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Category : [January/February/March 2005](#)

Published by Anonymous on Jan. 02, 2005

TRADITION

Fighting to Preserve a Tribal Heritage

A pilgrimage through Northeast India reveals a rich Vedic lifestyle threatened to the core by sometimes violent Christian insurgents

Stephen Knapp, Detroit, Michigan

In December of 2003 a few of us from the Vedic Friends Association traveled through Assam, Arunachala Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and later Sikkim on a spiritual journey. Unfortunately, the trip wasn't all love and light. The local tribesmen in that part of India face a major threat from sometimes violent Christian insurgents whose conversion efforts too often result in murder and mayhem. This article is about the plight of these noble people and the danger they face on a daily basis from religious zealots who have no notion of the vast spiritual heritage they debase or the terrible consequences they incur for doing so.

This is not the first time that Hinduism Today has reported on the plight of the 30 million tribal Hindus in Northeast India. In November/December, 2000, the magazine published a five-page feature article by Renu S. Malhotra entitled *Missionaries Roil Northeast India* in which the author detailed the disastrous effects Christian conversion efforts were having there. In 2004, Mrs. Malhotra took another trip through that same area and was disappointed to report that the situation has not improved. Instead, she said, it has gotten worse. (See page 65.)

During our trip, the tribal people seemed less concerned with aggressive Christians than they were impressed with us--white Americans who had been raised as Christians but had now chosen to follow the Vedic and Hindu path of spirituality. Our presence in their cultural rituals touched them deeply. They asserted again and

again that we were the only Westerners they had ever met who weren't hell-bent on convincing them to give up their traditional ways of living and convert to Christianity.

Many tribal cultures all over India are immersed in Vedic traditions, or contain elements that are carried over from the Vedic way of life. Today, however, the world is slowly coming to understand that Christians are thoroughly infiltrating the Northeastern region. Nagaland in particular--long famous for its ancient, ascetic, Naga culture--is an area where conversion tactics are most successful. According to census figures just released for 2001, Nagaland is 90 percent Christian.

Many tribal people of India's Northeast are being hammered with the idea that if they want to progress into the 21st century, they must become modern like the Westerners. Since most Westerners they meet are evangelical Christians, they presume that Christianity is the essence of the Western value system and that they must therefore become Christian to be progressive.

As these tribal people innocently and enthusiastically strive by this reasoning to stay in touch with the times, they adopt very little of the best the West has to offer and take instead much of its worst. Abuse of alcohol and drugs is escalating and so is sexual promiscuity, fueling the spread of AIDS and causing more abortions to be performed. Abortion never used to be an issue in this part of India, and AIDS was almost unheard of.

According to local tradition, if a boy and girl were caught in a sexual act, they were forced to marry. Illicit sex was not allowed. Now, many local people, wanting to sidestep local punishment, become Christian just so they can handle a vast array of sexual indiscretions under the protection of Western leniency.

In one area of Arunachal Pradesh that we visited, new converts to Christianity were being told to not associate with their "heathen" friends and neighbors. They were also being discouraged from participating in their traditional festivals, dances and music, or even joining in community harvests and group house raisings. They were being motivated to wear only Western clothes, listen only to Western music and celebrate only Western holidays. This was creating divisions in families and communities, and creating social unrest.

Further complicating conversion matters today, even as I am writing this article, different Christian sects are quarreling with each other over converts. This is having an interesting effect on the tribal people. While it is confusing them, it is also sending them an important message that perhaps they were better off before these Christians came into their lives. Many are beginning to think now that perhaps their old culture was fine just the way that it was. In the old days, tribal wars were only fought for land and resources. Quarrels and crimes over religious differences were almost unheard of.

The most significant conflicts arise from the sometimes violent aggression of Christian insurgents (See page 64). In the last two decades 10,000 people have been killed for religious reasons in the state of Tripura alone.

During our travels, we tried to stress that from our Western perspective the indigenous cultures could easily survive in the modern world if some sense of flexibility could be brought to bear with regard to incorporating technological developments and advanced education. We tried to present the idea, for instance, that much good could come from the amalgamation of the old with the new, such as improvements in communication, medicine, farming, construction, transportation and more.

