

The Findings of Reverend J.T. Sunderland
(His two Weeks Stay in the Khasi Hills of Assam, April 1896)

This letter is taken from a booklet of correspondences from Hajom Kissor Singh with Rev, Dr. Jabez Sunderland, compiled by Hamlet Rani, great grandson of Hajom Kissor Singh.

I write this letter on the deck of a steamer as I sail down the broad Brahmaputra, the most majestic of all rivers of India, I am just returning to Calcutta from a tour of two weeks in the picturesque Khasi Hills of Assam, where I have been visiting the little Unitarian Churches and schools planted there by Hajom Kissor Singh and his fellow workers. As it was from America that Mr. Singh received the first encouragement and aid in starting his missions and his works is somewhat known to Americans, I take for granted that an account of what I saw and experienced will not be altogether without interest to the readers of the Unitarian. To me, the town has been one of extraordinary interest partly because of the fine hill and mountain scenery through which it has taken me (150 miles on horse's back and 130 miles in a cart), partly because it has brought me into contact with different phases of life and civilization from any I had before seen in India or elsewhere, but specially because I found these groups of faraway brothers, who had never before seen an English or American Unitarian, so eagerly waiting my coming and so grateful beyond words to the Unitarian Association in England for sending some one to visit them.

The Khasi and Jaintia Hills (our people live in both) form an elevated and exceedingly picturesque region in Central Assam, there hundred and fifty miles or so north east of Calcutta. To reach the region requires a ride of a day and a night by railway train, with four or five ugly night changes, a most delightful ride of a day and a half by steamer on the Brahmapootra, with the mighty Himalayas dimly in view on the left, seventy or eighty miles away, and a day's journey by tonga (pony cart) from the river, by a road as picturesque as anything in the white mountains or in the Alps, to Shillong, the mountains Sanitarium and political Asylum, five thousand feet above the sea level.

Shillong has about six thousand population, perhaps five thousand of the number being Khasis. The rest are Bengalis and English, drawn here by the fact that it is the head quarter of the government. The place is one of very remarkable natural beauty and attractiveness. Indeed, I have seen no other in India that seems to me to equal it. Here we have a little Unitarian school and the nucleus of a church, established a few months ago; and here I first took the hand of a Khasi Unitarian. It was not here however, the Unitarian Movement in this hills began and it is not here that is now strongest, though this is doubtless the most important in the hills, and it is hoped that a strong movement may in time be built up here.

The Khasi and Jaintia people (they are very closely related and may be thought of as essentially one) number about two hundred thousand. Being a hill people through out nearly all their history, they have been independent. Even now, under the British

Government, they enjoyed a sort of semi-independence, and are granted certain tribal privileges which they very much prize. Thus, while they are simple folk, with a much less developed civilization than is found in many parts of India, they have yet preserved, as a result of their historic independence, many sturdy and manly traits of character, which are more or less wanting among the Hindu peoples whose history has been one of political subjection. Only for about half a century have they had an alphabet and a written language, and these were given to them by Europeans; namely by Welsh Calvinistic Methodist, who established missions among them about sixty years ago, and as early as possible provided them with an alphabet, so that they might be able to translate the Bible in Khasi tongue. These missions have grown and developed until now they have connected with them ten European missionaries, a training school for the native preachers, two free medical dispensaries, quite a large number of churches (I could not learn just how many), about two hundred village schools, and about ten thousand converts.

It was among their native Trinitarian Christians that Unitarian thought first makes its appearance. Mr. Kissor Singh was educated in a Methodist Christian School. So were several of our leaders. The same experience came to them that come to so many Trinitarians in America and England, namely mental and spiritual dissatisfaction with some of the theological dogmas which they have been taught, and an inability to reconcile them with reason and their own sense of right.

Mr. Singh's dissatisfaction with orthodoxy began before he ever saw a Unitarian book or tract except the Bible. He found a special difficulty in accepting the doctrine of the Trinity and of the Deity of Christ. These doctrines did not seem to him reasonable and the Bible did not seem to teach them. The first Unitarian "Channing Works" were lent to him by a Brahmo. Probably it had been obtained by the Rev. C.H.A Dall, the American Unitarian missionary of Calcutta. Mr. Singh read Channing's sermons on "Unitarian Christianity Most Favorable to Piety" and felt at once he had found the religion, which his soul craved. He immediately set about trying to find other Unitarian literature. Through Mr. Dall, he obtained other Unitarian literature. Through Mr. Dall, he obtained copies of the "Inquirer" and "The Christian Life" of England, and finally "The Unitarian of America". As a result of reading the last name periodical, he wrote a letter of inquiry to its Editor in America, which led to an extended correspondence, to the sending of tracts and many American Unitarian books, to the printing of Khasi tracts and Khasi Hymn-Books in Ann Arbor for Mr. Singh and to obtaining of other help in America which enabled him to begin the work establishing schools and little centers of Unitarian Worship among the Khasi people.

