end of the Year 1904* published in 1910 or Victor H. Sword's *Baptists in Assam: A Century of Missionary Services 1836-1936* published in 1935. These histories of particular missions were written from the same perspectives, and with the same purposes as the general missionary histories of Christianity in India. Often they were even more propagandistic in nature because they were usually written for the constituents of that missionary society. That the perspectives and approach of these particular histories was the same as the general ones I have mentioned is clear in what Sword says in the Preface to his book:

It is hoped that the perusal of the following pages will lead the reader to a greater appreciation of the difficulties that had to be encountered in the development of the Baptist mission work in a country such as Assam, with its multitude of tribes and languages. There is indeed no need for disappointment regarding that work. On the contrary, there is encouragement, especially to those who have carried the burden in the heat of the day, and to those who have given liberally in support of the task.²

This perspective is re-enforced by the Foreword given by Joseph C.

Robbins, at that time the Foreign Secretary of the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society. He wrote:

The story of Baptist Missions in Assam is one of adventure and heroism, of suffering and steadfast faith. The devoted service of the missionaries has borne abundant fruit, and today there are 54,000 Christians and 900 Baptist churches in Assam.

One certainly would not expect scientific historical analysis in a book so promoted.

The elements in the perspective from which books like those by Morris and Sword are written are quite clear. In the first place they are about missionaries. Very little is said about the indigenous Christians, and when they are mentioned it is only as "fruits" of missionary work. Their opinions, their cultures, their work in furthering the Christian movement is either not mentioned at all, or mentioned only in passing. It certainly does not constitute the central subject of study. That is because the books are written for the missionaries and their supporters in the west. They tell the story of the missionary extension of the western church—those less kindly disposed than I might even describe them as accounts of ecclesiastical expansionism or ecclesiastical imperialism. To be sure the mission did not gain material benefit from their work, but the books do imply that their supporters gained spiritual merit! The books were not intended to be read by the members of the churches that grew out of the missionary work, and they certainly were not written for the purpose of bringing self-understanding to those people. Nor were they written to bring understanding of the Christian movement to the general Indian public. These books are still widely used by students of the history of Christianity in the North-East. They are often the only books on the subject read by academic historians and social scientists only indirectly concerned with the Christian movement. Such works can be quickly evaluated as reliable sources for the study of the history of Christianity by a quick look at their bibliographies. It should be a matter of concern to those interested in writing histories from the perspective of the local peoples that these missionary histories are still shaping the views of academic historians and social scientists concerning the nature of Christianity in this country. Books written from the western church expansion

perspective reinforce the idea that Indian Christians are simply a by-product of western imperialism and have no indigenous authenticity.

In 1973 the Church History Association of India (CHAI) appointed an Editorial Board to write a new multi-volume comprehensive history of Christianity in India. The first thing the Editorial Board did was to take up the question of the historiographical perspective from which the writing would be done. The result of these deliberations was the production, in 1974, of a very significant document entitled “Guidelines for the Six-Volume History of Christianity in India”. They clearly rejected what I have called the western church expansion perspective of the mission histories. I quote:

The history of Christianity in India has hitherto often been treated as an eastward extension of western ecclesiastical history. Stress has been laid upon either its internal history or upon its “foreign mission” dimension so that the Church is viewed as a relatively self-contained unit which acted upon and was acted upon by the society outside. It is now intended to write the history of Christianity in the context of Indian history.

The CHAI Editorial Board “Guidelines” themselves have a history. Ever since Indian Independence there have been some historians who have questioned the traditional mission-oriented perspective. Their writing at first mirrored that of the nationalist historians. Several books were published, such as Rajaiah D. Paul’s *The Cross Over India* (1952) and P. Thomas’ more ambitious *Christians and Christianity in India and Pakistan: A General Survey of the Progress of Christianity in India from Apostolic Times to the Present Day* (1954), which focused on the Indian church rather than foreign missions. They often stressed the nationalist point that Christianity has existed in India since the first century—long before the arrival of the European imperial powers—and therefore must be considered genuinely Indian. Other books were written that reflected not so much nationalism as a church-centred missiology. They were written from the Indian perspective, in the sense that they were historians of the Indian church—not of mission work in India.

Another way of putting it would be to describe the perspective as a “coming” perspective rather than a “sending” perspective. The

shift was in the starting point. The starting point of the mission histories was the western churches and the mission societies they created which sent out missionaries to countries like India. Their histories were the history of this sending, and the work of those who were sent. The new starting point was India itself. They start with the India and then go on to study the impact upon the Indian people of the missionaries who came among them from abroad. Their histories were the histories of the coming of outsiders, and the Christian communities that grew up among the Indian people as a result. Whereas the purpose of the mission histories was to inform and encourage the western supporters of missions, the purpose of the new church-centred histories was to bring self-understanding to Indian Christians. A secondary purpose of these histories was to help the general public in India, including people of other faith communities, understand the way in which Christianity has become firmly rooted in Indian soil—irrespective of the origins of those who first proclaimed it. Examples of church-centred histories are C.B. Firth's *An Introduction to Indian Church History* first published in 1980 and subsequently revised and my own *The Mighty Works of God. A Brief History of the Council of Baptist Churches in North-East India: The Mission Period 1836-1950* (1971). My purpose in writing that book is clearly stated in the Preface:

The study of our (CBCNEI Christians) history should also help us understand what we are today. The way in which our churches were established, the pattern of their organization and growth, and the nature of the various problems they faced . . . have influenced their present character and relationships with each other . . .

