

# Introduction

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## One Faith, Many Ethnicities

They are a very uncivilized race, with dark complexions, athletic sinewy frames, hideously wild and ugly visages . . . They are reckless of human life; treacherously murdering their neighbours often without provocation, or at best for a trivial cause of offence . . . Amongst a people so thoroughly primitive, and so independent of religious prepossessions, we might reasonably expect missionary zeal would be most successful.

– John Butler, *A Sketch of Assam*, 1847

ON EASTER SUNDAY 2010, a group of Naga Christians assembled at sunrise near a famous World War II monument in Kohima, capital of the state of Nagaland in north-east India. It appears that the faithful had chosen this spot since the stone-sculpted structure has at its apex a stately crucifix. The WWII memorial, where an interdenominational “sunrise service” is held on this day every year, is a stark reminder of the ruthless modern warfare that ravaged this once-remote place inhabited by an obscure head-hunting tribe best known for its grisly “trophy collection”. The spot is usually pummelled by strong winds at this time of year, and 2010 was no exception, but they seemed only to spur the congregation into a more determined show of devotion on that early morning. Around them was complete silence, except for tall pines that rustled in the wind. Enhancing the melancholy of the scene were hundreds of small white marble tombstones that stretched across an immaculately trimmed lawn, their engravings showing mainly alien names.

On a hillside overlooking the Kohima War Cemetery spreads the expanse of Kohima town. The narrow and winding roads of Kohima – which has a population of 1.15 lakhs according to the 2011 census – are always flooded with people, its busy streets clogged with endless traffic jams. Sundays are the exception, for the Sabbath is when the entire town comes to a halt and the many churches in the state capital come to be packed with worshippers. The day after, life bursts forth in the heart of town, and a flurry of Nagamese – the lingua franca of the streets and commercial transactions – flows unimpeded again. Through the snail-paced traffic, people throng the streets once more to continue everyday tasks interrupted by the day of rest.

But at this moment in the Kohima War Cemetery everything seemed calm and serene, as the gathered believers waited for the sun to rise above the lofty mountain range that dominates the sleeping town.

The congregation consisted of a few hundred, young and old, all dressed for the occasion, some in the latest fashions of the town, others in traditional garb. Now, as the sun's soft rays began to light up the surrounding grass, the crowd sang out exuberantly and in unison – “Up from the grave He arose”; the words were from an old Baptist English hymnal. An elderly Naga gentleman, whose erudition and confidence bespoke decades in the business, led the congregation in worship as intermittent applause, cacophonous prayers, and melodious hymns resonated from this piece of hillside.

The significance of the cemetery as a symbol of the clash of civilisations and the collapse of empires seemed lost on the devotees; the attention of each of those gathered was keenly focused on a Palestinian-Jewish prophet from two thousand years earlier whose teachings had changed their world. From being seen as “much-dreaded” tribes during the British Raj to becoming a pietistic community of Christians at the opening of a new millennium in the Indian republic, their transition, over the span of a mere century, had been uncommonly swift.

About 4 km away from the WWII memorial is the Kohima Cathedral. This is built in a noticeably traditional Naga style of architecture, on the Aradura spur, where the faithful would soon proceed for the Easter Sunday service. The cathedral, also known as Mary Help of Christians Cathedral, boasts of being the biggest place of worship in north-east India. It was built on a budget of thirty million rupees, generously donated by “Japanese people” who wished the cathedral to also serve as a memorial for the Japanese soldiers who had laid down their lives during the Battle of Kohima in WWII. Etched on a memorial stone in both English and Japanese are these words:

It is with thankfulness that we heard that a Catholic Cathedral was being built at Kohima, where mass would be offered every morning in the memory of the fallen . . .

