



CATHOLICISM'S IMPACT ON THE LIFE AND CONDITIONS OF THE PEOPLE OF MANIPUR

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ABSTRACT

The mission of the Catholic Church has been explained- to be at the service of the human family, as also what is meant by 'Mission' and 'Evangelization'. The Catholic Church is determined to touch the life of all Manipuris, and established educational institutions, hospitals, homes, etc., with special care extended to the needy. The paper contains some relevant features of the Meitei and Tribal religion and states that Catholicism strengthened communitarian feelings, as all are equal members in the Christian fellowships.

Key words: Catholic Church, educational institutions, hospitals, homes, etc.,

Introduction:

The mission of the (Catholic) Church is the continuation and an unfolding of the Mission of Christ. The Church prompted and guided by the Spirit of Christ, must proceed along the way that Christ followed, the way of poverty, obedience, service and self-sacrifice, even unto death. The Church in Manipur, cannot stand aloof from the society but be at the service of the human family, sharing "the joys and hopes, grieves and anxieties" of the people. Mission and Evangelization cannot be seen merely as a Church expansion but to be seen as "a pilgrimage with other believers in the task of building up the Kingdom of God on earth, making it a place hospitable to all God's children. Christians believe that Jesus Christ, true God and true man, is the one Saviour, who alone accomplished the Father's universal plan of salvation. He is the definitive manifestation of God's love for all. He is indeed unique and "it is precisely this uniqueness of Christ which gives him an absolute and universal significance, whereby, while belonging to history, remains history's centre and goal". Indeed, we must proclaim the radical newness of the persons and sisters of other religions "to be followers of Jesus Christ with us or in their own way, without the pre-occupation with baptizing, when we let our genuine love be manifested in our concern for people, in our service without ulterior motives, then there will be a chance for the Spirit of God to work true conversion, true change of heart and outlook, to enable all to work together for the coming of his Kingdom". As his grace Rev. Dominic Lumon asserts "may the Church in Manipur be a true and faithful servant of her master and Lord who

came for all humankind that we may have life and have it abundantly”.¹

From the following passage, it is apparent that the Catholic Church is determined to touch the lives of Manipur without any discrimination. The word of the God should be spread to every nook and corner of the world. They are motivated by the several verses in the Scriptures that tell us that God’s word should be spread to everyone in the world. The Catholic missionaries consider it their duty to reach to, as many people as possible to share the word of God. Mark 16:15-16 NKJV states that and he said to them, “Go into the world and preach the Gospel to every creature”. Psalms 96: 3 NKJV4 “Declare His glory among the nations, His wonders among all peoples”. And towards accomplishment of these goals, establishment of hospitals, schools, colleges and many such other institutions became an extension of their charity work.

In an interview with Rev. Fr. Karumampallil Joseph SDB, Vice Rector, Mary Immaculate Parish, Chingmeirong, He talked about transforming the way of life of the people through education. He emphasized that Catholic institutions mainly caters to the need of the poor and the needy people. Often, they are asked as to why they don’t run their institutions on the likes of Assam Valley School (a premier private institution) and such others. Fr. Joseph professed that such schools are equipped with high class infrastructure and in order to maintain the status and the facilities, high fees are levied on the students, which goes against their mission of helping out the helpless Manipuri who are financially lacking. Some of them are not only financially deprived but are also deprived of the guidance of their parents and guardians. The Catholic missionaries also tried to guide the students and also uplift those who are under their guardianship, both spiritually and intellectually. They are given guidance on almost all aspects of life. Various training centres have also been opened for the not so intellectually gifted ones, to enhance their scope of employment.²

The traditional religious rites and offering and their national prayers to gods and goddess for the welfare were almost the same for the hills and the plain people. The Meiteis used to worship four supreme Gods viz, ‘Sidaba Mapu’, ‘Ema Leimalel’, ‘Lainingthou Sanamahi’, and ‘Epouthou Pakhangba’. The first three are worshipped daily at their houses but ‘Epouthou Pakhangba’ is worshipped occasionally and specially at sacred place known as ‘Kangla’ altars. Besides, there are 364 ‘Umanglai’ (demi-gods and goddesses) worshipped as household deities.⁶ These ‘Umanglai’ gods and goddess consists of ancestors of each tribe and also spirits of the mountain passes, spirits of the lakes, rivers, vampires, etc. The Creator deity is identified both with the Chiefs of the Gods and either the snake ancestor of the royal family. Traditionally, the Meiteis practice ancestor worship, head-hunting and buried their dead. They also believed that all human suffering and illness are sent by the evil spirits of demi-Gods and Goddess. The Maiba (Priest) and Maibi (Priestess) practise occultism and made sacrifice and offering for healing the patient. Moreover, there is a belief that by worshipping the four supreme gods with Lainingthou will protect them from the evil spirit.

