

The American Baptist Missionaries in The Field of Primary Education - A Study with Reference towards the Garos of Meghalaya



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Abstract

The contribution of the American Baptist Missionaries towards primary education in Garo Hills is commendable. It has change the educational scenario of the Garos to a great extent which has up lift the pattern of living, values and practices as well. Apparently, the contact of the Garos with the American missionaries, western values and knowledge spread among them to a large extent.. Prior to their coming the Garos did not have their own script. Thereafter the American missionaries introduced the Roman Script and set up schools even in the interior places. The contribution of the missionaries in the field of education and health sector besides propagating their own religion is remarkable This study will focus mainly on the role of American missionaries towards primary education as indicated in the theme.

Keywords: Contribution, Primary, Education, Garos, Change.

Introduction

The Christian Missionaries in Garo Hill in particular and North East India in general represented not only a new religion but also a new way of life. Their methods of propagation through institutional works in the fields of education, health and charity were far more pragmatic, efficient and better organized than those of the existing religious institutions of the tribes. The advent of Christian Missionaries to Garo Hills of the erstwhile parts of Assam was one of new forces which gave a powerful push to the wheel of social change in North East India as whole.

Objectives of the Study

1. To highlight about the role of the American Baptist Missionaries towards Primary Education into Garo Hills
2. To dwell also on the other activities which have uplift the indigenous tribe of Garo Hills.

Methodology

This paper is basically based on descriptive analysis method. Secondary data are used for this purpose such books, proceedings, magazine, etc related to this theme.

The advent of American Baptist Missionaries

It was a known fact that the British Officials were unable to administered Garo Hills due to the savage nature of the people. They were convinced that no better solution would be possible except calling for help from Christian Missionaries to deal and civilize them. On their invitation, the first Christian Mission centre was set up in 1826 at Singimari. The missionaries also set up a school to educate the Garo children. Again after twenty years ie in 1847, another School was established for Garos in Goalpara by Capt. Jenkins. Captain Jenkins was known as a pioneer of that institution, where future leaders like Omed, Ramke, Gongaram and Rangku were groomed for their Christian ministry. However, the process of spreading the gospel was very much slow. It was till April 14, 1867, that twenty six Garo men and women were converted and were baptized by Dr. Miles Bronson in the Rongkil Stream in Rajasimla, a Church was born. Incidentally it was the starting point of the activities of the missionaries among the Garos.

The major contributions of the American Baptist Missionaries towards the Garos of Meghalaya are discussed below:

Roman Script

Christian missions were made an instrument of change by the British authority. It is a fact that the Christian missions also benefitted in many ways due to their linkage with the British authority. The effort of the Missionaries to introduce education was recognized by the British as a policy of civilizing the hill tribes who were savage and very backward. The Christian Missionaries besides propagating their region, they also supported the cause of providing written scripts for the tribal communities in North East India. They were the pioneers in introducing modern education as well as ministering to the health of the tribes.

The American Baptist Missionaries were known as the pioneers in propagating Christianity to the nook and corner of Garo Hills. Education as well health care was also introduced by them side by side with religious activities. The arrival of American Baptist Missionaries like Rev. Philips and Mason in Tura, the District Headquarters of Garo Hills in 1874 was a turning point in the history of the Christian mission. These two missionaries brought a type writer and with this machine they began to publicize the use of the Roman script for the Garo language. In the beginning they printed a few primers and found visible interest in reading among the Garos. Nevertheless they realized that twenty one Roman letters were sufficient to represent the needed sound in the Garo language. Finally the American Baptist Missionaries introduced Roman alphabet to the Garo in 1893. This step had a far reaching benefit. First the Garos learned the art of reading and writing in a very easy way. No doubt the missionary had the intension that their people should be able to read the Holy Scripture. Through language and literature it had also enabled the people in breaking up isolation. It also opened up new perspectives of cross cultural communication and enabled the people to cope up with their new socio-economic and political situation.

Education

Another significant contribution made by the American Baptist Missionaries was in the field of education. The Missions set up educational institutions in various parts of Garo Hills including those villages which are predominantly inhabited by the Garos in the part of Assam adjoining Garo Hills. No doubt education goes side by side with religious activities. According to census of 1901, the literacy percentage was only 0.8% of the total population e.g. 1.5 males and 0.2 females. Primary Education is in the hands of Mission, had made considerable progress. There were no Secondary Schools, but in 1902-03, there were 3 Upper Primary and 86 lower Primary Schools. In 1934, High School was started in Garo Hills.

At the time when the missionaries came to Garo Hills, the people were not aware of any form of formal education. The missionaries took initiative by themselves and even visited villages and brought girls and boys to learn and study in mission schools and contributed all their expenses. Free- education was offered by the missionaries. The number of schools increased and scattered to almost all parts of Garo

Hills. It is important to mention here that many schools set up by the missionaries often faced dearth of teachers and affected when the missionaries returned home.

