

Uniting Minds and Spirits: A Journey of Educational Reform in the Unitarian Movement

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Abstract

Education catalyzes social movements, influencing awareness, critical thinking, and organizational skills. It raises consciousness about societal issues, fosters the development of critical thinking, and equips individuals with the skills necessary for effective activism. Institutions become hubs for networking and solidarity, nurturing connections among like-minded individuals. Additionally, academia contributes to social movements through research and theoretical frameworks. Student activism, often rooted in educational institutions, is pivotal in challenging established norms. Education's impact extends to policy advocacy, empowering individuals to engage in shaping societal change. At the same time, Education can be a powerful force for social transformation and social movements, shaping educational discourse and priorities. The study emphasizes the multifaceted and symbiotic relationship between Education and social movements in the Khasi Hills, recognizing their mutual influence in fostering informed, empowered, and socially conscious individuals.

Keywords: Education, Unitarian, Khasi Hills. Christian Missions, Social Change.

INTRODUCTION

Education and social movements are interconnected in various ways. Education often plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' awareness, values, and capacity for critical thinking, all essential components of social movements. While Education can be a powerful catalyst for social change, it is essential to note that social movements can also emerge from grassroots activism, community organizing, and lived experiences. The relationship between Education and social movements is complex and multifaceted, with each influencing and shaping the other in dynamic ways. Education can significantly impact socio-religious movements, influencing both their development and outcomes. It is important to note that the relationship between education and socio-religious movements is complex and can vary significantly based on cultural, historical, and regional contexts. While Education can be a force for positive change, it can also be a source of tension if different religious groups interpret and teach their beliefs in ways that contribute to social and cultural conflicts.

The Unitarian movement and Education have historical connections, particularly in the context of liberal religious traditions. The Unitarian movement has a strong intellectual tradition, emphasizing reason, rationality, and critical thinking in matters of faith. This

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intellectual focus aligns with the values of Education, particularly Higher Education, where critical thinking and intellectual exploration are emphasized. Unitarians have been associated with the founding and support of educational institutions. Historically, Unitarians have valued Education as a means of personal and societal enlightenment. Unitarian Universalist churches often promote Education for moral and intellectual development. While there is a historical connection between the Unitarian movement and Education, it is essential to recognize that individuals within any religious movement may hold a variety of perspectives on Education. Like any religious movement, the relationship between Unitarianism and Education is dynamic and subject to individual interpretation and community practices.

Study Area

The Khasis are an indigenous ethnic group of Meghalaya in Northeastern India. Khasi Hills comprises four districts: East Khasi Hills, West Khasi Hills, South West Khasi Hills, and Ri-Bhoi. Tribal Khasi dwellers inhabit the region. The Khasis are an indigenous ethnic group of Meghalaya in North Eastern India who practiced an indigenous tribal religion before the advent of Christianity. They are a matrilineal society, and the children take their surname from that of the mother, forming a clan under that name from the first mother down the generations. One must be clear regarding the nature of matriliney in the Khasis.

Inheritance is passed down through the female line, and all Property acquired by a man belongs to his 'mother.' They have a patriarchal system, which can be seen in most societies worldwide since in matters concerning the wife and children, the father is the head of the family, and the maternal uncles manage matters relating to family affairs, material and religious connected with the clan.

Educational Reforms during the Christian Missionaries Period

The Khasis had no formal education prior to the entrance of the Christian missionaries. On the other hand, every Khasi home is an unofficial institution that teaches morality via folk songs, pastoral melodies, proverbs, maxims, and other materials. Customs, convictions, and expertise were transmitted orally from one generation to the next. Folktales and stories revolve around visible items and things, connecting them to human experiences and events. The stories are recounted to children not just for their entertainment value but also to impart moral lessons, guidance, and instructions.

It is impossible to divorce the history of Christian missions in the Jaintia and Khasi hills from the emergence and growth of the early documented Khasi language and literature. The Khasi Hills were first visited by the Serampore Baptist Mission, a branch of the London Baptist Society, after the Charter Act of 1813 allowed protestant missionaries to preach the Gospel in India. The first Christian mission effort in North-East India began on November 11, 1793, with the arrival of William Carey, an English Baptist missionary. Carey established Bengal's Serampore College in 1818 to prepare Indians for ministry. On December 28, 1800, after spending seven years in Bengal, he baptized Krishna Chandra Pal, the first Hindu convert and missionary among the Khasis.