In olden days, Meitei never worshipped an idol. It was king Khagemba, who introduced the idol of ‘Lainingthou Sanamahi’ for the first time in Meitei culture. Many kings after him used to worship the idols of Hindu gods and goddess by adopting Hindu religion and began to construct many temples of Hindu Gods and Goddess in and around sacred altars of Meitei and cremated their dead bodies.³ However, the Meitei under Maharaja Garibniwaj (reign from 1709-1748) became Hindu Vaishnavites. But regardless, the indigenous beliefs and practices are still strong and they co-exist with the Hindu religion. The predominant festival observed by them are ‘Yaosang’ (Doljtra), ‘Lai Haraoba’, ‘Cheiraoba’, and ‘Chingkaba’ and its popularity has not dwindled away yet. It is compelling to notice here that there was little socio-cultural interaction between the people living in the valley

¹ Dr R. Tikoo, Problems of National Integration, Seminar on National Integration-Agents of Social Change, Manipur university, 1986, p. 10.

² Salam Irene, Catholic Education in Manipur, Op.cit. p. 115

³ Salam Irene, Catholic Education in Manipur, Op.cit. p. 115.

and in the Hills as neither Hinduism nor the indigenous Meitei religion was not followed and practised in the Hills. All the hill tribes of Manipur believed in the existence of a Supreme Being or God, who is in control of all events, a divine power who is the maker of the world though their idea about him was faint and confused.⁴ The name of this Supreme Being varied from tribe to tribe. The Kuki-Chin-Mizo call it 'Pathian', the Mao call it 'Oramai', the Kabuis call it 'Ragwang', the Marams call it 'Pumpu'. They believed that a good person after death goes to heaven but the bad ones are punished by God through rebirth in a lower position in life. Thus, they worship him to find a place in heaven after death. They consider him to be a beneficent being who, dwells high above in heaven, loving and kind who bless people and punished wrong doers. He is well disposed towards men and so, there is no need for offering sacrifices for propitiating. For in-depth understanding and to emphasise on the changes, the earlier practices of both the Tribal and the Meitei are explained briefly in this chapter, it has been dealt with in detail in the earlier chapters.

(a) Tribal: The Beliefs in Spirits and Demons

The Tribal earlier belief in the existence of friendly and evil spirits who are proficient in bringing them either bad or good luck as has been challenged with the advancement of their intellectual level and the progression of the socio-economic level. The spirits, demons and ghosts were known by different names among different tribes. They also believe in the existence of individual house deities who help the welfare of the families and individual paddy field deities who protect and bless the crops. They, therefore, offer sacrifices very often to these deities to appease them, especially during the time of sowing seeds, harvesting and festival times. As per the questionnaire's respondent, this has undergone a transformation and now at present times, it is mostly directed towards offering 'tithes' (1/10th of a Catholic's earning to be given to the church), going to Church every Sunday, helping the needy and the sickly. A notable example would be that, the coming of Catholicism had strengthened their communitarian feelings as all are considered as equal members in the same Christian fellowship and Catholicism united tribal and plain people, who became Catholics under one banner -there was no discrimination between the tribal and Meitei or different groups of people. As they (Catholic missionaries) believed their mission was not just charity but also caring for the sick and dying, the Catholic fellowships on the social media keeps updating the community on the condition of COVID-19 and on measures to keep safe. They also share pertinent and relevant information on matters pertaining to everyday life. One of the Catholic Priests who served several years in Manipur and now posted in the Vatican, Fr. M.C. George, Former Rector and Parish Priest, Don Bosco, Imphal wrote on the social media that 28 catholic priests who administered to Covid-19 patients have died in Italy. He himself was not chosen to counsel the sick and dying as his Italian was not so fluent. But this information on the social media invited many praiseworthy and laudable comments on the work of the Catholic missionaries especially in Manipur.⁵

(b) Worship of Ancestors, Beliefs and Omens:

According to Naga religion omens are consulted in various ways. Nagas consider that certain dreams are portentous. Among the Zelaiangrong; a common omen is the cutting of a piece of ginger, the auguries being indicated from the fallen pieces. Omens are also divined from the crossing of fowl's legs after it is killed by strangulation. By means of such divination, the evil spirit's influence is found and accordingly the rites' are performed to ward it off.⁶ In Naga religion the dead were generally buried. The obsequies were elaborate and the rituals were connected with funeral feasts. Sacrifice of animals, ceremonial offerings of food to the deceased and keeping of effigies at a graveyard. The interviewees and respondents are of the view that these omens and ancestors' worship has been curbed with the coming of Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular

⁴ Ministry of Human Resource Development of India, (Department of Education), New Delhi, National Policy on Education, 1986, p. 33.

