



Christianity And Social Change With Special Reference To Indigenous Tribal Women Of Tripura

Prof. Sukhendu Debbarma^{1*}, Jonomti Reang²

^{1*}Dean, Faculty of Social Sciences and Dean, Faculty of Music and Fine Arts, Tripura University.

²Research Scholar, Department of History, Tripura University

Citation: Prof. Sukhendu Debbarma, et. al (2024), Christianity And Social Change With Special Reference To Indigenous Tribal Women Of Tripura, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(6) 4895 - 4904

Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i6.8765

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Christianity has long been a catalyst for cultural change around the world, with a rich history of influencing many aspects such as ideas, society, the arts, architecture, education, etc. It has contributed immensely in accelerating and influencing the changes that transformed Europe and other parts of the world. Without a doubt, the arrival of Christian missions in India, particularly in North East India, has a significant impact on social transformation. Tripura, one of the Northeast Indian states, is not an exception. The arrival of Christianity in Tripura has ushered in a new era for indigenous tribal society. This paper tries to examine the historical background of Christianity in Tripura. It sheds light on the significant contributions made by women missionaries to the fields of education and health care. The paper also discusses the impact of Christianity on the social lives of the indigenous tribal women of Tripura. Additionally, to comprehend the social changes, the condition of women in traditional indigenous tribal society is highlighted. The paper is based on the primary and secondary sources.

Keywords: Christianity, Social Change, Women missionaries, Indigenous tribal women, Tripura

Introduction:

Tripura is a tiny state of India with an area of 10,491.69 square kilometres, measuring about 183.5kms in length from north-east to the west and about 112.7 kms width from south to north. It is located between latitudes 22° 56' N and 24° 32' N north of the Equator, and longitudinal lines 91° 10' E and 92° 21' E¹. In the east, it borders the Mamit district of Mizoram and the Karimganj district of Assam. It also shares its longest border with Bangladesh, a neighbouring country in the North-West, South and South East. Tripura is the most populous state after Assam in Northeast India. According to the 2011 census, the population of Tripura is 3,671,032, with 11,66,813 people belonging to the scheduled tribe (ST), accounting for 31.78 per cent of the population.² There are nineteen tribal communities in Tripura. They are *Bhill*, *Bhutia*, *Chaimal*, *Chakma*, *Garo*, *Halam*, *Jamatia*, *Khasi*, *Kuki*, *Lepcha*, *Lushai*, *Mog*, *Munda*, *Noatia*, *Orang*, *Riang/Reang*, *Santhal*, *Tripura/Tripuri*, and *Uchai*, according to the Scheduled Caste/ Scheduled Tribes Orders (Amendment) Act 1976.³ Of them, eleven tribes—the Tripura/Tripuri, Reang (Bru), Jamatia, Noatia, Uchai, Kuki, Lushai, Halam, Chakma, Mog, and Garo—are regarded as the original indigenous inhabitants of Tripura.⁴ Each community represents a distinct culture, and they have coexisted peacefully while maintaining distinct social traditions, language, religion, and dress. The Chakmas and the Mogs predominantly adhere to Buddhism, whereas the entire Lushai and Darlong communities are Christian. The tribes who speak a language belonging to the Bodo group of the Tibeto-Burman sub-family of the Sino-Tibetan language family—Tripuri, Jamatias, Noatias, Reangs (Bru), Uchois, Murasing,

¹ Suchintya Bhattacharyya. (2014). *Genesis of Tribal Extremism in Tripura*, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, p.1

² Census of India

³ Menon, K.D, *Tripura District Gazetteers*, Agartala, 1975, p.143

⁴ Saha, Sudhanshu Bikash, *Development of Political Consciousness of the Tribes of the Tribes of Tripura* in Sudhanshu Bikash Saha (ed.) (1987). *Tribes of North East India: Spectrum of Changes*, Agartala: Pupali Publishing, pp. 61-62

and two sub-tribes of the Halam community, the Rupini and the Kolois⁵—are witnessing an ongoing growth in the number of adherents of Christianity. The present study is concerned with the Indigenous tribal communities of Tripura.

Women in Traditional Indigenous Tribal Society in Tripura

One can speak of men's societal problems without involving the family, but one cannot speak of women without addressing their family functions (Mies, 1980). In the indigenous tribal society of Tripura, males hold a more decisive position in the society. The father is the head of the family and possesses all the authority in the family. Lineage and descent are traced through the father's line and so the society is patrilineal. However, in exercising the power the father consulted with his wife to maintain harmony and balance within the family. Women are equal partners in the house, though the male head has rights over the household. Family tasks are divided equally between men and women. Apart from growing vegetables in the *huk* (shifting cultivation) and collecting firewood, wild fruits and vegetables, she educates her children, especially the daughters to weave. The mother or the daughter does the entire family work such as feeding the domestic animals such as pigs, poultry, and cattle, as well as the entire family. If a man engages in tasks traditionally associated with women, he may face ridicule from other men. It is taboo for menfolk to weave, gin, or spin. They believed that if a man weaves clothes, a tiger may eat him.⁶ Thus, indicating clear division of work between men and women and which can not in any be overlapped.

