

ORIGIN  
AND  
GROWTH  
OF  
CHRISTIANITY  
IN  
TRIPURA

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*With Special Reference to the  
New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society  
1938-1988*

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SUKHENDU DEBBARMA

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INDUS PUBLISHING COMPANY  
NEW DELHI

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CHRISTIANITY  
IN KIPURA

Call No. 261.809 5415  
Acc. No. 3811

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First published in 1996 by  
Indus Publishing Company, New Delhi

ISBN 81-7387-038-1

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Published by M.L. Gidwani, Indus Publishing Company  
FS-5, Tagore Garden, New Delhi-110027, and printed at  
Elegant Printers, Mayapuri Indl. Area, New Delhi.

*Dedicated*

*In Loving Memory of the  
Missionaries*

## Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	9
<i>Preface</i>	11
<i>Chapter 1</i> : Land and People	13
<i>Chapter 2</i> : Christianity Before the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society	23
<i>Chapter 3</i> : Origin and Growth of the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society	41
<i>Chapter 4</i> : Contribution made by the Baptist Missionary Society in the Fields of Education, Medical, Literature and Rural Reconstruction	75
<i>Chapter 5</i> : Conclusion	97
<i>Bibliography</i>	105
<i>Index</i>	111

## Preface

This book is an attempt to examine the origin and growth of Christianity in Tripura with special reference to the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society between 1938 and 1988. Attempt is also made in studying the coming of various missions or missionaries before the coming of the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society. Nothing has so far been written about Christianity and the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society. In fact, this subject has failed to attract the attention of the scholars. Thus many important questions relating to this subject remained unanswered. How did Christianity penetrate Tripura? Which was the first mission to reach Tripura? Why did the Maharaja not allow the early missionaries to live and work in Tripura? How did the New Zealand Baptist Missionaries at last manage to get permission to live and work in Tripura? What were the reaction of the people towards Christianity? This work also makes an attempt to evaluate the contributions made by the Missionary Society in the field of education, medical and health, literature and rural reconstruction etc. In fact, this work makes an intensive analysis of Christianity in Tripura, which is a source of knowledge about the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society and also an attempt to answer the hitherto unanswered questions.

Both the dates chosen for the beginning and the end of this study were significant in the history of the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society in particular and Christianity in general in Tripura. It was in the year 1938 that

the New Zealand Baptist Missionaries were given the permission to live and work in Tripura and at the same time the Tripura Baptist Christian Union (T.B.C.U.) was formed. In the year 1988, the indigenous Christians, who formed Tripura Baptist Christian Union (T.B.C.U.), attained fifty years and a grand Golden Jubilee was celebrated. A period of fifty years is quite enough to assess Christianity in Tripura.

I am indebted to Prof. Milton S. Sangma, Professor and Head, Department of History, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong under whom I had the opportunity of carrying out this work. I am really grateful to him for his untiring inspiration and sympathetic guidance, valuable and timely advice and ungrudging gift of his time, during the course of this investigation. I am once again thankful to him for writing the Forword.

I gratefully acknowledge the Tripura Baptist Christian Union ((T.B.C.U.) for making available to me all the required materials for this research. I also take this opportunity to thank Dr. David R. Syiemlieh, Reader, Department of History, NEHU, Shillong; Rev. H. Hnehliana (retired General Secretary of Tripura Baptist Christian Union); Rev. Rajani Kaipeng, present General Secretary of Tripura Baptist Christian Union; Rev. Jong Bahadur Debbarma, Associate General Secretary, Tripura Baptist Christian Union; Mr. Sridam Debbarma; Morgang Kami; Rev. Lalrema Darlong, Headmaster, St. Paul's School, Agartala and my parents and others who helped me in one way or the other. I take this opportunity to express my sincere appreciation to Mr. W.R. Lyngdoh for his carefully typing out this typescript. This work was carried out under the tenure of a Research Fellowship awarded by the University Grants Commission, through the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong which is also thankfully acknowledged.

*Chapter 1*

Land and People



## 1. THE LAND

### Area and Location

Tripura is one of the states of north-east India. It is a small hilly state, covering an area of 10,477 sq. km. and about 60 percent of which is forest. It lies between 91°10' and 92°21' east longitude and 22°56' and 24°32' north latitude. It is bounded by Bangladesh on three sides and by Mizoram and Assam in the north. The state has a curved strip of land, measuring about 183.5 km. in length from north-east to west, and 112.7 km. in width from south to north. It is well connected with the rest of the country by air, road and railways.