⁵ S.K. Saini, Development of Education in India, (Cosmo publications New Delhi, 1980), p. 14.

⁶ Salam Irene, Catholic Education in Manipur, Op.cit. p. 116.

and brought about upliftment of their way of life. It is hard to deny the modernizing influence into the daily tribal life. Their new faith has brought about a new awakening and remolding of their standard behaviour. By and large the educated tribal have abandoned superstition and have recourse to the power of logic and have forged ahead in all spheres of life.

Head Hunting:

According to Hodson's observation on head hunting he found it connected with simple blood feud, with agrarian rites, and with funerary rites and eschatological belief.

R.R. Shimray equates head hunting to a Naga war. He asserted that the practice of head hunting in Naga society was basically done for the following reasons:

- The god-fearing warriors were prompted to kill for they believed that after death those captured and killed would carry his luggage to the land of the dead. The warriors wanted to be happy and famous while alive and also after death. This is the reason why there stood several stone monuments over the tombs of the warrior representing the number of human heads he had taken while alive.
- Another important factor for head hunting was the fact that the warrior who scored a number of heads over his rival had the better chance to win favour and love of the fairest girl of the village for marriage.

According to Shimray, in Nagasociety, there were two most important steps for gaining social recognition-the number of headstones could capture and the feast of merit one could arrange- these ushered a man to the social ladder of honour and dignity. After bringing a few heads, one was entitled to wear a special type of shawl which the commoners were not permitted to wear. He was then given a special seat in social functions. He further says that 'head hunting' prevalent in the past had religious sanction, economic utility, political considerations and most of all social value and justice.

Dr. Verrier Elwin on head hunting writes: "It stimulated the crop to grow better, especially when the head was that of a woman with long hair. Moreover, the Nagas have always been a warlike race and the warrior, especially the young warrior, who had taken a head held a great advantage over his fellows in attracting the most beautiful girl of his village for marriage. Indeed, it is said that youth who had not taken a head found considerable difficulty in obtaining a wife at all."⁷

Among the Kuki-Chin-Mizo, human heads were valued more as a trophies and house decorations than a religious symbol. In Kuki-Chin-Mizo tradition, a man after bringing a few heads, one was entitled to wear a special type of shawl called 'Thangsuo' which the commoners were not permitted to wear. The Kuki-Chin-Mizo believed that those killed would become their slaves in the next world. Therefore, they used to place the heads on the grave of relatives in order that the souls of the hunted human being might accompany the dead relatives in the next world.

Head hunting practised among the hill tribe were for acquiring social status.⁸

The tradition of head hunting practised by the tribals had been given up in entirety with the spread of Christianity. As in Christianity committing a murder goes against the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ, which formed the basic principle of Christianity. The sense of brotherhood has crept in into their minds and they don't believe in shedding blood to uplift their social status or appease the ancient minds. This does not mean that feuds in the political arena have stopped but head-hunting has become extinct and one of the Ten Commandments clearly states: Do not Kill!

Community Life:

The community life of the tribals is also undergoing drastic transformation. Earlier they not only go or come together to and from the agricultural plots but also work together in the field. Even collection of firewood, wild fruits, tubers, leaves, drinking water etc. are done in groups. As stated elsewhere village is a social unit composed of khel as sub-unit and family is the smallest unit. In case of any calamity, need or emergency within a family, the

⁷ Usha S. Nayar, Education for Social Transformation: A Collective Step Forward, The Journal of Family Welfare, Vol. 50, No. 1, June 2004. p. 10.

⁸ Georg Evers, The Churches in Asia, (Delhi: ISPCK- Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2006), p. 499.

members of khel come forward for assistance. Now this practise is not relevant to the present circumstances. Their new way of life consists of going to schools, colleges to gain educational degrees. And when these educational degrees are attained the population would go to work in offices or other institutions resulting in the restriction of their earlier way of life. This does not mean that the tribal have given up the essence of a community. As stated before, Catholicism is a community oriented religion.