In the traditional indigenous tribal society of Tripura, women are not involved in the decision-making process in society at any level, nor do they have any group of their own⁷ though some received respect. For instance, the wife of the *chudri* (village head) gets equal respect as her husband but cannot take part in the administration of the society. However, women, as mothers or wives, play a key role in the decision-making of their families. The younger ones may have very little say in the family, the decision of the elderly women is generally accepted.⁸ The womenfolk contributed much to socio-economic and cultural activities. In socio-economic aspects, she has been considered the pillar of the family economy. She worked hard and has been industrious since her childhood, and even after marriage, her participation in economic activities cannot stop. She simultaneously worked at home and in the field. The shifting cultivation depends on the active participation of women in performing certain specific functions related to slash-and-burn cultivation. The division of work between men and women in the system has been well defined. While clearing the jhum site, setting fire to the jhum and adopting fire protective measures, basket-making, bamboo-hut-making, and hunting activities are the exclusive work of men. Whereas husking rice, pressing oilseeds, weaving, collecting firewood, carding cotton, etc. are the tasks of women.⁹ Besides this, she rears domestic pigs, goats, fowl, etc. and earns her income to support the family. She also weaves clothes, prepares local brew rice wine at home, and collects firewood, wild vegetables, snails, and crab from the stream for family consumption and nowadays for sale in the market.

There is no preference of child at birth either a girl or a boy as it makes no difference in the family. A girl child was never unwanted, rather they believe a household is well-maintained if the first child is a girl. Parents with many daughters held a sense of complacency, as having many daughters meant that they had more potential brides to offer. The bride's price in cash or kind was high. *Chamari ompa*¹⁰ / *Chamaroi youhmoing*¹¹ rendering of service in the house of the prospective in-law was a common practice in the traditional marriage system of the indigenous tribal society of Tripura. To get the hand of a bride, a groom had to live and serve in the house of the bride for several years. The bride's family have the upper hand in the traditional marriage system. For instance, the Reang has a common phrase, '*Sayouh bagra kau ktor*' meaning the owner of the bride holds more power to speak. Which reflects the bride's family having greater rights to demand the groom's family. Women also enjoy considerable sexual freedom and freedom in the choice of her husband¹² Dowry was absent in

⁵ Debbarma, Sukhendu and Debbarma Mousami, *Kokborok*, in G.N Devy and Sukhendu Debbarma (eds.) (2016). *The Languages of Tripura: People's Linguistic Survey of India* Volume Twenty-Eight, Part Two, Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, p. 128

⁶ Debbarma, Suren. (2006). *A Short Account of Tripuri Society*. Jnan Bichitra Prakashani, Kolkata, p. 79

⁷ Debbarma, Sukhendu. (2002). *Christianity and Social Change: A Case Study of Kokborok Speaking People*, in the Proceeding of North East India History Association, Twenty Third Session, Tripura University, Tripura, p. 290

⁸ Kalai, Gauri, *Role and Status of Women in Traditional Tribal Society of Tripura*, in Bhattacharya, Ruma, (ed). *Identity Issues in Northeast India*, Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, 2011, p. 145

⁹ K.B. Jamatia. (2007). *Modernity in Tradition: A Historical Study of the Jamatia Tribe of Tripura*. Akshar Publications, Agartala, p. 236

¹⁰ Debbarma, Sukhendu. (2002). *Christianity and Social Change: A Case Study of Kokborok Speaking People*, *op.cit.*, p.288

¹¹ Reang, Lincoln, *History of the Reang (Bru)*, EBH Publishers, Guwahati, 2021, p. 21

¹² Chakravarti, Tapati. (1998). *Economic Participation of Rural Tribal Women of Tripura: A Case Study*. Tribal Research and Cultural Institute, Tripura, Agartala, p.183

marriages. Widow re-marriage was permitted in the society after the performance of a socio-religious ritual called '*Khum-Shuo*'.¹³

The women can have a share of their parental property in special circumstances, but the amount is not equal to that of the male members of the family. The brothers are the greater beneficiaries of sharing the inheritance of property. From the in-laws portion after the husband's death, the wife can inherit it, but not completely, as it is also distributed among the children in case they are there.¹⁴ A man without a wife is restricted from the ownership of a household or membership in the village and community judicial administration.¹⁵

In the matter of traditional religious belief women in the past could not become an *ochai/aukchai* (priest). In most religious matters, women can not take part especially when they are on their menstrual period, for women are treated as unholy during this time. She can take part only in rituals concerning birth, marriage, death, selection of sites for jhum, and house building. Childbirth is considered unclean. She is prohibited from going to the water point unless a purification ritual is done for her.

Women are free to participate in social events like dancing, singing and other recreation programmes. However, a tribal woman also lives a life of exclusion and suffering in the indigenous tribal society because of the existence of social evils like witchcraft, alcoholism and social-religious superstitious beliefs.¹⁶ When someone gets ill in the village usually a woman is suspected as a witch who cause that sickness. The society believes that only women are witches. Being victimised of witchcraft there are instances where such women are either divorced, mercilessly beaten, socially boycotted or even killed.¹⁷

Indigenous tribal people of Tripura had been given to drinking and brewing *arag/chuak* (rice beer), which was freely consumed by both young and older people. Every household brewed rice beer, particularly the women folk. Drinking rice beer is not taken as a social or moral offence in society. Guests are welcomed with pipes of home-brewed rice beer. Events and gatherings require traditional drinks; without them, no act of joy or sorrow is complete. Even during religious rituals and rites deities are offered rice beer. However, in certain instances, women experience social ostracism and domestic violence as a result of alcoholism. For instance, Sukhendu Debbarma mentioned that '*She has to prepare home-brewed liquor which is a very lengthy, complicated and time-consuming process. Any guest coming to the house had to be entertained and served with locally brewed liquor. Not only that the scenes created in the house after consuming liquor are something which one cannot imagine and the concept of time is not there. The drinking may continue for days together without caring for food and health. The lady of the house had to solely shoulder the responsibility of entertaining the guests. There are cases where the lady of the house did not drink and showed some reluctance to entertain the guest. She was ostracized from society for some time. Since the locally brewed drink was not served by that lady many of the relatives do not visit the family.*'¹⁸

