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**Abstract:** Most Indians know the Northeast only as a region of conflict. The media speak about the “Seven Sisters” of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura only when there are killings or other conflicts. In reality, the Northeast stands out also for other forms of change, high literacy being one of them. That achievement is the doing mostly of Christians. Seen in the context of this achievement and the economic and cultural marginalisation of the region, the conflicts may be understood as integral to the process of a search for an identity. That turns the situation into a challenge to those who believe in continuing the work of the Prince of Peace. It requires an understanding of the causes of the conflict and a search for solutions that are just to the people of the region and to other marginalised groups. In other words, the Northeast challenges Christians to go beyond appearances and understand the changes and the agony that its people are going through. It also demands courage to adapt one’s work to the aspirations expressed through what is termed unrest or militancy or terrorism. As the Vatican II Pastoral Constitution (No. 4) says, their prophetic role demands that Christians read the “signs of the times” and respond to them in a spirit of faith. With that in view we shall attempt in this paper to understand these changes and study possible solutions to the conflict.

**Keywords:** North East, Seven Sisters, Signs of the times, Peace

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## **The Challenge of Peace Amid Social Change in the Northeast**

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Most Indians know the Northeast only as a region of conflict. The media speak about the “Seven Sisters” of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura only when there are killings or other conflicts. In reality, the Northeast stands out also for other forms of change, high literacy being one of them. That achievement is the doing mostly of Christians. Seen in the context of this achievement and the economic and cultural marginalisation of the region, the conflicts may be understood as integral to the process of a search for an identity. That turns the situation into a challenge to those who believe in continuing the work of the Prince of Peace. It requires an understanding of the causes of the conflict and a search for solutions that are just to the people of the region and to other marginalised groups. In other words, the Northeast challenges Christians to go beyond appearances and understand the changes and the agony that its people are going through. It also demands courage to adapt one’s work to the aspirations expressed through what is termed unrest or militancy or terrorism. As the Vatican II Pastoral Consti-

tution (No. 4) says, their prophetic role demands that Christians read the “signs of the times” and respond to them in a spirit of faith. With that in view we shall attempt in this paper to understand these changes and study possible solutions to the conflict.

### **Population Growth, Economy and Conflict**

The first change is demographic. 8.14 millions out of India’s 67.76 million tribals live in the “Seven Sisters”. Except for the plains tribes like the Bodos, they inhabit the hills. Non-tribals dominate most plains. Some tribes are numerically small and others strong. The Adis are 26.9% and the Nishi 21.74% of the Arunachal tribals while the Aka are only 0.63%. The Mishing are 11.24% and the Boro-Kachari a third of the Assam tribals. The Garos are 50% and the Kasi 47% of the Meghalaya population. The Mizos are 87.3% of the tribals in their State. In three States tribals are more than 80% of the population and in one, two thirds. But the tribal proportion is low in the populous States of Assam, Manipur and Tripura. The Bodo-Kachari, numerically a third

of the tribals in the Northeast are only 3.7% of Assam’s population. In Tripura the proportion of tribals has changed from more than 56% in 1951 to around 30% today (Sen 1993: 13). Moreover, the more than 40 million *Adivasis* in the estate areas of Assam are probably 20% of the State’s population but are the most

exploited and powerless in the region. They are not included in the schedule for reservations. Even other tribes of the region resist their inclusion since that would raise the number of tribals in the Northeast by about 50% and result in more competition for a share of the already shrinking job reservations’ cake.

**Table 1. Area and Population in the Northeast in 1991**

Sl No.	State	Area Sq. km	Population 1991	Density Sq. km	Growth Rate 1981-91	Annual	Birth Rate	Death Rate	Sex Ratio
01.	Arunachal	83,743	864,558	10	35.86	3.06	35.2	14.1	861
02.	Assam	78,438	22,414,322	284	23.58	2.12	29.1	10.3	925
03.	Manipur	22,327	1,837,119	82	28.56	2.51	22.4	6.7	961
04.	Meghalaya	22,429	1,774,778	78	31.80	2.76	31.1	11.3	947
05.	Mizoram	21,081	689,756	33	38.98	3.29	NA	NA	924
06.	Nagaland	16,579	1,209,546	73	56.86	4.50	19.8	4.1	890
07.	Tripura	10,456	2,757,205	262	33.69	2.90	25.7	7.7	946
	India	3,287,263	843,930,861	267	23.50	2.11	27.4	10.2	929

Source: D’Souza 1999: 4-5.

