

## **The impact of Ramakrishna Mission among the Khasi People in North East India.**

**Nirmalya Karmakar\***

### **Introduction:**

North East India popularly known as the Land of Seven Sisters comprising the seven states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. Of late Sikkim has been added as the eighth state to the North East. All these states have their own indigenous tribes speaking different languages and having varied cultures. Meghalaya is a state known for its scenic beauty, and its capital, Shillong is called the queen of the North-East India and the Scotland of the East. The state has two dominant tribal groups, the Garos in the western part and the Khasis in the central and eastern regions. The Khasis in the eastern part are called Pnars or Synteng. The Khasis as a race of people have a very unique and rather mysterious origin. They stand apart from the rest of the hill tribes of North East India from the point of view of their language, culture, dress and physical feature. Their origin is shrouded in mystery and all we know about their history is derived from their legend and folklore.

### **A Brief Historical background of the Khasis:**

The origin of the Khasis is still a matter of debate amongst scholars. They depend on oral traditions, which were passed on from generation to generation. There is a tradition among the Khasis that they originally came into Assam via the Patkoi range which is said to be a hill they came across on their journey. According to Gait, the forefathers of the Khasis might have migrated to these hills in pre-historic times. He also believes that Khasis belongs to the Mon-Khmer group on the ground that they speak the same language. S.K. Chatterji observes that there had been several exchanges and contacts between the earliest Austro-Asiatic and races of the Mongoloid family, which led to a formation of sections of Mon-Khmer speakers like the Rmen and Southern Burma, the Palaung, the Wa of Upper Burma, the Khmer and other Austro-Asiatic speakers of Siam and Indo-China. Khasis appear to be a Mongoloid people who have adopted the language of the Austro-Asiatics and that they became Austro-Asiatic while in

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\* Research Scholar, Department of History, Tripura University.



Burma before they advanced into the Khasi Hills. The Khasi society is perhaps the only matrilineal society in India besides the Nairs of Kerala. However more power is wielded by Women in Khasi Society than in Kerala. The Khasis have their distinct history, culture, traditions, customs and beliefs which are treasured as their most cherished heritage. They love music, dancing and songs. They observed many festivals and ceremonies. One of the striking features of the Khasi culture is the Megalithic Culture where they erect the megaliths.

### **The Christian Missionaries in the Khasi Hills having colonialist attitude:**

The Khasi hills felt the gentle breeze of change with the arrival of the British and the missionaries in the early nineteenth century. Their initial uneasiness about the relations between the natives and the alien religion involved the Khasi and society deeply. It also affected the Khasi cultural dynamics and structural integration. There is no doubt that the missionary activities brought in a lot of changes are seen in the areas of the formation of local development of a sense of tribal identity, formation of local leadership, and more freedom to women, changes in lifestyle, social organization and finally the sphere of religion. The missionaries used the terrain of North East India for bringing revolutionary changes in the mind and heart of the people. Through social service and universal approach of humanity brought these groups to work together in the region of North East India. The missionaries started converting the tribal people in the name of spreading education. Towards the end of 19th century and early 20th century, the tribal people found that missionaries' basic purpose was to root out the native culture and bring the tribes under western influence and thus to place the British rule in India.

### **Arrival of Education:**

Prior to the arrival of the missionaries the Khasi Hills had been fragmented into various divisions, according to the dialects spoken. It was because of the zeal and unceasing efforts of the Welsh missionaries that the Khasi language has an intelligible script. They coined the script for Khasi language by using the Roman alphabet. When the Welsh missionaries arrived at Cherrapunjee in 1842, the Khasi-Jaintia people possessed neither schools, nor books nor even a written language. The first thing that the missionaries did was to begin to correct that situation by opening schools and introducing a written language. This work was started even before churches were organized. The Presbyterian Church was running 436 Primary Schools, 78 middle Schools, 30 High Schools and 1 college. The Catholic Church has successfully made much headway in providing higher network of educational and technical schools and colleges more than the stable pioneering Welsh mission. As of 1990, the Catholic church runs in Khasi - Jaintia hills alone, as many as 879 elementary



Schools, 50 High schools and 3 colleges with a number of boarding and hostels in its parishes and centers in the region.

Thomas Jones is rightly considered to be the father of Khasi education. It was he who brought a script to the language and whose vision and policies began the process of formal education in the Khasi hills. Therefore the missionaries realized the importance and the grave need for a common language to communicate with and begin the education of the tribal. At an early stage itself the British administration handed over the responsibility of education to the missionaries. The administration official supported the missionaries in the educational endeavor, both financially and morally. Even today, the missionaries or the church plays an important role in the field of quality education of the people, especially in distant and interior villages.

