

**Christian Missionaries and their Impact among the Meches of
Jalpaiguri District in the Colonial Period**

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Abstract: Followed by the British rule in India numerous Christian missionaries came to Jalpaiguri district with the mission of evangelism. American Baptist Missionary, Church Missionary, Scotland missionary, Scandinavian Alliance Missionary, United Church of Northern India, Roman Catholic Missionary, Presbyterian Missionary etcetera came to the district and influenced the tribals very much. At the time of evangelism these Christian missionary societies introduced many welfare schemes for increasing the number of converts to which greatly influenced the Meches and other tribals of the district. It was under the influence of Christian faith that a new Mech Christian society emerged within the traditional Mech society. Some traditional beliefs, customs, and rituals of the Meches were given up by the Christian Meches. It was through missionary activities that a few number of mission schools came into existence in the Mech populated areas. Most of the Christian Meches were also encouraged to learn the western education. Then the Meches started having a taste of white collar jobs. The educated Meches became exposed to something new and novel.

Keywords: Christian Missionary, Education, Meches, Tribal, Orphanages, Serampore.

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Introduction

Christianity played an important role on the lifestyle of the Meches of Jalpaiguri district. In colonial period followed by the British rule in India three prominent and devoted British personalities came to Bengal for the purpose of spread of Christianity. They were William Carey

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who firstly arrived in Serampore of Hoogly in 1793 and later on Joshua Marshman and William Ward also arrived in 1799. But in respect of religious affairs, a policy of neutrality was maintained by the British East India Company towards the end of 18th century. The fact was that the native Indians at that time were very sensitive and conservative about the religious affairs. Hence, the preaching of Christian faith among the Indians carried by William Carey, the first British missionary in Calcutta was restricted. But by the passage of Charter Act of India in 1813, the Christian missionaries were permitted to propagate the faith of Christianity.¹ Therefore numerous Christian missionaries came to Jalpaiguri district with the mission of evangelism. American Baptist Missionary, Church Missionary, Scotland missionary, Scandinavian Alliance Missionary, United Church of Northern India, Roman Catholic Missionary, Presbyterian Missionary etcetera came to the district and influenced the tribals very much. At the time of evangelism these Christian missionary societies introduced many welfare schemes for increasing the number of converts to which greatly influenced the Meches and other tribals of the district.

In order to convert the tribals to Christianity, the missionaries provided some social services like education and medical aid. The missionaries laid emphasis on providing humanitarian services in selected tribal areas in order to extent the activity of religious conversion. Such services included health facilities, activities for improving the economic condition of the tribals, eradicating poverty and running orphanages besides removing illiteracy, establishing and running educational institutions for educational development. Such efforts are still going on among the tribal society of the district. As a result the religious conversion became simple and easy and extensive.² However the efforts made by the missionaries, encouragement of the British government, helpless condition of the tribals, sufficient lack of control over conversion, desire to improve economic condition of the tribals were some of the factors responsible for the conversion of the Meches and other tribals of the district. Besides, the main objective of the activities of the Christian missionaries was the spread of Christianity among the backward tribals of tea gardens and forest adjoining villages. Thus like other tribals the Meches of the district embraced Christianity under the impacts of these different factors which were actually baits of conversion.³ Conversion to Christianity was a process of religious transformation

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in which a previously non-Christian person converted to Christianity. Conversion to Christianity typically made a vow of repentance from past sins, accept Jesus as their savior and vow to follow the teaching of Jesus Christ, which were repentance from dead works, faith toward God, the doctrine of baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. Different sects of Christianity might perform various kinds of rituals or ceremonies on a convert in order to initiate them into a community of believers. The most community accepted rituals of conversion of Christianity was through baptism that was considered a sacrament in most churches, and as an ordinance in others. But this was not universally accepted among Christian denominations. A period of instruction and study almost always ensure before a person was formally converted to Christianity, but the length of this period varies, sometimes as short as a few weeks and possibly less, and other times, up to as long as a year or possibly more.⁴

Christianity and the Meches

The Christianity formed one of the important religions of the Meches of Jalpaiguri district in the colonial period. This religion played a very important role in the socio-economic and cultural changes of the traditional Mech society. The Christian missionaries came to the community through the adoption of various charitable activities for their development in order to attract them towards Christianity. The Anglican Church known also as the Scottish Presbyterian Church which began its work of spreading their faith among the Nepalese of Darjeeling extended its services gradually to the Meches of Jalpaiguri district of *Duars* areas in 1870.⁵ In 1867-68 Dr. Normen Macleod and Dr. Watwon visited India on the request of the Church of Scotland. They reported on the great success of the missionary work that was being carried out among the aborigines in Northern India. Encouraged by the report 'the Mission to the Aborigines of Northern India' was founded in 1869. Its aim was to evangelize the Lepchas, Bhutias, Nepalis, Meches and the Rajbansis. The Foreign Mission Committee of the Church of Scotland appointed two German missionaries named Conrad Bechtold and Beutal to work in India. Reverend William Macfarlane, a missionary who was then posted at Gaya (Bihar) advised the starting of a

