

The Healing Hand: Missionaries and their Medicines in the Khasi Hills (1879-1899)

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Abstract : *This article proposes to study the role of the missionaries in regard to health and medicine in the Khasi Hills (Meghalaya) within a time frame of twenty years (1879-1899). By missionaries it refers to the activities and works of the Welsh missionary doctor belonging to the Welsh Presbyterian Church. Dr. Griffith Griffiths, who was an allopathic doctor and surgeon and arrived in the Khasi Hills in December 1878, to begin practice in 1879 and also to a Brahma missionary Nilmoni Chakraborty, who by his own admission was not a trained homeopathic doctor but was compelled to take up the practice of homeopathy when he came to the Khasi Hills in June 1889, after seeing the desperate plight of the Khasis who were plagued by various diseases – cholera, malaria, dysentery, tuberculosis etcetera. This article argues that apart from humanitarian reasons the purpose of both the missionaries was to attract the Khasi people to their respective religions which they were successfully able to do to some extent by capitalizing on the Khasi indigenous belief that medicinal practice and healing were closely related to religion. Illnesses, according to the Khasis were caused by evil spirits and remedies or cures could only be found through divination ceremonies followed by sacrifices, something which with the passage of time increasingly failed under the onslaught of allopathic and homeopathic medicines. This article argues that the recovery from various diseases and better health under the ministrations of the missionaries was attributed to the Healing Hand of a Christian Godhead or a Brahma God in the context of which Khasi methods of healing became redundant and some of them, at least, gradually inclined towards Christianity and the Brahma Dharma. The Khasi superstitions and*

religious beliefs, their resistance to modern medicines, the obstacles which the missionaries encountered in the course of their work and the extent of success of allopathic treatment and surgery as counterpoised to homeopathy are some of the aspects this article looks into.

Key Words : *Khasi, allopathy, homeopathy, egg-breaker, dispensary, gospel, cholera, brahmo dharma, diksha, saviour.*

The Khasis are a matrilineal tribe of Meghalaya. A Paleo-Mongoloid people who were said to be one of the earliest waves of the Mongolian invaders; they speak an Austric tongue, Mon-Khmer which they were believed to have adopted in course of their wanderings long before they settled in their present habitat.¹ The word Khasi comes from the word Kha - born of and Si -ancient mother meaning born of an ancient mother. Following the defeat of U Tirot Singh,² Chief of Nongkhlaw in 1833 in the Anglo-Khasi war, the Khasi chiefs numbering twenty-five made their feudal submission to the English East India Company by means of treaties and engagements.

In 1841 the first Welsh missionary, Thomas Jones entered the Khasi Hills and with him Christianity. Earlier the efforts of the Serampore Baptist Mission to bring the Khasis within the fold of Christianity proved futile. The Welsh missionaries found a 'tribal people steeped in superstition ...sturdy from their open air life, yet stricken with disease because of ignorance and poor living conditions.'³ Initially the missionaries administered to the sick their basic medical knowledge and stressed on the improvement of personal hygiene. It was not until 1878 that the Mission sent its first trained missionary doctor to the Khasi Hills in the person of Dr. Griffith Griffiths who obtained his M.B. and C.M.(Surgery) degrees from the Glasgow University on the basis of Reports of the 1870s regarding the deplorable condition of the Khasis. It may be mentioned here that though the British Raj tried to improve the health of the Khasis by opening a Charitable Dispensary at Shillong in November, 1872, a lot remained to be done for the great majority of the Khasi people who were suffering from various diseases like rickets, malaria, cholera, small pox, typhoid etcetera, in an age when most of the Khasi Hills was covered with dense forests and difficult and often no pathways that rendered communication a challenging task.

Ten years later, in 1899 another missionary arrived in the Khasi Hills who was to do commendable work in the improvement of the health condition of the Khasis. This was Nilmoni Chakraborty, a Brahma missionary who was sent to the Khasi Hills by Pandit Shivanath Sastri to preach and propagate the Brahma religion on the request of three Khasis from Shella who wanted to know more about the Brahma religion after reading some pamphlets issued by some Bengali Brahmos in Shillong. As early as 1874-75 the Brahma Samaj had been established in Mawkhar in Shillong by some Bengali Brahmos and two young Khasis Job Solomon and Radhon Singh Beri (earlier Christians). A sum of rupees three hundred was provided by Debendranath Tagore for the building which housed the Samaj⁴ and ten rupees every month to help Nilmoni in his work⁵. By his own admission, Nilmoni was not a trained homeopathic doctor but was compelled to take up the practice of homeopathy when he came to the Khasi Hills in June 1889, after seeing the desperate plight of the Khasis who were plagued by various diseases and irrational beliefs. It was these two missionaries Dr. Griffiths and Nilmoni Chakraborty, very much opposite in their methods of treatment, who toiled tirelessly to improve the quality of life of the Khasi villagers, counteracting old superstitions and beliefs and overcoming their resistance to modern medicines. In their endeavours the missionaries were assisted by Khasi converts without whom their proselytizing efforts would have been in vain.