The first little band of the Khasi Unitarian was organized in the village of Nongtalang with the two brothers, Heh and Riang Pohlong, men of considerable education and of much influence at its head. Later, in the larger village of Jowai, which was, Mr. Singh's own home, an organization was formed. Then the movement spread to other villages, and finally to the capital, Shillong.

The slight sketch of the Khasi people and the origin of the Unitarian Movement among them will throw light upon the narrative of my visit to them, which I will now briefly give.

Already, I have taken my reader with me from Calcutta to the picturesque and charming mountain capital of Assam. On my arrival here I was met by our two Unitarian teachers, Mr. Jang Kassar and Mrs. K. Hirbon, our workers, Mr. Robin Roy and Mr. Marsingh, several men from the Unitarian Congregation, a group of our school children and the number of the officers and members of the Shillong Brahmo-Somaj, all of whom extended to me a most hearty welcome. I spent a day in Shillong visiting and examining our school, forming acquaintance, so far as I could, with the little band gathered together here, and in the evening speaking for the Brahmo-Somaj brethren in their prayer hall.

At Shillong, the road for wheeled vehicles ends. Consequently, I was obliged here to engage a pony for the rest of the journey. But a pony was not enough: I must also have a cook, and men to carry on their backs my luggage, bedding, and food, as well as grain for my pony since I was informed that I would find not hotels or accommodations in my journey except every ten miles or so on an unfurnished dak-bungalow, or Rest House, erected by the government, into which I could go, and have the privilege of cooking my own food and making a bed of my own for the night.

So on the third morning, we set out for Jowai, thirty-three miles away, a procession of nine of us, consisting (beside myself) of three Shillong Unitarian friends, a cook, a hostler and three carriers. All, except the American are on foot. The day is bright; the air is sweet and invigorating. We travel twenty miles, over glorious hills, through narrow but beautiful valleys, up and down rugged mountainsides, and then stop in a Dak-Bungalow, in a quiet spot near a little Khasi village for the night. A blazing fire is soon made in the fireplace of the Bungalow, and there is a need of it, for we are in a high altitude, and the air is sharp as the night comes on. In half an hour, the cook has supper ready for a company blessed with the keenest appetites. We have only blankets for beds; but we sleep as sweetly as children, and the next morning at eight are on the road again. We finish the remaining thirty miles soon afternoon. Two miles before reaching Jowai, we are surprised and delighted by being met at a shady place on a picturesque mountain side by a company of thirty or so children carrying a banner and singing a song of welcome which has been composed for the occasion, and then accompanying us to the village singing Unitarian Sunday School songs and hymns, with both Khasi and English words, to English and American tunes I could hardly believe my eyes and ears. Was I in India or America?

The next day was Sunday, and it was a great day at Jowai, the Jowai Unitarians have just erected a new church and school building to take place of the old one, which was too small. The new one stands in a most excellent situation, on top of a fine central hill which seems as if lifted by nature on purpose for it. May the little church prove a "City On A Hill" a "Light On A Candle Stick" to send its rays out far and wide in these Khasi Hills! The building will seat two hundred persons. It is planned for school use as well as for worship. It is very plain and simple, with wood walls and floor and thatch roof. But

it is neat, well adapted for the uses required, and is all the society will need for sometime to come. It is not quite finished, and I was sorry to find, is not quite free from debt, but I hope its debt will soon be lifted. Here on Sunday, we hold four meetings, one for prayer at 7 AM, and service with sermons by three or four of the lay preacher and myself, at ten, two and four o'clock, besides a meeting of dozen of the leading Unitarians at my Bungalow for conference in the evening. At the principal meetings the church was full, of course, the language used was Khasi. Though a few could understand English, yet of course, when I spoke, what I said had to be translated by Mr. Singh or one of the other lay preachers into the language of the people. The singing surprised me by its vigor, favor, and excellence. The services were reverent, devout, and earnest in a high degree. The Unitarians of America and England may be sure that these Khasis are appreciative of the help, which has been extended to them. They fairly loaded me down with messages of regard and gratitude to the British and Foreign Unitarian Association, and to the Women's Alliance and Individuals in America who have helped them.

