

# Primal Vision and Hermeneutics in North-East India—A Protestant Tribal View

J. L. ROY\*

The word "hermeneutics" is derived from the Greek *hermeneus*, which in its turn is derived from Hermes, the divine messenger of the gods and patron of eloquence. Hermeneutics is thus the science and art of interpretation, especially of ancient writings which were held to contain divine truth. The mythology of Hermes as the herald of the gods is full of meaning for an existentialist philosopher like Heidegger. For him language is not a game which we play, making up the rules as we go along; it constitutes our humanity which he defines as the place where the "being" speaks. Language is the instrument through which "being" itself communicates with our existence and imparts understanding.

Hermeneutics, therefore, as I understand it, is the task of transposing the biblical message from one situation to another—an attempt to understand how the Word of God, which was written and lived out some 2000 or more years ago, can command obedience in today's contexts. The hermeneutical task, therefore, consists for theology in nothing else but in understanding the Gospel as addressed to modern man.

Hermeneutics nowadays no more remains a technical word of Christian monopoly, for it can be used for any kind of knowledge and certainly for all religious writings and scriptures of all faiths.

With a view to formulating some idea about the relation between primal vision and hermeneutics in North-East India from a Protestant Tribal viewpoint, it will be necessary to investigate the pre-Christian society, the Christian movement and its impact on society before Independence and after.

## Historical Perspective

In the pre-Christian society the tribesmen developed certain notions about God, man and the world. Among the Khasis God is known by different names—God the Lord and master of the Universe, God the creator and cosmic force, God all encompassing, filling the heaven and earth, God the Giver and Determiner of life, God the Dispenser, God the Sustainer. God is the cause of everything that has been, that is,

\* The Revd. J. L. Roy works for the Synod of the Khasi Jaintia Presbyterian Church.

and that will be, and out of that cause comes man into this world. In that great plan and design man has a place and an allotted part to play; he has a destiny and a vision. He is a created being but a creator above all creatures. He comes out of the righteousness of God and therefore he must act righteously, live righteously and earn that righteousness so that on completion of this life journey he would go to *Ka Ing U Blei* to enjoy betel-nut eating there along with his own people.

The Khasis believe that there is a close and direct communication between God and man and that there is a covenant between them from the beginning of time. This relation has been depicted in such stories as *U Sohpetbneng*, *U Lum Diengiei* and *Ka Krem Lamet ka Krem Latang*. *U Sohpetbneng* symbolises a relation between God and man through a golden ladder of communication. That relation was snapped and man found himself in deepening crisis. *U Lum Diengiei* is a peak and on top of it there grew another tree which encompassed the whole earth in complete darkness. This peak symbolises the ever-deepening crisis in men's relation with God. *Ka Krem Lamet ka Krem Latang* symbolises man's reconciliation with God, woven round a parable of how in that Dance of all creatures the sun and the moon, regarded as brother and sister, also danced and this was jeered at by all. The sun in shame went off to hide himself inside a cave called *Ka Krem Lamet ka Krem Latang* and with his withdrawal the earth was in complete darkness. At this juncture a cock was used as a messenger and with his reappearance there was light again symbolising man's reconciliation with God.

A Khasi had a loose notion of the world that he lived in as the centre of the world, which implied that what a Khasi thought and did affected the well-being of the world. So far no scientific investigation in this respect has been undertaken and so in the absence of reliable sources we may infer that this notion arose out of one's patriotism.

Relation with God being snapped, a Khasi found to his dismay that he could no longer speak to God face to face, no longer seek his light and guidance. In this state of deep agony God promised a Khasi that he would continue to converse with him through signs and symbols, through rituals and sacrifices which should be observed from womb to tomb.

Years passed and the gap of knowledge in the way of performing the sacrifices and reading the signs widened between uncles and nephews, and in most families offering of sacrifices was discontinued for a Khasi would not dare do a thing without first rationalising, and then weighing the pros and cons.