Though education in Garo Hills spread slowly but had been an instrument of change. It had brought awareness among the people that there should be an adjustment between modernity and tradition. Moreover education brought about political consciousness. For instance, the Garos under the leadership of Sonaram Sangma were fighting for the lost territories in Goalpara District.

Written Literature

As has been discussed above that prior to the coming of Missionaries, there was no formal education in Garo Hills. There was neither script nor any written books. In the beginning the missionaries could not provide any specific curriculum for teaching in their schools. However the first job that the missionaries did and practice was to learn the Garo language. After they were well verse with the language they started to introduce books for Garos in Roman scripts. At that juncture, books were mainly written and published by the Missionaries. The missionaries followed its own educational policy, decided to introduce religious instructions in all Schools. The Missionaries also introduced sewing and knitting for girls and crafts for boys. During the year 1849- 1874, a number of books for the lower primary schools as well as few religious literatures both in Roman and Bengali were published. Among the pioneers in Education and literature on the Garos include Dr. & Mrs. Keith (January 1872), Rev. & Mrs. E.G. Phillips (December 1874), Miss M. Russel (January 1879), Rev. C.E. Burdette (December, 1883), Miss E.G. Bond (January 1886), Miss Stella Mason (January 1886), Rev. & Mrs. Dring (December, 1890), Rev. & Mrs. S.A. D Boggs (February 1892), Miss A.J. Rood (December, 1894), Rev. & Mrs. L.E. Munger (November, 1896), Last Missionaries were Miss F.E. Wormser (March 1949) Miss L.L. Bate (May, 1965). She left in the year 1970.

From year 1867 to 1970, the American Baptist Missionaries have involved in Education and Literary works. As many as 29 missionaries were assigned to work not only in Garo Hills but they took some Garo Young men to be trained and educated in U.S. A. e.g. Rev. Tangkhan K. Sangma.

Missionaries in the Medical and Health Services

Like most tribes of North East India, the Garos too were very much ignorant and practically unacquainted with hygiene ways of living, proper dietary habits and medical care. They were superstitious and in case of any sickness they sacrificed birds or animals to god or goddess so that they will be cured. Sometimes they used plants and herbs as well. Most of the time, they attribute all sickness to evil spirit.

With regard to health services, missionaries did not take upon as the primary function of the missionary cause but as an auxiliary in the propagation of faith. But with the passage of time it was felt the necessity to be involved in this great cause of giving medical service to the people. Some

medical Missionaries like Dr. & Mrs. G.G. Crozier (1899), Dr. & Mrs. Ahlquist (1918) and Dr. & Mrs. E.S. Downs (1927) were deputed to start the medical mission in Garo Hills. They built the first Christian Hospital at Tura and a Dispensary at Nishangram. Some of the Lady Missionaries were trained Nurses. The Missionaries did not confined in one place only but moved throughout Garo Hills to extend their helping hands. They also opened the orphanage in Tura Christian Hospital to help the needy and poor.

Change the Traditional Economic life of Garos

Some of the Missionaries who really understood the economic problems faced but the Garos, they pioneered horticulture. They brought seeds from America, Philippine, and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) tried in their gardens and distributed seeds to the local people. Among these were Mangoes, Guavas, Pomeloes, Peaches, Plums, Litchis, Pine-apples, Bananas, Oranges, Cotton and Papayas. They started printing press and trained Garos as typists. Dr. Mason dreamt of flourishing economy of Garos by setting up small scale industries like carpentry, blacksmith and Canning centres. The Missionaries tried to change the economic condition of the Garos in whatever possible means.

Contribution for Spiritual Growth

The growth of Churches with the establishment of a Church in Rajasimla (on 14th April, 1867) with 37 members is significant. When the Church in Tura celebrated its centenary in 1982, the position of the convention stands as 12 Association inclusive of 81 Mother Churches and over 81,000 baptized members (Centennial Souvenir, 1982). Today even in one Krima No. I, Headquarter Nishangram has 75,347 adherents, Christian families: 21,475, Mother Churches: 49 Churches, Baptist Churches:

517, Small Churches: 320 churches. With the growth of the Church, the spiritual life of the Garo adherents increased from strength to strength.

Conclusion

In conclusion it may be observed that the American Baptist Missionaries had done a commendable service for the Garo indigenous tribe of Meghalaya. Though the basic objective is to evangelize and propagate Christian religion. From that perspective they had succeeded in their mission. It is also a fact that when the Garos converted into Christianity their own Garo traditional religion is almost vanishing away from the scene. Christianity had also negative effect on the culture and custom as well. However the contribution of the American Baptist missionaries towards the Garos is significant whether in the fields of education, health, literature etc. Had the missionaries not entering into Garo Hills, life style, education, literature, hygiene, etc will not be achieved at this level.

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