Traditional Indigenous tribal women also face social avoidance. She can engage in playful banter with her younger brother-in-law, sister-in-law, elder sister's husband, elder brother's wife, grandmother, and grandfather. However, it is taboo for a woman to make jokes with her husband's elder brother, uncle, and maternal uncle.¹⁹

Brief Historical Background of Christianity in Tripura

Christianity in Tripura dates back to the reign of Maharaja Amar Manikya (1579-1585 A.D), who had employed Portuguese mercenaries to ward off frequent attacks by Mogs of Arakan and the Chittagong Hill Tracts.²⁰ Portuguese mercenaries settled in Udaipur, the then capital of Tripura. They were very loyal to the Tripura Raj. They followed the fortunes of the raja and when the capital was shifted to old Agartala by Maharaja Krishna Kishore Manikya (1760-1761) they were given rent-free land in a village not far away from Agartala and their village was named Mariamnagar i.e. Mary's village.²¹ The Christians settled at that time were the Indo-Portuguese '*Filhos de Indos*' offsprings of Portuguese mercenaries who had settled with Indian women or Christian converts who adopted the Portuguese way of life.²² Christianity remained confined to them alone. There was no priest to cater to the needs of the Christians in Tripura, priests from East Bengal would come to minister them occasionally. In 1843 Fr. P Barbe, the pastor of Chittagong visited Tripura. In 1856, Holy Cross

¹³ Tripura, K.N Jena Babu Dhan. (2009). *Life and Customary Laws of Tripura Tribe*. Abhijeet Publication, Delhi, p. 50

¹⁴ Bhowmik, Krishna Nath. (2005). *Status and Empowerment of Tribal Women in Tripura*, Kalpaz Publications, Delhi, p. 88

¹⁵ Kalai, Gauri, *op.cit.*, p. 145

¹⁶ Kalai, Gauri, *op.cit.*, p. 144

¹⁷ Debbarma, Sukhendu, Christianity and Social Change: A Case Study of Kokborok Speaking People, *opcit.*, p. 288

¹⁸ Debbarma, Sukhendu, Christianity and Social Change, *op.cit.*, p.291

¹⁹ Debbarma, Suren, *op.cit.*, p.45

²⁰ Syiemlieh, D.R, *Mariamnagar: Cultural Integration-Social Seclusion* in Proceedings of North East India History Association, Eighteenth Session Tripura University, Agartala, 2002, p.166

²¹ Debbarma, Sukhendu, Christianity and Social Change, *op.cit.*, p.292

²² Syiemlieh, D.R, *op.cit.*, p.166

Pioneering Missionaries Fr Louis Augustine Verite and Fr Benoit Adolphe Mercier visited Agartala and administered Sacrament to the Christians in Mariamnagar.²³ It became clear that though Mariamnagar Christians were isolated they kept their faith even without any priest or catechist to minister to them. They were looked after from Dacca, as missionaries had no permanent residence in Tripura until 1939 when the first Catholic Church Parish in Tripura was erected at Mariamnagar.²⁴

In the meantime, attempts were made by various Christian missions to enter Tripura but were futile since missionary activities were restricted in Tripura. Such missions were, the British Missionary Society (BMS) around 1792, Arthington Aborigines Mission in 1890,²⁵ New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society (NZBMS) from 1891-1938. While the state was closed to foreign missions, pioneering work began with the Mizo Christians settling in the state.²⁶ In 1911-1912, Chief Hrangvunga and his group of 40 Christians migrated to Phuldungsei, Jampui Hill Tripura from Bunghmun, Lushai Hills. They had previously become Christians through the Welsh Mission in Lushai Hills. The Welsh mission had entered Lushai Hills since 1897.²⁷ When Chief Hrangvunga and his group arrived in the state of Tripura they started witnessing their fellow Lushai non-Christians and at the same time constructed a church building in Phuldungsei, Jampui Hill. There was no pastor or organised mission to care for them. So, Rev. Phawka of the Lushai Hills visited them on occasion. It was there that Christianity first took deep root in Tripura.²⁸

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the number of Christians grew steadily in Jampui Hill. Soon, it became apparent that they needed to be cared for by a pastor or an organized mission body. It was in this situation that they first approached Wales Presbyterian Mission at Aizawl in 1913. Requesting the mission to look after them and accept the Church fund of Rs. 90/- which they brought along with them. Rev. D.E. Jones was the missionary stationed at Aizawl. He told them that they could not accept the funds brought by them as no missionaries were allowed to enter Tripura at the same time Tripura was already assigned to the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society²⁹ who were still awaiting permission to enter Tripura. Raja Hrangvunga then asked Watkin R. Robert,³⁰ the founder of the Thado-Kuki Pioneer Mission, for assistance in looking after them. Without delay, Watkin R. Robert started the mission work in Tripura in 1916. He sent one emissary named Thankunga to Phuldungsei village in Jampui Hill, Tripura to assess the situation and work as an evangelist. In 1917, Thangte and Khuanga was sent.

The next year in 1918 H.K Dohnuna was sent to work in Tripura.³¹ In the same year, Jampui Presbytery was formed. Under the leadership of H.K Dohnuna, the church made tremendous progress in the field of education as well. Village Primary School was set up in every Mizo Christian village along with Sunday Schools. The result was that almost all the Mizos were able to read and write irrespective of age or sex.³² Through the Thado-Kuki Pioneer Mission later called as North-East India General Mission the church in Tripura grew from strength to strength. The gospel began to take a foothold among the Darlongs in 1920, Reangs in 1922, Hrangkhawl in 1924 and other tribes of Tripura.³³

However, the Thado-Kuki Pioneer Mission's separation in 1929 prevented the church from expanding. The division of the mission into two groups namely, the North-East India General Mission and Indo-Burma Pioneer Mission (IBPM) was the result of the disturbance which took place on the ground of financial misappropriation in the management of the mission.³⁴ Due to the division of the mission the workers and the churches also remained divided. There was a sort of turmoil in every church. The split affected the churches in many ways and continued even in the later period.

