

Unitarian Movement and Social Reforms among the Khasis of Meghalaya

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Abstract:

The changes brought by the British rule have resulted in many social and religious reform movements in India. It sowed the fruit for more people appreciating the values of Indian culture, but they were also vocal enough to reject the bad elements in it. Many leaders emerged to reform Indian society at that time. They mostly aspired to revive the Indian society with modern values. Social leaders then set out to reform their traditional religions. The Khasi society as of now can be said to have transformed and changed tremendously. With advent of Christianity and education, many changes can be seen in the socio-cultural life of the people as well as political and religious life. The study is purely based on Secondary Sources of Data collected both from books, journal and government records. The study is necessary from a sociological point of view as it will throw light on the Unitarian movement as a socio-religious reform movement which had tried to create a healthy environment on the Khasi people with its liberal ideologies and how as a movement it has grown, impacted and brought about changes in the society.

Keywords: Social change, Social Reform Movements, Unitarian, Meghalaya.

Introduction:

The conquest of India by the British during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, exposed some serious weaknesses of Indian social institutions. As a consequence, several individuals and movements sought to bring about changes in the social and religious practices with a view to reforming and revitalizing the society. These efforts were complex social phenomena. It is important to note that this phenomenon occurred when India was under the colonial domination of the British. When the British came to India, they introduced certain modern ideas such as liberty, social and economic equality, fraternity, democracy and justice which had a tremendous impact on Indian society. MSA Rao offered a typology of social movements such as reformist, transformatory and revolutionary movement. Reformist aims to modify the belief system of the members. The revolutionary aims to bring about sudden changes in every area of the society. The transformatory aims to change power relations. Rao believed that the study of social movements requires various techniques such as participant observation, interviews, survey and intensive field work is necessary. K. S. Singh uses the term Sanskritization instead of Reform or Reform movements. S.M. Dubey divides the tribal movements in North East India into – religious or social reform movements, political movement, insurgency and cultural movements.

Many religious and social reformers of Reforms Movements of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chand Vidyasagar, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Swami Vivekananda, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and many others were advocating the eradication of the evils prevalent at that time and were willing to bring reforms in the society so that it could face the challenges of the West. They were no longer willing to accept the traditions, beliefs and practices in the society simply because they had been observed for centuries.

Raja Rammohan Roy contributed towards fight against many social evils and growth of modern Education. R.G Bhandarkar and M.G. Ranade through the Prarthana Samaj propagated inter-caste marriages and improvement of the lot of women. Swami Dayananda Saraswati with his Arya Samaj pleaded for the right of individuals to interpret Vedas and also against untouchability and caste rigidity. Swami Vivekananda, a great humanist, through his Ramakrishna Mission condemned religious narrow mindedness, advocated free thinking and emphasised on service for the poor. India's North east has also seen a lot of movements with regards to reform movements. The Seng Khasi movement led by Jeebon Roy saw the movement as a start to preserving cultural and religious identity

of the Khasis in Meghalaya. In Assam as well, there was a Socio-cultural movement called the Neo-Vaishnavite movement which worked for the removal of superstitions and irrational beliefs.

The Unitarian Movement led by HajomKissor Singh is a socio-religious movement in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya. When society was undergoing rapid changes, then HajomKissor spread his ideas. He established a religious institution which was used as a tool for reforming the structure of the society at that time. The impact of the movement spread rapidly all over the region and extended to a few parts of the neighbouring state of Assam. Some of the ideas and philosophy became a part of the life of the people here. The ideas and philosophy of HajomKissor should be examined in the context of the religious, cultural, social changes that the Khasi community underwent. The study is necessary from a sociological point of view as it will throw light on the Unitarian movement as a socio-religious reform movement which had tried to create a healthy environment on the Khasi people with its liberal ideologies and how as a movement it has grown, impacted and brought about changes in the society.

Unitarian Movement:

In contemporary Indian society, few movements play a very vital role in social change. Unitarian movement is one of them which was started in late 19th century in Meghalaya among the Khasi tribe. In the early 19th Century, with the coming of the British missionaries brought a lot of change in local development. The missionaries used North East India for bringing in some revolutionary change in the minds of the people through social service. They started converting the tribal people in the name of Education. Towards the end of the 19th Century, the tribal people realised the basic purpose of the missionaries was to root out the tribal culture and bring in Western influence.

The Khasis are an indigenous ethnic group of Meghalaya in North eastern India who practiced an indigenous tribal religion before the advent of Christianity. They are a matrilineal society and the children take their surname from that of the mother forming a clan under that name from the first mother down the generations. They have a patriarchal system which can be seen in most societies all over the world since in matters concerning the wife and children, the father is the head of the family and the maternal uncles manage matters relating to family affairs, material and religious connected with the clan.

The Khasi Society during the 19th Century perceived that their social and cultural elements were lost. It was felt that there was a need to maintain their own identity. The Khasi elders then launched a resistant movement. The Khasi Christians have also in some extent asserted that they wanted to retain their new religion and also keeping their pride in Khasi Culture by retaining their Khasi identity. The Unitarian Movement centered around an individual- HajomKissor Singh Nongbri was locally born and founded in 1887. The founder was born at Cherrapunji on 15th June, 1865 who had then converted to the Welsh Calvinistic Church. Later he began to question the rigidness teachings of Welsh Calvinistic Missionaries and started a liberal movement called '*KaNiam Mane Wei Blei*' (The Religion which worships One God) on 18th September 1887 at the age of 22. And this was how the movement started.