### Topography

The state consists of 40 percent of plain land and 60 percent is hilly. In fact, Tripura is mainly a hilly tract, the hills are not very high and the highest peak, Betling Sib being about 975.36 metres. There are flat lands in the northern and western end of the state and are fertile, which is good for paddy cultivation. There are seven long ranges and numerous hillocks. The ranges are: Jampui, Sakhantang, Longtharai, Atharamura, Boromura, Devatamura and Sardeng. These ranges have formed valleys between them and are watered by the rivers flowing from the hills. The principal rivers are: Gomati, Howrah, Longai, Deo, Manu, Juri, Khowai, Muhari and Feni. The drainage is towards the south-west, the west and the north. The rivers are not fit for navigation. After traversing Bangladesh they ultimately fall into the Bay of Bengal.

### Climate and Rainfall

The Tropic of Cancer passes through the state. So, it is quite

natural that Tripura will have a typical tropical climate. It is neither too hot nor too cold. In the month of May and June the average maximum temperature is about 35°C - 40°C, while in the months of December and January the temperature sometimes falls to 10°C - 5°C.<sup>1</sup> The five principal seasons are: summer, monsoon, autumn, winter and spring. The summer is between March and May, monsoon between June and September, Autumn from October to early November and then winter up to January. Spring is only in the month of February.

The average rainfall is more or less about 200 cm. Generally rainfall occurs between June and September. The rainy season is accompanied by cyclones, hailstorms, thunder storms and lightning causing damages to houses, crops, trees including deaths of animals and human beings.<sup>2</sup>

### Flora and Fauna

Varieties of trees, plants and herbs are available for the timber as well as medicinal purposes. In fact, Tripura is a paradise for those who seek medicinal plants. It is virtually an herbarium.<sup>3</sup> Apart from these a large scale plantation of tea, rubber and coffee has been undertaken. There are about 280 species of trees found within the state.<sup>4</sup> Crops like paddy, sweet potato, wheat, potato, mustard, Jute, etc. are cultivated in the flat low lands. Jhum or shifting cultivation is carried out in the slopes of the hills and crops like paddy, jute, cotton, chilli, maize, etc. are cultivated.

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1. Gan Choudhuri, Jagadish, *Tripura, The Land and Its People*, Delhi, 1980, pp. 2-3.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

3. Gan Choudhuri, Jagadish, *Tripura, The Land and Its People*, Delhi, 1980, pp. 2-3.

4. Singh, Ram Gopal, *The Kukis of Tripura, A Socio-Economic Survey*, Agartala, 1985, p. 3.

The wild animals found in the forest include elephant, tiger, leopard, monkey, spotted deer, bear, porcupine, pig, jackal and Buck deer etc. Bison, white elephant and rhinoceros are now virtually extinct. Once upon a time, Tripura was famous for white elephant. In old days, the Tripura Rajahs used to present elephants to the Nawab of Bengal in token of allegiance.<sup>5</sup> Birds include crow, bulbul, sparrow, mynah, parrot, wild cock, wood pecker, kingfisher, owl etc. Domestic animals include cow, goat, horse, sheep, buffalo, dogs and cats.

### Mineral Resources

Tripura is not rich in mineral resources. Minerals of the state include clay, limestone, lignite, coal and ochre. Clay deposits appear to be the only deposits of workable value. The state is rich in oil and natural gas. The Oil and Natural Gas Commission (O.N.G.C.) have found gas and oil in the Boromura range. It goes without saying that the prosperity of Tripura depends largely on the exploitation of her oil resources.<sup>6</sup> However, the mineral wealth of the state has not yet been systematically explored and scientifically exploited.

### Agriculture and Industries

The state is primarily dependent on agriculture and is dominated by monsoon. Agriculture is not developed properly and presents a picture of extreme under development. Cultivation may be broadly classified into settled and shifting or wet land and jhum cultivation. During the plan period many measures such as wasteland reclamation, construction of minor irrigation project and activization for extend-

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5. *Ibid.*, p. 3

6. Chatterjee, S.N., *Tripura—A Profile*, New Delhi, 1984, p. 19.

ing agricultural activity were undertaken.<sup>7</sup> In spite of all these the yield per acre is exceedingly low. Although the output of foodgrains had increased considerably still there is food deficit due to the increase of population.

Though, the main occupation of the people is agriculture, they practise weaving, carpentry, pottery, blacksmithy and other handicrafts to meet domestic as well as market demands. In Tripura, there are no large industries. Stress is laid on village and cottage industries and special attention is paid for the development of handloom, sericulture, khadi and village industries and handicraft sector. The products are even being exported outside India. It has a very rich heritage of cottage and village industries.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. PEOPLE

Tripura, though a small state, is densely populated. The tribals and the non-tribals constitute the two major ethnic groups of Tripura, making the bulk of population.