Meanwhile, in the west, the Maharaja of Tripura finally gave the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society the long-awaited official permission to live and do missionary activities in Tripura in 1938. The year marked

²³ Bishop Lumen Monteiro, *legacy of Catholic Church in Tripura (1996 to 2021) Pathways Ahead*, Indian Society for promoting Christian Knowledge (ISPCK), Delhi, p.2

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.2

²⁵ Debbarma, Sukhendu. (1996). *Origin and Growth of Christianity in Tripura; With Special Reference to the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society 1938-1988*, Indus Publishing Company, New Delhi, p.29

²⁶ Pachuau, Lalsangkima. (2003). *Church-Mission Dynamics in Northeast India*. Retrieved from International Bulletin of Missionary Research Vol.27, No.4. p.158

²⁷ Lawmsanga. (2010). *A Critical Study on Christian Mission with Special Reference to Presbyterian Church of Mizoram*, Ph.d Thesis, University of Birmingham, p.86

²⁸ Debbarma, Sukhendu, *Origin and Growth of Christianity in Tripura*, *op.cit.*, p.31

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32

³⁰ Jonathan Pudaite. (2009). *The Legacy of Watkin R. Roberts: A Pioneer Missionary who Advocated & Empowered Indigenous Christian Leader*, Shillong: Partnership Publishing House, p.77

³¹ Darlong, Letthuama. (1995). *The Darlongs of Tripura*. Directorate of Tribal Research Institute Govt. of Tripura, Agartala, p.231

³² Debbarma, Sukhendu, *Origin and Growth of Christianity in Tripura*, *op.cit.*, p.35

³³ Jonathan Pudaite., *op.cit.*, p.77

³⁴ Rev. Lalhuala Darlong. (2011). *How The Gospel of Jesus Christ First Entered Into The Dark State of Tripura*, Tripura Gospel Centenary, Souvenir 1911-2011, Vanghmun, Jampui Tripura: Tripura Gospel Centenary Celebration Organising Committee, p.87

significant in the history of NZBMS. In the same year Mission station at Arundhutinagar in Agartala was established. Garo Christians of the western and southern part of Tripura who migrated from Mymensing (Bangladesh) having no organised body to look after them soon joined the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society.³⁵ To bring all the Christians of Tripura under one umbrella, a Baptist Christian Union of Tripura was formed i.e. Tripura Baptist Christian Union (TBCU) on 3rd-4th December 1938 at Lakhilunga Tea Estate.³⁶ The Christians in the north and eastern part of the state i.e. the Darlong and the Mizo churches in Jampui Hills were affected by the split of Thado-Kuki Pioneer Mission. They decided to join Tripura Baptist Christian Union in 1942-43 respectively. Under NZBMS Christianity started to penetrate among other tribes of Tripura as well, such as Debbarmas in 1938, Uchoi in 1942, Rupinis in 1957, Kalai in 1962, Jamatia in 1972, Noatias in 1974 and Tripura in 1975.³⁷

Contribution of Women Missionaries in Tripura

The Maharaja of Tripura did not allow Christian missions in Tripura. However, Rosella E.M. Bose played a very important role in the spread of the Christian faith in Agartala and, more particularly, within the palace. She was the daughter of Mr. H.C. Bose, the chief judge of the Maharaja of Tripura. They stayed for about three years and five months in Tripura.³⁸ Although Rosella was not a missionary, she did work no less than any missionary. She distributed pamphlets and the Bible. She had been working with several missions in central India for years by helping in the work of bringing Indian women to Christianity. In Tripura, missionary activities were restricted so she began the activities for the overall development of the women.³⁹ Her first work included providing sewing lessons. Rosella established a strong connection with the girls, who subsequently developed a liking for her. The girls demonstrated their stitching skills, learned from Rosella to the prince and princesses. Both the prince and princesses were delighted, and the Jubraj personally expressed gratitude to Rosella for her exceptional efforts. Additionally, she actively participated in instructing the girls in discipline. On the occasion of Maharaja Birendra Kishore Manikya's coronation, she was entrusted with the responsibility of overseeing the girls and performing the Tipperah National Anthem.⁴⁰ She along with her father had organised the first Christmas celebration at Agartala in the palace in 1902.⁴¹ Due to her effort, Rev John Tackle of the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society from Brahmanbaria got limited permission in 1909 to send two Bengali workers to live and converse with the people within the city only but was not allowed to preach.⁴²

