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Impact of Christianity among the Vaipheis in Northeast India

Khaute Lamneithang Vaiphei [α], Thanglunlal Gangte [σ] & Hae Young Kim [ρ]

Abstract - The Vaiphei people belonged to the Kuki-Chin-Mizo group of the Tibeto-Burman and were scattered throughout Northeast India. Before the advent of Christianity in this region, they practiced an animistic religion. The Vaiphei community remained almost segregated. There was little scope for mixing together with other people of the country. They were left alone to lead a life according to their own ways of life. The paper examines the process of transformation and changes taking place among the Vaiphei community with the advent of Christianity. The Vaiphei are also one of the recognized Scheduled Tribes of India.

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I. Introduction

Probably not many of us are aware that Christianity constitute one of the oldest agencies of change in this country dating since about the time of Jesus Christ himself when one of his Apostles. Saint Thomas is believed to have come to India in the 1st century AD and preached the Gospel to the people of South-Western coast of India. Since then, Christianity passed through a long and eventful history and witnessed the advent of a number of Church denomination and Christian organizations as well, which have been influencing the life and culture of Indian people on the countryside level. Like many other tribal societies in India, among the Vaiphei society in Northeast India, we see that significant changes have taken place with the advent of Christian missionaries. The introduction of Christianity among the Vaiphei (1901) exercised a profound impact in their traditional tribal society. The new religion which was preached and carried on the wings of culture had its own impact, values and prejudices. Once the Vaiphei people responded to the newfound religion, certain changes were effected in different spheres of their life which had profoundly influenced their subsequent history.

II. Transfer to Religious Life

In the days of yore, the Vaiphei were dominated and oppressed by evil spirits, demons and ghosts. As has been mentioned, Vaiphei religion was animistic and believed in a variety of gods and spirits. Therefore to appease, most of the sacrifices were directed towards the evil spirits who were believed to have caused misfortune or any illness to the people. With the coming of Christianity, the morbid fears or phobia that grew out of their ignorance and animistic belief causing them to perform many ritualistic offerings had totally disappeared. The practice of offering food, meat, etc to propitiate the spirits of their dead was totally given up ever since the new religion taught that human's spirits did not roam the earth. The belief that the spirits of animals (offerings to the spirit of their dead) accompanied the dead on the way to Pialgal (paradise) is no more. Instead, eternal life as outlined in Christian doctrine replaced their assumption of "Pialgal" or "Vangam" of their old religion. Moreover, the practice of offering a series of costly feasts like Zangsial Feast for securing a right place in their life-after-death has also came to an end.

Again, before the advent of Christianity, the Vaiphei did not observe Sunday in any special, manner. Their everyday life was occupied with work, except in the case of certain community festivals or death as such. With the coming of the Gospel, the Church was organized, and converted Christians started observing Sunday by attending church services. The Holy Scriptures are selected and preached through Sunday-School, which is considered a must for the young and old. Today, even in the rural areas if villagers spent a week in the agricultural fields, they never failed to return home on Saturday for Sunday Worship-Service. This has improved a lot the sociological awareness. The coming of Christianity thus, turned the whole religious belief of their pre-Christian life upside down. The sacrificial act and element in the ancient Vaiphei religion was replaced by the self-sacrificing act of Jesus' in the place of man and indeed, to the Vaiphei coverts, this is their greatest relief that the new religion has offered to them. For the Vaiphei Christian, "….the cock is no more a necessary element in the search for a redemptive act but all is dealt with by the Lamb of God. The one vicarious sacrifice for all men" (Ponger:1993:173).

III. Expanded World View

Every era of Vaiphei life had been influenced by the newfound religion. Before the advent of Christianity in the Vaiphei area, the Vaiphei tribal world-view was limited to a village or at the most to a particular geographical area or areas. Christianity has brought a new world-view to the Vaiphei people not only by exposing them to the Indian nation but also to the

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international community. Exposure to a new world with its new economic systems and structures, its political philosophies and forms of government, its educational and social infrastructures in general totally different from those of the Vaiphei living in isolated geographical and cultural pockets was bound to alter the "world-view" of the Vaiphei people. The passport of Christianity made the Christian acceptable to other Christian community in various parts of the world. Through Christian missionaries, the tribal life, culture and the indigenous Church came into direct contact with the international community thus bringing about a world-wide solidarity in faith, despite internal tension and divisions arising from theological and historical reasons.