Rumour has it that there is more to the Kohima Cathedral than meets the eye; an inscription of the “number of the beast”, i.e. 666, is said to be imprinted on the crucifix atop the cathedral.<sup>1</sup> Some fundamentalist Naga Baptists are convinced that the papacy is a representation of the Antichrist, soon to reveal its true nature, and along their eschatological beliefs the rumour does not seem fanciful. The Kohima Cathedral, which took half a decade to build and was consecrated in 1991, is a manifestation of Catholicism’s success story among the Angami Nagas, the average Angami Baptist considering Catholicism an “upstart” denomination that spread its “devious” tentacles to embrace their tribe within a short span of time, and posing a heretical threat to the true Christian faith. Not so long ago, adherents of the traditional Naga religion harboured

<sup>1</sup> This “number of the beast” derives from the Book of Revelation, chapter 13, verse 6, and in general suggests danger to Christianity. It has been variously interpreted as signifying the Antichrist, the Prophet Mohammed, and the Roman emperor Nero. The rumour in the Naga context indicated an antipathy for Roman Catholics and was more widespread among fundamentalist Baptists of the North American variety, the denomination I grew up with.

similar perceptions of the Baptist Church as the “white man’s religion”, but what good did it do them? The followers of traditional religion were an enfeebled minority in less than a hundred years.

Despite the fact that the Angami Nagas have embraced Catholicism in larger numbers compared to other Naga tribes, misgivings about Catholicism among them are no less than among tribes like the Ao, Lotha, and Sumi Nagas, which also have large Baptist followings. Why this general suspicion toward Catholicism among the Naga Baptists? Is it possible that Baptists have viewed Catholicism in a different light than have other Protestant denominations? The Catholics have not been oblivious to the Baptists’ perception: “Up to the eve of the Second Vatican Council, the average American Roman Catholic considered an American Baptist as the ‘most difficult of all Protestants to comprehend.’”<sup>2</sup>

Being an admirer of Pope Francis, the first Jesuit pope, I find it baffling that this soft-spoken austere man of the cloth with a socialist outlook can seem to anyone a representative of the coming Antichrist who will dominate the world. Yet, according to fundamentalist Baptists, Pope Francis is a baddie who makes lesser baddies seem pale by comparison. Many Naga Baptists consider the Catholics heretics – such is the complexity of interdenominational relations now in this small Baptist heartland. It puts in perspective the history of sectarian conflict generally, and, nearer our context, that of the global Christian past, when Catholics gloated over Protestants who responded to Jesus’ “Great Commission” only as late as the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

## II

Baptists are Protestant Christians who practise the complete water immersion of believing adults, this being distinct from the baptism

<sup>2</sup> Puthenpurakal, *Baptist Missions in Nagaland*, 15.

<sup>3</sup> Taken from the Gospel of Matthew 28: 18–20, the “Great Commission” is understood as a template for mission activity among the Christians who believe that they are fulfilling the commands of Jesus Christ to make disciples of all nations.

of infants as practised by Protestant denominations such as Anglicans, Brethren, and Lutherans. Tracing their roots to the English Separatist movement in the 1600s, the Baptists are discernible as a denomination by their specific beliefs and practices: the accountability of the individual; the autonomy of local churches; communion; *sola scriptura* (scripture as the sole authority for faith and practice); and *sola fide* (salvation by faith alone).

Baptists are of various shades and their beliefs have fostered an impressive array of perspectives. The American journalist and award-winning writer Robert Wright begins his book *The Evolution of God* by mentioning his Southern Baptist upbringing, and how he outgrew his Baptist roots, when introducing his position as lying between science and faith.<sup>4</sup> The Baptist stance on science and faith has gained for its followers the opprobrium of religious fundamentalism, at least in the Bible Belt of the United States. Yet I have come across individual Baptists who are devout while accepting the Darwinian theory. Their reconciliation of the contradiction takes the shape of a supplementary belief – that natural selection shows selection by the Divine Hand. More common, however, are the established denominational orthodoxies that have made Baptists controversial in an increasingly globalised world.

“What distinguishes a Naga Baptist?” I put this ostensibly simple question to Zelhou Keyho, General Secretary of the Nagaland Baptist Church Council (NBCC), one of the foremost Baptist organisations in India. With a PhD on the Old Testament from the US, Zelhou taught in a popular Baptist seminary in Dimapur for several years before being selected to head the parent Naga Baptist organisation in 2015. According to this charming leader of the NBCC, Naga Baptists can be distinguished by their “belief in being born-again, taking the Bible to be the divinely inspired word of God, evangelical faith and adult baptism – a water immersion ritual that is afforded only after a person can discern between good and evil and decides to follow Jesus Christ.”

