Fighting Back
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Swarup, Ram It was in 1826 that the British first got into the territory of the Khasi Hills of what is now Meghalaya, India. The leader and Chief of the Khasi people, U Tirot sing, put up a brave fight, but the succumbed to the superior weaponry of the invaders. He died in a prison cell in Dacca in 1833.

Close on the heels of the British armies came the Christian missions. The Welsh-Calvinist-Methodist-Presbyterian Church of Wales set up their shop in Soho in 1841. They symbolized the power and prestige of the rulers and very soon, with their patronage, created havoc with the religion and culture of the local people. The Company exploited them economically; the missionaries culturally and spiritually. The two things are sides of the same coin; physical and political domination go hand in hand with cultural domination.

But even when the people were down and out, they threw up some far-seeing leaders whose hearts bled at the sight of the humiliation of their people. They got together and started in 1899 an organization called "Seng Khasi" to uplift their people and preserve their traditional religion and culture...The organization could not do much in palpable results, but is kept the fire burning. It is thanks to this organization that the Khasis have not gone the way of the Nagas. But the Christian money and influence could not but take a heavy toll and make deep inroads into the cultural and religious life of the people. Fifty percent of the Khasis were converted to Christianity. The converts became the new aristocracy. They had all the education, pelf, positions of profit and political pull. The nonconverted Khasis became second-grade citizens, mere hewers of wood and drawers of water.

The political change in the destiny of India brought no deeper change at the cultural level. The new rulers are Macaulayites (a class intended by Lord Macaulay to be Indian in blood and color but British in taste and training) who are blind to the spiritual heritage of their country and, in fact, hate it. They have all the contempt of the missionaries and the Europeans for the culture and the religion of

their forefathers. Hindus as Hindus live apologetically, furtively, guiltily. It is bad form to call oneself a Hindu. No wonder, in this inhibitive atmosphere, Hindus are treated as second-grade citizens in the only homeland they have. They are divided and demoralized and, therefore, pull no electoral and ideological weight with politicians and parties. Themselves living in neglect and self-forgetfulness, they have therefor, not been able to help much their tribal brothers...

The Khasis are not alone in the reassertion of their old faith and culture. There is reawakening in the whole north-eastern region. The patriotic Nagas, too, are coming forward and have organized themselves under the banner of Jeliangrong Heraka Association. Different tribals of the area have now gotten together and created a common platform named "The Indian Tribal Cultural Forum." This organization eschews politics but stands for cultural and religious self-assertion. A call has gone out to Christian converts to come back again into the fold of their ancient religion...

We have also to realize that the struggle these friends are waging in the northeast area is the same struggle which we have to wage in the rest of the country, which, in turn, is part of a larger struggle which a spiritually awakened humanity is called upon to wage against barbarous monolatries like Islam and Christianity all over the world. Let us become aware of how these totalitarian ideologies are spreading their tentacles in Africa, in the Americas, in Asia. Christian missionaries are taking full advantage of the demoralization and economic poverty of the people of the third world and are converting them at the rate of 55,000 people a day. Of this number, 20,000 are in Africa alone. This region is the happy hunting ground of Islam as well. Let us remember that if these dark forces triumph, medieval ages will descend on the world again. We in India who do not want to go very far either in history or geography can see Islam in our own immediate neighborhood and during our own times. Pakistan has already been cleared of the Hindus, and in Bangladesh, the Hindus, the Buddhists and the tribal are already facing genocide.

We are happy to note that the ancient people who have suffered at the hands of these aggressive faiths are beginning to speak up. Some years ago, the red Indians of the USA met under the auspices of The Native American Conference. The cry of participants was, "These people give us the Bible, but they take away our lands. Now take away the Bible and give us back our land." Similarly, the natives of Canada have formed the National Indian Brotherhood to fight for their rights and defend their culture.

A similar wind is blowing in Australia and New Zealand. A National Aboriginal Conference of the native remnants of this region has been formed and it even hosted an international conference recently. There is also the World Council of Indigenous People which held its first meeting in 1975 in Port Alborni in British Colombia. It solemnly declared: "We, indigenous people of the world, glory in the past. They, other peoples, arrived, thirsted for blood, for gold, for land and all its wealth, carrying the cross and the sword, one in each hand. Without knowing or waiting to learn the ways of the worlds, they consider us to be lower than animals. Now we come from the four corners of the earth. We protest before the concert of nations that we are the indigenous peoples; we are the people with consciousness of culture and race..."

The victims of bigoted faiths like Islam and Christianity say, "All we ask is respect for our beliefs." But this right is denied them by fanatic monolatries. On the contrary, they assert their right to convert.' Who gave them that right? Some make-believe revelation or command by some tribal God to some individual they call the Son of God or the Last Prophet...

Thus there is an all-round awakening. Peoples of Africa, Asia and America are finding out that they have been the victims of a double aggression: economic-political and religious- cultural. Thanks to this two-pronged attack, they lost their livelihood, their community life, their culture and their religion. They were expropriated, denationalized, demoralized. They were atomized and they lost all defenses: economic, political, social and ideological. But now they are rising up again and seeking their old roots. And important idea has been proclaimed, and thousands are returning to their ancestral religion.

Hinduism and Buddhism have known aggression from the same fanatic sources. They were badly mauled but, thank God, they did not completely go down. In fact, the ordeal has made them stronger in some ways and more conscious of the dangers they still face. In this new awareness, it is, therefore, their duty to help their weaker and less fortunate brothers. Hinduism and Buddhism should lead the new' shuddhi' movement - the seeking of spiritual roots and reestablishment of ancient religions - which is coming up spontaneously in many countries. They should help people in different countries, including people in Europe and the Middle East, to go back to their old Gods, some of them as ancient as their own. They have the spiritual resources to render his help.