



The Dissemination of Colonial Education and Its Impact on the Nagas

K Hokato Sumi

Assistant Professor, Department of History, St. Joseph University, Nagaland

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17636737>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 25-10-2025

Published: 10-11-2025

Keywords:

Nagas, Colonial Education, Christianity, Missionaries.

ABSTRACT

The colonial education played a significant role in the pacification of the Nagas and transformation of Naga cultural and political identity. With the contact of the British and the Nagas in 1832, education became primary instrument for extending the British administration in the Naga Hills; the British perceived the Nagas as primitive and uncivilized, thus education was used a means to civilize, discipline and streamline the Nagas into civilized society. The spread of education was undertaken by the American Baptist Missionaries as a part of the effort of spreading of Christianity among the Hills tribes. The introduction of education was major key element in changing the perspectives the Nagas towards the colonials who were earlier perceived as a threat to a benevolent figure, who had come not to destroy but to transform the Nagas from the traditional to a civilized society. This paper tries to examine the process of the introduction of education and the impact it brought among the Nagas in the transformation of culture, religious beliefs, and social norms, in shaping and developing the political identity of the Nagas.

I. INTRODUCTION

The objectives of the British in the initial phase in India were primarily governed to have a trade and commerce with India. Later as the British paramount and administration extended over India, the needs to civilize the subjects in India were felt both by the colonial administrators, educationist and religious reformers. This consciousness is often referred as, 'the white man's burden' that was applied even in the



Naga hill, the colonial felt that it was their moral and religious responsibility to educate and transform the Nagas to a better cultural, social and religious life. This process of cultural construction had transformed the Naga indigenous socio-religious fabric of the Naga society. The Naga society has thus come under the influence of modernization impacting their culture, tradition, dress, costume, beliefs, language and identity.

II. ENGLISH EDUCATION

The colonial used English education as tool of subjugation by the Indians in their process of the colonization of India to enslave the minds of the Indians. The indigenous Indian education system that was taught as per the requirements of indigenous life styles was considered as hindrance preventing the society to become a civilize society and thus alternatively to lighten the darkness, English was considered to be the source of solution in civilizing the people and to bring out from all the social, religious evils, superstitious practices. The ancient educational system was destroyed in the process in westernizing the Indian society through the medium of English education (Dr Surender, S. Ghonkrokta, 2020, p.4) this similar pattern was also applied as the British came into contact with the Naga tribes in the early 19th century after the Anglo-Burmese War. The hill Naga tribes were labeled as savages, barbaric, illiterate, uneducated and uncultured who were considered to be living in darkness that can be transformed only through imparting education. British followed this policy of dominance by language to the fullest. The colonial succeeded transforming the Nagas from an indigenous way of life to a westernized culture impacting their social, religious and political life and English education was the pillar behind the transformation.

III. DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATION AMONG THE NAGAS

The process of formal education began in late 1880s with the arrival of the American Baptist missionaries in Naga Hills. As early as 1839, the primary school in Namsang village was opened by Rev.Miles Bronson as a party of mission activity. The primary objective of the mission was to impart the knowledge of reading and writing, so that they could read the bible, and the hymnal. Morung functioned as an institution of schools during the pre-colonial period, the indigenous education were disseminated through the opening of Morung in the village where an overall development of life skills education were imparted to the young inmates in the Morung promoting folk stories, customs, traditions, dance, lores, customary laws etc. The Morung was located at the village entrance, among the Aos and Konyaks, boys and girls had separate dorms. The introduction of education and Christianity changed, transformed these concepts, beliefs and practices. During the pre-colonial era, the traditional system of education prevailed was based



on the values of traditional customs and cultural norms. The traditional education system socialized children to build up strong tribal and clan identities. Nagas had oral traditions passing down their histories through transmissions of cultural material, vocal utterance tales, stories and song. The oral tradition forms the Naga traditional education foundation, which is an oral knowledge based on history of the native people transmitting their cultures and identities from generation to generation. (Tenzin Tsega, 2022)