At the close of this most educational journey, it became apparent to me that, more often than not, it is old values--not new ones--that provide solutions to modern day problems. This can be an important lesson learned too late. One of our more sobering observations during the trip was that when a culture is lost, it is almost impossible to bring back, or even to fully understand in retrospect.

The indigenous cultures of India are treasures worth saving. They offer an important connection to the best India's past has to offer. It seems to me that the social and environmental problems of the country are not due to some inherent problem in the traditional culture itself, but rather in the choice many make to abandon this culture. Remaining fixed in the true principles of this ancient lifestyle and passing these principles on to the next generation certainly can't hurt India in its attempts to carve a future which is at least as powerful as its past.

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Violence in Northeast India

Suffering the effects of poverty, neglect, exploitation and religious conversion

Turn on the television any day of the week, anywhere in the world, and you are sure to catch current news detailing terrorist atrocities occurring in Iraq and Afghanistan. Although similar violence is being committed by insurgents in Northeast India, these latter crimes are receiving surprisingly little news coverage.

On a single day in early October, 2004, militants set off bombs and opened gunfire all across India's Northeast, killing at least 46 people and wounding nearly 100. Two bombs exploded in a marketplace in Dimapur, the commercial center in the state of Nagaland. At the same time, a third bomb ripped through a nearby railway station. Twenty-six people died in the Nagaland attacks. Later on the same day, heavily armed Bodo tribal guerrillas in the neighboring state of Assam drove into a town square and gunned down eleven people who were shopping in a local market. Almost simultaneously, guerrillas of the United Liberation Front of Assam, the biggest of the insurgent groups in the Northeast, set off grenades at four places in Assam killing nine people.

India's mountainous Northeast is home to nearly 200 underground militant organizations, some of which have thousands of fighters. (See <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/country...terroristoutfits/index.htm>) It is generally reported that a portion of these groups are seeking greater autonomy or statehood, while others are demanding secession and the formation of Christian states. In truth, however, what these groups really want depends on who you ask.

Dr. Arun Kumar Sarma, Ph.D., a Member of Parliament representing Assam Gan Parishad [AGP] in the Lok Sabha, told our Hinduism Today correspondent, Rajiv Malik, that he was not aware of any violent conversion efforts. "I am myself a

Hindu," Dr. Sarma said. "And I can tell you that the local Hindus of the Northeast are mainly concerned with immigrants, whether they are from India or from Bangladesh. These immigrants infiltrate the Northeast region of India to settle there and exploit business and employment opportunities that would ordinarily go to the native populace. What I want to emphasize here is that the insurgency exists for economic rather than religious reasons. Actually, a large portion of the Northeast is already Christian. Who is there left to convert? The government of India is primarily responsible for the lack of financial stability in the Northeast. They have no clear-cut policy for the economic development of the region. Most development funds go into the pockets of either corrupt politicians or insurgents who kidnap government servants for ransom. Among the Hindus, the high caste exploits the low caste, including the tribal people. In addition to all of this, Central Government is not doing anything for the preservation of Hindu temples and ashrams, although they conscientiously maintain Buddhist monasteries."

Offering a different perspective in an article written for Mainstream, commentator Kunal Ghosh states: "Baptist Christian terrorists are active in India's Northeast. They derive their financial support from the southern parts of the USA where the Baptist Church has a strong following. Funds are collected in the form of donations in various church establishments. Some of this money is spent in true philanthropic work such as spreading education and health care.

"However, it has been suspected for a long time that a part of these funds get diverted to the purchase of arms for Baptist terrorists of the Northeast. Ex-Chief Election Commissioner, T.N. Seshan, gave voice to this suspicion in a television panel discussion on Doordarshan back in 1993 when he said, 'Our Army is baffled by the seemingly unending supply of sophisticated and expensive arms and equipment flooding into the Northeast. Money generated by the local extortion of businessmen and citizens accounts for only a small fraction of funds collected. The greater part must be coming from abroad. It is suspected that the funds come from Christian sources such as the Baptist Church in southern USA and the Presbyterian Church of the UK.'