Healing and the Khasi world of Spirits and Beliefs

The Khasi religion was both theistic and animistic with lesser gods subordinate to a Supreme God, *U Blei Nongthaw Nongbuh* who was ultimately responsible for creation. He was closely associated with another divinity of feminine gender called *Ka Blei Synshar*, 'the ruling Goddess' the protector and preserver of life.⁶ Due to the influence of Christianity the masculine gender began to be used for God, who had always been regarded in the past as Creator, Father, Formless, Omnipotent, Omniscient and All Powerful.⁷ However the Khasis did not worship the High God but spirits or demons said to be responsible for causing diseases and unhappiness. It rested on the foundation of fear, fear of the unknown forces and spirits

hostile to man who could do them harm. The spirits resided in all mountains, valleys, forests, groves, rivers and streams.⁸ In order to satisfy and pacify them sacrifices were made which formed an integral part of Khasi life and religion. These spirits or deities described in Welsh missionary accounts as demons (much to the consternation of modern Khasis) consisted of good and evil. The good ones were the spirits of water, wealth, state and village. Some of the evil ones were *u Rih*, the malarial fever devil, the *ka Khlam*, the demon of cholera and *ka dukha*, the fever devil who afflicted mankind with all kinds of ailments and calamities.⁹ They could however be pacified by the sacrifice of a fowl or other animals. Sacrifices were always preceded by divinations which were almost an every-day occurrence. Traditionally, therefore, it was believed that sickness was caused by demons and that its cure was therefore a religious problem.¹⁰

The Khasis, moreover, did not have an organized religion with written instructions, as customs and myths were passed within the clan from generation to generation by word of mouth with the maternal uncle acting something like a priest. Neither did they worship idols nor did they have any altars. Though there existed a class of professional priests called *lyngdohs* who belonged to the *lyngdoh* clan, they usually presided over sacrifices for the good of the State or the community at large. They also cast out evil spirits from houses.

The divination ceremonies performed to ascertain the offended spirit normally consisted of breaking eggs, throwing cowries and examining the entrails of animals and birds. In every Khasi village the egg-breaker was an important functionary and his services were sought on all occasions such as the building of a new house before proceeding on a journey or whether the building or the journey would be lucky or not. He could be any person of the house who was instructed by the elders of the house. However, it was generally the maternal uncle of each clan who handled the acts of divination. The egg-breaker would dash the egg, smeared with red earth, on a board with considerable force. From the position in which the fragments of egg-shell lay, he would discover the offended demon or evil spirit, and the sacrifice which it demanded- a fowl, pig, goat, cow etcetera. Sometimes it was only after the breaking of many eggs that the cause of the sickness

was discovered. Thereafter a *pooja* was performed for the sacrifice. Another simple method of divining was by means of cowrie shells, where the diviner would plunge his hand into a bag or basket asking the god a question and if the number of covies that came out was odd, the omen was good; if it came out even the reverse was the case.¹¹ In another instance, certain signs were read in the intestines or entrails of the sacrificed animal. For example if the intestines of a sacrificed fowl was full, healthy and without spots, then it meant good signs and if empty, wrinkled and spotted then a bad augury that would have to be rectified with more *poojas* and sacrifices. It was not surprising, therefore, the many Khasis became debt-ridden in order to meet the expenses of sacrifices and *poojas* for the propitiation of the spirits or demons. They lived in filth and rags, they were afraid to wash a rag lest it should wear out the sooner and so deprived themselves of proper clothing; niggardly hoarding every pice they could get, and if asked the reason why, the answer was that they might have something to sacrifice when they or their friends were ill.¹²

According to the missionaries the Khasis did not have any knowledge of medicine or medical science. They were afraid to take 'foreign' medicines lest they angered their spirits; they would not even touch medicine bottles.¹³ Moreover in case of sickness they did not take any precaution relating to food and hygiene. The common belief was that a sick person should be fed plenty otherwise he would become weak. For this reason they used to overfeed the patient which made him sicker. Those food items which many people could not digest in normal times such as meat, fish and dry fish would be fed to the sick person hoping it would increase his appetite. People afflicted with pox would consume all these items and at the same time did not know how to stay clean.¹⁴ Many would die and those who managed to survive became blind, deaf and dumb. Surprisingly, the consumption of milk which was necessary for the recovery of a sick person was resisted by the Khasis as they had an inborn aversion to it due to the commonly held belief that it was excrement! Personal hygiene and cleanliness were unknown to them. There were frequent outbreaks of cholera, a disease which the Khasis really dreaded and this was attributed to the fact that, 'the stringent sanitary precautions necessary in such cases were wholly wanting, for the Khasias,

as a nation,' were, 'extremely filthy in their habits, mode of living, and surroundings'.¹⁵ Thus it was not an easy task for the two missionaries, one an allopath doctor and surgeon and the other a practitioner of homeopathy in spreading the word of God as they had to encounter many obstacles in overcoming the prejudices and apathy of the Khasis in regard to modern health care and hygiene.