IV. Educational Sphere

Formal education of the Vaiphei in reality and practice as we see today has its beginning since the advent of Christianity with the arrival of Watkin R Roberts, a Welsh missionary, in 1910 in response to an invitation from Thangkai and Lungpau in South Manipur. After a few days of in-depth communication with the exposure to the Duhlian translations of the Scriptures portion and preaching the Gospel at Maite and its surrounding villages, Roberts returned to his Headquarters in Aizawl and invited 2 native Bible students – Thangkai and Lungpau – to look after the new mission. These two evangelists-teachers reached Maite village on May 7, 1910 and opened a Primary Mission School as part of their evangelical activities (Prim, 1981). In the early days, teaching at first was in the simplest form, mainly confined to Bible reading and understanding of writing since education was initially imparted with Bible preaching. Since there was no age limit, children and adults sat together and learned the subjects (Pudaite,1963:80). The mission schools did not necessarily emphasize vocational training. Whatever vocational training they offered was mainly for the development for the catechists, clergy and other native workers to work in the missionary effort. As a result, most of the early educated Vaiphei were employed in the mission services as low paid workers (Vanrammawi,1992:89). Thus, it appears that formal education introduced by the missionaries were so designed at religious instruction to serve the needs of the missionaries rather than in giving vocational guidance or preparation for better living to the Vaiphei. In those days, it was felt that basic education was sufficient enough to serve the purpose of the missionaries; they did not see any need for introducing higher education. For instance, William Pettigrew, the first missionary ever landed in the soil of Manipur and the man at the helm of tribal education, was not convinced that it was necessary for the tribals to have anything higher than a Middle English School grade. He opines that "the great majority will, for many years to come, be content with an education that will enable them to read and write in their vernacular". (Pettigrew in Lal Dena,1988:75). Moreover, educational motives were also reduced to a mere attainment of livelihood. Probably due to this attitude of the missionaries, Vaiphei education in the early period was mostly limited to the primary level. It may be noted that till 1941, apart from the numerous primary schools there were only 3 middle schools and not a single high school in all the hill area inhabited by the tribals in Manipur.

However, with the increase in number of Christian population there was a corresponding increase in the number of 'Mission School'. From a very humble beginning, the new Christian education project gained momentum through the instrumentality of the native pioneer missionaries. Soon the people were awake and realized the intrinsic value of modern education. In order to quench their thirst for knowledge, the 1st beginner book called 'Vaiphei Simpat Bu' was prepared and published by Rev Edwin B. Rowland in 1919, and the following year of 1920, Rev. F.J Sandy wrote St. Mark in Vaiphei language which was published by the British Foreign Bible Society from Kolkata. Over a year or so, several other books in Vaiphei language such as 'Simpat Bu' by Thangkai and Lungpau was published in 1950. As time rolled by, new schools of elementary standard were started in other villages as well. Thus the newfound religion made good progress in educating the people. To develop and to look after the welfare of the students, the Vaiphei Zillai Association (VZA) was founded in 1939, under the leadership of Sawmkhawlal, Kaikhawgin, Dr Lamminthang, Kaihau and Thianlam (VZA,1982:85). Today the ZVA is becoming one of the fastest growing students' organization having branches all over India with its Headquarter in Churachandpur, Manipur (Lamboi, 1997).

A brief review of the historical development of formal education among the Vaiphei brings to light that Christian missionaries, inspired by the zeal of spreading the gospel became the most important agency in the spread of education among the Vaiphei in the North-East. It is true that Vaiphei education in the pre-Independent period was mainly confined to the primary level. Nevertheless, it is also true that the missionaries laid the foundation of 'Modern Education' among the Vaiphei people. It may be said that the tempo of educational progress during the post-Independent period thus, would have been never the same but not for the ground-work prepared by the missionaries. In the words of B.D. Sharma "It is education more than anything else that shapes the new tribal society…In some tribal areas, particularly in the north-east, education played a big role in molding the natives. A beginning was made by the missionaries as early as the eighteenth century". (Sharma,1984:24). Today, education is highly valued and a rapid increase in literacy is observed in the Vaiphei society.

