

Book Review

John Thomas, *Evangelising the Nation: Religion and the Formation of Naga Political Identity*. New Delhi: Routledge, 2016.

Reviewed by Sangay Tamang

Within the domain of controversial debate concerning missionary and Naga Nationalism in India, this book presents a new perspective to look historically the relationship between missionary, colonialism and ethnic identity formation among the Nagas of North East India. Tracking history dated back to 17th century Europe, the author attempted to bring a picture of missionary emergence and the role it played in transforming the culture and tradition of Native American. Through extensive archival research and using the missionary metaphor of “city set on the hill”, Thomas tried to locate the birth of American Baptist missionary in the Hills of Nagatoo and the way it mediate the notion of “civilisation” and “modernity” in North East India. The discussion on conversion towards Christianity among the Nagas has been well presented in this book by articulating the contradiction, confrontation and negotiation of politics between missionary, colonial administration and local institutions. The question likes “what do we want of this man’s new religion?” by an Ao elder (p. 50) present a problematic discourse of missionary’s inconsistency, conflict and its suspicious character within the heterogeneous configuration of Naga society.

The popular slogan of “Nagaland for Christ” and its cosmopolitan outlook has been well presented in the book by taking into account the historical growth of Naga nationalism seeing through the lens of a religious perspective. Though the book mostly focuses on the issues of religiosity among Nagas, it took a dramatic shift at the very outset by claiming that the entire discourse of Naga nationalist movement is not a religious one rather assert that “religious institutions, ideas and practices, with transnational presence, did have an impact on the local political movement” (p.3). The mounting up of missionaries in Naga Hills had a great impact on local culture more particularly on languages which has been politicised as a missionary agenda for translation of Bibles and so on. Hence, by showing the case of missionary’s effort in learning vernacular language, Thomas focuses not only on the translation of Bible but

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also towards standardising other religious tracts and school text books; the coming of printing press into the hills and the growth of Gospels, hymns and popular Christian culture. All these resulted in the growth of religious consciousness in the region where traditional institution like *Moronggot* decline by considering it to be “heathen”. The book also engage in a detail analysis of the Naga–Kuki confrontation in the Hills of Manipur and the way both ethnic group has been treated as a “buffer” or “Mirror” by colonial administration. To understand the issues of Naga Raj and the Naga resistance for Hindu and Christian missionary, Thomas highlighted the case of Zeliangrong movement. Despite regional diversity among Naga inhabitants, Thomas succeeded in portraying the life of Jadonang and his disciple Gaidinliu in a very attractive way—the way individual life shape the Naga politics and the resistance and reformation against the missionary vision of Evangelical Naga. Locating his argument within religious domain, Thomas tried to show how religious affiliation of missionary marks the distinction and contradiction in making modern Naga political identity between Naga club and movement among the Zeliangrong.

Given such contradiction of missionary and colonial activities in Naga Hills, in chapter three, Thomas analyses the crisis, famine and suffering of Nagas in the aftermath of the World War II. With the expansion and encampments of Japanese soldiers in Naga villages, suffering and humiliation of Naga people increased more and hence restoration of peace and rehabilitation was an immediate need. It is in this context that Thomas highlighted the formation of various organizations like Naga Hills District Tribal Council which later provides a building stone for NNC. These organization though served as an important political platform for the Nagas to develop the imagination of Naga Nation but in due course of time it turned into a new dimension of political inconsistency. The book also highlights the attitude of Indian leader especially Gandhi and Nehru towards the issues of Naga sovereignty (within and outside India) and the imposition of draconian laws such as the Armed Force (Special Powers) Regulations and Armed Forces (Assam and Manipur) Special Power Acts, 1958 (AFSPA). To resist the arm rule in Nagaland and to propagate the political nation that was imagined among the Nagas, the region witnessed the birth of India’s longest insurgent war which further deteriorated the relation between post independent India and the Nagas. Thomas writes “whether it was the patronizing protectionism or the racist taming of the ‘violent’ Naga self, military pacification of the Nagas was perceived a necessary step towards integrating them with India” (p. 116).

The period 1940s and 1950s not only witnessed a state of famine, war and military occupation but also a dramatic rate of conversions to Christianity and the spread of religious revivals among the Nagas (p. 117) which empower the local church further. The increasing militarisation of the region and growing humiliation of the Naga self has been well articulated in the book with the historical narration of the birth of various missionary based organization among the Nagas. These Organisations in lieu of resorting peace in the region mediate with entangled politics between Indian administration, Naga insurgent groups and local sentiment of Naga Nationalism. Hence, Thomas argued that, it is in this context of constant chaos created by various actors in Naga Hills, Christianity becomes an important mechanism

not only in constructing modern national identity among Nagas but also in bringing peace and humanity in the region. But missionary efforts to restore peace in the region was not an easy task as it has to mediate with the politics of Indian intelligence agency and the emerging threat of communist rhetoric. As has been argued in the book, after the Shillong Accord such anti-communist rhetoric has become a strategic mean to mobilize public opinion against those who opposed the accord. Thus the book also captures the differentiation, contestation and contradiction that emerge within Naga society especially after Shillong accord. It also highlights the way Indian Government uses the accord to bring Nagaland under its control. Towards the last chapter, Thomas engages into the politics of Theology among Nagas and showed how Christian ideas, ethical values and practices have been culturally rooted in the Naga context. Moreover the book engages highly into the debate of politics behind history, missionary, theology, church, colonialism and Indian administration in pre and post independent India and Nagaland as an Indian state.

The book covers a diverse range of topic from religion to nationalism to socio-political history of Nagas. It deals with various historical junctures from pre-colonial to colonial extending to post-independence period. It also highlights the politics of nation-building project in India while incorporating the state formation of “Nagaland”. Every book has its own limitation and criticism, and we cannot expect any book to cover everything. But given the context, location of the study and the stand of the author, this book steers the Nagas history into a new direction thereby creating a body of knowledge that would be useful for further research on Naga issues.