The Promise of a Great Harvest

The setting up of a Medical Mission for the Khasi Hills was justified, not only on humanitarian grounds, but it would do much to attract the Khasi people to convert to Christianity.¹⁶ Accordingly Dr. Griffiths was sent out to the Khasi Hills as its first medical missionary. Humorous, persevering and possessing abundant energy, he started his work at Mawphlang where there was not a single Christian but through his dedicated efforts he was able to draw many into the fold of Christianity. Two branches of his work were established here, one in the form of a Dispensary in which assistance was given to the out-patients. Here a Khasi boy Kissorai acted as his compounder.¹⁷ The other was a hospital where attention was given to the worst cases that consisted of in-patients who were kept under constant care. Dr. Griffiths later shifted to Sohra (Cherrapunjee) in 1891 and then to Laitlyngkot in 1897.

By the time Dr. Griffiths had settled down with his medical practices in the Khasi Hills, some progress had already been made in the way of converting some Khasis to Christianity. In fact in the year 1867 the Welsh missionaries preceding Dr. Griffiths had set up two printing presses in Cherra, much to the incredulity of the Khasis who lacked material and scientific progress. This made it much easier to preach the word of the Gospel as Christian books could be printed in large numbers. An important step was also taken with regard to the appointment of Khasi teachers to spread the message of the Gospel. The first Evangelists Examination was held in 1869, and finally six were approved who became the first 'licensed preachers' of the Khasi Hills. As Morris writes in his book it was only after competent teachers from among the Khasis were obtained that the beginning of the *great* progress of the Mission can be dated.¹⁸ This was in 1870.

Consequently when Dr. Griffiths started his dispensary many of the native evangelists served as compounders and had ample opportunities to address a ready-made congregation throughout the year as the patients were always accompanied to the dispensary by a crowd of sympathizers and relatives since the Khasi society consists of highly cohesive clans. The Khasi compounders in the 1880s were well grounded in Pharmacopeia and could compare to any dispensary assistant in Wales Hospital¹⁹. Attempts were also made by Dr. Griffiths towards hospital teaching where three pupils were taught from Holden's 'Osteology', Cleland's 'Comparative Anatomy', Foster's 'Outlines of Physiology' and Carter's 'Elements of Medicine'. Bandaging, application of splints etc were also taught in the daily work in the wards.²⁰

The Medical Mission gradually became a valuable adjunct to evangelistic work. Every day the patients who came from distant villages to the dispensary heard the name of Jesus for the first time from the lips of the Medical Missionary as well as the Khasi compounders who were also evangelists, and carried the Gospel seed to their 'heathen' homes. A Khasi evangelist, U Ksan-bin wrote from Sohra that for many Khasis, medicine was synonymous with the Christian religion, and when they saw that the Christians were healthier than them, they began to consider Christianity a little.²¹ In fact in Dr. Griffiths's opinion many Khasis would not have heard or rather would not hear the Gospel had they not been brought into contact with the Medical Mission.²² In this respect the Khasi evangelist, U Kypa Ka Loi played a very important role. He would not only preach to those in the Dispensary, but sought the opportunity of speaking to each one personally. Afterwards he would visit the homes of the more promising ones. In this way many were received into the Church with whom Kypa took a lot of trouble. He also tried to arrange to mix the Christians and heathens among the patients in the likely way to influence the latter.²³ Religious meetings were held in the Dispensaries and many who regularly attended them joined the churches later on. Dr. Griffiths admitted this part of the missionary's work was blessed as one means of bringing many souls to the Saviour.²⁴ According to a Khasi evangelist U Juramon's report, once the Khasis realized that medicine, which before was looked upon them as poison and something

to enrage the demons, possessed greater healing power than their egg-breaking and their sacrifices, they began to believe and seek the medicines of the missionaries.²⁵ In this way their faith in the demons rapidly departed. It may not be out of context to mention the case of one U Juncha, an early convert. When seized with a serious illness, he was removed by his friends to his own village, and for three months continual sacrifices were offered but the youth became steadily worse. At length, when U Juncha lay almost at the point of death, the aid of the Sahib's medicines was sought, and under his treatment, the young man gradually recovered.²⁶

Another interesting fact that induced many Khasis to come for medicine and put their trust in the Missionary was that the number of deaths among the 'heathens' from various diseases was far greater than those in the Christian villages. They began to see clearly that their gods were not able to save them from sickness and death. These influenced their minds to such a degree that hundreds of them came to hear the Gospel preached and to learn and read the word of God. In this way medical care began to play a more important role in conversion than did the message of the Gospel. Wherever medical work was done the seed of the Gospel was sown in many villages where it was not known before. This led Dr. Griffiths to comment that the Khasi religion would never be strong again in those villages as many of them were moving with the question of having teachers and schools and scores of people were already learning to read the Bible even before they had regular teachers. This Dr. Griffiths could see was the beginning of what promised to be a great harvest.²⁷ He was of the opinion that it made the Khasis realize the worthlessness of the Khasi religion and prevailed upon them the value of Christianity, where Christ the Lord began to be regarded as their Healer and Saviour. As Khasi beliefs vis-à-vis health and healing became ineffective in the face of diseases, the traditional healers became discredited in the eyes of the people who naturally turned to the missionaries, abandoning their older beliefs in the malign supernatural causation of illness and embracing the new western medicine wholeheartedly.