Thus there is an unequal power relationship, on one side tribal–non-tribal, and on the other between various tribes. The high population growth during the 1981-1991 decade has to be situated in this context. It was as high as 56.86% in Nagaland, 38.98% in Mizoram, 38.86% in Arunachal Pradesh and 33.69% in Tripura. It has not been substantially different in the earlier decades (Table 1). Some conclude from it that the people of the region are irresponsible on the fertility front and attribute it to the tribal culture or religious attitudes. But a look at the sex ratio in the region shows a different trend. One knows from many studies that the tribal and to some extent, Dalit women’s status has traditionally been better than that of their high caste counterparts. But at 927 per thousand, the sex ratio in the

Northeast is slightly lower than the national average of 929 which is itself very low. At 861 and 890 respectively it is the lowest in the tribal majority States of Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland (Pandey and Goel 1994: 5).

So, reasons other than fertility behaviour have to be found to explain this change. That gives the first indication of the causes of the conflict. The phenomenal population growth is due mainly to massive immigration from outside the region, some of it from neighbouring countries. A third of the migrants into Tripura are families migrating from Bangladesh. In most other cases only men come in search of jobs (D’Souza 1999: 4). Most immigrants are poor tribals and Dalits from Bihar and UP who have been impoverished by

deforestation, displacement and other forms of alienation of their livelihood. But the people of the region view them as competitors for their jobs, land, forests and other scarce resources. Thus, population growth becomes a question of their very survival. Because the outsiders take up jobs in these highly literate States, compete for the natural resources and control the local economy, the local people, especially the youth, view immigration as an attack on their livelihood.

Their resentment is primarily against outsiders controlling their economy and marginalising them. External control is seen, among others, in urbanisation. It is very low in the North-

east and is lower among the tribals than among the rest. Only in Mizoram tribals, who are 94.75% of the population, are 45.21% of the urban inhabitants. It is mainly because of the regrouping of villages during the insurgency into camps that are today considered towns. In Nagaland and Meghalaya the tribals, who are over 80% of the population, are below 20% in the towns. In other States their proportion is below 10% (Table 2). Outsiders dominate the towns and cities where economic decisions are taken. Four States also have tribals as their political leaders. So the local people tend to believe that they are running the State administration on behalf of the external economic forces.

**Table 2: Total & Tribal Population, Urban/Rural in the Northeastern States, 1991**

State	Population Total	% of Urban	% of Rural	Tribals Total	% of Urban	% of Rural	Tribals as % of Total
Arunachal	864558	12.80	87.50	550351	05.84	94.16	63.66
Assam	22441322	11.09	88.89	2874441	03.38	96.62	12.81
Manipur	1837149	27.52	72.48	632173	08.42	91.58	34.41
Meghalaya	1774778	18.60	81.40	1517927	13.56	86.44	85.53
Mizoram	689756	46.10	53.90	653565	45.21	54.79	94.75
Nagaland	1209546	17.21	82.79	1060822	12.04	87.96	87.70
Tripura	2757205	15.30	84.70	853345	01.65	98.35	30.95

Source: Registrar General and Census Commissioner 1992: 13-17.

Given the domination of a few mostly non-tribal groups, the discontent spills over also into internal conflicts. But the worst consequences of the conflict are felt by the weakest like the *Adivasis* who were brought to Assam by the British in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as indentured labourers. They are landless, politically powerless, and literacy is low among them. Besides, they keep referring to their ancestry in Jharkhand and

are yet to find an *Assam Adivasi* identity. That confers legitimacy on those who perceive them as outsiders even a century after their arrival in the region. Similar is the Naga-Kuki conflict in Manipur, and the tribal-Bangali tension in Tripura, mainly for land and control of trade.