The tribes are as follows: (i) Tipras, (ii) Riangs, (iii) Jamatias, (iv) Noatias, (v) Lushais, (vi) Uchais, (vii) Mogs, (viii) Kukis, (ix) Chakmas, (x) Khasis, (xi) Garos, (xii) Halams, (xiii) Bhutias, (xiv) Bhils, (xv) Mundas, (xvi) Orangs, (xvii) Lepchas, (xviii) Santals, and (xiv) Chaimals. The Tipras constitute the largest tribe and are the dominant group among the tribals. Munda, Oraon, Santals, Bhils, Lepchas and Bhutias are numerically insignificant. Though Tripura was predominantly a tribal area, its population comprised a considerable number of non-tribal people, mostly

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7. Gan Choudhuri, Jagadish, *Tripura, The Land and Its People*, Delhi, 1980, p. 91.

8. Bhattacharyya, Gayatri, *Refugee Rehabilitation and its Impact on Tripura's Economy*, New Delhi, 1988, p. 4.

Bengalee immigrants from neighbouring districts of Bengal (now Bangladesh).<sup>9</sup> Before the partition of India, the progress of settlement of the Bengalees in Tripura was slow and steady but after partition, specially after 1951 there was a sudden spurt. The Bengalee immigrants came into Tripura in successive waves as communal frenzy displaced them from their native villages and cities of the then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). These displaced persons, now settled permanently in Tripura, are a dominant and volatile section of Tripura's population. Though both the tribals and the non-tribals are increasing, the latter show a faster rate of growth because their increase is accelerated by immigration.<sup>10</sup> The following table will show the growth rate of population in Tripura.<sup>11</sup>

#### Growth rate of population

Year	Population	Percentage of growth
1872	35,262	
1881	95,637	171.00
1891	1,37,442	4.00
1901	1,73,325	26.00
1911	2,29,613	32.50
1921	3,04,427	52.60
1931	3,82,450	25.60
1941	5,13,010	34.14
1951	6,39,029	24.56
1961	11,42,000	78.71
1971	15,56,342	34.32
1981	20,53,058	24.19

9. Bhattacharyya, Gayatri, *Refugee Rehabilitation and its Impact on Tripura's Economy*, New Delhi, 1988, p. 4.
10. Gan Choudhuri, Jagadish, *Tripura, The Land and Its People*, Delhi, 1980, p. 8.
11. Singh, Ram Gopal, *The Kukis of Tripura, A Socio-Economic Survey*, Agartala, 1985, p. 4.

**Decrease in the percentage of tribal population:  
CRI (Tripura)**

Year	Total population	Tribal population	Percentage of tribals to total population
1874-75	74,523	47,523	64.00
1881	95,637	49,915	55.00
1891	1,37,575	70,292	51.09
1901	1,73,325	91,679	52.89
1911	2,29,613	1,11,303	48.47
1921	3,04,437	1,71,610	56.37
1931	3,82,450	2,03,327	52.00
1941	5,13,010	—	—
1951	6,45,707	2,37,953	37.00
1961	11,42,005	3,60,070	31.50
1971	15,33,342	4,50,544	28.95
1981	20,53,058	5,83,920	28.44

### Origin of the Name Tripura

It is very difficult to come to a conclusion as to how the name Tripura was derived. The history of Tripura is shrouded in mystery. According to Captain Lewin "the origin of the name of Tripura is doubtful".<sup>12</sup> In fact there is no unanimous opinion among the different scholars. Many scholars believe that the name Tripura was derived from the name of goddess Tripura Sundari, whereas others believe that Tripura has been coined from the 'KokBorok' language which means 'Tui' meaning water, 'Pra' meaning near. The whole meaning indicates that land adjoining water.

12. Lewin Capt. T.H.J., 'Hill tract of Chittagong and the dwellers there' cited in Ram Gopal Singh's, *The Kukis of Tripura, A Socio-Economic Survey*, Agartala, 1985, p. 7.

### Pre-Christian Religion

The religion of the people can be broadly classified under three headings namely, Animism, Hinduism and Buddhism. All the tribals living in Tripura, with the exception of the Chakmas and Mogs, are all Animists. The Chakmas and the Mogs are the followers of Buddhism. All the non-tribal people are the followers of Hinduism. In the course of time due to the interaction between the tribals and non-tribals, many tribals became Hindus, side by side with Animists.

As many as 179 Maharajas ruled over Tripura and it remained a Princely State till 15th October 1949, before it merged with the Indian Union. It remained as a Union Territory till 1971 and under the provisions of the North Eastern Areas Act of 1971, Tripura became a full-fledged state in 1972.

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