<sup>4</sup> See Wright, *The Evolution of God*, Introduction.

Zelhou's mild version of what makes the Naga Baptist distinctive omits the fact that some Naga Baptist beliefs can be very unpopular, even unpalatable, in a multicultural society. For instance, many Naga Baptists believe in a literal interpretation of the scriptures, the eternal damnation of unbelievers, and that salvation comes exclusively through Jesus Christ and his atonement on the cross. However, Naga Baptists mostly occupy a spectrum less extreme, showing adherence to doctrines that are not different from the fundamental southern Baptist churches in the United States at one end, and an uber-Pentecostal variety of faith at the other.<sup>5</sup> One feature that all Naga Baptist churches share is zeal for evangelism and mission, which I think has not waned since the last American Baptist missionaries left the Naga Hills in the mid-1950s; rather, the sense of mission has not yet peaked, for the inevitable decline, clearly visible in the history of other Christian missions, is not yet in evidence. The Naga Baptists currently send missionaries to various states in India, and to neighbouring countries like Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and China. Local churches in Nagaland are self-reliant as the believers who throng them tithe religiously and give generously toward mission; most Baptist churches have a mission department which undertakes to spread the gospel to the "unreached". In fact the success of a Baptist church is measured in terms of missionaries sent out and its sponsoring missions outside the home state. As the general secretary of the NBCC puts it, "the heartbeat of the Naga Baptist churches is mission and evangelism."

I was raised in a conservative Baptist home, so I am familiar with Naga Christian denominational idiosyncrasies and legalistic beliefs, and familiarity tends to naturalise what can seem an oddity to those far removed from contexts they see as alien. The images people in the world outside hold of Naga Baptists are often caricatures, much as are views of Baptists in general in the

<sup>5</sup> Pentecostalism is the Protestant belief in direct and personal experience of God via baptism in the Holy Spirit.



Map 1: American Baptist mission stations in the Naga areas by 1955.

West. On a visit to the United States, the country to which the Naga Baptists trace their denominational origins, I encountered so-called secularists making sweeping generalisations about an entire religious community. Frequently, friends and acquaintances in the West raise eyebrows or cringe when they hear that I am a practising Baptist. It is small mercy that they do not see me as the Third World version of a gun-toting Young Earth creationist or a Bible-thumping churchgoing fanatic – that being the usual image of Baptists in popular culture.

Baptists, despite a shared history and doctrinal origins, have diversified over the centuries as waves of Christian movements across the world have changed the contours of the faith. Similarly, Baptist denominations among ethnic Naga groups are not monolithic. In my opinion, no serious scholar of religion can write authoritatively on Naga Baptists without grasping the nuances of nineteenth-century Evangelicalism and twentieth-century Pentecostalism, both of which have had a huge influence on the religious life of ethnic Nagas. These global religious movements have fostered schismatic divisions within the Baptist denomination and have engendered a wide range of beliefs and practices. Also, some aspects of indigenous religious beliefs and practices have continued in the new faith, rendering a distinctive character to the Baptist tradition among the Naga tribes.

Verrier Elwin (1902–1964), an authority on Indian tribal life and culture who began his career in India as a missionary from England, infamously labelled one strain of the Baptist faith – which had spread among the eastern Naga tribes in the “Tuensang Frontier Division” in the post-Independence period – the “RSS of Christianity”.<sup>6</sup> It seems to me very unlikely that Elwin could hold the same opinion of Naga Baptists now: the new generations of

<sup>6</sup> “Tour Notes of Dr Verrier Elwin for the months of March–April, 1954 on the Tuensang Frontier Division”, in File No. 139, Elwin Papers, NMML, New Delhi. “RSS” is now one of the best-known abbreviations in India, denoting the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the Hindu nationalist organisation which propagates the hardline version of Hinduism known as Hindutva.