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V. Prohibition of zu (Country Liquor)

Before the advent of Christianity in the Vaiphei areas Zu (liquor) was considered as one of the unavoidable items in all the important feasts, festivals and ceremonies. What Mrs. Grimwood says is true: "They have a beverage of their own which they make of fermented rice water…they called this liquor-Zu" (Grimwood, 1891:15). Serving Zu to the Village Chief and his Council of Elders was a must while dealing with all cases between his villagers. During the pre-Christian times, drunkenness was, thus, prevalent in the Hmar society. With the coming of Christianity, the missionaries, simultaneously with their evangelical task, took steps for social reformation in the Vaiphei society by prohibiting consumption of Zu to the new converts since Zu as a common drink was very closely linked with the animistic sacrifices and other Vaiphei customs which belonged to their old pagan life and an atmosphere of such revelry was uncongenial to Christian spiritual growth. The step taken by the missionaries and the Churches, thus resulted in the gradual reduction of Zu as a common drink in all occasions. Today the Vaiphei people found Thingpi (Tea) as a substitution to Zu and, offering Thingpi to the guest and visitors has become the social habit of the Vaiphei people. With the prohibition of Zu as a common drink which sucked the agricultural surplus products such as rice, corn, etc, in Zu brewing, a considerable amount of rice and corn has now turned into regular food for the family, thus improving the economic growth of the community.

VI. Christianity and the Vaiphei Culture

Christianity has a far reaching impact on Vaiphei culture and tradition. The advent of Christianity brought a cultural conflict that affected social transformation. Within a few years of Christianization many Vaiphei people embraced the new religion. As a result, there occurred misunderstanding between the convert Christian and the ancient traditionalists at certain levels. The traditional lovers blamed the Missionaries for undermining culture and rejecting old values. In contrast, the Missionaries and the new converts felt that most of the cultural traditions of the early Vaiphei people were profusely connected with old religious practices and considered Zu as unbecoming of Christian living. The newly converted Christians were therefore strongly discouraged to participate and indulge in any of the festivals and cultural ceremonies like Thazing-Lap and other Kuts or cultural activities as they thought such activities would hold them and pull them back to their old pagan ways. It should be admitted that the Missionaries had some weakness. They thought every ancient culture was devilish with no exception. This was due to their inability to study the meaning and value system behind Vaiphei cultural behaviors. This led to undermining of ancient cultural features that resulted in misunderstandings. Surprisingly enough, there seems to have been a tendency among the converts to think that anything that was 'Western' was 'good and civilized'. This attitude resulted in the danger of total rejection of all Vaiphei culture and a copying of Western culture in the name of Christianity. With almost cent percent Vaiphei population being converted to Christianity, the various cultural activities were no longer observed in the Vaiphei society as they were in the days of yore. In fact, traditional cultural dances, today, have become items in the cultural functions and some such occasions only. Thus, slowly and gradually, the importance of Vaiphei cultural festivals, other social gatherings and amusement lost their importance and has fallen almost in complete disuse. Today, the Christmas festival although of recent origin among the Vaiphei people, has gained paramount position over the traditional festivals on performance and observance.

With the increase in literacy rate among the Vaiphei people with their new expanded world-view, there is an increasing opinion that the Vaiphei cultural heritage should be revived in a refined way and go along with Christianity without compromising the doctrines in the Bible. Today, even the enlightened Church-leaders see no harm in singing traditional songs and observing the traditional cultural festivals and dances if there is no pagan revelry and obeisance to anything connected to old religion. In fact, there is no harm in cultural activities if they are merely done with the spirit of demonstration and not actual indulgence or adherence to the old religion since co-existence and adjustment bring development either in form or in bringing to (both) or partial change due to assimilation and adaptation in different factors according to the demands of time. In the words of Dr Joseph Vaiphei, "Christianity does not have to destroy unnecessarily people's culture and traditions…experience among the Vaiphei people shows that Christianity grows faster if it flows along the cultural pattern and tradition of the people"(Pakhuongte,1983:67).

VII. Better Management of Healthcare

In the pre-Christian period, to heal the sick, the common practice was by offering bloody sacrifices to the evil spirits by the village Thiampu (priest). In fact, the Vaiphei people did not believe that they could be cured of sickness or diseases by any means other than sacrifices performed by the Thiampu since it was their belief that diseases was closely associated with powers of a spirit or a wizard. The health conditions of the people were miserable and pathetic which can be best expressed in the words of a Missionary: "Malaria was of course prevalent everywhere. There was also Dropsy, internal parasites, Hookworm, Dysentery, Tuberculosis and other dreaded diseases. Parents had large families but more than 50% of the children died before reaching adolescence, many mothers died at childbirth due to

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lack of care and superstitious ideas"(Lloyd:41). In order to overcome the horrible condition of people's health the Missionaries used to give them medicine and took up the dual function of education and medical care. They established hospitals and made them improve their mental and physical health. The 'Sielmat Christian Hospital and Research Centre' established in 1964 at Churachandpur is the healing ministry of Partnership Mission Society under the Founder and Chairmanship of Rochunga Pudaite. It is a 25 bedded hospital, equipped with modern facilities providing tender loving care to the sick and the suffering at the start. Earlier, the Vaiphei family had one large house in which they would accommodate the entire family members and other household articles including all the domestic animals such as cows, pigs, hens, dogs, cats, etc, of course in a separate room.