### **The attitude of the Khasis towards the Ramakrishna Mission :**

It is true that the growth of Christianity in the Khasi Hills was a Challenge to Khasi cultural norms. As the missionaries rejected the religious elements in traditional Khasi Culture, it was assumed that there was a complete change in attitude towards culture on the part of those who adopted the new faith. The progress of Christianity was considered as a challenge to traditional culture of the Khasis. The situation has made a section of the Khasi intellectuals to resort to certain measure for the preservation of their religion and culture by inspiring the Khasis to be proud of their rich heritage. This cultural awakening found its expression through the Seng Khasi organization initiated by some educated Khasis who may be regarded as the apostle of the Khasi renaissance leading to the establishment of the Seng Khasi organization in 1899. With the advent of Christianity and western education, transformation took place in the social and political life of the people. The converts abandoned their former religious rites, beliefs, rituals and accepted the Christian teachings.

Now the question arises why the people of the village considered Ramakrishna Mission to work among them in preference to the Christian Missions who were already working there? The Christian Missions, though did a very commendable job in promoting Khasi people's life and culture but unfortunately many children, young men were converted to Christianity and not only that they also gradually left their religious traditions. According to the Khasi people, the reason behind it was the Christian Missionary schools, where books were of Christian theology and the teachers were played the role of teacher as well as preacher. The Khasi leaders were very much disappointed for this reason. But they were helpless because at that time the British were reining India, who utilizes Christian Missionaries to spread education and preach among the tribal people of the region. They welcomed



Ramakrishna Mission which according to them an organization having its roots in the plains and to that extent would at least not interfere with their life or try to impose on them an alien culture.

### **The beginning :**

The Ramakrishna Mission started its work in the Khasi Hills way back in the 1920s. Its Cherrapunjee centre was officially affiliated in 1931. Swami Prabhananda (Ketaki Maharaj) started primary schools at Shella, Cherrapunjee and Shillong. He ably assisted by younger swamis in imparting the man-making education advocated by Swami Vivekananda. He introduced Homeopathic and biochemical medicines and also improved methods of potato cultivation, which were the staple food of the Khasis. In the teaching of the alphabets, an innovation was made- music and poetry was introduced. Thus by singing a few couplets, the students could master all the fifty odd alphabets. Swami Chandikananda, who had a flair for singing and composing, could write quite a number of songs in the Khasi dialect, the themes of which were the life and message of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother and Swami Vivekananda. He has, in a way, become inextricably associated with the Khasi people through these songs.

In this way by establishing these educational institutions by Ramakrishna Mission, the pride of the Khasi people in their own tribal culture silently started growing back. The folk dances of Cherrapunjee and other places began to come into prominence, especially when they were taken up by the educated youths who were getting modern education in the Ramakrishna Mission schools. This helped the Khasis to some extent from being swept off their feet by onslaught of the Western culture. These educated Khasi young men later started Seng Khasi which means Pure Khasi movement, which works for the preservation of the best values of life in their tradition, along with spreading modern education. The liberal concept of respect for all religions practiced by the Ramakrishna Mission has attracted students of many sects of Christianity, which were engaged in converting them. Thus the Catholics and Protestants of Khasi, Garo, Mizo, Naga and also the Kachari and Jaintia groups, started joining the Ramakrishna Mission School along with the Hindu students. It thus became a laboratory of the harmony of religions where all respected the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda.

### **Expansion of work in the Khasi Hills :**

Ramakrishna Mission under the leadership of Swami Prabhananda expanded its works and activities and also set up educational institutions in Khasi Hills through which the



pride and cultural heritage of Khasi people has rejuvenated. The segregation of tribal society with others has been removed with the activities of the Mission. They were moved with the spirit of self respect and capacity building activities. Now there are more than 40 Schools located in different places over the Khasi Hills. Cherrapunjee become the headquarter of education and social movement. The Ramakrishna Mission School at Cherrapunjee is now considered as one of the best schools in Meghalaya. The Mission at Cherrapunjee runs large number of Schools at primary, secondary and higher secondary level. There are nearly 200 students living in the hostel at Cherrapunjee and the results of the Ramakrishna Mission Schools are one of the best in the state. With this attitude towards the people and society, it has turned into the socio-cultural movement among the Khasi people. Thanks to this pioneering work, Ramakrishna Mission earned a name for itself in Khasi Hills and Swami Prabhananda is still remembered both with respect and affection.