Naga Baptists have been educated in some of the finest seminaries and universities around the globe – no less than Elwin in his own day. I have come across some brilliant Naga theologians and scholars, and I am certain the early Elwin – before he converted to tribal hedonism – would have enjoyed a conversation with Kethoser Kevichusa, an Angami Baptist theologian from his alma mater, Oxford.

I heard this young and erudite preacher in 2010, in a small chapel in Kohima Science College, Jotsoma, about 10 km from the state capital; he is from a family of pioneering Baptist converts. His congregation comprised mainly undergraduate students of the college, among whom there is a witty popular aphorism: “Blessed are the preachers who deliver short sermons, for they shall be invited again.” The young do not favour the conventionally lengthy sermon, and, unlike in traditional churches, congregations comprising the predominantly young can turn against the most sagacious of preachers if they grow prolix. But the suave young preacher had gauged his congregation’s predisposition and had his listeners in the palm of his hand. At one point they burst out laughing when he joked about meeting the veteran Hindi film director Mahesh Bhatt and confessing to him that he, Kethoser, had seen none of his movies.

The sermon was on forgiveness and reconciliation. Kethoser said: “Without forgiveness there can be no reconciliation,” which I quickly jotted down in my field notebook. I could not help but notice the timing, since the Naga armed conflict, which began life as hostility to the hegemonic Indian state, was now going through one of its most turbulent factional phases in decades. After a botched attempt to unify the warring factions, especially the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (IM) and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (K), their clashes had escalated, resulting in the loss of lives. At the time that I joined Delhi University as a postgraduate student in 2008, word was that the various Naga factions were working to end all hostilities, but by 2010 the olive branch had withered and the internecine war had

resumed. During this tumultuous period, I was in the Angami village of Jotsoma for my fieldwork; I was working on a doctoral thesis on the religion and worldview of a Naga tribe. And so I had happened to visit the college chapel where Kethoser was delivering his sermon – it was the chapel I had frequented during my undergraduate days in the same college. And Kethoser had been a sought-after preacher on the campus back then as well.

Kethoser represents, as I said, a new generation of highly educated Naga Baptist elites. Having earned a master's in theology from the University of Oxford and a PhD from the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies (validated by Middlesex University, London), his is a success story from the Angami Naga tribe. Hailing from a historic village, Khonoma, the Kevichusa family produced some of the early Naga intellectuals in the British Naga Hills district, courtesy of the American Baptist mission. Kethoser's great-grandfather, Nisier Angami, was the first convert from Khonoma village to enter the halls of Baptist greats as an evangelist and church planter.<sup>7</sup> Nisier's son, Angami Kevichusa (popularly known as A. Kevichusa), educated in a Baptist mission school, distinguished himself as the first Naga graduate, became a Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (MBE), and played an instrumental role in emerging modern Naga society. But the family's position among the foremost Naga intellectuals also came at a great cost.

Kethoser is no stranger to anguish and loss; he has lost close relatives to the Naga political conflict. Two of his brilliant uncles were assassinated by Naga rebels, adding to the list of many promising educated individuals who fell victim to violence. Despite these losses and bitter memories, or perhaps because of them, Kethoser travels around the country lecturing on peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation to fellow Indian Christians. Apart from being a devout Baptist and well-known figure in Naga Baptist circles, he

<sup>7</sup> "Church planter" is a term used mainly in evangelical Christianity to refer to a minister or pastor who starts a new congregation where none existed.

is a leading Naga scholar in the area of peace and reconciliation studies. His ecumenical approach to Christianity is the new face of the Baptist faith in Nagaland.