Every year Dr. Griffiths would perform many operations, both minor

and major. In 1890 Dr. Griffiths performed as many as one hundred and seventy-six operations. Many of these operations must have appeared magical to the untutored local Khasis, especially eye operations, whereby the blind, some since childhood, were able to at last see. In some cases once the patients were able to see they were given to learn to read the New Testament.²⁸ Not that all operations were successful. But this did not prevent the spread of the Good News. In one instance when it was impossible to restore a girl's sight, Dr. Griffiths through the kindness of some friends received some appliances for printing books for the blind, and soon the girl was able to read several portions of the Gospel of St. Mark readied by Dr. Griffiths, which she did every day in the hospital much to the surprise and wonder of the patients.²⁹ Operations for the removal of gallstones became a mighty weapon in the breaking down of Khasi superstition and faith in the healing power of the demons, as the disease, common amongst Khasis was regarded by them as invariably fatal and beyond the power of even the demons.³⁰ The use of chloroform by Dr. Griffiths at first alarmed the villagers but having come to realize that it did not harm them, they began to shun the ministrations of the augurers (egg breakers) and flocked to be treated by Dr. Griffiths. An interesting anecdote of the use of chloroform at the initial stages may be narrated here. Water borne diseases were a major problem in the Khasi Hills and once Dr. Griffiths had great difficulty in persuading the villagers to remove themselves from the infected areas and relocate. The verdict from egg breaking had decreed that the village should not move. The doctor 'put to death', one of the village boys by the administration of chloroform declaring that if the boy came back to life it would be a message from Jesus that the village should move.³¹ The boy did indeed recover and the doctor got his way.

There was also great difficulty in getting the out-door patients to take medicines according to instructions. Sometimes the patient would throw away the medicine as useless just because the first dose did not cure him; also, a patient who felt better after the first dose of medicine would empty the whole bottle in his haste to get well and at other times the out-door patient would take mission medicine and native medicine together, probably

considering that two halves make one whole.³² When again in 1892, typhoid fever and cholera broke out, this time in Sohra, Dr. Griffiths took care of the sick. Apart from his work in the dispensary and hospital, Dr. Griffiths also made visits to the homes of the patients, where the people were made to feel that Christianity was a religion of love.

In 1894 the workload increased considerably. Dr. Griffiths carried out 51 major operations and 529 minor operations. He was of course convinced that his medical skills were all a part of God's purpose in bringing the 'heathen' into the light of the Christian faith and spoke of developing the work of hospital in-patient treatment as being an opportunity to spread the Gospel. Vaccination against small pox was also producing excellent results and its reputation was growing amongst the mothers in the villages, once again seen as an opportunity to introduce them to Christianity.³³ In 1897, after the Great Earthquake Dr. Griffiths moved to his new post in Laitlyngkot where the population were terrified to even think of medicine. However people flocked to the Dispensary. In 1898 he performed as many as 77 surgical operations under almost primitive conditions where there was neither an operating room nor a ward. He supplied several thousands with quinine, santonine, chlorodyne etcetera.³⁴ Since the earthquake of 1897 there was a severe outbreak of malaria. Dr. Griffiths sold as many as 40,902 grain doses of quinine, packed by the Indian prisoners and sold by the Government for one pice each.³⁵ In 1899 he performed 67 operations with 8380 visits by patients to his dispensary. He also travelled to many distant villages on foot as there were frequent outbreaks of cholera. The roads were rough and when it rained, he was inevitably wet to the skin. He would resort to carrying his instruments and medical supplies in the heavy rains in an old waterproof cartridge bag, slung over his shoulder which Dr. Griffiths thought was neither 'ministerial' nor 'professional'.