After the formation of the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society in 1885, Rosalie Macgeorge was the first missionary sent by the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society. In 1886, she moved to East Bengal and began working among the ladies of Zenanas.⁴³ Due to Tripura's restrictions on missionary activity, her mission was restricted to Brahmanbaria (present-day Bangladesh), which is relatively near to Agartala. Numerous missionaries were sent out by NZBMS after her. In 1931, Dr. Nola Ivory came. She was the first women doctor sent by the NBMS. She served from 1931-1961 in East Bengal (Bangladesh) and Tripura. During her stay in East Bengal and Tripura, the region experienced significant upheaval caused by World War II, a severe famine, and related problems. The Bengal famine of 1943 alone resulted in the deaths of 2-3 million people. Additionally, it was the time of Indian independence and the partition of the country to form Pakistan, which led to the displacement of 10-12 million individuals and was accompanied by widespread violence and loss of life.⁴⁴ While she was working in Chandpur (Bangladesh). She trained Bengali women to be nurses and provided courses for village midwives. In 1943, she arrived in Tripura with compounder Upendra Karmakar to engage in full-time medical work. This was made possible since in 1938, the Maharaja of Tripura had formally granted permission to the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society to reside and carry out missionary activities in Tripura. The first clinic set up by Dr Nola was at Howaibari, 20 miles east of Agartala.⁴⁵ In 1945 Agartala Mission Hospital was opened.⁴⁶ While working in the mission hospital Dr. Ivory along with Hazel Drew and Miss Turner often organised medical outreach programs while visiting many sick people in different parts of the state. Nola's concerns centred on the tribal groups of Reang, Jamatia, Tripuri, Garo and Halam. She longed to work in

³⁵ Debbarma, Sukhendu, *Origin and Growth of Christianity in Tripura*, *op.cit.*, p. 48

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 48

³⁷ Rangchak Mukumu (Golden Souvenir), *Borok Christians' Golden Jubilee 1938-1988*, p.132

³⁸ Debbarma, Sukhendu, *Rosella E.M. Bose and Christian Missions in Tripura* in the Proceeding of North East India History Association, p.207

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.208

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.208-209

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.209

⁴² Debbarma, Sukhendu, *Origin and Growth of Christianity in Tripura*, *op.cit.*, p.30

⁴³ Baptist Women New Zealand, *Woman of the Month: Rosalie Macgeorge (1859-1891)*, Beulah Wood, 01 February 2021, www.women.baptist.nz Last accessed on 18 December 2023.

⁴⁴ Baptist Women New Zealand, *Woman of the Month: Dr Nola Ivory (1904 1988)*, Beulah Wood, 05 January 2021, www.women.baptist.nz Last accessed on 21 November 2023.

⁴⁵ Debbarma, Sukhendu, *Origin and Growth of Christianity in Tripura*, *op.cit.*, p.85

⁴⁶ Rengsi, Esther. (2022). *The Lushais of Tripura: A Socio-Cultural Study (1910-2010)*, A Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment for the doctor of philosophy in History, TRIPURA University, p.155

remote villages.⁴⁷ Eventually, Dr Nola established the first medical centre in the village of Hachupara among the Reang, located in South Tripura, about three hours away from Agartala. She lived and worked there from 1956 until 1961. She acquired proficiency in the Reang language (*Kau Bru*) and translated a portion of the New Testament into Reang. As a result of her diligent work, seven young men and two women became Christian.⁴⁸ Another notable contribution was made by Dr Dorothy Daintree who after her retirement from the British Baptist Missionary Society came and rendered her services to the Darlong people of North Tripura in 1941-1943. Where numbers of death occurred reducing the Darlong population to 1000 in 1940-41.⁴⁹ The report details the demise of several young infants during that period due to transient ailments. So, a distant clinic was established in the village of Darlong, Darchawi, Tripura by Dr Dorothy Daintree. She facilitated the anti-hookworm camp and emphasised cleanliness and good sanitation. Dr Daintree suggested each home should dig a toilet hole and that the pigs should not be kept from roaming around the village.⁵⁰ In 1973, 28 years later the Governor of Tripura who was holding the charge of Assam and Manipur visited Darchawi and commented that nowhere in India had he seen a cleaner village and the Darchawi village was the most presentable village in the state.⁵¹

The contribution of Miss Marjorie Turner in bringing social transformation among the Lushai of Jampui Hills, North Tripura is worth mentioning. Health and hygiene was one area where her contribution is highly commendable. There was a great transformation and improvement in the field of sanitation and hygiene during her stay in Jampui Hills. The village people were taught the importance of regular bathing, cleaning one's feet before going to bed and most importantly how to clean themselves during their menstrual period. She would often visit houses to check whether the kitchen, utensils, cloth line etc were clean and see how they maintained themselves well. She also introduced observation of *Faina Hapta* or cleanliness week. The legacy of maintaining cleanliness and hygiene left by Miss Turner is carried forward by the Lushai youth of Jampui Hill. In December 2019 Vangmun village of Jampui Hill was declared as the cleanest village in Tripura.⁵² With the coming of Miss Turner in Vangmun, *Baptist Kohhran Hmeichhe Pawl* (BKHP) women organisation was founded on 15th November 1952. In April 1957 under her supervision and guidance Jampui Thalai Kristian Pawl (TKP), the first Lushai Christian youth organisation was also founded.⁵³

Women missionaries also made notable contributions to the field of education. The first school established by the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society was St. Paul's School in 1943 at Mission Compound, Agartala, the TBCU headquarters. The initiative was taken by Rev. M.J.Eade. Miss I. J. Thomson took over as the principal of the school at the end of the year till 1945 after Rev. M.J.Eade. In 1945, Miss Elleen F. Arnold took over as principal. At first, there were 12 boys and 2 girls in the boarding. All the students were from the villages. They were brought with high hopes that one day they would graduate and serve the mission. The school grew from strength to strength under the capable leadership of Miss Arnold. From class III it was upgraded to class VI and later developed into high school grades. She served the school for 14 years until she retired to New Zealand. According to Miss Arnold, the real aim of the school was to prepare the students for fuller living. So, handwork, art, woodwork and domestic science were included in the curriculum.⁵⁴

Impact of Christianity on indigenous tribal women of Tripura

Education: During the 19th century, while females from other regions of the country attended universities, young men and women from the indigenous tribal society of Tripura were unaware of formal education. It was Christian missionaries and evangelist teachers who introduced preliminary formal education to them in the 20th century. They opened primary schools in the remote areas where they were posted.

