

A Native Flower

Like the orchids that grow plentifully in the area, Unitarianism has found favourable conditions for germination in the Khasi Hills. Within a radius of 50 miles in the highlands of northeast India live 98 percent (over 9000 people) of the country's Unitarians. (A small but important community of Tamil Unitarians exists in Chennai, formerly Madras, India. It traces its history back to 1795, when a Tamil man returned to Madras after being taken to England as a slave, having taken the name, William Roberts, and the religion, Unitarianism.

To understand the development of Unitarianism in northeast India it is important to understand the environment in which it took root. The northeastern states of India are separated from the rest of India by the country Bangladesh. Little is known about the early Khasi people.

They were a matrilineal tribal people who came to India from Southeast Asia and settled in the upland center of Meghalaya, the mountainous northeastern most part of India where Jaintia and Khasi Hills meet. The Khasis are one of numerous tribes in the region that have never been Hindu or Muslim but have always retained their own indigenous religion, Ka Niam Khasi.

Before the British came in the 1800s, there were three major tribes in Meghalaya: Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia. All had independent tribal governments and traditional native religions. The Khasi speak Cherrapunjii, a dialect of the Mon-Khmer language of the Austro-Asiatic family which had no written component in India until the 1840s. The Khasi culture differs dramatically from typical images of continental India, their culture and ethnic background being more akin to southeast Asia. They are not vegetarians, they do not typically cook with spicy curries, and they do not wear saris. In fact, a visit to the Khasi Hills will leave you with the image of a marketplace filled with nuts, bananas, papayas, pineapples, vegetables of all kinds and animals, both dead and alive, for sale, and of men, women, and children wrapped in shawls made of woolen tartan plaids, remnants of the Scottish influence (Van Leer, 2004).

The native Khasi religion was neither Hindu nor Muslim and had no temples or churches, holy books or ministers. It was, according to tradition, a religion based on the belief in one formless living god (UBlei) who was omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient. They considered it a sacrilege to symbolize God or to picture God in any shape or form. The religion taught that through service to others, one serves God. At the same time they believed in gods and goddesses of rivers, streams, jungles, etc. Their religion was based on conciliating good, evil and ancestor spirits through animal sacrifices to these gods and goddesses. The indigenous Khasi religion is still practiced by many in the region. But whether Christian, Unitarian or Ka Niam Khasi, religion was (and remains) inseparable from all that happens in their lives. The Reverend John Rex tells us that religion is passed on within the home "through a complex traditional system of family, clan, tribal organization, and governance" (Rex, 2001).

In 1835 the British imperialists built a road through the northeast region of India and made it part of the Indian state of Assam. With the arrival of the British came waves of Christian missionaries – the largest group being the Welsh Calvinists. By the early 1840s they had written the Khasi language using Roman (Western) letters and had translated the Bible into Khasi. It was not long thereafter that they opened missionary schools and created a monopoly in education.

Rex points out that “with a written language tied to the imposition of colonial government, the only way for tribal people to progress was to learn to read and write by attending missionary school and enduring proselytizing” (Rex, 2001). By 1887 Christianity had established a stronghold in northeast India and had launched a large-scale evangelical movement.

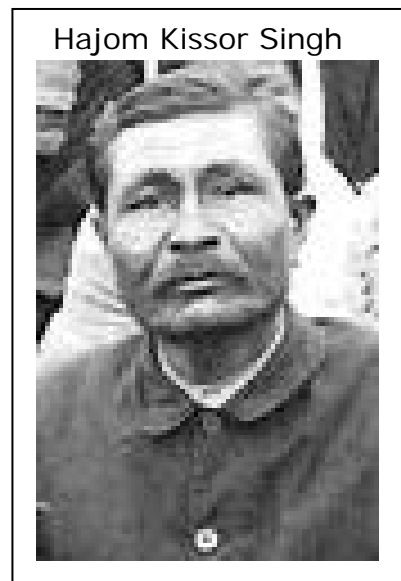
This period of Indian history must be seen as a remarkable period for the Khasis. Though Christianity insinuated itself rapidly throughout India, it provided a means for the development of Khasi prose, poetry, and song as well as stimulating thought on religious and spiritual matters.

Christianity was soon followed by the arrival of scientific humanism and rationalistic ideas which further stimulated thought and questioning (Marbaniang, 2002). Also factoring into the broader context of the time were the 19th century social and religious reform movements which reached as far east as Shillong and Cherrapunji in Meghalaya. Many among the reformers were Brahmos, members of a liberal Hindu movement believing in monotheism and dedicated to eliminating social abuses in India.

It was into this culture that the founder of Khasi Unitarianism was born in 1865. Hajom Kissor Singh was the eldest of two sons born into a family that followed the Khasi traditional religion. Singh was well-read, inquisitive and even in his childhood, showed interest in spiritual and religious matters. He and his brother attended missionary school and at age 15 Singh converted to the Reformed faith of the Welsh missionaries.

Singh’s inquiring mind propelled him to continuous study and questioning of spiritual and religious ideas and led him to become disenchanted with his adopted Calvinistic faith. He observed that the Welsh missionaries had done away with the superstitions, fear of demons, and sacrifices integral to the Khasi tribal religion only to replace them with a fear of hell.