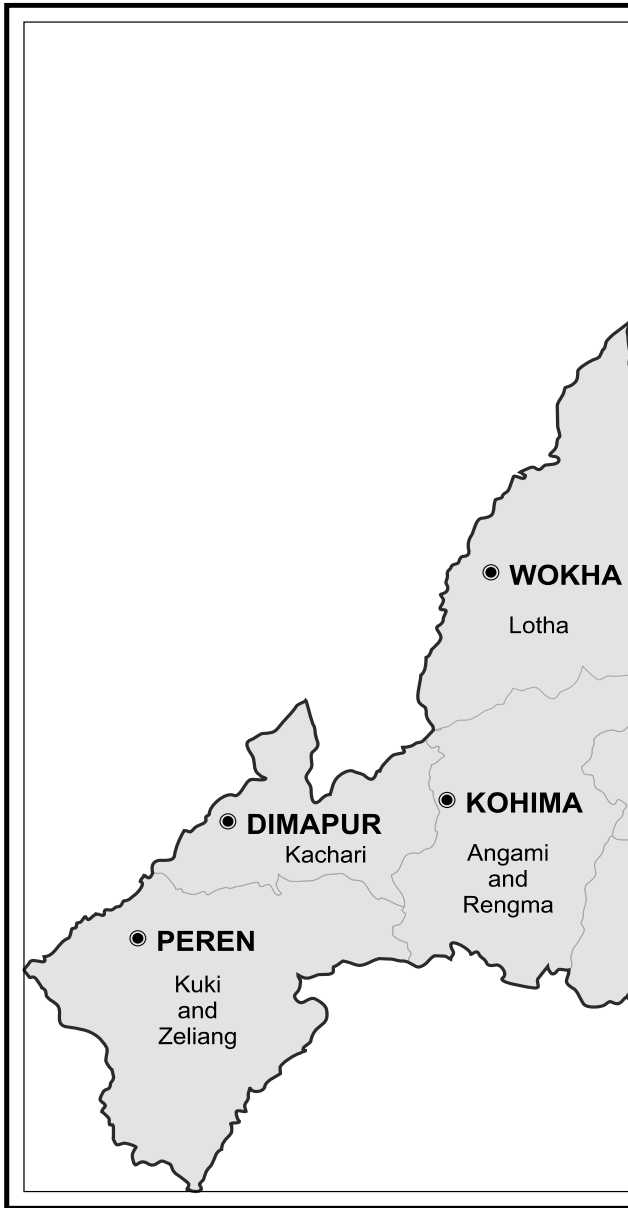
A variety of ecumenism is being promoted by a new generation of seminary-trained Naga Christians. Among the Ao Naga tribe toward the north of the Angami area, topnotch Baptist seminar-ians and theologians are spearheading ecumenical theology. One of the oldest Baptist seminaries, Clark Theological College (CTC; founded in 1972) in Mokokchung district, is at the forefront of theological studies and is affiliated to the Senate of Serampore College – the institution in Bengal founded by a renowned English Baptist missionary, William Carey, a household name among Naga Christians.<sup>8</sup> At CTC, seminary students acquaint themselves with subjects ranging from feminist theology, tribal theology, and other subaltern theologies, to Greek hermeneutics and New Testament studies. Bible colleges and institutes have mushroomed in the state, but seminaries like Clark Theological College and Witter Theological College (founded 1991) in Wokha district are still preferred because of the American Baptist mission legacy.

Ironically, most of what the students learn in these Bible colleges does not tally with social reality: the Baptist churches are having to grapple with new social issues. Kethoser is, as noted, one manifestation of the change; another is the fact that we are now well past the day when native converts considered themselves equipped to save souls with a bare minimum of Bible knowledge; now, the higher learning in theological studies is a popular pursuit among Naga Baptists.

### III

Not every Naga is an ardent follower of the Baptist faith. Many have conflicting views on Christianity in general and the Baptist

<sup>8</sup> As a pioneering figure (alongside William Ward and Joshua Marshman) in the history of printing technology, who in 1800 founded the Baptist Mission Press in Serampore, Carey is also well known to scholars and students of book history in India.