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mission among the Meches of the *Terai* and *Duars* with Darjeeling as the centre. In 1870, Bechtold and Beutal arrived at Darjeeling. It was decided that the two missionaries would live in Pankhabari (near Siliguri) and worked among the Meches. But after sometime Beutal returned home and Reverend Bechtold was instructed by the mission committee in Scotland to go to Goalpara in Assam. In 1872 he moved to Goalpara but had to return home due to health problems.⁶

Meanwhile, a Mech named Jagatsingh Basumata was not finding solace in the traditional 'Bathou' religion and was looking out for something more to quench his spiritual thirst. He met an American Baptist missionary named Reverend James at Jalpaiguri who told him the story of Jesus Christ. Jagatsingh felt that he had found what he was seeking and decided to become a Christian. He was baptized in 1896 and became the first Mech Christian in Bengal. Jagatsingh then went to the Church of Scotland Mission in Kalimpong for Bible training. It was here that he met Dr. John Graham, the Guild Missionary. After completing his training Jagatsingh was appointed as a Catechist at Oodlabari of present Mal block, Jalpaiguri in 1898.⁷ The official name of the Mission Church of Scotland was changed to Eastern Himalayan Mission in 1903. In 1904, the first church among the Bodos or Meches in eastern *Duars* was established at Dhantali of present Assam with Jagatsingh as its first Catechist. In 1906, the Kamakhyaguri and the Chakchaka churches were established in Alipurduar of Jalpaiguri district. Nayansingh Mochary and Rajasing Narjinary were appointed as Catechists. In 1908, the Mahakalguri Central Church was established. In 1913, Jagatsingh was ordained as Pastor. But unfortunately one year later he met with a tragic end. In 1920, Reverend Lauchlen Maclean offered the post of Catechist to Jitnal Narjinary, the nephew of Jagatsingh who was then working as a primary school teacher. Jitnal Narjinary was ordained as a Pastor in 1925.⁸ In 1924, the United Church of Northern India was formed. It was a union of the Presbyterian and the Congregationalist. However having arrived among the Meches, the Scottish Presbyterian missionaries learned the Bodo language, the language of the Meches and propagated the gospel among them. They worked extensively among the Meches and were able to convert a considerable number of them to their Christian faith. According to Michael Basumata, Ex-Head Master and eminent church leader of

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Mahakalguri of Alipurduar under Jalpaiguri district, “ The Eastern Dooars Churches, despite the setback in the Mahakalguri pastorate have matured a lot in the spiritual life and have been steadfastly working towards the main goal of being saved for eternal life through Jesus Christ”.⁹

In colonial period the spread of Christianity among the Meches was very slow as the animistic Meches were influenced by some other religious and spiritual ideas such as Brahma faith of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma, Hinduism of the neighbouring Rajbansis etcetera. But at that time, the traditional Mech religion and its philosophy were not able to fulfill the desire of the community. In colonial period some foreign writers named W.W. Hunter, E.T. Dalton, G.A. Grierson and others described that the religion of the Meches was animistic in nature which based on believing in ghosts and spirits. The Christian missionaries also announced that this type of religion would never be able to elevate the human beings. Simultaneously they carried on their work in the Mech populated areas. The Christian missionaries learnt that the religious beliefs and practices of the Mech community were responsible for their socio-economic and cultural degeneration. So, in the initial stage, a very simple way was adopted by the missionaries for its remedy by converting the Meches into the fold of Christianity. The Meches were persuaded by showing love and the principle of charity of Christian missionaries. However, in case of the charitable relief and care for the sick the missionaries gained a good attention, sympathy and goodwill from the Mech people.¹⁰ Various benevolent works such as establishment of Missionary Schools like St. Joseph’s Primary School (Estd.1927) at Damanpur, St. Joseph’s H.S. School (Estd.1932) at Alipurduar, Health Centre like Dispensary, DSA, (Estd.1927) at Damanpur, Various Occupational Training Centre like tailoring training centre, doll making centre etc., were also undertaken by the Christian missionaries for the elevation of human beings among the Meches. As a result, a number of Meches converted into the fold of Christianity. At the time of field survey the present investigator learnt that the process of conversion to Christianity among the Meches of the district was still going on.¹¹

