The American Baptist Christians in North-east India

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The Britishers entered Assam and established their rule in the early years of the 19th century. Soon after, the different Christian denominations also gradually established their outposts and started their work. Their main objective, no doubt, was to spread their religion. But they also undertook to spread literacy, render medical aid, open schools and other educational institutions, etc. Out of all denominations which worked in the North-eastern region, the American Baptists were able to spread out in many parts. Even today the followers of the American Baptist denomination form the majority of Christians in the region.

The author of this article, Shri Amrit Kumar Goldsmith is the regional head of CASA (Church's Auxiliary for Social Action). In answer to our request, he undertook to study old records and has come out with the present article. Besides describing the life and services of some of the highly dedicated missionaries, he also narrates about the work that began in the past and which is continuing till date. It may be noted that out of the seven states of the North-eastern region, three states namely, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram are predominantly Christian. There is the presence of Christian mission work in all the other states including Assam.

We have four major religions in the North-east, namely Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and Buddhism. Any student of the affairs of the region cannot afford to miss studying the impact of these religions and the influence they have in the region. Since* Ishani *is committed to promote correct knowledge and understanding of people in the region, the present article is a very important input in this direction.

Author

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to trace the development of Christian mission work under the American Baptist Missionary Union (ABMU), in the North-east region since 1836 to the present day. The article will trace and highlight the vision of the mission which led to such glorious pioneering works in the fields of human development. The intention is to appreciate the positive and negative side of the works of the mission. The article is confined only to the programmes and

development under (ABMU/ABFMS) American Baptist Foreign Missionary Society. Presently this group of Baptist Christians is popularly known as family of **Council of Baptist Churches in North-east India (CBCNEI**).

It will also touch the Ecumenical movement (communion) in the region of several church missions (denominations) to project a clear comparative picture of development under several Christian missions. The article is based on the author's own experiences, besides other sources of information and some data from history books.

The American Baptist Christians were the pioneers in North-east India (NEI) to start permanent mission work hence the title. It does not undermine the hard work of several Protestant Christian Church denominations and the Roman Catholic Church mission in NEI.

The erstwhile NEI (Assam) was divided among the Christian Church Denominations under a system called **Comity** for better area coverage and efficient coverage of mission work.

The American Baptists covered upper Assam areas of Brahmaputra Valley, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya (Garo/Achik) and Arunachal Pradesh.

Welsh Presbyterian Church covered Khasi Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya and Northern Lushai Hills of Mizoram, NC Hills, Barak Valley of Assam.

Southern/ General Baptists covered South Mizoram and Tripura and North Bank of Assam.

Australian/ New Zealand Baptists covered Lower Part of Assam.

The Church of England (CNI) and the Lutheran Church basically covered the erstwhile British urban Headquarters and the tea belts of Assam.

The Northern Evangelical Lutheran Church is present in Bodo/Santhal areas of lower Assam.

The Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) donated its Guwahati property to the American Baptist Foreign Missionary Society (ABFMS) currently the Council of Baptist Churches in NEI (CBCNEI), Panbazar. In 1883, the Cherrapunji field was also offered to ABFMS by the BMS but the ABFMS could not accept the additional responsibility and the Welsh Presbyterian Mission took the responsibility. ([1]TAM)

The denominational churches have developed in the region in the spirit of comity and tribe lines.

Almost all the Protestant Christian denominational churches come under North East India Council of Churches (NEICC).

A necessity for developing local Christian leaders became urgent after the departure of the foreign missionaries due to insurgency movements that started in Nagaland in the 1950s and in Mizoram in the 1960s. There was also urgent need to mobilize local resources to run the several mission programmes. It can be satisfactorily noted that the Churches have grown with local initiatives both in structure and human potential. The Churches which developed as **receiving churches** have now emerged as **giving** Churches. Missionaries are sent from NEI to, Andamans, West Bengal, Nepal, Bhutan, Thailand, Myanmar, Madagascar, Samoa, etc., with their own resources.

There are other families of Baptists in the region, namely the North Bank Baptist Christian Association, The Lower Assam Baptist Union, Baptist Church of Mizoram, Mid Mission Baptists and the Tripura Baptist Union. Their detailed work account is not mentioned in this article.

Against such a kind of socio-political backdrop, the ABMU started their mission.

The Pioneering Journey

The first attempt to reach Sadiya, Assam, was made from Burma in 1835.