By curing the ailments of the Khasis, it was possible 'to get at them' in an effective way and to undermine their belief in their old religion so much so that there were cases of the village priest and the egg- breaker and sacrificer preferring to suffer poverty with Jesus to riches without Him. Thus the Khasi 'heathens' who visited Griffiths's dispensary not only found bodily relief, but an effort was made to bring to their 'guilty and corrupt

souls' the 'unfailing remedy to be found in the blood of Jesus Christ.'³⁶ It was not surprising, therefore, that the number of converts increased to 6,941 in 1891. Several of the groves and the places which were considered sacred because the demons and the gods were thought to dwell in them were turned into arable land.³⁷ However they were exceptional cases where in spite of medical care rendered, the patient proved to be very stubborn when the question of conversion to Christianity came up. Such was the case of an old sacrificer who was usually called upon to sacrifice for the children of the King of Cherra. He thought he would die though he had only a case of mumps! While he expressed his gratefulness, he was determined not to have anything to do with Christianity.³⁸ In fact many Khasis articulated the view that even if their religion was false and the Christian religion the best, it was difficult for them to cast off at once the practices of their mothers and fathers for generations.³⁹ It also required great courage on their part to break off from old associations and customs and begin the life of a professing Christian.

The Promise of a New Path

Nilmoni's efforts to treat the Khasis through homeopathic medicines had twin objectives-firstly, so that it might benefit them and secondly, to show them a new path through the propagation of the Brahmo religion, that stressed on the believe in one and only God. For the latter Nilmoni mastered the Khasi language within three months and got a Brahmo service book and a hymn book published in Khasi from Calcutta. Over the years Nilmoni published many tracts in the Khasi language which helped a good deal in spreading the principles of the new faith amongst the people.⁴⁰ He stayed in Shillong for a few months and left for Cherrapunjee in September 1889 as he was keen on working amongst the poor rural folks. At the beginning, due to paucity of funds he did not have a permanent shelter in Cherrapunjee. Often he would walk for miles working in the nearby villages and return to Cherra as dusk fell spending the night in some tiny Khasi hut or whoever might give him shelter. Once during the rainy season he had to stay for two months in a tiny room meant to keep fowl in the house of a trader. Boxes of three different heights put together served as his bed at night time; his

cooking was done beneath a discarded table the top of which served as the place from where medicines were distributed during the day time. It was only in June 1892 that the foundation stone of a school and prayer hall was laid at Cherra on the land donated by the Syiem(Raja) of Cherra, Hajan Manick. Two Khasis, Heli Roy and U Simiyam were in charge of the Samaj.⁴¹ Shortly sixteen centres were set up in different villages and there were eight workers.⁴² Nilmoni's activities covered most of southern Khasi Hills which consisted of Shella (a large and prosperous village bordering the plains, now in Bangladesh), Mawsmam, Mawkhar, Laitkynshew etcetera.

In order to tend to the sick, Nilmoni obtained books and medicine boxes from Calcutta. Initially he used to walk from house to house with the box of medicines under his arms and yet except one or two persons no one was willing to take medicines for cholera. The Khasis would refuse to take medicines from foreigners as they felt doing so would displease the spirits. In fact according to Nilmoni they did not possess any medical knowledge. But with the realization of the beneficial results of homeopathic medicines, their fears and beliefs in demons and spirits disappeared and many began to take them. But this was not easily achieved. Nilmoni had to make them take medicines after a great deal of persuasion and even by the inducement of coins. For example, in one instance an old Khasi woman who was rolling on the ground groaning in pain would only take medicine after being given a rupee by Nilmoni.⁴³ He met with further success when a suckling baby who had hurt its hand which had swollen up after a fall and would not stop crying was given a drop of homeopathic medicine mixed with water; not only did the baby stop crying but within a few minutes was seen playing.⁴⁴ In fact an old Khasi man who had seen Nilmoni mixing water with one drop of medicine had remarked that it would not do and the mother would have to take the baby to the Padre Saheb. However seeing the results the local Khasis were incredulous and exclaimed among themselves how a drop of medicine could contain so much power! This also amply demonstrated the power of homeopathy over allopath. One Khasi by the name of Bud Singh who had been a Christian but having lost his belief in the Trinity refused to take the medicines of the missionaries in spite of many illnesses came

running to Nilmoni and requested him for the latter's medicines as he had met with someone of equal belief,⁴⁵ meaning the concept of just One God only. This amply demonstrates how religion became associated with medicines. This man had a cloth shop at Shella and made a *Sabha Mandap* for the Brahmos with cloth. In fact many Khasis who had earlier been Christians and could not accept the concept of Trinity came to be attracted towards the Brahmo Dharma. One such person was U Simiyan who remained a devout Brahmo till the end.