### **Opposition and Challenge faced by the Ramakrishna Mission :**

Swami Prabhananda's policy of associating the public with his venture proved wise and ultimately paid rich dividends. In the first place it secured for him an increased measure of public support and cooperation. It also ensured that if there was ever any organized opposition to his work, it was not that he alone would have to stand up in its defense, but that there would be others also to do so. It is perhaps not known to many that the hills of Assam in those days were treated by the British as 'excluded' areas, that is to say, as places where people from the plains could come and work only under duress. For instance, if the local authorities at any time felt that Swami Prabhananda's presence was not in public interest, he might than be expelled from the Khasi Hills at a short notice without showing any reason whatsoever. He could not even appeal to a higher authority against this. That he ran this risk soon proved true, for a few Christian leaders wrote to the district authorities complaining that under the pretext of giving education to the Khasi children, Swami Prabhananda in fact was preaching hatred against the British. This was in those days when anti-British feeling ran very high in the country. The district authorities took alarm and the Deputy Commissioner ran post haste to Shella where he was then staying, to make enquiries on the spot. He questioned people of all shades of opinion in an attempt to get a true picture of the man he was, his activities, the source of his income, who was his supporters and so on. It was quite a surprise to him to find that except for a handful of die-hard Christians, the Khasis in general praised him. It was their unanimous opinion that his only concern was to promote the all round welfare of the Khasis irrespective of their religious beliefs. He was not interested in the politics in the least; he had never tried to preach any particular political viewpoints, which might even be remotely constructed as anti-British or anti-government.



## **Socio-Cultural and Religious changes among the Khasi people :**

At the beginning, the attitude of the Khasis towards the Ramakrishna Mission was not so positive because they were afraid of their identity loss. Slowly they felt that the Mission had come to live in their midst to help and heal them. Social changes were phenomenal among the Khasis as they came into contact first with the British Government and Christian Missionaries in 1860's and then through their contact with the Ramakrishna Mission missionaries since 1920's. In this connection the retrospective effects from the process of urbanization, spread of Christianity, administrative orientation, emergence of new trade, structures and new social contacts from outside led to a social transformation. In spite of that the Ramakrishna Mission has been able to bring about social change through education and medical care among the akahsis. Though the Ramakrishna Mission taught the traditional Khasis to maintain their social, cultural and religious values, yet it also preached the equality of genders and importance of family. It also taught the people not to embrace the western social way of living but rather to maintain their social and cultural values. It has been successful to some extent.

Education is one of the essential factors for any positive change or development. The Ramakrishna Mission pays special attention to the education of the Khasis. They tried their best to provide education with its limited resources so that they may play their due role in the making of better community. Wherever there were the Ramakrishna Mission schools, they were influential. These schools have won the hearts of the rural Khasi people. Education changed the living standard in the Khasi Hills. It also changed the mood of living, religious values, their occupation and social atmosphere. Many people appreciated the education rendered by the Ramakrishna Mission. It may be because Government Schools failed to render quality education to the Khasi children. Many parents find it difficult to bear the expenditure. The Ramakrishna Mission schools are able to attract the people because the education in these schools are provided free of cost.

The Ramakrishna Mission has been instrumental in fostering the spirit of nationalism. The Mission also has taught about the national democratic system of politics. Moreover there were some weaknesses in the traditional political system that compelled the Khasis to find an alternate political system for themselves. The Mission missionaries have brought about some changes in the Khasi political thinking due to education. The Mission laid stress on the ideas of nationhood. The Mission has also helped the traditional Khasi leaders to be aware of their political rights. Women were deprived of political participation in decision making bodies. Due to education, even Khasi women were made aware of the importance



of their political participation. Khasi women also started demanding for their rights in decision making bodies, which is the result of the education. The leadership is enlightened and of a superior caliber and highly respected by the public. Due to Western education, local leadership of high caliber emerged on a large scale. As the demand for political rights began to be pressed, misgivings arose in the minds of the Indian politicians all over India. The demand for political rights in the Khasi Hills was unique because it was peaceful. All Khasis spoke with one voice. The result of the one voice was that democracy came to have a new dimension in the East Khasi Hills, which was supported by the Ramakrishna Mission.

The presence of Ramakrishna Mission in Khasi society has brought about a cultural change also. Science, education, modernization, enculturation and other forces have brought about changes at the periphery. The change has made its impact on various spheres of cultural life of the Khasis. It is believed that Khasi culture has been influenced by different cultural and religious elements. The cultural change has also taken place due to the exposure of the Khasi society to contact from outside. After the pre-colonial period, Christian Missionaries have worked among the Khasis to bring about a change in their cultural life. For instance, with the coming of the British administration, iron smelting on which thousands of families gained their livelihood received a death blow, and with it went the skills and many Khasi families out-turned in goods and implementation of various kinds. Weaving is diminished in many places. Gold washing, excavation of copper, silver and precious metals went to extinction. It is believed that the new contacts with the outsiders did contribute to bring about the changes when Shillong became the capital of Assam.