In 1836, Major Jenkins, the Commissioner of Assam, asked Calcutta Baptists to start a mission on the frontiers with chief reference to the Shans or Khamti tribes. This seemed a providential opening. Mr. Nathan Brown and Mr. Cutter with his printing press were sent from Burma in 1836 and established a mission centre at Sadyia. They travelled on the river Brahmaputra by boat to Sadiya. In April 1837 Mr. Miles Bronson and Rev.Jacob Thomas came to join them, but unfortunately Thomas was killed by a falling tree from the bank before he could reach Sadiya. ([3]tam- page 20)

The Western educated missionaries had much influence on the lives of the people who came in contact with them. There was no transport except boat and horses and mostly they walked to cover the distances. It is mentioned a number of times in the history books that the missionaries who survived in the region had to go on furlough to America for rest and treatment. Malaria, the dreaded enemy of all Europeans in Assam drove them back to America. Miss. Marie Bronson who was helping her father Miles Bronson in all his works died in the steamer due to cholera near Goalpara on her way back from Burma to Nowgong (Nagaon) and was buried at Goalpara.

The intention of the British Government was that the Missionaries will educate the immediate neighborhood, create a congenial atmosphere so that the local communities will be in a better position to participate in the British governance system.

The Mission's intention was to use the opportunity to use Sadiya as a station to reach China and Tibet to start Mission work. ([4]Tam)

The pioneering missionaries first started the education process, printed primers as textbooks and started human development work. As missionaries of the Church, their primary goal was to establish a praying community based on Christian faith as demonstrated by Jesus Christ.

Christian faith is based on love and justice and the initial work of the mission was based on the strong value of peace.

I appreciate the noble contribution of the missionaries and the other subsequent developments they helped to bring about.

The primary objective of the mission was to promote Community Organization process through education. The fruits of the education process are the tangible different developments that can be witnessed today.

In 1819 the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) Serampore, had translated portions of the *Bible* into Assamese (Sanskritised) version. By 1837 the New Testament and the Old Testament of the *Bible* were published in Assamese.

During 1846 – 1851, Mrs. Brown, Mr. Cutter and Mr. Whitting were busy translating, printing and teaching in and around Sibsagar (Sivasagar). In 1846 *Orunodoi,* the first Assamese newspaper was started. The newspaper played a vital role in the development of modern Assamese language. Rev. Nathan Brown wrote the Assamese grammar. They introduced Assamese as medium of instruction in the schools. The Assamese language was ousted from the courts and from the schools by 1836. Through advocacy of Rev. Miles Bronson and Sri.Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, George Cambell recognized Assamese as an independent language in 1873 and declared it to be the medium of instruction in schools and courts in Assam.

Rev. Miles Bronson played a very significant role indeed in rescuing the Assamese language from being replaced by the Bengali language in the courts and schools.

Mr.Charles Bronson, in his turn, undertook the great literary work of his life –**the writing of the Assamese-English dictionary, which was published in 1867.**

Emergence of local leaders

Through Community Organization process, persons like Nidhi Levi, the first Assamese convert in 1841, Batiram, Ramsingh and Kolibor, an uneducated opium addict, became preachers and teachers. These were the initial people who helped the pioneer missionaries.

In 1877, Kandura R. Smith, Guwahati, and Charles Sonaram Thomas, Nowgong were the first ordained local leaders to assist in the mission work.

An orphan and a product of Nowgong Orphan Institute named Tuni John Goldsmith was ordained in 1882 and became one of the icons in the line of mission workers in the region. ([6]TAM) His son Henry Goldsmith was a pioneer missionary to Kohima and was instrumental in developing the Christian Mission school in Jorhat. Sons of Rev. Henry Goldsmith, Comfort Goldsmith, Member of Legislative Council, was in the first Sadullah ministry of Assam. Kumud Goldsmith, the first master degree holder among Christians from Calcutta University, was the first local headmaster of Jorhat Christian Mission School. He also served as honorary Pastor of

Jorhat Baptist Church for 40 years. He was a fine musician and could play several instruments. Kamal Goldsmith, a doctor, was a pioneer in the Malaria eradication programme with the British at Ledo. Mrs. Priyabala (Sweet) Goldsmith, a well respected educationist and wife of Comfort Goldsmith, was the headmistress of Jorhat Govt. Middle Girls School for 28 years. Annie Goldsmith (Bogi Gogoi), wife of Kumud Goldsmith, rose to be a National Christian women leader of international repute. She was also the President of India, Ceylon, Pakistan and Burma Baptist Women Union. She was once the Secretary of Red Cross Child Welfare Centre at Jorhat, an educationist and pioneer teacher of Hemalata Handique Memorial School, Jorhat.

