

Unitarianism In The Hills: An Indigenous Religion With Modern Offshoots

By Helpme H. Mohrmen, minister, Unitarian Church of Puriang, Khasi Hills, India

Rev. Bert Inkson once said, "Unitarianism is rather a religious way of life than a set of belief." Unitarianism hence can be defined as a way of life followed by different people in different parts of the World. Unitarianism's origin as a faith in various parts of the Globe is in fact unique to the culture and surrounding of the area in which it exist. In many cases all around the world where Unitarians Universalist churches present, the movement was originally started by individual who experienced spiritual trial and tribulation within ones self, it could be the individual discontent with the faith that he possessed and was struggling to find new meaning and insight to life. In other words it was started by people in their respective area against conforming to any set of beliefs or tradition dictated by certain authority in the power that is. From a historical point of view its origin as a movement can be trace back to a group of people in early Christian era, under the leadership of Arius who started a debate on the issue of the 'godliness' of Jesus Christ at a Council was held at Nicea in 357 AD. Since it is a way of life followed by people in different Places, of different Races and of different Cultures, Unitarian Universalism in different part of the Globe is therefore as varied as the people that followed it and each has maintain it own uniqueness. Though it varies with the people that followed it, but in spite of the diversity, it however has a certain common belief that the whole church adheres to, prominent among the many are the freedom of belief, respect of other religions and respect of the dignity of a person, are few of the fundamental principle which bind together the Unitarians Universalist the world over.

Unitarianism in Khasi Jaintia Hills and Karbi Anglong District, like any of its sisters in faith in different parts of the World is a unique religion with an equally unique beginning. The later part of eighteen and early nineteen hundred, Khasi Jaintia society witnesses an emergent of giants and stalwarts of Khasi intellectuals and the doyen of Khasi literature in the like of Babu Soso Tham, Pahep R.S. Berry, Nissor Singh and his brother u Babu Hajom Kissor Singh, the list is however by no mean exhausted. The mentioned personalities were great littérateurs, and of these H.K. Singh was not only poet and an essayist par excellence but he is also religious reformer in his own right.

Born to a Khasi family whose father was an employee of the mighty British Empire, the Singhs along with few of their contemporary were perhaps few lucky educated Khasis of the time. It is said that in those days one can count on one's hand the numbers of educated Khasis and H.K.Singh was able to complete his Entrance examination (High School graduate) which is itself a great achievement. H.K. Singh though born a Khasi was converted to Calvinist faith along with the whole family while he was studying at a school in Nongsawlia Sohra. He being an

educated and an ardent quest for spiritual truth was well acquainted with the traditional animist religion and read his Bible thoroughly. He read the sacred text from cover to cover and found that the Bible has only reinforced his belief in one God, which in fact is a belief not alien to the Khasis. His studies of the Bible particularly the Gospels convinced him that Jesus himself; a true Jew to the last; worshiped one God, which he called Abba and taught his disciples to pray to this God the Father when they pray in what is latter to be known as the Lords prayer. At the same time H.K. Singh though he discovered that even the Bible and Jesus teaches about the existence of one true God which is similar to the belief followed by the Khasis, he however is reluctant to go back to the Niamtynrai/Seng Khasi fold (to which he has very close relationship) for other theological intricacies. Basically H.K.Singh was not at ease with what he believed to be the two variant of unreasonable belief that he cannot comprehend and one must remember that the age we are concern see the advent of Christianity and the beginning of the people in the Khasi traditional belief to organise themselves to repel the rapid advancement of this new faith in the hills - the Seng Khasi was also started around this particular period. H.K.Singh was essentially caught between the traditional and new and come up with his own version of truth.

H.K.Singh was juggling and struggling with the new truth that he had discovered, he was in search of a faith or religion, which worship one true God as well freed human from the bondage of other super natural deities and at long last his search led him to his goal. By divine providence he met one Brahma from (member of Brahma Samaj) Kolkata on a visit to Shillong who introduced him to Rev. C.H.A. Dahl a Unitarian Missionary stationed at Kokata (Calcutta). Singh's contact with Dahl was like the proverbial 'light at the end of the tunnel' and the correspondence between the two has indeed greatly influenced Singh. The communication between H.K.Singh and C.H.A. Dahl came to an end only in the demise of the later, which had shocked Singh and ironically the tragedy happens only two months before Unitarianism in this Hills saw the light of the day. H.K. Singh in spite of all odds went ahead with his plan and started "Ka Niam Mane Wei Blei" Unitarianism in the Khasi Jaintia and Karbi Anglong on the 18th of September 1887 and the rest is history.