Even though the early mission to the Khasis was short-lived, it did contribute to Serampore's decision to translate the scriptures into several languages, including Khasi. Carey hired a Pandit in late 1813 to help with the translation, and in 1824, he published a limited edition of 500 copies of the New Testament in Bengali script, which he gave to the Khasis of Sylhet, who could read the Bengali script. Nevertheless, the translation needed to be revised so that the Khasis could not understand it, and the Welsh Presbyterian missionaries eventually started a new translation using the Roman script when they began their work in 1841.

During a fortuitous visit to Cherrapunji in 1840, Rev. Jacob Tomlin was traveling to China. Following a nine-month sojourn in the Khasi highlands, he returned home with a report on his findings and a recommendation to start evangelistic work. By then, the London

Missionary Society, an orthodox organization, had split, and the Welsh faction that had broken away had established the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Mission (later to become the Welsh Presbyterian). Although this mission lacked resources, its employees' strong sense of devotion, zeal, and commitment more than made up for it. On Jacob Tomlin's request, the Welsh mission sent its first missionaries, Rev. Thomas Jones and his wife. They eventually landed at Cherrapunji on June 22, 1841. With the help of a few literate Khasis, particularly u Laithat, they began educating the Khasis and translating the scriptures. The first Khasi book, "Ka Kot Pule Nyngkong" (Khasi First Reader), and "Ka Kitab Nyngkong" (AB) were published in the same year. The 21 Roman Script alphabets were first introduced in these two primers. Literacy and Education were made possible by the 1841–1895 release of the Khasi Readers for use in schools.

More transitional advances in the sphere of literature occurred between 1895 and 1915, coinciding with the great cultural awakening. Modern writers have extensively tried reviving Khasi culture regarding morality, religion, and folktales. Jeebon Roy, Radhon Singh Berry, Rabon Singh, Dr. Hormu Rai Lyngdoh, Sib Charan, and P. Nelson Dkhar are the names that stand out in this task.

UNITARIAN MOVEMENT IN THE KHASI HILLS

In contemporary Indian society, few movements are vital to social change. The unitarian movement is one of them, which was started in the late 19th Century in Meghalaya among the Khasi tribe. In the early 19th Century, the British missionaries changed local development. The missionaries used North East India to bring revolutionary change in the people's minds through social service. They started converting the tribal people in the name of Education.

Towards the end of the 19th Century, the tribal people realized the primary purpose of the missionaries was to root out the tribal culture and bring in Western influence. The book *Brief Questions*, written by the founder and his colleague Robin Roy a hundred years ago, strongly shows how Khasi Unitarianism draws its theology mainly from the traditional Khasi religion. What is said of God here seems to match up with traditional teachings. Khasi Unitarianism uses selected parts of the Bible to support what was already present as traditional beliefs.

As with traditional Khasi religion, the primary emphasis was duty, and Khasi Unitarianism honored traditional culture. This Church clearly showed the Khasis who had accepted Christianity and at the same time asserted the Khasi traditional belief of 'One God' and 'Salvation by God's grace.' The Unitarian Movement then got institutionalized into the Unitarian Union North East India (UUNEI).

EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES OF THE UNITARIAN MOVEMENT IN THE KHASI HILLS

The Khasi society owed it to the Welsh Mission over their Alphabet and Education. However, it may be mentioned that Education was not secular. The main aim of schools opened was for proselytization to enable the people to read the Gospel. This has put the non-Christians at a disadvantage as most were afraid to send their children to schools for fear of conversion. Hajom Kissor and like-minded Khasi people wanted to change this.

The Khasi-English Dictionary by Nissor Singh may be mentioned. It should be noted that Kissor Singh, the author's brother, gave his brother every assistance he could in getting the publication out. Hajom Kissor Singh was a committee member who revised the dictionary's draft.

In August 1893, the Jowai Unitarian Church opened a free school, known as Jowai Unitarian Free School, which started with about 20 girls and boys. This School gave free elementary Education. U Khasi Mynta, a leading newspaper then, would give regular writeups about the school. One such report read:

"The Seventh Anniversary of the Unitarian School at Jowai was held on September 14, 1900... Besides teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic, the school also values Education and tonic solfa music, drill, sewing, knitting... The School teaches readings using phonetics. This year, Dr. Booth, Director of Public Relations, inspected the school, and he was full of praises for it."

