

Learning from the Unitarians of the Khasi Hills and the Brahma Samaj of India

**By Rev. Ginger Luke
August 27, 2006**

If we were Unitarians living in the Khasi Hills of Northeast India, all the way north—north of Bangladesh—in the state of Meghalaya, India, we would be preparing for the new year. (I am told by UU minister John Rex in a report of his visit to the Khasi Hills). ¹From August 18 until September 18th we would each night gather at the home of one of our member families for a worship service that would end in a blessing of the household and then a potluck dinner. We would be cleaning each of our houses so they were spotless as a symbol of the inner purification that each of us works on during this month. We would be renewing ourselves and our community. And on September 18th we would celebrate an official state holiday. Banks and schools would be closed and Unitarians would spend the day together in religious observance, celebration and feasting. And the holiday is the anniversary of Hajom Kissor Singh holding the first Unitarian service in the state of Meghalaya, India—September 18, 1887—one hundred and nineteen years ago.

1887—Grover Cleveland was President of the United States. Louis Pasteur had just recently developed a vaccine for rabies. Alexander Graham Bell, Henry Ford, and the Wright Brothers were all “doing their thing.”

The people of the Khasi Hills were tribal people with a traditional animistic religion. When the British, who had occupied India in 1857 discovered that the people of the Khasi were not Hindu or Muslim, they sent in Christian missionaries—mostly Welsh Calvinist missionaries. These missionaries quickly wrote down the Khasi Hills language so they could

translate the Bible into this language. Hajom Kissor Singh, who was born in 1865 (at the end of our Civil War) was sent to missionary school and converted to Christianity at 15. As Kissor Singh studied and read the bible he became disenchanted with the Calvinist faith wanting more of a religion of Jesus than he was hearing from the Calvinists and wanting a “Religion of One God” –not a trinity.

Rev. John Buehrens tells the story this way, “Hajom Kissor Singh, rose up and said to the Calvinists, “Thank you, for introducing us to Jesus, to his spiritual teachings and fearless moral example; very inspiring. Only one small question: Why do you want us to believe so many things about him? Why not just do what he said to do-treat all people as sisters and brothers, children of the one God, the one he called Father, that our tribal religion called Mother, that the Muslims call Allah and the Hindus have so many names for?” And the missionaries, of course, said, “Heretic! We know your kind, back in Wales! Why, you’re a Unitarian!” To which Kissor replied, “Oh? Well then, thank you for that! It’s always good in life not to be all alone. Unitarian. You have an address for them maybe?”²

Other historians tell the story slightly differently. It is said that Kissor Singh learned from a member of the liberal Hindu Brahmo Samaj of a Rev. Charles Dall, an American Unitarian minister in Calcutta. Kissor was told that Dall thought as Kissor did. An active letter exchange ensued between Dall and Kissor. Dall sent Kissor a volume of the writings of William Ellery Channing. Kissor understood that many others thought as he did and they called themselves “Unitarians.” He called his new religion of one God, “Ka Niam Unitarian”—The Unitarian Religion. Dall continued support and writing until his death. After Dall’s death, Kissor Singh received support

from Jabez T. Sunderland, the editor of the Unitarian Magazine of the American Unitarian Association.³

This Unitarianism of the Khasi Hills started by Hajom Kissor Singh still flourishes to this day. Our partner church taskforce has recently made contact with one church in this area—a church at Pingwait. The Unitarian church in Pingwait, like many of the other 30 plus Unitarian Church in the Khasi Hills villages, runs a school in the village that is open to all the children of the village. In Pingwait, a settlement of 235 Unitarians, there are 48 students in a lower primary school open to all from nursery to fourth grade.

There are some Khasis who are highly educated Ph. Ds who teach in colleges, use computers, and live in houses with electricity, lovely gardens, TV etc, but most of the people in the Khasi Hills are farmers and many live well below the global poverty level. These are less formally educated, live in simple houses—many without electricity and do subsistence farming. They face serious water problems, lack of job opportunities and labor issues, lack of support for some of the basic infrastructures—like transportation, telecommunications and power--; and health problems

There are over 10,000 Unitarians and 32 Unitarian churches and six fellowships in the Khasi Hills and the people are some of the most hospitable and gracious in the world. They describe their faith as a faith of one God; a faith that considers training its children paramount, that recognizes their “Duty to God;” “Duty to Fellow Humans,” and “Duty to Ourselves.” They describe “sin” as not doing one’s duty or going against the commands of God. Their tribal roots come out of Southeast Asia and they are one of the last known matriarchal communities in the world. Their names and inheritance are passed along female lines.