Rabon Singh, writing in 1901 at a time when Christians formed only one per cent of the population, stated, obviously referring to the pre-Christian period, that the decadence in observing the sacrifices duly prescribed was due to this gap of knowledge which went on increasing as the years passed by and that a Khasi found himself in such a hopeless state that he regarded himself as a child unable to perpetuate the

religious sanctions of his forefathers. It is erroneous to say that the response to Christianity was due to the preparatory ground already made by the Khasi Tribal religion. Further research will disprove this. The response is obviously the result of a void caused by this gap of knowledge.

I have treated the Khasis in greater detail than other tribal groups because of my more intimate knowledge of them, being a Khasi myself.

Let us turn to the pre-Christian society in Nagaland. The Nagas believe in the existence of one supreme God, a God of goodness and humility and thus Nagas are monotheist, but this spiritual repose is disturbed by the evil spirits who also cause sufferings, sickness, misfortune, and death. In order to ward off these sufferings, people propitiate the evil spirits by offering eggs, fowls, pigs, dogs and other domestic animals. Among the Nagas there is a belief that a man does not die with the death of his body, but, if he leads a good and worthy life upon this earth, he goes to a higher place of life. Among the Ao-Nagas there is the possibility of life's existence after the disintegration of the physical body. Life continues after death in the village called "Asayim." There is a god of death who is also the final judge of human conduct. This is contrary to what W.C. Smith wrote when he said, "Concerning the future the Ao's ideas are vague, weak and shadowy."<sup>1</sup>

Like all animistic religions, that of the Garos consists of the belief in a multitude of beneficent and malevolent spirits. The destinies of men from birth to death are governed by a host of divinities whose anger must be appeased by sacrifice. The main features of Garo religious observance are the sacrifice of animals and birds and drinking.

About the Manipuri, one writer says, "In their own country they appear to oscillate between the wild paganism, unsophisticated manners and savage customs of their hill cousins, and a desire to be esteemed worthy of the beautiful visionary history which the Indian epics have been so kind as to assign to them. Manipur was one of the most favoured of the regions visited by Arjun during his self-imposed punishment of twelve years wandering in Exile. He remained some time in the beautiful Valley and espoused the daughter of the king and another maiden, and again in the wake of sacrificial horse, he re-entered Manipur and found it flourishing wonderfully under the dominion of his son by the Manipuri princess."

### **The Christian Movement**

The Christian movement among the hill peoples of North-East India began almost one hundred and fifty years ago. In the Khasi Hills the movement actually started in 1841 which resulted in the set-

<sup>1</sup> W. C. Smith, *The Ao Naga Tribe of Assam*, London, 1925, p. 167.

ting up of the Welsh Calvinistic Mission. The American Baptists remained confined to the Brahmaputra valley espousing the cause of the Assamese language and entered the Naga Hills only after 1876 when the Hills had come under some kind of administration. The first Christian Mission to be set up in Manipur (tribal areas) was the American Baptist in 1894, three years after Manipur administration was taken over by the British. In 1865 administration entered the Garo Hills and the American Baptists followed in 1867 and their headquarters were shifted to Tura. In the Lushai Hills also Christianity entered close upon the heels of administration in 1890s. The Indo-Burma Pioneer Mission was admitted into the Kuki areas of Manipur. The First Catholic Mission in the Hills was German. It came towards the end of the 19th century to Shillong, and during World War I was replaced by the Italians. The area of operation remained unchanged. In the thirties, it got entry into the Garo Hills chiefly through the patronage of the Governor, Michael Keane. It has grown in the Mizo and the Naga Hills only since Independence. Until Independence, the administration did not enter the Frontier Tracts beyond the Inner Line, hence, there was no Christian Mission in these Hills. It was thus apparent that it was not the Church which entered the hills first. Rather the Administration entered first. It would not be wrong to say that whereas in Nineteenth Century Bengal Christianity came as an overwhelming intellectual movement, in the eastern Hills it came through administrative policy.