Map 2: District-wise location of



sixteen tribes of Nagaland.

faith in particular. In April 2016, I met the daughter of a well-known Naga writer, now settled in Norway, who claimed to be a follower of the ancestral faith. I had encountered many young Naga intellectuals who sought their roots in the animist past, but rarely anyone claiming to actually practise animism: this intelligent and articulate Naga woman in her mid-twenties was educated in both Kohima and Tromsø. She had thus experienced two diametrically opposite worlds – a zealously religious Naga society, and a far-from-fervid secularised Scandinavian society akin to those in Western Europe. All the same, her more dispassionate world did not seem to have cleansed her of passion, for despite her avid interest in the traditional faith it seemed to me that, like many well-educated Nagas who have had the privilege of travelling and studying abroad, she was romanticising the past. Somewhat in line with the Durkheimian dictum, these new generations of Nagas are not worshipping the multitude of spirits that once inhabited their world, they are revering a past which they presume to be, and valorise as, pristine – in other words, they worship a collective ethnic identity.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, traditional Naga religion is heaving its last sigh and poses no challenge to the Baptist faith in the state. Social conditions in Nagaland are not conducive for resurgences such as the Donyipolo in Arunachal Pradesh or the Adi-dharam among the tribes of Central India – both indigenous religious revivals aimed at preserving cultural and ethnic identity.

However, not all is well in Naga Baptist land. Many are disillusioned with the faith and some who have joined university have grown critical, especially in recent decades, of the mode of spreading the Baptist mission. Phejin Konyak, a young Naga independent researcher from Shiong village, is one such. I met her in Kolkata's national museum in 2015, where she was delivering a special lecture on the Konyak tattooing tradition.<sup>10</sup> She

<sup>9</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. According to Durkheim, worship of the gods translates into the strengthening of social relationships – the gods being only a figurative representation of society.

<sup>10</sup> Phejin's extensive research on the Konyak tattoo tradition was published two years later. See Konyak and Bos, *The Konyaks*.

had been collaborating with a Dutch photographer to document this fast-disappearing custom among her people. We began our conversation by mentioning the work of the Austrian anthropologist Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf on the Konyak Nagas.<sup>11</sup> Phejin said her grandfather was with Furer-Haimendorf during the punitive expedition when British forces – led by a deputy commissioner, J.P. Mills, along with a contingent of Naga warriors and coolies – marched into the unadministered eastern region. They had set out to take action against a recalcitrant village, Pangsha, that had defied British authority; to teach its inhabitants a lesson the village was burnt to the ground. This powerful Khiamniungan Naga village, which once wreaked havoc on neighbouring tribes and villages, is now a hundred per cent Baptist.

Phejin is passionate about the Konyak cultural past, and, like most of my Konyak friends and informants, worries about the progressive loss of their traditions. Educated Konyak Nagas lament that their customs have become showpieces of a fast-fading culture – an instance of this being exquisite Konyak woodcarvings that adorn the drawing rooms of wealthy Nagas in Kohima and Dimapur, far removed from the culture and aesthetics of the Konyak world. Phejin tells me that the disregard for past traditions and the abandoning of indigenous beliefs and practices are a consequence of the Baptist mission, especially in the post-Independence period, when Naga Baptist converts took up the task of preaching to their “unsaved” brethren. This is not a new phenomenon in the conversion of the Naga tribes to a new faith – so, what makes the Konyak Naga experience different from that of other Naga tribes?

Like most Naga tribes, the Konyak are devout Baptists, but the spread of the Baptist faith in the Konyak area is much more complex. The manner of their conversion sticks out like a sore thumb in the history of Naga Baptists, especially the bits showing Naga insurgents, operating from the hermetically sealed region of the Indo–Myanmar border, taking up evangelism along with their

<sup>11</sup> Furer-Haimendorf, *The Naked Nagas*.

ethnonationalism. The evangelical enterprise of these Naga rebels cannot hold a candle to the many decades of the Naga Baptist mission's proselytising in the frontier region, when Naga groups that first came into contact with the American Baptists themselves took up mission work as a divine call. However, the enmeshing of evangelical zealotry with ethnonationalism among a section of the faithful has introduced an element of controversy into Naga Baptist history when viewed in the context of inter-faith relations and political processes in a diverse country like India.