Though this book deals with the period during which the American Baptist Mission bore much of the responsibility for initiating new work, supervising the churches, and running the major institutions this is not a history of that Mission. It is a history of the Church, within which the Mission and its missionaries played an important part, but only a part. However much the missionaries may have contributed to the general social development of the area . . . their most important function was to be instruments of God in establishing his church.³

But books like *The Mighty Works of God* were basically institutional histories.⁴ That was the inevitable consequence of their church-centredness. In the words of the CHAI Editorial Board "Guidelines" it was still "internal history" in which "the Church is viewed as a relatively self-contained unit which acted upon and was acted upon by the society outside." It still mirrored the nationalist historical perspective in which a study was made of how mission controlled programmes and institutions became church controlled; studies of how Indians took over from foreigners. By and large it was also denominational rather than ecumenical or regional.

The CHAI "Guidelines" propose going beyond that. They identify four ingredients in the perspective from which the CHAI history of Christianity is to be written: (1) the socio-cultural, (2) the regional, (3) the national, and (4) the ecumenical. The text reads as follows:

1. *The Socio-cultural*: The history of Christianity in India is viewed as an integral part of the socio-cultural history of the Indian people rather than as separate from it. The history will therefore focus attention upon the Christian *people* in India; upon whom they were and how they understood themselves; upon their social, religious, cultural and political encounters; upon the changes which these encounters produced in them and in their appropriation of the Christian gospel as well as in the Indian culture and society of which they themselves were a part. These elements constitute the history of Christianity in India, and are not to be merely chapters tacked on to the end of an institutional study. This history should, therefore, provide an insight into the changing identity of the Christian people of India through the centuries.

2. *The Regional*: The socio-cultural approach commits us largely to using regions or even smaller areas as our basic working units because of regional, or even local, social and cultural diversities in India.

3. *The National*: The basic framework of this study, however, will be the national. Not only will the common features among regional histories in different periods be explored but also all-India developments will be described so that regional diversities will not obscure national unities. In addition, the international contacts and connections of Christians in India are not to be ignored; they are to

be seen in relation to the Indian history of Christianity.

4. *The Ecumenical*: Christianity rather than any one section of the Christian church will form the basic framework for study. Denominational diversities will not be ignored or played down. Here too both common features of different denominational experiences in each period and region will be explored, and the growth of the ecumenical movement in India described so that these basic unities may be seen along with the diversities.

It is obvious from the amount of space given to it, that the CHAI Editorial Board places primary emphasis on history written from a socio-cultural perspective or, to use the language of academic historians, social history. The emphasis upon regional studies follows from this, as does the emphasis upon the ecumenical. The ecumenical perspective is essentially historiographical, not theological. If one is primarily interested in the relationship of Christianity to the socio-cultural context, that is both the impact Christianity had upon that context and the influence the context had upon the forms of Christianity that developed, then which Christian denomination was involved does not particularly matter. While in the North-East it may be true to say that Protestants created a written language and literature for many of the tribal peoples and Catholics did not—that is, after all, only an accident of history. In other parts of the world, and even in other parts of India where they were first on the scene, Catholics have done the same. The impact of a written language and literature upon the development of Mizo society, for instance, was not different where the Christians were Presbyterian than where they were Baptist. The impact of Christian educational institutions and medical services is the same under whatever denominational auspices they are provided. Denominational distinctives are significant only when one is writing institutional history, not when one is writing history from a socio-cultural perspective.

Thus far three volumes have been brought out in the CHAI series. The first two, dealing with the history of Christianity up through the seventeenth century were difficult to write according to the guidelines due to lack of sources. The third, Hugald Grafe's *History of Christianity in India. Vol. IV Part 2. Tamilnadu in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (1990) does make a serious

and largely successful effort to write from the new perspectives. An example more familiar to you is my own *Christianity in North-East India: Historical Perspectives* (1983), an updated and revised form of which has been published in the CHAI series.

While the book is by no means entirely successful in incorporating the perspectives of the CHAI "Guidelines", it has attempted to do so. Its main weakness, in my opinion, is the failure to fully integrate what I identify as the three main components in the history of the Christian movement in the North-East—the political,⁵ the ecclesiastical and the socio-cultural. I have tried to achieve this integration through the common theme of identity, which I feel is the key to understanding the nature and function of Christianity in this region, particularly in the hill areas where it has had the greatest impact.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The best historiographical study that has been made of representative histories of Christianity in India is John C.B. Webster, "The History of Christianity in India: Aims and Methods", *Indian Church History Review*, XIII 2 (Dec. 1979), pp. 87-122.
2. *Baptists in Assam* (Chicago: Conference Press, 1935), p. 14. Italics mine.
3. pp. ii-iii.
4. Other examples of similar church-centred histories relating to the North-East are J. Fortis Jyrwa, *The Wondrous Works of God: A Study of the Growth and Development of the Khasi-Jaintia Presbyterian Church in the 20th Century* (1980); O. Paviotti, *The Work of His Hands: The Story of the Archdiocese of Shillong-Guwahati 1934-84* (1987); and, David Syiemlieh, *A Brief History of the Catholic Church in Nagaland* (1990).
5. The relationship between political developments and Christianity is much closer in the North-East than in any other part of India.