## **The Impact of the Christian Movement**

### **I. Before Independence**

It is a natural process that when two different cultures meet, there is interaction which results either in synthesis or confrontation. Western culture came along with western Theology and, being of a higher culture, the result would have been the supplanting of the tribal culture. But the tribal culture had its own inert strength and it survived against the onslaught of a higher culture. The Church, Protestant as well as Roman Catholic, operated under especially difficult circumstances and had to make some adjustments. The Church retained some of the tribal culture and attempted to remove some elements which were revolting to Christian principles. The coming of the missionaries had quickened the process of westernisation which was visible in changing the life-style in dress, food, appearance, use of medicines, care of homes and one's health and avoidance of liquor and other intoxicants which were harmful to life. In fact the material culture of the tribals had changed through the opening of schools in tribal areas: the tribals were exposed to education and this helped them to shed their exclusiveness and as a result of this an "intelligentsia clan" was formed which in turn accentuated the process of westernisation.

The social and cultural dislocation could not be placed squarely on the shoulders of the missionaries, as the Government also by its executive orders had a share in the process. With regard to the chiefs

in Lushai Hills (now Mizoram) it may be said that a social and cultural dislocation was caused by Christianity. The Chief's position was connected with the indigenous customary rites. The temporal powers in a traditional society were linked to this position. The conversion of a chief would automatically lead to the loss of this ritualistic privilege and where the chief was endowed with real temporal power, a great resistance to Christianity could naturally be expected. Thus, in the Lushai Hills, where Christianity has achieved the highest record of success in India, the chiefs, according to McCall, "being, on the Lushai standards, comparatively rich, were less ready to give up their standards, their Zu (rice beer) and their sacrifices." This may also account for the belated success of Christianity in the Naga Hills. Among the eastern Nagas, particularly the Konyaks, who were under the greatest of authoritarianism, resistance to Christianity was considerable. Even today three Siemships are non-Christian. Traditional religious rites are so strongly attached to the Khyrim Siemship that the incumbent cannot afford to change his faith even though most of his close relatives might have done so.

## 2. *Traumatic Change Consequent Upon British Annexation*

The question that is often posed is whether the Government or Christianity is responsible for the demise of social customs and usages. Christianity is always blamed. Dr F. S. Downs in his paper relating to the change consequent upon British Annexation has argued that Christianity should not be blamed. He cites one example of how the imposition of alien values, not by a religious organisation but by a Government, can affect an entire culture. As soon as the British annexed the Hill areas, they prohibited inter-village raiding and the associated practice of head-hunting. For many of the tribes, especially the Nagas and Kuki tribes, head-hunting was not mainly a matter of taking trophies in war, but was considered essential to the image of manhood and was a necessary part of certain ceremonies that ensured the welfare of the family. The principal role of the men, and the basic social institution of the village were closely related to raiding and head-hunting. J. P. Mills has observed that by putting a stop to head-hunting the British Government profoundly changed the mode of life of all the Tribes in the administered area of the Naga Hills. R. N. Haldipur symbolises head-hunting as the very core of the Naga culture based upon the concept of fertility. It was the mainspring of their lives. The aesthetic life, full of inspired dances and songs and colourful dresses, is a response to their adventurous spirit.

Alemchiba Ao sees a close connection between head-hunting and the morung. Christianity did not approve because of its association with religious ceremonies, drinking, warfare and a generally hedonistic life-style, but its disapproval cannot account for the disappearance of the institution in non-Christian villages. It is rather the imposition of an alien value system which is responsible for its disappearance.

Reaction to the Church came from persons like Jeebon Roy and others, who considered the progress of Christianity as a challenge to the traditional culture of the Khasis and a threat to tribal religion. This cultural awakening found its expression through a movement initiated by Jeebon Roy and this resulted in the founding of the *Seng Khasi* a revivalistic, anti-Christian organisation. Sib Charan, Radhon Singh Berry, Hormu Roy Diengdoh were closely associated with the *Seng Khasi*.