IV. OPENING OF SCHOOLS IN NAGA HILLS

Prior to the coming of the mission in 1876-77 only a few schools were opened by the British government in the Naga hill, Education was not given the priority until the effort was undertaken by the missionaries, only the British officials children were made to attend a school located at the British headquarter at Samaguting. In 1878 at Molungyimsen, the first primary school was established in Naga Hills. Later, three more government schools were opened in 1879 in Naga Hills. (Bareh, H., Gazetteer of India, 1970, p.190). By 1904, there were already 6 lower primary schools, which were run on grants-in-aid from the British government. (Allen B.C.,1905, pp.67-68). The 6 primary schools maintained by the government were located at Mokokchung, Wokha, Jakhama, Henima, Khonoma, and the other 16 mission schools were situated at Molung, Yagong, Sirsemen, Womaken, Merangkong, Akoia, Asangma, Warammung, Chungliyimsen, Changki, Nametong, Longkum, Ungma, Lungsa, Lungpa and Lungsang. By 1908-09, the number of govt. school increased to 21 in number and in 1909-11 there were 25 but later decreased to 22 in 1911-12 but In 1913-14, the schools went up to 24 in number again. There were 42 schools at Kohima alone by 1931. (Bareh, H., Gazetteer of India, 1970, p.190)

V. FACTOR FOR THE SLOW GROWTH OF EDUCATION AND NEW COLONIAL EDUCATION POLICY

As per the information from the Quinquennial Review of the Progress of Education in Assam, (1932-37, p.63), there were several factors that have influenced the new educational policy of the British government.

- i. Education was not the primary object in which missionaries were engaged. Education and religions were part and parcel of the same system. Portions of the hill tribes have refused education because it brought Christianity with it, and it is unfair that they should be deprived of education because they are unwilling to abandon their tribal customs.



- ii. Lack of fund, lack of fund support by the govt. in the initial phase is also responsible for the growth of Education and education was secondary to mission works
- iii. The government also identified the heavy language burden in the school curriculum as another case for the decline of enrolment.
- iv. The mission schools were understaffed, and often faced with the lack of qualified teachers.
- v. Children were not sent to school for various reasons like the need of man-power that necessitated the sending of children to the field, either to work or to tend to the ancestral family cattle, or to tend to their younger siblings. Fear of conversion and corruption of the mind also made many animist and conservative Nagas to hold their reservation against sending their children to school for a long time.
- vi. In view of the teaching of the gospel in mission schools and the subsequent conversion of pupils, animists were reluctant to send their children to missionary sponsored schools for fear of conversion.

In consideration of all these aspects, the government modified its educational policy in the district, and accordingly started taking over more village schools under its control, which were in fact mission venture schools. The missions did not quite approve of the government's initial attempt to take over the village schools. Nevertheless, Christian missionaries still continued to establish schools with the grants-in-aid they received from the government. In 1922, the number of government primary schools and aided venture schools had risen to 42 in number. (Quinquennial Review of the Progress of Education in Assam, 1917-22, p.99.) During the 1930s, government schools had significantly increased. In 1938, out of 167 educational institutions, 115 were government lower primary schools, 10 governments aided lower primary schools, 36 missions aided lower primary schools, 1 government Middle English school, 2 governments aided training schools, and 2 missions aided upper primary school and 1 government industrial school. An industrial school called the 'Fuller Technical School' was opened at Kohima for training the Naga boys in carpentry and blacksmith. In the beginning, the school admitted only 3 students annually, but later increased the annual intake to 7 students per year, Due to the difficulty in the medium of linguistic communication in earlier phase year of education in around 1930s, Assamese was dropped as a compulsory subject, and English and vernacular was made as the medium of communication and instruction in schools with English acting as the medium for higher classes. The educational policy of the



British was thus partially guided by the response of the tribal subjects in adapting to the system. (Census of India, 1931, pp.185-187)