Nilmoni treated the Khasis for various ailments-fevers, injury caused by fall, pox and especially cholera; and sometimes even uncommon diseases. Outbreaks of cholera were frequent in the Khasi Hills. Nilmoni writes how the Khasis reacted to cholera-

The whole village afflicted by cholera used to remain silent like a cremation ground. Fear of cholera kept everyone indoors. Some would consume alcohol to keep their fears at bay. Three healthy young men would move from house to house where they would pay respect to the sick and remove the dead. Every time a patient vomited he would be fed cold rice and roasted dry fish and his relatives would exclaim, 'How many times will it come out let's see, no matter how many times it comes out, we will put in more.'⁴⁶

Once the marvelous results of homeopathic medicines began to spread far and wide, people began to travel from distant places to Nilmoni's ashram in Cherra. The rush was especially marked on bazaar days when people would gather in groups in front of Nilmoni's ashram. In 1892 along with new and old patients the number had risen to more than two thousand and in the six months preceding that the number was thirteen hundred. Many times the people travelled a distance of ten to fifteen miles to take medicines.⁴⁷ In the treatment of these patients only two deaths were reported.⁴⁸ Nilmoni had to construct a three-roomed tin house to serve as living quarters for patients coming from distant places. After the Great Earthquake of 1897 a twelve by fourteen feet room was constructed with two small cabins beside it. Nilmoni used to live in one room and distribute medicines in the other. In his endeavours, Nilmoni was assisted by other

Brahmos, some of them Khasis who had been given lessons on diseases and their treatment. The important Khasi Brahmos were Surajmani Rai, Rohini Kanta Roy, Ashwathama Rai and Bangabhusan Roy.⁴⁹ They also served as native preachers in the nearby villages. *Upasanas* were held at different places on different days. Brahmo songs were sung and was followed by preaching. In case of Shella, a Khasi by the name of Krishnadhan acted as Nilmoni's interpreter in the discussions that took place which included among other things a comparison between Christianity and the Brahmo Dharma.

The homeopathic medicines supplied to Nilmoni were donated free of cost by some medicine shops in Calcutta and from the month of May, 1893 the same was done by the Calcutta *Dhanasram* (probably the Brahmo Workers Shelter).⁵⁰ It goes to the credit of Nilmoni for establishing something like a charitable Homeopathic Dispensary for the treatment of the 'suffering poor amongst the hill people'⁵¹ in 1891 in the remote Khasi Hills. By 1893 homeopathic dispensaries had been established in three important branches of the Brahmo Samaj, namely Mawblei (Cherrapunjee), Laitkynsew and Mawkhar.⁵² It was in Mawkhar that the first Khasi homeopathic doctor, Bangsabhusan Roy began his practice. Seeing his keen desire to learn homeopathy after witnessing its usefulness, Nilmoni took the initiative to send Bangsabhusan Roy to Dr. M.M. Bose's Homeopathy School in Calcutta where from the latter graduated. But unfortunately he did not live long.

Within a few years of Nilmoni's stay in the Khasi Hills, the attitude of the Khasis towards Brahmo religion was described in a booklet published by the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj published in 1892. It observed that those people who have heard once about the Brahmo religion have expressed their sympathy towards this religion. In order to know more things many have engaged themselves in debates; but that there may be no truth in the Brahmo religion have been expressed by none save two to four Christians.⁵³ It also emphasized why almost all the Khasis had sympathy with the Brahmo religion. This was because the Khasis do not have any caste system, child marriage, no gurus or *shastras* (religious texts), idol worship and belief in many Gods (as the Khasi religion was basically theistic). Impressed by this religion, people of some places have requested the Brahmo Samaj to establish

their centres in hundreds and hundreds of villages but due to scarcity of funds and workers, this has not been possible. Some people, it was reported, confessed 'I have tried to understand the Christian religion for the last ten to fifteen years but have not understood anything, but within a short time I have understood about this religion.'⁵⁴ Many thought of the Brahma religion as a poor man's religion. They would agree to the truth of the Brahma religion but would ask, 'We are poor people, if we become Brahmos, what will we eat?'⁵⁵ It also conceded that attracting the Khasis to the Brahma religion was not an easy task as they were many obstacles like the superstitious beliefs of the Khasis and their worship of spirits which meant that they would not take any medicines during illness without first worshipping spirits, otherwise it was an affront to the Khasi religion; their lack of religious feeling or *Dharma* ; and their propensity to always want something in return as all their ceremonies were done with some motives in mind. According to the Report of the Sadharan Brahma Samaj in 1893 the number of Samajes had risen to six, with the mission drawing in a large number of hill people, who held in Cherrapunje that very year a conference where important questions relating to their faith and conduct were discussed.⁵⁶ The conference furnished an occasion for gathering in large numbers of the Khasi people who were considerably strengthened in their love for the cause.

As a Brahma missionary Nilmoni could through medical skill and knowledge gain access to homes and hearts that would never have been reached through purely teaching. Nilmoni's care of the sick and suffering appeared to offer a palpable demonstration of the practical humanitarian side of religion. Sometimes he would tend to sick shelterless Khasis lying along the road side, who had come from distant villages, provide them with shelter and only let them go after completely curing them. In one instance when cholera broke out in the vicinity of the ashram a Khasi woman who had lost her husband, daughter and three members of her family to cholera and was driven out of her village, sought shelter with Nilmoni along with three of her remaining children. She along with one of her surviving children was afflicted with cholera and the other was becoming cold. In this situation she was determined to stay in Nilmoni's ashram even if he beat or drove

her out. Nilmoni somehow made arrangements for their shelter elsewhere and continuously supplied them with medicines till they recovered after one and a half months and left for their village, which by then was free from cholera.