Thus, some conflicts take an anti-Centre form since it is perceived as sup-

porting the external economic forces. Secessionism is its expression. Regional conflicts tend to be expressed in terms of autonomy and ethnicity. Together with this, one also sees expressions of a new identity either in the form of the demand that they be considered indigenous people, or the expansion of identities by many tribes coming together, as the Nagas and the Mizos have done. So the conflict expresses itself in terms of political autonomy, ethnicity and identity. An effort to restore peace requires an understanding of these processes.

### **Literacy, Economy and Demography**

The external control and marginalisation of the local communities have to be seen in the context of the good work done by the Churches in health and education. Literacy is high especially in States with a high Christian proportion. Even the relatively high, internal population growth results from the access the Church-run institutions have provided to the health services. Because of it, mortality has declined without a proportionate lowering of fertility (Goswami 2000: 53). In Mizoram literacy was 82.27% in 1991 and in most other States of the region, above the national average of 52.21% (Biswas 1999: 17). There are indications that in the 1990s Mizoram has overtaken Kerala as the most literate State in India. But in States like Tripura where non-tribals dominate, literacy is a little over 50% of the population as a whole but only around 30% among the tribals. Besides, only in Mizoram at 85.61% and 78.60% respectively and in Nagaland at 66.09% and 55.72% is male and female literacy somewhat close to each other.

In all other States, female literacy is about a third less than that of males (Biswas 1999: 144-146).

So the proportion of educated young persons is high, among the tribals in particular. It turns immigration into a major threat to the youth who need jobs. In this perspective, demographic changes give us a view of insurgency that is different from that presented by persons controlling the economy. To hide their own vested interest in keeping the local population out of economic decision-making, they present it as missionary inspired or externally controlled. To the local people, the youth in particular, the main problem is immigration combined with high literacy on the one hand and low investment and employment generation on the other. The outsiders who dominate the economy seem to view the region primarily as an extraction zone for tea, timber, petroleum, coal and some other minerals. The number of industries is one of its indications. In 1994 Assam had only 116, while there were merely 17 in Arunachal Pradesh, 6 in Manipur, 7 in Meghalaya, 1 in Mizoram, 16 in Nagaland and 1 in Tripura (Table 3). The economic performance of the Northeast is calculated by economists as 61% of the nine most advanced States of India (Mazumdar 1998: 58). Even Orissa that is considered industrially backward had 374 industrial units in 1995 (Fernandes and Asif 1997). That creates a contradiction between the investment made in education and the aspirations of the youth who view the school as a step towards a secure economic future and perceive the immigrants as persons who snatch it away from them.

**Table 3: Economic Profile of the Northeastern States, 1991**

State	Industries 1994	Workforce Participation			% in Each Sector			Per Capita SDP (Rs)		
		Total	Male	Female	Primary	Second	Tertiary	80-81	85-86	90-91
Arunachal	17	45.22	63.66	36.34	67.44	8.66	23.90	1561	3274	5046
Assam	166	31.19	80.64	19.33	73.99	5.56	20.45	1200	2313	4114
Manipur	6	38.55	58.57	41.43	70.00	9.66	20.34	1429	2362	3893
Meghalaya	7	40.32	62.83	37.17	74.81	3.73	21.46	1361	2250	4530
Mizoram	1	42.09	61.32	38.68	65.99	5.07	28.94	1289	2658	NA
Nagaland	16	42.29	58.54	41.46	75.26	3.48	21.26	1448	2591	5006
Tripura	1	29.09	83.07	16.93	64.08	6.41	29.51	1323	2074	3430
All India	NA	37.64	51.52	27.06	67.53	11.97	20.50	1625	2749	5054

*Source: D'Souza 1999: NEC 1995: 149; Dubey and Gangopadhyay 1998.*

### Economy and Cultural Domination

To it should be added the effort of the external economic forces to impose a single culture on them in the name of “one nation, one State”. As Datta (1990: 41) says, the tendency of the Indian State is “to take the degree of Aryanisation as the measure of Indianisation.” In attempting to turn itself into a nation, the Indian State does not respect the cultural and ethnic identity of different groups or recognise that the tribals have a culture and a religion of their own (Singh 1990: 234). Such imposition is integral to economic domination. The forces controlling their economy tend to devalue the tribal community and present their culture as song and dance, i.e., easy going people who need outsiders to develop them. In its place they impose a single culture as “development” and “civilisation”. This approach serves both the purpose of hiding their own vested interest and the upper caste dominated fundamentalist objective of conferring a *Hindutva* identity on them by co-opting them into the dominant religious culture as a low caste (Fernandes and Roy Choudhury 1993: 18-19).