### 3. *After Independence*

The 70,000 square miles expanse of the North-Eastern Hills are inhabited by nearly 3 million tribesmen belonging to more than 100 district tribes and sub-tribes. There is thus a very rich assembly of cultures and forms of social organisation in the hills. The Tribesmen have been exposed to all kinds of change, inducing influence in their socio-cultural life for a long time especially since the consolidation of British rule in North-East India. A great many of these influences emanated from sources and agencies outside the immediate resources of indigenous socio-cultural traditions. The pace of social change has been rapid after Independence. There are today tribes in the hill areas at diverse levels of achievements and modernisation. The roots of many of the changes can be traced to the end of Colonial rule which caused many sections of the emergent educated tribesmen to search for a secure identity in the new scheme of things. Nagaland since the 1950s and Mizoram since the 1960s have come to be widely known for intense and violent disorder. And the socio-political issues are not fully resolved.

The creation of new states and union territories has opened up new avenues of social and economic change. In fact, the altered political situation following Independence is among the major contributing factors to social change among the hill tribesmen of North-East India. There are now new bases of identity, hopes, aspirations and frustrations as well.

The altered political situation apart, the change in the character of Governmental commitment with an accent on development in spheres such as education, economy, transport, and communication and health services has also paved the way for rapid transformation. In an area like Arunachal the massive induction of administrative resources after Independence is largely responsible for much of the change among tribesmen hitherto untouched by the forces of modernisation.

In the wake of Independence one finds the emergence of a new trend in the realm of tribal identity. It is the attempt at crystallisation of ethnic identity on an expanded level, but cutting across the former barriers of village, tribe and language. The classic example of this process is offered by the Naga group which is an amalgam of 20 distinct tribes. Mizos followed suit. For the tribals this has been a way of responding to the new demand for externalisation of socio-political

relationships. The phenomenon is different from sheer tribalism which implies withdrawal and unwillingness on the part of a small community to explore the possibilities of expanding the socio-political relationship. Many people seemed to be perturbed by so-called pan-tribalism or tribal regionalism. But identity information at levels higher and more expansive than those of minuscule cultural communities could be viewed as an effective way in which the tribesmen might resolve the minority complex. There is much talk of bringing the "fringe" communities into the national mainstream. One poses the question of what constitutes "mainstream." It is a question of identity, then the hill tribesmen belong to the mainstream—but if "mainstream" implies adoption and sharing of certain cultural traditions and values of the dominant society, say the Hindu society, then most of the hill tribesmen are apart from the mainstream.

The intelligentsia are the people who will lead and articulate the opinion of the people. Contrary to popular notions, the educated and modernised tribesmen do not opt out of their respective cultural milieux. In many places in North-East India and Arunachal, it is the educated people who have been found to display a conscious commitment to their society and cultural values.

One of the burning problems related to the preservation of identity is that of "foreign nationals." Little has been written on this issue which has agitated the minds of the people of this hitherto neglected region—the influx of foreign nationals and the fear of becoming a minority in their homeland of Assam, the apprehension of being swamped by "outsiders" in Meghalaya; grievances of step-motherly treatment meted out by the Centre to the Meitei Manipuris; these are indeed genuine fears. In Assam the genesis might be traced to the Line System introduced by the Government in the 30s. All along the River Brahmaputra there were rich alluvial soils which remained virgin and without cultivation. There was an urgent need of stepping up food production in the State. With this end in view the Government threw these areas open to the people of Mymensingh and West Bengal for increasing food production. Within a few years of their arrival food production went up, but along with increased food production there was a sudden increase in the number of people coming from outside Assam who in the course of years entrenched themselves in Assam. When partition came, these people remained in Assam, learned the language and settled down in Assam as a result of which the population equilibrium was tilted. Most of the best lands in some districts like Nowgong were in the hands of Muslims from either East Bengal or Mymensingh. It is unfortunate that no proper study of the outcome of the Line System has been undertaken so far. What bits of information I have collected were drawn from personal knowledge during my association with the Assam Government.