Just as culture influences education, in the same way education also exerts its powerful influence upon the culture of a community. The function of education not only preserve and transmit the culture of society, but it also brings about the needed and desirable changes in the cultural ideals and values for the progress and continued development of society, without which social progress will stratify and come to naught. Ramakrishna Mission was against conversion and the deterioration of Khasi culture and religion. Through education, they made the Khasis aware of their cultural values. They have been very active from the very beginning of its ministry of strengthening the traditional Khasi culture. It has been working to bring awakening among the traditional Khasis through the Seng Khasi organization since the traditional Khasi culture was influenced by the western cultural norms through Christian Missionaries. The Mission gave importance to the celebration of the Khasi festivals and maintains their customs and religious traditions. They have been successful to some extent in protecting the traditional Khasi Culture from further deterioration through education. This may include change in cultural traits, habits, worldview and some values. Through the awareness



by the Ramakrishna Mission, the traditional Khasis have realized the importance of their old cultural values. The cultural functions to their artistic life and ancient culture, Music, Dance, architecture, festivals and environmental issues were given importance by Ramakrishna Mission. Education imparted by Ramakrishna Mission to the Khasis has proved to be a veritable boon to them in many ways.

Ramakrishna Mission has helped to revive pride of the Khasis in the indigenous religion in the face of increasing Christianization. As compared to Hinduism, Christianity in the early days appealed to the Khasi mind more as it was practical in approach and its Mission better organized. It was also the religion of the rulers, the Khasis were converted to Christianity and as a result their identity and culture were threatened. They opposed these religious changes. Ramakrishna Mission brought about changes at the core of religious life. The monks of the Mission like Swami Prabhananda cautioned the Khasis against losing their identity as a race. The Mission wants them to be progressive but not at the expense of their fine religious tradition and culture. Through the service and teachings of the Ramakrishna Mission, the Khasis come to the knowledge of Vedantic culture and religion. Through education by the Ramakrishna Mission, there is awakening of the consciousness about the past glorious traditions. Many young Khasis both Christian and non-Christians have begun to realize the importance of cultural values. Ramakrishna Mission has been trying to bring religious revival among the Khasis. The revival was to protect traditional Khasis from embracing Christianity and realize the importance of their traditional religious elements.

The Ramakrishna Mission continued to encourage the Khasis to maintain their religious practices. The influence of the Mission is seen on parts like Sohbar, Shella, Sohra, Mawmluh and Laitryngrew Villages. Some Khasi families have started worshipping Chandi and have adopted other religious practices. Some Christian Khasis are also interested in Vedantic teachings. Those families influenced by the services and teachings of Ramakrishna Mission believe that the religious teachings of Khasi traditional religion and that of the Mission are same. However they could not call themselves Hindu. The orthodox Khasis have shown religious tolerance to the Ramakrishna Mission. Many Khasi families have taken initiation in the Ramakrishna Mission as the Khasi Christians did by embracing Christianity. The impact of the Ramakrishna Mission was also found on the Khasi Christian society in education, health, living standard and so on. It was because many Khasi Christians were the products of the Ramakrishna Mission schools. Even in the field of healthcare and emplacement many Khasi Christians have been benefited through the service of the Mission.



## Conclusion :

Khasi society has greatly been transformed by many changes. With the advent of Christianity and western education, transformation in the social, cultural and religious life of the Khasi society took place. Christianity played a major role in the field of education and health. Integration of the area in the colonial dominion of the British resulted in a change by exposing the traditional society to modern forces. Adoption to the western life was quickly made although the matrilineal law of inheritance and succession and the other cultural traits were retained. The converts abandoned their former religious rites, beliefs, and rituals and accepted the Christian teachings. The most remarkable Indian mission to bring changes in the Khasi Hill was Ramakrishna Mission compared to the Christian Missions. They have been working here since 1920. The Mission raised them to new levels of knowledge and understanding. They contributed a lot in the fields of education, medicine, hygiene, music, diet, economic development, introduction of new crafts and skills, removal of untenable myths and superstitions and fears afflicting the Khasi minds, and helped in widening their outlook and in the development of their self-reliance and confidence in them. The work of the missionaries in the Khasi Hills has done incalculable good, without which the directions of the Khasi society could have been far difficult. They also tried to strengthen the traditional Khasi culture and religion and to some extent they were successful.

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