How American Baptists spread the word in a British Raj outpost

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

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A pause for Konyak

The American Baptist mission's first Nagi contact, says Chophy, were the Ngeko, who are ethnically related to the Konyak Nagas and are a Scheduled Tribe in Arunachal Pradesh. The Konyak and Naga tongues are spread across the Indo-Burman 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," Bar 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 "mythology, culture and cultural life is a living tissue" 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 NBC 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 NBC'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 HPV ban.

For those who still abide by the Krana, a traditional religion followed by a substantial number of Angami Naga 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 pichiu, in Visvema village and learns that his three sons have now joined the Catholic, Baptist and Hindu 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 Missions and Nagaland Nationalism
G. Kanato Chophy
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