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Counter-reaction

Under Kalicharan Brahma a good number of Meches of the district accepted *Brahma Dharma*, a new religious faith, teachings of Swami Shibnarayan Paramahansa. The religion tried to reform some of the traditional customs like '*Bathouism*' (an animist doctrine) of the Mech society. In 1917 Kalicharan came to Jalpaiguri district and preached Brahma Dharma¹² at several Mech Villages like Satali of Kalchini block, Salkumor and Gaburpara of Alipurduar block, etc. He also tried to stop many Meches from converting to Christianity. Then the converted Brahma Meches of Jalpaiguri district raised their claim to use the title 'Brahma'. Meches, who used the title Basumatari, Narjinary were mainly the worshiper of Brahma in the form of fire or the Sun God, the main force around which life in this universe exists. Moreover in the end of the colonial period some of the Meches of the district began to accept the religious faith of the neighbouring Rajbansis that was Hindu religion and which was no doubt a counter-reaction of Christianity.¹³

Impact

The Christianity brought some significant changes in the socio-cultural and religious life of the traditional Meches. With the advent of Christianity among the Meches in the colonial period the traditional Mech society underwent a tremendous change at various institutional levels. It was under the influence of Christian faith that a new Mech Christian society emerged within the traditional Mech society. Some traditional beliefs, customs, and rituals of the Meches were given up by the Christian Meches. The children were sent by their parents to the missionaries schools for western education. The use of liquor or other intoxicating things was also forbidden among the Christian Meches at home and any socio religious ceremonies. Polygamy and other unhealthy social practices such as forcibly marriage, bride price were discouraged in the Christian Mech society. Most of the Christian Meches were given the western style name but their titles remained the same, such as Andreas Narjinary, John Mandal, Anthony Karjee, Emmanuel

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Basumata etc. But the Christian Mech women did not abandon the wearing of their traditional dress, '*dokhna*' during their stay at home and village.¹⁴

Religion

The Christian Meches were not different from the universal Christians in respect of belief and practices. The belief of the Christian Meches was also based on trinity, God the father, God the son and Holy Spirit. But in case of the Catholics, a prayer was made to Virgin Mary and a number of saints. Most of the Christian Mech villages had their own church for prayer. Every man irrespective of age and sex attended the church for Sunday prayers. In the prayer the Bodo language was used as a medium of service. On every Sunday, the church prayer and other religious functions were carried out by a Pastor. The prayers or hymns were sung in the tune and style of the Christian missionaries. The Christian Meches were encouraged to study the religious scriptures, like Bible, prayer books, etc. Besides, they were also taught various literal models of the socio-religious conduct, etiquettes and manner of the Christians. From the very childhood, each child of the Christian Mech family was persuaded by the missionaries to learn the stories of the Bible. They were even allowed to take part in the various religious rituals and ceremony, like Holy Communion, confession, prayers, Bible reading, etc. In the protestant family, each child was forbidden to attend the church for such religious ceremony until he or she did not attend the proper age (14 to 16 years old) for confirmation.¹⁵ Thus the Christian Meches practised the system of religious worship conforming to the universal Christianity although their functions appeared to be slightly differed from one religious sect to other.

Village- council

In a Christian village, the Pastor was the head of the village in the social, religious and other functions. Like traditional Mech society, every Christian Mech village had also its own village council called '*Garni affad*' where any dispute if occurred in a village were openly discussed and

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settled in the meeting. Most of the male elderly persons of village became the members of this village body. However, they also had a head of the village named '*Gamibwrai*' to settle the disputes among them.

Festivals

After embracing Christianity, the Christian Meches gave up all traditional fairs and festivals of the Mech society. They discarded all religious festivals, like *Kherai*, *Gaija* and *Marai*, etc. Besides, some popular seasonal and agricultural festivals, like *Bwisagw* (spring festival), *Maghw* (*Domashi* or post-harvest festival) and *Katigasa saonai* (harvest festival) of the traditional Mech society were not observed by them. Instead, they celebrated some other fairs and festivals conforming to the universal Christian faith, such as Christmas, Good Friday and Easter day, etc. The Christian Meches did not keep their traditional customs and instead they only make general prayer in the church.¹⁶ Thus the Christian Meches gradually merged with the mainstream Christian people in terms of the observances of religious fairs and festivals.¹⁷

Marriage

The advent of Christianity among the Meches witnessed a significant change in the institution of the traditional Mech marriage. Unlike the traditional form of Mech marriage the Christian Mech marriage was usually performed in *Girja* (church). The marriage was carried out by a Catholic father in the church. But in other Christian denominations, like Baptist or Lutheran, the marriage was conducted by Pastor or Bishop in the church. Some modified manner of pre-marriage and post-marriage ceremony of the traditional Mech society was performed but it was not much valued. Polygamy and polyandry was strictly prohibited in the Christian Mech society.¹⁸ However, in terms of the marriage between a Christian and a non Christian Mech, the difference in the attitudes, manner and conduct often created discomfiture in the society.¹⁹