The inventions of various machines and equipments have also contributed greatly. Earlier to work the field, the villages would usually go in groups and helped out each other in tilling the fields and continue to do so till all the fields are done. However, now with the introduction of machines and equipments labour had been cut down and with the machines help (tractors etc), the farmers and others can till and work on their respective fields individually. The practice of 'Lom' (working in group) is not very popular as earlier. The traditional games and sports usually played by the tribal are also gradually replaced by football, basketball, volleyball, carom, cricket etc. The games have been taught in Catholic schools but the incentive to excel in such sports comes basically from the social media, the film industry, sporting fraternities across the world. Many national and international players in many disciplines are residents of Manipur-take the example of Rajya Sabha MP, Mary Kom. From a humble beginning, she rose to the heights and her Christian faith was certainly a facilitating factor.

With the huge number of tribal population now migrating from the village to the city, their mode of enjoyment and self relaxation has also undergone changes. Nowadays, people would go for more sophisticated forms of leisure and entertainment like travel, films, theatres, swimming pools, dance classes, gyms, yoga etc and also entertains family and friends at restaurants, clubs etc with a more sophisticated and varied cuisine.

The tribal had their own indigenous games and sports which often included high jump, long jump, stone throw, spear throw, chopping of wood, pole climbing, wrestling, tug of war etc. in some villages old games are still played along with modern sports. The interesting feature of tug of war game is participation of men and women and use of stout jungle creeper in place of rope. At present the reason behind the Feast of Merit that was given often by the tribal has also evolved. Prior to the coming of Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular 'when a man accumulates some wealth, in order to establish a higher social status, he arranges a feast for the villagers. By giving such Feast of Merit he assumes a higher status within the community. Moreover, to reach to a particular stage of high social status he may repeat such feast thrice in his lifetime'. Nowadays, the feasts are not to raise the social standing but actually are a feast of felicitation, thanksgiving for the blessings bestowed upon the particular family providing the feast. Catholicism emphasises on offering thanks to God for listening to one's supplications.

Burial:

The customs of burial practices amongst the Kuki and the Nagas vary in certain ways but general uniformity is noticed in natural death and unnatural death. Those who died a natural death were buried inside the village while those who died an unnatural death due to war, suicide, accidents etc. were buried outside the village. Most of the tribes did not even take in the dead body of unnatural death inside the village. The general practise among the tribal when an infant died was entirely different. The Kuki-Chin buried it beneath the house without much ceremony.⁹

In the case of the Naga as well not all the dead are buried inside the village or in the usual burying place. The following are the death ceremonies observed by T.C. Hodson in his book, "Naga Tribes of Manipur". In the first place the children of tender years who die before they are weaned are often not buried in the ordinary grave but close to the house. In the second place, those that die outside the village must as a general rule be buried, outside the village, though there is either a ceremonial burial in the usual place or the burial of some part of the remains or belongings of the deceased.

At Uilong a man killed in war is buried outside the village on the side of the village opposite to that on which live the enemies who inflict the fatal wound. Among the Quoirengs (Koireng) and Kabuis a woman who dies in

⁹ Manipur Catholic Youth Organization (MCYO) Silver Jubilee 1995-2020, pp. 30-31.

childbirth is buried inside the house. The Quoirengs in such case bury all the moveable articles and utensils in the house, while the Kabuis abandon the house and its contents completely. In the Kabui settlements in the valley of Manipur it is usual to carry the body out by the small door at the side of the house, or even through a special aperture cut for the purpose and then closed, and to bury it close to the house, within, so I understand limits of the shadow cast by the noontide sun. ¹⁰

Marriages:

Traditionally, in Kuki society there were two forms of marriage that were socially recognised and are based on arrangement or negotiation by parents. They were:

- Chong-Mou Hailam Marriage:- “Chong-Mou” means a bride from the family who had performed ‘Chonpi’ (i.e. victor’s grand feast/ceremony on prosperity), and “Hailam” is a wine container made of gourd for the specific purpose of forecasting the couple’s future known as ‘Hailam-Phun- San’. This form of marriage is the most coveted and the most expensive marriage. It thus, required social status and great wealth. ¹¹
- Sahap-Sat Marriage:-it is a less expensive marriage. This form of marriage is the most commonly observed form of marriage amidst the Kukis as it could be performed with ease. The entire proceedings of Kuki marriage in general can be broadly divided into three stages:
- "Moulhen-Mudoh" (Selection of bride and marriage negotiation. (ii) "Moupui_Golvah" (fetching the bride and marriage ceremony) (iii) "Sulle"(Post-marriage ceremony) ¹²

