

How American Baptists spread the word in a British Raj outpost

In Nagaland, missionaries stand witness to a remarkable transformation by which tribals became an assertive community of the Christian faith

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The Jesuits and the Salesian sisters may run some of the most prominent educational institutes (the Don Boscos and the Little Flowers) in Nagaland, but the American Baptists were the first to set foot in this remote Northeast frontier, as far back as 1839.

Miles Bronson who grew up in a small town in New York State set sail for Assam in 1839 and trekked up to Namsang village (now in Arunachal Pradesh's Tirap district) to begin mission work.

He was forced to relocate to Nowgong in Assam in 1841, because of ill health and the death of his sister Rhoda who used to help him, des-

pite a plea from locals that he continue running the school he had started. Through education, health camps and other mission work, the Baptist churches stand witness to a remarkable transformation by which Naga tribals became an assertive community of the Christian faith.

In *Christianity and Politics in Tribal India: Baptist Missionaries and Naga Nationalism*, G. Kanato Chophy explains how Nagaland within a century of missionary contact became a predominantly Baptist State.

The other stories he traces are the success of American Baptist missions of the 19th century in an area then under British rule, the role of the Baptist church in Nagaland today, particularly in the light of the

fact that the Naga dispute is yet to be sorted out, and the impact Christianity has had on tribal life.

A pause for Konyaks

The American Baptist mission's first Naga contacts, says Chophy, were the Nocte, who are ethnically related to the Konyak Nagas and are a Scheduled Tribe in Arunachal Pradesh. The Konyak and related ethnic groups were spread across the Indo-Burmese border. "Devout Konyak Baptists believe that had the American Baptist mission work continued unimpeded in Namsang in the 19th century, the Konyak would have been the most advanced of all the Naga tribes." But Bronson's work was interrupted, and as it turned out, the Naga tribes that first came

under the influence of American missionaries "reaped greater political and socio-economic dividends in the post-independence period – the Ao, Angami and Tangkhul Nagas being cases in point."

Critics of the Baptist mission, however, might say that its exit from Namsang saved a traditional culture from being wiped out, for "modernity vs. tribal culture is a thorny issue" in Nagaland which became a State in 1963.

Church and politics

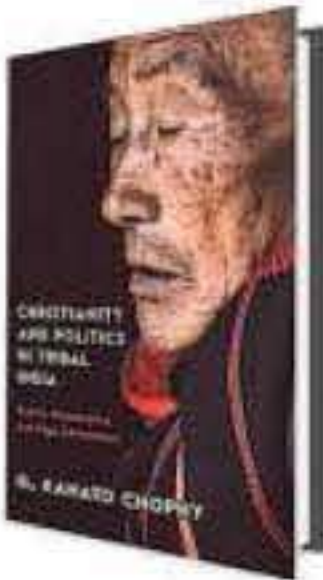
The Nagaland Baptist Church Council is headquartered in the heart of Kohima and is one of the most influential in Northeast India. Since its inception in 1937, the NBCC has "intervened on numerous occasions to

settle ethnic disputes in the State and continues to engage with the protracted Naga political issue." There's been some criticism, however, of the NBCC's role as arbiter. Chophy points out that besides its influence on culture and politics in Nagaland, the Baptist church is sometimes accused of infringing on personal rights, like backing the liquor ban.

For those who still abide by the Kruna, a traditional religion followed by a substantial number of Angami Nagas who live in and around Kohima, the local rice beer or *zu* is indispensable in social and religious transactions.

Chophy visits the home of the custodian of the traditional faith, the *phichu*, in Viswema village and

learns that his three sons have now joined the Catholic, Baptist and Revivalist faiths respectively. At his home are several relics of the past, including a WWII helmet, ceramic sake bottles – the Japanese had crossed the village en route to Kohima in 1944 – and a large wooden vat to ripen *zu*. Looking to the future, Chophy cites the example of Dimapur, the gateway to Nagaland and a melting pot, where Christians comprise Baptists, Catholics, Protestants and others. He argues that Naga Baptists, who are in a majority, "must perform the difficult task of harmonising their faith with emerging realities." In his remarkable book, Chophy shines a light on the social history of a fascinating region cut off from mainland India.



Christianity and Politics in Tribal India: Baptist Missionaries and Naga Nationalism

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