



# Christianity as a Factor of Socio-economic change in the Kharam Community of Manipur

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**Abstract:** Manipur presents a rich cultural mosaic with the distribution of tribal and non-tribal communities of various ethnic affiliations following differing social structures and cultural heritages. Almost all the tribal populations of this region traditionally profess animistic religion, reflecting their pristine customs and beliefs. During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity paved its way among the Kharam of Manipur. It was Christianity that brought a tremendous change in the culture and tradition of the people. This paper will look into the pattern of changes in the socio-cultural life of the Kharam tribe; it will also highlight the impacts on their life.

**Keywords:** animism, customs, belief, Christianity, and socio-cultural.

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## Introduction

Christianity has been an important factor in cultural change among the tribals since the British rule in India. In general, it seems that owing to the sincere efforts of the missionaries, the patronage and cooperation of the British colonial Government, and the miserable conditions of tribal, certain pockets in different parts of tribal India and significantly large tribal groups became Christian.

Before the advent of Christianity, tribals had a particular concept of religion; they believed in some spirit or powerful being that had its abode in natural objects like stone, rivers, trees, and mountain peaks. There were many spirits – benevolent as well as evil- that influenced the life of man (Nembiakkim, 2008). People took to Christianity with a positive frame of mind as Christianity provided an ideology that helped the tribal people to maintain their identity in the face of severe erosion of their traditional religious, social, and political institutions (Downs, 1983).

These changes arose because Christian missionary movements were often based on a very philanthropic zeal. Indeed, most of the tribals are still poor, devoid of education, and oppressed by fears arising from unfamiliarity with modern knowledge. But in this respect, they are better off than the poorer class of the non-tribal people because the Christian missionaries have worked among the tribals for many years. For many missionaries of that time, their work in their home country is less rewarding than work among the simple and more responsive inhabitants of tribal India (Bose, 1971).

Christianity had a tremendous impact on the tribal societies of northeast India. Almost all the recent changes in their social, cultural, and political life are attributed by various scholars to Christianity. Singh (1997), in his study of the problem of change in the North East, mentions that the study of religions and religious values and precepts is essential in understanding most societies as religion plays a prominent role in human activities and social institutions. Singh (1982) attempted to study the changes in tribal society in India from a broader perspective of social, political, and economic changes. Since the British advent in India, North-East India witnessed large-scale proselytization into Christianity, especially among the hill tribes. Roy Burman (2004) made an admirable effort to assess the Church's impact on North-East India's development.

One of the most striking features of the impact of Christianity on social life is the introduction of modernity and Western education, which in turn had a profound effect on lifestyle and consumption patterns. According to Dubey (1972), an analysis of the socio-cultural life of these tribes will show that there is a positive correlation between Christianity, a high percentage of literacy, and modernization.

Christianity brought radical social change by broadening their outlook and worldview from particularism to universalism. It cemented the traditionally hostile tribe groups speaking different languages into a broad group of interrelated networks of cognate tribes. This brought about a change in their way of life; forgetting their cultural way of life, they adopted the Western culture of life.

Das (1985) studied the valley and hill cultural phenomena in the context of Manipur. He elaborates on the socio-cultural background of the tribal people, where religion plays a determining role in the assertion of tribal identity. He describes the change in religion and trends in socio-economic outlook among the tribes. Singh (1991) deals with the activities of the Christian missionaries in Manipur and neighboring areas in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that led to the

conversion of many hill people to the Christian faith. He gives an elaborate account of the early conflicts and the final triumph of the efforts of the missionaries. Given these assertions, an attempt has been made to conduct this study on the Kharam community, focusing on the changes brought about by the conversion to Christianity.

### **Methodology**

Fieldwork and participatory research methodology were the techniques used for this study. A series of consultations with community leaders, both literate and non-literate, personal interviews with selectively identified people, a household survey, and a review of relevant written materials were the prime sources of information employed in this study. During the field survey, elders, village chiefs, and leaders were interviewed to get an overall picture of each Kharam village – past and present.