VI. GRANT OF SCHOLARSHIP

Scholarships were also provided for the Naga students to encourage the post-primary school studies. In 1942, there were 3 primary scholarships given to the students of an amount of Rs. 3/- at school level and 3 Middle English scholarships of an amount of Rs. 10/- each available to the Naga boys. In 1946, the number of scholarships for Post-primary education of 3-4 year course increased to 13 in number, which was a significant development in the educational development. (Quinquennial Review of the Progress of Education in Assam, 1901-07. p.118.) In 1935, the British government discussed the up gradation of primary school to upper primary school up to class 8 at Shillong and consequently in 1938 upgraded to class opening of school up to 8 in Naga Hills giving training in mechanical studies of agriculture that facilities higher education in the later years. (Quinquennial Review of the Progress of Education in Assam, 1932-37, p.63.)

VII. INFLUENCE OF CHRISTIANITY IN MODERN EDUCATION

The traditional religion, beliefs and practices of a particular society is influenced by spirits and other cultural practices. The Nagas also belief in the existence of all sort of spirits, they believe that things are animated and all phenomena are inhabited by spirits. However, it should be clear that the Nagas do not worship any idol or creatures but believe in the existence of spirits and that the spirits need to be obeyed and fear which were popularly known as animism. (Lasuh 2002, p.16) Whenever people face any hardship, ailments, etc. they appease the spirits through rituals and sacrifices because they belief that the spirits have the power to control the lives of humans. (Lucy & Zehol, 2009) According to Bareth (1970), Naga religion is described by sociologists to be animistic which lays emphasis on the existence of the deified manifestations of nature and propitiation of spirits both benevolent and malevolent. The causes of troubles and torments which befall upon the family and the inhabitation are attributed to the action of the evil spirits. They hold commitments, omissions and occasional failures to appease them are the reasons for incurring the spirits' displeasure. By divination they trace such sufferings, ailments and ill-luck to the influence of the evil spirits, and the spirits having been traced, appeasement to them follows (Bareth, 1970, p. 61). Christianity came to the Naga Hills when the head-hunting practice was at its peak. (Lucy & Zehol 2009, p. 81)



VIII. COMING OF EDUCATION WITH CHRITIANITY

Rev. Miles Bronson was the first missionary to work among the Nagas in 1842 that laid the foundation of Christian mission works in Naga Hills; He was the first missionary to start the foundation of education for the Nagas. Rev. E.W. Clarke, another missionary who had significantly contributed in the growth of education. The missionaries introduced roman alphabets to the Nagas, adapted their dialects to the written form and produced the first literature in their dialects. It was the American missionaries who introduced education to the Nagas along with the Christian faith. The first school in Kohima, known as the Kohima Mission School was started by C.D. King in 1882 (Liezietsu 2009, p.2) The Christian mission equipped with modern education indeed has changed the Nagas' perception of women and their roles and also changed the Naga culture and tradition which includes festivals, village organization, life-cycle beliefs and practices, personal and social life, ideals and aspirations, dance, bachelors dormitory, religious status of women, economic life, health and hygiene, ideas and attitudes etc., (Lucy & Zehol 2009, p. 90). In short, Christianity has affected changes in the social, cultural, religious and even political life of the Nagas (Philip 1976, p.203). Christianity and education thus became the complimentary tools for achieving this economic and political goal. The introduction of new institutions and the advent of Christianity and Western education in the Naga Hills by the end of the colonial era had completely reshaped the society. They ushered the Naga society into the modern era through education, healthcare, and as a mediator to the outside world. It was through the missionaries that the Nagas had a first glance at the developing world, If one dynamic factor were to be singled out for an overall change in the life of the Nagas, it would undoubtedly be the introduction of Christianity among them.(Sanyu. V, 2000)