Last October eight Unitarian Universalists from Virginia visited their partner churches in the Khasi Hills. They described seeing “a land of rolling green hills and verdant valleys with the mighty Himalayas dominating the distant horizon; hillsides spotted with groves of pine trees and tree-like banana plants; tangled undergrowth filled in places with a plethora of wild flowers that include both orchids and roses; valleys filled with rice paddies, potato fields, and vegetables gardens; tumbling streams of water racing over rocky precipices and falling hundreds of feet to the plains below.” They described seeing, “hump-backed cattle grazing quietly along the highways and byways, watched over by small boys and old men; villages and small towns filled with for the most part a gentle, peaceful people whose faces reflect an aura of contentment and joy rarely seen in our own country.” They said, “many believe that the Khasi Hills region of far northeastern India, served as the model for, the fictional Shangri-la made famous by James Hilton’s 1930’s novel Lost Horizons.”⁴

One of the Khasi Hills young adults who visited our UU General Assemble a few years ago said, “You move through life so fast. You do everything so quickly. People even seem to run fast here. People work so hard they have no time left for family and friends. **Relationships** are a core value where I come from.” She was a 5th generational Unitarian and the first woman to serve in a role much like what we call a minister in the Unitarian Union of India.

Unitarianism has participated in another part of India--the part of India you heard Krishna Roy speak about earlier this morning—the part that may have led Hajom Kissor Singh to discover the Unitarians. The Brahmo Samaj was founded by Rammohun Roy, the relative of Krishna Roy. He is

as she said often called the “Father of Modern India.” He lived almost a century before Kishor Singh. He was born just before the American Revolutionary War and died just before the Khasi Hills Unitarians were established. He sought to integrate Western culture with the best features of his own country’s traditions. He promoted a rational, ethical, non-authoritarian, this-worldly, and social reform Hinduism.⁵ His writings influenced our Transcendentalists.

Rammohun Roy was a member of the Brahmin caste. He was highly educated, brilliant, in possession of great privilege. He was trained in religions, literature, banking, real estate, civil service and the judiciary.

He advocated faith in “one being” and the universal morality of doing no harm to others. Every person, he wrote, “should exercise his own intellectual power, with the help of acquired knowledge, to discern good from bad, so that this valuable divine gift should not be left useless.”⁶

When Roy learned about Christianity from a Baptist missionary, he said he, “found the doctrines of Christ are more conducive to moral principles, and better adapted for the use of rational beings than any others which have come to my knowledge.”⁷ Roy wrote extensively about Jesus showing that out of a study of Christian scriptures Jesus was not divine and not a part of the Trinity, that salvation came through the teachings of Jesus and not vicarious atonement, and that the Holy Spirit had no separate existence.

He helped Baptist missionary William Adam revise a Baptist translation of the New Testament into Bengali. In the process Adam was converted to Unitarianism. In that same year, 1821, Roy, Adam, several prominent Brahmins, including Dwarkanath Tagore, some British merchants

and civil servants funded the Unitarian Press, publishing in English and Bengali.

Over the years Adam and Roy had several disagreements. It seems to me that Adam always hoped that Roy would become a Unitarian Christian and it seems Roy wanted to become a Unitarian Hindu. It reminds me a bit of the discussions in early Christianity when people were asking if you had to become a Jew before you could become a Christian. Paul fought hard to win the argument that people could come to Christianity directly from whatever previous religious thoughts they had. It clarified that Christianity was indeed not a special group of Jews but a religion on its own.

Roy believed in the teaching of Jesus, but didn't want to become a Christian, probably this was influenced by the fact that he probably would lose his status and prestige as a Brahmin if he became a Christian. He also thought that as a liberal Hindu he could believe all he did about Jesus. In 1828 he founded the Brahmo Samaj, dedicated to one God and taking its scriptural authority from the Vedas. It allowed upper-caste Hindus to practice monotheism and universality within their own culture. The Brahmo Samaj nurtured and propagated what became a school of thought that flowered into the Bengal Renaissance, a great burst of modern, yet distinctively Indian political theory, idealism and poetry.⁸

About 25 years after the Brahmo Samaj was created, Rev. Charles Dall, that Unitarian minister who was to give Hajom Kissor Singh in the Khasi Hills information about Unitarianism, came to Calcutta from the American Unitarian Association with an assignment to find out how the Brahmo Samaj might be relevant to Unitarian concerns. He developed great friendships within the Hindu intelligencia and he actually became a member of the Brahmo Samaj while remaining the Unitarian Christian minister in

Calcutta. He thought it would help him recruit Unitarian Christians, especially to convert the then leader of the Brahmo Samaj—Keshub Chunder Sen. Many Unitarian Christians and Hindus were quite uncomfortable about Dall being a Brahmo Samaj member.

In 1895 The British and Foreign Unitarian Association recruited Jabez T. Sunderland, an American Unitarian minister who had been on the “theistic” and “Christian” side of the controversy in the Western Unitarian Conference—a controversy over whether Unitarianism was a theistic or a humanistic religion, to be a Unitarian missionary in India to help negotiate a settlement among three factions of the Brahmo Samaj. He reunited the factions and revitalized the movement. He was the first “European” (He actually was an American.) to visit the Khasi Hills Unitarians and initiated sending Unitarian missionaries to the Khasis. He became the first American to attend the Indian National Congress. In 1908 he attacked the British rule in India in an Atlantic magazine article. He became an outspoken supporter of Indian Nationalism— independence for India from the British rule.