Dr. R. K. Raj, Reader N.E.H.U., has made a study of the trends of population growth of Meghalaya based on data culled from the 1971 census:

## *Population Trends in Meghalaya and India*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Population (in lakhs)</i>		<i>Growth rates in per cent</i>	
	<i>Meghalaya</i>	<i>India</i>	<i>Meghalaya</i>	<i>India</i>
1951	6.06	3610.88	8.97	13.31
1961	7.69	4392.35	27.03	21.51
1971	10.12	5479.50	31.50	24.75

This sudden increase in the growth of the population of Meghalaya is not only due to the high birth rate but may be due to heavy influx of foreign nationals and immigrants from other parts of the country. From the above Table the population trend in Meghalaya shows that the State's population has increased at a faster rate than the country's since 1951. For the high rate of growth, the main causes seem to be the heavy influx of foreign nationals from erstwhile Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and Nepal since the fifties and the inflow of population from other states of India to engage in agriculture, trade and transport and many activities and for working in the Central Government offices which are located in Shillong. According to the writer, this rapid population growth poses a threat to socio-economic development. Meghalaya being a hilly area and having only 15 per cent land available for cultivation and the locals being mainly tribals, there are fears that, because of the influx of foreign nationals, they may lose their identity. Such problems do not exist in Nagaland, Mizoram, Arunachal as these states make use of the Inner Line regulation, which acts as a brake on any infiltration by outsiders. In Manipur the problem is that of infiltration by the Nepalese who have established themselves in some parts of Manipur. The problems may exist in the Garo Hills to a greater degree than it exists in other parts of Meghalaya. There is large-scale infiltration of foreign nationals in Tripura. The mathematical calculation may not be precise, but it gives some indication of the extent of infiltration.

### **Conclusion**

On the basis of the investigation made, which is incomplete and subject to many errors, I venture to bring some of my findings to bear on the relation between primal vision and hermeneutics.

#### *1. The use of religious symbols*

Our whole attitude towards mythology has to be re-examined in the light of modern biblical studies. It calls for the separation of myths and symbols in the Bible from real revelation. The next step would be a revaluation of non-Christian mythology. Mascall says that all assertions about God are grossly inadequate insofar as they apply concepts to Him. "A false mental image of God," says William Temple "may be more idolatrous than a false metal image." Myths,

dogmas, symbols are mere channels towards the attainment of the ineffable, incomprehensible, unknowable Absolute.

(a) *Sohpeibneng* appears to me to be a creation story in another form. It speaks of the fall of man as due to avarice and pride. The creation story in the Bible speaks of man as having been made in the image of God which presupposes a divine origin. After the fall, man needs to be restored to God. This analogy will help us to bring into focus the work of Christ in the world today bringing people of all realms to the saving knowledge of Christ.

(b) The symbol of a cock in Khasi sacrifice can be made more meaningful as we bring to play the work of Christ as Mediator between God and man. But there is a difference. The service of a cock was summoned by the people in the hour of crisis but the service of our Lord Jesus Christ was voluntary for it springs out of God's love for us. The work of the sacrificial cock foreshadows the work of Christ which has found completion in the cross.

(c) The idea of the "hereafter" among the Nagas can be related to Christian faith. This belief in existence of life after death has exercised a tremendous influence on the behaviour patterns of the Ao Naga people as after death there is reward and punishment in the next world. This can be linked with the life, death and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and of the judgement to come which will serve as corrective to man's life.

## 2. *Some issues*

(i) *Foreign nationals*: What is our Christian attitude to this highly perplexing problem? How can we solve it? Should it be based on humanitarian grounds or some other grounds? What constitutes our self-identity as Christians?

(ii) *Amalgamation of the tribes*: Is this purely a political idea, to gain a common forum? In spite of our cultural distinctiveness, are we not members of the Body of Christ?