Not every educated Konyak holds Phejin's opinions: a bright Konyak college student named Mercy has a favourable view of the Baptist mission. Both Mercy and Phejin are from the Lower Konyak region and represent second-generation Baptists; both also belong to the Konyak middle class that can afford to send sons and daughters to study in Indian metropolitan cities. Mercy is an undergraduate at one of the premier colleges of Delhi University; she dresses in the latest Western fashion and sports a fashionable haircut; she speaks impeccable English. But we converse mostly in Nagamese, sharing our common identity as Nagas in mainland India. Mercy is also a praise-and-worship leader in a small interdenominational evangelical church, frequented mostly by middle-class students from the north-eastern states, in the university area of north Delhi. She is not very knowledgeable on the Konyak traditional past but outspoken about women's rights and very proud of her heritage. Interestingly, Mercy – like most of my Konyak acquaintances – sees no contradiction between traditional religion and Christianity. I find this intriguing, because the very individuals who critique the British Raj as a manifestation of Western imperialism perceive Christianity as if it were from a different realm. The Nagas are known for their doggedness in political life, but the tenacity of religious belief in their social life is even more compelling. Christianity has taken hold of the Naga mind, entrenched itself firmly in Naga society, and is influencing the future of its next generations.

While in Delhi, I spent some time with Moba Langfhoang at a popular American-brand café in an upscale shopping mall.



Moba is my long-time friend, a graduate in economics from Delhi University and knowledgeable informant on Konyak society. With both of us having studied in Delhi University, our more serious conversations range from the works of English writers much steeped in the Christian worldview – such as C.S. Lewis and G.K. Chesterton – to the works of agnostic postcolonial writers like Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, and Gayatri Spivak. And yet, among educated middle-class Nagas, the encounter with British colonialism – and more importantly the American Baptist missions – evokes multiple perspectives far removed from those of the anticolonial Left. Moba is of the opinion that Nagas would have lagged far behind modern Indian society had it not been for the changes wrought by British rule and the American Baptists. Notwithstanding feelings of resentment against colonialism and disillusionment with the Baptist missions, the modern Naga middle classes were undeniably shaped by the colonial encounter and are beneficiaries of the American Baptist heritage. As Indian citizens within a multicultural nation, Nagas are now striving to find common ground between their traditional cultures and the modern ideals of universal human rights, liberal democracy, the parliamentary form of government, a quasi-British legal system, and an affinity for the English language – all inherited from the West.

#### IV

Of all the Naga tribes, the Konyak seem to most intrigue those interested in so-called indigenous cultures. What the outside world sees through the aperture of sophisticated cameras belies fast-changing Konyak society and culture. The average reader of expensive coffee-table books may find herself engrossed in glossy high-definition photographs of Konyaks with blackened teeth, body tattoos, exquisite headgear, and colourful tribal dress; what she will not see in these books is teenagers in Levi's jeans and T-shirts dancing to the latest Christian pop songs at the local Baptist church. Like it or not, these are two contrasting worlds

that coexist in Konyak villages; also, there are two emerging realities distinguishing those Konyak settled on the Indian side in Nagaland from those on the other side in Myanmar. But, in an indication of increasing apathy among various stakeholders, including academics, the districts of Mon, Tuensang, Kiphire, Longleng, and Noklak, bordering Myanmar, have been clubbed together as “eastern Nagaland”, which has become synonymous with underdevelopment, poverty, and backwardness.

Tuensang district remains infamous for its assumed imagery of unruly and warmongering tribes. Known as the trans-Dikhu tribes, or as the unadministered tribes, or euphemistically as the free tribes, the internal doings and affairs of these tribes made the British turn a Nelson’s eye in their direction as long as colonial interests were served without threat to the administration. This policy of “splendid isolation” for the unadministered tribes may have been politically strategic, but it also proved crucial in the spread of Christianity. Britain’s dual approach to administering the Naga tribes had far-reaching implications in the later years of the Baptist mission, and in the relations between administered and unadministered tribes. I will take up these issues in succeeding chapters, but suffice it to say that the tribes in the administered region inherited from the British a thinly veiled feeling of superiority *vis-à-vis* their eastern Naga brethren.

This state of feeling superior is itself a product of modernity, where education and the embracing of a new faith tilt the scales in favour of Naga groups that were subdued earlier by the British government, as against those subdued later. In the Ao Naga country, where the Baptist faith first took root, the American Baptist mission had pitched its tent even before the British annexed the area, but in retrospect the mission may not have flourished if the British had not come in as conquerors. Overall, the Union Jack had to be foisted on this secluded and “unruly” hill tribe to secure peace – using force if need be – before the American missionaries could preach their message of salvation.

