

Freedom and Resistance: Commitment is Strength

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This occasion of celebrating Torda450 has helped me to see the similarity of the beginning and growth of Unitarianism in two different places and times. Francis David in his sermon delivered in 1569 said “Bread is to nourish and strengthen our body, likewise the teachings of Jesus is bread to nourish our soul”. Hajom Kissor Singh, the founder of the Unitarian church in Khasi-Jaintia Hills of North-East (NE) India (1887) stated in his diary, that “I will follow the religion as taught by Jesus and not about Jesus”.

Both the events are stories of how the power structure of vested interest would resist the march of freedom. When some Protestants opposed prayers to the Saints and the Virgin Mary; Francis David went ahead to oppose prayers in the name of Jesus. For he said that, the Bible shows that God alone should be the object of worship. For proclaiming the full humanity of Jesus, a trial was ordered where Francis David was placed in prison and died on Nov 15, 1579.

What is significant about this Celebration is that David believed in freedom of religion even when he had the power to be intolerant. In one of his sermons he made a statement that Unitarian Universalist still repeat today:

“You need not think alike to love alike”.

The land that I come from as well has a similar story. H.K. Singh, an indigenous tribal at age 15 was converted by the missionaries in the 1880's, questioned certain aspects of the Calvinistic faith. He felt and declared that the message of election, damnation and salvation was incompatible with the teachings of Jesus as he read it for himself in the Gospels. The message based on fear was not the one which would redeem his people. He said that what the British did away with the Khasi's fear of demons they substitute the fear of hell. The missionaries were incensed and but for a modern time and another place, they would have said ‘Die heretic’. A church was burnt down, the founder's house was stoned and the Unitarian Christmas celebrations was pelted with stones. This event was the precursor for the Khasi-Jaintia Unitarians not celebrating Christmas or Easter till date.

The foundational theological commitment of Khasi Unitarianism is derived from two Khasi Principles of ‘ Know Man, Know God’ and ‘Earn Righteousness’ and hence our Unitarian Faith is also named as ‘*Ka Niam Ieit Iu Briew, Ieit Iu Blei*’- The Religion of love to man, love to God. Thus it is a religion stressing on the here and now.

By loving or serving our fellow men we also love God because man is made in his own image. God as mother and father means love. If we are not able to love those who we see and interact how can we love God which is abstract?

The motto of Khasi Unitarianism is *To Nangroi*- Keep on Progressing or better evermore. Hence it is the responsibility of a Unitarian to fight for social justice. But since we are numerically small many a times we ourselves have become victims of discrimination. The Presbyterian Synod is a huge event that takes place in the Khasi Hills and it is a fact that this event receives regular state funding. Since we are a minority religion (We are not even recognised as a minority in our country) we cannot avail of any financial or social capital. This does tend to put us at a disadvantage in many fields. We have had experiences of a child being denied admission because of being Unitarian, of a scholar being questioned on her research

proposal based on the study of Unitarian movement as it is was taken to be an insignificant and primarily to be anti-Christian.

But as our faith commitment is to earn righteousness, to love man and salvation through good character and good deeds; issues of education, rural health and development and environment are of great concern for us.

Education was the instrument of conversion to Christianity by the missionaries. Mary Lawrence in *Khublei* said that the missionary set up schools to receive instructions in the four R's, the fourth being the zealously taught Christian religion. It was in the liberal spirit of Unitarianism that the Jowai Church opened a Unitarian Free school in August 1893 under a woman teacher which did not include any form of religious instructions. Today, we have more than forty schools to spread the light of knowledge and in some places the church buildings serve as schools. Jowai Church has undertaken projects for the social and economic upliftment under the aegis of Society for Urban Rural Empowerment (SURE). This is led by Rev. H.H. Mohrmen who through his newspaper columns express concern on a multitude of social, political and environmental issues.

With mortality rate among the children and young mothers the Church has undertaken health camps from time to time in different villages.

Being a matrilineal society, special attention is taken to improve the lot of women. There is an established Women's League (*Seng Kynthei*) whose job is to visit the sick, counsel the young and bereaved. In some a lot of pastoral care is done by the women.

The Khasi philosophy on nature, environment, sacred groves and reverence for rivers, spirits and deities have greatly enriched us in viewing the present issues of environmental degradation. Jaintia Hills is considered as nature's own land. An ancient indigenous developed agriculture had made it a granary of the region with exquisite variety of turmeric, brown rice and oranges. But as Gandhi said, the world has got enough for every man's need but not for every man's greed; a new occupation in recent years in the form of coal and limestone mining have brought considerable damage to the environment and has widened the divide between the rich and the poor.

As a learned citizen and concerned Unitarian I myself was instrumental in the formation of Jaintia Tourism and Environment Society (JTES) to spread awareness and to call and mobilise people to see the potentiality of tourism as a sustainable industry as gainst mining. We have been organising festivals as 'Discover Jaintia' and other events like 'Explore Jaintia' for awakening the Jaintia Society to evils of environmental degradation and the beauty of their own land.

As a developing country India has one of the best democratic constitution. But the reality is that many are still living in the past without understanding the essence of democracy as Rights and Rule of Law. As a graduate in Political science and Law I have been privileged to have taught at the only law college in my District and am also a member of the Society for the Study of Law, Jaintia Hills District. Through my understanding of Law I have from time to time in my own way been able to serve the cause of social justice and democratic values within and outside my faith.

Spreading of non-sectarian education and scientific temper in the midst of many superstitious beliefs nevertheless is a big challenge. Beliefs that some possess *thlen, taro* (the practice of witchcraft) still continues which is not only against our principles but affect the relationships amongst ourselves weakening our community and belief system.

Recently we have had our state general elections where the influence of money was profoundly seen and felt. It is observed that it has affected even some of us who claim to be the salt of the earth or the torch bearers. It is sad that the slogan 'go with the flow' has gotten better of the principle 'to earn righteousness- *Kamai ia Ka Hok*' and salvation by deed or character.

However in the midst of these challenges and failures and despite being a minority I am happy to say that we have been able to make a mark. We have been at the forefront of social justice campaigns both for the society as a whole and making the Unitarians in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills to be a significant minority. I am glad to say that 18th September the foundation day of our church has been acknowledged by the State of Meghalaya to be a public holiday for the Khasi and Jaintia Hills Districts.

All human beings are brothers and sisters and hence one must serve and love the here and now in order to make the world a better place. This message is not regarded by the majority who believe that this world is a terminus where the ultimate destination is heaven. People are not willing to listen to the good news because they are so used and intoxicated by the thought that for all that they do on earth will be condoned if one accepts Jesus as Saviour.

But as a Unitarian who stands on the principle of To Nangroi, we are in a position to see the world with hope that good times are still to come.

It is important to note that H.K. Singh did not include salvation in the 1888 statement of beliefs as we do not believe in original sin. Our foundational belief is that we have never fallen from grace, we are a religion not of the fallen but alive; we are a religion that do not talk of death but of love and life. We are not concerned about salvation and we have no need of a saviour.

With this new mantra, non-acceptance by others will soon be reversed and the best of times are coming.

To Nangroi