Marriage among the Nagas is more a process than an event. The youths are at liberty to select their partners after prolonged courtship and then obtain permission of their respective partners for the formal marriage, refusal in such cases are not heard of. The marriage by negotiation is not common. The girls generally marry between 20-25 years of age while man considers between 25 to 30 years as the right age for himself. The parity between ages of spouses is generally five to seven years. Marriages between the clans are forbidden. According to customary laws consanguineous marriage of specified categories are generally avoided. Consanguineous marriages within certain degrees are also not allowed by the Catholic Church, neither is polygamy or divorce. In each Naga group marriages law vary and sometimes a young man was limited by so many circumstances and rules while selecting a bride that it was decided upon relaxation of the customs connected with the choice of mate between numbers of certain groups of the village community. Moreover, certain conditions of life compel a man to marry a girl of his own or at most of the neighboring village. The girl’s parents also feel happy when their daughter marries a man of their own village because thus they will not have to part from her, but chiefly for the specific reason that she can continue to help them in the household and look after them in times of illness. Further, another difficulty is payment of bride price either in cash or in kind. According to established norm the money part of bride price is paid in installments. Therefore, every father-in-law likes to have his son-in-law comfortably near, to avoid any delay in payment of installments. ¹³

Most of the Kukis still follow their old customs with replacing the “Zu” (rice Beer) with “Chabel-Dop”(tea). And most marriages be it the Naga or the Kuki, takes place in the Church presided by the Priest/Father/Pastors etc. Changes have taken place mostly in the materialistic aspect when it comes to marriages for the tribal. Most tribal brides opt for white wedding gown which symbolically represents the purity instead of the old ways of wearing a wrap around. Then there is the cake cutting ceremony which was unknown earlier as it was never a part of the diet

¹⁰ Cf. Code of Canon Law in Regnum Christi, Op.cit. p. 11

¹¹ The Holy Bible- New King James Version (NKJV)

¹² Interview with Fr. Joseph (Rector) Mary Immaculate Parish, Chingmeirong on 23rd January 2020 at Chingmeirong Parish, Imphal East

¹³ N Bijoykumar Singh, The Geogrpny of Manipur, 1984 p. 7. cited in T. Ngulkhomang Haokip, Spread of Christianity and its Impact on the Hill Tribes of Manipur, Unpublished M.Phil. Dissertation, NEHU: Shillong, 2014 p. 28.

even on a special occasion. The invitation cards for the wedding which was not practised prior to conversion, as it was usually through word of mouth that people were invited to weddings. The decor of the wedding hall/churches are also being sourced out to event planners, something unheard of until very recently and was absent earlier. Thus, it can be put concisely that the economic activities which was practised earlier by the tribal mainly agriculture, hunting and food gathering etc have been replaced by commercial activities, entrepreneurship, working government jobs etc. and this has impacted the lives of the tribal tremendously. It can be noted here, that there is an emergence of a middle educated class amongst the tribal. No doubt, by creating a middle class, the opportunities for diverse, new kinds of employment increased and there can be no doubt that, the Catholic education facilitated in great measure this change. But the Catholic missionaries were not trying to usher in modernity and make material pursuits predominant in an individual's life. That has been the effect of globalization and consumerism. Although consumerism has infected everyone Pope Francis has appealed to all to cut down on it by referring to the opinion of economist Mariana Mazzuruto in her book, 'The Value of Everything: Making and Taking in the Global Economy'. Her book explores the need to rethink value, rather than the price will help make the world a better place. 'I think it helps to think about the future', says the Pope. This is the attitude which Catholic missionaries in Manipur are trying to popularize especially as there is so much consumerism associated with the Passage of Rites of all communities in Manipur. ¹⁴

CONCLUSION

The new faith has awakened and remoulded the behaviour of the Tribal. As a result of the advent of Catholicism, the Tribal have given up head hunting, as killing is not permitted by the Church and instead focus on building a brotherhood. The earlier practice of the Tribal working in groups together to perform any work has been abandoned, as now children are sent to schools and colleges and many/most opt for working in urban areas, in fields not related to agriculture. Catholicism is a community oriented religion, and it was easy for the Tribal to accept Catholicism. Technology in various spheres has revolutionised the old way of life, and the Tribal now enjoys more the modern sports, forms of recreation, dining out etc. The Feast of Merit has been replaced by Feasts of Felicitation and the Offering of Thanksgiving for the family giving the Feast- Gratitude to God for favours is emphasised by the Catholic Church. The Passage of Rites had exhibited changes since the coming of Christianity. Babies are now born in hospitals and health care centres, the dead are buried in cemeteries, and the funeral ceremony is conducted by a priest. The celebration of marriages is conducted in Church, the bride attired in a white bridal gown symbolising purity and the groom in a formal western suit. The manner of celebrations has changed but there are few practices such as the practice of giving Poyang (gift in cash) to the couple, that continues.

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¹⁴ T.C Hudson, Manipur in the Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, (New York: Charles Scribers Son, 1958), p. 402

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