It is thus a direct attack on the communities that have found a new identity. It creates in the youth in particular a sense of ambiguity towards the outsiders as well as their own society. The tribals resent the efforts to homogenise their culture and monopolise their livelihood. They also resent non-tribal domination, especially in Assam, Manipur and Tripura. Their first reaction is sub-nationalism. They begin to perceive the Central Government as promoter of the external economic forces and of a homogenising culture. At times they also view the locally dominant groups as allies of the external forces though the latter are often in conflict with the outsiders, for example in Assam and Manipur.

So most struggles in the Northeast are in reaction to external economic control, their own marginalisation and the homogenising cultural trend. One witnesses a double resentment—against the Central Government as representing the economic forces and against the locally dominant groups. The former may lead to secessionist demands and the latter takes the form of autonomy. Much of

the history of the region is conditioned by this interaction. In reaction to domination, the people demand control over their livelihood: economic and political power, and assert their cultural identity which may take an exclusive form. Their demands take the form of identity, ethnicity and nationalism. Political, economic and cultural autonomy go hand in hand. Though much of the immigration is caused by poverty (Nandi 2000: 104), the local people view it as competition for livelihood. Hence the anti-Bangladeshi, anti-Nepali or anti-*Adivasi* feelings in different States. For example, the tribals who were 70% of the Tripura population in 1901 were reduced to 56% in 1951 and to around 30% in 1991 because of immigration from Bangladesh. People in the rest of India do not consider them foreigners because they are Hindus. Only when Muslims come in are they referred to as Bangladeshis. But the fact remains that whatever their religion, they deprive the tribals of their land and other resources (Sen 1993:13).

### Churches and Social Change

An understanding of this ambiguity can help one to identify the areas where the churches can make a contribution to peace. A way of understanding this role is to look at the contribution the churches have made to social change in the past. The missionary was rarely aware of the social processes that his inputs set in motion. But without realising it, he supported tribal empowerment. To begin with, the parish and other Church institutions provided the organisational base the tribals required to come

together. As a result, the Naga tribes as early as the 1920s, the Mizos in the 1950s and others at different periods of time, went beyond inter-tribal conflicts. Their coming together itself has to be understood in the context of the cultural attack on them that began in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and intensified in the 19<sup>th</sup>. Many social historians attribute the 19<sup>th</sup> century conversion of the tribals in the Northeast to the possibility it provided to them to protect their identity against this attack. They had seen how the Meiteis and Ahoms were Sanskritised and absorbed into the Gangetic valley culture. The tribals were afraid of being subjected to the same homogenising process. That is when conversions to Christianity increased among them. The missionary probably did not understand this process and did very little to protect their culture. But their coming together using the churches' organisational base has been integral to the process of expanding their identity beyond individual tribes (Fernandes 1999).

Organisational support would have been inadequate without education. It gave them a sense of hope in the future and became a tool of awareness building in their communities. The hope generated by education helped them to strengthen the process of identity expansion that had begun with the support of the organisational structure. In the process of their developing a sense of being one among themselves, education also became a crucial step in the awareness of what they perceived as threats to their identity (Pakem 1990: 110-112). The missionary viewed education as integral to his pastoral efforts. But combined with the organisational structure,

he set in motion processes that made their communities aware of the possibility of making progress by using their rich resource base (Sanyu 1996: 115-126).