Unitarian Movement and Socio-cultural and Religious Changes:

The advent of Unitarianism in the Khasi-Jaintia was a breakaway from Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Church. The foundation therefore should be examined in the context of the religious, cultural, social and intellectual ferment that the Khasi community was experiencing in the last quarter of the 19th century and in the early years of the present millennium. (Syiemlieh D.R, Indigenous roots: HajomKissor Singh and the Founding of Unitarianism in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills.)

Christianity has started taking roots in the Khasi- Jaintia Hills with the arrival of Thomas Jones. He started opening schools. Henceforth, changes started happening in the cultural life of the people. Unitarian as a movement also started laying roots during this time. Rev. Bert Inkson once said, "Unitarianism is rather a religious way of life than a set of belief." Unitarianism hence can be defined as a way of life followed by different people in different parts.

HajomKissor Singh has to his credit 63 hymns in the Khasi hymn book of the Unitarian Union North East India; this is by no means a small feat. H.K.Singh's contribution which the Khasi literary world failed to notice is that, apart from composing the 63 hymns, translating several English hymns and responsive readings in the Khasi hymn book of the Unitarian Church, H.K. Singh has also served as a member of the committee along with his brother Nissor Singh to co-produce the first English Khasi

dictionary. Later, along with Babu Jeebon Roy, he helped R.S. Berry in bringing out the famous book on Khasi Etiquette (Ka Jingsneng Tymmen).

We find that the Khasi society owed it to the Welsh Mission over their Alphabet and Education. However, it may be mentioned that Education wasn't a secular type. The main aim of schools opened was for proselytization so as to enable the people to read the Gospel. This has put the non-Christians at a disadvantage as most were afraid to send their children to schools for fear of conversion. Hajom Kissor and like-minded Khasi people wanted to change this. In August, 1893, the Jowai Unitarian Church opened a free school, known as Jowai Unitarian Free School who started with about 20 girls and boys. This school gave free elementary education. U Khasi Mynta, a leading newspaper at that time would give regular writeups about the school. One such report read:

"The Seventh Anniversary of the Unitarian School at Jowai was held on 14th September 1900... Besides teaching reading, writing and arithmetic, the school is also giving value education as well as tonic solfa music, drill, sewing, knitting... The School teaches readings using phonetics. This year the school was inspected by Dr. Booth, Director Public Relations and he was full of praises for the school."

Besides this school, another school was also opened in the Laban church and a training class for young women teachers started. Very rapidly word went round that here was a school different from all the rest and methods of teaching that had never ever been dreamed of in the Khasi Hills. Even the inspector of schools, himself a Khasi, on visiting the school less than six months after it had been started, stated in his report that "it was totally different from any school he had ever seen," and added the significant remark that he "could never have believed it possible for Khasi school children to be so alert and so happy". By 1941 that first little school had a building of its own, given by American Unitarians and called the Sunderland Memorial School in memory of Dr. J. T. Sunderland and of all that his friendship did to encourage Hajom Kissor Singh in his early struggles.

In 1940 another and larger school was opened in a more central position to cater for children from the Nongthymmai as well as the Laban church, The Laban school remained an Infant school and all the older children went to the new school at Malki, meeting at first in a large rented bungalow, until in the winter of 1941-42 the school was built. This building was opened in March 1942 by Lady Reid who, as a mark of her appreciation of the work that the schools were doing, allowed this one to be called by her name. These schools between them meet the needs of the Unitarians whose homes are in Shillong. But that is only the beginning, as the majority of Khasi Unitarians live in villages.

The most important contribution of Hajom Kissor can be seen in his efforts to get medium of examination relaxable in order to allow lower classes to give their examination in Vernacular. Hajom Kissor along with Samuel Shallam wrote to Dr. Booth in this regard. The letter got a positive response and children in Elementary schools were able to write their examinations in Vernacular.

Due to the coming of Christian missionaries and change in the Khasi society, most of the woman were given role in the participation of Church-based activities but as was said earlier women were not at par with their male counterparts due to the representation of women in biblical texts showing male-centric authority. Unitarian women, however, were given the liberal freedom to lead. Most of them play an important part in decision making. They have their voices heard.

The movement had a lot of opposition at the start from the dominant Christian group. The first Church was burned, stones were pelted on the houses of the members of this movement. The opposition from the dominant group could be considered a main reason for the movement not being recognised at that point of time. There was even a prediction the Unitarianism would die with the death of the founder but there were leaders who worked hard and persisted.

A major feat, however, came later when there was the recognition given by the British government through the granting of a restricted holiday on their Founding Day which is observed as their Anniversary in the year 1908. After India's Independence, restricted Holiday was still granted by the Assam Government till 1975 on every 18 September. From 1976 onwards, Local Holiday is granted every year on 18 September. Though slow in growth, today Unitarians stand at having almost 36 villages in the East Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills and Ri-Bhoi districts of Meghalaya and in Karbi Anglong district of Assam. We also find that Unitarianism in these few years had propagated the spirit of

Religious Tolerance. Such cases can be seen where the Unitarian Church Madan Laban was the first in Shillong to have a foundation day where religious leaders and people from all sections of the Society was invited.

Conclusion:

The Khasi society as of now can be said to have transformed and changed tremendously. With advent of Christianity and education, Many changes can be seen in the socio-cultural life of the people as well as political and religious life. The Unitarian movement has been working for the last 130 years since its inception and contributed in education, literature, removing of fears from the Khasis. It has also worked for empowerment of women and helped spread the idea that every living being is equal. The movement is now considered to be a religion which is liberal and tolerant.

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