IX. INFLUENCE OF MISSIONARIES IN EDUCATION

The missionaries who came to the Naga Hills established their mission work by building schools and effectively created a platform for not only education but also teaching the ways of Christianity to the tribes. One of the first missionaries to set foot in the Naga Hills was Rev. Miles Bronson who opened a school in 1842. However, initial efforts were futile and Rev Miles Bronson had to leave the region due to illness, misfortunes, and the death of his sister. The warring tribes continued their feuds and rebelled against all types of foreign ideologies and institutions in the following years. In the year 1869, Rev. Dr. E.W. Clark arrived at Sibsagar in Assam where he came into contact with an Ao Naga by the name of Supongmeren from Molungkimong village also called Deka Haimong by the Assamese) (Yonuo, A, 1984). He persuaded Godhula, an Assamese Christian to learn Ao (Chungli) language from Supongmeren and eventually sent them to preach the gospel in Molung village on 18th December 1872. Dr Clark and



his family established their mission in 1872 at Molung village among the Ao nagas and Mary Mead Clark started a girls' school as part of the mission. The result of this first mission was deemed successful when nine Nagas were baptized in Sibsagar by Clark. (Ao.A. & Yonuo. A, 2004, 1984). It is recorded that the mission schools gave free clothing, books, and stipends to students, and in return, the students did manual work in the compound. All these were partly funded by the government's grant-in-aid for mission schools (Ao, A., 2004). In the year 1894, the mission center at Molung was shifted to Impur (*Baptist Missionary Magazine, 1888*). The pioneer missionary was Rev. C.D. King who arrived at Kohima in 1881 and continued his mission till 1887 (Allen, 1905). Rev Dr. S.W. Rivenburg then took over the mission in Kohima in 1887 and took it upon himself to formulate a written script for the Angami to translate the Bible (Ao, A., 2004). The schools in the Naga Hills were mostly run by the missionaries and initial government policy was to leave education to the Christian missionaries by supporting them with an annual pecuniary aid and later on taking over the mission schools (Sema.P, 1980). The many social reforms that Christianity and Western education brought into the region and as a consequence, led to a wave of proselytization and the destruction of essential tribal institutions. (Kethosilhu Meyase, 2025, p.2) Christianity and Western education in due course, became the two agencies that greatly transformed the socio-economic life of the Nagas. Under the protection of the colonial government, Christianity and education functioned simultaneously as part of the same mechanism to aid imperialism. The British government was more than willing to assist and establish mission schools in the Naga Hills. For instance, in 1882, C. A. Elliot, Chief Commissioner of Assam announced his intentions to assist any missionary efforts and help build schools for this purpose (New Delhi Gazetteers of Naga Hills and Manipur, 1905)

X. INFLUENCE OF COLONIAL ADMINISTRATION IN ASSERTING THE IDEA OF NAGA IDENTITY

The British wanted to set up the Naga Hills as military buffer zones against the threat from the east (Burma and Japan). So a large portion of resources was directed at setting up military outposts on the areas bordering Naga Hills which were expensive and not very effective as there were continued incursions on the tea gardens by the Nagas. The Naga Hills had to be governed at all costs because of the British economic and political interests. The objective of introducing modern education in Naga Hills was to train the natives for the service of colonial administration. With this purpose, the administration encouraged the establishment of schools in Naga Hills, although the administration was keen in opening schools, initially they did not directly shoulder the responsibility. The Naga education was left to the care of the American Baptist Missionaries. However, later in the first decade of the 20th century, the government gradually took over some of the mission schools and opened new schools on its own.



Consequently, the number of missionary educational institutions decreased and correspondingly, the numbers of government schools increased. (Quinquennial Review of the progress of Education in Assam, 1912-17, p.99) As a result, the educated Nagas became evangelists, teachers and government officials. The proliferation of education gave rise to Christian ‘tribal elite’ who became the mediator between the British and Nagas. The institution of Dobashis and Goanbura later started playing a pivotal role in the transformation of political and social culture of the Nagas leading to the formation of various, Naga tribal Council in asserting the ethnic identity in later years. (Sema.P, 1992). They opened up the Nagas mind to the outer world, introduced new perspectives in their thinking about themselves and the world around by embedding the seed to individuality and collective identity themselves. (Thomas, J. 2016)