However, they were to be disillusioned in this enterprise. The outsiders controlling the economy view the region only as an extraction zone from which raw material and capital can be taken out for investment elsewhere. Table 3 shows that investment in the region is very low. So its highly literate population does not have enough jobs. As the employment figures show, against an All India proportion of 11.97% of the workforce in the secondary (production) sector, it is as low as 3.48% in Nagaland, 3.73% in Meghalaya, 5.07% in Mizoram and 5.56% in Assam. Only Manipur at 9.66% comes close to the national average. So their only recourse is administrative jobs. In most States, more than 25% of the workforce is in the tertiary (services) sector, against 20.50% in India as a whole (D'Souza 1999: 9-10). The nature of the tertiary sector itself is different. In many places it is commerce, tourism, information technology, transport and related fields. In much of the Northeast it is mainly administration.

The other alternative is agriculture. But the outsiders view the forests and other natural resources in which the region abounds only as a raw material to be extracted for use elsewhere. To them, the region is tea, petroleum, minerals and timber. The All India tree cover is 13%. But it is as low as 2% in much of Gujarat (except its tribal regions), Gangetic UP and North Bihar, while

above 50% in most Northeastern States and above 70% in Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland. It has been coming down steadily because of the timber trade (FSI 1997). Besides, the agricultural sector is saturated. More than 5 lakh families (or 3 million of 8.17 million tribals) have shifting cultivation as their main sustenance. They use nearly 4,000 sq. km of land in any year. The tertiary sector cannot produce more jobs. But very few jobs are created in the secondary sector. Hence the spectre of unemployment (D'Souza forthcoming).

Much of what is called insurgency can be attributed to these processes. That is the main reason why the conflict combines nationalism, ethnicity and economic autonomy into one. History shows that one cannot take an exclusive view of the conflict being religious or cultural or economic. External control over the resources is basic to it. The tribals are not able to cope with the depletion of their resources caused by the commercialisation of forests and agricultural produce. They feel the need to come together to safeguard their livelihood or to take advantage of modernisation (Roy Burman 1985: xii-xiii). That brings them into conflict with the forces that want to keep them subjugated in order to exploit their resources. That is what Butola (1997: 73) calls counter-hegemonic insurgency.

But while resentment is against the powerful who control the economy, the people are unable to counter them. So often their resentment gets diverted to soft targets like the *Adivasis* or Bangladeshi and Nepali migrants whom poverty pushes towards India in search



of a livelihood. Those who call themselves indigenous to the region view the late comers both as outsiders and as competitors for the resources that have been made scarce by those who control their economy. The leaders of the conflict concentrate on the educated youth who are hit by unemployment (Hazarika 1994: 237-239). Most social movements that are presented as militancy or terrorism can be viewed in this context.

### **The Role of the Churches**

Those interested in finding a solution to the unrest need to attend among others to these issues. The Church personnel, particularly those in education, can play a role in finding a solution, with the knowledge that they have contributed much to identity formation and awareness of the dignity of self among the tribal communities of the region. Precisely because of this achievement, there is also the possibility of self-complacency. Hence the need to ask whether they are dealing with the situation in the region and building on the good work of the past. They need to ask themselves whether their approach has responded to the challenges the Northeast faces. In other words, has it been able to provide the opportunities to meet the people's aspirations? Some think that,

The spread of modern education without accompanying compatible changes in the socio-economic bases of people's life in the region has not only created a rupture in the traditional and modern way of life, but it has also inculcated aspirations and ambitions among the people with non-existent opportunities available for their realisation (Butola 1998: 27).

Social analysts speak of education, religion and the family as the three main social reproduction systems. They reproduce the value system of the dominant society, not question it. As a result, they are important tools in reproducing unequal societies. The churches in the region may need to ask themselves whether, in the context of an attack on the economy and identity of the local people, the tribals in particular, their pastoral and religious approach has prepared the people to meet the challenges facing them. It is possible that by looking at conversion only as a religious event, the leaders, most of them coming from relatively old churches of southern and western India, have not understood their culture and aspirations fully. That lacuna can go against the people without the leaders being aware of it. Studies show that Christianity gave the tribals a history and a myth needed for identity formation. Education and medical care were instrumental in raising their consciousness. But the morality and education imparted accentuated individualism, private rights and a sense of being different from the rest (Singh 1985: 197).