However, after Christianity the missionaries and the evangelists taught the Vaiphei people cleanliness in their day-to-day life. Care of sickness, simple hygiene and 'First-Aid' are included in their education curriculum. They learned better ways of life. Today, as for instance, a mother's chewing food for their babies and unhygienic mouth-to-mouth feeding is replaced by special cooking for babies and spoon-feeding. To provide basic health care and education especially to the tribal people, a few prominent citizens of the area with the initiative of the indigenous Independent Church of India (ICI) have formed a Society registered under the 'Manipur Societies Registration Act. 1989' under the name 'Mualvaiphei Rural Health and Research Centre' in Churachandpur, Manipur, which came into existence in the year 1990. Under this Society, a 'School of Nursing' called 'Bethesda School of Nursing' was started in July 1995 to train the tribal young ladies and others in 'General Nursing' and 'Midwifery Course'. Also, there is a condensed course for missionaries. Since its inception, the Society has succeeded in creating mass awareness of the evils of drug abuse and running health care centre-providing health-check, maternity and child - care. Today, the Vaiphei have given up their age-old traditional practice of curing diseases by observing sacrificial rituals and are inclined to the use of medicines for any sort of disease. However, in some Vaiphei remote areas, perhaps due to non-availability of modern medicines and physicians, the traditional method of curing diseases, be it goiter or stomach ache, fever or cancer, by branding with a hot iron to the patient is still practiced.

VIII. Marriage

With the coming of Christianity and consequently the introduction of formal education by Christian missionaries, the traditional Vaiphei marriage customs could not retain some of the traditional characteristics. Changes were affected to fit the marriage customs in such a way that it had become a mixture of traditional and modern Christian marriage. The new religion has little effect upon the basic structure of the traditional nuptial rites, except that the marriage was solemnized in the Church where an authorized church leader, usually a pastor conducted the oath of allegiance according to Christian customs and practices in place of traditional village Thiampu (priest). The part once played by Zu during marriage negotiation and on the wedding day was now replaced by a simple marriage-feast and tea drinking. However, even after full conversion into the new faith the services of the Makpas (son-in-laws) known as Palais (mediators) in the bride-price negotiations are the pre-requisites before anything is done in the Church. Therefore, the traditional norms and social obligations still have some weight in matter relating to the marriage ceremony. Thus, it may be said that no Christian marriage can take place without following the traditional formalities. However, in actual practice, among the modern Vaiphei people living in urban areas these traditional marriage customs are observed only for the sake of formality without their true significance.

IX. Inter-Denominational Tension and Conflict

Under this background what we find is that a gulf has been created within the Vaiphei converts. The new religion divided the Vaiphei people to such an extent that each group tried to plead the superiority of its own 'denomination' over the other and advanced several reasons to justify its attitude and evaluation which get amply reflected in their mutual attitudes. Religious division among the Vaiphei people is a regular feature mainly on the issue of leadership. Today, there are more than 12 different Christian groups among the Hmar people, each under a separate Church name. The division of the 'Vaiphei Baptist Association (VBA)' into two rival factions and subsequently, their fight for leadership and church properties before the law court by squandering away mission funds paved the future divisive elements among the Vaiphei people, which now seems to be irreparable injuries. Despite their professed brotherhood, there were sharp rivalries often leading to conflicts between them. Equality in this world was proclaimed but rank in this world was a different matter. Due to want of space, it would not be possible to discuss the overall impact of Christianity among the Vaiphei people in detail. It would suffice to say that within a comparatively short time, Christianity has incorporated changes without any serious effect upon the general frame-work of the society. The old tradition is happily blended in the Vaiphei society with the new ways of life. On the whole, had it not been for the missionaries, the history of the Vaiphei people would

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have been different, perhaps less advanced than the one we discern now.

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