XI. REPLACING TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS OF MORUNG

One of the most impactful consequences left by the introduction of education and Christianity was the destruction of the traditional institutions of the Nagas. The most notable was the destruction of the Morung system. A system of the dormitory where every young boys or girls after their infancy stage were recruited in the Morung, and all aspects of life skills knowledge were given to the youngsters. The Morung acted as an educational hub, court of justice, center for training and learning military warfare. Morung also served as a platform for the few traders who traversed and communicated with the outside world to return and share their experiences and exposure to their tribe. Morung was an important educational, political and social institution through which the youth learn manners, discipline, art, stories, songs, war tactics, diplomacy, religious and customary rites and ceremonies living in it. Morung acted as a school to learn the art of livelihood, responsibility, and co-operation. It was inevitable that the Morung should incur the condemnation of the Baptist mission which put a ban on it as a heathen institution without trying to understand its social implication. The institution of Morung was dismantled by the missionaries and replaced with the institution of the Church. (Yonuo.A. 1984)

XII. OUTLOOK OF WORLDVIEW AND RISE OF POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The western education brought about by the Christian missionaries had helped the Nagas to expand their outlook of the world in western line of thinking. (Longkumer, 2019a: 22). The impact of education on the socio-cultural life of the Nagas was in fact the impact of Christianity. Christianity penetrated the Naga culture through the agency of colonial education; it was the educated Nagas who spearheaded the formation of the Naga Club. The formation of the Naga Club by the Nagas reveals the growing awareness among them regarding their identity and their historical roots. The educated Nagas provided both leadership and the spirit to start the Naga movement led the tribal councils and the Naga National



Council. Education thus led the Nagas towards a new dimension of a system of life. The impact of education among the Nagas is thus very significant. It transformed the very thinking and outlook of the Nagas who refused to remain static in a rapidly changing world. Their culture, however vigorous and colorful, gradually gave way to the impact of modern civilization and education. (Lanutemjen Aier, 2006, pp.50-51.) The introduction of Christianity and western education awakened the Nagas to new beliefs, ideas, possibilities and thoughts, and showed them the means and spirit to strive for congregated solidarity and to assert their identity. The education imparted by the church to the Naga people paved the way for the growth of a greater pan-Naga consciousness which began to represent the whole Naga population. (Gautam Saikia, 2019)

XIII. CONCLUSION

Education led the Nagas to a new dimension of valued system of life, and revolutionized their entire cultural ethos. With the progressive propagation of modern education, the outlook of the people, which formerly remained narrow, significantly developed. On the whole, education as a colonizing instrument was to a great measure successful, especially as it was an agent of peaceful change. The introduction of modern education produced very significant results among the hill tribes. Western education gave the Nagas, who were hitherto without a common language, a common means of communication with the introduction of the English language. It gave access to absorption of many new methods of learning, a sense of unity and being able to understand each other with a sense of change from tradition. The colonial report estimates that the number of Christians in 1881 was just 25 which grew to 8,734 in 1921 and 22,908 in 1931 (Sema, 1980). By the end of colonial era in 1940's almost 41,237 out of the 205,950 were Christians, almost 20 percent had converted to Christianity, a percentage that rose rapidly in the years after colonization (Sema, 1980). Christianity and Western education remained the two biggest emissaries of change in the Naga Hills. The British had a clear understanding of the effectiveness of Christianity and education as agents of changing the conservative traditional Naga societies. From the onset of the conquest of the Naga Hills, education had become imperative tools for achieving political control, safeguarding economic interest, and instituting exchange. The growth of education in the Naga Hills had an encompassing effect on the socio-cultural, political, and economic transition in the Naga Hills. (Gautam Saikia, 2019) It ushered in a new era leading to social transition. Many aspects of the traditional society of the Nagas, including identity formation, and the cultural value system encountered a transitional experience. (Dr.Temsukala, 2021) When Christian missionaries first arrived, disease was widespread and unhealthy for both natural and political reasons (Downs 1992, p. 175). Education facilitated peace, progress, and westernization of Naga society towards developing a modern society. It