### **Area of Study**

The Kharam tribe is one of the indigenous tribes found in the Senapati district of Manipur. The Government of India recognized them as one of the Schedule Tribes In 2003. They have their own unique cultural life. The Kharams are scattered in different villages. Though the villages are presently situated within the same district, these villages are located at significant distances from each other. Of these Kharam settlements, Kharam Pallen is the oldest and biggest village, which is located at a distance of about 37 km away from Imphal, the capital city of Manipur. Kharam Tampak is situated in the Imphal West District. Tuisenphai Kharam village is in Senapati district of Manipur, it is about 14 Km from Imphal. Laikot Phaijol and Laikot are in the Sadar Hill, East sub-division of the Senapati District.

### **Results**

Generally, the Kharam people are polytheistic in their religious beliefs. They have gods and goddesses of high and low ranks, whose help or blessings they invariably invoke in times of danger and distress. They propitiate the guardian deities in their traditional way to protect them from epidemics, diseases, and disasters – both natural and artificial. The devils or the evil spirits are not worshipped; they are propitiated with sacrifices and offerings. Such propitiations are done to appease the spirits and not to cause trouble for human beings. The Kharams believed in Supreme Beings called *Pathen* as the creator of this earth and humankind.

Christianity has been an important factor in cultural changes among the Kharams. Around the 1950s, G. Kalangai, from Phakboklong Baptist church, spread the word of Christianity among the Kharam tribes. R. Namkujinang was the first individual from the Kharam community to convert to Christianity; after him, three men were converted, viz., S.P. Pu, Chonkasong, and J. Thangsinril. These Christians were not allowed to join the village get-together, and in many situations, they were not given any place to participate. Even in the selection of cultivable land, the non-Christians chose the place first, and the leftovers were given to the Christians. In the face of these overt and covert acts of persecution against the Christian converts, people, more Kharams became Christians. So much so that eventually, a separate settlement had to be established; in 1959, all the Christians lived together on the western side below the original village, which they named '*Lainingkhul*,' meaning 'believer's village,' as a hamlet of Kharam Pallen. Gradually, the number of Christians among the Kharams increased, and today, they form the largest population. In 2002, the Golden Jubilee, marking the advent of Christianity among the Kharam tribe, was commemorated. Today, all Kharam villages are Christian, except for Kharam Pallen, where there are few non-Christians, even though all their children have become Christian.

The once unshakable faith of the Kharams in their customary way of life and approaches to the supernatural is fast giving place to new ideas and received concepts. The Kharams believed that the spirits keep a watchful eye on them; therefore, they come to know when one among them commits a crime. Therefore, the Kharams are afraid of doing something contrary to customary beliefs and local practices. In their belief, spirits control the earth, the land of the dead souls, rain, crops, epidemics, etc. Therefore, the whole village worships these deities periodically. Cattle, pigs, fowl, eggs, goats, dogs, etc are sacrificed during the worship ceremony. *Genna* is often observed after every religious ceremony. It imposes several restrictions on all individuals (taboo). Thus, a person observing *Genna* cannot leave the house or village. In case a person falls sick, many taboos believe that the spirit causes sickness and that the only way to relieve that individual's suffering is to appease the specific spirit by making appropriate sacrifices. Notably, with modernity and the shift to Christian values and worldview, all these have ceased to exist as practices among the Kharams.

Drinking rice beer was considered one of the unavoidable items in all the affairs and events – from day-to-day life to all the important feasts, festivals, and

ceremonies. The Church strictly prohibited alcoholic drinks; tea was introduced as a substitute for rice beer. Kharams had many indigenous feasts and festivals falling almost every month. However, with the advent of Christianity, many traditional festivals have been given up. The Church performs many social activities; a marriage that binds the bride and the bridegroom with an oath is performed in the Church. In the social field, the contribution of the Church is undeniable. The traditional beliefs, ideas, and related social practices, costly feasts, etc., had been abolished by the people themselves after their conversion to Christianity.