Besides this School, another school was also opened in the Laban church, and a training class for young female teachers started. Very rapidly, word went around that this School differed from all the other teaching methods that had never been dreamed of in the Khasi Hills. Even the inspector of schools, himself a Khasi, on visiting the school less than six months after it had been started, stated in his report that "it was different from any school he had ever seen" and added the significant remark that he "could never have believed it possible for Khasi school children to be so alert and so happy." By 1941, that first little School had a building of its own, given by American Unitarians and called the Sunderland Memorial School in memory of Dr. J. T. Sunderland and of all that his friendship did to encourage Hajom Kissor Singh in his early struggles.

In 1940, another larger school was opened in a more central position to cater to children from the Nongthymmai and the Laban church. The Laban school remained an Infant school, and all the older children went to the new School at Malki, meeting at first in a large rented bungalow until the school was built in the winter of 1941-42. This building was opened in March 1942 by Lady Reid, who, as a mark of her appreciation of the work the schools were doing, allowed this one to be called by her name. These schools meet the needs of the Unitarians whose homes are in Shillong. However, that is only the beginning, as most Khasi Unitarians live in villages.

The most important contribution of Hajom Kissor can be seen in his efforts to make the examination medium relaxable to allow lower classes to give their examination in Vernacular. Hajom Kissor and Samuel Shallam wrote to Dr. Booth in this regard. The letter got a positive response, and children in Elementary schools could write their examinations in Vernacular.

After Kissor Singh's death, educational work was carried out by his son, Ekiman Singh. In 1938, he established a school at Kharang without any government help. Unfortunately, his schools could not be run solely on the Unitarian Union's fund with the arrival of A. M. Barr, the School in Kharang, was reopened in 1953. The School at Jowai was restarted in 1968 and named Hajom Kissor Singh Memorial School. The School has been upgraded and is now Hajom Kissor Singh Memorial Higher Secondary School. It is now one of the best schools in Jowai. In February 1976, the Board of Unitarian Union (footnote) passed a resolution to set up a student hostel in Jowai. The hostel was named Margaret Barr Memorial Student's Hostel.

In 1951, Rev. Barr started the Kharang Rural Centre by serving as a residential Senior Basic school. The School gained a reputation, as a result of which a boarding house was set up. The School started by Rev. Barr was soon upgraded. Now, it is known as Annie Margaret Barr Memorial Higher Secondary School, which recently celebrated the 50th anniversary of the death of Rev. Barr.

The Unitarian Union of North East India set up various schools to be administered under the Education Committee and the School Managing Committee. Since 2004, the Unitarian Universalist Partner Church Committee (UUPCC) has been sponsoring schools in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. Apart from direct funding, the UUPCC sponsors students who cannot pursue higher studies due to financial restrictions. However, some Unitarian schools have had the help of the government.

CONCLUSION

The two-quarter Century was a remarkable period for the Khasis. It marked the development of Khasi literature, which the Welsh Presbyterian missionaries had first put into Roman letters, encouraged in their translation of the Bible and other Christian literature, and flowering into prose, poetry, drama, and song by missionaries and their mission school products. Much of the emerging literature had a strong base in the religion and culture of the society. Christians and the adherents of Ka Niam Khasi (the indigenous Khasi Religion) came together to discuss the changes and responses the society was undergoing. Two local newspapers that reflected their mood kept up a relentless crusade to preserve the Khasi culture and religion. Linked with the growth of the Welsh Presbyterian Mission was the spectacular growth in mission schools. Wherever a mission was established, a school was invariably started. The 19th-century Indian social and religious reform movements reached as far east as Shillong and Cherrapunjee. The movement came by way of Bengalis attached to the Assam provincial administration. Many among this community were Brahmos. They set up residences around Laban, organized places of meeting and worship, and entered into dialogue with the more educated Khasis. Occasionally, the Brahmos would be visited by their missionaries. The Khasi religious and social change was a combination of many factors. It was expressed in the founding of the Unitarian movement in 1887.

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