During the Thadou-Kuki Pioneer Mission's missionary work in Jampui Hill, Tripura, the mission established the school and the mission dispensary in Tlangsang village in Jampui Hill (which was then the Jampui presbytery's headquarters) in 1917. Sunday schools were also introduced. One middle English School (up to class VI) was established, headed by headmaster N. Luaia. Both Lushai Christians and non-Christians welcomed the introduction of modern education, and soon the majority of young Lushai men and women were able to read and write. It is noteworthy that the first Lushai postgraduate Pu Khawtinkhuma, was the product

⁴⁷ Baptist Women New Zealand, *Woman of the Month: Dr Nola Ivory (1904 1988)*, Beulah Wood, 05 January 2021, www.women.baptist.nz Last accessed on 21 November 2023.

⁴⁸ Baptist Women New Zealand, *Woman of the Month: Dr Nola Ivory (1904 1988)*, Beulah Wood, 05 January 2021, www.women.baptist.nz Last accessed on 21 November 2023.

⁴⁹ Tripura Gospel Centenary Souvenir, Tripura Gospel Centenary Celebration Organising Committee, 2011, p.93

⁵⁰ Darlong, Saithankhuma. (2019). *The Advent of Christianity to The Darlong People of Tripura and The Darlong People Today*, Self publication, pp. 121-122. Cited from Tripura Baptist Christian Union Golden Jubilee Souvenir, 1988, p. 14

⁵¹ Tripura Baptist Christian Union Golden Jubilee Souvenir, 1988, p. 14

⁵² Rengsi, Esther, *op.cit.*, p.159

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.157

⁵⁴ Debbarma, Sukhendu, *Origin and Growth of Christianity in Tripura*, *op.cit.*, p.78

of this school.⁵⁵ The mission also sent trained women nurses, such as Kapthiangi (a midwife), Miss Rochuhi (who had training in Calcutta), Miss Khami, and Lalnguri (a nurse), to serve in the mission dispensary in Tlangsang.⁵⁶

Earlier, the parents of the indigenous tribal society of Tripura did not favour sending their daughters to school. As they are required to perform household work such as cleaning the house, fetching water, cooking for the family, feeding domestic animals, caring for younger siblings while their parents are in the jhum, etc. With the coming of Christianity, girls are encouraged to enrol in schools and higher education. For seeking a high school education students from the remote had to travel to urban areas like Agartala. The establishment of St. Paul's School in Agartala in 1943 marked a significant milestone in this regard. This missionary school provided high school education and also offered affordable hostel services for students from rural areas at a low cost, such as Rs. 3 or 5 per month for food and lodging in the hostel.⁵⁷ This allowed children from remote villages to pursue their education beyond the primary level and obtain a high school degree. Furthermore, alongside their core academic curriculum, women were also trained to enhance their skills as proficient homemakers. This included teaching on improving kitchen gardening, maintaining good health and cleanliness, and developing sewing abilities.⁵⁸

Decision Making: As discussed earlier, women were not involved in the decision-making process at any level in the traditional indigenous tribal society. Even after embracing Christianity, women faced restriction from male counterpart to take part in church activities. This is evident by what Joy Smith (New Zealand Missionary to Tripura) wrote in her book, *"Some women who want to attend the Women's Bible teaching camps have been prevented from attending by their husbands or male family members. We hear such comments as 'The woman's place is in her home. There is no need to be gadding around to other villages to hear Miss Smith's teaching or the pastors teaching or anyone else. They can learn in their own home and in their own village. Since women are told in the Bible to be silent, why are they becoming so forward in their Bible teaching and spiritual talk? There is nothing in the Bible about women going out in groups or in one or two to pray.'"*⁵⁹

However, the arrival of female missionaries in Tripura and their endeavours also significantly contributed to the transformation of indigenous tribal women. Their activities had influenced them to preach, pray, sing and to learn how to read the Bible. Despite the opposition from their male counterpart, women with their babies on their back walked miles to attend women's meeting.⁶⁰ Miss Smith mentioned that *'God at that time was raising the standard of the women. When you went into a village with the gospel and the people became Christians, one of the first things you saw was the women being set free. Many of them used to feel they had no place or position. Their role, they thought was just to have babies, do the housework, and work in the fields. Religion was the man's responsibility, and in some cases the woman was not even thought to have a soul. She was getting to heaven on her husband's passport, as it were. Then I came on the scene. How encouraged the women were to see me travelling around from village to village. It opened their eyes to new possibilities. If Miss Smith can preach, pray and read the Bible in the church, they thought, there must be a place for us too.'*⁶¹ The introduction of education further enhance the outlook of the tribal women. Indigenous tribal Women in different parts of the state started to take part in decision-making, leadership etc. Today women can preach and pray at social gatherings. She can even preach in the church. There are a number of women who are children's Sunday school teachers and evangelist. Some women also go for theological studies and training. There are Christian women in the administration of the state as well. They are, Smt. Swapna Debbarma (Member of Legislative Assembly), Smt. Nandita Debbarma Reang (Member of Legislative Assembly) and Mrs. Dolly Reang (Member of District Council).