A pertinent example of the change in cultural practice can be traced through observation of one element of the tradition of marriage among the Kharam tribe – the tradition of giving a bride price called the *man*. The *man* given to the parents of the to-be betrothed girl traditionally consists of two gongs of different specified sizes and one traditional shawl called *panjaadum*. The latest incident of demanding and accepting gongs was in 1990. Concerning elopement as a form of marriage, the Kharams believe that the couple will have a short life span due to their elopement. Therefore, she is forbidden to come out of the house for five days, believing that she will have a long life, which the elopement has shortened. Today, these beliefs have disappeared from the minds of Kharams. Polygamy was also traditionally permitted, where a man can wed up to three wives and not more, as Christianity does not allow this practice, and it is frowned upon in their society.

The Kharams maintain a common cemetery outside the village limits. They practice burying all the deceased family members in a common grave. It was done with the belief that they lived together after death in *kathikho* (village of the dead); presently, this is no longer followed, and the dead are now interred in the village's common cemetery. People have more contact with the outside world, and now, they are more immune to the dynamics of change. Their way of life has been affected; traditional dresses were worn only on special occasions, and the younger generation prefers Western dress on Sunday church service. The younger generations are ignorant of traditional songs and dances because they are only occasionally sung, and dances are performed on special occasions.

Kharam festivals are performed with the changing cycle and season. Festivals are the only occasions where people enjoy themselves after toiling hard throughout the year. These festivals allow them to forget the hard day's work, and the merry-making gives them much-needed breaks that soothe their aching body and minds. It is considered taboo to beat the drums before the harvest; however, currently,

there is no such restriction. Most festivals were not celebrated with the conversion to Christianity as almost all the celebrations involved blood sacrifices, drinking of rice-beer, and chasing away evil spirits.

The socio-economic structure in the Kharam community is markedly different from that of more advanced groups. They have a very simple technology, which fits well with their ecological surroundings and conservative outlook. Moreover, their economy can be said to be subsistence type. They practice different occupation types to sustain themselves and live in a 'marginal economy.' Kharam tribe is an economically independent group of people with a specific economy and thus have a living pattern.

The first and foremost characteristic of the Kharam economy is the close interconnection between their natural habit and economic life. This economy revolves around the forest and the forest products. They obtain most of their daily necessities and livelihood from their surrounding, the forest. This is accomplished using techniques and processes developed by indigenous people suited for the particular habitat using the most essential tools and implements. Nothing seems to escape them – edible roots, fruits, vegetables, flowers, honey, insects, fish, pigeons, cock, and other birds, monkeys, hares, pigs, and so on depend on the forest in these areas. The flora and fauna predominate as the primary source of food. They also rely on forest products like cane and bamboo as raw materials to make different types of baskets and handicrafts work.

The Kharam people's production mode can be classified as domestic mode. The family in the Kharam economy is the basic unit of production. It is directly engaged in the economic processes and is mainly in control. All family members, whether husband or wife, parents or children, form the basic production unit. The decisions involving the allocation of labor and produce mainly arise from and are dependent on domestic stipulation. Production is thus geared to familial requirements, i.e., they produce what they need. However, it never means that the familial group is self-sufficient. They get the cooperation of individuals from other households, too. The family is constituted for production by age groups and is equipped to govern production by possessing the necessary tools that are easily made and common and uncomplicated skills. The whole family works for its livelihood. The pattern of labor in a family is based on a well-organized division of labor according to sex and age. The sex-wise division of labor is more prominent in them, and the women are considered physically weak by the male folk. Both males and females work according

to their physical capacity. The boys and girls are allotted different jobs suited to their age and mental acumen.