The first national Assamese leader of CBCNEI was Rev. Edward Sinha, a resident of Guwahati.

Garo Hills

Omed and Ramkhe, two Garo boys, were baptized in Feb.1863. Rajasimla village became an important centre of Mission work. Later on Nishangram village became another important Mission centre for works in Garo Hills of Meghalaya. When Tura became headquarter of administration, the government entrusted the Christian Mission to take charge of education in the district as early as 1878. ([7] Narola Imchen)

Such was the expectation of the missionaries and subsequently we notice that in the states of (now) Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Meghalaya, the educational institutions run by Baptist Christian Missions had done tremendous human development works in the last 150 years or so.

Nagaland

Rev. E.W.Clerk, Rev. Godhula Brown, the local pioneer Missionary from Sibsagar started work at Dicka Haimung village, Nagaland from 6th April 1872.

Mrs.Clerk ran a school for girls and was assisted by Ms.Tungbangla. In 1881, a new station was started at Merangkung. This was the beginning of mission work in Nagaland. Rev. Longri Ao and Rev.Kijunglibas Ao were conferred, the title “Man of Peace” by Government of India. They were the products of the mission work in Nagaland.

In 1883 C.D.King and Henry Goldsmith started the mission among the Angami Nagas in Kohima area and today we witness the fruits of that mission.

Manipur

In 1895 William Pettigrew started mission work in Ukhrul in Manipur.

Arunachal Pradesh

Arunachal Pradesh Baptist Convention started in 1995. Mr. Madam Dini is the first executive secretary.

Mizoram

In 1894 Rev. F.W. Savidge and Rev. J.H.Lorrain came to Mizoram (Lushai Hills) sent by BMS. Their initial work was translation of Gospel of Luke, John and Acts, chapters of the *Bible*, a grammar and a dictionary in Lushai. They also started a dispensary which later on turned into a full fledged hospital in Lungleih (South Mizoram). The Baptist Church of Mizoram (BCM) became the local body to assume all the mission works started by BMS. In 1936 the Young Mizo Association (YMA) a very central body in lives of the Mizo youth was started.

Very simple ordinary people were thus turned into leaders of that time who contributed immensely towards the human development work.

The British government did not want an educated elite class to emerge who can question their presence and their rule in the region. The missionaries were not encouraged to produce such elite groups. They were involved in educating ordinary persons to become Preachers (messenger of good news) and Teachers. This small group of people has done wonders in the years to take the mission in the forefront as chief agents of human development.

Genesis of Education Mission

Ms.Eliza Brown and Ms.Harrier Cutter started a small school with around 20 students at Sadiya. Mr.Oliver T. Cutter was involved in establishing village schools in 1836.

The Jorhat Christian Mission School.....

In 1903 the Assam Valley School was started, and in 1906, the Bible School was started and a Normal department was added to teach English and other relevant subjects, which was turned to Middle English school by 1909. Within 40 years or so the school became one of the leading institutions for boys in the region. Its concern was not only the academic excellence but also holistic development of the boys.

In Jorhat 200, it is written that Dr.T. Ao, who captained the Indian Olympic football team, represented The Jorhat Christian Mission School. The players played barefoot, and yet the standard was fairly good". ([8]Ajit K.Sarma)

Dr.C.L.Rema, IAS, Mr.Rishang Keishing, Chief Minister of Manipur, Mr.Hokishe Sema, Chief Minister of Nagaland, Dr.Amal Goldsmith, FRCS, one of the physicians of the Queen of England, Mr.Atul Sarwan, IAS, Ex-Chief Secretary of Assam, are a few names to mention who were products of the school.

The school was closed by 1951 to pave way for the Eastern Theological College.

In 1909 agriculture training was introduced which eventually paved way for the Industrial Training School in 1919. The present Industrial Training Institute (ITI) near the Jorhat Mission Compound owes it origin to the American Baptist Mission. ([9]O.M.Rao)

Gale Memorial Bible School for Women was opened on 3rd January 1925 at Jorhat after it was shifted from Golaghat, where it was started in 1918. The school contributed a lot in the area of women leadership development and paved way for gender sensitiveness in all spheres of life.