Jabez Sunderland’s life marked the sharp turning point between the religion-missionary thrust of the 19th Century Unitarianism and the socio-political approach of much 20th Century Unitarianism.⁹ India was not to receive independence until 1947 and throughout that half century many American Unitarians were deeply involved in the struggle.

What does all this tell us about ourselves? One, our language of reverence needs to always make room for theism and Christianity as well as non-theistic religious language. Historically, first we argued that we were Unitarian Christians, even though many other Christians wouldn’t accept us as Christians without a trinity. Then we argued that we didn’t have to be

Christians to be Unitarians. And then we argued we didn't have to believe in a God—at least in a God defined by other people. In some form or other we've been struggling with these ideas for literally centuries. And we need to have room for all—the Christians, the theists and the humanists.

The Khasi Hills people were not Hindus or Muslims and their label of Unitarian Christianity allowed them to hang on to some of their tribal beliefs and to let go of those tribal beliefs about demons and lack of self worth and to take on the teachings of Jesus about the poor, about justice and about peace. It allowed them to honor their relationships to be present in their world—to educate their children and continue to lift up the importance of women in their society.

The Brahmo Samaj were Hindus who amazingly could find their tradition still affirmed in a monotheistic home. Perhaps it is only we non-Hindus who thought all those thousands of gods and avatars were not just a piece of one whole.

One year when I was taking a class in “Spirituality” one of the students returned from Thanksgiving break and said to the student behind him, “I went home to my mother and started talking about this class and I said “My god has been too small.” Maybe like that college student our understanding of what “God” is or may be has been too small.

Like the Unitarians of the Khasi Hills we need to leave room for some of the religious traditions of our pasts. It needs to be safe to carry it with us as well as safe to have left it behind, or to never have had that past. Yes, we need to make room for that much diversity. It is probably our greatest attribute as a religious institution and yet it is one we always are working to do better.

. And the second lesson from India today, our religion cannot be separated from our social justice activity. The fact that the churches in the Khasi Hills are running schools, (The Unitarian church in Shillong, the capital of the state, runs a high school for about 450 students.) makes me wonder if we shouldn't be doing more for education here in the U.S. What would that look like?

And the third lesson from India-- both the institutions I talked about today emerged indigenously. Missionaries were of some support, but not until after the movements emerged from the grassroots people. Are we listening well enough to discover what both the poorest and the most privileged in our society are seeking in their religious quests? Are we listening or do we think we already know? I wonder.

We'll hear more about Unitarians in India, we've just started that relationship with Pingwait. I hope we take time again to look at ourselves through another lens and to recognize the pleasure we feel in being connected to these Unitarians of India .

When I was a little girl I used to think that there was a little girl in China that didn't look like me, but thought just like I did. I like the idea that there are people in India who think—sort of like I do, about something so important as religion and women's issues and education and religious diversity.

May it always be so.

Benediction:

At the end of the Khasi Hills annual conference of 3,000 people recently, all stood, including children, and recovenanted with this pledge:

“We pledge to remove selfishness, jealousy, stupidity, misgiving and enmity among ourselves, so that we may build the holy religion of one God in the spirit of compassion, love and trust. . . We pledge to respect other religious groups. . . We pledge to take care of our environment. . .and all forms of life in it. We pledge to respect the conscience and free thinking of all. . . and to support each other to uphold justice, righteousness and truth.” And then they said, “Khublei!” which is God bless you. Blei was the name in the Khasi Hills tribal religion for God, the one creative power. Khublei to you all.

- ¹ Khasi Unitarians of India by John Rex, Quest, March 2001 (www.uua.org/clf/quest/2001-03.html)
- ² “Power” a sermon delivered at First Universalist Church of Denver, Colorado, April 11, 1999 by The Rev. Dr. John A. Buehrens, President of the UUA.
- ³ Spencer Lavan, “Hajom Kissor Singh”, www.uua.org/uuh/duub/articles/hajomkissorsingh.html,
- ⁴ Article from the Unitarian Universalist Partner Church Council Newsletter , “Just Imagine” written by Hal Fuller (November 2006)
- ⁵ Marilyn Richards and Peter Hughes, “Rammohun Roy,” www.uua.org/uuh/duub/articles/rajarammohunroy.html
- ⁶ Richards and Hughes.
- ⁷ Richards and Hughes, pg 3
- ⁸ Andrew Hill, “William Adam,” www.uua.org/uuh/duub/articles/williamadam.html, pg 3
- ⁹ Spencer Lavan, *Unitarians and India: a study in encounter and response*, Exploration Press of the Chicago Theological Seminary, Chicago, 1991, p.180.