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Education

The Christian missionaries also played a very important role in imparting education to the Mech converts along with the preaching the faith. For the purpose of spreading the Christian religion some schools like Mahakalguri Mission High School (Estd.1921) at Mahakalguri under Kumargram block, St. Anne's convent, Nirmala Girls High School (H.S.) at Damanpur, Xavier Sadan & St. Xavier's School (Estd.1927) at Uttar Panialguri under Alipurduar block-I etc., were opened in the Mech populated areas of Jalpaiguri district. Besides, the missionaries had also Sunday schools at Kamakhyaguri, Taleswarguri, Mahakalguri of Alipurduar block-II, and Satali of Kalchini block where the Mech converts were taught to go the church to learn etiquettes, behaviour pertaining to the universal Christian church and prayer.²⁰ It was through missionary activities that a few number of mission schools came into existence in the Mech populated areas. Most of the Christian Meches were also encouraged to learn the western education.

Literature

The Christian missionaries contributed greatly in the field of Bodo or Mech language and literature. The Bodo language which was once spoken throughout the entire Brahmaputra valley of Assam, North Bengal and erstwhile East Bengal began to decline due to the domineering languages of the Aryans, namely Assamese and Bengalis. But it was the Christian missionaries who had made a great contribution in consolidating the Bodo language and literature along with the propagation of gospel. The fact is that the scientific study on the Bodo language was firstly undertaken by the Christian missionaries. The Bodo language was no doubt a rich and ancient language but it did not have written form or literature till the second decade of the twentieth century. Some books on religion, tales, rhymes and songs were published by the Christian missionaries in 1886.²¹ The development of written Bodo language and literature by the missionaries not only helped in the growth and development of the Bodo language but also

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meant for conversion of the Mech to Christianity. The great works like *'Linguistic survey of India'* by G. A. Grierson (first published in 1903) and the *'Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal'* by Edward Tuite Dalton (first published in 1872) greatly contributed towards the study of the Bodo language, literature, culture and history. There is no denying the fact that the role played by Christian missionaries and British administrative officials in the development of Bodo language by means of publishing books on grammar, dictionary, folktales and rhymes was of great value to the Mech society.

Thus the Christianity brought about some changes in various institutional levels of the traditional Mech society. At the time of field survey the present investigator came to know that during this period there were several Christian dispensaries and hospitals such as Nirmala Dispensary in Nirmala Girls High School premises under Christ the King Church Damanpur, Alipurduar block-II (Estd.1927) , Puspika Dispensary in Puspika Girls High School and Hostel Premises under Our Lady of Rosary Church, Mal block (Estd.1935) etcetera to help in the health care of the poor Meches of interior villages.²² Some of their basic customs and values however, remained as earlier. It also led to the social divergence among the Meches in terms of the marriage rituals, social and religious functions but their solidarity feelings remained unaltered.²³

Conclusion

In conclusion it may be said that at the beginning the Christian missionaries started their activities among the Varna-Hindus of Jalpaiguri towns. Getting no satisfactory response from them the missionaries sought out the oppressed tribal people of tea gardens and forest adjoining villages of the district for evangelism. Hence they had to open some welfare activities as bait of conversion. However the impact of the Christian Missionaries on the Meches of Jalpaiguri was unique. They approached the tribals with their usual 'Bell, Book and Candles'. But there was something more in the process of conversion of the major tribes of the district. Their promise of secure jobs worked wonders among the tribals of the area. From food-gathering, hunting and *jhum* (swinden) cultivation that was cutting and burning the jungles and then sowing different

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seeds in each hole made by dibbers, the Meches started having a taste of white collar jobs. Oftener than not, the missionaries would educate a handful of tribals and give them employment in teaching, so that, these 'native' teachers would train up other tribals in the locality. However rudimentary the education might have been, it was a great moment in the life of a tribal. The educated tribe became exposed to something new and novel. This, by and large, developed in them a sense of nobility both social and economic.²⁴ Though prime intention of the Missionaries was the conversion of the non-Christian people to Christianity, yet the effects of the welfare works of the missionaries were not confined only within a single religious group. They welcomed all people for accepting their religion, education, medical facilities etc. They launched their social, cultural and other welfare activities on a broader scale. Its effect was not confined only within the converted Meches. The non-Christian tribals as well as non-tribals have also benefited from the welfare works of the missionaries.

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