Health Care: The incorporation of health care along with missionary activities was not a new phenomenon in Christian missions. Before the 1940s there were very few medical facilities available in Tripura. The tribals were ignorant of medical facilities and were animistic and fatalistic. Little or nothing was understood by them about the fundamental basis of health and hygiene.⁶² When the missionaries and evangelists went to work among the indigenous tribal people, they took first aid kits with them or in some places village dispensaries were

⁵⁵ Darlong, Lalhuala. (2011). *How the gospel of Jesus Christ First Entered into the dark state of Tripura*, Tripura Gospel Centenary, Souvenir 1911-2011, Vanghmun, Jampui Tripura, p.89

⁵⁶ Lianzuala, C. (2018). *JSBA Chanchin leh Rawngbawlina, Jampui Sakhan Baptist Association*, Jampui, North Tripura, p.21

⁵⁷ Souvenir Bru Christian Golden Jubilee (T.B.C.U) 1945 – 1995, p.8

⁵⁸ Debbarma, Sukhendu, Christianity and Social Change, *op.cit.*, p.295

⁵⁹ Smith, Joy. (2003). *Joy to the World: A Journey With God*, Daystar Publications Trust, Auckland, New Zealand, p.88

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.88

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.87

⁶² Debbarma, Sukhendu, Origin and Growth of Christianity in Tripura, *op.cit.*, p.85

opened. They were responsible for introducing a modern system of medicine and health care.⁶³ They taught the people about personal hygiene practices such as cutting hair, and nails, regular bathing, women cleaning themselves during their menstrual period etc. They also organized regular clean-up activities in the surrounding areas of the school, instilling a sense of cleanliness and hygiene in the community.

The establishment of Mission Hospital at Mission Compound, Agartala in 1945 had a great impact on the indigenous tribal people of Tripura. It acts not only as a place for treatment but for training the midwives and nurses. They were trained to provide better healthcare within their communities which has helped in reducing infant mortality rates. As Miss Smith has rightly mentioned, *"I taught the nurses midwifery because I knew this would be particularly useful in the villages where old women usually delivered the babies.....The midwives would cut the umbilical cord with any sharp thing available, such as a piece of broken glass or a piece of bamboo. They would then use anything available to tie the cord with. If a labour was obstructed or delayed they would push with great force on the abdomen in an effort to expel the infant. This often led to a ruptured uterus and the death of both mother and baby....A woman normally had numerous children, but many babies died during the first few years of life. Human life was cheap, especially the lives of women, who were looked upon as chattels...It was only later, as the gospel began to spread through the villages, that women began to realise their true value as persons. So it was vital for my nursing students to have a thorough grounding in hygiene and in the management of labour and deliveries and I'm happy to say procedures in the villages have improved considerably over the last fifty years."*⁶⁴

Women Organisation: In the traditional society of Tripura, there was no organisation for the women. With the coming of Christianity and through education the consciousness of the women began to change. They started to have exclusive women's organisations. After the formation of the Jampui Presbytery in 1918 some women felt the need to have separate women fellowship. From the 1920s separate women's fellowship was occasionally held. The coming of Miss Turner missionary from the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society had added impetus to the life and condition of the women of Jampui Hill. In Vanghmun village, Baptist Kohhran Hmeichhe Pawl (BKHP) i.e., Baptist Women group was founded in 1952. Women's Bible classes were also started.⁶⁵ On May 3, 1953, when a few groups of women had an informal meeting in Behliangchhip village felt the need to form a women's body within the church. Meanwhile, they further learnt about the Women's Conference which was held in the neighbouring state of Mizoram. Some women came to Miss Turner to discuss organising a convention. Miss Turner was very enthusiastic about organising the Joint Women Convention in Jampui Hill. On 4th June 1955, the first Women's Joint Convention was held in Behliangchhip village. It was there Jampui Sakhan Baptist Hmeichhe Pawl i.e., Jampui Sakhan Baptist Church Women Group was founded as an organised body for women.⁶⁶ In the first convention three resolutions were passed; Family devotion should be started under the responsibility of a mother, women should take up the responsibility of decorating and cleaning the church as when needed and Jampui BKHP convention should be organised regularly.⁶⁷ The newly formed women's organised body had to endure severe criticisms and confrontations from different corners. The main opposition came from the then-male church leaders who claimed that the active involvement of women in church activities was not necessary. Despite all those hurdles the organisation has grown from strength to strength even today.

Gradually over the years, women's societies were formed in other places of Tripura, such as in Kailashahar Presbytery, Central Presbytery (undivided) and South Presbytery (undivided) in the late 1950s and 1960s. These societies had their respective office bearers and executive committee members. The societies did not work separately but rather cooperated with the church in different fields and activities. Their main cooperation with the church was in the form of giving financial support.⁶⁸ During those periods associations under TBCU were formed according to geographical area. Hence, there are five Associations, such as Jampui, Kailashahar, Khowai-Kamalpur, Central and South. Each jurisdiction was very large and consisted of different subdivisions and tribes.

Tripura Baptist Women's Society (TBWS): When the women missionaries of New Zealand noticed the growing zeal and enthusiasm of women in different churches of Tripura, they saw the need to bring all of the women's groups together under one banner. Miss O.J. Kemp, who was then working in the Kulai dispensary near Ambassa, presented a proposal to the TBCU Assembly held at Agartala in February 1961. The proposal was not accepted, but in the Assembly held at Betchhora on 6-7 February 1962, it was approved. Thereafter,

⁶³ Pariyaram M. Chacko, *Christianity and Urbanization in North East India*, in J. Puthenpurakal, *Impact of Christianity on North East India*, Vendrame Institute Publication, Shillong, 1996, p. 420

⁶⁴ Smith, Joy, *op.cit.*, p.51

⁶⁵ Rengsi, Esther, *op.cit.*, p. 158

⁶⁶ Lalrinkimi, *A Brief History of Jampui-Sakhan Baptist Kohhran Hmeichhe Pawl (JSBKHP)(Jampui-Sakhan Baptist Women Society)*, in TBWS Golden Jubilee Souvenir (1962-2012), p. 64