After the Earthquake of 1897, Nilmoni rendered valuable help to the people of Shella by giving them old clothes and homeopathic medicines in bamboo casks as the medicine bottles had broken or been rendered useless. Not surprising by 1899 there were about one hundred and fifty Khasis who began to believe in the Brahmo Dharma, many more who attended the *upasanas* and twenty-seven who were actually initiated into the Brahmo religion or given *diksha*.⁵⁷ Incidentally the first Khasi to be given *diksha* by Nilmoni was U Thom Singh which was in the year 1892. Many who had been exposed to the teachings of the Brahmo Samaj or had read Brahmo texts outside their villages abandoned the worship of demons and their ancestral gods on returning to their villages. One illustration was that of a person who refused to resort to egg breaking or worship demons when his son or daughter fell ill but prayed to one God.⁵⁸

Thus, through the demonstration of the amazing results of homeopathic medicine and also preaching, Nilmoni was able to remove some of the deep prejudices of the Khasis and win their affections and confidence. Many Khasis began to store homeopathic medicines in their homes. They were also given *sabu* and arrowroot by Nilmoni and taught to prepare them which enabled them to care for the sick. It was largely through his efforts that a government charitable dispensary was set up in Cherra in 1898.⁵⁹ Many Khasis who failed to recover from the treatment of government doctors (allopaths) came to Nilmoni and were cured by homeopathic medicines. He cured hundreds of patients and among them the numbers of difficult cases of sickness were not any less.⁶⁰ Nilmoni attributed the wonderful results of homeopathic medicines to the Healing Hand of the Almighty God. He never took any credit himself even though he stayed awake through many nights reading books on homeopathic medicines so that he might make up for his inadequacy as he was not a qualified doctor. Crossing tortuous paths, walking through difficult terrain and often having

to live on a meager diet of parched rice and water, he tried to improve the health and hygiene of the Khasis through preaching and homeopathic medicines.

Conclusion

Thus healing from various illnesses through the aegis of the medicines of the missionaries attracted the Khasis towards religions other than their own. Recovery from surgery appeared like a miracle and was attributed to Jesus Christ, the Saviour. A small drop of homeopathy medicine could also work wonders demonstrating thus, that there existed a powerful force greater than their spirits. It may be noted that the numbers of Christians were greater than the Brahmos and this may be attributed to the fact that much groundwork had already been done by the Christian missionaries before the arrival of Nilmoni to the Khasi Hills. In fact the latter's observation of the Welsh Calvinistic Mission was that it was old and powerful and in the last ninety years, had established schools and made many Christians and distributed medicines at cheap prices and spent lacs of rupees. Allopathic medicines and surgeries obviously meant faster recoveries compared to homeopathic medicines. There was also the availability of more funds where the Christian missionaries were concerned something in which the Brahmos were poorly lacking. It may be pointed out that in both cases the dispensaries were not only centres of distribution of medicines but also the propagation of the Christian and Brahma faiths. The activities of these two missionaries, one a Christian, the other a Brahma, were not without underlying tensions and conflicts. The arrival of the Brahma Samaj gave much annoyance to the Welsh missionaries who felt that the Samaj along with other Christian denominations had no compunction to "build on other men's foundation."⁶¹ The presence of an increasing number of Khasis in the *upasanas* held in Mawkhar led to the publication of a detailed letter by an Eurasian journalist from Shillong in the newspaper *Englishman* that hinted how Nilmoni's work and activities might threaten the work of the missionaries.⁶² A secret agitation was also started among the Christians because of his activities. Nilmoni also had to open a number of schools as children of Brahma parents were not treated fairly in missionary schools

where they were kept in the same class for two to three years without any explanation and compelled to attend church on Sundays. Undeterred, Nilmoni went about his work and was able to make a substantial difference in the lives of the Khasis. In conclusion it may be said that had it not been for these missionaries and their persistent efforts, old superstitions would not have been destroyed; the Khasis not become cleaner and healthier and the scenario in the Khasi Hills not changed for the better.