The following week was spent in making visits to the villages where there are groups of Unitarians. Accompanied by Mr. Singh and others, I went to Taliang, twenty miles away in one direction, and to Nongtalang and Nonglamin, twenty-two miles away in another. At each place, we visited we held meeting, and I made as full investigations as possible as to the social and religious condition of the people, and what was being undertaken by the Unitarians in educational, social and religious directions. Everywhere the people expressed their gratitude in the warmest possible manner to the Unitarian of the west for aiding them in the past and now for sending a messenger to them. They had never before seen a white Unitarian or one outside their own number, and now for one to come so far seemed to them almost or quite miraculous, almost like a visitor from another world. I should not have been human if I had not been touched by the warmth and sincerity of their welcome and by the depth of their feeling and parting, when I bade them a final good-bye. A hundred times they asked me; would I not come again? Would not the Unitarian Association send someone else to visit and instruct them? Would it not send them, an English or American missionary to take charge of their work and be their guide and teacher?

Of course, the number of Unitarians here is as yet small; they told me that about one hundred and fifty have really joined us, aside from children. But, when we remember that is only seven or eight years, since Mr. Singh stood alone here in his Unitarian faith, the wonder rather is that in so short a time the number has become so large. I found Unitarians in seven or eight villages, and little houses of worship completed in no fewer than five villages. In addition to Sunday schools, there are three weekday schools; and this week day school work is very important.

One of the most serious difficulties – under which our Unitarian cause in these hills up to this time has been laboring has grown of the fact that our brethren have had among them no ordained minister: all the preachers and workers have been lay men. Thus there has been no one of their number, who could for example, officiate at a marriage. This drawback to their works, the brethren have long felt, for sometime past they have been thinking of ordaining one of their number; namely, Mr. David Edwards of Taliang, a man

of much intelligence and of excellent Christian spirit, esteemed by who was for some years a Methodist deacon, and who studied theology and prepared for ordination as an Evangelist among the Methodists, but grew liberal in his religious views, and hence finally left them and joined us. As soon as I arrived in Jowai, the question of such an ordination was decided upon. It took place before my departure. A council was called in Jowai consisting of representatives from three Unitarian churches and from two villages where there are groups of Unitarians, but no churches, besides myself as representing the British and Foreign Unitarian Association. The council elected the present writer as its Moderator and Mr. Kissor Singh as its clerk. After a very careful examination of Mr. Edwards as to his religious experience and views, his aims in entering the Unitarian ministry, etc. It was voted unanimously and heartily to proceed to ordination. Four of the brethren were chosen to conduct the ordination services, the sermon, the ordaining prayer, and the laying of hands falling to me. I cannot but believe that Mr. Edwards will be an earnest and devoted minister and that the Unitarian cause will be strengthened by his influence and work.

I shall always look back upon my visit to the Khasi Hills with very great interest. These two weeks have given me experiences that I would not willingly drop out of my life. I can never cease to think of these warmhearted and earnest Khasi brothers and sisters with particular tender and affectionate regard.

What is to be the future of the Unitarian movement here? The Khasi people are poor. Those who have not come into contact with Christianity are very ignorant and superstitious. Their religion is a kind of worship of spirits; perhaps I should say a form of devil-worship. The work required to be done among them is quite as much a work of civilization as of christianization: it is both. That Unitarianism will find a ready welcome among them is already demonstrated. Indeed, evidence comes from various sources to the effect that they more readily accept it than Trinitarianism. What has already been done here, of course, is only a mere beginning of what awaits to be done. New villages are asking for schools and for the visits of our preachers. As the work extends, of course much more aid will be needed from England and America, or rather from England, since England has now assumed charge of India as a mission field, leaving America free to give her efforts to Japan. Hers is a wider open door. Are the Unitarians of the west ready to enter it in earnest? As I have already said, the Khasi people feel very deeply their need of an English or American missionary to be their leader, teacher, organizer, and guide. Can one be sent them? Can the work among them go on much further safely without a missionary at its head? These are some of the grave questions, which now present themselves to the English Unitarian churches for answer.

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