He concluded from his independent search for truth and meaning that there was no basis for belief in the Trinity or for the Calvinist preoccupation with sin, hellfire and damnation. The missionaries’ message of election, damnation and salvation – by belonging to a certain church and professing a certain creed – was, reasoned Singh,



incompatible with the teachings of Jesus as he read them for himself in the Gospels (Marbaniang, 2002).

“He felt further that the (Calvinistic) message, based as it was on fear, was not the one that would redeem his people, fear-ridden as they were by their own primitive demon-haunted, pre-Christian religion” (Marbaniang, 2002). It was Singh’s belief that the power in the teachings of Jesus would save them from their own fears and give them a new sense of dignity as members of the human race (Marbaniang, 2002). The heart of the Gospels is found in the message of divine love. This love casts out fear, overcomes evil with good, and recognizes the essential divinity and potential splendor of the human spirit. Unable to persuade his fellow Christians that the essence of Christianity was to be found in Jesus’s way of life and values rather than in a scheme of salvation by blood or by faith, Singh broke away to seek “the true religion of Jesus, the love of God” (Lavan, 2001).

Finding a spiritual home in neither the traditional Khasi religion nor in the religion of the missionaries, Singh continued his study and his questioning, inviting conversations with others about his nascent beliefs. Drawing on traditions from both the Christian and tribal religions, he formed a “new” religion which he called a Religion of One God (“Ka Niam Mane Weiblei”). Singh’s new religion was created at a time when Christian missionaries were making inroads in these northeastern highlands, undermining, criticizing, disparaging and threatening traditional

Khasi culture and religion – an interesting climate for a new religion to take root. Orchids in the Khasi Hills grow on trees, mossy rocks and on the ground, getting the nutrients they need to thrive in a variety of ways – from soil, from insects, and from decaying leaves that fall among the root masses. The same can be said of the development of Unitarianism in the Khasi Hills. Singh’s new religion thrived by taking nutrients from both the tribal customs and from Christianity. Singh maintained the core of the Khasi traditional belief system including the covenant requiring Khasis to follow a code of clan behavior in all personal, family, clan and tribal matters, but omitted beliefs and practices such as the reading of omens and animal sacrifice. Singh’s religion of one God provided many Christian elements to Khasi religion as it had been practiced: churches, a liturgy, Sunday services, and group worship (Rex, 2001). And yet the new religion was neither the tribal religion nor Calvinism, just as the orchid and its nutrient sources are not the same. Due to the seed of free inquiry and reason, Singh’s religion blossomed into a flower quite separate from its hosts.

When in his early 20s, Singh learned from a Brahmo convert that he was not alone in his belief in one beneficent God. Jope Solomon told him that in Calcutta there was an American Unitarian minister, Rev. George Appleton Dall, who held beliefs like his own. There ensued an eager exchange of letters and through those and the writings of William Ellery Channing (which Mr. Dall had sent him), Singh discovered that there were many others, called Unitarians, who shared his faith. He thereafter called his faith “Ka Niam Unitarian” (The Unitarian Religion).

Singh did not immediately start a society of Unitarians but, as would have been the tradition, began by gathering friends into his home for religious discussions. Until his untimely death in 1886, Dall continued to write and send Unitarian publications to Singh. Singh was bereft at Dall's death and worried that without his friend and mentor he would not be able to continue his work. "I confess that I have got great light from him," he wrote in his diary; "I hope to further the cause of Unitarians in the Khasi Hills but now that my helper has died it will be very difficult to do this alone" (Lavan 2001).

But he was not alone. It wasn't long before Singh was in regular communication with Jabez T. Sunderland, editor of the *Unitarian Magazine*, the publication of the American Unitarian Association. Sunderland became a source of major assistance to the Khasi Unitarians. Funds he solicited for them were used to print copies of Singh's book *A Book of Services and Hymns in the Khasi Language* in 1892.

On September 18, 1887, an anniversary date Khasi Unitarians still celebrate, Hajom Kissor Singh led his first church service in his home. One woman and two men joined as the first members of this new church. By 1899, under Singh's leadership, Khasi Unitarians numbered 214 with average attendance at services of 148. Although the state of Meghalaya, where the Khasi Hills are located, is primarily Christian (Unitarians make up only one percent of the population), today the Khasi and Jaintia Hills Unitarian Union includes thirty-two scattered congregations in Meghalaya and Assam with a growing membership of over 9,000 people; quite a land of orchids! Almost all these churches maintain non-sectarian pre-primary schools for the children in the village. There is a quarterly newsletter published by the Unitarian Union. In 1987, though separated by hundreds of miles and very different cultures, the Khasi Unitarians and the Christian Unitarian Church of Chennai joined to form the Indian Council of Unitarian Churches. Since its infancy Khasi Unitarians have maintained relationships with Unitarians around the world, first through the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) and then through ongoing connections with the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) and the British Unitarians, and now through the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists (ICUU) which was founded in 1995 (Rex, 2001). Extending its outreach further, the Khasi Unitarians hosted an ICUU-sponsored international youth conference in 2003.

From The Garden Of Unitarianism