Metaphorically speaking Unitarian in the Khasi Jaintia and Karbi Anglong District is like a tree standing tall with its roots deep into the ground and its branches and leaves widely spread receptive of the light and the blessings of the Universe. Its roots are strong and firm in the belief and culture of the people of the region as well as being open to truths from elsewhere.

From a theological point of view, the concept of God Worshipped by the Unitarians in the Hills is the Khasi's own concept of God the Creator (U Blei Nongbuh Nongthaw) (which is) formless. The Khasi concept of God is in contrary to the western concept that they inherited from Judeo-Christian tradition. The

concept of God in a western context is God in an "Anthromorphical form." – God on whose image man was created or to be specific God in a human shape. God in Khasi Pnar concept is not only of a formless God but also in contrary to other tribal God or gods; the Khasi Pnar concept of God is that of a Universal God. He is neither a God, which have a territory, nor God, which belong and recognize only his own tribe. H.K. Singh preaches of a formless God and a Universal God and he even went a step further by preaching a dual identity of God 'the motherhood and fatherhood' concept of God. Unitarians therefore worship the Khasi original idea of God- a formless God, a Universal God, a Divine Power and a benevolent Benefactor.

Khasi Pnar is a tribe with its own distinct culture and value system. The genesis of any tribe's culture and value system is based on its Aetiological or Mythological stories handed down by their ancestors since time immemorial from generation to generation. Unitarian treated the khasi-pnar folklore and legends as aetiological account of the tribe that can neither be describe as historically factual or mere mythologies. Like any other tribes or races in the World, the Khasi-Pnar also has its own genesis the "Hynniew trep hynniew skum." Hynniew trep hynniew skum is a folktales or story as important and profound to the Khasis as the story of Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis of the Torah for the Jews and the Old Testament for the Christian or for that matter as solemn as any mythological stories of any race or tribe to itself. The story does not have to be factually true but they certainly have a profound impact on the belief, culture and psyche of that particular tribe or race.

The contemporary Khasi Pnar society witnesses an emergence of radical groups whose aim is to reform the traditions and the culture of the society starting with changing the lineage system of the society. The group's argument is that the matrilineal system that the society is following is detrimental to the future of this tiny society. The Unitarians in the Khasi Jaintia Hills faces no contradiction what so ever between the faiths they followed and the common culture or ethos of the tribe. Believers in western oriented denomination are many a time in a dilemma whether to believe in the teachings of their Sacred Book or to follow the Value System follow by their forefathers since time immemorial. Oftentimes their faith and dogmas being western oriented are in contrary to the prevailing customs and ethos of the society. Being a liberal religion in a unique Khasi Pnar context, the Khasi Unitarians adapt well to the culture and ethos of the society, they follow and lives by the cardinal values of the tribe and continue to respect the traditions values of the tribe. The basic Khasi value system are 'To earn righteousness' (Ban kamai ia ka hok), 'To live honorably and courteously and to know and revere God' (Ban long Tip-briew Tip-Blei) 'To know and respect one's relation both from mother and father side' (Ban tip kur tip kha). These three basic value systems of the Khasi pnars are like the tri-pot stones (maw byrsiew) in the hearth of the khasi-pnar's home that provide warmth and feed the entire

family. The Unitarians found no contradiction to the Value System; they in fact adhered in letter and spirit to these basic value system. Faiths that were introduced from other areas, they naturally carry with them the ethos and traditions of the area from which they originated. Therefore they remain out of place to the contemporary Khasi-pnar society; and like the proverbial fish out of water they neither belong here nor there. We see that these religious organisations started the process of trying to adapt to the prevailing culture of the people of the area. Inculturation or Contextualism is the process of trying to adapt to the prevalent Culture of the area, the feeling of the need to adapt to the prevailing culture of the area itself speak volume about the in-accordance of the faith.

Unitarian church though has an alien name and naturally has the influence of Protestantism in their worship traditions, yet they hold tight and fast the intrinsic values of their tribal value system. In fact Unitarian Universalism Church is itself an all pervading and all-encompassing religion it is inherent to the church to be able to easily accept different variety of thoughts and beliefs. Unitarian church in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, is therefore a liberal church with its roots strong in the Khasi Pnar value system while it is also all encompassing and free reach out to new thoughts and teaching. R.S. Berry in one of the many hymns he generously composed for the Khasi Unitarian hymn book, described Unitarianism as "Ka niam iei i'u blei iei i'u brieu" (The Religion of love God and love fellow human being), this best describe the concept of Unitarian in Khasi Jaintia hills.

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