The churches may need to ask themselves whether they are continuing to reproduce individualism in a region in which the community has played a crucial role. For example, many persons in education perceive individualism and competition as progress and modernisation, and encourage it in the school. The commercial forces need individualism in their divide and rule policy. The sense of being exclusive can add to the divisive forces at a time when the tribals need to come together. In

other words, some approaches to pastoral and educational work run the risk of instilling these social and cultural stereotypes in the tribals. The value system or culture imparted are not conscious decisions on the part of the churches' policy makers. Their conscious objective is to serve the tribals. But their value system may belong to the so called "mainstream" controlled by the dominant decision-makers.

By not questioning this, persons with the good will of serving the people of the region can attack their identity, contribute to the break-up and marginalisation of their communities and go against them at a time when they need to come together to protect their identity and economy from external commercial and cultural attack. They can thus reinforce the fundamentalist forces that are attempting to impose a single culture on them. Studies show that a purely individual, profit and achievement based modernisation introduces inequalities in an egalitarian society (Butola 1997: 76). Most Northeastern tribes are egalitarian. One can ask whether this approach has been instrumental in introducing such a value system without taking steps required to deal with the changes it introduces. Similarly, patriarchy is basic to the "mainstream" society. One wonders whether that too has been reproduced unconsciously. We have stated above that literacy is much higher in the Northeast than in the rest of India but lower among women than among men. Is it an indication of this value system?

## Searching for Alternatives

These issues are a challenge, particularly to persons in education. When the culture, economy and the very identity of the people they serve are under attack, the churches' pastoral, social and educational work has to strengthen their sense of identity. Through education in particular, they should acquire the self-confidence required to take control of their economy and deal as equals with the outsiders who are trying to impose on them a culture that can confirm them in their inferior status. The search for alternatives to these processes is integral to the much misunderstood "evangelisation". Many oppose it, thinking that it involves baptising the biggest possible number. Theology today views it as making the values of Jesus real to His people. And the value required in the region is one of peace based on equality, autonomy and the social liberation that Jesus promised. In other words, one has to understand the causes of the unrest. Though at times expressed through violence, what the people of the Northeast are demanding is their right to a life with dignity. That is integral to evangelisation, i.e., making real in our surroundings the freedom that Jesus lived and died for. He came to make all things new (Gal. 1.8). This newness has to be seen in making the right to a life with dignity real to the people who are deprived of it for the profit of a few. These processes are being further intensified through globalisation. With greater effort to take control of the resources of the Northeast, one can expect more resistance from the local people and greater repression in the name of national security.

The pastoral, educational and social work of the churches can play a genuinely evangelical role by helping all the local people (not merely Christians) to acquire self-confidence required to deal with the external forces at work and to grow as communities with dignity. Involvement in this process can help the churches, people in education in particular, to build on their past that has helped the people of the region to grow as communities. For example, the parish has been a meeting point for groups in conflict. Today the pastor often finds himself in a situation of being forced to opt for one or the other group. Taking a look at parish and school work as a mode of bringing groups in conflict together can make a contribution to peace. It may involve developing a new understanding of sharing and co-operation among these communities, at a time when the shortage of resources makes them competitors and even adversaries since one of the groups in conflict feels that it alone has a right over their livelihood and tends to ignore communities that are poorer. They do not respect the spirit of sharing that is fundamental to their traditional culture. That is where a new spirit of sharing and co-operation can be developed in the place of individualism and competition that can destroy many communities.

To this spirit is integral the self-confidence mentioned above. Helping the communities to develop self-confidence requires firstly a profound respect for their culture. Such respect is integral to evangelisation. One does not state that one has to go back to the past and maintain all their beliefs and prac-

tices. That approach would be fundamentalist. That tendency does exist among some. Some try to legitimise the values they absorb from the dominant castes by finding a parallel in their traditions. For example, most tribal movements are male-dominated. Some of them justify it by going back to their culture in which the man was the fighter. In reality men have lost their traditional status of fighters, rulers and hunters of the village. Outmigration or insurgency can become modes of regaining this status (Menon 1995). In the process they often ignore the woman's role. So her situation may deteriorate.