Since Independence, Tuensang has witnessed waves of ethnic conflict which continue to this day. This region, which remained

beyond the pale of modernity even years after Independence, became a launchpad for the Naga nationalist A.Z. Phizo to lead an armed uprising. As an administrative unit Tuensang had kept the civil servants of the nascent Indian state on tenterhooks due to the natives' irrepressible desire for freedom. Also at Tuensang, the new Indian state had suffered its first casualty in the theatre of Naga insurgency that ran amok in subsequent years.<sup>12</sup> The state machinery battered the region, and Tuensang was made an example of, for daring to rebel against the Indian state. Importantly, the growth of the Baptist faith in the region went hand in hand with the spread of ethnonationalism among the diverse ethnic groups. Today, Tuensang is a tinderbox. Even a slight misunderstanding can explode into a major ethnic conflict.

Home to Naga tribes like the Chang, Khiamniungan, Sangtam, Tikhir, and Yimchunger, Tuensang district was a fertile Baptist mission field in the post-Independence period. The Baptist mission among the eastern Nagas during these tumultuous years is illustrative of human fortitude, suffering, and perseverance for the sake of religious belief. However, the missionary endeavour in the post-Independence period was no longer the white man's burden; it had become the divine calling of native converts. So, itinerant Ao and Sumi Naga preachers and evangelists preached the gospel to their "less fortunate" brethren whom the fruits of modernity and education had reached late. The phraseology had changed; the eastern Naga tribes were now typecast as heathens: backward, uneducated, and unsaved.

Among the eastern Naga tribes, many first-generation Baptist converts still show the marks of former animist days: intricate faded-green tattoos on their sunbaked and wrinkled skins are a silent reminder of the past. Yet the religious fervour among these elderly Christians is unprecedented, outdoing the religious commitment of second- or third-generation Christians. Prayer and fasting are common, and their seemingly immovable faith in an invisible god is conspicuous. Tuensang district has a substantial number of

<sup>12</sup> See Ramunny, *The World of the Nagas*, 74.

first-generation converts, and the narratives of religious conversion here seem to offer a different vantage point on the history and discourse of the Naga Baptists.

Meanwhile, in the Angami and Chakhesang Naga villages in Kohima and Phek districts, the last generation of animists relish their tankards of frothy rice beer. In these villages some Christians, as I was told with a tinge of irony, still brew rice beer clandestinely at the time of important festivals and during agricultural seasons that require heavy work. It seems the sweet, appetising rice beer is too tempting even for Baptists. Nagaland is in theory a “dry” state, but it is also one where the law-enforcement agencies are struggling to curtail bootlegging – all to no avail; the streets of Dimapur, Kohima, and other towns are flooded with Indian made foreign liquor (IMFL). Indeed, the Baptist church faces an uphill battle. It knows full well that many of its baptised members would sell their birthright for a peg of whisky or even spurious liquor. In fact, prayer houses in Nagaland also function as quasi-rehab and de-addiction centres.

Why so much ado about a traditional fermented rice drink? The reason is that teetotalism is a way of life among Naga Baptists, a virtue to be emulated that also amounts to teetotalitarianism. In the early days of Baptist missions, the words “teetotaller” and “non-teetotaller” were used to signify a Christian and a non-Christian, respectively, though the terms “churched” and “unchurched” became popular usage later. So, the consumption of rice beer still raises eyebrows in Naga society. Rice beer is political. It is synonymous with what the Baptists think of as “the sinful days”. But the elderly animists won’t give up their drinking habit; for many of them, drinking is also an act of dissent.

Critics may condemn the Naga Baptists for inordinate legalism and for their espousal of a religious-fundamentalist attitude toward alcohol. But the elderly generation that had witnessed the ill effects of alcoholism when IMFL began to flood this young Indian state in the late 1960s may give Naga Baptists benefit of the doubt. As for *zu* brewing as a cultural tradition, it will soon vanish like