The Francis Memorial Primary School was started on 25th January 1926 at Jorhat. It was a co-educational primary school for all sections of children. The Primary school still continues to provide value based education to many children. (The author is a product of the school).

Women-Zenana work

The work among women began from the schools. A few ordinary women were persuaded to come to the mission bungalows where they were taught by missionary wives, on many practical subjects. Mrs.Brown and Mrs. Cutter in Sibsagar, Mrs. Barkar in Guwahati and Mrs.Bronson in Nowgong were such missionary wives. To include more women in the schools of learning, the Nowgong Orphan Institution was started in 1843. The work among women started with very slow progress due to several practical problems, chief among them being the absence of ready availability of women to teach. Another significant problem faced is the deep patriarchal practices in family and in religious life. To break through that situation and to encourage gender equality and gender empowerment work was very difficult. Lack of effective workers to work with women was a great hindrance.

The Golaghat Mission Girls School, Nowgong Mission Girl's School with residential facilities were the only schools for girls in the region and produced eminent women leaders.

The history books, however, speak of women leaders who equally contributed towards human development.

Ms. Anandi Konwar of Nowgong, Dr. Alice Mark, Guwahati, Dr. Lahori Bhuyan, Ms. Lydia Sinha, Ms. Rano Shaiza, Nagaland, Ms. Angno Anal, Imphal, to name a few emerged as strong Baptist Christian women leaders in different fields.

Gender sensitiveness has been incorporated in all walks of life. Any inconsistent behavior in value inculcation process is strongly discouraged. Deliberate cultural reforms were attempted to wean away people from what was seen inconsistent to human development.

Missionaries faced two main social problems in their mission work, the **Use of Opium** and **drinking alcohol (liquor**). The missionaries had to find solution to dissuade people from these two social evils which were hampering their human development work.

The Church discipline at its peak

The minutes of the Jubilee Conference, December 18-29, 1886, reports that.. " *we as members of the Conference, deem it our sad duty, in consideration of his attitude against the Church, and confessed misconduct, to withdraw from, (name irrelevalent) our fellowship as a minister of the gospel*". This is a point to prove that the missionaries were very true to the mission and not compromising on values. Even though there were only a handful of Christians at that time, yet the authorities of the Church took a very tough decision to maintain Church discipline. It shows the intent of the mission for human development.

By 1853 they faced a serious problem and in Missionary Magazine Report, it is quoted, "The total or partial dependence of native converts on the mission for temporal support is regarded **as evil** for which a remedy has been anxiously sought".([10]TAM) The initial mission strategy was on sustainable development concepts and the self help training was initiated from beginning.

Medical Mission

Jorhat Christian Medical Centre was started in 1919 and in 1938 Dr. Herbert W. Kirby strengthened the Leprosy Mission work, a section of the programme of the hospital. A laudable pioneering work serving that section of the population who were most hated for no fault of theirs, was thus initiated. The hospital has an Intensive Care Unit (ICU) in that part of Assam.

The Jorhat Christian Hospital, Satribari Christian Hospital, Tura Christian Hospital and Kangpokpi Christian Hospital have nursing training school and have produced numbers of nurses for the region. I remember Mr.Phani Sarma, tea planter of Jorhat as saying, "I go to Mission hospital for the nursing care I receive". Indeed, the nurses are taught to give very personal Christ-like human touch to all patients including administering bed pans.

The Satribari Christian Hospital

Due to ignorance, superstition and religious belief, the mortality rate of children and women was once very high, as men did not allow their women to be examined by male doctors. With this situation in mind a decision was taken to open the hospital exclusively for women and run by women medical staff. The foundation was laid in 1923. The hospital with 25 beds was established in 1926.

The Tura Christian Hospital

The hospital was established in the year 1908.

Kangpokpi Christian Hospital

The hospital was established in the year 1920. The only hospital that was started between Mao Gate and Imphal town.

Impur Christian Hospital

A dispensary was established in the year 1912 which was upgraded to a hospital in 1955. Dr. James Bailey was the first doctor of the centre.

Babupara (Nishangram) Christian Hospital

All the medical centers have rendered tremendous service to provide the basic human right – the right to health care.