⁶⁷ Rengsi, Esther, *op.cit.*, p. 158

⁶⁸ Sailo, Laldhawmi, *A brief History of Tripura Baptist Women's Society*, in TBWS Golden Jubilee Souvenir (1962-2012), p. 14

the Tripura Baptist Women's Society (TBWS) as an apex body was formed to organise all the women groups of Tripura to take greater roles and responsibilities in the church activities.⁶⁹

The establishment of the Tripura Baptist Women's Society (TBWS) has played a significant role in empowering the indigenous tribal women of Tripura. The organisation facilitated the unification of women's groups from different churches affiliated with TBCU. A *handful of rice* was one of the activities practised by the Christian women of Tripura. Initially, from Jampui Presbytery in Tripura.⁷⁰ Over time, Christian women throughout Tripura practised this handful of rice. It is a handful of rice that is set aside every time a meal is about to be prepared. The rice is collected from house to house by collectors assigned to this task. Once the rice is sold, the cash is sent to the church headquarters. It is a major source of income for the church. It was started by a Khasi woman in the Khasi hills. Eventually, all the churches in the Khasi hills started to notice its worth and followed it. It gradually spread to Mizoram in 1915⁷¹ and to Tripura.

Traditional Costume: Apart from rice funds some churches also do other things to raise funds. For instance, talented women of the church, work together to produce *rignai/rinai* (lower garment of the women) or *risa* (upper garment of the women) in their respective churches once a year. All these rignai/rinai are collected every year and sold at the annual meeting. For example, Sadar North Baptist Women's Society received Rs. 2,38,000 in total from this project.⁷² This project not only raises funds but also revives the traditional costume with a modern touch.

At one point of time in Tripura after joining the Indian Union in 1949 indigenous people were influenced by Bengali culture the young girls started wearing the *sari* that Bengali women wear in instead of *rignaiborok* which is their traditional dress. In this Twipra Student Federation (TSF) which was formed in 1968 played an important role. They went to different schools in Tripura and urged the indigenous girls to wear traditional dress to protect the culture. Their slogan became popular *Rignaiborok ma kanai* (all have to wear *rignaiborok*).⁷³ The preservation of the costume was also greatly aided by Christian women. The Christian women participate in conventions such as the women's convention, youth convention and other gathering. These gatherings provide a platform for the women to dress formally in traditional costumes.

Civil Society Organisation: The Civil Society Organisation for Women has also emerged through the impact of Christianity as an important liaison between people and the government in every society. Among the Lushai of Tripura, to ensure the welfare and uplift the status of the womenfolk, a Mohila Samity was formed in 1960.⁷⁴ The Samity received innumerable assistance from the Government of Tripura. Adult Literary Drive was also carried out by the Samity and many women learned the art of reading and writing through this programme. But the Samity became inactive and gradually stopped functioning. In 1997, Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl (MHIP) was formed and later renamed Tripura Mizo Women Welfare Society.⁷⁵ This society has taken various activities to promote the welfare of women and children. The Catholic Church in Tripura formed the Integrated Human Development Program (IHDp) in 1990. It focused on the less privileged, marginalized and Tripura women in particular. Under this program, Self-Help Groups (SHG) were formed. By 1999 there were 155 SHGs, out of which 90 were women groups.⁷⁶

Marriage: The coming of Christianity brought some changes to the traditional marriage system. Christian marriage is always held in high reverence. It is held in the church in the daytime, unlike traditional marriage which was held in the bride's home at night/dawn. The marriage ceremony was solemnized by the priest/pastors. A bottle of fruit syrup replaced the traditional practice of carrying bottles of rice beer. Instead of wine, tea is served.

Prohibition of arag / chuak (rice beer)

Christianity forbade the practice of brewing and drinking rice beer known as *arag*, which is one of the most significant practices among the indigenous tribal community of Tripura. Brewing *arag/chuak* (rice beer) was mostly done by the womenfolk. Missionaries or native preachers forbade the drinking of rice beer. According

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 15

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 26

⁷¹ Compendium, The Baptist Church of Mizoram (1903-2003), Serkawn, Lunglei, 2003, p. 128

⁷² Debbarma, Anjali, *A Brief Report of Sadar North Baptist Women's Society* in TBWS Golden Jubilee Souvenir (1962-2012), p. 78

⁷³ Interview with Dhananjay Debbarma, ex-General Secretary of TSF in Mainul Islam, *Role of Twipra Students federation (TSF) for the social change in Tripura*, Quest Journal Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science Volume 10, issue 4 (2022), p. 50

⁷⁴ Rengsi, Esther. *op.cit.*, p. 109

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 110

⁷⁶ Sequeira, Marina, *Journey of the Catholic Church in Empowering of the Deprived in Tripura: A Case Study of JUST* in David R. Syiemlieh and Ivan D'Silva, SVD (eds) *Legacy of Catholic Church in Tripura (1996-2021): Pathways Ahead*, Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (ISPCK), Delhi, 2021, p.93

to their observations, the missionaries believed that the people were lazier or less eager to work as a result of their heavy usage of rice beer. After becoming intoxicated, the males in particular caused havoc in the family. As a result, the missionaries persuaded the Christians to abstain from drinking rice beer. Today, however, tea has taken its place and is used on all occasions everywhere in place of rice beer. Although brewing of rice beer by the women is gradually declining, the practice of drinking rice beer among the Christians has not fully disappeared. Many continue to consume even though their churches prohibited them from drinking.

To conclusion, Christianity and education has played a significant role in driving social change. The social change however did not take place overnight; it was gradual. Through education Christian women gain knowledge and skills enabling them to challenge traditional gender roles and contribute to the development of their communities.