"The most prominent among the terrorist outfits of Tripura is the NLFT (National Liberation Front of Tripura). It employs terror tactics to effect mass conversion to Christianity and is a predominantly Baptist organization. On August 6, 1999, four RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) workers of Tripura, named Shyamal Kanti Sen Gupta, Sudhamoy Dutta, Dinendranath Dey, Shubhankar Chakraborti, were kidnapped by the NLFT and taken to a camp in the jungles of Bangladesh. A ransom of one million dollars was demanded from their parent organization. When the RSS

refused to pay, they were put to death. Their 'sin' was that they were preaching among the tribals to preserve Hinduism. Although our constitution permits propagation of religious faith by any legitimate means, this crime of murder did not create a media sensation.

"This is not the first time that a Hindu preacher has been attacked in Northeast India. In 1999, Swami Gokulananda, the present head of the Ramakrishna Mission Ashram of New Delhi, says that during the 1980s when he was Secretary of the Khasi Hills Ashrama in Meghalaya, 'The hostile forces were against our movement as it was trying to bring back the lost tradition of faith among the people of the Khasi hills. They wanted to remove me. One day, a time bomb was planted in my room but they did not succeed in killing me.' "

On a map, the seven states of Northeast India look conspicuously orphaned. Attached to the rest of India only by a thin sliver of land that marks the juncture of Bihar and West Bengal, these "seven sisters," as they are sometimes called, are all but separated from their mother Bharat by an imposing, wall-shaped Bangladesh.

The mountainous terrain of the area is rich with beauty and heritage, but the wedge of separation left in the wake of India's Partition in 1948 has severed valuable lifelines to the region and catalyzed violence through desperation. Ten thousand people have been killed here over the past ten years.

My Hopeful Visit With Kind People

A lovely, precious land besieged by fanaticism

By Renu S. Malhotra, Grand Rapids, Michigan

The beauty of arunachal and Assam keeps us connected to Mother Nature's power. It is only my second day here and I am in a most interesting place. It's Maajuli in Assam, the largest river island in the world. For ages, it has endured the force of the surrounding water that flows so erratically it is sometimes affectionately referred to as Paglaa Nadi, which means "Crazy River."

There are three satras in Maajuli. A satra is a very ancient monastery-like school of sorts. In these satras young children are taught ancient dance, drama and music to keep the rich heritage of the area alive for posterity. As we visit each of the satras, the students perform for us. Their discipline is impeccable.

People from the Vivekananda Kendra are hosting me all through my travels, and I have many opportunities to carefully observe their work and its effect, which is very extensive in this part of the world. They have 41 schools in just two states alone--a big achievement. The dedication of the jeevan vratis (life workers) of the Kendras has earned them such a fine reputation that their schools are favored over those managed by Christian missionaries.

One of the many reasons the Kendra schools are so popular is that they include instruction in the native and ancestral arts. Arun Jyaoti, a cultural arm of the Kendra, is helping the indigenous population to adapt to modern times while retaining their traditional values and lifestyle.

In India there is a saying, "Atithi Devo Bhava, " which means a guest is like a God. Everywhere we go we are offered food and drink. In Tafra Gaon, Arunachal Pradesh, it is so beautiful that I want to stay back and be a student. In this serene environment, children learn easily. Bright and early each morning these young ones can be heard singing songs as they welcome the day before taking hatha yoga class.

My two days in Numaligharh are special. Numaligharh is a small town near the Kaziranga Wild Life Sanctuary in Arunachal. Here, the Vivekananda Kendra runs a small hospital which is extraordinarily clean and well equipped. It is a sort of a one-stop treatment center staffed by well-trained, courteous medical personnel. If ever I need medical care while in India, I would like to receive it here.

The sometimes violent Christian missionary zeal to "harvest souls " has become a long-standing obstacle to the peaceful coexistence of the various jana jaathi, or tribal natives of this area. The Ramakrishna Mission also lives under a perpetual threat posed by newly converted Christians who are armed and especially zealous. All through our travels I am cautioned to be careful, as there is always a risk of death at the hands of these Christian fanatics!

Although violence and oppression hang like clouds over these beautiful people, they are somehow able to maintain some semblance of that benign innocence that every human being is born with. It is my firm conviction that the Hindus of Northeast India could enjoy a peaceful future, if they would stand strong against Christian conversion now. I have confidence in this because I am fortified by a faith in the people of India. As a friend of mine once told me, "India lives because a lot of people work constantly for her out of love and admiration."