Dr. K.V.Dodgson, Former Medical Superintendent writes, "The Christian community has made a 'contribution out of proportion to its numbers. This has been most evident in the fields of education and health care." ([11]Jorhat 200)

Statistics of CBCNEI 2007 shows the fruits of pioneering Mission labour

Convention	Association	Church	Members
ABC	5	378	35106
APBC	13	449	35239
KABC	11	278	22092
MBC	28	1280	171690
GBC	12	2381	218817

NBCC	20	1347	454349
Shillong BC		1	80
Zomi BC		1	1096
Total	89	6115	938469

ABC- Assam Baptist Convention
APBC- Arunachal Pradesh Baptist Convention
KABC – Karbi Anglong Baptist Convention
MBC – Manipur Baptist Convention
GBC – Garo Baptist Convention
NBCC – Nagaland Baptist Church Council

The other Churches (denominations)

The Presbyterian Church of India (PCI)

Once a decentralized group, the Presbyterian churches have now been organized into a centralized administrative unit called the Presbyterian Church in India with headquarters at Shillong. The PCI has taken initiative to start the only private University in the region called "Martin Luther Christian University" in Meghalaya, with other churches as partners.

THE CHURCH OF NORTH INDIA, NEI

Its origin is with the Church of England. It entered into church union and functions under the style of CNI with headquarter at Shillong, headed by a Bishop.

THE SALVATION ARMY

Its strong base is at Aizawl, Mizoram. This church is organized in the style of military administrative line and carries the army designations for its officers. They wear uniforms with marks of rank.

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH

There are several groups of Lutheran Church in NEI and they are organized under the UELCI (United Evangelical Lutheran Church of India), and Evangelical Lutheran Churches in Himalayan States, The Northern Evangelical Lutheran Church, The Bodo Evangelical Lutheran Church, The Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church, Eastern Evangelical Lutheran Church, are some of the constituent church bodies of UELCI.

Contribution in Nation building of the Christian Churches in the NEI region.

Social Service

The faith in Action is expressed through the para church bodies like the Church's Auxiliary for Social Action (CASA), World Vision of India, North East India Committee on Relief and Development (NEICORD), Bosco Reach-Out, Catholic Relief Service (CRS), Development Out-Reach, CARITAS India, Thangkhul Theological Association (TTA),Social Front Mizo Presbyterian Synod, BCM Relief and Development Department, Christian Medical Association of India (CMAI), Young Women Christian Association (YWCA), Young Men Christian Association (YMCA), Lutheran World Service India (LWSI), Missionaries of Charity (Mother Teresa), etc.

There are also several Social Fronts and Committees of the churches working for sustainable development in the region.
Protestant Churches
By 1990s they were operating
Primary Schools – 929
Middle schools – 208
High Schools – 72
Colleges – 3
University – 1
Theological Colleges – 21
Hospitals – 14
Dispensaries – 21

Youth Programme

Lewis Memorial Hostel
White Memorial Hostel,
Tyranus Hall
Young Women Christian Association
Young Men Christian Association
Young Mizo Association

Catholic Church Contributions

Through 15 Dioceses in the Region the Church is running:-
Elementary Schools – 6000
High Schools - 246
High Secondary Schools – 75
Colleges – 13
Specialized Institutions – 80
Hospital – 13
Dispensaries – 95
Hostels, Boys/Girls - 243

The Regional Rural Training Centre at Umran is one of its kind in sustainable agriculture practices and demonstration of herbal medicines in the region.

The Catholic Museum in Shillong is a rare sight of preservation of the culture and heritage of NEI.

The Don Bosco Youth Service Centre at Kharghuli, Guwahati is one of the landmarks in NEI.

Conclusion

The Baptist Christian centres (mission compound) are models of human development. From early 1950s, almost all the mission centres are being managed by local leaders. Very simple insignificant people turned leaders have emerged as models of human growth - A model based on love and justice of the Christian faith. Peaceful approaches are always appreciated. Thus writes Dr. K.V.Dodgson, in Jorhat 200 "The night of silent procession" (Assam agitation) "They converged on Jorhat from all directions along all of the roads that led to the city from all of the villages around... the city glowing in the golden light of burning torches. The silence seemed as profound as the light, as great as the crowd. No fire had been set. No sound had been made. No shot had been fired. No one had been hurt! We had experienced an amazing display of *Satyagraha.*"

Violence was denounced and discouraged all the time through education. Respect to all creation of God was the teaching, and peaceful and harmonious community living was demonstrated through the services.
Only love of God, honesty, dedication, and commitment could have led a handful of missionaries to perform such Herculean task of human development against all human comforts and risk of life.

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TAM [2] TAM [3] Page 20, TAM [4] Page 18, TAM [5] Page 22, TAM [6],
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