Economic life depends upon the means of sustenance, of which agriculture is the mainstay and an essential and indispensable component of other factors that rest their economic activities. Agriculture is supplemented by food-gathering or foraging of jungle products and then some hunting and fishing. According to tradition, entire lands, including forests, portions of the rivers, and streams situated within the notional boundaries of a village, belong to the village community. So, there is no individual ownership except in the case of wet paddy fields. Each village has some reserved forest or lands directly controlled by the traditional stewards—the Village Council. The rest are at the disposal of the villagers for their various requirements. As long as a person cultivates a particular area of land, another cannot use the said land. However, he cannot claim the land once he leaves it. The same land can, therefore, be subsequently used by another. Thus, the village land was divided into three portions viz., the village occupied area or the village site, the reserved forests, and the rest of land for agriculture. The Kharam practice three types of agricultural cultivation. Viz., *Rampui*, *Kanglei* and *Phailei*.

*Rampui* is the most predominant of the three forms of cultivation. It is closely related to the practice of shifting cultivation or *jhum*. In this practice, a portion of forest land is brought under cultivation for a year or a crop cycle and is left to regenerate for the next eight to ten years. The hilly areas are not fertile to be utilized continuously. During this interval, the trees mature, and the soil is enriched. The selection of new fields for cultivation starts with the *Meithal Kaap* festival at the village gates. It is traditionally practiced to drive away malevolent spirits; this practice has carried over into the present day and is usually observed coincident with New Year's Day. Then, on the following day, a ritual called *Tasaanna* is performed for cultivation both in the village and the land. On the day, the Village Council members select their land, starting from the *Khokalakpa*, and then follow the rest of the village people.

Following this, the clearing of the land starts, and anyone can start the work. Though one can clear his field individually, a team is preferred because the work becomes lighter. People take their own drinks and food and work together in the fields. When the felled trees get dry, they first make *Meilam*, meaning fire path. They clear a strip of land all around the *jhumming* sites so that fire does not spread beyond the areas around the area earmarked for the *jhum*. Rituals are no longer

performed in taking up any activities; traditionally, the *Chemchoteng* ritual was performed in connection with any metallic tools to be used for clearing the *jhum* sites for cultivation. Such a ritual was performed to avert any danger that may be caused while using the metallic tools; today, people no longer perform this ritual; instead, they pray to the Heavenly Father to protect them from harm and danger.

Earlier, no one could sow the seeds in the fields for the year as one desired. A person selected explicitly by the Village Council must do the first act of sowing. They exercise due caution in selecting such a person, following specific criteria. The person must be from a good family, and no member of his family should suffer from serious diseases or should not be sickly, and there should be no pregnant women in the family. There should have been at least no death in the family the previous year. They believed that a year of plenty and prosperity could be expected when a man from such a family did the first act of sowing. Only then can the rest of the people start their work the following day. Today, people no longer believe in such, and now they plant crops according to the suitable season.

*Kanglei* is also similar to the first category of *jhum* previously described. They perform the same rituals and traditional activities before clearing and sowing. The slight difference between this and *Rampui* is that *Kanglei* can be cultivated for at least three consecutive years depending on the varied factors of the fertility of the soil and the preference of the cultivator. Thirdly, the last category is called *Phailei*. This is a type of wet cultivation mainly for paddy plantations. It is done only once a year, and the field is under cultivation every year.

Lastly, under the traditional system, informal education was imparted through the system of youth dormitories in which the older boys taught the juniors different skills, customs, and manners. It was a training institution where the young boys were trained, including training in the use of weapons and conduct of warfare. It was only in the post-independent period that the Kharams could go for a formal education, which became accessible to them following the coming of Christian missionaries among them. Thus, conversion to Christianity paved the way for a formal education, and youth dormitories no longer exist.

## Conclusion

Due to the untiring, dedicated, and selfless service of the Christian missionaries, not only was the spiritual life transformed to a great extent, but also, the socio-economic life of the people of the Kharam tribe underwent an extensive change.

They had released the people from bondage of blind belief, superstitions, illiteracy, and poverty. In the meantime, there was the lamentable loss of valuable ancient traditions, customs, and moral values. This has resulted in the decay of their traditional religion and associated practices. The converts refused to take part in traditional religious festivals and rituals. In this way, social control over the village members began to loosen, and slowly, even the taboos and customs ceased to be observed.

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