has as also brought the different tribes of Nagas together in contact with each other and to the world. As per census 2011 report, Nagaland's literacy rate stands at 79.55%. And as per 2024 unofficial census report, Nagaland literacy rate stand at 95.7% becoming third most literate state in India. (DIPR, Nagaland)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allen. (1905). *District Gazetteer of Naga Hills (1905) in the Imperial Gazetteer of India: Vol. Vol. XVIII*. Delhi.
- Allen, B.C., *Gazetteers of Naga Hills & Manipur*, in Assam District Gazetteer, Assam Secretariat Press, Vol.IX, 1905, pp.67-68.
- Ao, A. (2004). *History of Christianity in Nagaland: Social Change 1872-1972*. Shalom Ministry Publication.
- Baptist Missionary Magazine (XXVIII). (1888).
- Bareh, H., *Gazetteer of India, Nagaland, Kohima*, 1970, p.190.
- Census of India, *Progress of Education, 1931, Vol-II, Part I*, pp.185-187.
- Department of Information and Public relations, Govt. of Nagaland, access on 10 September 2025, <https://ipr.nagaland.gov.in/about-nagaland>
- Foreign Department Political -A, January 1882, no. 135. National Archives of India, New Delhi
- *Gazetteers of Naga Hills and Manipur, vol.IX. (1905)*.
- Gautam Saikia, *Identity Politics In Post-Colonial Assam: A Study Of Naga Identity Politics*, Volume - 8 | Issue - 7 | April – 2019
- Khriereizhüno Dzüvichü, *Colonial State And The Emergence Of Naga Identity: 1881- 1947*, Thesis, Nagaland University,2015
- Kethosilhu Meyase, *Impact of Christianity and Western Education in the Colonial Naga Hills:Historical Reorganization of Naga Tribal Society*,International Journal for Multi-disciplinary Research (IJFMR), Volume 7, Issue 2, March-April 2025, p. 2-3.



- Longkumer, A. (2019b). Representing the Nagas: Negotiating National Culture and Consumption. In N. Bhattacharya & J. L. K. Pachau (Eds.), *Landscape, Culture and Belonging: Writing the History of Northeast India* (pp. 151–175). Cambridge University Press.
- Lanutemjen Aier., *Contemporary Naga Social Formations and Ethnic Identity*, 2006, p.50-51.
- Lotha, A. (2007). *History of Naga anthropology (1832-1947)* (1st ed.).
- Peetem Surakal (1984), *Baptism Mission in Nagaland*, Published by (Rev. Fr. P.V. Joseph SDB Sacred Heart Theological College Mawtai Shillong, pp. 97-99.
- Quinquennial Review of the Progress of Education in Assam, 1932-37, p.63.
- Records and Indices of the Nagaland State Archives, *Annual Administrative Report of the Naga Hills, 1905-06*, 1st Edition, Sl. No. 226.
- Sanyu, V. (2000). *A history of Nagas and Nagaland: Dynamics of oral tradition in village formation* (2nd ed.). Common Wealth Publishers.
- Sema, P. (1980). *British policy and administration in Nagaland (1881-1947)* (2nd ed.). Scholar Publishing House.
- Surender S Ghonkrokta, *Socio-cultural and Political Impact of Colonization on Naga Hills IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) Volume 25, Issue 6, Series 10 (June. 2020) 01-07 , P.2.*
- Tenzin Tsega, *Development And Role Of Education: North East India*, JPTCP, Vol.29 No. 01 (2022): Jptcp (609-613)
- Thomas, J. 2016. *Evangelizing the Nation: Religion and the formation of Naga Political identity*. Routledge India.
- Walu Walling (2008), ed., “Down the Memory Lane Vol.1. Mission to the Nagas” Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, p.4.
- Yonuo, A. (1984). *The Rising Nagas: A historical and political study* (2nd ed.). Manas Publications.