This is dangerous because it tries to find answers to today's problems in yesterday's myths, scriptures and customs. Instead, one has to look at the past with the future in view. To achieve it one has to identify the fundamentals of their culture, i.e., their value system, build on it and update it. One can summarise most tribal social systems as based on the triple value of (1) intra-generational equity i.e. ensuring that everyone's needs are met and no one's greed prevails over others: (2) inter-generational equity i.e. resources are treated as renewable, as community sustenance that has come down from the ancestors, and as such should be used according to present needs and preserved for posterity. (3) The role of the woman. She was not considered equal but had a higher status than her sisters had in caste societies.

This value system has to be identified and updated in order to make it possible for their communities to face outsiders and new situations with con-

fidence. In education it has implications for methods of teaching, the language, the atmosphere and culture of the school. For example, many assume that the tribals are unable to learn science and maths. The teaching methods are changed in order to assist them to improve. But their learning systems that may be different from the ones that the decision-makers in the churches in general and education in particular understand, are rarely attended to. Building on the good work of the past involves identifying these systems and adapting school administration and teaching methods accordingly. Technical training is essential if they are to take control of their economy. Understanding their learning systems is also basic to this.

Similarly, often the solution to the low self-image the *Adivasis* have developed is to say that nothing can be done with them. One temptation is to ignore them. Equally dangerous is the effort to keep them as a group apart—one that looks to Jharkhand as its land rather than the one they have inhabited for a century. It confirms the local people in their feeling that they are outsiders encroaching on their livelihood. Pastoral, social and educational work has to help them become *Assam Adivasis* and attain an identity that helps them to view themselves as people who have a right to live in this land rather than be forever considered outsiders. It has implications for their language, culture and value system.

Of equal importance is the role of the community. The powerful forces coming from outside cannot be confronted by individuals. It is important

to strengthen their communities including the expanded identity that some have been growing into. Their community itself may have to be modernised, for example into a co-operative that helps them to take control of their local economy. It may also mean supporting social reform efforts that strengthen their community, for example by taking a new look at the woman's role. The tribal woman enjoyed a relatively high status. It is important to go beyond it and instil in them a sense of gender equality particularly when men among them are beginning to internalise patriarchy based values from the dominant castes. If that is not done the churches' work may be instrumental in reproducing them into the values of the dominant society that depends on structural inequality. The atmosphere in the school and parish has to maintain a sense of equality and community.

Such a role involves at times questioning the value system maintained through some of this work. A big section of the personnel have come into the region with a caste mentality of inequality, with a sense of superiority of some cultures and a patriarchal outlook. Clericalism may intensify this value system. Education and religious practices can strengthen it further. So for the churches to become "leaven in the dough" or facilitators of change, their personnel may have to begin by examining their own value system. Otherwise, they may unconsciously play the traditional role of turning education and religion into reproductive tools of an unequal society. In the Northeast it would mean further marginalising the people, the tribals in particular, greater resentment, and more

unrest and repression. A sense of equality, an approach based on their culture and methods that strengthen their identity and self-confidence are basic to a solution to this problem.

## Conclusion

We have asked in this paper, questions that do not have easy answers. The questions have been asked in the context of the good work done by the churches through education, health and other fields, on the assumption that they can be more supportive of social change than they have been hitherto. Left to themselves, the family, religion and education are reproductive systems that maintain the status quo. But in the Northeast, the tribals have been able to use them to their own benefit, as tools of building a new community and of expanding their identity. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century missionaries were not aware of

these processes. Today they can become aware of the people's aspirations and consciously support their right to a life with dignity. It involves understanding the situation of the communities one is dealing with and supporting efforts to provide alternatives to the forces that marginalise them or to the violence and drug addiction that are responses of despair.

That is the reason why an answer has been attempted in this paper to questions that do not have easy answers. The basic assumption in these answers is that Christian communities have to be a "leaven in the dough". In other words, the changes in our approach are not meant only for Christians but for the whole community, whatever their religion. The task is to make the hope of freedom real to everyone, knowing fully well that those with a vested interest in their poverty will present it as anti-national.

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