Notes and References

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1. P.N. Dutta, *Impact of the West on the Khasis and Jaintias—A Survey of Political Economic and Social Change*, New Delhi, 1982, p. 3.
2. The Khasis use U and Ka before male and female genders respectively.
3. Ameenah N. Passah, 'The Welsh Presbyterian Church and Health Care in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills (1841-1969)' in Manorama Sharma (ed.), *Proceedings of the North East India History Association*, Volume 19, Shillong, 1999, p. 277.
4. Nilmoni Charaborty, *Atmajibonsmriti*, (in Bengali), Brahma Mission Press, Calcutta, 1920, p. 248.
5. *Khasia Jati ebong Khasia Mission 1893* in Nilmoni Chakraborty, p. 257 (henceforth *KJKM*).
6. Namita C. Shadap-Sen, *Origin and Early History of the Khasi-Synteng People*, Calcutta, 1981, p. 204.
7. Nilmoni Chakraborty, *Ibid*, p. 246.
8. *Ibid*, p. 102.
9. J.N. Chowdhury, *The Khasi Canvas*, Shillong, 1998, p. 191.
10. O.L. Snaitang, *Christianity and Social Change in North East India*, Calcutta, 1993, p. 117.
11. P. R. Gurdon, *The Khasis*, Delhi, 1990, p. 119; It may be pointed out here that in cases of divination the most common sacrifice was that of the fowl or cock. The cock was regarded as a saviour and true symbol of Khasi religion. Khasi legend has it that at the beginning of creation there existed a direct and friendly relation between God and man. But due to Man's transgression all links were severed with Heaven so that the world was plunged into darkness. It was then that the cock decided to act as a mediator between God and Man by shedding its blood for liberating mankind. It was decreed that God would

- no longer directly communicate with Man but would let his will be known through the fragments of the egg shell and the entrails of the cock. Thus every prayer carries the name of Cock as an access, the path and entrance to God. For more details see Hamlet Bareh, *The History and Culture of the Khasi People*, New Delhi, 1997, pp. 342-343.
12. J.H.Morris, *The History of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists Foreign Mission To the end of the year 1904*, New Delhi, 1996, p. 88.
 13. Nilmoni Charaborty, *Ibid*, p. 104.
 14. *Ibid*, p. 129.
 15. Annual Report on the Administration of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills for the year 1878-79, p. 11.
 16. Basil Griffiths, *Khasis and the Welsh Legacy*, Wales, 2007, p. 15.
 17. Ameena Passah, *Ibid*, p. 278.
 18. J. H. Morris, J.H. *Ibid*, p. 169.
 19. Report of Dr.Hughes who started to work in the Khasi Hills from 1888 in Basil Griffiths, *Ibid*, p. 93.
 20. *Ibid*, pp. 199-200.
 21. *Reports of the Foreign Mission of the Presbyterian Church of Wales on Khasi-Jaintia Hills 1864-1899*, compiled by J.F. Jyrwa, Shillong, 1998, p. 141 (henceforth *Reports*)
 22. *Ibid*.
 23. *Ibid*, p. 328.
 24. *Ibid*.
 25. *Ibid*, p. 513.
 26. J.H. Morris, *Ibid*, p. 92.
 27. *Reports*, p. 523.
 28. *Ibid*, p. 200.
 29. *Ibid*, pp. 236-7.
 30. Basil Griffiths, *Ibid*, p. 93.
 31. *Ibid*, p. 91.
 32. *Reports*, p. 199.
 33. Basil Griffiths, *Ibid*, p. 103.
 34. *Ibid*, p. 120.
 35. *Ibid*.
 36. Dr. Griffiths's report in 1887, in *Reports*, *Ibid*, p. 125.
 37. U Juramon's opinion in *Reports*, *Ibid*, p. 287.
 38. *Reports*, *Ibid*, p. 287.
 39. *Ibid*.
 40. The tracts were Opinions and Beliefs of Brahmo Dharma, *Upasana* Rules,

- Brahmo Sangeet, God's Invaluable Wealth ,Questions and Answers of Brahmo Dharma and Important Tenets of the Brahmo Dharma, See Nilmoni Chakraborty, p. 255.
41. Dipankar Banerjee, Brahmo, *Samaj and North-east India*, New Delhi, 2006, p. 96.
 42. *Ibid.*
 43. Nilmoni Chakraborty, *Ibid*, p. 127.
 44. *Ibid.*
 45. *Ibid*, p. 120.
 46. *Ibid*, p. 128.
 47. *KJKM*, 1893 in Nilmoni Chakraborty, *Ibid*, p. 253.
 48. *Ibid.*
 49. Gautam Neogy, 'A Brahmo Reformer in Meghalaya(1889-1916):A Study in the Life and Work of Nilmoni Chakraborty,' in *NEIHA (North East India History Association)Proceedings Volume,10*, Shillong, 1989, p. 223.
 50. Nilmoni Chakraborty, *Ibid*, p. 253.
 51. Annual Report of the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, 1893 in Sivanath Sastri, *History of the Brahmo Samaj*, Calcutta, 1974, p. 324.
 52. *Ibid*, p. 438.
 53. *KJKM*, 1893 in Nilmoni Chakraborty, *Ibid*, p. 250.
 54. *Ibid*, p. 249.
 55. *Ibid*, p. 250.
 56. Sivanath Sastri, *Ibid*, p. 329.
 57. *KJKM*, 1893 in Nilmoni Chakraborty, *Ibid*, p. 251.
 58. *Ibid.*
 59. *Ibid*, p. 130.
 60. *Ibid*, p. 135.
 61. Morris, *Ibid*, p. 208.
 62. Nilmoni Chakraborty, *Ibid*, p. 92.